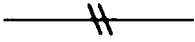


# Esteban Echeverría

Argentina  
(1805–1851)



Although Esteban Echeverría's renown rests on his intellectual and political activities, he was an important writer, and "The Slaughter House," the selection chosen for this volume, is a landmark in the history of Latin American short fiction. Echeverría was one of the young Argentines who founded in 1838 the *Asociación de Mayo*. This organization hoped to develop a national literature reflecting Argentina's realities. Having spent four formative years in Paris (1825–30), Echeverría was imbued in the romantic spirit, and he became one of the movement's promoters. Back in Argentina he devoted himself to the overthrow of the Rosas dictatorship. In 1841 he went into exile in nearby Uruguay, where he stayed until his death. Echeverría's "The Captive," a narrative poem about a white woman abducted by Indians, is among the better-known tales from nineteenth-century Latin America. "The Slaughter House," written about 1838, was published thirty years later, so its immediate political aim was not realized, but it became one of the most important stories in Latin American literary history. Its opening, which proposes the colonial chronicles as a narrative model, is a programmatic and prophetic statement on the relationship between Latin American history and fiction. "The Slaughter House" is mostly significant, however, because it displays the clash between "civilization and barbarism" that Sarmiento saw at the core of Latin American culture. Read in this light the story is a political allegory. Its more specific design was to accuse Rosas of cuddling the thugs who slay the civilized young man. A deeper conflict perhaps is between the liberal ideology of "The Slaughter House" and its painstaking representation of the ritual murder, an atavistic story of sacrifice that appears to be the source of its quasi-religious power.

## The Slaughter House

Although the following narrative is historical, I shall not begin it with Noah's ark and the genealogy of his forebears as was wont once to be done by the ancient Spanish historians of America who should be our models. Numerous reasons I might adduce for not pursuing their example, but I shall pass them over in order to avoid prolixity, stating merely that the events here narrated occurred in the 1830's of our Christian era. More-

over, it was during Lent, a time when meat is scarce in Buenos Aires because the Church, adopting Epictetus' precept—*sustine abstine* (suffer, abstain)—orders vigil and abstinence to the stomachs of the faithful because carnivorousness is sinful and, as the proverb says, leads to carnality. And since the Church has, *ab initio* and through God's direct dispensation, spiritual sway over consciences and stomachs, which in no way belong to the individual, nothing is more just and reasonable than for it to forbid that which is both harmful and sinful.

The purveyors of meat, on the other hand, who are staunch Federalists and therefore devout Catholics, knowing that the people of Buenos Aires possess singular docility when it comes to submitting themselves to all manner of restrictions, used to bring to the Slaughter House during Lent only enough steers for feeding the children and the sick whom the Papal Bull excused, and had no intention of stuffing the heretics—of which there is no dearth—who are always ready to violate the meat commandments of the Church and demoralize society by their bad examples.

At this time, then, rain was pouring down incessantly. The roads were inundated; in the marshes water stood deep enough for swimming, and the streets leading to the city were flooded with watery mire. A tremendous stream rushed forth from the Barracas rivulet and majestically spread out its turbid waters to the very foot of the Alto slopes. The Plata, overflowing, enraged, pushed back the water that was seeking its bed and made it rush, swollen, over fields, embankments, houses, and spread like a huge lake over the lowlands. Encircled from north to east by a girdle of water and mud, and from the south by a whitish sea on whose surface small craft bobbed perilously and on which were reflected chimneys and treetops, the city from its towers and slopes cast anxious glances to the horizon as if imploring mercy from the Lord. It seemed to be the threat of a new deluge. Pious men and women wept as they busied themselves with their novenas and continuous prayers. In church preachers thundered and made the pulpit creak under the blows of their fists. This is the day of judgment, they proclaimed, the end of the world is approaching! God's wrath runs over, pouring forth an inundation. Alas you poor sinners! Alas you impious Unitarians who mock the Church and the Saints and hearken not with veneration to the word of those anointed by the Lord! Alas you who do not beg mercy at the foot of the altars! The fearful hour of futile gnashing of teeth and frantic supplications has come! Your impiety, your heresies, your blasphemies, your horrid crimes, have brought to our land the Lord's plagues. Justice and the God of the Federalists will damn you.

