

Aimard Gustave

The Flying Horseman



Gustave Aimard

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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

THE STORM

We left the Marchioness de Castelmelhor and her daughter Eva prisoners of the Pincheyra.¹

Thanks to the presence of the strangers in the camp, no one came to trouble the solitude of the captives.

Towards the evening they were warned by a somewhat brief message to make all their preparations, so as to be ready to commence a journey at the first signal.

The baggage of the two ladies had been, strange to say, scrupulously respected by the partisans; it was therefore somewhat considerable, and required four mules to carry it. They were promised that beasts of burden should be placed at their disposal.

The night was dark; the moon, hidden by thick clouds, fringed with greyish tints, gave no light; the sky was black; dull sounds were carried on the wind, and, repeated by the echoes, awakened the wild beasts in the depth of their secret lairs.

A funereal silence reigned over the camp, where all the fires were extinguished; the sentinels were mute, and their long motionless shadows stood out in relief from the darker tints of the surrounding hills. Towards four o'clock in the morning, when the horizon began to be tinged by greyish streaks of light, the noise of horses was heard.

The captives understood that the moment of their departure had come.

They had passed the night in prayer, without sleep having come for a single minute to close their eyelids.

At the first knock at their door they opened it.

A man entered; it was Don Pablo. A thick cloak enveloped him, and a broad-brimmed hat was pulled over his eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"We are," laconically answered the marchioness.

"Here are your horses, ladies," said the Pincheyra; "will you mount?"

"Are we to leave immediately?" ventured the marchioness.

"It must be so, Madame," answered Don Pablo, respectfully; "we are threatened with a storm, and any delay might cause us serious injury."

"Would it not be better to defer our journey for some hours?" pursued the marchioness.

"You do not know our Cordilleras, my lady," answered the Pincheyra, smiling. "A storm of two hours generally occasions such disasters that the means of communication are stopped for weeks; but for that matter I am completely at your orders."

The marchioness did not reply, and was at once escorted to the horses which awaited them.

The two ladies were placed about the centre of a troop formed by some twenty horsemen. By a remarkable refinement of courtesy on the part of uncultivated soldiers, Don Pablo had placed two horsemen to the right of the ladies, in order to preserve them from a fall during the darkness.

A group of a dozen horsemen, separated from the body of the troop, proceeded in advance as pioneers.

Notwithstanding the precarious situation in which she found herself, and the apprehensions by which her mind was harassed, the marchioness experienced a certain satisfaction, and an indefinable feeling of joy, to find herself at last out of the camp of the bandits.

Don Pablo, in order no doubt to avoid annoying the ladies, kept with the advanced guard, and, as soon as the day had become light enough to direct his course with safety, the two horsemen placed

¹ See "The Insurgent Chief," same publishers.

near the ladies were removed, so that the latter enjoyed a degree of liberty, and could talk to each other without fear of their words being heard.

"Mother," said Doña Eva, "does it not seem strange to you, that since our departure from Casa-Frama, Señor Sebastiao Vianna has not come near us."

"Yes; this conduct on the part of an intimate friend does appear to me singular; however, we must not be in a hurry. Perhaps Don Sebastiao has reasons for keeping aloof."

"Don Sebastiao ought to know how anxious we are to receive news of my father. I confess I am more concerned about it than I can explain."

"My dear, our parts are changed," said the marchioness; "it is you who fear, and I who hope."

"That's true, mother. I have misgivings about this journey. The warnings of Don Emile; his precipitate departure; what Don José told you yesterday, and even the courteous manner of Don Pablo, and the attentions which he heaps upon us, increase my suspicions. The more we advance in this direction, the more I am disquieted. Is it presentiment, or low spirits? I cannot tell you, mother."

"You are mad, Eva," answered the marchioness; "your presentiments arise from low spirits. What can we have further to fear. The men in whose hands we now are are completely masters of our fate."

At this moment the gallop of a horse was heard; the ladies turned, and a horseman passed rapidly, slightly jolting against them, doubtless on account of the narrowness of the path.

But quickly as this man had passed, he had time to skilfully throw on the knees of the marchioness a Book of Hours, bound in red morocco, and closed by clasps in chased gold.

The marchioness uttered a cry of astonishment, as she placed her hand on the book.

This prayer book was the one she had given some days before to the young painter. How was it that he returned it to her in such a singular way?

His pace had been so rapid, and the brim of his hat had so thoroughly concealed his face, that the marchioness did not recognise him.

We have said that the two ladies were almost alone; in fact, the soldiers walked at some distance before and behind. The marchioness assured herself that no one observed them, and opened the book.

A note, folded in two, was placed at the first page; this note, written in pencil, was in French, and signed Emile Gagnepain.

The two ladies at once recognised the writing of the painter; both spoke French a little, and they did not experience any trouble in reading the letter. Its contents were as follows: —

"They are deceiving you, while they deceive themselves; the bandit is of good faith in the treason of which he is an accomplice, without knowing it. Whatever you see, whatever you hear, manifest no surprise. Do not offer any resistance, do not ask any explanation; I am watching over you; all that is possible to do I will attempt: I have to take revenge on the man to whom you are about to be given up, in a few hours. I shall be more than a match for the deceiver. We shall see who is the more cunning, he or I."

"Do not keep this paper, which might compromise you. Have confidence in God, and trust to the devotion of the man who has already delivered you once. Especially, I urge you not to be astonished at anything."

"EMILE GAGNEPAIN."

When Doña Eva had ascertained the purport of the note, on a sign from her mother, she tore it into minute fragments, and scattered them by degrees on the road.

For some time the prisoners remained pale, motionless, and speechless, weighed down by this horrible disillusion.

"You were right, my daughter," at last said the marchioness; "your presentiments were true; it was I who was mad to suppose that fate was weary of persecuting us."

"Mother," answered Doña Eva, "it is better for us to have the certainty of misfortune than to continue to buoy ourselves up with chimeras. In warning us, Don Emile has rendered us an immense service. When the blow with which we are threatened shall fall, thanks to him, we shall be prepared to receive it; besides, does he not assure us that all is not yet lost? He has a brave heart; he will save us, mother. And then the fashion in which this book has come to us – does not even that prove that we have one friend?"

"Alas! Dear child, what can I do? Nothing, if not strictly follow the counsel our friend gives us. Unhappily, he is struggling single-handed; he will be lost, without saving us."

"No, mother; Don Emile has doubtless taken his precautions. You have already seen how he works; you know how prudent he is."

"Prudence and courage are not sufficient. Power alone can give success, and, unhappily, it is power that fails us. He is isolated, without a friend; in a country, the language of which he can hardly speak. Oh," she cried, with feverish energy, "if I alone were in the power of these wretches! If I did not tremble for you, my child, I should long since have finished with these tigers – these cowardly and heartless monsters who are not ashamed to torture women."

"Calm yourself, mother."

"You are right, my daughter," she said.

Doña Eva leaned towards her mother, threw her arms around her, and kissed her several times.

"You are brave and courageous, mother," she said; "I am proud and happy to be your daughter."

Meanwhile, for some little time the sky had taken a threatening appearance; the sun had lost its brilliancy, and only appeared drowned in copper-coloured clouds, which drifted rapidly, and concealed its disc. The heat was suffocating, the atmosphere heavy; without a breath of air, the trees trembled from root to summit. A yellowish vapour rose from the chasms of the rocks, by degrees condensed, and enveloped the landscape as with an ominous winding sheet. The birds wheeled in long flights, above the chasms, uttering discordant cries, and at intervals were heard rumblings of bad omen. All appeared to presage the approach of a storm.

Suddenly – a horseman approached; they recognised Don Pablo Pincheyra; the soldier made signs as he galloped, and uttered cries that the great distance prevented them from understanding, although it was evident that he gave them warning.

"Are you good horsewomen?" he asked, as he reached them; "Do you feel yourselves capable of keeping your seats with the horses galloping at their utmost speed?"

"If it must absolutely be so, yes, señor," answered the marchioness.

"Listen! the moment is critical. Before an hour the storm will have burst upon us; if it overtakes us here, we are lost; it will envelope us in its whirlwind, and twist us like wisps of straw. I do not guarantee to save you, but I will do all that I can towards success. Will you have faith in me?"

"Command, señor!"

"Well, spur your horses, and give them the rein. Ahead, then, and God help us!"

