

**REID MAYNE**

GASPAR THE GAUCHO: A  
STORY OF THE GRAN  
CHACO

Томас Майн Рид

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Story of the Gran Chaco**

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# Mayne Reid

## Gaspar the Gaucho: A Story of the Gran Chaco

### Chapter One. The Gran Chaco

Spread before you a map of South America. Fix your eye on the point of confluence between two of its great rivers – the Salado, which runs south-easterly from the Andes mountains, and the Parana coming from the north; carry your glance up the former to the town of Salta, in the ancient province of Tucuman; do likewise with the latter to the point where it espouses the Paraguay; then up this to the Brazilian frontier fort of Coimbra; finally draw a line from the fort to the aforementioned town – a line slightly curved with its convexity towards the Cordillera of the Andes – and you will thus have traced a boundary embracing one of the least known, yet most interesting, tracts of territory in either continent of America, or, for that matter, in the world. Within the limits detailed lies a region romantic in its past as mysterious in its present; at this hour almost as much a *terra incognita* as when the boats of Mendoza vainly endeavoured to reach it from the Atlantic side, and the gold-seekers of Pizarro's following alike unsuccessfully attempted its exploration from the Pacific. Young reader, you will be longing to know the name of this remarkable region; know it, then, as the "Gran Chaco."

No doubt you may have heard of it before, and, if a diligent student of geography, made some acquaintance with its character. But your knowledge of it must needs be limited, even though it were as extensive as that possessed by the people who dwell upon its borders; for to them the Gran Chaco is a thing of fear, and their intercourse with it one which has brought them, and still brings, only suffering and sorrow.

It has been generally supposed that the Spaniards of Columbus's time subdued the entire territory of America, and held sway over its red-skinned aborigines. This is a historical misconception. Although lured by a love of gold, conjoined with a spirit of religious propagandism, the so-called *Conquistadores* overran a large portion of both divisions of the continent, there were yet extensive tracts of each never entered, much less colonised, by them – territories many times larger than England, in which they never dared set foot. Of such were Navajoa in the north, the country of the gallant Goajiros in the centre, the lands of Patagonia and Arauco in the south, and notably the territory lying between the Cordilleras of the Peruvian Andes and the rivers Parana and Paraguay, designated "El Gran Chaco."

This vast expanse of champaign, large enough for an empire, remains to the present time not only uncolonised, but absolutely unexplored. For the half-dozen expeditions that have attempted its exploration, timidly entering and as hastily abandoning it, scarce merit consideration.

And equally unsuccessful have been all efforts at religious propagandism within its borders. The labours of the *padres*, both Jesuit and Franciscan, have alike signally failed; the savages of the Chaco refusing obedience to the cross as submission to the sword.

Three large rivers – the Salado, Vermejo, and Pilcomayo – course through the territory of the Chaco; the first forming its southern boundary, the others intersecting it. They all take their rise in the Andes Mountains, and after running for over a thousand miles in a south-easterly direction and nearly parallel courses, mingle their waters with those of the Parana and Paraguay. Very little is known of these three great streams, though of late years the Salado has received some exploration. There is a better acquaintance with its upper portion, where it passes through the settled districts of Santiago and Tucuman. Below, even to the point where it enters the Parana, only a strong military

expedition may with safety approach its banks, by reason of their being also traversed by predatory bands of the savages.

Geographical knowledge of the Vermejo is still less, and of the Pilcomayo least of all; this confined to the territory of their upper waters, long since colonised by the Argentine States and the Republic of Bolivia, and now having many towns in it. But below, as with the Salado, where these rivers enter the region of the Chaco, they become as if they were lost to the geographer; even the mouth of the Pilcomayo not being known for certain, though one branch of it debouches into the Paraguay, opposite the town of Assuncion, the capital of Paraguay itself! It enters the river of this name by a forked or *deltoid* channel, its waters making their way through a marshy tract of country in numerous slow flowing *riachos*, whose banks, thickly overgrown with a lush sedgy vegetation, are almost concealed from the eye of the explorer.

Although the known mouth of the Pilcomayo is almost within gun-shot of Assuncion – the oldest Spanish settlement in this part of South America – no Paraguayan ever thinks of attempting its ascent, and the people of the town are as ignorant of the land lying along that river's shores as on the day when the old naturalist, Azara, paddles his *periaqua* some forty miles against its obstructing current. No scheme of colonisation has ever been designed or thought of by them; for it is only near its source, as we have seen, that settlements exist. In the Chaco no white man's town ever stood upon its banks, nor church spire flung shadow athwart its unfurrowed waves.

It may be asked why this neglect of a territory, which would seem so tempting to the colonist? For the Gran Chaco is no sterile tract, like most parts of the Navajo country in the north, or the plains of Patagonia and the sierras of Arauco in the south. Nor is it a humid, impervious forest, at seasons inundated, as with some portions of the Amazon valley and the deltas of the Orinoco.

Instead, what we do certainly know of the Chaco shows it the very country to invite colonisation; having every quality and feature to attract the settler in search of a new home. Vast verdant savannas – natural clearings – rich in nutritious grasses, and groves of tropical trees, with the palm predominating; a climate of unquestionable salubrity, and a soil capable of yielding every requisite for man's sustenance as the luxury of life. In very truth, the Chaco may be likened to a vast park or grand landscape garden, still under the culture of the Creator!

But why not also submitted to the tillage of man? The answer is easy: because the men who now hold it will not permit intrusion on their domain – to them hereditary – and they are hunters, not *agriculturists*. It is still in the possession of its red-skinned owners, the original lords of its soil, these warlike Indians, who have hitherto defied all attempts to enslave or subdue them, whether made by soldier, miner, or missionary. These independent savages, mounted upon fleet steeds, which they manage with the skill of Centaurs, scour the plains of the Chaco, swift as birds upon the wing. Disdaining fixed residence, they roam over its verdant pastures and through its perfumed groves, as bees from flower to flower, pitching their *toldos*, and making camp in whatever pleasant spot may tempt them. Savages though called, who would not envy them such a charming *insouciant* existence? Do not you, young reader?

I anticipate your answer, "Yes." Come with me, then! Let us enter the "Gran Chaco," and for a time partake of it!

## Chapter Two. Paraguay's despot

Notwithstanding what I have said of the Chaco remaining uncolonised and unexplored, I can tell of an exception. In the year 1836, one ascending the Pilcomayo to a point about a hundred miles from its mouth, would there see a house, which could have been built only by a white man, or one versed in the ways of civilisation. Not that there was anything very imposing in its architecture; for it was but a wooden structure, the walls of bamboo, and the roof a thatch of the palm called *cuberta*— so named from the use made of its fronds in covering sheds and houses. But the superior size of this dwelling, far exceeding that of the simple *toldos* of the Chaco Indians; its ample verandah pillared and shaded by a protecting roof of the same palm leaves; and, above all, several well-fenced enclosures around it, one of them containing a number of tame cattle, others under tillage – with maize, manioc, the plantain, and similar tropical products – all these insignia evinced the care and cultivating hand of some one else than an aboriginal.

Entering the house, still further evidence of the white man's presence would be observed. Furniture, apparently home-made, yet neat, pretty, and suitable; chairs and settees of the *caña brava*, or South American bamboo; bedsteads of the same, with beds of the elastic Spanish moss, and *ponchos* for coverlets; mats woven from fibres of another species of palm, with here and there a swung hammock. In addition, some books and pictures that appeared to have been painted on the spot; a bound volume of music, with a violin and guitar – all speaking of a domestic economy unknown to the American Indian.

In some of the rooms, as also in the outside verandah, could be noticed objects equally unlike the belongings of the aboriginal: stuffed skins of wild beasts and birds; insects impaled on strips of palm bark; moths, butterflies, and brilliant scarabaei; reptiles preserved in all their repulsive ugliness, with specimens of ornamental woods, plants, and minerals; a singular paraphernalia, evidently the product of the region around. Such a collection could only belong to a *naturalist*, and that naturalist could be no other than a white man. He was; his name Ludwig Halberger.

The name plainly speaks his nationality – a German. And such was he; a native of the then kingdom of Prussia, born in the city of Berlin.

Though not strange his being a naturalist – since the taste for and study of Nature are notably peculiar to the German people – it was strange to find Prussian or other European having his home in such an out-of-the-way place. There was no civilised settlement, no other white man's dwelling, nearer than the town of Assuncion; this quite a hundred miles off, to the eastward. And north, south, and west the same for more than five times the distance. All the territory around and between, a wilderness, unsettled, unexplored, traversed only by the original lords of the soil, the Chaco Indians, who, as said, have preserved a deadly hostility to the paleface, ever since the keels of the latter first cleft the waters of the Parana.

To explain, then, how Ludwig Halberger came to be domiciled there, so far from civilisation, and so high up the Pilcomayo – river of mysterious note – it is necessary to give some details of his life antecedent to the time of his having established this solitary *estancia*. To do so a name of evil augury and ill repute must needs be introduced – that of Dr Francia, Dictator of Paraguay, who for more than a quarter of a century ruled that fair land verily with a rod of iron. With this same demon-like tyrant, and the same almost heavenly country, is associated another name, and a reputation as unlike that of José Francia as Hyperion to the Satyr, and which justice to a godlike humanity forbids me to pass over in silence. I speak of Amadé, or, as he is better known, *Aimé* Bonpland – cognomen appropriate to this most estimable man – known to all the world as the friend and fellow-traveller of Humboldt; more still, his assistant and collaborates in those scientific researches, as yet unequalled

for truthfulness and extent – the originator and discoverer of much of that learned lore, which, with modesty unparalleled, he has allowed his more energetic and more ambitious *compagnon de voyage* to have credit for.

Though no name sounds more agreeably to my ears than that of Aimé Bonpland, I cannot here dwell upon it, nor write his biography, however congenial the theme. Some one who reads this may find the task both pleasant and profitable; for though his bones slumber obscurely on the banks of the Parana, amidst the scenes so loved by him, his name will one day have a higher niche in Fame's temple than it has hitherto held – perhaps not much lower than that of Humboldt himself. I here introduce it, with some incidents of his life, as affecting the first character who figures in this my tale. But for Aimé Bonpland, Ludwig Halberger might never have sought a South American home. It was in following the example of the French philosopher, of whom he had admiringly read, that the Prussian naturalist made his way to the La Plata and up to Paraguay, where Bonpland had preceded him. But first to give the adventures of the latter in that picturesque land, of which a short account will suffice; then afterwards to the incidents of my story.

Retiring from the busy world, of which he seems to have been somewhat weary, Bonpland took up his residence on the banks of the Rio Parana; not in Paraguayan territory, but that of the Argentine Republic, on the opposite side of the river. There settled down, he did not give his hours to idleness; nor yet altogether to his favourite pursuit, the pleasant though somewhat profitless one of natural history. Instead, he devoted himself to cultivation, the chief object of his culture being the “yerba de Paraguay,” which yields the well-known *maté*, or Paraguayan tea. In this industry he was eminently successful. His amiable manners and inoffensive character attracted the notice of his neighbours, the Guarani Indians – a peaceful tribe of proletarian habits – and soon a colony of these collected around him, entering his employ, and assisting him in the establishment of an extensive “yerbale,” or tea-plantation, which bid fair to become profitable.

The Frenchman was on the high-road to fortune, when a cloud appeared, coming from an unexpected quarter of the sky – the north. The report of his prosperity had reached the ears of Francia, Paraguay's then despot and dictator, who, with other strange theories of government, held the doctrine that the cultivation of “yerba” was a right exclusively Paraguayan – in other words, belonging solely to himself. True, the French colonist, his rival cultivator, was not within his jurisdiction, but in the state of Corrientes, and the territory of the Argentine Confederation. Not much, that, to Dr Francia, accustomed to make light of international law, unless it were supported by national strength and backed by hostile bayonets. At the time Corrientes had neither of these to deter him, and in the dead hour of a certain night, four hundred of his myrmidons – the noted *quarteleros* – crossed the Parana, attacked the tea-plantation of Bonpland, and after making massacre of a half-score of his Guarani *peons*, carried himself a prisoner to the capital of Paraguay.

