

THE WILD MAN OF SANTA CRUZ

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FIRST of all, contemplate for a moment the scene upon which the events I am about to narrate took place: The pampas of Patagonia, limitless leagues of harsh grass, of thorn of granite pebble and of black basaltic rock. Upon the Atlantic rim of these mighty plains a few sheep and cattle farms exist, a few settlements such as Santa Cruz and Gallegos; in the far interior a few Tehuelche Indians lead their nomadic life.

Otherwise the pampas throughout all their enormous extent are given over to bird and beast, and upon them is carried out a perpetual warfare. Huge condors, measuring as much as eleven feet across their wings, hawk-like chimangos and corachos, pumas, hoary dogs, Magellan wolves, carrion-eaters and creatures of prey exist in almost inconceivable numbers.

Traveling through this country, one is forced to realize the struggle for life. Let the camper leave his bridle upon the ground for the night and all the leathern parts of it will have been devoured by morning. This is the work of the hoary dogs or the Magellan wolves.

It is easy for a murderer to get rid of all trace of his victim upon the pampas. A shot at twilight, a body lying stripped of its clothes, and two hours after dawn there will be nothing save a few bones to tell that the deed has been done.

Ascensio Brunel, the wild man of Santa Cruz, was by birth a Swiss, but in very early years his parents emigrated to Argentina, and while still a young man he broke away from them, and with his brother, whom I knew but whose name I forgot, worked his way south until he came at last to the Santa Cruz province of Patagonia. Here for some years he and his brother, whom we will call Henri, worked as peones, cattle-herding and sheep-tending, but, growing in time weary of the unexciting nature of their calling, at length set up as tamers of horses.

Now a horse-tamer in Patagonia carries on his business by travelling from estancia to estancia. When he arrives at a place where the owner has some horses which he wants broken, the tamer camps and remains until he has finished his contract.

The business Ascensio and Henri pursued for a long period. Ascensio was a marvelous rider, and his services and those of his brother were in considerable request all over the south. So some months and even years went by during which many hundreds of animals passed through the hands of the Brunels, and they became the owners of a comparatively large troop of horses. Ascensio, though a savage and merciless rider, never during all this time gave a glimpse of the ferocity which underlay his character.

At length the two brothers happened, in the natural course of their nomadic profession, to come to the estancia—this fine word may mean anything from a large residence to a mud hovel with a roof of tin—of a farmer who had recently settled in the country and who was the husband of a very pretty wife, a dark beauty of, it was rumored, a rather uncertain temper.

The farmer gave the brothers a horse-breaking contract and for some weeks all went well.

One evening when the farmer, tired from a long day in the saddle, had just come home, Ascensio Brunel entered, and having, it is said, put him off his guard by making some simple little request, murdered him in cold blood.

The actual details of this, Ascensio's first, murder are hard to come by. Henri, whom I met near Ultima Casa, never told the same story twice running, and the only other witness, the wife of the murdered man, passed through some terrible experiences and I never heard her authentic story. The main fact remains:

Ascensio murdered the farmer in order that he might carry off his wife, which he did, besides driving the whole stock, the cattle, sheep and horses of the dead man, into the heart of the wilderness.

Here for a time, the two brothers dwelt with the unhappy woman, until at last Ascensio quarreled with Henri. It was not for the first time, and Henri went to sleep, thinking it would have all passed over in the morning. He was awakened at dawn by a voice shouting to him, and saw at once that during the night Ascensio had driven away all the horses and had also removed the woman.

Ascensio then said he had decided to part company with his brother for good and all; that at first it had been in his mind to kill him in his sleep, but for their mother's sake he had relented. He added that he had shifted the horses and stock to a safe distance, and that if Henri followed he would unhesitatingly shoot him down. He then rode away without more words.

As Henri had neither horse nor weapons he did not follow. Indeed all his efforts were directed toward getting out of the wilderness alive. Living chiefly upon berries, he wandered for many days, finally to arrive, an emaciated wreck, at the estancia of an Argentine herdsman. The latter tended him and, when he was recovered, gave him sufficient provision to take him to the nearest settlement, where he duly arrived.

