

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW THEY TOOK THE GOLD-TRAIN.

"God will relent, and quit thee all thy debt,
Who evermore approves, and more accepts
Him who imploring mercy sues for life,
Than who self-rigorous chooses death as due,
Which argues over just, and self-displeased
For self-offence, more than for God offended."

Samson Ag. l. 12.

A FORTNIGHT or more had passed in severe toil; but not more severe than they have endured many a time before. Bidding farewell once and forever to the green ocean of the eastern plains, they have crossed the Cordillera; they have taken a longing glance at the city of Santa Fé, lying in the midst of rich gardens on its lofty mountain plateau, and have seen, as was to be expected, that it was far too large a place for any attempt of theirs. But they have not altogether thrown away their time. Their Indian lad has discovered that a gold-train is going down from Santa Fé toward the Magdalena; and they are waiting for it beside the miserable rut which serves for a road, encamped in a forest of oaks which would make them almost fancy themselves back again in Europe, were it not for the tree-ferns which form the undergrowth; and were it not, too, for the deep gorges opening at their very feet; in which, while their brows are swept by the cool breezes of a temperate zone, they can see far below, dim through their everlasting vapor-bath of rank hot steam, the mighty forms and gorgeous colors of the tropic forest.

They have pitched their camp among the tree-ferns, above a spot where the path winds along a steep hillside, with a sheer cliff below of many a hundred feet. There was a road there once, perhaps, when Cundinamarca was a civilized and cultivated kingdom; but all which Spanish misrule has left of it are a few steps slipping from their places at the bottom of a narrow ditch of mud. It has gone the way of the aqueducts, and bridges, and post-houses, the gardens and the llama-flocks of that strange empire. In the mad search for gold, every art of civiliza-

tion has fallen to decay, save architecture alone; and that survives only in the splendid cathedrals which have risen upon the ruins of the temples of the Sun, in honor of a milder Pantheon; if, indeed, that can be called a milder one which demands (as we have seen already) human sacrifices, unknown to the gentle nature-worship of the Incas.

And now, the rapid tropic vegetation has reclaimed its old domains, and Amyas and his crew are as utterly alone, within a few miles of an important Spanish settlement, as they would be in the solitudes of the Orinoco or the Amazon.

In the meanwhile, all their attempts to find sulphur and nitre have been unavailing: and they have been forced to depend after all (much to Yeo's disgust) upon their swords and arrows. Be it so: Drake took Nombre de Dios and the gold-train there with no better weapons; and they may do as much.

So, having blocked up the road above by felling a large tree across it, they sit there among the flowers chewing coca, in default of food and drink, and meditating among themselves the cause of a mysterious roar, which has been heard nightly in their wake ever since they left the banks of the Meta. Jaguar it is not, nor monkey; it is unlike any sound they know: and why should it follow them? However, they are in the land of wonders; and, moreover, the gold-train is far more important than any noise.

At last, up from beneath there was a sharp crack and a loud cry. The crack was neither the snapping of a branch, nor the tapping of a woodpecker; the cry was neither the scream of the parrot, nor the howl of a monkey,—

"That was a whip's crack," said Yeo, "and a woman's wail. They are close here, lads!"

"A woman's? Do they drive women in their gangs?" asked Amyas.

"Why not, the brutes? There they are, sir. Did you see their basnets glitter?"

"Men!" said Amyas in a low voice, "I trust you all not to shoot till I do. Then give them one arrow, out swords, and at them! Pass the word along."

Up they came slowly, and all hearts beat loud at their coming.

First, about twenty soldiers, only one-half of whom were on foot; the other half being borne, incredible as it may seem, each in a chair on the back of a single Indian,

while those who marched had consigned their heaviest armor and their arquebuses into the hands of attendant slaves, who were each pricked on at will by the pikes of the soldier behind them.

"The men are mad to let their ordnance out of their hands."

"Oh, sir, an Indian will pray to an arquebuse not to shoot him; be sure their artillery is safe enough," said Yeo.

"Look at the proud villains," whispered another, "to make dumb beasts of human creatures like that!"

"Ten shot," counted the business-like Amyas, "and ten pikes; Will can tackle them up above."

Last of this troop came some inferior officer, also in his chair, who, as he went slowly up the hill, with his face turned toward the gang which followed, drew every other second the cigar from his lips, to inspirit them with those pious ejaculations to the various objects of his worship, divine, human, anatomic, wooden and textile which earned for the pious Spaniards of the sixteenth century the uncharitable imputation of being at once the most fetich-ridden idolaters, and the most abominable swearers of all Europeans.

