

CHAPTER XVI

WITH the accession of Gatiño and his family and Valiente and his men, our numbers had gradually increased, and the camp at night had quite a lively aspect. The men would tell their adventures, and conversation frequently turned on local topics. We had gradually drifted into practical indifference concerning the doings of that distant world to which we belonged, and towards which we were moving. Newspapers, letters, telegrams, the multifarious scraps of gossip, the bursts of curiosity which fill so great a part in the life of modern man, had totally disappeared as daily elements in our own. To tell the truth, I did not miss them greatly. I have always thought that the daily newspapers are thieves of time, and cannot but approve the system of a certain friend of mine, an Englishman, who, residing in New

York, had no other source of information for the world's news than the weekly edition of the *Times*. He was dependent on it even for the news of American life and politics.

He argued that the ups and downs of a given event were of little interest to him.

'All that one need know,' he said, 'is the upshot, the crystallized fact, without wasting valuable time in the slow developments which, at times, are pure inventions of the editor—"padding," as it is called. I am a little behind-hand at times,' he remarked, 'but at the end of the year I make it up, balance the account, and start afresh.'

Certainly if all the attention given to local news of no importance, or to descriptions of fires, crimes, and sundry topics which never change in essence and vary solely as regards names and secondary details, were devoted to studying something useful, the average mind of the great newspaper-reading nations would not have been degraded to the depths revealed by a glance at a collection of the newspapers and reading matter on the bookstalls of any railway-station in France, England, or the United States, where the flood of trash and sensationalism swamps

and carries away with it public intelligence, or what stands for it.

Gautier used to complain of the curse of the daily press

‘Formerly,’ he said, ‘every human being brayed in his own original asinine way. Now we only get variations on the leaders in their respective newspapers!’

The great French writer expressed the simple truth in a pointed way. The cheap press, like cheap liquor, is a public calamity.

Our men poured forth personal impressions of Nature. The world varies in size and in beauty in proportion to the eye and the mind that contemplate it. In Leal’s and Valiente’s conversation especially there was something like the voice of the forest and the murmuring waters. They had lived to some purpose in those deserts, and to them cities, railways, palaces, sea-going ships, and all the other methods of modern locomotion—material civilization, in fact—were as wonderful as the beauties and splendours of Eastern tales are to us.

Talking about tigers, Leal told us that they roamed all over those plains, especially on the banks of the Meta and the Orinoco, where the

forests intersect breeding and grazing plains. The cattle-ranchers must be ever on the watch, and from instinct and experience the cattle acquire a natural spirit of defence without which the losses would be far heavier than at present.

Whenever the cattle scent the approach of the tiger, they crowd together, the young calves in the centre, the cows and young heifers covering them behind their bodies, and the bulls pacing around and outside the group like sentinels before a tent. There is no exaggeration in this tale. Leal assured us that he had himself seen these preparations on more than one occasion.

The tiger, whose daring and ferocity are multiplied tenfold by hunger, frequently attacks the group: then ensues a life and death struggle. The tiger tries to jump upon the bull sideways or from behind, whilst the bull strives to face the tiger constantly. As the latter is far more agile and can leap from a long distance, he frequently lands upon the bull, sometimes breaking his spine with the blow. If he misses, the bull gores him. Occasionally both animals die, the tiger in its death-struggle tearing the bull's neck open with its claws.

'More than once,' said Leal, 'have I found the two enemies dead in a pool of blood side by side.'

The tigers also crouch in the bushes close to the drinking-places, and jump upon the animals as they lower their heads into the water. They rip open the necks of their victims, drag them into the jungle, and there devour them.

The hunters know that a sated tiger is far less daring than a hungry one, and they frequently place a calf or some other easy prey within his reach. After his meal he is hunted down, but Leal added that this is not considered fair play amongst thoroughbred *llaneros*; it is a trick unworthy of a real sportsman.

The tigers live exclusively upon other animals. They prefer cattle, and have a special predilection for donkeys and mules; they are gourmets. The choicest morsel to their taste seems to be the fat neck of donkeys and mules; they have, too, a pretty taste in turtles. They can crush the back of the younger turtles not yet fully developed. These awkward amphibians rush, if their ponderous movements can be so described, into the water for fear of the tiger. There he is powerless to harm them.

