THE LAST MILES OF THE RIVER OF DOUBT

Hungry and Exhausted, a Ragged Company of Men Finally Overcame the Hazards of the Stream

One of the Wild Indians Encountered in the Jungle.

The Rio Roosevelt is no longer the River of Doubt but a "river of fact." The following article completes the story of the expedition that followed the course of Roosevelt and Rondon down the treacherous Brazilian stream that cuts a thousand-mile path through the steaming jungle. It was a ragged group of men that emerged at Manaos with memories of perilous rapids, strange Indians, fever, armies of insects, and the satisfaction of having accomplished a remarkable journey without a single casualty.

By G. M. DYOTT

As we fought our way down the Rio Roosevelt our stores ran lower and lower. Eight men consume a lot of food, even if restricted to two meals a day. Ours were not square meals, either, and it was becoming daily more doubtful whether our supplies would hold out until we reached the rubber gatherers on the lower river.

To make matters worse, one of our canoes upset. We had passed safely through a bad group of rapids and were embarking at the tail end of some broken water. Juan, in the leading canoe, was well under way; I was right behind him and the third canoe was just putting out from shore. I had cautioned Bob Young about some trees that were growing in mid-river. They were unpleasantly close and the swift current threatened to carry our canoes right on top of them. The moment I was out of danger I looked around to see how Bob was getting on. He drifted out into the current, with Luiz in the stern paddling. Suddenly the canoe disappeared and soon after there was a frenzied yell from Bob.

The moment we heard him shout we put back to shore and Eugene Bussey and myself made our way along the bank as quickly as the tangled forest growth permitted. I hurried ahead until I was opposite the submerged island on which Bob had been wrecked. I could not see anything, but heard him yell that he was drowning. Bussey caught the word "cargoes" and was quick to sense what was meant. He called out in turn to Doc, who was with Juan in the first canoe further downstream. Doc acted at once and had Juan pull out into the middle of the river to intercept any of our belongings if they came floating by.

Bob had with him our valuable films, and my feelings can be imagined as I stood on the bank realizing that all had gone to the bottom.

The only thing to be done was to rescue Bob and Luiz. To get a canoe out into the middle of the river was a dangerous and difficult task. I hurried back to my boat, discharged the cargo and with the assistance of Bussey and Alfredo paddled upstream against the swift current. Crossing over to the tail end of the submerged island, we worked our way up to the head of it by hauling on branches, finally reaching the spot where Bob and Luiz were perched in the branches of a tree.

The noise of the water tearing through the trunks made it difficult to hear. I shouted to ask where the canoe was. Bob pointed to a rope, taut as a piano wire, which was hitched to a branch. Somewhere at the end of the rope, under the surface of the rushing water, was our canvas boat. We hauled on the line but could not budge it. We stood in the water up to our arm-pits pushing and pulling, but without effect. There was nothing to do but take the whole thing to bits. We knew every bolt and rib by heart and so, piece by piece, we dismantled it and transferred the parts to the other canoe. The keel was broken into splinters and two ribs were missing. Otherwise everything was rescued. Within three hours the wreckage had been safely piled up on the bank a quarter of a mile away and we were hastening down river to look for the rest of our party.

On finding them I learned that the prompt action of Bussey and Doc had saved a good portion of my photographs from a watery grave. Four out of six of the fiber cases had been picked up, also a camp bed and a few other odds and ends, as they were floating past their canoe. Our heavy bundle of tobacco, in its waterproof bag, was also rescued.

