

CHAPTER IX.

THE CATARACTS OF THE MADEIRA.

"On! on!" Martin Paz had exclaimed. And without saying a word, Don Vegal followed the Indian. His daughter!--he must find again his daughter! Mules were brought, prepared for a long journey among the Cordilleras; the two men mounted them, wrapped in their ponchos; large gaiters were attached by thongs above their knees; immense stirrups, armed with long spurs, surrounded their feet, and broad-brimmed Guayaquil hats sheltered their heads. Arms filled the holsters of each saddle; a carbine, formidable in the hands of Don Vegal, was suspended at his side. Martin Paz had encircled himself with his lasso, one extremity of which was fixed to the harness of his mule.

The Spaniard and the Indian spurred their horses to their utmost speed. At the moment of leaving the walls of the city they were joined by an Indian equipped like themselves. It was Liberta--Don Vegal recognized him; the faithful servant wished to share in their pursuit.

Martin Paz knew all the plains, all the mountains, which they were to traverse; he knew among what savage tribes, into what desert country the Sambo had conveyed his betrothed. His betrothed! he no longer dared give this name to the daughter of Don Vegal.

"My son," said the latter, "have you any hope in your heart?"

"As much as hatred and tenderness."

"The daughter of the Jew, in becoming my blood, has not ceased to be thine."

"Let us press on!" hastily replied Martin Paz.

On their way the travelers saw a great number of Indians flying to regain their ranchos amid the mountains. The defection of Martin Paz had been followed by defeat. If the émeute had triumphed in some places, it had received its death-blow at Lima.

The three cavaliers traveled rapidly, having but one idea, one object. They soon buried themselves among the almost impracticable passes of the Cordilleras. Difficult pathways circulated through these reddish masses, planted here and there with cocoanut and pine trees; the cedars, cotton-trees, and aloes were left behind them, with the plains covered with maize and lucerne; some thorny cactuses sometimes pricked their mules, and made them hesitate on the verge of precipices.

It was a difficult task to traverse the Cordilleras during these summer months; the melting of snows beneath the sun of June often made unforeseen cataracts spout from beneath the steps of the traveler; often frightful masses, detaching themselves from the summits of the peaks,

were engulfed near them in fathomless abysses!

But they continued their march, fearing neither the hurricane nor the cold of these high solitudes; they traveled day and night, finding neither cities nor dwellings where they might for a moment repose; happy if in some deserted hut they found a mat of tortora upon which to extend their wearied limbs, some pieces of meat dried in the sun, some calabashes full of muddy water.

They reached at last the summit of the Andes, 14,000 feet above the level of the sea. There, no more trees, no more vegetation; sometimes an oso or ucuman, a sort of enormous black bear, came to meet them. Often, during the afternoon, they were enveloped in those formidable storms of the Cordilleras, which raise whirlwinds of snow from the loftiest summits. Don Vegal sometimes paused, unaccustomed to these frightful perils. Martin Paz then supported him in his arms, and sheltered him against the drifting snow. And yet lightnings flashed from the clouds, and thunders broke over these barren peaks, and filled the mountain recesses with their terrific roar.

At this point, the most elevated of the Andes, the travelers were seized with a malady called by the Indians soroche, which deprives the most intrepid man of his courage and his strength. A superhuman will is then necessary to keep one from falling motionless on the stones of the road, and being devoured by those immense condors which display above their vast wings! These three men spoke little; each wrapped himself in the

silence which these vast deserts inspired.

On the eastern slope of the Cordilleras, they hoped to find traces of their enemies; they therefore traveled on, and were at last descending the chain of mountains; but the Andes are composed of a great number of salient peaks, so that inaccessible precipices were constantly rising before them.

Nevertheless they soon found the trees of inferior levels; the llamas, the vigonias, which feed on the thin grass, announced the neighborhood of men. Sometimes they met gauchos conducting their arias of mules; and more than one capataz (leader of a convoy) exchanged fresh animals for their exhausted ones.

In this manner they reached the immense virgin forests which cover the plains situated between Peru and Brazil; they began thenceforth to recover traces of the captors; and it was in the midst of these inextricable woods that Martin Paz recovered all his Indian sagacity.

Courage returned to the Spaniard, strength returned to Liberta, when a half-extinct fire and prints of footsteps proved the proximity of their enemies. Martin Paz noted all and studied all, the breaking of the little branches, the nature of the vestiges.

Don Vegal feared lest his unfortunate daughter should have been dragged on foot through the stones and thorns; but the Indian showed him some

pebbles strongly imbedded in the earth, which indicated the pressure of an animal's foot; above, branches had been pushed aside in the same direction, which could have been reached only by a person on horseback. The poor father comforted himself and recovered life and hope, and then Martin Paz was so confident, so skillful, so strong, that there were for him neither impassable obstacles nor insurmountable perils.

Nevertheless immense forests contracted the horizon around them, and trees multiplied incessantly before their fatigued eyes.