The Argentine Government, weak with its own intestine strife, submitted to the insult almost unprotestingly. Bonpland was but a Frenchman and foreigner; and for nine long years was he held captive in Paraguay. Even the English *charge d'affaires*, and a Commission sent thither by the Institute of France, failed to get him free! Had he been a lordling, or some little *viscomte*, his forced residence in Paraguay would have been of shorter duration. An army would have been despatched to “extradite” him. But Aimé Bonpland was only a student of Nature – one of those unpretending men who give the world all the knowledge it has, worth having – and so was he left to languish in captivity. True, his imprisonment was not a very harsh one, and rather partook of the character of *parole d'honneur*. Francia was aware of his wonderful knowledge, and availed himself of it, allowing his captive to live unmolested. But again the amiable character of the Frenchman had an influence on his life, this time adversely. Winning for him universal respect among the simple Paraguayans, it excited the envy of their vile ruler; who once again, and at night, had his involuntary guest seized upon, carried beyond the confines of his territory, and landed upon Argentine soil – but stripped of everything save the clothes on his back!

Soon after, Bonpland settled near the town of Corrientes, where, safe from further persecution, he once more entered upon agricultural pursuits. And there, in the companionship of a South American lady – his wife – with a family of happy children, he ended a life that had lasted for fourscore years, innocent and unblemished, as it had been useful, heroic, and glorious.

## Chapter Three.

### The Hunter-Naturalist

In some respects similar to the experience of Aimé Bonpland was that of Ludwig Halberger. Like the former, an ardent lover of Nature, as also an accomplished naturalist, he too had selected South America as the scene of his favourite pursuits. On the great river Parana – better, though erroneously, known to Europeans as the La Plata – he would find an almost untrodden field. For although the Spanish naturalist, Azara, had there preceded him, the researches of the latter were of the olden time, and crude imperfect kind, before either zoology or botany had developed themselves into a science.

Besides, the Prussian was moderately fond of the chase, and to such a man the great *pampas* region, with its pumas and jaguars, its ostriches, wild horses, and grand *guazuti* stags, offered an irresistible attraction. There he could not only indulge his natural taste, but luxuriate in them.

He, too, had resided nine years in Paraguay, and something more. But, unlike Bonpland, his residence there was voluntary. Nor did he live alone. Lover of Nature though he was, and addicted to the chase, another kind of love found its way to his heart, making himself a captive. The dark eyes of a Paraguayan girl penetrated his breast, seeming brighter to him than the plumage of the gaudiest birds, or the wings of the most beautiful butterflies.

“*El Gilero*” the blonde – as these swarthy complexioned people were wont to call the Teutonic stranger – found favour in the eyes of the young Paraguayense, who reciprocating his honest love, consented to become his wife; and became it. She was married at the age of fourteen, he being over twenty.

“So young for a bride!” many of my readers will exclaim. But that is rather a question of race and climate. In Spanish America, land of feminine precocity, there is many a wife and mother not yet entered on her teens!

For nigh ten years Halberger lived happily with his youthful *esposa*; all the happier that in due time a son and daughter – the former resembling himself, the latter a very image of her mother – enlivened their home with sweet infantine prattle. And as the years rolled by, a third youngster came to form part of the family circle – this neither son nor daughter, but an orphan child of the Señora’s sister deceased. A boy he was, by name Cypriano.

The home of the hunter-naturalist was not in Assuncion, but some twenty miles out in the “*campo*.” He rarely visited the capital, except on matters of business. For a business he had; this of somewhat unusual character. It consisted chiefly in the produce of his gun and insect-net. Many a rare specimen of bird and quadruped, butterfly and beetle, captured and preserved by Ludwig Halberger, at this day adorns the public museums of Prussia and other European countries. But for the dispatch and shipment of these he would never have cared to show himself in the streets of Assuncion; for, like all true naturalists, he had no affection for city life. Assuncion, however, being the only shipping port in Paraguay, he had no choice but repair thither whenever his collections became large enough to call for exportation.

Beginning life in South America with moderate means, the Prussian naturalist had prospered: so much, as to have a handsome house, with a tract of land attached, and a fair retinue of servants; these last, all “Guanos,” a tribe of Indians long since tamed and domesticated. He had been fortunate, also, in securing the services of a *gaucho*, named Gaspar, a faithful fellow, skilled in many callings, who acted as his *mayor-domo* and man of confidence.

In truth, was Ludwig Halberger in the enjoyment of a happy existence, and eminently prosperous. Like Aimé Bonpland, he was fairly on the road to fortune; when, just as with the latter, a cloud overshadowed his life, coming from the self-same quarter. His wife, lovely at fourteen, was

still beautiful at twenty-four, so much as to attract the notice of Paraguay's Dictator. And with Dr Francia to covet was to possess, where the thing coveted belonged to any of his own subjects. Aware of this, warned also of Francia's partiality by frequent visits with which the latter now deigned to honour him, Ludwig Halberger saw there was no chance to escape domestic ruin, but by getting clear out of the country. It was not that he doubted the fidelity of his wife; on the contrary, he knew her to be true as she was beautiful. How could he doubt it, since it was from her own lips he first learnt of the impending danger?

Away from Paraguay, then – away anywhere – was his first and quickly-formed resolution, backed by the counsels of his loyal partner in life. But the design was easier than its execution; the last not only difficult, but to all appearance impossible. For it so chanced that one of the laws of that exclusive land – an edict of the Dictator himself – was to the point prohibitive; forbidding any foreigner who married a native woman to take her out of the country, without having a written permission from the Executive Head of the State. Ludwig Halberger was a foreigner, his wife native born, and the Head of the State Executive, as in every other sense, was José Gaspar Francia!

The case was conclusive. For the Prussian to have sought permission to depart, taking his wife along with him, would have been more than folly – madness – hastening the very danger he dreaded.

Flight, then? But whither, and in what direction? To flee into the Paraguayan forests could not avail him, or only for a short respite. These, traversed by the *cascarilleros* and gatherers of yerba, all in the Dictator's employ and pay, would be no safer than the streets of Assuncion itself. A party of fugitives, such as the naturalist and his family, could not long escape observation; and seen, they would as surely be captured and carried back. The more surely from the fact that the whole system of Paraguayan polity under Dr Francia's régime was one of treachery and espionage, every individual in the land finding it to his profit to do dirty service for "El Supremo" – as they styled their despotic chief.

On the other side there was the river, but still more difficult would it be to make escape in that direction. All along its bank, to the point where it enters the Argentine territory, had Francia established his military stations, styled *guardias*, where sentinels kept watch at all hours, by night as in the day. For a boat to pass down, even the smallest skiff, without being observed by some of these Argus-eyed videttes, would have been absolutely impossible; and if seen as surely brought to a stop, and taken back to Assuncion.

Revolving all these difficulties in his mind, Ludwig Halberger was filled with dismay, and for a long time kept in a state of doubt and chilling despair. At length, however, a thought came to relieve him – a plan of flight, which promised to have a successful issue. He would flee into the Chaco!

To the mind of any other man in Paraguay the idea would have appeared preposterous. If Francia resembled the frying-pan, the Chaco to a Paraguayan seemed the fire itself. A citizen of Assuncion would no more dare to set foot on the further side of that stream which swept the very walls of his town, than would a besieging soldier on the *glacis* of the fortress he besieged. The life of a white man caught straying in the territory of "El Gran Chaco" would not have been worth a withey. If not at once impaled on an Indian spear held in the hand of "Tova" or "Guaycuru," he would be carried into a captivity little preferable to death.

For all this, Ludwig Halberger had no fear of crossing over to the Chaco side, nor penetrating into its interior. He had often gone thither on botanising and hunting expeditions. But for this apparent recklessness he had a reason, which must needs here be given. Between the Chaco savages and the Paraguayan people there had been intervals of peace —*tiempos de paz*— during which occurred amicable intercourse; the Indians rowing over the river and entering the town to traffic off their skins, ostrich feathers, and other commodities. On one of these occasions the head chief of the Tovas tribe, by name Naraguana, having imbibed too freely of *guarapé*, and in some way got separated from his people, became the butt of some Paraguayan boys, who were behaving towards him just as the idle lads of London or the *gamins* of Paris would to one appearing intoxicated in the streets. The Prussian

naturalist chanced to be passing at the time; and seeing the Indian, an aged man, thus insulted, took pity upon and rescued him from his tormentors.

Recovering from his debauch, and conscious of the service the stranger had done him, the Tovas chief swore eternal friendship to his generous protector, at the same time proffering him the “freedom of the Chaco.”

The incident, however, caused a rupture between the Tovas tribe and the Paraguayan Government, terminating the *tiempo de paz*, which had not since been renewed. More unsafe than ever would it have been for a Paraguayan to set foot on the western side of the river. But Ludwig Halberger knew that the prohibition did not extend to him; and relying on Naraguana’s proffered friendship, he now determined upon retreating into the Chaco, and claiming the protection of the Tovas chief.

Luckily, his house was not a great way from the river’s bank, and in the dead hour of a dark night, accompanied by wife and children – taking along also his Guano servants, with such of his household effects as could be conveniently carried, the faithful Caspar guiding and managing all – he was rowed across the Paraguay and up the Pilcomayo. He had been told that at some thirty leagues from the mouth of the latter stream, was the *tolderia* of the Tovas Indians. And truly told; since before sunset of the second day he succeeded in reaching it, there to be received amicably, as he had anticipated. Not only did Naraguana give him a warm welcome but assistance in the erection of his dwelling; afterwards stocking his *estancia* with horses and cattle caught on the surrounding plains. These tamed and domesticated, with their progeny, are what anyone would have seen in his *corrals* in the year 1836, at the time the action of our tale commences.

## Chapter Four. His Nearest Neighbours

The house of the hunter-naturalist was placed at some distance from the river's bank, its site chosen with an eye to the picturesque; and no lovelier landscape ever lay before the windows of a dwelling. From its front ones – or, better still, the verandah outside them – the eye commands a view alone limited by the power of vision: verdant savannas, mottled with copses of acacia and groves of palm, with here and there single trees of the latter standing solitary, their smooth stems and gracefully-curving fronds cut clear as cameos against the azure sky. Nor is it a dead level plain, as *pampas* and prairies are erroneously supposed always to be. Instead, its surface is varied with undulations; not abrupt as the ordinary hill and dale scenery, but gently swelling like the ocean's waves when these have become crestless after the subsidence of a storm.

Looking across this champaign from Halberger's house at almost any hour of the day, one would rarely fail to observe living creatures moving upon it. It may be a herd of the great *guazuti* deer, or the smaller *pampas* roe, or, perchance, a flock of *rheas* – the South American ostrich – stalking along tranquilly or in flight, with their long necks extended far before, and their plumed tails streaming train-like behind them. Possibly they may have been affrighted by the tawny puma, or spotted jaguar, seen skulking through the long *pampas* grass like gigantic cats. A drove of wild horses, too, may go careering past, with manes and tails showing a wealth of hair which shears have never touched; now galloping up the acclivity of a ridge; anon disappearing over its crest to re-appear on one farther off and of greater elevation. Verily, a scene of Nature in its wildest and most interesting aspect!

Upon that same plain, Ludwig Halberger and his people are accustomed to see others than wild horses – some with men upon their backs, who sit them as firmly as riders in the ring; that is, when they do *sit* them, which is not always. Often may they be seen standing erect upon their steeds, these going in full gallop! True, your ring-rider can do the same; but then his horse gallops in a circle, which makes it a mere feat of centrifugal and centripetal balancing. Let him try it in a straight line, and he would drop off like a ripe pear from the tree. No curving course needs the Chaco Indian, no saddle nor padded platform on the back of his horse, which he can ride standing almost as well as seated. No wonder, then, these savages – if savages they may be called – have obtained the fanciful designation of centaurs – the “Red Centaurs of the Chaco.”

Those seen by Ludwig Halberger and his family are the “Tovas,” already introduced. Their village, termed *tolderia*, is about ten miles off, up the river. Naraguana wished the white man to have fixed his residence nearer to him, but the naturalist knew that would not answer. Less than two leagues from an Indian encampment, and still more if a permanent dwelling-place, which this *tolderia* is, would make the pursuit of his calling something more than precarious. The wild birds and beasts – in short, all the animated creation – dislike the proximity of the Indian, and flee his presence afar.

It may seem strange that the naturalist still continues to form collections, so far from any place where he might hope to dispose of them. Down the Pilcomayo he dares not take them, as that would only bring him back to the Paraguay river, interdict to navigation, as ever jealously guarded, and, above all, tabooed to himself. But he has no thought, or intention, to attempt communicating with the civilised world in that way; while a design of doing so in quite another direction has occurred to him, and, in truth, been already all arranged. This, to carry his commodities overland to the Rio Vermejo, and down that stream till near its mouth; then again overland, and across the Parana to Corrientes. There he will find a shipping port in direct commerce with Buenos Ayres, and so beyond the jurisdiction of Paraguay's Dictator.

