Aimard Gustave

The Smuggler Chief: A Novel

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Содержание

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PREFACE

The present is the most powerful story which Gustave Aimard has yet written. While there is enough of startling incident and hairbreadth escapes to satisfy the greatest craver after sensation, the plot is carefully elaborated, and great attention is paid to developing the character of the heroines. If there has been any fault in the author's previous works, it is that the ladies introduced are too subordinate; but in the present tale, the primary interest hinges upon them, and they are the most prominent characters. For this reason I am inclined to believe that the "Smuggler Chief" will become a greater favourite with readers than any of its predecessors.

Lascelles Wraxall, Bart.

CHAPTER I
THE PROCESSION

America, a land not yet thoroughly explored, and whose immense savannahs and gloomy virgin forests conceal so many mysterious secrets and unknown dramas, sees at this moment all eyes fixed upon her, for everyone is eager to know the strange customs of the semi-civilized Indians and the semi-savage Europeans who people the vast solitudes of that continent; for in the age of transformation in which we live, they alone have remained stationary, contending inch by inch against the civilization which invades and drives them back on all sides, and guarding with a religious obstinacy the faith, manners, and customs of their fathers – curious manners, full of interest, which require to be studied carefully and closely to be understood.

It is to America, then, that we invite the reader to accompany us. But he need not feel alarmed at the length of the voyage, for he can make it while comfortably seated in his easy chair by the fireside.

The story we propose to tell has its scene laid at Valparaíso – a Chilian city as regards the soil on which it is built, but English and French, European or American, through the strange composite of its population, which, is formed of people from all countries, who have introduced every possible language and brought with them every variety of trade.

Valparaíso! the name echoes in the ear like the soft sweet notes of a love strain!

Valparaíso! the city of Paradise – the vast depôt of the whole world. A coquettish, smiling, and frolicsome city, slothfully reclining, like a thoughtless Indian maid, at the base of three mountains and at the end of a glorious bay, dipping the tips of her roseate feet in the azure waters of the Pacific, and hiding her broad brilliant forehead in the tempest-swollen clouds which float along from the crests of the Cordilleras to make her a splendid diadem.

This city, the advanced sentinel of Transatlantic civilization, is the first land which the traveller discovers after doubling Cape Horn, of melancholy and ill-omened memory.

When at sunrise of a fine spring morning a vessel sails round the lighthouse point situated at the extremity of the Playa-Aucha, this charming oasis is perceived, half veiled by a transparent mist, only allowing the white houses and lofty edifices to be distinguished in a vague and fantastic way that conduces to reverie.

The atmosphere, impregnated with the sharp scents from the beach and the sweet emanations of the trees and flowers, deliciously expands the chest, and in a second causes the mariner, who comes back to life and hope, to forget the three months of suffering and incessant danger whose long hours have passed for him minute by minute, ere he reached this long-desired haven.

On August 25th, 1833, two men were seated in a posada situated in the Calle San Agostino, and kept by a Frenchman of the name of Crevel, long established in the country, at a table on which stood two glasses and a nearly empty bottle of aguardiente of Pisco, and were eagerly conversing in a low voice about a matter which seemed to interest them in the highest degree.

One of these men, about twenty-five years of age, wore a characteristic costume of the guasos, a name by which the inhabitants of the interior are designated; a wide poncho of llama wool, striped with different brilliant colours, covered his shoulders and surrounded his bare neck with an elegant and strangely-designed Indian embroidery. Long boots of dyed wool were fastened above his knees by silk cords, and armed at the heels with enormous silver spurs, whose wheels, large as saucers, compelled him to walk on tiptoe whenever he felt an inclination to leave his saddle for a moment – which, however, very rarely happened, for the life of a guaso consists in perpetual horse exercise.

He wore under his poncho a belt containing a pair of pistols, whose heavy butts could be distinguished under the folds each time that a hurried movement on the part of the young man evidenced the fire which he introduced into the conversation.

Between his legs rested a rifle richly damascened with silver, and the carved boss of a knife handle peeping out of the top of his right boot.

Lastly, to complete this accoutrement, a splendid Guayaquil straw hat, adorned with an eagle's plume, was lying on a table near the one which he occupied.

In spite of the young man's swarthy face, his long black hair falling in disorder on his shoulders, and the haughtiness of his features, it was easy to recognise by an examination of his features the type of the European under the exterior of the American; his eyes full of vivacity which announced boldness and intelligence, his frank and limpid glance, and his sarcastic lips, surmounted by a fine and coquettishly turned up black moustache, revealed a French origin.

In truth, this individual, who was no other than Leon Delbès, the most daring smuggler on the Chilian coast, was born at Bayonne, which city he left after the loss of an enormous fortune which he inherited from his father, and settled in South America, where in a short time he acquired an immense reputation for skill and courage, which extended from Talcahueno to Copiapó.

His comrade, who appeared to be a man of five-and-thirty years of age, formed the most perfect contrast with him.

He wore the same costume as Delbès, but there the resemblance ended.

He was tall and well built, and his thin, muscular limbs displayed a far from ordinary strength. He had a wide, receding forehead, and his black eyes, close to his long, bent nose, gave him a vague resemblance to a bird of prey. His projecting cheek bones, his large mouth, lined with white, sharp teeth, and his thin pinched-up lips, imparted to his face an indescribable expression of cruelty; a forest of greasy hair was imprisoned in a red and yellow silk handkerchief which covered his head, and whose points fell upon his back. He had an olive complexion, peculiar to individuals of the Indian race to which he belonged.

This man was well known to the inhabitants of Valparaíso, who experienced for him a hatred thoroughly justified by the acts of ferocity of which he had been guilty under various circumstances; and as no one knew his real name, it had grown into a custom to designate him by the name of the Vaquero, owing to his great skill in lassoing wild bulls on the Pampas.

"The fiend twist the necks of those accursed English captains!" the Frenchman exclaimed, as he passionately smote the table: "it is easy to see that they are heretics."

"Yes," the other replied; "they are thieves – a whole cargo of raw silver, which we had such difficulty in passing, and which cost us the lives of two men."

"It is my fault," Leon continued, with an oath. "I am an ass. We have made a long voyage for nothing, and I ought to have expected it, for with the English it is impossible to gain one's livelihood. I am sure that we should have done our business famously at Copiapó, and we were only eight leagues from there."

"That's true," said the half-breed; "and I cannot think how the mad idea occurred to us of coming, with thirty loaded mules, from Chanoccillo to Valparaíso."

"Well, what is done is done, my friend; but we lose one thousand piastres."

"*Vaya pués*. Captain, I promise you that I will make the first Englishman I catch on the sierra pay dearly for our misadventure. I would not give an ochavo for the life of the man who comes within range of my rifle."

"Another glass," said Leon, as he seized the bottle, and poured the last of the spirit into the glasses.

"Here's your health," said the half-breed, and raising his glass, he emptied it at a draught, and then put it back on the table, heaving a deep sigh.

"Now, Diego of my soul, let us be off, as nothing keeps us here any longer."

"*Caray*, captain, I am ready. I am anxious to reach the mountains, for my health fails me in these poisoned holes which are called towns."

"Where are our lads?"

"Near the Rio Claro, and so well hidden that the fiend himself could not discover them."

"Very good," Leon answered. "Hilloh, Crevel!" he shouted, raising his voice, "come hither."

At this summons the posadero, who was standing at the end of the room, and had not lost a syllable of the conversation between the two smugglers while pretending to be busy with his household duties, advanced with a servile bow.

He was a fellow of about forty years of age, sturdy built, and with a red face. His carbuncled nose did not speak at all in favour of his temperance, and his crafty and hypocritical manners and his foxy eyes rendered him a complete specimen of one of those men branded in the French colonies by the name of BANIANS, utter scoundrels, who swarm in America, and who, in the shadow of an almost honest trade, carry on a dozen others which expose them to the scaffold. True fishers in troubled waters, who take with both hands, and are ready for anything if they are well paid.

This worthy landlord was an old acquaintance of the smugglers, who had for a long time been able to appreciate him at his full value, and had employed him successfully in many ugly affairs; hence he came up to them with that low and meaning smile which is always found stereotyped on the ignoble face of these low class traffickers.

"What do you desire, señores?" he asked, as he respectfully doffed the cotton nightcap of equivocal whiteness which covered his greasy poll.

"To pay you, master rogue," his countryman replied, as he tapped him amicably on the shoulder; "how much do I owe you?"

"Fourteen reals, captain."

"The deuce! you sell your adulterated Pisco rather high."

"Well," said the other, assuming a pious look and raising his eyes to heaven, "the excise dues are so heavy."

"That is true," said Leon; "but you do not pay them."

"Do you think so?" the landlord continued.

"Why, hang it! it was I who sold you the Pisco we have just been drinking, and I remember that you would only pay me – "

"Unnecessary, unnecessary, captain," Crevel exclaimed, quickly; "I will not bargain with a customer like you; give me ten reals and say no more about it."

"Stay; here are six, and that's more than it is worth," the young man said as he felt in a long purse which he drew from his belt, and took out several lumps of silver marked with a punch which gave them a monetary value.

"The deuce take the fancy they have in this country of making such money," he continued, after paying the posadero; "a man feels as if he had pebbles in his belt. Come, gossip, our horses."

"What, are you off, señores?"

"Do you suppose we are going to sleep here?"

"It would not be the first time."

"That is possible, but today you will have to do without us. I have already asked whether our horses are ready."

"They are at the door, saddled and bridled."

"You have given them something to eat, at least?"

"Two trusses of Alfalfa."

"In that case, good-bye."

And, after taking their rifles on their arms, the smugglers left the room. At the door of the inn, two richly-harnessed and valuable horses were waiting for them; they lightly leaped into the saddle, and after giving the landlord a parting wave of the hand, went off at a trot in the direction of the Almendral.[1]

[1] A part of Valparaíso situated at the end of the bay, and so called from the great number of almond trees that grew there.

While riding side by side, Leon and Diego continued to converse about the ill success of their last operation, so unluckily interrupted by the sudden appearance of custom-house officers, who opposed the passage of a string of mules conveying a heavy load of raw silver, which it was intended to smuggle, on account of certain merchants of Santiago, on board English vessels.

A fight began between the officers and the smugglers, and two of the latter fell, to the great annoyance of Leon Delbès, who lost in them the two bravest men of his band. It was a vexatious check; still, as it was certain that regretting would not find a remedy, Leon soon resolved to endure it manfully.

"On my word," he said, all at once, as he threw away the end of his cigarette, which was beginning to burn his fingers, "I am not sorry, after all, that I came to Valparaíso, for it is a pretty town, which deserves a visit every now and then."

"Bah!" the half-breed growled, thrusting out his lips disdainfully. "I prefer the mountains, where at any rate you have elbow room."

"The mountain has certainly its charm, but – "

"Look out, animal!" Diego interrupted, addressing a fat Genovevan monk who was bird gazing in the middle of the street.

Before the monk had time to obey this sharp injunction, Diego's horse had hit him so violent a blow in the chest that he fell on his nose five or six paces farther on, amid the laughter of a group of sailors, who, however, we must do them the justice of saying, hastened to pick him up and place him again on his waddling legs.

"What is the matter here?" Leon asked, as he looked around him. "The streets seem to me to be crowded; I never saw such animation before. Can it be a festival, do you think?"

"It is possible!" Diego answered. "These people of towns are so indolent, that, in order to have an excuse to dispense them from working, they have invented a saint for every day in the year."

"It is true that the Spaniards are religious," Leon muttered, with a smile.

"A beastly race," the half-breed added, between his teeth.

We must observe to the reader that not only did Diego, like all the Indians, cordially detest the Spaniards, the descendants of the old conquerors, but he, moreover, seemed to have vowed, in addition to this old hereditary rancour, a private hatred through motives he alone knew; and this hatred he did not attempt to conceal, and its effect was displayed whenever he found the opportunity.

The remark made by Leon was well founded – a compact crowd occupied the entire length of the street in which they were, and they only advanced with great difficulty; but when they entered the Governor's square it was impossible for them to take another step, for a countless multitude of people on horseback and foot pressed upon all sides, and a line of troops stationed at regular distances made superhuman efforts to keep back the people, and leave a space of a few yards free in the centre of the square.

At all the windows, richly adorned with carpets and garlands of flowers, were grouped blooming female heads, anxiously gazing in the direction of the cathedral.

Leon and Diego, annoyed at being unable to advance, attempted to turn back, but it was too late; and they were forced to remain, whether they liked it or no, spectators of what was going to take place.

They had not long to wait however; and few minutes had scarce passed after their arrival ere two cannon shots were heard. At the same time the bells of all the churches sent their silvery peals into the air, the gates of the cathedral were noisily opened, and a religious chant began, joined in by the whole crowd, who immediately fell on their knees, excepting the horsemen, who contented themselves with taking off their hats.

Ere long a procession marched along majestically in the sight of all.

There was something at once affecting and imposing in the magnificent appearance which the Governor's square offered at this moment. Beneath a dazzling sky illumined by a burning sun, whose

beams glistened and sparkled like a shower of diamonds, and through the crowd kneeling and praying devoutly, the army of Christ moved onwards, marching with a firm and measured step, and singing the exquisite psalms of the Roman litany, accompanied by the thousand voices of the faithful.

Then came the dais, the crosses and banners embroidered with gold, silver, and precious stones, and statues of male and female saints larger than life, some carved in marble and wood, others sculptured in massive gold or silver, and shining so brightly that it was impossible to keep the eyes fixed on them.

Then came long files of Franciscan, Benedictine, Recollet, Genovevan, and other monks, with their arms folded on their chest, and the cowl pulled over their eyes, singing in a falsetto voice.

Then marched at regular intervals detachments of troops, with their bands at their head, playing military marches.

And after the monasteries came the convents, after the monks the nuns, with their white veils and contemplative demeanour.

