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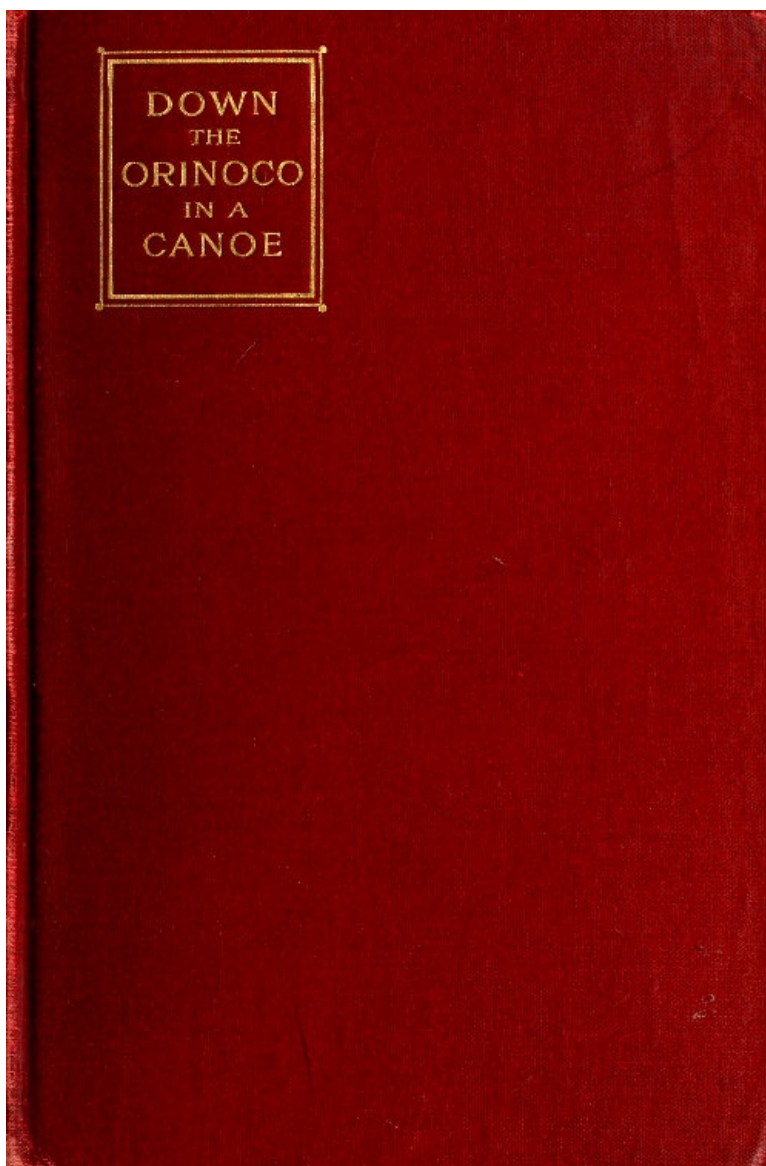
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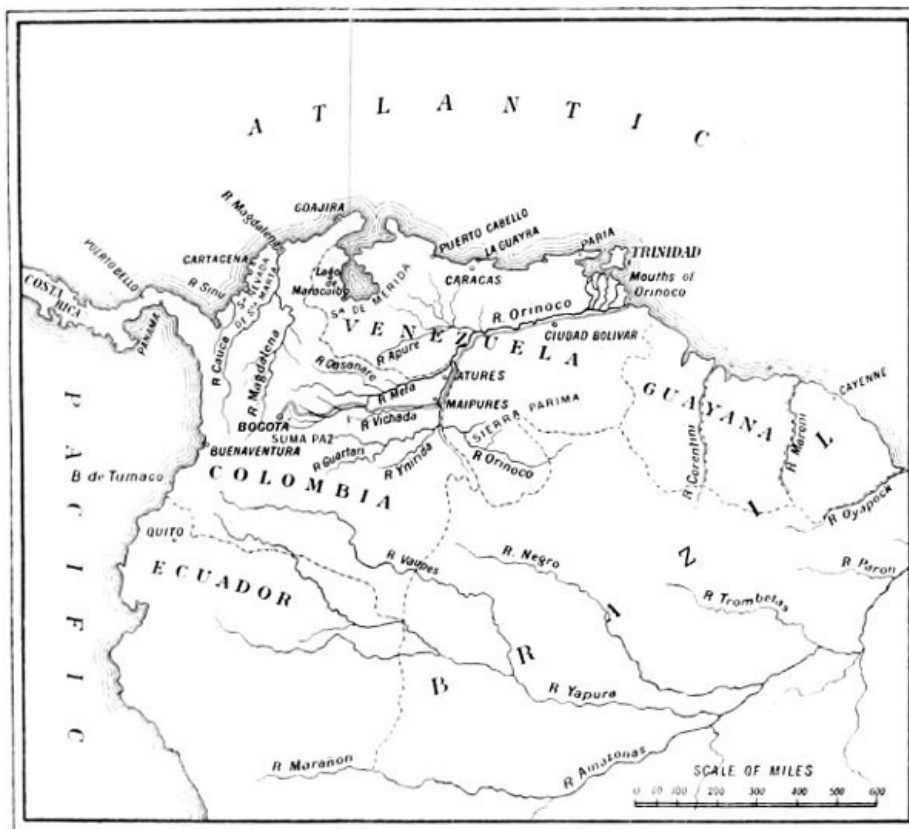
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DOWN THE ORINOCO IN A CANOE ***





MAP SHOWING THE ORINOCO AND ITS TRIBUTARIES

[High-resolution Map](#)

Down the Orinoco in a Canoe

By
S. Pérez Triana

With an Introduction by
R. B. Cunninghame Graham

'Que ejcura que ejtá la Noche!
La Noche! que ejcura ejtá!
Asi de ejcura ej la ausencia ...
Bogá, Negrito, bogá,
Bogá!'

CANDELARIO OBESO

New York
Thomas Y. Crowell & Co.
Publishers
1902

v

PREFACE

'Climas pasé, mudé constelaciones, golfos inavagables, navegando.'—ERCILLA: *La Araucana*.

To read a book to which a friend has asked you to write a preface is an unusual—nay, even a pedantic—thing to do. It is customary for a preface-monger to look contemptuously at the unopened bundle of his friend's proofs, and then to sit down and overflow you his opinions upon things created, and those which the creator has left in

chaos. I plead guilty at once to eccentricity, which is worse than the sin of witchcraft, for witchcraft at one time may have exposed one to the chance of the stake; but eccentricity at all times has placed one outside the pale of all right-thinking men. To wear a different hat, waistcoat, or collar, from those affected by the Apollos who vi perambulate our streets, to cut your hair too short, to wear it by the twentieth fraction of an inch too long, is *scandalum magnatum*, and not to be endured. So in confessing that I have read 'Down the Orinoco in a Canoe,' not only in the original Spanish in which it first appeared, but in its English dress, is to condemn myself out of my own mouth, to be set down a pedant, perhaps a palterer with the truth, and at the best a man so wedded to old customs that I might almost be a Socialist.

