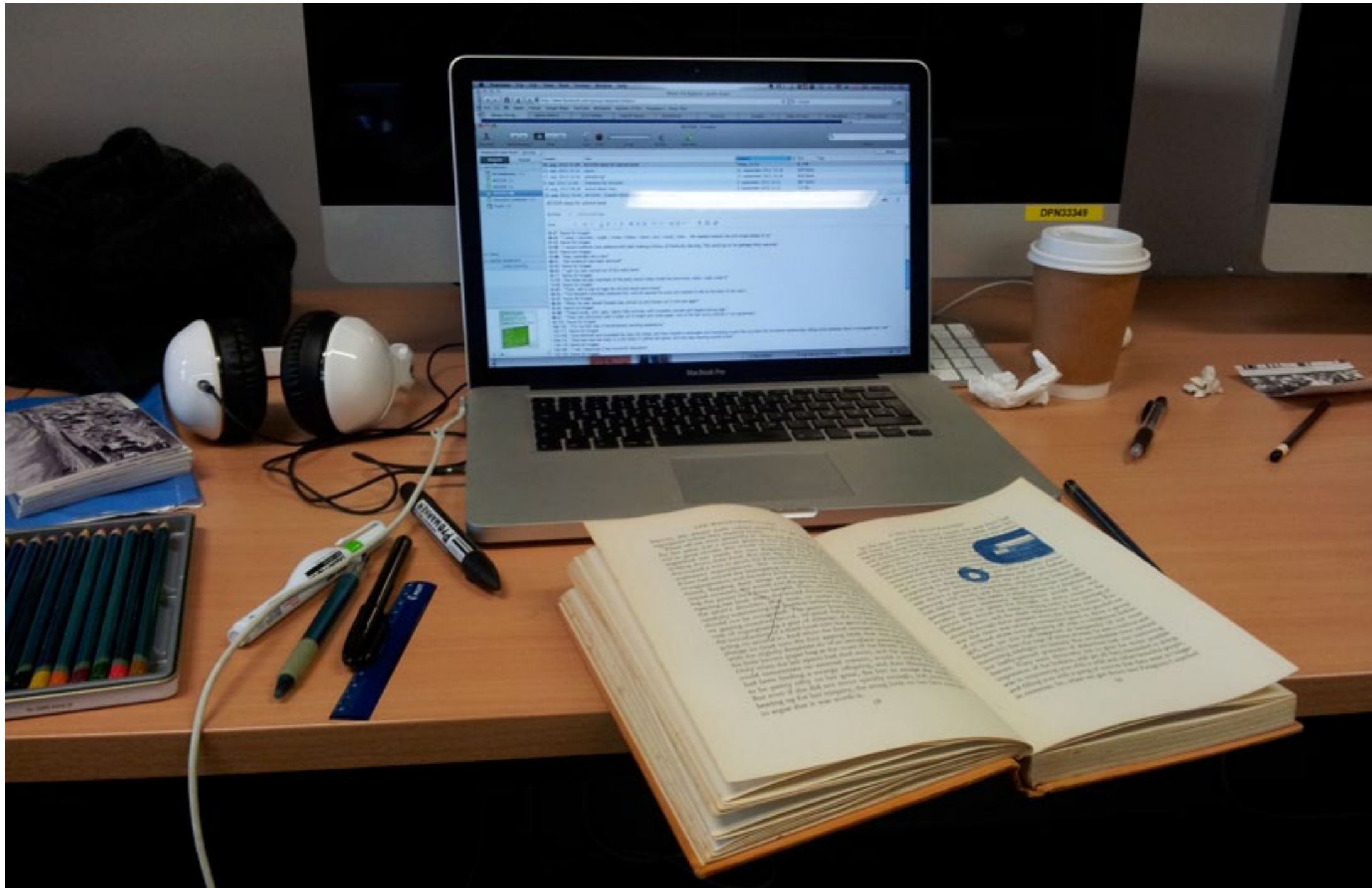


‘WhisperLand’ - “The world in the eyes of a madman”

Roy Halvor Frimanslund



~~at the moment we were heading to~~

17

THE WHISPERING LAND

So, at four o'clock that afternoon we collected the somewhat reluctant tapir and drove round to Marie's house, purchasing

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night he had eaten half Mama's begonias. I've got him locked in the coal cellar, and Mama's upstairs having a headache. I think you had better come round and bring a new leash."



THE CUSTOMS OF THE COUNTRY

Cursing animals in general and dogs in particular, I leapt into a taxi and fled round to Marie's, pausing on the way to buy fourteen pots of the finest Begonias I could procure. I found Clardine, covered with sweat, meditatively chewing a bone. I demanded of him, put on his nose and a large back (strong enough, one would have thought, to hold a dinner) wrote a note of apology to Mr. Rodriguez, and left, Clardine having promised to get in touch immediately should anything further transpire. The next morning the rang me

"Good morning."

"Good morning," I said, "all right?"

"No, no, no, do not worry," he's done it again. I have no more of the bone, but I will get you a new one. I think I will have to leave it to you, you know."

"Thank you," I growled, "what with the Adams and the Clardine, it's enough to drive one to drink. I'll come round and bring a chain."

