

THE GITANA.

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THE GITANA.

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KXV.

A STRANGE DUEL.

The Indian drew his hanger; Morales's legs gave way beneath him; his hair, had he possessed any to speak of, would have stood on end with affright.

"Sir," cried Tancred horrified, "what are you going to do? Do not kill the man in this way. He cannot defend himself and it would be a cowardly thing to do?"

Quirino made no reply. He took from his game bag a long and thin rope, which he cut in two. With one piece he tied Morales' hands behind his back, and with the other securely bound the Spaniard to a tree. This done he said in a low tone, but loud enough for Tancred to hear:

"At least I shall be sure to find him again just now."

"And I too," Tancred murmured to himself, "will be very glad to find him when this business is over."

"Alas!" thought Morales, "whoever comes out the best, it is all over with me. There is only one chance for me, and that is in their both being killed. Ah, Our Lady of Atocha, deign to grant that two deaths may prove my salvation!"

"My dear Senor Quirino," cried the chevalier, "what a queer place you have chosen for our affair. It is no easy matter to extricate ourselves amongst this tall grass."

"I chose the place," replied the Indian, "to equalize the chances."

"What do you mean?"

"My life has been passed in the woods, senor. My business is that of a hunter. My eye is as keen as an eagle's; I have never missed a shot; my bullet goes straight to the mark, if it be only a humming bird pecking itself over the crest of a palm-tree."

"Plague on it," thought Tancred, "that is a bad look-out for me."

"Therefore," continued Quirino, "you are a dead man if I fire first. As I said before, I don't wish to murder you. I must have your life, for you have robbed me of her whom I loved more than the whole world. But you are guilty of no crime against me; you have neither deceived nor betrayed me, so even in my hatred I shall act honorably towards you. There is only one way of giving you a chance of safety, and it is this: You see that hut?"

"Yes."

"We will take our places one at each end of the garden, so that the hut will be between us, at an equal distance from each."

"But then," said Tancred, who was unable to understand these strange preliminaries so completely foreign to his own experience, "we shall not be able to see one another."

"Just what I intend."

"I do not exactly see what you are driving at, but I suppose I shall understand when you have thoroughly explained yourself."

"When we have taken our places," continued the Indian, "I will clap my hands three times, and then each one will do his best to save himself and take the other one's life. The one who



"OLIVER, I BEG YOU, I COMMAND YOU TO READ ME THE LETTER."

first shows himself to the other will be a dead man."

"Ha, ha! I see now. It is rather an uncivilized way of doing it, but it possesses the merit of originality. I think," he added to himself, "that if God grants me life, the story of this affair will make a sensation at home."

"Senor," said the Indian, "I am waiting for you."

"I am ready," returned the Frenchman. The two followed the beaten path which led to the hut. On reaching the door they stopped.

"I take the right, you the left," said Quirino. "I shall stop at the hedge, under the loto tree, your place is yonder, near that clump of aloes."

"Agreed."

The two turned their backs on one another and advanced slowly to their respective positions.

"The chevalier will get through the hedge and escape," thought Morales, and I shall remain alone at the mercy of this fiend incarnate Quirino. Oh, Carmen, you accursed girl, what a wasp's nest you have set loose about your unhappy brother with your ambitious dreams!"

The Gitano was mistaken. The thought of escaping never occurred to Tancred. He resolutely crossed the thick undergrowth of brushwood and parasitical plants, took his place near the clump of aloes, and examined the priming and cock of his musket. Having satisfied himself on this score, he waited for the signal. Before very long he heard the three claps agreed upon. Instinctively he sunk on one knee and disappeared among the long grass which when he stood reached to his breast. Thus hidden, with his musket at his shoulder, he was ready to shoot down his opponent as soon as he might show himself.

The Indian's tactics were entirely different. As soon as he had given the signal he bounded

through the grass to the hut and hid himself behind the angle of the wall, exposing only a part of his forehead and one watchful eye. In this position he was able to command that part of the enclosure which Tancred would have to cross to reach him. With his finger on the trigger and his ear on the alert for the slightest noise he stood as motionless as a statue.

On his side the Frenchman did not move. Some moments passed in this manner. To the two combatants they seemed like hours. Morales too was surprised at the length of time that elapsed without bringing any change in the situation. He was, to say the least, an interested spectator.

The Gitano's feelings may be judged when he heard a low voice behind him.

"Listen, Senor Don Guzman, but don't stir, and if you care for your life answer me in a whisper. Do you hear?"

"Yes, yes," replied Morales. "Whoever you may be, if you have any pity, help me in the name of Our Lady of the Pillar, of Our Lady of Atocha, and of St. James of Compostella."

"Senor Don Guzman," continued the voice, "you are a dead man, and you know it, don't you?"

"Yes, I am lost, completely lost unless you help me. But you have a kind heart, and you will save me. I shall be eternally grateful to you."

"You value your life very highly, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"What would you give to be free at this moment?"

"Everything!—everything I possess in the world, caramba!"

"Would you give two doubloons?"

"Two doubloons? I would give four! I would give ten!"

* A doubloon is a little over \$17.

"Ten doubloons! Really?" continued the voice eagerly.

"Besides my life-long gratitude."

"Never mind the gratitude. We are talking about the doubloons."

"I have them!"

"With you?"

"Yes."

"Then give them to me and I will set you free."

"Alas, I cannot get to my pocket! My hands are tied behind my back."

"I'll cut the rope, but I won't touch the rope round your waist, and if you try to get away without giving me the money I'll yell for help."

"Don't be afraid. Great Heaven, if my hands were only free you would not have to wait a minute—not a second!"

In another moment the cord that bound Morales' hands was out and the Gitano hastily fumbling in his pockets drew out ten gold pieces which he dropped into an outstretched black hand. Slightly turning his head he saw to his surprise the grinning countenance of the *calesero* who had brought him into the snare.

"There's your money, my good fellow. Now cut the last rope, quick!"

"It's soon done, senor. And now get through the hole in the hedge and run like mad."

While this was going on below the enclosure an idea had occurred to Quirino.

"Who knows," he asked himself, "but that the Frenchman, profiting by my foolish good faith, has made off like a coward. But I'll find out."

He was on the point of quitting the shelter of the wall, but a sense of prudence and of mistrust withheld him.

"One moment more," he thought, "I will repeat the *Pater*, the *Ave*, and the *Credo*, and at the last word of the *Credo* I advance."

And he began slowly, but impatiently: *Pater noster qui es in caelis*.

In the mean time Tancred's patience was giving out. His right knee, which rested on some sharp stones, was intolerably painful, and his arm could hardly sustain the weight of his gun. He fought with all the energy in his nature against the weariness that was overpowering him. In a few seconds more he felt that he must change his position. But the slightest movement he might make would reveal his whereabouts. Like Quirino, he too said: "One moment more."

A sudden rustling in the aloe clump beside him stopped his train of thought. This was followed by a low metallic rattle. He looked behind him, and saw, within a few inches of his face, a huge cascade hanging from a tree. The creature's eyes were fixed on him with a strange fascinating power.

The sight of the terrible reptile made him forget the other peril of his position. He threw himself back, with the butt end of his musket struck the animal heavily on the head and sent it rolling twenty feet away. In so doing he raised his head an instant above the friendly bushes. It was enough for Quirino. A shot