It is undoubtedly a far cry to Bogotá. Personally, more by good fortune than by any effort of my own, I know with some degree of certainty where the place is, and that it is not built upon the sea. My grandfather was called upon to mediate between Bolivar and General Paez, and I believe acquitted himself to the complete dissatisfaction of them both. Such is the mediator's meed.

The general public, of whom (or which) I wish to speak with all respect, is generally, I take it, in the position of the American Secretary of State to whom an office-seeker came with a request to be appointed the United vii States Vice-Consul for the town of Bogotá. The request was duly granted, and as the future Consul left the room the Secretary turned to the author of this book, and said: 'Triany, where in thunder is Bogoter, any way?' Still, Bogotá to-day is, without doubt, the greatest literary centre south of Panama. Putting aside the floods of titubating verse which, like a mental dysentery, afflict all members of the Spanish-speaking race, in Bogotá more serious literary work is done during a month than in the rest of the republics in a year. The President himself, Don José Manuel Marroquin, during the intervals of peace—which in the past have now and then prevailed in the republic over which he rules—has found the time to write a book, 'El Moro,' in which he draws the adventures of a horse. The book is written not without literary skill, contains much lore of horsemanship, and is a veritable mine of local customs; and for the moral of it—and surely Presidents, though not anointed, as are Kings, must viii have a moral in all they write, they do and say—it is enough to make a man incontinently go out and pawn his spurs.

Thus, Bogotá, set in its plateau in Columbian wilds, is in a way a kind of Chibcha Athens. There all men write, and poets rave and madden through the land, and only wholesome necessary revolutions keep their number down. Still, in the crowd of versifiers one or two, such as Obeso, the negro poet, who, being denied all access to the lady of his love—the colour line being strictly drawn in Bogotá, as well befits a democratic government—brought out a paper once a week, entitled *Lectura para ti*, have written verse above the average of Spanish rhyme. Others, again, as Gregorio Gutierrez Gonzalez and Samuel Uribe Velazquez have written well on local matters, and Juan de Dios Carasquilla has produced a novel called 'Frutos de mi Tierra,' far better than the average 'epoch-making' work of circulating library and press.

Pérez Triana, son of an ex-President, and speaking English and Spanish with equal fluency, is a true son of ix Bogotá, and writes as easily as other people talk.

His book occurred in this wise. The usual biennial revolution having placed his enemies in power, he found it requisite to leave the country with all speed. The seaports being watched, he then determined, like Fray Gaspar de Carbajal, to launch his boat upon the Orinoco, and, that the parallel should be exact, write an account of all he saw upon the way. Few books of travel which I have come across contain less details of the traveller himself. Strangely enough, he rescued no one single-handed from great odds. His strength and valour, and his fertility of brain in times of peril, together with his patience, far exceeding that of Indian fakirs, are not obtruded on the bewildered reader, as is usual in like cases.

Though armed, and carrying on one occasion so much lethal stuff as to resemble, as he says himself, a x 'wandering arsenal,' he yet slew no one, nor did he have those love adventures which happen readily to men in foreign lands from whom a kitchen wench would turn in scorn in their own native town: nothing of empire and little of patriotism is there in his book. In fact, he says that those who are his countrymen are those who have the same ideals as himself—a cursed theory which, if it once obtained, would soon abolish Custom-houses, and render armies useless, make navies all to be sold for scrap iron, and would leave hundreds of patriotic sweaters without a platitude. What chiefly seems to have appealed to this unusual traveller was the strangeness and beauty of the long reaches on the interminable waterways, the brightness of the moon, the thousand noises of the desert night, the brilliant birds, kaleidoscopic fish, and the enchantment of a world remote from all that to a really well-constituted modern mind makes life endurable. At times, although I tremble as I write, it seems to me he doubts of things which we all take on trust, such as the Stock Exchange. Even the army is not sacred to this xi democrat, sprung from a shameless State in which there is no King, and which, consequently, can never hope to contemplate a Coronation show, for he retails a joke current in Columbia, but which, I think, if duly followed up, might be encountered in Menander, or, at the least, in Aristophanes. A Columbian Mayor of a town sent to the President a hundred volunteers, with a request that all the ropes should be returned. Jokes such as these cannot be helpful to a State; in fact, a joke at all is to a serious man a rank impertinence, and if an author wishes to obtain a place within the ranks of Anglo-Saxon literature, he should not joke at all, or, if he does, joke about fat or thin men, bald heads or sea-sickness, or on some subject which the great public mind has set apart for wit. However, as a member of the Latin race, it cannot reasonably be expected of him that at one bound he should attain unto the fulness of our Anglo-Saxon grace.

The careful reader of this book may possibly be struck with the different point of view from which a Latin xii looks at many questions which to an Englishman are set immovably as the foundations of the world, embedded in the putty of our prejudice.

For instance, on arriving at the open plains after a tedious journey across mountain ranges and through forest paths, the thing that interests the author most is that the land in the Columbian *llanos* is not held in many instances by individuals, but that so scant is population that it is open to all those who choose to take it up. This

does not strike him as a folly or as affording room for speculation, but simply as a fact which, on the whole, he seems rather to approve of, but without enthusiasm, looking upon the matter as a curious generality, but not inclining to refine or to reduce it to any theory in particular. A state of mind almost impossible for Saxons (Anglo or Celtic), who, as a general rule, seem quite incapable of looking at a proposition as a whole, but must reduce it to its component parts. xiii

The voyage in itself was memorable, for no one of the party seems to have been the least the kind of man who generally ventures upon journeys of the sort, and furthermore because, since the first conquerors went down the river with the faith that in their case, if rightly used, might have smoothed out all the mountain ranges in the world, no one except a stray adventurer, or india-rubber trader, has followed in their steps. Leal, the jaguar-hunter, who slew his tigers as I have seen them slain in Paraguay, on foot, with a forked stick in one hand and in the other a bamboo lance; the Indian guide Gatiño; and the young Venezuelan Governor of a State, who, shut up in his house, fought to the death, his mistress, an ex-ballet dancer, handing him up loaded guns, are to the full as striking characters as I have met in any book of travels outside the types that crowd the pages of the 'Conquistadores' of America. The naked Indian in his canoe, before whose eyes the immeasurable wealth of powder, looking-glasses, a red flannel shirt, and other treasures, rich and rare to him, were spread, who yet had strength of mind to scorn them all rather than pledge his liberty for two days' paddling, is the kind of Indian that merits such a chronicler as he has found. Long may he paddle on the *caños* and the *aguapeys*, and die, still crowned with feathers and with liberty, as did his fathers, by some forgotten beach or by some *morichal*, where parrots chatter and toucans flit through the leaves, and hummingbirds hover like bees above the tropic flowers. xiv

What most delights me in the book is that the author had no settled plan by means of which he strove to square the circle of the globe.