Once more I arrived at the Rodriguez establishment, only to find that the chain would have been used to anchor the Queen Mary, and hearing another horridous border in pain. Clardine was enchanted with the chain. He found it tasted very nice if sucked loudly, and better still, found it a loud and tuneful melody if he jerked his head up and down, a noise that suggested there was some "howl" from the past work in the Rodriguez garden. I left hurriedly before Mrs. Rodriguez came down to ascertain the cause of the noise. Marie phoned me the following

"Good morning."

"Good morning," I said, with a strong premonition of what was going to turn out to be anything but a good morning.

THE WHISPERING LAND

one point we passed through two villages, within a few miles of each other, one called "The Dead Christian" and the other "The Rich Indian." Marie's explanation of this strange nomenclature was that the Indian was rich because he killed the Christian, and had stolen all his money, but attractive though this story was, I felt it could not be the right one.

For two days we sped through the typical landscape of the Pampa, flat golden grassland in which the cattle grazed knee-deep; occasional clumps of eucalyptus trees, with their bleached and peeling trunks like leprous limbs; small, neat *estancias*, gleaming white in the shade of huge, carunculated *ombú* trees, that stood massively and grimly on their enormous squat trunks. In places the neat fences that lined the road were almost obliterated under a thick cloak of convolvulus, hung with electric-blue flowers the size of saucers, and every third or



through the cobbled streets of Carmen de Patagones, lit by

THE WHISPERING LAND

pale, trembling street-lights. It was two o'clock in the morning, and every house was blank-faced and tightly shuttered. Our chances of finding anyone who could direct us to a hostelry were remote, and we certainly needed direction, for each house looked exactly like the ones on each side of it, and there was no indication as to whether it was a hotel or a private habitation. We stopped in the main square of the town and were arguing tiredly and irritably over this problem when suddenly under one of the street-lights, appeared an angel in the shape of a tall, slim policeman clad in immaculate uniform, his belt and boots gleaming. He saluted smartly, bowed to the female members of the party, and with old-world courtesy directed us up some side-roads to where he said we should find an hotel. We came to a great gloomy house, heavily shuttered, with a massive front door that would have done justice to a cathedral. We beat a sharp tattoo on its weather-beaten surface and waited restlessly patiently. Ten minutes later there was still no response from the inhabitants, and so Dicky, in desperation, launched himself on the door that would, if it had succeeded, have opened on the dead. But as he lashed out at the door it swung mysteriously open under his assault, and displayed a long, dimly-lit passage with doors along each side, and a marble staircase leading to the upper floors. Dead tired and extremely hungry, we were in no mood to consider other people's property, so we rushed into the echoing hall like an invading army. We stood there and shouted "¡Hola!" until the hotel rang with our shouts, but there was no response.

"I think, Gerry, that sometime they are all deceased," said Dicky gravely.

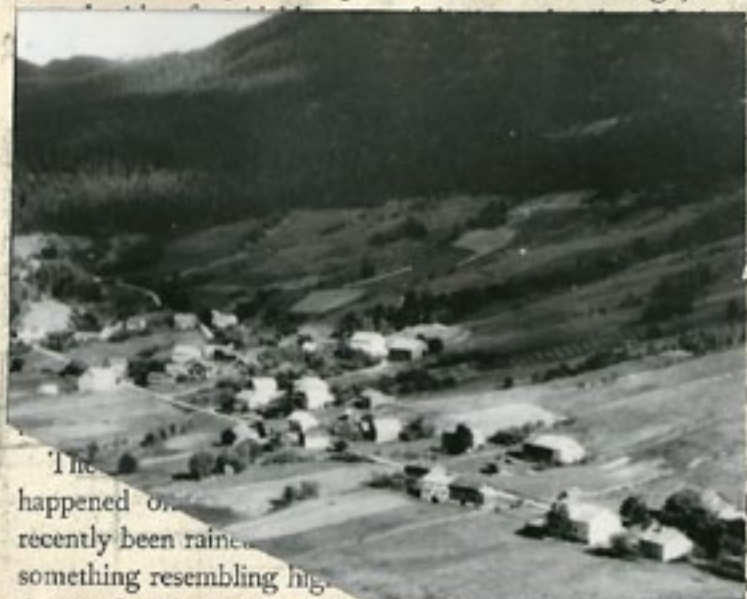
"Well, if they are I suggest we spread out and find ourselves some beds," I said.

So we climbed the marble staircase and found ourselves

THE WHISPERING LAND

and so we left and sped down a hill and across the wide iron bridge that spanned the rusty red waters of the Rio Negro. We rattled across the bridge from the Province of Buenos Aires to the Province of Chubut, and by that simple action of crossing a river we entered a different world.

Gone were the lush green plains of the Pampa, and in their place was an arid waste stretching away as far as the eye could see on each side of the dusty road, a uniform pelt of grey-green scrub composed of plants about three feet high, each



The
happened on
recently been rained
something resembling high
driving for a long time, suddenly nodded off behind the wheel, and before anyone could do anything sensible, both Land-Rover and trailer had skidded violently into the churned-up mud at the side of the road, and settled there snugly, wheels spinning like mad. Reluctantly we got out into the bitter chill of the evening wind, and in the dim sunset light set to work to unhitch the trailer and then push it and the Land-Rover separ-

THE WHISPERING LAND

ately out of the mud. Then, our feet and hands frozen, the five of us crouched in the shelter of the Land-Rover and watched the sunset, passing from hand to hand a bottle of Scotch which I had been keeping for just such an emergency.

