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of the Voyage of the “Belgica” among Newly Discovered Lands and Over an Unknown
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Excerpt

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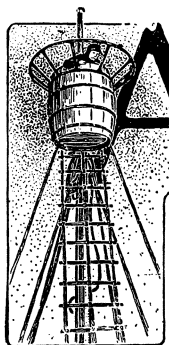
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THROUGH THE FIRST ANTARCTIC NIGHT

CHAPTER I

IN AND ABOUT RIO DE JANEIRO

RIO DE JANEIRO, October 30, 1897.



THE CROW'S NEST

At last I am on the way to the land which has been the dream of my life, — “the mysterious antarctic.” I have talked of this journey of exploration so long, have wished for it so persistently, that now, when my one foremost ambition seems on the verge of a realisation, I can hardly assure myself that I am not on the road to another of many disappointments.

In three weeks one half of the distance in an air line from New York to the south pole was traversed, and here on the lower edge of the tropics I have waited for the arrival of the ship with the company of Belgian explorers with whom the journey to the antarctic, now just begun, is to be made.

On my arrival at Rio de Janeiro the Belgian Legation looked after my comforts, and the Minister, Count van den Steen, offered me the hospitality of his home at Petropolis.

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After a fortnight of dreamy tropical life, a telegram announced the arrival of the expedition ship, the *Belgica*, in the Rio harbour. We took the early morning train and slowly descended the two thousand feet along several valleys, winding around various hills, down and down on the curious cog-wheel railroad, until we reached the head of the bay. Here an old-style side-wheel steamer carried us to Rio de Janeiro. On the pier a delegation appointed by the Belgian colony of Rio met us with a tug, in which we were carried to the *Belgica*.

There was nothing about the *Belgica* to attract unusual attention from a distance. She was rather odd in shape and colour, but Rio harbour is full of weird-looking crafts. We boarded the *Belgica* at about 11 o'clock. It was a scorching morning, and as we ascended the sea ladder a cloud of hot vapour rose above us from the moistened decks. The Captain, Lecoite, was at the gangway and greeted each visitor as the Minister introduced us. Behind him on deck stood Commandant de Gerlache, at his side the officers and scientific staff, while the crew was stationed on the port side of the quarter deck.

To me this was a moment of special interest. Here for the first time I met face to face the party of total strangers, the members of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, with whom I am to remain as companion and co-worker for a period of months, perhaps years. I was greeted in a strange tongue—French—not a word of which I understood. One after another came to me asking questions, but I could only look askance at them. After a while I

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learned that the Commandant could speak English and all of the scientific staff could speak German, so we began to exchange ideas in tongues familiar to me.

My first impression of the officers and crew was—as it is to-day—decidedly favorable. Every one seemed a picture of health, full of youthful vigour, and jolly good fellowship. The *Belgica* appeared small, but she seemed well adapted to the prospective work, and above all, she was filled brim full with good food,—such delicacies as only a Belgian could select. I am sure as we penetrate the white antarctic she will seem large enough; she will afford us a safe home, and many, very many, comforts, as comforts go in the polar regions.

The *Belgica* left Ostend, Belgium, on August 24, 1897, and reached Madeira September 13. From here, after an adjustment of the instruments and some scientific observations, lasting three days, she sailed for Rio de Janeiro; but Rio was not reached until late in the afternoon of October 22. The voyage was made against a series of adverse winds and calms, making it necessary to steam a part of the time. Excepting a few cases of seasickness the party enjoyed excellent health while crossing the tropics.

The general plan of the expedition was now for the first time outlined to me by Commandant de Gerlache. Up to the present all my communications had been by cable, and necessarily brief, but now I was able to elicit from the hardworked projector the prospective plan of our campaign. The *Belgica* will start from here, after the magnetic instruments are ad-

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justed, for Montevideo, where she will stop perhaps two days. From Montevideo we will proceed to Punta Arenas, Chile, in the Strait of Magellan.

At Punta Arenas we shall make some scientific observations and collections, stopping perhaps eight days. And then, after coaling and restocking our provision supply, we shall sail for the South Shetland Islands, thence to Grahamland, and southward along its border to the limit of navigation. If time and ice conditions will permit we shall first sail along the eastern shore of Grahamland and south into Weddel Sea. But this journey, tempting as it seems, is now rather doubtful, owing to the short time at our command. From this western terminus of Grahamland we shall try to map the coast to Alexanderland and beyond as far as possible, then we are to press southward and westward to Victorialand. Deep sea soundings and dredgings will be taken wherever the opportunity presents. Systematic, magnetic, and meteorological observations are to be made, and large zoölogical collections are expected. In a general way it is the aim of the expedition to make a thorough scientific survey of the regions traversed. The commander reserves the right to alter any or all plans to suit unexpected conditions as we meet them.

