

## Literature, &amp;c.

## ABREYO: THE BRIGAND OF CUBA

## PART I.

RETURNING, one evening, in the island of Cuba, with ten or twelve others, from the *cafetal* of a friend with whom we had been dining, my horse becoming restive at the sluggishness of our pace, I gave him the reign, and in a few minutes was considerably in advance of the party. The sun had just set behind the mighty Pan of Matanzas, that lifted its dark blue summit in the distance; and the whole western half of the hemisphere presented a glorious drapery of golden clouds, tinging every object around and beneath with a deepness and richness of glow altogether unknown and inconceivable to the untravelled inhabitants of colder climates. The coffee-trees—their tops all level to the view, just exhibiting the even rows in which they are planted, which intersect each other traversely, and obliquely; and their bright green leaves profusely intermingled with their small white flowers—lay on either hand in extensive squares, separated by broad alleys of the red soil of the country, lined either with lime-hedges, pine-apples, or flowers, or with mangoes, guavas, or other large or smaller fruit trees. Here and there tall, straight, slender, column-like palms, singly rearing their plumed tops to the sky, or in thick clusters mingling them into leafy canopies—tufts of the feathery bamboo, with its long, narrow leaves of light green—patches of the broad-leaved plantain and banana trees—and the picturesque, horizontally-spread, roof-like tops of a few scattered plane or table trees, varied and beautified the scene; while an occasional *ceiba*, or cotton tree, with its huge, smooth, silver-coloured trunk, bulging out towards the centre, heaving out from its very summit its gigantic arms, and majestically towering over all, seemed to connect the lower with the upper world. Not a breath of air stirred the lightest leaf; and the repose of the scene was heightened by the sound of the bells on the neighbouring *cafetiles*, tolling the *five Maria*, and by gangs of negroes, in the distance, with their instruments of labour, slowly retreating, to assemble before their masters, or their *mayorales*, for the purpose of prayer, preparatory to their dismissal for the night. The beauty and tranquillity that surrounded me filled my soul with tenderness and adoration; and, yielding myself to my feelings, I lost all consciousness save that of forming a portion of the world about me.

A pricking of the ears and a restless pawing of the fore foot of my steed recalling me from my reverie, I heard the quick tramp of a horse behind; and, not wishing to be disturbed in my meditations by any of my companions, rode hastily forward. Finding, however, that I was likely soon to be overtaken, I slackened my pace, and in a few moments a stranger, on a coal-black Arabian charger, was at my side. His features, and the noble animal he bestrode, were indistinctly familiar to me; but where or when, I was utterly unable to recal. His face, a transparent olive, was of the higher order of the Spanish cast—oval—a slightly curved nose—and piercing black eyes, sparkling beneath well-arched eyebrows, which, with the mustachios, the tuft below and under lip, and long, curling hair, was of the deepest and glossiest black. It was one of those countenances that one would imagine in a Castilian hero; and in which might be read many a tale of successful gallantry, high chivalrous love, and perilous adventure. His dress was that usually worn by gentlemen in that climate; and he was armed, as most travellers are, with a steel scabbard sabre, and pistols in his holsters and in a belt around his body. The butt ends and all the wood portion of which being thickly ornamented with silver mountings. Over his shoulder was slung—a rather unusual thing, however—a blunderbuss, with an enormous bell muzzle, the stock curiously inlaid with ivory, and the trigger, guard, and heelplate of embossed silver. The trappings of the horse were profuse and cumbersome. The saddle was of Moorish, or ancient Spanish structure, with a huge, projecting, outward curved pommel, and a broad, high raised ridge edging the hinder part of the seat; and was covered, as was also the padding down the sides of the flaps, with crimson velvet most elaborately embroidered with gold. An ample saddle-cloth, also of crimson

velvet richly embroidered, with large gold tassels at the corners, hung over the horse's haunches, and down his flanks, almost as low as the stirrups, which were slipper-shaped, like those used in this country by ladies. The whole of this once splendid furniture was considerably soiled and tarnished, and had, doubtless, belonged to some ancient governor or state officer.

I must here premise, that the only gait taught to the saddle horse in Cuba is the pace—the least fatiguing to the rider in that sultry climate, and it is, astonishing with what celerity and steadiness they perform their journeys without once breaking into a trot or canter. The animal I rode, a noble roan, was celebrated as the swiftest pacer in the island; having, in occasional trials on the road, frequently distanced the famous barb of the great bandit Abreyo, who had, consequently, been incessant and exorbitant in his offers of purchase, and was known to have declared, that should he ever change the scene of his achievements to some other neighbourhood, the stall of *El Rey* would be found tenantless on his departure.

The stranger, after regarding my person and accoutrements with a quick military scrutiny, and examining my Bucephalus with the eye and satisfaction of a connoisseur, imperceptibly urged on his own beautiful animal, until I insensibly found myself engaged in a tacit trial of speed and mettle. I had been satisfied with merely keeping pace with my unknown companion; but finding *El Rey* pulling hard on the reign, and feeling, myself, inclined to give the stranger a taste of our quality—the Champagne and St. Julien of my late host beginning, too, to exultate and excite me—I was on the point of spurring my steed to the top of his bent through a wood into which we had just entered, and through which our road lay, when, observing the stranger edging towards me, all of a sudden it flashed on my recollection, that he was Abreyo, the brigand chief himself! whom I had once before seen, on this very horse, in the habit of a *montero*, or peasant.