"The blasphemous dog!" said Yeo, fumbling at his bow-string, as if he longed to send an arrow through him. But Amyas had hardly laid his finger on the impatient veteran's arm, when another procession followed, which made them forget all else.

A sad and hideous sight it was; yet one too common even then in those remoter districts, where the humane edicts were disregarded, which the prayers of Dominican friars (to their everlasting honor be it spoken) had wrung from the Spanish sovereigns; and which the legislation of that most wise, virtuous, and heroic Inquisitor (paradoxical as the words may seem), Pedro de la Gasca, had carried into effect in Peru,—futile and tardy alleviations of cruelties and miseries unexampled in the history of Christendom, or perhaps on earth, save in the conquests of Sennacherib and Zinghis-Khan. But on the frontiers, where negroes were imported to endure the toil which was found fatal to the Indian, and all Indian tribes convicted (or suspected) of cannibalism were hunted down for the salvation of their souls and the enslavement of their bodies, such scenes as these were still too common; and, indeed, if we are to

judge from Humboldt's impartial account, were not very much amended even at the close of the last century, in those much-boasted Jesuit missions in which (as many of them as existed anywhere but on paper) military tyranny was superadded to monastic, and the Gospel preached with fire and sword, almost as shamelessly as by the first Conquistadores.

A line of Indians, Negroes and Zambos, naked, emaciated, scarred with whips and fetters, and chained together by their left wrists, toiled upwards, panting and perspiring under the burden of a basket held up by a strap which passed across their foreheads. Yeo's sneer was but too just; there were not only old men and youths among them, but women; slender young girls, mothers with children running at their knee; and, at the sight, a low murmur of indignation rose from the ambushed Englishmen, worthy of the free and righteous hearts of those days, when Raleigh could appeal to man and God, on the ground of a common humanity, in behalf of the outraged heathens of the New World; when Englishmen still knew that man was man, and that the instinct of freedom was the righteous voice of God; ere the hapless seventeenth century had brutalized them also, by bestowing on them, amid a hundred other bad legacies, the fatal gift of negro-slaves.

But the first forty, so Amyas counted, bore on their backs a burden which made all, perhaps, but him and Yeo, forget even the wretches who bore it. Each basket contained a square package of carefully corded hide; the look whereof friend Amyas knew full well.

"What's in they, captain?"

"Gold!" And at that magic word all eyes were strained greedily forward, and such a rustle followed, that Amyas, in the very face of detection, had to whisper—

"Be men, be men, or you will spoil all yet!"

The last twenty, or so, of the Indians bore larger baskets, but more lightly freighted, seemingly with manioc, and maize-bread, and other food for the party; and after them came, with their bearers and attendants, just twenty soldiers more, followed by the officer in charge, who smiled away in his chair, and twirled two huge mustachios, thinking of nothing less than of the English arrows which were itching to be away and through his ribs. The ambush was complete; the only question how and when to begin?

Amyas had a shrinking, which all will understand, from drawing bow in cool blood on men so utterly unsuspecting and defenceless, even though in the very act of devilish cruelty—for devilish cruelty it was, as three or four drivers armed with whips, lingered up and down the slowly-staggering file of Indians, and avenged every moment's lagging, even every stumble, by a blow of the cruel manati-hide, which cracked like a pistol-shot against the naked limbs of the silent and uncomplaining victim.

Suddenly the *casus belli*, as usually happens, arose of its own accord.

The last but one of the chained line was an old gray-headed man, followed by a slender graceful girl of some eighteen years old, and Amyas' heart yearned over them as they came up. Just as they passed, the foremost of the file had rounded the corner above; there was a bustle, and a voice shouted, "Halt, Señors! there is a tree across the path!"

"A tree across the path?" bellowed the officer, with a variety of passionate addresses to the Mother of Heaven, the fiends of hell, Saint Jago of Compystella, and various other personages; while the line of trembling Indians, told to halt above, and driven on by blows below, surged up and down upon the ruinous steps of the Indian road, until the poor old man fell groveling on his face.

The officer leaped down, and hurried upward to see what had happened. Of course, he came across the old man.

"Sin peccado concebida! Grandfather of Beelzebub, is this a place to lie worshipping your fiends?" and he pricked the prostrate wretch with the point of his sword.

The old man tried to rise; but the weight on his head was too much for him; he fell again, and lay motionless.

The driver applied the manati-hide across his loins, once, twice, with fearful force; but even that specific was useless.