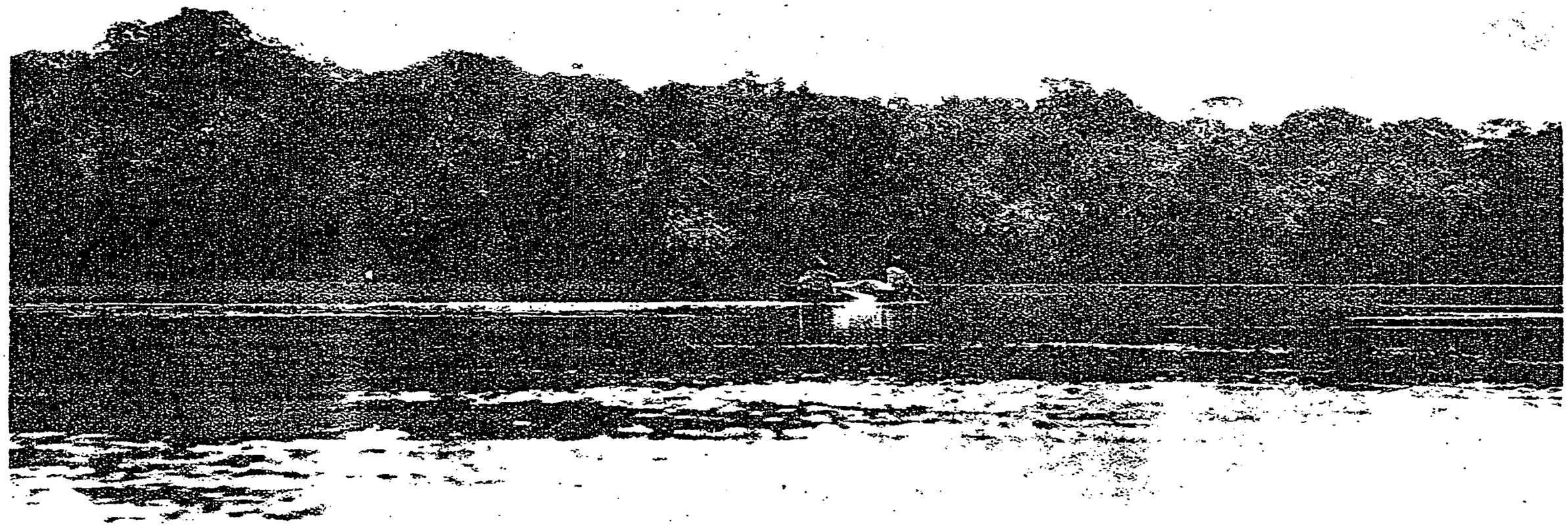
I think we all felt a trifle dejected that night after the wreck. Every one lost something of importance and there was some doubt as to how we could continue with only two canoes at our disposal. The prospect of spending a week making a dugout was not attractive. We camped for a night which proved to be a perfect nightmare, creeping hordes of ants thronging our encampment and making sleep or rest impossible. At dawn we went back to the wreckage and toiled all day with our rough tools. By nightfall the wreckage of the canvas craft had been transformed into a serviceable boat.

Having spent most of the two weeks past in rain, our clothing was beginning to disintegrate. Nothing would dry out thoroughly in the forest shade. Also, our numerous passages through the jungle had torn our clothes to shreds and what had not suffered from thorns had been chewed by ants. We presented a most disreputable appearance, our rags held together with safety pins, and in this ventilated condition we were an easy mark for stinging and biting insects. Dressing in the morning was a delicate operation, for it was easy to put arms or legs through the wrong holes.

It is always a problem to know what to discard on a trip of this kind. A good deal of excess material has to be thrown away in emergencies to lighten loads. In our case the misfortune that befell Bob Young's canoe made an involuntary cut in our baggage, especially in edible stores. Our large tin of beans had been lost, our emergency dehydrated foods had gone; most of the coffee had shared the same fate, as had every ounce of sugar. An occasional fish or a stray monkey shot near camp helped to replenish our larder, but we could not always depend on such sources of supply. There was a certain tree that we tapped for milk. It was like cream and had a pleasant taste. All we had to do was to make an incision in the trunk and the latex ran freely. As a substitute for sugar we raided bees' nests for honey. Fortunately we were never short of something to smoke, although we had no longer any cigarette papers. Bussey irreligiously used the pages of a Bible as a substitute. Doc was less fastidious and consumed old advertising sheets or any scraps of paper he could lay hands on. To

"Under the Shade of Banana Trees We Waited for a River Launch to Take Us to Manaos."

The New York Times
Published: July 10, 1927



Smooth Water at Last—In Its Lowest Reaches the River of Doubt Is a Wide, Placid Stream.

follow in the wake of his canoe was like traveling behind a bonfire.