On every side of us the scrubland stretched away, dark and flat, so that you got the impression of being in the centre of a gigantic plate. The sky had become suffused with green as the sun sank, and then, unexpectedly, turned to a very pale powder-blue. A tattered mass of clouds on the western horizon suddenly turned black, edged delicately with flame-red, and resembled a great armada of Spanish galleons making a fierce dash for shore. The sky behind them turned black silhouette by the light of the plate that then came on. As the sun sank lower and lower the black of the clouds became flat and mottled with grey, and the sky behind them became suffused with green, blue and pale red. Suddenly our fleet of galleons disappeared, and in its place was a perfect archipelago of islands strung out across the sky in what appeared to be a placid, sunset-coloured sea. The illusion was perfect; you could pick out the tiny white rimmed towers of the rocky, indented shoreline, the occasional long white beach, the dangerous shoal of rocks formed by a wind-swept island, the entrance to a safe anchorage; the curiously shaped mountain island covered with a tattered pelt of evening dark forest. We sat there, the whisky warming our bodies, watching entranced the geography of this archipelago unfold. We each of us chose an island which appealed to us, on which we would like to spend a holiday, and stipulated what the hotel on each of our islands would have to provide in the way of civilised amenities.

"A very, very big bath, and very deep," said Marie.

"No, a nice hot shower and a comfortable chair," said Sophie.

THE WHISPERING LAND

"Just a bed," said Jacqui, "a large feather bed."

"A bar that serves real ice with its drinks," I said dreamily.

Dicky was silent for a moment. Then he glanced down at his feet, thickly encrusted with rapidly drying mud.

"I must have a man to clean my feet," he said firmly.

"Well, I doubt whether we'll get any of that at Descado," I said gloomily, "but we'd better press on."

When we drove into Descado at ten o'clock the next morning, it became immediately obvious that we could not expect any such luxuries as feather beds, ice in the drinks, or even a man to clean our feet. It was the most extraordinarily dead-looking town I had ever been in. It resembled the set for a rather bad Hollywood cowboy film, and gave the impression that its inhabitants (two thousand, according to the guide-book) had suddenly picked up and left it alone to face the biting winds and scorching sun. The empty, rutted streets between the blank-faced houses were occasionally stirred by the wind, which produced half-hearted dust devils, that swirled up for a moment and then collapsed tiredly to the ground. As we drove slowly into what we imagined to be the centre of the town, we saw only a dog trotting briskly about his affairs, and a child, crouched in the middle of a road, absorbed in some mysterious game of childhood. Then, swinging the Land Rover round a corner, we were startled to see a man on horseback, clopping slowly along the road with the subdued air of one who is the sole survivor of a catastrophe. He pulled up and greeted us politely, but without interest, when we stopped, and directed us to the only two hotels in the place. As these turned out to be opposite each other and both equally unprepossessing from the outside, we chose one by tossing a coin and made our way inside.

In the bar we found the proprietor, who, with the air of one

THE WHISPERING LAND

who had just suffered a terrible bereavement, reluctantly admitted that he had accommodation, and led us through dim passages to three small, grubby rooms. Dicky, his deer-stalker on the back of his head, stood in the centre of his room, pulling off his white gloves, surveying the sagging bed and its grey linen with a cat-like fastidiousness.

"You know what, Gerry?" he said with conviction. "This



"Not very convivial, is it?"

"It is so old . . . it has an air of old," he said staring about him. "You know, Gerry, I bet it is so old that even the flies have beards."

Then the door opened suddenly, a blast of cold air rushed into the bar, the old men looked up in a flat-eyed, reptilian

THE WHISPERING LAND

"Señor Huichi has agreed that you shall use his *estancia*," said Gini, "and he is going to accompany you himself, so as to show you the best places for penguins."

"That is very kind of Señor Huichi . . . we are most grateful," I said. "Could we leave tomorrow afternoon, after I have seen my friend off on the plane?"

"*Si, si, como no?*" said Huichi when this had been translated to him. So we arranged to meet him on the morrow, after an early lunch, when we had seen Dicky off on the plane that was to take him to Buenos Aires.

So, that evening we sat in the depressing bar of our hotel, sipping our drinks and contemplating the forlorn fact that the next day Dicky would be leaving us. He had been a charming and amusing companion, who had put up with discomfort without complaint, and had enlivened our flagging spirits throughout the trip with jokes, fantastically phrased remarks, and lilting Argentine songs. We were going to miss him, and he was equally depressed at the thought of leaving us just when the trip was starting to get interesting. In a daring fit of *jeu de vivre* the hotel proprietor had switched on a small radio, strategically placed on a shelf between two bottles of brandy. This now blared out a prolonged and mournful tango of the more cacophonous sort. We listened to it in silence until the last despairing howls had died away.

