

Aimard Gustave

The Guide of the Desert



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NOTICE

Gustave Aimard was the adopted son of one of the most powerful Indian tribes, with whom he lived for more than fifteen years in the heart of the Prairies, sharing their dangers and their combats, and accompanying them everywhere, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. In turn squatter, hunter, trapper, warrior, and miner, Gustave Aimard has traversed America from the highest peaks of the Cordilleras to the ocean shores, living from hand to mouth, happy for the day, careless of the morrow. Hence it is that Gustave Aimard only describes his own life. The Indians of whom he speaks he has known – the manners he depicts are his own.

CHAPTER I

A PRISONER

Loading in the environs of Barbara Bay, Cape Horn, I was surprised, with two companions, by the Patagonians, and made prisoner. I had the pain of witnessing from the cliffs the departure of the whaler on board of which I had entered at Havre as harpooner.

It was with a deep pang of grief, and eyes bathed in tears, I saw the white sails of my ship disappear on the horizon, and the sea become solitary once more.

I little suspected that the vessel I then saw for the last time was doomed to some terrible fate. Nothing was ever heard of her again.

Two hours later, stripped of our clothes and tied by the wrists to the tails of Patagonian horses, we were carried off into the interior of the country.

The Patagonians, with regard to whom travellers relate so many fables, are neither so gigantic nor so evil as generally represented.

They are sturdily independent. The least yoke galls them, and rather than submit to the will of a chief, they rush off into exile, and submit to the most terrible privations.

We were not ill-used by our captors, but I was at length alone. One of my companions went raving mad, the other committed suicide. I was kept alive, I believe, by the spirit of hope.

I was twenty years of age, and had a constitution of iron, as well as a buoyancy of spirits, a boldness and firmness, which saved me from myself, by permitting me to look upon my position in its true light. Cruel as it was, it was far from being desperate.

My first care was, by invariable complaisance, to secure the goodwill of the savages, in which I succeeded pretty well, more easily, indeed, than I should have dared to hope.

However, when in the evening after a whole day's journey in the interminable steppes of Patagonia, I threw myself, overcome with fatigue, before the bivouac fire, while the savages laughed and sang among themselves, I often felt my heart on the point of bursting by reason of the efforts I made to suppress my sighs.

How many times have I felt my courage fail! How many times has the thought of suicide burst upon my mind! But, always at the most critical moment, the hope of deliverance arose to put new life into my heart; my sufferings were calmed little by little, my frame ceased to be agitated, and I slept, murmuring in a gentle voice one of those national refrains which are, for the exile, a sweet and far-off echo of the absent country.

Fourteen months thus passed away, hour by hour, second by second, in an incessant and frightful torture.

Always on the watch to seize an opportunity of escaping, but not wishing to leave anything to the risk of failure, I had had the greatest care not to awaken the drowsy mistrust of the Patagonians. I always affected, on the contrary, not to wander too far from the tribe; so the Indians had at last come to allow me to enjoy comparative liberty amongst them; and instead of compelling me to follow them on foot, they decided of their own accord to allow me to mount on horseback.

It was only on horseback that I could dream of escaping.

The Patagonians are some of the first horsemen in the world. In their school I made rapid progress; and, however wild and vicious might be the horse that they gave me, in a few minutes I subdued him, and made myself completely his master.

Our wandering and purposeless journeys conducted us at last to about ten leagues from the Carmen of Patagonia, the most advanced fort constructed by the Spaniards on the Río Negro, at the extreme frontier of their former possessions.

The troop camped for the night at a little distance from the river, near an abandoned farm.

The opportunity for which I had waited so long had come at last. I prepared to profit by it, convinced that if I did not escape now, I should die a slave.

I will not fatigue the reader with the details of my flight; I will content myself with simply saying that after a devious journey, which lasted seven hours, and during which I constantly felt the smoking nostrils of the horses on my track, on the croup of the one I rode; after having escaped twenty times by a miracle from the bolas which the Patagonians threw at me, and from the sharpened points of their long lances, I came unexpectedly upon a patrol of Buenos Airean horsemen, in the midst of whom I fell fainting, overcome by fatigue and excitement.

The Patagonians, suddenly taken aback by the appearance of white men, whom the high grass had hidden from them till that time, turned tail with fright, and fled away, howling with fury.

I was saved!

By my singular equipment – all the clothing I had on was a frazada (blanket) in rags, fastened round the body by a leather strap – the soldiers at first took me for an Indian, a mistake which was rendered more natural by my complexion, bronzed by the severity of the seasons to which I had been so long exposed and which had assumed nearly the colour of copper. As soon as I regained consciousness, I hastened to disabuse them as well as I could, for at that time I could only speak the Spanish language very imperfectly.

The brave Buenos Aireans listened with signs of the liveliest sympathy to the recital of my sufferings, and lavished on me the kindest attentions.

My entry into Carmen, in the midst of my preservers, was a veritable triumph.

It required nearly a month to enable me to recover from the long sufferings which I had endured, and from the privations of all kinds to which I had, during so long a period, been condemned; but, thanks to the attention by which I was surrounded, and especially thanks to my youth and the vigour of my constitution, I at last regained my health.

The governor of Carmen, who had become much interested in me, agreed at my request to give me a passage on board a little Buenos Airean brig, then anchored before the port, and I left for Buenos Aires, with the firm intention of returning to France as soon as possible – so much had the rude apprenticeship I had had to American life disgusted me with travel.

But it was not to be so, and before again reaching France – I was to wander for twenty years an adventurer in all the countries of the world – from Cape Horn to Hudson's Bay, from China to Oceania, and from India to Spitzburg.

On my arrival in Buenos Aires, my first care was to present myself to the French consul, to ask of him the means of returning to Europe.

I was well received by the consul, who, on proofs of my identity, immediately informed me that there was no French ship in the harbour, but that need not disquiet me, since my family not receiving news of me, and fearing that I might find myself in a difficult position from the want of money, if any misfortune had happened to me during my voyage, had written to all our agents in foreign countries, so that anyone to whom I might present myself might give me, on my demand, a sum adequate to supply my wants, and put me in a position, if I wished it, to try my fortune where chance should have conducted me. He concluded by adding that he held at my disposal the sum of 25,000f., and that he was ready to give it me immediately.

I thanked him, and only accepted three hundred piastres.

Some months passed, during which I made several agreeable acquaintances, and perfected myself in the study of the Spanish language.

On several occasions the consul had done me the kindness to inform me that if I wished to leave for France, it would entirely depend upon my own will; but each time, under some pretext or other. I declined his offer, not being able to resolve to leave forever that land where I had suffered so much, and to which, for that very reason, I was attached.

It is not with impunity that one has once tasted the wild pleasures of independent, nomadic life, and breathed in liberty the embalmed atmosphere of the high savannahs! I felt arising within me the passion of an adventurer, and suffered a secret horror at the thought of recommencing the colourless, circumscribed, and mean existence to which European civilisation would have bound me.

And then I had bound myself in friendship with the gauchos. I made excursions with them into the pampas, slept in their ranches, hunted wild oxen and horses; all the poetry of the desert had taken possession of me, and I only wished to return into the savannahs and virgin forests, whatever might be the consequences to me of such a determination.

In a word, one day, instead of embarking, as I had almost promised the consul, I went to him, and explained my intentions.

The consul neither blamed me, nor gave me his approbation, but contented himself with shaking his head with the melancholy smile of a man in whom experience had killed all the illusions of youth, counted out to me the sum I asked of him, shook my hand with a sigh of regret and of pity, and, my business being at an end, I never saw him again.

Four days later, mounted on an excellent wild horse, and accompanied by an Indian Guaranis, whom I had engaged to serve me as a guide, I left Buenos Aires with the intention of proceeding by land to Brazil.

What business had I at Brazil?

I myself did not know.

But it is neither my history, nor that of my sensations, that I relate here; all which precedes has no other design but that of preparing for the recital, unhappily too true, that I now undertake, and which, without that prelude, would not perhaps have been so clearly explained as is necessary to its being clearly understood. Leaping, then, at a single bound, over some hunting adventures of too little importance to mention, I will transport myself to the banks of the Uruguay, a little above the Salto, four months after my departure from Buenos Aires, and I will enter immediately on the narrative.

After a rather fatiguing day, I stopped for the night in a pagonal, half-inundated by reason of the sudden overflowing of the river, and where it was necessary to go into the water nearly up to the horse's belly, in order to gain a dry spot. For some days the Guaranis, whom I had engaged at Buenos Aires, appeared to obey me with repugnance; he was sad, morose, and answered only in monosyllables the questions I was sometimes obliged to put to him. This turn of mind in my guide disquieted me, as, knowing very well the character of the Indians, I feared he might plot some treason against me; therefore, feigning not to perceive his change of humour, I kept myself on my guard, resolved to blow his brains out at the least hostile demonstration on his part.

As soon as we were encamped, the guide, notwithstanding the suspicions I had conceived of him, manifested great activity in gathering dry wood to light the fire for the evening, and to prepare our modest repast.

