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MISTAKEN JOURNEY

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and we must have trodden on it, for the thing made no effort to get out of our path, and its evil eyes were looking up at us with a hard, unblinking stare. There were four minds with but a single thought, and Rufino, Carlos, Walter and myself fairly hurled ourselves into the canoe. To the alligator, if it had a sense of humour, the sight must have been vastly entertaining; but we were not amused, and while Walter was groping for his rifle, I loosed the contents of my automatic at the thing's head. The beast suddenly flared into life. Its threshing tail churned the water into a frenzy, and it made quick thrusts forwards and sideways, as if grappling with

an unseen enemy. The exhibition of bad temper was most impressive, and I felt glad it had saved the fireworks until after we were in the canoe. Walter brought the display to an abrupt finish with a shot from his rifle, and for the next few minutes we were busy taking each other's photograph following the best traditions of big-game hunters.

But it was Rufino who deserved his picture taken, for without his warning shout things might have gone very differently. The day passed without special incident after that, for fresh cattle were located, and we returned to the ranch house just before nightfall.

It was my swan-song to the life of a Matto Grosso cowpuncher. Back at the fazenda with the setting sun, I noticed, in a sudden excitement, that a launch was tied up alongside the landing-stage. The discovery was at once a relief, and a disappointment. It had to be good-bye. The master of the launch was a young Brazilian, who traded up and down the Rio Paraguay in his little vessel. He was willing to take me down to Corumba, and proposed to start the following morning.

WE had a riotous farewell supper in the evening, and Ramsey's wife provided a veritable banquet. All the dishes I had ever sampled seemed to be on the table, together with many little delicacies in honour of the occasion.

When finally the party was over I went to sleep with a feeling of profound dejection. Descalvados turned out in full force in the morning to bid me farewell. The cattle outfit was there to a man; José, Rufino, Carlos, Pietro and the others, they all shook hands and for a few hilarious moments we recalled the various incidents which had enlivened my stay. Shooting the mosquito; losing the seat of my trousers; the sinking canoe; the alligator; these, and a host of other things they remembered, and each one brought a laugh.

The launch's gasoline engine chugged into life, and as we swung round and headed downstream I gave the outfit the cattle-scaring scream they had taught me. Their answer shrilled back loud and long, and the thin, mournful echoes slowly died away in the forest. Rounding a bend in the river the ranch house was lost to view, and Descalvados was no more than a delightful memory.

The launch was a trading vessel which called at the various settlements along the river, and the captain was quite young, as were several of his crew. They did not strike me as being anything so capable as were the hard-bitten collection who had taken me up to the fazenda.

Lashed to the starboard side of the launch was a covered wooden barge containing a heterogeneous assortment of trading goods, ranging from sewing machines and saddles down to silk underwear and cigars; from sacks of sugar to spear heads, and from embroidered hammocks to strings of beads. We made no stops the first day, and with the assistance of the strong current skimmed swiftly downstream. With darkness came a steady downpour of rain, and at the same time the gasoline engine developed a bad attack of asthmatic splutters. Each spasm was followed by a burst of redoubled vigour, but soon the splutters became more frequent and the energy less sustained, until finally it gave up the ghost altogether, and relapsed into silence.

At once the boat was at the mercy of the river, for with no way on her, she was impossible to steer, and the fast-running tide took her where it might. For a time we drifted safely in midstream, albeit we were going sideways like a crab; and then, with a sweeping crash, we were plunged into the wall of jungle which marked the bank. Heavy branches and long arms of foliage scraped the deck, and involved us in imminent danger of being carried overboard. Our progress was arrested for barely a minute, and once more being borne along by the stream, we slowly spun round and smacked into the bank again some fifty yards further on.

These crazy antics were repeated half-a-dozen times, and I began to weary of dodging to and fro across the launch to escape the clutching vegetation. A small pig tied in the stern saved the situation, for suddenly his piercing squeals shattered the silence of the night, and he was rescued from over the gunwale where he was suspended by his neck and one leg.

This narrow escape stirred the captain into action, and he shouted an order. At once the crew joined him in noisy debate, the general trend of which seemed to lie in hurling opprobrious remarks at the man tinkering with the engine. Though outnumbered, he was not at a loss for a reply, and after a rapid interchange of pleasantries he slammed down his spanner with a gesture which plainly said, "do the — job yourself!" His defection united the others into a concerted plan of action, and to my relief the anchor was dropped, and we hove-to in safety.

I BEGAN to wonder what other adventures might befall us before we reached Corumba. I was dozing off to sleep before the engine of the launch was coaxed back to life, and it appeared to have recovered from its malady, for we continued on our way without further delay.

We made two calls next day, both at settlements of river Indians, and I was interested to discover what would be the requirements of such simple folk. I wondered if the crew were, in reality, a team of high-pressure salesmen, and would sell the unwilling natives silk stockings, or vacuum cleaners; or perhaps a pair of roller skates, or a bicycle on the eternal payment system. The Indians seemed not to want any of these articles, however, and their fancy ran to something in small sacks, probably cereals. In return they traded cattle hides and skins, among which I recognised otter and wild pig.

The procedure in these deals was leisurely in the extreme, although the initial method of approach was something of a novelty, and might easily commend itself to unsuccessful canvassers whose suburban bell-rings and door-knockings evoke no response. Not being a steamboat, we had no siren, and in its place a cow horn was used; the horn hung over the wheel and, when occasion demanded, one of the crew would blow down it, producing a long, steady booo-oop. I imagine one of these poked through a letterbox would almost certainly bring a reply. At any rate, the Indians answered, although I was surprised that the soft, mellow note of the horn should be heard for more than, say, two hundred yards. There must be something in the timbre of a horn's note, however, which gives it a long range of audibility,

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