

Mistaken Journey

by ROY SHEFFIELD

An account of adventures in Central South America by an English "Innocent Abroad." In this chapter he learns something of Asuncion prisons— from inside.

XX.

THE next quarter of an hour was spent in silent contemplation of our predicament, and I wondered what Mr. Walker would have thought had he known of the two other exploits previous to the one at Concepcion. But such is the ingrained conceit of untravelled Englishmen that I really thought the whole affair was rather a joke, and was already relishing the amusing tale I would be able to tell when the Paraguayans should discover their mistake and release us with flowery apologies. The British Lion is a fearsome creature — to Britishers!

This jaunty confidence in the Might of an Empire lent to our next move an air of distinction which otherwise might have been lacking. The officer at his desk received a note from an orderly and, restoring his chair to its normal angle, he shouted across to a group of soldiers. Four of them came forward and ranged themselves round us, and the order was given to march; but Mr. Walker did not march. Instead, he pointed to our bags.

"They come too," he said firmly, and stood there, very dignified, as if he had entirely lost interest in the whole affair.

The officer was nonplussed; he gave my companion a sharp look up and down and clearly was wondering what to do about it. I suspect that had I been alone I would have carried my own kitbag, haversack and tiger-skin without any assistance whatsoever; but not so Mr. Walker. If he were to be arrested, it was going to be in the grand manner, with chest out and head erect; no petty scufflings or bag carrying for him, and his manner plainly showed as much.

For a long moment the officer's gaze rested on the immaculate crease in Mr. Walker's cashmere trousers. Had those garments seen as much service as my own disreputable pair of concertinas, then, I fear, the dignity of their wearer would have availed him naught; as it was, the officer was impressed, a little awed even, and at a word from him two of the soldiers gathered our bags together and attempted to carry them.

This, however, was more than they could manage, for already they were burdened with a rifle and bayonet apiece, and reinforcements were called for. Between them they shouldered the bags, and the column moved off.

Altogether there were now eight of us. In front, Mr. Walker and myself were flanked by two soldiers carrying their rifles more or less in military fashion, while in the rear straggled the other four giving a passable imitation of a mule train. After one glance round I sincerely hoped that their rifles had the safety catches down, for they pointed them anywhere and a chance explosion might have hit with equal facility an on-looker, us in front, or their own persons. Our progress was greeted with neither cheers nor brickbats. The populace, in fact, seemed blissfully unaware that anything out of the ordinary was taking place, and the procession did not even attract the small boy, or the usual dog. The people we met stopped and gaped, and I could tell from their expressions that they did not know whether we were prisoners or guests of honour.

It seemed safe to speak. "Mr. Walker," I said, "you're out of step." He glanced down at his feet. "No, I'm not," he replied, "it's you other fellows." That, I think, convinced the spectators that we were guests of honour after all, for prisoners, surely, would have had nothing to laugh at.

* * *

We arrived at the Prefectura da Policia, and I listened in admiration to Mr. Walker's flow of oratory. I certainly had found a good champion, for his command of Spanish was perfect, even down to the gestures. But the police official was not impressed. He referred to a paper and, I suppose, read out the charges against me, for my companion wilted visibly.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "you're not really a spy, are you?"

As briefly as possible I related what had happened before he came aboard at Concepcion, and assured him that my guilt went no deeper than foolishness and ignorance. The recital filled him with misgiving, and when he turned to the Paraguayan again the sparkle had gone out of his eloquence, and he seemed to be answering questions instead of asking them. At length the official shrugged his shoulders resignedly, and apparently we had reached a deadlock. But Mr. Walker took up the cudgels once more, and with a fresh burst of energy, prevailed upon the other to speak to somebody on the telephone.

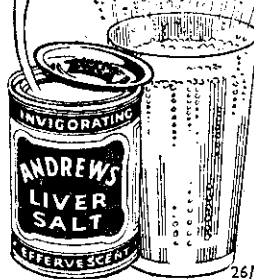
"Come on," he said. "They won't let us get in touch with the British Consul, so I've asked to see one of the heads of the Government. This fellow is only a subordinate, he can't help us."

I was heartened to know that despite my disquieting disclosures he was still thinking of effecting my release as well as his own, and once more we paraded in the street with our armed escort at our elbows.

This time we mustered only six, for two of the soldiers remained behind with our bags, the absence of which gave the party a more business-like appearance. The passers-by evidently thought so, too,

(continued on next page)

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