

# O U T I N G

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## HUNTING SHEEP AND ANTELOPE IN LOWER CALIFORNIA

By Charles B. Slade

THE sparsely settled wilderness comprising the peninsula of Lower California extends short of a thousand miles between the Gulf of California and the Pacific, with an average width of over one hundred miles. Scattered here and there at isolated points gold and onyx mines are being worked, and a few small cattle ranches are hidden in the interior. The necessity of having a permanent point of ingress and egress for supplies, materials, etc., to and from the mines and ranches, accounts for the presence of San Quintin, the little lost settlement by the sea.

Picture to yourself a clustered dozen of small frame houses, sheltering a population of not more than twenty-five, one hundred miles from any other civilized community; with the vast ocean before and an all but impenetrable desert-land behind—and you see San Quintin. Here we arrived after a five days' sail from Ensenada, just over the border line between Lower California and the United States.

The next day, Duarte, followed by a fat mongrel cur called Fino, appeared with the mules. He brought with him his son Marguerito and a swart Mexican from Guadalajara, called Ignacio O'Rosco whose deftness in the culinary art was demonstrated later to our entire satisfaction.

The morning passed in packing the train. There were eighteen animals in all, nine pack mules, seven saddle animals, the bell

mare, and one spare mule. Flour, rice, bacon, coffee, sugar and other provisions of all sorts, which we had brought with us, were soon stowed away. In all, nearly half a ton of supplies were distributed; an average load weighing two hundred pounds. Owing to previous experience, and with a keen, not to say pointed, recollection of sleepless nights passed on jagged rocks and amid spiny cactus beds, we came provided with two folding cots, together with four stout but light mattresses and eight heavy blankets. These awkward impedimenta tried the very soul of Duarte and tested to the utmost his skill as a packer. One mule was selected to carry these and other odds and ends which were difficult to pack, and when the bedding, kitchen utensils, etc., had been loaded upon it the beast presented an absurd appearance. The principal thing in view was a pair of wing-like ears, to which was attached a confused, misshapen mass about as wide as long, from the general appearance of which there seemed to be no particular reason why it should progress in any one direction more than another. However, a closer inspection discovered four legs and a head protruding, and a wisp of a tail, hanging from the after section of the pile like the frayed end of a rope.

And thus we set out.

The spectacle of a pack-train in action is interesting if amusing. In the lead the old bell-mare stalked along to the jangling accompaniment of a rusty cow-bell hanging

from her scrawny neck. Next in line came the ludicrous odds and ends mule. Other hump-backed, wing-eared animals followed in close order, and from a distance one might be pardoned for mistaking the train for a caravan of camels.

We laid a trail parallel to the coast for a couple of miles, then turned almost due east and rode for five miles over the level plain leading to the mountains. An hour before sundown we reached Santa Maria, where our first camp was made. The next day we pushed on to Cypress, twenty-four miles away. Our journey was mainly up hill now, and the country became wild and rugged, a succession of terraces or mesas leading to the higher ground like a rough, giant stairway. The table-like mesas are cut and slashed by deep cañons, radiating in every direction, some of the great gorges being over a thousand feet deep. The more shallow añons, with rather sloping sides, are called arroyas, and at the bottom of one of these Camp Cypress was made.

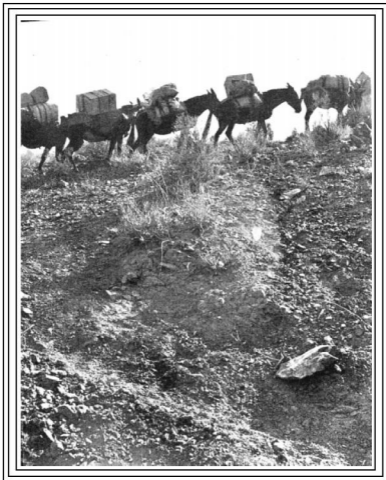
While Duarte and his men unpacked the animals, we—F. L. Lowndes, R. Crewe-Reid, G. S. Hamilton and I, who constituted our party—climbed out of the arroya upon the mesa. The big tableland, eighteen hundred feet above tide-water, afforded a grand view of the massive stairway by which we had come. Step by step the uneven ridges sank lower and lower for thirty miles, until at last the final step was lost beneath the placid waters of the mighty ocean. Looking eastward we saw an apparently impenetrable barrier or rather an interminable succession of barricades and obstructions which seemed to forbid our farther progress. Huge hills rose on every hand. Here a high ridge, there a jagged peak, lapping and overlapping, banked one upon another, until mountains and clouds commingled in an indistinct, irregular outline upon the horizon, many miles away.