The supper over, each enveloped himself in his blanket, and gave himself up to repose.

In the middle of the night I was suddenly awakened by a strange noise; my first movement was to seize my gun, and to look around me.

I was alone; my guide had disappeared.

The night was dark, the fire extinguished; to complete my discomfiture, my bivouac was about to be invaded by the waters of the river, the overflowing of which continued with extreme rapidity.

I had not a moment to lose. I rose in haste, and leaping into the saddle, I darted, with a loose rein, in the direction of a neighbouring hill, the black outline of which was clearly marked on the sombre background of the sky.

Here I was in comparative security. I passed the rest of the night awake, as well to watch for the wild beasts, the howlings of which I heard about the place where I had sought a refuge, as because my present position had become critical – alone, abandoned in a desert country, and completely ignorant of the route it was necessary to take.

On the rising of the sun, I examined the horizon around. As far as my view could reach, reigned the most complete solitude; nothing gave me ground for hope, so wild and desolate appeared the landscape.

This uncertainty, however, from a singular disposition of mind, did not seriously affect me; my position, without being pleasant, had nothing in it positively sad in itself. I possessed a good horse, arms, supplies in abundance – what more could I desire? I, who for so long a time had aspired to the adventurous life of the gaucho and of the trapper?

Accordingly I took in good part the desertion of my guide, and prepared myself, half laughing, half railing against the ingratitude of the Guaranis, to commence my apprenticeship to the life of the desert.

My first care was to light a fire. I prepared a maté cimarron, that is to say, without sugar; and, refreshed by this warm drink, I mounted my horse, with the design of seeking my breakfast by killing a head or two of game, an easy thing in the locality in which I found myself; then I carelessly resumed my adventurous route.

Some days thus passed. One morning, at the moment when I was preparing to light, or rather to rekindle, my bivouac fire to cook my breakfast, I suddenly saw several venados rise from the midst of the high grass, and, after having sniffed the wind, scamper away with extreme rapidity, passing at a pistol shot from the thicket where I had established myself for the night; at the same instant a flight of vultures passed above my head, uttering discordant cries.

Novice as I still was in my new occupation, I instinctively understood that something extraordinary was passing not far from me.

I made my horse lie down, tied my girdle round his nostrils to prevent him neighing, and stretching myself on the ground, I waited with my finger on the trigger of my gun, my heart palpitating, and eye and ear on the watch. Carefully scanning the undulations of the high grass of the plain stretched out before me, I was ready for every event.

I was crouching in the middle of a nearly impenetrable thicket. On the outskirts of a wood which formed a kind of oasis in this desolate wilderness, I found myself in an excellent ambuscade, and perfectly sheltered from the danger I felt was approaching.

I did not deceive myself. Scarcely a quarter of an hour had passed since the venados and the urubus had given me the first hint, than the noise of a precipitate flight distinctly reached my ear. I soon perceived a horseman lying on the neck of his horse, flying with wild rapidity, and coming in a straight line towards the wood in which I was concealed.

The horseman, when he had come within twenty paces, suddenly pulled up his horse, leaped to the ground, and making a shelter of a rocky projection, shrouded by a cluster of trees, loaded his gun, and, leaning his body forward, appeared to listen to the sounds of the desert.

This man, as far as it was possible for me to assure myself of it by a hasty glance at him, appeared to belong to the white race; he was about thirty-five or forty years of age; his energetic features, animated by his rapid journey, and by emotion, were handsome, regular, stamped with a certain nobility, and uncommon boldness; his figure was rather below the middle height, but well made; his large shoulders denoted great vigour; he wore the costume of the gauchos of the Banda Oriental, a costume that I had myself adopted – a maroon jacket, a white waistcoat, a sky blue chirapa, white calzoncillos with fringe, under blue cloth trousers, a poncho thrown over the left shoulder, a knife sheathed in the girdle of the chirapa behind his back, a red Phrygian bonnet, slouched over the forehead, and allowing to escape ringlets of thick black hair, which fell in disorder on his shoulders.

Suddenly the man threw himself backward, put his knee to the ground, and shouldered his gun.

Ten horsemen started up, as if by enchantment, emerging with extreme rapidity from the grass which, up to that time, had concealed them from my view, and precipitated themselves, brandishing their long lances, flourishing their terrible bolas above their heads, and howling with fury, as they looked towards the spot where the gaucho was in ambush.

These horsemen were Indiæ bravos.

CHAPTER II

THE GAUCHO

The Indians stopped within gunshot of the spot where the gaucho and I were concealed; they appeared to be consulting amongst themselves before commencing the attack.

These Indians, thus grouped, formed in the midst of the arid desert, of which they were the veritable kings, a most singular and at the same time a most picturesque tableau, with their noble and animated gestures, their tall and elegant figures, their well-proportioned limbs, and their ferocious appearance.

Half-clothed with ponchos in rags, and with pieces of frazada, fastened by leathern strings round their bodies, they brandished their long lances, garnished with iron blades, and ornamented near the points with tufts of ostrich feathers.

Their chief, still young, had great black eyes veiled by long black eyelashes; his high cheekbones, surrounded by a mass of sleek and flowing hair, fastened on the forehead by a narrow band of red wool; his mouth, large and furnished with brilliant white teeth, which contrasted with the red hue of his skin, impressed on his physiognomy the stamp of remarkable vigour and intelligence. Although he knew that he was but a little distance from the spot where the gaucho was in ambuscade, and that consequently he was exposed to the danger of being struck by a ball, nevertheless, openly exposing himself to the attack of his enemy, he affected a carelessness and a contempt for the peril by which he was threatened, which was not wanting in grandeur.

After a tolerably long discussion, the chief urged his horse forward, and advanced without hesitation towards the rock.

Arrived at about ten paces from it, he stopped, and supporting himself carelessly on the long lance which he held in his hand:

"Why does the white huntsman earth himself like a timid viscacha?" said he, elevating his voice and addressing the gaucho; "The Aucas warriors are before him: let him come out from his ambuscade, and let him show that he is not a frightened and babbling old woman, but a brave man."

The chief waited an instant; then he resumed in a mocking voice:

"Come, my warriors are deceived, they thought to have unearthed a bold jaguar, and it is but a dog returning from the pampa that they are about to attack."

The eye of the gaucho flashed at the insult; he applied his finger to the trigger, and the charge flew.

But, sudden and unexpected as had been his movement, the wily Indian had foreseen it, or rather had guessed it; he threw himself rapidly on one side, there bounding in advance with the elasticity and certainty of a wild beast, he alighted in front of the gaucho, with whom he closed.

The two men rolled on the ground, grappling each other with fury.

Meanwhile, at the sound of the shot, the Indians had uttered their war cry, and had darted forward with the design of supporting their chief.

The gaucho seemed, therefore, doomed. If even he could have succeeded in overcoming the chief against whom he was fighting, he would evidently have had to succumb to the attack of ten Indians.

At that moment I do not know what revulsion of feeling seized me. I forgot the danger to which I exposed myself in discovering my retreat, and instinctively putting the gun to my shoulder I fired my two shots, followed immediately by the explosion of two pistols and darting from my retreat, my two other pistols in hand, I discharged them close to the breasts of the horsemen, who came down upon me like a thunderbolt.

The Indians, surprised and frightened by this fusillade, which they could not foresee, since they believed they had but a single adversary to fight, turned about and escaped in every direction, uttering cries of fright, abandoning not only their chief, who was occupied with defending himself against the gaucho, but also the corpses of four of their companions, struck by my balls. While I was loading my gun, I saw two other Indians fall from their horses.

Certain of not having anything more to fear in that direction, I ran towards the gaucho in order to render him assistance, if it were necessary, but at the moment I reached him the blade of his knife entirely disappeared in the throat of the Indian chief.

The latter expired, his eye fixed on his enemy, without trying even to ward off the blow.

The gaucho withdrew his knife from the wound, plunged its blade several times in the earth, to cleanse it from the blood with which it was soiled, then quietly replacing his knife in his chirapa, he rose and turned towards me.

His countenance had not changed; he still preserved that expression of cold impassability and of implacable courage that I had at first seen in him; only his face was more pale, and some drops of perspiration stood like pearls on his temples.

"Thank you, caballero," said he to me, holding out his hand; "to the revenging charge! ¡Vive Dios! It was time that you came. Without your brave assistance I avow I should have been a dead man."

These words had been uttered in Spanish, but with an accent which denoted a foreign origin.

"I had arrived before you," I answered, "or rather had passed the night at a few paces only from the spot where chance so fortunately led me."

"Chance," he replied, gently shaking his head, "chance is a word invented by the strong minds of towns. We of the desert ignore it. It is God only, who desiring to save me, led me to you."

I bowed affirmatively. This man appeared to me still greater at that moment, with his simple faith and genuine humility, than when he was preparing to fight singly against ten men.

