

Aimard Gustave

Last of the Incas: A Romance of the Pampas



Gustave Aimard

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CHAPTER I. THE BOMBEROS

Patagonia is as little known at the present day as it was when Juan Diaz de Solis and Vicente Yanez Pinzon landed there in 1508, sixteen years after the discovery of the New World.

The earliest navigators, whether involuntarily or not, threw over this country a mysterious veil, which science and frequent relations have not yet entirely removed. The celebrated Magalaës (Magellan) and his historian, the Chevalier Pigafetta, who touched at these coasts in 1520, were the first to invent these Patagonian giants so tall that Europeans scarce reached their girdle, who were upwards of nine feet high, and resembled Cyclops. These fables, like all fables, have been accepted as truths, and in the last century became the theme of a very lively dispute among learned men. Hence the name of Patagonians (great feet) was given to the inhabitants of this country, which extends from the western watershed of the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean.

Patagonia is watered, through its entire length, by the Rio Colorado in the north, and the Rio Negro in the east-south-east. These two rivers, through the windings of their course, agreeably break the uniformity of an arid, dry, sandy soil, on which prickly shrubs alone grow, or dispense life to the uninterrupted vegetation of their banks. They wind round a fertile valley overshadowed by willow trees, and trace two deep furrows through the midst of an almost level country.

The Rio Negro runs through a valley surrounded by precipitous cliffs, which the waters still wash at places; wherever they have retired, they have left alluvial soil covered with an eternal vegetation, and formed numerous islets covered with willows, and contrasting with the mournful aspect of the naked cliffs.

Monkeys, wild asses, foxes, and red wolves constantly traverse the desert in every direction, together with the cougar, or American lion, and the imbaracayas – those ferocious and formidable wild cats. The coasts are thronged with amphibious carnivora, such as sea lions and elephant seals. The *guya*, concealed in the marshes, utters its melancholy cry; the *guacuti*, or stag of the Pampas, runs lightly over the sand; while the *guanaco*, or American camel, sits pensively on the summit of the cliffs. The majestic condor soars amid the clouds, in the company of the disgusting cathartes. Urubús and auras which, like it, hover round the cliffs on the seaboard to dispute the remains of corpses with the voracious caracaras. Such are the plains of Patagonia, a monotonous solitude empty, horrible, and desolate!

One evening in the month of November, which the Aucas Indians call the "moon of the pruning," a traveller, mounted on a powerful horse of the Pampas of Buenos Aires, was following at a sharp trot one of the thousand paths traced by the Indians, in that inextricable labyrinth found on the banks of all American rivers. This traveller was a man of thirty years of age at the most, clothed in a semi-Indian, semi-European garb peculiar to the Gauchos. A poncho of Indian manufacture hung from his shoulders to his horse's flanks, and only left visible the long Chilean polenas that came above his knees. A lasso and *bolas* hung from either side of his saddle, and he carried a rifle in front of him.

His face, half concealed by the broad brim of his straw hat, had an expression of brute courage and spitefulness; his features were, so to say, modelled by hatred. His long hooked nose, surmounted by two quick threatening eyes, rather close together, gave him a distant resemblance

to a bird of prey; his thin lips were contracted with an ironical air, and his prominent cheekbones suggested cunning. The Spaniard could be recognized by his olive tint. The effect of this face, surrounded as it was by long tangled black hair and a large beard, was to inspire fear and repulsion. His wide shoulders and well-knit limbs denoted far from common strength and agility in this man, who seemed above the average height.

On reaching a spot where several tracks crossed each other to form an inextricable network, the stranger stopped to look about him, and, after a moment's hesitation, turned to the right and struck a trail. Going further and further away from the banks of the Rio Colorado, which he had hitherto been following, he entered a plain, the soil of which, burned by the sun and covered with small pebbles or gravel, only offered a few stunted shrubs to the eye. The further the stranger advanced in this desert, the further solitude extended in its gloomy majesty, and the footfall of his horse alone disturbed the silence of the desert. The horseman, but slightly affected by this savage beauty of Nature, contented himself with carefully reconnoitering and counting the *pozos*, for in these countries utterly void of water, travellers have dug reservoirs in which the water collects during the rainy season.

After passing two of these *pozos*, the traveller saw in the distance horses hobbled in front of a wretched *toldo*. At once a shout was raised, and in less than a minute the horses were unfastened; three men leapt into the saddle, and dashed forward at full gallop to reconnoitre this man, who, careless of their movements, continued his journey without making the slightest attempt to put himself on his defence.

"Eh, *compadre*, whither are you bound?" one of them asked, as he barred the way for the stranger.

"*Canario*, Pepe," the latter answered; "have you been emptying a skin of *aguardiente* this evening? Do you not recognize me?"

"Why, 'tis the voice of Pedrito, if I am not mistaken."

"Unless someone has stolen my voice, my good fellow, it is I, the real Pedrito."

"Caray! You are welcome," the three men shouted.

"Duce take me if I did not fancy you killed by one of those dogs of Aucas; ten minutes ago I was talking about it to Lopez."

"Yes," Lopez added in confirmation, "for you have disappeared for eight days."

"Eight days – yes; but I have not lost my time."

"You will tell us your exploits?"

"I should think so; but I and my horse are hungry after a two days' fast."

"That will be soon remedied," said Pepe, "for here we are."

The four friends, while conversing, had ridden on, and at this moment dismounted in front of the *toldo*, which they entered, after hobbling their horses and placing food before that of the newcomer. This *toldo*, as they are called in the country, was a cabin thirty feet long and the same in depth, covered with reeds, and formed of stakes driven into the ground, and fastened together with thongs. In one corner, four wooden and leather benches served as beds for the dwellers in this house, where it was difficult to shelter themselves against the wind and rain.

In the centre of the *toldo* each sat down on a large stone, in front of a fire whose dense smoke almost concealed objects. Lopez took up a piece of guanaco that was roasting, and planted the spit in the ground. The four comrades drew their long knives from their *polenas*, and began eating with good appetites.

These men were *bomberos*.

Ever since the foundation of the Spanish colonial fort of Carmen, it had been found necessary, in consequence of the vicinity of the Indians, to have scouts to watch over their movements, and give the alarm at the slightest danger. These scouts form a species of corps of the bravest men, thoroughly habituated to the privations of the Pampas. Although their services are voluntary and

their profession perilous, bomberos are never wanting, for they are handsomely paid. They often go twenty or five and twenty leagues from the fort, as extreme outposts, ambushing on spots where the enemy – that is to say, the Indians – must necessarily pass. Day and night they ride across the plains, watching, listening, and hiding. Scattered during the day, they reassemble at sunset, though they rarely venture to light a fire, which would betray their presence; and they never all sleep together. Their bivouac is a flying camp, and they live on the produce of the chase. They have long been accustomed to this strange and nomadic life, and hence they acquire a fineness of perception almost equal to that of the Indians, and their practised eyes recognize the slightest trace on the lightly trodden grass or sand. Solitude has developed in them a marvellous sagacity, and a rare talent for observation.

The four bomberos collected in the toldo were the most renowned in Patagonia. These poor fellows were supping gaily while warming themselves at a good fire, a rare pleasure for men surrounded by dangers, and who hate a surprise to fear at any hour. But the bomberos did not appear to trouble themselves about anything, although aware that the Indians never give them any quarter.

The character of these men is singular: courageous to cruelty, they care not for the life of other persons or their own. If one of their comrades die, victim of an Indian or a wild beast, they content themselves with saying he has a *mala suerte* (ill luck). True savages, living without any affection or faith, they are a peculiar type in humanity.

These scouts were brothers, and their names were Lopez, Pepe, Juan, and Pedrito. Their home, twice plundered by the Aucas Indians, had been utterly destroyed by fire in the last invasion. Their father and mother had succumbed under atrocious torture; two of their sisters had been outraged and killed by the chiefs, and the youngest, Mercedes, a child scarce seven years of age, was carried off into slavery, and since then they had received no news of her, and were ignorant were she dead or alive.

The four brothers from this moment became bomberos, through hatred of the Indians and desire of vengeance, and had only one head and one heart. Their prodigies of courage, intelligence, and craft during the last seven years would take us too long to record, and, moreover, we shall find specimens in the course of this narrative.

So soon as Pedrito, who was the eldest, had finished his meal, Lopez put out the fire, and Juan mounted his horse to go the rounds; then the two brothers, curious about the news Pedrito brought them, drew closer to him.

"What news, brother?" Pepe asked.

"Before anything else," the eldest asked, "what have you been doing during the last week?"

"That will not take long," Lopez answered; "nothing."

"Nonsense."

