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Stories by Prize Winners in \$2000. Fishing Contest

NOVEMBER 1911

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FIELD AND STREAM

OFFICIAL ORGAN of the CAMP FIRE CLUB OF AMERICA



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by John A. Gianini

THE CARE AND USE OF THE RIFLE,

by Sergt. Leushner

MOOSE HUNTING IN NEW BRUNSWICK,

by Douglas W. Clinch

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by Aloysius Coll

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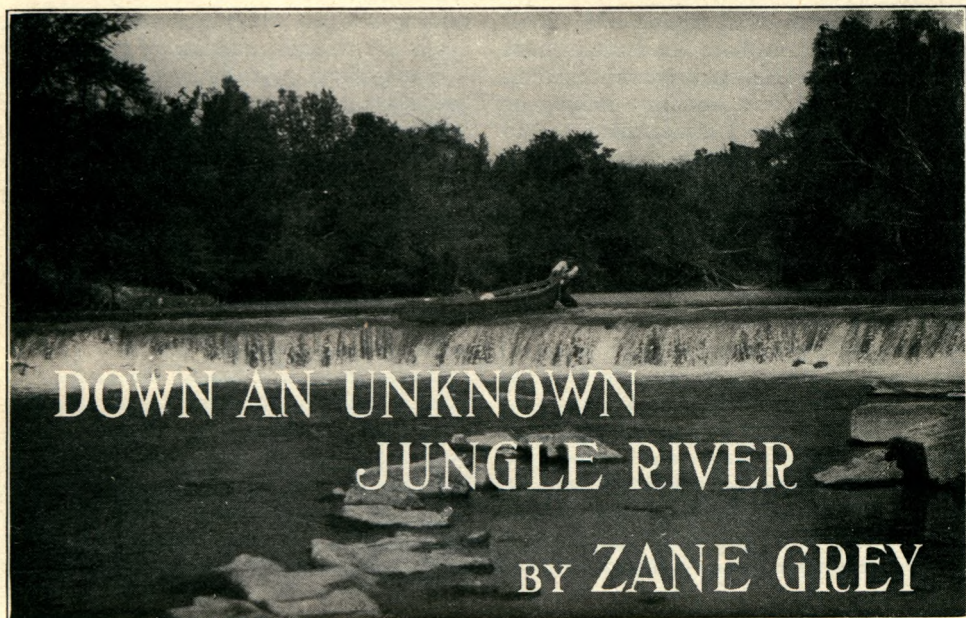
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A thrilling series of adventures with jaguars, wild boars, alligators and tropical snakes, encountered while exploring an unmapped river flowing down through the wildest jungles of Mexico.

PART IX

CROCODILES

THAT night my dreams were not pleasant. I awoke from one in a fright and had no small task to persuade myself that half of my anatomy had not been chewed off by huge crawling black things.

It must have been late in the night, for the moon was low, and I was falling asleep again when the clink of tin pans made me sit up with a start. Some animal was prowling about camp. I peered into the moonlight shadows, but could make out no unfamiliar object. Still I was not satisfied, so I awoke Pepe and told him to get up and help me chase away the night marauders.

Certainly it was not my intention to let Pepe get out ahead of me, and to take any possible risks; nevertheless I was tired and slow, and Pepe rolled out of the tent before I had started.

"*Santa Maria!*" he shrieked.

I fumbled under my pillow for a gun. George raised up so quickly that he

bumped my head, making me see a million stars.

From outside came a sliddery, rustling noise, then another yell that was deadened by a sounding splash. I leaped out with my gun, George at my elbow. Pepe stood just back of the tent, his arms upraised, and he appeared stunned. The water near the bank was boiling and bubbling; waves were dashing on the shore, and ripples spreading in a circle.

"Alligator!" I exclaimed, before Pepe had time to speak.

"Si, si, Señor," replied he, and his big hands trembled. Then he said that when he stepped out of the tent the alligator was right in camp, not ten feet from where we lay. He also said that these brutes were man-eaters, and that he would watch the rest of the night. I thought him, like all the natives, inclined to exaggerate; however, I made no objection to his holding watch. Nothing further happened to disturb our rest.