'We wandered,' as he says, 'with the definite aim of reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Beyond that we did not venture to probe too deeply the mysterious and wonderful manifestations of Nature, but took them as they appeared to our limited means of vision and understanding, and sought nothing beyond.'

A charming way to travel, and a wise, and if not profitable to commerce, yet to literature, for books writ in the fashion of this brief record of a trip through the great waterways of Venezuelan and Columbian wilds, although perhaps not 'epoch-making,' yet live and flourish when the smart travellers' tales, bristling with paltry facts and futile figures, which for a season were sea-serpents in the press, have long been pulped to make the soles of ammunition boots. xv

R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM.

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DOWN THE ORINOCO IN A CANOE

CHAPTER I

The hour was about ten one evening in December, which in equatorial Andine latitudes is a month of clear skies, cold winds, and starry nights. The moon shone brilliantly, casting upon the ground shadows as clear as those caused by a strong electric light. Truly, the local poet who said that such nights as these might serve as days in other lands was right.

We came out—three of us, Alex, Fermin and I—through an old Spanish gateway, a rectangular structure of *adobes*, or sun-burnt bricks, capped with a slanting roof of tiles, dark-reddish and moss-covered, with a swinging gate of cross wooden beams, held together by iron bolts. This was the gateway of the *hacienda* of Boita, about thirty miles north of the city of Bogotá, in the South American Republic of Colombia. We passed into the open road, and turned our horses and our minds northwards. 2

From south to north, as far as eyes could see, stretched the road, an old Spanish causeway, bordered on either side by low-lying stone fences, in front of which were ditches filled with water and covered with vegetation.

The ground was hard with the consistency of baked clay. As no rain had fallen for weeks, the dust was thick, and the horses' hoofs rang like hammer-strokes upon muffled or broken brass. We let the reins hang loose, and the horses, knowing their way, started at a brisk canter. Wrapped in thought and in our *ponchos*, we journeyed on.

No sound was audible; we seemed to be travelling through a deserted or dead world; the neighbouring meadows, black beneath the moon, contrasted with the grayish white line of the broad causeway. Now and then the solitary houses, some close to the road, some far back, loomed up with the magic-lantern effects of moonlight, and their

white walls seemed like huge tombstones in that lonely cemetery. Sometimes we crossed bridges, under which the water lay motionless, as though enchanted by the universal stillness; only a gentle breeze, causing ripples on the neighbouring pools, made them glitter and revealed their presence. A cow or a stray heifer would poise its head across the stone fence and watch us with wondering moist eyes, whilst two tiny columns of condensed breath rose from its nostrils. 3

Beyond, black and frowning, misshapen and mysterious, the huge boulders of the Andes raised their vague outlines, forming a sort of irregular circle, in some directions quite close to us, in others lost in the darkness which the moon and the stars were too remote to overcome. Indeed, that other local poet was also right in thinking that under the brilliant moon those mountains looked like huge sepulchres, wherein are stored the ashes of dead worlds upon which judgment had been passed.

And so we journeyed on.

Many travellers have observed that whenever a voyage of a certain nature is undertaken—one that for some reason or other differs from the ordinary transference of one's self elsewhere, when through circumstances beyond our control we know that the moment of starting necessarily marks an epoch in our lives, even as the beginning of a descent or an ascent from the summit or the foot of a mountain necessarily marks a change in our motions—our thoughts fly backwards, and not only cover the immediate time and space behind us, but, once started, plunge, so to speak, with the rapidity inherent to them, into the deepest recesses of our memory, so that, as our bodies are carried forward, our minds revisit old scenes, we hold converse with old friends, and the old-time world seems to live and throb again within our hearts. 4

Unheeding the clatter of the horses' hoofs, which was the only perceptible noise, my mind flew across the few leagues that separated me from my dear quaint old native town, cradled there to the south at the foot of two hills, each crowned by a tiny church. I saw its streets meeting at right angles, its two streams, dubbed rivers, parched with thirst, crawling under the ancient arched Spanish bridges, its low houses, with their enclosing *patios* planted with roses and flowers that bloom all the year round, with fountains murmuring in the midst, and creepers covering the columns and the ceilings of the open corridors, and then climbing out of sight; the numerous churches, each one with its familiar legend; the convents—solid, spacious—turned into barracks or public offices or colleges; the still old cells desecrated, their dividing walls torn down so as to convert the space into large halls, and, ruthless iconoclasm having carried away the statues of the saints, no other trace of religion left but a stone cross, or a carved saint's face set too high above ground to be reached by irreverent hands. 5

Yes, there was the little Church of Holy Humility—El Humilladero—an *adobe* structure, a mere hut, yet revered beyond words as being, so tradition said, the first church built in the land. And not far from it the Church of la Tercera and its convent, about which gruesome tales were told. Its monks never slept on mattresses, and, as they felt death approaching, would have themselves placed upon the ground to die close to their Mother Earth; and one of them, it was said, for some misdeemeanour or possibly greater fault, had committed suicide, and wandered headless—people had seen him—on dark and stormy nights through the neighbouring street of the Arch, as it was called, though of the arch nothing but the memory remained. And close to that convent of la Tercera was the other one of the jolly Franciscan Fathers, four beautiful *patios* surrounded with broad cloisters, into which opened over 600 cells, each provided, besides the sitting and sleeping room, with a snug kitchen, old Moorish style, an open hearth for charcoal fire, on which meats were roasted and earthenware saucepans simmered and purred all day long, extracting the juice from beef, mutton, plantains, mañoc, green corn, potatoes, and the other numerous vegetables of that region, forming a most substantial broth, a peculiarly rich *pot-au-feu* which enabled the reverend monks to recruit their strength and spirits after the pious labours of the day; and with this came, it is said, a copious supply of that beer, *chicha*, brewed from molasses and Indian corn, strong and delicious—to those who like it. These reverend monks, it is said, owned broad lands and numerous herds, and each had a lay brother who looked after the material wants of his superior, and received daily rations sufficient for ten or twenty men, so that a great part of them was sold by the monks to the profane outside the cloister walls. As the lay brother looked after all these worldly interests, he enabled the monk to devote his whole time and attention to finding a smooth path to heaven, not only for himself, but for as many others of his fellow-creatures as he met. 6

But though of good cheer, they were not lacking in piety, nor were they unable to withstand temptation. Their church was beautiful, all full of gilt columns, carved woodwork, niches with statues of saints displaying rich silks and gems and gold embroidery.

