

An epic ride

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AN EPIC RIDE.

FROM BUENOS AIRES TO WASHINGTON.

A most interesting book from the pen of our countryman Mr. A. F. Tschiffely, has just been published under the title "Southern Cross to Pole Star" (Heinemann 15/-).

Modestly written, showing natural descriptive powers, richly charged with personal experiences that demanded daring and resource, and exhibiting rare powers of endurance on part of both horse and rider and also a fine co-operative sympathy and understanding of the horse, this record has peculiar fascination: it is travel book, adventure book, nature book all in one. Tschiffely is a Swiss; after completing his education he came to England as a teacher and thence migrated to the Argentine and served as a schoolmaster for nine years in the largest English-American school there. But he wanted "variety": he became interested in the breed of the Creole horse, descendants of the 16th century Spanish stock, "at that time the best in Europe," with a mixture of Arab and Barb blood in their veins; conceived the idea, to prove the quality of this "native" horse of the Argentine, of his great ride, got into touch with Dr. Emilio Solanet, an expert breeder of the Creole horse, who supplied him with Mancha and Gato, the 15- and 16-year-old horses which he rode on alternate days in his 10,000 mile ride. Careful preparations were made and success was achieved — after a trip of 2½ years' duration, in which the two ponies, as well as their rider, proved themselves heroes. Mr. Cunningham-Graham, in a preface to "the three friends," beautifully heroicises the horses in a passage of noble, imaginative prose that matches the nobility of their achievement. Here is a simple extract from that preface:

Even if they [Mancha and Gato] would not understand me, I know that they understand the man who shared so many perils, hardships, thirst and weariness with them, in the long pilgrimage through the Americas that has placed them with the immortals of the equine race.

In the green Trapalanda, I have always thought that Providence, however hardly its judgments may bear on man, must have prepared for all the horses that suffered here on earth, from over-work ill-usage, and neglect, as well as those so innocent and shy who in their life-time ranged the pampas, steppes and prairies, Caesar's eight-footed horse, Pascasas and Bucephalus will be there to welcome them. May the time be long, before that they exchange their greetings, whinnying low, holding their velvet nostrils gently forward, till they touch, with their ears quivering.

I like to imagine their infinite, celestial home — for our imagination can but conceive what we have known on earth, however, sublimated — as a great prairie, with the wind sweeping over the perennial grasses, till they roll like waves. Pasture shall not wither there, nor lose its succulence. Water shall never fail. There shall be neither 'cangrejal' or treacherous 'guadal,' still less stretches of arid sand, as in the steppes, or poisonous 'mio-mio,' to slay them cowardly. All shall be fresh and green. No winter blasts shall set their coats astare, or burning sun pour down upon their undefended heads, making the little foals shelter in the shadow of their dams... In the shade of some celestial Ombu, leafy and wide-spreading, in the hours of siesta, may they doze all together, and now and then recount — for then the barrier of speech will have broken down — the incidents of their long Hegira.

Such an introduction keys the interest in the succeeding narrative — and horses and rider justify the enthusiasm. The 10,000 mile ride northward led over the cold barren 16,000 feet ranges of the Andes, down steamy equatorial jungles, over rope-bridged ravines, across alligator infested rivers, across the Isthmus of Panama, through Central America and Mexico, and so to the United States and Washington. The narrative tells us much of fresh interest — of man, beast and bird; touches freshly the historical associations of the country of the Incas and the old Spanish gold trail; La Paz, "the Hidden City," Titicaca, "the Sacred Lake," the ruined palace of Montezuma, and the Temple of the Sun are described; in Lima we see the glass coffin containing the body of Pizarro, with the wounds still visible after 400 years; we climb a mountain-top which is perhaps that "Peak in Darien" whence Balboa was the first white man to view the Pacific. There are accidents to man and horse and strange encounters; some hospitable, others distinctly unfriendly; in most of the Pacific countries habits are "primitive," though the larger cities are "fairly clean;" in Loja the "whitest" people are "of dusky hue showing a strong splash of Indian blood," and religious fanaticism and idolatrous worship — "they adore hideously-painted saints and dolls and are fond of pomp and processions, in connection with which usually goes a drunken orgy." He tells of extraordinary and original cures for snake-bite — in one tribe the victim is laid out in the centre of a shuffling dance and as