In the morning when I got up I viewed my body with curiosity. The ticks and the cigarettes had left me a beautifully

tattooed specimen of aborigine. My body, especially my arms, bore hundreds of little reddish scars—bites and burns together. There was not, however, any itching or irritation, for which I made sure I had to thank Pepe's skill and the *canya*.

George did not get up when I called him. Thinking his sleep might have been broken, I let him alone a while longer, but when breakfast was smoking I gave him a prod. He rolled over, looking haggard and glum.

"I'm sick," he said.

My cheerfulness left me, for I knew what sickness or injury did to a camping trip. George complained of aching bones, headache, and cramps, and showed a tongue with a yellow coating. I said he had eaten too much fresh meat, but Pepe, after seeing George vomit called it a name that sounded like "*Colenturus*."

"What's that?" I inquired.

"Tropic fever," replied George. "I've had it before."

For a while he was a very sick boy. I had a little medicine case, and from it I administered what I thought was best, and he grew easier presently and went to sleep. Then I dispatched Pepe to the bamboo swale to get my coat, while I sat down to deliberate on the situation.

Whatever way I viewed it, I always came back to the same thing—we must get out of the jungle, and as we could not go back, we must go on down the river and trust to luck. That was a bad enough proposition without being hampered by a sick boy. It was then I had a subtle change of feeling; a shade of gloom seemed to pervade my spirit.

Pepe returned with my coat, and also a choice collection of ticks. He reported big jaguar tracks around the remains of the deer carcass I had left in the swale. If George had not required my attention I would have had another watch in the twilight. But I stayed in camp and had the satisfaction of seeing him very much better by bed-time. I forbade him and Pepe, too, to drink any more unboiled water. In the morning George was well enough to walk; however, he appeared weak and shaky. I decided to break camp immediately.

By nine o'clock we were packed, and

turning into the shady channel, soon were out in the sunlight, and saying good-bye to Cypress Island. At the moment I did not feel sorry to go, yet I knew that feeling would come to me bye and bye, and that Cypress Island would take its place in my memory as one more haunting, calling wild place.

We turned a curve to run under a rocky bluff from which came a muffled roar of rapids. A long projecting point of rock extended across the river, allowing the water to rush through only at a narrow mill-race channel close to the shore. It was a ticklish obstacle to get around. There was no possibility of lifting the boat over the bridge of rock, and the alternative was shooting the channel.

We got out upon the rocks, only to find that drifting the boat round the sharp point was out of the question, owing to a dangerously swift current. I tried the depth of the water—about four feet. Then I dragged the boat back a little distance and stepped into the river.

"Look! Look!" cried Pepe, pointing to the bank.

About ten yards away was a bare shelf of mud, glistening with water, and showing the deep tracks of an alligator. It was a slide and manifestly had just been vacated. The alligator tracks resembled the imprint of a giant's hand.

"Come out," yelled George, and Pepe jabbered to his saints.

"We've got to go down this river," I replied, and I kept on wading till I got the boat in the current. I was frightened, of course, but I kept on despite that. The boat lurched into the channel, stern first, and I leaped up on the bow. We shot down with the speed of a toboggan, and the boat whirled before I could scramble to the oars. What was worse, an overhanging tree with dead snags left scarce room to pass beneath. I ducked to prevent being swept overboard, and one of the snags that brushed and scraped me ran under my belt and lifted me into the air. I grasped at the first thing I could lay hands on, which happened to be a box, but I could not hold to it because the boat threatened to go on, leaving me kicking in mid air, holding up a box of potatoes. I clutched a gunwale, only to see the water

swell dangerously over the edge. In angry impotence I loosened my hold. Then the snag broke, just in the nick of time, for in a second more the boat would have swept away from me. I fell across the bow, held on, and soon to my satisfaction drifted from under the threshing branches, where I got to the oars. Pepe and George walked round the ledge, and were all smiles when they reached me.

"Boys, it wasn't funny," I declared soberly.

"I said it was coming to us," replied George, with a hint of his old humor.

