

Mistaken Journey



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

XI.

OUR lucked changed, though, for the Indians' quick eyes noticed a turtle splashing along a creek. It was a fair-sized one too, just about as much as Rufino could lift, but he swung it up across his saddle, and we rode on, looking for the next course on the menu. Further along the same creek, the Indians once more called a halt. This time Walter pointed to a small hummock of earth, and to an alligator whose snout was just visible under a bush about ten yards away. Walter handed his pistol to the other Indian, who dismounted and walked very slowly to within 15 feet of the alligator. His shot went straight between the eyes, and the beast was stone dead with barely a shudder.

We all dismounted, and Rufino made the turtle a safe prisoner by turning it over on its back. We scraped away the earth from the hummock and there, in the shape of 31 alligator's eggs, was the rest of our dinner. A fire was kindled, and when it was well alight the turtle was dumped in the flames. That seemed rather hard on the poor turtle as he was still alive, but the only way to get at the meat is to break the shell, and this is impossible unless it is heated. When it was hot enough the Indians broke the shell with a stick and cut up the meat for roasting, while Walter and I busied ourselves boiling the eggs in the stew-pot. They were larger than a chicken's egg, with a rough, pitted shell, and according to Walter were much better fried than boiled. I find this easy to believe, for the way we had them I thought they tasted disgusting. Each egg contained a quantity of slimy liquid and a small jelly alligator in embryo, but Walter and the two Indians broke them in halves and poured the contents down their throats in evident enjoyment. One was enough for me, and the others finished the whole of the remainder between them, an average of ten apiece.

The turtle meat, however, which was soon roasted over the fire, was much more appetising. Walter was in good form over this.

"There you are," he said, "you could go to all the hotels in London city, an' you couldn't get a turtle's liver like this in none of 'em. An' as for 'gators' eggs, why, they'd think you was plumb crazy if you asked for 'em. This is the big feast all right, all right, an' no mistake."

I thought to myself that I would certainly be "plumb crazy" if ever I asked for alligators' eggs again under any circumstances. But the turtle's liver was different. It is, of course, a rare delicacy, and one to which my keen appetite did full justice.

It was then just after mid-day, and we took a brief siesta before continuing the ride. As usual, the mosquitoes bothered me too much to go to sleep, and I was content to brush them off, and to watch the vultures steal scraps of meat. It is amazing where these birds come from. Even in the most deserted place a brief stop for food would fetch them out of a clear sky, while at the camp there were always dozens of them about, ready to seize on the remains of a meal almost before one's back was turned. They are horrible creatures; their curved beaks, clumsy rolling walk, and everything about them are the epitome of all that is sinister and evil.

Among those that came down then was one particularly nasty specimen. His head was grey, not black like the others, and he viewed my attempts to scare him off by tossing little sticks at him with silent contempt. He was asking for trouble, and I took a shot at him with my revolver. Walter and the two others dozing by my side came back to earth abruptly and reached for their weapons.

"What is it, pal?" demanded Walter in some alarm. I sat up and brushed my knee nonchalantly.

"Mosquito!" I replied, accenting the middle syllable in true Portuguese manner.

It was the best joke the Indians had heard for a long time, and they howled with laughter; tough as they were, even they did not shoot mosquitoes off their knees with a revolver!

WE reached the little Indian village, if the half-a-dozen huts could be called a village, during the afternoon, and set a pack of lean, mangy curs barking frenziedly. The Indians were pleased to see Walter, and came out to greet him with smiles. He cracked jokes with all of them, and soon had the leather-faced old squaws giggling like schoolgirls. Maté was forthcoming and the ceremony was performed in true conventional style. This green tea, yerba maté as it is called in Spanish, or herva maté in Portuguese, is extensively drunk in South American countries, and in those places where meat forms so great a portion of the diet it is very beneficial. Quoting the text book: "It contains a nitrogenous principle, which is both nourishing and sustaining. It does not tax the digestive powers in the slightest degree." Which is all very good and healthy, but some methods of drinking it are not beyond criticism from the hygienic point of view.

On this occasion, seven of us sat down in the shade of one of the palm-roofed

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