The wretched women left the church breathless, overwhelmed, blaming the Unitarians, as was natural, for this calamity.

However, the torrential rainfall continued and the waters rose, adding credence to the predictions of the preachers. The bells tolled plaintively

by order of the most Catholic Restorer, who was rather uneasy. The libertines, the unbelievers, that is to say, the Unitarians were frightened at seeing so many contrite faces and hearing such clamor of imprecations. There was much talk about a procession which the entire population was to attend barefoot and bareheaded, accompanying the Host, which was to be carried under a pallium by the Bishop to the Balcarce slope, where thousands of voices exorcising the demon of inundation were to implore divine mercy.

Fortunately, or rather unfortunately, for it might have been something worth seeing, the ceremony did not take place, because the Plata receded and the overflow gradually subsided without the benefit of conjuration or prayer.

Now what concerns my story above all is that, because of the inundation, the Convalescencia Slaughter House did not see a single head of cattle for fifteen days and that, in one or two days, all the cattle from nearby farmers and watercarriers were used up in supplying the city with meat. The unfortunate little children and sick people had to eat eggs and chickens, and foreigners and heretics bellowed for beefsteak and roast. Abstinence from meat was general in the town which never was more worthy of the blessing of the Church, and thus it was that millions and millions of plenary indulgences were showered upon it. Chickens went up to six pesos and eggs to four reales and fish became exceedingly expensive. During Lent there were no promiscuities or excesses of gluttony, and countless souls went straight to heaven and things happened as if in a dream.

In the Slaughter House not even one rat remained alive from the many thousands which used to find shelter there. All of them either perished from starvation or were drowned in their holes by the incessant rain. Innumerable Negro women who go around after offal, like vultures after carrion, spread over the city like so many harpies ready to devour whatever they found eatable. Gulls and dogs, their inseparable rivals in the Slaughter House, emigrated to the open fields in search of animal food. Sickly old men wasted away from the lack of nutritive broth; but the most remarkable event was the rather sudden death of a few heretic foreigners who committed the folly of glutting on sausages from Extremadura, on ham and dry codfish, and who departed to the other world to pay for the sin of such abominations.

Some physicians were of the opinion that if the shortage of meat continued, half the town would fall in fainting fits, since their stomachs were accustomed to the stimulating meat juice; and the discrepancy was quite noticeable between this melancholy prognosis of science and the anathemas broadcast from the pulpit by the reverend fathers against all kinds of animal nutrition and promiscuity during days set aside by the Church for fasting and penitence. Therefore a sort of intestinal war between stomachs and

consciences began, stirred by an inexorable appetite and the not less inexorable vociferations of the ministers of the Church, who, as is their duty, tolerated no sin whatsoever which might tend to slacken Catholic principles. In addition to all this, there existed a state of intestinal flatulence in the population, brought on by fish and beans and other somewhat indigestible fare.

This war manifested itself in sighs and strident shrieks during the sermons as well as in noises and sudden explosions issuing from the houses and the streets of the city and wherever people congregated. The Restorer's government, as paternal as it is foreseeing, became somewhat alarmed, believing these tumults to be revolutionary in origin and attributing them to the savage Unitarians, whose impiety, according to Federalist preachers, had brought upon the nation the deluge of divine wrath. The Government, therefore, took provident steps, scattered its henchmen around town, and, finally, appeasing consciences and stomachs, decreed wisely and piously that without further delay and floods notwithstanding, cattle be brought to the Slaughter Houses.

Accordingly, on the sixteenth day of the meat crisis, the eve of Saint Dolores' day, a herd of fifty fat steers swam across the Burgos pass on their way to the Alto Slaughter House. Of course this was not much considering that the town consumed daily from 250 to 300 and that at least one-third of the population enjoyed the Church dispensation of eating meat. Strange that there should be privileged stomachs and stomachs subjected to an inviolable law, and that the Church should hold the key to all stomachs!

