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THE TWO HORSEMEN

Adolfo Costa du Rels

(BOLIVIA)

Translated by Helen B. MacMillan

THE ROAD which leads from Challapata to Potosí, now seldom used by travelers, is one of the most desolate and unlucky highways in existence. Long before the Spanish Conquest, it climbed over mountains and burrowed through valleys, changing its course as hamlets sprang into existence, in order to keep them in touch with each other. Since then it has become a trail with deep cuts and narrow passes, although innkeepers insist that it can still be followed through the underbrush along the precipices. And so, in certain stretches, in spite of its age and difficulty, the old road justifies its existence by the directness of its route.

A traveler wishing to go from Challapata to Potosí plans in advance where he will stop for the night. These resting places are fixed at equal distances, according to the space which a mule can easily cover between dawn and sunset. Anyone who ventures into these regions must be sure to reach an inn before night sets in, for the high plains are treacherous when dusk overshadows them, and give rise to terrifying visions. The Indians insist that one must never disturb the slumbers of Pachamama, the terrible goddess of the desert, the mountains, and the valleys. The tale which follows is proof of this.

It was in 1889 in the midst of winter. Yocalla was the last stop where travelers could spend the night on their way to Potosí. Picture to yourself a building clinging to the saddle between two hoary mountains, 4,100 meters above the sea, half hidden by its roof of straw and mud, whose adobe walls have been so battered by the rain and the wind that it bears an aspect of extreme old age and poverty.

Near by, a few Indian huts, almost always deserted, lifted their conical earthen roofs. A high wall with a single door acted as a stockade to shelter it from the wind and the dangers which stalk at night in solitary spots like these. It boasted of three rooms only, three parallel niches in a row opening onto a balcony at ground level, looking out into the patio. Behind was a courtyard where the mules belonging to the post dragged out a monotonous life.

On this particular day, Don Cristóbal Quespi, the innkeeper, had as usual little to do; he squatted against the wall under his varicolored poncho, and contemplated an empty gorge which bit by bit was filling with dust. He was a half-breed with a sunburned face where the pits of smallpox took on the appearance of pale islands among the thick whitish stubble of his beard. His eyes were watery, lifeless, foundering under lids continually watered by faulty tear ducts.

The night before, in order to get rid of his boredom, he had got drunk all by himself. Today as he brooded over some new grouch his gaze wandered, and an expression of melancholy drew down the corners of his mouth. Who can ever tell what a taciturn Indian is thinking about as he chews his cud of coca, squatting in the doorway?

Suddenly a woman, who served him as both mistress and servant, made her appearance, disheveled and in rags, and addressed a few words to him. Don Cristóbal looked at the sky which was clouding over. He made a long face, exclaiming, "Rotten weather on the way!"

"It will probably snow tonight," said the woman.

"What do we care?" Cristóbal replied in a harsh voice. "The mail came yesterday. But it will go hard with anybody who gets caught! I'm going to lay in some fodder."

Then, in order to be prepared for any possible guest, he began in sluggish fashion to gather the heaps of dry straw which he had dropped in the patio for this purpose.

Daylight was on the way, and with it came a strong gust of wind which dashed sand against the stockade and threatened to sweep the Indian huts away like so many dried leaves.

Cristóbal was about to close the door of the enclosure when someone whom he instantly recognized entered at a trot, mounted on a black horse—a horse so black that he seemed to be dragging night behind him.

"Good evening. God be with you, Estévez," said the innkeeper.

"Good evening, God be with you, Cristóbal."

Thus they exchanged the customary pious evening salutation. In these desolate spots everything is entrusted to God.

The innkeeper hurried forward, respectful and smiling. The rider whom he had called Estévez, having alighted from his horse, handed him the reins, and wearily entered the house with which he seemed to be well acquainted.

In the room set aside for travelers, he was removing the heavy poncho which fell to his heels, when the Indian woman came in with a brazier of live coals. Again, through custom, they exchanged the casual, humble salutation spoken in a plaintive voice: "Good evening. God be with you, Señor."

As soon as the woman had retired, Estévez held his reddened hands over the fire.