The third day we pushed on to El Alamo, about thirteen miles away, and camped in the bend of a cañon on a sand drift, beside a stream of water. This, by the way, was the only running water we discovered during the trip. Our future water supply was wholly dependent upon pools and natural basins which collected the rain in the cañon beds. The little stream followed the course of the cañon floor until three miles below our camp, where it disappeared into the ground. After traversing a subterranean

passage for twenty miles, we were told that it reappeared in the bed of the same gorge and followed it to the sea. That night we were lulled to sleep by the musical discord of a thousand frogs. Save for this choir, led by the melancholy hooting of an owl and a whippoorwill's plaintive call, there was naught to disturb the immense silence of the wilderness. At daybreak I was awakened by songs of many birds. The earliest risers seemed to be the little warblers of a rich, golden yellow hue, which flitted in and out among the foliage of the alamo trees. From my couch I could see a handsome oriole with its gorgeous arrangement of rich yellow and black, making it conspicuous whenever present. Many varieties of dainty fly-catchers darted to and fro in the thick foliage. A quail was heard whistling in the distance. Overhead a dove flew noiselessly in and alighted upon a dead limb. The bright sunshine percolated through the trees, throwing latticed shadows upon the ground and the entire scene had a charm irresistible. My reverie was ended abruptly by a call from Rosco who had prepared breakfast. After the meal we broke camp.

It was a source of never-ending interest to watch the process of getting the pack-train under way. At night in making camp the packs were removed one by one and placed in a semi-circle upon the ground. The mules were then hobbled and left to forage for themselves. In the morning, the first effort was to catch the old bell-mare, and this feat apparently required the assistance of many vivid Spanish oaths. With the bell-mare tied to a nearby tree it was no difficult task to gather in the other animals. The subsequent behavior of the mules was uncertain. Sometimes they would stand like dusty brown statues, while the packs were being securely strapped to their backs. Again, they acted like a lot of small boys afflicted with the collywobbles after a raid in an apple orchard, pacing off a few yards and deliberately lying down for a period to grunt and groan in a way that would arouse sympathy in the hearts of one unfamiliar with their tricks, but which Duarte treated with a liberal application of small stones plied vigorously against their ribs.

The train moved at a gait of perhaps three miles an hour, now laboriously climbing a steep and rugged hillside, to follow along the crest of an uneven ledge jutting out



IN LINE ON THE CREST.

from some cañon side, again plunging abruptly down a seemingly vertical wall in an altogether alarming manner. The sagacity of the bell-mare was astonishing. Often only the faintest ghost, of a trail was visible, yet she picked the way with marvelous accuracy. A well-bred hound could not have followed the trail of a fox with greater certainty. Leaving the crest of a ridge we were confronted with an almost vertical

descent along the wall of a deep cañon. Without a pause the train plunged downward. On the brink we hesitated. I glanced at Crewe-Reid questioningly. He nodded with an assumed lightheartedness, and shouted "Come on!"

"Mules are sure-footed. Nice, sure-footed mules. Sure-footed mules never slip," I repeated mentally, and followed by Hamilton, went after Crewe-Reid. Lowndes,



A FAMILY CHAPEL.

who was always kind-hearted, especially to dumb beasts, slipped out of the saddle and employed his legs and arms in the descent, "to save the mule's back!" he explained when we reached the bottom. Half way down the declivity, the trail abruptly fell three feet in a sort of terrace. In a moment my mount had made the step, but with its fore legs only. The rear legs were still on the elevation and the beast was apparently going to rest standing on its head. Meanwhile I lay back, stretched along the creature's spine, parallel with its body, my feet in the stirrups sticking up besides its ears. It was a trying moment. A slip meant a fall of perhaps five hundred feet; "Sure-footed. They never slip!" I murmured prayer-like to myself, and the next instant my Faith was justified by a cautious movement beneath me, and the mule had passed the terrace and was picking its way safely along the trail.

