

Aimard Gustave

The Insurgent Chief



Gustave Aimard

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Содержание

BOOK I. – THE PINCHEYRAS	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	13
CHAPTER III	20
CHAPTER IV	28
CHAPTER V	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	41

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BOOK I. – THE PINCHEYRAS

CHAPTER I

THE CALLEJÓN DE LAS CRUCES

Although the town of San Miguel de Tucuman is not very ancient, and its construction dates scarcely two centuries back, nevertheless – thanks, perhaps, to the calm and studious population which inhabit it – it has a certain middle age odour which is profusely exhaled from the old cloisters of its convents, and from the thick and gloomy walls of its churches. The grass in the low quarters of the town freely grows in the nearly always deserted streets; and here and there some wretched old house crumbling with age, leaning over the river which washes its foundations, incomprehensible miracle of equilibrium – presents to the curious look of the artistic traveller the most picturesque effects.

The Callejón de las Cruces, especially – a narrow and tortuous street, lined with low and sombre houses – which at one end abuts on the river, and at the other on the street de las Mercaderes, is, without doubt, one of the most singularly picturesque in the town.

At the period of our history, and perhaps at the present time, the greater part of the right side of the Callejón de las Cruces was occupied by a high and large house, of a cold and sombre aspect, whose thick walls, and the iron bars with which its windows were furnished, made it resemble a prison.

However, it was nothing of the sort. This house was a kind of nunnery, such as are often met with even, now in Belgian and Dutch Flanders, so long possessed by the Spaniards, and which served for a retreat for women of all classes of society, who, without having positively taken vows, wished to live sheltered from the storms of the world, and to devote the remainder of their lives to exercises of piety, and works of benevolence.

As the reader has seen, by the description which we gave of the place when it came under notice, this house was thoroughly appropriated to its uses, and there continually reigned around it a peacefulness and a calm which made it rather resemble a vast necropolis than a partially religious community of women.

Every sound died without an echo on the threshold of the door of this gloomy house; sounds of joy, as well as cries of anger – the uproars of *fêtes*, as well as the rumblings on insurrection – nothing could galvanise it, or rouse it from its majestic and sombre indifference.

However, one evening – the very night when the governor of San Miguel had given, at the Cabildo, a ball to celebrate the victory gained by Zeno Cabral over the Spaniards¹ – towards midnight, a troop of armed men, whose measured tread sounded heavily in the darkness, had left the street de las Mercaderes, turned into the Callejón de las Cruces, and, having reached the massive and solidly bolted door of the house of which we have spoken, they stopped.

He who appeared to be the chief of these men had knocked three times with the pommel of his sword on the door, which was immediately opened.

¹ See "The Guide of the Desert."

This man had, in a low voice, exchanged a few words with an invisible person; then, on a sign from himself, the ranks of his troop opened, and four women – four spectres, perhaps – draped in long veils, which did not allow any part of their person to be perceived, entered the house silently, and in a line. Some few words further had been exchanged between the chief of the troop and the invisible doorkeeper of this mysterious house; then the door had been again noiselessly closed, as it had been opened; the soldiers returned by the way they had come, and all was over.

This singular circumstance had transpired without awakening in any way the attention of the poor people who lived in the vicinity. The greater part were assisting at the *fête* in the streets or in the squares of the high quarters of the town; the remainder were sleeping, or were too indifferent to trouble themselves about any noise whatever at so advanced an hour of the night.

So that, on the morrow, the inhabitants of the Callejón de las Cruces would have been quite unable to give the slightest account of what had passed at midnight in their street, at the gate of the Black House as among themselves they called this gloomy habitation, for which they had a strong dislike, and which was far from enjoying a good reputation among them.

Several days had passed since the *fête*, the town had resumed its calm and peaceful appearance, only the troops had not raised their camp – on the contrary, the *Montonera* of Don Zeno Cabral had installed itself at a short distance from them.

Vague rumours, which circulated in the town, gave rise to the belief that the revolutionists were preparing a great expedition against the Spaniards.

Emile Gagnepain – much annoyed at first at being continually the sport of events, and at seeing his free will completely annihilated for the benefit of others, and especially at being obliged, in spite of himself, to be mixed up with politics, when he would have been so happy to pass his days in wandering about the country, and particularly in dreamily stretching himself on the grass – had finished by making up his mind to these continual quarrels in which he could do nothing. He had, till better times arrived, resigned himself to his fate with that philosophic carelessness which formed the foundation of his character; and this the more readily, as he was not long in perceiving that his position as secretary to the Duc de Mantone was rather nominal than actual, and that, in fact, it was a magnificent sinecure, inasmuch as during the fortnight he had been supposed to fulfil its duties, the diplomatist had not given him a syllable to write.

Although both lived in the same house, the patron and the nominal secretary only saw one another rarely, and, ordinarily, did not meet but at meals, when the same table served them. Two or three days sometimes passed without their seeing each other.

M. Dubois, completely absorbed in the intricate combinations of politics, often passed the day in long and serious conferences with the chiefs of the executive power. He had been charged with a very difficult work on the election of the deputies to the general congress, which was about to be held at San Miguel de Tucuman, and in which the independence of the provinces of the ancient vice-royalty of Buenos Aires was about to be proclaimed.

So that, spite of the lively interest which he had in his young countryman, the diplomatist was obliged to neglect him – of which the latter by no means complained; on the contrary, profiting conscientiously by the agreeable leisure which politics gave to him, he gave himself up with delight to the contemplative life so dear to artists, and lounged whole days about the town and country, in quest of picturesque points of view, and of fine landscapes.

This search was by no means unprofitable in a country such as that in which he was accidentally living, where nature, yet but little spoiled or marred by the unintelligent hand of man, possessed that seal of majesty and of grandeur which God alone knows how to impress so royally alike upon the most vast and the meanest works which spring from His all-powerful hands.

The inhabitants, accustomed to see the young man among them, attracted by his handsome and frank countenance, by his gentle manners and his careless air, were, by degrees, familiarised with him; and, notwithstanding that he was a European, and especially a Frenchman – that is to say,

a *gringo* or heretic – had at last come to be very friendly to him, and allowed him to go wherever fancy led him, without following him with an uneasy curiosity, or worrying him with indiscreet questions.

Moreover, in the state of political excitement in which the country was at this time, when every passion was in ebullition, and revolutionary ideas turned every head, it appeared so strange to see a man walking about continually with an unconcerned air, carelessly looking about him with a smile on his lips, and his hands in his pockets, without regret for yesterday or care for tomorrow, that this man justly passed for a kind of phenomenon. Everyone envied him, and felt constrained to love him, by reason even of his placid indifference. He alone, perhaps, did not perceive the effect produced by his presence, when he rambled about the square or the most populous streets of the town; and he continued his promenade without even considering that he was for those whose path he crossed a walking enigma, of which they vainly sought the key. Some even, quite astounded by this magnificent indifference, which they could not comprehend, went so far as to believe that if he were not completely mad, at least he had some tendencies that way.

Emile occupied himself neither with one nor the other. He continued his careless open air life, following with his eyes the birds in their flight, listening for hours together to the mysterious murmur of a cascade, or in rapture with a splendid sunset in the Cordillera. Then, in the evening, he philosophically re-entered his lodging, murmuring between his teeth:

"Is not all this admirable! How much better this than politics! *Parbleu!* He must be an idiot who does not see it. Positively, people are absurd, they are asses! They would be so happy if they would only consent to live carelessly, without seeking to free themselves from their masters. As if, when some masters are gone, others will not immediately come! Positively they are animals fit to eat hay!"

The next day he resumed his walks, and so day after day, without worrying himself about a mode of life so agreeable and happy; and in this he was perfectly right.

The young painter, as we have already said, lived in a house placed at the disposal of M. Dubois by the Buenos Airean Government, and situated on the Plaza Mayor, under the gates. The young man, on stepping out of his house, found himself in face of a wide street, furnished with shops, which led out of the square. This street was the Calle de las Mercaderes. Now, the painter had been in the habit of going straight on, of following the Calle Mercaderes, at the end of which was the Callejón de las Cruces; he then entered the Callejón, and arrived, without any turning, at the river. Thus, twice a day – in the morning in going out, and in the evening in returning from his promenade – Emile Gagnepain passed the entire length of the Callejón de las Cruces.

He stopped sometimes for a considerable time to admire the graceful outline of some gable ends, dating from the earlier years of the conquest, and preferred to traverse this silent and solitary street, where he could freely give himself up to his thoughts without fear of being interrupted, rather than to take the streets of the higher quarters, where it was impossible to take a step without meeting some acquaintance whom he could not have passed without exchanging a few words, or at least without a bow – things which annoyed him much, as they broke the thread of his thoughts.

One morning when, according to custom, Emile Gagnepain had begun his walk, and was pensively traversing the Callejón de las Cruces, at the moment when he was passing the house of which we have spoken, he felt a slight tap on the crown of his hat, as if some light object had struck it, and a flower immediately fell at his feet.

The young man stopped with astonishment. His first movement was to raise his head, but he saw nothing; the old house had still its accustomed mournful and sombre aspect.

"Hum!" murmured he; "What does that mean? This flower, at all events, has not fallen from the sky."

He stooped down, picked it up delicately, and examined it with care.

It was a white rose, scarcely half opened, and still fresh and damp with dew.

Emile remained an instant wrapped in thought.

"Well, that is odd," said he; "this flower has only been gathered a few minutes; is it not to me that it has been thrown? Nay," added he, looking around him, "it would be very difficult to have thrown it to another, for I am alone. This deserves reflection. I must not be carried away by vanity. I'll wait till the evening."

And he continued his walk, after having vainly explored, with an anxious look, all the windows of this solitary house.

This incident, slight as it was, was sufficient to trouble the artist during the remainder of his promenade.

He was young, he believed himself good-looking; and, moreover, he had more than a reasonable share of vanity. His imagination soon carried him away. He called to mind all the love stories he had heard related in relation to Spain; and, putting this and that together, he soon arrived at this conclusion, excessively flattering to his self-love – that a beautiful *Señora*, held prisoner by some jealous husband, had seen him pass under her windows, had felt herself drawn towards him by an irresistible passion, and had thrown him this flower to attract his attention.

This conclusion was absurd, it was true but it immensely pleased the painter, whose self-love, as we have said, it flattered.

During the whole day the young man was burning with anxiety; twenty times he thought of returning, but, happily, reflection came to his aid, and he came to the conclusion that too much haste would compromise the success of his adventure, and that it would be better not again to pass the house till the hour when he was in the habit of returning home.

"In this way," said he, with a knowing air – questioning himself to avoid a disillusion, if, which was possible, he was deceived – "if she expects me, she will throw me another flower; then I will buy a guitar, a mantle the colour of the wall, and I will come like a lover of the time of the Cid Campeador, by starlight, to tell her my love."

But, notwithstanding this mockery, which he addressed to himself as he wandered about, he was much more concerned in the matter than he was ready to confess, and every moment he was consulting his watch to see if the hour for his return was near.

Although we may not be in love – and certainly the painter only felt at this moment a curiosity which he could not explain; for it was impossible for him to entertain any other feeling for a person whom he did not know: nevertheless the unknown – the unforeseen, if you will – has an indefinable charm, and exerts a powerful attraction on certain excitable organisations, which induces them in a moment to build up suppositions which they are not slow to consider as realities, until the truth suddenly comes, as a drop of cold water thrown into a boiling fluid will in a moment stop the evaporation of steam.

When the painter thought the hour had arrived, he turned back towards home. Affecting, perhaps, a little too visibly – if anyone had had an interest in watching his movements and gestures – the manners of a man completely indifferent, he reached the Callejón de las Cruces, and soon arrived near the house.

