LITTLE LAND OF PARAGUAY

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QUITE accidentally I managed to time my arrival in Asunción—the four-hundred-year-old capital of diminutive Paraguay—just as hostilities with Bolivia were officially ended. For three years these two countries had fought for a tract of land called the Chaco, and each claimed it even after the armistice. I managed also to arrive in Asunción on the heels of a small but tidy revolution; actually the result of the war, for numbers of returned soldiers, having nothing but wounds, skeleton bodies and grievances to show for their patriotism, determined to end the "Liberal" régime and set up their own political system, headed by a young officer—Rafael Franco.

But getting to Paraguay was not a simple matter. It took some doing!

"Passport, please," said the Tourist Office clerk in Buenos Aires.

I was surprised at the request, because I intended to return to the Argentine. An *ida y vuelta* (round trip) was what I applied for.

The midday closing was upon us, and my passport lay miles distant in the hotel. But at three o'clock that afternoon I, like little Mabel, pressed my face against the pane of the ticket office, passport in hand.

"You haven't a visa," complained the clerk.

I drove across the city and cajoled the Paraguayan Consul to affix stamps and his signature, while I waited. This should be regarded as a conspicuous diplomatic triumph. Usually, one must leave one's *documentos*, returning for them *manana*, next week, or next year.

The clerk, unappreciative of my good old Canadian speed, grumbled: "And where is the Tourist Card given you on landing? This must be stamped before you leave the country, and you must have another permit to re-enter the Argentine, without which the round trip ticket cannot be issued."

I drooped in a queue at the Darsena Norte all afternoon. Finally, the handsomest official I have ever seen heard my request. Then he directed me back to a window I had passed, a step at a time, two hours and twenty minutes earlier!

By now, the ticket office was closed, so I tottered home and went to bed. The next morning, however, laden with certificates—Vaccination, No Trachoma, General Health, Good Conduct, Insanity Nil (this last had become somewhat open to question), Passport, Tourist Card, cables, magazine commissions and even private letters—I returned to the young German clerk, and my ticket was delivered.

A day or so later, the *Ciudad de Corrientes* received me, and I was on my way, a thousand miles up inland waters, a thousand miles nearer the equator, and a thousand degrees hotter than any human being ought to be, to Asunciön. The comfortable but expensive little ship was owned by a company of Jugoslavs.

The four-day-trip was crowded with interest. Sleep being impossible, I spent most of the nights on deck, watching the noisy confusion at the various ports of call. From the River Paraná we slipped into the Paraguay; so narrow we nearly touched the tangled bodies of jacarés (alligators) that sprawled like a rustic fence along the shore; so shallow, often we barely crawled through the yellow ooze! On our last evening out, two bronzed lads, stripped to the waist, appeared on opposite sides of the bridge, and cried antiphonally to the accompaniment of singing plumb lines;

"*Nueve pies de largo*!" (nine foot depth).

"*Once pies de larguito*!" (eleven feet).

Ahead, a little tug fussily pointed out the channel. Against the robin's-egg sky, a flock of immense black birds flew in aeroplane formation. They did three's, five's, a group in four tiers, stringing out at last in single file.

We stuck!

The tug backed, and belched gallons of thin mud in our perspiration-glazed faces. "Now," several passengers groaned, "we'll have to wait for the tide."

"I pray the ice won't give out," murmured an Argentine, who sat at my table, and had no difficulty in wrapping himself around the eight courses—four of them meat, one eggs, one fish—served daily at lunch *and* dinner. "Is the *Senora* pressed for time?" he enquired, in the curious Spanish typical of his country. The only English heard on board was spoken by Germans.

I shook my head, explaining that I only wanted to make a brief study of Paraguay.

"Nothing to study," he exclaimed. "A poor country, without a history; and one whose past is more important than

its present. As for the future—". He shrugged. "It is sometimes called the Mesopotamia of South America. Chief industries, the production of meat, quebracho* and maté, regarded by the natives as both food and drink, and responsible, they believe, for the endurance of their soldiers in the Bolivian campaign."

"Many Argentines drink maté, too," I suggested.

"Oh certainly, *Senora.* I don't criticize them, although personally I prefer china tea. And, anyway, all the maté that is exported or drunk does not make Paraguay independent economically. And her money is so valueless that when an Argentine talks 'big' without justification, we say that 'he must be a millionaire from Paraguay'."

Then the *Senor* laughed long and heartily, showing very red gums and a set of magnificent teeth.