in single file the other members "slowly move around, describing snake figures, every time they pass the victim they each spit at him ... the 'patient' usually recovers." Snakes, we are told, have a dislike for garlic, and so the openings of the habitations are rubbed with it to keep them out; "others affirm that no snake will crawl over a rope made of horse hair."

It is a fascinating, fresh Odyssey, told with rare modesty: "Remote from cities and seaports — far from white men's haunts — ran much of my lonely trail. One night camp might be pitched far from any human habitation; again, I ate and slept with ancient Indian tribes in stone villages older than the Incas. Of high adventures, hairbreadth escapes, and deeds of daring, there were few" — that is the modest attitude, though "naturally an expedition of this kind was bound to entail a certain amount of adventure and risk, but I have purposely endeavoured to avoid anything that might give an arm-chair voyager the idea that I was exaggerating for the sake of effect;" but the claim is made and justified, that "I doubt if any traveller, not excepting Marco Polo himself, had more leisure than I to see and understand the people, the animals, and plant life of the countries traversed," and the chief pride in the achievement is that the Argentine Crillo horse maintained his reputation as "second to none for continuous hard work under any conditions. My two pals, 'Mancha' and 'Gato' have shown powers of resistance to heat, cold, hunger, and every hardship imaginable that have surprised even the most sanguine admirers of the breed."

The ride is illustrated with numerous and excellent photographs, and as end papers a descriptive map of the route is provided.

RIMEMBRANZE.

San Bernardino, nei Grigioni, è divenuto una stazione sportiva, nell'evoluzione dei tempi, come altre sorelle della Svizzera interna, ma l'unica forse nella Svizzera italiana. San Bernardino, d'inverno! Ricordo quel paesello composto di tre alberghi ed una pensione, di alcune case e di tre villette; colla sua chiesetta modesta, raccolta, poggiata su di un promontorio verdeggianti, col praticello davanti.

Per lunghi mesi sepolto nella neve alta; separato dal resto dei viventi per dei chilometri; tutto pace, silenzio, solitudine. I soli suoi abitatori erano il Prete ed i padroni dell'albergo Brocco o della Posta; per tutto l'inverno queste persone vivevano la vita degli eremiti.

Soltanto di giugno gli alberghi si riaprivano e si popolavano di forestieri; le ville schiudevano le finestre baricate, tornavano ad apparire allegre ed ospitaliere; tutto sornideva sotto un cielo bleu, un sole caldo, una flora alpina fragrante e meravigliosa; ruscelli limpidi ed argenteli, cime coperte di neve eterna, splendente al sole primaverile.

Rivedo le pinete folte, vaste, dal verde cupo, fresche, fatate, invitanti al riposo, all'oblio ... che bellezza quel "dolce far niente," sdraiarsi su quei tappeti lucidi, sotto agli alti pini, nella solitudine assoluta, con un libro interessante in mano ...

Che gioia l'alzarsi di buon'ora, col sole, ed ascendere quelle cime, per stradicciuole alle volte appena, appena possibili per le capre ... e salire su, su in alto, sempre più in alto, sul "pizzo uccello," sul "pane di zucchero" in cerca della "stella dell'alpe."

Che quiete, che soddisfazione infinita, che gioia di vivere, contemplando tanto spazio ai nostri piedi; quel verde lussureggiante, quei declivi, il torrente fiuggiante, e pini, pini resinosi, folti, ricchi, inalzandosi al cielo!

Che aria balsamica, pura, da respirare a pieni polmoni e farne tanta scorta per il resto dell'anno!