Spite of himself, the young man felt that he was flushed; his heart beat rapidly, and he had a buzzing in his ears, as when the blood, suddenly excited, rushes to the head.

All of a sudden, he felt a pretty smart shock to his hat.

He briskly raised his head.

Sudden as had been his movement, he could see nothing; only he heard a slight noise as if a window had been cautiously closed.

Disappointed at this second and unsuccessful attempt to perceive the person who was thus interested in him, he remained for a moment motionless; then, recollecting the ridiculousness of his position in the middle of a street, and under the eyes of people who were, perhaps, watching

him from behind a window blind, he resumed his apparent coolness and indifference, and looked on the ground about him for the object which had so suddenly struck him.

He soon perceived it two or three paces from him.

This time it was not a flower. The object, whatever it was – for at first he could not be certain of it – was enveloped in paper, and tied carefully with a purple silk thread several times round the paper.

"Oh, oh!" thought the painter, picking up the little roll of paper, and rapidly hiding it in the pocket of the waistcoat which he wore under his poncho; "This complicates the matter. Are we already to write to one another? The devil! This is making rapid progress, indeed!"

He began to walk rapidly to reach his lodgings; but soon reflecting that this unaccustomed proceeding would astonish people who were in the habit of seeing him, lounging and looking about him, he checked himself, and resumed his ordinary pace.

But his hand was incessantly going to his pocket, to feel the object which he had so carefully deposited there.

"God pardon me," said he, after a time! "I believe it is a ring. Oh, oh! That would be charming! Upon, my word, I return to my first idea – I will buy a guitar, and a mantle the colour of the wall, and in making love to my beautiful unknown – for she is beautiful, I doubt not – I will forget the torments of exile. But," said he, suddenly stopping right in the middle of the square, and throwing up his arms with a desperate air, "if she is ugly! Ugly women have often extraordinary ideas which seize them, they know not why. Ah! That would be frightful! Come! What am I talking about? The devil take me, if I am not becoming stupid! She cannot be ugly, for the very simple, reason that all the Spaniards are pretty."

And reassured by this reasoning, the deduction from which was so pleasant, the young man pursued his journey.

As the reader has been in a position to perceive, Emile Gagnepain loved talking to himself – sometimes even he went to extravagant lengths – but the fault was not his. Thrown by chance in a foreign land, only speaking with difficulty the language of the people among whom he found himself, and not having near him any friend to whom he could confide his joys and his troubles, he was to some extent obliged to make a confidant of himself; so true is it that man is an eminently social animal, and that life in common is indispensable to him, through the incessant want which he experiences in each circumstance of his life, of unburdening his heart, and of sharing with some one of his own species the sweet or painful sentiments which it feels.

While he was still reflecting, the young man arrived at the house which, he occupied in common with M. Dubois.

An attendant seemed to be waiting for his arrival. As soon as he perceived the painter, he quickly approached him, and after having respectfully saluted him —

"I beg your pardon, your lordship," said he to him, "my lord duke has several times asked for you today. He has left orders that as soon as you arrive we should ask you to go to his apartment."

"Very well," he answered, "I will go there immediately."

So saying, instead of turning to the right to enter the part of the house which he occupied, he went towards the great staircase situated at the bottom of the court, and which led to the apartment of M. Dubois.

"Is it not strange," murmured he, mounting the staircase, "that this nuisance of a man, of whom I never know how to speak, should just want me at the very moment when I desire to be alone?"

M. Dubois waited for him in a large room rather richly furnished, in which he was pacing up and down, his head lowered and his arms crossed behind his back, like a man occupied with serious reflections.

As soon as he perceived the young man, he advanced rapidly towards him.

"Oh, you have come!" cried he. "For two hours I have been waiting for you. What has become of you?"

"I! Why, I have been walking. What would you have me do? Life is so short!"

"Always the same!" pursued the duke, laughing.

"I shall take good care not to change; I am too happy as I am."

"Sit down, we have to talk seriously."

"The devil!" said the young man, seating himself on a butaca.

"Why this exclamation?"

"Because your exordium appears to me to be of bad omen."

"Come, you who are so brave!"

"That's possible, but, you know, I have an unconquerable fear of politics, and it is probably of politics that you wish to talk to me."

"You have guessed it at the first trial."

"Then, I was sure of it," said he, with a despairing air.

"This is the matter on hand –"

"Pardon, could you not put off this grave conversation to a later period?"

"Why should I do so?"

"Why, because that would be so much gained for me."

"Impossible!" pursued M. Dubois, laughing; "You must take your part in it."

"Then, since it must be so," said he, with a sigh, "what is the question?"

"Here are the facts in a few words. You know that affairs are becoming more and more serious, and that the Spaniards, who, it was hoped, were conquered, have resumed a vigorous offensive, and have gained some important successes for some time past."

"I! I know nothing at all, I assure you."

"But how do you pass your time, then?"

"I have told you – I walk; I admire the works of God – which, between ourselves, I find much superior to those of men – and I am happy."

"You are a philosopher."

"I do not know."

"In a word, here is the matter in question. The Government, frightened, with reason, at the progress of the Spaniards, wish to put an end to it by uniting against them all the forces of which they can dispose."

"Very sensibly reasoned; but what can I do in all this?"

"You shall see."

"I ask nothing better."

"The Government wishes, then, to concentrate all its forces to strike a great blow. Emissaries have already been dispatched in all directions to inform the generals; but while we attack the enemy in front, it is important, in order to assure their defeat, to place them between two fires."

"That is to reason strategically, like Napoleon."

"Now, our general only is in a position to operate on the rear of the enemy, and to cut off his retreat. This general is San Martin, who is now in Chili, at the head of an army of 10,000 men. Unhappily, it is excessively difficult to traverse the Spanish lines; but I have suggested to the council an infallible means of doing so."

"You are full of schemes."

"This means consists in dispatching you to St. Martin. You are a foreigner; they will not distrust you; you will pass in safety, and you will remit to the general the orders of which you will be the bearer –"

"Or I shall be arrested and hanged."

"Oh! That is not probable."

"But it is possible. Well, my dear sir, your project is charming."

"Is it not?"

"Yes, but on thorough reflection it does not please me at all, and I absolutely refuse it. The devil! I do not care to be hanged as a spy for a cause which is foreign to me, and of which I know nothing at all."

"What you say to me annoys me to the last degree, for I interest myself very much in you."

"I thank you for it, but I prefer that you should leave me in my obscurity. I am unambitiously retiring."

"I know it. Unhappily it is absolutely necessary that you charge yourself with this mission."

"Oh, indeed! It will be difficult for you to convince me of that."

"You are in error, my young friend; on the contrary, it will be very easy to me."

"I do not believe it."

"In this way: it appears that two Spanish prisoners, arrested some days ago at the Cabildo, and whose trial is proceeding at this moment, have charged you in their depositions, asserting that you are perfectly acquainted with their plans – in a word, that you were one of their accomplices."

"I!" cried the young man, starting with rage.

"You!" coolly answered the diplomatist "It was then a question of arresting you; the order was already signed when, not wishing you to be shot, I intervened in the discussion."

"I thank you for it."

"You know how much I love you. I warmly took up your defence, until – forced into my last retrenchments, and seeing that your destruction was resolved upon – I found no other expedient to make your innocence apparent to all, than to propose you as an emissary to General San Martin, asserting that you would be happy to give this pledge of your devotion to the revolution."

"But it is a horrible murder!" cried the young man, with despair; "I am in a fix!"

"Alas; yes, you see me afflicted at it – hanged by the Spaniards, if they take you – but they will not take you – or shot by the Buenos Aireans, if you refuse to serve them as an emissary."

"It is frightful," said the young man, utterly cast down; "never did an honest man find himself in so cruel an alternative."

"On which do you decide?"

"Have I the choice?"

"Why, look – reflect."

"I accept," said he, expressing a strong wish as to the fate of those who had thus entrapped him.

"Come, come, calm yourself. The danger is not so great as you suppose. Your mission, I hope, will terminate well."

"When I dreamed that I had come to America to study art, and to escape politics, what a fine idea I had then!"

M. Dubois could not help laughing.

"Grumble now; later you will relate your adventures."

"The fact is, that if I go on as now, they will be considerably varied. It is necessary that I set out immediately, no doubt?"

"No, we are not going on so rapidly as that. You have all the time necessary to make your preparations. Your journey will be long and difficult."

"How much time can I have to get ready to leave?"

"I have obtained eight days – ten at most. Will that suffice you?"

"Amplly. Once more I thank you."

The countenance of the young man suddenly brightened, and it was with a smile on his lips that he added —

"And during this time I shall be free to dispose of myself as I like."

"Absolutely."

"Well," pursued he, grasping heartily the hand of M. Dubois, "I do not know why, but I begin to be of your opinion."

"In what way?" said the diplomatist, surprised at the sudden change manifested by the young man.

"I believe that all will finish better than I at first thought."

And after having ceremoniously saluted the old man, he left the saloon and went to his apartments.

M. Dubois followed him a moment with his eyes.

"He meditates some folly," murmured he, shaking his head several times. "In his own interest I will watch him."

CHAPTER II THE LETTER

The painter had taken refuge in his apartments, a prey to extreme agitation.

Having reached his bedroom, he doubly locked the door; then, certain that for a time no one would come to thrust him out of this last asylum, he allowed himself to fall heavily on a *butaca*, threw his body backward, leaned his head forward, crossed his arms over his chest, and – an extraordinary thing for an organisation like his – he gave himself up to sad and profound reflections.

At first he called to mind – tormented as he was by the saddest presentiments – all the events which had happened to him since his arrival in America.

The list was long, and by no means pleasant.

At the end of half an hour, the artist arrived at this miserable conclusion – that, from the first moment that he had placed his foot on the New World, Fate had taken a malicious pleasure in falling furiously upon him, and in making him the sport of the most disastrous combinations, spite of the efforts that he had made to remain constantly free from politics, and to live as a true artist, without occupying himself with what was passing around him.

"*Pardieu!*" he cried, angrily striking with his hand the arm of his chair, "it must be confessed that I have no chance! In conditions like these, life becomes literally impossible. Better a hundred times would it have been for me to remain in France, where at least I should have been allowed to live quietly, and in my own fashion! A pretty situation is this of mine – placed here, without knowing why, between the gun and the gallows! Why, it is absurd, it is unheard-of! The devil take these Americans and Spaniards! As if they could not quarrel with one another without bringing into the dispute a poor painter, who has nothing to do with it, and who is travelling as an amateur in their country! They have, indeed, a singular manner of rendering hospitality, these pretty fellows! I compliment them sincerely upon it. And I, who was persuaded, on the faith of travellers, that America was, *par excellence*, the land of hospitality – the country of simple and patriarchal manners. Trust to narratives of travel – those who take such pleasure in leading the public into error, ought to be burnt alive! What is to be done? What is to become of me? I have eight days before me, says that old lynx of a diplomatist, to whom, however, I shall preserve eternal gratitude for his proceedings in my behalf. What a charming compatriot I have met there. How fortunate I have been with him. Well, no matter, I must make up my mind what to do. But what? I see nothing but flight! Hum! flight – that's not easy; I shall be closely watched. Unhappily, I have no choice; come, let me study a plan of escape. Away with the wretched fate which obstinately makes of my life a melodrama, when I employ all my powers to make it a vaudeville!"

Upon this the young man, whose gaiety of disposition gained the victory over the anxiety which agitated him, set himself – half laughing, half seriously – to reflect anew.

He remained thus for more than an hour, without stirring from his *butaca*, and without making the least movement.

It cannot be denied that at the end of that time he was as far advanced as before; that is to say, that he had hit upon nothing.