But it is not so strange if one believes that through meat the devil enters the body, and that the Church has the power to conjure it. The thing is to reduce man to a machine whose prime mover is not his own free will but that of the Church and the government. Perhaps the day will come when it will be prohibited to breathe, to take walks and even to chat with a friend without previous permission from competent authorities. Thus it was, more or less, in the happy days of our pious grandparents, unfortunately since ended by the May Revolution.

Be that as it may, when the news about the action of the government spread, the Alto Slaughter House filled with butchers, offal collectors, and inquisitive folk who received with much applause and outcry the fifty steers.

"It's surely wonderful!" they exclaimed. "Long live the Federalists! Long live the Restorer!" The reader must be informed that in those days the Federalists were everywhere, even amid the offal of the Slaughter House, and that no festival took place without the Restorer—just as there can be no sermon without Saint Augustine. The rumor is that on hearing all the hubbub the few remaining rats dying in their holes of starvation revived and began to scamper about, carefree, confident, because of the

unusual joy and activity, that abundance had once more returned to the place.

The first steer butchered was sent as a gift to the Restorer, who was exceedingly fond of roasts. A committee of butchers presented it to him in the name of the Federalists of the Slaughter House and expressed to him, *viva voce*, their gratitude for the government decree and their profound hatred for the savage Unitarians, enemies of God and men. The Restorer replied to their harangue by elaborating on the same theme, and the ceremony ended with vivas and vociferations from both spectators and protagonists. It is to be assumed that the Restorer had special dispensation from His Most Reverend Father, excusing him from fasting, for otherwise, being such a punctilious observer of laws, such a devout Catholic, and such a staunch defender of religion, he would not have set such a bad example by accepting such a gift on a holy day.

The slaughtering went on, and in a quarter of an hour forty-nine steers lay in the court, some of them skinned, others still to be skinned. The Slaughter House offered a lively, picturesque spectacle even though it did contain all that is horribly ugly, filthy, and deformed in the small proletarian class peculiar to the Plata River area. That the reader may grasp the setting at one glance, it might not be amiss to describe it briefly.

The Convalescencia, or Alto Slaughter House, is located in the southern part of Buenos Aires, on a huge lot, rectangular in shape, at the intersection of two streets, one of which ends there while the other continues eastward. The lot slants to the south and is bisected by a ditch made by the rains, its shoulders pitted with ratholes, its bed collecting all the blood from the Slaughter House. At the junction of the right angle, facing the west, stands what is commonly called the *casilla*, a low building containing three small rooms with a porch in the front facing the street and hitching posts for tying the horses. In the rear are several pens of ñandubay picket fence with heavy doors for guarding the steers.

In winter these pens become veritable mires in which the animals remain bogged down, immobile, up to the shoulder blades. In the *casilla* the pen taxes and fines for violation of the rules are collected, and in it sits the judge of the Slaughter House, an important figure, the chieftain of the butchers, who exercises the highest power, delegated to him by the Restorer, in that small republic. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of man required for the discharge of such an office.

The *casilla* is so dilapidated and so tiny a building that no one would notice it were it not that its name is inseparably linked with that of the terrible judge and that its white front is pasted over with posters: "Long live the Federalists! Long live the Restorer and the Heroine Doña Encarnación Escurra! Death to the savage Unitarians!" Telling posters, indeed, symbolizing the political and religious faith of the Slaughter House folk!

But some readers may not know that the above mentioned Heroine is the deceased wife of the Restorer, the beloved patroness of the butchers, who even after her death is venerated by them as if she were still alive, because of her Christian virtues and her Federalist heroism during the revolution against Balcarce. The story is that during an anniversary of that memorable deed of the *mazorca*, the terrorist society of Rosas' henchmen, the butchers feted the Heroine with a magnificent banquet in the casilla. She attended, with her daughter and other Federalist ladies, and there, in the presence of a great crowd, she offered the butchers, in a solemn toast, her Federalist patronage, and for that reason they enthusiastically proclaimed her patroness of the Slaughter House, stamping her name upon the walls of the casilla, where it will remain until blotted out by the hand of time.

