

# The Captive

By R. B. Cunninghame Graham

SOMEHOW or other none of the camp could sleep that night. It may have been that they were hungry, for they were just returning from a bootless attempt to overtake a band of Indians who had carried off the horses from an *estancia* on the Napostá. Night had fallen on them just by the crossing of a river, where a small grove of willows had given them sufficient wood to make a fire, for nothing is more cheerless than the fierce transient flame ("like a nun's love") that cow-dung and dry thistle-stems afford. Although they had not eaten since the morning when they had finished their last strips of *charqui*, they had a little *yerba*, and so sat by the fire passing the *maté* round and smoking black Brazilian cigarettes.

The stream, either a fork of the Mostazas or the head waters of the Napostá itself, ran sluggishly between its banks of rich alluvial soil. Just at the crossing it was poached into thick mud by half-wild cattle and by herds of mares, for no one rode where they were camped, in those days, but the Indians, and only they when they came in to burn the settlements. A cow or two which had gone in to drink and remained in the mud to die, their eyes picked out by the *caranchos*, lay swelled to an enormous size, and with their legs sticking out grotesquely, just as a soldier's dead legs stick out upon a battlefield.

From the still, starry night the mysterious noises of the desert rose, cattle coughed drily as they stood on rising ground, and now and then a stallion whinnied as he rounded up his mares. Vizcachas uttered their sharp bark and tuco-tucos sounded their metallic chirp, deep underneath the ground. The flowers of the chañar gave out their spicy scent in the night air, and out beyond the clumps of piquillin and molle the pampa grass upon the river-bank looked like a troop of ostriches in the moon's dazzling rays.

The southern cross was hung above their heads, Capella was just rising, and from a planet a yellow beam of light seemed to fall into the rolling waves of grass, which the light wind just stirred, sending a ghostly murmur through it, as if the sound of surf upon

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some sea which had evaporated thousands of years ago was echoing in the breeze.

A line of sand-hills ran beside the stream. Below their white and silvery sides the horses, herded by a man who now and then rode slowly to the fire to light a cigarette, grazed on the wiry grass. The tinkling bells of the *madrinas* had been muffled as there was still a chance the Indians might have cut the trail, and now and then the horse guard cautiously crawled up the yielding bank and gazed out on the plain, which in the moonlight looked like a frozen lake.

Grouped round the fire were most of the chief settlers on the Sauce Grande, Mostazas and the Napostá.

The brothers Milburn, who had been merchant sailors, dressed in cord breeches and brown riding-boots, but keeping, as it were, a link with ships in their serge coats, were there, sitting up squarely, smoking and spitting in the fire.

Next to them sat Martín Villalba, a wealthy cattle-farmer and major in the militia of Bahia Blanca. No one had ever seen him in his uniform, although he always wore a sword stuck underneath the girth of his *recao*. The light shone on his Indian features and was reflected back from his long hair, which hung upon his shoulders, as black and glossy as the feathers of a crow. As he sat glaring at the blaze he now and then put up his hand and listened, and as he did so, all the rest of those assembled listened as well, the man who had the *maté* in his hand holding it in suspense until Villalba silently shook his head, or, murmuring, "It is nothing," began to talk again. Spaniards and Frenchmen sat side by side with an Italian, one Enrique Clerici, who had served with Garibaldi in his youth, but now was owner of a *pulperia* which he had named "The Rose of the South," and in which hung a picture of his quondam leader, which he referred to as "my saint."

Claraz, the tall black-bearded Swiss, was there. He had lost one finger by a tiger's bite in Paraguay, and was a quiet, meditative man who had roamed all the continent, from Acapulco down to Punta Arenas, and hoped some day to publish an exhaustive work upon the flora of the Pampa, when, as he said, he found a philanthropic publisher to undertake the loss.

The German Friedrich Vögel, was book-keeper at an *estancia* called La Casa de Fierro, but being young and a good horseman had joined the others, making a contrast to them as he sat beside the fire in his town clothes, which, though they were all dusty and his trouser legs coated thick with mud, yet gave him the appearance of being on a picnic, which a small telescope that

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dangled from a strap greatly accentuated. Since he had started on the trail eight or nine days ago, he had Hispaniolised his name to Pancho Pajaro, which form, as fortune willed it, stuck to him for the remainder of his life in South America. Two cattle-farmers, English by nationality, known as El Facon Grande and El Facon Chico from the respective sizes of the knives they carried, talked quietly, just as they would have talked in the bow-window of a club, whilst a tall, grey-haired Belgian, handsome and tactiturn, was drawing horses' brands with a charred mutton bone as he sat gazing in the fire. Of all the company he alone kept himself apart, speaking but seldom, and though he had passed a lifetime on the plains, he never ventured his opinion except men asked for it, when it was taken usually as final, for everybody knew that he had served upon the frontier under old General Mancilla in the Indian wars.