"Gastado, Señor Capitan," said he with a shrug. "Used up. He has been failing these three months!"

"What does the intendant mean by sending me out with wornout cattle like these? Forward there!" shouted he. "Clear away the tree, Señors, and I'll soon clear the chain. Hold it up, Pedrillo!"

The driver held up the chain, which was fastened to the old man's wrist. The officer stepped back, and flourished

round his head a Toledo blade, whose beauty made Amyas break the Tenth Commandment on the spot.

The man was a tall, handsome, broad-shouldered, high-bred man; and Amyas thought that he was going to display the strength of his arm, and the temper of his blade, in severing the chain at one stroke.

Even he was not prepared for the recondite fancies of a Spanish adventurer, worthy son or nephew of those first conquerors, who used to try the keenness of their swords upon the living bodies of Indians, and regale themselves at meals with the odor of roasting caciques.

The blade gleamed in the air, once, twice, and fell: not on the chain, but on the wrist which it fettered. There was a shriek—a crimson flash—and the chain and its prisoner were parted indeed.

One moment more, and Amyas' arrow would have been through the throat of the murderer, who paused, regarding his workmanship with a satisfied smile; but vengeance was not to come from him.

Quick and fierce as a tiger-cat, the girl sprang on the ruffian, and with the intense strength of passion, clasped him in her arms, and leaped with him from the narrow ledge into the abyss below.

There was a rush, a shout; all faces were bent over the precipice. The girl hung by her chained wrist: the officer was gone. There was a moment's awful silence; and then Amyas heard his body crashing through the tree-tops far below.

"Haul her up! Hew her in pieces! Burn the witch!" and the driver, seizing the chain, pulled at it with all his might, while all springing from their chairs, stooped over the brink.

Now was the time for Amyas! Heaven had delivered them into his hands. Swift and sure, at ten yards off, his arrow rushed through the body of the driver, and then, with a roar as of the leaping lion, he sprang like an avenging angel into the midst of the astonished ruffians.

His first thought was for the girl. In a moment, by sheer strength, he had jerked her safely up into the road; while the Spaniards recoiled right and left, fancying him for the moment some mountain giant or supernatural foe. His hurrah undeceived them in an instant, and a cry of "English! Lutheran dogs!" arose, but arose too late. The men of Devon had followed their captain's lead: a

storm of arrows left five Spaniards dead, and a dozen more wounded, and down leapt Salvation Yeo, his white hair streaming behind him, with twenty good swords more and the work of death began.

The Spaniards fought like lions; but they had no time to fix their arquebuses on the crutches; no room, in that narrow path, to use their pikes. The English had the wall of them; and to have the wall there, was to have the foe's life at their mercy. Five desperate minutes, and not a living Spaniard stood upon those steps; and certainly no living one lay in the green abyss below. Two only, who were behind the rest, happening to be in full armor, escaped without mortal wound, and fled down the hill again.

"After them! Michael Evans and Simon Heard; and catch them if they run a league."

The two long and lean Clovelly men, active as deer from forest training, ran two feet for the Spaniard's one; and in ten minutes returned, having done their work; while Amyas and his men hurried past the Indians, to help Cary and the party forward, where shouts and musket shots announced a sharp affray.

Their arrival settled the matter. All the Spaniards fell but three or four, who scrambled down the crannies of the cliff.

"Let not one of them escape! Slay them as Israel slew Amalek!" cried Yeo, as he bent over; and ere the wretches could reach a place of shelter, an arrow was quivering in each body, as it rolled lifeless down the rocks.

"Now then! Loose the Indians!"

They found armorers' tools on one of the dead bodies, and it was done.

"We are your friends," said Amyas. "All we ask is, that you shall help us to carry this gold down to the Magdalena, and then you are free."

Some few of the younger groveled at his knees, and kissed his feet, hailing him as the child of the Sun; but the most part kept a stolid indifference, and when freed from their fetters, sat quietly down where they stood, staring into vacancy. The iron had entered too deeply into their soul. They seemed past hope, enjoyment, even understanding.

But the young girl, who was last of all in the line, as soon as she was loosed, sprang to her father's body, speak-

ing no word, lifted it in her thin arms, laid it across her knees, kissed the fallen lips, stroked the furrowed cheeks, murmured inarticulate sounds like the cooing of a woodland dove, of which none knew the meaning but she, and he who heard not, for his soul had long since fled. Suddenly the truth flashed on her; silent as ever, she drew one long heaving breath, and rose erect, the body in her arms.

Another moment and she had leaped into the abyss.