"Besides," added he, speaking to himself, "I knew that God would not allow me to fall today. Every man in this world has a task to accomplish. I have not yet fulfilled mine. But pardon," said he to me, changing his tone, and trying to smile, "I am saying to you now words which must appear, without doubt, very strange, especially at this moment, when we have to think of things more important than to commence a philosophic discussion. Let us see what has become of our enemies? Although we may be two resolute men now, if the desire of returning seizes them we should be hard put to it to rid ourselves of them."

And without waiting for any answer, he left the wood, taking at the same time the precaution to reload his gun as he walked.

I followed him in silence, not knowing what to think of the strange companion whom I had so singularly found, and asking myself who this man could be who, by his manner, his language, and the turn of his mind, appeared so much above the position which the clothes he wore, and the place where he was, appeared to assign to him.

The gaucho, after assuring himself that the Indians remaining on the battlefield were dead, ascended a tolerably elevated hill, scanned the horizon on all sides for a considerable time, and then returned towards me, holding a cigarette between his fingers.

"We have nothing to fear at present," said he to me. "However, I think we shall act prudently in not remaining here any longer. Which way are you going?"

"Upon my word," I answered him frankly, "I avow that I do not know." Notwithstanding his apparent coolness, he allowed a gesture of surprise to escape him.

"What!" said he, "You do not know?"

"No! Strange as it may appear to you, it is so. I know not where I am, nor where I am going."

"Come, come; that's a joke, is it not? For some motive or other you do not wish – which shows your prudence – to acquaint me with the object of your travel; but it is impossible that you do not really know in what spot you are, and the place to which you are going."

"I repeat to you, caballero, that what I tell you is true. I have no motive for concealing the object of my travel; I am merely wandering on account of the unfaithfulness of a guide whom I had engaged, and who abandoned me some days ago."

He reflected an instant, then taking me cordially by the hand:

"Pardon me the absurd suspicions of which I am ashamed," said he, "but the situation in which I find myself must be my excuse; let us mount our horses, and get away from here. While we are on the road, we can talk; I hope soon you will know me better."

"I need not know you more," I replied; "from the first moment I felt myself attached to you."

"Thank you," said he, smiling. "To horse, to horse! We have a long journey to make."

Five minutes later we were galloping away, leaving to the vultures that already wheeled in large circles above our heads with harsh and discordant cries, the corpses of the Indians killed during the combat.

While we were proceeding, I related to the gaucho my life and adventures, as far as I thought necessary he should know. This recital pleased him by its singularity.

It was easy to perceive that, notwithstanding the brusque and sometimes even harsh manner he affected, this man possessed a profound knowledge of the human heart, and great practical knowledge of life; and that he had for a long time frequented not only the best American society, but also visited Europe with advantage, and seen the world under its most varied phases. His elevated thoughts, always characterised by nobility of mind, his good sense, his lively, vigorous, and attractive conversation, interested me in him more and more; and although he kept the most complete silence as regards his personal circumstances, and had not even told me his name, I nevertheless felt the sentiment of sympathy with which he had at first inspired me continually increasing.

We passed the whole day laughing and talking, at the same time rapidly advancing towards the rancho where we were to pass the night.

"Look," said the gaucho to me, pointing out a slight column of smoke, which was ascending spirally towards the sky; "that is where we are going, and in a quarter of an hour we shall be there."

"Thank God," I answered, "for I begin to feel fatigued."

"Yes," said he to me, "you have not yet become used to long journeys; but patience, in a few days you will think nothing of it."

"I hope so."

"By-the-bye," said he, as if the thought suddenly occurred to him, "you have not yet told me the name of the pícaro who abandoned you."

"Robbing me of a gun, a sabre, and a horse – things for which I have ceased to grieve."

"How is that?"

"Why, because it is probable that the bribón will not bring them back to me."

"You are wrong to think that; although the desert may be large, a rascal cannot so easily conceal himself there as you think."

"What good would it do to find him?"

"You do not know what may happen; perhaps someday I shall come across him."

"That is true; they call him, in Buenos Aires, Pigacha, but his real name among his own people is the Venado; he is blind of the right eye. I hope that is sufficient description," I added.

"I believe so," answered he; "and I promise you if I meet him I shall recognise him. But here we are."

In fact, at twenty paces before me appeared a rancho, the complete outline of which the first shades of night prevented me from making out, but the sight of which, after a fatiguing day, and

especially after the wild life to which I had been so long condemned, rejoiced my heart in giving rise to the hope of that frank and cordial hospitality which is never refused in the pampa.

Already the dogs hailed our arrival with their deafening bark, and leaped furiously around our horses. We were obliged to give them a taste of the whip, and soon our horses stopped before the entrance to the rancho, where a man was standing with a lighted torch in one hand, and a gun in the other. This man was tall, with bold features, and a bronzed complexion lit up by the ruddy reflection of the torch which he held above his head gave me a good idea, with his athletic form and wild appearance, of the true gaucho of the pampas. On perceiving my companion, he bowed deferentially.

"I hail you, most pure Mary," he said.

"Conceived without sin."

"Can we enter, Don Torribio?"

"Enter, Señor Don Zeno Cabral; this house and all it contains belongs to you."

We dismounted without asking anything further, and after a young man of eighteen or twenty, half-naked, who had run out at the call of his master or father – I did not get to know which – had taken the bridle of our horses and had led them away, we entered, followed by the dogs who had so noisily announced our arrival, and who, instead of being hostile to us, leaped around us with signs of pleasure.

This habitation, like all those of the gauchos, was a hut of earth intermingled with reeds, covered with straw; constructed, in fact, with all the primitive simplicity of the desert.

A bed formed of four stakes driven into the earth, supporting a hurdle of reed or strip of leather interlaced, on which was placed, like a European mattress, the untanned skin of an ox; some other hides laid on the floor near the wall for the children's beds, some bolas, some lazos, the indispensable arms of the gauchos, some horses' harness hung from stakes of wood pierced in the wall of the rancho, formed the only furniture of the inner room.

As to the first room, its furniture was simpler still, if possible; it was composed of a hurdle of reeds, supported by six stakes, and serving for a sofa, the heads of two oxen in the place of an armchair, a little barrel of water, a brass kettle, some gourds serving for drinking vessels, a wooden bowl, and an iron spit stuck vertically before the fireplace, which was in the very middle of the apartment.

We have described this rancho thus minutely, because all resemble one another in the pampa, and are, so to speak, constructed on the same model.

Only, as this one belonged to a comparatively rich man, apart from the main building, and at about twenty yards' distance, there was another used as a magazine for the hides and the meats that were to be dried, and surrounded by a tolerably extensive hedge about three yards high, forming the corral, behind which the horses were sheltered.

The honours of the rancho were done for us by two ladies, whom the gaucho introduced to us as his wife and daughter.

The latter, about fifteen years of age, was tall, well made, and endowed with a rather uncommon beauty; she was named Eva, as I afterwards learned; her mother, though still young – she was at the most thirty years of age – had now only the fugitive remains of a beauty which had been very remarkable once.

My companion appeared to be an intimate friend of the ranchero and his family, by whom he was received with signs of the utmost pleasure, moderated by a cloud of respect and almost fear.

On his side, don Zeno Cabral – for I at last knew his name – acted towards them with patronising unceremoniousness.

The reception was what it ought to be, that is to say, most frank and cordial. These honest people only studied to be agreeable to us; the least thanks on our part filled them with joy.

Our repast, which we ate with a good appetite, was composed as usual of the asado, or roast beef, of goya cheese, and of harina, or the flour of mandioca the whole moistened by some libations

of caña or sugar brandy, which, under the name of traguitos, little draughts, circulated freely, and finished by putting us in good humour.

As a compliment to this repast, much more comfortable than doubtless the European reader will suppose, when our cigarettes were lighted, doña Eva took down a guitar, and after having presented it to her father, who, smoking all the while, commenced to prelude with his four fingers united, she danced before us with that grace and that elasticity which only belong to the women of South America, a cielito, followed immediately by a montonera. Then the young man, of whom I have already had occasion to speak, and who was not the servant but the son of the ranchero, sang with a fresh, full, musical voice, and with an expression which went to our hearts.

A strange incident then occurred, the meaning of which I could not understand. Don Quino, the young man, sang with inexpressible passion these charming verses of Quintana: —

Feliz aquel que junto a tí suspira,
Que el dulce nectar de tu risa bebe.
Que a demandarte compasión se atreve,
Y blandamente palpitar te mira.¹

Suddenly don Zeno became pale as death, a nervous trembling agitated his whole body, and two burning tears burst from his eyes; however, he kept the most profound silence, but the young man perceiving the effect produced upon their guest by the verses which he was singing, immediately struck up a joyous jarana, which soon brought back the smile on the pale lips of the gaucho.

¹ Happy he who sighs near thee, who drinks the sweet nectar of thy smile, who dares to ask pity of thee, and sees thee gently agitated.

CHAPTER III

THE RANCHO

On the morrow, at the rising of the sun I was up, but early as I had been, my companion was before me: his place near me was empty.

I went out hoping to meet him, but could not see him.