From a distance the view of the Slaughter House was now grotesque, full of animation. Forty-nine steers were stretched out upon their skins and about two hundred people walked about the muddy, blood-drenched floor. Hovering around each steer stood a group of people of different skin colors. Most prominent among them was the butcher, a knife in his hand, his arms bare, his chest exposed, long hair dishevelled, shirt and sash and face besmeared with blood. At his back, following his every movement, romped a gang of children, Negro and mulatto women, offal collectors whose ugliness matched that of the harpies, and huge mastiffs which sniffed, snarled, and snapped at one another as they darted after booty. Forty or more carts covered with awnings of blackened hides were lined up along the court, and some horsemen with their capes thrown over their shoulders and their lassos hanging from their saddles rode back and forth through the crowds or lay on their horses' necks, casting indolent glances upon this or that lively group. In mid-air a flock of bluewhite gulls, attracted by the smell of blood, fluttered about, drowning with strident cries all the other noises and voices of the Slaughter House, and casting clear-cut shadows over that confused field of horrible butchery. All this could be observed at the very beginning of the slaughter.

But as the activities progressed, the picture kept changing. While some groups dissolved as if some stray bullet had fallen nearby or an enraged dog had charged them, new groups constantly formed: here where a steer was being cut open, there where a butcher was already hanging the quarters on the hook in the carts, or yonder where a steer was being skinned or the fat taken off. From the mob eyeing and waiting for the offal there issued ever and anon a filthy hand ready to slice off meat or fat. Shouts and explosions of anger came from the butchers, from the incessantly milling crowds, and from the gamboling street urchins.

"Watch the old woman hiding the fat under her breasts," someone shouted.

“That’s nothing—see that fellow there plastering it all over his behind,” replied the old Negro woman.

“Hey there black witch, get out of there before I cut you open,” shouted a butcher.

“What am I doing to you, Ño Juan? Don’t be so mean! Can’t I have a bit of the guts?”

“Out with the witch! Out with the witch!” the children squalled in unison. “She’s taking away liver and kidneys!” And with that, huge chunks of coagulated blood and balls of mud rained upon her head.

Nearby two Negro women were dragging along the entrails of an animal. A mulatto woman carrying a heap of entrails slipped in a pool of blood and fell lengthwise under her coveted booty. Farther on, huddled together in a long line, four hundred Negro women unwound heaps of intestines in their laps, picking off one by one those bits of fat which the butcher’s avaricious knife had overlooked. Other women emptied stomachs and bladders and after drying them used them for depositing the offal.

Several boys gamboling about, some on foot, other on horseback, banged one another with inflated bladders or threw chunks of meat at one another, their noise frightening the cloud of gulls which celebrated the slaughtering in flapping hordes. Despite the Restorer’s orders and the holiness of the day, filthy words were heard all around, shouts full of all the bestial cynicism which characterizes the populace attending our slaughter houses—but I will not entertain the reader with all this dirt.

Suddenly a mass of bloody lungs would fall on somebody’s head. He forthwith would throw it on someone else’s head until some hideous mongrel picked it up as a pack of other mongrels rushed in, raising a terrific growl for little or no reason at all, and snapping at one another. Sometimes an old woman would run, enraged, after some ragamuffin who had smeared her face with blood. Summoned by his shouts his comrades would come to his rescue, harassing her as dogs do a bull, and showering chunks of meat and balls of dung upon her, accompanied by volleys of laughter and shrieks, until the Judge would command order to be restored.

In another spot two young boys practicing the handling of their knives, slashed at one another with terrifying thrusts, while farther on, four lads, much more mature than the former, were fighting over some offal which they had filched from a butcher. Not far from them some mongrels, lean from forced abstinence, struggled for a piece of kidney all covered with mud. All a representation in miniature of the savage ways in which individual and social conflicts are thrashed out in our country.