There were rapids below, which I went at in the way men face obstacles in the wilderness, when the dominant and controlling thought is to get out. More than one high wave curled spitefully round Pepe's broad shoulders. We came to a fall where the river dropped a few feet straight down. As usual in such places, I sent the boys around to meet me below. George made a detour and Pepe jumped right off the ledge into a foot or more of water.

Used as I was becoming to Pepe's wild yell, the one he now pealed out sent a shiver over me. Before looking, I snatched my rifle from the boat, then leaped upon the ledge of rock.

Pepe appeared to be sailing out into the pool. But his feet were not moving. I had only an instant, but in that I saw under Pepe a long black swimming shape leaving a wake in the water. He had stepped upon an alligator. Suddenly he leaped to a dry stone, and the energy of his leap carried him into the river beyond. Like a flash he was out again, spouting water. I shot a magazine of shells at the alligator. He made a thunderous surge, churning up a slimy foam, then vanished in a pool.

"I guess it's alligator day," I said, changing the clip in my rifle. "I'll bet I made a hole in that one. Look out below, boys."

I shoved the boat over the ledge in line with Pepe, and it floated to him, while I picked my way around the rocky shore. We piled aboard again and proceeded on our journey. I cautioned the boys to avoid wading unless it was impossible, in which case to use care where they stepped.

Pepe pointed now and then to huge bubbles breaking on the surface of the water, with the information that they were made by alligators.

From then on my hands were full. We struck swift water, where rapid after rapid, fall on fall, took us down hill at a rate that was grim gratification to me. Where the current was not rough, it yet had a five- or six-mile speed, and as we had no portages, and pounded through the corrugated rapids of big waves, we made by far the best time of the voyage. The hot hours passed, cool for us because we were always wet; the sun sank behind a bald hill; the wind ceased to whip the streamers of moss; and at last, in a gathering twilight, we halted at a wide, flat rock to make camp.

"Forty miles, if we made an inch!" I declared, and both the boys said more.

We built a fire, cooked our supper, and then weary and silent, rolled into our blankets. Next morning the mists had not lifted from the river when we shoved off, determined to beat the record of yesterday. Difficulties beset us from the start: the highest waterfall of our trip, a leak in the boat, deep, short rapids, narrows with choppy waves, and a whirlpool where we turned round and round, seemingly unable to row out. Nor did we get out till Pepe lassoed a snag and pulled us out.

About noon we came to another narrow chute brawling down into a deep, foamy pool. Again I sent the boys around and backed the boat through. Either I was tired or careless, for I drifted too close to a half-submerged rock, and, try as I might, at the last moment I could not avoid a collision. As the stern went hard at the rock I expected to break something, but was surprised at the soft thud with which we struck. It flashed into my mind that the rock was moss-covered. Quick as the thought followed a rumble under the boat, the stern heaved up, there was a great sheet-like splash, and then a blow that splintered the gunwale. The boat shunted off, affording me a good view of a very angry eight-foot alligator. I had a clear view of him at close range. Manifestly he had been sleeping on the rock when I disturbed him. It was this look at him

that enabled me to make a discovery. Instead of the wide rounded nose of the alligator he had the sharp nose and narrow jaws of the crocodile.

"Hey! George, that was a crocodile," I shouted. "These devils are not alligators at all—they're crocodiles."

"Same thing," replied George laconically.

"Well, my boy, not so you'd notice it," I added. "I'll tell you something about——"

"Say, the boat's half full of water—the gunwale's all split up," interrupted he.

We unloaded, turned out the water, broke up a box to use for repairs and mended the damaged gunwale—work that lost us more than a good hour. Once more under way, we made some interesting observances. The river ceased to stand on end in places; crocodiles slipped off of every muddy promontory, and wide trails ridged the steep clay banks.

"Cattle trails, Pepe says," remarked George. "Wild cattle roam all over the jungle along the Panuco."

It was a well-known fact that the rancheros of Tamaulipas State had no idea how many cattle they owned. I was so eager to see if Pepe had been correct that I went ashore, to find the trails were indeed those of cattle.

"Then, Pepe, we must be somewhere near the Panuco River," I said.

"*Quien sabe*," rejoined he, quietly.

When we rounded the next curve we came upon a herd of cattle. They clattered up the bank, raising a cloud of dust.