"What is the translation of that jolly little piece?" I asked Marie.

"It is a man who has discovered that his wife has T.B.," she explained. "He has lost his job and his children are starving. His wife is dying. He is very sad, and he asks the meaning of life."

The radio launched itself into another wailing air that sounded almost identical with the first. When it had ended I raised my eyebrows inquiringly at Marie.

THE WHISPERING LAND

"That is a man who has just discovered that his wife is unfailingly faithful."

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that rapidly grew bigger and bigger. The two men in animal coats now came into their own. With shrill cries they ran out on to the airstrip and proceeded to drive away the three ponies,

THE WHISPERING LAND

rather carelessly. They had blunt, rather hare-like faces, small, neat, rabbit-shaped ears, neat forequarters with slender fore-legs. But the hindquarters were large and muscular in comparison, with powerful hind-legs. The most attractive part of their anatomy was their eyes, which were large, dark and lustrous, with a thick fringe of eyelashes. They would lie on the gravel, sunning themselves, gazing aristocratically down their blunt noses at the miniature Trafalgar Square lions. They would creep up fairly close, and then suddenly their heads would pop over their eyes seductively, and with a flick of the tail would bounce into a sitting position. They would turn their heads and gaze at us for one brief moment, and then they would launch themselves at the heat-shimmered horizon in a series of gigantic bounding leaps, as if they were on springs, the black and white pattern on their behinds showing up like a retreating target.

Presently, towards evening, the sun sank lower and in its slanting rays the landscape took on new colours. The low growth of thorn scrub became purple, magenta and brown, and the areas of gravel were splashed with scarlet, rust, white and yellow. As we scrunched our way across one such multi-coloured area of gravel we noticed a black blob in the exact centre of the expanse, and driving closer to it we discovered it was a huge tortoise, heaving himself over the hot terrain with the grim determination of a glacier. We stopped and picked him up, and the reptile, horrified by such an unexpected meeting, urinated copiously. Where he could have found, in that desiccated land, sufficient moisture to produce this lavish defensive display was a mystery. However, we christened him Ethelbert, put him in the back of the Land-Rover and drove on.

Presently, in the setting sun, the landscape heaved itself up into a series of gentle undulations, and we switchbacked over

THE WHISPERING LAND

the last of these and out on to what at first looked like the level bed of an arroyo. The wind was in the hills and down the hills and down the hills, which killed off the spreading and the lee of the furrows seen since last that this little fence, and in the wooden house.

Huichi's characters did not have black hair and he had gear and car and washed, they went with them to kill a sheep and prepare an *asado* in our honour. At the bottom of the slope on which the house was built, Huichi had prepared a special *asado* ground. An *asado* needs a fierce fire, and with the biting and continuous wind that blew in Patagonia you had to be careful unless you wanted to see your entire fire suddenly lifted into the air and blown away to set fire to the tinder-dry scrub for miles around. In order to guard against this Huichi had planted, at the bottom of the hill, a great square of cypress trees. These had been allowed to grow up to a height of some twelve feet, and had then had their tops lopped off, with the result that they had grown very bushy. They had been planted so close together in the first place that now their branches entwined, and formed an almost impenetrable hedge. Then Huichi had carved a narrow passage-way into the centre of this box of cypress, and had there chopped out a room, some twenty feet



THE WHISPERING LAND

in which Jacqui and I were ensconced. Then, after a moment's meditation, I decided that if Huichi was up I ought to be up as well; in any case I knew I should have to get up in order to rout the others out. So, taking a deep breath, I threw back the bed-clothes and leapt nimbly out of bed. I have rarely regretted an action more: it was rather like coming freshly from a boiler-room and plunging into a mountain stream. With clattering teeth I put on all the clothes I could find, and hobbled out into the kitchen. Huichi smiled and nodded at me, and then, in the most understanding manner, poured two fingers of brandy into a large cup, filled it up with steaming coffee and handed it to me. Presently, glowing with heat, I took off one of my three pullovers, and took a malicious delight in making the rest of the party get out of bed.

We set off eventually, full of brandy and coffee, in the pale daffodil-yellow dawn light and headed towards the place where the penguins were to be found. Knots of blank-faced sheep scuttled across the nose of the Land Rover as we drove along, their fleeces wobbling as they ran, and at one point we passed a long, shallow dew-pond, caught in a cleft between the gentle undulation of hills, and six flamingoes were feeding at its edge, pink as eyelash buds. We drove a quarter of an hour or so, and then Huichi swung the Land-Rover off the main track and headed across country, up a gentle slope of land. As we came to the top of the rise, he turned and grinned at me.

"Ahora," he said, "*ahora los pinguinos.*"

Then we reached the top of the slope and there was the penguin colony.