He was a stout man of perhaps forty years. From his manner he might have been a miner or a merchant. His high cheekbones, half-closed eyes, ruddy complexion told the story of his origin and the reason for his long trips over the *puna*. Thick mustaches purposely hid his mouth where two sharp canines—I almost called them tusks—projected over his lower lip, giving him the disagreeable aspect of a tough customer. Very well-known in that region, from Huayna-Potosí to Huanchaca, he was mixed up in some shady undertakings involving mines which had struck it rich. His business was to buy at a low price the high-content metallic ores which the workmen stole by hiding it under their clothing when they left their work. He was both accomplice and instigator—what is popularly known as a professional fence, a *rescatador*.

In every season—winter, as well as summer—he visited the mines in search of a new vein, making cautious inquiries as to the probabilities, stirring up greed among the miners, bribing them, right under the nose of the mine-owner, who could do nothing about it. But according to certain gossip, the money which he earned this way slipped rapidly from his fingers. Estévez was a great gambler and fond of women.

"How's business?" asked Cristóbal, sticking his pointed, weasel-like snout around the doorframe.

"Hum! it's hardly worth the trouble," the *rescatador* dryly replied.

"Are you staying in Pososí long?" asked Cristóbal.

"Two weeks."

"Did you know that the Amigos Mine at Colquechaca had struck a good vein?"

"Ah?"

"Somebody who came from there told me about it on Monday."

"A vein, you say?"

"Well, it's really a lode of pure silver—the rich kind called 'ruby'—it sounds almost fantastic."

"Ah!"

"You ought to go to Colquechaca, Don Luis."

"Maybe I will, Cristóbal; I have a partner there . . . a friend."

Estévez's eyes lighted up with little rapid flashes; he stretched out his hands towards the brazier at the risk of burning them, such was the dryness of his rootlike fingers. Then he was silent, thinking:

Ah, those Colquechaca veins, they are marvelous, even if they are undependable. The miners follow them for years, and both men and capital are lost in the terrible fight underground against the rock and water which take turns in obstructing the work. Then one fine day, when fate decrees that enough lives have been sacrificed, the metal suddenly appears. Now it is a vein coiled like a splendid serpent with its head and tail hidden in the dark depths of the earth; again it is a large block, a huge nut of silver hidden within the dark fruit of a mountain. Then prosperity returns, and gaiety expressed in crude drunkenness, the inevitable results of good luck.

Estévez kept dreaming along these lines. Greed, ambition, and daring—a fearsome trilogy—kept chasing through his mind. "I certainly shall have to go to Colquechaca," he muttered between his teeth.

Suddenly the dog began to bark.

"Is somebody coming?" asked Estévez.

"I don't believe so," Cristóbal replied.

But the dog was protesting against something, to judge by his ceaseless, obstinate howls; and Cristóbal, followed by the *rescatador*, went to see who—at this hour—might have been stranded in those treacherous shadows.

"Mine host! Mine host!" called a weak voice from the stockade gate.

The innkeeper and Estévez went to the gate. Cristóbal opened it, and a white horse—looking all the whiter in contrast with the blackness of the night—entered slowly, his ears drooping, then stopped. The rider apparently had let the reins fall, but did not alight, remaining upright as if glued to his mount.

"Kindly help me," he said. The innkeeper and Estévez drew near. "My hands are completely frozen . . . kindly untie these cords.

I had myself tied on for fear that I would fall asleep or faint. What can you expect at my age? How hard the knot is! Ouch—the cold has turned the leather to iron.”

Clouds cast further darkness over the patio. Through his sense of touch alone Cristóbal had to undo the ropes which tied the strange traveler to his saddle, and while he was doing so heard him murmur: “What would have become of me if this noble animal had not stopped here by instinct? I would have died of cold, for I no longer could see a thing. My eyes had gone back on me. I must have left my feet somewhere behind on the road; I can't feel them at all.”

He tried to rise in his saddle, but in vain. Estévez and Cristóbal had to lift him down and carry him into the building. There, two good swallows of “singani,” a type of brandy well known in the Cinti-Bolivia region, and the heat from the brazier brought him back to consciousness sooner than could be expected. A slight color flowed into his cheeks, his eyes lit up, and soon he was able to thank his host quite calmly.

Since it was already very late, Estévez invited his chance companion to share the frugal meal which the Indian woman had prepared for him. While they ate, they rapidly became acquainted. Thus the *rescatador* learned that the man who questioned him was a Spaniard called Cabralín, a fine old man, with a thick white beard like a waterfall. He had a Roman nose, a frank smile, was fluent but slow of speech, and his dialect was that used by the Bretons of Spain, the Guipuscoanos.