Colonel Roosevelt's narrative abounds in reference to things that enabled me to follow his movements closely. He spoke, for instance, of a certain rock in mid-channel that had almost wrecked his canoe. He described a small river that had been christened "Rio Kermit." We found the stream, with the little falls near its mouth and the Roosevelt camping ground. Of the "Rio Cherrie," another stream further down, he wrote as follows: "The loads were carried to the other side of a little river coming in from the west which Colonel Rondon christened Cherrie River. Across this we went on a bridge consisting of a huge tree felled by Macario, one of our best men."

We came across this tree in an excellent state of preservation, with the axe marks still visible on the hardwood stump. Incidentally it saved us the trouble of making a bridge ourselves. In the latter stages of the expedition I noticed that Colonel Roosevelt's powers of observation were less acute, or if he noted things of prominence he did not write about them. The fever that gripped him and the trouble he had with a bruised leg must have had their effect.

***

My party was in excellent spirits, but the men showed signs of the strain under which they were working. Spells of fever and days of indisposition were becoming common; yet every one kept on working in a most praiseworthy manner. There seemed to be some unseen power holding them together and goading them on in almost superhuman effort. The disaster to Bob's canoe no doubt had a salutary effect and after all might have been a blessing in disguise.

After several days of hardship we were once more on the winding river road that leads to Manaos. At our last stopping place we had run across Indian trails. And now, passing swiftly downstream, we noted a number of abandoned Indian huts in a clearing. It seemed highly probable that we should meet these denizens of the forest before long.

On Feb. 27 our three canoes slid into the upper reaches of a narrow gorge, going through some swift passages on the way. At a nasty looking curl we pulled up alongside a face of rock that seemed to overhang the river. Caution was the better part of valor, so we chose a suitable location for our camp half a mile from where we landed. It was a lovely spot, from which we could hear the gulping of the restless waters and the rumble of large boulders carried along the bed of the stream. Juan and Alfredo brought the canoes down to the lip of the falls, where our camp was pitched. It was indeed a risky business and required great skill. Those of us who remained on shore procured long ropes and, standing as far out in the current as possible, threw our lines to the passing canoes. In this fashion we hauled them in to the bank, safe from the swirling whirlpools below.

Our arrival at this gorge, named Paixao by the Roosevelt party, was an important day for us. This was to be the acid test of our endurance and skill. On it hung the entire issue of the expedition. What we had passed through heretofore was child's play compared with what we now had to tackle. Upon reaching this "sinister chasm," Colonel Roosevelt wrote:

"The men were growing constantly weaker under the endless strain of exhausting labor. Kermit was having an attack of fever and Lyra and Cherrie had touches of dysentery, but all three continued to work. * * * Our men were disheartened, weak and sick. Most of them had already begun to have fever. * * * There were already two of the camaradaz who were too weak to help the others, their condition being such as to cause us serious concern."

It was at this place that a Roosevelt camarada killed one of his fellow-men in cold blood. He was a sergeant called Paixao, in the Brazilian army. It is his name that the rapids now bear.

***

WHEN we came to make a detailed survey of the country it looked as if we were up against a brick wall. The course of the river was flanked with vertical faces of rock overgrown with vegetation. Luiz and I spent a whole day examining the countryside and surveying a possible route over which to transport our cargoes. For more than a mile we worked our way along the narrow ledges on the cliff, but still the river ran madly over rocks and boulders at the bottom. It seemed as if we should never reach smooth water. After six hours we had literally squeezed our way out of the gorge on to some level slopes, over which we could move with greater freedom.

I have already referred to the evidences of Indian life encountered during the last few days; none of these evidences had appeared to be very recent, but now we came across indications that were quite fresh—twigs of jungle plants broken by the hand of man. Indians traveling through the forest bend back the stems of plants to act as sign posts in case they wish to retrace their steps. The indications we saw must have been made only a few hours previous to our arrival.

We proceeded with greater caution, keeping our eyes open for further signs. We passed by the trunk of a milk tree from which the latex was slowly trickling. A man must have passed barely two minutes ahead of us.