"On my word it is true. The Aucas and Pehuenches are becoming absurdly timid; if this goes on, we shall have to send them petticoats like squaws."

"Oh! Set your minds at rest," Pedrito said, "they have not come to that yet."

"What do you know?" Lopez asked.

"What next?" Pedrito asked, instead of answering.

"That is all; we have seen nothing, heard nothing suspicious."

"Are you sure?"

"Hang it! Do you take us for asses?"

"No, but you are mistaken."

"What?"

"Search your memory carefully."

"No one has passed, I tell you," Pepe remarked confidently.

"No one."

"Unless you count as somebody the old Pehuenche squaw who crossed the plain this evening on a sorry horse, and asked us the road to El Carmen."

"That old squaw," Pedrito said, with a smile, "knows the road as well as I do. Canarios, your innocence amuses me."

"Our innocence!" Lopez exclaimed with a frown; "We are asses, then."

"You look very like it to me."

"Explain yourself."

"You shall understand."

"We shall be only too glad."

"May be so. The old Pehuenche squaw who crossed the plain this evening on a sorry horse, and asked you the road to El Carmen," Pedrito said, repeating Pepe's words, maliciously, "Do you know who she was?"

"Hang it all! A frightful old witch, whose face would terrify the fiend."

"Ah, you think so. Well, you are altogether wrong."

"Speak out, and do not play with us like a congona with a mouse."

"My boy, this Pehuenche witch was – "

"Who?"

"Nocobotha!"

Nocobotha (the Hurricane) was the principal Ulmen of the Aucas. Pedrito might have gone on talking for a long time without his brothers noticing it, so greatly had the news startled them.

"Malediction!" Pepe at length shouted.

"But how do you know it?" Lopez asked.

"Do you suppose I have been amusing myself with sleeping away the last eight days, brothers? The Indians, to whom you want to send petticoats, are preparing, with the greatest secrecy, to deal you a furious blow. We must distrust silent waters and the calm that conceals a tempest. All the nations of Upper and Lower Patagonia, and even Araucania, have leagued together to attempt an invasion – massacre the whites, and destroy El Carmen. Two men have done it all – two men with whom you and I have been long acquainted – Nocobotha, and Pincheira, the chief of the Araucanos. This evening there will be a grand meeting of the delegates of the free nations, at which the day and hour for the attack will be definitely settled, and the final measures taken to insure the success of the expedition."

"¡Caray!" Pepe exclaimed, "There is not a moment to lose. One of us must go at full gallop to El Carmen to inform the governor of the danger menacing the colony."

"No, not yet; we must not be in such a hurry, but try to discover the intentions of the chiefs. The *quipu* has been sent round, and the chiefs who will be present at the meeting are twenty in number. You see that I am well informed."

"Where will they meet?"

"At the tree of Gualichu."

"¡Demonio! it will not be an easy thing to surprise them at such a place."

"Hang it, it is impossible," Lopez said.

"Where force fails, try cunning. Here is Juan returned. Well, have you any news?"

"All is quiet," he said, as he dismounted.

"All the better. In that case we can act," Pedrito continued. "Listen to me, brothers. I believe that you have confidence in me – "

"Oh!" the three men exclaimed.

"In that case you will follow me?"

"Anywhere."

"Quick to horse, for I too wish to be present at this Indian gathering."

"And you are going to take us – "

"To the tree of Gualichu."

The four bold comrades mounted their horses, and started at a gallop. Pedrito possessed a superiority over his brothers, which the latter recognized; nothing he did astonished them, so accustomed were they to see him perform marvels.

"Do you intend to mingle with the chiefs also?" Pepe asked.

"Yes, Pepe; instead of twenty there will be twenty-one, that is all," Pedrito added, with a careless smile.

The bomberos spurred their horses, and disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER II. EL CARMEN

In 1780, long after the discovery of the New World, the Spaniards founded in Patagonia a factory, situated on the left bank of the Rio Negro, about seven leagues from its mouth, and called Nuestra Señora del Carmen, and also Patagonia.

The Ulmen Negro, chief of the Puelches, encamped in the vicinity of the Rio Negro, favourably greeted the Spaniards, and in consideration of a distribution made to the Indians of a large quantity of clothing and other useful articles, sold them the course of that river from its mouth up to San Xavier. In addition to this, by the wish of the Ulmen, the natives aided the Spaniards in building the citadel, which was to serve them as a shelter, and thus assisted with their arms in producing their own serfdom.

At the period of the foundation of El Carmen the post merely consisted of a fort, built on the northern bank, at the summit of a scarped cliff, which commands the river, the southern plains and the surrounding country. It is of a square shape; it is built with strong walls of dressed stone, and flanked by three bastions, two on the river to the east and west, and the third on the plain. The interior contains the chapel, the priest's house, and the powder magazine; on the other side run spacious quarters for the commandant, treasurer, officers, garrison, and a small hospital. All these buildings, only one storey in height, are covered with tiles. The Government also possesses outside vast granaries, a baking house, a mill, two blacksmiths' and carpenters' shops, and two *estancias*, or farms, stocked with horses and cattle.

At the present day, the fort is nearly in ruins; the walls, for want of repairs, are everywhere decaying, but the dwelling houses are still in good condition.

El Carmen is divided into three groups, two on the north, and one on the south side of the river. Of the two former, one, the old Carmen, is situated between the fort and the Rio Negro, on the slope of the cliff, and consists of some forty houses of varying height and style, and forming an irregular line which follows the course of the river. Around them are scattered wretched huts, and this is the staple of the trade with the Indians.

The other group on the same bank, called Población, is a few hundred paces to the east of the fort, and is separated from it by shifting sand dunes, which entirely stop the range of the guns. Población forms a vast quadrilateral, round which are about one hundred houses, mostly new, only one storey high, tile-covered, and serving as a residence for farmers, agriculturists, and *pulqueros*, or dealers in spirits and grocery. Between the two groups there are several houses scattered along the river bank.

The village on the south bank, which is called Población del Sur, is composed of twenty houses, standing in a line on a low soil, subject to inundations. These houses, which are poorer than those of the north side, serve as a shelter for gauchos and estancieros. A few *pulqueros*, attracted by the vicinity of the Indians, have also opened their stores there.

The general aspect is sad; only a few isolated trees grow on the river bank, and the streets are full of a pulverized sand, which obeys the direction of the wind. This description of a country hitherto perfectly unknown, was indispensable for a due comprehension of the incidents that are about to follow.

The day on which this story begins, at about two in the afternoon, five or six gauchos, seated in a *pulquero's* shop, were holding a sharp discussion while swallowing long draughts of *chicha* from the half-gourds which went the round. The scene is laid in Población del Sur.

"Canario," said a tall, thin fellow, who had all the appearance of a desperate ruffian, "are we not free men? If our governor, the Señor Don Antonio Valverde, insists in plundering us in this

way, Pincheira is not so far off but that we may manage to come to an understanding with him. Although an Indian chief now, he is of the white race, without any mixture, and a caballero to the end of his fingers."

"Hold your tongue, Panchito," another said, "you would do better if you swallowed your words with your chicha, instead of talking such nonsense."

"I have a right to speak," said Panchito, who was moistening his throat more than the rest.

"Don't you know that invisible eyes are prowling about us, and that ears are open to pick up our words and profit by them?"

"Nonsense," said the first speaker, with a shrug of the shoulders, "you are always frightened, Corrocho. I care as much for spies as I do for an old bridle."

"Panchito!"

"What, am I not right? Why does Don Antonio wish us so much harm?"

"You are mistaken," a third gaucho interrupted with a laugh, "the governor, on the contrary, desires your comfort, and the proof is that he takes as much as he possibly can from you."

"That confounded Patito has the cleverness of the scamp he is," Panchito exclaimed, bursting into a noisy laugh. "Well, after us the end of the world!"

"In the meanwhile let us drink," said Patito.

"Yes," Panchito replied, "let us drink and drown our cares. Besides, have we not Don Torribio Carvajal to help us if necessary?"

"That's another name that ought to stick in your throat, especially here," Corrocho exclaimed, striking the table angrily with his fist, "can't you hold your tongue, accursed dog?"

Panchito frowned, and looked askant at his comrade.

"Are you trying to bully me? Canario, you are beginning to stir my blood."

"Bully you? Why not, if you deserved it?" the other answered without the slightest excitement. "Caray, for the last two hours you have been drinking like a sponge; you are as full as a butt, and you chatter like a foolish old woman. Hold your tongue, do you hear, or go to sleep."

"¡Sangre de Cristo!" Panchito yelled, as he dug his knife vigorously into the bar, "You will give me satisfaction."

"On my word, bloodletting will do you good, and my hand itches to give you a navajada on your ugly chops."