Naraguana has promised him not only an escort of his best braves, but a band of *cargadores* (carriers) for the transport of his freight; these last the slaves of his tribe. For the aristocratic Tovas Indians have their bondsmen, just as the Caffres, or Arab merchants of Africa.

Nearly three years have elapsed since the naturalist became established in his new quarters, and his collection has grown to be a large one. Safely landed in any European port, it would be worth many thousands of dollars; and thither he wishes to have it shipped as soon as possible. He has already warned Naraguana of his wish, and that the freight is ready; the chief, on his part, promising to make immediate preparations for its transport overland.

But a week has passed over, and no Naraguana, nor any messenger from him, has made appearance at the *estancia*. No Indian of the Tovas tribe has been seen about the place, nor anywhere near it; in short, no redskin has been seen at all, save the *guanós*, Halberger's own male and female domestics.

Strange all this! Scarce ever has a whole week gone by without his receiving a visit from the Tovas chief, or some one of his tribe; and rarely half this time without Naraguana's own son, by name Aguara, favouring the family with a call, and making himself as agreeable as savage may in the company of civilised people.

For all, there is one of that family to whom his visits are anything but agreeable; in truth, the very reverse. This Cypriano, who has conceived the fancy, or rather feels conviction, that the eyes of the young Tovas chief rest too often, and too covetously, on his pretty cousin, Francesca. Perhaps, except himself, no one has noticed this, and he alone is glad to count the completion of a week without any Indian having presented himself at his uncle's establishment.

Though there is something odd in their prolonged non-appearance, still it is nothing to be alarmed about. On other occasions there had been intervals of absence as long, and even longer, when the men of the tribe were away from their *tolderia*, on some foraging or hunting expedition. Nor would Halberger have thought anything of it; but for the understanding between him and the Tovas chief, in regard to the transport of his collections. Naraguana had never before failed in any promise made to him. Why should he in this?

A sense of delicacy hinders the naturalist from riding over to the Tovas town, and asking explanation why the chief delays keeping his word. In all such matters, the American Indian, savage though styled, is sensitive as the most refined son of civilisation; and, knowing this, Ludwig Halberger waits for Naraguana to come to him.

But when a second week has passed, and a third, without the Tovas chief reporting himself, or sending either message or messenger, the Prussian becomes really apprehensive, not so much for himself, as the safety of his red-skinned protector. Can it be that some hostile band has attacked the Tovas tribe, massacred all the men, and carried off the women? For in the Chaco are various communities of Indians, often at deadly feud with one another. Though such conjecture seems improbable, the thing is yet possible; and to assure himself, Halberger at length resolves upon going over to the *tolderia* of the Tovas. Ordering his horse saddled, he mounts, and is about to ride off alone, when a sweet voice salutes him, saying: —

“Papa! won't you take me with you?”

It is his daughter who speaks, a girl not yet entered upon her teens.

“In welcome, Francesca. Come along!” is his answer to her query.

“Then stay till I get my pony. I sha'n't be a minute.”

She runs back towards the corrals, calling to one of the servants to saddle her diminutive steed. Which, soon brought round to the front of the house, receives her upon its back.

But now another, also a soft, sweet voice, is heard in exhortation. It is that of Francesca's mother, entering protest against her husband either going alone, or with a companion so incapable of protecting him. She says: —

“Dear Ludwig, take Caspar with you. There may be danger – who knows?”

“Let me go, *tio?*” puts in Cypriano, with impressive eagerness, his eyes turned towards his cousin as though he did not at all relish the thought of her visiting the Tovas village without his being along with her.

“And me, too?” also requests Ludwig, the son, who is two years older than his sister.

“No, neither of you,” rejoins the father. “Ludwig, you would not leave your mother alone? Besides, remember I have set both you and Cypriano a lesson, which you must learn off to-day. There is nothing to fear, *querida!*” he adds, addressing himself to his wife. “We are not now in Paraguay, but a country where our old Friend Francia and his satellites dare not intrude on us. Besides, I cannot spare the good Caspar from some work I have given him to do. Bah! ’Tis only a bit of a morning’s trot there and back; and if I find there’s nothing wrong, we’ll be home again in little ever a couple of hours. So *adios! Vamos, Francesca!*”

With a wave of his hand he moves off, Francesca giving her tiny roadster a gentle touch of the whip, and trotting by his side.

The other three, left standing in the verandah, with their eyes follow the departing equestrians, the countenance of each exhibiting an expression that betrays different emotions in their minds, these differing both as to the matter of thought and the degree of intensity. Ludwig simply looks a little annoyed at having to stay at home when he wanted to go abroad, but without any great feeling of disappointment; whereas Cypriano evidently suffers chagrin, so much that he is not likely to profit by the appointed lesson. With the Señora herself it is neither disappointment nor chagrin, but a positive and keen apprehension. A daughter of Paraguay, brought up to believe its ruler all powerful over the earth, she can hardly realise the idea of there being a spot where the hand of “El Supremo” cannot reach and punish those who have thwarted his wishes or caprices. Many the tale has she heard whispered in her ear, from the cradle upwards, telling of the weird power of this wicked despot, and the remorseless manner in which he has often wielded it. Even after their escape into the chaco, where, under the protection of the Tovas chief, they might laugh his enmity to scorn, she has never felt the confidence of complete security. And now, that an uncertainty has arisen as to what has befallen Naraguana and his people, her fears became redoubled and intensified. Standing in the trellised verandah, her eyes fixed upon the departing forms of her husband and daughter, she has a heaviness at the heart, a presentiment of some impending danger, which seems so near and dreadful as to cause shivering throughout her frame.

The two youths, observing this, essay to reassure her – one in filial duty, the other with affection almost as warm.

Alas! in vain. As the crown of the tall hat worn by her husband, goes down behind the crest of a distant ridge, Francesca’s having sooner disappeared, her heart sinks at the same time; and, making a sign of the cross, she exclaims in desponding accents: —

“*Madre de Dios!* We may ne’er see them more!”

## Chapter Five. A Deserted Village

Riding at a gentle amble, so that his daughter on her small palfrey may easily keep up with him, Halberger in due time arrives at the Indian village; to his surprise seeing it is no more a village, or only a deserted one! The toldos of bamboo and palm thatch are still standing, but untenanted – every one of them!

Dismounting, he steps inside them, one after the other, but finds each and all unoccupied – neither man, woman, nor child within; nor without, either in the alleys between, or on the large open space around which the frail tenements are set, that has served as a loitering-place for the older members of the tribe, and a play-ground for the younger.

The grand council room, called *malocca*, he also enters with like result; no one is inside it – not a soul to be seen anywhere, either in the streets of the village or on the plain stretching around!

He is alarmed as much as surprised; indeed more, since he has been anticipating something amiss. But by degrees, as he continues to make an examination of the place, his apprehensions became calmed down, these having been for the fate of the Indians themselves. His first thought he had entertained while conjecturing the cause of their long absence from the *estancia*, was that some hostile tribe had attacked them, massacred the men, and carried captive the women and children. Such tragical occurrences are far from uncommon among the red aborigines of America, Southern or Northern. Soon, however, his fears on this score are set at rest. Moving around, he detects no traces of a struggle, neither dead bodies nor blood. If there had been a fight the corpses of the fallen would surely still be there, strewing the plain; and not a *toldo* would be standing or seen – instead, only their ashes.

As it is, he finds the houses all stripped of their furniture and domestic utensils; these evidently borne off not as by marauders, but taken away in a systematic manner, as when a regular move is made by these nomadic people. He sees fragments of cut *sipos* and bits of raw-hide thong – the overplus left after packing.

Though no longer alarmed for the safety of the Indians, he is, nevertheless, still surprised and perplexed. What could have taken them away from the *tolderia*, and whither can they have gone? Strange, too, Naraguana should have left the place in such unceremonious fashion, without giving him, Halberger, notice of his intention! Their absence on this occasion cannot be accounted for by any hunting or foraging expedition, nor can it be a foray of war. In any of these cases the women and children would have been left behind. Beyond doubt, it is an absolute abandonment of the place; perhaps with no intention of returning to it; or not for a very long time.

Revolving these thoughts through his mind, Halberger climbs back into his saddle, and sits further reflecting. His daughter, who has not dismounted, trots up to his side, she, too, in as much wonderment as himself; for, although but a very young creature, almost a child in age, she has passed through experiences that impart the sageness of years. She knows of all the relationships which exist between them and the Tovas tribe, and knows something of why her father fled from his old home; that is, she believes it to have been through fear of El Supremo, the “bogie” of every Paraguayan child, boy or girl. Aware of the friendship of the Tovas chief, and the protection he has extended to them, she now shares her father’s surprise, as she had his apprehensions.

They exchange thoughts on the subject – the child equally perplexed with the parent; and after an interval passed in conjecturing, all to no purpose, Halberger is about to turn and ride home again, when it occurs to him he had better find out in what direction the Indians went away from their village.

There is no difficulty in discovering this; the trail of their ridden horses, still more that of their pack animals, is easily found and followed. It leads out from the village at the opposite end from that

by which they themselves entered; and after following it for a mile or so along the river's bank, they see that it takes an abrupt turn across the *pampa*. Up to this point it has been quite conspicuous, and is also beyond; for although it is anything but recent, no rain has since fallen, and the hoof-prints of the horses can be here and there distinguished clean cut on the smooth sward, over which the mounted men had gone at a gallop. Besides, there is the broad belt of trodden grass where the pack animals toiled more slowly along; and upon this bits of broken utensils, with other useless articles, have been dropped and abandoned, plainly proclaiming the character of the cavalcade.

Here Halberger would halt, and turn back, but for a remembrance coming into his mind which hinders, at the same time urging him to continue on. In one of his hunting excursions he had been over this ground before, and remembers that some ten miles further on a tributary stream flows into the Pilcomayo. Curious to know whether the departing Tovas have turned up this tributary, or followed the course of the main river, he determines to proceed. For glancing skyward, he sees that the sun is just crossing the meridian, and knows he will have no lack of time before darkness can overtake him. The circumstances and events, so strange and startling, cause him to forget that promise made to his wife – soon to be back at the *estancia*.

Spurring his horse, and calling on Francesca to follow, he starts off again at a brisk gallop; which is kept up till they draw bridle on the bank of the influent stream.

This, though broad, is but shallow, with a selvedge of soft ooze on either side; and on that where they have arrived the mud shows the track of several hundred horses. Without crossing over, Halberger can see that the Indian trail leads on along the main river, and not up the branch stream.

Again he is on the balance, to go back – with the intention of returning next day, accompanied by Caspar, and making further search for the missing Indians – when an object comes under his eye, causing him to give a start of surprise.

It is only the track of a horse; and strange that this should surprise him, among hundreds. But the one on which he has fixed his attention differs from all the rest in being the hoof-print of a *shod* horse, while the others are as Nature made them. Still even this difference would not make so much impression upon him were the tracks of the same *age*. Himself skilled as any Indian in the reading of *pampas* sign, at a glance he sees they are not. The hoof-marks of the Tovas horses in their travelling train are all quite three weeks old; while the animal having the iron on its heels, must have crossed over that stream within the week.

Its rider, whoever he was, could not have been in the company of the departing Tovas; and to him now regarding the tracks, it is only a question as to whether he were a *white* man, or Indian. Everything is against his having been the former, travelling in a district tabooed to the palefaces, other than Halberger and his – everything, save the fact of his being on the back of a *shod* horse; while this alone hinders the supposition of the animal being bestridden by an Indian.

For a long while the hunter-naturalist, with Francesca by his side, sits in his saddle contemplating the shod hoof-prints in a reverie of reflection. He at length thinks of crossing the tributary stream, to see if these continue on with the Indian trail, and has given his horse the spur, with a word to his daughter to do likewise, when voices reach his ear from the opposite side, warning him to pull in again. Along with loud words and ejaculations there is laughter; as of boys at play, only not stationary in one place, but apparently moving onward, and drawing nearer to him.

On both sides of the branch stream, as also along the banks of the river, is a dense growth of tropical vegetation – mostly underwood, with here and there a tall *moriché* palm towering above the humbler shrubs. Through this they who travel so gleefully are making their way; but cannot yet be seen from the spot where Halberger has halted. But just on the opposite bank, where the trail goes up from the ford, is a bit of treeless sward, several acres in extent, in all likelihood, kept clear of undergrowth by the wild horses and other animals on their way to the water to drink. It runs back like an embayment into the close-growing scrub, and as the trail can be distinguished debouching at its upper end, the naturalist has no doubt that these joyous gentry are approaching in that direction.

