

Legends of the Hunt

John Seerey-Lester

Sickness, vicious insects, raging rapids, and even murder plague Roosevelt and his men on their Brazilian jungle expedition down The River of Doubt.

By early April, 1914, Theodore Roosevelt's Brazilian jungle expedition had been journeying down the River of Doubt for more than a month. The conditions they were experiencing had almost become intolerable. The ferocious biting insects had affected every member of the party and several men had come down with

fever. The men were wet, hungry, and sick, their meals reduced to nothing more than small mouthfuls of catfish, piranha, or monkey.

Discontent was steadily growing among the *comeradas* (military assistants) and native helpers, and as often happens, the discomfort was bringing out the worst in the men. On April 3 it all came to a head.



TR & TRIGUEIRO BY JOHN SEEREY-LESTER

They were paddling into a narrow, hazardous stretch of water, where the dense jungle rose like walls on each side of the river. The rapids were more ferocious and more frequent. In many instances the dense vegetation fringing the river made it difficult or impossible to land their dugouts and portage around rapids.

Of the seven canoes that had started down the river on February 27, only two remained. The others had sunk or been smashed in the rapids on the raging river. Along the way, the men had been forced to chop down trees and fashion crude dugouts, each one taking several days to complete. Then, one by one, these too had been lost.

The men were wet from head to toe most of every day. Even on land they suffered from the incessant rain. Their nights in camp were spent drying their gear and clothes, while trying to ward off insects, which had taken their toll.

The bites and stings of insects turned to sores and then, in nearly all cases, into festering wounds. Everyone was tormented by poisonous ants, biting flies and ticks, and the stings of bees and wasps. Luckily, no one had been bitten by venomous snakes, scorpions, and centipedes, though all had been seen in camp.

Led by Colonel Rondon, the expedition guide, the men had arrived in a jungle canyon where getting the canoes to safe area would be a challenge. Somehow they had to get the heavy dugouts and supplies over steep rocks alongside the rapids.

Kermit's experience with bridge-building came in useful. He engineered and helped to construct a complex series of ropes to ease the dugouts—very carefully—down the cliffs next to a waterfall about 15 yards wide.

They made camp on the stream bank that night, then next morning TR and the colonel headed down a freshly cut trail where the men carried their supplies to the canoes tied up at the foot of the rapids.

It was then that the brewing discontent came to a boiling point. At the top of the trail, unknown to TR and the colonel, one of the *comeradas* had been caught stealing food. Julio, of European descent,

had apparently been stealing for some time. His supervisor, Sgt. Paixao Paishon, had caught him in the act, pulled him to one side and chastised him. Then a scuffle had ensued.

Paishon put the incident behind him, then brought a load of supplies down the trail and put it on the bank along with his carbine near the canoes. He had said nothing of the incident to TR as he returned to get another load.

Julio then appeared carrying his own load of supplies, which he put down on the ground and then picked up Paishon's carbine and walked back up the trail, muttering to himself.

TR thought nothing of it, figuring that Julio had seen some game and was simply going off to shoot it for the pot, which would not be out of the ordinary.

After a few minutes a shot rang out in the jungle canyon. Four men, who had been making the portage, came running out from the trail shouting that Paishon was dead. Breathlessly, they told TR that Julio had shot him and had disappeared into the jungle.

TR sent a messenger to the colonel and Lyra, who had gone ahead to survey the river. George Cherrie, one of the expedition naturalists, and Kermit stayed behind to guard the canoes and supplies, while TR, with rifle in hand, and Doctor Euzebia de Oliveira, a geologist with the expedition, started up the trail. The doctor carried a revolver, and they took along a couple of *comeradas*. It was not long before they found Paishon's body, lying in a pool of blood on the trail.

They were immediately worried that Julio might return to camp and threaten the lives of the other men, all of them unarmed. The doctor and TR walked cautiously back to camp, looking right and left in case the murderer was hiding somewhere along the trail.

They finally reached the camp and were greeted by some men who had recovered the carbine. They had retraced Julio's tracks and found that in his haste to leave the scene of the crime, he had run into a tree, which had knocked the rifle out of his hands.

For TR, a former police commissioner, the incident was frustrating. What

could they do if they caught the man? He couldn't be brought to justice in the wilderness. If they captured him, it would be impossible to continue their journey with Julio in shackles.

Their main worry, as they prepared to move on, would be that Julio would be a constant threat to everyone on the expedition. The men were carrying the only food supply around, in addition to their firearms and ammunition. Everyone would have to be doubly vigilant and alert to possible danger as they proceeded down the river.

Poor Paishon was buried in a shallow grave alongside the lonesome river. A crude cross was placed at his head and the men fired a volley as a tribute to a fallen soldier.

Julio was never seen again. ■

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