JULIUS BEERBOHM

WANDERINGS IN PATAGONIA; OR, LIFE AMONG THE OSTRICH-HUNTERS

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

In the month of August, 1877, I found myself on board ship, bound from Buenos Ayres for the coast of Patagonia, in company with a party of engineers, who were going to survey that portion of the country which lies between Port Desire and Santa Cruz.

After leaving the River Plate we encountered adverse winds and heavy weather, which kept us tossing about for three weeks, without making any material progress on our course. At last we got a fair wind, however, which soon brought us close to our destination, the port of St. Julian (lat. 49° 20′ S.); and one morning, together with my five o'clock coffee, the cabin-boy brought me the welcome news that land was in sight. I jumped out of bed and ran on deck, careless of the hail and rain which were falling in blinding showers, and of the wind which blew off the land, far colder and sharper than we had hitherto experienced. On looking to leeward, I could at first see nothing but a thick bank

of clouds; but presently the horizon got clearer, and I descried a dark, lowering line of coast, of fierce and inhospitable aspect, rising abruptly from the sea to a considerable height.

I had not long to examine it, for a sudden shift of the wind shrouded the whole coast in mist, and it did not become visible again till the afternoon, when the weather cleared up, and the sun shone out brightly. The wind, however, slowly increased in violence; by the time St. Julian came in sight we were plunging along under reefed topsails, and the captain began to think that we should have to stand off the port till the force of the storm had abated – a prospect which threw us all into dismay, as we had already been looking forward with vivid expectations to the pleasure of stretching our legs on *terra firma* the next morning – a luxury which those who have made a long sea voyage can fully appreciate.

While the captain was yet doubtful what course to take, the matter was summarily decided by the weather itself. The wind, which had hitherto been blowing from the north-east, shifted to the south-east, and redoubled its fury; and rather than run the risk of standing off the port for the night, under a lee shore and with a strong current setting in to the land, the captain elected to face the lesser danger, and enter the port.

The necessary orders were accordingly given; a man was sent aloft to look out for banks or rocks, and all preparations were made for any emergency. An anxious time ensued for all on board, as we steered slowly in under the northern headland of

St. Julian, menaced on either side by steep and rugged cliffs, falling vertically down to the water's edge; the sea dashing at their base with an angry roar, and hurling the white spray almost to their very summits. The gale howled through the rigging, and a thousand sea-birds, startled at such an unusual apparition, circled round the ship, white and silent, seeming to eye us with an unpleasant curiosity.

Suddenly we heard a shout, "Breakers ahead!" and everyone turned pale and looked anxiously forward. Right in front of us, and forming a belt across the entrance of the port, stretched a line of breakers, boiling and foaming like a cauldron; while to the left a long ledge of black, jagged rocks pierced through the waters, promising certain destruction, should we drift upon them. For a moment the captain was irresolute; but it was too late to go back; in any attempt to put the ship round we should have gone on the rocks, and there was, therefore, no alternative but to continue our course and dash through the breakers, leaving the rest to fate. On we went, with beating hearts and strained nerves, as the threatening roar of the foaming rollers became louder and louder. In another second we were in their midst, and everyone held his breath in suspense. Suddenly there was a shock; the ship quivered, and I was thrown violently on my face. By the time I got to my feet again, all danger was over. We had crossed the harbour bar, and were now sailing slowly up the bay, in comparatively smooth water, and congratulating ourselves on our escape from what had looked a most serious peril. The wind, too, had lulled,

and by the time we let go the anchor all was still and calm. The sun was just setting; one by one the gulls, albatrosses, and other sea-birds, which had hitherto been continuously sweeping round the ship, disappeared; and not a sound was heard from either side of the broad bay.

On arriving in port, after a long sea voyage, the sudden change of scene and associations, the bustle and the noise of commercial activity – the steamers, lighters, and other small craft, plying from shore to shore; the ships moored alongside the wharves, taking in or discharging cargo, the busy hum arising from the distant town, the sight of new faces, and the sound of strange voices – all combine to excite and bewilder one, contrasting forcibly with the dull, quiet, and drowsy sameness of the life one has just been leading during several weeks of dreary navigation.

But none of these accustomed sights and sounds gladdened our hearts in the desert harbour where we had just safely come to anchor, after our stormy passage. The silence of death reigned everywhere, and its mysterious effect, joined to the wild character of the surrounding country, whose bold, bare hills were now looming gigantic and black in the gathering dusk, impressed me with a vague sense of awe and wonder.

And not out of harmony with the gloomy spirit of solitude which broods over St. Julian, are the tragic memories connected with the three famous nautical expeditions which have visited its inhospitable shores.

We were anchored between two islands – Justice and

Execution Islands. These names were given to them by Sir Francis Drake, who visited St. Julian in 1578. On the former he caused one of his party, a Master Doughty, to be put to death for alleged insubordination. Sir Francis found a gibbet already erected on one of these islands, which had been left there by Magellan, who passed the winter of 1520 at St. Julian, and who, during his stay, had also to quell a formidable mutiny which broke out amongst his little fleet; and which, but for his timely energy, foresight, and courage, might have ended fatally for him. The ringleaders were executed. In more modern times, another fatality occurred during the expedition of the *Adventure* and *Beagle*, 1832. A Lieutenant Sholl, a young officer of much promise, died there, and was buried on a point overlooking the bay which now bears his name. The spot is marked by a small cairn, bearing an inscription recording the date, etc.

As I looked over the bay, for all the change that has happened there since, either in the rugged outlines of its shores or in the spirit of silence and desolation that hangs over them, it seemed that it might have been but yesterday that Magellan dropped anchor there, with his quaint, high-pooped craft:

'The first who ever burst into that silent sea.'

Peering into the darkness till a mist rose into my eyes, I gradually fell into a half-dreaming, half-waking state, and presently I seemed to behold some strangely rigged vessels lying close to me in the bay. Magellan's own ships! There was the tall, spare figure of the intrepid commander himself, standing on

the poop of the largest vessel, dressed in a brown leather jerkin, the cross-hilted sword at his side; and I could plainly mark the expression of dauntless enterprise on his weather-worn brow, and the determined gleam of his sharp grey eyes, whose glance now wandered over the far shore and now rested reverentially on the high cross fixed on the poop. I could see the quaintly-costumed sailors busy at work on deck, repairing rigging, mending boats, or making sails, talking and shouting the while in a strange tongue. Hardy, noble figures these men, who, in the frailest of craft, braved a thousand dangers in the wildest countries, and fearlessly carried the symbol of their religion to lands which mariners of today with all the advantages of modern instruments and superior vessels, approach with the utmost mistrust and dread. Soon a bell rang, and all was silence; the men left their work and gathered round the commander, who, I thought, seemed to be addressing them. And then floating over the waters came the sound of the 'Ave Maria!' weirdly sweet and plaintive.

But at this juncture somebody shook me, and I woke up, to find it was all a dream, and to remember that Magellan had been dead and buried for centuries, and that I, a son of the nineteenth century, had come to that spot, not to plant the true Cross, but to find what the country was capable of – and that, finally, it was time for supper.

CHAPTER II

The next morning we were up betimes. The weather was fine, and, as there was no wind, not too cold, though the taller hills were covered with snow, and the thermometer stood considerably below zero. Plenty of sea-birds were flying round the ship, or disporting themselves in the water, heedless of our presence; but on shore there were no signs of animal life stirring anywhere. Preparations were made for getting the horses on shore as quickly as possible, as their long confinement was beginning to tell injuriously upon them. In the meantime a boat was lowered, and, taking our guns, a few of us started off for the shore, to find some suitable spot to land the horses, and to have a general look round.

