

# Mistaken Journey



An account of adventures in Central South America by an English "Innocent Abroad." In this chapter he journeys from Corumba towards Asuncion — and trouble.

## XVIII.

AFTER four days and three nights we arrived in Corumba, and gladly accepting the missionaries' invitation, I stayed with them before embarking on the next lap of my homeward trek. I had planned to follow my original itinerary and to continue the river journey all the way down to Buenos Aires by means of the service of steamers which plied from there to Corumba. Luckily, there was a boat due to arrive within 24 hours, and it was expected to remain not longer than two days before departing on the return trip. That sounded hopeful, and remembering my previous experience of Brazilian time schedules I guessed I should not have to wait more than a week before getting away.

The missionaries were charming people, and it was a privilege to be with them during that week. Together with the rest of the population they were suffering from domestic discomforts caused by the failure of the town's water and electric light supplies. The breakdown had already lasted three weeks and could easily last three more, they said. Rather surprisingly, they told me that people were not allowed to help themselves to water from the river; that was the perquisite of the official water-carriers, and householders were obliged to depend on these independently-minded gentry for their supply.

The people of Corumba again surprised me with their quaint ideas on what constitutes a well-dressed man. Those sweltering days made the little town so much like the hot room of a Turkish bath, that surely, I thought, even their stiff conventions must break down in face of such physical discomfort. But no; to be seen abroad without one's coat, or collar and tie, was still a social crime; although, paradoxically enough, in the evenings when the cooler night air made conditions more bearable, one could promenade in a pyjama jacket in all decency and with complete self-respect.

Within four days the expected boat arrived, and I was pleasantly surprised at the size and splendour of it. Far from being the old creak I expected, she was a modern, high-powered, double-decked motor vessel, positively resplendent with white paint and shining brass. The voyage to Buenos Aires, I was told, necessitated a change of boats at Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay, and the complete journey would take eight days.

The vessel carried first and third-class passengers, and since the first-class fare, about £25, was most decidedly outside my slender resources, I took a steerage ticket with a good grace.

Before leaving I bought a tiger skin, which since it had not been thoroughly cured, but only salted, proved a very smelly acquisition to my kit. I little thought, when I stepped on board that fine ship, that circumstances would arise to make my voyage on her as exciting as the last one on the gasoline launch, or that it would prove infinitely more dangerous and troublesome.

But it did, and the remarkable series of events which culminated in my being arrested in Asuncion on a charge of espionage, forged a chain of circumstantial evidence against me that was almost irrefutable.

BOLIVIA and Paraguay for many months had been openly at war over the disputed territories of the Gran Chaco. It was a bitter war, fought under terrible conditions of hardship and privation, and in the opinion of many people, one country or the other would have called a truce long ago but for the intervention of outside interests.

The neutral Brazilian town of Corumba, being a mere 11 miles from Puerto Saurez over the Bolivian border, and only two days' journey down river to Paraguay, was, by reason of its proximity to both countries, a town of international importance. Little went on there which was not known to the agents of the two combatant powers. Mysterious commissions were undertaken; queer cargoes found their way down river, or across country; and certain individuals were finding the war a very profitable pastime.

Into this atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue arrives a stranger, an unknown foreigner, in short, myself, who with a fantastic tale of wanting to get to Buenos Aires by canoe really means to slip into Paraguayan territory for some nefarious purpose best known to himself. He is refused permission to make the trip, and what happens? Does he return the way he has come? No. Does he proceed to Buenos Aires by normal methods. No. He disappears up-country in great haste to a place within three days' ride of the Bolivian border, and after an absence of two months stealthily reappears on a trading launch. This time he does not stay at the hotel, but lies low with his fellow-foreigners, even though they do call themselves English missionaries. Finally he plans to go to Asuncion, and although like all Englishmen, he must be rich, he chooses to go with the rabble in the steerage in pursuance of his own evil plans.

DURING the three days' journey to Asuncion three separate and distinct incidents occurred, any one of which

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