The procession had been marching past thus for nearly an hour, and the end could not be seen, when Leon's horse, startled by the movement of several persons who fell back and touched its head, reared, and in spite of the efforts made by its rider to restrain it, broke into formidable leaps; and then, maddened by the shouts of the persons that surrounded it, rushed impetuously forward, driving back the human wall opposed to it, and dashing down everything in its passage.

A frightful tumult broke out in the crowd. Everybody, overcome by terror, tried to fly; and the cries of the females, closely pressed in by all these people, who had only one thought – that of avoiding the mad course of the horse – could be heard all around. Suddenly the horse reached the middle of the procession, at the moment when the nuns of the Purísima Concepción were defiling past; and the ladies, forgetting all decorum, fled in every direction, while busily crossing themselves.

One alone, doubtless, more timid than her companions, or perhaps more terrified, had remained motionless, looking around her, and not knowing what resolution to form.

The horse advanced upon her with furious leaps.

The nun felt herself lost; her legs gave way, and she fell on her knees, bending her head as if to receive the mortal stroke.

Leon, despairing of being able to change his horse's direction, or stop it soon enough not to trample the maiden under foot, had a sudden inspiration: driving in both spurs, he lifted the animal with such dexterity that it bounded from the ground, and passed like lightning over the nun without even grazing her.

A universal shout escaped from every throat on seeing the horse, after this exploit, touch the ground, stop suddenly, and tremble in all its limbs.

The crisis was spent, and there was nothing more to fear. Leon left the horse in the hands of Diego, who had joined him with great difficulty, and leaping out of his saddle, ran to raise the fainting maiden.

Before anyone had time to approach her, he took her in his arms, and lifted the veil which concealed her face.

The poor girl had been unable to resist the terrible emotion she had undergone; her eyes were closed, and a deadly pallor covered her features.

She was a delicious creature, scarce fifteen years of age, and her face was ravishing in its elegance and delicacy, through its exquisite purity of outline.

Her complexion, of a dazzling whiteness, had that gilded reflection which the sun of America produces; long black and silky lashes fringed her downcast eyelids, and admirably designed eyebrows relieved by their dark hue the ivory features of her virgin forehead.

Her lips, which were parted, displayed a double row of small white teeth. Deprived of consciousness as she was, it seemed as if life had entirely withdrawn from this body.

Leon stood motionless with admiration. On feeling the maiden's waist yield upon his arm, an unknown emotion made his heart tremble, and heavy drops of perspiration beaded on his temples.

"What can be the matter with me?" he asked himself, with amazement.

The nun opened her eyes again; a sudden flush suffused her cheek, and quickly liberating herself from the young man's arms with a gesture full of modesty, she gave him a glance of indefinable meaning.

"Thanks, Signor Caballero," she said, in a soft and tremulous voice; "I should have been dead without you."

Leon felt troubled by the melodious accents of this voice, and could not find any answer.

The maiden smiled sadly, and raising her hand to her bosom, she quickly pulled out a small bag, which she wore on a ribbon, and offering it to the young man, said —

"Farewell! farewell for ever!"

"Oh no!" Leon answered, looking around him, as if defying the other nuns, who, now that the danger was past, hurried up to resume their place in the procession; "not farewell, for we shall meet again."

And, kissing the maiden's hand, he took the scapulary.

The procession had already set out again, and the hymns were resounding once more in the air, as Leon perceived that the nun had returned to her place among her companions, and was going away singing the praises of the Lord.

A hand was heavily laid on the smuggler's shoulder, and he raised his head.

"Well," the half-breed asked him, "what are you doing here?"

"Oh!" Leon answered; "I love that woman, brother. I love her!"

"Come," Diego said; "the procession has passed, and we can move now. To horse, and let us be off!"

A few minutes later the two men were galloping along the road to Rio Claro.

CHAPTER II
THE COUNTRY HOUSE

Between Valparaíso and Rio Claro, halfway to Santiago, stood a delicious country house, belonging to Don Juan de Dios-Souza y Soto-Mayor, a descendant of one of the noblest and richest families in Chili: several of its members have played an important part in the Spanish monarchy.

The Soto-Mayors are counted among the number of the bravest and proudest comrades of Fernando Cortez, Pizarro, and all those heroic adventurers who, confiding in their sword, conquered for Spain those vast and rich countries, the possession of which allowed Philip II. to say at a later date, with truth, that the sun never set on his states.

The Soto-Mayors have spread over the whole of South America; in Peru, Chili, and Mexico, branches of this powerful family are found, who, after the conquest, settled in these countries, which they have not quitted since. This has not prevented them, however, from keeping up relations which have ever enabled them to assist each other, and retain under all circumstances their power and their wealth.

A Soto-Mayor was for ten years a Viceroy of Peru, and in our time we have seen a member of this family prime minister and chief of the cabinet at the Court of Spain.

When the American Colonies raised the standard of revolt against the Peninsula, Don Juan de Dios, although already aged and father of a family, was one of the first who responded to the appeal of their new country, and ranged themselves under its banner at the head of all the forces and all the servants they could collect.

He had fought the War of Independence as a brave soldier, and had endured courageously, and, before all, philosophically, the numerous privations which he had been compelled to accept.

Appointed a general when Spain, at length constrained to recognise the nationality of her old colonies, gave up the struggle, he retired to one of his estates, a few leagues from Valparaíso, and there he lived in the midst of his family, who loved and respected him, like a country gentlemen, resting from his fatigues and awaiting his last hours with the calmness of mind of a man convinced that he has done his duty, and for whom death is a reward rather than a punishment.

Laying aside all political anxieties, devoid of ambition, and possessing an immense fortune, he had devoted himself to the education of his three children, Inez, Maria, and Juanito. Inez and Maria were two maidens whose beauty promised to equal that of their mother, Doña Isabel de Costafuentes. Maria, the younger, according to the custom prevalent in Chilian families, was forced into a convent in order to augment the dowry of her sister Inez, who was nearly sixteen, and only awaited Maria's taking the veil to solemnize her own marriage.

Juanito, the eldest of the three, was five-and-twenty; he was a handsome and worthy young man, who, following his father's example, entered the army, and was serving with the rank of Major.

It was eight in the evening, and the whole family, assembled in the garden, were quietly conversing, while enjoying the fresh air after a stifling day.

The weather seemed inclined to be stormy, heavy black clouds coursed athwart the sky, and the hollow moaning of the wind could be heard amid the distant mountains; the moon, half veiled, only spread a vague and uncertain light, and at times a splendid flash tore the horizon, illumining the space with a fantastic reflection.

"Holy Virgin!" Inez said, addressing the general, "only see, father, how quickly the flashes succeed each other."

"My dear child," the old gentleman answered affectionately, "if I may believe certain wounds, which are a barometer for me, we shall have a terrible storm tonight, for they cause me intense suffering."

And the general passed his hand along his leg, while the conversation was continued by the rest.

Don Juan de Soto-Mayor was at this period sixty-two years of age; he was a man of tall stature, rather thin, whose irreproachable demeanour evidenced dignity and nobility; his grey hair, abundantly on the temples, formed a crown round the top of his head, which was bald.

"Oh! I do not like storms," the young lady continued.

"You must say an orison for travellers, Inez."

"Am I to be counted among the number of travellers, señorita?" interrupted a dashing cavalier, dressed in a splendid military uniform, and who, carelessly leaning against an orange tree, was gazing at Inez with eyes full of love.

"You, Don Pedro; why so?" the latter said eagerly, as she gave a pout of adorable meaning. "You are not travelling."

"That is true, señorita; at least, not at this moment, but – "

"What Colonel!" Don Juan said, "are you returning to Santiago?"

"Shortly, sir. Ah! you served at a good time, general; you fought, at any rate, while we parade soldiers are fit for nothing now."

"Do not complain, my friend; you have your good moments too, and the war which you wage is at times more cruel than ours."

"Oh!" Inez exclaimed, with a tremor in her voice, "do not feel annoyed, Don Pedro, at your inaction; I fear lest those wicked Indians may begin again at any moment."

"Reassure yourself, Niña, the Araucanos are quiet, and we shall not hear anything of them for a long time; the last lesson they received will render them prudent, I hope."

"May heaven grant it!" the young lady remarked, as she crossed herself and raised her eyes to heaven; "But I doubt it."

"Come, come," the general exclaimed, gaily, "hold your tongue, little girl, and instead of talking about such serious things, try to be more amiable to the poor colonel, whom you take a pleasure in tormenting."

Inez pretended not to hear the words which her father had just said to her, and turning to her mother, who, seated by her side, was talking to her son in a low voice.

"Mamita," she said, coaxingly, "do you know that I am jealous of you?"

"Why so, Inez?" the good lady asked.

"Because, ever since dinner you have confiscated Juanito, and kept him so closely to you that it has been impossible for me to tease him once the whole evening."

"Have patience, my pet," the young man said, as he rose and leaned over the back of her chair; "you will make up for lost time; besides, we were talking about you."

"About me! Oh, brother, make haste and tell me what you were saying."

And the girl clapped her little childish hands together, while her eyes were lighted up by curiosity.

"Yes," said Don Juanito, maliciously; "we were talking about your approaching marriage with my friend, Colonel Don Pedro Sallazar."

"Fie! you naughty fellow," Inez said, with a mocking smile; "you always try to cause me pain."

While saying these words, the coquette shot a killing glance in the direction of the colonel.

"What! cause you pain!" her brother answered: "is not the marriage arranged?"

"I do not say no."

"Must it not be concluded when our sister Maria has pronounced her vows?"

"Poor Maria!" Inez said, with a sigh, but quickly resumed her usual good spirits.

"That is true; but they are not yet pronounced, as my dear Maria will be with us shortly."

"They will be so within three months at the most."

"Ah!" she exclaimed lightly, "before then the donkey and its driver will die, as the proverb says."

"My daughter," the general remarked, gravely, "the colonel holds your word, and what you have just said is wrong."

The girl blushed: two transparent tears sparkled on her long lashes; she rose quickly, and ran to embrace her father.

"Forgive me, father; I am a madcap."

Then she turned to the colonel, and offered him her hand.

"And do you also forgive me, Don Pedro? For I did not think of what I was saying."

"That is right," the general exclaimed; "peace is made, and I trust that nothing will disturb it in future."

"Thanks for the kind wish," said the colonel, as he covered with kisses the hand which Inez abandoned to him.

"Oh, oh!" Don Juan remarked, "here is the storm; let us be off."

In fact, the lightning flashed uninterruptedly, and heavy drops of rain began beating on the foliage which the gusts continued to agitate.

All began running toward the house, and were soon collected in the drawing room.

In Europe it is difficult to form an idea of the magnificence and wealth which American houses contain; for gold and silver, so precious and so rare with us, are profusely employed in Chili, Peru, and the entire southern region.

The description of the room in which the Soto-Mayor family sought refuge will give a sketch of what is called comfort in these countries, with which it is impossible for us to contend, as concerns everything that relates to splendour and veritable luxury.

It was a large octagonal room, containing rosewood furniture inlaid with ebony; the floor was covered with mats of Guayaquil straw of a fabulous price; the locks of the doors and window fastenings were of massive silver; mirrors of the height of the room reflected the light of pink wax candles, arranged in gold candelabra enriched with precious stones; and on the white and gold damask, covering the space below the looking glass, hung masterpieces of art signed by the leaders of the Spanish and Italian schools.

On the credence tables and whatnots, so deliciously carved that they seemed made of lacework, were arranged China ornaments of exquisite workmanship – trifles created to excite for a moment the pleasure of the eye, and whose manufacture had been a prodigy of patience, perfection, and invention. These thousand nothings, – on which glistened oriental gems, mother-o'-pearl, ivory, enamel, jasper, and all the products of the mineral kingdom, combined and mingled with fragrant woods; feathers, &c., – would of themselves have absorbed a European fortune, owing to their inestimable value.

The lustre of the crystal girandoles, casting multicoloured fires, and the rarest flowers which grew down over enormous Japanese vases, gave a fairy like aspect to the apartment; and yet, of all those who had come there to seek shelter from the bad weather, there was not one who did not consider it quite usual.

The conversation interrupted in the garden had just been recommenced indoors, when a ring of the visitor's bell was heard.

"Who can arrive so late?" the general asked; "I am not expecting anybody."

The door opened, and a servant appeared.

"Mi amo," he said, after bowing respectfully; "two travellers, surprised by the storm, ask leave to take shelter in the house."

At the same time a vivid flash rendered the candles pale, and a tremendous peal of thunder burst forth. The ladies uttered a cry of alarm, and crossed themselves.

"Santa Virgin!" Señora Soto-Mayor exclaimed, "do not receive them, for these strangers might bring us some misfortune."

"Silence, madam," the old gentleman answered; "the house of a Spanish noble must ever be open to the unfortunate."

And he left the room, followed by the domestic. The Señora hung her head at her husband's reproach, but being enthralled by superstition, she kept her eyes anxiously fixed on the door through which the strangers would enter. In a few minutes the general re-appeared, conducting Delbès and Diego el Vaquero.

"This house is yours, gentlemen; enter, in Heaven's name;" he said to them, affably.

Leon bowed gracefully to the ladies, then to the two officers, and thanked the general for his cordial reception.

"So long as you deign to honour my poor house with your presence, gentlemen," the latter replied, courteously, "we are entirely at your service; and if it please you to drink maté with us, we shall feel flattered."

"I accept your proposal, sir, with thanks."

Diego contented himself with nodding his head in the affirmative; the general rang, and ordered the maté. A minute later, a butler came in, carrying a massive gold salver, on which were arranged exquisitely carved maté cups, each supplied with an amber tube. In the midst of the cups were a silver coffeepot full of water, and a sandalwood box containing the leaves. On golden saucers were piled regalias, and husk and paper cigarettes.

The butler placed the salver on a table to which the company sat down, and he then retired. After this, Señora Soto-Mayor prepared the decoction, poured the burning liquid into the cups, and placed them before the guests. Each took the one within reach, and was soon drawing up the maté, while observing deep silence and sitting in a contemplative attitude. The Chilians are very fond of this beverage, which they have borrowed from the Indians, and they display some degree of solemnity when they proceed to drink it.