A short pull brought us in sight of a little cove, with a strip of sandy beach leading up to the mainland, which fell steeply down on all sides, so as to form a kind of natural corral, where the horses would be quite safe and conveniently sheltered from the wind. There we accordingly landed, roughly waking the echoes, which had doubtless been comfortably sleeping for many a long day, with a loud hurrah, as we jumped on shore and climbed up the bluff which shut in the cove. There the first object which met our sight was the little cairn, already mentioned, commemorative of Lieutenant Sholl. It was standing, probably, just as it had been left by the hands which reared it, as the Indians seldom, if ever, come so near to the port. The letters of the inscription were still

tolerably visible, for the stones suffer little from the action of the atmosphere, and gather but few mosses or lichens in that dry climate, where, during nine months of the year, hardly any rain falls, and where all vegetation is stunted and scanty.

The view we obtained from our present standpoint was very limited, the horizon being bounded by a chain of conically shaped hills, flattened at the top, and generally similar in outline and height. The country which they enclosed appeared to consist of a series of irregular plains, broken up by glens, or 'cañons,' as they are aptly called in Spanish, with here and there an isolated hill and an occasional plain of short extent. There were plenty of bushes of a thorny species scattered everywhere, and in the glens the grass seemed to flourish in tolerable luxuriance, though on the higher-lying land it was less plentiful, the ground there being covered with pebbles of porphyry, worn round and smooth by the action of water at some remote period.

After our long cooping-up on board, we were not equal to any prolonged exertion, and soon got tired of climbing up the steep hills and escarpments, especially as there was no employment for our guns, either in the shape of beast or fowl. We therefore went back to our boat, to get at which, as the tide had already fallen considerably, we had to wade knee-deep through a long tract of black, slimy mud. As there is a tide-range at St. Julian of from thirty to forty feet, the ebb and flood tides rush in and out with great rapidity, and we often had great difficulty in pulling back to the ship, even with four oars, when the wind and tide happened

to be against us.

The rest of that day was employed in getting the horses on shore, a task which was successfully accomplished before the tide commenced to rise again, so that they had comparatively little distance to swim to the cove. The poor animals seemed as glad as we had been to find themselves on land once more, and testified their satisfaction by neighing and frisking about with great vigour. In the evening we made a short excursion to Justice Island, close alongside of which we were anchored. Whilst exploring it we startled a large covey of shag, numbering quite a thousand, which, to judge by the accumulation of guano, appeared to roost there habitually. They did not fly up immediately at our approach, but waddled clumsily down to the beach, holding their bodies quite erect, and flapping their wings in a ludicrous manner. The sailors killed several with sticks, and subsequently cooked and ate them, notwithstanding the strong fishy taste of the flesh.

Early the next morning, together with two of my companions, I started on an expedition towards the interior, with a view to discover what kind of country lay beyond the range of hills which bordered the horizon. We took some provisions with us, as we did not expect to be home till the evening, thinking it prudent not to rely on our guns for our dinner, after the experience of the previous day of the absolute absence of game; indeed, we left them behind us, as being rather irksome on horseback.

Mounting the three freshest horses we could find amongst our

stock, we struck off at an inspiriting gallop. We had not gone far, however, before it came to an abrupt ending. The plain over which we were riding suddenly terminated, descending into a deep ravine, which seemed to wind from the hills down to the port. The descent was rather steep, but we got down somehow; and then our horses had a hard climb up the opposite side, rendered still more arduous by the loose nature of the pebbly soil, which afforded no reliable hold, giving way under their feet. On reaching the top, we found ourselves on another plain, intersected a little further on by a ravine similar to the one we had just crossed and so we continued, now scrambling up and down these cañons, now leisurely trotting over short plains, whose level surfaces gave our horses time to get breath and to prepare for tackling the next ravine, until gradually we got nearer to the hills, beyond which we hoped to meet some more pleasant variety of landscape.

Presently we came to a very broad cañon, on the surface of which we observed some irregularities, which, on inspection, proved to be the remains of some human habitation. Portions of wall, about three feet high, were still standing, and here and there lay several pieces of timber; but, excepting a millstone, half embedded in the soil, there were no other vestiges of those who had once attempted to create a homestead in this lone spot.

The colony, on the site of which we were now standing, was founded in 1780 by Antonio Viedma, under commission from the Viceroy of the River Plate Provinces, and was abandoned in

1784, in accordance with a royal order, chiefly on account of the sterility of the soil, which rendered agriculture impossible. The colonists also suffered severely from scurvy, and were further troubled by the Indians, whose hostility they seem to have incurred. The Spaniards, whatever grave faults they may have committed in the administration of their South American possessions, developed great energy and spared no expense in their endeavours to colonise Patagonia, and numerous expeditions were despatched from Buenos Ayres with this object. Settlements were established at Port Desire and other spots on the coast, all of which, sooner or later, came to share the fate of the colony of St. Julian.

And indeed it is not to be wondered at. Unless some very cheap manure be discovered, by means of which sand may be profitably fertilised, or unless some new source of riches at present hidden be discovered there, it is much to be apprehended that Southern Patagonia is destined to remain almost entirely unpopulated and uncultivated till the end of time. In the cañons, where there is a little alluvial soil, some scanty crops might be harvested, or a patch of potatoes might be cultivated; but the spring and summer months are so dry, that even these limited attempts at husbandry might not always be attended with favourable results. Sheep might be reared in the valley of the Santa Cruz River, though not in great numbers, as the pasturage there is rather limited, and the grass itself is coarse and long, and not particularly adapted for sheep, for which it is preferable that

it should be short and fine.

The coast is extremely rich in fish, however, and a dried-fish trade might, perhaps, be successfully carried on with the Brazils, where a good market exists for this article, which forms the staple diet of the poorer classes in that country. An attempt to start an industry of this kind was made by a Frenchman, M. E. Rouquand, who established himself, in 1872, at Santa Cruz, with all the machinery, boats, etc., necessary for such an undertaking, under a concession granted to him by the Argentine Government. He built several houses and sheds there, the materials for which were conveyed at great expense from Buenos Ayres; and when everything was ready, and he was about to go practically to work, a Chilian man-of-war steamed into Santa Cruz one day and signified to him that he was trespassing on Chilian territory, and would be required to leave immediately. Chili, it appears, claims jurisdiction over Patagonia as far as Santa Cruz River, and could therefore not permit anyone to attempt to benefit that country whose authorisation to do so came from the Argentine Government. The latter country does not admit Chili's claims to possession over the territory in question, but contented itself in this case with a diplomatic protest against the act of violence committed in defiance of the Argentine flag, under whose protection M. Rouquand had laid out his capital and his energies. In the meantime, M. Rouquand is of course ruined, as neither Government has granted him any compensation for the losses he has sustained by his arbitrary ejection. After such an example,

and as the settlement of the territory dispute seems to have been indefinitely shelved by the easy-going countries concerned, it is easy to understand why no one has hitherto been found disposed to risk his time and capital in an endeavour to establish any industry on the Patagonian coast.

Turning our backs on the 'Glen of the Spaniards,' as it is still called in Indian traditional nomenclature, we again continued our journey towards the hills, which were in reality much further than they had appeared at first sight, being, by the rather roundabout road by which we had come, about fifteen miles from the port. Another hour's ride brought us to their base, and as the keen morning air had made us all rather hungry, before going any further we dismounted, and having made a good fire with the branches of some of the thorny bushes which abounded everywhere, and which proved an excellent combustible, we discussed a hearty breakfast of cold meat and biscuit.

After a short rest we remounted and rode slowly up a glen which led between the hills, craning our necks expectantly as we climbed the escarpment which bounded its further end, from the top of which we should have a good view of the surrounding country. We emerged on the summit, and behold, there was nothing but an immense plain, stretching away in dreary uniformity to the far horizon. The scene was not a cheerful one. Down in the cañons the grass is long and green, and clumps of underwood, growing at intervals, lend a pleasant variety to the landscape. But on the plains, which often extend uninterruptedly

for thirty or forty miles, all is different, and nothing more dull and dreary can be imagined than the view presented by these immense tracts of land, where, by reason of the sterility of the soil and the fierce winds which sweep continuously over them, no vegetation can possibly flourish. The soil is sandy and covered with stones, with here and there an isolated tuft of grass, withered and grey, whilst a peculiar gloom is further added to the melancholy of the scene by the sombre, melancholy hue of a straggling, stunted bush, the jume, which grows there in considerable quantities – in its blackness and ugliness, the fit offspring of such an uncongenial soil.