Cristóbal, who had just entered the room, complained of the solitude and the cold. Coming from Cochabamba where the climate is milder and whither he had often dreamed of returning, he was, like all Indians, carefree and fatalistic. Only when he was talking with others, with the passing travelers, did this nostalgia for his native meadows seem to oppress him.

“They say that this road is bewitched, and you must have passed over the bridge,” he remarked to the recent arrival.

“Yes, there was a bridge about two leagues away, one of the most sinister places I have ever seen. I passed it as night was falling.”

“That was lucky, for they call it the Devil's Bridge,” said Cristóbal. “Anyone who reaches there at night finds the fiend waiting for him and has to pay with his life.” The Spaniard smiled ironically. “Ah, don't smile, Sir!”

“What, you believe in this foolishness?” Estévez asked mockingly,

apparently waking from the thoughts in which he had been absorbed.

"All I can say is," added the Indian in a hushed voice, "nobody gets by that spot at midnight. Eight years ago, two travelers refused to listen to me and in order to take advantage of the moonlight started out after supper. Dios mío! Their bodies were found a few days later under that cursed bridge with their faces completely burned away, black as hell. . . . Many others have undoubtedly died in like manner, according to reports. I don't believe all they say, but I do know about those two, for I saw them. God does not dwell near that region, I can assure you. It was along the very road which passes in front of this house that the Spaniards carried their treasure from Potosí, three hundred years ago. All the worst human instincts were their companions. On the Hill of the Three Crosses, not far from here, the wicked Tola, one of the leaders under Tomás Catari, gave the signal for the most terrible and frightful of Indian uprisings. That was almost a hundred years ago. . . ."

The innkeeper's tone was so serious that neither of the travelers dared to smile. Estévez, with the gentle curiosity so typical of the half-breed, asked a few straightforward, indiscreet questions which the Spaniard avoided with ill-concealed distrust.

"What was he going to Potosí for? Did he intend to remain there a while? Was he perchance going to visit some relative there? A sister, maybe . . . ?"

Estévez could find out nothing. The most he could learn was that Cabralín had just come to Bolivia and was going to Potosí for the first time.

"What time are you planning to leave?" Estévez asked Cabralín.

"At dawn. I certainly don't want night to overtake me again."

"But it is no use to start too early, Señor, since the day's journey from here is shorter than the others were. I should be glad to accompany you. In order to reach Potosí before nightfall, there will be time enough if we leave at eight. That way we can avoid the frightful cold of early dawn."

"Yes, that is true, certainly."

"It's dangerous, too," insisted the *rescatador*. "Relax and get a good sleep, for you need worry no longer. I am an experienced traveler. This is the thirtieth trip I have made to Potosí so I certainly should know the road, and I shall be very happy to help you in any way I can."

"I am very grateful to you, Sir, and shall probably take advantage of your kind offer," said the Spaniard.

"If I don't wake up before dawn, as will very likely be the case, I beg you to shake me until I do," said the *rescatador* suddenly. "Meantime, please excuse me and allow me to get some rest, for I am dead tired."

Each of them on his *poyo* or sleeping platform wrapped himself in his poncho, fully dressed, with his saddle for a pillow. Estévez blew out the candle. From time to time a few noises could be heard—the mules kicking to ward off the cold, or the dog barking and barking, and the monotonous sound of the wind struggling with the night.

It was evidently quite late when Estévez was awakened by a realization that he was cold. No ray of light yet penetrated through the chinks in the door; the yard was hushed in silence; outside all was dark with not a star to deceive the cocks who were eagerly awaiting the dawn.

The *rescatador*, after huddling down in his covers, shivering, thought he heard his neighbor talking to him. "What do you want?" he asked. The Spaniard made no reply. Moments passed. . . . A few words reached Estévez's ears quite clearly, but he thought, "The old man is dreaming . . . probably just as I did about those stupid ideas of Cristóbal's."

The voice became more audible. Instead of a jumble of incoherent words, it became a long monologue with slight pauses, as if his memory had brief lapses. Estévez, curious and intrigued as usual, sat up on his bed and listened. This is more or less what he heard Cabralín saying in his deep sleep: "George, I promise you we will get there . . . the directions are clear enough. You remember what the Marquis told us? Poor old man. God must have taken him to his bosom. He wanted so much to cross the ocean, come to Potosí, and get the hidden treasure which his ancestors put away in . . . in . . . 1631 it was . . . Yes, that long ago. Where did you put the parchment? Is it in the chest? But I can't open the chest . . . it is tight . . . it has rusted. It has stood for more than two centuries. Where is Antonio? And Basilia? My God, we will miss the boat! Bah! Stay here, then, you fools! I will find the treasure by myself . . . missing the boat! Yes, alone . . . I, Jaime Moreno, count of Horellana . . . Here's what I'll do . . . I'm not too old . . . I'll get there . . ."