Proved innocent of the murder his brother had committed, he went back to the life of a peon and shepherd, and so he passes out of this history for good.

The next act in the drama opens with the arrival in the coast settlement at Punta Arenas of the woman whom Ascensio had forced to accompany him into the wilderness. She had a frightful tale of cruelty to relate, culminating in a fortunate escape.

It appears that Ascensio had become subject to fits of passion so frightful that they were akin to madness, and indeed madness of a kind had already declared itself in him.

The Tehuelches of Patagonia hold the well-known belief, common to many branches of the Indian race, that when they die they pass to the Happy Hunting Grounds. On the grave of a warrior they place his dog and horses; within it they place saddle, knife and food, and for nine nights they kindle great fires, by the light of which the



ghost may find his way upon his long dark journey. After that they light no more fires, as they consider that the dead man has had time to finish his journey.

Whether Ascensio grew deranged suddenly or whether it was a slow and gradual process, no one can ever know, yet the fact remains that he came to believe in the religion of the Indians with some variations and startling effects of his own. Believing, as he did, that death was only a road by which man passed into a longer and more enduring, though not necessarily an eternal life, he conceived the idea of building up a fortune for himself in that future life.

In Ascensio's diseased brain there arose the idea that whatever he slew in this world would be his property in the next. On that point he was a fanatic; on all others, perfectly sane. Now began the series of thefts which made Brunel's name known from the Rio Negro to the Magellan straits. One after another he raided the horse farms near the coast, drove away as much of the stock as he could, and, shaking off his pursuers in every instance, escaped into the wildest parts of the pampas.

So for a long time, for years indeed, Ascensio Brunel, the Wild Man of Santa Cruz, lived his life beyond the reach of the short arm of the Argentine law. Comasarios hunted him, various Jueces de Paz declaimed about him, and the garrison of cavalry in Chubut "bolted their beef, and started again on the track of the thief." And then suddenly, one morning, the news flew across the countryside that the Wild Man had been captured. It was true. The way of it was as follows:

In the very heart of Patagonia, upon the banks of a river called the Mayo, and indeed still live, a tribe of Tehuelche Indians, the tallest and perhaps the strongest people on earth. They are hunters and horse-breeders, wonderful riders and good men. They worship horsemanship and have a number of strange rites which they practice at the birth of a man child in order to insure that he shall turn out a good rider.

Into the nature of those rites we need not go. They are very curious. I merely mention them that you may understand what a task the Wild Man set himself when he decided to steal a hundred mares from men such as these peerless riders, trained in every phase of horsemanship, much of whose lives is spent in searching for strayed horses and who can ride a hundred miles a day without fatigue.

It appears that the herd of mares that Ascensio stole were feeding in a vega or marsh that stretches on the southern banks of the Mayo. No one was watching them, and, as they were well used to their pasturage, it seemed unlikely that they would stray. Therefore, when shortly after dawn an Indian lad came galloping to the toldos with the news that the mares had disappeared, the men of the tribe were soon on horseback and riding upon their trail.

Hard on the trail the Indians rode all day, and before sunset they were aware of a man clad in skins driving the mares before him. Swiftly some of the pursuers closed in on him, while others rode to cut him off by a canon or rift in the pampas which lay across his path. Had it not been for this canon the Wild Man would never, in all probability, have been taken.

As it was, he galloped down the sheer wall of it, but only to find himself cut off by the Indians who had been detached from the main body by the cacique for the purpose. Riding in upon him the Indians flung their heavy boleadoras—the Tehuelche weapon of three rawhide thongs, each weighted at the end with a ball of stone—which entangled the legs of the Wild Man's horse and brought it crashing to the ground. On the ground the Indians captured the Wild Man, snarling and biting.

They did not slay the Wild Man, but bound him

upon a horse and conveyed him over three hundred miles of pampas to Gallegos, where they handed him over to the authorities in due form. He was thrown into prison and the Indians departed for their wilderness home once more.