"Well, I give it up for the present," he cried, rising suddenly; "my imagination absolutely refuses me its aid! It is always so. Well, I, who wanted sensation, cannot complain; it is to be hoped that for some time past I have had enough of it, and of the most poignant sensation too!"

Then he began to stride about his room, to stretch his legs, mechanically rolled up a cigarette, and felt in his pocket for his *mechero* to light it.

In the movement which he made in searching for it, he felt in his waistcoat pocket something which he did not remember to have placed there; he looked at it.

"*Pardieu!*" said he, striking his forehead, "I had completely forgotten my mysterious unknown; but that's accounted for by my vexation! If this lasts only for eight days, I am convinced I shall completely go out of my mind. Let me see what it is that she has so adroitly dropped on my hat."

While he soliloquised, the painter had drawn from his pocket the little roll of paper, and attentively considered it.

"It is extraordinary," continued he, "the influence which women exert, perhaps unknown to ourselves, on the organisation of us men, and how the most trivial thing which comes to us from one of them, who is utterly unknown, immediately interests us."

He remained several moments turning about the paper in his hand, without coming to the resolution to break the silk, which alone prevented him from satisfying his curiosity, all the while continuing in *petto* his speculations on the probable contents of the packet.

At last, with a sudden resolution, he put an end to his hesitation, and broke with his teeth the delicate silk thread, and then unrolled the paper carefully. This paper, which – as the young man had conjectured – served for an envelope, contained another, folded carefully, and covered on every page with fine close writing.

Spite of himself, the young man felt a nervous trembling as he unfolded this paper, in which a ring was enclosed.

This ring was but a simple gold ring, in which was set a Balas ruby, of great value.

"What does this mean?" murmured the young man, admiring the ring, and trying it mechanically on all his fingers.

But although the artist had a very beautiful hand – thing of which, in parenthesis, he was very proud – this ring was so small, that it was only on the little finger that he could succeed in putting it on, and this with some difficulty.

"This person is evidently deceived," pursued the painter; "I cannot keep this ring; I will return it, come what may. But to do that I must know the individual, and I have no other means of obtaining this information except by reading her letter. I'll read it, then."

The artist was at this moment in the singular position of a man who feels himself gliding down a rapid decline, at the foot of which is a precipice, and who, perceiving that he has not the power successfully to resist the impulse which controls him, endeavours to prove to himself that he does right to abandon himself to it.

But before opening the paper, which he apparently held with such a careless hand, and on which he looked so disdainfully – so much, say what we may, is man (that being said to be made in the image of his Maker) always a comedian, even to himself, when no one can see him, because even then he tries to impose upon his self-love – the artist went to try the lock, to see if the door was firmly fastened, and that no one could surprise him; then he slowly returned, sat himself on the *butaca*, and unfolded the paper.

It was, indeed, a letter, written in a fine close hand, but nervous and agitated, which convinced him in a moment that it was a woman's writing.

The young man at first cursorily read it, and feigning to take but moderate interest in it; but soon, spite of himself, he felt himself influenced by what he learned. As he proceeded in his reading, he found his interest increase; and when he had reached the last word, he remained with his eyes fixed on the thin paper which was being crushed in his convulsive fingers; and a considerable time elapsed before he could succeed in conquering the strong emotion that this strange letter had excited.

The following are the contents of this letter, the original of which has for a long time remained in our hands, and which we translate without comment: —

"As an important preliminary, let me, Señor, claim, from your courtesy a formal promise – a promise in which you will not fail, I am convinced, if, as I

have the presentiment, you are a true *caballero*. I demand that you read this letter without interruption from beginning to end, before passing any judgment whatever on her who addresses it to you."

"You have sworn, have you not? Well, I thank you for the proof of confidence, and I begin without further preamble."

"You are, Señor – if, as I believe, I am not deceived in my observation – a Frenchman from Europe: that is to say, the son of a country where gallantry and devotion to women reign supreme, and are so far traditional, that these characteristics form the most salient feature in the men."

"I also am – not a French woman, but born in Europe; that is to say, although unknown to you, your friend, almost your sister on that far-off land; and as such, I have a right to your protection, and I now boldly claim it from your honour."

"As I do not wish that you should at once take me for an adventuress, from the mode, somewhat beyond the rules of society, in which I enter on relations with you, I must first tell you, in a few words, not my history – that would cause you unreasonably to lose precious time – but who I am, and by what motives I am compelled for a time to put aside that timid modesty which never abandons women worthy of the name; and then I will tell you what is the service I ask of you."

"My husband, the Marquis de Castelmelhor, commands a division of the Brazilian army, which, they say, has some days since entered Buenos Airean territory."

"Coming from Peru with my daughter and some servants, with the intention of joining my husband in Brazil – for I knew nothing of the events which had just previously occurred – I have been surprised, carried away, and declared a prisoner of war, by a Buenos Airean *Montonero*; and I and my daughter are now imprisoned in the house which you pass twice a day."

"If it were but a question of a detention more or less protracted, I would resign myself to submit to it, confiding myself to the power and goodness of God."

"But, unhappily, a terrible fate threatens me – a frightful danger hangs not only over my own head, but over that of my daughter – my innocent and pure Eva."

"An implacable enemy has sworn our ruin; he has boldly accused us of being spies, and in a few days – perhaps tomorrow, for this man is thought very highly of by the members of his Government – we shall be brought before a tribunal assembled to judge us, and the verdict of which cannot be doubtful – the death of traitors, dishonour! The Marchioness of Castelmelhor cannot submit to such infamy."

"God, who never abandons the innocent who trust in Him in their distress, has inspired me with the thought of addressing you, Señor, for you alone can save me."

"Will you do it? I believe you will."

"A stranger in this country – sharing neither the prejudices, the narrow ideas, nor the hatred of its inhabitants against Europeans – you ought to make common cause with us, and try to save us, even if it be at the peril of your life."

"I have long hesitated before writing this letter. Although your manners were those of a respectable man – although the frank expression of your countenance, and even your youth, prepossessed me in your favour – I feared to trust myself to you; but when I learned that you were a Frenchman, my fears vanished, to give place to entire confidence."

"Tomorrow, between ten and eleven o'clock in the morning, present yourself boldly at the door of the Black House, and knock. When the door is opened, say that you have heard that a professor of the piano is wanted in the convent, and that you have come to offer your services."

"But be very careful. We are watched with the greatest care. Perhaps it would be better if you were to disguise yourself, to avoid being recognised, in case your proceedings are watched."

"Remember that you are the only hope of two innocent women, who, if you refuse them your help, will die cursing you; for their safety depends on you."

"Tomorrow, between ten and eleven in the morning."

"The most unfortunate of women,"

"Marquise LEONA DE CASTELMELHOR."

No pen could describe the expression of astonishment, mingled with fright, which was painted on the countenance of the young man, when he had finished the reading of this singular letter, which had reached him in so extraordinary a way.

As we have said, he remained a long time with his eyes fixed on the paper, probably without seeing the characters which were written there, his body leaning forward, his hands clenched, a prey to reflections which could not be at all pleasant.

To say nothing of the check to his self-love – a check always disagreeable to a man who for several hours had given his imagination free play in the pleasant land of chimeras, and who had thought himself the object of a sudden and irresistible passion, caused by his good looks and his Don Juan-like appearance – the service which the unknown lady demanded of him could not but considerably embarrass him, especially in the exceptional position in which he found himself at the time.

"Decidedly," murmured he, in a low voice, dashing his hand on the chair with rage, "Fate too furiously pursues me. This is absurd! Here am I asked to be a protector – I, who so much want protection myself! Heaven is not just to permit, without rhyme or reason, a good fellow, who only sighs for quiet, to be thus tormented in every possible circumstance."

He rose, and began to stride about his room.

"However," added he, after a pause, "these ladies are in a frightful position; I cannot abandon them thus, without trying to come to their aid; my honour is engaged in it; a Frenchman, spite of himself, represents France in a foreign country. But what is to be done?"

He sat down again, and appeared to be lost in a deep reverie. At last, in about a quarter of an hour, he again rose.

"That is it," said he; "I see no other means that. If I do not succeed, I shall have nothing to reproach myself with, for I shall have done even more than my actual position, and especially prudence, should permit me to attempt."

Emile had evidently made a resolve.

He opened the door, and went down into the *patio*.

It was almost night; the attendants, freed from their labours, more or less properly accomplished, were resting themselves, reclining on palm-mats, smoking, laughing, and chatting together.

The painter had not long to search for his domestics in the midst of the twenty or five-and-twenty individuals grouped pell-mell on the ground.

He made a sign to one of them to come to him, and he immediately went up again into his room.

The Indian, at the call of his master, immediately rose, in order to obey him.

He Was an Indian Guaraní, still very young; he appeared to be at the most twenty-four or twenty-five, With fine, bold, and intelligent features, a tall figure, of a robust appearance, and with free and unconstrained manners.

He wore the costume of the gauchos of the Pampa, and was named Tyro.

At the call of his master he had thrown away his cigarette, picked up his hat, gathered his poncho round him, and had darted towards the staircase with an alacrity which spoke well for him.

The painter much liked this young man, who, although of rather a taciturn disposition, like all his people, appeared, nevertheless, to entertain some affection for him.

Having reached the sleeping room, he did not pass the door, but, stopping on the threshold, he respectfully bowed, and waited till his master might be pleased to address him.

"Enter, and close the door behind you," said the painter to him, in a friendly tone; "we have some important things to talk about."

"Secrets, master?" asked the Indian.

"Yes."

"Then, with your permission, master, I will leave the door open."

"What is that caprice for?"

"It is not a caprice, master; all these places are rendered noiseless by the mats which cover the ground; a spy can, without being heard, come and put his ear to the door and hear all that we may say, so much the more easily as we, absorbed in our own conversation, should not be aware of his presence; whereas, if all the doors remain open, no one will enter without our seeing him, and we shall not risk being watched."

"What you remark is very sensible, my good Tyro; leave the doors open, then. The precaution cannot do any harm, although I do not believe in spies."

"Does not the master believe in the night?" answered the Indian, with an emphatic gesture. "The spy is like the night; he likes to glide about in the darkness."

"Be it so; I will not discuss the matter with you. Let us come to the reason for which I have called you."

"I am listening, master."

"Tyro, first answer me, frankly, the question which I am about to ask you."

"Let the master speak."

"Bear in mind, that I wish you to speak candidly; but pay particular attention to the form of my question, so as to answer, fully understanding it. Are you towards me only a good domestic, strictly performing your duties; or a devoted servant, on whom I have the right to reckon at all times."

"A devoted servant, master – a brother, a son, a friend. You cured my mother of a disease which appeared incurable. When you bought the rancho, instead of sending her and me away, you preserved to the old woman her *cuarto*, her garden, and her flock. As to me, you have treated me as a man, never commanding me with rudeness, and never obliging me to do shameful or dishonourable things, though I am an Indian. You have always considered me an intelligent being, and not an animal possessed of instinct merely. I repeat, master, I am devoted to you in everything, and forever."

"Thank you, Tyro," answered the painter, with slight emotion; "I half thought what you have just told me, but I was resolved to make you confirm it; for I have need of your services."

"I am ready; but what is to be done?"

Notwithstanding the candour of this avowal, the French painter – little acquainted yet with the character of these primitive races – by no means intended to put the Indian completely in the confidence of his secrets.

Too much civilisation renders us mistrustful.

The Guaraní readily perceived the hesitation of the artist, who, unaccustomed to dissimulation, allowed his countenance to reflect his emotions, as in a mirror.

"The master has nothing to teach Tyro," said he, with a smile; "the Indian knows all."

"What!" cried the young man, with a start of surprise; "You know all!"

"Yes," he merely said.