They watched her dark and slender limbs, twined closely round the old man's corpse, turn over, and over, and over till a crash among the leaves, and a scream among the birds, told that she had reached the trees; and the green roof hid her from their view.

"Brave lass!" shouted a sailor.

"The Lord forgive her," said Yeo. "But, your worship, we must have these rascals' ordnance."

"And their clothes too, Yeo, if we wish to get down the Magdalena unchallenged. Now listen, my masters all! We have won, by God's good grace, gold enough to serve us the rest of our lives, and that without losing a single man; and may yet win more, if we be wise, and He thinks good. But oh, my friends, remember Mr. Oxenham and his crew; and do not make God's gift our ruin, by faithlessness, or greediness, or any mufinous haste."

"You shall find none in us!" cried several men. "We know your worship. We can trust our general."

"Thank God!" said Amyas. "Now then, it will be no shame or sin to make the Indians carry it, saving the women, whom God forbid we should burden. But we must pass through the very heart of the Spanish settlements and by the town of Saint Martha itself. So the clothes and weapons of these Spaniards we must have, let it cost us what labor it may. How many lie in the road?"

"Thirteen here, and about ten up above," said Cary.

"Then there are near twenty missing. Who will volunteer to go down over cliff, and bring up the spoil of them?"

"I, and I, and I;" and a dozen stepped out, as they did always when Amyas wanted anything done; for the simple reason, that they knew that he meant to help at the doing of it himself.

"Very well, then, follow me. Sir John, take the Indian lad for your interpreter, and try and comfort the souls of

these poor heathens. Tell them that they shall all be free."

"Why, who is that comes up the road?"

All eyes were turned in the direction of which he spoke. And, wonder of wonders! up came none other than Ayacanora herself, blowgun in hand, bow on back, and bedecked in all her feather garments, which last were rather the worse for a fortnight's woodland travel.

All stood mute with astonishment, as, seeing Amyas, she uttered a cry of joy, quickening her pace into a run, and at last fell panting and exhausted at his feet.

"I have found you!" she said; "you ran away from me, but you could not escape me!" and she fawned round Amyas like a dog who has found his master, and then sat down on the bank and burst into wild sobs.

"God help us!" said Amyas, clutching his hair, as he looked down upon the beautiful weeper. "What am I to do with her, over and above all these poor heathens?"

But there was no time to be lost, and over the cliff he scrambled; while the girl, seeing that the main body of the English remained, sat down on a point of rock to watch him.

After half-an-hour's hard work, the weapons, clothes and armor of the fallen Spaniards were hauled up the cliff, and distributed in bundles among the men; the rest of the corpses were thrown over the precipice, and they started again upon their road toward the Magdalena, while Yeo snorted like a war-horse who smells the battle, at the delight of once more handling powder and ball.

"We can face the world now, sir! Why not go back and try Santa Fé, after all?"

But Amyas thought that enough was as good as a feast, and they held on downwards, while the slaves followed, without a sign of gratitude, but meekly obedient to their new masters, and testifying now and then by a sign or a grunt, their surprise at not being beaten, or made to carry their captors. Some, however, caught sight of the little calabashes of coca which the English carried. That woke them from their torpor, and they began coaxing abjectly (and not in vain) for a taste of that miraculous herb, which would not only make food unnecessary, and enable their panting lungs to endure that keen mountain air; but would rid them for awhile at least, of the fallen Indian's most unpitiful foe, the malady of thought.

As the cavalcade turned the corner of the mountain, they paused for one last look at the scene of that fearful triumph. Lines of vultures were already streaming out of infinite space, as if created suddenly for the occasion. A few hours and there would be no trace of that fierce fray, but a few white bones amid untrodden beds of flowers.

And now Amyas had time to ask Ayacanora the meaning of this her strange appearance. He wished her anywhere but where she was; but now that she was here, what heart could be so hard as not to take pity on the poor wild thing? And Amyas, as he spoke to her, had perhaps a tenderness in his tone, from very fear of hurting her, which he had never used before. Passionately she told him how she had followed on their track day and night, and had every evening made sounds, as loud as she dared, in hopes of their hearing her, and either waiting for her, or coming back to see what caused the noise.

Amyas now recollected the strange roaring which had followed them.

"Noises? What did you make them with?"

Ayacanora lifted her finger with an air of most self-satisfied mystery; and then drew cautiously from under her feather cloak an object at which Amyas had hard work to keep his countenance.

"Look!" whispered she, as if half afraid that the thing itself should hear her. "I have it—the holy trumpet!"