When the first mouthfuls had been swallowed, the conversation began again. Leon took a husk cigarette from one of the saucers, unrolled it, rubbed the tobacco for a moment in the palm of his hand, then remade it with the consummate skill of the inhabitants of the country, lit it at the flame of a small gold lamp prepared for the purpose, and, after taking two or three whiffs, politely offered the cigarette to Doña Inez, who accepted it with a gracious smile, and placed it between her rosy lips.

Colonel Don Pedro had not seen the Frenchman's action without a certain twinge of jealousy; but at the moment when he was about to light the cigarette which he held in his hand, Inez offered him the one Leon had given her, and which she had half smoked, saying —

"Shall we change, Don Pedro?"

The colonel gladly accepted the exchange proffered to him, gave his cigarette to the young lady, and took hers, which he smoked with rapture.

Diego, even since his arrival at the house, had not once opened his lips; his face had grown clouded, and he sat with his eyes fixed on the general, whom he observed askance with an indefinable expression of hatred and passion.

Leon knew not to what he should attribute this silence, and felt alarmed at his comrade's strange behaviour, which might be noticed by the company, and produce an unpleasant effect in their minds.

Inez laughed and prattled merrily, and several times in listening to her voice Leon was struck by a vague resemblance to another voice he had heard, though he was unable to call to mind under what circumstances he had done so. Then on scrutinizing Señora Soto-Mayor's features, he thought he could detect a resemblance with someone he knew, but he could not remember who it was.

Believing himself the dupe of an illusion, he had to get rid of the notion of explaining to himself a resemblance which probably only existed in his imagination; then, all at once, on hearing a remark that fell from Inez's lips, he turned to recognise an intonation familiar to his ears, which plunged his mind once more into the same perplexity.

"Madre," said Inez to her mother, "Don Pedro informs me that his sister Rosita will take the veil at the convent of the Purísima Concepción on the same day as my beloved Maria."

"They are, indeed, of the same age," the Señora replied.

Leon started, and could not repress an exclamation.

"What is the matter, Caballero?" the general asked.

"Nothing, general; merely a spark from my cigarette that fell in my poncho," Leon replied, with visible embarrassment.

"The storm is lulling," Diego said, at length emerging from his silence; "and I believe that we can set out again."

"Can you think of such a thing, my guests? Certainly not; the roads are too bad for me to let you depart. Besides, your room is prepared, and your horses are resting in the corral."

Diego was about to refuse, but Leon did not allow him the time.

"Since you wish it, general, we will pass the night beneath your roof."

Diego was obliged to accept. Moreover, in spite of what he stated, the storm, instead of lulling, redoubled its intensity; but it could be seen that the Vaquero obeyed against his will the necessity in which he found himself of remaining, and that he experienced an invincible repugnance in submitting to it.

The evening passed without any further incident, and about ten o'clock, after prayers had been read, at which all the servants were present, they separated.

The general had the two smugglers conducted to their bedroom by a peon, after kindly wishing them good night, and making them promise not to leave his house the next morning without wishing him good-bye, Leon and Diego thanked him for the last time, and so soon as they reached their apartment, dismissed the servant, for they were eager to cross-question each other.

CHAPTER III
THE CONVENT OF THE PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN

Whatever may be asserted to the contrary, a religion frequently undergoes, unconsciously, the atmospheric influences of the country in which it is professed; and while remaining the same fundamentally, the forms vary infinitely, and make it change its aspect according as it penetrates into countries where climates are different.

This may at the first glance appear a paradox; and yet, if our readers will take the trouble to reflect, we doubt not but they will recognise the justice and truth of our assertion.

In some countries, like Germany and England, where thick fogs brood over the earth at certain periods of the year, the character of the inhabitants is tinged by the state of the gloomy nature that surrounds them. Their ideas assume a morose and mystical hue perfectly in harmony with what they see and feel. They are serious, sad, and severe, positive and material, because fog and cold remind them at every moment that they must think of themselves, take care, and wrestle, so to speak, with the abrupt and implacable nature which allows them no respite. Hence come the egotism and personality, which destroy all the poetry of religion which is so marvellously developed in southern nations.

If we look further back, we shall find the difference even more marked. For this purpose it is only necessary to compare Greek mythology – Paganism, with its smiling images which deified vices and passions, with the gloomy and terrible worship of Odin in Scandinavia, or with that even more sanguinary paid to the god Teutates in the Gaul of olden times, and in the sombre forests of Germany.

Can we deny the influence of the northern ice over the disciples of Odin? Is not the savage majesty of the immense forests which sheltered the priests of Teutates the principal cause of the mysteries which they celebrated? And, lastly, is not the benignity of the Greek mythology explained by the beauty of the sky in which it sprang up, the mildness of the climate, the freshness of the shadows, and the ever renewing charm of its magnificent landscapes?

The Catholic religion, which substitutes itself for all the rest, has been, and still is, subjected to the action of the temperature of those countries into which it has penetrated, and which it has fecundated.

In Chili it is, so to speak, entirely external. Its worship is composed of numerous festivals pompously celebrated in churches glittering with light, gold, silver, and precious stones, of interminable processions performed under a reign of flowers, and clouds of incense which burn uninterruptedly.

In this country, beloved of the sun, religion is full of love; the ardent hearts that populate it do not trouble themselves at all about theological discussions. They love God, the Virgin, and the saints with the adoration, self-denial and impulse which they display in all their actions.

Catholicism is changed with them, though they do not at all suspect it, into a sort of Paganism, which does not account for its existence, although that existence cannot be contested.

Thus they tacitly accord the same power to any saint as to deity; and when the majority of them address their prayer to the Virgin, they do not pray to Mary the Mother of our Saviour, but to Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, Nuestra Señora del Carmen, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Nuestra Señora de Guatananga, and ten thousand other Our ladies.

A Chilian woman will not hesitate to say, with perfect conviction, that she is devoted to Nuestra Señora de la Sierra, because she is far more powerful than Nuestra Señora del Carmen, and so on with the rest.

We remember hearing one day in the church of Nuestra Señora de la Merced, at Pilar, a worthy hacendero praying to God the Father to intercede for him with Nuestra Señora del Pilar, so as to obtain for him a good harvest!

Novenas are kept and masses ordered for the slightest pretext. If a Chilian lady be deserted by her lover, quick a mass to bring him back to her side; if a man wish to avenge himself on one of his fellow men, quick a mass that his revenge may be carried out!

There is also another way of insuring the protection of any saint, and that is by making a vow. A young man who wishes his beloved lady to give him a meeting, never fails to pledge himself by a vow addressed to San Francisco or San Antonio to perform some pious deed, if the saint will consent to advise the lady in his favour. And these practices must not be taken for juggling; the people who accomplish them do so in perfect good faith.

Such is the way in which the Catholic religion is understood in South America.

In all the ex-Spanish colonies members of the clergy swarm, and we are not afraid of being taxed with exaggeration when we assert that in Chili they form at least one-fourth of the population. Now, the clergy are composed of an infinite number of monks and nuns of every possible form, species, and colour, Franciscans, Benedictines, Genovevans, Barefooted Carmelites, Brothers of Mercy, Augustines, and many others whose names have escaped us. As will be easily understood, these religious communities, owing to their considerable number, are not paid by the government, whose resources would not nearly suffice for their support. Hence they are compelled to create a thousand trades, each more ingenious than the other, in order to be able to exist.

In these countries – and there will be no difficulty in understanding this – the clergy are excessively tolerant, for the very simple reason that they have need of everybody, and if they committed the mistake of alienating the inhabitants they would die of hunger in a fortnight. It is worth while seeing in Chili the extension given to the trade in indulgences. *Agnus Deis*, scapularies, blessed crosses, and miraculous images; everything has its price, everything is sold. So much for a prayer – so much for a confession – so much for a mass.

A Chilian sets out on a journey, and in order that no accident may happen to him on the road, he has a mass said. If, in spite of this precaution, he is plundered on the high road by the Salteadores, he does not fail on his return to go to the monk of whom he ordered the mass, and bitterly complain of his want of efficacy. The monk is accustomed to such recriminations, and knows what to answer.

"That does not surprise me, my son," the Franciscan, or the Benedictine, or whoever he may be, as the answer is always the same, replies; "what the deuce did you expect to have for a peso? Ah, if you had been willing to pay a half ounce, we should have had the beadle, the cross, the banner, two choristers, and eight candles, and then most assuredly nothing would have happened to you; but how could you expect the Virgin to put herself out of the way for a peso?"

The Chilian withdraws, convinced that he is in the wrong, and promising not to be niggardly on the next opportunity.

With the exception of the minor trades to which we have alluded, the monks are jolly fellows, smoking, drinking, swearing, and making love as well as a man of the world. It is not uncommon to see in a wine shop a fat monk with a red face and a cigarette in his mouth, merrily playing the vihuela as dance accompaniment to a loving couple whom he will confess next morning. Most of the monks carry their knife in their sleeve, and in a quarrel, which is a frequent thing in Chili, use it as well, and with as little remorse as the first comer.

With them religion is a trade by which they make the largest profit possible, and does not at all compel them to live without the pale of the common existence.

Let us add, too, in concluding this rather lengthy sketch, but which it was necessary to give the reader, in order that by knowing Chilian manners, he might be able to account for the strangest of the incidents which we are about to record, that, in spite of the reproaches which the light conduct of the monks at times deserves – regard being had to the sanctity of the gown they wear – they are

not the less an object of respect to all, who, taking compassion on human weakness, excuse the man in the priest, and repay tolerance for tolerance.

The convent of the Purísima Concepción stands at the extremity of the Almendral. It is a vast edifice, entirely built of carved stone, nearly two hundred years old, and was founded by the Spaniards a short time after their arrival in Chili. The whole building is imposing and majestic, like all the Spanish convents; it is almost a small town, for it contains everything which may be useful and agreeable for life – a church, a hospital, a washhouse, a large kitchen garden, a shady and well-laid out park, reserved for the promenades of the nuns, and large cloisters lined with frescoes, representing scenes from the life of the Virgin, to whom the convent is consecrated. These cloisters, bordered by circular galleries, out of which, open the nuns' cells, enclose a sandy courtyard, containing a piece of water and a fountain, whose jet refreshes the air in the midday heat.

The cells are charming retreats, in which nothing that promotes comfort is wanting – a bed, two chairs covered with Cordovan leather, a prie-Dieu, a small toilet table, in the drawer of which you may be certain of finding a looking glass, and a few sacred pictures, occupy the principal space destined for necessary articles. In one corner of the room is visible, between a guitar and a scourge, a statue of the Virgin, with a wreath of roses on her head and a constantly-burning lamp before her. Such is the furniture which will be found, with but few exceptions, in the cells of the nuns.

The convent of the Concepción contains about one hundred and fifty nuns of the order of Mount Carmel, and some sixty novices. In this country of toleration, strict nunneries are rare; the sisters are allowed to go into town and pay or receive visits; the rule is extremely gentle, and with the exception of the offices which they are expected to attend with great punctuality, the nuns, when they have once entered their cells, are almost free to do what they think proper, no one apparently paying any attention to them.

After the incident which we recorded in our first chapter, the procession, momentarily interrupted by the furious attack of Leon's horses, was reorganized as well as it could be; all the persons comprising it returned to their places so soon as the first alarm was over, and two hours after the gates of the Purísima Concepción closed again upon the long file of nuns engulfed in its walls.

So soon as the crosses, banners, and statues of saints had been deposited with all proper ceremony in their usual places, after a short prayer repeated in community, the ranks were broken, and the nuns began chattering about the strange event which had suddenly interrupted them as they left the cathedral. Several of them were not tired of praising the bold rider who had so cleverly guided his runaway horse, and saved a great misfortune by the skill which he had displayed under the circumstances.

From the midst of a group of about a dozen sisters conversing together, there came forth two maidens, dressed in the white garb of novices, who, taking each other's arm, walked gently toward the most deserted part of the garden. They must have eagerly desired not to be disturbed in their private conversation, for, selecting the most shaded walk, they took great care to hide themselves from their companions' observation behind the shrubs that formed the borders.

They soon reached a marble seat hidden behind a clump of trees, in front of a basin filled with transparent water, whose completely motionless surface was as smooth as that of a mirror. No better place could have been selected for a confidential conversation; so they sat down, and raised the veil that covered their face.

They were two charming girls, who did not count thirty years between them, and whose delicate profile was gracefully designed under their pure and exquisitely white wimple. The first was Doña Maria de Souza y Soto-Mayor; the other was Doña Rosita Sallazar, sister of the dashing Don Pedro, of whom we have already got a glimpse as affianced husband of Inez.

Doña Maria's face displayed visible traces of emotion. Was it the result of the terror she had felt on seeing herself almost trampled on by the smuggler's horse, or did a cause, of which we are ignorant, produce the effect which we have just indicated?

The conversation of the young ladies will tell us.

"Well, sister," Rosita asked, "have you recovered from the terror which this morning's event caused you?"

Doña Maria, who seemed absorbed in secret thoughts, started, and hurriedly answered —

"Oh! I am well now; quite well, thank you."

"In what a way you say that, Maria! What is the matter? You are quite pale."

A short silence followed this appeal. The young ladies took each other's hand, and waited to see which would be the first to speak.

Maria and Rosita, who were nearly of the same age, loved each other like sisters. Both novices, and destined to take the veil at the same date, the identity of their position had produced between them an affectionate sympathy which never failed them. They placed in a common stock, with the simple confidence of youth, their hopes and sorrows, their plans and dreams – brilliant winged dreams, which the convent walls would pitilessly break. They had no secret from each other, and hence Rosita was grieved by the accent with which Maria had answered her when she asked her how she was. The latter evidently concealed something from her for the first time since she had entered the convent.