Some ten miles had been covered when we entered a forest of cactus trees. What the conifer is to northern latitudes the cactus is to Mexico. Here we saw the biggest specimens of the one hundred varieties of the prickly vegetation. The huge pulpy trunk and limbs, covered with sharp spines, grew in many instances to the height of fifty and

sixty feet. Others were round masses of prickly, pale green vegetation lying on the ground like a porcupine rolled into a ball. The spines of some were three and four inches in length and hard and sharp as needles. The fantastic appearance of a cactus forest is difficult to express. The general impression was that of a submarine scene. Many of the trees looked like huge coral growths. Others extended tentacle-like arms in all directions. The porcupine balls resembled sea urchins resting on the ocean bed, and are found in abundance throughout the mountain country. They constitute food for the sheep, that use their big horns to knock off the outer rind with its spines, thus exposing the soft, pulpy heart which is eaten with avidity.

We covered twenty miles that day, and were glad to rest when Duarte led us to a sandy bar on the floor of an arroya amid a clump of palm trees, near which a number of alamo trees growing beside a pool of water served to name the camp, Los Álamos. We were now close to the big game country and rivalry keen among us to achieve the honor of first sighting sheep.

Early one morning, we entered the Puerta Suela (single gate) cañon, which, as its name implies, is the only gap leading into

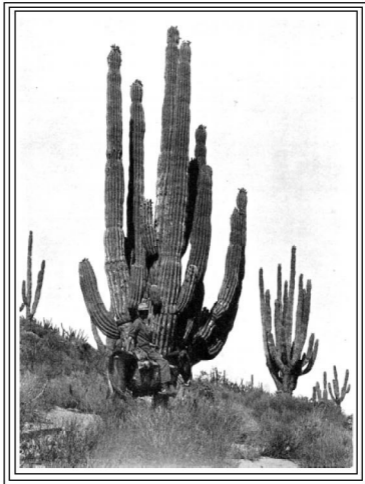
the heart of the high hills. Traversing this gap, we headed toward Matami, the loftiest peak in the range, and the very center of the big game region, and camped at La Huerte in a clump of palms beside a spring of clear, cold water—a most unusual find on the peninsula.

At dawn next day Duarte and I left camp to hunt the hills and bottoms for sheep. We found it extremely rough going for the first two miles and though there were many

tracks of sheep, none was fresh, so we kept on up and down and around the precipitous shelves projecting from the mountain sides. Four hours later, during which time we had traveled about ten to twelve miles without sighting game, a warning from Duarte brought me to a sudden halt.

"*Dos blancos, bobregas,*" said he, looking steadily toward a shelf three quarters of a mile away.

Following the direction of his gaze, I saw



ONE OF THE GIANT CACTUS WE SAW.

two sheep feeding lazily up the steep rocky sides of a ragged hill. After picking our way cautiously through a cañon bed with much difficulty for a quarter of a mile, around a promontory we saw three of the wary animals. They were feeding gracefully and unconscious of our presence, yet while we watched, they suddenly disappeared over the crest and gained a mesa beyond. We were now obliged to make a detour of a mile and a half to the leeward side of the mesa, where, from between two big boulders, I espied three fine rams not one hundred yards away. Out of breath and still shaking from the exertion, I raised my rifle. It was too good a chance to lose. A moment I hesitated, to steady my aim.

"Quick!" urged Duarte. At the sound of his voice, the ram I had covered, turned and looked straight into my eyes. Now was the time. I fired. The report echoed and re-echoed through the surrounding valleys and among the high peaks. At the same instant the three sheep bounded swiftly away over the sloping mesa. After running a hundred yards the foremost ram stumbled to its shoulders and rolled over dead. My bullet had penetrated the heart. I hurried after the others, pausing at intervals to shoot. A final dash of two hundred yards brought me to the last margin of the mesa. A wounded ram was ascending the opposite hill. A quick shot ended its life. The last one of the trio disappeared among the hills.

