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Mistaken Journey



XVI.

AFTER two days' rest Walter proposed another reconnoitring trip to discover the condition of the cattle. But it did not take place, for that evening an Indian arrived from a settlement about twenty miles up river. He brought a message from a Bolivian man and his wife, who on their way down to Corumba had been stranded by the high flood water at the Indian's home. Accompanied by two peons they had crossed from Bolivia with a wagon and a team of oxen, planning to reach Descalvados and to proceed from there to Corumba by launch. But the swamps had been too deep for them, and they had failed by twenty miles to reach Descalvados.

Mac and Walter listened to the Indian's recital, and decided to send the biggest canoe to the rescue of the travellers.

We made an early start in the morning, the party again consisting of Rufino, Carlos, Walter and myself. I wondered if the boys would be required to figure anything out on this occasion, and hoped that if they were obliged to do so they would not be quite so optimistic regarding the margin of safety. Such exactness of judgment as they had displayed before, I told Walter, called for more than a little luck, and the best interests of an expedition were not served by depending on that uncertain factor. He solemnly agreed, and we both burst out laughing.

The canoe we were using was a bigger and much heavier one than the other, and needed a deal of pushing. But for the first part of the journey progress was easy. We followed the creek, and afterwards cut straight across the campo where in many places the water was too shallow to paddle the canoe and we were obliged to drag it. It was intended to strike another creek, which would bring us out to the Big River at a spot close to the Indian settlement, and Walter said he hoped to reach there in time to make the return journey downstream before sundown.

All went well until we came to look for this second creek, and then our troubles started, for it was not to be found. We had passed landmarks which were familiar to the others, and had pushed the canoe into a tangle of undergrowth, expecting to come out on the other side and to discover the channel. But the deeper we went the worse it became. The trees and vegetation were so thick, and the canoe was so long, that it was impossible to turn it; once we were started on a course it meant going straight forward, or straight back, and any obstacles in the way had to be surmounted.

Ahead of the canoe, Carlos hacked and slashed with his machete, felling saplings and chopping a passage through solid banks of bush and clutching vine. Pushing and heaving, we forced the canoe

through after him, and wiped countless ants, mosquitoes, beetles and heaven knows what other insects, from our sweating bodies. Some of the bushes were simply alive with red ants, which we were careful not to disturb, for their bite can be poisonous. Even so, I was bitten on the little finger, which swelled up like a sausage and later earned me several doses of booze.

At length we rested, and Carlos, who had been scouting ahead, reported that he had discovered no sign of the channel. That was a blow, for it meant our struggles of the past hour had been all in vain; not only that, but we should have to fight just as hard again to extricate ourselves. Two hours after we had struck into the tangle of undergrowth we finally fought clear of it, the net result of our labours being a multitude of scratches and bites, and a more intimate conception of the family life of the insect world.

Walter took fresh bearings and we paddled a short distance before again plunging into the battle. This time it did not take us so long to discover that our efforts would be as unprofitable as they had been before, and a second time we retreated with hard feelings.

I began to think that for once the outfit's figuring really had gone wrong; but they were not the men to be beaten by a mere few miles of jungle, or the attentions of ten million ants and mosquitoes. Not they! We paddled along to a third place which to me looked just as unpromising as the other two, and in we went once more.

It was a case of third time lucky, for after heavy going at the start the vegetation thinned out and we entered the missing creek. Both the other places had been canoe roads the previous season, Walter said, which was a striking example of the amazing rapidity of the tropical growth.

Our creek, with many a twist and turn, led us to the Big River, and for half a mile we had to paddle upstream. At times our most strenuous exertions did not prevent us from losing ground against the strong current and in that heavy canoe it was a struggle all the way.

The Indian settlement was some two miles inland from the river and, leaving our canoe, we finished the journey on foot. Actually we might well have gone almost to the doors of the huts in it, for during the last mile the water was always above our knees, and frequently up to our waists.

The Bolivian couple proved to be a voluble little man, all greasy hair and gold teeth, and his large, panting wife. It was easy to guess for whose benefit the ox-wagon had been brought along, and I hoped that with her in the canoe the boys would have no occasion to do any figuring on the way home!

We had lost so much time over our fruitless excursions in the bush that the afternoon was well advanced before we reached the settlement, and it was too

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

late to think about returning until the morning.

As I was wearing a pair of football shorts under my ordinary trousers, I was able to take off my wet clothes and to hang them in the sun to dry. Rufino and Carlos did the same thing, and, very properly, were unashamed of their nakedness; but Walter could not be tempted to follow suit. He said his social ambitions would be ruined, and contented himself with removing his shirt.

When we arrived the womenfolk of the community were engaged in a very curious operation. They were squatting in a circle under the shade of a tree, and in the centre was an earthenware bowl. All were busily engaged in the noisy mastication of mouthfuls of barley, which, when reduced to the required consistency, they spat out into the bowl.

"What on earth are they doing?" I asked Walter in surprise, looking at the horrid mess which filled the pot.

"I'll tell you in a minute, son," he answered, "but let's see if there's a drink goin' first, before I start gettin' the shivers."

A visit to the headman proved fruitful, and we returned to where the squaws were chewing and spitting.

"Now, if you're going to be sick," he said, "don't do it on me, but them beauties is makin' the booze you've just been drinkin'." And at the look of consternation on my face he burst into shouts of laughter.

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." It is indeed, and Walter, the villain, did me no service in imparting that particular piece of wisdom!

This revealing insight into local brewing methods discouraged me from making any further enquiries, and what other ingredients went into its manufacture besides barley and saliva I never knew. But later on, when I felt better, I did ask Walter why they chewed it and spat it out, and he said that the saliva acts as a fermenting agent and saves the use of sugar.

Our departure was not delayed, and after a breakfast of corncob and maté we drove the ox-wagon down to the canoe. This part of the journey provided me with an unusual mount, for I rode down on a saddle bull belonging to the Bolivians. The bullock was either a stubborn beast, or else I could not manage him properly—probably the latter—for he insisted on following his own course, and sank into a patch of deep water. Even in his swimming he was equally resolute, and obstinately refusing to turn aside he swam for about twenty yards with me perched on his back, holding my camera above my head with one hand.

The large lady was plumped down amidships in the bottom of the canoe, and an endless variety of goods were packed round her. I thought she looked like Mother Goose, but Walter had never heard of her, and said she looked more like a mother hippopotamus.

The two peons who had accompanied the Bolivians were going to return home