And though many of these things had disappeared in my day, and of the monks only a few more vital spirits survived, downcast and forlorn, lamenting the good old times, yet enough remained to give an idea of the happier age.

A proof of the virtue of the monks was visible at the entrance of the church looking on the main street, where the Evil One himself had branded it, so to say, for the greater glory of God and the renown of the convent.

It was whispered that Father Antonio, who combined profane accomplishments with spiritual insight, skilled in playing the guitar, not averse to a song or two, fond of cards for a friendly quiet game with the Father Superior and two or three other plump, kind-hearted brethren, where small sums were staked merely to give zest to the game, discovered to his horror one night that the Evil One, possibly in memory of his namesake (the monk's, not the Evil One's), had decided to tempt his virtue, and appeared in his cell in the guise of a beautiful damsel. 7

Alas! the Evil One had reckoned without his host. Holy water was poured upon him, the cross with the Redeemer nailed on it which lay handy was taken up by Antonio, so that Beelzebub in his fright jumped out of the window with such force that his cloven foot left its imprint upon the granite slab outside the church, and this imprint I saw

myself in my very young years. Although many people continue to see it, I have grown so short-sighted that, strive as I may, the stone now appears untouched and like the others. But then these things will happen, and they certainly should not lead us to doubt so pious a tradition.

And so all the old memories of the town kept passing before me. I saw a living panorama, silent, bathed in mysterious light, moving slowly in the background of the mind, large, infinite in its magnitude, with space in it for men and buildings and mountains and rivers and broad plains and leafy forests, and, what is more, with space in it for Time, the boundless Time that contains all and everything. 9

Schooldays, holidays spent in the neighbouring towns and villages which lie in the warmer valleys, my first voyage to a certain distance, and then across the ocean—life, in fact, with its ebb and flow under various suns and in different continents—all came back; but it were out of place to give my reflections on them here.

Then, pausing for one moment as a bird alights on the mast of a ship before launching forth into mid-ocean, my mind rested for an instant on the old cemetery where so many loved ones slumbered. Alas! when we leave the graves of those whom we have loved, not knowing when we shall again kneel upon the sod that covers them, we feel that death itself has not severed the link that bound us to those who were blood of our blood and bone of our bone.

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CHAPTER II

A little geography may not be amiss here. A glance at the map will show that the city of Bogotá is situated upon a vast plateau, at an altitude of about 8,500 feet above sea-level, 4 degrees from the equator, and 75 degrees to the west of Greenwich. Its position in the continent is central. It is perched like a nest high up in the mountains. To reach the ocean, and thus the outer world, the inhabitants of Bogotá are even now still compelled to have recourse to quite primitive methods; true, there are some apologies for railways starting northward, southward and westward, but in some cases their impetus ends as soon as they reach the end of the plain, and in others long before attaining that distance. Once the railway journey finished—which does not exceed two or three hours on any of the lines—the traveller has to content himself with the ancient and slow method of riding, mostly mule riding. The ground is so broken and the roads are so bad that horses could not cross them as safely as that thoughtful, meditative, and much-maligned animal the mule. After covering a distance of some ninety to one hundred miles westward, the traveller reaches the town of Honda, which lies on the Magdalena River. Here steam-boats are to be found, stern-wheeled, shallow-bottomed, drawing no more than from 2½ to 3 feet, in which, within four or five days, he makes the journey down to the sea-coast. 11

The map of the country would seem to show that the easiest way from the capital to the ocean would be towards the Pacific, and as the crow flies such is the case; but between Bogotá and the Pacific Ocean the Andes, at some period of their youth, must have frolicked and gambolled amongst themselves and lost their way home, so that they now form the most rugged country imaginable. Geographers, with that thirst for classification that afflicts—or should I rather say animates?—men of science, speak of two or three chains of mountains. The average man, however, who has to travel over that country, conceives his task as corresponding to a start made from one end of a huge comb, following the developments of it from the root to the point of each tooth until Providence and Nature take pity on him, and land him, so to speak, on the sea-shore. 12

Bogotá is no thoroughfare. When you get there, there you are, and if you go there, it is because you were bent on it; it is not like other towns that may be on the road to somewhere else, so that travellers may chance to find themselves there.

The plateau of Bogotá proper was formerly—no one knows how many centuries or thousands of years ago—a lake of about eighty square miles encased between the surrounding mountains. The waters of the lake broke through the barrier of mountains towards the south, draining it, and leaving the plateau dry, save for some small lakes that dot it here and there, and a few rivers of no great importance. I could not help thinking that this immense lake thus held aloft upon that mighty pedestal at such an altitude formed a sort of gigantic goblet such as is rarely seen under the sun. The river that marks the course through which the waters are supposed to have been drained drags its sluggish waves meandering in many turns and twists from north to south along the plain, and gives a sudden leap of 750 feet through the open gap on the mountain-side, forming those magnificent waterfalls called the Tequendama. The river plunges headlong, as if to make up for its previous semi-stagnant condition; it disappears between two mighty walls of stone, polished as if chiselled by the hand of man; it roars with a deafening sound; its waters appear, as they curl over the abyss, white as the wool of a lamb, and their consistency conveys the impression of wool rather than that of snow. The morning sun plays upon the mass of waters, and crowns it with a halo of rainbows varying in size. On the borders of the river, at the place where the cataract springs, are to be seen evergreens and pine-trees, and other such plants belonging to the temperate or cold zones; down below, where the water falls, and the river reappears like a dying stream following its course in the lower valley, palm-trees and tropical vegetation are to be seen, and birds of variegated plumage, parrots, cockatoos, parroquets and others, fly like living arrows from the sunlight, and plunge into the mist with piercing shrieks amidst the deafening roar of the cataract. 14

As we journeyed on in the cool night air, it seemed to me that the whole country—north, south, east and west—lay at my feet, and to the mind's eye it appeared with its vast interminable plains to the east crossed by numberless rivers, the mountain region to the north on the western side of the Magdalena Valley, the broad plains in the Lower Magdalena, and the rugged mountainous district of Antioquia on the western side of the river, and then

mountains and more mountains towards the Pacific Ocean.

Surely, if a journey in these days presents such difficulties, the first journey undertaken by the conquerors who discovered the plateau of Bogotá, may be held for a feat worthy of those men who, whatever their faults, were brave among the bravest.