"God help us!" repeated the two ladies, crossing themselves.

"Santiago! ah! Santiago!" cried Don Pablo, putting the spurs to the flanks of his horse.

We have said that the travellers followed the meanderings of a path on the flanks of an abrupt mountain. But unless a person has himself traversed the new world, it is impossible to make sure of what, in these wild countries, is honoured by the name of a road. One of our village paths, separating fields, is certainly more safe and practicable than some American roads. The path of which we speak, and which served at this time as a track for travellers, had originally been marked out by wild beasts. The men had adopted it from the beginning of the war of independence, as it formed the only means of reaching the plain of Casa-Frama, the headquarters of the Pincheyras; the latter had naturally taken good care to make it, we will not say convenient, but at all events practicable for others than themselves. It was six feet wide in its widest parts, and often it narrowed to about two feet; from time to time it was interrupted by ravines, hollowed by the torrents formed from the melting of the snow

– ravines which it was often necessary to leap at a single bound, at the risk of personal injury, or to cross on stones rendered slippery by the green waters. The ground was rugged, and obstructed nearly everywhere by pieces of rock or shrubbery. To the right it was bounded by a precipice of immense depth, and to the left by a wall of granite, which rose nearly perpendicularly, it was by such a road as this that the two ladies and their escort were obliged to gallop at full speed.

Ravines, ditches, and bogs were passed with giddy rapidity in this, desperate flight; the sun was without heat and without rays, like a ball of yellowish copper; the clouds lowered more and more, and ominous sounds rose mournfully from the depths of the chasms.

The travellers galloped without exchanging a word, desperately urging forward their horses whose efforts appeared almost supernatural.

Suddenly the voice of Don Pablo was heard.

"Halt!" he cried; "Alight, and throw yourselves on your faces. If you value your lives, make haste."

There was in the sound of his voice such an accent of anguish, that the bravest felt themselves tremble.

But all knew that the accomplishment of the order which they had just received was a matter of life and death. By a desperate effort they reined up their horses short; two or three cries of agony, followed by the harsh sounds of several falls, were heard.

They came from the horsemen, whose horses had, becoming restive, stumbled over the edge of the path.

These horrible yells passed unperceived; the instinct of self-preservation was too powerful for anyone to care for others than himself.

In an instant all the horsemen had alighted, and were lying on the ground near their horses, which, instinctively understanding the danger had also crouched themselves on the path, burying their nostrils, and presenting their croup to the tempest.

"The hurricane! The hurricane!" cried the Pincheyra, in a loud clear voice; "Hold on to anything that you can seize!"

All of a sudden, a horrible rumbling was heard, and the wind was let loose with such extraordinary fury, that the mountain seemed to tremble as if it had been shaken by an earthquake. A horrible squall swept the valley with a roaring sound, and for some minutes separating the veil of fog.

Don Pablo half raised himself up at the risk of being carried away like a dry leaf, by the whirlwind which was raging, twisting, and tearing up the trees as though they were wisps of straw, and carrying them away in wild disorder, with a rapid but certain glance, the soldier explored the scene; then he assured himself that but a few steps farther, after a rather gentle descent, the path suddenly widened, and formed a platform of about three or four yards.

It was this spot towards which all the efforts of the soldiers had been directed. Once arrived in the valley, the situation would not be so critical.

It was necessary, then, that come what might, they should reach the valley.

Only, at the first terrible shock of the tempest, which in these wild regions assumes such formidable proportions, an avalanche had been detached from the summit of the mountain, and had been precipitated from rock to rock with a frightful crash, dragging with it the earth, the underwood, and the trees which were in its way, and blocking up the path.

The case was so much the more desperate as the storm redoubled its violence, and the darkness had fallen thicker.

But the Pincheyra was one of those iron-hearted men who took no account of apparently impossible things. Born in the mountains, he had often struggled face to face with the tempest, and always he had come forth a conqueror from this gigantic struggle.

To attempt to rise and walk would have been madness; the soldier did not dream of it for a moment. Taking in his hand the knife from his right pocket, in order to give himself a hold, and

planting it in the ground, the hardy mountaineer began to crawl gently, and with precaution, on his knees and elbows by the side of the ruins massed across the path.

At every step he stopped, and lowered his head to allow the squall around him to pass.

It required nearly an hour for him to traverse a distance of less than sixty yards. During this time his companions remained motionless, holding on to the ground.

At last Don Pablo reached the spot on which the avalanche had fallen. He looked around.

Brave as the soldier was, he could not repress a cry of anguish at the terrible spectacle.

The rocks over which the path was traced, torn away by the fall of the avalanche, had in some places given way for a space of more, than six yards, and had rolled over the precipice, opening a frightful chasm.

The ruins left by the avalanche were composed in a great measure of trees, and fragments of rock, which, entangled together, and massed, so to speak, by the branches and the underwood, formed a thick wall on the very edge of the gulf.

It was of no use thinking of forcing the passage with horses and mules.

The soldier with rage struck with his fist the obstacle that he could not destroy, and proceeded to rejoin his companions. After having cast a last look on the chasm, he prepared himself to retreat, when suddenly he thought he heard a sharp and prolonged cry, like that used by the mountaineers of all countries to communicate between themselves, often at considerable distances.

Don Pablo stopped suddenly and listened, but a considerable lapse of time passed, during which he could hear nothing but the horrible sounds of the storm. The soldier supposed that he had been the sport of an illusion, but suddenly the same cry, stronger and nearer, reached his ear, "Good God!" he cried, "Are other Christians lost in the mountains, amidst this horrible tempest?"

He stood for some moments, and cast a searching glance around.

CHAPTER II

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

"I am deceived," he murmured, after a few seconds of reflection; "these mountains are deserted, no one would dare to venture so near the Casa-Frama."

At this moment he felt that someone touched him slightly on the shoulder. He turned round trembling; a man had joined him, and was crouching behind him.

It was Don Zeno Cabral.

Since the departure from the camp, the soldier had continually remained in the advanced guard with the three Spaniards, in order to escape the looks of the two ladies, by whom he did not wish to be recognised till the last moment.

"Ah, 'tis you, Don Sebastiao," said Don Pablo; "what do you think of our situation?"

"It is bad – very bad indeed; however, I do not think it desperate," coldly answered the soldier.

"I am persuaded, on the contrary, that it is desperate."

"It may be so; but we are not yet dead."

"No; but pretty near to it."

"Have you thought of a means to escape from the bad position in which we are?"

"I have thought of a thousand; but I have not thought of one which is practicable."

"That is because you have not thought in the right direction, my dear sir. In this world, you know as well as I do, that as long as the heart beats in the breast, there is some resource left, however critical may be the position in which we are placed. The remedy exists. Shall I aid you in doing so?"

"Well! I do not stand on my self-love," answered Don Pablo slightly smiling; "but I believe we shall have difficulty in finding the remedy."

"I am a bold man, as you are yourself. My pride revolts at the thought of dying a ridiculous death in this mousetrap, and I wish to escape – that's all."

"By Jove! You please me by speaking like that; you are really a charming companion."

"You flatter me, señor."

"No. I tell you what I think; rely on me as I rely on you, and we shall do wonders, I am sure."

"Keep your mind easy; we shall do our best, and if we fail, it will only be after having disputed our life inch by inch in a desperate struggle. But first, where are we?"

"We are at a few steps from the Valle del Tambo, where we should already have been in safety a long time ago, had it not been for this cursed avalanche."

"Very well – but," stopping himself suddenly; "did you not hear something?" asked he.

"Yes," answered the Pincheyra; "several times I have heard that noise strike on my ear."

"By Jove! And you have told me nothing of it."

"I feared that I was deceived; besides, you know that the country we are traversing is a desert, and that no one can be here."

"We are here, though, eh?"

"That is not a reason; we are at home, or nearly so."

Don Zeno smiled with irony.

"That is possible; however, till we find to the contrary, let us act as if we were certain of meeting someone."

"If there were other travellers in the neighbourhood, would they not find themselves in the same situation as us, if not worse; and what you take for cries to help us may probably be, on the contrary, cries of distress."

"That is why we ought to assure ourselves of the truth."

"You are right; answer, then, if you think proper."

"Let us wait for a new cry, in order to assure ourselves as much as possible of the direction we ought to turn to in answering."

"Be it so, let us wait," answered the Pincheyra.

They stretched themselves again on the ground, their ears to the earth, listening with the greatest anxiety.

