

was one which seemed to me a masterpiece of simple cunning. It kept me perplexed for about twenty minutes, and Fräulein <sup>liberal</sup> ~~was~~ for ~~hours~~ as many hours - indeed, I don't think she understands it yet. But then she is slow to the point of being simple, and her efforts to unravel the mystery were ludicrously funny, as I will tell you later. One of you - perhaps Roger, as he is a carpenter - might make it up and try it on Hugh; his reactions would be as laughable as those of the dear Fräulein.

The thing consists of a piece of wood of square section, about 6" long and 1" across. It could just as well be round. This is divided into two pieces, of which the upper part is drilled with a longitudinal hole to receive a projection of nearly equal length on the lower part. Those of you who know engineering terms will see the idea when I say that it is essentially a spigot. The end of the thin rod which fits into the hole has a hook on it like a crochet needle, while the bottom of the lower part is tapered to a point. From the top of the upper part project two small ends of elastic, and a loop drawn on one side shows how the elastic is continued within. There are also arrows to mark the necessary registration of the upper and lower parts. The object is to insert the rod in the hole and by twisting it suitably to catch the elastic loop on the hook which can then be pulled back against the tension of the ~~spring~~ rubber. The person demonstrating gives the device a peculiar twist, makes the arrows register, and then pulls down the lower part and shows it spring back.

The point is that there is no elastic in the inside at all, the ends being merely embedded in the wood, and the drawn loop and the arrows just a blind. As the bottom of the lower part is tapered, it is possible to make it jump back by squeezing it between the fingers, and with a little practice this looks exactly as if it was being pulled by elastic caught in the hook.

The Chief Engineer was brilliant at deceiving the Fraulein. He said that she must first shake the device to free the rubber inside, then hold it at just a particular angle, turn it backwards and forwards exactly as he had done, and only then would the hook engage with the elastic. And of course he demonstrated how it could be done as often as she asked him to. In the end we left her long after dinner muttering, "Einmal <sup>mal</sup> links! Zweimal <sup>mal</sup> rechts!" and twisting the gadget with fearful concentration, declaring that she would take it to bed with her if she could not solve the mystery before the dining-room was locked for the night.

MARCH 19, 1938.

On the 17th, as darkness was falling, we arrived at the entrance to the little port of Corinto in Nicaragua. At many points on the remote shore great fires were burning, but we were never able to discover their origin. Though the harbour was wide it must have been shallow, for we had to make a slow, zig-zag course in the darkness guided by lighted buoys before we arrived at the tumbledown quay. It was built of planks on which a railway line had been carelessly laid, and was lit by naked electric bulbs hung from the corrugated iron sides of the small shed which was all the storage space there was. The quay was now swarming with dock workers, the more affluent armed with revolvers, the less affluent with daggers and knives, and all of them wearing the strange tall hats of the Mexican peon.

M. Caro and Herr Wohlgemuth tried to dissuade me from going ashore alone on the score of danger, but I was certain that none was to be feared. An unpleasant looking creature approached me on the quay and asked if I wished to change any money, saying invitingly, "Cabaret! Plenty girls!" As the quay already contained most of the female population, this was obvious. And be-

fore we entered the harbour the Maitre ~~and~~ Commis had discussed with the fascinated M. Caro the price of girls in Corinto. He rated it at 25 cents, which seemed to me very cheap even they were American and not Nicaraguan cents. But of course he may have been wrong. Anyway, after shaking off the detestable man, I walked into the town which I explored fairly thoroughly. Its streets were of dust, like those of Cartagena, but its houses were more in the style of Colon, which I have already described briefly. Here, however, they were less ambitious and more decrepit, often not rising above one storey and standing in a state of fearful disrepair. There was no glass in use, the doors and grilled apertures being covered with boards as high as was required at the moment. This practice made it very easy to see the insides of the houses without inquisitiveness. Even the largest had no proper interior walls, the single large room being divided by wooden screens shoulder high. On these were pasted large areas of American newspapers, containing pictures of motor-cars and girls.

The town was lit with electric light. Naked bulbs hung at long intervals from bare wires fixed to the rafters and shone very dimly indeed. The reason for this was apparent when I had tracked down the generating plant by its persistent throbbing - it was very little larger than the one which lights St. Julians, although it had to supply a whole town. As I walked down one street I heard a number of loud tinny voices punctuated by human laughter, and found a primitive cinema showing a Mexican film. There were no precautions whatever against fire, and the place might have become a fearful holocaust.

When I had thoroughly explored the town I wandered out along the sands. By now the full moon was rising among the palm trees, and the ship extended a majestic length by comparison with that of the town which was only twice

as great. The rattle of railway trucks and winches died away as I walked along the firm sands; the only signs of life were the negro couples who strolled in the moonlight, the men visible in the far distance by their white shirts and trousers. They were coming from a rough floor where they danced to the raucous music of a gramophone; and as this was the farthest outpost of the electric light, they went no further. But the full moon and the peacefulness tempted me to go on. Far away on one side the cicadas shrilled, and on the other the long, gentle breakers rolled against the shore.