A tall, fair, English boy, whose hair, as curly as the wool of a merino sheep, hung round his face and on his neck after the fashion of a Charles II. wig, was nodding sleepily.

Exaltacion Medina, tall, thin and wiry, tapped with his whip upon his boot leg, on which an eagle was embroidered in red silk.

He and his friend, Florencio Freites, who sat and picked his teeth abstractedly with his long silver-handled knife, were gauchos of the kind who always rode good horses and wore good clothes, though no one ever saw them work, except occasionally at cattle-markings. They both were Badilleros, that is, men from Bahia Blanca, and both spoke Araucano, having been prisoners amongst the Infidel, for their misfortunes as they said, although there were not wanting people who averred that their connection with the Indians had been in the capacity of renegades by reason of their crimes.

Some squatted cross-legged like a Turk, and some lay resting on their elbows, whilst others, propped against their saddles, sat with their eyes closed, but opened them if the wind stirred the trees, just as a sleeping cat peers through its eyelids at an unusual noise.

When the last *maté* had been drunk and the last cigarette end flung into the blazing brands and yet a universal sleeplessness seemed to hang in the air, which came in fierce, hot gusts out of the north, carrying with it a thousand cottony filaments which clung upon the hair and beards of the assembled band, Claraz suggested that it might be as well if some one would tell a story, for it was plain that, situated as they were, no one could sing a song. Silence fell on the group, for most of those assembled there had stories that they did not care to tell. Then the mysterious

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impulse that invariably directs men's gaze towards the object of their thoughts turned every eye upon the Belgian, who still was drawing brands on the white ashes of the fire with the burnt mutton bone. Raising his head he said: "I see I am the man you wish to tell the story, and as I cannot sleep an atom better than the rest, and as the story I will tell you lies on my heart like lead, but in the telling may perhaps grow lighter, I will begin at once."

He paused, and taking off his hat ran his hands through his thick, dark hair, flecked here and there with grey, hitched round his pistol so that it should not stick into his side as he leaned on his elbow, and turning to the fire, which shone upon his face, set in a close-cut, dark-brown beard, slowly began to speak.

"Fifteen,—no, wasn't it almost sixteen years ago—just at the time of the great Indian, Malon—invasion, eh? the time they got as far as Tapalquén and burned the *chacras* just outside Tandil, I was living on the Sauce Chico, quite on the frontier. . . . I used to drive my horses into the corral at night and sleep with a Winchester on either side of me. My nearest neighbour was a countryman of mine, young . . . yes, I think you would have called him a young man then. An educated man, quiet and well-mannered, yes, I think that was so . . . his manners were not bad.

"It is his story I shall tell you, not mine, you know. Somehow or other I think it was up on an expedition after the Indians, such as ours to-day, he came upon an Indian woman driving some horses. She had got separated from her husband, after some fight or other, and was returning to the tents. She might have got away, as she was riding a good horse . . . piebald it was, with both its ears slit, and the cartilage between the nose divided to give it better wind. Curious the superstitions that they have." Florencio Freitas looked at the speaker, nodded and interjected, "If you had lived with them as long as I have you would say so, my friend. I would give something to slit the cartilage of some of their Indian snouts. . . ." No one taking up what he had said, he settled down to listen, and the narrator once again began.

"Yes, a fine horse that piebald, I knew him well, a little quick to mount, but then that woman rode like a gaucho—as well as any man. As I was saying, she might have got away—so said my friend—only the mare of her *tropilla* had not long foaled, and either she was hard to drive or the maternal instinct in the woman was too strong for her to leave the foal behind . . . or she had lost her head or something—you can never tell. When my friend took her prisoner, she did not fight or try to get away, but looked

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at him and said in halting Spanish, ' Bueno, I am take prisoner, do what you like.' My friend looked at her and saw that she was young and pretty and that her hair was brown and curly, and fell down to her waist. Perhaps he thought—God knows what he did think. For one thing he had no woman in his house, for the last, an Italian girl from Buenos Aires, had run off with a countryman of her own, who came round selling saints—a *santero*, eh? As he looked at her, her eyes fell, and he could have sworn he saw her colour rise under the paint daubed on her face, but he said nothing as they rode back towards his rancho, apart from all the rest. They camped upon the head waters of the Quequen Salado, and to my friend's astonishment when he had staked out his horse and hers and put the hobbles on her mare, so that her *tropilla* might not stray, she had lit the fire and had put a little kettle on to boil. When they had eaten some tough *charqui*, moistened in warm water, she handed him a *maté* and stood submissively filling it for him till he had had enough. Two or three times he looked at her, but mastered his desire to ask her how it was that she spoke Spanish, and why her hair was brown.