The situation momentarily became more critical; already several horses had been precipitated into the gulf, and it was with extreme difficulty that men and horses could resist the efforts of the tempest, which every moment threatened to carry them away.

However, after some minutes, which appeared to be an age, the two men again heard the cry.

This time it appeared nearer; it was sharp and perfectly distinct.

"It is a cry to help us," said Don Zeno, with joy.

And placing his two hands at the corners of his mouth, so as to carry his voice, he immediately answered by a cry not less shrill, which swept on the wind, echoed and re-echoed, to die away at a great distance.

"You are sure that is a cry to help us that we have just heard?" said the Pincheyra.

"Yes, thank God, it is," answered Zeno Cabral; "and now let us to work, for if we escape from here, master, we shall escape safe and sound; you may take my word for it."

Don Pablo shook his head sadly.

"You still doubt," pursued the hardy partisan in a tone of disdain. "Perhaps you are afraid?"

"Yes, I am afraid," candidly said the Pincheyra; "and I do not think there is anything humiliating in that avowal. I am but a man after all – very weak, and very humble before the anger of God; I cannot prevent my nerves from trembling, nor my heart from sinking."

Zeno Cabral held out his hand to him with a sympathising smile.

"Excuse me, Don Pablo," said he, in a gentle voice, "for having spoken to you as I have. A man must be really brave to avow so candidly that he is afraid."

"Thank you, Don Sebastiao," answered the Pincheyra, affected more than he wished to show. "Act, order, I will be the first to obey you."

"Above all, let us rejoin our companions; we want their aid and their counsel; let us make haste."

The two men then rejoined their companions, crawling on elbows and knees, with the same difficulty they had previously experienced; for although the weather began to brighten, the wind had not ceased to howl with fury, and to sweep the path.

In a few words, Don Pablo Pincheyra put his adherents in possession of the facts of the situation, and imparted to them the feeble hope he himself possessed. All energy had been crushed within them, and they awaited death with stolid apathy.

"There is nothing to expect from these brutes," said Zeno Cabral, with disdain: "fear has neutralised all human sentiments."

"What is to be done, then?" murmured the partisan.

"If it only depended on you and me," pursued Don Zeno – "strong, determined, and active as we are, we should soon know how to escape this peril; but I do not wish to abandon these unhappy Women."

"I completely share your opinion on that matter."

"So I can depend upon you?"

"Most thoroughly; but what can we do?"

"Bethink yourself; you know these mountains well, do you not?"

"They do not possess a gorge – a hidden retreat – that I have not twenty times explored."

"Good! You are sure, then, of the place where we are?"

"Oh, perfectly."

"The path we follow, is it the only one that leads to the place where you wish us to go?"

"There is another, but to take that, it would be necessary we retrace our steps for at least four leagues."

"We could never accomplish that. What direction does this path take?"

"Upon my word, I cannot positively tell you."

"We have only one recourse left," pursued Don Zeno; "it is to join the man whose cry to help us has been several times heard."

"I should think nothing better; but how shall we descend the precipice?"

"This is my project. We will take all the lassos of those poltroons, and tie them end to end; one of us will tie the end of these round his body, and will attempt the descent, whilst his companions will hold the rope in his hand, letting it out only in such a way as, precarious as the support may be, it may serve to maintain the equilibrium of the one who descends. Do you agree with it?"

"Yes," decisively answered the Pincheyra, "but on one condition."

"What is it?"

"It is that it shall be I who descends."

"No, I cannot admit that condition; but I propose another."

"Let us hear it."

"Time presses; we must make an end of this. Every minute that we lose brings us nearer death. Let chance decide it."

The partisan drew from the pockets of his trousers a purse full of gold, and placed it between himself and the Pincheyra.

"I do not know what this purse contains," said he, "I swear it. Odd or even! If you guess, you descend; if not, you give up the place to me."

Notwithstanding the prostration in which they were, some of the adventurers, excited by the irresistible attraction of this strange game, played in the midst of a horrible tempest, and of which death was the stake, half rose up, and fixed their ardent gaze on the two.

Don Pablo cried Even, and then the purse was opened.

"Forty-seven!" cried Don Zeno, in a joyful accent; "I have gained."

"True," answered Don Pablo; "do as you wished to do!"

Without losing a moment the partisan seized the lassos from the Pincheyras, tied them firmly together, and after having fixed one of the ends round his girdle, he gave the other to Don Pablo, and prepared to commence his hazardous descent.

The countenance of Don Zeno was grave and sad.

"I confide these two poor ladies to you," said he in a low voice; "if, as is probable, I shall not be able to resist the strength of the tempest, promise me to watch over them till your last breath."

"Go boldly; I swear to you to do it."

"Thank you," merely answered Don Zeno.

He knelt down, addressed to Heaven a mental prayer; then, seizing his knife in one hand, and his dagger in the other:

"God help me," said he firmly, and in a crawling attitude he approached the edge of the precipice.

Don Zeno commenced his descent with the courage of a man who, while he has resolutely risked the sacrifice of his life, nevertheless applies all the energy of his will to the success of his perilous enterprise.

The edge of the precipice was less steep than it appeared from above. Although with great difficulty, the partisan succeeded in maintaining his equilibrium pretty well, by holding on to the grass and shrubbery which were within his reach.

Don Zeno continued to descend, as upon a narrow ledge, which seemed insensibly to retreat, and upon which he could only maintain himself by a desperate effort. Then, having reached a tree which had thrown out its branches horizontally, he disappeared in the midst of the foliage, and after

a moment the adventurers felt that the tension of the lasso, which they had given out inch by inch, had suddenly ceased, Don Pablo drew towards him the cord; it came without resistance, floating backwards and forwards to the sport of the wind.

Don Zeno had let go his hold. It was in vain that the adventurers tried to discover the young man. A considerable lapse of time passed; they could not discover him; then all of a sudden, the tree, in the branches of which he had disappeared, oscillated slowly, and fell with a noise down the precipice.

"Oh," cried Don Pablo in despair, throwing himself back, "the unhappy man; he is lost!"

Meanwhile the partisan, cool and calm, looking at danger in its full extent, but regarding it, thanks to his habits of desert life, in a common-sense light, had continued his terrible journey, step by step, only advancing slowly, and with precaution.

He thus attained the tree of which we have spoken, and which formed nearly a right angle with the precipice, just below the spot where the avalanche had blocked up the path, although between the tree and the other edge of the precipice, the distance was pretty considerable. However, Zeno Cabral, after mature reflection, did not despair of getting past it.

To do this, he relieved himself of the lasso, which had only become useless to him.

Encircling the trunk of the tree, he raised himself as far as the principal branch, and making use of it as a bridge, at the same time holding on to the upper branches, he advanced towards its extremity.

But scarcely had he reached halfway the length of the branch, than he perceived with horror that the tree, broken by the fall of the avalanche, oscillated under him. A shudder of terror ran through his veins; his hair stood on end; a cold sweat broke upon his temples; his look was riveted, spite of himself, upon the yawning gulf which opened beneath, ready to bury him; giddiness seized him; he felt that he was lost, and closed his eyes, murmuring a last prayer. But at the moment when he was about to abandon himself and fall into the gulf, the instinct of life suddenly awoke. By a last effort of will he subdued the giddiness, ordered, so to speak, his arteries to cease to beat, and resolving to try a last effort, he darted along the branch which bent more and more under him, sprang ahead and reached the opposite edge of the precipice, at the very moment when the tree, suddenly losing its balance, rolled into the gulf with a horrible sound.

Weakened by the terrible effort he had been obliged to make, and not yet knowing whether he was lost or saved, the young man remained for some minutes stretched on the ground, pale, panting, his eyes starting; not caring to think of the miraculous way in which he had escaped from a nearly inevitable death, or to stir – so much did he still seem to feel the ground stealing from under him.

However, by degrees he became calmer and more rational.

The place where he was was a kind of platform, situated a few yards below the path, which at that place declined gradually as far as the valley.

Although the position of the partisan was much improved, it was still very dangerous. In fact, the side of the precipice, above which he was literally suspended, rose perpendicularly, and it was impossible to scale it. Zeno Cabral had only succeeded in changing his mode of death. If he no longer feared to be precipitated to the bottom of the abyss, he ascertained by a look the certainty that, unless by some extraordinary help, he could not quit the place where he was, and that, consequently, if he could not blow his brains out, or plunge his poignard into his heart, he was condemned to die miserably of hunger – a prisoner on the pedestal that he had succeeded in reaching.

