

# Mistaken Journey

by ROY SHEFFIELD

An account of adventures in Central South America by an English "Innocent Abroad." He is now on a cattle ranch in the Matto Grosso.

## IX.

WHEN the riders were all back, the drive started. Walter's head boy, the Brazilian, Jose, led the way. He was the pointer, and rode on ahead all the time, setting the pace and choosing the best route to follow; we others circled round the herd and drove it behind him. Across a flat open plain this is a comparatively easy job, and half-a-dozen riders might handle a thousand head of stock. But the country we had to traverse was timbered, with tall grasses and thick undergrowth, offering cover to the cattle, while in most places the ground was under two feet of water. Then also a bunch of three or four hundred head of cattle such as we had do not jog along in an orderly, well-behaved manner. There are always several, usually old bulls or lively young steers, who object to the whole business, and who seize every opportunity to charge away across the campo. All this made our job more difficult, and demanded the utmost alertness and energy from both horses and riders.

The boys whooped, waved branches, and rode like demons, while the horses responded magnificently. They needed no urging when any of the cattle made a break, and were off after them in a flash. Usually a rider managed to head off any recalcitrant deserter before he covered more than a few yards, but sometimes one got well away, and the cursing cowboy would be led a merry dance indeed. My horse did not mean to miss all the fun, and I was astounded at my own ability to hang on.

Eventually, we came to the place where the cattle were to be left. This was the beginning of a stretch of country slightly higher than the surrounding campo, and free from flood water. Here was a fallen tree, the trunk of which had been hollowed out to form a trough; into this Jose emptied a small sack of salt which he had been carrying behind his saddle. Cattle love salt, and he said this was to tempt them to stay in their new pasture instead of straying back to their old surroundings.

This place was only half an hour's ride from the camp, and when we arrived back there we had been in the saddle for 10 hours. Young Pietro had been sent on ahead, and we were welcomed by a blazing fire and the fragrance of meat cooking in a big black stew pot. The "big wash" and a swim followed before the sun went down, and then, once more in dry clothes, with

a piping hot supper no more than a pleasant memory, I lay in my hammock listening to the voices of the Indians getting fainter . . . and fainter . . . and fainter.

ONCE more it was Walter Hill swinging my hammock. "Come on, son," he said, "you've bin drivin' 'em home all night. Hustle around, else the boys'll pinch your breakfast."

Our day's programme was again the same, except that we intended returning to the ranch in the evening instead of sleeping at the camp. Fresh horses were saddled, and the remainder turned loose, for, whenever possible, a horse was worked only one day at a time. Our route this time took us more to the north. On subsequent trips, Walter used to test my sense of direction by asking me which way we were heading, or where I thought the fazenda was situated. Or to tell him the time by the sun, which was not so difficult, as, at that time of the year, we trod on our own shadows at mid-day, and the sun rose and set at six o'clock.

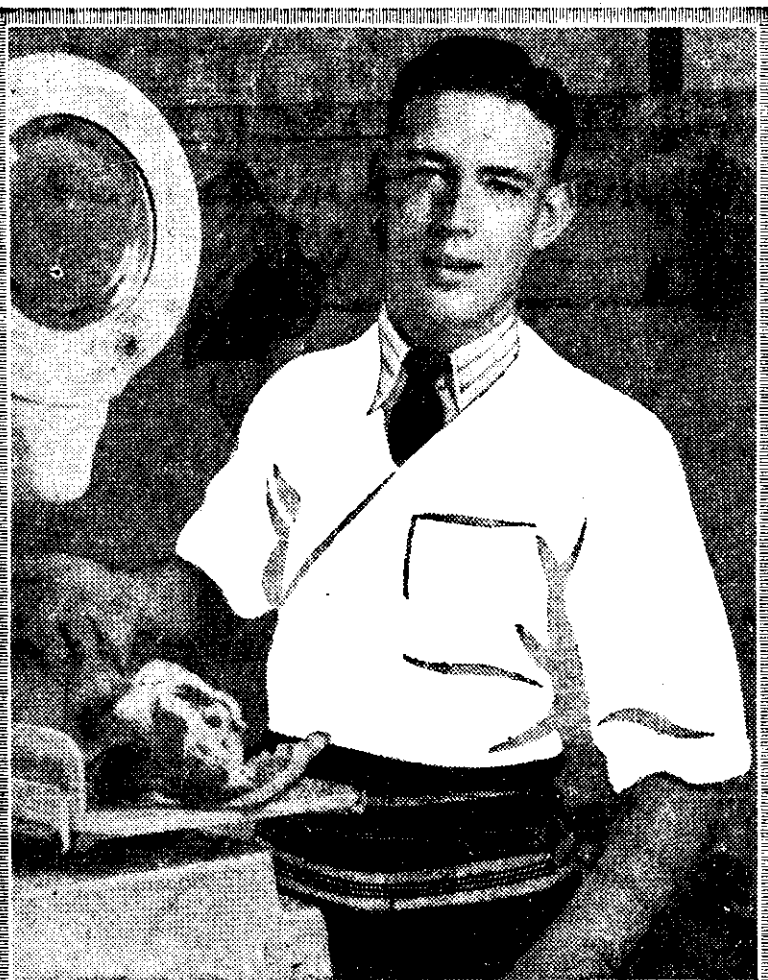
That morning was memorable for one of the big thrills of the trip. We were walking our horses along a creek in single file, and I was last, some 30 yards behind the next man. Suddenly there slid towards me through the water an enormous snake. It really was a big one, fully 14 feet long, and travelling fast. It turned sharply to avoid us, and at that moment my horse spotted it. The frightened animal snorted, reared up, and once more I owed my seat to the big pommel on the saddle. As he came down, I dug my heels in hard, and we dashed up to the others in a flurry of flying spray.

Hill was not alarmed at the encounter. "Sure," he said, "we get 'em here. Big 'uns, too, but they're only water snakes, and they won't hurt none."

AFTER about three hours' steady riding, we came up with the cattle, but Jose said that there should have been many more than the few we could see, and that by going a little further afield we should probably come across the others.

Acting on this advice, Walter split the outfit up into two parties, and both sections rode out into the campo in opposite directions. We separated into extended order, with about half a mile between each two riders and then, when enough ground had been covered, the furthermost men in each party gradually wheeled inwards. It was not long before the rest of the cattle were disturbed from the timber and long grasses which had hidden them, and were slowly rounded up by the circle of horsemen. Altogether we had collected some 500 head, and wasted no time in getting them moving.

It was grand to watch that outfit at work. They rode in perfect balance with straight backs and straight legs, just their toes resting in their long



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