

An Argentine Connaughtman.

A TRUE INCIDENT OF THE PAMPAS.

[BY MAG.]

It occurred in the spring of 1891. I had taken a voyage to Buenos Ayres to recoup a stock of youthful health which I had foolishly wasted by overwork. From Buenos Ayres I had gone up the country to Mercedes to spend a month with my good friend and fellow-countryman, Father Dominic O'Halloran. And Father Dominic contrived that I should spend it to good purpose, in indolence—I might also say vagrant—rambling with him over the vast Pampas which abound in that province, Pampas, where we might easily contrive to ride for days together without the perfect circle of the horizon being once broken by so much as a hillock, whilst the dwellings of man were as few. Long, long monotonous miles of perfect plain stretched away on either side, covered by tall, waving grass, in some parts of which a man on horseback could easily contrive to hide himself and keep his seat. But any native of our hilly Erin will readily understand that this wonderful monotony was to me, for my short stay, a very welcome variety. An Irish bull is by no means out of place on the Pampas. These Pampas are divided into *estancias*, or farms, of perhaps some hundred square miles each. One large dwelling, with quite a little village of barns, cow-houses and other office houses, is on every farm, where resides the *estanciero*, a proprietor, with his family and employees. But in addition one or more little cabins exist on remote parts of the *estancias*, for the accommodation of *puesteros* or herds who look after the immense flocks of sheep and herds of cattle (the raising of which is the industry of these never-ending and luxuriant plains) in that part of the farm, and guard the mearings. Father Dominic was very familiar with the paths, having often done the tour before, and we now journeyed before us leisurely, going from one *estancia* to the other, and spending usually one night at each, though we would have been heartily welcome to spend thirty nights, for than Father Dominic it would be difficult to a man of any profession who was such an ideal boon companion and had such a tact for sociability and the ingratiating into the hearts of all whom he met with. It was a pleasant scene when after a fifty or sixty-mile journey we had been refreshed by as good a dinner as the plains could afford—and I have seldom had any more to my taste—the home-brew was placed steaming upon the table, and the good priest's happy temper actually glowed from his own features and was reflected on every face around, whilst his quips and his jokes made the welkin ring. So delighted was I, indeed, with this life that I often expressed to the padre the wish that the fate of the Wandering Jew had been mine, with him for companion. We had been already some ten days on our journey, in thorough enjoyment of Argentine hospitality, when one morning we quitted, not without regret, the residence of Don Miguel Juarez, where we had spent two nights, and turned our horses' heads to the path which led to his neighbour's, Don Pena, who resided about fourteen leagues off. One hour after noon we halted for dinner, and after refreshing ourselves thus with the addition of a good washdown which I never omitted to bear in my saddle bags, and a rest, we remounted and proceeded on our journey.

The day was, I well remember, a most glorious one; the novelty of the scene had not yet abated a whit for me; and the light spirits begotten of this, and of my fast recruiting health, infused in me a buoyancy I could not easily restrain. We had scarcely been half an hour on our resumed journey when in the distance I espied a flock of ostriches.

"What think you," said I to my companion, "if we give them chase?" I would like to put to the test, and ascertain for myself that swiftness for which they are so famed. Our horses are good; we have ridden easily, and so are quite fresh. And I have a fancy that if I could only get within a respectable distance of the wind of their heels I would cause some little commotion in their ranks, and deal more or less destruction amongst them with this machine," said I, displaying a bola, which is made of three strips of leather, about two feet long each, radi-

ating from a common centre, and having a leaden ball attached to the outer extremity of each; and which, when in the hands of the ostrich hunter, is thrown at the bird with a sweeping motion, causing it to rotate in its flight, and striking the legs of the ostrich—of which the bird has a very ample display—to wind round and round them many times till they are completely entangled, and effectively stayed in their race by the plaited bola arms. "You know," I continued, "Don Miguel kindly gave me a few lessons on the art of bola-throwing, till he confessed that I was fully as expert as himself, and that I was a born ostrich-hunter, and mistook my vocation when I went to the bar. Rather flattering, don't you think?"