In the Argentine Republic there is no capital punishment, so that after his trial, the sentence that would be passed upon the Wild Man was certain—penal servitude for life.

But it never came to a trial, for it was not long before the wardens of the prison awoke one morning to find their prisoner gone. He had cut his way out through the walls of wood, stolen a horse that had been tied by some late visitor before the door of a house in the main street, ridden through the night until, at dawn, he found himself far out upon the pampas.

All along this belt of country from Gallegos to Santa Cruz are scattered farms set along the coast at frequent intervals. The Wild Man turned north and, on the second day of his escape, caught and stole a horse from one of these farms and so rode on up the coast. While the ordinary traveler dismisses the horse which has borne him gallantly and well with a pat and a kind word, the Wild Man, each time he procured a fresh mount, returned to his tired and weary beast and killed it.

And then one night, before the Indians had even heard of his escape from jail, once more he raided their mares and drove away a great troop of them. His intention doubtless was to get them to some suitable spot and there kill them, thereby gratifying his own peculiar and bloody-minded beliefs and at the same time revenging himself upon the Indians.

The instant they discovered their loss the Indians rode on the trail of the mares, but this time Ascensio drove them like a madman, as indeed he was.

The sun was already falling toward the west when they spied him at last. He was nearly naked, for he had flung away the clothes which had been supplied to him in the jail, and he rode, mounted upon a gigantic horse. As he rode, he uttered a cry of a lion, and the frenzied and terrified mares galloped wildly in front of him.

The sun sank and the chase continued. One by one the Tehuelches dropped away until at last the Wild Man and a single Indian alone remained. Now the moon was in the sky and by its light the Indian saw the Wild Man slacken his pace and, with features convulsed with rage and hate, turn at bay. The Indian grew afraid and paused. They looked at each other for a moment and then the Wild Man laughed aloud and, turning his great yellow horse, rode slowly to the west, while the Indian returned to his companions, whom he rejoined on the following day.

Near the cordillera of the Andes an adventurous German settler had squatted with his family, and had built himself a small house or hut. One night the German was awakened by a knocking at the door and opened it to find a man clad in skins facing him.

The man appeared to be emaciated and was certainly of the most extraordinary appearance, his whole face being blackened by an almost continuous growth of hair.

The man demanded food, whereupon the German invited him to enter and, taking a frying pan, commenced to cook some meat. As he bent over the fire the Wild Man, with senseless and brutal cruelty, shot him through the back and, helping himself to various provisions, left the house and the dead man lying in it.

The news of this crime and of others, which followed close upon it, aroused the whole district. Neither man nor woman could feel safe while the Wild Man lived, and at last a body of armed settlers ran the criminal to earth in a house which he had entered for purposes of plunder. He never left that house alive, yet fell on the threshold riddled with bullets, yet not before he had left his mark upon more than one of his assailants.

THEIR MOST JOYOUS MOMENT

Of the Trio, Probably Representative Redfield Had the Best Occasion to Smile.

The talk in one of the cloak rooms of congress turned to the thought of the happiest moments in one's life. Senator Bailey said his came the day he wore his first pair of trousers. And Paul Howland of Ohio declared his big moment of joy was when he was permitted once to drive a chariot in a pony and dog show parade.

Representative Redfield, who is a wise chap, even if he does hail from Brooklyn, said it was when he was going to school and trying to master long division. Three or four aisles over from where he sat a boy yawned. It was not an ordinary yawn, but one of such genuine expression of feeling toward things in general that it attracted Redfield's attention. He was fortunate in having a paper wad right at hand, ready for any emergency, and he aimed this at the boy's cavernous mouth. The wad went right square into the goal—and well, Fourth of July fireworks are tame to the stunts that boy did in the next few minutes.

He says he almost smiled once on ship board when the vessel gave a lurch and threw a platter full of beefsteak, gravy and all, over the open-faced shirt front of a pompous passenger across the table.

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