One of the sheep was three and the other five years old, and they were beautiful specimens, with creamy white coats instead of the dingy gray which they carry later in the season. We covered the carcasses with large flat stones to protect them from buzzards and coyotes, and returned to camp well satisfied. In the morning Marguerito and I started on mule back to bring in my kill, and on approaching the caché we discovered several old rams on the very ground where the day before we had sighted the others. They evidently saw us and were moving about uneasily. One big fellow, the leader, faced us for a moment. Immediately dismounting and uncasing my rifle, I fired at him, and in less time than it takes to write it, the entire band was lost to view among the boulders, although they soon reappeared near the top of the hill, with the same big ram in the lead. On the summit he stood with proud dignity holding aloft

the mighty horns. It was an inspiring picture and sharply outlined against the sky he made a fine target. In another moment I levelled my rifle and fired. Then followed a scene to send the warm blood to the heart of any sportsman. There, on the crest, two hundred and twenty yards above me, the old monarch faltered; swayed from side to side, limbered and fell, striking another member of the band, and the others quickly stepping aside, the dead ram rolled helplessly down among the rocks for forty yards. The other sheep were missed by a volley of shots and disappeared.

The dead ram was a king of his kind, about twelve years old. My first bullet had traversed the abdomen, without apparently inconveniencing him, the second entered the back of his neck lodging at the base of the skull, causing almost instant death. We rolled the heavy carcass to the foot of the hill and loaded it, together with two other sheep, upon the mules, which made a heavy load to carry back to camp.

Meanwhile Lowndes and Crewe-Reid had been out into the hills to the southward. Toward dark they came in with one ram and a deer, so that we now had plenty of meat in the larder. At first the flesh of the big-horns was rather tough, but after hanging a few days it became a tender morsel indeed, having a delicate flavor somewhat resembling that of young beef, and with no suggestion of domestic mutton.

We enjoyed the sport at this location for ten days, and then pushed southward to San Juan de Dios, where, at Espanosa's ranch, we left the heads and hides of our game to be picked up on our return, and then went on to an abandoned habitation known as the Stone Corral. We were now approaching the antelope country, and it was a parched and desolate region indeed. Our guides said no rain had fallen in ten years in nearby sections of the country, which we could readily believe as we had been out nearly a month and it had rained only once. Our water supply at the Corral was abominable. It was obtained from a half dried pool found in a dark cave in a cañon wall; the cave was the haunt of numerous bats, and the water in the basin was alive with myriads of insect life. But boiling made the water harmless if not palatable.

After a day of enforced inactivity, because of a strong wind which forbade venturing among the crags, I went out one morn-



OUR PACK TRAIN IN ACTION.

ing looking for antelope, and determined to bring in a pair of horns or resign all pretensions as a hunter. Following a cañon bed some three hundred yards, I ascended to a mesa five hundred feet above. From this view point the outlook was a picture of desolation. On all sides were ever-extending mesas, bare and lifeless. The horizon to the north and west was serrated by the irregular outline of the mountains in the distance. The means averaged about one mile in width and were of unequal height, separated by irregular, ragged,

one hundred and twenty yards in front. I halted at once, and they did likewise. One of the three stepped aside, apparently to get a better view of me, and presented a broadside target of which I took quick advantage. At the report the antelope fell in his tracks while the others bounded away, their black horns glistening in the sunshine and their manes floating lightly in the wind.

From the Corral we moved onward ten miles to La Tinaja, so-called because of the presence of a natural cistern of stagnant water, where we enjoyed the opportunity to



"THE DEAD RAM WAS A KING OF HIS KIND."

cliff-walled gorges. It was on these tablelands I hoped to find the object of my search. Toward noon I came to a small pool of water, a mere puddle standing in the bottom of a tinaja, as the water catch-basins are called by the Mexicans. Stooping over to drink I heard the thunder of galloping hoofs along the ground. Near at hand, under a dead juniper tree, with tracks leading from the pool, I found a yet warm bed. The click of my rifle butt against the rocks had evidently frightened the animal. Following the tracks, I suddenly caught sight of three buck antelope. They saw me at the same moment and were trotting away

use soap and towels. Thence we trailed due south twenty-five miles to the plains of St. Augustine within twenty miles of the coast and completed thirty-one days of travel and an estimated two hundred and eight miles since leaving San Quintin.

The return journey was begun by striking west as the crow flies to San Fernando, twenty-two miles, then northwest twenty-one miles to San Juan de Dios, thus making an irregular parallelogram. From thence, we retraced our outward bound trail, reaching San Quintin on the forty-first day of the trip, having covered two hundred and ninety-seven miles in all.