"Yes, Charlie, my boy, rather flattering I do think. French compliments are said in more places than France. The principal commotion you would excite by throwing these leather straps, avic, would be, not in the ranks of the ostriches, but in my visible muscles, and the main destruction you would deal would be to my gravity. Be advised by me, and put by those things till you get out of the country, then, with the time-honored prerogative of every traveller, you can exhibit them in Ireland as having taken down a regiment of ostriches with them. Believe me, Charlie, a man of your talents and profession can take in more than he can take down. So, confine yourself to capturing at home two-legged ostriches—"

"What! Father Dominic! Two-legged ostriches! And pray what is the customary number of legs for ostriches of standing in this country?"

"Oh, but you're airy on it, aren't ye! You know well what I mean—confine yourself to fetching down clients and stripping them of their feathers, and their very hides, too—as your order usually do—but let our ostriches alone. You'd be a long time taking down as many neres as would feather your nest. And, faith, it would be no ways improving on the sweet tempers of the London dames if they were waiting on their ostrich feathers till Charlie O'Mara plucked them and sent them home. Moreover, Charlie, we might find some little difficulty in regaining our path again in case we went on such a wild-goose—I mean wild ostrich chase."

"Oh, never fear for that. Here goes!" said I, with the unreasoning impetuosity of youth, and I put spurs to my horse and off at a dashing pace in the direction of the birds, followed closely by Father O'Halloran, who saw that he must indulge me in my little frolic.

We had a sharp run, for Father Dominic soon warmed to the work, and being a skilled horseman was ahead of me oftener than I would have wished. But the ostriches out-distanced us, not even allowing me half a chance of convincing my companion that his scepticism in regard to my bola-throwing was rash. After a considerable time we reined in and wheeled about, proceeding now in such a direction as, Father Dominic directed, would cause us to strike the path again at an acute angle some ten miles ahead of the point at which we had quitted it. Hour after hour we rode steadily onward, but when it had reached seven o'clock in the evening no sign of a path had yet been seen. We rode about another hour with equal want of success.

"So," said the good priest, at length raining in, "ye have brought us into a pretty fix, haven't ye, you and your tomfoolery? My blessing on Don Miguel and he had kept his lessons and his bolas for the next fool! Ye had figaros enough in your head since ye came here, without that, goodness knows. What are ye going to do with yourself now, do ye know, and with me too, which is of far more importance?"

"Why," said I, assuming a *sang froid* which I was truly very far from feeling, "why, I suppose we had better ride on, and if we don't find the path, which we cannot be far from, or stumble on to Don Pena's, which we must nearly have reached by this, I suppose we'll have to pitch our camp on the prairie and rough it for a night."

"Ride on! aye, indeed, ride on!" said Father Dominic with much iron. "Ride to Jericho—ride to the moon! Sure ye don't know where ye are riding! But all the same," said he, with a sigh as if resigned to the inevitable, "I suppose we'll have to ride on. And pretty riding it will be—nice and comfortable. Breaking our horses legs, and, what's a little worse, our own blessed necks; stumbling into *tudo tudo* burrows. As for stretch-

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ing ourselves out here for the night, I am not that mad yet, thank God—though I dare say I won't be very long in your company till I am. That would be roughing it sure enough—a little too much roughing; you would be apt to confess before morning, if by any remote chance ye'd have your speeches about you till past midnight even. Do you see that vapour," said he, directing my gaze to a fleecy cloud in the low horizon, "rolling up from the south-east? If Father Dominic's instincts don't deceive him, many hours won't pass over us till a *pampero* gives us a passing call, and if it finds ye stretched out here on the open prairie, you'll have to commence recruiting your health in the new tomorrow—that is, if there's any of you left. No, sir, you must consider yourself on Grafton street pavement with a peeler telling you to move on. You'll get a taste of what the life of a wandering Jew is like to-night, even with me for a companion, I'm sorry to say, and we'll see how you relish it. We might meet with luck yet, though I doubt it."

True enough, when I had been wishing for the cloak of the venerable Jew, I had never anticipated being "at home" to a *pampero* on the shelterless plains of Argentina, and I then and there heartily agreed with my friend Hamlet (slightly amended to suit the circumstances) that it was better to bear the hills we have than fly to plains we know not of.