About 400 yards beyond this point we found the end of the rapids, the river subsiding into tranquil reaches of black water. We then went back to camp, choosing a slightly different route. As we moved cautiously forward we heard sounds of running through the forest ahead of us. The next moment we stumbled over a big Indian basket half full of forest fruit. Alongside of it were a few ornaments, evidently discarded in a hurry by their owner. We touched nothing, but left a peace offering in the shape of a large knife, hastening back to warn the others of possible trouble. We came across the other men of our party not far off, busy widening the path. I told them briefly what we had seen and cautioned them to keep a lookout.

Soon after I left them there was a terrible yell from the forest, and from behind a tree on top of a knoll an Indian jumped out into the open. He was stark naked and held a bow in one hand and arrows in the other. Like a huge ape-man he beat his chest with his clenched hands and shouted. Without hesitation the boys turned about to retreat.

The moment they turned, other brown figures leaped from behind other trees. All were armed and, like their leader, they beat their chests and yelled at the top of their lungs.

***

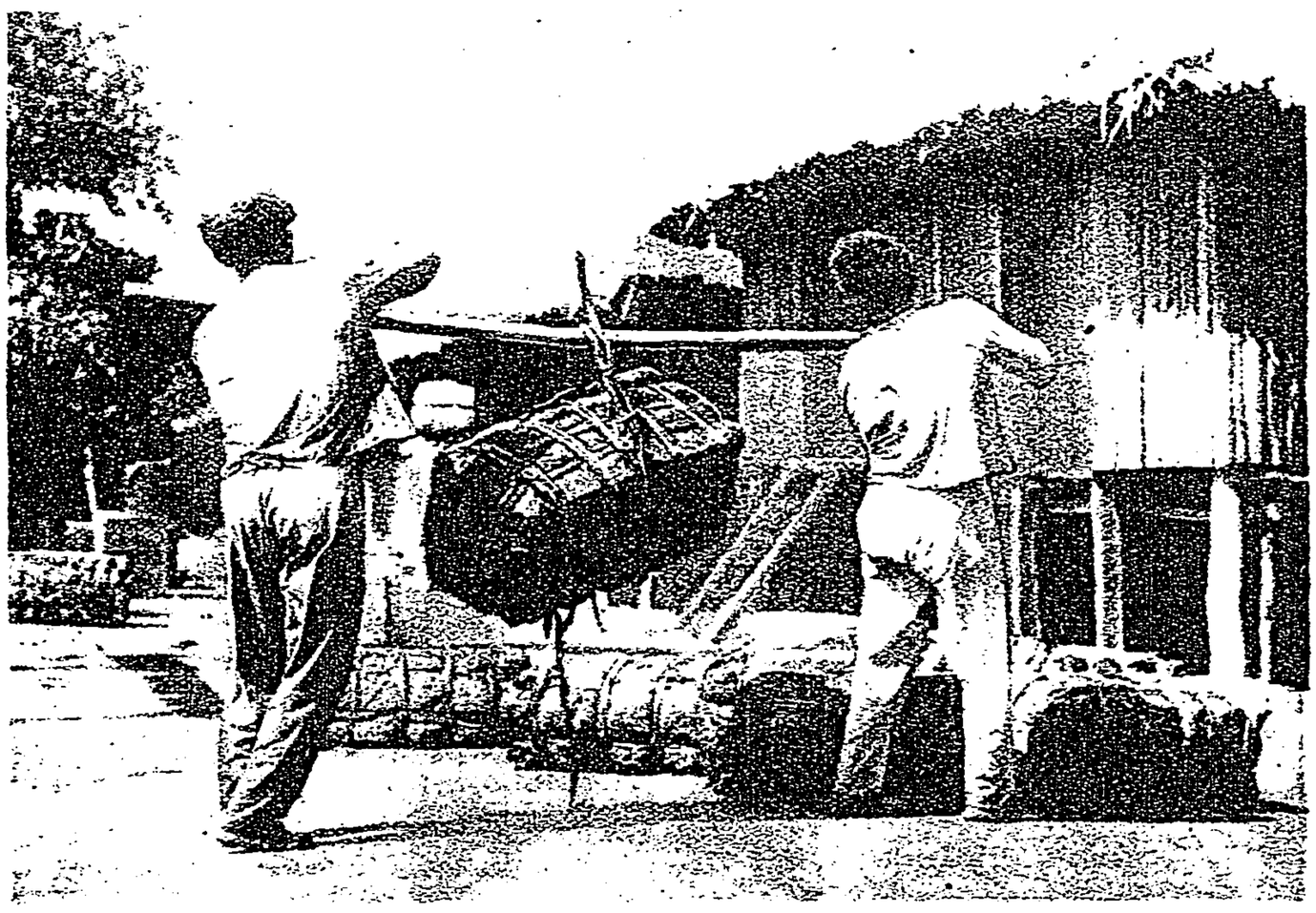
THE situation was critical, and but for Juan's prompt action tragedy might have ensued. He shouted back at the Indians, imitating their sounds and gestures as best he could. He then held up his machete so that they could see its shining blade. He pointed alternately to it and to the bows and arrows of the nearest savage, indicating that he was open to exchange. Slowly he advanced to the leader, making sundry noises to intimate that he was friendly. The hullabaloo subsided and the chief, plucking up courage, advanced half a dozen steps.