"Maria," she said to her, gently, "forgive me if I acted indiscreetly in asking after your dear health; but I feared, on noticing the pallor of your face – "

"Dear Rosita, how kind you are!" Maria interrupted, embracing her companion tenderly; "and how wrong I am! Yes, I am suffering, really; but I know not from what, and it only began just now."

"Oh! accursed be the wicked man, cause of so much terror!" Rosita continued, alluding to Leon the smuggler.

"Oh, silence, Rosita! Speak not so of that cavalier, for he has on his face such a noble expression of courage and goodness that – "

"So you looked at him, sister?" Rosita exclaimed.

"Yes, when I regained my senses and opened my eyes, his were fixed on me."

"What! he dared to raise your veil? But it is a great sin to let a man see your face, and you must confess it to dear Mother Superior; the convent rule demands it."

"I know it, and will conform."

"After all," Rosita continued, with volubility, "as you had fainted, you could not prevent him raising your veil; hence it is not your fault, but that young man's."

"He saved my life!" Maria murmured.

"That is true, and you are bound to feel grateful to him instead of hating him."

"Do you think I can remember him without sinning?"

"Certainly: is it not natural to remember those who have done us a great service?"

"Yes, yes; you are right," Maria exclaimed, joyfully. "Thanks, sister – thanks, sister: your words do me good, for I was afraid it would be wrong to think of him who saved me."

"On the contrary, sister," Rosita said, with a little doctorial tone which rendered her ravishing, "you know that Mother Abbess daily repeats to us that ingratitude is one of the most odious vices."

"Oh, in that case, I did right in giving him my scapulary as a pledge of remembrance."

"What! did you give him that holy object?"

"Oh, poor young man! he seemed so affected, his glance was so full of sorrow and grief – "

While Maria was speaking, Rosita was examining her, and after the last words, entertained no doubt as to the feelings which animated her friend.

"Maria," she said to her, bending down to her ear and speaking so low that no other but the one for whom it was meant could hear it – "Maria, you love him, do you not?"

"Alas!" Maria exclaimed, all trembling – "do I know? Oh, silence, for mercy's sake!" she continued, impetuously. "I love him! But who would have taught me to love? A poor creature, hurled within the walls of this convent at the tenderest age, I have up to this day known nought but the slavery in which my entire life must be spent. Excepting you, my kind Rosita, is there a creature in

the world that takes an interest in my fate, is happy at my smile or grieved at my tears? Have I ever known since the day when reason began to enlighten my heart, the ineffable sweetness of maternal caresses – those caresses which are said to warm the heart, make the sky look blue, the water more limpid, and the sun more brilliant? No; I have ever been alone. My mother, whom I could have loved so dearly – my sister, whom I sought without knowing her, and whose kisses my childish lips yearned for – both shun me and abandon me. I am in their way; they are anxious to get rid of me; and as all the world repulses me, I am given to God!"

A torrent of tears prevented the young lady from continuing. Rosita was terrified by this so true grief, and tried to restore her friend's calmness, while unable to check the tears that stood in her own eyes.

"Maria! why speak thus? it is an offence to God to complain so bitterly of the destiny which He has imposed on us."

"It is because I am suffering extraordinary torture! I know not what I feel, but I fancy that during the last hour the bandage which covered my eyes has suddenly fallen, and allowed them to catch a glimpse of an unknown light. Up to this day I have lived as the birds of the air live, without care for the morrow and remembrance of yesterday; and in my ignorance of the things which are accomplished outside these walls I could not regret them. I was told: You will be a nun; and I accepted, thinking that it would be easy for me to find happiness wherever my life passed gently and calmly; but now it is no longer possible."

And the maiden's eyes flashed with such a brilliancy that Rosita dared not interrupt her, and listened, checking with difficulty the beating of her own heart.

"Listen, sister!" Maria continued, "I hear an undefinable music in my ears; it is the intoxicating promises which the joys of the world wake in me, which I am forbidden to know, and which my soul has divined. Look! for I saw strange visions pass before my dazzled eyes. They are laughing pictures of an existence of pleasures and joys which flash and revolve around me in an infernal whirlwind. Take care; for I feel within me sensations which horrify me; shudders that traverse my whole being and cause me impossible suffering and pleasure. Oh, when that young man's hand touched mine this morning, I trembled as if I had seized a red-hot iron; when I regained my senses, and felt his breath on my face, I fancied that life was going to abandon me; and when I was obliged to leave him, it seemed to me as if there were an utter darkness around me; I saw nothing more, and was annihilated. His fiery glance cast eternal trouble and desolation into my soul. Yes, I love him: if loving be suffering, I love him! For, on hearing the convent gates close after the procession, a terrible agony contracted my heart, an icy coldness seized upon me, and I felt as if the cold tombstone were falling again on my head."

Overcome by the extreme emotion which held possession of her, the maiden had risen; her face was flushed with a feverish tinge; her eyes flashed fire; her voice had assumed a strange accent of terror and passion; her bosom heaved wildly, and she appeared to be transfigured! Suddenly she burst into sobs, and hiding her face in her hands, yielded to her despair.

"Poor Maria!" said Rosita, affected by this so simply poignant desolation, and seeking in vain by her caresses to restore calmness, "how she suffers!"

For a long time the two maidens remained seated at the same spot, mingling their tears and sighs. Still a complete prostration eventually succeeded the frenzy which had seized on Maria; and she was preparing, on her companion's entreaties, to return to her cell, when several voices, repeating her name, were heard at a short distance from the thicket where she had sought refuge.

"They are seeking us, I think," said Rosita.

"They are calling me," Maria continued; "what can they want with me?"

"Well, beloved sister, we will go and learn."

The two maidens rose, and soon found themselves in the presence of two or three sisters, who were looking for them.

"Ah, there you are!" the latter exclaimed; "Holy Mother Superior is asking after you, Maria; and we have been seeking you for the last ten minutes."

"Thanks, sisters," Maria answered; "I will obey the summons of our good mother."

"Be calm," Rosita whispered to her, with some amount of anxiety.

"Fear nothing; I will manage to hide my feelings." And all returned in the direction of the convent.

CHAPTER IV
THE SMUGGLERS

Three years prior to the events which we have just recorded, that is to say, about the month of May, 1830, Diego the Vaquero, who at that period was one of the bravest gauchos on the pampas of Buenos Aires, was returning to his rancho one evening after a day's hunting, when suddenly, before he could notice it, a magnificent panther, probably pursuing him in the tall grass, leaped, with an enormous bound, on his horse's neck. The animal, startled by this attack, which it was far from expecting, neighed with pain, and reared so violently that it fell back on its master, who had not had time to leap on the ground, but was held down by the weight of his steed.

It was, doubtless, all over with man and horse when Diego, who, in his desperation, was commending his soul to all the saints in paradise, and reciting, in a choking voice, all the scraps of prayers which he could call to mind, saw a long knife pass between his face and the head of the foetid brute, whose breath he could feel on his forehead.

The panther burst into a frightful howl, writhed, vomited a stream of black blood, and after a terrible convulsion, which set all the muscles of his body in action, fell dead by his side.

At the same moment the horse was restored to its trembling feet, and a man helped the Vaquero to rise, while saying, good-humouredly —

"Come, tell me, comrade, do you think of sleeping here, eh?"

Diego rose, and, with an anxious glance around him, felt all his limbs to make sure they were intact; then, when he was quite certain that he was perfectly sound and free from any wound, he gave a sigh of satisfaction, devoutly crossed himself, and said to his defender, who, with folded arms and a smile on his lips, had followed all his movements with the utmost interest —

"Thanks, man. Tell me your name, that I may retain it in my heart along with my father's."

"Leon," the other answered.

"Leon," the gaucho repeated, "it is well; my name is Diego; you have saved my life; at present we are brothers, and do with me as you will."

"Thanks," said Leon, affectionately pressing the hard, rugged hand which the half-breed offered him.

"Brother, where is your rancho?"

"I have none," Leon answered, with a cloud of sorrow over his face.

"You have none? What were you doing all alone, then, in the middle of the Pampas at this hour of the night?"

The young man hesitated for a moment, and then, regaining his good spirits, replied —

"Well, if I must confess to you, comrade, I was dying of hunger in the most philosophical way in the world: I have eaten nothing for two days."

"Caray," Diego exclaimed; "die of hunger! Come with me, brother; we will not part again; I have some charqui in my rancho. I repeat to you, you have saved my life, and henceforth all must be in common between us. You look like a daring fellow, so remain with me."

From this day Leon and Diego never parted again; and the friendship of these two men grew with time so great that they could not live without one another; but however great was the intimacy existing between them, never had a word been exchanged concerning their past life; and this mutual secret, mutually respected, was the only one that existed between them.

Diego certainly knew that Leon was a Frenchman, and had also noticed his great aptitude in bodily exercises, his skill as an excellent horseman, and, above all, the depth of his ideas and far from ordinary conceptions.

Recognising of what great use the young man's intellect had been to him in critical moments to get out of a difficulty, Diego regarded him with a species of veneration, and endured his moral superiority without even perceiving it.

With the sublime self-denial of virgin natures whom the narrow civilization of towns has not degraded, he had grown to regard Leon as a being placed on his path by Providence, in order that he might have someone to love; and finding in Leon a perfect reciprocity of friendship, he felt ready to sacrifice to Leon the life which he owed him.

On his side, Leon, captivated by the frank advances which the Vaquero had made him, had gradually come to feel for him a sincere affection, which was evidenced by a deep and unbounded devotion.

A short time after their meeting, Diego communicated to Leon the plan he had of going to Chili, and proposed to him to accompany him. The idle life on the pampas could not suit Leon, who had dreamed of an active and brilliant existence when he set foot on American soil. Gifted with an adventurous and enterprising character, he had left his native land to tempt fortune, and hitherto chance had not favoured his hopes. As nothing, therefore, prevented him from trying whether Chili might not be more lucky, he accepted.

One morning, therefore, the pair, mounted on Indian horses, crossed the pampas, and then, after resting for some days at San Luis de Mendoza, they entered the passes of the Cordilleras, which they got through with great difficulties and dangers of every description, and at length reached their journey's end.

On arriving at Chili, Leon, powerfully supported by Diego, organized the contraband trade on a vast scale, and a few months later fifty men obeyed his orders and those of Diego, whom he made his lieutenant. From this moment Captain Leon Delbès found the mode of life which suited his tastes.

Now that we have explained the nature of the ties which bound the two principal characters of our story, we will resume our narrative at the moment when we left our smugglers in the room which Don Juan y Soto-Mayor ordered to be got ready for them.

Scarce had the peon left the room ere Leon, after assuring himself that no one could hear his words, walked up to Diego, who was sitting gloomy and silent on a folding chair, and said —

"What is the matter with you tonight? Why did you remain so silent? Is it that General Soto-Mayor – "

"There is nothing the matter with me," the half-breed sharply interrupted; "but by the way," he added, looking Leon in the face, "you appear yourself to be suffering from extraordinary agitation."

"You are right; but if you wish to learn the cause, confidence for confidence, and tell me what you have on your mind."

"Leon, do not question me on this subject. You are not mistaken; I allow I have been thoughtful and silent ever since I have crossed the threshold of this house; but do not try to penetrate the motive. It is not the time yet to tell you the things which you must know some day. Thanks for the interest you take in my annoyances and my sorrows; but once again I implore you, in the name of our friendship, do not press me."

"Since such is the case, brother, I will refrain from any questions," Leon answered.

"And now, if you please, tell me why I saw you turn pale and tremble when a word that fell from the lips of the Señora Inez, and which I did not catch, struck your ear."

"Brother, do you remember that this morning, after saving from a certain death the novice of the convent of the Purísima Concepción, I told you that my heart knew love for the first time in my life?"

"But what is there in common between that girl and Señora Inez?"

"Do you remember also," Leon continued, without answering the Vaquero's observation, "that I swore to see the maiden again, even if I were obliged to lay down my life in satisfying my desire?"

"But again I say – "

"Well, know then, brother, that I have learned her name, and it is Doña Maria y Soto-Mayor."

"What are you saying?"

"And that she is the daughter of our host, Don Juan de Dios-Souza y Soto-Mayor."

"And you love her?" Diego exclaimed.

"Must I repeat it again?" Leon remarked impetuously.

"Malediction!" said the half-breed.

"Yes, malediction, is it not? for Maria is eternally lost to me; she will take the veil shortly, and the hopes I entertained of being able to drag her out of the walls of that convent are blighted."

"To marry her?" Diego remarked, mockingly.

"Nonsense, Leon, my friend: you are mad. What, you, the smuggler, marry a Señora, the daughter of a gentleman! No, you cannot suppose such a thing."

"Silence, Diego, silence! for the more that I feel the impossibility of possessing the girl, the more I feel that I love her."

And the young man, crushed by sorrow, fell into a seat by Diego's side.

"And do you believe," the latter continued, after a moment's silence, "that there is no hope of delaying her in taking the veil?"

"How do I know? Besides, of what good is it, as you said just now – can I think of the daughter of General Soto-Mayor? No, all is lost!"

"Remember the Spanish proverb – 'Nothing is certain but death and the tax gatherer.'"

For a moment past, the half-breed's face had become animated with a singular expression, which would not have escaped Leon, had not the latter been entirely absorbed in the thought of losing her whom he loved.

"What do you mean?" he asked Diego.

"Listen patiently, for the question I am going to ask you is intended to fix an important determination in my mind."

"I am listening," the young man said.

"Do you really love Doña Maria?"

At this question, which might seem, at the least, inopportune after what Leon had just stated, the latter frowned angrily; but on noticing the half-breed's serious face, he understood that it was not for the purpose of making a jest of his despair that Diego had revived the fire which was burning in his bosom.

"If I do not see her again, I shall die," the young man replied, simply.

"You shall not die, brother, for within a fortnight she will be at your knees."

Leon knew the half-breed, and that he was a man who never promised in vain: hence he did not dare doubt, and merely raised his eyes and questioned him with a look.

