

## CHAPTER VII

EARLY next morning, January 2, we started from the village, and, after a short ride across the plain, reached the river Tua, at the house of a small cattle-ranch called Santa Rosa del Tua.

The owner of the premises welcomed us most hospitably, and, to our joy, placed at our disposal two small canoes. No others were to be found there at the moment. However, they were large enough to carry us and our belongings, and accordingly we made ready for an early start next day.

The houses—or what serve for houses in the *llanos*—are built on the most primitive architectural principles. Poles, varying in thickness and in length, according to the proportions of the desired structure, are sunk into the ground at convenient distances, following

the lines either of a perfect square or of a rectangle. Cross-beams are nailed or tied to the vertical poles at the required height ; in the latter case the vertical poles are grooved, so as to give additional support. From the cross-beams on either side other beams are thrown, slanting so as to meet in the centre, thus forming the basis of the roof, which is again covered with reeds, upon which are placed several layers of palm-leaves, fastened by means of thin ropes to the slanting beams and poles ; and thus the roof is completed. This finishes the house for use during the dry season.

During the wet season the sides are covered in the same fashion as the roof. The palm-leaf most used is that of the *moriche*, which abounds in the *llanos*.

When lying in the hammock during the dry season one feels the breath of the breeze as it blows across the plain, and may see the stars twinkling in the deep blue dome of heaven, like far-off tapers. The *llaneros*, or inhabitants of the plains, prefer to sleep in the open air, even without palm-leaf roofing above their heads. It is as though they felt imprisoned indoors, and pined for the ampler ether.

Here we had thus reached the last stage of our land journey. The real voyage was about to begin.

The reader who has followed me thus far will have gathered that there were three of us in this expedition—Alex, Raoul, and myself. With us came our servant Fermin, who adapted himself to the most urgent requirements, being now muleteer, now valet, now cook. Leal had engaged the services of several *peones* to paddle the canoes when we reached the Tua River ; these numbered seventeen, so that, including Leal and ourselves, we formed a group of twenty-two men. The canoes were so small that we were packed like herrings, but, as it was impossible to obtain others, we had to make the best of them.

Raoul was a sportsman : more than once he had taken up arms against the harmless ducks that swarm at certain seasons of the year in the lakes studding the plateau of Bogotá. I had no personal knowledge of his powers, but, with the modesty and truthfulness characteristic of all hunters and fishermen, he carefully impressed upon us that he was a dead shot, and that when a bird, hare, or any furred or

feathered creature, came within range of his gun its doom was certain.

Immediately upon our arrival at the river Tua, the shores of which are covered with a dense forest, he called our attention to the numberless birds to be seen, and as soon as he could manage it he left us, accompanied by one of the men, and was speedily lost to sight amongst the trees. Shortly afterwards the report of his gun reached us with such frequency that one might think he was wasting powder for mere love of smoke. By-and-by he returned, bringing with him about sixteen different birds of various sizes and kinds, sufficient to feed the whole expedition for one or two days. He was on the point of starting on another murderous excursion, when we remonstrated against the wanton destruction of animal life. Leal quietly observed that if Raoul thus continued wasting powder and shot he would soon exhaust our store of those indispensable articles, the lack of which might entail most serious consequences later on. On hearing this we held what might be called a council of war, at which it was decided that no more birds or game were to be shot than were absolutely

indispensable. We were influenced not so much by a feeling of humanity or love for the birds as by the fact that a long journey lay before us, that the loss of a canoe, the flooding of a river, or illness, or any accident that might befall us, would detain us for much longer than we had bargained. Raoul reluctantly listened to all these reasons, but, acknowledging their force, agreed to comply with them.

Our descent of the river Tua began next day. The waters were very shallow, owing to the dry season, and, as our men could not use their paddles, they punted the canoes down-stream. We were often detained by palisades which obstructed the current. These were formed by trunks uprooted from the shores by the river in its flood, and then jettisoned in the bed of the stream. In the dry season they stood forth like small islands, and gathered round them all the floating débris of the river. These palisades, with which we met very often, gave us a deal of trouble. We often had to jump out of the canoes and either drag or push them, as they would stick to the sandy bottom, and punting failed to make them budge. We took to this task cheerfully, and found it tolerable

sport, until one of our men was stung by a peculiar sort of fish, black and round, called *raya*. This lies hidden in the sand, and, when touched or trodden upon, stings, darting its harpoon into the ankle or the calf, leaving its point in the wound, a most painful one, which continues to smart for several days. The man, who was stung in our presence, cried and moaned like a child, so intense was the pain. After this we were decidedly chary of lending a hand in dragging or pushing the canoes, and—I must confess it to our shame—we would wade booted to the shore and wait till they had been got afloat again, rather than take the chances of being stung in our turn.