"Wilder than deer!" I exclaimed.

From that point conditions along the river changed. The banks were no longer green; the beautiful cypresses gave place to other trees, as huge, as moss-wound, but rugged and of gaunt outline; the flowers and vines and shady nooks disappeared. Everywhere wild wide-horned steers and cows plunged up the banks. Everywhere buzzards rose from grewsome feasts. The shore was lined with dead cattle, and the stench of putrifying flesh was almost unbearable. We passed cattle mired in the mud, being slowly tortured to death by flies and hunger; we passed cattle that had slipped off steep banks and could not get back, and

were bellowing dismally; and also we passed strangely acting cattle that Pepe said had gone crazy from ticks in their ears. I would have put these miserable cattle out of their misery had not George restrained me with a few words about Mexican law.

With all this I sickened, and though I drove the feeling from me it continually returned. George lay flat on the canvas, shaded with a couple of palm leaves; Pepe rowed on and on, growing more and more into a settled quiet. His quick, responsive smile was wanting now. By way of a diversion, and also in the hope of securing a skin, I began to shoot at the crocodiles. George came out of his lethargy and took up his rifle. He would have had to be ill indeed to forswear any possible shooting; and now that I had removed the bar he forgot he had fever. Every hundred yards or so we would come upon a crocodile, measuring somewhere from about six feet upward, and occasionally we would see a great yellow one, as large as a log. Seldom did we get within good range of these huge fellows, and shooting from a moving boat was not easy. The smaller ones, however, allowed us to approach quite close. George bounced many a .32 bullet off the bank, but he never hit a crocodile. I allowed him to have the shots, for the fun of it, and besides I was watching for a big one.

"George, that rifle of yours is leaded. It doesn't shoot where you aim."

When we got unusually close to a small crocodile George verified my statement by missing his game some yards. He promptly threw the worn-out rifle overboard, an act that caused Pepe much concern.

Whereupon I proceeded to try my luck. Instructing Pepe to row about in the middle of the stream, I kept my eye on one shore while George watched the other. Since my failure to kill the jaguar I had lost faith in the little automatic, and now I had a chance to find out really what it could do. I shot half a dozen small crocodiles, but they slipped off the bank before we could get ashore. This did not appear to be the fault of the rifle, for some of the reptiles were shot almost in two pieces. But I had yet to learn more about the tenacity of life of these water-brutes. Sev-



" I SLASHED THE TAUT LASSO AS THE WATER BEGAN ROARING IN "

eral held still long enough for me to shoot them through, then with a plunge they went into the water, sinking at once in a bloody foam. I knew I had shot them through, for we found large holes in the mud banks lined with bits of bloody skin and bone.

"There's one," said George, pointing. "Let's get closer, so we can grab him. He's got a good piece to go before he reaches the water."

Pepe rowed slowly along, guiding the boat a little nearer the shore. At forty feet the crocodile raised up, standing on his short legs so that all but his tail was free of the ground. He opened his huge jaws, either in astonishment or to intimidate us, I imagined, and then I shot him straight down the throat. He flopped convulsively and started to slide and roll. When he reached the water he turned over on his back with his feet sticking up, resembling a huge frog. Pepe rowed hard to the shore, just as the crocodile with one last convulsion rolled off into deeper water. I reached over, grasped his foot, and was drawing him up when a sight of cold, glassy eyes and open fanged jaws made me let go. Then he sank in water where we could not touch bottom with an oar.

"Let's get one if it takes a week," declared George. The lad might be sick, but there was nothing wrong with his spirit. "Gee! look there!" he exclaimed. "Oh, I guess it's a log. Too big!"

We had been often unable to tell the difference between a crocodile and a log of driftwood, until it was too late. In this instance a long, dirty-gray object lay upon a low bank. Despite its immense size, which certainly made the chances in favor of its being a log, I determined this time to be fooled on the right side. I had seen a dozen logs—as I thought—suddenly become animated and slip into the river.

"Hold steady, Pepe. I'll take a crack at that, just for luck."

The distance was about a hundred yards, a fine range for the little rifle. Resting on my knee, I sighted low, under the gray object, and pulled the trigger twice. There were two *spats* so close together as to be barely distinguishable. The log of driftwood leaped into life.

