

THE LAND OF NITRATE ¹

BY ALICE SCHALEK

A THOUSAND kilometres northward stretches the railway line. On Saturday evening I boarded at Santiago de Chile the train that runs once a week to the nitrate country and that reaches its destination Tuesday morning. During the interval my eyes rested on nothing but desolate, yellow, stony desert. The only justification for a railway here is the mineral wealth in the neighboring mountains and the nitrates of the northern pampas.

'How wonderfully prompt you are!' exclaimed the young German who had come to meet me. We had arrived only a half-hour late, at 2.30 A.M. instead of two.

No one had forewarned me how cold it would be at this hour. My teeth chattered as I took my seat in the heavy truck and we started on our way to 'The Works,' across a rolling, yellowish plain faintly radiant in the starlight. In the deathless silence of the tawny desert every star shone as brilliantly as a little moon, and the Milky Way hung like a great radiant ribbon athwart the path of the unfamiliar constellations.

'Those two clusters of light you see below are our Chile and Alemannia works,' remarked my companion nearly four hours later as our auto-truck mounted a little crest. 'We'll be there in fifteen minutes.'

It was almost 6 A.M. when we drew up in front of the manager's house, and an indescribable, purple

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dawn such as I had never seen before flushed the wide, lifeless landscape.

'Would n't you like breakfast and a bath?'

It was almost ten o'clock when this inquiry, by my kind-hearted hostess, roused me from a heavy slumber. Not until later did I realize what a mark of hospitality a bath meant; for water is the most precious thing they have in nitrate land.

The pretty young German wife of the manager showed me her house, which was decorated with prettily patterned ponchos, dyed leather objects, and other specimens of native art. But what delighted me most were the beautiful bouquets everywhere. In front of the verandah was a little flower garden hemmed in by eucalyptus trees and cacti — a garden almost unique in this waterless land. It never rains here oftener than once in three or four years, and there are no springs or wells. In fact, so rare are the showers even in the mountains that only tiny rivulets flow down their gorges, to vanish in the neighboring waste. Each of these is now carefully husbanded and led through pipes for fifty or sixty miles to larger mains that supply the nitrate mines. In order to prevent any interruption of the service, riders patrol the pipe lines daily.

I imagined beforehand that the nitrate pampas would be white, but actually they are as yellow as the *caliche*, or crude mineral, which contains only about sixteen per cent of

nitrate and which lies three or six feet below the surface of the earth. This must be leached to obtain the white nitrate of commerce. Every square yard of this unpromising country has been prospected, and the richest deposits have probably been discovered. In the early days some produced from thirty to forty per cent. Whenever a new mine is found, the Government sells it at auction, and there are generally plenty of bidders. The German firm whose guest I was owns eight hundred kilometres of pampas land. Riding over it in the morning, I saw in all directions huge yellow sandy mounds left by explosions. From these shallow pits the loosened caliche is carried by a little narrow-gauge railway to the principal works, where the nitrate is extracted.

These desolate regions do not attract the pick of Chile's proletariat, which is miserable enough at best, and their labor camps are favorable seed beds for Communism. For that reason a close watch is kept on every stranger arriving in the district. Of course, it is illegal to refuse a passenger a ticket, and the English who control the railways are obliged by their charter to provide regular passenger service. But the nitrate business is what supports the line, and only two passenger trains a week are run over them. Naturally, therefore, it is an easy matter to keep track of the passengers. Nevertheless, a good many peddlers manage to get into the district and to start more or less agitation among the workers. Many of them are Catholic Syrians from Jaffa, for whom the natives have the odd name 'Christian Jews.'

The nitrate laborers live in *campamentos*, which are long galvanized-iron barracks with an outside door to every compartment. I cannot imagine worse quarters. There is not a particle of green in sight, no view, not even

windows. Behind the living-room, which is about fifteen feet square, utterly dark, and has no floor, is a windowless sleeping-room. Cooking is done in a kind of gallery around a little court, into which the garbage is thrown. The men work in twelve-hour shifts, day and night, including Sundays. The only holiday is the anniversary of Chile's independence, in September. But it is not compulsory to work on Sunday, and on the afternoon of that day a workingmen's band plays in a little square surrounded by a few pepper trees, or at the movie theatre, which is the only place of entertainment in the camp. This theatre shows Wild West films of the most hair-raising sort, whose episodes are greeted by the noisy audience with riotous approval or disapproval.

Wages are paid in *chits*, which naturally are accepted only at the company's store. Thus the workers' pay flows back into the employer's pocket. That is another reason why peddlers are discouraged.

All the nitrate works are members of a 'trust' or pool, and are permitted to sell only a certain quota. This helps the numerous small enterprises conducted by the natives to compete with the big modern undertakings of foreigners. Were there free competition, the Chilean establishments, with their primitive machinery and inadequate capital, would soon go to the wall. The cheapening of artificial nitrates, however, is likely to bring about that result in any case. If the trust breaks up, the Americans, who have the best-equipped works, will profit by it.

The only compensation for living in this country is the magnificent sunsets. Any one of these royal spectacles is worth the long and toilsome trip required to see it. In the afternoon the characteristic soft egg-yellow of the pampas gradually changes to a dark

ochre, which deepens into mahogany, and, at length, into a rich episcopal lilac. These colors do not blend with each other, but settle uniformly over the entire landscape, which for this reason varies in appearance according to the hour of the day. Shortly before sunset a flush of red shoots across the deep lilac of the pampas, and a moment later the ruddy firmament arches like a bower of roses above the blue desert, and is reflected in the latter, until heaven and earth seem all aflame, as if one were looking into a gigantic fire box. Just after the blood-red ball of the sun drops below the horizon, the so-called 'last green ray' quivers across the heavens. It is a phenomenon that even the oldest residents await as for a faithfully repeated miracle.

