

Mistaken Journey



[IV.]

ONE of the chemists in the institute was able to give me some helpful advice regarding conditions on the Rio Paraguay, and, at first, was particularly reassuring regarding mosquitoes and the risks of fever. The Paraguay, unlike the River Parana, he said, was practically free from the malaria-carrying mosquito, and ordinary precautions with quinine should be quite sufficient for a normal healthy person. One could even drink the river water in safety, he affirmed, which was pleasing, since I could not imagine any other possible supply. However, after some conversation, he discovered that I was not intending to go on a passenger launch, but by canoe, and his tone promptly changed. The mosquitoes assumed a new frightfulness; the water became polluted; the now familiar warnings were trotted out, and some he omitted I was able to mention for him. He was a very charming man, and my news caused him such uneasiness that he spent the rest of the afternoon showing me the different species of mosquito I should meet. I wish I had listened more carefully; then, later on perhaps, I could have called them by their scientific names instead of the names I did call them.

The chemist, who was really a very obliging man, showed me various snakes, which he hoped I should not encounter — an expression of goodwill which I seconded. The flat-headed ones were generally poisonous, he declared, though he thought it safest to act promptly in the event of a bite and to use the serum, whether the reptile looked to have either a flat head or a rounded one. I thought so, too, and bought some serum and a syringe on the strength of it.

THE outside of a horse is the best thing for the inside of a man, they say. That may be, but next to a horse I would put the remoter sections of that Brazilian railway track. We bumped and jolted gaily across half a continent, and although several times I felt certain we were off the metals, that was a contingency which did not arise. Had it happened, the second-class passengers would have been required to assist in lifting the derailed coaches back again.

There are only two trains a week to Puerto Esperanza, and before leaving Sao Paulo I was wisely prevailed upon to telegraph ahead to Bauru to reserve sleeping accommodation. This was indeed a wise precaution, because here, where we arrived about 9.30 p.m. and had to change trains, there was an excited scramble round the ticket-office window to obtain berths. Despite my youth and energy, my linguistic shortcomings would have proved too great a handicap among that bunch of fast talkers had it not been for the telegram. The ticket agent referred to a paper and

called out a name which, although he commenced it with a sibilant, sounded strange to me. However, the others were silent for a moment waiting for somebody to speak, so I promptly cried "Si senhor!" and kept repeating "Si!" to everything he said until I received my ticket and was elbowed out to the edge of the crowd.

The first part of the journey was made in an electric train with an overhead line, and the country we went through was well cultivated, coffee, rice, sugar, cotton, cocoa and orange groves being much in evidence. After a few hours we came to the end of the electric line, and our train was drawn by a wood-burning steam locomotive. Then, too, the fields and plantations began to thin out, and soon we were going through wooded jungle land. The single track was often just a thin line cut through the all-enveloping tropical growth, and the foliage brushed the coaches on both sides as we rattled through.

Usually, on this journey, one gets smothered in dust from the red earth, *terra roxa*, which in Sao Paulo is found to a depth of three feet, and in which the coffee plant grows so flourishingly. We were spared this ordeal, however, as the dust was laid by a steady drizzle of rain.

That night, in the not too uncomfortable sleeping berth, provided a first touch of comedy. In spite of the continual buffeting, and the imminent danger of being precipitated right out of the bunk altogether, I soon managed to fall asleep. Suddenly there was a tremendous bump, the train came to a clattering standstill, and a pungent smell of burning filled the carriages. The same thought occurred to all of us simultaneously, and in about 10 seconds there was a motley collection of frightened and voluble passengers on the line at a wayside halt. Had the danger been a real one we should probably have remained blissfully unaware of our shockingly immodest condition; but a refuse heap, foully smouldering, dispelled our fears of a fire, and the abrupt halt, apparently, was nothing more than an unusually violent application of the brakes. As my thoughts returned to normal, I was increasingly aware of several distressing irregularities in my companions' attire. The women, though still well covered, were, for once, not wearing their usual black dresses; although, to be honest, I must admit that I saw nothing which outraged my susceptibilities — much. The men, with a few exceptions, had prepared for bed merely by doffing their coats and collars. One cleric, however, had gone so far as to remove his trousers also, and he appeared among us minus these essential garments, but wearing his flat bowler hat and clutching his umbrella.

NEXT morning we were turned out of our sleeping berths at an amazingly early hour, and by 6.30 a.m. I began to

(continued on next page)

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