The plain we were now standing on was no exception to the general rule, and we found but little inducement to remain immersed in a long contemplation of its charms; so, turning our horses' heads, we followed the course of the hill range, which trended in a semicircle towards the port. After having ridden for some distance, the plain terminated, and we descended into a broken country again, marked with the usual peculiarities of glen and plateau. We presently came in sight of a large lake, which we thought might contain fresh water, but on coming closer we found that the shores were covered with salt crystals, and that the soil in the vicinity was impregnated with salt too. The lake measured about two leagues long, by a league and a half broad at the widest part, but the water was very shallow everywhere. We could see a herd of guanacos standing in the centre, and the water did not reach to above their knees. I have frequently

observed these animals standing in the salt lakes which abound everywhere in Patagonia, but whether they actually go to drink I am not prepared to say, though it is hard to account in any other way for their presence there. We looked with some curiosity at these guanacos, as they were the first animals we had met with as yet on the mainland, but they were too far off for us to be able to observe them with accuracy. I shall describe the species at another opportunity.

In the meantime it was getting late, and our horses, which had been severely tried by the nature of the ground we had gone over that day, were beginning to show signs of fatigue. My horse, in particular, was completely done up, and it was with great difficulty that I managed to keep up with my companions.

At sunset we were still a long way from the ship. Dusk came on apace; the hills around us first grew indistinct and hazy, and then gradually settled down into a dark, solid mass, blackly defined upon the lighter background of the sky, over which the stars were now glittering in the frosty air. It was getting cold, too, and I began heartily to wish myself on board, especially as every moment it became more apparent that my horse was in imminent peril of collapsing altogether.

Still he stumbled on, occasionally shying wildly at the glimmering whiteness of some heap of bleached guanaco bones, or startled at the fanciful shapes assumed by the bushes in the deepening shadows of night.

Presently, as I was riding up a rather steep escarpment, my

horse's saddle-girths slipped back, the saddle rolled over, and I fell with a heavy thud to the ground. The moment he felt relieved of my weight, and before I could jump up and seize the reins, the horse turned round and leisurely trotted back to a glen we had just left, where there was some fine grass, which had evidently taken his fancy in passing. I ran after him as fast as I could, but he gently, though firmly, refused to be caught, pausing now and then, whenever he had distanced me, to snatch a few mouthfuls of grass, and then starting off again as soon as I came near to him. This kind of thing went on for a long time, and when I had at last caught him, and had picked up the various saddle-belongings, I was completely done up. Not more so, however, than the horse, for when I remounted him he refused to budge an inch, and at the first touch of the whip, quietly lay down. I was now in a pleasant plight. I shouted, in the hope that my companions would hear me, but no answer came. They had evidently not noticed my mishap, and had continued their route, thinking I was coming up behind.

Reluctantly I had to make up my mind to stop where I was till the morning, though the prospect was anything but cheerful. I was too tired to go on on foot, and no persuasion would induce my horse to stir. I was very hungry, and, unfortunately, one of my companions carried what remained of the meat and biscuit; and though it was extremely cold, I had no other coverings for the night but my saddle-cloths, having neglected to bring my fur robes with me. Luckily, I had a box of matches; and having broken off a sufficient quantity of dry branches from the bushes,

I soon managed to have a good fire burning, whose warm glow afforded me no little comfort. As a substitute for supper, though it was not a satisfactory equivalent, I smoked a pipe, and then, wrapping myself up as well as I could in the saddle-cloths, I lay down by the fire and tried to go to sleep. This I could not accomplish; for although I fell into a half-doze at first, as soon as the fire got low, the cold thoroughly woke me again, and I had to set off and look for a fresh supply of firewood – by no means a plentiful article. I soon made the fire burn up again; but, do what I would, I could not get to sleep, and finally had to abandon the attempt as hopeless.

The night seemed interminable. Occasionally I would get up, and walk to and fro to pass away the time quicker, but the cold soon drove me back to the fire. I confess I should have liked some companion to enliven my weary vigil. All alone in the wild desert, surrounded by the dark night, I felt quite an uncanny feeling come over me as I listened to the strange whisperings which seemed to creep through the grass and hover in the air, as the wind rose and swept down the narrow glen where I was camping. The more I listened the more these noises seemed to multiply, till at last there was quite a Babel of confused sounds and vague murmurings. Now and then I would start to my feet, fancying I heard voices close to me, or something would rustle mysteriously past, and a sound as of faint laughter would seem to ring from out the depths of the darkness around me. For a time I was kept in quite a state of nervous agitation; but it gradually

wore off, and soon I became stolidly indifferent to everything except the fire, to replenish which from time to time I had to make an excursion in search of wood.

The hours went slowly by, as I sat watching the stars creeping over the heavens, longing wearily for daybreak. At last, worn out with fatigue, I fell into a troubled slumber, and when I opened my eyes again the sky was already grey with dawn. My fire had gone out, and my limbs were stiff with cold. On a bush near where I was lying four carranchos, a kind of hawk, were perched, eyeing me with a complacent, watchful look, as if they expected shortly to make a meal of me. Feeling quite uncomfortable under their unholy gaze, I flung a stone at them; but they merely flew up a little, circled once or twice round me, and then lighted again on another bush, as much as to say, 'Never mind; we can wait.' They abound in the pampas, and assemble in great numbers whenever a puma slays a guanaco, as the former often contents itself with merely sucking the blood of its victim, leaving the rest to these birds and the vultures, who soon pick the bones clean.

I rekindled the fire, and after I had warmed my stiffened fingers, I saddled the horse, which I had tethered to a bush during the night, and rode off towards the port. I arrived at the cove after about an hour's sharp riding, and found that my companions had also been obliged to pass the night in the open air, as their horses had eventually succumbed, under the fatigue consequent on their hard day's work.

CHAPTER III

During the next few weeks we were busy examining the country in the vicinity of St. Julian, without finding anything of special interest to reward our pains. Near the salt lake alluded to in the last chapter we discovered some extensive deposits of phosphate of lime, but as they are very far from the port, they must be considered to have practically no commercial value. Perhaps, however, when all the guanos and nitrates of more accessible regions have been exhausted, the phosphates of Patagonia may be utilised for manuring purposes, but in the interests of agriculture it is to be hoped that that day is as yet far distant.

St. Julian is a far superior harbour to either Chubut or Port Desire, but there is a dearth of fresh water in its vicinity during the months from October to June, which is of course a great drawback, and neutralises its other advantages. Indeed, the whole country is but sparsely watered. South of the Rio Negro, which must be considered as the dividing line between Patagonia and the Argentine Provinces, there are only small rivers, the Chubut, the Desire, and the Santa Cruz. Coy Inlet and Gallegos rivers during nine months of the year are unimportant streams, and the former at certain periods frequently dries up altogether.

The river Chubut has never been followed to its source by any trustworthy traveller, but Dr. Moreno, an Argentine explorer,

from personal observations and from information obtained from the natives, is inclined to place its source as taken from a lake, called Coluguapé by the Indians, which lies somewhere between lat. 44° to 45° S., and long. 68° to 69° W., Greenwich. Thence it flows in a north-north-easterly direction till within about sixty miles from its mouth, and then, having received near this point the waters of several small streams from the Cordilleras, it flows from west to east, and finally empties itself into the Atlantic in lat. 42° 20′ S. The depth of the river at forty miles from its mouth varies from five to eight feet, according to the time of the year. Its current is not so rapid as that of most Patagonian rivers, but its extremely tortuous course makes it difficult to navigate. Its estuary forms a tolerably safe harbour for craft of light draught.