The country around me was deserted and calm as on the day of the creation; the dogs, vigilant sentinels, who during the night had watched over our repose, rose and came to caress me with joyful growls. The aspect of the pampa² is the most picturesque at the rising of the sun. A profound silence reigns over the desert; it would seem that nature gathers and resumes her powers at the dawn of the day which is commencing. The fresh morning breeze flutters gently through the tall grass, which it bends by its light and cadenced movements. Here and there the venados raise their timid heads, and throw around them frightened glances. The birds, crouched for warmth under the foliage, prelude with some timorous notes their morning hymn. On the little heaps of sand formed by the holes of the viscachas, little belated owls, stationary as sentinels, and half-asleep, winked their eyes in the rays of the morning star, sinking their round heads in the feathers of their necks; whilst, high up in the air the urubus and the caracaras wheel in large circles, balancing themselves carelessly at their ease on their wings, and seeking the prey on which they will fall with the rapidity of a thunderbolt.

The pampa at this moment resembles a sea with its green and calm waters, the shores of which are hidden behind the horizon.

I sat down on a green mound; while smoking a cigarette I fell into reflection, and was soon completely absorbed by my thoughts.

I was suddenly aroused, however, by a voice which burst upon me in a tone of good humour. I turned round sharply.

Don Torribio was near me.

"Hola, caballero!" he said, "The pampa is beautiful at the rising of the sun, is it not?"

"It is indeed," I answered, without knowing exactly what I said.

"Have you passed a good night?"

"Excellent; thanks to your generous hospitality."

"Do not let us speak of that. I have done what I could; unfortunately, the reception has been poor enough. Times are hard. Only four or five years ago it would have been different; but from him who does all he can, people cannot ask more."

"I am far from complaining – on the contrary. But you are returning from a walk, it seems to me?"

"Yes, I have been to give an eye to my oxen which are at pasture. But," added he, raising his eyes to the sky and mentally calculating the height of the sun, "it is time to breakfast. Will you return with me?"

"I do not ask anything better; only I do not see my companion. It appears to me that it would ill become me not to wait breakfast for him."

"If that is all that hinders you," said the gaucho, laughing, "you can eat without fear."

"He is about to return?" I asked.

"On the contrary, he will not return."

"How is that?" I cried with surprise, mingled with uneasiness; "He is gone away?"

² The word pampa belongs to the Quechua language, language of the Incas. It signifies flat country, savannah, or great plain.

"Already more than three hours ago. But," he added, "we shall see him again soon; he wished to speak to you about it before mounting his horse; but, on reflecting on it, you appeared so fatigued yesterday evening that he preferred to allow you to sleep – sleep is so good."

"He will return without doubt, soon?"

"I cannot say so exactly. In any case he will not long delay; we shall see him again this evening or tomorrow."

"The devil! What am I to do, I who reckoned on him?"

"How is that?"

"Why, to tell me the route I ought to take."

"If that is all, there is no reason why you should torment yourself; he has requested me to beg you not to quit the rancho before his return."

"But I fear to discommode you. You are not rich, as you yourself have told me."

"Señor," answered the gaucho, with dignity, "strangers are envoys from God. Even if it might please you to live a month in my humble rancho, I should be happy and proud of your presence in my family. Do not say any more, I beg you."

What more could I object? Nothing. I resigned myself, therefore, to wait until the return of don Zeno.

The breakfast was pleasant enough; the ladies exerted themselves to bring out my good humour, by loading me with cares and attentions.

Immediately after the meal, as don Torribio prepared to mount his horse, I asked to accompany him. He agreed; I saddled my horse and we set out at a gallop across the pampa.

My design in accompanying the gaucho was not to have an agreeable ride, but to take advantage of our being together alone, to lead the conversation to my companion, whom he appeared to know very well, so as to obtain certain information which would enable me to form an opinion on that singular man.

But all my efforts were vain, all my finesse absolutely lost; the gaucho knew nothing, or, which is more probable, did not wish to tell me anything. The man who was so communicative, and so inclined to relate, often in a too prolix fashion, his own affairs, preserved a discretion proof against everything, and a reticence which made me despair when I turned the conversation to don Zeno Cabral.

He answered me only by monosyllables, or by the exclamation, "¿Quién sabe?" (Who knows?).

Wearied with my efforts, I gave up pressing him any more, and resigned myself to speaking only of his flocks.

Towards three o'clock in the afternoon don Torribio informed me that our journey was at an end, and that we were about to return to the rancho, from which we were then distant four or five leagues.

A ride of five leagues, after a day passed in an adventurous gallop, is but a trifle for gauchos mounted on the untiring horses of the pampa.

Our horses brought us in less than two hours in sight of the rancho, without a hair being moistened.

A horseman advanced at full speed to meet us.

This horseman – I recognised him immediately with feelings of joy – was don Zeno Cabral.

"There you are, then," said he, riding up by the side of us, "I have been waiting for you for an hour." Then, addressing me, he added, "I bring you a surprise, which I think will be agreeable to you."

"A surprise," I cried, "what is it?"

"You shall see; I am convinced you will thank me."

"I thank you in advance," I answered, "without seeking to guess of what character this surprise is."

"Look," answered he, stretching out his arm in the direction of the rancho.

"My guide," I cried; recognising my rascal of an Indian, firmly tied to a tree.

"Himself! What do you think of that?"

"Upon my word, it appears to be a marvel; I cannot understand how you have been able to meet with him."

"Oh! That is not so difficult as you suppose, especially with the information you gave me. All these vagabonds are of the family of wild beasts; they have hiding places from which they never go far. For a man habituated to the pampa, nothing is more easy than to put his hand upon them; this one, especially, trusting to your ignorance of the desert, did not take the trouble to conceal himself. He travelled openly and quietly, persuaded that you would not dream of pursuing him. This confidence, however, has ruined him, and I leave you to guess his fright when I surprised him unawares."

"All that is very well," I answered; "but what do you wish that I should do with this pícaro?"

"What!" he cried with astonishment, "What do I wish you to do? I wish that you should first correct him, in a style he will remember; then, as you have engaged him to serve as guide as far as Brazil, and as he has received in advance a part of the price agreed on, he must fulfil his engagement."

"I confess I have no great confidence in his future faithfulness."

"You are in error; you do not know the Manso Indians. This man, when once he has been corrected, will serve you faithfully; you may safely trust me for that."

"I will do so willingly, but this punishment, whatever it may be, I confess I feel incapable of administering it to him."

"Oh, don't let that disturb you; here is our friend, Don Torribio, who has not so tender a heart as you."

"I ask nothing more than to be agreeable to you," said don Torribio, in confirmation.

We arrived at that moment close to the prisoner; the poor fellow who doubtless knew what awaited him, had a very disconsolate air, and was very ill at ease.

Don Zeno approached the prisoner, while with an imperturbable coolness. Don Torribio occupied himself by doubling up his laço several times in his right hand.

"Listen, pícaro," said don Zeno, to the attentive Indian; "this caballero engaged you at Buenos Aires; not only have you basely abandoned him in the pampa, but you have robbed him; you merit punishment, and that punishment you are about to receive. Don Torribio, my dear sir, will you, I beg, apply fifty strokes of the laço on the shoulders of this bribón."

The Indian did not answer a word; the gaucho then approached, and with the conscientiousness with which he did everything, he raised his laço, which fell whizzing on the shoulders of the poor fellow, on which it made a bluish stripe.

The Indian did not make a movement; he did not utter a cry.

As to me, I suffered inwardly, but I did not dare to interfere.

Don Zeno Cabral reckoned without emotion the strokes as they fell, one by one.

At the eleventh the blood started out.

The gaucho did not stop.

The Indian, although his flesh quivered under the blows which came more and more rapidly, preserved his stony impassibility.

The fifty blows to which the guide had been condemned by the implacable don Zeno were administered by the gaucho without one being missed. At the thirty-second, notwithstanding all his courage, the Indian had lost consciousness, but that, notwithstanding my entreaty, did not interrupt the chastisement.

"Stop," at last, said don Zeno, when the number was complete, "unbind him."

The ties were cut and the body of the poor fellow fell helplessly on the sand.

The son of the gaucho then approached, rubbed with beef fat, water, and vinegar the bleeding wounds of the Indian – threw his poncho over his shoulders and then left him.

"But that man has fainted," I cried.

"Bah," said don Zeno, "do not trouble yourself about that. Those fellows have a tough hide. Let us go and dine."

This cold cruelty disgusted me; however, I refrained from any remark, and I entered into the rancho. I was still a novice; but I was to witness, at a later period, scenes compared with which this was but child's play.

After dinner, which, contrary to custom, was prolonged for a considerable time, don Zeno ordered the son of the gaucho to bring in the guide.

He entered in a minute. Don Zeno looked at him for some seconds with attention, and then said —

"Do you admit you have merited the punishment I have inflicted?"

"I admit it," answered the Indian, in a sulky voice.

"You are aware that I know where to find you?"

"I know it."

"If at my request this caballero agrees to pardon you, will you be faithful to him?"