Paraguay, about treble the size of England, is populated by less than a million people. It seemed to me—my eyes blurred and my senses dulled by the ghastly heat—that at least half the inhabitants were gathered to see us land. I can't say dock, for, although a fine new wharf lay fifty yards ahead, the ship was eased with delightful informality to a steep and muddy bank, and a rough plank was thrown across the blackish slime.

Immigration ceremonies were interminable. The smaller and less important a country, the greater the number of regulations and red-tape mileage. About mid-morning, however, all stamped and permitted, I went on deck and looked about for a porter. Several gaunt scarecrows in blue smocks stood on the river bank.

"Bolivian prisoners," the steward explained, "waiting to be exchanged."

A collection of flapping rags detached itself from a group nearer the plank. It shouted and flung a battered brass disc at my feet. The number was thirteen.

I motioned Thirteen to come on board, and indicated my four small bags, wondering if he had sufficient strength to carry them up the hill. Save for a little more in the way of covering, he looked not unlike Gandhi after a hunger strike.

Thirteen scorned the plank. He sank to his bare knees in ooze and, depositing my bags on the top of the hill, came paddling back for me. I must have looked distastefully at the mud, for with a murmured *permiso*—allow me—Thirteen picked me up so that I was doubled like the letter "u" over his strong if skinny

* Quebracho is a very hard wood.

arm, and set me down beside my bags, with only a minimum of splashes.

Trestles being inadequate to hold the travellers' effects, they were strewn over the ground. Owners and Customs Officers squatted beside them, picking them over and giving to the entire scene the appearance of a "native market", or a Sunday School picnic, rather than a setting for officialdom.

I kept looking about for the cake with cocoanut icing, for towers of sandwiches, for pyramids of hard-boiled eggs, and, most of all, for the pail of pink lemonade. Oh, for a pail of any kind of lemonade!

Presently, Thirteen and I ploughed through burning red sand to a group of spiritless taxis. Incomprehensibly, he selected the most melancholy, and in it I proceeded along a street paved with highly-polished sharp black cobbles. They were quarried, I learned, from The Hill nearby—a terrifying elevation of two hundred feet! The cobble stones are hard on taxi springs. So drivers, whenever possible, use the street car tracks over which infrequent trams rock with a gentle sea-going motion. The drivers have acquired considerable proficiency in keeping their wheels on the rails.

Asunciôn delighted me! It sprawled languidly over a large sandy district and looked like a lovely, if untidy, village. Edging the black cobbles ran lanes of red earth, and beyond them yellowing walls rose not quite high enough to shut one away from a glimpse of dim, hushed gardens; of pink, green, lemon-coloured houses, caressed by the long shadows of slowly moving palms. The houses are not so very old, but the sun, tropical rains and lack of care has given them a look of great antiquity and charm.

The streets are laced with long black shadows contrasting with the loose white robes of slender bare-foot women, who look with their flowing headdress rather like Hindus. Some of them smoke fat black cigars. The men, small, often poorly-clad, are not very attractive. Children are usually ragged, and covered with ugly sores; whether skin disease or merely insect bites, I don't know.

Leprosy is common all over Paraguay. It occurs in beggars, vendors of all sorts, drivers, and even your laundress may be a leper! There are leper hospitals, but treatment is not compulsory. Some of the most serious cases are interned with their families, but many more should be. One great difficulty in coping with the disease is that trained nurses are looked down upon as menials rather than professionals. Most nursing is in

the hands of the Sisters of Mercy, and the task is too great for so few.

I had given the name of my hotel.

"It's a long way," warned Thirteen, who had taken the seat beside my spotted driver. "All of ninety squares," he said.

"Well, let's get there as soon as possible," I returned. "The noon sun is savage."

We stalled, and the driver asked me for a small advance with which to purchase gas. A few blocks farther on, more intent upon his conversation than his job, he rammed a large tin tub standing outside a hardware store.

The proprietor screamed. The chauffeur and Thirteen screamed. A blood feud was firmly established.

"Why don't you look where you're going?"

"Why don't you find a proper place for your tub?"

The sun rose, and the blood count rose, and all the while sizzling in the back seat, I knew that somehow or other I would be tricked into paying the costs.

The men spoke in their native tongue—Guaranì.

The Guaranì Indians—original inhabitants of Paraguay—were among the most progressive and intelligent in the land. Like the Mayas of Yucatàn, they refused to be absorbed by their conquerors. On the contrary, they retained their characteristics and their language. There is an interesting Guaranì literature, including plays. A newspaper is published in Guaranì, and everyone from the President, up or down—depending upon your estimate of Presidents—speaks Guaranì.

Through the gateway of a walled garden, we drove into welcoming shade, and, accompanied by the inhospitable cries of flaming birds, stopped before a low building like a convent with a cloister.

