



BOMBEROS VOLUNTARIOS, HOMBRES DE TRABAJO Y OTRAS YERBAS firefighters, workers and other matters

As far as I know there are no non-volunteer fire brigades in Chile, but even so it's a very good service because captaining a brigade is a sought-after honor for the most able men in the towns or districts where they operate. And don't think it's only a job in theory: in the south of the country at least, fires occur with astonishing frequency. I'm not sure what the major contributing factor is, whether it's because most buildings are constructed with wood, or because the cultural level of the people is quite low and they do not have much education, or some other factor, or all of them put together. What's certain is that in the three days we stayed at the fire station there were two big fires and one small one (though I'm not suggesting this was average, just stating the facts.)

I've forgotten to explain that after spending the night at the lieutenant's house, we decided to move to the fire station, lured by the charms of the caretaker's three daughters, exponents of the grace of Chilean women who, ugly or beautiful, have a certain spontaneity and freshness that captivates immediately. But I'm drifting from my point... They gave us a room where we set up our camp beds and fell into them with our habitual sleep of the dead, meaning we didn't hear the sirens. The volunteers on duty had no idea we were there and rushed off with their fire engines while we slept on until mid-morning, when we learned what had happened. We extracted promises from them to include us in the party for the next fire. We had found a truck that in two days would take us and the bike to Santiago for a low price, on condition that we helped them with the load of furniture they were moving.

We made a very popular pair, with our abundant supply of con-

versation for the volunteers and the caretaker's daughters, and the days in Los Angeles flew by. In my eyes, constantly ordering and pencilling in the past, the symbolic representation of the town will always be the furious flames of a fire. It was the last day of our stay and after numerous toasts expressing the beautiful sentiments of our goodbyes, we had curled up in our blankets and gone to sleep. The much-awaited siren tore through the night, calling and waking the volunteers on duty, tearing also through Alberto's bed from which he sprang far too quickly. Soon we had taken our positions with the necessary gravity in the fire engine "Chile-España,"* which left the station at a breakneck speed, the long whine of its alarm alarming nobody, heard too often to constitute much of a novelty.

As each surge of water fell on to its flaming skeleton, the wood-and-adobe house shook. The acrid smoke of the burnt wood stood firm against the stoical work of the firefighters who, between fits of laughter, protected neighboring houses with jets of water or by other means. The flames hadn't reached a small part of the house and from there came the whimper of a cat who, terrorized by the fire, just meowed and meowed and refused to escape through the small space left. Alberto saw the danger, and measuring it with one quick look, leapt agilely over the 20 centimeters of flame, saving the little endangered life for its owners. Receiving effusive congratulations for his unrivalled heroism, his eyes shone with pleasure from beneath the huge helmet he had borrowed.

But everything comes to an end, and Los Angeles gave us its final goodbye. Little Che and Big Che (Alberto and I) solemnly shook the last friendly hands as the truck began its journey to Santiago, carrying on its powerful back the corpse of La Poderosa II.

On a Sunday we arrived in Santiago and as our first measure we went directly to the Austin garage. We had a letter of introduction to the owner but were unhappily surprised to find that it was

*Almost all Chilean fire brigades have a sister city or country, in this case, Spain.