In a few seconds he was holding the large knife in his own hands, while Juan grasped a five-foot bow with a bundle of arrows. This was a signal for others to follow suit, and in no time my party had parted with their valuable weapons and were the proud possessors of innumerable bows and arrows—as much use to them as a sick headache.

The Indians went wild with excitement. They swung the machetes about, slashing right and left at the trees and in general behaved like madmen. Juan followed up his success with further signs to follow him. Like a general at the head of his troops, he led them back to camp, where they promptly ran over everything and gave us much trouble. It was almost impossible to get rid of them. They would not go home. Doc wanted to invite them to stay to supper and would have traded away our last axe and machete for useless arrows had I not passed the word that no one was to do any bartering. Excessive exhibitions of friendliness are often forerunners of trouble.

We told the Indians to come back

(Continued on Page 20)



Crude Rubber—A Product of the Brazilian Jungle.

The New York Times
Published: July 10, 1927

THE LAST MILES OF THE RIVER OF DOUBT

(Continued from Page 11)

next day about 2 o'clock They grasped the meaning of our signs and, as darkness came on they faded away in the jungle Next day they were back on schedule with shouts of "Arara! Arara!" Swarms of brown figures crowded around us like bees They did not come empty-handed either They brought a few hunks of dried monkey meat, a drink that had quite a strong alcoholic content and ears of hard corn When greeting us they shouted "Arara!" and for that reason we called them "Arara Indians." So far I have been unable to find any record or description of them.

It is not easy to converse with a horde of savages. The sign language does not lend itself to the expression of varying shades of thought or complicated ideas. All we could hope to do under the circumstances was to impress our visitors with the one important fact that we were birds of passage.

I think we succeeded in making ourselves understood, because the Araras, in turn, gave us some friendly advice. It took us a long time to grasp what they were driving at but gradually the significance of their oft-repeated gestures dawned upon us They laid their shaggy heads on their hands and closed their eyes as if asleep; then, pointing to the opposite bank of the river they shook their fists energetically from side to side This was followed by an imitation of chopping off a hand or foot, and of eating food In plain English, they warned us not sleep on the opposite bank of the river, because the people who lived there cut off the hands and feet of strangers and ate them.

Our friends hung about till 3 P M. and when they left they took a number of our belongings with them I saw one man pull out a machete that had been hidden under some blankets and deliberately throw it into the jungle where he could pick it up later. It would not have been good diplomacy to retrieve it and confront the thief with proof of his unfriendliness and I had to let the offender go free

Once clear of our nimble-fingered guests we began moving our cargoes over the trail. As we could not shift camp two miles in a single day, we carried part of our belongings to a halfway point and left them piled up in the jungle. I had carried one case to the spot chosen, and on returning with a second I was astonished to find that the first had been opened during my absence. The contents, thrown about, had been soaked in the rain. Nothing, however, had been stolen Apparently the thought of finding some of those wonderful knives had prompted the Indians to open and ransack our baggage.

