

Mistaken Journey



[V.]

CORUMBA is not a beautiful town, neither is it an interesting one. Indeed, several people have described it in much less complimentary terms, among them being the late Theodore Roosevelt, who arrived there one sweltering day on one of his many sporting trips. On that occasion, uncomfortably hot even in riding breeches and an open-necked shirt, he was received by the Best People ceremonially clad in frock coats, stiff collars, hard hats, and all the other absurdities of that garb. To them, his informal attire constituted a serious breach of etiquette, a feeling which aroused Roosevelt's disgust.

"Not only are they crazy enough to live in this God-forsaken furnace of a town," he exclaimed, "but they have to dress up like a lot of undertakers into the bargain!"

Corumba certainly does get hot. In the afternoons the pavements and limestone houses throw back the heat they have been absorbing, and although it is something of an exaggeration to describe the town as a furnace, a more conservative opinion might easily incline towards a baker's oven.

Our Mrs. Grundy would be considered a depraved old harridan in Corumba and the things upon which nowadays even she smiles would cause social ostracism; or probably imprisonment. If I may be pardoned the impertinence of a criticism, I thought that many of their conventions were artificial and tended to stifle natural impulses. I caused displeasure by walking abroad in a cricket shirt and grey flannels, a sensible enough attire for most occasions if the weather is hot enough. But not for Corumba. To pay even an informal call without one's coat is an enormity, even if one is perspiring at every pore. Although out there probably no social call can ever be informal; there are two many conventions to be considered.

The houses have the curtains drawn back from the front windows revealing the interior of the drawing room, and the interest of the passer-by, far from being resented, is expected and appreciated. Every article of furniture is carefully placed, the room shines with polish, and abounds with innumerable ornaments and family photographs. Here the young women of the house receive their suitors and they are wooed in a fashion which would give but little satisfaction to most normal English couples. Long before this stage is reached the young man must have satisfied the girl's parents as to his credentials, and once their consent is gained the girl's

"Yes" is taken for granted. But for all that he is very much on his best behaviour and his conduct during his visits must be very, very proper. On these occasions the poor fellow is dressed to kill, and that must make him feel pretty uncomfortable to start with, since South American tailoring shows a distressing tendency to tightness. He is required to sit circumspectly on his chair; the object of his affections, at a respectable distance, sits on her chair: while the chaperon sits primly on her chair. Always there is the chaperon, usually a younger sister or an aunt, and her presence is as essential to the propriety of the courtship as the suitor's trousers.

A man and woman have only to be alone together to set tongues wagging, and the honour of the family is very much at stake on these occasions.

In outlying parts of Matta Grosso, the traveller, even though in sore need of assistance, never thinks of dismounting from his horse until the man of the house has invited him to do so. He would be courting a knife thrust or a shooting if he did. While he is there the women keep out of sight, and the guest, if he is wise, praises the food without mentioning the cook. Naturally enough this atmosphere of universal suspicion has the effect of provoking in otherwise innocent encounters that very relationship against which it is directed.

But these conventions to a certain extent are based on personal conceit, or family prestige (which is the same thing on a larger scale), and fed on fear. They are observed because the people are slaves to Public Opinion. They wear their best clothes on the slightest provocation, but only to appear as good as their neighbour and in case they should lose caste if they didn't. They parade their virtues to hide their weaknesses, and their immaculate drawing-rooms are on show simply because they are immaculate. That chaperon, if they only knew it, is the worst possible indictment on their moral character. If her presence is a necessity to ensure a girl's safety in her own home, then the men folk are an unprincipled pack of scoundrels. If she is there merely to satisfy Public Opinion as to the decency of the courtship, then the public must have a foul mind, and queer things must have happened in the past to make them think that way.

But underlying are probably deeper, and more commendable motives. In these distant towns the population is always a very mixed one. At the bottom of the social scale are the Indians, for whom life is fairly easy, inasmuch as they subsist on precious little, and their wants are few. Social backsliding to the level of the tribes would be easy for the other members of the community were it not for the rigid code of

conventions and moral laws which keep them up to scratch. Thus, in a way, that outward show of respectability is something of an essential, rather like a boiled shirt and a monocle among a crowd of naked savages. After a few days, though, my sympathies were all on the side of the savages.