"This," announced Thirteen, opening the door with a flourish that tore it from one hinge, "is your hotel."

The proprietor (German) answered haughtily when I hoped he had a room with a bath.

"*Como no?*" said he. "Why not?"

"Take me to it quickly." I entreated. "The idea that people can die from heat no longer seems fantastic."

"It's summer," he defended.

Like many South American homes, the hotel was almost a quadrangle enclosing a tangled garden. One wing was given over to living quarters; one to executive offices; one to the culinary department, etc. A verandah hemmed the bedrooms,

giving the cloister effect that I spoke of. Each room had one window looking on to the verandah. Tattered screens provided a decorative touch, but for all practical purposes were useless. A cat could have crawled through them. The verandah was flush with the garden.

The proprietor led me to the last room in the row. Beside each door stood a rough bench and a small table. The room was dim and stifling. No current of air was possible. I made out a large bed covered with a mosquito net, a chair and a chest of drawers. The proprietor moved towards an opening in the side wall.

"The bathroom," he announced, as though introducing the Republic's President.

I shrank away from a rusty tub filled with an assortment of spiders and armoured invaders that would have delighted an entomologist.

"It was a bath I asked for, not an aquarium. Who gets a bath here," I went on, "do the *bichos* or do I?"

"Ach," *Senor* dismissed the matter with a backward flip of his hand, "they're only thirsty and not dangerous. At the hour when the water is turned on, wash them down the drain; insert the stopper and rest your foot upon it. *Bichos*," he reminded me sternly, "are not of *my* making."

In spite of the sickening heat, the nightmare *bichos*—beetles as large as grandmother's locket, great wormy creatures scaled and furnished with trembling horns, blood-thirsty, loud-voiced flies and mosquitoes, a species of enormous toad called *sapo* that invaded every room, sitting motionless on the bare stone floor and regarding one with solemn bulging eyes, while the pulse in its triple chin beat oogle-oogle-oogle—in spite of all this, I adored Paraguay. It was here, I remembered, a thousand miles from the sea, in the heart of a great unknown continent, that civilization was established in 1536—about the time of Jacques Cartier's arrival in Canada. Asunciòn's two valiant founders, Irala and Ayola, should be more prominently named among South America's great men. I remembered that Jesuit missionaries introduced orange trees into Paraguay, from where their cultivation spread through the rest of the continent. I remembered that, a hundred years ago, State Socialism flourished in a land as isolated as Japan. I remembered the three nineteenth century dictators; especially Lopez, who, educated in France, determined to be South America's Napoleon. His

ambitious Irish-French mistress, Eliza Lynch, had no objection to ruling as Empress.

Lopez and Eliza made history by fighting their three powerful neighbours, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, and nearly defeating them. "The War" is the Paraguay's *only* war, and is spoken of as though it happened yesterday instead of some sixty years ago. Practically the entire population—men, women and children—took up arms, and the fight endured until the last gun had been spiked and the last cup of corn had been eaten. Two hundred thousand people remained, out of Lopez's million and a half; men being outnumbered eleven to one by women.

"The War" brought about unfortunate tendencies, the most conspicuous being illegitimacy; nearly sixty-five per cent in the capital; probably higher in the country. This does not necessarily mean promiscuity, at least among the women. Many mothers of large families boast that their children are "all of one colour," i.e. by the same father. The men, though a little casual, are kind to their women and broods. A Paraguayan is first, last, and all time, a fighting man. He cares only about war and politics which, for him, are the same thing. His courage is inspiring; his endurance almost superhuman; his patience under suffering a pattern of supreme heroism. But as a domestic, peace-time proposition, he's a dud. In a word, he's lazy. But there are enough pampering women to scramble for him; to accept him as he is, and work in order to keep him in magnificent idleness.

Girls—at least when I was in the country—made only a gesture of grasping the educational opportunities offered; especially by the *Colegio Internacional*, maintained by American money and staffed by American teachers. Paraguayan girls think of life in terms of matrimony, although they know that their husbands will not provide them a decent living, that they will tyrannize over them, and inevitably be unfaithful. In Paraguay, a woman may not leave the country without her husband's permission; nor even buy a railway or steamship ticket for inter-state travel; her money becomes his; she cannot bequeath or inherit it unless he says so, and her children are not hers but his.

Divorce is almost unknown!

Travelling through the country, I was always sure of a welcome, even at the poorest homes—one airless room, with a lean-to sagging on bent and feeble legs. I was usually invited inside where father, if at home, lay languidly in bed. A bed,

for a Paraguayo, is like a pair of shoes to a Bolivian or a crest to a North American. It is a symbol of elegance and respectability. So father lies in it, drinking matè which the younger children prepare.