The voice became hoarse and the sentences unintelligible, as if the sleeping man were choking on his words.

Estévez became all ears and wondered whether his neighbor was suffering from a nightmare or whether he was talking in his sleep about actual happenings.

A treasure? Bah! He had heard gossip about so many such. . . . And yet he knew that one had indeed been found by the Franciscans at Potosí in about 1870, and that the secret was guarded for fear that the tyrants then ruling might take it from them. Estévez had learned this from a son of the mason who had helped the monks in their digging, the very man who after his father's death had come to him and tried to sell him a bowl of massive gold. Later, when he was hard pressed, he in turn had sold the bowl to a Jewish merchant. Yes, Bolivia is the country of hidden treasures buried by the Spaniards long ago. The old man certainly had skillfully dodged all his questions. Why? Because they embarrassed him. There was no doubt that he was going to Potosí on business which he wished to keep secret. And his impatience to arrive at the first possible moment, at any price? An old man does not leave his homeland to try his fortune in America; that is for youth to do. He must have come on a pressing and definite errand. A hidden treasure. They are well hidden in the Bolivian earth, but the site of such a treasure is usually to be found in some old document in Spain, and is only discovered by chance; and that was just what the old man was saying in his sleep. There was no doubt of it. Cabralín—an alias taken by the Count of Horellana—Cabralín had just come directly from Europe. The site of the hidden treasure must be given in some document which he kept in his purse. Then Estévez remembered that when the old man was going to bed he had tapped his chest and then carefully buttoned his coat after making the sign of the cross, pretending he wore an amulet. A hidden treasure! Now he would no longer act as *rescatador*, subject to scorn and suspicion. His fortune had at last arrived, thanks to chance, the God who favors the bold. A serpent whispered in his conscience. Could he get hold of that purse? No, the old man would wake up, would call. Better take no chance of a scandal.

All these reflections went back and forth in his mind. He began making plans; from now on, he would stay right by Cabralín and once in Potosí would become his faithful shadow, following in his footsteps and watching every move he made. A treasure, by Jove. And one with

no owner. He would get his share, he, Estévez the vagrant *rescatador*. Finally ambition, greed, and wild ideas got mixed up in his mind, then faded out as he went off to sleep, overcome by fatigue.

The next day he was awakened by Cristóbal's shouts.

"Senor Estévez, Senor Estévez, it is time to leave if you are going to Colquechaca instead of Potosí. Besides, it is beginning to snow."

"What time is it?"

"After nine."

"It can't be! How could I sleep so late?" Estévez stopped abruptly. "And how about the other man?"

"He left at dawn in spite of my warnings. He is no longer young, and in weather like this! He didn't want to wake you since you had said you wished to get a good rest. He drank a big cup of very hot tea with singani and then made me tie him on his horse, apparently a custom of his. Even before it was light he started off at a gallop. He's a little mad, I'm sure. But more generous than usual . . . he paid me with a fifty-dollar bill and since I had no change for it told me to keep it all. 'If you have a patron saint,' he said, 'say a prayer to him for me, innkeeper. I need to have luck on my side. . . .'"

Estévez made his preparations for the trip without paying much attention to Cristóbal's chatter. He was obsessed by one idea: to overtake Cabralín at any cost and never to let go of him. In ten minutes everything was ready. Once mounted, he bent towards the innkeeper who had come to see him off and said, "If you happen to have another saint in reserve, pray to him for me. That will be a good way to tell which saint has the more power, for I, too, need to have luck on my side."

"Ah, Senor Estévez, don't joke. You mustn't make fun of the saints!"