Although rain practically never falls, fantastic cloud formations are not uncommon. One evening I watched three of these drift past, like Valkyries with flowing hair galloping upon their horses. As the sun sank lower their shadows charged like spectral cavalry up the slopes of the mountains. Even as I watched they disappeared, the last flush of red faded out of the pale lilac heavens, and night, with its starry hosts, swept westward across the sky.

I made a trip into the *cordillera* to visit the neighboring copper and silver mines. Catching an ever-belated train, we climbed upwards for four hours over an interminable serpentine road, to Guanaco, nearly ten thousand feet above the sea. From the top of Big Guanaco, a sharply silhouetted dome connected by a saddle with Little Guanaco beyond, I beheld an imposing mountain panorama culminating in giant peaks that presented under their shifting cloud-caps every delicate nuance of color from light ivory to red-amber. Near the summit we came upon great heaps of stony débris from the old excavations.

'You are the first writer who has ever visited our abandoned mines,' the head engineer said to me. 'I've explored the workings a hundred times, and have always wished that someone would come here and describe them.'

But that is easier said than done. It is difficult for words to give any conception of the imposing but shuddery workings the miners have left behind them. We climbed up into a gigantic grotto every cubic inch of which had been originally rich gold-bearing ore. Common laborers with drill and crowbar had dug galleries here comparable with the largest railway tunnels. Careless of danger, without plans or measurements, they left, in their eagerness to extract every ounce of gold, only a suggestion of support for the huge-arched roofs. These reckless and gold-greedy men vaulted over yawning chasms, and balanced themselves on tiny precipice ledges no broader than their hands, in order that no cranny containing the precious metal might be overlooked. In these magnificent subterranean halls I saw sparkling quartz galleries that glittered until I imagined they must be walls of solid silver. The roof of Perseveranca, which is the largest of the excavations, and contained the richest veins, resembles a vast mosaic, with its confused masses of porphyry and limestone and its red iron-oxide coloring. The hard granitic masses are interlaid with a porous reddish stone, so friable that you can break it with your hands, which in turn is interspersed with salt crystals, calcite formations that look like alabaster sponges, deposits of a slaglike mineral, tufa, and kaolin.

'No geologist has ever been able to explain what the Deity was up to here,' said the Chief Engineer. 'Of course, the bright coloring of the stone is caused by iron oxides, but no one has discovered a key to the faulting

that so abruptly terminated the gold veins.'

We clambered out of a dark grotto into a sort of pillared circular apartment through whose gorgeously tinted, broken roof we caught glimpses of the bright blue sky above. It was so ghostlike that we stood in rapt silence, gazing around us.

The old gold-mining town of Aguada, in whose barrooms and dance-halls the men who dug these galleries squandered their earnings, looks to-day like a cheap reproduction of Pompeii. Yellow dust lies inches deep over the ruins that border its deserted streets.

Seated on a hard bench in the railway station, I waited throughout an entire moonlight night for the delayed train, which arrived at 7 A.M. instead of two. After I got aboard I learned that the connecting train from Bolivia, which I was to take for Antofagasta on the sea, would not wait for us. By mere accident, however, I discovered that another connection was available to that port, from Aguas Blancas, the very next station.

'Why then,' I inquired, 'should we all go on seven hours further to Baquedano, when we might as well change here?'

But no one could tell me. The native passengers, who travel in blissful ignorance of maps and time-tables, merely answered stupidly: 'We never heard of any other way of getting to Antofagasta.' They preferred going on to Baquedano and waiting twenty-four hours for the next Bolivian train to taking a chance at the next station. Perhaps experience had taught them wisdom, but a young Englishman and I decided to risk it, and got off at Aguas Blancas.

This God-forsaken little station was perched on a terrace, with the high cordillera behind it and an infinity of

bare yellow sand in front. It was a dilapidated galvanized-iron box filled with dirt and litter, through whose broken doorway a violent, sand-laden wind whistled. The station master and his two daughters, who were dirty and ragged and looked frightfully neglected, were cooking their midday meal in a tiny iron shed. Although their provisions were scanty enough, they hospitably offered us a cup of tea and a couple of potatoes. I sat holding one of the broken doors shut with my feet to keep out the driving sand, until at length a long accommodation train painfully labored into the station. The station master's daughters, who, it seemed, were also going to Antofagasta, had managed miraculously to transform themselves with crêpe de Chine dresses and silk stockings. The solitary passenger coach attached to the rear of this train, to which we had to hustle down the track, carrying our heavy luggage in the hot sun, was crowded to the doors. On account of the sand storm, every window was shut tight. The passengers, who were employees of the nitrate companies, were mostly old acquaintances, and a din of greetings and loud conversation added to the other discomforts of the suffocating car.

Antofagasta. After a long search I found a weird little sailors' boarding house, situated on the beach, with a room whose windows opened on an outside gallery over the sea. Until late into the evening I leaned on the gallery railing, staring across the night-robed waters, dreaming of the yellow nitrate pampas, the cloud-capped cordillera, and the brilliant colors of the tunnel walls in the abandoned gold mine. I shall never see them again. Yet that boundless desert, with all its discomforts, privations, and hardships, still casts a spell of fascination over me.