We had started at about six in the morning; towards five in the afternoon Leal began to cast his eyes about in search of a nice, dry, sandy beach upon which to pitch our camp for the night. So far we had always found some house or hut to sleep in; now, for the first time, we were faced by the necessity of camping in the open air without any roof whatever above our heads. We experienced a peculiar sensation of unwarranted fear—a dread arising, doubtless, from the force of habit in the civilized

man, naturally averse to imitating the birds and the beasts, which sleep under God's heaven and run all risks; but whatever our feelings, we were forced to accept the inevitable.

As soon as a satisfactory strip of beach was found, we jumped ashore. The canoes were dragged halfway out of the water, and tied with stout ropes to neighbouring trees to prevent their being carried away in case of an unexpected flood—by no means an impossible contingency. The men took out the mats upon which we were to sleep, and as there were swarms of the mosquitoes, sand-flies, and numerous insects which make life a burden in the early hours of the night on the shores of these rivers, the mosquito-bars, made of cotton cloth, were rigged up over the mats.

Fermin, who had been promoted to the rank of private cook for Alex, Raoul, and myself, prepared our supper, making use of the sauce-pans and sundry implements contained in our travelling basket. To prepare their meals, the men used a huge iron pot, which was soon tilted over a large fire.

We were four days on the river Tua punting or paddling, according to the depth of water.

When we reached the river Meta, we had already arranged the daily routine best suited to our requirements, and I might as well, once for all, describe it.

Our acting chief, Leal, ever watchful and alert, wakened us at about three in the morning. Every man had his appointed task: two of them prepared the indispensable coffee in the fashion of the land; others folded up the mats, the mosquito-bars, and whatever else might have been landed. Alex, Raoul, and I would in the meantime stand on the river brink, whilst two of the men poured upon us small cataracts of water drawn from the river in the *coyabras* or *totumas* cut from native gourds, which form an indispensable part of the domestic arrangements in the *llanos*. It would have been sheer madness to bathe in the river, with its *rayas*, or water-snakes, or perhaps some shy, dissembling alligator in quest of a tasty morsel.

Sandy beaches are the best places for camping on the shores of tropical rivers. They are dry, clean, soft, and perfectly free from snakes, scorpions, tarantulas, and all such obnoxious creatures, which are more likely to be found

amongst the high luxuriant grass and the leafy trees.

Between four and five, as soon as it was ready, every man drank a large goblet of coffee and a small glass of aniseed *aguardiente*, which is said to be a specific against malaria. The men's faith in the virtue of the distilled spirit was astounding; they never failed to take it, and would even ask for more, lest the quantity given were not enough to protect them from the dreaded illness. Though the merits of quinine are more universally acknowledged, it did not seem to be as acceptable, nor to be coveted with equal greediness.

We generally started at about five in the morning, paddling steadily till about eleven, when we landed as soon as we found a suitable spot, if possible shaded with trees. Here we would hang the hammocks, prepare the mid-day repast, and wait until three, letting the hottest hours of the day pass by. At this time the sun seemed to dart real rays of fire upon the burnished waters, whose reflection dazzled and blinded our eyes.

About three in the afternoon we would start again for two or three hours more, until a con-

venient beach was found ; once there, the camp was formed without delay, the canoes tied up, the mats spread, and in a few minutes two huge bonfires, made of driftwood, sent their glad flames flickering in the night air. After supper we crept under the mosquito-bars, and waited for Leal to call us in the morning.

The seasons in the plains, as is well known, are sharply divided into dry and rainy. The first lasts from May to November, and the second from November to May. During the wet season it rains from eighteen to twenty hours out of the twenty-four ; showers are not frequent during the dry season, but they fall now and then.