"Within a fortnight she will be at your knees," the half-breed slowly repeated; "but till then, not a word, not a sign of recollection, reproach, impatience, or amazement, but passive obedience."

"Thanks, brother," Leon contented himself with answering, as he held out his hand to Diego, who pressed it in his.

"And now let us sleep, so that tomorrow our foreheads may be less burning, and we may be able to set to work."

Then, putting out the candles, the two men threw themselves on their beds, without exchanging another word, for each was anxious to reflect upon the course he should pursue.

Neither slept: Leon thought of Maria and the means Diego might employ to fulfil the pledge he had made; while Diego had in his head a ready-traced plan, whose success appeared to him certain, as it was connected with a far more dangerous affair.

At daybreak they rose, and kneeling down in the middle of the room, took each other by the hand, and devoutly said their prayers. Anyone would have been astonished who had overheard what these two men asked of God – the God of mercy and goodness! Their prayer ended, they went down

into the garden; the night storm had entirely passed away, the sun was rising in a flood of transparent vapour, and everything announced a magnificent day.

Shortly after their arrival, they perceived the general, who came to meet them with a regular step and a joyous face.

"Well, gentlemen," he shouted to them, so soon as he saw them, "how did you pass the night?"

"Excellently, general," Leon replied; "and my friend and myself both thank you sincerely for your kind hospitality."

"At your age a man can sleep anywhere," the general continued, with a pleasant smile. "Oh, youth!" he added, with a sigh of regret, "happy time, which flies, alas! too quickly." Then becoming serious; "As for the slight service which I have had the pleasure of rendering you, you will disoblige me by thanking me for so simple a thing."

After a few more words from him, dictated by politeness, the three men walked round the garden several times, and, to Leon's great surprise, Diego did not allude to their departure; but as the young man did not know the Vaquero's line of conduct as to the prospects which he nursed, he waited.

Don Juan was the first to break the silence.

"Gentlemen," he said, stopping at the corner of a shady walk, "be good enough, I pray, not to take in ill part what I am about to say – you are smugglers, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," replied Diego, amazed at the old gentleman's perspicuity.

"This discovery does not injure you at all in my opinion," continued the general, who had noticed the look of surprise exchanged by the two friends. "I have frequently had dealings with gentlemen of your profession, and have had always cause to be pleased with them; and I trust that the relations which may be established between us will prove advantageous to both parties."

"Speak, sir."

The Vaquero was all ears, and examined the general with a distrust which the latter did not notice, or feigned not to notice.

"This is the matter, gentlemen. I am obliged, owing to certain family reasons, to undertake a journey to Valdivia, where my brother Don Louis resides; now, your arrival at my house has made me think of making the journey under your escort, and I wish to propose to you, as I shall take Señora y Soto-Mayor and my whole family with me, that you and your men should escort us, leaving it to you to fix the price as you think right."

"General," Leon answered, "you have guessed correctly in regarding us as smugglers; I have the honour of being the captain of a band of fifty men, who know how to put down the customs' dues when they are too high; but you are mistaken in supposing that we can accompany you."

"Why so?" the Vaquero eagerly interrupted, on whose features a strange gleam of satisfaction had appeared. "It is true that it is not our habit to undertake business of that nature; but the general has shown himself too hospitable to us to refuse him our assistance. Captain, remember, too, that we have something to do within a few days in the neighbourhood of Valdivia, and hence we shall merely make our journey the sooner, which is a trifle."

"That is true," muttered the captain, whom a glance of Diego's had told that he must accept. "I fancied that I must return to Valparaíso; but what my friend has just said is perfectly correct, so you can dispose of us as you please."

"In that case, gentlemen," said the general, who had only seen in this opposition on the part of the captain a mode of demanding a large sum, "be good enough to step into my study, and while drinking a glass of Alicante, we will settle money matters."

"We are at your orders."

And all three proceeded to the general's apartments. It was arranged that, instead of bargaining with an arriero, the captain was to supply a dozen mules to carry the baggage, and that they should start the following morning. When this arrangement was made, Leon and Diego asked the general's

permission to go and join their men, and give orders for the departure; but he would not consent until they had breakfasted.

They therefore waited, and soon found themselves again in the company of the members of the Soto-Mayor family, as well as of Don Pedro Sallazar, who had decided on spending the night at the country house before setting out for Santiago. Leon was dying to turn the conversation to the Convent of the Purísima Concepción, and could have most easily done so by telling the event of the previous day; but he remembered the promise made to Diego, and fearing lest he might commit some folly injurious to his interests, he held his tongue; still he learned, on hearing the talk, that the general's major-domo had started that morning for Valparaíso entrusted with a message for the Señora Doña Maria.

When breakfast was over, the two friends took leave of their hosts, and, after finally arranging the hour for starting, they left the house, and found in the courtyard their horses ready saddled and held by a peon. At the moment of starting, Don Pedro de Sallazar waved his hand to them, and disappeared in the direction of Santiago, accompanied by the general's son.

The two smugglers arrived before midday at the spot where their men, somewhat alarmed at their prolonged absence, were encamped. It was a narrow gorge between two lofty mountains, and at a sufficient distance from the beaten road for the band to be safe from any surprise, of which there was not much apprehension, by the way, as in this country smugglers enjoy almost complete immunity, and have only to fear the excessively rare cases of being caught in the act.

The horses were browsing at liberty, and the men, seated on a hearth made of two lumps of stone, were finishing their breakfast of charqui and tortillas. They were mostly men in the prime of life, whose resolute air sufficiently evidenced the carelessness they felt for every species of danger.

Belonging to all nations, they formed a whole which was not without originality, but each of them, whether he were German or Portuguese, Sicilian or Dutchman, as he found in the existence which he led the charm of an adventurous life studded with perils, pleasures, and emotions, had completely forgotten the name of his country, only to remember the memorable days on which, indulging in his dangerous profession, he had put the custom house officers to flight, and passed under their very noses bales of merchandize.

Enemies of a yoke and servitude, under whatever form they might appear, they obeyed with rigorous exactness the discipline which Leon Delbès had imposed on them – a discipline which, by the way, allowed them to do whatever they pleased when not actually engaged with their smuggling duties. Some were drunkards, others gamblers, and others libertines; but all ransomed their faults, which they regarded almost as qualities, by a well-tried courage, and a perfect devotion to Leon and Diego.

Their dress varied but slightly from that of their chief; all wore a poncho, which covered their weapons, and the boots of wood rangers, which, while protecting their legs from the stings of reptiles, left them perfect liberty of motion. Their hats alone might be regarded as the distinctive mark either of their nationality or the difference of their tastes. There were broad-brimmed, pointed, and round hats; every shape came into strange contact there, from the worn silk hat of Europe to that of the American Bolivar.

They uttered a shout of joy on perceiving their chiefs, and, eagerly rising, ran to meet them.

"Good day, gentlemen," Leon said, as he leaped from his horse. "I am rather behind my time, but you must blame the night storm, which compelled us to halt on the road. Is there any news?"

"None, captain," they answered.

"In that case listen to me. Ten of you will stay here, and at four o'clock tomorrow morning proceed with twelve mules to the house of Don Juan y Soto-Mayor, and place yourselves at the orders of that gentleman, whom you will accompany to Valdivia." Diego set about selecting the men whom he thought the best fitted for the expedition; and after he had done so, Leon addressed the others.

"You will start for Valparaíso and await my orders there; you will lodge at Crevel's, in the Calle San Agostino, and at Dominique the Italian's, at the Almendral. Above all," he added, "be prudent, and do not attract attention; amuse yourselves like good fellows, but do not quarrel with the señores, or have any fights with the sailors. You understand me, I suppose?"

"Yes, captain," they all answered.

"Very well. Now I will give each of you five ounces to cover your expenses, and do not forget that I may want you at any moment, and you must be ever ready to obey my summons."

He gave them the money, and after repeating his recommendations, he retired, leaving it to Diego to give the men who were proceeding to Valparaíso the final instructions which they might need. The smugglers removed all traces of their meal, and each of them hurried to saddle his horse. A few minutes later, forty men of the band set out under the guidance of the oldest among them.

Diego watched them start, and then returned to Leon, who was resting from his fatigue on a small turf mound, overshadowed by a magnificent clump of trees. The Vaquero held in his hand the alforjas which he had taken off his horse; he examined the place where Leon was seated, and finding it as he wished, he sat down by his side; then taking out of the bag a clumsy carved earthern pipe, into which he fitted a long stem, he began to strike a light over a small horn box filled with burnt rags, which soon caught fire. When his pipe was lighted, he began smoking silently.

Leon, on seeing these preparations, understood that something important was about to take place between him and Diego, and waited. At the expiration of five minutes, the latter passed him his pipe; Leon drew several puffs and then returned it to him. These preliminaries completed, Diego began to speak.

"Leon, three years have passed since Heaven brought us together on the pampas of Buenos Aires; since that moment – and I shall never forget it, brother – everything has been in common between us – pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow."

Leon bowed his head in the affirmative, and the half-breed continued:

"Still, there is one point upon which our mouths have ever remained silent, and it is the one which refers to the life of each of us before that which we now lead together."

Leon looked at him in amazement.

"It is not a want of confidence," Diego hastily added, "but the slight interest we felt in cross-questioning each other, which alone is the cause. Of what use is it to know the past life of a man, if from the day when you first saw him he has not ceased to be honest and loyal? Besides, the hours are too short in the pampas for men to dream of asking such questions."

"What are you coming to?" Leon at length asked.

"Listen, brother. I will not question you about what I care little to know, but I wish to tell you something you must know. The moment has arrived to speak; and though the story I have to tell you is gloomy and terrible, I am accomplishing a duty."

"Speak, then," said Leon.

The half-breed passed his hand over his forehead, and for a moment collected his recollections. Leon waited in silence.

CHAPTER V
THE INCA OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

"Long ago, very long ago," Diego, the Vaquero, began, "all the lands bordering the bay of Valparaíso belonged to the Indians, whose vast hunting grounds extended on one side from the lofty peaks of the Cordilleras down to the sea, and on the other covered the Pampas of Buenos Aires, of Paraguay – in a word, all the splendid countries from which they have eternally disappeared, and it is impossible to find a trace of the moccasins which trod them during centuries."

"The Indians were at that day free, happy, powerful, and more numerous than the grains of sand in the bed of the sea. But one day strange news spread among them: it was said that white men, who had come no one knew whence, and mounted on immense winged horses, had suddenly appeared in Peru."

"I need not remind you of all that occurred in consequence of this news, which was only too true, or describe to you the hideous massacres committed by the Spaniards, in order to reduce the unhappy Indians to slavery, for it is a story which everybody knows. But what you are possibly ignorant of is, that during one of the dark and stormy nights which followed this invasion, a dozen men of majestic demeanour, with haughty though care-laden brows, were seen to land from a canoe half broken by the waves and jagged rocks."

"They were Indians who had miraculously escaped from the sack of Quito, and had come to present themselves as suppliants to the elders of the Araucano nation. Among them was a man whom they respectfully obeyed. He was the son of the sister of the valiant Atahualpa, King of Quito, and his name was Tahi-Mari. When in the presence of the elders, Tahi-Mari gave them a narration of the misfortunes which had struck him."

"He had a daughter, Mikaa, the purest and loveliest of the daughters of the Sun. When conquered by the Spaniards, who, after killing two of his sons, set fire to his palace, Tahi-Mari, followed by his three sons left home, rushed toward the palace of the Sun, in order to save his daughter, if there were still time."

"It was night: the volcano was roaring hoarsely, and hurling into the air long jets of fire, whose lurid and sinister gleams combined with the flames of the fire kindled by the conquerors of this unhappy city. The squares and streets were encumbered with a terrified multitude, who fled in all directions with terrible cries from the pursuit of the Spanish soldiers, who, intoxicated with blood and carnage, massacred mercilessly old men, women, and children, in order to tear from their quivering bodies the gold collars and ornaments which they wore. Neither tears, prayers, nor entreaties succeeded in moving their ferocious executioners, who with yells and shrill whistles excited their dogs to help them in this horrible manhunt."

"When Tahi-Mari reached the Temple of the Sun, that magnificent edifice, which contained such riches, had become a prey to the flames; a girdle of fire surrounded it on all sides, and from the interior could be heard the groans of the hapless virgins who were expiring in the tortures of a horrible death. Without calculating the imminency of the peril, the poor father mad with grief and despair, rushed into the burning furnace which opened its yawning mouth before him."

"'My daughter! my daughter!' he cried. In vain did the flames singe his clothing; in vain did frightful burns devour his hands and face: he felt nothing, saw nothing; from his panting chest constantly issued the piercing cry – "

"'My daughter! my daughter!'"

"Suddenly a half-naked virgin, with dishevelled hair, and her features frightfully contracted, escaped from the flames; it was Mikaa. Tahi-Mari, forgetting all that he had suffered, weepingly opened his arms to the maiden, when a Spaniard, dressed in a brilliant garb, and holding a sword

in his hand, rushed upon Mikaa, and ere her father had time to make a gesture thrust his weapon into her chest!"

"Oh, it is frightful!" Leon, who had hitherto listened to his comrade's story in silence, could not refrain from exclaiming.

Diego made no reply, but a sinister smile played round his livid lips.

"The maiden fell bathed in her blood, and Tahi-Mari was about to avenge her, when the Spaniard dealt him such a fierce blow that he lost his consciousness. When he regained his senses the officer had disappeared."

"It is infamous," Leon said again.

"And that officer's name was Don Ruíz de Soto-Mayor," Diego said, in a hollow voice.

"Oh!" Leon muttered.

"Wait a moment, brother; let us continue, for I have not finished yet."

"Though tracked like a wild beast, and incessantly hunted by the Spaniards, Tahi-Mari, accompanied by his three sons and some faithful friends, succeeded in getting away from Quito and reaching the country of the Araucanos."