"Ugly chops, did you say?"

And Panchito rushed upon Corrocho, who waited for him with a firm foot. The other gauchos rushed between to prevent them striking.

"Peace, peace, caballeros, in Heaven's name or the fiend's," the pulquero said, "no quarrelling in my house; if you wish to have it out, the street is free."

"The pulquero is right," said Panchito; "come on, then, if you are a man."

"Willingly."

The two gauchos, followed by their comrades, dashed out into the street. As for the pulquero, standing in his doorway with his hands in his pockets, he whistled a dance tune while awaiting the combat.

Panchito and Corrocho, who had already taken off their hats, and bowed with affected politeness to each other, after rolling their poncho round the left arm, in guise of a buckler, drew their long knives from their polenas, and without exchanging a syllable, stood on guard with remarkable coolness.

In this species of duel the honour consists in touching the adversary in the face; a blow dealt below the waist passes for an act of treachery unworthy a true caballero.

The two adversaries, solidly planted on their straddled legs, with bodies bent, and head thrown back, looked at each other attentively to divine movements, parry strokes, and scar each other. The other gauchos, with husk cigarettes in their mouths, followed the duel with unconcerned

eye, and applauded the more skilful. The fight continued on both sides with equal success for some minutes, when Panchito, whose sight was doubtless obstructed by copious libations, parried a second too late, and felt the point of Corrocho's knife cut the skin of his face its whole length.

"Bravo, bravo!" all the gauchos exclaimed simultaneously, "Well hit."

The combatants fell back a step, bowed to the spectators, sheathed their knives again, bowed to each other, with a species of courtesy, and, after shaking hands, re-entered the pulquería arm in arm.

The gauchos form a species of men apart, whose manners are completely unknown in Europe. Those of El Carmen, the great majority exiled for crimes, have retained their sanguinary habits and their contempt of life. Indefatigable gamblers, they have cards incessantly in their hands; and gambling is a fertile source of quarrelling, in which the knife plays the greatest part. Careless of the future and of present suffering, hardened to physical pain, they disdain death as much as life, and recoil before no danger. Well, these men, who frequently abandon their families to go and live in greater liberty amid savage hordes; who gladly and without emotion shed the blood of their fellow men; who are implacable in their hatred; are yet capable of ardent friendship, and extraordinary self-denial and devotion. Their character offers a strange medley of good and evil, of unbridled vices and of real qualities. They are, in turn, and simultaneously, quarrelsome, indolent, drunken, cruel, proud, brave to rashness, and devoted to a friend, or patron of their choice. From childhood blood flows beneath their hands in the estancias at the period of *mantaza del ganado* (cattle slaughtering), and they thus habituate themselves to the colour of the human purple. Lastly, their jests are as coarse as their manners; and the most delicate and frequent of them is to threaten with a knife under the most frivolous pretexts.

While the gauchos, on returning to the pulquería after the quarrel, were bedewing their reconciliation, and drowning in floods of chicha the remembrance of this little incident, a man, wrapped in a large cloak, and with his hat pulled over his eyes, entered the shop, without saying a word, went up to the bar, took an apparently indifferent glance around him, lit a cigarette at the brasero, and with a piastre he held in his hand, hit the table three sharp blows.

At this unexpected sound, which resembled a signal, the gauchos, who were talking eagerly together, were silent as if they had received an electric shock. Panchito and Corrocho started, and tried to see through the cloak that covered the stranger, while Patito turned his head away slightly to conceal a crafty smile.

The stranger threw away his half-consumed cigarette, and went out of the door as silently as he had entered it. A moment after, Panchito, who was wiping his cheek, and Corrocho, both pretending to remember some important business, quitted the pulquería. Patito glided along the wall to the door, and followed close at their heels.

"Hum!" the pulquero growled, "there are three scamps, who seem to be arranging some dog's trick, in which every man's head will not remain on his shoulders. Well, it is their business after all."

The other gauchos, completely absorbed in their game of monte, and bent over the cards, had not, so to speak, noticed the departure of their comrades. The stranger, when at some distance from the pulquería, turned round. The two gauchos were walking almost close behind him, and carelessly talking, like two loungers who were taking a walk.

Where was Patito? He had disappeared.

After making an almost imperceptible sign to the two gauchos, the stranger set out again, and followed a road which, by an insensible curve, left the waterside and gradually entered the plain. This road, after leaving Población, took a rather sharp turn, and suddenly contracted into a path, which, like the rest, appeared to be lost in the plain.

At the corner of the path a horseman, proceeding to the village, at a smart trot, passed the three men; but neither the gauchos nor the stranger, being, doubtless, busy with serious thought,

remarked him. As for the rider, he gave them a rapid and piercing glance, and checked the pace of his horse, which stopped a few yards further on.

"Heaven pardon me!" he said to himself "'tis Don Torribio, or the Fiend, in flesh and bone. What can he be doing there in the company of those two bandits, who look to me exactly like imps of Satan? May I lose my name of Blas Salazar, if I won't find out, and set myself at their heels."

And he quickly dismounted. Señor Blas Salazar was a man of five-and-thirty at the most, rather above the average height, and somewhat corpulent; but, on the other hand, the squareness of his wide shoulders and his sturdy limbs indicated his muscular strength. A small gray eye, quick and sparkling with intelligence and boldness, lit up his open and frank countenance. His dress, with the exception of being a little more elegant, was that of the gauchos.

So soon as he dismounted he looked round, but there was no one to whom he could give his horse to hold; for at Carmen, especially in the Población del Sur, it is almost a miracle for two persons to meet. He stamped his foot angrily, passed the bridle over his arm, led his horse to the pulquería the gauchos had just left, and entrusted it to the landlord.

This duty performed, for the best friend of an Hispano-American is his horse, Blas retraced his footsteps with the most minute precautions, like a man who wishes to surprise and himself remain unseen. The gauchos were ahead of him, and disappeared behind a shifting sand ridge, at the moment he turned the corner in the road. Still he soon saw them again, climbing up a steep path, that led to a thick clump of trees. A few trees had grown in these dry sands by accident, or a caprice of Nature.

Sure now of finding them, Blas walked on more slowly, and in order to remove any suspicion about his object, he lit a cigarette. The gauchos, fortunately for him, did not look round once, but entered the wood after the man whom Blas had recognized as Don Torribio Carvajal. When Blas, in his turn, reached the skirt of the wood, instead of entering the wood immediately, he took a slight bend to his right, and then stooping down, began crawling on his hands and knees with the greatest caution, in order not to arouse the attention of the gauchos by any noise.

In a few minutes voices reached his ear. He then raised his head softly, and saw the three men standing together and talking eagerly in a clearing about ten paces from him. He rose, concealed himself behind a maple tree and began listening.

Don Torribio had let his cloak fall, and with his shoulder leant against a tree and with his legs crossed, he was listening with visible impatience to what Panchito was saying at this moment. Don Torribio was a man of eight-and-twenty, handsome, tall, and well-built, possessing elegance and nobility in his every movement, and the haughty attitude which is produced by a habit of commanding. Two large quick eyes lit up the oval of his face; two eyes charged, apparently, with lightning, and whose strange fascination it was almost impossible to endure. His flexible nostrils seem to expand through quick passions; a cold mockery was imbedded in the corners of his mouth, which was filled with splendid teeth and surmounted by a black moustache. His forehead was spacious, his skin bronzed by the heat of the sun, and his hair long and silky. Still, in spite of all this prodigality of Nature, his haughty and disdainful expression produced, in the end, a sort of repulsion.

Don Torribio's hands were small and encased in splendid-fitting gloves, and his high-ankled feet were covered by patent leather boots. As for his dress, which was extremely costly, it was in appearance much like that of the gauchos. His shirt collar was fastened with a diamond of enormous value, and his fine-tissued poncho was worth more than five hundred piastres.

Two years before this story, Don Torribio Carvajal arrived at Carmen a stranger to everybody, and all asked themselves, where does he come from? Whence does he get his princely fortune? Where are his estates? Don Torribio had purchased an estancia in the colony, situated some two or three leagues from Carmen, and under pretext of defending it against the Indians, had fortified it, surrounded it with moats and palisades, and mounted six guns. He had thus walled in his existence

and routed curiosity. Though the gates of his estancia were never opened to any guest, he was welcomed by the first families at Carmen, whom he visited assiduously, and then to the great surprise of all, he disappeared for several months. The ladies had wasted their smiles and glances, the men their adroit questions to make Don Torribio speak. Don Antonio Valverde, to whom his post of being governor gave the right of being curious, had not failed to feel some alarm about the handsome stranger, but weary of losing his leisure in inquiries, he left the matter to time, which sooner or later rends asunder the densest veils.