Before him extended the Andean tableland, transfigured by the magic of the snow. Gusts of wind followed each other rapidly; howled by as if they were trying to devour each other. The struggle to breathe was painful; he felt as though his head were being used as a battering ram against a huge block of ice and as though, when he followed through the hole his head had made, he was filling his hands and face with icy splinters. A strange weight bent his shoulders down. An inert force pressed upon him from all sides. The treacherous cold of these heights, intensified by the lash of the wind, was trying to get the best of him; that cold of the *puna* might easily bring on an apoplectic

stroke; to him this fear was like a mirage of death. The *rescatador's* unduly sensitive heart became a helpless thermometer in which the mercury could go no lower. His feet seemed shod with ice; his mummified hands no longer felt the reins; his stiff muscles instinctively pressed against the flanks of his mount as he galloped on over the icy crust. In every direction, the tableland and the mountains stretched away into infinity, and around his body swept the wind with its saw-like teeth and incessant lament.

The road led slowly up towards the Cordillera de los Frailes, one of the most hostile ranges of the Andes.

Estévez, bent over the arch of the saddle, clinging to it, resisted the feeling of physical discomfort which threatened him. With an awkward gesture as if his fingers were weighed down by rings of bronze, he managed to get hold of a bottle of cognac which he was carrying in his saddlebags, and took a swallow. His whole body lit up with a warm flash. Again he wrapped himself in his poncho, as if he were afraid that the wind might blow out the little flame that drink had kindled. His horse climbed the hill at a slow pace. The *rescatador's* eyes suddenly gleamed with delight: he had discovered fresh tracks of horsehoofs. Cabralín!

He could not be very far away, especially in such a storm. The old idea came back to dance under Estévez's cranium like a fantastic roulette ball! The thought that he might obtain his share of the treasure which the old man had come from the other side of the sea to find; that he must get his share, cost what it might. And, as a natural result, he spurred his horse with a nervous prick of the spur.

An old Indian woman, returning with difficulty to her cabin, told him that an old traveler with a white beard had passed a long time ago. Then Estévez, without heeding the hunger which was beginning to gnaw at his vitals, whipped his horse and started to follow in Cabralín's footsteps, like a hunting dog.

The snow had stopped falling. The wind swept away the clouds, and a bit of blue appeared in the sky, like a bright window. The horse started off at a gallop. The sensation of speed and the cold air made Estévez somewhat sleepy and his brain held only one idea. The light was failing bit by bit, in spite of the white glow from the earth. Estévez took another drink in order better to resist the frightful combination of night and snow. Then he resumed his progress, with eyes ever on the alert.

Suddenly his watchful glance rested on something, a few hundred yards ahead, a black spot foreshortened like a Chinese shadow against the light background of the road. The silhouette of a traveler going slowly . . . slowly . . . the step of a horse, apparently a weary one. Estévez's heart almost stood still. . . . It is he, he thought. But how strange, he does not seem very exhausted. As he went forward, Cabralín—for it was he—seemed to slow up more and more. When he was only a short distance away, Estévez cried, "Hey—my friend—heh!"

Cabralín did not reply, nor even turn his head.

A few more paces and Estévez caught up with him.

"Good evening, Sir." Cabralín did not answer.

Estévez stopped. The other did the same. "Come, come, Sir, what is the matter? Are you joking?"

Cabralín with his face hidden by his hood, kept silence. Estévez felt a violent shiver run through his whole body. He came a little nearer but did not risk touching the old man or speaking to him again, fearing a repulse. A strong gust of wind passed by and disclosed Cabralín's face. Estévez began to tremble, for the Spaniard was looking at him with fixed, hard eyes. "Señor, Señor," stuttered Estévez. Cabralín, from the depths of the silence into which he was withdrawn, continued to pierce him with a steely glance. Five minutes passed thus, interminably sinister. Estévez recovered his composure. Was Cabralín dead or had he merely fainted? And the key to the treasure? The little leather purse hanging around his neck? The time had come, he must act.

Estévez thrust a cautious hand toward the old man's breast, but drew it back sharply. It seemed to him that the eyes which were looking fixedly at him had winked. He looked at his victim again. But ambition, like a drink of alcohol taken straight, gave his courage an edge. The *rescatador* leaned towards the old man, unbuttoned his overcoat, vest, and shirt; his head was wobbling without breath, his jaws were stiff, the hairy chest he touched was cold and rigid as a stone. Cabralín must certainly be dead, and he could rob him without worrying about any defense.

Estévez rose satisfied, opened the purse, and grasped the object which was to bring him a fortune of which only yesterday he had had no idea.

The night, the horrible winter's night on a *puna*, was the willing

accomplice in this profanation. As if a wildness had suddenly possessed it, a sinister madness dressed in black—it shook its immense scepter of stars like a rattle in Estévez's ears, exciting him still more, and making him lose his head completely.