"As they sat looking at the fire, it seemed somehow as if he had known her all his life, and when a voice came from another fire, ' You had better put the hobbles on that Indian mare, or she'll be back to the *querencia* before the moon is down,' it jarred on him, for somehow he vaguely knew his captive would not try to run away.

"So with a shout of ' All right, I'll look out,' to the other fires, he took his saddle and his ponchos and saying to the Indian woman, ' Sleep well, we start at daybreak,' left her wrapped up in saddle-cloths, with her feet towards the fire. An hour before the dawn, the camp was all astir, but my friend, though an early riser, found his captive ready, and waiting with a *maté* for him, as soon as he got up and shook the dew out of his hair, and buckled on his spurs.

"All that day they rode homewards, companions leaving them at intervals, as when they struck the Saucécito, crossed the Mostazas, just as it rises at the foot of the Sierra de la Ventana, or at the ruined rancho at the head waters of the Napostá. Generally, as the various neighbours drove their *tropillas* off, they turned and shouted farewell to the Indian woman and my friend, wishing them a happy honeymoon or something of the kind. He answered shortly, and she never appeared to hear, though he saw that she had understood. Before they reached his rancho he had learned a little of the history of the woman riding by his side. She told him, as Spanish slowly seemed to make its

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way back to her brain, that she was eight-and-twenty, and her father had been an *estanciero* in the province of San Luis ; who with her mother and her brothers had been killed in an invasion of the Indians eight years ago, and from that time she had lived with them, and had been taken by a chief whose name was Huinchan, by whom she had three sons. All this she told my friend mechanically, as if she had been speaking of another, adding, ' The Christian women pass through hell amongst the *Infidel*.' ” The narrator paused to take a *maté*, and Anastasio sententiously remarked, “ Hell, yes, double-heated hell : do you remember Ché, that Chilian girl you bought from that Araucan whose eye one of the Indian girls gouged out ? ” His friend Florencio showed his teeth like a wolf and answered, “ Caspita, yes, do you remember how I got even with her, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, as I once heard a priest say was God’s law ! ” The *maté* finished, the Belgian once again took up his tale.

“ When my friend reached his home he helped his captive off her horse, hobbled her mare, and taking her hand led her into the house, and told her it was hers.

“ She was the least embarrassed of the two, and from the first took up her duties as if she had never known another life.

“ Little by little she laid aside her Indian dress and ways, although she folded carefully, and laid by, her *chamál*, with the great silver pin shaped like a sun that holds it tight across the breast. Her ear-rings, shaped like an inverted pyramid, she put aside with the scarlet *vichu* that had bound her hair, which, when she was first taken, hung down her back in a thick mass of curls that had resisted all the efforts of the Indian women, aided by copious dressings of melted ostrich fat, to make straight like their own. Timidly she had asked for Christian clothes, and by degrees became again a Spanish woman, careful about her hair, which she wore high upon her head, careful about her shoes, and by degrees her walk became again the walk she had practised in her youth, when with her mother she had sauntered in the evening through the plaza of her native town, with a light swinging of her hips.

“ Her Indian name of Lincomilla gave place once more to Nievés and in a week or two some of the sunburn vanished from her cheeks.

“ All the time of her transformation my friend had watched the process as a man may watch the hour-hand on a clock, knowing it moves, but yet unable to discern the movement with his eyes.

“ Just as it seems a miracle when on a fine spring morning one

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awakes and sees a tree which overnight was bare, now crowned with green, so did it seem a miracle to him that the half-naked Indian whom he had captured, swinging her whip about her head and shouting to her horses, had turned into the Señorita Nievés, whilst he had barely seen the change. Something intangible seemed to have grown up between them, invisible, but quite impossible to pass, and now and then he caught himself regretting vaguely that he had let his captive slip out of his hands. Little by little their positions were reversed, and he who had been waited on by Lincomilla, found himself treating the Señorita Nievés with all the . . . how you say . . . 'egards' that a man uses to a lady in ordinary life.