Only one longhorn, of small, broad forehead and fiery stare, remained in the corrals. No consensus of opinion about its genitals had been possible: some believed it to be a bull, others a steer. Now its hour approached.

Two lasso men on horseback entered the corral while the mob milled about its vicinity on foot or on horseback, or dangled from the forked stakes of the enclosure. A grotesque group formed at the corral's gate: a group of goaders and lasso men on foot, with bare arms and provided with slipknots, their heads covered with red kerchiefs, and wearing vests and red sashes. Behind them several horsemen and spectators watched with eager eyes.

With a slipknot already round its horns, the angrily foaming animal bellowed fiercely; and there was no demon strong or cunning enough to make it move from the sticky mud in which it was glued. It was impossible to lasso it. The lads shouted themselves hoarse from the forked stakes of the corral and the men tried in vain to frighten it with blankets and kerchiefs. The din of hissing, handclapping, and shrill and raucous voices which issued from that weird orchestra was fearful.

The witty remarks, the obscene exclamations traveled from mouth to mouth, and either excited by the spectacle or piqued by a thrust from some garrulous tongue, everyone gratuitously showed off his cleverness and caustic humor.

"So—they want to give us cat for rabbit!"

"I'm telling you, it's a steer—that's no bull!"

"Can't you see it's an old bull?"

"The hell it is—show me its balls and I'll believe you!"

"Can't you see them hanging from between its legs? Each one bigger than the head of your roan horse. I guess you left your eyes by the roadside!"

"It's your old woman who was blind to have given birth to a chump like you! Can't you see that the mess between its legs is just mud?"

"Bull or steer, it's as foxy as a Unitarian!"

On hearing this magic word "Unitarian," the mob exclaimed in unison: "Death to the savage Unitarians!"

"Leave all sons of bitches to One-Eye!"

"You bet, One-Eye has guts enough to take care of all the Unitarians put together!"

"Yes—Yes—leave the bull to Matasiete, the beheader of Unitarians. Long live Matasiete!"

"The bull for Matasiete!"

"There it goes!" shouted someone raucously, interrupting the interlude of the cowardly mob. "There goes the bull!"

"Get ready! Watch out, you fellows near the gate! There it goes, mad as hell!"

And so it was. Maddened by the shouts and especially by two sharp goads which pricked its tail, the beast, divining the weakness of the slipknot, charged on the gate, snorting, casting reddish, phosphorescent glances right and left. The lasso man strained his line taut, till his horse



squatted. Suddenly the knot broke loose from the steer's horns and slashed across the air with a sharp hum. In its wake there came instantly rolling down from the stockade the head of a child, cut clean from the trunk as if by an ax. The trunk remained immobile, perched in the fork of a pole, long streams of blood spurting from every artery.

"The rope broke and there goes the bull!" one of the men shouted. Some of the spectators, overwhelmed and puzzled, were quiet. It all happened like lightning.

The crowd by the gate trickled away. Some, clustered around the head and palpitating trunk of the beheaded child, registered horror in their astonished faces; others, mostly horsemen, who had not witnessed the mishap, slipped away in different directions in the tracks of the bull. All of them shouted at the top of their voice: "There goes the bull! Stop it! Watch out! Lasso it, Sietepelos! It's coming after you, Botija! He's mad, don't get too close! Stop it, Morado, stop it! Get going with that hag of yours! Only the devil will stop that bull!"

The hubbub and din was infernal. A few Negro women who were seated along the ditch huddled together on hearing the tumult and crouched amid the intestines which they were unraveling with a patience worthy of Penelope. This saved them, because the beast, with a terrifying bellow, leaped sideways over them and rushed on, followed by the horsemen. It is said that one of the women voided her self on the spot, that another prayed ten Hail Mary's in a few seconds, and that two others promised San Benito never to return to the damned corrals and to quit offal-collecting forever and anon. However, it is not known whether they kept their promises.