The partisan supported himself against the granite wall, to shelter himself against the violence of the wind, which whirled about the chasm with ominous sounds; and although he had a conviction of his powerlessness, he nevertheless thought over in his mind a means of escaping from the frightful death which threatened him.

For some minutes he thus remained, his head drooping, his eyes fixed on the rock; then he mechanically raised his head and made a gesture of terror. An enormous bald vulture had swept down from the extremity of the platform, and looked at him with a sinister expression.

Brave as the young man was, he could not support the cold and sea-green eye of the hideous bird, which appeared to fascinate him. By an instinctive movement he seized from his girdle one of his pistols, and discharged it at the vulture, which immediately flew away with a harsh and discordant cry.

The noise of the explosion, re-echoed from chasm to chasm like so many thunderclaps, only gave place to silence, when it had reached the regions of eternal snow, where it died amidst their majestic solitudes.

But scarcely had the sound ceased, than the cry to help him, which had already struck the ear of the partisan, resounded again.

The young man regained hope. Gathering all his powers in order to give greater effect to his voice, he answered by a similar cry. Then immediately the cry was repeated, but this time above him.

Convinced that men were near him, and not knowing what means to use to inform them of his whereabouts, Zeno Cabral discharged his second pistol; nearly at the same time a formidable explosion burst over his head; then, when silence had been re-established, a sonorous and clear voice twice cried out to him:

"Courage! Courage!"

Zeno Cabral was compelled to support himself against a rock to prevent himself from falling; a convulsive trembling agitated his limbs; a harsh cry escaped from his panting breast; his body lost that agitation that fear had given it, and he hid his head in his hands, and melted into tears.

If he had not wept he would have gone mad, or he would have succumbed to the repeated attacks of the poignant emotions which for some hours had continually assailed him, and had at last crushed his energy, and almost annihilated his will.

Ten minutes – ten ages – thus passed without the partisan perceiving anything to induce him to believe that anyone was watching to save him. Anxiety began again to weigh heavily on his heart, when suddenly he saw above the crest of the precipice, the copper-coloured head of an Indian.

"Here I am!" cried he, immediately advancing.

"We see you," answered someone. "Are you wounded; can you help yourself?"

"I am not wounded, thank God," said he; "and I have all my energies."

"So much the better, for the ascent will be difficult. We will throw you a lasso; you must tie it to your body, and we will draw you up, as you do not appear to be in a position to climb, with a cord."

"Throw me down cord. I will keep it away from the edge, and fix it firmly at a certain distance, so as not to be swayed about."

"Well! Wait; we will pay you out the cord."

The Indian disappeared, but almost immediately a pretty thick cord, with knots a little apart from each other, descended slowly. They had attached a stone of a good weight to the end, to prevent it from drifting about. However, the wind was still so high that notwithstanding this precaution it was so driven about as to seriously disquiet the young man.

However, when the stone touched the platform, either from its weight, or because the storm had lost its intensity, it was easy enough for the young man to take it. He immediately occupied himself in fixing it firmly in the fissure of the rock.

Then the young man, for whom this ascent, perilous as it would have been for anyone else, was but child's play, thanks to his strength and skill, seized the cord and mounted.

Four men received him, when he put his foot on the path.

"Welcome to terra firma!" said the one who appeared to be the master, laughing and holding out his hand.

"Thank you," answered Zeno Cabral, and at last, overcome by so many emotions; he sank, half fainting, into the arms of his unknown friends.

They, with the gentlest solicitude, used every means in their power to restore his failing energies, with what success we shall see later on.

CHAPTER III

THE VALLE DEL TAMBO

The Valle del Tambo is a narrow valley shaded by beautiful trees, and almost wholly sheltered from the storms which rage on the mounts. It is a favourite halt for travellers, and is provided with a kind of little house of solid stones; where people shelter themselves from the rain, wind, or snow.

These lodges, or tambos, are met with frequently in the high regions of the Cordilleras. When the Spanish government was powerful in these countries, it ordered the construction of them on a large scale.

At the present day, thanks to the carelessness of the governments which have succeeded to that of Spain, the majority of these tambos are in ruins.

When Don Santiago Pincheyra, after the conversation with Emile Gagnepain, which we have previously recorded, had set out with his partisan, to return to Casa-Frama, the painter and his servant had sat down before their watch fire.

The news that Pincheyra, urged by a feeling of gratitude, had given to the young Frenchman, was of the highest importance. Unhappily, this information arrived too late to enable him to warn the ladies, and to place them on their guard against the dangers which threatened them.

In vain he racked his brain to find a means of honourably escaping from the difficult position in which he found himself, when Tyro rudely interrupted his reflections.

"Well, master," said he, "we are worrying our brains to little purpose. I will take the responsibility of acquainting these ladies."

"You, Tyro? How will you do it?"

"Oh, leave that to me. I will answer for everything. Just write a letter to the marchioness, place it in something that she will immediately recognise, and you may depend upon it I will convey it to her."

"You promise it?"

"On the word of Tyro."

"Good: I will write the letter. I have got a Book of Hours, which the marchioness gave me a few days ago. She will not fail to recognise it."

"That is right, master. Write immediately, that I may the sooner depart."

While they were thus speaking, the Guarani had lighted a torch, by the light of which the young man traced a few lines on a leaf of his memorandum book. Then he folded the paper, placed it in the prayer book, and closed the clasp.

While his master was writing, Tyro had saddled his horse, so that he was ready as soon as his master.

"Now," said he, "do not be uneasy, master. Remain quietly here, and you will soon see me again."

"Go then, but be prudent."

The Guarani spurred his horse, and broke into a gallop. He now disappeared in the darkness, and the sound of his horse's feet ceased to be heard.

The young man gave a sigh, and went sadly to lie down in the tambo, where, notwithstanding the anxiety to which his mind was a prey, it was not long before he soundly slept.

Meanwhile Tyro had set out. The brave Indian, without troubling himself about the night, the thick darkness of which enveloped him, galloped at full speed in the direction of Casa-Frama. The plan which he had conceived was extremely simple.

At about four or five leagues from the entrance of the camp, the road passed through a tolerably large defile, the sides of which were covered with thick shrubbery. It was in this place the Indian

made a halt. He entered the thicket, hid himself behind the trees and the shrubs, alighted, and having covered with his girdle the nostrils of his horse, he watched.

His body leaning forward, his eye and ear on the watch, he heard the sounds which the night wind brought him; and prepared to act as soon as the moment should arrive.

At last, a little before sunrise, at the moment when the darkness, struggled with a last effort against the daybreak, which paled the stars and tinged the heavens with greyish reflections, Tyro, whose eye had not been dosed for an instant, thought he heard a slight noise in the direction of Casa-Frama.

There was no room for mistake; it was the caravan which had set out from the camp, and in the middle of which were the two ladies.

The Guarani advanced cautiously, and scarcely had the last horseman been descried in the darkness, than he left the wood, and proceeded in the same direction as the travellers, and imperceptibly approached the rearguard.

The first part of the Indian's plan had succeeded with greater ease than he could have dared to hope for; the second part alone remained – that is to say, the conveying the book of hours to the marchioness.

Tyro, affecting the sleepy pace of his companions, patted gently the horse which he held firmly by the bridle; and, without exciting any suspicion, drew nearer to the body of the troop.

His design was to reach the two ladies, and to slip the book in their hands, without being perceived, but he soon saw that this project was impracticable. The two ladies formed the centre of a group.

Tyro, however, was not discouraged.

There was not a moment to be lost. Any hesitation would have been perilous. The day began to advance.

The decision of the Guarani was immediately taken.

Placed at about ten paces behind the two ladies, regardless of what might happen to him, and determined at all hazards to accomplish his mission, he took advantage of a moment when the horsemen to the right and left of the prisoners had removed to some little distance; and giving his horse the rein, he darted off at full gallop.

We have seen that, he succeeded in throwing the book to the marchioness.

Don Pablo Pincheyra, astonished at the unexpected appearance of this horseman, whom he had only seen as he passed, but who appeared to hint not to be part of his troop, prepared to follow him, to find out who he was, when suddenly another care came to change the current of his ideas, by constraining him to look after the safety of his companions. The tempest which had so long threatened them at last burst with extreme violence.

