

THE LAMPARAGUA

May Crommelin in the Pall Mall Gazette.

The two men had held on steadily riding since two hours before dawn, going all day without stopping, save for a brief noontide halt. During the afternoon of yesterday their track had lain across an utterly desolate pampa, and therefore they had pushed on to reach cultivated country again, and water before nightfall. Now, toward evening they found themselves near a long lake, bordered with reeds, the haunt of numberless wild fowl.

A small rocky valley, down which the native Chilean ponies warily scrambled, grew greener toward the lake shore, where a stream which the travelers had followed for some time widened into a V-shaped marsh.

"It is near sunset," said Ramsay, shivering slightly, for the fever had taken him two days ago. "Own the truth, man! You have lost your bearings, and don't know whether we are nine miles or nine leagues from the silver mine. Besides, the horses, poor beasts, will be dead soon."

"Of what good is a horse that cannot do his miles when asked?" returned the Chilean guide. "But, truly, the devil seems to have been driving round on these hills, changing their shape since I came this way."

He gazed with discontent deepening on his swarthy features at the hills behind, hiding the sandy desert, far beyond which rose the mighty range of the Andes, still veiled in rest, late this hot December evening. Then, in sudden recollection—

"There is a rich Englishman who lives near a lake in this neighborhood. He has smelting works and a large estate. The house may be close at hand."

All at once Ramsay fancied he heard Pedro's voice crying out in a tone of desperation—or was it terror?—"Me voy! I'm off to bring you help!"

The sick man did not heed, though vaguely conscious he was left alone. It seemed to him that he was in a hospital. The doctor would come round presently; if not, it was peaceful to lie still. Was that his mother lifting the hair on his fevered brow?

Then he started awake as a horrid cry roused his dull ears. (It was the scream of a horse!) What was this well-known valley? Where was he? For, raising himself weakly on one elbow, Ramsay saw a stream running past rocks which were strangely familiar, and yet when he had seen them? The river emptied itself in marshy land. The dawn showed a dark gray surface beyond, like a sea- or lake.

With a cold terror the sick man recognized that he lay not two hundred yards from the marsh, but the lamparagua; that headland; the water! All night they must have ridden in a circle. The horrible stream was already fading from his sick memory like a dream, when a snorting and scuffling noise caused Ramsay to turn slowly his weak head. He saw his horse stamping, pulling back from its halter, and with distended eye-balls staring terrified at a tree, to a root of which it was fastened. What was wrong? The tree had two bare topmost branches like horns, and some lower ones also without leaves, yet this was summer-time; in December. * * * It was withered! And, there about its onion-shaped bole, surely, a dark scar, a crack, or a hole, the top of the tree was that of the lamparagua.

And now, as Jock stared with fever-awakened eyes through the dim daybreak, the lower branches hung slowly downward, clutching the horse's halter with claw-like twigs; the crack in the side of the Thing was widening. Again a fearful sound woke the sleeping gien; the horse's cry of terror. Jock tried instinctively to find his revolver, but his senses reeled as the sun was high in the heavens. He was shivering, and wild myrtle from his heat, and though very weak, his senses had come back. Memory was slower. Ah—he remembered! Opening his eyes in a wide state of apprehension, Ramsay saw himself lying alone. There was a thick net, but not the awful tree. Pedro was gone; so were the horses. But perhaps—perhaps that last vision of the "Thing engulfing" the poor fevered crew had been a nightmare. He rose, and the ground round the Thing was horrible marsh and the lamparagua—if there were such a hideous dream. Drawing the myrtle leaves aside, as one might a curtain, Jock feebly turned himself to examine the tree. Then his fingers felt a cold, clammy, sticky mass, and a thrill of horror, like a spine, ran down his back. Out in the open on the grass, with not a bush near it, right between himself and safety.

Take it quietly! For manhood's sake, think out this business, and don't turn like a school girl seeing a snake. First, what is this affair a dream? What that withered tree out among the sward the very lamparagua? For if so, there were several, or it could change its situation. It was neither in marsh, nor by the fuchsia thicket. —Go! —As he peered, Ramsay believed that the tree was moving. It was horribly near, and it was surely creeping forward by inches. He held his breath, and marked a grass tuft at its bulbous base.