Such was the man who was listening to Panchito in the brake, and all that was known about him.

"Enough!" he said passionately, interrupting the gaucho; "you are a dog, and the son of a dog."

"Señor!" said Panchito, drawing himself up.

"I am inclined to crush you, like the wretch you are."

"Threats to me!" the gaucho shouted, pale with rage, and drawing his knife.

Don Torribio clutched the fellow's wrist with his gloved hand, and twisted it so rudely, that he let the weapon fall with a cry of pain.

"On your knees, and ask pardon," the gentleman said, as he twisted Panchito to the ground.

"No; kill me sooner."

"Begone, villain; you are only a brute beast."

The gaucho rose tottering, his eyes were filled with blood, his lips were livid, and his whole body trembled. He picked up his knife, and approached Don Torribio, who waited for him with folded arms.

"Well, yes," he said; "I am a brute beast, but I love you, after all. Forgive me or kill me, but do not send me away."

"Begone!"

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes."

"To the demon, then."

And the gaucho, with a movement rapid as thought, raised his knife to stab himself.

"I forgive you," Don Torribio said, after checking Panchito's arm; "but if you wish to serve me, be dumb as a corpse."

The gaucho fell at his feet, and covered his hand with kisses, like a dog licking his master, who has chastised it. Corrocho had remained a motionless observer of the scene.

"What power does this strange man possess to be thus beloved?" muttered Blas Salazar, who was still concealed behind his tree.

CHAPTER III. DON TORRIBIO CARVAJAL

After a short silence, Don Torribio continued —

"I know that you are devoted to me, and I have perfect confidence in you; but you are a drunkard, Panchito, and drink is a bad counsellor."

"I will drink no more," the gaucho answered.

Don Torribio smiled.

"Drink, but without destroying reason. In drunkenness people utter words, as you did just now, which cannot be recalled, and are more deadly than a dagger. It is not your master who is now speaking, but the friend. Can I count on both of you?"

"Yes," the gaucho said.

"I am going away; but you must not leave the colony, but be ready for anything. Before all, carefully watch the house of Don Valentine Cardoso, both inside and out. If anything extraordinary happens to him or his daughter Doña Concha, you will immediately light two fires, one on the cliff of the Urubús, the other on that of San Xavier, and within a few hours you will hear from me. Do you promise to execute promptly and devotedly any order of mine, however extraordinary it may appear to you?"

"We swear it."

"That is well. One word in conclusion. Connect yourselves with as many gauchos as you can; try, without exciting suspicion, which always sleeps with one eye open, to collect a band of determined fellows. By the by, distrust Patito: he is a traitor."

"Must he be killed?" Corrocho asked.

"Perhaps it would be prudent, but you would have to get rid of him cleverly."

The two gauchos exchanged a side glance, but Don Torribio pretended not to see it.

"Do you want money?"

"No, master."

"No matter; take this."

He threw to Corrocho a long silk purse, through the meshes of which a great number of gold ounces glittered.

"My horse, Panchito."

The gaucho entered the wood, and almost immediately re-appeared, holding the bridle of a magnificent charger, upon whose back Don Torribio leaped.

"Farewell," he said to them; "prudence and fidelity; any indiscretion would cost your life."

And, after giving the gauchos a friendly nod, he dug his spurs into the horse's sides, and went off in the direction of Carmen, while Corrocho and Panchito went back toward Población del Sur. As soon as they had gone some distance, the bushes in a corner of the brake were shaken, and a face pale with fear peeped out. This head belonged to Patito, who, with a pistol in one hand, and a knife in the other, drew himself up, and looked around with great agitation, while muttering in a low voice —

"¡Canario! kill me cleverly. We shall see, we shall see. ¡Santa Virgen del Pilar! What demons! Well, listening is a good thing."

"It is the only way to hear," someone replied a mocking voice.

"Who's there?" Patito shouted, as he leaped on one side.

"A friend!" Blas Salazar answered, as he came from behind the maple and joined the gaucho, whose hand he shook.

"Ah, ah, capataz, you are welcome. You were listening too, then?"

"I should think so. I took advantage of the opportunity to instruct myself about Don Torribio."

"Well?"

"This caballero appears to me a precious scoundrel, but, with the aid of Heaven, we will ruin his dark schemes."

"So be it!"

"And, in the first place, what do you intend to do?"

"On my word I do not know. There's a buzzing in my ears, 'kill me cleverly.' Corrocho and Panchito are certainly the most hideous villains of the Pampa."

"¡Caramba! I have known them a long time, and at present they alarm me but slightly."

"But me?"

"Nonsense; you are not dead yet."

"I am not much better."

"What, are you afraid? You, the boldest panther hunter of my acquaintance?"

"A panther is, after all, only a panther, and you can get the better of it with a bullet; but the two fellows Don Torribio has let loose on me are demons."

"That is true; so let us proceed to the most important point. Don Valentine Cardoso, whose capataz I am, is my foster brother, that is to say, I am devoted to him body and soul. Don Torribio is forming some infernal plot against my master's family, which I wish to foil. Are you decided to lend me a hand? Two men who have only one will between them can do a great deal."

"Frankness for frankness, Don Blas," Patito answered, after a moment's reflection. "This morning I should have refused, this evening I accept, because I no longer run a risk of betraying the gauchos, my comrades. The position is changed. Kill me cleverly! By Heaven I will avenge myself. I belong to you, capataz, as my knife blade does to its hilt – yours, body and soul, on the word of a gaucho."

"Excellent," said Don Blas, "we shall be able to understand each other. Get on your horse and go and wait for me at the estancia. I shall return there after sunset, and we will draw up the plan of the countermeasure."

"Agreed. Where are you going?"

"To Don Valentine Cardoso."

"This evening, then?"

"This evening."

They then separated. Patito, whose horse was hidden a short distance off, galloped toward the Estancia of San Julian, of which Don Blas was the capataz, while the latter proceeded in great haste toward the Población.

Don Valentine Cardoso was one of the richest landed proprietors in Carmen, where his family had been established since the foundation of the colony. He was a man of about five and forty. As his family originally came from old Castile, he had retained the handsome type of that race, a type which was recognized in his face by the vigorously marked lines, with which was combined a certain air of proud majesty, to which the rather sad eyes imparted an expression of gentleness and kindness.

Left a widower after two too short years of marriage, Don Valentine had kept the memory of his wife locked up in his heart like a sacred relic, and he believed that it was still loving her to devote himself entirely to the education of their daughter Concepción, called more familiarly Concha or Conchita.

Don Valentine lived in the Población of old Carmen, near the fort, in one of the handsomest and largest houses of the colony.

A few hours after the events we have recorded, two persons were seated near a brasero in a drawing room of this mansion.

In this drawing room, elegantly furnished in the French style, a stranger on opening the door might have believed himself transported to the Faubourg St. Germain; there was the same luxury in the paper hangings, the same taste in the choice and arrangement of the furniture. Nothing was wanting; not even an Erard pianoforte, covered with the scores of operas sung at Paris, and, as if better to prove that glory travels a great distance, that genius has wings, the fashionable romance writers and poets filled a buhl cheffonier. Here everything recalled France and Paris, excepting the silver brasero in which the smouldering olive stones indicated Spain. Chandeliers holding pink wax candles lit up this magnificent withdrawing room.

Don Valentine Cardoso and his daughter Conchita were seated near the brasero.

Doña Concha, who was scarcely fifteen years of age, was exquisitely beautiful. The raven arch of eyebrows, traced as with a pencil, heightened the grace of her rather low and pale forehead; her large blue and thoughtful eyes, fringed with long brown lashes, contrasted harmoniously with her ebony black hair which curled round her delicate neck, and in which odoriferous jessamine flowers were expiring in delight. Short, like all true-blooded Spanish women, her waist was exquisitely small. Never had smaller feet trodden in the dance the Castilian grass plots, and never had a more dainty hand nestled in that of a lover. Her movements, careless as those of all the creoles, were undulating and full of *salero* as the Spaniards say.

Her dress, which was charmingly simple, consisted of a dressing gown of white cashmere, embroidered with large silk flowers in bright colours, and fastened round the hips by a cord and tassels. A Mechlin lace veil was carelessly thrown over her shoulders, while her feet were thrust into pink slippers, lined with swan's-down.

Doña Conchita was smoking a tiny husk cigarette, while talking to her father.

"Yes, father," she said, "a ship has arrived to day from Buenos Aires, with the prettiest birds in the world."

"Well, little one?"

"I fancy that my dear little father," she remarked, with an adorable pout, "is not at all gallant this evening."

"What do you know about it, young lady?" Don Valentine replied with a smile.