There it was verily, that mysterious bone of contention; a handsome earthen tube some two feet long, neatly glazed, and painted with quaint grecques and figures of animals; a relic evidently of some civilization now extinct.

Brimblecombe rubbed his little fat hands. "Brave maid! You have cheated Satan this time," quoth he; while Yeo advised that the "idolatrous relic" should be forthwith "hove over cliff."

"Let be," said Amyas. "What is the meaning of this, Ayacanora? And why have you followed us?"

She told a long story, from which Amyas picked up, as far as he could understand her, that that trumpet had been for years the torment of her life; the one thing in the tribe superior to her; the one thing which she was not allowed to see, because, forsooth, she was a woman. So she determined to show them that a woman was as good as a man; and hence her hatred of marriage and her Amazonian exploits. But still the Piache would not show

her that trumpet, or tell her where it was: and as for going to seek it, even she feared the superstitious wrath of the tribe at such a profanation. But the day after the English went, the Piache chose to express his joy at their departure; whereon, as was to be expected, a fresh explosion between master and pupil, which ended, she confessed, in her burning the old rogue's hut over his head, from which he escaped with loss of all his conjuring tackle, and fled raging into the woods, vowing that he would carry off the trumpet to the neighboring tribe. Whereon, by a sudden impulse, the young lady took plenty of coca, her weapons and her feathers, started on his trail, and ran him to earth just as he was unveiling the precious mystery. At which sight (she confessed) she was horribly afraid, and half inclined to run; but, gathering courage from the thought that the white men used to laugh at the whole matter, she rushed upon the hapless conjuror, and bore off her prize in triumph; and there it was!

"I hope you have not killed him?" said Amyas.

"I did beat him a little; but I thought you would not let me kill him."

Amyas was half amused with her confession of his authority over her; but she went on,—

"And then I dare not go back to the Indians; so I was forced to come after you."

"And is that, then, your only reason for coming after us?" asked stupid Amyas.

He had touched some secret chord—though what it was he was too busy to inquire. The girl drew herself up proudly, blushing scarlet, and said—

"You never tell lies. Do you think that I would tell lies?"

On which she fell to the rear, and followed them steadfastly, speaking to no one, but evidently determined to follow them to the world's end.

They soon left the high road; and for several days held on downwards, hewing their path slowly and painfully through the thick underwood. On the evening of the fourth day, they had reached the margin of the river, at a point where it seemed broad and still enough for navigation. For those three days they had not seen a trace of human beings, and the spot seemed lonely enough for them to encamp without fear of discovery, and begin the

making of their canoes. They began to spread themselves along the stream, in search of the soft-wooded trees proper for their purpose; but hardly had their search begun, when, in the midst of a dense thicket, they came upon a sight which filled them with astonishment. Beneath a honeycombed cliff, which supported one enormous cotton-tree, was a spot of some thirty yards square sloping down to the stream, planted in rows with magnificent banana-plants, full twelve feet high, and bearing among their huge waxy leaves clusters of ripening fruit; while under their mellow shade, yams and cassava plants were flourishing luxuriantly, the whole being surrounded by a hedge of orange and scarlet flowers. There it lay, streaked with long shadows from the setting sun, while a cool southern air rustled in the cotton-tree, and flapped to and fro the great banana-leaves; a tiny paradise of art and care. But where was its inhabitant?

Aroused by the noise of their approach, a figure issued from a cave in the rocks, and, after gazing at them for a moment, came down the garden towards them. He was a tall and stately old man, whose snow-white beard and hair covered his chest and shoulders, while his lower limbs were wrapt in Indian-web. Slowly and solemnly he approached, a staff in one hand, a string of beads in the other, the living likeness of some old Hebrew prophet, or anchorite of ancient legend. He bowed courteously to Amyas (who of course returned his salute), and was in act to speak, when his eye fell upon the Indians, who were laying down their burdens in a heap under the trees. His mild countenance assumed instantly an expression of the acutest sorrow and displeasure; and, striking his hands together, he spoke in Spanish,—

"Alas, miserable me! Alas, unhappy Señors! Do my old eyes deceive me, and is it one of those evil visions of the past which haunt my dreams by night: or has the accursed thirst of gold, the ruin of my race, penetrated even into this my solitude? Oh, Señors, Señors, know you not that you bear with you your own poison, your own familiar fiend, the root of every evil? And is it not enough for you, Señors, to load yourselves with the wedge of Achan, and partake his doom, but you must make these hapless heathens the victims of your greed and cruelty, and forestall for them on earth those torments which may await their unbaptized souls hereafter?"