One evening, while the darkness was gathering beneath the opaque foliage, Martin Paz, Liberta and Don Vegal were compelled by fatigue to stop. They had reached the banks of a river; it was the river Madeira, which the Indian recognized perfectly; immense mangrove trees bent above the sleeping wave and were united to the trees on the opposite shore by capricious lianes (vines), on which were balancing the titipaying and the concoulies.

Had the captors ascended the banks? had they descended the course of the river? had they crossed it in a direct line? Such were the questions with which Martin Paz puzzled himself. He stepped a little aside from his companions, following with infinite difficulty some fugitive tracks; these brought him to a clearing a little less gloomy. Some footsteps indicated that a company of men had, perhaps, crossed the river at this spot, which was the opinion of the Indian, although he found around him no proof of the construction of a canoe; he knew that the Sambo might

have cut down some tree in the middle of the forest, and having spoiled it of its bark, made of it a boat, which could have been carried on the arms of men to the shores of the Madeira. Nevertheless, he was still hesitating, when he saw a sort of black mass move near a thicket; he quickly prepared his lasso and made ready for an attack; he advanced a few paces, and perceived an animal lying on the ground, a prey to the final convulsions--it was a mule. The poor, expiring beast had been struck at a distance from the spot whither it had been dragged, leaving long traces of blood on its passage. Martin Paz no longer doubted that the Indians, unable to induce it to cross the river, had killed it with the stroke of a poignard, as a deep wound indicated. From this moment he felt certain of the direction of his enemies; and returned to his companions, who were already uneasy at his long absence.

"To-morrow, perhaps, we shall see the young girl!" said he to them.

"My daughter! Oh! my son! let us set out this instant," said the Spaniard; "I am no longer fatigued, and strength returns with hope--let us go!"

"But we must cross this river, and we cannot lose time in constructing a canoe."

"We will swim across."

"Courage, then, my father! Liberta and myself will sustain you."

All three laid aside their garments, which Martin Paz carried in a bundle upon his head; and all three glided silently into the water, for fear of awakening some of these dangerous caïmans so numerous in the rivers of Brazil and Peru.

They arrived safely at the opposite shore: the first care of Martin Paz was to recover traces of the Indians; but in vain did he scrutinize the smallest leaves, the smallest pebbles--he could discover nothing; as the rapid current had carried them down in crossing, he ascended the bank of the river to the spot opposite that where he had found the mule, but nothing indicated the direction taken by the captors. It must have been that these, that their tracks might be entirely lost, had descended the river for several miles, in order to land far from the spot of their embarkation.

Martin Paz, that his companions might not be discouraged, did not communicate to them his fears; he said not even a word to Don Vegal respecting the mule, for fear of saddening him still more with the thought that his daughter must now be dragged through these difficult passes.

When he returned to the Spaniard, he found him asleep--fatigue had prevailed over grief and resolution; Martin Paz was careful not to awaken him; a little sleep might do him much good; but, while he himself watched, resting the head of Don Vegal on his knees and piercing with

his quick glances the surrounding shadows, he sent Liberta to seek below on the river some trace which might guide them at the first rays of the sun.

The Indian departed in the direction indicated, gliding like a serpent between the high brush with which the shores were bristling, and the sound of his footsteps was soon lost in the distance.

Thenceforth Martin Paz remained alone amid these gloomy solitudes: the Spaniard was sleeping peacefully; the names of his daughter and the Indian sometimes mingled in his dreams, and alone disturbed the silence of these obscure forests.

The young Indian was not mistaken; the Sambo had descended the Madeira three miles, then had landed with the young girl and his numerous companions, among whom might be numbered Manangani, still covered with hideous wounds.

The company of Sambo had increased during the journey. The Indians of the plains and the mountains had awaited with impatience the triumph of the revolt; on learning the failure of their brethren, they fell a prey to a gloomy despair; hearing that they had been betrayed by Martin Paz, they uttered yells of rage; when they saw that they had a victim to be sacrificed to their anger, they burst forth in cries of joy and followed the company of the old Indian.

They marched thus to the approaching sacrifice, devouring the young girl with sanguinary glances--it was the betrothed, the beloved of Martin Paz whom they were about to put to death; abuse was heaped upon her, and more than once the Sambo, who wished his revenge to be public, with difficulty wrested Sarah from their fury.

The young girl, pale, languishing, was without thought and almost without life amid this frightful horde; she had no longer the sentiment of motion, of will, of existence--she advanced, because bloody hands urged her onward; they might have abandoned her in the midst of these great solitudes--she could not have taken a step to have escaped death. Sometimes the remembrance of her father and of the young Indian passed before her eyes, but like a gleam of lightning bewildering her; then she fell again an inert mass on the neck of the poor mule, whose wounded feet could no longer sustain her. When beyond the river she was compelled to follow her captors on foot, two Indians taking her by the arm dragged her rapidly along, and a trace of blood marked on the sand and dead leaves her painful passage.