"No, have you really," she said, bounding with delight in her chair, and clapping her hands, "thought of –"

"Buying you some birds? You will tomorrow see your aviary stocked with parrots, Bengalis, macaws, hummingbirds, in short, about four hundred specimens, you ungrateful little chit."

"Oh, how good you are, father, and how I love you," the girl replied, throwing her arms round Don Valentine's neck, and embracing him several times.

"Enough, enough, madcap. Do you want to stifle me with your caresses?"

"What can I do to requite your kindness?"

"Poor dear, I have only you to love now."

"Say adore, my darling father; for it is adoration you feel for me. Hence, I love you with all the strength God has placed in my heart."

"And yet," Don Valentine said, with a gentle accent of reproach, "you do not fear, naughty girl, to cause me anxiety."

"I?" Concha asked, with an internal tremor.

"Yes, you, you," he said, threatening her tenderly with his finger, "you hide something from me."

"Father!"

"Come, child, a father's eyes can read the heart of a girl of fifteen, and for some days past, if I am not mistaken, I have not been the sole object of your thoughts."

"That is true," the girl replied, with a certain amount of resolution.

"And whom are you dreaming of, little maid?" Don Valentine asked, hiding his anxiety behind a smile.

"Of Don Torribio Carvajal."

"Ah," the father cried, in a choking voice "and do you love him?"

"No," she answered; "listen, father, I will conceal nothing from you. No," she continued, laying her hand on her heart, "I do not love Don Torribio, still he occupies my thoughts; why, I cannot say, but his look troubles and fascinates me, his voice causes me a feeling of undefinable pain; he is handsome, his manners are elegant and noble, he has everything belonging to a gentleman of high caste, and yet something in him, something fatal, checks me, and inspires me with invincible repugnance."

"You romantic girl."

"Laugh at me, ridicule me," she said with a tremor in her voice. "Shall I confess all to you, father?"

"Speak with confidence."

"Well, I have a presentiment that this man will be dangerous to me."

"Child," Don Valentine replied, as he kissed her forehead, "what can he do to you?"

"I do not know; but I am afraid."

"Do you wish not to remain here any longer?"

"Heaven forbid! That would be hastening on the misfortune that threatens me."

"You are losing your head, and taking pleasure in creating chimeras."

At the same moment a man servant announced Don Torribio Carvajal, who entered the room. The young man was dressed in the latest Parisian fashion, and the candles lit up his splendid face.

Father and daughter started.

Don Torribio walked up to Doña Concha, bowed to her gracefully, and offered her a superb bouquet of exotic flowers. She thanked him with a smile, took the bouquet, and almost without looking at it, laid it on a table.

In succession were announced the governor, Don Antonio Valverde, accompanied by his whole staff, and two or three other families, or altogether some fifteen persons. By degrees the conversation grew animated.

"Well, colonel," Don Valentine asked the governor, "What news from Buenos Aires?"

"Our great Rosas," the colonel answered, who was stifling in his uniform, "has again defeated Oribe's Unitarian savages."

"Heaven be praised! Perhaps that victory will procure us a little of that tranquillity which commerce requires."

"Yes," a colonist remarked, "the communications are becoming so difficult that nothing can be sent by land."

"Can the Indians be stirring?" a merchant asked anxiously, on hearing the observation.

"Oh!" the stout commandant interrupted, "There is no danger; the last lesson they received was rude, they will remember it a long time, and not dream of invading our frontiers for many a day to come."

An almost invisible smile played round Don Torribio's lips.

"In case of an invasion, do you consider them capable of seriously troubling the colony?"

"Hum!" Don Antonio answered, "Take them altogether they are poor scrubs."

The young man smiled again in a bitter and sinister manner.

"Excellency," he said, "I am of your opinion; I believe the Indians will do well in remaining at home."

"I should think so," the commandant exclaimed.

"Señorita," Don Torribio said, turning to Doña Concha, "would it be too great a favour to ask you to sing that delicious air from the Black Domino which you sang so exquisitely the other evening?"

The young lady, without farther pressing, sat down to the pianoforte, and sang the romance from the third act in a pure voice.

"I heard that sung in Paris by Madame Damoreau, a nightingale who has flown away, and I cannot say which of you displays more grace or simplicity."

"Don Torribio," Doña Concha answered, "you lived too long in France."

"Why so, señorita."

"Because you have come back a detestable flatterer."

"Bravo!" the governor said with a hearty laugh. "You see, Don Torribio, that our creoles are equal to the Parisian ladies in quickness of repartee."

"Incontestably, colonel," the young man replied; "but leave me alone," he added with an undefinable accent, "I shall soon take my revenge."

And he gave Doña Concha a look that made her shudder.

"I trust, Don Torribio," the governor said, "that you will be present tomorrow at the *Te Deum* chanted in honour of our glorious Rosas?"

"Impossible, colonel; this very evening I start on a compulsory journey."

"What, another of your mysterious excursions?"

"Yes, but this one will not be long, and I shall be back soon?"

"All the better."

"¿Quién sabe?" the young man murmured in a sinister voice.

Doña Concha, who had heard the last words, was not mistress of her terror.

The visitors took leave one after the other, and Don Torribio Carvajal was at length left alone with his hosts.

"Señorita," he said on taking leave, "I am setting out on a journey in which I shall doubtless incur great dangers. May I hope that you will deign to remember the traveller in your prayers."

Concha looked at him for a moment in the face, and replied with a frankness which was natural to her: —

"Señor Caballero, I cannot pray for the success of an expedition whose object I do not know."

"Thanks for your frankness, mademoiselle," Don Torribio answered without the slightest emotion, "I shall not forget your words."

And after the customary compliments he retired.

"The capataz of San Julian, Don Blas Salazar wishes to speak with Señor Don Valentine Cardoso on important business."

"Let him come in," Don Valentine said to the servant who had announced the capataz in so lengthy a fashion. "Conchita, come and sit by my side on this sofa."

Don Torribio was extremely agitated when he left the house; he turned round and darted a viper glance at the windows of the drawing room, across which Doña Concha's light shadow flitted.

"Proud girl," he said in a hollow and terrible voice, "I shall punish you for your disdain."

Then, wrapping himself in his cloak, he went at a rapid pace to a house situated a short distance off, where he generally lived when at Carmen. He knocked twice; the gate opened and closed after him.

Twenty minutes later the gate opened again to let two horsemen pass out.

"Master, where are we going?" one asked.

"To the tree of Gualichu," the other replied; and added in a whisper, "to seek vengeance."

The two horsemen entered the darkness, and the furious gallop of their horses was soon lost in the silence of night.

CHAPTER IV. THE TREE OF GUALICHU

As a general rule, the Southern natives have a divinity, or to speak more correctly, a genius, sometimes benevolent, but more frequently maleficent, and their worship is less veneration than fear. This genius is called Achellenat Kanet by the Patagonians, Quecuba by the Aucas, and Gualichu by the Puelches. And, as the latter have more especially traversed the country in which the sacred tree stands, they have perpetuated the name of their evil genius by giving it to the tree, to which they attribute the same power.

The belief in Gualichu dates back to the most remote antiquity on the Pampas.

This wicked god is simply a stunted tree, which, if mingled with other trees, would not have attracted attention; but which alone, and as it were lost in the immensity of the plains, serves as a beacon to the traveller wearied by a long journey across these oceans of sand. It rises to a height of thirty-five or forty feet, all twisted and prickly, and its withered trunk is rounded into a large cavity, in which men and women lay their presents in tobacco, beads, and corn. It is several centuries old, and belongs to that species of the acacia family which the Hispano-Americans designate by the name of *Algarobo*.

The wandering hordes of Indians, doubtless struck by the solitude of this tree in the midst of the deserts, constituted it the object of their worship. In fact, its branches are covered with various offerings, many of some value: here a poncho, there a manta; farther on woollen or cotton ribbons; while on all sides garments, more or less injured and torn by the wind, are affixed to the thorns, which gives this sacred tree the appearance of an old clothes' shop. No Indian, whether Aucas, Patagonian, Puelche, or Tehuette, would venture to pass it without leaving something; and the man who has nothing else cuts off his horse's mane and fastens it to the tree. The most precious offering in the sight of the Indians is that of their horse; and hence the great number of slaughtered horses round the tree attests the vitality of their faith.

The religion of the Southern natives, thoroughly primitive and spared by the conquest, does not take the moral being into account, and is only arrested by accidents of Nature, of which it makes gods. These people strive to make the deserts, where fatigue and thirst produce death, and the rivers that may swallow them up, favourable to them.