And so are they – a singular cavalcade, consisting of some thirty individuals on horseback; for all are mounted. Two are riding side by side, some little way ahead of the others, who follow also in twos – the trail being sufficiently wide to admit of the double formation. For the Indians of *pampa* and prairie – unlike their brethren of the forest, do not always travel “single file.” On horseback it would string them out too far for either convenience or safety. Indeed, these horse Indians not unfrequently march in column, and in line.

With the exception of the pair spoken of as being in the advance, all the others are costumed, and their horses caparisoned, nearly alike. Their dress is of the simplest and scantiest kind – a hip-cloth swathing their bodies from waist to mid-thigh, closely akin to the “breech-clout” of the Northern Indian, only of a different material. Instead of dressed buckskin, the loin covering of the Chaco savage is a strip of white cotton cloth, some of wool in bands of bright colour having a very pretty effect. But, unlike their red brethren of the North, they know nought of either leggings or moccasin. Their mild climate calls not for such covering; and for foot protection against stone, thorn, or thistle, the Chaco Indian rarely ever sets sole to the ground – his horse’s back being his home habitually.

Those now making way through the wood show limbs naked from thigh to toe, smooth as moulded bronze, and proportioned as if cut by the chisel of Praxiteles. Their bodies above also nude; but here again differing from the red men of the prairies. No daub and disfigurement of chalk, charcoal, vermilion, or other garish pigment; but clear skins showing the lustrous hue of health, of bronze or brown amber tint, adorned only with some stringlets of shell beads, or the seeds of a plant peculiar to their country.

All are mounted on steeds of small size, but sinewy and perfect in shape, having long tails and flowing manes; for the barbarism of the clipping shears has not yet reached these barbarians of the Chaco.

Nor yet know they, or knowing, they use not saddle. A piece of ox-hide, or scrap of deer-skin serves them for its substitute; and for bridle a raw-hide rope looped around the under jaw, without head-strap, bittless, and single reined, enabling them to check or guide their horses, as if these were controlled by the cruellest of curbs, or the jaw-breaking Mameluke bitt.

As they file forth two by two into the open ground, it is seen that there is some quality and fashion common to all; to wit, that they are all youths – not any of them over twenty – and that they wear their hair cropped in front, showing a square line across the forehead, but left untouched on the crown and back of the head. There it falls in full profuseness, reaching to the hips, and in the case of some mingling with the tails, of their horses.

Two, however, are notably different from the rest; they riding in the advance, with a horse’s length or so of interval between them and their following. One of the two differs only in the style of his dress; being an Indian as the others, and, like them, quite a youth, to all appearance the youngest of the party. Yet also their chief, by reason of his richer and grander dress; his attire being of the most picturesque and costly kind worn by the Chaco savages. Covering his body, from the breast to half-way down his thighs, is a sort of loosely-fitting tunic of white cotton stuff. Sleeveless, it leaves his arm bare from nigh the shoulder to the wrist, around which glistens a bracelet with the sheen of solid gold. His limbs also are bare, save a sort of gartering below the knee, of shell and bead embroidery. On his head is a fillet band ornamented in like manner, with bright plumes, set vertically around it – the tail-feathers of the *guacamaya*, one of the most superb of South American parrots. But the most distinctive article of his apparel is his *manta*, a sort of cloak of the *poncho* kind, hanging loosely behind his back, but altogether different from the well-known garment of the gauchos, which is usually woven from wool. That on the shoulders of the young Indian is of no textile fabric, but the skin of a fawn, tanned and bleached to the softness and whiteness of a dress kid glove, the outward side being elaborately feather-worked in flowers and patterns, the feathers obtained from many a bird of gay plumage.

Of form perfectly symmetrical, the young Indian, save for his complexion, would seem a sort of Apollo, or Hyperion on horseback; while he who rides alongside him, withal that his skin is white, or once was, might well be likened to the Satyr. A man over thirty years of age, tall, and of tough, sinewy frame, with a countenance of the most sinister cast, dressed gaucho fashion, with the wide petticoat breeches lying loose about his limbs, a striped *poncho* over his shoulders, and a gaudy silken kerchief tied turban-like around his temples. But no gaucho he, nor individual of any honest calling: instead, a criminal of deepest dye, experienced in every sort of villainy. For this man is Rufino Valdez, well-known in Assuncion as one of Francia's familiars, and more than suspected of being one of his most dexterous *assassins*.

## Chapter Six.

### An Old Enemy in a New Place

Could the hunter-naturalist but know what has really occurred in the Tovas tribe, and the nature of the party now approaching, he would not stay an instant longer on the banks of that branch stream; instead, hasten back home with his child fast as their animals could carry them, and once at the estancia, make all haste to get away from it, taking every member of his family along with him. But he has no idea that anything has happened hostile to him or his, nor does he as yet see the troop of travellers, whose merry voices are making the woods ring around them: for, on the moment of his first hearing them, they were at a good distance, and are some considerable time before coming in sight. At first, he had no thought of retreating, nor making any effort to place himself and his child in concealment. And for two reasons: one, because ever since taking up his abode in the Chaco, under the protection of Naraguana, he has enjoyed perfect security, as also the consciousness of it. Therefore, why should he be alarmed now? As a second reason for his not feeling so, an encounter with men, in the mood of those to whom he is listening, could hardly be deemed dangerous. It may be but the Tovas chief and his people, on return to the town they had abandoned; and, in all likelihood, it is they. So, for a time, thinks he.

But, again, it may not be; and if any other Indians – if a band of Anguite, or Guaycurus, both at enmity with the Tovas – then would they be also enemies to him, and his position one of great peril. And now once more reflecting on the sudden, as unexplained, disappearance of the latter from their old place of residence – to say the least, a matter of much mystery – bethinking himself, also, that he is quite *twenty* miles from his estancia, and for any chances of retreat, or shifts for safety, worse off than if he were alone, he at length, and very naturally, feels an apprehension stealing over him. Indeed, not stealing, nor coming upon him slowly, but fast gathering, and in full force. At all events, as he knows nothing of who or what the people approaching may be, it is an encounter that should, if possible, be avoided. Prudence so counsels, and it is but a question how this can best be done. Will they turn heads round, and go galloping back? Or ride in among the bushes, and there remain under cover till the Indians have passed? If these should prove to be Tovas, they could discover themselves and join them; if not, then take the chances of travelling behind them, and getting back home unobserved.

The former course he is most inclined to; but glancing up the bank, for he is still on the water's edge, he sees that the sloping path he had descended, and by which he must return, is exposed to view from the opposite side of the stream, to a distance of some two hundred yards. To reach the summit of the slope, and get under cover of the trees crowning it, would take some time. True, only a minute or two; but that may be more than he can spare, since the voices seem now very near, and those he would shun must show themselves almost immediately. And to be seen retreating would serve no good purpose; instead, do him a damage, by challenging the hostility of the Indians, if they be not Tovas. Even so, were he alone, well-horsed as he believes himself to be – and in reality is – he would risk the attempt, and, like enough, reach his estancia in safety. But encumbered with Francesca on her diminutive steed, he knows they would have no chance in a chase across the *pampa*, with the red Centaurs pursuing. Therefore, not for an instant, or only one, entertains he thought of flight. In a second he sees it would not avail them, and decides on the other alternative – concealment. He has already made a hasty inspection of the ground near by, and sees, commencing at no great distance off, and running along the water's edge, a grove of *sumac* trees which, with their parasites and other plants twining around their stems and branches, form a complete labyrinth of leaves. The very shelter he is in search of; and heading his horse towards it, at the same time telling Francesca to follow, he rides in by the first opening that offers. Fortunately he has struck upon a *tapir* path, which makes it easier for them to pass through the underwood, and they are soon, with their horses, well screened

from view. Perhaps, better would it have been for them had they continued on, without making any stop, though not certain this, for it might have been all one in the end. As it is, still in doubt, half under the belief that he may be retreating from an imaginary danger – running away from friends instead of foes – as soon as well within the thicket, Halberger reins up again, at a point where he commands a view of the ford as it enters on the opposite side of the stream. A little glade gives room for the two animals to stand side by side, and drawing Francesca's pony close up to his saddle-flap, he cautions her to keep it there steadily, as also to be silent herself. The girl needs not such admonition. No simple child she, accustomed only to the safe ways of cities and civilised life; but one knowing a great deal of that which is savage; and young though she is, having experienced trials, vicissitudes and dangers. That there is danger impending over them now, or the possibility of it, she is quite as conscious as her father, and equally observant of caution; therefore, she holds her pony well in hand, patting it on the neck to keep it quiet.

They have not long to stay before seeing what they half expected to see – a party of Indians. Just as they have got well fixed in place, with some leafy branches in front forming a screen over their faces, at the same time giving them an aperture to peep through, the dusky cavalcade shows its foremost files issuing out from the bushes on the opposite side of the stream. Though still distant – at least, a quarter of a mile – both father and daughter can perceive that they are Indians; mounted, as a matter of course, for they could not and did not, expect so see such afoot in the Chaco. But Francesca's eyes are sharper sighted than those of her father, and at the first glance she makes out more – not only that it is a party of Indians, but these of the Tovas tribe. The feathered *manta* of the young chief, with its bright gaudy sheen, has caught her eye, and she knows whose shoulders it should be covering.

“Yes, father,” she says, in whisper, as soon as sighting it. “They are the Tovas! See yonder! one of the two leading – that's Aguara.”

“Oh! then, we've nothing to fear,” rejoins her father, with a feeling of relief. “So, Francesca, we may as well ride back out and meet them. I suppose it is, as I've been conjecturing; the tribe is returning to its old quarters. I wonder where they've been, and why so long away. But we shall now learn all about it. And we'll have their company with us, as far as their *talderia*; possibly all the way home, as, like enough, Naraguana will come on with us to the estancia. In either case – ha! what's that. As I live, a white man riding alongside Aguara! Who can *he* be?”

Up to this, Halberger has neither touched his horse nor stirred a step; no more she, both keeping to the spot they had chosen for observation. And both now alike eagerly scan the face of the man, supposed to be white.

Again the eyes of the child, or her instincts, are keener and quicker than those of the parent; or, at all events, she is the first to speak, announcing a recognition.

“Oh, papa!” she exclaims, still in whispers, “it's that horrid man who used to come to our house at Assuncion – him mamma so much disliked – the Señor Rufino.”

“Hish!” mutters the father, interrupting both with speech and gesture; then adds, “keep tight hold of the reins; don't let the pony budge an inch!”

Well may he thus caution, for what he now sees is that he has good reason to fear; a man he knows to be his bitter enemy – one who, during the years of his residence in Paraguay, had repeatedly been the cause of trouble to him, and done many acts of injury and insult – the last and latest offered to his young wife. For it was Rufino Valdez who had been employed by the Dictator previously to approach her on his behalf.

And now Ludwig Halberger beholds the base villain in company with the Tovas Indians – his own friends, as he had every reason to suppose them – riding side by side with the son of their chief! What can it mean?

Halberger's first thought is that Valdez may be their prisoner; for he, of course, knows of the hostility existing between them and the Paraguayans, and remembers that, in his last interview

with Naraguana, the aged cacique was bitter as ever against the Paraguayan people. But no; there is not the slightest sign of the white man being guarded, bound, or escorted. Instead, he is riding unconstrained, side by side with the young Tovas chief, evidently in amicable relations – the two engaged in a conversation to all appearance of the most confidential kind!

Again Halberger asks, speaking within himself, what it can mean? and again reflecting endeavours to fathom the mystery: for so that strange juxtaposition appears to him. Can it be that the interrupted treaty of peace has been renewed, and friendship re-established between Naraguana and the Paraguayan Dictator? Even now, Valdez may be on a visit to the Tovas tribe on that very errand – a commissioner to arrange new terms of intercourse and amity? It certainly appears as if something of the kind had occurred. And what the Prussian now sees, taken in connection with the abandonment of the village alike matter of mystery – leads him to more than half-suspect there has. For again comes up the question, why should the Tovas chief have gone off without giving him warning? So suddenly, and not a word! Surely does it seem as if there has been friendship betrayed, and Naraguana's protection withdrawn. If so, it will go hard with him, Halberger; for well knows he, that in such a treaty there would be little chance of his being made an object of special amnesty. Instead, one of its essential claims would sure be, the surrendering up himself and his family. But would Naraguana be so base? No; he cannot believe it, and this is why he is as much surprised as puzzled at seeing Valdez when he now sees him.