The Welsh Colony at Chubut, which numbers at present about 700 souls, was founded by the Argentine Government in 1865. It is not, and never has been, in a flourishing state; but this is due not so much to the unfertility of the Chubut valley as to the fact that most of the people sent out from Wales by the Government agent to form the proposed agricultural colony were miners, who of course knew nothing about farming matters. For a great many years the colonists were supported entirely by the Government, and on several occasions when accidents had happened to the vessels which were bringing stores for them from Buenos Ayres, they were saved from starvation by the Indians, who supplied them with guanaco and ostrich meat. At present the prospects of the colony are rather more hopeful: about 15,000 bushels

of wheat were harvested last year; but even now the colony is not self-supporting, and costs the Argentine Government large sums annually for provisions and other assistance afforded the colonists.

South of Chubut lies Port Desire, formed by the estuary of the river, or rather stream, of that name. The Desire does not rise in spring and summer, like Gallegos and the other Patagonian rivers, to any great extent – a circumstance which makes it probable that it does not take its source in the Cordilleras, but rather from a chain of hills, which, according to Dr. Moreno, traverses the centre of Patagonia, running south-southwest from the Sierra de San Antonio, near the Gulf of San Matias. The Spaniards formed a colony at Port Desire, which, after having existed for a few years, was officially abandoned in 1807. The remains of a fort and some houses are still standing near the port, as well as some apple and cherry trees, with which the climate of Patagonia seems to agree very well.

I pass over the incidents of the rest of my sojourn at St. Julian, as having no relevancy to the object of this work. Suffice it to say that by the little Government schooner which makes two or three voyages annually from Buenos Ayres to the Rio Negro and Santa Cruz, and which on this occasion put into St. Julian to bring us our correspondence, I received some letters, conveying important news, which made my speedy return to Buenos Ayres imperative. About the same time a party of ostrich-hunters, attracted by the smoke of our fires, came to St. Julian from

Santa Cruz, partly out of curiosity to see the unusual visitors, and partly to trade for biscuits and tobacco. They did not stop long; and as they were going back to Santa Cruz, and from there to Sandy Point in the Straits of Magellan, where I should be able to take a steamer for Buenos Ayres, I embraced this favourable opportunity, and packing up a few things, started off with my new acquaintances.

We had not gone far, however, when it commenced to rain; and there being no particular object in getting wet, we halted for the day, and took shelter under our tent, hoping that by the next morning it would be fine again. In this hope we were disappointed; it rained incessantly for about four days, during which we of course remained where we were, and very tired I soon got of it. The ground was as damp as could be, and so loosened by the moisture that the stakes of our tent gradually gave, and the slack canvas being no longer water-tight, little pools of water gathered round the furs and saddle-cloths which served us in lieu of bedding, permeating them with a general dampness, which made our nightly slumbers rather uncomfortable. The daytime we passed cowering round the fire, with some covering thrown over our backs to keep off the rain, the front part of the body requiring no extra covering, for as fast as it was wetted it dried by the fire, which for this purpose was allowed to assume formidable dimensions. Under such unfavourable circumstances, conversation rather flagged, as may be imagined, being limited to occasional prophecies and conjectures as to when the weather

might be expected to change for the better. But in revenge, the tobacco-pipe and the maté-pot went round the circle without any intermission, and during the days of forced inaction consequent on the rain, we consumed startling quantities of those two almost indispensable commodities of pampa life.

Yerba-maté is a kind of tea in great repute throughout South America, especially amongst the country people, who drink it at all their meals, and whenever they have nothing particular to do, which is very often. It is the leaf of a shrub (*Ilex Paraguanensis*) extensively cultivated in Paraguay and the Brazils, constituting, in fact, the chief article of commerce of the former country. The powdered leaf is steeped in boiling water, and imbibed through a thin pipe (*bombilla*), perforated with holes, so as to prevent the fine herb from being sucked up with the fluid. It has a bitter, aromatic flavour, and though usually taken with sugar, many find it equally palatable without the latter adjunct. Its restorative powers are marvellous, and frequently, when thoroughly exhausted after a hard day's ride, I have taken a cup or two of maté, and found myself immediately revived and invigorated. It is decidedly a better stimulant than either tea or coffee, and as it does not seem to lose its flavour by exposure to the air and damp as quickly as those articles do, it is naturally preferred by those whose profession forces them to take these qualities into account in the selection of their victuals. Maté, as I have already said, is indispensable to the hunter in Patagonia. For months it is often the only addition he can make to his otherwise

exclusively meat diet. In fact he is never without it, except when in the saddest plight, and for its sake he would forego any other luxury, such as sugar, biscuit, or rice.

It is surprising that hitherto no attempt has been made to introduce yerba-maté into Europe as an article of domestic consumption. It has only to be known to be appreciated, and as it could be imported *pure*, far cheaper than tea or coffee, it might in time prove a formidable rival to those beverages, especially among the working classes, to whom its invigorating qualities would particularly recommend it.

Whilst the rain is pouring down upon us, I may as well take the opportunity of introducing my four companions to the reader. But first a few words as to their common profession, that of the ostrich-hunter.

In the plains that stretch from lat. 40° to 53° S., and from the sea-coast to the Cordilleras, the ostrich and the guanaco roam in immense numbers, their procreativeness being such as to more than neutralise the ravages caused among them by their numerous enemies, such as the Indians, the pumas, and the foxes. The Patagonian ostrich is much smaller than his African cousin, and the feathers are not nearly so valuable, the price usually paid for them at Sandy Point being from $1 to $2 per lb. The trade of the ostrich-hunter is not, therefore, very lucrative; but his wants, on the other hand, are very modest. Besides, he follows his profession more from a love of the wild pampa life, with its freedom from irksome restraint and awkward social obligations,

than from any desire to amass wealth; more from a necessity to satisfy his vagabond instincts, than from any impulse derived from some definite aim in life. His hunting-ground extends as far as he chooses to gallop. His stock-in-trade consists of ten or twelve hardy horses, five or six dogs of a mongrel greyhound species, a lasso, a pair of bolas, a knife, a revolver, and a long steel; besides, of course, all the necessary accoutrements for his horse, which, together with the indispensable capa, form his bed at night.

The capa is a long robe of guanaco furs, about five and a half feet long, by four and a half broad. They are made by the Indian women, who are very clever at sewing, notwithstanding the primitive clumsiness of their rude tools. Their needles consist of pieces of bone sharpened to the requisite point, and the thread they use is made from guanaco sinews. The skins are of the young guanacos before they are three weeks old, as after that time the fur becomes coarse and woolly. These capas are extremely warm, and effectually protect one from the cold winds that blow over the pampas, when almost any other garment would prove insufficient. A novice experiences considerable difficulty in the management of their somewhat awkward folds, especially on horseback; but the Indians wear them with infinite ease and grace.

The bolas, or balls, are of two kinds, being either two round stones or pieces of lead, covered with leather and joined by a thong of from six to eight feet long; or three balls, united

by thongs to a common centre. The latter are used chiefly for guanaco-hunting, and not a little skill is required to handle them efficiently. After having been swung round the head till the requisite pitch of velocity has been attained, the balls are hurled at the animal pursued, and becoming firmly twisted round whatever part of its body they may fall on, they effectually hamper its speed, and enable the hunter to come up to it and give the *coup de grace* with his long knife.

With no other *impedimenta* than the above-mentioned, the ostrich-hunter roams at will over the vast pampas. At night-time he makes himself at home under shelter of some thick bush, which, if such be his caprice, may become his head-quarters for weeks, and even months, especially if the game in the vicinity be abundant. His movements are altogether uncertain, and by no means regulated by any reference to time, to the course of which he is sublimely indifferent. The chase supplies all his wants. With the hide of the guanaco he makes his lasso, reins, bolas, and even shoes; whilst its flesh, varied by that of the ostrich, forms his staple article of diet. When he has collected a sufficient quantity of feathers, he pays a flying visit to Sandy Point, sells them, and with the produce lays in a new stock of tobacco and maté, renews his wardrobe, *i. e.*, say a shirt, a poncho, a jacket, and a chiripà; and if there still remains anything over, he may buy another horse, or some dog which may have taken his fancy.

