

THE TWO ANACONDAS.

Before leaving the subject of pythons, a few words must be said about the most terrible and dangerous of all pythons—the huge, dark, and almost black anacondas that inhabit the dense forests of central and south tropical America. These are far more common than is generally supposed by those who are not familiar with those regions; and but for the great difficulties which have been mentioned as to taking these monsters alive, there is no reason why our Zoological Gardens should not possess some half a dozen specimens. These American Boas are greatly dreaded by the natives, and not without reason. They haunt the pools where cattle drink, or swim, when watching for prey, in the branches of the forest. Their boling is well supported by their prodigious strength. There are not infrequently instances of specimens having been killed which had attained a length of more than thirty feet, and which in some parts were as thick round as the body of a child. The endless tales which are related of their daring in killing men, women and children, of course, partake somewhat of the marvellous; but there is too much reason to believe that the stories, when stripped of all native exaggeration, contain the terrible basis of truth that many human beings have been killed by these monsters. One peculiar habit of the anaconda is that it is said to be always found hunting in couples. This fact is undoubtedly deposited by all the natives and all the Europeans who have had any opportunity of learning anything about the habits of these gigantic serpents. Even Waterton, one of the most careful of natural historians, and one most thoroughly versed in the deadly ophiology of these regions, admit that when the male anaconda is seen the female is seldom far distant, and vice versa.

A terrible tale has been told me in connection with these great serpents. For its authenticity I do not vouch myself, but it certainly is, if not true, not only possible, but from what I know of the snakes, even perhaps probable. It was related to me by a Brazilian gentleman of high position, and in the presence of two others who had also heard the story, and were ready to vouch for its accuracy. Certainly it seems accepted in the wilder parts of Brazil as a tradition of frontier life. The story is simply this, and as it occurred more than forty years ago, there can be no reason for concealing names which were not concealed from me. Mr. Barclay, an English gentleman who had made a comfortable independence in mining speculations, determined, after some years' residence, to settle in the Brazils. With this end in view, he bought and formed a large tract of almost unexplored land on the extreme north-west frontier, and pursued his clearing and farming with great success and tolerable profit, and what is more, with a certain prospect of much greater profit to come in time. He gave himself, after a time, a short leave of absence, and came back to Scotland, where he married his cousin, with whom he again returned to his plantation in Brazil. During his absence, and according to his instructions, a neat, light wooden residence—such as are built on all plantations—had been erected in the midst of the clearing, with a lofty verandah round it to keep the rooms cool, and French windows leading straight from the apartments to the ground. Still, young Mrs. Barclay, though surrounded with every comfort, was very far from being quite happy, for she was constitutionally in terror of the repulsive and tremendous-looking insects and reptiles with which all the wilder parts of Brazil literally abound. She could not go to a drawer without finding in it a centipede as large as a little eel, or open a cupboard without meeting with a spider almost as large as a small crab. Lizards of beautiful colors, but repulsive appearance, had to be swept out of the bedroom at night. These are harmless enough, but there are few people who would care to wake up and find them crawling over their faces, or to hear their long nails clattering along the wooden floor. The climate, too, told on Mrs. Barclay's health. The reptiles by day and mosquitoes by night made her unusually susceptible of irritation and alarm. But of all her horrors, the greatest she entertained was that against snakes and serpents of all kinds. This was ineradicable from her nature, and was, in fact, as much a part of her nature as the overwhelming antipathies some ladies feel to the sight of a rat, a spider, or a bull. Unfortunately, Mrs. Barclay lived in a part of the country which was infested with snakes; some harmless, some deadly; but woe it were harmless or deadly, the unconquerable terror she evinced was the same to all. Once a tuboia, a quick and deadly snake, was killed in her house. At another time a coral snake, the most beautiful and most quickly deadly of all the venomous reptiles God has created, was found and killed with ease upon the rough lawn, if we may dignify by such a term the short, brown, burnt up herbage which surrounded the house. At another time a small anaconda, about eleven feet long, was found in the woods near the house, and killed; and what was much worse, constant tumors were brought in that two very much larger serpents of the same class had been seen in the forest not far off. Poor Mrs. Barclay's terrors were not diminished by the exaggerated tales of her native servants, till at length they rose to such a pitch that it seemed very likely, as she often said, that she would die if a serpent came near her. Her fears got to such a height that at last she would not venture out at all, and actually kept her room. In this frame of mind, it will easily be believed that her life was a misery to herself, and not of much comfort to her wild, fear-naught husband.

Early one summer morning, the latter went to look after the progress of some rather distant clearings he was making; of course, he went on horseback, and of course he carried with him the heavy, old fashioned, double-barrelled musket, without which, in that time and in those wild regions, no planter ever stirred far abroad. Both the barrels were loaded with a heavy charge of slugs, came near enough, or, better still, to scare away or stop the charge of a jaguar or tree panther. Mr. Barclay's survey took him rather late, and it was high in the noonday heat before he returned through a short belt of

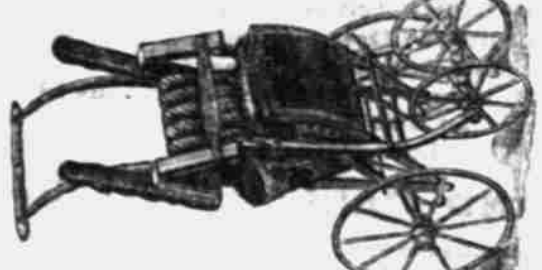
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