Could one be sure that Estévez had an idea in that moment? No. All his being was centered on himself, drinking in the marvelous sensation that he had found a fortune. Millions? Or just a few coins. Bah! what difference . . . the important thing is to have at last a bit of luck, to have mastered fate and made it submissive to his desires, to have turned away the curse of destiny.

Estévez breathed in the rarified air of the *puna*, while the Spaniard, indifferent to the formidable aspect of the northern sky, faced the storm with a stoic and impenetrable face.

The *rescatador* felt that under his benumbed skin his blood was again becoming congealed. Cabralín had winked a second time. Yes, there was no doubt about it; the eyelids had fluttered twice. Then he was not dead? Why, then, had he allowed himself to be robbed like a dead tree stump? Estévez did not dare move, did not even dare breathe, was incapable of the least gesture. A thousand foolish ideas took possession of him.

There was no doubt that Cabralín had been seized with a fainting fit and was just reviving and might even notice that he had been robbed of his precious purse. And then? What could he do, only a *rescatador*, a trader of bad reputation, whose ill luck trailed him, a pariah dogged by misfortune over all the Bolivian roads. Should he make an end of the old man?

Ah, yes! Estévez drew out his revolver and its plated barrel glittered in his fingers like a jewel. In spite of the cold which almost made him drop it, he pointed it at the breast of the obstinate old man who would neither see nor hear anything. Then, in a low voice, seized by a last scruple, Estévez murmured: "Will you give me half? You see, I am reasonable. Yes, or no? Come, speak, your eyes disturb me . . . speak. You are not dead. I just saw your eyelids move. You pretend to be clever, but you are old and weak. I will help you, do not be afraid. I am a good companion, do not be suspicious of me. Can't you say something? Do you refuse?"

The villain, transformed by fear into a hypocrite with a honeylike voice, might as well have been talking in an unknown tongue, for apparently Cabralín did not understand him. Perhaps, in his opinion,

such a hypocritical cynicism did not deserve as much as a smile. His impassivity had been changed into a cutting disdain and a silent one.

"Speak to me, or I will go ahead and kill you," blustered Estévez. Only a gust of wind answered him.

Then the *rescatador*, with a furious gesture, pressed the trigger and Cabralín must have received the bullet directly in his breast.

But whether because he pulled violently on his reins or because the report frightened his horse, the latter gave a start which would have thrown the best of riders to the ground. Cabralín, however, remained on his back without much effort. Then Estévez's anger turned to worried amazement, and when he saw the Spaniard come toward him, at a disdainful and imperturbable pace, covering him with his lengthening shadow like that of an enormous willow, he pulled his hat down to his ears and fled, crying, "Heavens, the man is no longer human."

The wind also fled before him, intractable and fearsome, and again clawed at his face. Under the horse's hoofs the road stretched out all white, like a rope.

In the background, on top of other ridges, the Hill of Potosí raised its dark pyramid, standing out against the mottled background of the sky. The boundary line was quite near. Soon the road would wind, like a lasso, around the mountain. Estévez found that he had to slow down his pace. Now that his horse no longer was galloping, he heard the clear sound of a stream falling down the mountain side, its song alternating with the rhythm of his unruly heart. The beast with difficulty went on, step by step, moving its ears in the direction of the wind; his breath left drops of frost on his muzzle. The half-melted snow shone in the starlight. But immediately Estévez rose up in his stirrups and listened desperately, attentively. He felt a strange mixture of sounds around him which he could neither place nor recognize.

That dry sound—was it the distant gallop of an animal, or was it his heart? Was it the stream? Were they perhaps the mysterious sounds which sometimes shake mountains laden with metal? He stopped, and bending over in his saddle, observed the air, the shadow, and himself. His brows contracted. There was no longer any doubt. Echoes multiplied the gallop of one, two, or three chargers. The noise came nearer. Estévez dared not move. Suddenly around an elbow in the road, rising in his stirrups, peaceful and proud as a St. George, appeared Cabralín. His cape floated in the wind and his horse was coming on at a slight trot.

Estévez's spurs pierced the belly of his horse. Panting and frightened under the threat of the whip and the spurs, he started up. Without taking into account the number of miles they had covered, without food or drink, the *rescatador* implacably urged his horse into a gallop faster than the wind. He felt he must reach Potosí as soon as he possibly could in order to throw his adversary off the trail, now that the papers had changed hands. Even if his horse should die of it, later, he must gallop . . . gallop . . . escape by terrified flight from the frightful conspiracy of the open spaces, from the phantoms and the deceptive starlight. . . .