Heaven knows how the people keep so clean. Water is scarce in summer, though there's driving tropical rain in the winter season. It's a delightful sight to watch white-clad women bringing their burros into market each morning. And even after the heat of the day, they manage to look tidy. Nor is the market unpleasantly dirty, although Asunciòn has no sewage system. Refuse is—was—just thrown into the streets and burned up cheaply by an obliging sun. Just after I left, however, I read that Germany had offered to build roads and install "sanitations" in return for the entire cotton crop.

In market, everything was on a small scale; a handful of beans, three or four potatoes, half-a-dozen oranges. The chickens looked like birds, and were sold by the pair. So were pineapples and eggs; and even lace doilies—the typical needlecraft of the country. Strangers—especially those who speak Spanish—are cordially received and, indeed, made much of. A shy and friendly curiosity marked all dealings.

The chief public buildings in Asunciòn are the Government Palace, built by Lopez, the theatre and the National Library containing priceless documents dealing with the Plata region, and early Jesuit records, as well as those pertaining to State Socialism. Hundreds of these documents were carried away when, during "The War", Lopez abandoned the capital. And for many years they were scattered through peasants' homes where, from time to time, manuscripts—being only bits of paper—were used to light their fires.

The nauseating heat made sleep impossible after six a.m. At about that hour, too, boys began serving breakfast. On the table outside each room, a pot of coffee and a few rolls were placed. I was the only woman guest, but I felt no particular embarrassment seated at my table, scantily clad, staring and being stared at. The gentlemen sat at their tables, scantily clad, too. But as their formal clothes looked like pyjama suits, I could not determine whether or not they were girded against the day.

I could not very well avoid exchanging a distant "good morning" with my Argentine neighbour who sat about six feet from me. But that formality finished, we behaved as though each were invisible. At evening, however, the amiable *Senor*

and I, sitting on our respective benches, allowed ourselves a little conversation. Our clothing differed only slightly from what we had worn for breakfast—the temperature unvarying throughout the twenty-four hours—but somehow a convention had been observed.

The *Senor* was a large, full-blooded man who suffered intensely from the heat, and "blew" rather like an unhappy whale.

One evening, as we fought off a blitz of winged assailants, the sound of distant shooting was heard.

"What's going on?" I asked a waiter who ran past. "Is it a revolution?"

"Oh no, my lady," he paused long enough to answer. "People are just shooting at the Government Palace where the President is imprisoned."

"The new President, Franco?" The United States had already acknowledged the Government of President Franco.

"Oh, no. The one before him. Some of the Ministers are shut up, too. They must have tried to escape. Come!" he called over his shoulder. "From where I stand, you can see the flashes."

It was true.

"Should we do anything about it?" I enquired of the *Senor*.

"No." He was contemptuous. "They'll kill a few innocent people, and make a few arrests, and it'll be all over."

One evening when the *Senor* dropped heavily to his bench, he opened the conversation thus:

"*Senora*, forgive me . . . Do not, I pray, misconstrue my words . . . I beg you to take no offence, but—"

Heavens, what is coming? I wondered, uneasily.

"—but I have noticed that you close your door, at night. It's suicide," he blew, "and quite unnecessary. There's no danger, and if you should find yourself in difficulty, you can always call on me."

I thanked him gravely. "Fear of *bichos*—", I began.

"A million *bichos* would be better than death by suffocation," he observed.

That night, with my door open, the chief difference lay in the increase of hopping, crawling, flying creatures, the added volume of the *Senor's* gusty breathing, and the whine of his complaining bed-springs.

Sweltering, at last I dozed, only to be wakened by an unfamiliar sound overhead. An enormous parrot sat on my mosquito net, pecking viciously at the frame.

I was cold for the first time since my arrival. Fear gripped me with an icy hand. Against this night-mare thing I had no protection. For hours seemingly, I lay without breathing. Coming to at breakfast time, I found myself alone.

Limply, I attacked my coffee.

"Good morning, *Senora*," murmured the *Senor*. "I hope you rested better with your door open."

"Worse," I told him. "I had an awful nightmare; dreaming that an angry parrot was perched on top of my *mosquitero*, daring me to move. Thank heaven, it was only a dream!"

"What makes you think so?"

"Because a parrot wouldn't really come into my room," I said. "And anyway, he isn't there, now."

"No," blew the Argentine, wearily. "Since dawn that savage bird has been in my room. It attacks me when I try to put it out. The closed door, *Senora*," he said, "may be best, after all."