"Yes, but on one condition."

"I do not wish for conditions on your part, bribón," replied don Zeno. "You deserve the garotte. Now answer my question."

"What question?"

"Will you be faithful?"

"Yes."

"I shall know it; chastisement or reward I shall charge with giving you; you understand?"

"I understand."

"Now listen to me; your master and you will leave here tomorrow, at sunrise; nine days hence he must be at the fazenda do Rio d'Ouro."

"He shall be there."

"No equivocation between us; you understand."

"I have promised," coldly answered the Indian.

"Good; drink this trago de caña to revive you from the blows you have received, and go to sleep."

The guide seized the gourd don Zeno offered him, emptied it in a draught with evident satisfaction, and withdrew without uttering a word.

When he had gone out, I addressed myself to don Zeno with the most indifferent air I could affect.

"All that is very good," I said; "but I vow, Señor, that notwithstanding his promises, I have not the least confidence in that fellow."

"You are wrong, Señor," he answered me; "he will serve you faithfully; not from affection, but from fear. He knows very well that if anything happens to you he will have a sharp reckoning with me."

"Hum," murmured I, "that only half assures me; but why, if, as you have allowed me to guess, you are again going towards the Brazilian frontiers, do you not permit me to accompany you?"

"That was my intention, but unhappily certain reasons, with which it would be useless to acquaint you, render the execution of this project impossible. However, I reckon on seeing you at the fazenda do Rio d'Ouro, where probably I shall arrive before you. In any case, will you remain there till I have seen you, and then perhaps it will be permitted to me to acknowledge, as I have an earnest desire to do, the great service you have rendered me."

"I will wait for you, since you desire it, Señor," I answered, boldly accepting these new circumstances, "not to remind you of the event to which you allude, but because I should be happy to become more intimately acquainted with you."

On the next day, at sunrise, I rose, and after having affectionately taken leave of the people who had so well received me, and whom I thought I should never see again, I left the rancho without being able to bid adieu to don Zeno Cabral.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAZENDA DO RIO D'OURO

My journey was continued thus under rather singular circumstances – at the mercy of an Indian whose perfidy had been already abundantly proved, and from whom I could expect no good.

However, I was well armed, vigorous, resolute, and set out in pretty good spirits, convinced that my guide would never attack me to my face.

I beg to state that I was wrong in attributing bad intentions to the poor Indian, and that my precautions were unnecessary. Don Torribio and don Zeno Cabral had said the truth; the rude correction inflicted on my Guaranis had had the most salutary influence on him, and had entirely modified his intentions towards me.

He became more lively, more amiable, and especially more of a talker; I took advantage of this change in his disposition to sound him with regard to don Zeno Cabral.

This time also I completely failed, not because the Indian refused to answer me, but on account of his ignorance. In a few words, this is all I succeeded in learning.

Don Zeno Cabral was well known, and especially much feared by all the Indians who live on the desert, and who unceasingly traverse it in every direction. He was to them a strange, mysterious, incomprehensible being, whose power was very great. No one knew his regular abode; he almost possessed the attribute of ubiquity, for he had been seen at distances far removed from each other almost at the same time; the Indians had often laid traps to kill him without ever having succeeded in inflicting on him the slightest wound.

He often disappeared for months together without their knowing what had become of him, then they saw him suddenly camped in their midst without their knowing how he had arrived there.

On the whole, the Indians, apart from the respectful fear he had inspired in them, for the most part were much indebted to him; no one better than he knew how to cure those maladies supposed to be incurable by their sorcerers.

This information, if I can so call the timid and superstitious ramblings of my guide, left me more perplexed than I was before with regard to this man, whom everything tended to surround in my eyes with a mysterious halo.

A word uttered, perhaps, by chance by the Indian aroused still more my insatiable curiosity.

"He is a Paulista," he said to me, in a subdued voice, looking cautiously around him, as if he feared that this word might fall upon an indiscreet ear.

On several occasions during my stay at Buenos Aires, I had heard of the Paulistas: the information which had been given me with regard to them, although for the most part very incomplete and erroneous, had, however, greatly excited my curiosity.

The Paulistas, or Vicentistas, for these two names are indifferently applied to the early historians, first settled in the vast and magnificent plains of Piratininga. There was then organised under the intelligent and paternal direction of the two Jesuits, Antieta and Nobrega, a colony within a colony – a sort of half barbarous metropolis, which owes to its courage a continually increasing prosperity and influence, and the exploits of which if some day they are related, will form, I am convinced, a most interesting chapter in the history of Brazil.

Thanks to the intervention of the Jesuits in Brazil, the Europeans did not disdain to ally themselves with those strong and bellicose Indian races who so long held the Portuguese in check, and sometimes drove back the conquerors.

From these alliances there arose a warlike race – brave, inured to all kinds of fatigue, and remarkably daring, who, well governed, produced the Paulistas.

Several serious charges are laid at their door; they have been accused from the very foundation of their colony of having shown an indomitable and independent disposition, an affected disdain for the laws of the mother city, and an unheard-of pride towards the other colonists.

To these accusations the Paulistas have given the most complete denial.

The province of St. Paul, peopled by them alone, is now the most civilised, the most industrious, and the richest in Brazil.

I urged my journey as much as possible, the rather because my guide had informed me that the fazenda do Rio d'Ouro, where don Zeno Cabral had given me a rendezvous, was situated on the frontier of the province of St. Paul, of which it was one of the richest and most vast achievements.

In order the more quickly to reach the end of our long journey, my guide, notwithstanding the difficulties of the way, had led us along the inundated banks of the Rio Uruguai.

On the fourth day after our departure from the rancho, we reached the Aldea of Santa Anna, the first Brazilian station in ascending the river.

The excessive rise of the river had caused terrible ravages in this miserable village, composed of scarcely a dozen ranchos. Several had been carried away by the waters, the remainder were threatened with speedy inundation; the poor inhabitants, reduced to the most frightful distress, were camped on a little hill, awaiting the withdrawal of the waters.

Nevertheless, these poor people, spite of their misery, received us in the most hospitable way, placing at our disposal everything they could furnish us with.

It was with an unspeakable pang of the heart and profound gratitude that on the next day at sunrise I left these good people, who overwhelmed us at our departure with wishes for the success of our journey.

I continued to advance through a charming and varied landscape. Three days after my halt at Santa Anna, about two o'clock in the afternoon, at an angle of the route, I suddenly turned my head, and in spite of myself I stopped, uttering a cry of admiration at the unexpected sight of the most delicious country I had ever contemplated.

My Guaranis smiled with joy. It was to him that I owed this splendid surprise, which he had been preparing for me for some hours by inducing me to take, under pretext of shortening the journey, concealed paths through almost impenetrable woods.

Before me, almost at my feet, for I had stopped on the summit of an elevated hill, extended – enclosed in a horizon of verdure, formed by a belt of virgin forest – a landscape of about ten leagues in circumference, of which, thanks to my position, my eye took in the minutest details. About the centre of this landscape, over an extent of two leagues, was a lake, the transparent waters of which were an emerald green in colour – the wooded and beautiful picturesque mountains which surrounded it were covered in some places with plantations.

We were on the spot where the Curitiba or Guazu, a rather important river, an affluent of the Parana, that we had reached, after having traversed the Paso de los Infieles, enters the lake.

At the entry of the Guazu I perceived an isle which my guide assured me had formerly floated, but which had by degrees approached the bank, where it had become fixed. At first formed by aquatic plants, the vegetable earth had been heaped up there, and now it is covered with pretty thick wood. Then, in the distance, in the midst of a ravine between two hills covered with wood, I perceived a considerable number of buildings raised like an amphitheatre, and surmounted by a tall steeple.

Below the rugged steep, on the summit of which these buildings were situated, the Guazu rushed along, struggling over the obstacles that abrupt rocks, covered with a verdant lichen, opposed to its course; then, dividing into several arms, it lost itself, after innumerable meanderings, in the sombre valleys which stretched right and left. I could not take my eyes from the spectacle of nature in this grand, wild, and really imposing form. I remained there as though fascinated, not caring either to advance or recede, so great was the emotion that I experienced, and, forgetting everything, still looking without being satiated at this splendid view, to which nothing can be compared.

"How beautiful!" I cried.

"Is it not?" replied the guide.

"What is this magnificent country called?"

"Do you not know, mi amo?" said the Indian.

"How should I know, when I come here today for the first time?"

"Why, because this country is well known, mi amo," replied he; "people come from long distances to see it."

"I doubt it not, but I should like to know its name."

"You see before you the fazenda do Rio d'Ouro; in former days all these mountains that you see were filled with gold and precious stones."

"And now?" I asked, interested in spite of myself.

"Oh, now they do not work the mines; they are exhausted or inundated with water. The master pretends that it is much better to work the earth."

"He is not wrong. What is the name of the good man who reasons so judiciously?"

"I do not know, mi amo; they pretend that the fazenda, and all the lands appertaining to it, belong to don Zeno Cabral, but I should not dare to assert it; but, for that matter, it would not astonish me, for singular things are related as to what passes in the caldeiras that you see down there," added he, pointing with his finger to three round holes in the form of a funnel, pierced in the rocks.