But the Sambo was no longer afraid of pursuit; he cared little that this blood betrayed the direction he had taken--he was approaching the termination of his journey, and soon the cataracts which abound in the currents of the great river sent up their deafening clamor.

The numerous company of Indians arrived at a sort of village, composed of a hundred huts, made of reeds interlaced and clay; at their approach,

a multitude of women and children darted toward them with loud cries of joy--more than one found there his anxious family--more than one wife missed the father of her children!

These women soon learned the defeat of their party; their sadness was transformed into rage on learning the defection of Martin Paz, and on seeing his betrothed devoted to death.

Sarah remained immovable before these enemies and looked at them with a dim eye; all these hideous faces were making grimaces around her, and the most terrific threats were uttered in her ears--the poor child might have thought herself delivered over to the torturers of the infernal regions.

"Where is my husband?" said one; "it is thou who hast caused him to be killed!"

"And my brother, who will never again return to the cabin--what hast thou done with him? Death! death! Let each of us have a piece of her flesh! let each of us have a pain to make her suffer! Death! death!"

And these women, with dishevelled hair, brandishing knives, waving flaming brands, bearing enormous stones, approached the young girl, surrounded her, pressed her, crushed her.

"Back!" cried the Sambo, "back! and let all await the decision of their

chiefs! This girl must disarm the anger of the Great Spirit, which has rested upon our arms; and she shall not serve for private revenge alone!"

The women obeyed the words of the old Indian, casting frightful glances on the young girl; the latter, covered with blood, remained extended on the pebbly shore.

Above this village, plunges, from a height of more than a hundred feet, a foaming cataract, which breaks against sharp rocks; the Madeira, contracted into a deep bed, precipitates this dense mass of water with frightful rapidity; a cloud of mist is eternally suspended above this torrent, whose fall sends its formidable and thundering roar afar.

It was in the midst of this foaming tempest that the unfortunate young girl was destined to die; at the first rays of the sun, exposed in a bark canoe above the cataract, she was to be precipitated with the mass of waters on the rude rocks against which the Madeira broke.

So the council of chiefs had decided; and they had delayed until the morrow the punishment of their victim, to give her a night of anguish, of torment, and of terror.

When the sentence was made known, cries of joy welcomed it, and a furious delirium seized the Indians.

It was a night of orgies--a night of blood and of horror; brandy increased the excitement of these wild natives; dances, accompanied with perpetual yells, surrounded the young girl, and wound their fantastic chains about the stake to which she was fastened. Sometimes the circle narrowed, and enlaced her in its furious whirls: the Indians ran through the uncultivated fields, brandishing blazing pine-branches, and surrounding the victim with light.

And it was thus until sunrise, and worse yet when its first rays illuminated the scene. The young girl was detached from the stake, and a hundred arms were stretched out to drag her to execution, when the name of Martin Paz involuntarily escaped her lips, and cries of hatred and of vengeance responded.

It was necessary to climb by steep paths the immense pile of rocks which led to the upper level of the river, and the victim arrived there all bloody; a canoe of bark awaited her a hundred paces above the fall; she was deposited in it, and fastened by bonds which entered her flesh.

"Vengeance and death!" exclaimed the whole tribe, with one voice.

The canoe was hurried on with increasing rapidity and began to whirl.

Suddenly a man appeared on the opposite shore-- It is Martin Paz! Beside him, are Don Vegal and Liberta.

"My daughter! my daughter!" exclaims the father, kneeling on the shore.

"My father!" replied Sarah, raising herself up with superhuman strength.

The scene was indescribable. The canoe was rapidly hastening to the cataract, in whose foam it was already enveloped.

Martin Paz, standing on a rock, balanced his lasso which whistled around his head. At the instant the boat was about to be precipitated, the long leathern thong unfolded from above the head of the Indian, and surrounded the canoe with its noose.

"My daughter! my daughter!" exclaimed Don Vegal.

"My betrothed! my beloved!" cried Martin Paz.

"Death!" yelled the savage multitude.

Meanwhile Martin Paz redoubles his efforts; the canoe remains suspended over the abyss; the current cannot prevail over the strength of the young Indian; the canoe is drawn to him; the enemies are far on the opposite shore; the young girl is saved.

Suddenly an arrow whistles through the air, and pierces the heart of Martin Paz. He falls forward in the bark of the victim; and, re-descending the current of the river in her arms, is engulfed with

Sarah in the vortex of the cataract.

A yell of triumph is heard above the sound of the torrent.

Liberta bore off the Spaniard amid a cloud of arrows, and disappeared with him.

Don Vegal regained Lima, where he died with grief and exhaustion.

The Sambo, who remained among his sanguinary tribes, was never heard of more.

The Jew Samuel kept the hundred thousand piasters he had received, and continued his usuries at the expense of the Limanian nobles.

Martin Paz and Sarah were, in their brief and final re-union, betrothed for eternity.