

Mistaken Journey



An account of adventures in Central South America by an English "Innocent Abroad." In this chapter he leaves the cattle ranch and starts for Buenos Aires.

XVII.

SOUTH AMERICAN Indians are no less superstitious than natives in other parts of the world, and one belief which is world-wide in its influence they share very strongly. It is that by raising an image of a person, and by harming that image, a corresponding injury may be inflicted on the person whom the image is supposed to represent. There is no doubt that witch doctors, or ju-ju men, wield amazing powers of auto-suggestion over their subjects, and Walter assured me that he had heard of authentic instances where death had been willed upon a victim by this means. If he believed that, the Indian had a good reason for not letting me take his photograph; and I, too, had a good reason for not persevering in my endeavour to take it!

* * *

It was late next afternoon when a distant call from the other canoe echoed across the water. Carlos let out a piercing yodel in reply, and we paddled to meet them. Their news was good, for they had come across a hummock of dry land rising above the flood, and beyond it, in the cover of bushes and light timber, they had disturbed nearly a hundred head of cattle.

There was barely an hour's daylight left, and with all speed, we made for the little island. It was very small, barely fifty yards across, and having served a hundred head of cattle as sleeping quarters for some weeks, it was in a fine mess. But if we could shoot a beef, it would do as a camping ground for the night, and we pressed on into the timber in pursuit of the cattle. Despite our stealthy approach, they would not let us come near them, and twice they charged away before we got a sight of them, a game which could go on indefinitely.

The occasion clearly demanded a change of tactics, and Walter was equal to the emergency. In the big canoe we took up a position where a patch of elephant grass screened us from view, but where we ourselves commanded a good sight of anything coming our way. Pietro and the other cowhand in the smaller canoe were instructed to make a wide semi-circle, and to head the cattle back towards us.

Walter urged them to hurry, for the daylight was precious, and we sat down quietly to await events.

Twenty minutes passed, and then away to our left, we heard a shout from

Pietro, and the crash of cattle charging away through the undergrowth. The same bitter thought occurred to all of us, and the anticipatory delight with which I had been considering my supper received a rude shock.

"Come on," exclaimed Walter, "they're goin' to miss us."

We hastily paddled the canoe in the wake of the cattle, while Walter stood braced up ready for a shot. There came a second shout from Pietro, and in the same instant another bunch of beefs rushed past. They were very close, but as Walter would say, "they lit by like a bat out of hell," and with the vegetation interfering with his aim, I thought he would never get a clear shot at them. He waited until they raced across a gap in the trees and then, bang! The rear-most animal somersaulted violently, made one frantic effort to regain her feet, and slumped down in the water.

The carcass was hauled athwart the canoe, and as we made for the island the sun went down, and with tropical suddenness darkness covered the campo. When our fire was blazing and strips of meat were roasting, the little island did not seem such a bad place, after all. I changed my view, however, as the night advanced, for somehow the devilish mosquitoes pierced my net.

In the morning, my face looked uncommonly like a balloon, and my eyes were so swollen that it was difficult to see. I discovered a tear in my mosquito bar, quite a small one, but easily large enough to admit the little winged furies, and I remarked how unpleasant it would be to be without a net at all. Walter agreed, and recalled a case of two men who were lost in the Matto Grosso forest while out on a day's hunting trip. They had all the essentials for sustaining life indefinitely; guns and ammunition to obtain food; matches to light their fires; and running streams for water. Yet they died; and the cause of their death was simply and solely through lack of sleep. It was a grim tale, and I could imagine, in part, the unspeakable agonies they suffered.

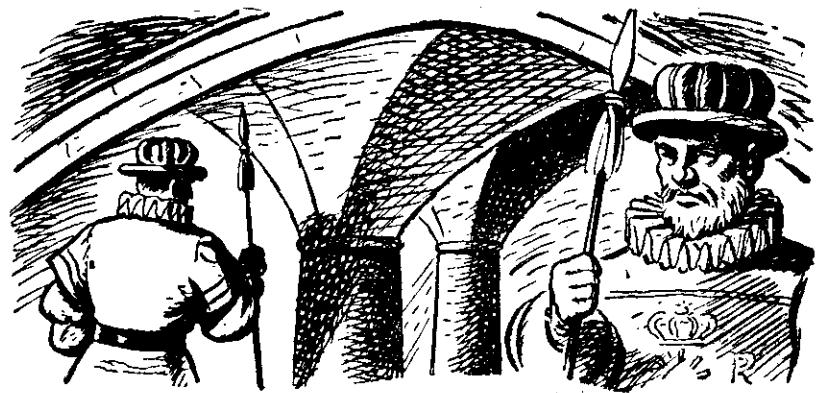
That day was the last I ever spent out in the campo, and it might easily have been the last one I ever spent anywhere, for Walter and I both had an extremely narrow escape from serious injury.

* * *

IN our search for another herd of cattle, we came across a stretch of campo where the flood water was too shallow to float the canoe. While Rufino pulled from the bows, Carlos pushed from behind, and our assistance not being needed, Walter and I walked alongside.

What was engaging our attention at the time I do not remember; but Rufino called us back to earth with a shock when, with an urgent note in his voice, he pointed to our feet, and screamed, "Jacare! Jacare!" There, right underneath us, was an alligator; another step

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Keep Watch for hidden enemies

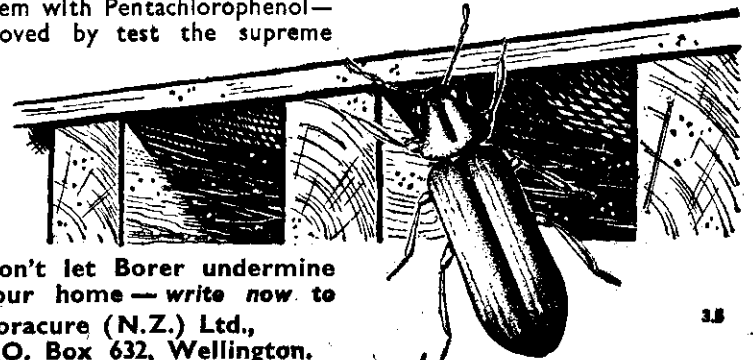
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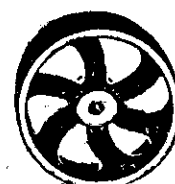
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