In the meantime the bull rushed toward the city by a long, narrow street which, beginning at the acutest point of the rectangle previously described, was surrounded by a ditch and a cactus fence. It was one of the so-called "deserted" streets because it had but two houses and its center was a deep marsh extending from ditch to ditch. A certain Englishman, on his way home from a salting establishment which he owned nearby, was crossing this marsh at the moment on a somewhat nervous horse. Of course he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the onrush of horsemen or the shouts until the bull was crossing the marsh. His horse took fright, leaped to one side, and dashed away, leaving the poor devil sunk in half a yard of mire. This accident did not curb the racing of the bull's pursuers; on the contrary, bursting into sarcastic laughter—"The gringo's sunk. Get up, gringo!"—they shouted and crossed the marsh, their horses' hoofs trampling over his wretched body. The gringo dragged himself out as best he could, but more like a demon roasting in the fires of hell than a blond-haired white man.

Farther on, at the shout of "the bull! the bull!" four Negro women who

were leaving with their booty of offal dived into a ditch full of water, the only refuge left them.

The beast, in the meantime, having run several miles in one direction and another, frightening all living beings, got in through the back gate of a farm and there met his doom. Although weary, it still showed its spirit and wrathful strength, but a deep ditch and a thick cactus fence surrounded it and there was no escape. The scattered pursuers got together and decided to take it back convoyed between tamed animals, so that it could expiate its crimes on the very spot where it had committed them.

An hour after its flight, the bull was back in the Slaughter House where the dwindling crowd spoke only of its misdeeds. The episode of the gringo who got stuck in the mud moved them to laughter and sarcastic remarks.

Of the child beheaded by the lasso there remained but a pool of blood: his body had been taken away.

The men threw a slipknot over the horns of the beast which leaped and reared, uttering hoarse bellows. They threw one, two, three lassos—to no avail. The fourth, however, caught it by a leg. Its vigor and fury redoubled. Its tongue, hanging out convulsively, drooled froth, its nostrils fumed, its eyes emitted fiery glances.

“Knock that animal down!” an imperious voice commanded. Matasiete dismounted at once from his horse, hocked the bull with one sure thrust, and, moving on nimbly with a huge dagger in his hand, stuck it down to the hilt in the bull’s neck and drew it out, showing it smoking and red to the spectators. A torrent gushed from the wound as the bull bellowed hoarsely. Then it quivered and fell, amid cheers from the crowd, which proclaimed Matasiete the hero of the day and assigned him the most succulent steak as his prize. Proudly Matasiete stretched out his arm and the bloodstained knife a second time, and then with his comrades bent down to skin the dead bull.

The only question still undecided was whether the animal was a steer or a bull. Although it had been provisionally classified as bull because of its indomitable fierceness, they were all so fatigued with the long drawn out performance that they had overlooked clearing up this point. But suddenly a butcher shouted: “Here are the balls!” and sticking his hands into the animal’s genitals he showed the spectators two huge testicles.

There was much laughter and talk and all the aforementioned unfortunate incidents of the day were readily explained. It was strictly forbidden to bring bulls to the Slaughter House and this was an exceptional occurrence. According to the rules and regulations this bull should have been thrown to the dogs, but with the scarcity of meat and so many hungry people in town the Judge did not deem it advisable.

In a short while the bull was skinned, quartered, and hung in the cart. Matasiete took a choice steak, placed it under the pelisse of his saddle and

began getting ready to go home. The slaughtering had been completed by noon, and the small crowd which had remained to the end was leaving, some on foot, others on horseback, others pulling along the carts loaded with meat.

Suddenly the raucous voice of a butcher was heard announcing: "Here comes a Unitarian!" On hearing that word, the mob stood still as if thunderstruck.

"Can't you see his U-shaped side whiskers? Can't you see he carries no insignia on his coat and no mourning sash on his hat?"

"The Unitarian cur!"

"The son of a bitch!"

"He has the same kind of saddle as the gringo!"

"To the gibbet with him!"

"Give him the scissors!"

"Give him a good beating!"

"He has a pistol case attached to his saddle just to show off!"