Now—now it had passed beyond the tall silvery grass blades and spear-leaves, and the ground close by it was stealthily approaching him; doubtless it was approaching him; doubtless it was staying quiet till now, gorged with its morning meal, but it was slowly nearing its next victim. With eyes fascinated by fear, Ramsay saw its roots moving forward like giant knobby suckers that later the tree came rattling herbage, noiselessly moving with the motion of a tortoise.

The hair of the young man's flesh stood up, an icy coldness numbed his blood. Then with a strong effort he gathered his senses to think out only one thing. The tree was close by him. He was grasping it, he was clutching it, he was clutching it at the grass tuft, at the sage bushes, drops of perspiration running down his face. Faster, faster, if it could only be done! The man had covered some yards; surely the tree moved more slowly. A blast blew backward over Ramsay's head raising his hair. By instinct he dug his nails into the ground, flattened his body as much as he possibly could. The draught was as if air had rushed into a deep cavity, while a sound like that of an escape pipe hissed in the air. Then it was over.

Pedro had he had tied to a tree. What's the matter?" For Ramsay struggled up, and was staring round.

"The tree! It was out there before the fire, Pedro, you know—where is it gone?" Pedro only shivered and stared. Some of the other ponies, muttering and giving sidelong glances at each other, crossed the burnt ground looking about them. One saw a party submerged tree at some distance down stream, floating slowly into the marsh. His attention was caught by a gleam of something scarlet tangled in the topmost withered bough.

A few days later Ramsay was stretched at ease in a cane deck-chair, with a tall glass of beer in the wicker socket by his arm. Overhead a veranda was shaded with masses of roses, stephanotis and begonia. Sunshine flooded the garden stretching beyond like a dream of enchantment, the tall palms above high flowering trees, and oranges and lemons were mingled low with gardenias and poinsettias.

Looked just finished after talking during some 20 minutes, so felt thirsty, exhausted and excited. "That's the whole story," he ended, "No, do you believe me, Mr. Campbell? Till now, I fancy you thought me mad." "No, but possibly a bit delirious in your fever, so you that imagined some tale Pedro told you of the lamparagua had really happened to yourself. That was all," said the kindly host.

"Man alive! There is Pedro to witness also. And where is my horse? And you own I had the torn red blanket in the marsh?" cried Ramsay. "True, quite true," nodded Campbell, coolly reflecting, "Well, my dear fellow, if it is any satisfaction to you, I do believe you are one of the few living human beings who have seen the lamparagua. What is more, for some years back I have heard rumors of such a thing, and that it haunted this lake and other adjoining it, both on my estate. But to confess the truth, I fancied the story was a convenient legend of my cattle-herds to account for missing beasts. Yes, I believe, that hardly any one else will, even in Chile, among our own wise educated class, of course the ponies know. They are nearer nature than we."

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At last! The rocks were near. The man began scrambling painfully up a steep incline of loose earth and round stones, which resembled a morning, and that gave no hold to his desperate grasp. Looking up, he saw with hopeless eyes that there had been a slight landslide lately, which had left the bank projecting overhead, so that he could not reach the top; looking down, he saw that the lamparagua was slowly but steadily approaching once more over the grass, foot-root following foot-root. There was a torn piece of crimson blanket hanging on one bough. The man stopped and stood blinking dry blades and twigs with the haste of one who has but a few moments to live should this plan fail of success. Not a drop of rain had fallen since last October; the scorching summer heat had baked the ground, and the top of the tree was the spurt of a match.

Two moments: five! The fire-spark, kindling, seemed about to spread, when a roaring wind-gust through the valley's stillness blew it out, and the fire felt himself swept off, and the tree toward a clump of prickly pear, to which he clung palpitating, with his face pressed against the thorny broad leaves that tore the skin to bleeding. Ah!—that was over! For the last time, the sick man was left alone. Ramsay snatched what dry fuel lay within his grasp, and he sheltered beneath the bushes. His papers, cheque book, all were in a small valise he had instinctively thrust over night under the eaves of the house. He felt a letter in his breast pocket which he had carried there two years—the last one ever written by his mother. His tone it out.

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