

(continued from previous page)

possession of the garden, though the curved horns and fiery temper of the ram made this a dangerous pastime.

The mother of the children was a small, cheerful Brazilian woman whom Ramsey had married in the early days of his regime, and it was this second marriage of his which so complicated the affairs of the estate. For not only had he died intestate, but he was also a man without a country. He had renounced his Canadian citizenship, had not complied with all the regulations making him a bona fide naturalised Argentine, and had troubled no more about it during his eighteen years in Brazil. His eldest son by his first wife had once paid a short visit to the fazenda, and in the absence of any will the property would normally have gone to him. But conditions were far from normal, for Ramsey had no legal standing anywhere, and, as far as his widow was concerned, possession was nine points of the law. When news of his death became known, a lawyer had been sent up there to straighten things out; but he very nearly got straightened out himself, and departed with more haste than dignity.

Descalvados was situated on the west bank of the Rio Paraguay, and the grazing lands extended as far west as the cowhands liked to go, the only definite boundary being the Bolivian border, a hundred miles or so away. But any cattle which roamed so far were as good as lost, and the various outfits endeavoured to keep their stock within reasonable limits. The other two Brazilian ranchers were strongly supporting the widow in her determination to retain control of the fazenda, for their own livelihoods depended upon it, and they were already covering land far in excess of their original agreements.

Mrs. Ramsey, or the Senhora, as everybody called her, wondered at first whether I was another emissary from the enemy; but the tale of my proposed canoe trip soon dispelled those doubts from her mind, although she probably had stronger ones regarding my sanity, for she, like the worthy burgher of Corumba, laughed immoderately at the recital.

I was given McLeod's old room in another house a little way from the ranch house, for he had changed his quarters since Ramsey's death, to be near the widow and children. This room was sparsely furnished to the point of austerity, the only articles of furniture on the stone floor being a camp bedstead and a cupboard. But, wonder of wonders, a door in the corner revealed a little wooden shelter containing a shower-bath, and, what's more, it worked! The bed had no mattress, as this would be a prolific breeding ground for vermin, and I slept on it with just a sheet and a couple of blankets spread over the springs. But it was comfortable, nevertheless, and the wire gauze across the windows lessened the mosquito nuisance, although a net over the bed was a necessity just the same.

The next day McLeod showed me round the place and explained its various activities, although the only activity proceeding just then was the loading of charqui into the two barges on which I had arrived. In other times, he said, the slaughterhouse was a busy place, killings being regular and heavy and the output of dried meat very considerable. But times had changed; killings were now few and far between, and an occasional boat such as the present one was

sufficient for transport purposes. The other buildings were in a pretty bad state, and everywhere were broken odds and ends which had served their turn and were now just lying around in useless confusion. The few families of Indians who still remained lived together in one corner of the settlement in their huts of grass and thatch, while the Brazilian peons boasted mud and plaster houses with thatched roofs.

Ramsey's family of eight were a wild lot of imps. The four older ones were all girls, the eldest, aged seventeen, being his step-daughter from his wife's first marriage. The other girls were dark, too, like their mother, but two of the boys had their father's fair hair, and could have passed as English children. The Senhora was a strict disciplinarian and they had to behave when she was about. Especially at meal times, which was just as well, as several other factors always tended to make these functions lively enough.

We all fed together in the big kitchen of the ranch house, and the food was cooked in an adjacent outbuilding over a long stone range which they heaped up with wood. The food was excellent and in abundance, and although rice and beans were invariably staple articles of diet, there was always a variety of other and less familiar dishes.

But it was not the fare which made these meals remarkable, nor yet the diners; it was the dogs, chickens, pigeons, doves, and ants. Two of the bigger and less many dogs were privileged to come into the kitchen, and they saw to it with many a shrewd bite that it was a favour not to be shared. Their sixteen confreres gathered round the open door or poked their heads in through the windows, and scrambled whole-heartedly for any scraps. The fowls pecked and gobbled up anything that was going, while every now and then one of them, usually a young bird, would flutter on to the table, make a quick snatch at the nearest plate, and dive off before an avenging hand could smite.

But the fowls were useful about the house, for, besides cleaning up bits from the table, they devoured moths, bugs, beetles and all manner of creepy, crawly creatures, even catching mosquitoes as well.

They did not interfere with the ants, however, and morning and night countless thousands of these amazing creatures swarmed up and down the wall. They had a nest somewhere in the ceiling, and early every morning at the same time the advance guard would appear; and then in regular marching order an army of ants made a living column from ceiling to floor. They always used the same strip of wall, and the column, about nine inches in width, kept strictly in alignment. After the main body had gone there would be odd stragglers going backwards and forwards all day, and at sundown the return journey would begin in the same orderly manner.

Close by the ants' highway was the food cupboard, and on top of this the doves had nested. This does not sound a particularly healthy state of affairs, but presumably they kept it free from worse evils—ants, cockroaches, or other pests—for their presence was not disputed, and was in fact encouraged. The doves would fly in and out, and at meal times were joined by their outside neighbours, a family of pigeons. So, whatever else might be said of them, our meals were certainly never dull!

(To be continued next week)

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