For the rest, he is a careless, easy-going vagabond, always cheerful, whatever plight he may be in, and submitting with calm

philosophy to any of the many hardships the inclemency of the climate may entail upon him. There are, however, few Ostrich-hunters *pur sang* in Southern Patagonia, though up near the Rio Negro they are more numerous; but those one does meet with are all distinguished by the characteristics I have described.

I will now attempt a sketch of my four companions, beginning with the most striking among them, Isidoro, who is several times mentioned in Captain Musters' interesting book, 'At Home with the Patagonians.' He was an Argentine Gaucho, with a dash of Indian blood in his veins, who had come down to Patagonia many years ago from the Rio Negro. He was a slender, well-built man, with a pleasant, swarthy face, of a warm, earth-brown complexion, set in by a profusion of long black hair, which he carefully groomed every morning with a comb, whose teeth, being old, were decayed and few and far between, kept for the purpose in the recesses of a rather greasy cap. Broad and shaggy eyebrows, meeting over a bold Roman nose and shading a pair of bright, restless eyes, habitually veiled by half-closed lids and the longest of lashes; slightly high cheekbones, full thick lips, and a shaggy beard and moustache, completed the *tout ensemble* of his really striking face, the general expression of which was one of intelligence and good humour.

His dress, which combined materials of Indian as well as European manufacture, was not unpicturesque, and consisted of a woollen shirt and a 'chiripà' – a covering for the lower limbs something like a kilt, secured by a strap at the waist, into

which were stuck the inevitable hunting-knife, revolver, pipe, and tobacco-pouch – while his feet were encased in potro boots, tied at the knees with Indian-worked garters; and over all hung the long capa.

The recipe for making a pair of potro boots is very simple, and the operation requires no previous knowledge of the cobbler's art. Having killed your horse, you make an incision with a sharp knife round the hide above the hock, say at the commencement of the lower thigh, and another a couple of inches below the curb-place, and then proceed to draw the hide off the legs. Each leg will thus supply a comfortable Wellington, in which the point of the hock has become the heel. Of course, before fit for wear, the hide must be well softened by hand – a task which requires no little patience; for if not thoroughly done, the boots after a time will become quite hard and useless. As soon as they have been worn long enough to have taken the shape of the foot, the toe-ends are sewn up, and the transformation of your horse's hocks into easy-fitting boots is an accomplished feat.

When hunting, the belt and bolas are strapped outside the capa, so that the upper part of the latter may fly loose whenever any exertion requires that the arms should be free, as when lassoing or throwing the bolas.

Isidoro was one of the best riders I have ever seen, and even amongst the Indians he was allowed to have no equal. The most unruly colt became quiet in his hands, and after a few ineffectual attempts to dislodge its rider, would sullenly

acknowledge the mastery of his firm hand and easy seat. All his horses were wonders of tameness and careful and intelligent teaching. His method of taming them I subsequently had an opportunity of studying, and in due course will revert to it. He was equally proficient in the use of the lasso and bolas, seldom, if ever, missing his aim. One of his peculiarities was his extreme watchfulness; not the slightest detail could escape his vigilance; and when anyone, as often happened, would mislay a knife or some such object, to save further trouble, Isidoro was always appealed to as to its whereabouts, which he would invariably point out immediately – the missing article often lying under a bush or saddle-cloth, where it had been thrown by its careless owner perhaps a day or two ago. It seemed as if Isidoro made it his special duty to look after everyone's things, though, to judge by appearances, he never paid particular attention to anything except his pipe, which seldom left his mouth. His sharpness of vision was intense, and he could detect guanacos and ostriches on the far horizon, when I could see nothing but bushes or clouds. Another distinguishing feature was his taciturnity. Only on very rare occasions have I heard him utter more than three or four words at a breath, and often he would sit for hours with the rest of us round the fire, listening attentively to all that was said, without breathing a syllable the whole evening. As the owner of some thirty fine horses, he was considered quite a rich man amongst the Indians and ostrich-hunters; and, on account of his honesty, good-nature, and quiet, unassuming bearing, he was a favourite

with everyone.

We will pass on to Garcia, who, in appearance at least, formed a striking contrast to Isidoro. His yellow beard, brown hair, and blue eyes seemed to betoken a Saxon rather than a Spanish descent. However, be that as it may, he was a true Gaucho, and but slightly inferior to Isidoro in horsemanship and general address as a hunter. He had formerly been a soldier on the Argentine frontiers, and in that capacity had had many a fight with the Indians, thrilling accounts of which he would often favour us with over the evening's fire. Subsequently he had worked as 'tropero' (cattle-driver) on the Rio Negro, a profession which in due course he had relinquished in order to become an ostrich-hunter. Having lived more amongst civilised people, his manners were less abrupt than Isidoro's, and he was rather more talkative and genial than the latter.

Next comes Guillaume, who was by birth a Frenchman, and who had originally been a blacksmith; but some chance having wafted him to Patagonia, he had taken a fancy to the country and remained there, and was now fast becoming naturalised. He was an active, intelligent fellow, and equal to any amount of hard work. One of his most striking features was his enormous appetite, the amount he could devour at one meal being simply astounding. It is on record amongst his companions that he demolished a whole side of a young guanaco at a sitting. But notwithstanding this extraordinary faculty for eating, he was as thin as could be, and always had a hungry, half-starved look.

His very antithesis was Maximo, the last of the group, who in size and corpulence might have competed with the most Herculean Patagonian Indian. He was an Austrian, age twenty, I think, and had formerly been a sailor, but having been wrecked on the syren shores of Patagonia, like Guillaume, he had been unable to withstand its subtle attractions, and having embraced the profession of ostrich-hunting, with the natural aptness of sailors, he had soon mastered the mysteries of his craft, and was already an adept in the use of lasso and bolas. His strength was such as his burly dimensions warranted, and he would often surprise us by the ease with which he would tear up firmly-seated roots, and stout underwood for firing purposes. He was, moreover, as I was surprised to find, an accomplished linguist, and spoke Spanish, Italian, French, German, and English with tolerable fluency, though I think he could neither read nor write. His appetite, like Guillaume's, was Homeric, the two being a host in themselves.

Maximo was not so rich as his companions; indeed, his whole property consisted in a horse and a dog. The former was a wiry little animal, and apparently impervious to fatigue; for its owner was by no means a featherweight, and it was a matter of continued astonishment to me, how it managed to carry him along, day after day, over tiring hilly country, with occasional fierce gallops after ostriches, without ever showing signs of distress. Neither was his attire so elegant or so comfortable as that of his companions. It consisted, on my first becoming

acquainted with him, of a shirt and a pair of trousers; boots he had none, but would now and then wear a pair of sabots, made with the skin of the hind-legs of the guanaco. However, the capa made up for all defects in dress, and Maximo was perfectly content with things as they were. Withal he was the best-tempered fellow imaginable, and the stoic indifference he showed to the discomforts of rain and cold, and his equanimity under all circumstances, were simply heroic.

As these four men, who by various strange chances had been thrown together on this desert spot, from such different parts of the world, were to become my companions during a long period of hardship and adventure, I have described them at some length, especially as I feel sure that their peculiar and utterly unconventional mode of life, so different from that of the ordinary people one meets in everyday intercourse with the world, will invest them, in the eyes of my readers, with the same romantic interest with which I regarded them.

CHAPTER IV

The rain continued to pour down almost without interruption for four days, till one afternoon a shift of the wind brought a definite change for the better; the clouds cleared off, the sun shone out brightly, and we were cheered by the sight of blue sky again.

We hastened to spread our furs, sheepskins, and general clothing on the bushes to dry, as everything had got more or less damp during the recent downpour, and, thanks to the wind and sun, by supper-time we were able to indulge in dry shirts and stockings again, which, with the luxury of having dry beds to creep into that night, in perspective, sent up our spirits a hundred degrees, and made the conversation over that evening's supper as lively as it had hitherto been dull.