"What do they relate, then, that is so extraordinary?"

"Oh, frightful things, mi amo, and things which I, a poor Indian, should never dare to repeat."

It was in vain I pressed my guide to explain himself; I could only draw from him ejaculations of fright, accompanied by innumerable signs of the cross. Wearied of doing so, I gave up asking any farther about a subject which appeared to displease him so much.

"In what time will we arrive at the fazenda?" I asked.

"In four hours, mi amo."

"Do you think that don Zeno will already have arrived, and that we shall meet him?"

"Who knows, mi amo? If the señor don Zeno wishes to have arrived there, he will be there."

Beaten on this point as on the first, I finally gave up asking my guide questions, to which, according to his pleasure, he made such ridiculous answers, and I confined myself to giving him the order to proceed.

By degrees, as we ascended the valley, the landscape changed, and assumed aspects of a striking character. I thus traversed, without perceiving it, the pretty considerable space which separated me from the fazenda.

At the moment when we began to ascend a rather wide and well-kept path that conducted to the first buildings, I perceived a horseman who was galloping towards me at full speed.

My guide touched me lightly on the arm with a quiver of fear.

"Do you not recognise him? It is the seigneur don Zeno Cabral."

"Impossible!" I cried.

The Indian shook his head several times.

"Nothing is impossible to señor Zeno," murmured he, in an undertone.

I looked more attentively; I recognised, indeed, don Zeno Cabral, my old companion of the pampa. He wore the same costume as at our first meeting.

In a minute he was near me.

"Welcome to the fazenda do Rio d'Ouro," said he to me joyfully, holding out his right hand, which I grasped cordially; "have you had a good journey?"

"Excellent, I thank you, although very fatiguing. But," added I, noticing a slight smile on his lips, "although I do not yet rank myself with a traveller of your calibre, I begin to be perfectly accustomed to it; moreover, the aspect of your beautiful country has completely made me forget my fatigue."

"Is it not beautiful?" said he with pride; "And does it not merit to be seen and appreciated?"

"Certainly."

"You have been satisfied with this bribón, I suppose," said he, turning towards the guide, who kept himself modestly and timidly in the background.

"Quite satisfied; he has completely redeemed his fault."

"I knew it already, but I am happy to hear you say so, that puts me on good terms with him."

"Go on ahead, pícaro, and announce our arrival."

The Indian did not wait for a repetition of the order.

"These Indians are singular characters," said don Zeno, looking after him "you can only subdue them by threatening them with harshness; but, on the whole, they are not bad."

"You except without doubt," I answered, smiling, "those who wished to do you so bad a turn when I had the pleasure of meeting you."

"Why should I do that? The poor devils acted with good intentions, from the point of view produced by their narrow ideas."

"Do you not fear to become one day the victim of their perfidy?"

"It will be as it shall please God; as to me, I shall accomplish the mission that I have imposed upon myself; but never mind that, you will remain some time with us, will you not, Don Gustavo?"

"Two or three days only," I answered.

"You are in a great hurry," said my host.

"By no means; I am absolutely master of my time."

"Then, why do you wish to leave us so quickly?"

"Why," I replied, not knowing exactly what to say, "I am afraid of discommoding you."

"Don Gustavo," said don Zeno Cabral, "abandon once for all those European fashions, which are out of place here; you cannot discommode a man like me, whose fortune amounts to millions of piastres, who is master, under God, of a territory of more than thirty square leagues, and who commands more than two thousand white, red, and black people. In accepting frankly the hospitality that such a man freely offers you, as to a friend and a brother, you do him honour."

"Upon my word," I answered, "my dear host, you have a style of doing things which makes a refusal absolutely impossible, so do with me as you like."

"Well and good, that's speaking plainly, without circumlocution or reticence. But make yourself easy; perhaps even if your vagabond notions still possess your heart, I shall make, some days hence, a proposition which will make you smile."

"What?" I eagerly exclaimed.

"I will tell you, but hush! Here we are arrived."

Five minutes later, indeed, we entered the fazenda, between a double row of servants.

I shall not dilate on the style in which hospitality was offered me in this truly princely abode.

Some days passed, during which my host endeavoured in every way to amuse me.

However, notwithstanding all his efforts to appear cheerful, I remarked that something weighed on his mind. I did not dare to ask him about it, fearing to appear impertinent, but I waited with impatience till he afforded me an opportunity to satisfy my curiosity, by asking him some questions which I had continually on my lips, and which I with great difficulty repressed.

At last, one evening, he entered my room. A servant, who accompanied him, carried several bundles of papers.

After telling the servant to put these papers on the table, and sending him away, don Zeno seated himself near me, and after a moment of reflection —

"Don Gustavo," said he, "I have spoken of an expedition in which I thought of having your company."

"Just so," I answered, "and I am ready to follow you, Don Zeno."

"Thank you, my friend; but before accepting your consent, let me give you some words of explanation."

"Do so."

"The expedition in question is one of a most serious character; it is directed towards well-known countries, which have been rarely, and at long intervals, trodden by the foot of the white man. We shall have nearly insurmountable obstacles to overcome – terrible dangers to run. Notwithstanding the precautions I have taken to secure our safety, I must tell you that we risk death in the midst of hordes of savages. As to me, my sacrifice is made."

"And are you going?"

"Yes, I am going, for I have the most important reasons for doing so; but as to you, your position is not the same, and I do not see what right I have to take you with me in a desperate venture."

"I shall go with you, Don Zeno, come what may; my decision is taken, my resolution will not change."

"Well," he said, in an agitated voice, "I shall not argue anymore. Several times we have spoken between ourselves about the Paulistas; you have asked me for information about them; that information you will find in these notes that I leave you. Read them attentively, they will make you acquainted with the motives for the expedition that I now undertake."

It is these notes, placed in order by me, followed by an account of the expedition in which I took part, that the reader is now about to peruse. I have only taken the precaution to change certain names and dates, in order not to wound the just susceptibility of persons still living, and worthy, according to all report, of the estimation in which they are held in Brazil.

CHAPTER V

O SERTÃO

On the 25th of June, 1790, about seven o'clock in the evening, a rather numerous troop of horsemen suddenly emerged from a narrow ravine, and began to ascend a steep path on the flank of a mountain forming the extreme limit of the Sierra di Ibetucata, situated in the province of São Paulo.

These horsemen, having traversed the Rio Paranapanema, prepared no doubt to cross the Rio Tietê, if, as the direction which they followed appeared to indicate, they were going to the territory of Minas Gerais.

For the most part well dressed, they wore the picturesque costume of sertanejos, and were armed with sabres, pistols, knives, and carbines. Their laços, rolled up, were hanging, attached by rings, to the right sides of their saddles.

We shall observe that the bolas – that terrible arm of the gaucho of the pampas in the Banda Oriental – is completely unused in the interior of Brazil.

These men, with their bronzed complexions, haughty bearing, boldly seated on their horses, their hands resting on their weapons, ready to make use of them, and their eyes constantly fixed on the underwood and the thickets in order to discover the route, and to guard against ambushes, offered in the oblique and mild rays of the setting sun, in the midst of that majestic scene, a striking resemblance to those troops of Paulista adventurers who in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, appeared led by the finger of God to undertake bold expeditions, which were to give new countries to the mother city, and to finish by confining to their impenetrable forests the warlike and unsubdued tribes of the first inhabitants of the soil.

The horsemen of whom we are speaking were thirty in number, reckoning the servants charged with the mules loaded with baggage, and who, in case of attack, were to join their companions in the general defence, and were armed with fusils and sabres.

At some distance behind this first troop came a second, composed of a dozen horsemen, in the midst of whom was a palanquin closely shut, carried by two mules.

These two troops evidently obeyed the same chief, for when the first had arrived at the summit of the mountain, it stopped, and a horseman was sent to hasten the arrival of the second.

The men of the second troop affected a certain military air, and wore the costume of the soldados da conquista, which, at the first glance of a person accustomed to Brazilian manners, clearly showed that the chief of the caravan was not only a rich and powerful personage, but that his journey was surrounded by perils.

Notwithstanding the heat of the day, which was then closing, these soldiers sat firmly in their saddles, and carried, without appearing in any way discommoded by it, the strange accoutrement without which they never undertake an expedition – that is to say, the cuirass, named gibao de armas, a kind of greatcoat stuffed with cotton and quilted, which descends almost to the knees, and also covers and protects the arms better than any other armour from the long Indian arrows.

As when they followed the savages into the forests, they were obliged to abandon their horses, upon which they could not penetrate the virgin forests, they had at their side a kind of large blade, called facão, which was of use to them in cutting bamboos to open up a passage; they each had also an espingole, or a fusil without bayonet, which they ordinarily loaded only with large shot, as it was almost impossible to direct a ball with certainty in these inextricable masses of foliage, rendered thicker still by the strange disposition of the branches, and the entanglement of the bamboos.