"*Pardieu!*" pursued the artist; "For the curiosity of the thing, I would not be sorry if you were to inform me how far extends that 'all' of which you so confidently speak."

"That is easy; let the master listen."

Then, to the extreme astonishment of the young man, Tyro related to him, without omitting the least detail, all that he had done since his arrival at San Miguel de Tucuman.

However, by degrees Emile, by a great effort, succeeded in regaining his coolness, reflecting with inward satisfaction that this recital, so complete in other respects, had one omission – an important omission for him; it stopped at that very morning. Tyro knew nothing of the adventure of the Callejón de las Cruces.

But fearing that this omission merely arose from forgetfulness, he resolved to assure himself of it.

"Well," said he, "all that you relate is correct, but you forget to speak about my walks through the town."

"Oh, as to that," answered the Indian, with a smile, "it is useless to occupy myself with that. The master passes all his time in a reverie, looking up at the sky and gesticulating as he walks. At the end of two days it was found that it was not worthwhile to follow him."

"The devil! I have been followed then! I did not know I had friends who took such an interest in me."

An equivocal smile played on the expressive lips of the Indian, but he did not answer.

"You, no doubt, know the person who has thus played the spy?"

"Yes, I know him, master."

"You will tell me his name, then?"

"I will tell you, when the time arrives to do so; but he is but an instrument; besides, if this person spies you at the command of another, I watch him, master, for your sake; and what he has been able to discover is of little importance. I alone possess your secrets, so you may be easy."

"What! You know my secrets!" cried the painter, again provoked at the moment when he least expected it; "What secrets?"

"The white rose and the letter of the Callejón de las Cruces; but I repeat that I alone know it."

"This is too much!" murmured the young man.

"A devoted servant," seriously remarked the Indian, who had heard the "aside" of the painter, "ought to know all, so that when the time comes that his assistance may be necessary, he may be in a position to come to his master's aid."

The artist then decided on doing what most men would have decided on doing, under similar circumstances. Seeing that there was no means of doing otherwise, he determined on giving his entire confidence to the Indian, and he avowed all with the greatest candour – a candour which the Guaraní would have little valued had he known the true reason for it. Though he did not fully admit it to himself, the painter only acted under the pressure of necessity, and, feeling the uselessness of concealing the least thing from so far-seeing a servant, he preferred freely placing himself entirely in the Indian's hands, hoping that this mode of acting would engage him not to betray him. For a moment, the thought crossed his mind to blow the man's brains out; but, reflecting what a ticklish thing this would be, especially in his position, he preferred trying a milder course and a feigned open-heartedness.

Happily for him, the painter had to do with an honest and really devoted man, who with any other person would probably have ruined him, rather than have saved him.

Tyro had for a long time led the life of the gauchos, hunted the Pampa, and explored the desert in all directions. He was thoroughly acquainted with all the Indian schemes. Nothing would

have been easier for him than to have acted as a guide to his master, and have conducted him either to Peru, Buenos Aires, Chili, or even to Brazil.

When confidence was thoroughly established between the two men, though the Frenchman had at first acted with but feigned candour, he was not long in displaying all the artless honesty of his character, happy in meeting in a country, where everybody was hostile to him, a man who manifested sympathy with him, even if this sympathy were more apparent than real. He at once seriously asked the advice of his servant.

"This is what must be done," said the latter. "In this house everything is suspicious; it is filled with spies. Pretend to put yourself in a rage with me, and dismiss me. Tomorrow, at the time of your usual walk, I will meet you, and we will settle everything. Our conversation has lasted too long already, master. Suspicions are awakened. I will go down as if I had been scolded by you. Follow me to the door of the room, speaking in a loud tone, and finding fault with me; then, in a little while, you will come down and dismiss me before everybody. Above all, master," added he, laying stress on these last words, "say nothing till tomorrow to the occupants of the house; do not let them suspect our arrangement: if you do, believe me, you are lost."

Having so said, the Indian withdrew, his finger on his lips.

All was done as had been arranged between master and servant.

Tyro was immediately sent from the house, which he left grumbling, and Emile again went up to his apartment, leaving all the attendants astounded at a scene which they never expected from a man whom they were accustomed to see ordinarily so gentle and tolerant.

The next day, at the same hour as usual, the painter went out for his accustomed walk, taking care, while he feigned the utmost indifference, to return every now and then, to assure himself that he was not followed. But this precaution was needless; no one cared to watch his promenade, so inoffensive was it known to be.

Arrived on the bank of the river, at about a hundred paces from the town, a man, concealed behind a rock, suddenly presented himself to him.

The young man smothered a cry of surprise. He recognised Tyro, the Guaraní servant dismissed by him the previous evening, according to mutual arrangement.

CHAPTER III THE RECLUSES

Almost at the moment when the half hour after ten in the morning had sounded from the clock of the Cabildo of San Miguel de Tucuman, a man knocked at the door of the mysterious house of the Callejón de las Cruces.

This individual, dressed somewhat like the well to-do artisans of the town, was a man of middle height, slightly bent by age; some few grey hairs escaped from under his straw hat, he wore large spectacles with iron frame, and supported himself on a stick. His appearance, on the whole, was very respectable; his well-made olive-green cloth trousers, and his poncho of Chilian make, left nothing to desire.

In a minute or two, a little slide moved in a groove, and the head of an old woman appeared behind.

"Who are you? And what do you want here, Señor?" said a voice.

"Señora," answered the old man, slightly coughing, "excuse my boldness; but I have heard that a professor of music is required in this establishment. If I am deceived, it only remains for me to withdraw, begging you once more to accept my apologies."

While the old man said these few words in the most natural tone, and with the most careless manner, the woman behind the grating examined him with earnestness.

"Wait," answered she, after a slight pause.

The slide was again put back.

"Hum!" murmured the professor, in a low voice, "The place is well guarded."

A noise of drawing bolts and of detaching chains was heard, and the gate was half-opened – just enough to admit one person.

"Enter, then," said, in a surly tone, the woman who had at first shown herself at the grating, and who appeared to be the portress of this convent-like house.

The old man entered slowly, his hat in his hand, and bowing low.

The sight of his bald head, with but here and there a few hairs of reddish grey, appeared to give confidence to the old woman.

"Follow me," said she to him, in a peevish tone, "and replace your hat, these corridors are cold and damp."

The old man bowed, replaced his hat on his head, and, leaning on his stick, he followed the nun with that somewhat trembling step which is characteristic of persons who have considerably passed middle age.

The nun led him through long corridors, which appeared to turn back upon themselves, and which at last opened into a rather spacious cloister, the centre of which was occupied by a mass of rose bushes and orange trees, in the middle of which burst forth a stream of water, which fell with a loud sound into a white marble basin.

The walls of this cloister, towards which opened the doors of some thirty little chambers, were garnished with a number of pictures of a mediocre character, representing various episodes in the life of Our Lady of Solitude, or of Tucuman.

The old man merely threw a disdainful look upon these paintings, half effaced by time and weather, and continued to follow the nun, who trotted on before him, causing at every step a jingling of the heavy bunch of keys suspended to her girdle.

At the end of this cloister there was another, on the whole like the first, only the pictures represented different subjects – the life, I believe, of St. Rosa of Lima.

Arrived nearly halfway through this cloister, the nun stopped, and after having fetched her breath for a minute or two, she cautiously gave too slight taps at a black oak door, curiously sculptured.

Almost immediately a gentle and musical voice pronounced from the interior of the little chamber this single word:

"*Adelante.*"

The nun opened the outer door and disappeared, after having with a sign requested the old man to wait for her.

Some minutes passed, and then the inner door opened, and the nun reappeared.

"Come in," said she, making a sign for him to approach.

"Come, she is not very loquacious, at least," grumbled the old man to himself, as he obeyed; "she is accommodating."

The nun stood on one side to give him passage, and he entered the little room, whither she followed him, closing the door after her.

This little room, with very comfortable furniture in old black carved oak, and the walls of which were covered, in the Spanish fashion, with thin Cordova leather, was divided into two, which was indicated by a door placed in a corner.

Three persons were, at the time, in the room, sitting on high-backed carved chairs.

These three persons were women.

The first, still young and very beautiful, wore the complete costume of a nun; the diamond cross, suspended by a large silk ribbon from her neck, and falling on her breast, at once pointed her out as the superior of the house, which, notwithstanding the simple and sombre appearance of its exterior, was, in reality, occupied by Carmelite nuns.

The two other ladies, seated pretty close to the abbess, wore ordinary costume.

The one was the Marchioness de Castelmelhor, and the other Doña Eva, her daughter.

On the entrance of the old man, who bowed respectfully to them, the abbess made a slight sign of welcome with her head, while the two other ladies, as they bowed to him ceremoniously, furtively cast curious looks at the visitor.

"My dear sister," said the abbess, addressing the old woman, in that harmonious voice which had already agreeably struck the ear of the old man, "bring, I beg you, a chair for this gentleman."

The nun obeyed, and the stranger seated himself with an apology.

"So," continued the abbess, this time addressing herself to the old man, "you are a professor of music?"

"Yes, Señora," answered he, bowing.

"Are you of our country?"

"No, Señora, I am a foreigner."

"Ah!" said she, "You are not a heretic – an Englishman."

"No, Señora; I am an Italian professor."

"Very good. Have you lived long in our dear country?"

"Two years, Señora."

"And before that you were in Europe?"

"Pardon me, Señora; I lived in Chili, where I have for a long time resided at Valparaíso, Santiago, and subsequently at Aconchagua."

"Do you intend to remain among us?"

"I, at least, wish to do so, Señora; unhappily, the times are not favourable for a poor artist like me."

"That is true," pursued she, with interest. "Well, we will try to procure you some pupils."

"A thousand thanks for so much goodness, Señora," he humbly answered.

"You really interest me, and to prove how much I desire to assist you, this young lady will be pleased, for my sake, to take this very day her lesson with you," said she, pointing towards Doña Eva.

"I am at the orders of the young lady, as I am at yours, Señora," answered the old man, with a respectful bow.

"Well, that is agreed," said the abbess; and turning towards the portress, still motionless in the middle of the room, "My dear sister," added she, with a gracious smile, "be so good, I beg you, as to bring in some refreshments. You will return in an hour to accompany this gentleman to the door of the convent."

The portress bowed with a crabbed air, suddenly turned round, and left the room, casting a sour look around her.

There was a silence of two or three minutes, at the expiration of which the abbess gently rose, advanced on tiptoe towards the door, and opened it so suddenly, that the portress, whose eye was placed at the keyhole, stood confused and blushing at being thus surprised in the very act of a spy.

"Ah! You are still there, my dear sister!" said the abbess, without appearing to remark the confusion of the old portress; "I am glad of it. I had forgotten to beg you to bring me, when you return to reconduct this gentleman, my Book of Hours, that I left through forgetfulness this morning in the choir in my stall."

The portress bowed, grumbling between her teeth some incomprehensible excuses, and she went away almost with a run.

The abbess followed her a moment with her eyes, and then she returned, re-closed the door, over which she had let fall a heavy curtain in tapestry, and turning towards the old professor, who scarcely knew what countenance to assume:

"Respectable old man," said she to him, laughing, "cover up the locks of your fair hair, which are indiscreetly escaping from under your grey peruke."

"The devil!" cried the professor, quite taken aback, suddenly putting his two hands to his head, and at the same time letting his cane and his hat fall, the latter rolling several paces from him.

At this unorthodox exclamation, uttered in good French, the three ladies laughed afresh, whilst the disconcerted professor looked at them with fright, not understanding anything which had passed, and arguing nothing favourable to him from this railing and unexpected gaiety.

"Hush!" said the abbess, placing a delicate finger on her rosy lips. "Someone is coming."

They were silent.