At the first breeze of the hurricane, Tyro understood that a danger, a hundred times more terrible than that from which he had just escaped, hung over his head. Exciting his horse, whose efforts were already prodigious; leaping ravines and bogs, at the risk of dashing himself to the bottom of precipices which he passed in his mad flight, he appeared to fly over this narrow and scarcely practicable path, and which the darkness, which suddenly spread over the mountains, rendered more perilous still.

Suddenly a terrible noise burst at a few paces from him, a cloud of dust enveloped him, his horse started and reared up on his hind legs balancing itself for some minutes on the very edge of the gulf. The Indian thought he was lost. By a prodigy of horsemanship, he gave him the bridle, plunged his spurs into the palpitating sides of the horse, and leant all his weight on the neck of the animal. The horse hesitated an instant, suddenly he bounded forward, and made a few stumbling steps. Then his four legs gave way, he fell, and threw the Indian over his head.

Tyro raised himself, shattered and bruised by his fall, and looked anxiously around him. A frightful spectacle met his eyes. An enormous avalanche had detached itself from the summit of the mountain.

But by a providential circumstance, Tyro, thanks to the rapidity of his journey, had reached the valley. He was saved, but was separated from the travellers who followed him by a nearly impregnable barrier.

The young man hastened to run towards his horse, which had already got up.

Tyro patted him, and spoke to him to give him courage; but knowing the impossibility of mounting in the state of prostration in which he found the horse, he took him by the bridle and continued his route, dragging him after him.

Emile was a prey to the greatest anxiety. It was with joy that he received Tyro, and congratulated him warmly upon having returned safe and sound.

The young man trembled at the thought of the perils with which the two ladies were threatened.

"They must be saved," cried he with spirit.

"They are lost," said Tyro.

"Lost!" cried Emile with energy. "Nonsense! You cannot believe it; it is not possible."

"I do not doubt, master; I am sure."

"But no, you are deceived. I do not believe you. That would be too frightful. Doña Eva, so young, so beautiful, to perish thus – no, that cannot be."

"Alas! Master," said the Indian, with a sigh, "how often have I seen perish thus other young ladies as beautiful, and, without doubt, as much loved!" added he, in a low voice.

Several minutes passed, during which the two men remained mute and pensive; no other sound was heard than that of the hurricane which raged in the valley.

Then the Frenchman raised his head. His face was radiant; an expression of determined bravery was spread over his features; his eyes appeared to flash.

"If I am to be crushed against the rocks," he said in a firm voice, "I will not leave these unhappy ladies to die. Our fate is in the hands of God; whatever happens, I will try to succour them."

While speaking thus, the young man had risen, and walked resolutely towards the door of the tambo.

"Master, what would you do?" cried Tyro, throwing himself quickly before him; "You do not know what a storm is in the mountains; you expose yourself to a horrible death!"

"Be it so!" coolly responded the young man, trying to disengage himself; "But I shall do my duty."

"Your duty, master," cried the Indian with grief – "you will go to your death, that is all!"

"It is possible; but my resolution is irrevocably taken. Release me then, my brave Tyro, your efforts and your words to detain me are useless."

"Do as you think proper, master," said the Indian; "let us try, then, since you wish it."

"I require nothing of you, my friend," replied he; "this regards me alone, you will remain here."

"Oh, master," replied the Indian in a tone of reproach, "what have I done that you should speak to me thus?"

"You have done nothing to me," my friend; "I am not angry with you. Only, I have no right to expose you, to satisfy one of my caprices, to a terrible death."

"Master," said the Indian in an earnest tone, "I am with you body and soul; where you go, I shall go; what you do, I shall do. You wish to try to save these travellers? Be it so; let us attempt it."

"You have misunderstood me, my friend. You have told me yourself, that I shall go to a certain death in attempting to aid these unhappy travellers; I have not wished that you, who are not concerned in it, should share these perils."

"Pardon, master," quickly interrupted the young man, "let us resume the question. I do not condemn or approve your project. You wish to put it into execution – very well. This is your desire, and I shall not discuss the point with you."

"Come then, since this is the case; but I leave to you to prove that I used no constraint with you."

"Certainly, my master, and whatever happens, be convinced that no reproach shall come from my lips."

A longer conversation became useless between the two men. They understood each other. Notwithstanding the hurricane, they quitted the tambo, followed by the gauchos.

Thanks to the incline of the path, and to its width at the spot where it debouched into the valley, the injury caused by the avalanche, although very great, was not irreparable. That which the travellers could not attempt, because of the precarious situation in which they found themselves placed, the four men, by uniting their forces, had hopes of being able to accomplish; that is to say, that after three or four hours' very painful work, they were certain of re-establishing a provisionary passage – solid enough, however, for the horses and beasts of burden to venture on.

They set themselves immediately to work, notwithstanding the efforts of the tempest, then in all its force, but of which the squalls, broken by the mountains, had not that intensity as on the road.

"While you work here to re-establish the passage," said Tyro, "I will go and occupy myself in taking care to warn the travellers whom we would save."

Without waiting for an answer, the Indian left.

We have shown how his appeals had been heard, and had moved Zeno Cabral to attempt a last effort.

When the partisan found himself at last upon firm earth, his first movement was to thank God for his marvellous deliverance; then tendering his hand to Emile, who, at the first glance, he perceived to be the master of those who had brought succour to him:

"Thank you, señor," he said; "thanks to you, I am saved; but there are other unhappy ones."

"I know it, caballero," interrupted the young man. "A numerous troop of travellers are at this moment still exposed to terrible danger; with the aid of God, we shall save them."

"You believe so?" joyously cried the partisan.

"I hope so, at all events, señor: for several hours already my companions and myself have been working. Come; your aid will not be useless."

Zeno Cabral followed him with readiness.

He gave utterance to a cry of joy, on perceiving the bridge which the painter had succeeded in throwing from one side to the other of the gulf.

The work was nearly finished; the plank alone remained to establish. This was the affair of half an hour.

"Do you think, now," asked the young man, "that your companions will risk themselves on this bridge?"

"Oh, that will be only play to them," responded the partisan.

"Cross the bridge, then; clear a passage through the ruins left by the avalanche. Then, arrived on the other side, you will only have to open in the earth heaped up on the rock a trench enough for a passage of a horse."

"Will you not come with me?"

"What's the good? Better that you should go alone. Our sudden presence would cause great surprise among your friends."

"That's reasonable; in the fainting state in which they are, perhaps that would cause serious consequences. Au revoir, then, and to our speedy meeting."

The young man took the hand of the Frenchman a last time, and set out on the bridge, which he traversed in a minute.

Meanwhile the Pincheyras, who had had a moment's hope when they had seen Don Zeno Cabral, with such skill and such cool bravery, launch himself into the precipice to attempt to find a passage, suddenly felt that hope extinguished in their hearts, when all of a sudden the tree on which the adventurous young man was holding rolled into the abyss.

In vain Don Pablo, whose indomitable courage had not been cast down by this terrible blow, attempted at several times, now in chiding, then in exciting them, to galvanise his companions, and to awaken in them a spark of bravery. All was useless; the instinct of self-preservation, the last sentiment which stands in the human heart, and which supports it in the most horrible crises, was extinct in their hearts.

Don Pablo, disheartened by this torpor into which the soldiers had fallen, and acknowledging the impossibility of raising them from it, crouched at the foot of the barricade, and there, his arms crossed over his chest, awaited death.

The tempest had sensibly diminished; the sky had cleared up; the wind only blew in gusts, and the fog, as it dissipated, permitted them to descry the landscape, which presented so many features injured by the storm, and the desolate aspect of which, if it were possible, added more to the horror of the situation in which the travellers were.

"We must have done with this," murmured Don Pablo; "since these brutes are incapable of helping us, and as terror paralyses them, I will leave them, if it must be so, to their fate; but, as I hope for heaven. I swear I will save these two unfortunate ladies."

Whilst speaking thus, the partisan raised himself, and, throwing around him a last look, he prepared to go to the ladies, who were lying in a fainting state.

On a sudden the branches of the barricade, pushed back by a vigorous hand, separated rudely behind him, and Don Zeno leaped into the path. At sight of him a total change took place in the troop. At the sight of Zeno Cabral, whom they believed to be dead, the partisans leaped up as though stricken by an electric shock, and hope, re-entering their breasts, gave them back all their courage.