Maximo told the story of the shipwreck which had first thrown him on Patagonian shores; Garcia related some exciting incident of his frontier warfare experience; Guillaume recounted the hardships and dangers he had undergone during the siege of Belfort in 1870, having belonged to the brave garrison which defended that fortress; and even Isidoro, yielding to the genial influence of the moment, so far abandoned his accustomed silence as to tell us how, when a soldier in the Argentine service at Rio Negro, he had deserted and run away with a tribe of Tehuelche Indians, who were going south, with whom he

lived for a long time, and from amongst whose brown-skinned daughters he had eventually taken unto him a wife. He admitted, however, that his matrimonial existence had not been a happy one. Mrs. Isidoro, it appears, took to drinking, and became too noisy and violent for her husband, who of all things loved quiet; so without any further fuss, and without many words, as was his custom, he led her back to her father's tent, where, with a short explanation, he left her, thus consummating his divorce *a mensâ et thoro* with expeditious ease, and securing for himself the blessing of undisturbed peace for the future.

We rose at daybreak the next morning, and commenced preparations for starting. The horses, some fifty in number, were driven together; those selected for the day's work were severally lassoed, and this being done, the others were allowed to disperse again and return to their grazing, whilst we got ready.

Although as tame as cats in every other respect, very few of these Indian-tamed horses allow one to approach them on foot; as a rule they can only be caught with the lasso. When a horse observes that it has been singled out from the herd for capture, it does its utmost to evade the flying noose, and often gives a great deal of trouble before it can be finally caught; but the moment it feels the lasso alight round its neck, it will stop short in the fiercest gallop, and immediately gives up any attempt at resistance, which it knows would be useless; and when once it is bridled, the lasso may be removed, and it will stand in the same spot for hours, without attempting even to graze.

Our stock of provisions, viz. some rice, biscuit, farina, sugar, maté, and a stone bottle of gin, were carefully packed up, and together with the tent and cooking utensils, an iron pot, a saucepan, and a tin kettle, were placed on the pack-horse, a sturdy animal, who trotted away under his load as if it had been a feather-weight.

We then commenced saddling our own horses – a somewhat lengthy operation. The articles which constitute the saddle-gear of a horse in the pampas are rather numerous, and at night-time serve, with the aid of the capa, as mattress, bed-clothes, and bedstead. First one lays two or three blankets or cloths, folded square, on the horse's back, taking care that they lie smooth and form no creases; over these comes a covering of leather, called a 'carona,' which consists of two thick pieces of leather sewn together, and which is very useful at night-time, as it forms a damp-proof foundation for one's bed. On the carona the saddle is placed, and firmly secured to the horse by means of a broad leather girth, and over the saddle again are laid the sheepskins, furs, or whatever coverings one may possess. All being ready for starting, we strapped our capas well around us, a few logs were heaped on the smouldering fire, we warmed our hands, which had got stiffened with the cold whilst saddling, smoked a last pipe, and after a look round to see if anything had been forgotten, jumped into the saddle, whistled to the dogs, and we were off, *en route* for Santa Cruz.

It was a bright morning. The wind was just cold enough

to make one feel grateful for the warm sunshine, and to give that exciting tingle to the blood which influences one's spirits like a subtle wine. I felt its power, and a strange elation made my pulse beat quicker, as I rode gaily along, inspirited by the strong, springy step of the good horse I bestrode, and inhaling deep draughts of the pure clear air, which seemed to sweep the cobwebs of care from my brain, and to blow all unpleasant thoughts far from me, making me feel gloriously happy in the mere consciousness of the fact that I breathed and had being.

I seemed to be leaving the old world I had hitherto known behind me, with its turmoils and cares and weary sameness, and to be riding merrily into some new sphere of free, fresh existence. I felt that without a pang I could break with old associations, renounce old ties, the pomps and the pleasures, the comforts, the bothers, the annoyances of civilisation, and become as those with whom I was now travelling – beings with no thought for the morrow, and therefore with no uneasiness for it either, living the life of our nomadic ancestors, in continual and intimate contact with nature – an unchequered, untroubled existence, as wild, simple, and free as that of the deer that browse on the plains.

We were riding along a broad glen, down the middle of which a rapid stream was flowing. Guillaume and Maximo were busy driving the horses before them – no easy matter, as, now and then, one or two would lag behind to crop up a mouthful of grass, or the whole troop would make a dash in the wrong direction, only to be got together again after much galloping and shouting.

The neighing of the horses, the continual cries of 'Jegua! Jegua!' with which they were urged along, and the tinkling of the bells on the 'madrinas' (bell-mares), broke cheerfully on the silence of the glen, and startled many a flock of wild geese, who were disporting themselves there in numbers; and occasionally a guanaco or two, who had been grazing in the young grass, would gaze at us in a momentary fit of curiosity, and then bound away with their graceful, springy gallop, neighing defiance at us as they glided swiftly up the far ravine.

After we had gone some way, Isidoro and Garcia and myself rode ahead of the horses, in order to look out for ostriches, Isidoro taking one side of the cañada, which was about a mile and a half broad, and Garcia and myself the other. I felt very excited, as it was my first hunt after this kind of game. The dogs, with erect and quivering tails, and noses down, were eagerly running this way and that, scenting the ground, or snuffing the wind which came in light puffs down the cañada.

Presently they made a simultaneous dash forward, and started off after something, and my horse, evidently an old hunter, with a sudden start that almost threw me out of the saddle, dashed after them, *ventre à terre*, like wild-fire, side by side with Garcia, who was already loosening the bolas to prepare for action.

I soon descried the ostrich, which was hurrying along as fast as its legs would carry it, wings drooping and neck outstretched, with the whole covey of dogs close on its heels. The race was at first doubtful, but a moment of indecision brought the

ostrich into difficulties, and the dogs slowly gained on their prey. Already the foremost one was up to it, when the ostrich suddenly darted sideways, whilst the hounds, unable to stop their impetuous speed, shot forward a long way before they could recover themselves. By that time the bird was half-way up the side of the glen, and out of danger; and Garcia whistled to the dogs, who came back slowly and sulkily, with their tails between their legs, looking wistfully over their shoulders at the retreating bird, which was already a mere speck on the summit of the ravine.

Garcia told me that the ostrich, like the hare, often resorts to this trick of 'doubling' when hard pressed. It is not always as successful as it had been in the present case, as the dogs generally know the exact moment and in what direction the ostrich is going to double, and are prepared accordingly.

We were riding slowly along, talking about our late disappointment, when another ostrich started up almost from under our very feet. With a wild shout we dashed after it, Garcia getting ready with the bolas, now our sole means of capturing the bird, as the dogs had lagged far behind us on some wrong scent. The horses were on their mettle, and in headlong chase we tore after the distressed quarry; but though we strained every nerve, we could not gain an inch of ground, and in another second we should have lost the ostrich, who was making for the steep ravine-side, when Garcia swinging the bolas two or three times round his head flung them with strong hand at the retreating bird.

Luckily lighting on its neck, they entangled its legs and it fell to the ground kicking desperately. An instant after and we were up to it, and Garcia ended its struggles by breaking its neck, and then proceeded to disembowel it – a process watched with peculiar interest by the dogs, the offal, etc., being their share of the spoils.

The trophy was then hung to Garcia's saddle, and we went back on our tracks to look for the nest; for, from the bird having started up so close to us, Garcia surmised that it must have been sitting, as during that period they are loth to leave their nests, at the approach of danger, till the very last moment. Garcia proved to be right, for, after a short search, we came upon the nest, which contained fourteen eggs – a prize we were not long in securing to our saddles.

I found the nest to be of the roughest description, being simply a hole scooped in the ground, under shelter of a bush, and made soft for the young chicks by a few wisps of grass.