At six o'clock the next morning we raised anchor and steamed along the mountainous coast of Nicaragua, arriving at one o'clock at the narrow entrance to the gulf where La Union lies. This gulf is as large as the Bay of Naples and only less beautiful because it lacks the associations of history and antiquity. Three countries come down to its shores: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras, whose only outlet this is to the Pacific. As M. Caro saw the great extinct volcano which marks the entrance (he was told) to Honduras, he raised an ironical salute to his adoptive fatherland. La Union is in El Salvador, and it is necessary to thread between the mountainous islands at the entrance to the gulf before reaching its little harbour. The currents added a further difficulty, and the final berthing of the ship took an hour.

The dock workers seemed to be poorer than at Corinto for the proportion of knives to revolvers was much higher. In fact the police almost alone carried firearms, but we were told that in El Salvador it was they alone who stole, and when they came on board the ship everyone rushed and locked their doors. One European sat motionless on a barrel throughout the hour of landing. He wore some kind of old school tie, a solar topee, and trousers which,

though of strange design, looked comparatively clean in the distance. It turned out that he was a store-keeper in the town of La Union, which lies a mile from the port, and had come on board with a message from a mutual friend to Mr. Auld. He was a Canadian, and thankful for the gift of a few English newspapers which, though three weeks old, were for him the very last word. In the afternoon M. Caro and I decided to go on shore, and he was resolved to take a train saying that it was too hot to walk. During the morning the ship had put its time on an hour to agree with a supposed local time - but this proved to be a mistake, and we were an hour early for the train. So M. Caro, and of course I, consented to walk in with the storekeeper along a dusty path which went through a clearing in the forest. Part of the way was shaded by mango trees; the rest was very hot indeed. M. Caro and the Canadian did not get on at all well, for the former kept on asking disagreeable questions like, "There is a harsh dictator here, is there not?" and, "Are not the poor people much ground down?", while the latter went into ecstasies over the delights of El Salvador. Apart from its enormous coffee output it had gold mines which were internationally famous and produced 800 tons a month; there were virtually no taxes, rents were low, everybody had enough to eat and was happy. Fortunately the two men could not well understand one another, and in interpretation I was able to soften some of the asperities. But when we passed the first townspeople sitting on their doorsteps, and M. Caro said in a loud guttural whisper, "Zey live like ze swines!" I could scarcely prevent the store-keeper from hearing. Indeed it was true that the people were living in the same rooms as their animals, and the children rolled about with them in the filth of the unmade roads. Scraggy hens ran in and out of the living-rooms, where also lay pigs with long snouts like wild boars. In this primitive scene M. Caro (and no doubt I)

made a strange appearance. He was wearing a pair of old check trousers of a seedy brown colour suspended <sup>by</sup> very conspicuous braces, while over his arm drooped a coat which he had been persuaded to carry by the supposition that the nights were cold. The factor ridiculed this idea. A white shirt was open at the neck while from rolled-up sleeves protruded arms which were skinny and white. He wore a jaunty cap which matched his trousers and seemed to exaggerate his weak features, puffy eyes and drooping moustache. But he was a better companion than you would think. Though the inhabitants lived like "ze swines", he could see that they were happy, having enough to eat, few cares and housing as good (he said) as the Polish peasantry. Indeed, he derided the American refrigerator-civilization and was amusingly ironical at the expense of the factor who was praising his own electrically equipped house.

This man led us to the Panama Consulate which we were surprised to find was solely inhabited by a young American woman wearing yellow silk beach pyjamas and little else. The factor explained that she was a collector of rare animals which she bought from the natives and sold to zoos in America. The first animal she brought out for us to see was an ant-eater, a nice furry little creature with a long nose. At first it accepted the woman's caresses, but soon began lashing about and biting her furiously. At once she seized its long tail and began furiously beating its bottom, which compelled it to retire within its cage. The woman, seeing that her fingers were covered with blood, said that she would bathe them in whiskey afterwards. Next she showed us two small wolf cubs (perhaps those were really jackals?), many parakeets and an iguana, a giant lizard with erectile spikes along its back. This vicious and repulsive creature was lying torpid at the bottom of its cage, and even the woman said that she did not enjoy feeding it; she added,

however, that its flesh was eaten by the natives whenever they could procure it. This small fact made me vividly aware of the remoteness of my situation.

Thence we went on towards the centre of the small town, which closely resembled the others I have described to you except that it was even poorer and more decayed. The factor, in telling us what was what, would use such phrases as "that great tower over there", "the finest beach in Central America", "the splendid house with green walls". The eye searched - but in vain, then fell upon some inconspicuous and derelict building which the factor's imagination had totally transformed.