Cabralín must have been left behind, far behind. "An old man like that is no good," thought Estévez. "He can't stand much buffeting. He will soon be overcome by fatigue and cold."

This idea calmed him; once at the foot of a large hill which he had descended like an avalanche, he stopped. Rivulets of perspiration furrowed his face, but he didn't have time to mop them, nor to verify the contents of the precious purse. There, above, on top of the crest, Cabralín was already in sight, armed to the teeth like one of those wandering knights who in olden times used to travel over the highways to right the wrongs of the world. As in ancient Spanish paintings, the stars made this fascinating apparition sparkle with golden gleams.

A distant neigh broke the silence. Estévez's horse started to reply, but his master did not give him time to complete it, for then through the dark of the night bespattered with metallic reflections, the nightmare of an endless pursuit began.

Whenever Estévez tried to rest Cabralín would rise up, tireless as a youth; if Estévez spurred his horse on in an attempt to gain ground, Cabralín without loss of time would dash in pursuit like a falcon pouncing on his prey; if Estévez sought a favorable wind, or the shelter of rocks, imploring the aid to his terror of the patron spirits of the mountain sides, Cabralín mute and as prophetic of doom as a judge, sure that he would reach him, came along without foolish stops or useless gallops. Bit by bit Estévez used up his strength. He underwent the horrible sensation of getting involved in the loops of the road which wound around like white ribbons. Cabralín, insensible to the wind or the cold, serene, strong and light, disdainful of warnings or threats, showed a supernatural toughness. Nothing could hold him back. His pace had the ineluctable regularity of fate.

The road broadened. All in silver, like a magic footprint, it made

the horrifying pursuit an easy one. Was Cabralín going to catch up? His uncannily long shadow became even more menacing than he was himself. His white horse came on in great strides, and the noise of his breathing reached Estévez's ears.

Pale, dishevelled, cursing, imploring, threatening, the *rescatador* was seized by a frightful anxiety. He sunk his head between his shoulders as if someone had seized him by the scruff of the neck, his right hand desperately clutching the purse, and no tutelary god of the shadows hastened to conceal the robbery. His teeth were chattering so hard he could scarcely continue his insults and prayers. Cold and fear combined to make one gigantic force which was trying to throttle him.

He dared not even turn his head, for at his side he felt the presence of the terror. His reddened spurs grazed once more the wounds already inflicted in his horse's flanks. Complaining, panting, its tongue torn by the bit, it too was seized with an inexplicable terror, and only by a supreme effort succeeded in escaping from the silent pursuer. Its gallop was almost supernatural, its hoofs barely touched the ground, leaving a slight print, immediately blotted out by the wind. As by a miracle its strength was reborn and its wounds scarcely bled; its panting breath had grown calmer. The cold seemed to make no difference. Its poor carcass weighed no more than a feather, and seemed to fly in space, like the winged chargers in oriental tales.

Estévez, free at last, laughed inwardly. The cold which had almost killed him had given way to a great heat which glued locks of hair to his pale forehead. His overcoat seemed heavier to him. He tore off his hat and threw it on the stones along the road. As the heat increased he took off all his clothes, even his shirt, which he shook off as though it were the last snowflake fallen on his shoulders. And when he had thrown everything away, he found that he was still on horseback, nude, happy. The precious purse in his fist was the only object which he had kept. Then his joy broke bounds. Strident bursts of laughter bubbled from his lips. Unnatural and bestial blubberings forced their way through his contracted jaws. It was fear laughing.

The tremendous laugh rolled like a torrent along the sleeping mountain ranges. And over the suddenly wider highway, God knows how far, the unrestrained gallop of the horses hammered without ceasing against the interminable night.

A half century has passed since then. Nobody in Bolivia has ever heard of Estévez and his strange pursuer.

The Spanish consul instigated a long search without any result, in the hope of finding the Count of Horellana. He had entirely disappeared.

But they say that at daybreak, on the sinister road from Challapata to Potosí, the timid light of dawn is disturbed by the noise of an invisible cavalcade. A very old Indian, whom I questioned one day, confirmed this, adding in a low voice:

“There are two horses which have been galloping for years and years. Their riders have no mercy on them. Woe to anybody who tries to stop them. . . . It is Death, Sir, pursuing Madness. . . .”