

STARS OF ROMANCE

By Henry Beston

ALL my life long I have wanted to see the Southern Cross. Beneath its ray, so countless books informed me, the ocean isles of paradise lifted their stately palms to the tropical glory of the moon; and traders, pirates, treasure seekers, shipwrecked sailors, and frabjously beautiful native maidens carried on a life just as real and just as earnest as Mr. Longfellow ever could have wished. On northern nights, when a liquefied slush used to get in over the tops of my rubbers, I often comforted myself by remembering the Cross, and musing on romantic sentences. You know the kind, they run like this: "It was night, and I remained by the shore, lying under the glorious Southern Cross, my senses dulled by the sleepy fragrance of the oopa tree."

I had quite an imaginative picture of the constellation. It was of impressive size, of Latin design, and composed of four or five well matched and magnificent orbs. There was really nothing in the northern heavens quite so fine. A man who had seen the Southern Cross had seen about everything there was to see.

Years passed, however, and in spite of many periods of naval service I never found myself in equatorial latitudes. Then almost overnight the opportunity came, and I boarded a passenger vessel bound for southern seas.

Almost from the hour we left New York, the Cross was in the air. Such is the power of romance! If you wanted to get acquainted with anybody, all you had to do was say, "We are going to see the Southern Cross this trip", and it did the trick every time. On one round of the deck, I was informed that we were going to see the

Cross by eighteen different passengers, while I myself spread the light among some twenty more. Enthusiasts began to look for the stars while we were passing the capes of Delaware. We argued, consulted authorities, looked for books on astronomy in the ship's library, and badgered third assistant pursers and pallid cabin boys who obligingly pointed out everything from Cassiopeia to the Heavenly Twins.

Day by day, the ship drew nearer to "the line", and it was presently said that a certain passenger had seen the Southern Cross. The passenger became the hero of the hour. Surrounded by admiring romantics, he led us to the twilight rail, and pointed out a new something or other in the sky.

"Oh, that's not the Southern Cross", said a ship's officer benignly; "that's the false cross. It rises some time before the real cross."

The false cross? But romance had never mentioned a false cross! Perplexity found a dwelling in our eyes. To further our confusion, the eastern heavens began to roll over the edge of the world the most baffling array of crosses and crisscrosses that could madden readers of romance. At the height of the dispute, there was evidently visible a cross, a false cross, a false false cross, and several more. But where was the Southern Cross? Where was the bright symbol of the romantic dream?

There came a night of stilled waters and a blue-black heaven swept magically clear of tropic mist. I remained on deck to muse a while, for all the other passengers had long since retired to their beds. The lights along the deck suddenly went out, and I listened to the mysterious swish of the alongside waters whispering in the dark. Presently I saw the red glow of a cigar drawing near my chair. A distin-

guished fellow passenger, an army officer of the general staff, was finishing a final smoke.

"Did not I hear you say something about the Southern Cross?" he asked, rolling his cigar. "It's risen well above the horizon now if you care to see it." And with a soldier's careful precision, he pointed out the long sought cross of literature.

My heart sank. "Not that small, misshaped affair? You really don't mean to tell me that's the Southern Cross?"

"Yes, that's it. I used to do geodetic survey work, so I made studies of the southern heavens. That's the Cross!"

Oh Stevenson, oh Conrad, oh Herman Melville, oh Frederick O'Brien!

The constellation of the Centaur had risen well into the sky, and within a bay of it was a cross. It was not a large cross, for you could just about have fitted the four stars into half the dipper's bowl. Moreover, it was less a cross than a sort of smallish, irregular kite, for there was no star to mark the intersection of the cross bar and the staff.

Alas for romance, the brilliance is likewise largely fabulous! The brightest star of the little kite, the "alpha" as astronomers say, lies at the foot, and is the only one in the constellation that ranks as a "first magnitude". If you want to know how bright a first magnitude star is, take a look at the outer top star of the dipper bowl. The stars that mark the left hand point of the kite and the apex are mere second magnitudes; you may match them, if you like, with the two lower stars of the dipper bowl. The star to the right, which is both faint and misplaced, ranks as a third magnitude, and you may match him with the star of the dipper bowl which marks the handle joint.

The secret of the Cross is not its

imaginary splendor, but its relation to the southern pole. A line drawn from the top star through the bottom star will almost touch the pole if prolonged. No wonder that Spanish seamen found an awesome omen in these new stars so strange to European eyes. And mind you, the polar constellations at the south go clockwise round the pole. It's confusing till one reasons it out.

What the Southern Cross is to us, the Northern Lights are to the dwellers in tropic lands. They talk about them with a longing wonder in their eyes.

“Lying under the glorious Southern Cross?” Well, I'm glad I know now what these romantic authors have been lying about!