These soldiers are much feared by the Indians and the runaway Negroes, whom they have a special mission to track and surprise.

They are much esteemed in the country on account of their courage, their sobriety, and their fidelity, whenever put to the test; thus the presence of a dozen of them in the caravan was a certain indication of the high position which the chief of the expedition occupied in Brazilian society.

The caravan stopped, as we have said, at the summit of the mountain. From that elevation there was a view spread before them, to a considerable distance, over a landscape of forests, of varied valleys, traversed by innumerable streams; but not a house, not a hut, was visible to animate this splendid and wild scene.

The travellers, little affected by the attractions of the magic panorama which was spread out before them, and moreover fatigued by a long journey through almost impracticable paths, while a torrid sun profusely poured its burning rays on their heads, hastened to instal themselves in their camp for the night.

Whilst some amongst them unloaded the mules and heaped up the baggage, others erected a tent in the midst of this improvised camp; the strongest made a heap of trees as a provisional intrenchment, and some others lit the fires intended for the cooking of the evening meal – fires which were to be kept up all night in order to keep off wild beasts.

When the camp was completely made, a horseman of haughty bearing, about twenty-eight or thirty years at the most, whose aristocratic manner, bold look and short manner of speaking, denoted the habit of command, gave the order for the palanquin, which up to that moment had remained at some little distance, surrounded by its escort, to approach.

The palanquin immediately advanced as far as the tent, and was opened. The curtain of the tent moved, and then fell back, without it being possible to know of what sex was the person whom the palanquin had enclosed, and who had just quitted it. The palanquin was immediately borne away. The soldier who had probably previously received strict injunctions, surrounded at a pistol shot the tent, to which they would allow no one to approach.

The chief of the caravan, after having assisted at the execution of the order he had given, withdrew under a somewhat smaller tent, erected at some paces from the first, and throwing himself on a seat, was soon absorbed in profound reflections.

This horseman, as we have said, was a man of twenty-eight or thirty years of age, with delicate and aristocratic features, of almost feminine beauty and delicacy. His countenance, gentle and affable at the first aspect, lost this appearance as soon as it was studied with care, to assume an expression of mocking and cruel wickedness, which inspired fear and almost repulsion; his large black eyes had a vague look which was rarely fixed, his mouth furnished with brilliant white teeth, surmounted by a fine black moustache, oiled with care, only half-opened to allow an ironic smile to escape from his lips, slightly raising their corners. Such as he was, however, to superficial eyes, he was an admirable horseman, full of nobility, and of a seductive bearing.

He had scarcely been twenty minutes alone under his tent, when the curtain of the tent was removed gently to give passage to a man who, after having assured himself by looking around, that the horseman of whom we have just given a sketch was quite alone, took two steps into the interior, and removed his hat respectfully.

This person formed to the first the most complete and the rudest contrast; he was still young, with muscular form and angular features – a base, mean, and cruel physiognomy, impressed with an expression of sullen wickedness; his forehead low and depressed, his eyes grey, round, deeply sunken, and considerably removed from each other, his nose long and hooked, his high cheekbones, his large mouth with flat lips, gave him a distant resemblance to a bird of prey of the least noble kind. His monstrous head, supported by a thick and short neck, was buried between two shoulders of great breadth, his awkward arms covered with enormous muscles, gave him the appearance of possessing extraordinary brutal force, the general aspect of which had something repulsive in it. This individual, whom it was easy at once to recognise as a *mameluco* [1] hybrid, wore the costume of the *sertanejos*.

Several minutes passed before the young man recognised the man who was standing before him.

"Ah, 'tis you, Malco Diaz," said he.

"Yes, Monsieur le marquis, it is me," answered the mameluco³, in a low and half-stifled voice.

"Well, what do you want with me, now?"

"Well," said the other with a chill sneer, "the reception that your lordship gives me is scarcely endearing; it is two days since I have spoken to you."

"I have no reason, I suppose, to trouble myself with you. What is the use of my putting myself out? Are you not in my pay, and consequently my servant?" replied the marquis, with a haughty frown.

"It is true," answered the other, "a servant is a dog, and ought to be treated as such; however, you know the proverb, 'A bom jogo bo a volta.'"⁴

"Spare me your stupid proverbs. I beg and tell me, without more circumlocution, what brings you here?" answered the young man with impatience.

"Well, the business is, your lordship, that I engaged myself to you for two months at Rio Janeiro, in order to serve you as a guide, for four Spanish ounces per month, or, if you prefer it, 106,000 reis.⁵ Is it not true, your lordship?"

"Perfectly; only you forget that you received before leaving Rio Janeiro – "

"One month in advance," interrupted the mameluco; "on the contrary, I remember it very well."

"What do you want, then?"

"I want the remainder for a simple reason, your lordship; because, our bargain expiring at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, I prefer to settle with you this evening, rather than cause you any trouble during the march."

"What, is it so long since we began the journey?"

"Calculate, your lordship."

"Just so, quite as long," replied he, pensively.

There was a long silence.

"So you wish to quit me, Malco Diaz," said the young man abruptly, in a more friendly tone than that which he had employed just before.

"Has not my engagement terminated, your lordship?"

"Just so; but you can renew it."

The mameluco hesitated; his master did not take his eye off him.

"Will your lordship allow me to speak frankly?"

"Speak."

"Well, you are a great lord, a marquis, it is true; as for me, I am but a poor devil, compared with you, very little and of no account. However, miserable as you suppose me, there is something invaluable in my estimation."

"And that is – "

"My liberty, your lordship; my independence, the right of going and of coming, without rendering anyone an account of my proceedings. I humbly submit that I am not born to be a servant."

"Have you said all?"

"Yes, all, your lordship."

"But you are not a servant, only a guide."

"That is true, your lordship; but often, spite of yourself, you forget the guide, to think only of the servant; and as to me, I cannot get used to be treated in that fashion. My pride revolts in spite of myself."

A scornful smile played upon the lips of the young man.

"So," answered he, "the motive that you give me is the only one that induces you to leave me?"

³ This name is given to the mongrels born of a white man and Indian woman, or *vice versa*.

⁴ One good turn deserves another.

⁵ The reis is a fictitious coin. This formidable sum is worth about 340 francs only, in French money.

"It is the only one, your lordship."

"But if, quite satisfied with your service, I propose to you five quadruplet instead of four, you would accept it without doubt."

"Pardon me, your lordship," said he, "I should refuse."

"Even if I offered you six?"

"Even if you offered me ten."

"Ah!" said the marquis, biting his lip; "When do you intend to leave us?"

"When your lordship will permit me."

"But if I insisted that you should remain with us until tomorrow at ten o'clock?"

"I should remain, my lord."

"Good," said the young man in a tone of indifference, "I see that your mind is made up."

"Oh, decidedly, my lord."

"I am going now to pay the remainder that I owe you; you shall then be free to go away immediately."

The young man drew several pieces of gold from a purse, and presented them to the mongrel.

"Take it," said he.

Malco held out his hand, but soon thinking better of it —

"Pardon, my lord," said he, "you are making a mistake."

"I? How is that?"

"Why, you only owe me four ounces, I believe."

"Well?"

"You are giving me eight."

"I give you four ounces because I owe them to you, and I add four others, because, before parting with you, I wish to give a proof of my satisfaction of the manner in which you have done your duty."

A second time the mameluco hesitated, but exercising great control over himself, and stepping back, as if to wish to escape the fascination exercised over him by the sight of the metal, he placed, although with an evident repugnance, four of the pieces of gold on a chest, answering with a voice stifled with emotion —

"I am very grateful to you, my lord, but I cannot accept so rich a present."

"Why not, if it pleases me to make it, Malco? Am I not the master, to dispose of what belongs to me?"

"Yes, my lord, you are free to do that; but I repeat that I shall not accept the money."

"At least you will give me an explanation of this enigma, for if I do not deceive myself, you love gold."

"Yes, my lord, when it is honourably gained, but I am not a beggar to accept a remuneration to which I consider I have no right."

"These sentiments do you honour," answered the young man, with a biting raillery.

He then took the four pieces of gold, chinked them in his hand, and then put them again into his purse.

"Now we are quits."

And with a gesture, he ordered the mameluco to withdraw. The latter, very ill at ease under the searching look of the marquis, did not wait for the suggestion to be repeated. He bowed awkwardly, and left the tent.

He then proceeded to his horse, which he had attached some paces off to a stake, threw himself in the saddle, and went off with a pensive air, descending the mountain at a gentle trot in the direction of the Sertão, at the entry of which the caravan had established its bivouac.

When he had gone sufficiently far not to fear being seen, he broke off abruptly to the right, and returned.

"Devil of a man," murmured he, in a low voice, attentively surveying the shrubs and thickets for fear of surprise; "it is evident that he suspects something; I have not a moment to lose; for – I know him. If I permit myself to hesitate, I am a lost man; but if I don't hesitate, the affair is too good for me not to devote all my efforts to bring it to a good conclusion. We shall see who will gain the day."