Towards the east of the Magdalena River, on the coast of the Atlantic, the city of Santa Marta had been founded somewhere in 1530. News of the vast empire alleged to exist in the interior of the country had reached the founders of the town, and they soon decided to conquer that region about which such marvels were told. In the month of August, 1536, an expedition of 700 soldiers, infantry, and 80 horse left Santa Marta to penetrate into the heart of the continent, confident in their courage, and lusting for gold and adventure. This part of the expedition marched by land, and 200 more men journeyed in boats along the river Magdalena. 15

A full narrative of their adventures would be long. They met foes large and small, from poisonous reptiles and the numerous insects which made life a burden, to tigers and alligators: add to these fevers and illnesses absolutely unknown to them. It is said that one man, whilst sleeping in camp with all his companions, was snatched from his hammock by a famished tiger. At times the rank and file seemed ripe for mutiny, but the captain was a man of iron. His name was Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada. Though himself sore smitten by some disease peculiar to the locality, he kept the lead, and dragged the rest in his train. Praise is likewise due to the chaplain of the expedition, Domingo de las Casas, who stoutly supported the commander. This friar was a kinsman of that other friar Bartolomé de las Casas, whose unwearying efforts in behalf of the native races won for him the well-deserved name of 'Protector of the Indians.' 16

After a while the boats and the shores of the great river were abandoned, and the men found themselves in a mountainous country where the temperature became more tolerable and pleasant as they climbed higher. Finally, their eyes beheld the Empire of the Chibchas. What a joy—after toil and suffering which had lasted over seventeen months, when only 160 of the original expedition were left—to gaze upon a land where cultivated fields were seen in all directions, and the hearth-smoke rising from the houses to heaven! This was the land of the Chibchas, who formed an empire second only to that of the Incas of Peru and the Aztecs of Mexico. They had a religion—by no means a bad one as religions went amongst the American aborigines—they had their code of laws, their division of time, their rules and codes in all matters appertaining to family life and administration of government; they tilled the soil, they believed in the immortality of the soul, they revered their dead, and practised barter according to well-defined laws. 17

The thousands and thousands of soldiers which the Zipa or King of the Chibchas could bring against the Spaniards were overawed rather than overcome by force. The greater sagacity of the Spaniards, coupled with their courage, soon made them masters of the land. Jiménez de Quesada founded the city of Bogotá in 1537. He chose a spot on the plains which suited him—where the city now stands—and, clad in full armour, surrounded by his companions and by a large crowd of Indians, plucked some grass from the ground, and, unsheathing his sword, declared that he took possession of the land for the greater glory of God as the property of his King and master, Charles V. of Spain. Then turning, with a fierce glance, to those who surrounded him, he challenged one and all to single combat should they dare to dispute his action. Naturally, no dispute arose, and so the title was acquired. They had their own peculiar ways, those old Spanish conquerors! A similar method was followed by Nuñez de Balboa, when, in the name of his King and master, he took possession of the Pacific Ocean with whatever lands and islands might border on it, stepping into the waters clad in full armour, holding the flag of Spain in his left hand, and his trusty Toledo blade—*la de Juanes*—in his right. 18

To speak of this conquest of the Chibcha Empire recalls the fact that the land of Bogotá was really the land of El Dorado. *El Dorado* in Spanish means the gilt one, the man covered with gold, and all chroniclers and historians of the early period are agreed as to the origin of the tradition.

The King of the Chibchas, amongst whom power and property passed by law of inheritance from uncle to nephew, was called the Zipa. His power as a monarch was absolute, but to attain the dignity of what we should nowadays call Crown Prince, and to become in due course King, it was not enough to be a nephew, or even to be the right nephew. The prospective heir to the throne had to qualify himself by passing through an ordeal which Princes of other nations and other times would certainly find most obnoxious. He had to live in a cave for six years, fasting the whole time, with limited rations, barely enough to sustain life. No meat or salt were to be eaten during the whole time. He must see no one, with the exception of his male servants, nor was he even allowed to gaze upon the sun. Only after sunset and before sunrise might he issue from his cave. After this ordeal he was qualified, but should he have so much as cast his eyes upon a woman during that period, his rights to the throne were lost. The consecration, so to speak, of the Zipa took the form of a most elaborate ceremony. The prospective Zipa would betake himself—being carried upon a special sort of frame so arranged that twenty men standing under it could lift it upon their shoulders—to one of the five sacred lakes that still exist in the plateau, generally to the lake of Guatavita. There, stripped naked, his body was smeared with a resinous substance, upon which gold-dust was sprinkled in large quantities. Naturally, after this process the man appeared like unto a very statue of gold. Two other high dignitaries or chiefs, called Caciques, as nude as the Zipa, would go with him upon a raft of twisted reeds and slowly paddle into the centre of the lake. All round the shore was a dense crowd, burning a species of aromatic herb which produced clouds of smoke. On every hand was heard the sound of music, or, rather, of noises representing the music customary at all ceremonies. On the raft, at the feet of the Zipa, lay a huge pile of gold and emeralds. Each of his companions, too, had gold and emeralds, wherewith to propitiate the god in whose honour the ceremony was performed. One of the chiefs in the raft would raise a white flag and wave it. The noise on the shores became deafening, whilst the gilded Zipa threw into the lake all the gold and all the emeralds; then his companions would follow his example. When all the gold and emeralds on the raft had been cast into the lake, the people ashore also made their offerings of gold. Thus, after six years' fasting, the Zipa was (so to put it) anointed or qualified for kingship. On reaching the land the period of abstinence came to an end, and now that the Zipa was full-fledged Crown Prince, or Zipa (if his predecessor should have chanced to die), his first 19

act was to get gloriously drunk.

From the early days of the conquest, efforts were made to drain the five lakes, from which numerous samples of gold idols and roughly-worked gold have been recovered. Even recently a company was formed in England for that purpose. The tradition in this case being so universal, it seems rational to assume that vast treasures must lie at the bottom of these lakes, because the Chibchas were an ancient race, and their ceremonies must have been repeated during centuries. The country also is rich in emeralds and in gold—hence the belief in the large amount of treasure to be obtained from those lakes whose waters look so placid. 21

Some years ago in Bogotá an enthusiast, who sought to form a company for the purpose of draining one of the lakes, carried about with him a few samples of gold, idols and suchlike, which, so he said, had been brought to light by a man whom he named, a good diver, who plunged five times into the lake, and after each plunge brought up one of the specimens exhibited. He argued thus: The bottom of the lake must be practically studded with gold, since Mr. X. succeeded each time. There are millions in the lake, and all that is needed is a little money to drain it.

The argument seemed so strong, and the gold gleamed so bright in his hands, that he obtained numerous subscribers, until he had the misfortune to come across one of those sceptics impervious to reason, who, after listening to him, replied: 'Yes, I have no doubt that there must be millions in the lake, since X. at each plunge brought out a bit of gold like those you show me; but what I cannot for the life of me understand is why he is not still plunging—it seems so easy!' The tale went round the town, and the lake was not drained, nor has it been up to the present. 22

This gilding of the man is the germ of the legend of El Dorado, which has cost so much blood, and in search of which so many thousands and thousands of men have wandered during past centuries in all possible directions on their bootless quest.