She withdrew the curtain. Almost immediately the door opened, after a slight tap had been given to ask permission to enter.

It was two lay sisters, who brought sweets and refreshments, as the abbess had desired.

They placed the whole on a table, and then withdrew with a respectful bow.

The curtain was immediately dropped behind them.

"Do you now believe, my dear marchioness," said the superior, "that I was right in mistrusting our sister, the portress?"

"Oh yes, Madame; this woman, sold to our enemies, is wicked, and I dread for you the consequences of the rude lesson, although merited, that you have given her."

A brilliant flash darted from the black eyes of the young woman.

"It is for her to tremble, Madame," said she, "now that I have in my hand the proofs of her treason; but do not let us care for that," said she, resuming her cheerful countenance; "time presses, let us take our places at the table; and you, Señor, taste our preserves. I doubt whether, in the convents of your country, the nuns make such good ones."

The marchioness, remarking the embarrassed position and the piteous air of the stranger, quickly approached him, and said with a gracious smile —

"It is useless to keep up any further disguise," said she to him; "it is I, Señor, who have written to you; speak, then, without fear before Madame, she is my best friend, and my only protectress."

The painter breathed heavily.

"Madame," answered he, "you remove an immense weight from my breast. I humbly confess that I did not know what countenance to assume in seeing myself recognised so unawares. God be praised, who permits that this may come to a better termination than I feared a little while ago."

"You are an admirable actor, Señor," pursued the abbess; "your hair does not at all come out from under your peruke; I only wished to tease you a little, that is all. Now, drink, eat, and do not worry yourself about anything."

The collation was then attacked by the four persons, between whom the ice was now broken, and who talked gaily to each other. The abbess especially, young and merry, was charmed at this trick she was playing on the revolutionary authorities of Tucuman, in trying to carry away from them two persons to whom they seemed to attach so much importance.

"Now," said she, when the repast was finished, "let us talk seriously."

"Talk seriously – I should like nothing better," pursued the painter; "*apropos* of that, I shall permit myself to recall the phrase that you have yourself uttered – time presses."

"That is true; you are no doubt astonished to see me – the superior of a house which is almost a convent onto whom has been confided the care of two prisoners of importance – enter into a plot, the design of which is to permit them to escape."

"Indeed," murmured the painter, bowing; "that does appear rather strange to me."

"I have several motives for it, and your astonishment will cease when you know that I am a Spaniard, and have no sympathy with the revolution made by the inhabitants of this country, to drive my fellow countrymen out of it, to whom it belongs by every divine and human law."

"That appears to me logical enough."

"Moreover, in my opinion, a convent is not – and cannot, under any pretext, be metamorphosed into a prison. Again, women ought to be always placed out of the region of politics, and be left free to act in their own fashion. In fact, to sum up, the Marchioness de Castelmelhor is an old friend of my family; I love her daughter as a sister, and I wish to save them at all hazards, even if my life is paid for theirs."

The two ladies threw themselves into the arms of the abbess, loading her with caresses and thanks.

"Good, good," pursued she, gently motioning them aside, "let me continue; I have sworn to save you, and I will save you, come what may, my dear creatures. It would be marvellous, indeed," added she, smiling, "if three women, aided by a Frenchman, could not be clever enough to deceive these yellow men, who have made this disastrous revolution, and who believe themselves eagles of intelligence, and the thunderbolts of war."

"The more I reflect on this enterprise, the more I fear the consequences of it for you; I tremble, for these men are without pity," sadly murmured the marchioness.

"Poltroon!" gaily cried the superior; "Have we not the *caballero* with us?"

"With you, ladies, until the last gasp!" cried he, carried away by emotion.

The truth is, that the beauty of Doña Eva, joined to the romance of the situation, had completely subjugated the artist. He had forgotten everything, and only experienced one desire – that of sacrificing himself for the safety of these women, so beautiful and so unfortunate.

"I knew well that I could not be deceived!" cried the abbess, holding out to him her hand, which the painter respectfully raised to his lips.

"Yes, ladies," pursued he, "God is my witness, that all that is humanly possible to do to assure your flight, I will attempt; but, doubtless you have not addressed yourselves to me without concerting a plan. This plan it is indispensable that you make me acquainted with."

"*Mon dieu*, Sir!" answered the marchioness, "This plan is very simple, one such as women alone are capable of concocting."

"I am all attention, Madame."

"We have no acquaintance in this town, where we are strangers, and where, without our knowing why, it appears we have many enemies, without reckoning one single friend."

"That is pretty well my position also," said the young man, shaking his head.

"Yours, Sir!" said she, with surprise.

"Yes, yes, mine, Madame; but continue, I beg."

"Our good superior can do but one single thing for us, but that is immense – it is to open for us the gates of the convent."

"That is much, indeed!"

"Unhappily, on the other side of this gate her power ceases completely, and she is constrained to leave us to ourselves."

"Alas! Yes," said the superior.

"Hum!" murmured the painter, like an echo.

"You understand how critical would be our position, wandering alone at hazard in a town which is completely unknown to us."

"Then you thought of me!"

"Yes, Sir," she simply answered.

"And you have done well, Madame," answered the painter, with animation. "I am, perhaps, the only man incapable of betraying you in the whole town."

"Thank you for my mother and myself, Sir," gently said the young girl, who, up to that moment, had kept silence.

The painter was half dazed; the sweet and plaintive accents of that harmonious voice had made his heart beat rapidly.

"Unhappily, I am very weak myself to protect you, ladies," he resumed; "I am alone, a foreigner, suspected – more than suspected even, since I am threatened with being shortly placed on my trial."

"Oh!" said they, joining their hands in their grief, "We are lost then."

"*Mon dieu!*" cried the abbess, "We have placed all our hope in you."

"Wait," pursued he; "all is perhaps not so desperate as we suppose. As for me, I am preparing a plan of escape; I can only offer you one thing."

"What?" cried they, eagerly.

"To share my flight."

"Oh, willingly!" cried the young girl, clapping her hands with joy.

Then, ashamed at having allowed herself to give way to a thoughtless movement, she lowered her eyes, and concealed in the bosom of her mother her charming face, suffused with tears.

"My daughter has answered you for herself and for me, Sir," said the marchioness, proudly.

"I thank you for this confidence, of which I shall try to prove myself worthy, Madame; only I want a few days to prepare everything. I have only with me one man on whom I can rely, and I must act with the greatest prudence."

"That is right, Sir; but what do you mean by a few days?"

"Three at the least – four at the most."

"Well, we will wait. Now, can you explain to us what is the plan you have adopted?"

"I do not know it myself, Madame. I find myself in a country which is totally unknown to me, and in which I naturally want the commonest experience. I must trust to the direction of the servant of whom I have had the honour to speak to you."

"Are you quite sure of this man, Sir? Pardon me for saying this, but you know one word might ruin us."

"I am as sure of the person in question as one man can be of another. It is he who has furnished me with the means of appearing before you without awakening suspicion. I rely not only on his devotion, but also on his skill, on his courage, and especially on his experience."

"Is he a Spaniard, a foreigner, or a half-caste?"

"He does not come in any of the categories you have mentioned, Madame; he is simply an Indian Guaraní, to whom I have been fortunate enough to render some slight services, and who has vowed an eternal gratitude."

"You are right, Sir; you can no doubt reckon on this man. The Indians are brave and faithful; when they are devoted, it is to the death. Pardon me all these questions, which, without doubt, must appear very extraordinary on my part; but you know this affair does not only concern myself – it concerns also my daughter, my poor dear child."

"I think it is very natural, Madame, that you should desire to be completely informed as to my plans for our common safety. Be thoroughly persuaded that when I shall positively know what must be done, I will hasten to inform you of it, in order that if the plan formed by my servant and myself should appear to you to be defective, I may modify it according to your advice."

"Thank you, Sir; will you permit me to ask you one question more?"

"Speak, Madame. In coming here, I place myself entirely at your orders."

"Are you rich?"

The painter blushed; his eyebrows knitted.

The marchioness perceived it.

"Oh, you do not understand me, Sir," she eagerly cried; "far from me be the thought of offering you a reward. The service that you consent to render us is one of those that no treasure could pay for, and the heart alone can requite."

"Madame – " he murmured.

"Permit me to finish. We are associates now," said she, with a charming smile. "Now, in an association each one ought to take a share of the common expenses. A project like ours must be conducted with skill and celerity; a miserable question of money might mar its success or retard its execution. It is in that sense that I have spoken to you, and in which I repeat my words – are you rich?"

"In any other position but that in which fate has temporarily placed me, I should answer you – yes, Madame, for I am an artist – my tastes are simple, and I live almost on nothing, only finding joys and happiness in the ever-fresh surprises that the art which I cultivate procures me, and which I madly love. But at this moment, in the perilous position in which you and I find ourselves – when it is necessary to undertake a desperate struggle against a whole population – I must be frank with you, and admit that money, the sinews of war, almost wholly fails me. I must assure you, in a word, that I am poor."

"So much the better!" cried the marchioness, with a movement of joy.

"Upon my word," pursued he, gaily, "I never complain; it is only now that I begin to regret those riches for which I have always so little cared, for they would have facilitated the means of being useful to you; but we must try and do without them."

"Do not distress yourself about that, Sir. In this affair you bring courage and devotion; leave me to bring that money which you have not."

"On my word, Madame," answered the artist, "since you so frankly put the question, I do not see why I should give way, in refusing you, to a ridiculous susceptibility perfectly out of place, since it is your interests that are at stake in this matter. I accept, then, the money that you shall consider fitting to place at my disposal; but, of course, I shall render you an account of it."

"Pardon, Sir; it is not a loan that I offer to make you; it is my part in the association that I bring – that is all."

"I understand it so, Madame; only if I spend your money, will it not be necessary that you should know in what way?"

"Well and good!" exclaimed the marchioness, going to a piece of furniture, of which she opened a drawer, from whence she took a rather long purse, through the meshes of which glittered a considerable quantity of *onces*.

After having carefully closed the drawer, she presented the purse to the young man.

"There are there two hundred and fifty *onces*² in gold," said she; "I hope that that sum will suffice; but if it is insufficient, let me know, and I will immediately place a larger sum at your disposal."

"Oh, oh! Madame, I hope not only that it will suffice, but that I shall have to give you back a part of this sum," answered he, respectfully taking the purse, and placing it carefully in his girdle. "I have now a restitution to make you."

"To me, Sir?"

"Yes, Madame," said he, drawing off the ring that he had placed on his little finger, "this ring."

"It is mine, that I wrapped up in the letter," eagerly exclaimed the young girl, with a charming heedlessness.

The young man bowed, quite confounded.

"Keep that ring, Sir," answered the marchioness, smiling, "my daughter would be vexed if you were to return it."

"I will keep it, then," said he, with secret joy, and suddenly changing the conversation; "I will only come once more, ladies," said he, "in order not to arouse suspicion; that will be to tell you when all is ready; only every day, at my usual hour, I will pass before this house. When, in the evening, on my return towards home, you shall see me holding a *súchil* flower or a white rose in my hand, that will be a sign that our business proceeds well; if, on the contrary, I remove my hat and wipe my forehead, then pray to God, ladies, because new embarrassments will have risen before me. In the last place, if you see me pulling asunder the flower that I hold in my hand, you must hasten your preparations for departure; the very day of my visit we shall quit the town. You will remember all these recommendations?"

"We are too much interested in remembering them," said the marchioness; "never fear, we shall forget nothing."

"Now, not another word on this subject, and give your music lesson," said the abbess, opening an instruction book, and handing it to the young man.

The painter seated himself at a table between the two ladies, and began to explain to them as well as he could the mysteries of black, of white, of crotchets, and of minims.