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The first friends I made in Corumba were the members of the International Mission, and real friends they proved, too. There was an American in charge of the Mission and three young British, two Englishmen and a Welshman, to help him. Corumba is an advanced station where the younger missionaries receive their final training before going out among the tribes. They were fine fellows, and their work leads them into many dangers and through strange experiences.

Some time previously two of their members had established themselves among remote and hostile Indians who, up till then, had killed any strangers falling into their hands. They lived with the tribe, and endeavoured to introduce practical Christianity into their lives. After a time they returned to the Mission to replenish their supplies and, although they knew the terrible risk they were running, again returned to the work which called them. They went to their deaths, for shortly afterwards, sickness afflicted the tribe and a poor, weakly youth succumbed to it. Superstition, which is incredibly strong, bade the witch doctor find a cause for the tribe's misfortunes, and his evil choice fell upon the two strangers, who were deemed to have brought the sickness upon them. I hope they died quickly.

I asked my missionary friends whether the results they obtained were encouraging, and they assured me that they were. Without wishing to take sides in a highly controversial issue, I should say that it is far better for the savage first to meet the invading white man in the shape of a missionary, than for them to encounter, and to be exploited by, the usual type of trader. Much missionary work is negated by the methods of these traders, who usually find that a bottle of liquor has more potent charms than any message of spiritual bliss to come. Medical assistance is, of course, an important feature of modern Christian endeavour, but often the native is loth to accept it. I was told that sometimes they will consent to have a bad tooth extracted, to undergo other treatment, only if they receive a gift for so doing. It must be very difficult to strive for results with a people who let themselves be saved out of politeness, and with an eye to the prizes offered.

The senior missionary, the American, related an interesting incident regarding the fate of Colonel Fawcett, whose disappearance in the wilds of Central Brazil gave rise to so many fantastic stories and aroused world-wide interest.

In 1925, Colonel J. Fawcett, with two companions, his own son and another young Englishman, struck into the interior of Matta Grosso on a most romantic and glamorous quest. Their aim was to discover the ancient cities of an unknown civilisation, a civilisation which, Fawcett was convinced, had existed, and the ruins of which were still to be found.

Even to-day, the interior of Matta Grosso is largely virgin soil, and is likely to remain so for many years; but, although little is known of this vast expanse of jungle waste, much is conjectured, and rumour speaks of a mountain range, of gold and silver mines, and of a race of white Indians, the offspring of a Lost People.

Into this land of mystery Fawcett disappeared in 1925, and from the moment he turned his back on the last civilised community, nothing was ever heard from him or from his companions. But rumour was not idle, and when two years later fears were entertained for his safety, amazing tales began to seep through from the interior. The basis of these stories was the same; that, although his companions were dead, Fawcett himself still lived. From this point, however, the tale differed, and it was variously held that he was the unwilling captive of savage Indians; that he was mad, and lived with the tribe as one of themselves; and that he was worshipped as a god, and wielded strange powers over his subjects.

The world received these tales with fervid interest, and in 1928, three years after Colonel Fawcett had disappeared, an American expedition under Commander George Dyott set out to find him. Their efforts proved that it was a thousand to one chance against the explorer still being alive, although, at the same time, they did not discover incontrovertible proofs of his death. Odds of a thousands to one did not deter a British party from leaving on a similar quest four years later, and the evidence they collected confirmed the earlier reports of Commander Dyott, that it was beyond the realms of possibility that Colonel Fawcett still survived.

This was a verdict with which my missionary friend concurred. His calling took him out among the remoter Indians, and none knew better than he the difficulties and the dangers to be faced in those parts. The incident he mentioned had occurred some years previously, when he was visiting a distant tribe. In one of the huts he had seen a black tin box with the initials J.F. painted on it. The box, the Indians told him, had been left there eighteen months before by a white man who had come to them and rested with them for a few days before continuing on his way. The missionary was firmly of the opinion that the box had belonged to Colonel Fawcett, and, he said, it was the first news of him since the expedition had left. Again there was no mention of Fawcett's son and his other companion, although this does not necessarily imply that they were not still with him.

When the missionary told me of this I had no more than a casual knowledge of the circumstances gleaned from newspaper reports, and I did not ask him the

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