At the foot of the tree of Gualichu, a few hours after the events already narrated, a strange scene was taking place, rendered still more striking by the density of the darkness, and by the storm which was approaching. Heavy black clouds rolled athwart the sky; the wind blew in gusts with a shrill whistle, and large drops of rain fell on the sand.

Around the sacred tree the Indians had improvised a village composed of some forty toldos raised hastily and without regularity. Before each toldo crackled a bright fire, round which two or three Indian squaws were crouching to warm themselves, without taking their eye off the hobbled horses which were devouring their stock of *alfalfa*.

An immense fire, resembling a funereal pyre, flamed a few paces from the tree of Gualichu, and was surrounded by twenty Indians, who stood apathetic and contemplative, and whose grand war paint led to the supposition that they were preparing for an important ceremony of their worship.

Suddenly a shrill whistle cleft the air, and announced the arrival of two horsemen; one of them dismounted, and threw his horse's bridle to his comrade, and walked into the circle formed by the warriors. This man wore the uniform of an officer of the Chilian army.

"I salute my brothers," he said, looking round him, "may Gualichu protect them."

"Salutation to Pincheira," the Indians responded; "are all the chiefs assembled?" he continued.

"All," a voice replied, "with the exception of Nocobotha, the grand Toqui of the Aucas."

"He will not be long; let us wait."

The silence had been scarce established, ere a second whistle was heard, and two fresh horsemen entered the circle of light projected by the fires.

Only one man dismounted. He was tall and fierce-looking, and dressed in the costume of the Aucas warriors, the most civilized and intelligent Indian nation in the whole of South America. These were the men who, almost unarmed, repulsed Almagro and his cuirassed soldiers in 1555, who triumphed over the unhappy Valdivia, and who, though constantly fought by the Spaniards, were never vanquished. The Aucas offered an asylum to the Incas whom Pizarro hunted like wild beasts, and who, as a reward for their hospitality, introduced among these Indians their own advanced civilization. By degrees the two nations became fused, and their hatred of the Spaniards has been perpetuated up to our day.

The warrior who had first entered the circle of Indian chiefs, was one of the most perfect types of this indomitable race; all his features bore the distinctive character of the haughty Incas, who were so long masters of Peru. His costume, differing from that of the Patagonians, who employ the skins of beasts, was composed of woollen cloth striped with silver. A blue *chaman* covered his body from the waist, where it was fastened with a woollen girdle down to the knee; in this way exactly resembling the *chilipa* of the gauchos, who borrowed from the Indians this garment and the short blue and red striped poncho; his boots armed with silver spurs, and cleverly sewn with the tendons of animals, were made of the tanned hide of the *guemul*, a species of llama; his hair was divided at the back of the head into three tails, fastened together at the end with a tuft of wool, while in front the rest of his hair was raised and fastened with a blue ribbon, which, after three turns, fell on one side, and terminated in small pieces of rolled up silver. His brow was girt by a circle of massive gold, a species of diadem, three inches in width, and in the centre of which sparkled a sun composed of precious stones; a diamond of enormous value hung from each of his ears; his cloak of guanaco skins which fell down to the ground, was held on his shoulders by a silk cord, and was fastened with a diamond. Two six-chambered revolvers glistened in his waist belt; on his right hip hung a machete, or short sabre with a very wide blade, and he held in his hand a double-barrelled rifle.

This warrior, on his arrival, created a lively sensation among the chiefs; all bowed before him respectfully, while murmuring with delight —

"Nocobotha! Nocobotha!"

The warrior smiled proudly, and took his place in the first rank of the chiefs.

"The nacurulu (*Bubo Magellanicus*) has sung twice," he said; "the osprey of the Rio Negro has raised its melancholy cry; the night is drawing to a close; what have the chiefs of the great nations resolved?"

"It would be useful, I think," one of the Indians answered, "to implore the protection of Gualichu for the council."

"The advice of my brother, Metipan, is wise. Let the *matchi* be warned."

While a chief went off to fetch the *matchi*, or sorcerer, another chief quitted the circle, went up to Nocobotha, whispered something to him, and then returned to his place. The Toqui of the Aucas laid his hand on his machete, and shouted in a loud and menacing voice —

"A traitor is among us! Attention, brothers."

A shudder of passion ran through the ranks, and each Indian looked at his neighbour.

"He must die!" they shouted unanimously.

"It is well," Nocobotha answered.

These words, spoken in Indian, must reach the traitor's ear as a vain sound, for the Aucas dialect is not generally understood by the Spaniards.

Still, a man, clothed like the other chiefs, and protected by the darkness, suddenly bounded far out of the circle, and uttered three different times the hoarse croak of the urubús. He leant against the trunk of the tree of Gualichu, and with his legs far apart, and a pistol in each hand, waited. This man was Pedrito, the bombero.

A living wall, formed of hundreds of Indians, rose in arms before him, and menaced him from all sides. Pedrito, to whom flight was impossible, frowned, gnashed his teeth, and foamed with rage.

"I am waiting for you, dogs," he yelled.

"Forward! Forward!" the Indians shouted.

"Silence!" Nocobotha ordered in a rough voice. "I wish to question him."

"What good is it?" Pincheira remarked, with a hateful expression. "He is one of those rats of the Pampa, whom the Spaniards call bomberos. I recognize him. Let us kill him at once."

"A bombero," the Indians yelled anew. "Death to him, death."

"Silence," said Nocobotha, "who dares to interrupt?"

At the command of the master silence was reestablished.

"Who are you?" the Toqui asked the bombero; "Who are you?" Pedrito replied with a grin, and crossing his arms, though he did not let go his pistols.

"Answer, if you would not die; you are in my power."

"A brave man only belongs to himself. He has always the resource of letting himself be killed."

"Perhaps so."

"Try to take me."

"Surrender, and no harm will be done you."

"A bombero never surrenders."

"Why did you introduce yourself among us?"

"¡Canario! I came to witness your Indian jugglery, and learn the object of this nocturnal meeting."

"You are frank, at any rate, and I will take that into consideration. Come! Resistance would be useless, so surrender."

"Are you mad, my master?"

"Forward!" Nocobotha, who was boiling with rage, shouted to the Indians.

The latter rushed on. Two pistol shots were fired, and two Indians writhed on the sand. While the others hesitated, Pedrito returned his pistols to his belt, and drew his machete.

"Make way," he shouted.

"Death!" the warriors repeated.

"Way, way!"

And Pedrito dashed at the Indians, hitting right and left, cutting and pointing. Nocobotha threw himself in his path, with the roar of a wounded lion.

"Ah, ah," said the bombero, "my worthy chief, with the diamond sun, it is our turn."

All at once three shots were fired behind the Indians, and three horsemen dashed upon them, scattering terror and death around. The Indians, not knowing how many enemies they had to contend with, believed, owing to the darkness and the number of dead, that a considerable reinforcement had arrived, and began dispersing in all directions, with the exception of the more resolute, who held their ground and continued to resist the assailants. Among these were Nocobotha, Pincheira, and a few renowned chiefs.

The three bomberos, summoned by the hoarse croaking of Pedrito, had hastened up to their brother; they helped him to get onto the saddle of the horse they had brought up for him.

"Ah!" they shouted, "Down with the Indian dogs!"

Nocobotha dealt the Spaniard a blow with the machete, to which he responded by a cut that scarred his adversary's face. The Toqui uttered a cry, not of pain but of rage.

"Eh," the bombero said to him, "I shall recognize you, if ever we meet again, for you bear my marks."

"Villain!" the chief said, as he fired a pistol at him.

"Ah!" Pedrito muttered in his turn, as he sank in his saddle.

He would have fallen had not his sword prevented him.

"He has killed me," the wounded man said, in a faint voice. "Courage, brothers, do not leave my corpse to them."

The three bomberos, supporting their brother, redoubled their ardour to get him away from inevitable destruction; but how were they to fly? The Indians, when the first moment of panic had passed, being able to count their enemies, returned to the charge and threatened to overwhelm them by their numbers. The position was horrible, and Pedrito, who had retained his coolness, understood that his brothers were about to ruin themselves for him, so, sacrificing his life to save them, he shouted —

"Fly! Leave me alone here; in a few minutes I shall be dead."

"No!" they replied, making their horses prance to ward off the blows, "We will all get away or perish together."

Pedrito, who knew his brothers, was not ignorant that their resolution was unbending.

The fight was going on at this moment, two yards at the most from the tree of Gualichu, Pedrito, while his brothers were defending themselves on all sides at once, slipped down to the ground, and when the bomberos turned round, they found his horse without its rider. Pedrito had disappeared.

"He is dead, what is to be done?"

"Obey him, as we were unable to save him," Juan answered.

"Forward, then!"