Then vigorously putting spurs to his horse, the mameluco pressed into a gallop, and was not long disappearing into the darkness; for, during his conversation with his former master, the night had fallen.

Meanwhile, as soon as the mameluco had quitted the tent, the marquis rose with a gesture of rage and of menace, but almost immediately reseating himself —

"No," said he, in a sullen voice, "let us give him time to get away; we will let him have complete security; the traitor does not think me so well informed. Oh, I will revenge myself cruelly for the constraint I imposed upon myself before him."

He rose again, withdrew the curtain of the tent, and looked out; the greatest tranquillity, the most complete calm, reigned in the camp. The marquis then called twice, in a moderately loud voice —

"Diogo! Diogo!"

At the call, which he appeared to expect, a man approached almost immediately.

"Here I am," said he.

"Come in directly," resumed the marquis.

This man was the chief of the soldados da conquista. He entered.

CHAPTER VI

TAROU NIOM.⁶

Of all the Indians of the new world the aborigines of Brazil are those who have defended their independence the most obstinately, and fought with the greatest fury against the invasion of their territory by the whites. At the present day this war, commenced in the early days of the conquest, is continued implacably on both sides, without any other result of it being perceptible, than the entire destruction of the unfortunate race so deplorably spoliated by Europeans.

By degrees, as we advance in our recital, we shall give more circumstantial details on the singular and extravagant customs of the Brazilian natives – customs of which little is known in Europe. They are all the more interesting, as at an early day they will no longer exist but in legend, by reason of the incessant progress of civilisation, which will effect the complete extinction of the aboriginal race, the same as in all the other countries of the new world.

At about ten leagues from the plateau, where the caravan of which we have spoken had camped for the night, the same day, a little before sunset, in a vast glade situated on the left bank of the Rio Paraguai, at the entrance of a considerable cotinga, or low forest, three men, seated on the trunks of dead trees lying on the earth, were holding a very animated conversation.

These persons, although Indians, belonged to tribes completely distinct.

The first, as far as could be discovered – for the age of the Indian is extremely difficult to determine – was a man who appeared to have attained middle age – that is to say, from thirty-five to forty. His tall and well-proportioned figure his vigorous and well-set limbs, displayed great strength; his regular features would have been beautiful, had they not been disfigured by strange painting and tattooing. But, on examining him with care, there was seen to flash in his eyes a cunning which denoted a rather uncommon intelligence. The nobility of his gestures, and his bold and haughty countenance, gave to his entire person a stamp of wild grandeur.

The costume of this Indian, although very simple, was not wanting either in grace or elegance; the bright red band in which were stuck some parrot feathers, and which encircled his head, the hair of which was shaved like that of the Franciscans, proclaimed not only his Guaycurus nationality, but also his position as a chief. A necklace of jaguar teeth encircled his neck; a poncho of gaudy colours was thrown over his shoulders; his large leather drawers reaching to the knee, were fastened at the hips by a girdle of tapir skin, in which was stuck a long knife; his legs were protected against the bite of serpents by boots made with the leather from the forelegs of a horse, cut away in a single piece while still warm, and made into a kind of sheath, so that the leather in drying had taken the form of the limbs it was intended to preserve.

Besides the knife hanging from his girdle, the Guaycurus chief had placed on the ground near him a quiver of tapir skin, four feet long, and filled with arrows. A polished and glittering bow of palo d'arco of uncommon strength and size was lying near the quiver, and within reach of his hand; leaning against the palm tree was an enormous lance, at least fifteen feet long, and furnished with a sharp blade, and garnished at the other extremity with a tuft of ostrich feathers.

The second Indian was about the same age as his companion; his features, notwithstanding the paint and tattooing which disfigured them, were handsome, and his countenance possessed great flexibility. He was dressed and armed like the first; only by the headdress, made with the fibrous and elastic cocoon of the flower of the ubassa palm tree, it was easy to recognise him as a Payagoas chief, a nation nearly as powerful as that of the Guaycurus.

⁶ In Botocondo, *tarou*, sun, *niom*, to come – rising sun.

The last Indian was a poor devil, half-naked, lean, and of a timid and sickly appearance – to all appearance a slave. He stationed himself out of hearing of the two chiefs whose horses he was charged to watch. These horses, painted like their masters, of different colours, had no harness, but a thick coarse saddle, furnished with wooden stirrups, covered with tapir skin, and to the right and left of which hung a lasso and the formidable bolas.

At the moment when we place these three persons on the scene, the Guaycurus chief was speaking, smoking all the while a kind of calumet, made of the leaves of the palm tree, rolled together, and was listened to deferentially by the other chief, who was standing up before him, carelessly supported by his long lance.

"The man that my brother Emavidi-Chaime told me of does not come," said he. "The sun descends rapidly, several hours have flown since I waited. What thinks the chief of the Payagoas?"

"He must wait still; the man will come; he has promised; although degenerate, he is not a paleface. He has in his veins some of the blood of the Tapis."

"What is the name of this man?" asked the other.

"Does Tarou Niom know him? He is a mameluco; his name is Malco Diaz."

"I have seen him," laconically said the chief, letting his head fall with a pensive air on his breast.

There was a silence of some instants; it was the Guaycurus who broke it.

"Has my brother ever seen," he said, "the jaguars make war upon each other?"

"Never," replied the Payagoas chief.

"Then why does the chief believe in the faith of this man? The Indian blood, if he has some drops of it, is so mingled in his veins with that of the whites and blacks, that it has lost all its vigour."

"My brother speaks well, his words are just; only it is not on the good faith of this mameluco that I reckon."

"On what then?" asked Tarou Niom.

"On his hatred first, and then – "

"Then?"

"On his avarice."

"Yes," replied the Guaycurus chief, "it is to these two feelings only that we must trust when we wish to ally ourselves with these faithless dogs; but this mameluco, is he not a Paulista?"

"No; on the contrary, he is a sertanejo."

"The whites are always bad. What guarantee has this Malco given?"

"The best that I can desire; his son, whom he charged with bringing me the message, has come into my village with two black slaves. One has gone away again, but the other remains with the child."

"Good!" answered Tarou Niom, "I acknowledge in this the prudence of my brother Emavidi-Chaime; if the father is a traitor, the child shall die."

"He shall die!"

Silence reigned again for a considerable time between the companions.

The sun had completely disappeared, shadows covered the earth, darkness, as with a funeral pall, enveloped the forest in which these two men were. Already in the inexorable depths of the desert low growlings began to reverberate, and announced the waking of the dread wanderers of the night.

The slave, who was an Indian mundracus, on the order of his master, Tarou Niom, the captain of the Guaycurus – for the Indians of this nation have adopted the Portuguese titles – gathered some dry wood, formed a pile of it between the two chiefs, and set fire to it, so that its light might keep off the wild beasts.

"It is very late," said the Guaycurus.

"The journey to come here is long," laconically answered the Payagoas.

"Has the mameluco explained for what reason he wished the meeting of his warriors and mine?"

"No. Malco is prudent; a slave might betray the confidence of his master, and sell his secret to an enemy. The mameluco reserves it to inform us himself of the affair he wishes to propose to us."

"Good!" answered the chief. "What matters this man to me? I have only come on the invitation of my brother. I know that he will not betray me."

"I thank my brother, Tarou Niom, for his opinion of me; for a long time I have been devoted to him."

At this moment a far-off noise was heard – slight, and almost inappreciable at first, but which approached rapidly.

The two Indians listened for some seconds, and then exchanged a smile.

"It is the gallop of a horse," said Tarou Niom.

"In a few minutes he will be here."

The chiefs were not deceived – it was, in fact, the furious gallop of a horse. Soon the branches snapped, the shrubbery separated under the powerful effort the chest of a horse, galloping at full speed, and a horseman bounded into the glade.

Arrived within a few paces of the warriors, he suddenly pulled up his horse, leaped to the ground, and gave the bridle to the slave, who took it and conducted the noble animal to the two others.

The horseman, who was no other than the mameluco, saluted the Indians and seated himself in front of them.

"My friend has tarried long," said the Payagoas.

"It is true, Captain," answered Malco, wiping his forehead, which was covered with perspiration; "I ought to have been here long before, but that was impossible. My master camped in a place farther off than I reckoned on, and notwithstanding my wish to be exact, it was impossible for me to come sooner."

"Good, that is nothing, since here is the sertanejo; some hours lost are nothing, if the affair you wish to propose to us is good."

"Good I believe it to be; but are you still resolved to break the truce that seven moons ago you concluded with the whites?"

"What is that to the sertanejo?" drily answered the Guaycurus.

"I want to know before explaining to you what brings me here."

"Let the warrior speak, and the captains will hear him; they will judge of the truth of his words."

"Very well; this is why I wish to ask you the question. I know the honour that you carry into all your transactions – even with the whites. If you consent, as I know for some days they have begged you, to prolong the truce, I should have nothing to propose to you, for the simple reason that you would refuse to give me your assistance against the people with whom you would be at peace. You see I speak to you frankly."

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