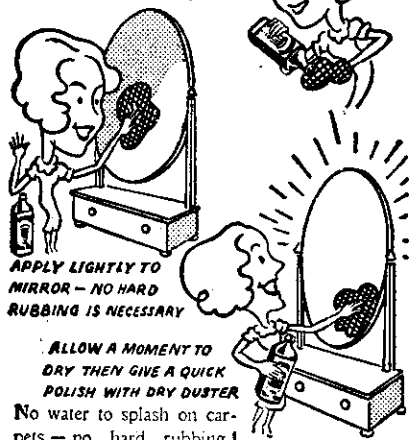


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Mistaken Journey



by ROY SHEFFIELD

XIII.

WE were off again next morning on the trail of the missing cattle just as soon as it was light enough to see. Every hour was precious, as our quarry were getting farther and farther away all the time, and making our task all the harder. If we could not catch up with them that day, Walter said, it meant that they were being purposely driven across the border into Bolivia, in which case we might expect trouble in reclaiming them. He further suggested that news of Ramsey's death had become known to the tribes and that this was a tentative attempt at cattle-stealing to see what action would result now that the old fire-eater was no longer alive to mete out his usual immediate punishment.

"I'll trace this bunch if it's the last thing I do," declared Walter, "otherwise the sons-o'-bitches won't leave us a pair of horns within fifty miles."

While applauding his sentiments, I sincerely hoped that it would not be the last thing I did, and that we should discover the truants before making ourselves unpleasantly unpopular with either marauding Bolivians, Chaco Indians, or any other local gentry.

However, it all added a zest to the chase, and we pushed our horses along at the best possible pace. As the day wore on it began to look as if Walter's theory was correct, and that ahead of us somebody was relentlessly driving the cattle to fresh pastures. The trail, too, for the most part was narrow and well defined, proof enough that the animals had been rounded-up into a bunch and were being hurried. Even when the outfit finally agreed that this was so, there was still a feature about the trail which gave us confidence; for it twisted here and there in tortuous fashion, an indication that there were probably no more than a couple of horsemen driving them, and that they were making comparatively slow progress. Despite this fact, we caught no sight of them before darkness came, and we were forced to abandon the chase for the day.

AS soon as it was possible to see the trail next morning, we were on our way again, and, almost before I was sufficiently wide-awake to know what was happening, we rounded the edge of a belt of forest and rode right into the missing cattle.

It was something of an anti-climax, though none the less welcome for all that. There was no sign of any horsemen; they, apparently, had become aware of our approach and had disappeared while the going was good. Walter fired a couple of shots to give them something to think about in case they were still within hearing, and rounding-up the whole herd we slowly headed them for home.

They had been driven, that was certain, for all of them, about 150 head altogether, were tired and lifeless and none seemed to have the energy or inclination to make a break for freedom. Thus our task was easy, and at a slow walk we began the long return journey.

This took us four days, and nothing particularly remarkable happened on the way back. McLeod was pleased at the recovery of the cattle, for had the thieves been successful they would have been encouraged to further and more serious depredations. Our prompt action, he thought, would prove an effective deterrent, and would save endless trouble in the future.

It had been six days' gruelling work for both horses and riders, and I, at least, was nursing several private aches and pains which were more likely to yield to pedestrian, rather than equestrian, exercise. But if they had been hard days, they had been happy ones, too, in return for which a few trifling discomforts of the flesh were mere nothings.

FOLLOWING our strenuous efforts of the previous week, a few lazy days in the vicinity of the ranch house proved a welcome respite. By this time the volume of flood water had become very much greater, and it was estimated that within another fortnight or three weeks much of the campo would be impassable except by canoe. There were, however, many head of cattle still grazing in the low-lying regions, and these had to be rounded up and shifted to higher ground. Preparations were fairly soon made, therefore, for the cattle outfit to make their headquarters at the first camp until this work was accomplished, or until the depth of water rendered conditions impossible.

Our stores were loaded on to a wagon drawn by six oxen, and after a day's delay owing to torrential rain the column moved off. There were the six native members of the cattle outfit, including José, Rufino and Pietro, with Walter and myself; altogether a very promising bunch, and I guessed that the time spent at the camp would not be without incident.

Although the grazing campo covered hundreds of square miles, the outfit always seemed to know where cattle were to be found, and in our outings from the camp they were never at a loss in locating a herd.

During the first week we spent at the camp we picked up three bunches of cattle, driving them through the swamps and across to the higher pastures, which although only a few feet higher than the surrounding land was free from flood water. It required two days' work to move a herd, for it took a full day to find them and to bring them back to the camp, and another

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

day to complete the cross-country journey and to establish them on new ground.

THE first morning we left as soon as it was daylight and rode out across the swamp. José, as always, led the way, and the rest of us followed in single file. Even when these rides lasted hour after hour without a stop, they never became wearisome, for there was always something fresh to see and hear. A bird; an animal; a flower; Walter Hill's flow of anecdotes; all continuously engaged my fascinated attention, and the minutes passed unnoticed.

We saw an ant-eater making for the shelter of the trees as we approached. They are good eating, and had we been in need of food he would have provided a good dinner. Much of the campo is dotted with anthills, some of them seven or eight feet in height, and the ant-eater feeds by making holes in them and poking in his long, thin tongue. A peculiarity about an ant-eater is that it is very difficult for a person to determine its sex, even when it is dead and the body is opened up.

That morning too, among the varieties of bird life, Walter pointed out a handsome white bird, an aigrette. They were seldom seen, he said, especially as Ramsey had been a ready buyer for all the feathers the Indians liked to bring him. I thought that the beautiful shining creature resting on the tree in the sunlight presented a picture of utter, undefiled loveliness; and that the coveted feathers were seen to better advantage on her own body than on any lady of society.

We picked up a bunch of cattle during the morning, and with only a brief halt for a swig of cold maté lost no time in rounding them up, and in heading back for the camp. The flood water was appreciably deeper than it had been a few days previously, and progress was slow. In the rear of the herd the calves were having a rough passage, and many times had to swim for it when they got out of their depth. They rolled their big, piteous eyes at us if we came too close, while their agitated mothers trotted round and encouraged them to further efforts.

When any of the cattle made a break for freedom the cowpuncher who chased them gave himself a fine shower-bath for his pains. His galloping horse would drench him in a flurry of flying spray, but probably before he was required to take another soaking the scorching sun had already dried the clothes upon his back. And if, as frequently happened, we were caught in a torrential down-pour, that did not matter either, as a state of maximum dampness had already been attained by all of us.

BACK at the camp it was a tricky business getting the cattle into the corral. They always showed a marked reluctance to enter, and needed careful