23

CHAPTER III

Returning to the lake, and now gathering the information furnished by geology, whose silent annals are so carefully and truthfully recorded (being as they are beyond reach of man's little contentions and petty adjustments), we find that the original lake covered an area of about seventy-five square miles, and attained great depths. Its placid waters, beating possibly for centuries against the environing rocks, have left their marks, from which it may be seen that in some places the depth was 120 feet, and in others 180.

We cannot fix the date of the break in the mountains which allowed the drain to occur. So far man has not succeeded in grasping with invariable accuracy the chronology of the admirable geological archives to which we have referred, and in matters of this kind a discrepancy of a few hundred years more or less is accepted as a trifle scarcely worth mentioning. And possibly this may be right. For man's passage through life is so short that his conception of time cannot be applied to Nature, whose evolutions, though apparently protracted and very slow to see, in truth are sure to develop themselves harmoniously in every way, as to time inclusive. 24

But no matter how far back the draining of the great lake may have taken place, it had left its memory and impression, not only on the mountains and the rocks, but also in the minds of men. The legend ran thus: At one time there came among the Chibchas a man differing in aspect from the inhabitants of the plateau, a man from the East, the land where the sun rises, and from the low plains where the mighty rivers speed to the ocean. He had taught them the arts of peace, the cultivation of the soil, the division of time; he had established their laws, the precepts by which their life was to be guided, their form of government; in one word, he had been their apostle and legislator. His name was Bochica or Zuhe. He resembled in aspect the Europeans who invaded the country under Quesada.

It is asserted by a pious Spanish Bishop, who in the middle of the seventeenth century wrote the history of the discovery and conquest of the Chibcha kingdom, that the said Bochica was none other than the Apostle St. Bartholomew, as to whose final work and preachings there is (not to overstate the case) some obscurity. The good old Bishop states that, as the Christian faith, according to the Divine decree, was to be preached in every corner of the earth, it must have also been preached amongst the Chibchas, and that, as nothing was known with certainty about the final whereabouts of the Apostle Bartholomew, and he was not unlike the description made of Bochica by the Chibchas (which, by-the-by, was such that it might have fitted any white man with a long blonde beard), it is evident that the saint must have visited those Andine regions. Furthermore, he adds, there is a stone on one of the mountains, situated between the plateau of Bogotá and the eastern plains, which bears the footprints of the saint. This, to many people, is decisive, and I, for my part, am not going to gainsay it, since it serves two important ends. It explains the saint's whereabouts in a most creditable and appropriate fashion, and it puts a definite end to all doubts concerning Bochica's identity. We cannot be too grateful to those who thus afford pleasant explanations of matters which would otherwise be intricate and difficult, perhaps even impossible, of solution. 25

The legend went on to say that the god of the Chibchas (Chibchacum), becoming irate at their excesses and vices, flooded the plain where they lived, by turning into it several neighbouring rivers. The inhabitants, or such of them as were not drowned, took refuge on the neighbouring mountain-tops, where, animated by that fervour and love of the Deity which takes possession of every true believer when he finds himself thoroughly cornered, they prayed abundantly to the Bochica, whose precepts they had utterly forgotten. He, of course, took pity on them, and, appearing amidst them on the mountain-top one afternoon in all the glory of the setting sun, which covered him as with a sort of royal mantle, he dashed his golden sceptre against the mighty granite wall of the nearest

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mountain, which opened at the blow into the gap through which the waters poured, draining the lake, and leaving as a memorial of his power and his love for his chosen people those waterfalls whose thunder goes up like a perennial hymn to heaven high above the trees that crown the mountain-tops, and whose sprays are as incense for ever, wreathing on high at the foot of a stupendous altar. [27]

The cataract takes two leaps, first striking a protruding ledge at a distance of about 75 feet from the starting-point, a sort of spring-board from which the other mighty leap is taken. Close to the shore, at a distance of about 6 feet, on the very brim of the abyss, there is a rock about 10 feet square, which, when the waters are low, breaks the river, and appears like a sinking island in the mass of foaming waters. The rock is slippery, being covered with moss, which the waters and the mists keep constantly wet. Bolivar, the soldier to whose tenacity and genius Colombia and four other South American republics owe their political independence, once visited the cataracts, and stood on the very edge of the abyss; glancing fitfully at the small round island of stone that stood in the very centre of the waters, fascinated by the danger, he jumped, booted and spurred as he was, upon the stone, thus standing in the very vortex of the boiling current. After remaining there for a few minutes he jumped back. The tale is interesting, for few men indeed have the courage and nerve required, once upon the rock, not to fall from it and disappear in a shroud fit for any man, however great. [28]

After the little scene of the foundation of Bogotá, in what later on became the public square of the city, Quesada devoted himself to establishing a government. I cannot help thinking that challenges like that which he flung down for the purpose of establishing the right of property are, to say the least, peculiar. True it is that no one contradicted, and, according to the old proverb, silence gives consent. A comfortable little tag this, especially when you can gag the other side! And a most serviceable maxim to burglars, conquerors, and, in fact, all such as practise the art of invading somebody else's premises, and taking violent possession of the premises and all that may be found on them. What I cannot for the life of me understand is, how it is that, the process being identical in essence, so many worthy men and so many worthy nations punish the misunderstood burglar, and bestow honours, praise, and, so far as it lies in their power, glory, upon the conqueror. It seems a pity that the gentle moralists who act in this puzzling fashion have not found time to indicate the point, in the process of acquiring somebody else's property by violence and bloodshed, when the vastness of the undertaking transfigures crime into virtue. The average man would hold it for a boon if those competent to do it were to fix the limit, just as in chemistry a freezing or a boiling point is marked by a certain number of degrees of heat. What a blessing it would be for the rest of us poor mortals, who find ourselves beset by many doubts, and who through ignorance are prone to fall into grave errors! but as these hopes are certainly beyond fulfilment, and are possibly out of place, it is better to drop them. [29]