And all three, tearing up their horses' sides with their spurs, bounded into the thick of the Indians. The collision was terrible; still, a few seconds later, the bomberos, saved from danger by their incredible audacity, were flying, like the wind, in three different directions, while uttering cries of triumph.

The Indians recognized the inutility of a pursuit across the sand; so they contented themselves with picking up their dead and counting the wounded, altogether some thirty victims.

"These Spaniards are perfect demons, when they are obstinate," Pincheira said, remembering his own origin.

"Yes," Nocobotha answered him, mad with fury, "if ever I place my foot on their chest, they will expiate the wrongs they have done my race for centuries."

"I am entirely devoted to you," Pincheira continued.

"Thanks, my friend. When the hour arrives, I shall remind you of your promise."

"I shall be ready; but at present what are your designs?"

"The scar that madman has made on my head compels me to fire the train as soon as possible."

"Do so, I pray; and let us finish with these accursed Spaniards so soon as we can."

"Then you really hate your countrymen?"

"I have an Indian heart, and that is saying enough."

"I will soon procure you the opportunity to slake your vengeance."

"May heaven hear you!"

"But the chiefs have again assembled round the council fire; come, brother."

Nocobotha and Pincheira approached the tree of Gualichu, where the Indians were grouped, motionless, silent, and calm, as if nothing had disturbed their gathering.

CHAPTER V. THE COUNCIL OF THE ULMENS

The Indians, while collecting their dead, sought in vain the corpse of the white man, and persuaded themselves that his comrades had carried it off. The latter, on the other hand, reproached themselves bitterly for having left their brother's body in the hands of the Pagans.

Now, what had become of Pedrito?

The bombero was one of those iron men, whom a powerful will leads to their object, and whom death alone can conquer. He wished, therefore, to be present at the council of the chiefs, the high import of which he suspected; and instead of throwing his life away in an unequal struggle, he found in Nocobotha's shot the pretext he was seeking. As time pressed, he pretended, to be mortally wounded, and both friends and enemies had been duped by his stratagem.

So soon as he had slipped down off his horse, by favour of the darkness and combat, he was able, either by crawling like a lizard, or leaping like a cougar, to hide himself in the hollow trunk of the tree of Gualichu. There he buried himself beneath a pile of objects offered by the devotion of the Indians, and was as safe as in the fortress of Carmen. However, like a bold hunter, who has always time to be killed, he had not thrown his weapons away. His first care was, without respect for Gualichu, to wrap up his arm in a piece of cloth, in order to prevent the flow of blood from his wound; then he arranged himself as well as he could, with his head thrust slightly forward, to see the scene that was about to take place.

All the chiefs were already assembled, and Lucaney, Ulmen of the Puelches, was the first to speak.

"The Spaniard who dared to introduce himself among us, in order to violate the secret of our deliberations, is dead; we are alone; let us begin the ceremony."

"It shall be done, according to the desire of my brother, the Ulmen of the Puelches," Nocobotha answered; "where is the wise matchi?"

"Here," said a tall, thin man, whose face was striped in different colours, and who was dressed like a woman.

"Let the wise matchi approach and accomplish the rites."

"A matchitun is necessary," the sorcerer said, in a solemn voice.

The usual preparations for this conjuration were immediately made. Two lances were planted, one on the right, one on the left of the sacred tree; on the left hand one were hung a drum, and a vessel filled with fermented liquor; twelve other vessels, containing the same liquor, were ranged in a circle from one lance to the other. A sheep and a colt were brought in, and deposited near the vessels, and two old squaws placed themselves by the side of the drum. The preparations terminated, the matchi turned to Nocobotha.

"Why does the Ulmen of the Aucas ask for the matchitun?" he asked.

Metipan stepped out of the circle.

"An hereditary hatred has for a long time separated the Aucas and the Pehuenches," he said; "the interest of all the great nations desires the end of this hatred. Kelzulepan, my ancestor, Ulmen of the Pehuenches, carried off a white slave belonging to Medzeliputzi, Toqui of the Aucas, and great grandfather of Nocobotha."

"Before the assembled chiefs, in the face of heaven, I have come to tell Nocobotha, the descendant of Yupanqui, the son of the sun, that my ancestor behaved badly to his, and I am ready, in order to extinguish all discord, past, present, and future, to give him here a white, young, lovely, and virgin slave."

"I give up, before Gualichu," Nocobotha answered, "the hatred which my nation and I had sworn against you and yours."

"Does Gualichu approve our conduct?" Metipan asked.

The matchi seemed to reflect profoundly.

"Yes," he replied, "you have gained the protection of Gualichu; let the white slave be brought up; perhaps he will demand that she should be surrendered to him, instead of belonging to a man."

"His will be done," both Ulmens said.

Two warriors led up a girl of about seventeen, and placed her between the lances, with her face turned to the tree of Gualichu. On seeing her, Pedrito felt a cold perspiration break out all over him, and a mist covered his eyes.

"Whence comes this strange emotion?" the bombero muttered to himself.

The girl's large black eyes had an expression of gentle melancholy. She was dressed after the fashion of the Pehuenche women; the woollen *quedito* was rolled round her body, fastened on the shoulders by two silver pins, and on her limbs by a *kepike*, or silken girdle, six inches in width, and secured by a buckle. The two ends of a square *pilken*, like a cloak, was fastened on her chest by a *topu*, adorned with a magnificent head in gold. She had on her neck two collars of beads, and on each of her arms four bracelets of glass, pearls, and silver balls. Her long black hair was parted down the centre into two tresses, tied up with blue ribbons, which floated on her shoulders, and terminated in bells; on her head was a conical cap of blue and red beads.

At this graceful apparition the Indians, who are very fond of white women, could not, despite their natural stoicism, restrain a murmur of admiration.

At a signal from the matchi the ceremony began. The two old squaws beat the drum, while the spectators, guided by the sorcerer, struck up a symbolical song while dancing round the captive.

The drum ceased with the song; then the matchi lit a cigar, inhaled the smoke, and thrice perfumed the tree, the animals, and the maiden, whose bosom he at the same time laid bare. He put his mouth to it and began sucking till he drew blood, and the poor child made superhuman efforts not to shriek. The dancing, accompanied by song, began again, and the old women beat the drum with all the strength of their arms. Pedrito, full of compassion for the innocent victim of Indian superstition, longed to fly to her help.

In the meanwhile, the matchi, with his swollen cheeks, gradually became more excited; his eyes grew bloodshot, he seemed possessed by the demon, and all at once became furious; he writhed and behaved like an epileptic. Then the dance ceased, and Metipan, with a stroke of his machete, cut open the flank of the colt, tore out its still palpitating heart, and gave it to the sorcerer, who sucked the blood, and employed it to make a cross on the maiden's brow. The latter, suffering from inexpressible terror, began to tremble violently.

The storm, which had been gathering in the clouds, at length broke out. A blue flash shot athwart the sky, the thunder rolled with a terrible din, and a blast of wind dashed over the plain, sweeping away the toldos, the fragments of which it dispersed far and wide.

The Indians stopped, terrified by the storm. All at once a formidable voice, that appeared to issue from the tree of Gualichu, uttered the ill-omened words.

"Retire, Indians! My wrath is let loose upon you. Leave here this miserable white slave as an expiation of your crimes! Fly, and woe to those who look back. Woe! Woe!"

A livid flash and a violent peal of thunder served as peroration to this harangue.

"Let us fly!" said the matchi, who in his terror was ready to believe in his god.

But, profiting by this unexpected intervention to enforce his own power, he continued —

"Fly, brothers! Gualichu has spoken to his servant. Woe to those who resist his orders."

The Indians had no need of this recommendation from their sorcerer; a superstitious terror lent them wings. They rushed tumultuously toward the horses, and soon the desert echoed again

with their wild flight. The tree of Gualichu was deserted, and the maiden alone lay fainting on the ground, with her bosom still bare.

When all was quiet on the Pampa, and the sound of the horses' gallop was lost in the distance, Pedrito gently thrust his head out of the tree, examined the black depths of the night, and reassured by the silence, ran up to the girl. Pale as a beauteous lily laid low by the storm, the poor girl had her eyes closed, and did not breathe. The bombero raised her in his muscular arms, and transported her close to the tree, laying her on a pile of skins belonging to a destroyed toldo. He placed her cautiously on this softer couch, and her head hung insensibly on his chest.

It was a strange group, in the midst of this devastated plain, only illumined by the lightning flashes. This young and lovely girl, and this rude wood ranger, offered a touching picture.

Pain and sorrow were delineated on Pedrito's face. He, whose whole life had been but one long drama, who had no faith in his heart, who was ignorant of gentle feelings and sweet sympathies, he, the bombero, the slayer of Indians, was moved and felt something new stir within him. Two heavy tears ran down his bronzed cheeks.