Ahead of us the low, brown scrub petered out, and in its place was a great desert of sun-cracked sand. This was separated from the sea beyond by a crescent-shaped ridge of white

A SEA OF HEADWAITERS

sand-dunes, very steep and some two hundred feet high. It was in this desert area, protected from the sea wind by the encircling arm of the dunes, that the penguins had created their city. As far as the eye could see on every side the ground was pock-marked with nesting burrows, some a mere half-hearted scrape in the sand, some several feet deep. These craters made the place look like a small section of the moon's surface seen through a powerful telescope. In among these craters waddled the biggest collection of penguins I had ever seen, like a

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and bright, predatory street-petun eyes. As you approached them they would back towards their burrows, twisting their heads from side to side in a warning display, until sometimes they would be looking at you completely upside down. If you approached too close they would walk backwards into their burrows and gradually disappear, still twisting their heads

THE WHISPERING LAND

they reached the bottom of the dune in a small avalanche of fine sand, and they would get to their feet, shake themselves, and set off grimly through the scrub towards the beach. But it was the last few hundred yards of beach that seemed to make them suffer most. There was the sea, blue, glittering, lipping seductively on the shore, and to get to it they had to drag their tired bodies over the stony beach, where the pebbles scrunched and wobbled under their feet, throwing them off balance. But at last it was over, and they ran the last few feet to the edge of



and film them at a distance of about twenty feet, so we could see every detail of the feeding process very clearly. Once the parent bird reached the edge of the colony it had run the gauntlet of several thousand youngsters before it reached its

A SEA OF HEADWAITERS

own nest burrow and babies. All these youngsters were convinced that, by launching themselves at the adult bird in a sort of tackle, they could get it to regurgitate the food it was carrying. So the adult had to avoid the attacks of these fat, furry youngsters by dodging to and fro like a skin centre-forward on a football field. Generally the parent would end up at its nest burrow, still hotly pursued by two or three strange chicks, who were grimly determined to make it produce food.

When it reached home the adult would suddenly lose patience with its pursuers, and rounding on them, would proceed to beat them up in no uncertain fashion, pecking at them so viciously that large quantities of the babies' fluff would be pecked away, and then like thistledown across the colony.

Having routed the strange babies, it would then turn its attention to its own chicks, who were now attacking it in the same way as the others had done, uttering all wheezing cries of hunger and impatience. It would squat down at the entrance to the burrow and stare at it feet pensively, making motions like someone trying to stifle an acute attack of hiccups.

On seeing this the youngsters would work themselves into a frenzy of delighted anticipation, uttering their wild, wheezing cries, flapping their wings frantically, pressing themselves close to the parent bird's body, and stretching up their beaks and clattering them against the adult's. This would go on for perhaps thirty seconds, when the parent would suddenly, with

an expression of relief, regurgitate vigorously, plunging its beak so deeply into the gaping mouths of the youngsters that you felt sure it would never be able to pull it back out again. The babies, satisfied and apparently not stifled from stem to stern by the delivery of the first course, would squat down on their plump behinds and meditate for a while, and their parent would seize the opportunity to have a quick wash and brush

THE WHISPERING LAND

burrow, she always made valiant attempts to get them to



But even if she did not move quickly enough, and received a beating up for her iniquity, the smug look on her face seemed to argue that it was worth it.

A SEA OF HEADWAITERS

In the days when Darwin had visited this area there had still been the remnants of the Patagonian Indian tribes left, fighting a losing battle against extermination by the settlers and soldiers. These Indians were described as being uncouth and uncivilised and generally lacking in any quality that would qualify them for a little Christian charity. So they vanished, like so many animal species when they come into contact with the beneficial influences of civilisation, and no one apparently mourned their going. In various museums up and down Argentina you can see a few remains of their crafts (spears, arrows, and so on) and inevitably a large and rather gloomy picture purporting to depict the more unpleasant side of the Indians' character, their lechery. In every one of these pictures there was shown a group of long-haired, wild-looking Indians on prancing wild steeds, and the leader of the troupe invariably had clasped across his saddle a white woman in a diaphanous garment, whose mammary development would give any modern film star pause for thought. In every museum the picture was almost the same, varying only in the number of Indians shown, and the chest expansion of their victim. Fascinating though these pictures were, the thing that puzzled me was that there was never a companion piece to show a group of civilised white men galloping off with a voluptuous Indian girl, and yet this had happened as frequently (if not more frequently) than the rape of white women. It was a curious and interesting sidelight on history. But nevertheless these spirited but badly-painted portraits of abduction had one interesting feature. They were obviously out to give the worst possible impression of the Indians, and yet all they succeeded in doing was in impressing you with a wild and rather beautiful people, and filling you with a pang of sorrow that they were no longer in existence. So, when we got down into Patagonia I searched

THE WHISPERING LAND

ways and downwards bite, try and slash open the thick hide of your antagonist's neck. Most of the old bulls on the beach



as he burst through men thick, he would but mock at the old bull, give him a quick bite on the neck, and then undulate

Then, with a roar of rage the old bull would give chase,



THE WHISPERING LAND

door to her. The bull sat up, snorted indignantly, and then bent down and seized Oswald in his great mouth before the pup could get away. Oswald dangled there by the scruff of his neck, without movement, while the bull decided what was the best thing to be done with him. At last he decided that a little swimming lesson would do Oswald no harm, and so he flopped his way down to the sea, Oswald dangling from his mouth as limp as a glove.