Quesada, after vanquishing the Chibchas and becoming lord of the land, did not have it all his own way. The fame of El Dorado existed all over the continent. Though peopled by numerous tribes, mostly hostile to each other, some knowledge of the power of the Chibcha Empire, covering over 5,000 square miles and including a population estimated at over a million and a half of inhabitants, had in the course of centuries slowly permeated to very remote parts of what is now known as South America. In the land of Quito, situated below the equator, it is said that the conquerors who had invaded it heard from an Indian of the wonderful El Dorado. The Indian's tale must have been enhanced with all the charms invented by a vivid imagination, playing safely at a distance. This set many of the conquerors on the road to Bogotá. Don Sebastian de Belalcázar, who had entered the continent by the Pacific, led his troops—not over 200 in number at the end of the journey—to the Bogotá plateau, thus making a march of several hundred leagues across forest and mountains, attracted by the renown of the land of El Dorado. Another expedition which had entered the continent by the north-east coast of the Atlantic, and had wandered along the Orinoco Valley for over two years, eventually found itself near the plateau, and entered it, so that, shortly after his arrival into the country and his conquest of it, Quesada found himself confronted with two powerful rivals. For the moment there was great danger that the conquerors might come to blows amongst themselves, but Quesada's political ability matched his military gifts, and arrangements were soon made by which the three expeditions were merged into one, gold and emeralds distributed amongst the soldiers, numerous offices created, taxes established, the Indians and their belongings distributed amongst the Christian conquerors, and the reign of civilization established to the greater glory of God, and that of his beloved monarch, the King of all the Spains. [30]

One detail deserves mention as an instance of tenacious though unpretending heroism. The men who had come along the Orinoco had wandered for many weary months, and at times had been on the point of starvation, so that all their leather equipment had been devoured. With the expedition marched a friar who carried with him a fine Spanish cock and four hens. During that long journey, which cost the lives of so many men, the murderous attempts made against this feathered family were past counting; yet the useful birds were saved, and formed the basis of an innumerable progeny in the land of Colombia. The incident seems trivial, but, if well weighed, the friar's sustained effort against others, and doubtless against himself, to save the precious germ, deserves the highest praise. [31]

After months of hunger, when the plenty found on the plateau had restored equanimity to the hearts of the conquerors, they must have felt how much they owed to the good friar, who, even if his sermons—about which I know nothing—may not have been of the best, had left behind him the hens to lay the egg so dear to civilized man, and the chanticleer to sing the praises of the Almighty and to remind everyone in this instance of the humble beings who serve Him and their fellow-creatures in such a practical way. [32]

It is not at all strange that the Spanish conquerors swallowed the wonderful tales of incalculable treasure to be found in different parts of the continent which they had just discovered. Columbus himself, in his second voyage, landed at Veraguas on the mainland, and reaped a most bountiful harvest of gold. Never before in the history of Spanish wars had such booty fallen to the lot of the common soldier as in that instance. Other expeditions in various parts of the continent were equally fortunate, so that they supported the belief that gold was inexhaustible. The ostensible object of the conquest was the conversion of the infidels to the true faith; officially the Government of the Metropolis proclaimed first and foremost its intense desire to save the souls of so many [33]

million men who groped in the darkness of heathenism. Doubtless many of the conquerors really thought that they were doing the work of God, but the great majority of them were certainly moved by more worldly ends and attractions.

The Indians, on their side, not only in Colombia but everywhere else, received the Spaniards in a friendly and hospitable way. Some warlike tribes there were, but it does not appear that their hostilities against the Spaniards began before these had shown their cruel greed and insatiable thirst for gold. The precious metals and jewels that had been accumulated amongst the tribes in the course of many generations were given freely to the Spaniards, who, believing that greater treasures were kept back from them, did not hesitate to recur to the cruellest methods of extortion, burning, pillaging, killing, and destroying everything in their way. 34

After a struggle which did not last long, the Indians—even those of riper civilization and better organized—were completely subdued, and the sway of the Spaniard established all over the land, whose former lords became the slaves of the conquerors.

Those who know the Indian of to-day in certain parts of the South American continent can hardly understand how at one time that same race possessed the qualities indispensable to the civilization which it had attained at the time of the Spanish conquest. Boiling the whole thing down to hard facts, we find that the Spaniards discovered a land wherein they found a people with civilization inferior to that of the old world; that this people, divided and subdivided in many tribes, received the conquerors hospitably, treated them generously, and in their ignorance considered them as superior beings; that they gave over to the Spaniards all the gold and treasures which the latter coveted, and that it would have been feasible for those superior beings to establish the civilization and the religion which they longed to propagate amongst the infidels, by methods worthy of the Christian faith which they professed. Instead of this, violence and bloodshed were the only methods employed, not to civilize, but to despoil the natives; and the right of force, brutal and sanguinary, was the law of the land. To this and its accompaniments the poets lifted up pæans of praise, the Church gave its blessing, history its acceptance, and, barring a handful of the just, no one gave a thought to the oppressed and helpless Indians whose sole crime was they were weaker than their aggressors. 35

Let us be thankful for what we have. Quintana, the great Spanish lyrical poet, pondering on these misdeeds and crimes, exclaims that they were crimes of the epoch, not of Spain. Fortunately it is, as we like to think, our privilege to live in an epoch when such things are impossible, when the mere thirst for gold, or its equivalent, cannot impel powerful nations to forget right and justice and to proclaim hypocritically that in so doing they are fulfilling the law of Him who said, 'Love ye one another,' and proclaimed charity amongst men as the supreme rule of life. Nowadays such wrongs as those perpetrated by the Spanish conquerors could not happen. Wars we have, and violence and destruction, and malcontents complain of them, saying that the same old burglarious spirit of brutal greed is the real cause of those wars; but those malcontents should not be (and, in fact, are not) listened to. I myself do not understand or pretend to explain where the justice of many wars comes in, but certainly they must be waged for good and honest ends, because the great and the powerful say that the ends are good and honest, that civilization and Christianity are served thereby; and it must be so since they say it, for they, like Brutus, are 'honourable men.' Let us be thankful, then, that we live in an age of justice and universal fairness amongst men! 36

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CHAPTER IV

But let us go back to our subject.

All this time we journeyed on. The stars had kept their watch above our heads, and the moon, as if passing in review the various quarters of heaven, had been moving from west to east, and was very high on the horizon. We were chilled through after the night's ride, longing to arrive at some wayside inn or *venta* where we might get something warm. The dawn was heralded in the far east by a broad streak of light, which grew rapidly, covering that side of the horizon like a fan, and soon bursting into glorious daylight. In equatorial regions there is hardly any dawn or twilight; in those latitudes there is no prelude of semi-obscurity that either waxes into day or wanes slowly into the dark, like the note of the lute, falling into silence so faintly and softly that none can tell the exact moment when it dies. At evening the sun sinks to the verge of the horizon, and disappears like a luminous orb dropped into empty space, and darkness sets in almost immediately. In the mountainous lands his last rays crown the highest peaks with a halo of glory, when darkness has settled over the valleys and mountain flanks. The moment the sun sets the stars assert their empire, and they are more numerous to the eye than anywhere else in the world. As for the moon, I have already spoken of its brilliancy. Another phenomenon connected with it is worthy of notice in our special case. During the various months of the trip which I am now describing, it seems to me that we had a full moon every night. I know that this is not quite in accordance with the established rules, or what in modern parlance is sometimes called the schedule of time for lunar service, but I am narrating my impressions, and, according to them, such is the fact. I should suggest that, as everything in Spanish lands is more or less topsy-turvy at times, the rules applicable to the moon in well-regulated countries do not hold good there, but I remember just in time that these irregularities apply solely to things human that happen 'tiles downwards,' as the Spaniards say, and cannot, therefore, affect the phenomena of Nature. As an explanation must be found for my permanent moon, an acceptable compromise would be that the ordinary moon did duty on its appointed nights, leaving the others—during which we wandered over mountain, through valley and forest, and on the waters of the silent rivers—to be illuminated for our own special benefit by some deputy moon, for whose services we were then, and still are, most grateful. 38