In any case things have a forbidding look, and the man's presence there bodes no good to him. More like the greatest evil; for it may be death itself. Even while sitting upon his horse, with these reflections running through his mind – which they do, not as related, but with the rapidity of thought itself – he feels a presentiment of that very thing. Nay, something more than a presentiment, something worse – almost the certainty that his life is near its end! For as the complete Indian cohort files forth from among the bushes, and he takes note of how it is composed – above all observing the very friendly relations between Valdez and the young chief – he knows it must affect himself to the full danger of his life. Vividly remembers he the enmity of Francia's *familiar*, too deep and dire to have been given up or forgotten. He remembers, too, of Valdez being noted as a skilled *rastrero*, or guide – his reputed profession. Against such a one the step he has taken to conceal himself is little likely to serve him. Are not the tracks of his horse, with those of the pony, imprinted in the soft mud by the water's edge where they had halted? These will not be passed over by the Indians, or Valdez, without being seen and considered. Quite recent too! They must be observed, and as sure will they be followed up to where he and his child are in hiding. A pity he has not continued along the *tapir* path, still further and far away! Alas! too late now; the delay may be fatal.

In a very agony of apprehension thus reflecting, Ludwig Halberger with shoulders stooped over his saddle-bow and head bent in among the branches, watches the Indian cavalcade approaching the stream's bank; the nearer it comes, the more certain he that himself and his child are in deadliest danger.

## Chapter Seven. Valdez the “Vaqueano.”

To solve the seeming enigma of Rufino Valdez travelling in the company of the Tovas Indians, and on friendly terms with their young chief – for he is so – it will be necessary to turn back upon time, and give some further account of the *vaqueano* himself, and his villainous master; as also to tell why Naraguana and his people abandoned their old place of abode, with other events and circumstances succeeding. Of these the most serious has been the death of Naraguana himself. For the aged cacique is no more; having died only a few days after his latest visit paid to his palefaced protégé.

Nor were his last moments spent at the *tolderia*, now abandoned. His death took place at another town of his people some two hundred miles from this, and farther into the interior of the Chaco; a more ancient residence of the Tovas tribe – in short, their “Sacred city” and burying-place. For it is the custom of these Indians when any one of them dies – no matter when, where, and how, whether by the fate of war, accident in the chase, disease, or natural decay – to have the body borne to the sacred town, and there deposited in a cemetery containing the graves of their fathers. Not graves, as is usual, underground; but scaffolds standing high above it – such being the mode of Tovas interment.

Naraguana’s journey to this hallowed spot – his last in life – had been made not on horseback, but in a *litera*, borne by his faithful braves. Seized with a sudden illness, and the presentiment that his end was approaching, with a desire to die in the same place where he had been born, he gave commands for immediate removal thither – not only of himself, but everything and even body belonging to his tribe. It was but the work of a day; and on the next the old settlement was left forsaken, just as the hunter-naturalist has found it.

Had the latter been upon the banks of that branch stream just three weeks before, he would there have witnessed one of those spectacles peculiar to the South American pampas; as the prairies of the North. That is the crossing of a river by an entire Indian tribe, on the move from one encampment, or place of residence, to another. The men on horseback swimming or wading their horses; the women and children ferried over in skin boats – those of the Chaco termed *pelotas* – with troops of dogs intermingled in the passage; all amidst a *fracas* of shouts, the barking of dogs, neighing of horses, and shrill screaming of the youngsters, with now and then a peal of merry laughter, as some ludicrous mishap befalls one or other of the party. No laugh, however, was heard at the latest crossing of that stream by the Tovas. The serious illness of their chief forbade all thought of merriment; so serious, that on the second day after reaching the sacred town he breathed his last; his body being carried up and deposited upon that aerial tomb where reposed the bleaching bones of many other caciques – his predecessors.

His sudden seizure, with the abrupt departure following, accounts for Halberger having had no notice of all this – Naraguana having been delirious in his dying moments, and indeed for some time before. And his death has caused changes in the internal affairs of the Tovas tribe, attended with much excitement. For the form of government among these Chaco savages is more republican than monarchical; each new cacique having to receive his authority not from hereditary right, but by election. His son, Aguara, however, popular with the younger warriors of the tribe, carried the day, and has become Naraguana’s successor.

Even had the hunter-naturalist been aware of these events, he might not have seen in them any danger to himself. For surely the death of Naraguana would not affect his relations with the Tovas tribe; at least so far as to losing their friendship, or bringing about an estrangement. Not likely would such have arisen, but for certain other events of more sinister bearing, transpiring at the same period; to recount which it is necessary for us to return still further upon time, and again go back to Paraguay and its Dictator.

Foiled in his wicked intent, and failing to discover whither his intended victims had fled, Francia employed for the finding of them one of his minions – this man of most ill repute, Rufino Valdez. It did not need the reward offered to secure the latter's zeal; for, as stated, he too had his own old grudge against the German, brought about by a still older and more bitter hostility to Halberger's right hand man – Gaspar, the gaucho. With this double stimulus to action, Valdez entered upon the prosecution of his search, after that of the soldiers had failed. At first with confident expectation of a speedy success; for it had not yet occurred to either him or his employer that the fugitives could have escaped clear out of the country; a thing seemingly impossible with its frontiers so guarded. It was only after Valdez had explored every nook and corner of Paraguayan territory in search of them, all to no purpose, that Francia was forced to the conclusion, they were no longer within his dominions. But, confiding in his own interpretation of international law, and the rights of extradition, he commissioned his emissary to visit the adjacent States, and there continue inquiry for the missing ones. That law of his own making, already referred to, led him to think he could demand the Prussian's wife to be returned to Paraguay, whatever claim he might have upon the Prussian himself.

For over two years has Rufino Valdez been occupied in this bootless quest, without finding the slightest trace of the fugitives, or word as to their whereabouts. He has travelled down the river to Corrientes, and beyond to Buenos Ayres, and Monte Video at the La Plata's mouth. Also up northward to the Brazilian frontier fort of Coimbra; all the while without ever a thought of turning his steps towards the Chaco!

Not so strange, though, his so neglecting this noted ground; since he had two sufficient reasons. The first, his fear of the Chaco savages, instinctive to every Paraguayan; the second, his want of faith, shared by Francia himself, that Halberger had fled thither. Neither could for a moment think of a white man seeking asylum in the Gran Chaco; for neither knew of the friendship existing between the hunter-naturalist and the Tovas chief.

It was only after a long period spent in fruitless inquiries, and while sojourning at Coimbra that the *vaqueano* first found traces of those searched for; there learning from some Chaco Indians on a visit to the fort – that a white man with his wife, children, and servants, had settled near a *tolderia* of the Tovas, on the banks of the Pilcomayo river. Their description, as given by these Indians – who were not Tovas, but of a kindred tribe – so exactly answered to the hunter-naturalist and his family, that Valdez had no doubt of its being they. And hastily returning to Paraguay, he communicated what he had been told to the man for whom he was acting.

“El Supremo,” overjoyed at the intelligence, promised to double the reward for securing the long-lost runaways. A delicate and difficult matter still; for there was yet the hostility of the Tovas to contend against. But just at this crisis, as if Satan had stepped in to assist his own sort, a rumour reaches Assuncion of Naraguana's death; and as the rancour had arisen from a personal affront offered to the chief himself, Francia saw it would be a fine opportunity for effecting reconciliation, as did also his emissary. Armed with this confidence, his old enmity to Halberger and gaucho, ripe and keen as ever, Valdez declared himself willing to risk his life by paying a visit to the Tovas town, and, if possible, induce these Indians to enter into a new treaty – one of its terms to be their surrendering up the white man, who had been so long the guest of their deceased cacique.

Fully commissioned and furnished with sufficient funds – gold coin which passes current among the savages of the Chaco, as with civilised people – the plenipotentiary had started off, and made his way up the Pilcomayo, till reaching the old town of the Tovas. Had Halberger's estancia stood on the river's bank, the result might have been different. But situated at some distance back, Valdez saw it not in passing, and arrived at the Indian village to find it, as did the hunter-naturalist himself, deserted. An experienced traveller and skilled tracker, however, he had no difficulty in following the trail of the departed people, on to their other town; and it was the track of his horse on the way thither, Halberger has observed on the edge of the influent stream – as too well he now knows.

## Chapter Eight.

### A Compact between Scoundrels

What the upshot of Valdez's errand as commissioner to the Tovas tribe may be told in a few words. That he has been successful, in some way, can be guessed from his being seen in close fellowship with him who is now their chief. For, otherwise, he would not be there with them or only as a prisoner. Instead, he is, as he appears, the accepted friend of Aguara, however false the friendship. And the tie which has knit them together is in keeping with the character of one, if not both. All this brought about without any great difficulty, or only such as was easily overcome by the Paraguayan plenipotentiary. Having reached the Tovas town – that where the tribe is now in permanent residence – only a day or two after Naraguana's death, he found the Indians in the midst of their lamentations; and, through their hearts rendered gentle by grief, received friendly reception. This, and the changed *régime*, offered a fine opportunity for effecting his purpose, of which the astute commissioner soon availed himself. The result, a promise of renewal of the old peace treaty; which he has succeeded in obtaining, partly by fair words, but as much by a profuse expenditure of the coin with which Francia had furnished him. This agreed to by the elders of the tribe; since they had to be consulted. But without a word said about their late chiefs protégé – the hunter-naturalist – or aught done affecting him. For the Paraguayan soon perceived, that the *sagamores* would be true to the trust Naraguana had left; in his last coherent words enjoining them to continue protection to the stranger, and hold him, as his, unharmed.

So far the elders in council; and the astute commissioner, recognising the difficulty, not to say danger, of touching on this delicate subject, said nothing to them about it.

For all, he has not left the matter in abeyance, instead, has spoken of it to other ears, where he knew he would be listened to with more safety to himself – the ears of Aguara. For he had not been long in the Tovas town without making himself acquainted with the character of the new cacique, as also his inclinings – especially those relating to Francesca Halberger. And that some private understanding has been established between him and the young Tovas chief is evident from the conversation they are now carrying on.

“You can keep the *muchachita* at your pleasure,” says Valdez, having, to all appearance, settled certain preliminaries. “All my master wants is, to vindicate the laws of our country, which this man Halberger has outraged. As you know yourself, Señor Aguara, one of our statutes is that no foreigner who marries a Paraguayan woman may take her out of the country without permission of the President – our executive chief. Now this man is not one of our people, but a stranger —a *gringo*— from far away over the big waters; while the Señora, his wife, is Paraguayan, bred and born. Besides, he stole her away in the night, like a thief, as he is.”

Naraguana would not tamely have listened to such discourse. Instead, the old chief, loyal to his friendship, would have indignantly repelled the allegations against his friend and protégé. As it is, they fall upon the ear of Naraguana's son without his offering either rebuke or protest.

Still, he seems in doubt as to what answer he should make, or what course he ought to pursue in the business between them.

“What would you have me do, Señor Rufino?” he asks in a patois of Spanish, which many Chaco Indians can speak; himself better than common, from his long and frequent intercourse with Halberger's family. “What want you?”

“I don't want you to do anything,” rejoins the *vaqueano*. “If you're so squeamish about giving offence to him you call your father's friend, you needn't take any part in the matter, or at all compromise yourself. Only stand aside, and allow the law I've just spoken of to have fulfilment.”

“But how?”

“Let our President send a party of his soldiers to arrest those runaways, and carry them back whence they came. Now that you’ve proposed to renew the treaty with us, and are hereafter to be our allies – and, I hope, fast friends – it is only just and right you should surrender up those who are our enemies. If you do, I can say, as his trusted representative, that El Supremo will heap favours, and bestow rich presents on the Tovas tribe; above all, on its young cacique – of whom I’ve heard him speak in terms of the highest praise.”

Aguara, a vain young fellow, eagerly drinks in the fulsome flattery, his eyes sparkling with delight at the prospect of the gifts thus promised. For he is as covetous of wealth as he is conceited about his personal appearance.

“But,” he says, thinking of a reservation, “would you want us to surrender them all? Father, mother – ”

“No, not all,” rejoins the ruffian, interrupting. “There is one,” he continues, looking askant at the Indian, with the leer of a demon, “one, I take it, whom the young Tovas chief would wish to retain as an ornament to his court. Pretty creature the *niña* was, when I last saw her; and I have no doubt still is, unless your Chaco sun has made havoc with her charms. She had a cousin about her own age, by name Cypriano, who was said to be very fond of her; and rumour had it around Assuncion, that they were being brought up for one another.”