We came to the square in the centre of the town where was the Hotel America which the Canadian said he owned (M. Caro was doubtful whether he was more than an employee). It was a pretentious building from which the humidity and the cruel sun was already beginning to strip the finery, making it look pathetically comic. Elsewhere the houses did not attempt to conceal their decay, which had spread even to the faded and drooping palms. This place was the chief pride of the Canadian and the city. It was obvious that we must buy something from the hotel to compensate the Canadian for all his kindness and trouble; so while I bought stamps and postcards, M. Caro ordered pineapples, lemons and eggs. We waited for these in a cool courtyard at the back of the hotel, drinking "Echt Pilsener" which M. Caro had the grace not to gibe at till afterwards. But whenever the factor answered the bell of the shop, he would whisper, "We have been cheated! We have been cheated!", and I could only quiet him by telling him that the sum was very small and that we had had a most interesting afternoon for our few cents. It was here then that I wrote with the factor's scratchy fountain pen the postcards which a few of you will have received if the Salvadorian

postman has not (as I suspect) licked off the stamps and pocketed them. At last M. Caro's goods arrived. The eggs were very small indeed. Next morning I was compelled out of politeness to eat one of them at the Caros' invitation, and found the taste most peculiar. The Chinese might have kept it in stock a little longer - but not much.

We returned by the same route and found the appearance of the ship greatly altered. To reach the quay we had previously descended the long ladder which is let down sideways from the ship; now to embark we had also to go down. Many thousand bags of coffee had been loaded during the day. It was the height of the coffee season, the storekeeper had told us, and during the remaining five months of the year his whole turnover was less than 50 dollars.

After dinner Mame. Caro said she wanted to go into the town, and with her husband and Bernard I went also. It was now quite dark, the moon not yet having risen, and we had to avoid the shady parts of the forest and walk along the railway lines. It is a bumpy business doing this at night. Afterwards we rejoined the path. The air was full of the shrieking of cicadas, strange rustling sounds could be heard everywhere in the forest, together with the sound of an unknown bird like the twanging of a taut wire. We picked our way along as the moon rose behind us, and so reached the town. Two of the junior officers from the ship danced in a cafe we passed to the sound of a cheap gramophone, while a group of women lounged invitingly in the entrance. In the square we found a cafe where the proprietor had all the day's news from the radio and could speak French.

A few months ago I should have derided anyone who told me that in the near future I should be discussing the day's European news in French with a Greek restaurant keeper in a remote town in El Salvador. When he had fin-



ished telling us about the dispute between Poland and Lithuania, I took my coffee and went and sat by the open door. The town's inhabitants were revelling in the hot squalor of the street. They lay sprawling on benches and balustrades and even in the dust of the gutters, bawling joyously in Spanish and listening to the raucous wireless sets which from every part of the square poured out a different programme. Over all was an atmosphere of poverty and decay, but far different from that which prevails in an English slum. There hardship is stubbornly borne, and humour and enjoyment are means of combating the ugliness of life. But here life was natural and free, and happiness was no more than the <sup>air</sup> ~~sun~~ the people breathed. And yet, in spite of this, I have never been able to understand such a life from the inside. I can appreciate that there is a kind of people which enjoys it, and I should not wish to change their views, even if I could; but I cannot enter into their spirit. It was not the factor's exaggeration of his surroundings which made me smile; I could well have understood it of an Englishman who was showing me his native village. But in La Union it only sounded to me pathetic and pitiable. Anne says that I have the "flat-mind", and that Bickenhall Mansions, rebuilt in modern architecture, is my private heaven; and many of you will find my difficulty imaginary, impossible to understand.

MARCH 26, 1938.

The next day we sailed from La Union and arrived at La Libertad, which is also in <sup>El</sup> ~~San~~ Salvador and is the port of the capital, San Salvador. A charming and very good-looking young Frenchman came on board here as agent of the C.G.T. I met him first as the person who would take letters to the shore and post them, and he refused to accept any payment for an air-mail letter I was sending to Dinah. This port was so small that it was impos-

ible to come up to the quay, and so the commission had to put out in a pinnace while the cargo arrived in lighters. These great broad boats were towed in a string by a small motor-tug, and the foremost boat was filled with the Indian crew which was to assist our own sailors in the loading. The Indians wore all manner of strange hats and clothes, some being stripped to the waist while others were dressed in coloured shirts and waistcoats. Only their trousers were a uniform dirty grey, most of them rolled up to the knees. They were a fine-looking set of men, with faces of the old Inca cast and bodies burnt bronze or mahogany by the sun. The lighters each contained several hundred bags of coffee which were loaded into the holds by derricks. Two derricks are required for each operation and their jibs are fixed, the load of coffee being suspended from the junction of the cables coming from both derricks. Thus all change of direction in lifting and swinging the load must be done by co-ordinating the movements of two winches, and it was wonderful to see the Indians working to a handbreadth, though they were often out of sight of one another.

The French agent and I stood by the rail looking on, and I asked ~~the~~ him the questions about El Salvador which I had put the day before to the storekeeper. His answers were very different. He said that the gold output of the country was negligible, the dictator harsh, government corrupt, and justice impossible to come by. So apparently is truth. He had a great love for England, where he had stayed for a year when a youth, and there were a number of places we knew in common. I was anxious to land and if possible go to San Salvador, which I had been told was reached by a very beautiful road amongst the mountains; and indeed splendid mountains, brown and bare, stretched back from the shore in endless succession. The agent, however, said that the wharf and all transport to the capital belonged to an Amer-