“When his hand accidentally touched hers, he shivered, and then cursed himself for a fool for not having taken advantage of the right of conquest the first day that he led the Indian girl into his home. All would have then seemed natural, and he would have only had another girl to serve his *maté*, a link in the long line of women who had succeeded one another, since he first drove his cattle into the south camps, and built his rancho on the creek. Then came a time when something seemed to blot out all the world, and nothing mattered but the Señorita Nievés, whom he desired so fiercely that his heart stood still when she brushed past him in her household duties, yet he refrained from speaking, kept back by pride, for he knew after all that she was in his power in that lone rancho on the plains. Sleeping and waking she was always there. If he rode out upon the *boleada* she seemed to go with him; on his return there she was standing, waiting for him with her enigmatic smile, when he rode home at night.

“She on her side was quite aware of all he suffered, suffering herself just as acutely, but being able better to conceal her feelings he never noticed it, or saw the shadowy look that long-suppressed desire brings in a woman's eyes. Their neighbours, ordinary men and women, had no idea things were on such an exalted footing, and openly congratulated him on his good luck in having caught an Indian who had turned to a white girl. When he had heard these rough congratulations on his luck, he used to answer shortly, and catching his horse by the head, would gallop out upon the plain and come home tired, but with the same pain gnawing at his heart. How long they might have gone on in that way is hard to say, had not the woman—for it is generally they who take the first step in such things—suddenly put an end to it. Seeing him sitting by the fire one evening, and after having watched him follow her with his eyes as she came in and out, she walked up to him and laid her hand upon his shoulder,

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and as he started and a thrill ran through his veins, bent down her face and pressing her dry lips to his, said, 'Take me,' and slid into his arms.

"That was their courtship. From that time, all up and down the Sauce Chico, the settlers who looked on love as a thing men wrote about in books, or as the accomplishment of a necessary function without which no society could possibly endure, took a proprietary interest in the lovers, whom they called 'Los de Teruel' after the lovers in the old Spanish play, who loved so constantly.

"Most certainly they loved as if they had invented love and meant to keep it to themselves. Foolish, of course they were, and primitive, he liking to rush off into Bahia Blanca to buy up all the jewellery that he could find, to give her, and she, forgetting all the horrors of her life amongst the Indians, gave herself up to happiness as unrestrained as that of our first mother, when the whole world contained no other man but the one she adored.

"As in a day out on the southern plains, when all is still and the wild horses play, and from the lakes long lines of pink flamingoes rise into the air and seem translucent in the sun, when the whole sky becomes intensest purple, throwing a shadow on the grass that looks as if the very essence of the clouds was falling like a dew, the Indians say that a Pampero must be brewing, and will soon burst with devastating force upon the happy world, so did their love presage misfortune by its intensity."

"A strong, north wind is sure to bring a Pampero," interpolated one of the listeners round the fire.

"Yes, that is so, and the Pampero came accordingly," rejoined the story-teller.

"Months passed and still the neighbours talked of them with amazement, being used to see the force of passion burn itself out, just as a fire burns out in straw, and never having heard of any other kind of love, except the sort they and their animals enjoyed.

"Then by degrees Nievés became a little melancholy, and used to sit for hours looking out on the Pampa, and then come in and hide her head beneath her black Manila shawl, that shawl my friend had galloped to Bahia Blanca to procure, and had returned within two days, doing the forty leagues at a round gallop all the way.

"Little by little he became alarmed, and feared, having been a man whose own affections in the past had often strayed, that she was tired of him. To all his questions she invariably replied



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that she had been supremely happy, and for the first time had known love, which she had always thought was but a myth invented by the poets to pass the time away. Then she would cry and say that he was idiotic to doubt her for a moment, then catching him to her, crush him against her heart. For days together she was cheerful, but he, after the fashion of a man who thinks he has detected a slight lameness in his horse, but is not certain where, was always on the watch to try and find out what it was that ailed her, till gradually a sort of armed neutrality took the place of their love. Neither would speak, although both suffered almost as much as they had loved, until one evening as they stood looking out upon the Pampa yearning for one another, but kept apart by something that they felt, rather than knew was there, the woman with a cry threw herself into her lover's arms. Then with an effort she withdrew herself, and choking down her tears, said, 'I have been happy, dearest, happier by far than you can understand, happier than I think that it is ever possible to be, for any man. Think of my life, my father and my mother killed before my eyes, myself thrown to an Indian whom my soul loathed, then made by force the mother of his children—his and mine. Think what my life has been there in the Tolderias, exposed to the jealousy of all the Indian women, always in danger till my sons were born, and even then obliged to live for years amongst those savages and become as themselves.