In the afternoon the Minister, Count van den Steen, took Commandant de Gerlachie and most of the scientific staff ashore to begin the first of a long series of presentations and introductions to the congenial Brazilian officials. We were first presented to the chief of customs and the Minister of marine

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affairs, from whom we derived the twofold pleasure of being warmly greeted and freed of harbour dues, custom annoyances, and other troublesome local regulations.

It was to me a source of never-ceasing interest to note the translations of the various questions asked. This portrayed clearly the Brazilian notion of a polar expedition. The ideas proved to be so tropical that I must risk a breach of etiquette and quote enough to show Brazilian versions of polar work. We were constantly asked, “Have you a smoking-room and much tobacco?” “Of course you have lots of wine and other nice drinks, but have you plenty of good things to eat? You must take some Brazilian coffee.” Others would put to us questions about our provision for pleasure, music, games, and pastimes in general, but I do not remember having been asked even once about the serious scientific work of the expedition. One broad-minded and apparently intelligent fellow, well on in the winter of life—a member of the Cabinet, asked the usual questions about wines, cigars, and personal comforts, and then, having heard of Mrs. Peary’s experience in the North, he asked if we had any women among us? On being answered with a rather sharp and quick “no!” he remarked: “Then, I don’t want to go along.”

This explains the lack of interest of South Americans in anything polar. So long as beautiful women, good wines, fine cigars, and delicate foods are not found at the south pole, Latin Americans will probably not aspire to reach it.

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The magnetic instruments were taken to the local observatory for adjustment and comparison. To do this properly required about a week, hence arrangements were made for various receptions, tours of exploration, of pleasure, and what not. The zoölogist, Mr. Racovitza, learning that he could take a fast steamer and reach Punta Arenas about a fortnight in advance of the expedition, at once made arrangements to leave us. This will afford him much additional and valuable time to make collections and observations in the immediate vicinity of the Strait of Magellan.

We began the week on Monday by the Presidential reception. The Belgian Minister, Count van den Steen, had arranged the details and according to his instructions we assembled at the office of Consul Laurys shortly after noon. From here we embarked in coaches drawn by small but handsome mules. We were hurried through narrow streets, along an endless number of low houses, plastered outside and in. The doors and windows were full of men, women and children, scantily dressed but ill at ease, all doing nothing in various ways.

In a half hour we reached the White House, an imposing and substantial building constructed from the local schist which everywhere underlies the city. Led by Count van den Steen we entered, ascended to the third floor, and were marshaled to the President's reception room with very little ceremony. The room was handsomely decorated by wall paintings, and fresco decorations probably of Italian design, while the floors were of beautiful inlaid wood,

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also of a foreign manufacture. There were no carpets, but little furniture, and the mantels were covered by artificial flowers and plants.

In a short time the President, Senor Trudente de Moreas Barros, entered. We were presented separately, after which the Minister made a short address in French to which the President replied in a few words, and then grasping our hands he offered a cheerful greeting to each member of the expedition.

The Belgian colony had long planned a feast for the expedition, and this was to be the grand event at Rio, to which we looked for real joy and lasting comfort. The time had been set for the evening of the 25th, at the Restaurant Petropolis, on Rue de Ovidor. We assembled at 7 o'clock; there were about 100 people present, representing the male members of the Colony, the officers and scientific staff of the expedition, and a few newspaper editors.

The room was large and airy; electric fans were in position, but the air was cool enough without their use. The walls were decorated with flags, and the tables with flowers and fruits. The bill of fare was Belgian—a few local additions to the very best that could be imported from Belgium. This, I am sure, is sufficient said of a very delightful collection of rare foods and good drinks. There was much enthusiastic speech-making and toasting in French, Portuguese, and Italian; presumably complimentary to Brazil, Belgium and the expedition, but I did not understand it. The spirit of hilarity, however, was in the air and, although I was a for-

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eigner among strangers whose language was unknown to me, I cannot remember having enjoyed a banquet at home better. We had all been wined and dined, separately and collectively, before and after, but the occasion which will always remain in our minds as the best treat of all is the Rio Belgian banquet.

The day following, and for the balance of the week, we visited the local places of interest, explored the city in various ways, and were received at a special meeting of the local Geographical Society. Rio de Janeiro is a city of perhaps six hundred thousand inhabitants, with about one hundred thousand foreigners. It is the metropolis of South America, but far, very far, behind Montevideo and Buenos Aires in modern improvements and in all the present arts of civilization. It is essentially a commercial city, a center from which exports are sent and imports distributed throughout Brazil and much of South America.

A great deal of money is made here, but the present money has fallen to about one eighth of its actual value. Things cannot be much longer prolonged as the present money market stands, from which it follows that various rumors of a national bankruptcy are current. A well informed resident assured me that a crisis would arrive before our return from the antarctic.

Brazil, in the infancy of its republican form of government, has very many political difficulties to settle. There is more political discussion to the square mile in Rio de Janeiro to-day than to an equal space on any other part of the globe with which I am familiar.