Don Pablo had no occasion to order them to set themselves to work; they rushed on the barricade with a desperate ardour, and in less than a half-hour every obstacle had disappeared. The earth, the rocks, the very trees were thrown into the gulf, with the partisans' cries of joy exciting one another to see who should do the most work.

The horses and the mules, held by the bridle by their masters, crossed the bridge without much difficulty, and soon found themselves in safety in the valley.

A litter had been made to transport the two ladies, still fainting; they were placed in the tambo, on a bed of dry leaves, covered with skins and cloaks, and then confided to the intelligent care of Tyro.

Don Pablo, perceiving his old prisoner, uttered a cry of surprise.

"What!" cried he, "you here, Don Emile?"

"As you see," answered the young man.

"Then it is to you that we owe our safety?"

"After God, it is to me that you owe it, señor."

The partisan looked at the Frenchman with admiration.

"Is it possible," murmured he, "that such great and noble natures exist? Don Emile," said he, "I have done you serious injury; I persecuted you during all the time that you were at Casa-Frama, without any real reason. My conduct has been despicable; you ought to hate me, and you save me!"

"Because, Don Pablo," answered the young man, "you are a man in the true sense of the word; because your faults are those necessitated by the life you lead; because every good feeling is not dead within you, and your heart is generous. I do not claim the right of being more severe than God, and of condemning you to perish, when a hope of saving you existed."

"This obligation that you impose on me, Don Emile, I accept with joy. You have a better opinion of me than I dared to have of myself. I will try to show myself, for the future, worthy of what you have done for me today."

"You were acquainted with one another?" said Don Zeno.

"A little," answered Don Pablo.

The conversation ceased here for the time. The partisans proceeded to arrange their camp, and to prepare their breakfast, of which, now that they were saved, they began to feel the want. Emotions, in the desert, for a time overcome hunger; the danger passed, hunger returns.

CHAPTER IV

DIPLOMACY

Meanwhile the storm had abated, the sky became cloudless, and the sun burst out with a warm glow that was very welcome.

Emile, after having confided the two ladies to the care of the Guarani, had left the tambo, oppressed by a sad apprehension.

At first, carried away by the vivacity of his disposition, he had, at the peril of his life, tried to save men threatened with a frightful death; but, the danger passed, all the difficulty of his position suddenly appeared to him.

The young man's position was critical; an event impossible to foresee had destroyed all his plans. The storm, in thus coming to the aid of the Pincheyras, obliged the Frenchman to adopt a system of dissimulation incompatible with his loyal character.

However, there was no other means than that; he must adopt it. The young man resigned himself to it – against his will, it is true – hoping that perhaps fate might weary of persecuting the two weak creatures whom he wished to serve.

A prey to by no means pleasurable thoughts, Emile, with his arms crossed behind his back, and his head leaning on his breast, paced with an agitated step the open space before the tambo, when he heard himself called several times in a loud voice.

He raised his head. Don Zeno and Don Pablo Pincheyra, seated side by side on the banks of a ditch, made a sign to him to join them.

"What do these demons want with me?" murmured he, in his manner of speaking to himself in a low tone. "They are certainly two good specimens of scoundrels. Ah!" said he, with a sigh, "How happy was Salvator Rosa – he who could at his ease paint all the brigands that he met! What a splendid picture I could make here! What a magnificent landscape!"

Speaking thus, the young man directed his steps towards the two partisans, before whom he found himself just at the last word of his "aside." He bowed to them, with a smile on his face.

"You wish to speak to me, gentlemen?" said he. "Can I be of any service to you?"

"You can," answered Zeno Cabral, smiling, "render me a service for which I should be ever grateful."

"Although I am ignorant as to what you expect of me, and what is the service you are about to ask of me, I do not wish to abuse your confidence, and to deceive you. It is well that we should thoroughly understand our position."

"What do you mean, señor?" asked Don Zeno, with a start of surprise.

"I will explain. You doubtless do not recognise me, señor. I confess that at first, when I came to your help, I did not know who was the man whose life I had saved; but now I recognise you as Don –"

"Sebastiao Vianna, a Portuguese officer, a friend and aide-de-camp of General the Marquis de Castelmelhor," quickly interrupted Don Zeno.

"Parbleu! Why hesitate? I by no means conceal my name; I have no reason for making a mystery of it. Don Pablo knows that – a devoted friend of the marchioness and her daughter – my mission has no other design than the conducting them safely to the general."

"There is nothing but what is very honourable in this mission," chimed in the Pincheyra, "and with God's help the colonel will accomplish it."

"I hope so," answered Don Zeno.

"Just so," answered the young man, taken aback by what he heard.

"Ah!" murmured he, "Whom do they think they are deceiving?"

"Is that all you wished to say?" continued Don Zeno.

"Yes, that is all," answered the painter, bowing.

"Very well," pursued the partisan with an agreeable smile, "I did not expect less from your courtesy; but what you do not wish to state, it is for me to make known, and to avow boldly."

"Your conduct towards me, Don Emile," he continued – "you see I remember your name – is so much the handsomer and more generous, inasmuch as mine, in appearance at least, is not in your estimation free from blame. At our first meeting, I wished, I believe, if my memory is faithful, to arrest you as a spy."

"I thank you for this frankness, señor," answered the young man, smiling.

"You misunderstand me, caballero," pursued the partisan with animation, "and that does not surprise me. You cannot understand the strange and abnormal position that we Southern Americans occupy at this time. I speak decisively, because I expect a last service, or, if you prefer to call it so, a last proof of your generosity."

Emile Gagnepain was a thoroughly clear-sighted man. The deliberate manner of the partisan who, while passing lightly over the details, yet confessed his errors, pleased him by its very eccentricity.

"Speak, Don Sebastiao," he answered; "I shall be happy to render you the service that you expect, if it is in my power."

"I know it, and I thank you for it, señor. I will state what it is in a few words."

"Speak, señor," answered the young man, his curiosity excited by such long preambles.

Don Zeno appeared for some time a prey to uncertainty and indecision; but, overcoming his feelings, whatever they were, he cast a look to where Don Pablo Pincheyra was apathetically smoking a cigarette, without appearing in any way to concern himself with the conversation.

"Here is the fact in a few words," he said; "Don Pablo Pincheyra, my friend, has informed me that you accompanied the Marchioness de Castelmelhor and her daughter, when his brother conducted them to Casa-Frama."

"That is true," gravely answered the painter; "these ladies did me the honour to accept me as guide."

"Then you are devoted to them?" decisively asked the partisan.

The painter did not wince; he suspected a snare.

"Pardon," he said, in a tone of kindness, impossible to describe. "Before going any further, let us understand each other thoroughly, caballero. You say, do you not, that I am devoted to these unfortunate ladies?"

"Is it not true?" added the Pincheyra.

"To a certain extent it is, señor. These ladies required aid; I was near them, and they claimed mine. To refuse them would neither have been gallant nor in good taste. I, therefore, acceded to their wishes; but you know as well as anyone, Don Pablo, that yesterday, having learnt that they had no further need of me, I took leave of them."

"Hum I that is awkward," murmured Zeno Cabral. "Had you, then, serious reasons for acting thus?"

"Not precisely, señor; I have always acted in good faith with these ladies."

There was a long silence between the three speakers. The tone of the young painter was so artless and decidedly frank, that Don Zeno, notwithstanding all his skill, could not ascertain whether he gave expression to his real thoughts, or was deceiving him.

"I am disheartened by what you tell me, as I intended to ask you to do me a service."

"With regard to these ladies?" said the young man, with astonishment.

"A service for which, by the by, I should be extremely grateful."

"I do not see in what I can serve you, señor."

"But I do. Look here, my dear sir; we are playing with our cards under the table."

"I do not know why you speak thus, señor; my policy towards you should, I think, be sufficient to place me above suspicion of treachery," answered he.

"These ladies," Don Zeno continued, "whether rightly or wrongly, I will not discuss with you, imagine that they are surrounded by enemies determined on their destruction. Perhaps, if I presented myself to them, their mind, embittered by misfortunes, would see in me, whom they know but imperfectly, instead of a sure friend and a devoted servant, one of their enemies."

"Oh," cried the painter, haughtily, "what is that you are saying, señor? Are you not the aide-de-camp of General the Marquis de Castelmelhor?"