The alligator rivals the tiger in voracity and fierceness. They are sworn enemies, and attack each other whenever they meet. The odds are on the tiger's side if the struggle be on land, and in favour of the alligator if the pair meet in the water. The tiger seeks to turn the alligator over on his back, or to get at the body towards the stomach, where the softer skin can be penetrated by the tiger's claws, which disembowel his enemy. The alligator defends himself by striking terrific blows with his tail, and seeks to scrunch the tiger between his formidable jaws. Fights between them, Leal said, are frequently seen on the beaches, and are a fascinating though ghastly spectacle.

The tigers frequently cross rivers infested with alligators, and display a really marvellous cunning in avoiding their enemy in his own element. The tiger will stand on the beach at a given point of the river, and there roar with all his might for an hour or so on end. The alligators, in the hope of getting at him, congregate in the water at that particular point. When the members of the assembly thus convened have, so far as the tiger can judge, met at the appointed place, he starts up-stream

along the banks as rapidly as possible, and crosses two or three miles higher up. There are two details to be noted : first, the stratagem by which the tiger misleads his enemies ; and, second, his choice of a crossing-place, so that the alligator would have to swim against the current to get at him.

Both Leal and Valiente had the true cattle-breeder's love for cattle, which to them are man's best friends.

'They give us milk and meat and cheese,' Leal would say ; 'they help us to cultivate the ground, and their very presence drives away fevers, mosquitoes, and miasmas. We and the cattle are allies against the boas, the tigers, the snakes, and all the beasts without which these lands would be a real paradise.'

The tales of our friends sounded most wonderful in Fermin's ears. He was a townsman, accustomed to bricks and mortar ; furthermore, he was naturally sceptical as to all that he heard, and felt rather small at seeing our men's familiarity with things and manifestations of Nature which to him were so strange and new.

Fermin came from the city of Medellin, where

he had spent most of his life. It is a typical old Spanish town of the central tropical belt. It nestles amongst the hills, 100 miles from the left bank of the Magdalena River, at a height of about 4,500 feet. The ground around is mountainous. The valley is small and beautiful, with numberless streams coursing down the hills, and luxuriant vegetation in perpetual bloom.

Prior to this journey, Fermin's travels had never taken him beyond his own province. Like all Colombians, he had been a soldier at some period of his life, a 'volunteer' of the type described in a telegram (very well known in Colombia) which a candid or witty—the distinction is at times difficult—mayor sent to a colleague in a neighbouring town: 'Herewith I send a hundred volunteers; kindly return the ropes!' Having joined the army in this wise, it is not strange that Fermin left it as soon as he could. His military career was no longer and no more glorious than Coleridge's.

Continental Europeans are wont to grow amusingly solemn and censorious when they hear of the system still obtaining in many parts of Spanish America for the formation of armies

which are chiefly engaged in the civil wars that devastate those countries from time to time ; this system is nothing more nor less than the press-gang method practised all over Europe not so long ago. But between this press-gang, which suddenly compels a man to join the ranks destined to fight, and the conscription, which forces him into the army whether he likes it or not, I can only see a difference of detail, but none in essence. Individual liberty is as much violated in the one case as in the other. In both cases the weak, the helpless, and the poor are the prey of the more cunning and more powerful, and as for the causes at stake, whatever the name or pretext may be, if the whole question is sifted, greed and ambition masquerading under some conventional high-sounding name will be found to be the real and essential motors. Militarism is a form of exploitation of mankind which adds human blood to the ingredients productive of gold and power to others ; it is nothing but an engine of plunder and of pride, the more disgusting on account of its sleek hypocrisy. Your money-lender frankly tells you that he will charge you three, four, or five per cent. per month, and

despoil you of house and home if you cannot pay; this, though cruel, is frank and open and above-board. But your advocate of militarism will despoil you like the cosmopolite Jew, telling you that glory shall be yours, that patriotism and the holy traditions of religion, the dynasty, the empire, or the nation, as the case may be, are at stake, and that it is necessary for you to risk your skin in consequence. With such baubles and clownish maunderings men have been led on, and are still being led on, to cut each other's throats for the personal benefit and satisfaction of their leaders, who give them a bit of ribbon or stamped metal if they survive and have luck. Meanwhile the exploiters sit safe on their office chairs, pocket the shekels, and chuckle at the pack of fools, the smug middle-class flunkies, and the dirty, bamboozled millions, the cannon fodder, fit only for bayonet and shrapnel.