"After the Inca had recounted his misfortunes to the great Indian Chief, the latter welcomed the fugitives with hearty marks of affection; one of them, the venerable Kouni-hous-koui (he who is respected), a descendant of one of the oldest families of the Sagamores of the nation, exchanging his calumet with Tahi-Mari, declared to him, in the name of the Araucanos, that the Council of Elders adopted him as one of their caciques."

"From this day Tahi-Mari, owing to his courage and wisdom, acquired the esteem of those who had given him a new country to love and defend."

"Several years passed thus, and no sign led the Araucanos to suspect that the Spaniards would ever dare to attack them; they lived in a perfect state of security, when suddenly and without any justification for the aggression, a Spanish fleet consisting of more than thirty brigantines sailed into the bay of Valparaíso. They had no sooner disembarked than they built a city, which soon saw the flag of conquest floating from its walls."

"Still the Araucanos, although driven back by their terrible enemies, were aroused by the voice of Tahi-Mari, and resolved to keep the Spaniards constantly on their defence, by carrying on against them a war of snares and ambushes, in which the enemy, owing to their ignorance of the places where they fought, did not always get the best of it."

"In the course of time, this perpetual war made them lose a great number of soldiers, and feeling desperate at seeing several of their men fall daily under the blows of invisible enemies, who seemed to inhabit hollow trees, the tops of mountains, or the entrails of the earth, they turned all their rage against Tahi-Mari, whose influence over all the men who surrounded him they were aware of, and resolved to get hold of him."

"But it was no easy matter, for the Inca was on his guard against every attack, and was too well versed in the tactics of his enemy to let himself be caught by cunning or treachery. And yet this was destined to happen. There was among the Indian prisoners – alas! it is disgraceful to say it, but it was so – a man who, given to habits of intoxication and brought to Peru by the Spaniards, did not recoil before the offer made him to betray his brothers, on condition that they should give him as much aguardiente as he could drink."

"The Spanish captain, fertile in expedients, who had proposed this cowardly bargain to the Indian, induced the latter to go to Tahi-Mari, give himself out as an escaped prisoner, and, after inquiring into his plans, urge him to surprise the Spaniards, of whose numbers, position, and plan of campaign he was to give a false account. Once that Tahi-Mari was in the power of the Spaniards, firewater would amply compensate the traitor."

"All was carried out in the way the officer suggested; for could Tahi-Mari suspect that an Araucano would betray him? He received him on his arrival among his brothers with transports of

joy, and then questioned him as to the enemy's strength and means of defence. This was what the Indian was waiting for: he answered the questions asked him by adroitly dissimulating the truth, and ended by asserting that nothing was easier than to take the Spanish troops prisoners, and he offered to guide the expedition in person."

"The hope of a certain victory animated the Araucanos, who joyfully greeted this proposition, and all was soon arranged for the start. During the night following the traitor's arrival, five hundred men picked from the bravest, and led by Tahi-Mari, descended the mountain under the guidance of the treacherous Indian, and marched silently upon a Spanish redoubt, in which they expected to find the principal chiefs of the enemy and surprise them."

"But as they advanced they perceived a dark line which was almost blended with the darkness, but which could not escape the piercing glances of the Indians. This line formed an immense circle, which surrounded them and became more contracted every moment. It was the Spanish horse coming to meet them and preparing to attack them."

"All at once Tahi-Mari uttered a yell of fury, and the head of the traitor who had drawn them into the snare rolled at his feet; but ere the Araucanos had time to retire, a number of horsemen, holding in leash twenty of those ferocious dogs trained for man hunting, rushed upon them. They were compelled to fight, and a terrible massacre began, which lasted all night. Tahi-Mari performed prodigies of valour. In the height of the action his eyes were injected with blood and a lurid pallor covered his face; he had recognised among those who were fighting the Spanish officer who killed his daughter Mikaa on the threshold of the Temple of the Sun in so dastardly a way. On his side the Spaniard rushed with incredible fury upon the Inca."

"It was a sublime moment! The two men attacked each other with equal fury, and the blood that flowed from their wounds stained their weapons. The axe which the Inca held was already whirling above the head of the Spaniard to deal him the final blow, when Tahi-Mari fell back, uttering a yell of pain: an enormous hound coming to the officer's assistance, had ripped open the Inca's stomach. Taking advantage of Tahi-Mari's defenceless state, Don Ruíz de Soto-Mayor despatched him by passing his sword right through his body."

"The next day the Inca's body, frightfully mutilated, was burnt on the public square of Valdivia, in the presence of a few Indians, who had only escaped the sword of their murderers to die at a later date in the punishment of a horrible captivity."

"Oh!" Leon exclaimed, who had felt his heart quiver; "it is frightful!"

"What shall I say, then?" Diego asked in his turn; "I who am the last of the descendants of Tahi-Mari!"

At this unexpected revelation Leon started; he looked at Diego, and understood that there was in this man's heart a hatred so deeply rooted, and, above all, so long repressed, that on the day when it broke out no power in the world would be strong enough to check the terrible effects of its explosion. He hung his head, for he knew not what to reply to this man who had to avenge such blood-stained recollections. Diego took his friend's hand, and remarking the emotion he had produced, added —

"I have told you, brother, what the ancestors of Don Juan de Souza y Soto-Mayor made mine suffer, and your heart has bounded with indignation, because you are loyal and brave; but what you do not yet know is that the descendants of that family have faithfully followed the conduct of the murderers of Tahi-Mari. Oh! there are strange fatalities in a man's life! One day – and that day is close at hand – you shall know the details of the existence which I have led, and the sufferings which I have endured without a murmur; but at the present day I will only speak of those of my race; afterwards I will speak of myself."

While uttering the last words, a flash of joy like that which a tiger feels when it holds a quivering prey under its claws passed into the half-breed's eyes. He continued —

"My father died a victim to the cruelty of the Spaniards, who put him to death because he dreamed of the independence of his country; his brother followed him to the tomb, weeping for his loss."

"Diego! God has cruelly tried thee."

"I had a mother," Diego went on, with a slight tremor in his voice; "she was the object of my father's dearest affections, and was young and lovely. One day when she left the mountain to visit my father, who was expiating within the walls of Valparaíso prison his participation in a movement which had broken out among the Araucanos, she met on the road a brilliant Spanish cavalier who wore a lieutenant's epaulettes."

"The Spaniard fixed upon her an impassioned glance; she was alarmed, and tried to fly, but the horseman prevented her, and in spite of her prayers and supplications, she could not liberate herself from the villain's arms. On the morrow Lieutenant Don Juan de Soto-Mayor was able to boast among his friends, the noble chiefs of the Spanish army, that he had possessed the chaste wife of Tahi-Mari the Indian."

"Yes, it was again a Soto-Mayor. This accursed name has ever hovered over the head of each member of my family, to crush it under punishment, sorrow, shame, or humiliation. Each time that one of us has reddened American soil with his blood, it was a Soto-Mayor that shed it. Each time that a member of this family met a member of mine, one was the executioner, the other the victim."

"And now, brother, you will ask me why, knowing that General Don Juan de Souza y Soto-Mayor is the man who dishonoured my mother, I did not choose among the weapons which hung from my girdle the one which should pierce his heart? – why I have not some night, when all were sleeping at the hacienda, carried within its walls the all-devouring fire, and taken, according to Indian custom, eye for eye and tooth for tooth?"

"Yes, I confess it; I should have quivered with pleasure had I seen all the Soto-Mayors, who live calm and happy a few leagues from us, writhing in the agonies of death. But I am the son of Tahi-Mari, and I have another cause to defend beside my own – that of my nation. And on the day when my arm falls on those whom I execrate, it will not be the Soto-Mayors alone who perish, but all the Spaniards who inhabit these countries."

"Ah! is it not strange to dream of enfranchisement after three hundred years of slavery? Well, brother, the supreme moment is close at hand; the blood of the Spaniard will again inundate the soil of Peru, and the nineteenth century will avenge the sixteenth."

"That is the reason why you saw me so silent at the general's house; that is why I agreed to escort him and his family to Valdivia, for my plans are marvellously served by this journey. As for the girl you love, as I told you, you shall see her again, and it will be the beginning of the punishment which is destined to fall on this family."

Diego had risen, but a moment later he resumed his ordinary stoicism.

"I have told you what you ought to know, in order to understand and excuse what you may see me undertake against the Spaniards; but before going further it is right that I should know if I can count on your help, and if I shall find in you the faithful and devoted friend who never failed me up to this day."

A violent contest was going on in Leon's heart. He asked himself whether he, who had no cause of complaint against the Spaniards, had any right to join those who were meditating their ruin. On the other hand, the sincere friendship which he felt for the Vaquero, whose life he had shared during the last four years, rendered it a duty to assist him, and did not permit him to abandon him in the moment of danger. Still he hesitated, for a secret anxiety kept him undecided, and prevented him forming a resolution.

"Diego," he asked the Vaquero in his turn, "before answering you, let me ask you one question?"

"Speak, brother!" Diego answered.

"What do you mean to do with Doña Maria?"

"I have promised you to bring her to your knees. If she love you, she will be my sister; if she refuse your love, I shall have the right to dispose of her."

"And she will have nothing to fear till I have seen her again?" Leon asked further.

"Nothing! I swear to you."

"In that case," said Leon, "I will take part in your enterprise. Your success shall be mine, and whatever be the road you follow, or the means you employ to gain the object of your designs, I will do all that you do."

"Thanks, brother; I was well aware that you would support me in the struggle, for it is in the cause of justice. Now I will set out."

"Do you go alone?"

"Yes, I must."

"When shall I see you again?"

"Tomorrow morning, at Don Juan's, unless I am compelled to remain at the place where I am going longer than I think; in that case I will join you on the Talca road. Besides, you do not require me to escort the general: our men will be at their post tomorrow, and you can say something about my going on ahead."

"That is true; but Doña Maria?"

"You will see her again soon. But start alone tomorrow for the country house, and I will meet you this day week, whatever may happen, in the Del Solar wood, at the San Francisco Solano quarry, where you will order a halt."

"Agreed, and I leave you to act as you think proper. Next Wednesday at the Del Solar wood, and if you wish to join us before then, we shall follow the ordinary road."

"Very good; now I am off."

Ten minutes after this long interview, Diego was galloping away from his comrade, who watched him depart, while striving to conjecture in what direction he was going. Profoundly affected by the varied events of the preceding day, and the story which Diego had told him, Leon reflected deeply as he walked toward the smugglers remaining with him, and who were engaged in getting their weapons in order.

Although nothing in his exterior announced the preoccupation from which the was suffering, it could be guessed that he was in a state of lively anxiety. The image of Doña Maria floated before his eyes; he saw her pale and trembling after he had saved her from his horse's rush, and then, carrying himself mentally within the walls of the convent of the Purísima Concepción, he thought of the barrier which separated them. Then suddenly the half-breed's words returned to his ear – "If she refuse your love," he had said, "I shall have the right to dispose of her!"

An involuntary terror seized on the young man at this recollection. In fact, was it presumable that Doña Maria loved him? and would not the Vaquero be compelled to employ violence in carrying out his promise of bringing him into the presence of the novice? In that case, how could he hope to make himself loved?

These reflections painfully agitated Leon Delbès, who, obeying that spontaneity of action peculiar to his quick and impetuous character, resolved to fix his uncertainty by assuring himself of the impression which he had produced on the heart of the maiden, whom he loved with all the strength and energy of a real passion.

Such a sudden birth of love would appear strange in northern countries, where this exquisite feeling is only developed in conformity with the claims of the laws of civilization; but in Chili, as in the whole of South America, love, ardent as the fires of the sun which illumines it, bursts forth suddenly and displays itself in its full power. The look of a Chilian girl is the flush which enkindles hearts of fire which beat in breasts of iron.

Leon was a Frenchman, but several years' residence in these parts, and his complete adoption of American manners, customs, and usages had so metamorphosed him, that gradually his tastes,

habits, and wants had become identified with those of the inhabitants of Chili, whom he regarded as his brothers and countrymen. Without further delay, then, Leon prepared to return to Valparaíso, and make inquiries about Doña Maria.

"It is two o'clock," he said to himself, after consulting his watch; "I have time to ride to Ciudad, set Crevel to work, and be at the general's by the appointed hour."

And leaping on his horse, he galloped off in the direction of the Port, after bidding the ten men of the escort to start with or without him the next morning for the country house.

CHAPTER VI
THE BANIAN'S HOUSE

Valparaíso, like nearly all the commercial centres of South America, is a collection of shapeless huts and magnificent palaces, standing side by side and hanging in long clusters from the sided of the three mountains which command the town. The streets are narrow, dirty, and almost deprived of air, for the houses, as in all American towns, have a tendency to approach each other, and at a certain height form a projection of four, or even six feet over the street. Paving is perfectly unknown; and the consequence is, that in winter, when the deluging rains, which fall for three months almost without leaving off, have saturated the ground, these streets become veritable sewers, in which pedestrians sink up to the knee. This renders the use of a horse indispensable.

Putrid and pestilential miasmas exhale from these gutters, which are filled with rubbish of every description, resulting from the daily sweepings of the houses. On the other hand, the squares are large, square, perfectly airy, and lined with wide verandahs, which at midday offer a healthy protection from the sun. These verandahs contain handsome shops, in which the dealers have collected, at great cost, all that can tempt purchasers. It is a medley of the most discordant shops and booths, grouped side by side. A magnificent jeweller displays behind his window diamond necklaces, silver spurs, weighing from fifteen to twenty marcs, rings, bracelets, &c.; between a modest grocer quarrelling with his customers about the weight, and the seller of massamorra broth, who, with sleeves tucked up to the elbow, is selling his stuff by spoonfuls to every scamp who has an ochavo to regale himself with.

The smuggler captain passed gloomily and thoughtfully through the joyous population, whose bursts of laughter echoed far and wide, and whose merry songs escaped in gay zambacuecas from all the spirit shops which are so frequent at Valparaíso. In this way he reached Señor Crevel's inn, who uttered a cry of joy on perceiving the captain, and ran out to hold his horse.