The number of eggs found in a nest varies from ten to forty, being usually about twenty. In size the Patagonian ostrich's egg is equal to about eight hen's eggs. It is the male bird that hatches the eggs and looks after the young – being, I believe, the only male among birds which does so. The period of incubation is from twenty to twenty-four days. During rainy weather he never leaves the nest, but will sit for six or seven days without feeding. In fine weather he grazes for an hour or two in the evening, but never strays far from the nest, as Master Reynard, who is always prowling near, would soon make a raid on the eggs. It is said

that if one egg is broken or abstracted from the nest during the absence of the male bird, on returning he will immediately detect the theft, and become so furious that he will dash the remaining eggs to pieces, and dance round the nest as if frantic.

After the hatching period, the birds lay their eggs promiscuously about the plains. These eggs are called 'huatchos' by the natives. They keep for a long time, and I have frequently met with huatchos in April, which, although they must have been laid more than six months at that time, were still fairly eatable.

The ostrich of Southern Patagonia (*Rhea Darwinii*) is smaller than the 'Avestruz moro' (*Rhea Americana*), as the species which frequents the country near the River Negro is called by the natives. The colour of its plumage is brown, the feathers being tipped with white, whereas the moro, as its name indicates, is uniformly grey. The *R. Darwinii* are extremely shy birds, and as their vision is remarkably acute, it is by no means an easy matter to catch them, unless one has very swift dogs to hunt with.

At the approach of danger the ostrich often crouches flat on the ground, with its neck stretched out under the grass, remaining motionless in this position till the dogs have gone past. This stratagem is successful when the wind is blowing against the scent; but when the contrary is the case, the dogs soon discover the hiding bird, which, doubtless too bewildered by the sudden failure of its naïvely artless ruse, makes no attempt to escape.

Our companions by this time were a long way ahead of us, so we started after them at a brisk gallop. On the way we met

Isidoro, who had also been fortunate, as two ostriches dangling from each side of his saddle evinced.

We continued our journey along the winding ravine, all helping now to drive the horses and keep them well together – an essential matter when rapid progress is desirable, for if the troop once gets broken up and scattered, one may spend no end of time in galloping about and herding the horses together again.

At about five o'clock we passed a fine thick bush, of considerable height, which appeared so well adapted for affording shelter, that we resolved to camp under it for the night, especially as I, not being accustomed lately to such long rides, already began to feel rather tired and shaken.

In a few minutes after we had made this decision our horses were unsaddled, the saddle-gear, packs, ostriches, etc., thrown higgledy-piggledy in a heap, and everyone lay down in the grass to stretch his limbs and smoke a pipe – a simple indulgence which, under such circumstances, becomes an absolutely priceless luxury.

A small fire was then made, the kettle filled from the rivulet which ran down the centre of the ravine, and as soon as the water boiled, maté was prepared, and we sat for some time silently imbibing that stimulating concoction, whose wonderful powers of banishing fatigue I have already alluded to.

Presently Maximo and Guillaume went off to collect firewood, whilst Isidoro and Garcia busied themselves with plucking the ostriches and laying the feathers in bundles, in which

form they enter the market. I stretched myself out on my furs and awaited the dinner-hour with eager expectation, as my ride and that sharp, dry air peculiar to Patagonia had given me the real pampa appetite, under the influence of which one becomes so inordinately and irksomely ravenous, and experiences such an unnatural craving for food, as quite to justify one in considering one's self attacked by some transitory, but acute disease which has to be undergone by the stranger in Patagonia, like those acclimatising fevers peculiar to some tropical countries.

In an hour or so Guillaume and Maximo returned, bringing a huge bundle of dry wood between them, and the kitchen being Maximo's special department, he immediately set about getting dinner ready. Thanks to his efforts, a fine fire was soon blazing; the big iron pot was filled with water, ostrich meat, and rice, and set to boil, and several other dainties were set to roast on wooden spits or broiled in the ashes, emitting odours of grateful promise as they sputtered and browned under Maximo's delicate handling.

Meanwhile, we sharpened our knives, took up comfortable positions round the fire, and the *chêf* having declared everything ready, the onslaught commenced.

I append the *carte* for the benefit of those curious in such matters:

Pot-au-feu (rice, ostrich meat, etc.).
Broiled ostrich wings.
Ostrich steak.

Cold guanaco head.
Roast ostrich gizzard, *à l'Indienne*.
Ostrich eggs.
Custard (ostrich eggs, sugar, gin).

A glance at the above will show that a pampa dinner may be pleasantly varied. Of the items mentioned, I think the ostrich wings are the greatest delicacy, tasting something like turkey, and, as I then thought at least, perhaps even finer. The ostrich gizzard, too, was worthy of note, being broiled Indian fashion, with hot stones – a task which, as requiring great care, was superintended by Isidoro himself, who in his way was a remarkable cook. The flavour of ostrich meat generally is not unpleasant, especially when fat. It varies greatly, according to what part of the bird it is from. The wings, breast, and extremity of the back are the tit-bits. The thighs are coarser, and bear a close resemblance to horseflesh.

When all the meat was consumed, Isidoro, who, by-the-bye, seemed to be able to produce anything that was required from somewhere or other (generally from his cap, which was quite a storehouse for all kinds of extraneous articles), now turned up with a small soup-plate and a dilapidated spoon, and I was requested to help myself to the broth and rice in the pot, handing the plate back to Isidoro when I had finished, who in his turn passed it to Garcia, and so on till it had gone round the circle.

We then lay back to smoke and recover from our exertions, whilst the dogs cleared up whatever fragments remained from

the feast.

Here I may say a few words about the dogs, of which there were in all about eighteen with us. Most of them were greyhounds, of more or less pure breeds, imported by the Welsh settlers at Chubut; the others being nondescript curs of heavier build, which were useful for pulling down the guanacos brought to bay by the fleeter but less powerful greyhounds. Their various merits and failings formed the usual topic of an evening's conversation, their owners comparing notes as to their respective achievements during the day's hunting, or recalling previous wonderful performances worthy of remembrance.

We were quite overrun by such a number of dogs, and often they became a nuisance only to be borne when we remembered that after all they were the meat-givers, without whom we should find ourselves in a very unpleasant plight. They had a peculiarly happy knack, when wet, of creeping into one's furs, and making one's bed damp for the night; and often I have been awakened by one of them trying to go comfortably to sleep on the pillow beside me, and thrusting its cold nose into my face as a preliminary. When eating, if I happened to lay down a piece of meat for a moment, it was sure to be immediately snapped up by one of them, and they would even snatch away the morsel held in my hand, if I did not take care to keep them at a safe distance. All provisions had to be put on the top of a bush, well out of their reach, as neglect in this particular might bring on the unpleasant alternative of going supperless to bed.

We sat for some time round the fire, chatting and smoking, and then each looked out for his furs and bed-gear, arranged his couch, and before long we were all fast asleep.

I woke once, roused by some horse which had strayed from its companions, and which was snuffing at me curiously, till on my starting up it bounded away, snorting with terror.

Before going to sleep again I looked around me. There was a faint scent of fresh earth on the cold night air, and a slight frost had fallen over bush and grass, which told that dawn was not far distant. The moon was shining full over the valley, bathing it in hazy light. I could see the horses standing about in black knots of twos and threes, some dozing, some grazing, the bells of the madrinas occasionally breaking the deep silence with a soft tinkle. Round the fire, some logs of which still smouldered redly, my companions lay motionless, sleeping soundly under cover of their warm furs.

Fascinated by the strange novelty of the scene and the calm silence of the hour, I lay for a long time gazing about me. I watched the soft charm of silvery indistinctness, lent to the landscape by the moon's rays glittering on the frosty crystals, gradually fade away, as the moon's splendour paled before the new light which sprang up in the east. Soon the bushes, the grass, and the winding ravine stood out sharply defined, looking grey and bleak in the sober light of dawn. The face of nature seemed blank and wan, like the face of a man on whom the morning light streams after a night of vigil. With a shiver I drew my head under

my capa, and fell into a sound sleep again.

CHAPTER V

When I awoke there was a good fire crackling and blazing cheerfully, and I lost no time in getting up and joining my companions, who had already risen, and were taking maté and enjoying the warm glow of the fire, which at that damp, chilly hour was indeed welcome.