"All these cocky Unitarians are as showy as the devil himself!"

"I bet you wouldn't dare touch him, Matasiete."

"He wouldn't, you say?"

"I bet you he would!"

Matasiete was a man of few words and quick action. When it came to violence, dexterity, skill in the handling of an ox, a knife, or a horse he did not talk much, but he acted. They had piqued him; spurring his horse, he trotted away, bridle loose, to meet the Unitarian.

The Unitarian was a young man, about twenty-five years old, elegant, debonair of carriage, who, as the above-mentioned exclamations were spouting from these impudent mouths, was trotting towards Barracas, quite fearless of any danger ahead of him. Noticing, however, the significant glances of that gang of Slaughter House curs, his right hand reached automatically for the pistol-case of his English saddle. Then a side push from Matasiete's horse threw him from his saddle, stretching him out. Supine and motionless he remained on the ground.

"Long live Matasiete!" shouted the mob, swarming upon the victim.

Confounded, the young man cast furious glances on those ferocious men and hoping to find in his pistol compensation and vindication, moved towards his horse, which stood quietly nearby. Matasiete rushed to stop him. He grabbed him by his tie, pulled him down again on the ground, and whipping out his dagger from his belt, put it against his throat.

Loud guffaws and stentorian vivas cheered him.

What nobility of soul! What bravery, that of the Federalists! Always ganging together and falling like vultures upon the helpless victim!

"Cut open his throat, Matasiete! Didn't he try to shoot you? Rip him open, like you did the bull!"

“What scoundrels these Unitarians! Thrash him good and hard!”

“He has a good neck for the ‘violin’—you know, the gibbet!”

“Better use the Slippery-One on him!”

“Let’s try it,” said Matasiete, and, smiling, began to pass the sharp edge of his dagger around the throat of the fallen man as he pressed in his chest with his left knee and held him by the hair with his left hand.

“Don’t behead him, don’t!” shouted in the distance the Slaughter House Judge as he approached on horseback.

“Bring him into the casilla. Get the gibbet and the scissors ready. Death to the savage Unitarians! Long live the Restorer of the laws!”

“Long live Matasiete!”

The spectators repeated in unison “Long live Matasiete! Death to the Unitarians!” They tied his elbows together as blows rained upon his nose, and they shoved him around. Amid shouts and insults they finally dragged the unfortunate young man to the bench of tortures just as if they had been the executioners of the Lord themselves.

The main room of the casilla had in its center a big, hefty table, which was devoid of liquor glasses and playing cards only in times of executions and tortures administered by the Federalist executioners of the Slaughter House. In a corner stood a smaller table with writing materials and a notebook and some chairs, one of which, an armchair, was reserved for the Judge. A man who looked like a soldier was seated in one of them, playing on his guitar the “Resbalosa,” an immensely popular song among the Federalists, when the mob rushing tumultuously into the corridor of the casilla brutally showed in the young Unitarian.

“The Slippery-One for him!” shouted one of the fellows.

“Commend your soul to the devil!”

“He’s furious as a wild bull!”

“The whip will tame him!”

“Give him a good pummeling!”

“First the cowhide and scissors.”

“Otherwise to the bonfire with him!”

“The gibbet would be even better for him!”

“Shut up and sit down,” shouted the Judge as he sank into his armchair. All of them obeyed, while the young man standing in front of the Judge exclaimed with a voice pregnant with indignation:

“Infamous executioners, what do you want to do with me?”

“Quiet!” ordered the Judge, smiling. “There’s no reason for getting angry. You’ll see.”

The young man was beside himself. His entire body shook with rage: his mottled face, his voice, his tremulous lips, evinced the throbbing of his heart and the agitation of his nerves. His fiery eyes bulged in their sockets,

his long black hair bristled. His bare neck and the front of his shirt showed his bulging arteries and his anxious breathing.

“Are you trembling?” asked the Judge.

“Trembling with anger because I cannot choke you.”

“Have you that much strength and courage?”