"That is true," answered the partisan, with embarrassment.

"Well, it seems to me, caballero, that that position ought to serve as a safeguard."

"Well, it probably would do so – at least I hope so. Unfortunately, reasons of the highest importance necessitate my trusting to someone else. That other – "

"Is to be me, is it not?" quickly interrupted the young man. "That is what you wanted to propose, caballero?"

"Whom could I choose if not you, señor? – you who know these ladies, and they have full confidence in you."

"Unhappily, caballero, my consent is necessary in this matter, and I have already had the honour to say, if not to you, at least to Don Pablo, that I do not feel at all disposed to continue, in respect to these ladies, the part that I have played for nearly a month. I am much concerned for them, but I must withdraw my support from them."

This tirade was uttered by the young man with such comic desperation, that the two partisans could not prevent themselves from laughing.

"Come, come," answered Don Zeno; "you are an excellent companion, and I see with pleasure that I was not deceived in you. Reassure yourself; the mission that I wish to confide to you is by no means perilous."

"Hum! Who knows?" murmured the young man.

"I give you my word, as a gentleman," resumed Don Zeno, "that when you arrive you will be free, and nobody will molest you."

"Hum! Hum!" again murmured the young man.

"Ah!" suddenly exclaimed Don Pablo Pincheyra, rising. "Why, then, my dear Don Sebastiao, do you not continue the escort of these ladies?"

"Have I not acquainted you," responded Don Zeno, "with the message which was given to me by the cavalier who met us on our first departure from the camp?"

"That is true," said Don Pablo, "I did not think of that. The message is important, then?"

"It could not be more so."

"Diable! Let us see, Don Emile," pursued the Pincheyra, in a conciliatory tone. "If I could, I would not hesitate to escort these two unfortunate ladies."

"You refuse me this service, then, caballero?" added Don Zeno.

"Well," said the young man, as if it had cost him a great deal to make this determination, "as you wish it, for this time I again consent to take upon myself an embarrassment of which I thought I was rid. I will escort these ladies."

Don Zeno made a gesture of joy which he immediately repressed.

"Thank you, caballero," said he. "Perhaps God will permit me, someday, to acquit myself of all that I owe you. Now that this affair is settled to our mutual satisfaction, allow me to take leave of you."

"Do you intend to depart so quickly then?"

"It must be. I cannot make too great haste. So, now that I have rested myself sufficiently for the various fatigues that I have for some time endured, I leave you, confiding in your loyal word, and convinced that you will act up to it."

"I shall fulfil my promise, señor."

"Thank you, caballero. I entirely reckon on you."

And after having amicably taken the hand of the young Frenchman, and having courteously bowed to Don Pablo, the partisan proceeded to rejoin his companions.

Don Zeno mounted his horse, made a last salute, and giving his horse the bridle, departed at full speed.

The painter followed him with his eyes as long as he could perceive him. Then, when at last the Montonero had disappeared behind the point of a rock, he gave a sigh of relief.

"That is one; now for the other? As to the latter, I think it will not be very difficult."

Don Pablo, still seated on the hillock of which he had made a seat, continued to smoke his cigarette.

The young man seated himself at his side, considered a moment, and placing his hand on the other's shoulder:

"Vive Dieu! Don Pablo," cried he with vigour; "For A month past I have lived in your camp; I have seen you accomplish marvellous things; but this far surpasses all the others."

"Eh!" said the partisan. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I render you homage, that is all."

"Homage!" repeated Don Pablo; "Why?"

"What makes you say why? Parbleu! I did not expect such an excess of modesty."

"Are we speaking in enigmas?"

"Do I not Know that you have played your part to perfection – I who, without being in the secret of the motives which have induced you to act thus, know the man as well as you."

"What secret? What motives? And of what man do you speak, companion?" cried Don Pablo impatiently.

"Pardieu! Of the man who has just left us."

"Don Sebastiao Vianna, the aide-de-camp of General de Castelmelhor."

"Well, it is capitally played," said Emile. "But now all dissimulation is useless. For the rest, if you persist in not uttering his name, that is your own affair. All this, in fact, does not much disturb me. You are free to give to Don Zeno Cabral the name of Dom Sebastiao."

"Eh!" cried the partisan, jumping up, "What name did you say?"

Don Pablo knit his eyebrows. A livid pallor covered his face.

"So this man," cried he, in a voice stifled by anger, "this man is Don Zeno Cabral?"

"Did you really not know that?" asked the young man.

"Yes, I was ignorant of it," cried the Pincheyra. "Do you swear it?"

"Pardieu! I have known him so long that I cannot be deceived."

The partisan darted a fierce look at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but changing his mind, he turned suddenly, and proceeded hastily towards his men, encamped around the tambo.

"To horse! To horse!" cried he to them.

"I believe," murmured the Frenchman, following him with a searching glance, "that the first one will free me from this one, unless it should be that this man should deliver me from the first."

CHAPTER V

FREE – PERHAPS

After his Machiavellian soliloquy, the Frenchman, rubbing his hands, advanced cautiously towards the tambo, following with a gloomy countenance the preparations for departure being made by the Pincheyras.

Don Pablo was ready the first.

"Don Emile," said he to the young man, "I do not seek to fathom the motives which have induced you to conceal from me till this moment the name of a man whom – you have known for a long time as my enemy."

The Frenchman wished to interrupt him.

"Do not say anything to me," cried he with violence; "the service that you have rendered me is still too recent for me to demand an account of this ambiguous conduct; but remember this, I consider myself as now freed from all gratitude towards you."

"Be it so," answered the young man. "You know me well enough, I suppose, to be convinced that I do not fear; any more than I love you."

"I know that you are a brave man, señor, and that if the moment were to come for you to face me, you would bear yourself valiantly; but I did not wish to leave you without telling you my intentions, and to warn you to place yourself on your guard."

"I thank you for that act of courtesy, señor; and I will take advantage of your warning."

"Now, adieu! Do not try again to cross my path."

Then striking the pommel of his saddle angrily with his fist, he placed himself at the head of his troop; and after having cried "Forward! Forward!" in a voice of thunder, darted off at a gallop.

"Aha!" said Emile, "All goes well; the vultures have rushed after the prey. It is a good game to win, to withdraw these two doves from the outstretched talons of these two birds of prey. God helping me, I will try."

And completely restored to good humour by this soliloquy, the painter entered the tambo.

The two ladies were half reclining on the skins before a fire lit by the Guarani. Scarcely recovered from the perils and the terrors they had undergone, they remained motionless and silent, their countenances pale, and their eyes half-closed absorbed in their own thoughts, not knowing whether they ought to be glad or sorry at being at last sheltered from danger, and at having escaped the fury of the tempest.

At the entry of the young painter, a faint smile appeared upon their faces.

"So," said the marchioness, after a stealthy glance at her daughter, "it is, thanks to your courage, and to your presence of mind, that we have escaped from a frightful death?"

"I have only been an instrument in the hand of God."

"This Indian has told me all," said the marchioness, designating Tyro by a gesture. "I know that now Don Pablo Pincheyra, bound by the gratitude which he owes you, would not dare to refuse you anything."

"Don Pablo was not alone, Madame."

"In fact, Don Sebastiao Vianna accompanies him, they say."

The painter smiled slyly.

"You laugh, Don Emile," she cried.

"Pardon me, Madame, this overflow of spirits. I will explain myself. Don Sebastiao Vianna was not the name of the man who came to the camp to demand your liberty."

"Ah!" murmured she; "Is he a man I know?"

"You know him, certainly; his name is Zeno Cabral."

"Don Zeno Cabral?" cried she, in a fright; "That man! Oh, then, I am lost!"

"Reassure yourself, Madame; you are in safety."

"What do you mean?"

"Don Pablo has departed, Madame. I have started him off in pursuit of Don Zeno, by revealing to him the name of the latter. Thus, apparently, we are completely delivered from all our enemies."

The marchioness tendered him her hand.

"I thank you," said she. "Your devotedness never fails."

"And never shall fail, Madame. We have not long to remain here. It is necessary for us to make a last effort, and to compete in strategy with our enemies."

"Have you any plan?"

"Unhappily, no, Madame; but perhaps with the aid of our brave and faithful Tyro, we may concert a plan."

"Let us try, then," responded she, "and lose no time, which is so precious to us."

Tyro re-entered at this moment.