"Then you came, and it seemed to me as if God had tired of persecuting me; but now I find that He or nature has something worse in store. I am happy here, but then there is no happiness on earth, I think. My children—his and mine—never cease calling me. I must return to them—and see, my horses all are fat, the foal can travel, and . . . you must think it has been all a dream, and let me go back to my master—husband—bear him more children and at last be left to die when I am old, beside some river, like other Indian wives. She dried her eyes, and gently touching him upon the shoulder looked at him sadly, saying, 'Now you know, dearest, why it is I have been so sad and made you suffer, though you have loaded me with love. Now that you know I love you more a hundred times than the first day, when, as you used to say, I took you for my own, you can let me go back to my duties and my misery, and perhaps understand.'

"Her lover saw her mind was fixed, and with an effort stammered, 'Bueno, you were my prisoner, but ever since I took you captive, I have been your slave . . . when will you go?'

"Let it be to-morrow, *sangre mia*, and at daybreak, for you must take me to the place where you first saw me, for it has

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become to me as it were a birthplace, seeing that there I first began to live.' Once more he answered, 'Bueno,' like a man in a dream, and led her sadly back into their house.

"Just as the first red streaks of the false dawn had tinged the sky they saddled up without a word.

"Weary and miserable, with great black circles round their eyes, they stood a moment, holding their horses by their *cabrestos*, till the rising sun just fell upon the doorway of the poor rancho where they had been so happy in their love.

"Without a word they mounted, the captive, once more turned to Lincomilla, dressed in her Indian clothes, swinging herself as lightly to the saddle as a man. Then gathering the horses all together, with the foal, now strong and fat running behind its mother, they struck into the plains.

"Three or four hours of steady galloping brought them close to the place where Lincomilla had been taken captive by the man who now rode silently beside her, with his eyes fixed on the horizon, like a man in a dream.

"'It should be here,' she said, 'close to that tuft of sarandis . . . yes, there it is, for I remember it was there you took my horse by the bridle, as if you thought that I was sure to run away, back to the Indians.'

"Dismounting, they talked long and sadly, till Lincomilla tore herself from her lover's arms and once more swung herself upon her horse. The piebald Pingo with the split ears neighed shrilly to the other horses feeding a little distance off upon the plain, then, just as she raised her hand to touch his mouth, the man she was about to leave for ever stooped down and kissed her foot which rested naked on the stirrup, after the Indian style. 'May the God of the Araucans, to whom you go, bless and encompass you,' he cried; 'my God has failed me,' and as he spoke she touched her horse lightly with the long Indian reins. The piebald plunged and wheeled round, and then struck into a measured gallop, as his rider, gathering her horses up before her, set her face westward, without once looking back.

"I . . . that is my friend, stood gazing at her, watching the driven horses first sink below the horizon into the waves of grass, the foal last disappearing as it brought up the rear, and then the horse that Lincomilla rode, inch by inch fade from sight, just as a ship slips down the round edge of the world. Her feet went first, then the *caronas* of her saddle, and by degrees her body, wrapped in the brown *chamál*.

"Lastly, the glory of her floating hair hung for a moment in his

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sight upon the sky, then vanished, just as a piece of seaweed is sucked into the tide by a receding wave."

"That's all," the story-teller said, and once again began to paint his horses' brands in the wood ashes with his mutton bone, as he sat gazing at the fire.

Silence fell on the camp, and in the still, clear night, the sound of the staked-out horses cropping the grass was almost a relief. None spoke, for nearly all had lost some kind of captive, in some way or other, till Claraz, rising, walked round and laid his hand upon the story-teller's shoulder. "I fear," he said, "the telling of the tale has not done anything to make the weight upon the heart any the lighter.

"All down the coast, as I remember, from Mazatlán to Acapulco, pearl-fishers used to say, unless a man made up his mind to stay below the water till his ears burst, that he would never be a first-rate pearl-diver.

"Some men could never summon up the courage, and remained indifferent pearl-divers, suffering great pain, and able to remain only a short time down in the depths, as their ears never burst. It seems to me that you are one of those . . . but, I know I am a fool, I like you better as you are."

He ceased, and the grey light of dawn fell on the sleepless camp on the north fork of the Mostazas (or perhaps the Napostá); it fell upon the smouldering fire, with Lincomilla's lover still drawing horses' marks in the damp ashes, and on the group of men wrapped in their ponchos, shivering and restless with the first breath of day.

Out on the plain, some of the horses were lying down beside their bell-mares. Others stood hanging their heads low between their feet, with their coats ruffled by the dew.