“I have will and pluck enough for that, scoundrel.”

“Get out the scissors I use to cut my horse’s mane and clip his hair in the Federalist style.”

Two men got hold of him. One took his arms and another his head and in a minute clipped off his side whiskers. The spectators laughed merrily.

“Get him a glass of water to cool him off,” ordered the Judge.

“I’ll have you drink gall, you wretch!”

A Negro appeared with a glass of water in his hand. The young man kicked his arm and the glass smashed to bits on the ceiling, the fragments sprinkling the astonished faces of the spectators.

“This fellow is incorrigible!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll tame him yet!”

“Quiet!” said the Judge. “Now you are shaven in the Federalist style—all you need is a mustache, don’t forget to grow one!”

“Now, let’s see: why don’t you wear any insignia?”

“Because I don’t care to.”

“Don’t you know that the Restorer orders it?”

“Insignia become you, slaves, but not free men!”

“Free men will have to wear them, by force.”

“Indeed, by force and brutal violence. These are your arms, infamous wretches! Wolves, tigers, and panthers are also strong like you and like them you should walk on all fours.”

“Are you not afraid of being torn to pieces by the tiger?”

“I prefer that to having you pluck out my entrails, as the ravens do, one by one.”

“Why don’t you wear a mourning sash on your hat in memory of the Heroine?”

“Because I wear it in my heart in memory of my country which you, infamous wretches, have murdered.”

“Don’t you know that the Restorer has ordered mourning in memory of the Heroine?”

“You, slaves, were the ones to order it so as to flatter your master and pay infamous homage to him.”

“Insolent fellow! You are beside yourself. I’ll have your tongue cut off if you utter one more word. Take the pants off this arrogant fool, and beat him on his naked ass. Tie him down on the table first!”

Hardly had the Judge uttered his commands when four bruisers be-

spattered with blood lifted the young man and stretched him out upon the table.

“Rather behead me than undress me, infamous rabble!”

They muzzled him with a handkerchief and began to pull off his clothes. The young man wriggled, kicked, and gnashed his teeth. His muscles assumed now the flexibility of rushes, now the hardness of iron, and he squirmed like a snake in his enemy’s grasp. Drops of sweat, large as pearls, streamed down his cheeks, his pupils flamed, his mouth foamed, and the veins on his neck and forehead jutted out black from his pale skin as if congested with blood.

“Tie him up,” ordered the Judge.

“He’s roaring with anger,” said one of the cutthroats.

In a short while they had tied his feet to the legs of the table and turned his body upside down. In trying to tie his hands, the men had to unfasten them from behind his back. Feeling free, the young man, with a brusque movement which seemed to drain him of all his strength and vitality, raised himself up, first upon his arms, then upon his knees, and collapsed immediately, murmuring: “Rather behead me than undress me, infamous rabble!”

His strength was exhausted, and having tied him down crosswise, they began undressing him. Then a torrent of blood spouted, bubbling from the young man’s mouth and nose, and flowed freely down the table. The cutthroats remained immobile and the spectators, astonished.

“The savage Unitarian has burst with rage,” said one of them.

“He had a river of blood in his veins,” put in another.

“Poor devil, we wanted only to amuse ourselves with him, but he took things too seriously,” exclaimed the Judge, scowling tiger-like.

“We must draw up a report. Untie him and let’s go!”

They carried out the orders, locked the doors, and in a short while the rabble went out after the horse of the downcast, taciturn Judge.

The Federalists had brought to an end one of their innumerable feats of valor.

Those were the days when the butchers of the Slaughter House were apostles who propagated by dint of whip and poignard Rosas’ Federation, and it is not difficult to imagine what sort of Federation issued from their heads and knives. They were wont to dub as savage Unitarians (in accordance with the jargon invented by the Restorer, patron of the brotherhood) any man who was neither a cutthroat nor a crook; any man who was kindhearted and decent; any patriot or noble friend of enlightenment and freedom; and from the foregoing episode it can be clearly seen that the headquarters of the Federation were located in the Slaughter House.