I had often watched the bulls giving the pups swimming lessons, and it was a frightening sight. I felt quite sorry for Oswald. The bull padded at the edge of the surf and started to shake Oswald to and fro until one felt certain that the pup's neck was broken, and then hurled him some twenty feet out into the waves. After a prolonged submersion Oswald surfaced, flapping his flippers desperately, spluttering, and coughing, and struck out towards the shore. But the bull lumbered into the water and caught him by the neck again, long before he was in the depth, and then proceeded to hold him under the water for five or ten seconds at a time, eventually releasing his hold so that Oswald popped up like a cork, gasping for breath. After this had happened three or four times Oswald was so frightened and exhausted that he tried to attack the bull's great bulk with open mouth, uttering spluttering yarring cries. This, of course, had about as much effect as a pekinest attacking an elephant. The bull simply picked Oswald up, shook him well and flung him out to sea again, and repeated the whole process. Eventually, when it was obvious that Oswald was so exhausted that he could hardly swim, the bull took him into the shallows and let him rest for a little while, but standing guard over him so that he could not escape. When he was rested Oswald was picked up and thrown out to sea again, and the whole lesson was repeated. This went on for half an hour and would have

THE GOLDEN SWARM

gone on longer, but another bull came and picked a quarrel with Oswald's instructor, and while they were fighting it out in the shallows Oswald made his escape, scrambling back to shore as fast as he could, wet, bedraggled and thoroughly chastened.

These swimming lessons, as I say, were to be seen very frequently, and were agony to watch, for not only was the terror of the pups so piteous, but I was always convinced that the bulls might go too far and actually drown one of them.

But that and body
ons,



black with sea-water. Then, suddenly, the bull would submerge, his portly form disappearing beneath the water with a speed and grace that was startling. His blunt, snub-nosed head would appear between the bodies of his wives, and the entire picture would change. Whereas before the female's movements

For me this was a tremendously exciting experience.

It is said that at Venice, or see the Acropolis before they
it is a tradition had been to see a live elephant in
environment, and here I was, lying on the
sandwiches within five feet of one, who lay there looking
unlike a baby barrage balloon which has, unaccountably
filled with dough. With a sandwich in one hand and a
p-watch in the other I checked on his breathing, which
one of the many remarkable things about an elephant
they breathe fairly regularly some thirty times during
minutes, and then they stop breathing for a time, which varies
from five to eight minutes. Presumably this is of great use to
them when they are at sea, for they can rise to the surface to
breathe, and then sink below the water and hold their breath
for this considerable period without having to resurface and
fill their lungs. I was so carried away, lying there with
antic and fantastic animals within touching distance,
I proceeded to give the others a lecture on the elephant seal.
"It's quite extraordinary the soundness of their sleep. I
know there was one naturalist who actually went and
climbed the top of an elephant seal without waking it?"
"Acquie surveyed the colossal animal in front of me.
"Rather him than me," she said.
Apparently the females don't become sexually mature until
they are two years old. They have this little implant

THE BULBOUS BEASTS

thing as well . . . you know, where they're mated and retain
the sperm for varying lengths of time in their bodies before
allowing it to develop. Now those babies over there are this
year's brood.

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THE WHISPERING LAND

When we had returned from the south the effects of the car crash we had had soon after arrival in Argentina (in which Jacquie was the only one hurt) had begun to make themselves



plane refuelled. Plane travel has never been my favourite form of transportation (except for very small planes, where you get

twitched and mumbled her way into sleep, and then started a prolonged and interesting snore that sounded like someone rhythmically rolling small potatoes down a corrugated iron roof.

THE WHISPERING LAND

ies of air-pockets, and managed to get the basic fact across to her. She lost all interest in the story about her cousin, and waited expectantly for the next air-pocket to make its appear-



THE CUSTOMS OF THE COUNTRY

inside, obviously wondering if some other magnificent largesse from the kindly air company was concealed inside it. Then she turned a puzzled eye on me.

"What is this for?" she asked in a penetrating voice.

I explained the necessity of the paper bag. She held it aloft and examined it minutely.

"Well," she said at last, "if I wanted to get sick I should want something *much larger than that*."

The man across the gangway cast a look at her ample form and the size of the brown paper bag, and the vision conjured up by her words was obviously too much for him, for he dived precipitously for his own bag and buried his face in it.

When the plane eventually touched down my girl-friend and I were the only ones who dismounted without looking as though we had just been through a hurricane. In the foyer of the airport her son was waiting, a pleasant-faced man who was identical in shape to his mother. Uttering shrill cries they undulated towards each other and embraced with a fat-quivering crash. When they surfaced, I was introduced and commended for the care I had taken of my protégée *en route*. Then, because the driver who was to meet me was nowhere to be seen, the entire Lillipampila family (son, wife, three children and grandmother) hunted round the airport like foxhounds until they found him. They saw me to the car, embraced me, told me to be sure to look them up when I was in Salta, and stood, a solid façade of fat, beaming and waving as I drove off on my way to Calilegua, the place where I was to stay. Kindness in Argentina is apt to be overwhelming, and after having been embraced by the entire Lillipampila family I felt every bone in my body aching. I gave the driver a cigarette, lit one myself and lean back and closed my eyes. I felt I deserved a few moments' relaxation.