"Can she be dead? Oh Heaven!"

This name, which he had hitherto only used in blasphemy, he uttered almost with respect. It was a sort of prayer and cry from his heart. This man believed.

"How to help her?" he asked himself.

The rain that fell in torrents eventually restored the maiden, who, half opening her eyes, murmured in a faint voice;

"Where am I? What has happened?"

"She speaks, she lives, she is saved," Pedrito exclaimed.

"Who is there?" she asked, raising herself with difficulty.

At the sight of the bombero's gloomy face, she had a fresh outburst of terror, closed her eyes again, and fell back exhausted.

"Reassure yourself, my girl. I am your friend."

"My friend! What means that word? Have slaves any friends? Ah, yes," she continued, speaking as if in a dream, "I have suffered terribly. Still I can remember long, long ago, being happy, but alas! The worst misfortune is the recollection of past happiness in misery."

She was silent. The bombero gazed at her, and listened to her as if suspended on her lips. That voice, those features! A vague suspicion entered Pedrito's head.

"Oh, speak, speak again," he said, softening down the harshness of his voice, "what do you remember of your youthful years?"

"Why think of past joys in misfortune? What does it avail?" she added, shaking her head with discouragement. "My history is that of all unfortunate persons. There was a time when, like other children, I had the song of birds to lull me to sleep, flowers that smiled on me when I awoke, and a mother who loved and embraced me – all that has fled forever."

Pedrito had raised two poles covered with skins to shelter her from the storm, which was gradually subsiding.

"You are kind, for you have saved me; still, your kindness was cruel, for why did you not let me die? People who are dead no longer suffer. The Pehuenches will return, and then – "

She did not conclude, and buried her face in her hands, with choking sobs.

"Fear nothing, señorita; I will defend you."

"Poor man; alone against all! But before my last hour arrives, listen to me, for I wish to relieve my heart. One day I was playing in my mother's arms, my father was near us, with my two sisters and my four brothers, resolute men who would not have feared twenty. Well! the Pehuenches came up, they burned our estancia, for my father was a farmer, they killed my mother, and – "

"Mercedes, Mercedes!" the bombero exclaimed, "Is it really you? Do I find you again?"

"That was the name my mother gave me."

"It is I, Pedro, Pedrito, your brother," the bombero said, almost shouting with joy, and clasping her to his bosom.

"Pedrito! My brother! Yes, yes, I remember. Pedrito, I am – "

She fell senseless into her brother's arms.

"Wretch that I am, I have killed her! Mercedes, my beloved sister, come to yourself again, or I shall die."

The maiden opened her eyes again, and threw herself on the bombero's neck, weeping with joy.

"Pedrito! My kind brother, do not leave me, defend me; they would kill me."

"Poor girl, they will pass over my body before reaching you."

"They will do so," a sarcastic voice exclaimed behind the tent.

Two men appeared, Nocobotha and Pincheira. Pedrito, holding his sister, who was half-dead with terror, with his left hand, leant against one of the posts, drew his machete, and prepared for a vigorous defence.

Nocobotha and Pincheira, too enlightened to be the dupes of the mysterious voice of Gualichu, and yield to the general panic, had, however, fled with their comrades; but they had turned back unnoticed. Curious to know the meaning of this enigma, and the author of the mystification, they had listened to the entire conversation between brother and sister.

"Well," Pincheira said, with a laugh, "you seem tolerably lively for a dead man. It seems, Canario, that you must be killed twice, in order to make sure that you will not recover. But, be easy, if my friend missed you, I shall not do so."

"What do you want with me?" Pedrito said. "Let us pass."

"Not at all," Pincheira replied, "that would be rather too dangerous an example. And stay," he added, after listening, "do you hear that galloping? your affair is as good as settled, there are our *mosotones* coming back."

In fact, the sound of a cavalcade momentarily drew nearer, and in the pale gleam of dawn the dim outlines of numerous horsemen could be distinguished in the distance. Pedrito saw that he was lost; he kissed for the last time the pale brow of his unconscious sister, laid her behind him, crossed himself, and prepared to die as a brave man should.

"Come," said Nocobotha, "let us have an end of this; it looks as if this scoundrel were afraid of death."

"Make haste," Pincheira answered, "I hear our men, and if we do not make haste, our prey will be torn from us."

"You did not fancy you were speaking so truly, Señor Pincheira," Pepe exclaimed, suddenly appearing with his two brothers; "now, let us see who is to be killed."

"Thanks, my brave brothers," Pedrito said joyously.

"Malediction!" Pincheira said with an oath, "Are these scoundrels everywhere?"

"I will not have him escape me," Nocobotha muttered, as he bit his lips till the blood came.

"Fie on you, caballeros," Pepe exclaimed ironically. "On guard, defend yourselves like men, or I shall kill you like dogs."

The blades crossed, and the fight began with equal fury on both sides.

CHAPTER VI. NOCOBOTHA

A struggle to the death was preparing between these irreconcilable enemies, the bomberos and the Indians; and on this occasion it seemed as if the advantage would be on the side of the brothers.

Mercedes, who had recovered from her fainting fit, felt so terrified that she regretted that she had awoken again.

After the first collision, Nocobotha fell back a step, lowered his weapon, made Pincheira a sign to imitate him, and with folded arms walked towards the brothers.

"Stay," he cried, "this fight will not take place; it is not proper for men to risk their lives in disputing for the possession of a woman."

An ironical smile contracted the bronzed faces Of Pedrito's brothers, while Pincheira stamped his foot impatiently. The Indian chief continued, without heeding these marks of disapproval —

"A man's blood is precious. Take away your sister, my good fellow. I give her to you; may she be happy with you."

"Our sister!" the three young men exclaimed with amazement.

"Yes," Pedrito said; "but what conditions do you exact?"

"None," the chief answered nobly.

Nocobotha's generosity was the more disinterested because the bomberos perceived by the first rays of the rising sun a band of nearly one thousand Indians, well equipped, and painted and armed for war, who had silently advanced and formed a circle round them.

"Can we," Pedrito asked, "trust to your word, and have we no cause to fear a trap?"

"My word," the Ulmen answered haughtily, "is more sacred than that of a white man. We have, like you, noble feelings, more so, perhaps, than others," he added, pointing to a red line that traversed his face; "we know how to forgive. You are free, and no one will disturb your retreat."

Nocobotha followed the thoughts of the bomberos on their faces. The latter felt themselves conquered by the magnanimity of the chief, who smiled triumphantly on divining their astonishment and confusion.

"My friend," he said to Pincheira, "let fresh horses be given to these men."

Pincheira hesitated.

"At once," he said, with a gesture full of supreme grace.

The Chilian, who was a semi-savage, yielding involuntarily to Nocobotha's superiority, obeyed, and five horses of great value, and ready saddled and bridled, were led up by two Indians.

"Chief," Pedrito said, in a slightly shaking voice, "I am not grateful for my life, as I do not fear death; but, in my brothers' names and my own, I thank you for our sister. We never forget an insult or a kindness. Farewell! Perhaps I shall someday have the opportunity to prove to you that we are not ungrateful."

The chief bowed without answering. The bomberos grouped round Mercedes, returned his salute, and went off slowly.

"Well, it was your wish," Pincheira said, shrugging his shoulders in vexation.

"Patience!" Nocobotha answered, in a deep voice.

During this time an immense fire had been kindled at the foot of the tree of Gualichu, where the Indians, whose superstitious fears had been dissipated with the darkness, had again assembled in council. A few paces behind the chiefs, the Aucas and Puelche horsemen formed a formidable cordon round the council fire, while Patagonian scouts dashed about the desert to scare away intruders, and insure the secrecy of the deliberations.

In the east the sun was darting forth its flames, the dry and naked desert was blended with the illimitable horizon; in the distance the Cordilleras displayed the eternal snow of their peaks. Such was the landscape, if we may call it so, in which these barbarous warriors stood, dressed in strange costumes near the symbolic tree. This majestic scene involuntarily recalled other times and other climates, when, by the light of burning towns, the ferocious companions of Attila rushed to the conquest, and rejuvenescence of the Roman world.

Nocobotha took up his speech at the point where it had been interrupted by the unexpected interference of the bombero.

"I thank my brother Metipan," he said, "for the gift of the white slave. From this day our disagreement ceases; his nation and mine will form one and the same family, whose herds will peacefully graze on the same pasturage, and whose warriors will sleep side by side on the war track."

The matchi then lit a pipe, drew a few puffs, and handed it to the two chiefs, who smoked in turn, passing the pipe to each other till the tobacco was entirely consumed. Then the pipe was thrown on the fire by the matchi.

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