After leaving the army, Fermin, who by trade was a journeyman tailor, had joined the remnants of a wrecked theatrical company, a group of strollers travelling through the towns and villages of his province, and giving performances from the modern and the ancient

Spanish repertory, to the enjoyment and the edification of the natives.

He had been in my service for over a year, proving himself admirable as a valet, and certainly very plastic, for during the journey he had been by turns muleteer, amateur paddler, fisherman, hunter and cook.

The people of his province, a hardy mountaineer race, so prolific that population doubles itself every twenty-eight years, are known all over Spanish America for their readiness at repartee, the frequent metaphors that brighten their daily speech, and a knack of humorous exaggeration.

Fermin, referring to one of the men whose idleness he criticised, said, 'That fellow is so lazy that he cannot even carry a greeting!' and talking of the wonderful climbing ability of a certain mule, he said that, if it could only find the way, it would reach the gates of heaven and bray in the ears of St. Peter!

One evening, during a lull in the conversation, Fermin, who had quietly listened to tales of fierce tigers, chivalrous bulls, alligators, and many other natives of forest or stream, burst forth, saying that he also knew of some wonderful

beasts ; but I prefer to quote his words as nearly as possible.

‘The truth is,’ said he, ‘that before starting on this trip I knew nothing about tigers, alligators, boas, and so forth, except from picture-books. I had even thought that people lied a great deal about those animals, but sight has now convinced me of their existence. I have no doubt they are to be found somewhere in my native province, but it is not about them that I am going to talk. I will tell you something which will show that we, too, have wonderful animals in our part of the country.

‘Some years ago I was the first lover in a theatrical company which, though modest in its pretensions, scored great success wherever it played. One night, in the mining region near the Cauca River, we were forced to sleep in the very shed where we had performed the comic opera entitled “The Children of Captain Grant,” a most popular seafaring tale set to music.

‘Mosquitoes were as abundant and aggressive as anywhere in the world, but they seemed to me to have far stronger lungs than those of these localities. Anyhow, there was a specially sustained high-sounding ring in their little

trumpets, so that they formed a sort of orchestra beneath the moon.

‘One of the lady artistes held the doctrine that life was sacred in all its manifestations; that man has no right to kill any animal, however small it may be, so she did not kill the mosquitoes that swarmed around her, but tried to blow them away with her fan. However, as some of them alighted on her forehead and on her hands, she would take them carefully between thumb and forefinger and place them on the side of a basin half filled with water, moistening their wings so that they stuck and remained harmless for the time being.

‘The smokers amongst us—all the men, in fact—after lighting their cigars or cigarettes, threw their wooden matches into the basin, a necessary precaution lest the thatch-roofed shed might catch fire.

‘In the earlier part of the night the mosquitoes made sleep almost impossible, and there we lay on the ground or upon canvas stretchers snoozing and tossing about, waiting for the morning. As night advanced, with the arrival of a welcome breeze, they seemed to diminish in numbers. I began to doze, but was awakened

by one of my companions who called my attention to the echo of distant music, sweet and low, a harmony of lutes and soft recorders, whose sounds were wafted on the wings of the night air. We went out of the shed, and the sounds ceased. On returning to it we heard the melody again. This was a mystery. Nearly all our companions were asleep. We were determined to ascertain whence the music came, and, on investigation, found that the blessed mosquitoes, placed by the charitable and humane artiste on the sides of the basin, had contrived to build a raft with the fag-ends of matches, on which, waiting for their wings to dry completely, they were whiling the night away gaily singing the most popular ditty in our operetta, descriptive of the joys of life on the ocean wave!

'This will show you,' Fermin added, 'that, though we have neither tigers, nor boas, nor turtles, nor fighting bulls, nor alligators, in our province, our mosquitoes beat all yours in talent and ability!'