Aguara’s brow blackens, and his dark Indian eyes seem to emit sparks of fire.

“Cypriano shall never have her!” he exclaims in a tone of angry determination.

“How can you help it, amigo?” interrogates his tempter. “That is, supposing the two are inclined for one another. As you know, her father is not only a paleface, but a *gringo*, with prejudices of blood far beyond us Paraguayans, who are half-Indian ourselves. Ah! and proud of it too. Being such, he would never consent to give his daughter in marriage to a red man – make a *squaw* of her, as he would scornfully call it. No, not even though it were the grandest cacique in the Chaco. He would see her dead first.”

“Indeed!” exclaims the Indian, with a disdainful toss of the head.

“Indeed, yes,” asseverates Valdez. “And whether they remain under your protection, or be taken back to Paraguay, ’twill be all the same as regards the señorita. There’s but one way I know of to hinder her from becoming the wife of her cousin Cypriano, and that is – ”

“What?” impatiently asks Aguara.

“To separate them. Let father, mother, son, and nephew be taken back to where they belong; the *niña* to stay behind.”

“But how can that be done?”

“You mean without your showing your hand in it?” asks Valdez, in a confidential whisper.

“I do. For know, Señor Rufino, that, though I’m now chief of our tribe, and those we have with us here will do as I bid them – obey me in anything – still the elders have control, and might make trouble if I did aught to injure the friend of my late father. I am not free, and dare not act as you propose.”

“*Carramba!* you needn’t act at all, as I’ve already told you. Only stand aside, and let others do the acting. ’Twill be easy enough. But give your consent to my bringing a pack of our Paraguayan wolves to this fold your father has so carefully shepherded, and I’ll answer for sorting out the sheep we want to take, and leaving the lamb you wish left. Then you and yours can come opportunely up, too late for protecting the old ram and dam, but in time to rescue the bleating lambkin, and bear her away to a place of safety. Your own toldo, Señor Aguara; where, take my word for’t, no one will ever come to inquire after, much less reclaim her. You consent?”

“Speak low!” cautions the wily Indian, casting a glance over his shoulders as one willing to do a wicked deed, but without desiring it known. “Don’t let them hear us. *You have my consent.*”

## Chapter Nine. A Red-Handed Ruffian

Just as the young cacique has yielded to the tempter, surrendering his last scruple of conscience, his horse dips hoof in the stream, that of the Paraguayan plunging into it at the same time. Knowing the ford well, and that it is shallow, with a firm bottom, they ride boldly on; their followers straggled out behind, these innocent of the foul conspiracy being hatched so near; still keeping up their rollicky mirth, and flinging about *jeux d'esprit* as the spray drops are tossed from the fetlocks of their wading horses.

It is a popular though erroneous belief, that the red men of America are of austere and taciturn habit. The older ones may be at times, but even these not always. Instead, as a rule they are given to jocularly and fun; the youth brimful of it as the street boys of any European city. At least one half of their diurnal hours is spent by them in play and pastimes; for from those of the north we have borrowed both Polo and La Crosse; while horse-racing is as much their sport as ours; and archery more.

Not strange, then, that the *jeunesse dorée* of the Tovas, escorting their youthful cacique, and seeing him occupied with the paleface who has been on a visit to their town, take no heed of what passes between these two, but abandon themselves to merriment along the march. No more is it strange that Aguara, engrossed with the subject of conversation between him and the *vaqueano*, leaves them free to their frolicking.

Nothing occurs to change the behaviour either of the two who are in front, or those following, until the horses of the former have forded the stream, and stepped out on the bank beyond. Then the Paraguayan, as said, a skilled tracker and cunning as a fox, chancing to lower his eyes to the ground, observes upon it several hoof-marks of a horse. These at once fix his attention; for not only are they fresh – to all appearance made but the moment before – but the horse that made them must have been *shod*.

While in the act of verifying this observation, other hoof-prints come under his eye, also shod, but much smaller, being the tracks of a pony. Recent too, evidently made at the same time as the horse's. He has no need to point them out to the young Indian, who, trained to such craft from infancy upward, has noted them soon as he, and with equally quick intuitiveness is endeavouring to interpret their significance.

Succeeding in this: for both the horse's track and that of the pony are known to, and almost instantly recognised by him. He has not lived two years in proximity to the estancia of Ludwig Halberger, all the while in friendly intercourse with the naturalist and his family, without taking note of everything; and can tell the particular track of every horse in its stables. Above all is he familiar with the diminutive hoof-marks of Francesca's pretty pony, which he has more than once trailed across the *campo*, in the hope of having a word with its rider. Perceiving them now, and so recently made, he gives out an ejaculation of pleased surprise; then looks around, as though expecting to see the pony itself, with its young mistress upon its back. There is no one in sight, however, save the *vaqueano* and his own followers; the latter behind, halted by command, some of them still in the water, so that they may not ride over the shod-tracks, and obliterate them.

All this while Halberger and his child are within twenty paces of the spot, and seated in their saddles, as when they first drew up side by side. Screened by the trees, they see the Indians, themselves unobserved, while they can distinctly hear every word said. Only two of the party speak aloud, the young cacique and his paleface companion; their speech, of course, relating to the newly-discovered "sign."

After dismounting, and for a few seconds examining it, Valdez leaps back into his saddle with a show of haste, as if he would at once start off upon the trail of horse and pony.

“There have been only the two here – that’s plain,” he says. “Father and daughter, you think? What a pity we didn’t get up in time to bid ‘good-day’ to them! ’Twould have simplified matters much. You’d then have had your young chick to carry to the cage you intend for it, without the mother bird to make any bother or fluttering in your face; while I might have executed my commission sooner than expected.”

“*Carramba!*” he continues after a short while spent in considering. “They can’t have gone very far as yet. You say it’s quite twenty miles to the place where the *gringo* has his headquarters. If so, and they’ve not been in a great hurry to get home – which like enough the girl would, since her dear Cypriano don’t appear to be along – we may come up with them by putting on speed. Let us after them at once! What say you?”

The young Indian, passive in the hands of the older and more hardened sinner, makes neither objection nor protest. Instead, stung by the allusion to “dear Cypriano,” he is anxious as the other to come up with the pony and its rider. So, without another word, he springs back upon his horse, declaring his readiness to ride on.

With eyes directed downward, they keep along the return tracks; having already observed that these come no farther than the ford, and turn back by the water’s edge —

“Aha!” exclaims the *vaqueano*, pulling up again ere he has proceeded three lengths of his horse; “they’ve left the trail here, and turned off up stream! That wouldn’t be their route home, would it?”

“No,” answers Aguara. “Their nearest way’s along the river, down as far as our old *tolderia*. After that —”

“Sh!” interrupts the Paraguayan, leaning over, and speaking in a cautious whisper, “Did you not hear something? Like the chinking of a bitt curb? I shouldn’t wonder if they’re in among those bushes. Suppose you stay here and keep watch along the bank, while I go and beat up that bit of cover?”

“Just as it please you,” assents the young cacique, unresistingly.

“Give me two or three of your fellows along. Not that I have any fear to encounter the *gringo* alone – poor weak creature, still wearing his green spectacles, I suppose. Far from it. But still there’s no harm in having help, should he attempt to give trouble. Besides, I’ll want some one to look after the *muchachita!*”

“Take as many as you wish.”

“Oh! two will be sufficient; that pair nearest us.”

He points to the foremost file of the troop, two who are a little older than their friends, as also of more hardened and sinister aspect. For, short as has been his stay among them, the subtle emissary has taken the measure of many members of the tribe; and knows something of the two he thus designates. His gold has made them his friends and allies; in short, gained them over to him as good for anything he may call upon them to do.

Aguara having signified assent, a gesture brings them up; and, at a whispered word from the *vaqueano* himself, they fall in behind him.

Heading his horse for the *sumac* thicket he is soon at its edge, there seeing what rejoices him – the tracks of both horse and pony passing into it. He has reached the spot where Halberger turned in along the *tapir* path. Parting the leaves with a long spear – for he is so armed – he rides in also, the two Indians after. And just as the tails of their horses disappear among the leaves, Aguara, who has kept his place, hears another horse neighing within the thicket at a point farther off. Then there is a quick trampling of hooves, followed by a hurried rush, and the swishing of bent branches, as the *vaqueano* and his two aides dash on through the *sumacs*.

The young cacique and his followers continuing to listen, soon after hear shouts – the voices of men in angry exclamation – mingling with them the shriller treble of a girl’s. Then a shot, quick followed by a second, and a third; after which only the girl’s voice is heard, but now in lamentation. Soon, however, it is hushed, and all over – everything silent as before.

The young Tovas chief sits upon his horse with heart audibly beating. He has no doubt – cannot have – as to who were the pursued ones; no more, that they have been overtaken. But with what result? Has the *vaqueano* killed both father and daughter? Or were the shots fired by Halberger, killing Valdez himself and the two who went with him? No; that cannot be; else why should the girl's lamenting cries be heard afterwards? But then again, why have they ceased so suddenly?

While thus anxiously conjecturing, he again hears the trampling of horses among the trees; this time evidently in return towards him. And soon after sees the horses themselves, with their riders – four of them. Three are the same as late left him, but looking differently. The Paraguayan has one arm hanging down by his side, to all appearance broken, with blood dripping from the tips of his fingers; while the steel blade of his spear, borne in the other, is alike reddened. And there is blood elsewhere – streaming down the breast of one of the young Indians who seems to have difficulty in keeping upon his horse's back. The fourth individual in the returning cavalcade is a young girl, with a cloth tied over her head, as if to hinder her from crying out; seated upon the back of a pony, this led by the Indian who is still unhurt.

At a glance, Aguara sees it is Francesca Halberger, though he needs not seeing her to know that. For he had already recognised her voice – well knew it, even in its wailing.

“Her father – what of him?” he asks, addressing Valdez, soon as the latter is up to him, and speaking in undertone.

“No matter what,” rejoins the ruffian, with a demoniac leer. “The father is my affair, and he has come very near making it an ugly one for me. Look at this!” he continues, indicating the left arm which hangs loose by his side. “And at that!” he adds, glancing up to the point of his spear.

“Blood on both, as you see. So, Señor Aguara, you may draw your deductions. Your affair is yonder,” he nods towards the muffled figure on the pony's back; “and you can now choose between taking her home to her mother – her handsome cousin as well – or carrying her to *your* home, as the queen that is to be of the Tovas.”

The young cacique is not slow in deciding which course to pursue. The allusion to the “handsome cousin” again excites his jealousy and his ire. Its influence is irresistible, as sinister; and when he and his followers take departure from that spot – which they do almost on the instant – it is to recross the stream, and head their horses homeward – Francesca Halberger carried captive along with them.

## Chapter Ten. Gaspar, the Gaucho

Over the broad undulating plain which extends between Halberger's house and the deserted *tolderia* of the Tovas, a horseman is seen proceeding in the direction of the latter. He is a man about middle age, of hale, active appearance, in no way past his prime. Of medium size, or rather above it, his figure though robust is well proportioned, with strong sinewy arms and limbs lithe as a panther's, while his countenance, notwithstanding the somewhat embrowned skin, has a pleasant, honest expression, evincing good nature as a habitually amiable temper, at the same time that his features show firmness and decision. A keenly glancing eye, coal-black, bespeaks for him both courage and intelligence; while the way in which he sits his horse, tells that he is not new to the saddle; instead, seeming part of it. His garb is peculiar, though not to the country which claims him as a native. Draping down from his shoulders and spreading over the hips of his horse is a garment of woollen fabric, woven in stripes of gaudy colours, alternating white, yellow, and red, of no fit or fashion, but simply kept on by having his head thrust through a slit in its centre. It is a *poncho*— the universal wrap or cloak of every one who dwells upon the banks of the La Plata or Parana. Under is another garment, of white cotton stuff, somewhat resembling Zouave breeches, and called *calzoneras*, these reaching a little below his knees; while his feet and ankles are encased in boots of his own manufacture, seamless, since each was originally the skin of a horse's leg, the hoof serving as heel, with the shank shortened and gathered into a pucker for the toe. Tanned and bleached to the whiteness of a wedding glove, with some ornamental stitching and broidery, it furnishes a foot gear, alike comfortable and becoming. Spurs, with grand rowels, several inches in diameter, attached to the heels of these horse-hide boots, give them some resemblance to the greaves and ankle armour of mediaeval times.