"It's a crocodile!" yelled George. "You hit—you hit! Gee! will you listen to that?"

"Row hard, Pepe—pull!"

He bent to the oars, and the boat flew shoreward.

The huge crocodile, opening yard-long jaws, snapped them shut with loud cracks. Then he beat the bank with his tail. It was as limber as a willow, but he seemed unable to move his central parts, his thick bulk where I had sent the two mushroom bullets. *Whack! Whack! Whack!* The sodden blows jarred pieces from the clay bank above him. Each blow was powerful enough to have stoved in the planking of a ship. All at once he lunged upward and falling over backward slid down his runway into a few inches of water, where he stuck.

"Go in above him, Pepe," I shouted. "Here!—Heavens! What a monster!"

Deliberately, at scarce twenty feet, I shot the remaining four shells into the crocodile. The bullets tore through his horny hide and spouted up blood and muddy water. George and Pepe yelled, and I kept time with them. The terrible lashing tail swung back and forth almost too swiftly for the eye to catch. A deluge of mud and water descended upon us, bespattering us, blinding us, and weighing down the boat. George and I jumped out upon the bank to escape it. There we ran to and fro in aimless excitement. I still clutched my rifle, but I had no shells for it. George was absurd enough to fling a stone into the blood-tinged cloud of muddy froth and spray that hid the thrashing leviathan. Presently the commotion subsided enough for us to see the great crocodile lying half on his back with belly all torn and bloody, and huge claw-like hands pawing the air. He was edging, slipping off into deeper water.

"He'll get away—he'll get away!" cried George. "What'll we do?"

I racked my brains, and suddenly had an inspiration.

"Pepe, get your lasso—rope him—rope him—hurry! he's slipping."

Pepe snatched up his lariat, and without waiting to coil it, cast the loop. He caught one of the flippers, hauled tight on it, just as the crocodile slipped out of

sight off the muddy ledge. George and I ran to the boat, and grasping hold of the lasso with Pepe we squared away and began to pull. Plain it was that the crocodile was not coming up so easily. We could not budge him.

"Hang on, boys!" I shouted. "It's a tug of war."

The lasso suddenly streaked out with a kind of twang. Crash! went Pepe into the bottom of the boat. I went sprawling into the mud, and George, who had the last hold, went to his knees, but valiantly clung to the slipping rope. Bounding up, I grasped it from him and wound it round the sharp nose of the bowsprit.

"Get in, hustle!" I called, falling aboard. "You're always saying it's coming to us—Here's where!"

George had hardly got into the boat when the crocodile pulled us off shore, and away we went, sailing downstream.

"Whoop! All aboard for Panuco!" yelled George.

"Now, Pepe, you don't need to row any more—we've a water-horse," I added.

But Pepe did not enter into the spirit of the occasion. He kept calling on the Saints and crying: "*Mucha malo*." George and I, however, were hilarious. We had not yet had experience enough to know crocodiles.

Faster and faster we went. The water began to surge away from the bow and leave a gurgling wake behind the stern.

Soon we reached the middle of the river where the water was deepest, and the lasso went almost straight down.

I felt the stern of the boat gradually lifted, and then, in alarm, I saw the front end sinking in the water. The crocodile was hauling the bow under.

"Pepe—your machete—cut the lasso!" I ordered, sharply.

Wildly Pepe searched under the seat and along the gunwales. He could not find the machete.

"Cut the rope!" I thundered. "Use a knife, the axe—anything—only cut it—and cut it quick!"

Pepe could find nothing. Knife in hand I leaped over his head, sprawled headlong over the trunk, and slashed the taut lasso just as the water began to roar into the boat. The bow bobbed up as a cork that had been under. But we had shipped six inches of water.

"Row ashore, Pepe—steady there—trim the boat, George."

We beached at a hard clay bank, and rested a little before unloading to turn out the water.

"*Grande!*" observed Pepe.

"Yes, he was big," I assented.

"I wonder what's going to happen to us next," added George.

Next installment: Treed by javelin—the most exciting adventure of all; don't miss it.

(To be continued.)

