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25/4

Mistaken Journey

by ROY SHEFFIELD

An account of adventures
in Central South America
by an English "Innocent
Abroad." He has now
reached the Matto Grosso

sub-let to one or two native ranchers, and the total head of cattle passing through his slaughter-house must have been very gratifying to the old man.

But then bad times came along; cattle were worth less than twenty shillings a head, and out-of-the-way Descalvados felt the slump badly. The herds, no longer carefully tended, since charqui had ceased to fetch a price, gradually dwindled to less than a third of their former numbers; Indians and peons losing their employment drifted away, and the fazenda was but a skeleton of its former self: Then, four months before my arrival, old Ramsey died at the age of 78 and with his dying breath the place went back twenty years. His two assistants—McLeod, the storekeeper, and Walter Hill, the rancher, the only white folk for hundreds of miles; and the only two who spoke English—were methodically performing their usual duties, and wondering what was going to happen next. Such, in brief, was the fazenda of Descalvados when I drifted along.

* * *

A motley group were assembled at the landing stage as we tied up alongside, and they viewed our arrival with interest. Once again I was glad of the impulse which had prompted me to leave England with my possessions contained only in a sailor's kitbag and a haversack. A suitcase or a cabin trunk would have struck such a wrong note in Matto Grosso! McLeod proved to be a tall, slow-moving, loose-limbed American, who spoke only when occasion demanded. He read my letter of introduction twice very carefully before saying "Sure. Come along in," and, picking up my haversack, walked towards the ranch house.

The tales I had heard of Descalvados and its history had prepared me for something very dreadful, and it was with some surprise and perhaps a little disappointment that I followed McLeod into the house. This was a square, two-storied building standing on the river bank, with a fenced-in garden and a few trees. The big rooms were white-washed and distempered, while the high ceilings and heavy wooden beams made it a home of some character. But it was in a shocking state of untidiness and disrepair, and my first impressions were that it was either a dogs' home or a kindergarten school. Later I learnt that there were eighteen dogs—though this number constantly varied—and eight children. Also, there were four green parrots, countless chickens and other fowls, some lovebirds, a family of doves which nested on top of the food cupboard, and black pigs with long snouts. The pigs were intruders, coming in only when the gate was left open, or when they found a hole in the fence; if this happened the dogs stopped their scratching, and chased them out again amid a pandemonium of barks, bites, and squeals. There was also a ram and a goat with whom the dogs disputed

(continued on next page)

VII.

THE cattle fazenda of Descalvados is the result of one man's pioneer spirit, and its history reads like a romance. The man was J. A. Ramsey, and before ever he came to Matto Grosso at the age of sixty he had lived a full life of adventure which would have more than satisfied the majority of men. He was born in Canada of Scottish parents, and served his time in the North West Mounted Police, retiring with the rank of sergeant. Subsequently, finding life rather dull, he turned his attention to politics, a game for which his fiery disposition was hardly suited.

He was contesting an election in his home town one day; and, as it drew towards the close of the poll, it became very evident that J. A. Ramsey was not going to be the successful candidate. So, mounting his horse, he careered down the High Street, grabbed the ballot box, threw it on a fire and rode away never to return. His fancy led him to Buenos Aires, where, joined by his wife and family, he lived more or less quietly for some time, taking out naturalisation papers. But he never kept up his Argentine citizenship, and his next move was to Brazil, where he entered into an agreement with a company to develop certain wild land as cattle country.

This was an undertaking to tax the strength and courage of any man, and yet Ramsey, at sixty, tackled it with gusto, and made himself practically a monarch in his own domain. Matto Grosso still is to a great extent a country which knows only one law, the law of the gun, and by the gun Ramsey protected his cattle and developed his property. The neighbouring Indians, while not dangerous, were resentful of his intrusion, and considered his stock fair game, a state of affairs to which Ramsey reacted with vigour. The necklace of human ears that hung in the ranch house was a proof of his methods, and a charm which "encouraged the others."

There were no fences in his country, the cattle, numbering over 100,000 head at one time, being free to wander practically as they willed. He built a fine ranch house, a store, and all the other buildings and appurtenances necessary for the production of charqui. "Charqui" is the universal dried meat of South America, and at the peak of its prosperity Descalvados was a flourishing centre with a mixed peon and Indian population of some hundreds. Part of the huge tract of campo, or country, which he had made safe for grazing Ramsey