THE WHISPERING LAND

wind. Presently we came to a villa half-hidden in a riot of flowers and creepers, and here the car stopped. Joan Lett, who, with her husband Charles, had invited me to Calilegua, came out to meet me. She was a young woman, some twenty years of age, with a fresh, rosy complexion, and a pair of sparkling eyes. She was dressed in a simple, elegant manner, and her hair was styled in a becoming fashion. She was smiling warmly at me, and her hand was extended to help me out of the car. I took her hand and stepped out, feeling a little awkward in my new surroundings. The villa was a beautiful sight, with its white walls and red-tiled roof, and its garden filled with a variety of tropical plants and flowers. The air was warm and fragrant, and the sound of birds and insects was everywhere. I felt as if I had entered a new world, one that was both beautiful and mysterious.



tenor voice, as he came down the avenue of bamboo, and as

JOJUY

he reached the gate he paused in his song, clasped his hands in the customary manner of anyone in South America when arriving at your house, opened the gate, and joined me by the bush and the butterflies. He was a young man, five feet in height, and as slender as a fourteen-year-old boy. He had a handsome, faintly skull-like face, with dark eyes, and black hair that was cropped close to his head. He held out a hand that looked as fragile as the butterflies we were surrounded by.

"Señor Durrell?" he inquired.

"Yes," I replied, shaking his hand gently, for fear it should break off at the wrist.

"I am Luna," he said, as if this should be sufficient explanation.

"Señor Lett sent you?" I asked.

"Sí, sí," he answered, giving me a smile of great charm and sweetness.

We both stood and watched the butterflies drifting round the red blooms, while I racked my brains for the right Spanish phrases.

"*¡Qué lindo!*," said Luna, pointing at the butterflies, "*que bicho más lindo!*"

"You speak English?" I inquired, looking at him.

"No, señor," he said, "but I can understand it."

"It was lovely," I said, looking at the butterflies.

"It was lovely," he said, looking at me.

"It was lovely," he said, looking at me.

"It was lovely," he said, looking at me.

THE WHISPERING LAND

"What do you want?" she inquired.

I sighed.

"You have no soul," I complained. "I was just getting into my stride. Well, if you must know, Charles says that Luna and I can go to Oran for three days. Will you look after my animals for me?"

"But of course," she said, surprised that there should have



We had been travelling some three-quarters of an hour when

[illegible][illegible]

the water rose higher and higher and was rushing and lapping along the

THE WHISPERING LAND

yard was always neat and full of flowers. This looked like a council rubbish dump, with old broken barrels, rusty tin cans, piles of old wire-netting, bicycle wheels and other flotsam and jetsam. Our host lumbered over to a rough wooden cage in one corner which would have been small for the average rabbit. He opened the door, caught hold of a chain inside and hauled out on to the ground one of the most pathetic sights I have seen. It was a half-grown ocelot, and how it managed to fit



much, for she will probably die. I won't bargain, so you can tell this bloated illegitimate son of an inadequate whore that he can take it or leave it."

Luna translated my message, tactfully leaving out my character rendering. The man clasped his hands in horror. Surely

A CITY OF BICHOS

~~we were joking? He giggled feebly. For such a magnificent animal three hundred pesos would be a beggarly sum to pay. Surely the señor could see what a wonderful creature... and so on. But the señor had seen enough. I spat loudly and accurately into the remains of a barrel, lovingly entwined with a bicycle wheel, gave the man the dirtiest look I could achieve, turned on my heel and walked back to the road. I got into our ancient car and slammed the door with such violence that, for a moment, I thought the whole thing was going to fall to pieces.~~

I leant out of the window and roared at Luna to come on and not waste time.

~~presently, I leant out of the window and roared at Luna to come on and not waste time. We drove off in silence. Presently, when I had finished mentally working out what I would like to have done to the cat's late owner, which would not only have been painful but have made his marital state, if any, difficult in the extreme, I sighed and lit a cigarette.~~

"We must get home quickly, Luna. That animal's got to have a decent cage and some food or she's going to die," I said. "Also I shall want some sawdust."

"Sí, sí," said Luna, his dark eyes worried. "I have never seen anyone keep an animal like that. She is half dead."

"I think I can save her," I said. "At least, I think we've got a fifty-fifty chance."

~~We drove in silence along the rutted road for some way before Luna spoke.~~

"Cerry, you do not mind stopping once more, only for a minute," he inquired anxiously. "It is on our way. I hear of someone else that has a cat they might sell."



THE WHISPERING LAND

"Well, I hope you say nothing like that tonight," said Luna, his eyes gleaming.

"Why? What's happening tonight?"