All this has he whose dress we are describing; while surmounting his head is a broad-brimmed hat with high-peaked crown and plume of *rheas* feathers – underneath all a kerchief of gaudy colour, which draping down over the nape of his neck protects it from the fervid rays of the Chaco sun. It is a costume imposing and picturesque; while the caparison of his horse is in keeping with it. The saddle, called *recado*, is furnished with several coverings, one upon another, the topmost, *coronilla*, being of bright-coloured cloth elaborately quilted; while the bridle of plaited horse-hair is studded with silver joints, from which depend rings and tassels, the same ornamenting the breast-piece and neck straps attaching the martingale, in short, the complete equipment of a *gaucho*. And a gaucho he is – Gaspar, the hero of our tale.

It has been already said, that he is in the service of Ludwig Halberger. So is he, and has been ever since the hunter-naturalist settled in Paraguay; in the capacity of steward, or as there called *mayor-domo*; a term of very different signification from the *major-domo* or house-steward of European countries, with dress and duties differing as well. No black coat, or white cravat, wears he of Spanish America, no spotless stockings, or soft slipper shoes. Instead, a costume more resembling that of a Cavalier, or Freebooter; while the services he is called upon to perform require him to be not only a first-class horseman, but able to throw the lazo, catch a wild cow or colt, and tame the latter – in short, take a hand at anything. And at almost anything Gaspar can; for he is man-of-all-work to the hunter-naturalist, as well as his man of confidence.

Why he is riding away from the estancia at such an hour – for it is afternoon – may be guessed from what has gone before. For it is on that same day, when Halberger and his daughter started off to visit the Indian village; and as these had not returned soon as promised, the anxiety of the wife, rendered keen by the presentiment which had oppressed her at their parting, became at length unbearable; and to relieve it Gaspar has been despatched in quest of them.

No better man in all the pampas region, or South America itself, could have been sent on such an errand. His skill as a tracker is not excelled by any other gaucho in the Argentine States, from which he originally came; while in general intelligence, combined with courage, no one there, or elsewhere, could well be his superior. As the Señora said her last words to him at parting, and listened to his in return, she felt reassured. Gaspar was not the man to make delay, or come back without the missing one. On this day, however, he deviates from his usual habit, at the same time from the route he ought to take – that leading direct to the Indian village, whither he knows his master and young mistress to have gone. For while riding along going at a gentle canter, a cock “ostrich” starts up before his horse, and soon after the hen, the two trotting away over the plain to one side. It so chances that but the day before his master had given him instructions to catch a male ostrich for some purpose of natural history – the first he should come across. And here was one, a splendid bird, in full flowing plumage. This, with an observation made, that the ostriches seem less shy than is usual with these wary creatures, and are moving away but slowly, decides him to take after and have a try at capturing the cock. Unloosing his *bolas* from the saddle-bow, where he habitually carries this weapon, and spurring his horse to a gallop, off after them he goes.

Magnificently mounted, for a gaucho would not be otherwise, he succeeds in his intent, after a run of a mile or so, getting close enough to the birds to operate upon them with his *bolas*. Winding these around his head and launching them, he has the satisfaction of seeing the cock ostrich go down upon the grass, its legs lapped together tight as if he had hard spliced them.

Riding on up to the great bird, now hopped and without any chance to get away from him, he makes things more sure by drawing out his knife and cutting the creature’s throat. Then releasing the *bolas*, he returns them to the place from which he had taken them – on the horn of his *recado*. This done, he stands over the dead *rhea*, thus reflecting: —

“I wonder what particular part of this beauty – it is a beauty, by the way, and I don’t remember ever having met with a finer bird of the breed – but if I only knew which one with identical parts the master wants, it would save me some trouble in the way of packing, and my horse no little of a load. Just possible the *dueño* only cares for the tail-feathers, or the head and beak, or it may be but the legs. Well, as I can’t tell which, there’s but one way to make sure about it – that is, to take the entire carcase along with me. So, go it must.”

Saying this, he lays hold of a leg, and drags the ostrich nearer to his horse, which all the time stands tranquilly by: for a gaucho’s steed is trained to keep its place, without need of any one having care of it.

“*Carramba!*” he exclaims, raising the bird from the ground, “what a weight the thing is! Heavy as a quarter of beef! Now I think on’t, it might have been better if I’d let the beast alone, and kept on without getting myself into all this bother. Nay, I’m sure it would have been wiser. What will the Señora say, when she knows of my thus dallying – trifling with the commands she gave me? Bah! she won’t know anything about it – and needn’t. She will, though, if I stand dallying here. I mustn’t a minute longer. So up, Señor Avertruz, and lie there.”

At which, he hoists the ostrich – by the gauchos called “*avertruz*” – to the croup of his *recado*; where, after a rapid manipulation of cords, the bird is made fast, beyond all danger of dropping off.

This done, he springs upon his horse’s back, and then looks out to see which direction he should now take. A thing not so easily determined; for in the chase after it, the ostrich had made more than one double; and, although tolerably familiar with the topography of that plain, the gaucho is for the time no little confused as to his whereabouts. Nor strange he should be; since the palm-groves scattered over it are all so much alike, and there is no high hill, nor any great eminence, to guide him. Ridges there are, running this way and that; but all only gentle undulations, with no bold projection, or other land-mark that he can remember.

He begins to think he is really strayed, lost; and, believing so, is angry with himself for having turned out of his path – as the path of his duty. Angry at the ostrich, too, that tempted him.

“*Avertruz, maldito!*” he exclaims, terms in the gaucho vernacular synonymous with “ostrich, be hanged!” adding, as he continues to gaze hopelessly around, “I wish I’d let the long-legged brute go its way. Like as not, it’ll hinder me going mine, till too late. And if so, there’ll be a pretty tale to tell! *Santissima!* whatever am I to do? I don’t even know the way back to the house; though that wouldn’t be any good if I did. I daren’t go there without taking some news with me. Well; there’s only one thing I can do; ride about, and quarter the pampa, till I see something that’ll set me back upon my road.”

In conformity with this intention, he once more puts his horse in motion, and strikes off over the plain; but he does not go altogether without a guide, the sun somewhat helping him. He knows that his way to the Indian village is westward, and as the bright luminary is now beginning to descend, it points out that direction, so taking his bearings by it, he rides on. Not far, however, before catching sight of another object, which enables him to steer his course with greater precision. This a tree, a grand vegetable giant of the species called *ombu*, known to every gaucho – beloved, almost held sacred by him, as affording shade to his sun-exposed and solitary dwelling. The one Gaspar now sees has no house under its wide-spreading branches; but he has himself been under them more than once while out on a hunt, and smoked his *cigarrito* in their shade. As his eye lights upon it, a satisfied expression comes over his features, for he knows that the tree is on the top of a little *loma*, or hill, about half-way between the estancia and the Indian town, and nearly in the direct route.

He needs nothing more to guide him now; but instead of riding towards the tree, he rather turns his back upon it, and starts off in a different direction. This because he had already passed the *ombu* before coming across the ostrich.

Soon again he is back upon the path from which he had strayed, and proceeds along it without further interruption, riding at a rapid pace to make up for the lost time.

Still, he is far from being satisfied with himself. Although he may have done that which will be gratifying to his master, there is a possibility of its displeasing his mistress. Most certainly will it do this, should he not find the missing ones, and have to go home without them. But he has no great fear of that; indeed, is not even uneasy. Why should he be? He knows his master’s proclivities, and believes that he has come across some curious and rare specimens, which take time to collect or examine, and this it is which has been retarding his return. Thus reflecting, he continues on, every moment expecting to meet them. But as there is neither road nor any regular path between the two places, he needs to keep scanning the plain, lest on their return he may pass them unobserved.

But he sees nothing of them till reaching the *tolderia*, and there only the hoof-marks of his master’s horse, with those of his young mistress’s pony, both conspicuous in the dust-covered ground by the doors of the *toldos*. But on neither does he dwell, for he, too, as were the others, is greatly surprised to find the place deserted – indeed alarmed, and for a time sits in his saddle as one half-dazed.

Only a short while, for he is not the man to give way to long irresolution, and recovering himself, he rides rapidly about, from *toldo* to *toldo*, all over the town, at the same time shouting and calling out his master’s name.

For answer, he only has the echoes of his own voice, now and then varied with the howl of a wolf, which, prowling around like himself no doubt wonders, as he, at the place being abandoned.

After a hurried examination of the houses, and seeing there is no one within them, just as Halberger had done, he strikes off on the trail of the departed inhabitants; and with the sun still high enough to light up every track on it, he perceives those made by the *dueño’s* horse, and the more diminutive hoof-prints alongside them.

On he goes following them up, and in a gallop, for they are so fresh and clear he has no need to ride slowly. On in the same gait for a stretch of ten miles, which brings him to the tributary stream at the crossing-place. He rides down to the water’s edge, there to be sorely puzzled at what he sees – some scores of other horse-tracks recently made, but turning hither and thither in crowded confusion.

It calls for all his skill as a *rastrero*, with some considerable time, to unwind the tangled skein. But he at length succeeds, so far as to discover that the whole horse troop, to whomsoever belonging, have recrossed the ford; and crossing it himself, he sees they have gone back up the Pilcomayo river. Among them is one showing a shod hoof; but he knows that has not been made by his master's horse, the bar being larger and broader, with the claw more deeply indented. Besides, he sees not the pony's tracks – though they are or were there – and have been trodden out by the ruck of the other animals trampling after.

The gaucho here turns back; though he intends following the trail further, when he has made a more careful examination of the sign on the other side of the stream; and recrossing, he again sets to scrutinising it. This soon leading him to the place where Halberger entered the *sumac* grove. Now the gaucho, entering it also, and following the *slot* along the *tapir* path, at a distance of some three hundred yards from the crossing, comes out into an open glade, lit up by the last rays of the setting sun, which fall slantingly through the trees standing around. There a sight meets his eye, causing the blood at one moment to run cold through his veins, in the next hot as boiling lava; while from his lips issue exclamations of mingled astonishment and indignation. What he sees is a horse, saddled and with the bridle also on, standing with neck bent down, and head drooped till the nostrils almost touch the earth. But between them and the ground is a figure extended at full stretch; the body of a man to all appearance dead; which at a glance the gaucho knows to be that of his master!

## Chapter Eleven.

### A Silent Fellow-Traveller

Another sun is rising over the Chaco, and its rays, red as the reflection from a fire, begin to glitter through the stems of the palm-trees that grow in scattered topes upon the plains bordering the Pilcomayo. But ere the bright orb has mounted above their crowns, two horsemen are seen to ride out of the *sumac* grove, in which Ludwig Halberger vainly endeavoured to conceal himself from the assassin Valdez and his savage confederates.

It is not where any of these entered the thicket that the horsemen are coming out, but at a point some half-mile further up the branch stream, and on its higher bank, where it reaches the general level of the upper plain. Here the *sumac* trees cover the whole slope from the water's edge to the crest of the bordering ridge, on this ending abruptly. Though they stand thinly, and there is room enough for two horsemen to ride abreast, these are not doing so, but one ahead, and leading the other's horse by a raw-hide rope attached to the bitt ring.

In this manner they have ascended the slope, and have now the great plain before them; treeless, save here and there a tope of palms or a scattering of willows around some spot where there is water; but the taller timber is behind them, and soon as they arrive at its edge, he riding ahead reins up his horse, the other stopping at the same time.

There is still a belt of bushes between them and the open ground, of stunted growth, but high enough to hinder their view. To see over them, the leading horseman stands up in his stirrups, and looks out upon the plain, his glances directed all around it. These, earnestly interrogative, tell of apprehension, as of an enemy he might expect to be there, in short, making a reconnaissance to see if the "coast be clear."

That he judges it so is evinced by his settling back into his saddle, and moving on across the belt of bushes; but again, on the skirt of this and before issuing out of it, he draws bridle, and once more makes a survey of the plain.

By this time, the sun having mounted higher in the heavens, shines full upon his face, showing it of dark complexion, darker from the apprehension now clouding it; but of honest cast, and one which would otherwise be cheerful, since it is the face of Caspar, the gaucho.

Who the other is cannot be easily told, even with the bright sun beaming upon him; for his hat, broad-brimmed, is slouched over his forehead, concealing most part of his countenance. The head itself, oddly, almost comically, inclined to one side, droops down till the chin nigh touches his breast. Moreover, an ample cloak, which covers him from neck to ankles, renders his figure as unrecognisable as his face. With his horse following that of the gaucho, who leads him at long halter's reach, he, too, has halted in the outer selvedge of the scrub; still maintaining the same relative position to the other as when they rode out from the *sumacs*, and without speaking word or making gesture. In fact, he stirs not at all, except such motion as is due to the movement of his horse; but beyond that he neither raises head nor hand, not even to guide the animal, leaving it to be lead unresistingly.