When, some minutes afterwards, the portress entered, her serpent-like look gliding from under her half closed eyelids, perceived three persons apparently very seriously occupied in estimating the value of notes, and the difference between the key of F and the key of G.

"My holy mother," hypocritically said the portress, "a horseman, saying that he is sent by the governor of the town, asks the favour of an interview with you."

"Very good, my sister. When you have reconducted this gentleman, you will introduce this *caballero* to me. Beg him to wait a few minutes."

The painter rose, bowed respectfully to the ladies, and followed the portress. The door of the room closed behind him.

Without uttering a word, the portress guided him through the corridors that he had already traversed, as far as the gate of the convent, before which several horsemen, enveloped in long mantles, had stopped, to the general astonishment of the neighbours, who could scarcely believe their eyes, and who had come out to their doors, the better to see them.

² £850 sterling.

The painter, thanks to his looking like an old man, his little dry cough, and his trembling walk, passed in the midst of them without attracting their attention, and went away in the direction of the river.

The portress made a sign to one of the horsemen, that she was ready to conduct him to the superior.

Just at that moment, the painter, who had gone some little distance, turned to give a last look at the convent.

He suppressed a gesture of fright on recognising the horseman of whom we are speaking.

"Zeno Cabral!" murmured he. "What does this man do in the convent?"

CHAPTER IV THE INTERVIEW

The French painter was not deceived. It was indeed Zeno Cabral, the Montonero chief, whom he had seen enter the convent.

The portress walked with a hasty step, without turning her head, before the young man, who appeared plunged in sorrowful and painful reflections.

They proceeded thus for a considerable time through the corridors, without exchanging a word; but at the moment when they had reached the entry of the first cloister, the chief stopped, and lightly touching the arm of his conductress —

"Well?" said he, in a low voice.

The latter turned briskly, threw an enquiring look around her, and then, reassured, no doubt, by the solitude in the midst of which she was, she answered, in the same low and stifled tone, the single word —

"Nothing."

"How nothing?" cried Don Zeno, with suppressed impatience, "You have not, then, watched as I desired you, and as was agreed between us."

"I have watched," answered she, eagerly; "watched from evening to morning, and from morning to evening."

"And you have discovered nothing?"

"Nothing."

"So much the worse," said the Montonero, coldly; "so much the worse for you, my sister; for if you are so little clear-sighted, it is not just yet that you will quit your post of portress for a superior employment in the convent, or one better still, in that of the Bernardines."

The portress trembled; her little grey eyes gave a sinister look.

"I have discovered nothing, it is true," said she, with a dry and nervous laugh, like the cry of a hyena; "but I suspect, and soon I shall discover; only I am watched, and opportunity fails me."

"Ah! And what shall you discover?" asked he, with ill-concealed interest.

"I shall discover," she pursued, laying an affected stress on each syllable, "all that you wish to know, and more, too. My measures are now taken."

"Ah, ah!" said he, "And when will that be, if you please?"

"Before two days."

"You promise me?"

"As I hope for heaven."

"I rely on your word."

"Rely on it; but as to yourself?"

"I?"

"Yes."

"I will keep the promise I have made you."

"All?"

"All."

"Well, do not distress yourself about anything; but — giving, giving?"

"That's agreed."

"Now, come; they expect you. This long stay may excite suspicion; more than ever, prudence is necessary."

They proceeded. At the moment when they entered the first cloister, a black figure came away from an obscure corner, which, until that moment, it had remained shrouded in darkness;

and after having made a threatening gesture to the portress, it appeared to vanish like a fantastic apparition, so rapidly did it glide through the corridors.

Arrived at the door of the superior's room, the portress knocked gently twice without receiving any answer; she waited a moment, and then knocked again.

"*Adelante*," was then answered from within.

She opened the door, and announced the stranger.

"Beg the gentleman to enter; he is welcome," answered the abbess.

The portress disappeared, and the general entered; then, on a sign from the superior, the portress withdrew, closing the door behind her.

The superior was alone, sitting on her great abbess's chair; she held open a Book of Hours, which she appeared to be reading.

At the entry of the young man she slightly inclined her head, and, with a gesture, directed him to a seat.

"Pardon me, Madame," said he, bowing respectfully, "in thus coming so inopportunistically to disturb your pious meditations."

"You are, you say, Señor *caballero*, sent to me by the governor of the town. In that capacity my duty is to receive you at any hour that you please to come," pursued she, in a tone of cold politeness. "You have no apologies to make me, but only to explain the reason for this visit."

"I am about to have the honour of explaining myself; as you so graciously request it, Madame," answered he, with a constrained smile, taking the seat which she had pointed out.

The conversation had commenced in a tone of frigid politeness, which completely expressed the relation which the two speakers wished to hold towards each other during the whole interview.

There was a silence of two or three minutes.

The Montonero turned and returned his hat in his hands with a vexed air; while the abbess, who pretended to read attentively the book which she had not abandoned, stealthily cast a mocking look at the officer.

It was he who, feeling how strange his silence would appear, recommenced the conversation with an ease which was too marked to be natural.

"Señora, I do not know what causes the displeasure that you appear to have in seeing me; will you acquaint me with the reason, and accept, meanwhile, my humble and respectful apologies for the annoyances that, to my great regret, my presence occasions you?"

"You are in error, *caballero*," answered she, "as the meaning I attach to my words. I do not feel any annoyance, believe me, at your presence; only I am vexed at being obliged, at the good pleasure of the persons who govern us, to receive, without being prepared for it beforehand, the visits of envoys – very respectable, no doubt – but whose place should be anywhere else than in the room of the superior of a convent of women."

"That observation is perfectly just, Madame. It is not my fault that this has occurred. Unhappily it is, for the present, a necessity to which you must submit."

"So," resumed she, with some sharpness, "you see that I submit to it."

"You submit to it – yes, Madame," he pursued, in an insinuating tone, "but complaining at it, because you confound your friends with your enemies."

"I, Señor! You make a mistake, no doubt," said she, with compunction; "you do not reflect on who I am. What friends or what enemies can I have – I, a poor woman retired from the world, and devoted to the service of God?"

"You deceive yourself, or, which is more probable – excuse me, I beg, Madame – you do not wish to understand me."

"Perhaps, also, it is a little your fault, Señor," she resumed, with a slight tinge of irony, "owing to the obscurity in which your words are enveloped, unknown to yourself, no doubt."

Don Zeno repressed a gesture of impatience.

"Come, Madame," said he, after a pause, "let us be candid, shall we?"

"I wish nothing better for my part, Señor."

"You have here two prisoners?"

"I have two ladies that I have only received into this house on the express injunction of the governor of the town. Is it of these two ladies that you speak, Señor?"

"Yes, Señora, the same."

"Very well, they are here; I have, indeed, very strict orders with respect to them."

"I know it."

"These ladies have nothing, that I can see, to do with this conversation."

"On the contrary, Madame; it is them alone that it concerns; it is on their account alone that I have come here."

"Very well, Señor, continue; I am listening."

"These ladies have been made prisoners by me, and by me also conducted into this town."

"You could even add – into this convent, Señor; but continue."

"You are wrong in supposing, Madame, that I am the enemy of these unfortunate women; no one, on the contrary, interests himself more than I do in their fate."

"Ah!" said she, with irony.

"You do not believe me, Madame; indeed, appearances condemn me."

"Meanwhile, you condemn these unhappy ladies; is it not so, *caballero*?"

"Señora," he cried, with violence, but immediately controlling himself, "pardon me this outburst, Madame; but if you consent to understand me –"

"Is not that what I am doing at this moment, Señor?"

"Yes; you listen to me, it is true, Madame; but with your mind made up, beforehand, not to put faith in my words, however true they may be."

The abbess slightly shrugged her shoulders, and resumed: "It is, Señor, that you now tell me things which are so incredible. How can you expect, when you yourself have just admitted that you arrested these ladies, when it would have been so easy to allow them to continue their journey; that it is you who brought them into this town; that it is you who also brought them to this convent, in order to deprive them of all hope of flight – how can you expect that I should credit the professions of devotion of which you are now pleased to make a parade before me? It would be more than artlessness on my part, you must admit, and you would have a right to believe me to be what I am not – that is to say, to speak frankly, a fool."

"Oh, Madame, there are many things which you do not know."

"Certainly, there are many things which people do not know in such cases; but come, let us come to the fact, since you yourself have proposed candour: prove to me that you really intend to speak the truth – tell me the things of which I am ignorant."

"I am quite willing to do so, Madame."

"Only I warn you that I perhaps know many of these things, and that if you wander from the right path I will pitilessly put you in it again. Does that course suit you?"

"Nothing better can be done, Madame."

"Well, speak; I promise not to interrupt you."

"You overwhelm me, Señora; but to acquaint you with the whole truth, I shall be obliged to enter into some details touching my family which, doubtless, will have little interest for you."

"I beg your pardon; I wish to be impartial, so I ought to know all."

And as she said these words, she looked stealthily towards the door of the adjoining room.

This look was not observed by the Montonero, who at this moment, his head sunk upon his breast, appeared to be collecting his thoughts.

At last, after a few minutes, he began —

"My family, as my name indicates, Madame, is of Portuguese origin; one of my ancestors was that Alvarez Cabral, to whom Portugal owes so many magnificent discoveries. Settled in Brazil from the period of the occupation, my ancestors established themselves in the province of São Paulo, and led, one after the other, by the example of their neighbours and friends, they made long and perilous expeditions into the interior of unknown lands, and several of them were reckoned among the most celebrated and the most bold Paulistas of the province. Pardon me these details, Madame, but they are indispensable; for the rest, I will abridge them as much as possible. My ancestor, as the result of a very lively discussion with the Viceroy of Brazil, Don Vasco Fernandez Cesar de Menezes, about 1723 – a discussion, the topics of which he never wished to reveal – saw his property placed under sequestration. He himself was obliged to take flight with all his family. A little patience, I beg you, Madame."

"You are unjust, Señor; these details, of which I was ignorant, interest me in the highest degree."

"My great-grandfather, with the wreck which he had succeeded in saving from his fortune – of considerable value, I hasten to say; for he was enormously rich – took refuge in the vice-royalty of Buenos Aires, in order to go back the more easily to Brazil, if fortune ceased to be adverse to him. But his hope was frustrated; he was to die in exile; his family was condemned never again to see their country. However, on various occasions propositions were made to him to enter into relations with the Portuguese Government, but he always haughtily rejected them, protesting that, never having committed any crime, he would not be absolved, and that especially – pay particular attention to this, Madame – the Government which had taken away his property had no claim to what remained to him; that he would never consent to pay for a pardon that they had no right to sell him. Subsequently, when my great-grandfather was on the point of death, and my grandfather and father were round his bed, although then very young, my father thought he understood the propositions made by the Portuguese Government, and which the old man had always obstinately repulsed."

"Ah!" said the abbess, beginning to take an interest in the recital, which was made with an air of truth which could not be questioned.

"Judge of the matter yourself, Madame," resumed the Montonero; "my great-grandfather, as I have said, feeling that he was about to die, had called my grandfather and my father round his bed; then, after making them swear on the Cross and on the Gospel never to reveal what he was about to tell them, he confided to them a secret of great importance for the future of our family; in a word, he stated to them that some time before his exile, in the last expedition that he had made, according to his custom, he had discovered diamond mines and deposits of gold of incalculable value. He entered into the minutest details as to the route that was to be followed to discover the country where these unknown riches were hidden; gave to my grandfather a map traced by himself on the very spot, and added, for fear that my grandfather should forget any important detail, a bundle of manuscripts, in which the history of his expedition and of his discovery, as well as the itinerary life that he had followed, going and returning, were related as a diary, almost hour by hour; then, certain that this fortune which he had left them would not be lost to them, he gave his children his blessing, and died almost immediately, weakened by the efforts that he had been obliged to make to give them complete information; but before closing his eyes for ever, he made them, for the last time, swear inviolable secrecy."