Checking *El Rey*, and turning him round so suddenly that we both narrowly escaped a back somerset, I pressed the rowels into his side, and in a second or two was far beyond the reach of my late companion's blunderbuss, had he been ever so disposed to have favoured me with its contents.

"*Carake!*" exclaimed he, pulling up his horse; and finding that I was fairly off, he shouted at parting "*Vi usted con Dios!*" an expression which, though it means "God bless you!" is as frequently used as a dismissal to Heaven's antipodites.

Looking behind me, I saw Abreyo precisely where I had left him, just within the entrance to the wood, resting on his left thigh on the saddle, his right leg stretched out, supported by the stirrup, and his arms leaning on the high pommel, quietly watching the progress of my, to him, doubtless, unexpected escape. Reining in the gallant *El Rey*, and patting him on the neck, I faced him about to the enemy, and placed myself on the saddle in imitation of the brigand, who, after some moments of mutual observation, waved his hat, a salutation I almost simultaneously returned, and disappeared in the shades of the wood.

"So," thought I, unbuttoning the holsters and the pockets of my belt, to examine the priming of my pistols—"So this Abreyo, whom the new patrol are congratulating themselves on ousting from the neighbourhood, is still here—in the guise of a gentleman, too—and all his ruffians, doubtless, within hearing of his bugle! Well, 'tis a secret worth knowing at any risk. And I must needs endanger thee, my noble fellow," said I aloud, patting him on the breast, "by running thy neck into the very halter of thine unhalloved admirer! But thou performed it rarely, *amigo, mio!*"

The creature seemed to understand me; for, licking my hand with his tongue, he stretched out his neck, and neighed most triumphantly.

The clouds were now fast sinking below the horizon after the sun, and their golden hue was deepened into a bright purple. The moon was just peering in her chaste and pale lustre over the extreme right of the forest through which I had to pass; and myriads of *cicuilias*, or fire-beetles—those gay harbingers of night—were issuing from the trees, and bespangling the air and the ground with their silvery scintillations.

Well armed and mounted as I was, and accustomed to ride out alone at all hours of the night, I had no ambition, singly, to tempt and provoke Abreyo a second time in the same evening with so valuable a bait as *El Rey*; in the face, too, of his known declaration to carry him off on his departure from the neighbourhood, which, I was pretty sure, notwithstanding his present open appearance, was near at hand. To proceed through the wood alone, therefore, was by no means advisable; and I began to look anxiously along the road for the friends from whom I had parted. There were no signs of them, however; but, after a brisk pace back of about five minutes, I saw them slowly advancing.

On relating my adventure, they all declared that no such person had passed them; but, as most of the party were members of the volunteer horse patrol organized for the purpose of ridding the neighbourhood of this prince of marauders, and his more infamous gang, and were, consequently, aware of some of his many cunning expedients to avoid being seen in his excursions, it was suggested and concluded, that he had performed a semicircle round them, through the plantations, and come out again into the road considerably in advance—which he was easily enabled to do, even when those whom he desired to shun travelled at a quicker rate than they did, from the amazing speed of *Sombre del Diablo*, or the Devil's Shadow, the name given by the people to his celebrated black Arabian.

The owner of *El Rey*, a gentleman with whom I was spending a few months, congratulated me, and himself, on my escape, and the preservation of his horse, and reminded me, that on first appropriating him to my service, during my visit, he had stated, that though the animal himself might expose me to some danger from Abreyo, or his followers, from the determination of that brigand to possess him on any terms, yet his speed was such as, of itself, to preserve me, not only from that, but, to a certainty, from every other attack.

The party having halted to listen to my adventure, now carefully examined their fire-arms, and, after making the necessary arrangements, and fixing on a pass-word, in case of a collision with the robbers, we struck forwards into the wood.

At the bottom of a wild ravine, about half way through the forest, where there was a *posada*, or inn, a number of horsemen, as we were passing, issued suddenly upon us from an extensive shed at the side of the road, opposite to the *posada*, and demanded "*Quien vive?*"

Taking them for the patrol on duty, the customary answer of "*Espana!*" was given.

"*Que hente?*"

"*Paizanos.*"

But instead of the usual "*Buenas noches,*" which should have followed, we were ordered to halt.

"By what authority?" demanded one of our party.

"The patrol."

"What patrol?"

"The volunteers of the *partido.*"

"By whom commanded?"

"Don Guillermo de Ponce de Leon,"—the name of the friend with whom I was a guest, and who was then at my side.

"'Tis false!" exclaimed my friend, "for I am Ponce de Leon—and the disposition and command of the patrol was this morning altered by my orders, and you are villains and robbers."

A bloody battle would, doubtless, have ensued, had not, at that very moment, the heavy tramp of horse, and the clattering of arms, alarmed the rascals who had thus audaciously interrupted us. Exclaiming "*La patrulla! la patrulla!*" they rode hastily up to the door of the *posada*—from which I distinctly saw my late companion issue with great precipitation, and throw himself on his sable steed—and in an instant, amidst a volley of imprecations, both loud and deep, they started off, like lightning, down a by-road running beside the *posada*, leading to the coast.

Waiting until the real patrol came up, which they did immediately, we hastily informed them of the occurrence, and Don Guillermo taking the command, we all proceeded at full pace in pursuit. After a hard ride, we halted for the purpose of holding a general council, at which it was decided, that the villains must, by some