As we were not going far that day, we were in no hurry to start off, preferring to wait till the sun should get high enough to dispel the cold mist which hung over the country.

We took our ease over breakfast, therefore, and it was already nearly midday when Maximo rode down the ravine to collect the horses. We waited for a long time, but, to our surprise, he did not reappear, and presently Garcia went after him to see what was the matter. After a time they both returned, driving the horses before them, but reporting Isidoro's stallion and several of his mares missing. From the appearance of the tracks, Garcia seemed to think that some wild stallion had made a raid on the mares and driven them off – a piece of news which filled Isidoro with consternation, as he feared that by that time the missing animals might be forty or fifty miles away, beyond any hope of recapture. Without losing any time, therefore, we all saddled; and leaving some of our gear and packages under the bush where we had been camping, we started off on the trail.

Some way down the cañon we came to a place where there

had evidently been a fierce struggle. The ground was torn up in all directions, and Isidoro's sharp eye was not long in detecting some tufts of hair lying in the grass, which he declared came from the coat of his own bay stallion. Some of the hoof-marks were very large – larger than could have been made by any of his horses – and he quite confirmed Garcia's surmise, that some 'bagual' (wild horse) had carried off the mares, after having previously fought and vanquished his own stallion. We had no difficulty in following the trail, as the recent rain had made the ground quite soft. The tracks went along the cañon for some distance, and then suddenly turned and went up the cañon-side on to the plain. We had not gone far over the latter when our horses pricked up their ears and began to sniff the air in a nervous manner. A few strides more brought us to the edge of the plain, and in the cañon at our feet we discovered Isidoro's bay stallion, looking very crestfallen and wobegone. At our approach he gave a faint neigh of satisfaction; but he had hardly done so, when it was answered by a triumphant pæan from another quarter, and from behind a bend in the cañon, meekly followed by Isidoro's mares, issued a magnificent black stallion. Undeterred by our presence, he made straight for his but recently vanquished rival, with head erect nostrils distended, and his long mane and tail streaming in the wind. As for the bay,

'Not a moment stopped or stayed he;'

but ignominiously took to his heels, and started up the cañon at full speed.

Isidoro, who was some way ahead of us, galloped to the rescue. The bagual, strange to say, however, suddenly rushed at him, standing upon its hind-legs, and beating the air with its fore-feet in a threatening manner. Taken by surprise, Isidoro had hardly time to loosen his bolas when the furious brute was upon him, and for a moment I thought it was a bad case. But Isidoro was as cool as he was adroit, and in another second the bagual dropped on its knees, half stunned, struck full in the forehead by a well-aimed blow of the balls. Before it could recover, Garcia's lasso whizzed through the air and lighted on its neck, and then, setting spurs to his horse, he galloped away at full speed in an opposite direction. The shock, as the lasso tautened, threw his horse on its haunches, but the stallion lay half strangled and powerless. To finish matters, Maximo whipped his lasso over its fore-feet, and drew them tight together, and the poor brute was thus reduced to utter helplessness.

We could now contemplate it at our ease. It was a splendidly-made animal, and far larger than any of the horses of our troop. I was very much astonished at the way it had shown fight, as I had imagined that, being wild, it would have fled at the sight of man. I pleaded strongly that its life might be spared, but the fact that it was in very good condition weakened the force of any argument I might bring in support of my plea, fat meat in spring being a luxury which my companions did not feel justified in depriving themselves of, if fate chanced to throw it in their way. The poor bagual was accordingly despatched, skinned, and

cut up; but eventually none of the meat was eaten, for, much to everyone's disappointment, it proved so strong that even the dogs did not care to touch it.

We now returned towards our camp. The bay stallion, his wrongs avenged and his abducted wives restored to his affectionate keeping, kept neighing and tossing up his heels in a state of high glee, without, to all appearance, being troubled by any misgivings as to whether his recent ignominious defeat had caused him to forfeit the esteem of his family circle.

On our way back, Isidoro told me that he had frequently seen troops of wild horses near St. Julian, and that at times the Indians make excursions to those regions on purpose to catch them. At the foot of the Cordilleras there is a smaller, and in every way inferior, breed of baguals, several tame specimens of which I subsequently saw amongst the horses of the Southern Tehuelches.

Having reached the camp, we loaded the pack-horse, and resumed our journey southwards. We continued to follow the windings of the ravine for some distance, and then, turning abruptly, we rode up one of its steep sides, and found ourselves on a broad plain, which seemed to stretch away interminably, presenting the characteristics of dreary gloom and hopeless sterility I have already described.

The wind, which down in the ravine we had scarcely felt, blew with astonishing violence upon the plain; the gusts were so strong occasionally that we could hardly keep our saddles, and

at intervals we encountered squalls of hailstones of unusual size, which, coming full in our faces, caused us no little annoyance. It was bitterly cold, too, and I was thankful for my capa, which kept me tolerably warm, though I had great difficulty in keeping it tightly folded round me, for if the wind could but find hold in the smallest crevice, it would blow the capa right off me. In fact, it requires a peculiar knack, only to be attained by long experience, to enable one to wear a capa on horseback with ease and comfort.

Conversation under these adverse circumstances was not very practicable, and we rode on for the most part in silence. It was altogether a miserable day, and that tedious plain seemed as if it were never going to end.

We reached its limit rather suddenly, however. I had been holding my head down for some time, to avoid a passing squall of hailstones, and so had fallen insensibly to the rear of my companions. On looking up presently, I found, to my astonishment, that they had vanished as if by magic, and I was apparently alone in the plain.

I galloped forward, and their sudden disappearance was soon explained, for in a couple of minutes I found myself at the edge of the plain, which terminated abruptly, descending almost vertically into another plateau, which lay some two hundred feet below, down towards which my companions were slowly winding their way in a zigzag line, as the descent was too sharp for them to ride straight down. I had considerable difficulty in following them, as the violence of the wind seemed doubled at this spot,

and it was only by clinging firmly to the neck of my horse that I prevented myself being blown from the saddle. In a measure as I descended, however, the wind grew less boisterous, and on arriving below it entirely ceased. I soon rejoined my companions, and presently, on coming to a spring of fresh water, with some good pasture near it for the horses, we resolved to go no further that day.

We accordingly unsaddled and made the usual arrangements for the night, which, as the sky looked rather threatening, on this occasion included setting up the tent. This precautionary measure was a wise one, as towards morning there was a slight fall of snow, and when I woke up I found the whole landscape whitened over.

Garcia and the others were of opinion that we had better remain where we were for the day, as they considered that travelling through the snow might be bad for the horses; so, there being nothing better for us to do, we crept under our furs and went to sleep again till about midday, by which time the snow had nearly all melted away under the influence of the sun, which shone out brightly. Isidoro and Garcia then rode off hunting. Maximo, Guillaume, and I, being lazily inclined, remained by the fire, and beguiled an hour or so with breakfast.

Afterwards they went to fetch firewood, whilst I amused myself by practising with the bolas. I found it very difficult to use them with any precision; in fact, they always took exactly the opposite direction to that in which I wished to throw them, and finally, in an attempt to 'bolear' a bush, I very narrowly missed

poor Maximo, who was just coming up behind me.

As an instance of the skill which may be acquired in the use of the bolas, I have several times seen Isidoro throw them at some refractory colt at full gallop, with such true aim as to make them alight round its hind legs, and effectually pinion them, without doing the animal any harm whatever – a feat which requires immense confidence and nerve, as the bolas, which are very heavy, being generally made of stone or lead, have to be flung with considerable velocity.

The first hunter to return was Garcia. He had killed a female puma, a great prize, as the meat is excellent, and especially esteemed during the winter and spring months, when it is always fat, whereas the ostriches and guanacos are at that time generally miserably lean. The brute looked very fierce and dangerous; the half-opened jaws displayed a row of cruel white teeth, which gave its face an uncomfortable expression of rage and spite. The fur was of a yellowish-grey; and the length of the animal from tip to tail was about nine feet.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.