"I do not yet see, Sir, what relation there is between this history – very interesting, certainly – that you are relating, and these two unfortunate ladies," interrupted the abbess, shaking her head.

"A few minutes more complaisance, Madame; you will not be long in being satisfied."

"Be it so, Sir; continue then, I beg."

Don Zeno resumed:

"Some years passed; my grandfather was at the head of the vast *chacra* occupied by our family, my father was beginning to aid him in his labours. He had a sister beautiful as the angels, and pure as they. She was named Laura; her father and brother loved her to adoration; she was their joy, their pride, their happiness – "

Don Zeno stopped; tears that he did not try to restrain slowly flowed down his cheeks.

"This souvenir affects you, Señor," said the abbess, gently.

The young man proudly nerved himself.

"I have promised to tell you the truth, Madame, and although the task that I impose on myself is painful, I will not give way. My grandfather had deposited in a place, known to him and his daughter only, the manuscript and the map that had been left them by my great-grandfather on his deathbed, and then neither of them had cared much more about the matter, not supposing that a time would arrive when it would be possible to take possession of this fortune, which, nevertheless, belonged to them by incontestable title. One day, a foreigner presented himself at the *chacra*, and asked hospitality, which was never refused to anyone. The stranger was young, handsome, and rich – at least, he appeared so – and for our family he had the great advantage of being our fellow countryman; he belonged to one of the most noble families of Portugal. He was then more than a friend – almost a relation. My grandfather received him with open arms; he lived several months in our *chacra*; he might have lived there altogether had he wished it; everyone in the house liked him. Pardon me, Madame, for passing rapidly over these details. Although too young to have personally assisted in that infamous treason, my heart is broken. One day the stranger disappeared, carrying away Doña Laura. That is how that man repaid our hospitality."

"Oh! that is horrible!" cried the abbess, carried away by the indignation she felt.

"Every search was fruitless; it was impossible to discover his traces. But what was more serious in this affair, Madame, was, that this man had coldly and basely followed out a plan previously laid."

"It is not possible!" said the abbess, with horror.

"This man had – I do not know how – discovered something in Europe about the secret that my great-grandfather had so well guarded. The stranger's design, in introducing himself into our house, was to discover the complete secret, in order to rob us of our fortune. During the time that he lived at the *chacra*, he several times tried, by artful questions, to learn the details of which he was ignorant – questions addressed sometimes to my grandfather, sometimes to my father, then a young man. The odious violence that he committed did not proceed from love, pushed almost to distraction, as you might suppose; he might have demanded of my grandfather the hand of his daughter, which the latter would have given him; no, he did not love Doña Laura.

"Then," interrupted the abbess, "why did he carry her off?"

"Why, you say?"

"Yes."

"Because he believed that she possessed the secret that he wished to discover; that, Madame, was the only motive for the crime."

"What you tell me is infamous, Señor," cried the abbess; "this man was a demon."

"No, Madame, he was a wretch devoured by the thirst for riches, and who, at any price, determined to possess them, even if to do so he had to bring dishonour and shame into a family, or to walk over a heap of corpses."

"Oh!" she gasped, hiding her head in her hands.

"Now, Madame, do you wish to know the name of this man?" he pursued, with bitterness; "But it is needless, is it not? For you have already guessed, no doubt."

The abbess nodded her head affirmatively, without answering.

There was rather a long silence.

"But why render the innocent," at last said the abbess, "responsible for the crimes committed by others?"

"Because, Madame – an inheritor of the paternal hatred for twenty years – it is only a fortnight ago that I have again found a trace that I thought was lost forever; that the name of our enemy has, like a thunderclap, suddenly burst on my ear, and that I have demanded of this man a reckoning in blood for the honour of my family."

"So to satisfy a vengeance which might be just, were it brought to bear on the guilty, you would be cruel enough –"

"I do not yet know what I shall do, Madame. My head is on fire; fury carries me away," interrupted he, with violence. "This man has stolen our happiness; I wish to take away his; but I shall not be a coward, as he has been; he shall know from whence comes the blow which strikes him; it is between us a war of wild beasts."

At this moment the door of the adjoining room opened suddenly, and the marchioness appeared calm and imposing.

"A war of wild beasts let it be, *caballero*; I accept it."

The young man rose abruptly, and darting a look of crushing scorn at the superior:

"Ah! I have been listened to," said he, with irony; "well, so much the better, I prefer it to be so. This unworthy treachery precludes any further explanation; you know, Madame, the cause of the hatred that I bear towards your husband; I have nothing more to tell you."

"My husband is a noble *caballero*, who, if he were present, would wither, by his denial – as I do myself – the odious tissue of lies by which you have not scrupled to accuse him before a person," added she, directing a look of sorrowful pity to the superior, "who would not, perhaps, have believed this frightful tale, the falsity of which is too easy to prove for it to be necessary to refute it."

"Be it so, Madame; this insult, coming from you, cannot affect me; you are naturally the last person to whom your husband would have confided this horrible secret; but whatever happens, a time will come – and it is near, I hope – when the truth will be declared, and when the criminal will be unmasked before you."

"There are men, Señor, whom calumny, however skilfully concocted, cannot reach," answered she, with scorn.

"Let us cease this, Madame; all discussion between us would only serve the more to embitter us against each other. I repeat that I am not your enemy."

"But what are you then, and for what reason have you related this horrible story?"

"If you had had the patience to listen to me a few minutes more, Madame, you would have learned."

"What prevents you telling me, now that we are face to face?"

"I will tell you if you desire it, Madame," replied, he, coldly. "I should have preferred, however, that some other person, who might have more sympathy for you than I have, should perform this task."

"No, no, Sir; I am myself a Portuguese also, and when the honour of my name is concerned, my principle is to act for myself."

"As you please, Madame; I was about to make a proposition to you."

"A proposition – to me!" said she, haughtily.

"Yes, Madame."

"What is it? Be brief, if you please."

"I was about to ask you to give me your word not to quit this town without my authority, and not to try and communicate with your husband."

"Ah! And if I had made this promise?"

"Then, Madame, I should, in return, have freed you from the accusation which weighs upon you, and should immediately have obtained your liberty."

"Liberty to be a prisoner in a town, instead of in a convent," said she, with irony; "you are generous, Señor. But you would not have had to appear before a counsel of war."

"That is true; I forgot that you and yours make war on women – especially on women – you are so brave, you revolutionary gentlemen." The young man was unmoved by this bitter insult; he bowed respectfully.

"I wait your answer, Madame," said he.

"What answer?" she replied, with disdain.

"That which you will be pleased to make to the proposition which I have the honour to make."

The marchioness remained a moment silent; then, raising her head, and taking a step in advance —

"*Caballero*," she resumed, in a haughty voice, "to accept the proposition you make me, would be to admit the possibility of the truth of the odious accusation that you dare to bring against my husband. Now, that possibility I do not allow. The honour of my husband is mine; it is my duty to defend it."

"I expected that answer, Madame, although it afflicts me more than you can suppose. You have, no doubt, well reflected on all the consequences of this refusal?"

"On all – yes, Señor."

"They may be terrible."

"I know it, and I shall submit."

"You are not alone, Madame; you have a daughter."

"Sir," she answered, with an accent of supreme hauteur, "my daughter knows too well what she owes to the honour of her house to hesitate in making for it, if need be, the sacrifice of her life."

"Oh, Madame!"

"Do not try to frighten me, Señor; you will not succeed. My determination is taken, and I should not change it, even if I saw the scaffold before me. Men deceive themselves, if they think they alone possess the privilege of courage. It is good, from time to time, for a woman to show them that they also know how to die for their convictions. A truce, then, I beg you, to any more entreaties, Señor; they would be useless."

The *Montonero* bowed silently, made a few steps towards the door, stopped, and half turned as if he wished to speak; but, altering his mind, he bowed a last time and went out.

The marchioness remained an instant motionless; then, turning towards the abbess, and extending her arms to her —

"And now, my friend," said she to her, with a sorrowful voice, "do you believe that the Marquis de Castelmelhor is guilty of the frightful crimes of which that man accuses him?"

"Oh, no, no, my friend," cried the superior, melting into tears, and falling into the arms which opened to receive her.

CHAPTER V

THE PREPARATIONS OF TYRO

The painter's rencontre, on his leaving the convent, had struck him with a sad presentiment as to his *protégés*.

Without being able quite clearly to account for the sentiments he entertained for them, however unfortunate himself, he felt himself constrained to aid and succour by all means in his power, the women who, without knowing him, had so frankly claimed his protection.

His self-love – first as a man, and then as a Frenchman – was flattered at the part which he thus found himself called on to play unawares in this sombre and mysterious affair, the whole of which, notwithstanding the confidence of the marchioness, he much doubted whether they had revealed to him.

But what mattered that?

Placed by chance – or rather by bad fortune – which so furiously pursued him, in an almost desperate situation, the risks that he had to run in succouring these two ladies, did not much aggravate that situation; whereas, if he succeeded in enabling them to escape the fate which threatened them, while he saved himself, he would bring to bear on his persecutors a little warlike strategy in showing himself more keen than they, and would once for all avenge the continual apprehensions they had caused him since his arrival at San Miguel.

These reflections, in bringing back calmness to the young man's mind, gave him back also his careless gaiety, and it was with a quick and deliberate step that he rejoined Tyro at the spot which the latter had assigned as a permanent rendezvous.

The place was well chosen; it was a natural grotto, not very deep, situated at two pistol shots or so from the town, so well concealed from curious eyes by the chaos of rocks, and of thickets of parasitic plants, that, unless the exact position of this grotto were known, it was impossible to discover it – so much the more, as its mouth opened onto the river, and that to enter it, it was necessary to go into the water up to the knees. Tyro, half lying on a mass of dry leaves, covered with two or three Araucanian *pellones*³ and ponchos, was carelessly smoking a cigarette of maize straw, while he waited for his master.

The latter, after being assured that no one was watching him, removed his shoes, tucked up his trousers, went into the water, and entered the grotto – not, however, without having whistled two separate times, in order to warn the Indian of his arrival.

"Ouf!" said he, as he entered the grotto, "A singular fashion this of coming into one's house. Here am I returned, Tyro."

"I see, master," gravely answered the Indian, without changing his position.

"Now," pursued the young man, "let me resume my clothes, and then we can talk. I have much to tell you."

"And I also, master."

"Ah!" said he, looking at him.

"Yes; but first change your clothes."

"That's right," resumed the young man.

He immediately proceeded to abandon his disguise, and soon he had recovered his ordinary appearance.

³ Sheepskins dyed and prepared.

"There – that's done," said he, sitting near the Indian, and lighting a cigarette. "I can tell you that this disgusting costume annoys me horribly, and I shall be happy when I shall be able to get rid of it altogether."

"That will be soon, I hope, master."

"And I also, my friend. God grant that we have not deceived ourselves! Now, what have you to tell me? Speak, I am listening."

"But you – have you not told me you have news?"

"That is true; but I am anxious to know what you have to tell me. I believe it is more important than what I have to tell you. So, speak first; my communication will come soon enough."

"As you please, master," answered the Indian, settling himself, and throwing away his cigarette, which began to burn his fingers; then, half turning his head towards the young man, and looking him full in the face —

"Are you brave?" he asked.

This question, put so suddenly unawares, caused such a profound surprise to the painter, that he hesitated an instant.

"Well," he at last answered, "I believe so then, collecting himself by degrees," he added, with a slight smile. "Besides, my good Tyro, bravery is in France so common a virtue, that there is no conceit on my part in asserting that I possess it."

