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LAVELLE SCHOOLS OF DANCING

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MISTAKEN JOURNEY

(continued from previous page)

for they evinced a livelier interest in us than they had done before, and we marched through the streets to the accompaniment of an excited buzz of comment. But our guards did not mind us talking, and we were too busy discussing the situation to pay much attention to our surroundings. Mr. Walker was frankly scared by the serious turn things had taken, for the new developments, especially the account of the letter-throwing at Puerto Murtino, had come as a shock to him. He considered that our only hope was to get in touch with the British Consul as soon as possible. "And that is the last thing they'll let us do if they want to keep us in custody," he said.

Arriving at an official-looking building, we were escorted through many tiled corridors to an ante-room where a secretary was waiting to receive us. He ushered us into a beautifully appointed room, panelled in dark wood, with huge balcony windows and a thick pile carpet on the floor. A stout man, in a shining white uniform rose from a desk and my comrade in distress, who seemed to have recovered his former confident bearing, strode forward to meet him and shook him by the hand. Whatever surprise I felt at these unexpected tactics I did not show it, and, politely murmuring, "How do you do?" I, too, shook hands with a fair imitation of my companion's easy assurance.

Undoubtedly, we were away to a flying start, and Mr. Walker made the most of the advantage. It was a fine tale he

told, I am sure, and I half-expected the large gentleman to press a handful of cigars upon us from the box on his desk, and to beg us forget the whole regrettable affair. Unfortunately, he began asking questions instead, and I soon saw that I would be lucky to get another handshake from him before I left, let alone a cigar. He inspected our passports, and a period of busy telephoning followed, which I learned later was to call the person with whom Mr. Walker had an appointment for that day, a prominent business man in the town. That terminated the interview, and I was right about the handshake, for this time a stiff little bow sufficed for both of us.

The soldiers were waiting in the ante-room, and the procession formed up once again. On the way back to the Prefectura da Policia, my companion imparted the gist of his recent conversation, and up to a point the news was very good. That point, however, was where his troubles left off and mine began, for subject to the confirmation of his identity by his business associate he was going to be released immediately. The questions he had answered had practically freed him from any suspicion of complicity with me, but at the same time had done little to disabuse their minds of my own guilt.

He had been asked whether he had known me before our meeting at Concepcion, and of course, had answered no. Then why had we immediately spoken to each other, being strangers? That, he said, was because we had recognised one another as fellow countrymen. So, actually, he knew no more about me than I had chosen to tell him? That was so. And I had not told him about the spying at Puerto Pinasco, nor the letter at Puerto Murtino? No, I had not. So for all he knew, my passport and everything about me might be false, and I could speak Spanish and Portuguese fluently. He was sure that this was not so, although he could not prove it.

From my point of view the one reassuring feature was that immediately he was free Mr. Walker could go to the British Consul and enlist his help, and that, I felt certain, would see the end of my troubles.

* * *

BACK at the Prefectura once again, there followed another session of questionings and telephonings in which I had no part. Mr. Walker appeared to be holding his own quite well, and I sat down on a form against a wall, and began to feel hungry. There was a lull in the proceedings, and he told me the Paraguayans had discovered from his passport that he had been in Bolivia less than a year previously. He had explained that it was only a transitory visit on the way from Lima, in Peru, to Buenos Aires, but all the same it was nothing in his favour, and had given them fresh grounds for suspicion.

Nothing happened for some time after that, and I still felt hungry. Then we made another move, and this time stepped out of the thrilling atmosphere of a gripping melodrama straight into the lighter realms of comic opera. The soldiers gathered our bags together and one of them, smarter than the rest, made a grab at my tiger-skin. He had been carrying Mr. Walker's heavy suitcase before, I remembered, and obviously was not going to be so foolish a second time. We descended the steps of the Prefectura, and once we were out of sight of the building the soldiers

(continued on next page)

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18

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