

Mistaken Journey

by ROY SHEFFIELD

XXI.

IT was a long wait this time, and I began to wonder what was happening. I wondered, too, what would be likely to happen if they searched me. That would certainly complicate matters, for in a pocket was my .25 automatic and a box of shells. For an unauthorised person to carry a weapon is, of course, a serious offence, but I had reasoned that in the event of an examination by customs officials, or others, my kit would be more likely to receive attention than my own person. As it was, however, the revolver was a decided embarrassment, and I determined to rid myself of it should the opportunity occur; although, with the two soldiers in the room, that seemed a remote possibility.

The wooden seat grew harder and harder, and the other end of me became as uncomfortable as the thoughts in my head. I walked across to the open window and the big butcher, still chopping his meat, gave me a broad smile. He probably thought it was a nice day, so I smiled back and made a motion of bending my arm and feeling the muscle. I was trying to convey a humorous idea of how strong he was, but the smile vanished from his face, and the other soldiers in the courtyard burst out laughing. I subsequently discovered before leaving South America that this particular gesture carries an entirely different interpretation in that country; it is, in fact, a more provoking form of the insult implied by a Britisher when he elevates two fingers in silent scorn. I was not to know that, however, and since the butcher had appeared to miss the point of my joke I repeated the action two or three times. His only answer was to wave his chopper at me in a threatening manner, which made the soldiers laugh all the louder, and caused my own guards to join in the mirth.

In the middle of this by-play, the door opened and the two soldiers came in who had escorted Mr. Walker. They stayed only to collect his suitcases, and I heard footsteps echo across the courtyard, and the iron door slam. But whether it had shut on our hopes of release, or whether my companion had passed through it a free man, I could not tell.

My custodians were dismissed shortly afterwards, and two strangers took their places. The quietness of the midday lunch hour descended on the courtyard, and I hoped that their new guest would not be left unattended. But he was, and his stomach registered a protest against this continued neglect. I asked for a drink of water—one of the stock phrases I had learned to say—and the soldiers brought me some in an enamel mug. My new guardians appeared to be of an obliging disposition, and I determined to make an immediate attempt to dispossess myself of my revolver and the box of ammunition. Across the courtyard was a wash house with, I guessed,

the usual domestic offices, and one excellent hiding place instantly suggested itself.

I intimated my desire to take a walk—the text-book phrase for meeting that emergency read, “Where, please, can I hang my hat and coat,” an idiom I shrank from using on the uneducated soldier—and they willingly acquiesced. Too willingly, in fact, for my request had apparently come at an opportune moment, and all three of us crossed the courtyard together. Even so, I still had a chance, for half a minute’s privacy would be sufficient to do the trick, and surely, I thought they would grant me that. But those Paraguayan soldiers had a devotion to duty which overruled their sense of decency, and despite the embarrassing circumstances, they did not lose sight of me for a single second. So my plan failed, and more than ever I was aware of the incriminating bulge in my hip pocket.

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For a long time after this nothing happened at all, and there was no movement in the courtyard. Then, the hour of siesta being over, the butcher and several others appeared once more, and proceeded with their respective tasks. Again there was a long wait, and I forgot all about my missed breakfast; I was too busy thinking about the lunch I had not had, and weighing up the prospects of getting some tea.

At last the door opened, and an official came for me. He led me along a passage and back into the main building to where a man was sitting at a table in a large office. The latter pulled up another chair, and invited me to be seated. On the table were pens and ink, and a very official-looking form on which was printed a long list of questions. He handed me a pen, and indicated that I was to fill in the answers, a proceeding which, since I could not understand the questions, was going to prove somewhat difficult. However, I was anxious to oblige, and we started off.

The first question was easy, and I wrote my full name nicely and neatly. The second was a trifle more complicated, and the man was not very helpful in his attempted explanations. Then it came to me, and I appended my father’s name. The next two or three queries looked far too formidable, so I skipped those and concentrated on one where a single word said, “Stat.” A reasonable translation of “stat” was “state,” and I began to think of a suitable reply. But the longer I lingered, the greater became the possibilities that simple enquiry invoked. I was in many states, principally in a state of hunger. But this, I reflected, was hardly a condition that the Paraguayans wished to place on record. Beyond that, I could have told them I was in a state of good health, nearly broke, still fairly cheerful, and needed a haircut; but none of these seemed matters of primary importance to my captors, and I compromised by writing “single.”

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