Era una festa, una felicità, un premio il passarvi le vacanze estive; godevo un mondo ogni giorno, ogni ora; piangevo l'ultima notte che passavo lassù, al pensiero di lasciare tanto paradiso e tornare in città ed agli studi; avrei voluto passarvi tutta la vita!

Son passati molti anni, ma il ricordo di San Bernardino mi rimase scolpito nell'anima, un ricordo vivo e sempre caro, che spesso invoco e mi vi soffermo sognando ad occhi aperti, riandando ore belle e serene della mia fanciullezza.

Ricordo! Era Santa Marta l'indomani — l'onomatico di una nonnina cara de'miei nipotini.

Con questi conceatati di salire ad un certo posto nella "valle del silenzio," e raccogliere tante violette bianche e quei "miosotis" color rosa, viola e bleu che crescono soltanto ai piedi della neve eterna; raccogliere tanti fiori alpini, farne un grosso mazzo e spedirlo alla nonna, certi di farle tanto piacere.

Salimmo in quella bella mattina estiva; l'aria era placida e lassù in alto, dopo un paio d'ore di salita, il silenzio era talmente profondo, ci sentimmo così soli, da impressionare; affrettatamente facemmo una buona scorta di quella flora ricca e bella ... quando, ad un tratto, un ululato spaventoso attraversò lo spazio silenzioso e ci agghiacciò il sangue nelle vene ... "L'orso!" gridò il maggiore dei maschi ... e gli urli si ripeterono! Ci guardammo spaventati ... presi per mano la più piccola nipotina, i maschi davanti e giù a salti ed a sbalzi per la rapida scesa ... Come arrivammo salvi in paese non so; non per l'orso, ma per lo spavento, per la corsa continua, per i salti ... per non esserci rotto l'osso del collo!

Ma l'orso v'era veramente in quei deserti paraggi. Due cacciatori salirono, dopo sentita la nostra storiella, nella "valle del silenzio," ed il giorno dopo scesero in paese trionfanti, colla vittima che ci aveva fatto tanta paura.

Londra, 27 Febbraio 1933.

T.L.R.

THE EDITOR'S POST-BAG.

To the Editor of the Swiss Observer.

Dear Sir,

I read with great interest in your last number a letter of an English correspondent wondering what the Swiss people think of Britain and the British.

Although I have been in London only for a few months, I shall try to give an answer to this letter in my best English.

The following impressions are quite personal and may be wrong. It is always very difficult to judge a country and its people in all objectivity for we are more or less influenced by certain prejudices of which it is sometimes not easy to get rid. But if one tries to observe in an intelligent way, and to understand certain things that may appear paradoxical or even stupid, I am convinced that one may get a right perspective and a correct judgment.

"Do Swiss people think us hypocritical"? asks your correspondent. I do not consider personally British people hypocritical, but realize perfectly well that other people, judging superficially, may think so.

The lack of spontaneity, the fear of showing opinions or feelings which often observe in this country is much more, from my point of view, a sort of shyness, of exaggerated reserve; a consequence of the great quantity of conventions which imprison English people and influence nearly all their words and actions. On the contrary, we, continental people, are, as general rule, much more expansive, perhaps a little too frank now and then but we expose our opinions, our feelings, and that is the reason why we do not find easily points of contact with the British. Which is to be preferred? No one knows.

We must confine ourselves to statements: Britain is a great nation that we all admire. The secret of her strength is obviously to be found in a certain measure in the mentality of the British subjects. It is incontestable that all this reserve and circumspection, typically British, presents in many respects a great advantage. In business, in politics, etc., English people generally examine questions "a fond," think them over before taking any decision, show prudence, look for compromise. Although we often dislike these methods, we must recognize that there is a good deal of wisdom in these proceedings.

I was just speaking about the strength and the power of the British Empire. I should like to add some remarks with regard to this.

Swiss people coming to this country are generally surprised to find that in many respects, England is backward in comparison to other countries. England is naturally, by definition, a conservative country, a land of traditions as

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References from Swiss parents in Great Britain available.