Were the gaucho of warlike habits, and accustomed to making predatory expeditions, he might be taken as returning from one with a captive, whom he is conducting to some safe place of imprisonment. For just like this his silent companion appears, either fast strapped to his own saddle, or who, conquered and completely subdued, has resigned all thoughts of resistance and hopes of escape. But Caspar is essentially a man of peace, which makes it improbable that he, behind, is his prisoner.

Whatever the relationship between them, the gaucho for the present pays no attention to the other horseman, neither speaks to nor turns his eye toward him; for these are now all upon the plain, scanning it from side to side, and all round as far as he can command view of it. He is not himself

silent, however, though the words to which he gives utterance are spoken in a low tone, and by way of soliloquy, thus: —

“I will never do to go back by the river’s bank. Whoever the devils that have done this dastardly thing, they may be still prowling about, and to meet them would be for me to get served the same as they’ve served him, that’s sure; so I’d best take another route, though it be a bit round the corner. Let me see. I think I know a way that should lead tolerably straight to the estancia without touching the river or going anywheres near it. I mustn’t even travel within sight of it. If the Tovas have had any hand in this ugly business – and, by the Virgin, I believe they have, however hard it is to think so – some of them may still be near, and possibly a party gone back to their old *tolderia*. I’ll have to give that a wide berth anyhow; so to get across this open stretch without being seen, if there be anyone on it to see me, will need manoeuvring. As it is, there don’t appear to be a soul, that’s so far satisfactory.”

Again he sweeps the grassy expanse with searching glance, his face brightening up as he observes a flock of ostriches on one side, on the other a herd of deer – the birds stalking leisurely along, the beasts tranquilly browsing. Were there Indians upon the plain, it would not be so. Instead, either one or the other would show excitement. The behaviour of the dumb creatures imparting to him a certain feeling of confidence, he says, continuing the soliloquy: —

“I think I may venture it. Nay, I must; and there’s no help for’t. We have to get home somehow – and soon. Ah! the Señora! poor lady! What will she be thinking by this time? And what when we get back? *Valga me Dios!* I don’t know how I shall ever be able to break it to her, or in what way! It will sure drive her out of her senses, and not much wonder, either. To lose one of them were enough, but both, and – Well, no use dwelling on it now; besides, there’s no time to be lost. I must start off at once; and, maybe, as I’m riding on, I’ll think of some plan to communicate the sad news to the Señora, without giving her too sudden a shock. *Pobrecita!*”

At the pitying exclamation he gives a last interrogative glance over the plain; then, with a word to his horse, and a touch of the spur, he moves out into the open, and on; the other animal following, as before, its rider maintaining the same distance and preserving the self-same attitude, silent and gestureless as ever!

## Chapter Twelve. Skulking Back

While the gaucho and his silent companion were still in halt by the edge of the *sumac* wood, another horseman could be seen approaching the place, but on the opposite side of the stream, riding direct down to the ford. Descried at any distance, his garb, with the caparison of his horse – the full gaucho panoply of bitted bridle, breast-plate, *recado*, and *caronilla*– would tell he is not an Indian. Nor is he; since this third traveller, so early on the road, is Rufino Valdez. As commissioner to the Tovas tribe, he has executed the commission with which he was entrusted, with something besides; and is now on return to make report to his master, El Supremo, leaving the latter to take such other steps as may deem desirable.

The *vaqueano* has passed the preceding night with the Indians at their camp, leaving it long before daybreak, though Aguara, for certain reasons, very much wished him to return with them to their town, and proposed it. A proposal, for reasons of his own, the cunning Paraguayan declined, giving excuses that but ill satisfied the young cacique, and which he rather reluctantly accepted. He could not, however, well refuse to let Valdez go his way. The man was not a prisoner moreover, his promise to be soon back, as the bearer of rich presents, was an argument irresistible; and influenced by this, more than aught else, Aguara gave him permission to depart.

The young chief's reasons for wishing to detain him were of a kind altogether personal. Much as he likes the captive he is carrying with him, he would rather she had been made captive by other means, and in a less violent manner. And he is now returning to his tribe, not so triumphantly, but with some apprehension as to how he will be received by the elders. What will they say when the truth is told them, – all the details of the red tragedy just enacted? He would lay the blame, where most part of it properly belongs, on the shoulders of the Paraguayan, and, indeed, intends doing so. But he would rather have the latter with him to meet the storm, should there be such, by explaining in his own way, why he killed the other white man. For Valdez had already said something to them of an old hostility between himself and the hunter-naturalist, knowing that the Tovas, as well as other Chaco Indians, acknowledge the rights of the *vendetta*.

But just for the reason Aguara desires to have him along with him, is the *vaqueano* inclined to die opposite course; in truth, determined upon it. Not for the world would he now return to the Tovas town. He has too much intelligence for that, or too great regard for his safety – his very life, which he believes, and with good cause, would be more than risked, were he again to show himself among a people whose hospitality he has so outraged. For he knows he has done this, and that there will surely be that storm of which the young cacique is apprehensive – a very tempest of indignation among the elders and friends of the deceased Naraguana, when they hear of the fate which has befallen the harmless stranger, so long living under their late chiefs protection. Therefore, notwithstanding the many promises he has made, not the slightest thought of performing any of them, or even going back on that trail, has Rufino Valdez. Instead, as he rides down the ford of the stream he is thinking to himself, it will be the last time he will have to wade across it, gleeful at the thought of having so well succeeded in what brought him over it at all. Pondering on something besides, another deed of infamy yet to be done, but for which he will not have to come so far up the Pilcomayo.

In spite of his self-gratulation, and the gleams of a joy almost Satanic, which now and then light up his dark sinister countenance, he is not without some apprehensions; this is made manifest by his behaviour as he rides along. Although making what haste he can, he does not rush on in a reckless or careless manner. On the contrary, with due caution, at every turn of the path, stopping and making survey of each new reach before entering upon it. This he did, as the ford opened to his view, keeping under cover of the bushes, till assured there was no one there; then, striking out into

the open ground, and riding rapidly for it. And while wading across the stream, his eyes are not upon the water, but sweeping the bank up and down with glances of keen scrutiny.

As he sees no one there, nor the sign of anyone having been – for it is not yet daylight, and too dark for him to note the tracks of Gaspar’s horse – he says with a satisfied air, “They’re not likely to be coming after the missing pair at so early an hour. Besides, it’s too soon. They’ll hardly be setting them down as lost till late last night, and so couldn’t have tracked them on here yet.”

Riding up out of the water, he once more draws rein by its edge, and sits regarding the *sumac* grove with an expression in his eyes strangely repulsive.

“I’ve half a mind to go up in there,” he mutters, “and see how things stand. I wasn’t altogether satisfied with the way we left them, and there’s just a possibility he may be still alive. The girl gave so much trouble in getting them parted, I couldn’t be quite sure of having killed him outright. If not, he might manage to crawl away, or they coming after in search of him —*Carrai!* I’ll make sure now. It can only delay me a matter of ten minutes, and,” he adds glancing up at the blade of his spear, “if need be, another thrust of this.”

Soon as forming his devilish resolve, the assassin gives his horse a prick of the spur, and passes on towards the *sumac* grove, entering at the same place as before, like a tiger skulking back to the quarry it has killed, and been chased away from.

Once inside the thicket, he proceeds along the *tapir* path, groping his way in the darkness. But he remembers it well, as well he may; and without going astray arrives at a spot he has still better reason to recall; that where, but a little more than twelve hours before, he supposes himself to have committed murder! Delayed along the narrow tortuous track, some time has elapsed since his entering among the *sumacs*. Only a short while, but long enough to give him a clearer light, for the day has meanwhile dawned, and the place is less shadowed, for it is an open spot where the sanguinary struggle took place.

It is sufficiently clear for him, without dismounting, to distinguish objects on the ground, and note, which at a glance he does, that one he expected to see is not to be seen. No murdered man there; no body, living or dead!

## Chapter Thirteen.

### A Party not to be pursued

For some seconds, Rufino Valdez is in a state of semi-bewilderment, from his lips proceeding exclamations that tell of surprise, but more chagrin. Something of weird terror, too, in the expression upon his sallow, cadaverous face, as the grey dawn dimly lights it up.

“*Mil demonios!*” he mutters, gazing distractedly on the ground. “What does this mean? Is it possible the *gringo’s* got away? Possible? Ay, certain. And his animal, too! Yes, I remember we left that, fools as we were, in our furious haste. It’s all clear, and, as I half anticipated, he’s been able to climb on the horse, and’s off home! There by this time, like enough.”

With this double adjuration, he resolves upon dismounting, to make better inspection of the place, and, if possible, assure himself whether his victim has really survived the murderous attack. But just as he has drawn one foot out of the stirrup and is balancing on the other, a sound reaches his ear, causing him to reseat himself in the saddle, and sit listening. Only a slight noise it was, but one in that place of peculiar significance, being the hoof-stroke of a horse.

“Good!” he ejaculates in a whisper, “it must be his.”

Harkening a little longer, he hears the sound again, apparently further off, and as his practised ear tells him, the distance increasing.

“It must be his horse,” he reiterates, still continuing to listen. “And who but he on the animal’s back? Going off? Yes; slowly enough. No wonder at that. Ha! he’s come to a halt. What’s the best thing for me to do?”

He sits silently considering, but only for a few seconds; then glancing around the glade, in which yester eve he had shed innocent blood, at the same time losing some of his own, he sees another break among the bushes, where the *tapir* path goes out again. Faint as the light still is, it shows him some horse-tracks, apparently quite fresh, leading off that way.

He stays not for more, but again plying the spur, re-enters the thicket, not to go back to the ford, but on in the opposite direction. The *tapir* path takes him up an acclivity, from the stream’s edge to the level of the higher plain, and against it he urges his horse to as much speed as the nature of the ground will permit. He has thrown away caution now, and presses forward without fear, expecting soon to see a man on horseback, but so badly crippled as to be easily overtaken, and as easily overcome.

What he does see, on reaching the summit of the slope, is something very different – two horses instead of one, with a man upon the back of each! And though one may be wounded and disabled, as he knows him to be, the other is not so, as he can well see. Instead, a man in full health, strength, and vigour, one Rufino Valdez fears as much as hates, though hating him with his whole heart. For it is Gaspar, the gaucho, once his rival in the affections of a Paraguayan girl, and successful in gaining them.

That the *vaqueano’s* fear now predominates over his antipathy is evident from his behaviour. Instead of dashing on after to overtake the horsemen, who, with backs towards him, are slowly retiring, he shows only a desire to shun them. True, there would be two to one, and he has himself but a single arm available – his left, broken and bandaged, being now in a sling. But then only one of the two would be likely to stand against him, the other being too far gone for light. Indeed, Halberger – for Valdez naturally supposes it to be he – sits drooped in his saddle, as though he had difficulty in keeping to it. Not that he has any idea of attacking them does the *vaqueano* take note of this, nor has he the slightest thought of attempting to overtake them. Even knew he that the wounded man were about to drop dead, he knows the other would be more than his match, with both his own arms sound and at their best, for they have been already locked in deadly strife with those of the gaucho, who could have taken his life, but generously forebore. Not for the world would Rufino Valdez again

engage in single combat with Caspar Mendez, and soon as setting eyes on the latter he draws bridle so abruptly that his horse starts back as if he had trodden upon a rattlesnake.

Quieting the animal with some whispered words, he places himself behind a thick bush, and there stays all of a tremble, the only thing steadfast about him being his gaze, fixed upon the forms of the departing travellers. So carefully does he screen himself, that from the front nothing is visible to indicate the presence of anyone there, save the point of a spear, with dry blood upon the blade, projecting above the bushes, and just touching the fronds of a palm-tree, its ensanguined hue in vivid contrast with the green of the leaves, as guilt and death in the midst of innocence and life!

Not till they have passed almost out of his sight, their heads gradually going down behind the culms of the tall pampas grass, does Rufino Valdez breathe freely. Then his nerves becoming braced by the anger which burns within – a fierce rage, from the old hatred of jealousy, interrupted by this new and bitter disappointment, the thwarting of a scheme, so far successful, but still only half accomplished – he gives utterance to a string of blasphemous anathemas, with threats, in correspondence.

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