"Good!" murmured the Indian, who caught his idea, "You are brave, master; and so am I, I believe; I have seen you in several circumstances conduct yourself very well."

"Then why ask me this question?" said the painter, with some slight annoyance.

"Do not be angry, master," quickly replied the Indian, "my intentions are good. When a serious expedition is commenced, and when we wish to bring it to a good conclusion, it is necessary to calculate all the chances. You are a Frenchman – that is to say, a foreigner, not long in this country, of the customs of which you are completely ignorant."

"I admit that," interrupted the young man.

"You find yourself on an unknown territory, which, at every moment must be a mystery to you. In asking you, then, if you are brave, I do not doubt your courage I have seen you act courageously – only I wish to know if this courage is white or red; if it shines as much in darkness and solitude as in broad daylight, and before the crowd – that's all."

"Thus put, I understand the question, but I do not know how to answer it, not having ever found myself in a situation where it was necessary for me to employ the kind of courage of which you speak. I can simply, and in all confidence, assure you of this – that day or night, alone or in company, in default of bravery, pride would always prevent me from retreating, and would constrain me to front my adversaries, whoever they might be, if they stood before me to oppose my will, when I had formed a resolution."

"I thank you for that assurance, master, for our task will be arduous, and I shall be happy to know that you will not abandon me in the great danger in which I shall be placed, and my devotion to you."

"You can count on my word, Tyro," answered the painter; "so, banish all afterthoughts, and boldly march ahead."

"That I will do, master, you may depend. Now, let us leave that, and come to the news that I had to tell you."

"Just so," said the painter; "what is this news – good or bad?"

"That depends, master, on how you estimate it."

"Good; let me know first."

"Do you know that the Spanish officers, whom they were going to try tomorrow, or the day after, have escaped?"

"Escaped!" cried the painter, with astonishment, "When was that?"

"This very morning; they passed near here scarcely two hours ago, mounted on horses of the Pampas, and galloping furiously in the direction of the Cordilleras."

"Upon my word, so much the better for them – I am delighted at it, for, as matters go in this country, they would have been shot."

"They would have been shot certainly," said the Indian, nodding his head.

"That would have been a pity," said the young man. "Although I know very little about them, and they have placed me, by their fault, in a rather difficult position, I should have been sorry if any misfortune had happened to them. So you are certain that they have really escaped?"

"Master, I have seen them."

"Then, *bon voyage!* God grant that they may not be retaken."

"Do you not fear that this flight may be prejudicial?"

"To me! Why?" cried he, with surprise.

"Have you not been indirectly implicated in their affairs?"

"That is true, but I believe I have nothing to fear now, and that the suspicions which had been excited against me have been completely dissipated."

"So much the better, master; however, if I may give you advice – believe me, be prudent."

"Come, talk candidly. I see behind your Indian circumlocutions a serious thought which possesses you, and which you wish me to share. Respect, or some fear that I cannot understand, alone prevents you from explaining yourself."

"Since you demand it, master, I will explain myself, especially as time presses. The flight of the two Spanish officers has awakened suspicions which were but suppressed; and now they accuse you of having encouraged them in their project of flight, and of having procured them the means of accomplishing it."

"I! Why, that is impossible! I have not once seen them since their arrest."

"I know it, master; however, it is as I say; I am well informed."

"Then my position becomes extremely delicate; I do not know what to do."

"I have thought of that for you, master; we Indians form a population apart in the town. Disliked by the Spaniards, scorned by the Creoles, we sustain one another, in order to be in a position, in case of need, to resist the injustice they may design to do us. Since I have occupied myself with preparations for your journey, I have communicated with several men of my tribe, engaged in the families of certain persons in the town, in order to be informed of all that passes, and to warn you against treachery. I knew yesterday evening that the Spanish officers were going to escape today at the rising of the sun. For several days, aided by their friends, they have planned their flight."

"I do not yet see," interrupted the painter, "what relation there is between this flight and anything which concerns me personally."

"Wait, master," pursued the Indian, "I am coming to that. This morning, after having aided you to disguise yourself, I followed you and entered the town. The news of the flight of the officers was already known – everybody was talking of it. I mixed myself in several groups, where this flight was commented on in a hundred different ways. Your name was in every mouth."

"But I knew nothing of this flight."

"I know it well, master; but you are a stranger – that is enough for them to accuse you – so much the more as you have an enemy determined on your ruin who has spread abroad this report, and given it consistency."

"An enemy! – I!" said the young man, astounded; "It is impossible!"

The Indian smiled, sarcastically.

"Soon you will know it, master," said he; "but it is useless to occupy ourselves with him at this moment; it is you we must think of – you that we must save."

The young man shook his head sadly.

"No," said he, with a sad voice; "I see that I am really lost this time; all that I might do would but hasten my destruction; better resign myself to my fate."

The Indian looked at him for some moments with an astonishment that he did not seek to dissimulate.

"Was I not right, master," he resumed at last, "to ask you at the commencement of this conversation, if you had courage?"

"What do you mean?" cried the young man, suddenly collecting himself, and darting a look at the Indian.

Tyro did not lower his eyes; his countenance remained impassive, and it was with the same calm voice, with the same careless accent, that he continued:

"In this country, master, courage does not resemble in anything what you possess. Every man is brave with the sabre or the gun in hand – especially here, where, without reckoning men, we are constantly obliged to struggle against all kinds of animals of the most destructive and ferocious character; but what signifies that?"

"I do not understand you," answered the young man.

"Pardon me, master, for teaching you things of which you are ignorant. There is a courage that you must acquire – it is that which consists in appearing to give in when the strife is unequal – reserving yourself, while you feign flight, to take your revenge later. Your enemies have an immense advantage over you; they know you; they therefore act against you with certainty, while you do not know them. You are liable at the first movement you make to fall into the snare spread under your feet, and thus to give yourself up without hope of vengeance."

"What you say is full of sense, Tyro; only you speak to me in enigmas. Who are these enemies whom I do not know, and who appear so determined on my destruction?"

"I cannot yet tell you their names, master; but have patience – a day will come when you will know them."

"Have patience! – It's very well to say that. Unhappily, I am up to my neck in a trap, out of which I do not know how to escape."

"Leave it to me, master; I will answer for all. You will escape more easily than you think."

"Hum! That appears to me very difficult."

The Indian smiled, as he slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"All the whites are like this," murmured he, as if he were speaking to himself; "in appearance their conformation is the same as our own, and, nevertheless, they are completely incapable of doing the least thing by themselves."

"It is possible," answered the young man, nettled at this uncomplimentary remark; "that involves a number of considerations too long to explain to you, and which, moreover, you would not understand; let us return to what ought solely to occupy us just now. I repeat, that I find my position desperate, and that I do not know, even with the aid of your devotion, in what way I shall escape."

There was a short interval of silence between the two men, and then the Indian resumed, but this time with a clear and decided voice, like that of a man who desires to be understood at once, without being obliged to lose precious time in explanations.

"Master," said he, "as soon as I was informed of what had passed, convinced that I should not be unsupported by you, I laid my plan, and put myself in a position to ward off the new blow which threatens you. My first care was to go to your house. They know me; the greater part of the attendants are my friends; they took no heed of me. I was free to go and come as I liked, without attracting attention. I then took advantage of a time when the house was almost deserted on account of the *siesta* which closed the eyes of masters and servants, and, aided by some of my friends, I hastily carried away all that belongs to you, even to your horses, which I loaded with your baggage, and your boxes full of papers and linen."

"Well," interrupted the young man, with a satisfaction clouded by slight anxiety; "but what will my countryman think of this proceeding?"

"Do not let that distress you, master," answered the Guaraní, with a singularly expressive smile.

"Be it so; you no doubt found a plausible pretext to account for this strange proceeding."

"That is just it," said he, with a chuckle.

"Very well; but now tell me, Tyro; what have you done with this baggage? I should by no means like to lose it – it contains the best part of my fortune. I cannot camp out in the open air, more especially as that would avail me nothing, and that those who have an interest in seeking me would soon discover me; on the other hand, I can scarcely see in what house I can lodge, without running the risk of being soon arrested."

The Indian laughed.

"Eh! Eh!" gaily said the young man. "As you laugh, it is, perhaps, because my affairs go on well, and that you are nearly certain of having found a safe shelter."

"You are wrong, master. I am immediately going to seek some spot where you will be safe and completely hidden from pursuit."

"The devil! That is not so easy to find in the town."

"But it is not in the town that I look for it."

"Oh, oh! Where then? I scarcely see that there is any place in the country where it is possible for me to hide."

"That is because you do not, like we Indians, understand the desert. At about two miles from here, in a rancho of the Guaraní Indians, I have found an asylum where I defy them to come and look for you, or, in case of a visit, to find you."

"You strangely pique my curiosity. Is everything prepared to receive me?"

"Yes, master."

"Why do we then remain here, instead of going there?"

"Because, master, the sun has not yet set, and it is too light to venture into the country."

"You are right, my brave Tyro; I thank you for this new service."

"I have only done my duty, master."

"Hum! Well, since you wish it, I consent. Only, believe that I am not ungrateful. So that is agreed. I am unhoused. My dear compatriot will be much astonished when he finds that I have left without taking leave of him."

The Indian laughed, without answering.

"Unhappily, my friend," continued the young man, "this position is very precarious; it cannot last for long."

"Depend upon me for that, master; before three days we shall have set out. All my measures are taken accordingly. My preparations would have been finished already, if I had had at my disposal a sufficient sum to purchase some indispensable things."

"Do not let that disturb you," cried the young man, quickly putting his hand into his pocket, and drawing from it the purse which the marchioness had given him; "there is the money."

"Oh!" said the Indian, with joy, "There is much more than we want."

But suddenly the painter became sad, and took the purse again from the hands of the Guaraní.

"I am mad," said he. "We cannot use that money, it is not ours; we have no right to make use of it."

Tyro looked at him with surprise.

"Yes," continued he, gently shaking his head, "this sum has been given to me by the person whom I have promised to save, in order to prepare everything for her flight."

"Well?" said the Indian.

"Why, now," resumed the young man, "the affair appears to me to be quite altered; I should have a right, I think, to save myself alone."

"Your situation is just the same, master; you can keep the word that you have given; in fact, perhaps you are in a better position today than you were yesterday, to organise, not only your flight, but that of these persons. I have foreseen all."

"Come, explain yourself; for I begin no longer to understand you at all."

"How is that, master?"

"Why, you appear to know my affairs better than I do."

"Do not let that distress you. I only know as much about your affairs as I ought to know, to be useful to you in case of need, and to be in a position to prove to you what is my devotion for you. Moreover, if you wish it, I will appear to know nothing."

"That is a good joke!" exclaimed the young man, laughing. "Come, since it is not even possible to keep my secrets to myself, act as you like – sorcerer that you are. I shall complain no more; now, continue."

"Only give me this gold, master, and leave me to act."

"Well, I think that is the best; take it then," added he, putting the purse in his hand; "only, make haste, for you ought to know better than I do, that we have no time to lose."

"Oh! Just now nothing presses. They believe you have gone; they are searching for you far away; they thus give you every facility to do here all that you wish."

"That is true. If it only concerned myself, upon my word I have so great a confidence in my own skill, that I should not hurry myself at all, I assure you; but –"

"Yes," he interrupted, "I know what you wish to say, master, it concerns these ladies. They are anxious to be off, and they are right; but they have nothing to fear before three days. I only ask two, is that too much?"

"No, certainly; only I confess there is one thing which much embarrasses me at present."

"What is it, master?"

"It is how I shall introduce myself into the convent to warn them."

"That is very simple; you will go in the convent in the same disguise that you assumed yesterday."

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