The third or fourth night that we spent on the banks of the Tua, I was awakened by feeling a moist sheet over my face, and at once realized that the heavy rain had beaten down the mosquito-bar. There was nothing for it but to cover myself with the waterproof *poncho*, sitting up for greater convenience, and disengaging myself from the fallen mosquito-net. There we all sat helpless under the dense cataract. The beach, slanting towards

the river, bore with it the waters from the higher ground, and as my body made an indenture in the sand, I felt on either side a rushing stream. Fortunately, the shower was soon over, the bonfires were heaped with driftwood and blazed forth joyously. Coffee was specially prepared for the occasion, and we sat in the genial warmth of the flames until the sun burst forth on the horizon. That morning we did not start as early as usual: the tents and covers were spread in the sun, and after an hour or so were again dry and soft. Then we started on our journey, leaving behind us the discomforts of the night. The rain seemed to have gladdened the forest, and brightened the trees and bushes into a livelier green. During the journey we underwent a similar experience upon two or three other occasions.

As for food, we had a comfortable supply, and hardly a day passed without our having either some fine bird, or at times a larger piece of game in the shape of a species of wild-boar, fairly plentiful in that locality, the flesh of which is quite agreeable after one learns to eat it. Besides game, we also had plenty of fish. All

this without counting the salt meat and tinned provisions. The birds most abundant were ducks of various descriptions, wild turkeys, and a beautiful bird of fine dark-bluish plumage, similar to a wild turkey, called *paujil* by the natives, the meat of which greatly resembles that of the pheasant.

At about this stage of the journey an incident took place which shows how even the humblest tasks in life require a certain degree of ability and experience. One day on the river Tua, Raoul—who, as I have said, was a great hunter before the Lord, and had no more esteem than most men for the milder arts—had brought down a beautiful duck of exceptional size, and of the kind known as ‘royal duck.’ Not satisfied with his triumph as a Nimrod, he took it into his head to cook the bird himself and rival the achievements of Vattel or Carême. He invited me to help him in his undertaking. My culinary attainments being purely of a theoretical kind, I promised him my moral support and hearty co-operation in the shape of advice. We invited Alex to share our wonderful supper, to which he replied that, being aware of the perils most incident to the

efforts of inexperienced cooks, however enthusiastic they might be, he preferred the men's supper, which, though humbler, was far more to be depended on. Heedless of this taunt, Raoul went on with his work. A pot filled with water was placed over the fire, and as soon as it was boiling the bird was plunged into it. In due course Raoul began to pluck valiantly; feathers black and bluish fell from his hand numerous as flakes of snow in a winter storm. When he began to tire after a while, I took the bird in hand, and continued the task, the feathers falling like dry leaves in the autumnal forest. After half an hour of steady work, when the ground was literally covered with black feathers, that blessed bird seemed untouched. We were beginning to feel anxious and hungry, and the tempting whiffs from the large iron pot, where the men were stirring their stew, stung our nostrils in a tantalizing fashion. However, it was now a question of pride and self-esteem, and we were bound to cook the bird at any cost. By-and-by Alex, holding a steaming plate in his hand, came to us and invited us to eat. Raoul rejected the offer, and though I was most anxious to

accept it, I felt bound in loyalty to stand by him. We told Alex that we wanted to reserve the fulness of our appetite for our delicious bird, to which Alex replied that by the time that bird was ready we should certainly be hungry enough to devour it, leaving the bones quite clean. Raoul and I took turns at plucking the duck, which at last seemed to yield, showing a few whitish specks here and there devoid of all feathery covering. Seeing our plight, Fermin, who had stood by, not being called upon to help, seized the bird, declaring that we had allowed it to become chilled, and that the perfect plucking of it was well-nigh impossible. However, he undertook the job most courageously, and finally, taking advantage of the shades of night, which facilitated a compromise, we dropped that royal duck into the boiling water and pretended to enjoy our supper, such as it was, when ready. How much we ate is a question as to which I need not go into detail here, but I must own that in lying down upon my mat under the mosquito-bar I felt famished. From that day onwards both Raoul and I decided to forego all interference in matters culinary,

beyond occasional advice. I have no doubt that, had Fermin or one of the men undertaken the task, we should not only have had our supper much sooner, but a dish fit for any man's palate.