"Well," asked Emile of him. "Has anything fresh happened?"

"No, my friend; Sacatripas, whom I have charged to watch the departure of the Pincheyras, has seen them go at full speed towards the plain. There is no fear of a surprise on the part of Don Zeno; for a considerable distance from here there is only one practicable road, and that is the one on which we are."

"That is to be regretted, indeed; our flight is impossible."

"Mon Dieu!" murmured Doña Eva, clasping her hands with anguish.

"So we are lost," said the marchioness.

"I did not say so, Madame. I am compelled, however, to confess that the situation is extremely critical."

"Let us see, Tyro, my friend; you who know so well these mountains, in the midst of which you have been brought up – seek, invent! As for me, what do I know? Find an expedient which gives us a chance of safety," cried the painter.

"God is my witness, my friend, that my best desire is to see you out of danger," replied he.

"We have no hope but in you, my brave Indian," said Emile.

"Listen, then, since you insist on it; and first, I must tell you, that at a league from here, more or less, there is an almost impracticable path, which is, in fact, only the dry bed of a torrent. This path few persons know, and no one, I am convinced, would venture to follow it, so difficult is it. Scarcely traced on the side of the mountains, it winds through rocks and precipices, and must at the present time be inundated, by reason of the frightful storm which has raged in these parts. This path, however, has this advantage over the other; it very much shortens the passage from here to the plain."

"Up to the present time," interrupted the painter, "I do not see anything but what is very advantageous to us in what you say."

"Patience, my friend, I have not yet finished."

"Finish, then, in mercy's name," cried the Frenchman, with impatience.

"If it were only you and me, my friend," pursued the Guarani, "I should not hesitate."

"Why do you stop short?" asked the young man.

"I understand you," said the marchioness. "What two men can undertake, with a chance of success, would be madness for women to attempt."

The Indian bowed respectfully to the two ladies.

"That is just my idea, señora," said he. "But there are other objections."

"Of what objections do you speak?"

"This path, very little known by the whites, is nevertheless much frequented by Puelche and Pampas Indians, fierce and untamed tribes, into whose hands we should be pretty nearly certain to

fall. We should only escape one danger, to fall into another. At all events, it is necessary that these ladies should consent to resume the men's clothing."

"Do not trouble yourself about that," cried the marchioness.

"It would be necessary to march with the greatest prudence, watching, for fear of a surprise."

"And should a surprise happen," quickly interrupted the marchioness, "rather to allow ourselves to be killed, than to become the prey of these men."

"You admirably understand my thoughts, señora," answered the Guarani, respectfully bowing. "I have nothing more to add."

"This project is hazardous, and fraught with difficulties, I am convinced," said the painter; "but, for my part, I see nothing which renders its execution impossible. Let us set out at once, unless," added he, considering, "you think differently from me, Madame la Marquise, and that the dangers which, without doubt, await us on the road appear to you too great; in which case, Madame, I will conform to your wishes."

"As that is the case," nobly replied the marchioness, "a longer discussion becomes useless. Let us set out immediately. Go, then; in a few moments we shall be quite ready to follow you."

"Be it so, Madame," said the painter; "we will obey."

He made a sign to the Guarani to follow him, and both quitted the tambo.

A quarter of an hour, indeed, had not passed, when the ladies came out of the tambo, ready to start.

It was about half past three in the afternoon – an hour rather late to commence a journey, especially in the midst of the mountains, in these wild regions, where storms are so frequent, and changes of weather so rapid. But the fugitives, surrounded by enemies, from whom they had escaped as if by a miracle, had the gravest reasons to take themselves quickly from the spot.

The sky was of a dull blue; the sun, near the horizon, spread profusely its oblique rays on the earth, which it warmed; a light breeze tempered the heat, and agitated the leaves of the trees; black swans rose from the depths of the valleys, and flew rapidly in the direction of the plains, followed by great bald vultures. The evening was magnificent, and seemed to presage the continuance of fine weather.

Notwithstanding the rather perplexed state of mind in which the travellers were, the journey was commenced gaily. They talked, and even joked, forcing themselves to look hopefully to the future. As Tyro had stated, at about a league from the valley, hidden in the midst of a thick wood, they found the commencement of the path.

For any but those long habituated to life in the desert, the aspect of the path would have appeared very encouraging. In fact, the underwood almost wholly obstructed it; a high and tufted grass covered it as with a green carpet.

However, notwithstanding these encouraging signs of complete solitude, the Guarani knew too well the astuteness of his race to be so easily deceived. The deserted appearance of the locality, instead of inspiring him with confidence, led him to redouble his precautions.

"Well, Tyro," the painter asked him, "you have nothing to complain of, I hope? Upon my word, this path is wild."

"Too wild, my friend," answered the Indian, shaking his head. "This disorder is too well managed to be real."

"Oh, oh! And what makes you suppose that, my friend? I see, absolutely, nothing to suspect."

"That is because you do not look above you, my friend. In the desert, and especially in the mountain, a track is marked in the trees, and not on the ground."

"But as to ourselves, It appears to me we simply follow the path."

"And we are wrong, my friend. On our entrance into the wood, we ought only to have advanced from branch to branch on the trees; our horses will betray us. Unhappily, what you and I could do, with some chance of success, the ladies who accompany us could not attempt."

"If what you say is very true, our efforts will only end in retarding our capture."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not, my friend; if God only gives us till tomorrow at noon, we shall probably be saved."

"How is that?"

"Look here; this path goes towards the desert of the Frentones. The Frentones are, especially, enemies of the whites, to whatever country they belong; but they are good and hospitable to travellers. If we succeed in reaching their territory, we shall be comparatively in safety."

"Very good; and you expect to reach this territory tomorrow?"

"No; but we shall find ourselves nearly on the banks of the river Primero, and might set ourselves adrift on a raft."

"Pardieu!" joyously cried the young man, "That is a happy idea? It would be very unfortunate if, with so many chances of success, we do not escape."

"You know the people against whom we have to fight. Believe me, we are not saved yet."

"That is true; but, on the other hand, you see everything on the bright side."

"What a life would ours be if we could not brighten it up now and then!" pursued the young man.

CHAPTER VI

COMPLICATIONS

The same day, and nearly at the same hour, when Emile Gagnepain quitted the Valle del Tambo, a little troop, composed of seven or eight horsemen, followed a path a little distant from the encampment of the Guaycurus.

These travellers, well mounted and well armed, appeared to be Indians. A woman, or rather a young girl, accompanied them.

This young girl appeared to be of the age of fifteen years at the most. Graceful and sprightly, she allowed to float in disorder the silken ringlets, of her long blue-black hair upon her fair shoulders, slightly browned by the sun, which had given her complexion, a golden tint. Her fine skin, under which could be seen the course of the veins, preserved still the velvet down of youth; her features were beautiful, her eyes sparkling with humour; and her laughing mouth was formed with rare perfection.

She wore the costume of the women of the Guaycurus, that is to say, a long robe of striped cotton cloth fastened at the hips by the ayulate, that symbolical girdle that these women wear before marriage. A large mantle of the same stuff as the robe, which could, in case of need, cover her whole body, rested at this moment on the croup of her horse; little silver rings, strung together, formed a kind of necklace which she wore on her neck; metal plates; bearing different figures covered her breast, and golden half-hoops were suspended from her ears.

Her delicate little feet, aristocratically arched, were, imprisoned in elegant buskins or half-boots, made with the fibres of the palm tree.

The cavalier, who travelled side by side with the young girl, bore a striking resemblance to her. His features were fine and intelligent, his forehead and his eyes black and well opened. – Although he wore the complete costume of the Guaycurus warrior, he was not tattooed, nor had paint in any way soiled the whiteness his skin.

Although his height was scarcely above the average, his limbs slight, and his manners rather effeminate, it was easy to perceive that this elegant exterior was united to an ardent soul and a brave heart.

The other warriors composing the little troop were hard-featured men, with bronzed complexions, and of ferocious aspect, forming a perfect contrast with the two persons whom we have tried to describe.

"Shall we arrive soon, brother?" asked the young girl, at the moment when we enter on the scene.

"Soon, I hope," distractedly replied the warrior. "The indications we have had appear to me to be favourable."

"Do you know, brother for what reason the Cougar has sent for us?"

"I do not know," answered the young man, with some hesitation; "the Cougar is a prudent chief, who does nothing without having maturely reflected on it."

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