Next day we worked like ants carting things back and forth over the hills There still remained a portage of 300 yards to land our baggage at the foot of the rapids. We figured on shooting the canoes down empty and started to make a footpath through the forest. We had advanced barely fifty yards from camp when we came to a halt. There, in the centre of the trail, was planted an arrow. That is the Indian way of saying "Stop," and when he says stop he means it.

Such a turn of events came as a surprise and we went back to camp to think it over. I made another careful examination of the river with our head pilot, and as I scanned the rapids lapping the rocks with long white tongues of foam, I wondered which was the better alternative—a five-foot arrow through one's stomach or the cold embrace of the hungry waters. Juan, confident as ever in the seaworthiness of our canoes, approved the latter course. The arrow was sure death; the river held out some chance of safety I agreed

* * *

NEXT morning we passed through the angry waters in safety While speeding through the foam we had seen the Indians darting in and out among the trees. Whether they were sorry to have us go or whether there was some sinister motive back of their actions, I cannot say All I know is that we were glad to have put thirty miles of dense forest between ourselves and them before nightfall

Our troubles were by no means over More and more rapids had to be conquered; more heavy work to be done—and less food on which to do it Several times during the next week overconfidence resulted in narrow escapes; but grave disaster was avoided and every day saw us nearer our goal. The river meandered all over the map. It swung around in great curves We never knew what trouble might await us around each bend, and forever there loomed up ahead of us the possibility of delay and the crowning danger of nothing to eat.

At last we came to a long, tranquil stretch of water, and then, to our joy, saw a deserted shack standing on the west bank. It must have been the temporary quarters of some enterprising rubber gatherer. Soon after we saw another hut on the eastern shore, and outside, on a line, hung a pair of pants, flapping in the wind. We gave one shout and made for shore.

That evening Bussey expressed the sentiments of the party when he said that he had never before been so glad to see a pair of pants in all his life. To us that simple garment was an emblem of success, a flag of victory—and only just in time, for our last ounce of meat was consumed that night and our supply of rice was exhausted.

Long, weary days of paddling still lay ahead of us, but our eventful journey was now nearing its end. It was only a matter of hard work. Food was plentiful, for the kind settlers we met gave us generously of their stores. Senhor Olvidio Araripi, who owns the trading post of Vera Cruz, was hospitality personified; he treated us like kings. "How many of you died on the way?" was the question every one asked us They took it for granted that half at least must have perished. To have eight start and eight finish was to them nothing short of a miracle.

Down the unending lane of flowing water we traveled to the Madeira River. We encountered Colonel Caripe on the way. He had helped the Roosevelt party out at the end of their memorable journey in 1914, and now he came to our rescue and facilitated our movements down the river. He had given Roosevelt a suit of clothes and he had a photo of the Colonel decked out in his garments. He showed us the picture with great pride. We met others who also had met Colonel Roosevelt, and one and all were high in his praise for the endurance he had shown in making such a trip.

It was not long before we reached the Madeira River, down which we sailed to Manaos, on a river launch. We arrived there, 1,000 miles from the mouth of the Amazon, at 10:30 A. M., and by 4 o'clock the same day Bussey and I were on board the steamship Stephen, homeward bound for New York.

Commander G. M. Dyott.
Photograph by New York Times Studio

Luck plays an important rôle in any expedition, and I must say that in spite of setbacks fortune treated us well. We had, of course, the benefit of Colonel Roosevelt's experience; but it was our canvas boats that did more to crown our efforts with success than anything else. How Colonel Roosevelt survived the ordeal of that trying river journey is hard to realize; yet he did, and the data collected by his party form a substantial contribution to our geographic knowledge of South America. Even if the head waters of the Duvida were known to General Rondon in 1909, or the mouth of the same stream to the rubber men more than half a century ago, the fact remains that no one had previously explored it in its entirety or thought of the two extremes as being one and the selfsame river. I like the Colonel's own expression: "We put a river on the map." That is just what was done, and it was done uncommonly well.

My story of this much-talked-of river now ends and I feel it a privilege to go on record with the assurance that this roaring torrent is no longer a river of "doubt" but a river of "fact," and that the official name given to it by the Brazilian Government, namely, Rio Roosevelt, will always remain a fine tribute to one of the finest citizens America ever had.

The New York Times
Published: July 10, 1927