"Are my men here?" Leon asked civilly, as he dismounted.

"They arrived nearly two hours back," Crevel answered, respectfully.

"It is well. Is the green chamber empty?"

Every landlord, in whatever country he may hang out his sign, possesses a separate room adorned with the names of blue, red, or green, and which he lets at a fabulous price, under the excuse that it is far superior to all the others in the house. Señor Crevel knew his trade too well not to have adopted this habit common to all his brethren; but he had given the name of the green room to a charming little quiet nook, which only his regular customers entered. Now, as we have said, the smugglers were very old friends of Crevel.

The door of the green room, perfectly concealed in the wall, did not allow its existence to be suspected; and it was in this room that the bold plans of the landlord's mysterious trade, whose profits were far greater than those which he drew from his avowed trade, were elaborated.

On hearing Leon's question, the Banian's face assumed an expression even more joyous than that with which he had greeted the young man's arrival, for he scented, in the simple question asked him, a meeting of smugglers and the settlement of some affairs in which he would have his share as usual. Hence he replied by an intelligent nod, and added aloud, "Yes, señor; it is ready for your reception."

After handing the traveller's horse to a greasy waiter, whom he ordered to take the greatest care of it, he led Leon into the interior of the inn. We are bound to confess that if the architect who undertook to build this house had been more than saving in the distribution of ornamentation, it was admirably adapted for its owner's trade. It was a cottage built of pebbles and beams, which it had in common with the greater portion of the houses in Valparaíso. Its front looked, as we know, upon the Calle San Agostino, while the opposite side faced the sea, over which it jutted out on piles for

some distance. An enormous advantage for the worthy landlord, who frequently profited by dark or stormy nights to avoid payment of customs dues, by receiving through the windows the goods which the smugglers sold him; and it also favoured the expeditions of the latter, by serving as a depôt for the bales which they undertook to bring in on account of people who dealt with them.

This vicinity of the sea also enabled the Frenchman, whose customers were a strange medley of all sorts of men, not to trouble himself about the result of the frequent quarrels which took place at his house, and which might have caused an unpleasantness with the police, who at Valparaíso, as in other places where this estimable institution is in vogue, sometimes found it necessary to make an example. Hence, so soon as the squadron of lanceros was signalled in the distance, Señor Crevel at once warned his guests; so that when the soldiers arrived, and fancied they were about to make a good haul, they found that the birds had flown. We need scarce say that they had simply escaped through the back window into a boat always kept fastened in case of need to a ring in the wooden platform, which served as a landing stage to the house. The lanceros did not understand this sudden disappearance, and went off with a hangdog air.

Differing from European houses, which fall back in proportion to their elevation from the ground, Señor Crevel's establishment bulged outwards, so that the top was spacious and well lighted, while the ground floor rooms were narrow and dark. The landlord had always taken advantage of this architectural arrangement by having a room made on the second floor, which was reached by a turning staircase, and a perfect ear of Dionysius, as all external sounds reached the inmates, while the noise they made either in fighting or talking was deadened. The result of this was that a man might be most easily killed in the green room without a soul suspecting it.

It was into this room, then, witness of so many secret councils, that the landlord introduced, with the greatest ceremony, the captain of the smugglers, who walked behind him. On regarding the interior of the room, nothing indicated the origin of its name; for it was entirely hung with red damask. Had this succeeded a green hanging? This seems to be a more probable explanation.

It received light from above, by means of a large skylight. The walls were hung with pictures in equivocal taste, representing subjects passably erotic and even slightly obscene. A large four-post bed, adorned with its tester, occupied all one side of the room, and a mahogany chest of drawers stood facing it: in a corner was a small table covered with the indispensable toilette articles – combs, brushes, &c. A small looking glass over the table, chairs surrounding a large round table, and, lastly, an alabaster clock, which for the last ten years had invariably marked the same hour between its two flower vases, completed the furniture of this famous green room. We must also mention a bell, whose string hung behind the landlord's bar, and was useful to give an alarm under the circumstances to which we have referred. Leon paid no attention to these objects, which had long been familiar to him.

"Now, then," he said, as he took off his hat and poncho, and threw himself into an easy chair, "bring me some dinner at once."

"What would you like, captain?"

"The first thing ready: some puchero, some pepperpot – in short, whatever you please, provided it be at once, as I am in a hurry."

"What will you drink?"

"Wine, confound it! and try to find some that is good."

"All right."

"Decamp then, and make haste to bring me all I require."

"Directly, captain."

And Señor Crevel withdrew to attend to the preparation of the young man's dinner. During this time Leon walked up and down the room, and seemed to be arranging in his head the details of some plan he was meditating.

Crevel soon returned to lay the table, which he performed without opening his lips for fear of attracting some disagreeable remark from the captain, who, for his part, did not appear at all disposed

for conversation. In an instant all was arranged with that coquettish symmetry which belongs to the French alone.

"Dinner is ready, captain," said Crevel, when he re-entered the room.

"Very well. Leave me; when I want you I will call you."

The landlord went out. Leon sat down to the table, and drawing the knife which he wore in his boot, vigorously attacked the appetizing dishes placed before him.

It is a fact worthy of remark, that with great and energetic natures, moral sufferings have scarce any influence over physical wants. It might be said that they understand the necessity of renewing or redoubling their strength, in order to resist more easily and more victoriously the griefs which oppress them, and they require all their vigour to contend worthily against them.

Chilian meals in no way resemble ours. Among us people drink while eating, in order to facilitate the absorption and digestion of the food; but in America it is quite different – there people eat without drinking. It is only when the pastry and sweets have been eaten that they drink a large glass of water for digestion; then comes the wines and liqueurs, always in small quantities, for the inhabitants of hot countries are generally very sober, and not addicted to the interminable sittings round a table covered with bottles, in an atmosphere impregnated with the steam of dishes.

When the meal was ended, Leon took his tobacco pouch from his pocket and rolled a cigarette, after wiping his fingers on the cloth. As this action may appear improper to the reader, it is as well that he should know that all Americans do so without scruple, as the use of the napkin is entirely unknown. Another custom worth mentioning is that of employing the fingers in lieu of a fork. This is the process among the Americans. They cut a piece of bread crumb, which they hold in their hand, and pick up with it the articles on their plate with great rapidity and cleanliness.

Nor must it be thought that they act in this way through ignorance of the fork; they are perfectly well acquainted with that utensil, and can manage it as well as we do when required; but though it is present on every table, both rich and poor regard it as an object of luxury, and say that it is far more convenient to do without it, and remark that the food has considerably more flavour when eaten in this fashion.

Leon lit his cigarette, and fell again into his reflections. All at once he rose and rang the bell, and Crevel at once appeared.

"Take all this away," said Leon, pointing to the table.

The landlord removed all traces of the meal.

"And now bring me the articles to make a glass of punch."

Crevel gazed for a moment in amazement at the man who had given this order. The sobriety of the smuggler was proverbial at Valparaíso; he had never been seen to drink more than one or two glasses of Pisco, and then it was only on great occasions, or to please his friend Diego, whom he knew to be very fond of strong liquors, like all the Indians. When a bottle of aguardiente was served to the two men, the Indian finished it alone, for Leon scarce wet his lips. Hence the landlord was almost knocked off his feet on receiving his guest's unusual order.

"Well, did you not hear me?" Leon resumed, impatiently.

"Yes, yes, sir," Crevel replied; "but – "

"But it surprises you, I suppose?"

"I confess it."

"It is true," Leon said, with a mocking smile, "that it is not my habit to drink."

"That it is not," said Crevel.

"Well, I am going to take to it, that's all. And what do you find surprising in that?"

"Nothing, of course."

"Then bring me what I asked for."

"Directly, directly, captain."

"On my soul, something extraordinary is taking place," Crevel said to himself as he descended to his bar. "The captain never had a very agreeable way with him, but, on the word of Crevel, I never saw him as he is tonight; it would be dangerous to touch him with a pair of tongs. What can have happened to him? Ah, stuff, it concerns him, after all: and then, who knows; perhaps he is on the point of becoming a drunkard."

After this aside, the worthy landlord manufactured a splendid bowl of punch, which he carried up to Leon so soon as it was ready.

"There," he said, as he placed the bowl on the table; "I think that will please you, captain."

"Thanks! but what is this?" Leon said, as he looked at what Crevel had brought – "there is only one glass."

"Why, you are alone."

"That is true; but I trust you will do me the pleasure of drinking with me."

"I should be most unwilling, captain, to deprive myself of the honour of drinking with you, but – "

Crevel, through his stupefaction, was unable to complete his sentence, for the invitation which the captain gave him surprised him beyond all expression. Let us add that it was the first time such an honour had been done him.

"In that case bring a glass for yourself."

Crevel, without further hesitation, fetched the glass, and seated himself facing the captain.

"Now, my dear Crevel," Leon said, as he dipped into the bowl and filled the glasses to the brim, "here's to your health, and let us talk."

The landlord was all ears.

"Do you know the convent of the Purísima Concepción?"

At this question Crevel opened his eyes to their fullest extent.

"What the deuce can the captain have to do with the nuns of the Purísima Concepción?" he asked himself, and then replied, "Certainly, captain."

"Very good; and could you contrive to get in there under some pretext?"

The landlord appeared to reflect for a moment.

"I have it," he said; "I will get in whenever you like."

"In that case get ready, for I want to send you there this very moment."

"What to do?"

"A trifle. I want you to see the Señora Maria," Leon said to him, after describing the accident of which he had been the involuntary cause, "and deliver her a message from me."

"The deuce! that is more difficult," Crevel muttered.

"Did you not tell me that you could get into the convent?"

"Yes; but seeing a novice is very different."

"Still you must do so, unless you refuse to undertake the task. I thought of you, because I believed you to be a clever and resolute fellow; if I am mistaken, I will apply to someone else, and I feel certain that I shall find more than one ingenious man who will not be sorry to earn four ounces."

"Four ounces, did you say?" and the Parisian's eyes sparkled with a flash of covetousness.

"Tell me if that suits you?"

"I accept."

"In that case, make haste. Have my horse saddled for I shall accompany you."

"We will start within a quarter of an hour; but in order that I may take my precautions, tell me what I have to do when I see the Señora?"

"You will hand her this scapulary, and say to her that the cavalier who wore it is lying at your house in danger of death. Pay careful attention to the expression which her face assumes, and manage to describe it to me. That is all I want."

"I understand."

And the landlord went down to make his preparations.

"In that way, I shall know whether she loves me," Leon exclaimed, so soon as he was alone.

Then, taking up his poncho and montera, he rolled a cigarette in his fingers, and went to join Crevel in the ground floor room.

"Do not be impatient, captain; I shall be with you in a moment," the banian said on perceiving him; "I only ask of you the time to run to my cellar."

"Make haste, for time is slipping away."

"Do not be alarmed; I shall be at the convent within half an hour."

On returning from the cellar the landlord brought with him three bottles covered with a thick coating of mould, bearing witness to the long stay they had made in the shadow of the sun, and adorned with a skullcap of pitch, whose colour time had changed.

"What is that?" Leon asked.

"The keys of the convent of the Purísima Concepción," Crevel replied, with a crafty smile. "We can start now."

In a moment Leon, on horseback, was going down the Calle San Agostino a few paces a head of Crevel, who was on foot.

CHAPTER VII
THE NOVICE

We left Doña Maria in the garden of the convent, preparing to obey the summons of the venerable abbess, Doña Madeline Aguirre Frías, in religion, Sister Santa Marta de los Dolores, the Mother Superior of the community, not doubting but that she was summoned to give a detailed account of the morning's events. Doña Maria expected to receive some reproof for the involuntary fault she had committed by letting her face be seen by the cavalier who raised her when in a fainting state.

But, in her present state of mind, far from upbraiding herself for not having quickly lowered her veil so soon as she regained possession of her senses, she was quite prepared to confess the impression which the sight of the young man had produced on her, and the present she had made him of her scapulary, for she had only one thought, one desire, one wish, and that was, to see again the man whom she loved.

Still, in consequence of the remonstrances which her companion, Rosita, made to her, and in order not to give anybody the opportunity of reading in her eyes what was passing in her soul, she removed all traces of her tears, overcame the feeling of sorrow which had invaded her whole being, and proceeded with a firm step toward the cell of the Mother Superior, while Rosita regained her own.

We have described the interior of the cells of the nuns or novices dwelling in the convent of the Purísima Concepción, which, with but rare exceptions, are all alike, but that of the Mother Superior deserves a special description, owing to the difference that exists between it and those of the other nuns. Nothing could be more religious, more worldly, and more luxurious than its whole appearance. It was an immense square room, with two large pointed windows, with small panes set in lead, on which were painted holy subjects with an admirable delicacy and surety of touch. The walls were covered with long gilt and embossed Cordovan leather tapestry; and valuable pictures, representing the chief events in the life of the patron saint of the convent, were grouped with that symmetry and taste which are only found among ecclesiastics.

Between the two windows was a magnificent Virgin by Raphael, before which was an altar; a silver lamp, full of odoriferous oil, hung from the ceiling and burnt night and day in front of the altar, which could be concealed by thick damask curtains when required. The furniture consisted of a large Chinese screen, behind which was concealed the abbess's bed, a simple couch of carved oak, surrounded by a mosquito net of white gauze. A square table, also in oak, supporting a few books and a desk, was in the centre of the room; and in one corner a large library filled with books relating to religious matters, allowed the rich gilding of scarce tomes to be seen through the glass doors. A few chairs with twisted legs were arranged against the wall. Lastly, a brasero of brilliant brass, filled with olive kernels, faced a superb press, whose fine carving was a work of art.

The sunshine, subdued by the coloured glass of the windows, spread a soft and mystical light, which made the visitor undergo a feeling of respect and contemplation, by giving this large room a stern and almost lugubrious aspect.

At the moment when the maiden was introduced to the abbess, the latter was seated in a large, straight-backed chair, surmounted by the abbatial crown, and whose seat, covered with gilt leather, was adorned with a double fringe of gold and silk. She held an open book in her hand and seemed plunged in profound meditation. Doña Maria waited till the abbess raised her eyes to her.

