

The Liar

by Jim McAulay

The cunning caudillo, Facundo Quiroga, was the leader of a band of gauchos; savage nomads who once lived off the wild cattle that roamed the vast pampas of Argentina.

One morning he found Manuel, one of his men, lying quietly on the ground. His sombrero was pulled down over his eyes and his poncho was wrapped tightly around him. He was not sleeping. Blood seeped into the sheep-skin saddle beneath his head. There was more blood at his feet. While he slept his throat had been cut and his toes had been hacked off so that he could not ride into heaven. A gaucho always rode barefooted with his stirrups between his toes, and Manuel's toes had undoubtedly been buried some distance from his body.

Life was cheap on the pampas. Men settled their differences with knives, but the coward who would slit your throat in the middle of the night was too dangerous to be allowed to remain among them.

Facundo rose up in a rage and demanded that the culprit give himself up. No one stirred. He cursed the unknown killer. Then he turned and rode off into the night.

Where had he gone, the men wondered. They waited tensely, keeping their hands near their knives. If he should not return soon with the coward's identity, there would be more blood spilled,

He rode to an ombu tree. The ombu is an evil tree. No birds nest in the ombu for at night its leaves emit a poison and a traveller who sleeps beneath *it* will be visited by the anemas en penae, undead spirits who prey upon the unwary.

He cut branches from the ombu and trimmed them carefully so that they would all be of identical length.

The impatient gauchos were preparing to solve things their own way.

Facundo galloped back into the camp and separated them. After the dust had settled he went up to each man and, looking him straight in the eye, demanded if he had killed Manuel. As each man answered in the negative, he gave him one of the branches.

"One of you is a liar," he said, "and tonight while you sleep the branch of the liar will grow longer."

That night a terrified gaucho whittled off part of his branch.

In the morning they hanged him from an ombu.