"Because we are leaving tomorrow for Calilegua, my friends have made an *asado* in your honour, Gerry. They will play and sing only very old Argentine folk-songs, so that you may rec-



and asked Luna's some organised. of bare whispering wooden glow circle of out fifty of them almost under the asp and -bottles an-hour Luna and I were thoroughly in the party spirit, full of good food, warmed with red wine. Then these gay, pleasant young people gathered round while I got the recorder ready, watching with absorbed attention the mysteries of threading tape and getting levels. When, at last, I told them I was ready, guitars, drums and flutes appeared as if by magic, and the entire crowd burst into song. They sang and sang, and each time they came

A CITY OF SCHOOLS

the end of the summer when the... they would... something... would be... there must... then... the sole reason... was... and... moving... I... a... that I... they danced the

delightful handkerchief dance with its pleasant lilting tune... they danced... they called by that name in Europe was a member of the same family. Then, shouting with laughter because my nose had run out and I was in despair, they rushed me to the table, plating me with meat and wine, and sitting round me sang more sweetly than ever. These, I say again, were mostly teenagers, revelling in the old and beautiful songs of their country, and the old and beautiful dances, their faces flushed with delight at my delight, honouring a stranger they had never seen before and would probably never see again.

By now they had reached the peak. Slowly they started to relax, the songs getting softer and softer, more and more plaintive, until we all reached the moment when we knew the party was over, and that to continue it longer would be a mistake. They had sung themselves from the heavens back to earth, like a flock of descending larks. Flushed, bright-eyed, happy, our young hosts insisted that we travelled back to Dean with them in the big open back of the lorry in which they had come. We piled in, our tightly-packed bodies creating

suddenly flattened out, and we rode into a flat, fairly clear area of forest. Here we found that our hunters had already mounted and unsaddled the horses, while one of them had gathered dry brushwood and lighted a fire. We dismounted quickly, unsaddled our horses and then, using our saddles and the woolly sheepskin saddle-cloth, called a *recado*, as back-rests we relaxed round the fire for ten minutes, while the hunters dragged out some of the unsavoury-looking meat from the sacks and set it to roast on wooden spits.

Instantly, feeling better, and as there was nothing to do, I decided to have a walk round the immediate area of our camp. Very soon the ground beneath the hunters were lost among the leaves as I ducked and twisted my way through the tangled, sunset-lit undergrowth. Overhead an occasional humming-bird flipped and purred in front of a flower for a last-night drink, and small birds flapped from tree to tree, yapping like puppies, rattling me with heads on one side, wheezing like rusty hinges. But it was not the birds that interested me so much as the extraordinary variety of fungi that I saw around me. I have never in any part of the world seen such a variety of mushrooms and toadstools littering the forest floor, the fallen tree-trunks, and the trees themselves in all colours, from wine-red to black, from yellow to green in a fantastic variety of shapes. I walked slowly for about fifteen minutes in the forest, and in that time I must have covered an area of about an acre. Yet in that short time, and in such a limited space, I found with twenty-five different species of fungi. Some were shaped like goblets of Venetian glass on delicate stems, others were fluted like so that they were like little carved ivory tables in snow-white; others were like great, smooth blobs of tar or lava, black and hard,

VAMPIRES AND WINE

spreading over the rotting logs, and others appeared to have been carved out of polished chocolate, branched and twisted like clumps of miniature stag's antlers. Others stood in rows, like red or yellow or brown buttons on the shirt-fronts of the fallen

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on my poncho (that invaluable garment like a blanket with a hole in the middle) wrapped myself tightly in it—with one hand free to accept the wine bottle as it drifted round the circle—rolled my sheepskin *recado* into a warm, comfortable pillow





and influential friends? Don't you find Argentina, to say the least, a little dull?"

He looked at me and laughed.

"Sure, I really enjoyed it, but when I have been away from you for a long time, I find it hard to get used to. It was wonderful while it lasted."

"I will have enough left over," he said, "to buy a few more of my dear old day when my children are grown up. What more do I want?"

I pondered this for a moment, with my hand on my chin, smiling.

"Then you like your job here," I said, "managing the animals?"

"But, of course," he said. "It is much better than the job I had when I first came to Argentina."

"What was that?" I inquired curiously.

"Castrating bulls in Cordoba," he said chuckling.

I walked down to join Helmut in the car, feeling very thoughtful. It seemed that I had been privileged to spend the last two years with a very unusual human being, a truly happy man, and one without bitterness.

By now my collection of creatures had grown to such an extent that it was a whole-time job looking after it.

Could I go on for three or four years at a time and leave poor Edna to cherish my creatures. Also I was busy building cages for those same animals which, up until now, had either been at complete liberty, or spent their lives in a cage, but on leashes. I had originally intended to fly my collection back to Buenos Aires, but the air freight estimate, when it arrived, looked as if it had been worked out by the Argentine Royal Air Force.

There was nothing for it. I would have to go by train a two-day and three-night journey, but I did not refuse, for there was no alternative. Charles arranged the whole thing for me.

THE WHISPERING LAND

The animals, as I have said, were now in a huge shed in the Museum grounds which had no heating. While this did not

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to ask if

I could introduce a peccary as well into her beautifully appointed flat. David had now returned at the double from the



Anything else we can do," said David hopefully, for, like me, he had grown tremendously fond of the little

coldest of all the little
let's take a walk to the
house. We sat on the
through the rain, listening
we arrived at the house
stairs with a light, rushed
for the supply of food
and the food was
laid the food on a table
and, sitting down, we
I sat on the electric fire
windows that would have
strengthened in a space
hooded and had large
I said it was almost
necessary to go, and for
to it. Then, I sat down
at and watched her.