"Ah, you are here, my child," the abbess at length said, on perceiving the presence of the novice. "Come hither."

Maria advanced towards her.

"You were nearly the victim of an accident which cast trouble and confusion upon the progress of the procession, and it is slightly your own fault; you ought to have got out of the way of the horse as your dear sister did; but, after all, though the fear exposed your life to danger, I see with satisfaction that you have, thanks to the omnipotent protection of Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, escaped from the peril, and hence I order you to thank her by reciting an orison morning and night for eight days."

"I will do so, buena Madre," Maria replied.

"And now, chica, in order to efface every trace of the emotion which the event must have caused you, I recommend you to drink a few spoonfuls of my miraculous water; it is, as you are aware, a sovereign remedy against every sort of attack. Worthy Don Francisco Solano, the reverend Pater-Guardian of los Carmelitos Descalzos, gave me the receipt for it, and on many occasions we have recognised the truly surprising qualities of this water."

"I will not fail to do so," the young lady replied, with the firm intention of doing nothing of the sort, as she knew the perfect inefficiency of the good lady's panacea.

"Good! You must take care of your health, Maria, for you know that my great object is to watch over the welfare of all our sisters, and to render their abode in this peaceful retreat in which we live in the peace of the Lord, full of attractions and sweetness."

Maria looked at the abbess; she had expected some sort of reprimand, and the honeyed words of the worthy Mother Superior had a tinge of benignity which was not habitual to them. Emboldened by the abbess's kind manner, Maria felt a great desire to tell her of the deep aversion she felt for a monastic life, but fearing lest she might be mistaken as to the purport of the words which fell from the unctuous lips of the holy person, she awaited the end of her discourse, and contented herself with saying, with all the appearance of a submission full of humility —

"I know, buena Madre, how great your anxiety is for all of us; but I do not yet merit such kindness, and – "

"It is true that you are but a novice, and the solemn vows have not eternally consecrated you to the pious destination which Heaven has reserved for you, but the blessed day is approaching, and soon – "

"Madre!" Maria impetuously interrupted, about to speak and display the wound in her heart which was painfully bleeding at the thought of taking the veil.

"What is the matter, my child? you are impatient. I understand the lively desire which animates you, and am delighted at it, for it would be painful for me to employ with you, whom I love so dearly, any other means than those of persuasion to oblige you to take the gown which is destined for you."

On hearing the abbess speak thus, Maria understood that her fate was settled, and that no supplication would produce any change in what was resolved. Moreover, the air of hypocritical satisfaction spread over the face of the Mother Superior sufficiently proved that the conversation which she had begun had no other object than to adroitly sound the young lady as to her feelings about taking the veil, and that, if necessary, she would employ her right and power to force her into submission. —

Maria, consequently, bowed her head and made no reply. Either the abbess took this silence for a sign of obedience, or regarded it as a manifestation of utter indifference, for a faint smile played round her lips, and she continued the conversation.

"While congratulating you on the good sentiments which have taken root in your mind, it is my duty to inform you of the orders which I received this morning from your father, General Soto-Mayor."

Maria raised her head, trying to read in the abbess's looks what these orders might signify.

"You are not ignorant, chica, that the rule of our convent grants novices who are preparing to take the veil, permission to spend a month with their family before beginning the retreat which must precede the ceremony of their vows."

Here Maria, who was anxiously listening, felt her heart beat as if it would burst her bosom. The abbess continued —

"In obedience to this custom, your father, before affiancing you to God, informed me this morning that he wished to have you near him, and employ the month which you will spend out of the convent in taking you to Valdivia to see his brother, that worthy servant of the Lord, Don Luis."

A cry of joy, restrained by the fear of letting what was taking place in her mind be seen, was on the point of bursting from her bosom.

"Dear father!" she said, clasping her hands.

"You will set out tomorrow," the abbess continued; "a servant of your family will come to fetch you in the morning."

"Oh, thanks, madam," Maria could not refrain from exclaiming, as she was intoxicated with joy at the thought of leaving the convent.

Assuredly, under any other circumstances, the announcement of this holiday would have been received by the maiden, if not with coldness, at the least with indifference; but her meeting with Leon had so changed her ideas, that she fancied she saw in this departure a means which Providence gave her to escape from a cloistered life. The poor child fancied that her parents were thinking of restoring her to the world; then, reflecting on the slight probability which this hypothesis seemed to possess, she said to herself that, at any rate, she might see again within the month *him* whose memory excited so great an influence over her mind. There was still hope for her, and hope is nearly happiness. The abbess had not failed to notice the look of pleasure which had suddenly illumined the maiden's features.

"You are very happy, then, at the thought of leaving us, Maria," she said, with an attempt at a smile.

"Oh, do not think that, Mamita," Maria said, as she threw herself on her neck. "You are so kind and so indulgent that I should be ungrateful did I not love you."

At this moment the maiden's heart, inundated with delight, overflowed with love. The aversion which she had felt an hour previously for all that surrounded her had faded away and made room for a warm expression of joy. A sunbeam on high had sufficed to dissipate the dark cloud which had formed on the blue sky.

In spite of the lively desire which Maria had to bear the good news to Rosita, she was obliged to listen to the perusal of General Soto-Mayor's letter, which the abbess gave her, as well as a long exhortation which the latter thought it her duty to address to her about the conduct she should assume when she found herself in the bosom of her family. Nothing was forgotten, neither the recommendation to perform her religious vows exactly, nor that of preparing to return to the convent worthily at the close of the month, animated with the pious desire of devoting herself to it joyfully, as the trial of the world would serve to show her the slight happiness which those forced to live in it found there. Maria promised all that the superior wished; she only saw through the pompous phrases of the holy woman the temporary liberty offered to her, and this sufficed her to listen patiently to the rest of the peroration. At length the harangue was finished, and Maria rushed towards Rosita's cell; on seeing her companion with a radiant brow and a smile on her lip, the latter remained stupefied. Amid the transports of joy, Maria informed her of the happy event which had occurred so opportunely to calm her anguish, and embraced her affectionately.

"How happy you seem!" Rosita could not refrain from saying to her.

"Oh! I really am so. Do you understand, Rosita, a whole month out of the convent, and who knows whether I may not see during the month the man who so boldly saved me from peril."

"Can you think of it?"

"Yes; I confess to you that it is my dearest wish to see him again and tell him that I love him."

"Maria!"

"Forgive me, dear Rosita, for, selfish that I am, I only think of myself, and forget that you, too, might perhaps like to leave these convent walls in order to embrace your brother."

"You are mistaken, sister; I am happy here; and though my brother loves me as much as I love him, he will not call me to his side, for he would be alone to protect me, and what should I do in the world when he was compelled to remain with his soldiers? Ah! I have no father or mother!"

"Poor Rosita!"

"Hence," the latter said, gaily, "speak no more of me, but let me rejoice at finding you smiling after having left you so sad."

The maidens soon after separated, and Maria went to make the necessary preparations for her departure. On entering her cell, her first care was to throw herself on her knees before the image of the Virgin and thank her. Then the rest of the day passed as usual. But anyone who had seen the novice before her interview with the Mother Superior, and met her after the latter had made the general's letter known to her, would have noticed a singular change in her. A lovely flush had driven the pallor from her lips, her eyes had regained their expression of vivacity, and her lips, red as the pomegranate flower, parted to let her heaving breath pass through.

The morrow Maria was up at daybreak, still under the impression of the sweet dreams which had lulled her slumbers. The whole night Leon's image had been before her, flashing in her ravished eye the dazzling prism of a new existence. It was striking ten by the convent clock when General Soto-Mayor's major-domo presented himself at the door of the house of God.

CHAPTER VIII
A VISIT TO THE CONVENT

It was about five in the evening when Leon Delbès left the posada in the company of Crevel. The great heat of midday had been succeeded by a refreshing sea breeze, which was beginning to rise and blow softly, producing an exquisite temperature, of which all took advantage to rush from their houses, and join the numerous promenaders crowding the streets, squares, and the shore of the ocean, whose calm and smooth surface was tinged by the ardent beams of the sun, which had spent two-thirds of its course. It was a saint's day, and the people, dressed in their best clothes, whose varied colours offer the eye such a piquant effect, hurried along with shouts, song, and laughter, of which no idea can be formed in Europe. In South America a holiday is the occasion for all the pleasures which it is given to man to enjoy, and the Americans do not neglect it. Marvellously endowed by nature, which has given them strength, vigour, and unalterable health, their powerful organization allows them to do anything. Born for love and pleasure, the South Americans make of their life one long enjoyment: it is the ideal of refined sensualism.

The two Frenchmen, with their hats pulled over their eyes, and carefully wrapped in their ponchos, so as not to be recognised and delayed, mingled with the crowd, and elbowing and elbowed, pushing and pushed, they advanced as quickly as they could, moving with great difficulty through the mob that surrounded them.

The reader will be doubtless astonished to see, in a country so hot as Chili, Leon Delbès and Crevel enveloped, as we have just said, in heavy cloaks. In Chili, Peru, and generally in all the ex-Spanish colonies, the cloak is constantly in use, and almost indispensable! It is worn everywhere and always in all weathers and all places, at every hour of the night and of the day. There is a Spanish proverb which says that the cloak protects from heat and cold, from rain and sun. This is true to a certain extent, but is not the sole reason why it has become obligatory.

The South Americans, as well as the descendants of the Spaniards, have retained the two chief vices which distinguished their ancestors, that is to say, a mad pride and invincible indolence. The American never works save when driven into his last entrenchments, when hunger forces him to lay aside his careless and contemplative habits in order to earn means to support himself. Hence it follows very naturally, that it is impossible for him to obtain the fine clothes which he covets, and whose price is so heavy, that he despairs of ever possessing them.

In order to remedy this misfortune, and save, at the same time, his pride, which prohibits him from appearing badly dressed, he works just long enough to save the money to buy himself a Panama hat, a pair of trousers, and a cloak. When he has succeeded in obtaining these objects of permanent necessity, he is all right and his honour is saved, for thanks to the exceptional talent which he possesses of draping himself elegantly and majestically in a piece of cloth, he can boldly present himself anywhere, and no one will ever suspect what hideous rags and frightful misery are covered by the splendid cloak which he bears on his shoulders.

In addition to the motive which we have just explained, it is fair to state that, owing to the excessive heat of the climate, the advantage of the cloak is felt in the fact that it is ample and wide, leaves the limbs liberty of movement, and does not scorch the body, as well-fitting clothes do when heated by the sunbeams. Hence rich and poor have all adopted it.

After a ride interrupted at every moment by the people who encumbered the streets, the two Frenchmen reached their destination, and stopped before the church adjoining the convent. There they separated: Crevel proceeded toward the gate of the community, and Leon, after dismounting and fastening his horse to an iron ring fixed in the wall, entered the church, and leant against a pillar to wait.

The church of Nuestra Señora del Carmo, belonging to the Convent of the Purísima Concepción, is one of the finest and richest of those existing in Valparaíso. It was built a short time after the conquest of Chili, in the Renaissance style. It is lofty, large, and well lighted by a number of arched windows, whose coloured glass is among the finest specimens of the art. A double row of columns delicately carved, supports a circular gallery, with a balcony in open work, made with that patience which the Spaniards appear to have inherited from the Arabs, and which produced the marvellous details of the great mosque of Cordova.

The choir is separated from the nave by a massive silver grating, modelled by some rival of Benvenuto Cellini. The high altar is of lapis lazuli, and sixteen silver columns support a dome painted blue, and studded! with gold stars, above the splendid table covered with a rich pall of English point, on which stand the magnificent golden reliquary containing the Holy Sacrament.

In the aisles, eight chapels, placed under the protection of different saints, and adorned with, extraordinary wealth, each contains a confessional which closes hermetically, and in which it is impossible to catch a glimpse of the male or female penitent asking remission of sins. Nothing can be imagined more aërial or coquettish than the ebony pulpit, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, used by the preacher. This pulpit is a masterpiece, and it is said that a Spanish workman, finding himself in great danger, made a vow to Nuestra Señora del Carmen that he would give her a pulpit if he escaped. Having escaped the danger, he devoted hourly years of his life to the accomplishment of the work he had promised, and which he only completed a few months prior to his death. If we may judge of the danger this man incurred by the finish of the execution and the merit of the work, it must have been immense.

Lastly, there are at regular distances large holy water vessels of carved marble, covered with plates of silver. When Leon entered the church it was full of faithful people. Upwards of two thousand candles spread a dazzling light, and a cloud of incense brooded over the congregation, who were plunged into a profound contemplation.

In American churches that impudent traffic in chairs, which goes on so shamelessly elsewhere during the holiest or more sorrowful ceremonies, is unknown. There are no seats, but the men stand, and the women bring with them small square carpets on which they kneel. This custom may perhaps injure the symmetry, but it certainly imparts to the assembly of the faithful a more religious appearance. We do not see, as in France, individuals stretching themselves, taking their ease, throwing themselves back, or sleeping in their chairs, and we are not at each movement disturbed by the rattling of wood upon the slabs.

On hearing the chants of the nuns, which rose in gentle and melodious notes, accompanied by the grave sound of the organ, Leon Delbès felt himself involuntarily assailed by a melancholy feeling. Gradually forgetting the motive of his presence at this sacred spot, he let his head fall upon his chest, and yielded entirely to the ecstasy into which the mighty harmony that filled his ears plunged him.

In the meanwhile Crevel, after leaving the captain of the smugglers, took a half turn and proceeded, as we said, toward the gate of the convent, on which he knocked thrice, after looking around him rather through habit than distrust, in order to make certain that he was not followed. The door was not opened, but a trap in the niche of the upper panel was pulled back, and an old woman's face appeared in the aperture. Crevel assumed his most sanctimonious look, and giving a mighty bow, he said, as he doffed his broad-brimmed straw hat —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.