We started forward simlessly in the all but firm belief that we were about to pass the night on the unprotected plain, in company with a lively *pampero*, that might be bearing vestiges of us far on the way to Ireland when morning dawned. My weatherwise companion assured me that, from the thickening signs, we might expect operations to commence in less than two hours. This gave me pause.

"It is comical, too," said I, after a little while's abstraction, "is the idea of two Irishmen away here in the very centre of South America, in a forgotten quarter of the world, passing the night out on the open prairies, with, perhaps, not another of our countrymen within a thousand miles!"

"Oh, you forget, interposed the priest, "you have lots of them within a thousand miles. They are comparatively plentiful in the province of Buenos Ayres, scattered through the camps, or farming colonies, there; whilst in the suburbs of the metropolis many of the handsomest palaces are owned by Irishmen, or the descendants of Irishmen—the Meat farmers—who came out here less than half a century ago, and introduced sheep-farming, which has now become the very backbone of Argentine's prosperity. The bank accounts of some of them run into the sixth figure."

"True, indeed," said I. I had almost forgotten our Buenos Ayres brethren.

"Besides," continued Father Dominic, "would it be after all so very strange, the position in which we two Irishmen are found? The Celt, the Irish Celt, is a ubiquitous nomad. He is restless; he is everywhere—everywhere that man can live, and many places that most other men would starve. The sun, no matter how disastrous his manœuvring, can never dart up in the morning from a back of a hill in any part of the habitable globe, that there isn't an Irishman rubbing his eyes to have a good look at him. You are aware, I presume, of the

very generally accepted theory, that if ever they succeed in discovering the North Pole there will be found an Irishman at it?"

"Oh yes, perched on top of it, haranguing against the Government—I know all about that."

After considerable riding which was not by any means without its discomforts, as our horses were prone to get amongst the burrows of the *tudo tudo*, the Argentine rat, as well as into growths of coarse grass taller than a man, and we ourselves apt to get into a temper, our eyes were blessed with the joyful glimpse of a twinkling light in the distance.

"Thanks be to God! fervently ejaculated my companion. "We are not, after all, I trust, going to pass the night out here in the rough company of our rollicking friend the *pampero*, who seems make the best of his way for us."

On coming close we discovered that it was the shieling of a *puestero*, and great was our inward feeling of thanks to Providence. A wire fence now barred our way.

"I'll hold the horses," said the priest, "while you go forward and salute."

Now, on entering a house in Argentina, the customary form of salutation is "Ave Maria!" by the visitor, responded to with "Sin pecado concebida!" (Conceived without sin), by the inmates. But, since banditti founded a field, a very extensive one, in Argentina, the custom has been slightly modified for precaution sake, after night. If a belated traveller unwittingly walked into a remote residence on the plains now-a-days with the pious "Hail Mary" on his lips, for rejoinder the inmates might haply hail shot and bullets, and the result be that the visitor would need to hail nothing more in this world but a hearse. Accordingly, the practice, after dark, is to stand and salute at a respectable hailing distance, and there await the reply, which signified that you might enter. As I had no desire to make an Argentine throw away his powder and shot on a poor invalid from Ireland, when he might easily find something more profitable, as well as more game, to expend it upon, I did not pass the fence very far, but gauging my lung power to its utmost strength, stood a very handsome distance off and shouted "Ave Maria!"

I repeated this three times without any sign of having been heard at the hut.

"What the dickens," shouted the impatient Father Dominic, "are you standing bawling there for, at that distance? Don't think it's in Ireland you are, scaring crows out of the corn."

"Well, I'm not just prepared to be shot like a rat, Father," said I.

"Faith," said he, "there's no disputing at all that ye're bad enough looking for a bandit, but anyone sees your face in the light, would think it a shame to cheat death, even providing they hadn't any scruples about cheating the hangman. Go forward, man, where you'll be heard."

I paid no attention to Father Dominic's good natured sarcasms, but timorously advanced to within twenty paces of the door, within easy reach of a large tree, which I calculated to slip behind if I perceived anything of the size and nature of a gun muzzle protruded from the doorway.

"Ave Maria!"

I paused—but there came no reply.