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As to the topsy-turviness of things Spanish and Spanish-American, the story is told that Santiago, the patron saint of Spain, being admitted into the presence of God, asked and obtained for the land of Spain and for its people all sorts of blessings: marvellous fertility for the soil, natural wealth of all kinds in the mountains and the forests, abundance of fish in the rivers and of birds in the air; courage, sobriety, and all the manly virtues for men; beauty, grace, loveliness, for the women. All this was granted, but, on the point of leaving, the saint, it is said, asked from God that he would also grant Spain a good government. The request was denied, as then, it is said, the Lord remarked, the angels would abandon heaven and flock to Spain. The story has lost none of its point even at the present day. 40

With the morning we reached the longed-for *venta*, a square, thatch-roofed hut, which stood by the roadside quite close to the mountain-range which we had reached after crossing the whole breadth of the plateau. Outside stood several pack-horses and mules, tied to the columns and waiting for their loads. Under the roof the space was divided into three rooms, one of them provided with a counter and shelves running along the sides of the walls, whereon bottles of various sizes and contents were exhibited, and where *chicha*, the national drink, was served to thirsty travellers. The middle room was what might be called the sitting, waiting, sleeping, and dining room all in one, and the other was the kitchen. The fire was built on the ground, several logs burning brightly in the open air, filling the room with smoke and heat. On three stones—the traditional stones of the first hearth—a saucepan was seen in full boil. In the parlour we saw several *peones*, or labourers, from the highlands on their way to the coffee estates to help in the harvest. Behind the counter, the *ventera*, barmaid and landlady all in one, buxom and wreathed in smiles, was already filling either the *totuma*, a large bowl cut from a gourd, containing about a quart of *chicha*, or the small glass of native whisky (*aguardiente*). 41

We jumped from our horses and entered the so-called sitting-room, envying the men who slept deep and strong as virtue on the bare ground. In a few minutes Fermin had brought from our saddle-bags the copper kettle used for making chocolate, and the paste for the preparation of that delicious drink. Within twenty minutes of our arrival we had before us the steaming cups of chocolate which had been boiled three times, in accordance with the orthodox principle which lays it down that this must be done if it is to be rightly done; it was well beaten and covered with that foam peculiar to chocolate brewed in hot water, which looks at you with its thousand eyes or bubbles that burst as the liquor is imbibed. Never was a cup of chocolate more welcome. The night seemed to have been interminable now that it lay behind. We would fain have stretched ourselves on the ground with the labourers, but to reach our destination that day it was necessary to lose no time; so after an hour's rest, during which our horses had had their *pienso* of fodder, we started again, now over more broken country, leaving the plain behind us, climbing and descending the road which was still available for carts and wheeled vehicles of all sorts. 42

And thus we advanced, seeing the sunrise darting its slanting rays, which were quite pleasant to feel in the early morning, until they became perpendicular, hot, and almost unbearable in the dusty road.

The horses, after the long journey, slackened their pace, and we looked upon surrounding Nature with weary eyes and that emptiness of feeling in the brain, that consciousness of a void somewhere, which always follow nights passed absolutely without sleep.

Towards four in the afternoon, after seventeen hours' steady ride, interrupted only by the short stay at the roadside *venta*, we reached the *hacienda* of Gambita, where one of our companions, Raoul, who had started ahead to prepare everything for the longer journey, was waiting for us. He came up quite briskly along the road, joyful at our arrival, full of spirits, and most anxious that the journey should be continued. He might well feel thus, as he had not passed a sleepless night on horseback like a knight-errant over field and moor. The desire for sleep and rest was overpowering—all else lacked interest for us; so that, alighting from our horses, we walked into the house, and, finding convenient sofas, stretched ourselves and slept. Like Dante after listening to the sorrowful tale of Francesca, we fell as a dead body falls, which goes to prove that identical effects may arise from totally different causes. Towards ten at night Raoul waked us. The supper waiting for us was quickly despatched, and our mules were saddled and ready. 43

As I have said before, mules are far preferable to horses when travelling on the mountain-paths, which are called roads in the Andes. The old Shakespearian query, 'What's in a name?' and the answer that a rose would smell as sweet even if called by another name, demonstrates the elasticity of words. To the average Englishman a road is a well-defined means of communication with or without rails, but offering all sorts of advantages for comfortable locomotion. Roads in the Andes at times are such as to invite the formation of legends. It is said that an American diplomatist, visiting a South American republic, alighted from the river steamer which had borne him far inland by the respective river, and was shown the mountain-road which he had to follow to reach the capital—a yellowish or reddish streak like a gash in the mountain, lying on its side like a rope carelessly thrown from the summit towards the base, following the sinuosities of the ground—and straightway remarked, 'I'm off home; this road is only fit for birds.' 44

On such roads the mule is the best friend of man. Had Richard III. found himself in the plight we all know of in some such locality, the generous offer of bartering his kingdom (which, by-the-by, at that moment was a minus quantity to him) would have made for a mule instead of for a horse, and although the phrase—'A mule! a mule! my kingdom for a mule!'—sounds comical (for these are questions of habit), probably the stock phrase would bring down the house with laughter. If the camel is called the ship of the desert, the mule deserves the title of the balloon of the mountains. 45

A friend of mine, knowing of my intended trip, had sent me his favourite mule, and well did the animal deserve the praises that its owner bestowed upon it; patient, sure-footed, collected, it carried me by precipice, ravine, ascended paths only fit for ants as lightly and carefully as if no weight were on its back. At the mud ditches which intersected the roads, and at times reached the proportions of miniature lakes, often treacherously deep, it would halt, looking at the waters with its big, ball-shaped, moist eyes, and no hint of mine, whether given with spur or

whip, could disturb its equanimity. At the right moment, heedless of my meddling, it would jump or ford or slide as circumstances required. At the beginning of our companionship, during those long days, I began by endeavouring to have a mind of my own as to the part of the road to be selected. I soon saw that my efforts were useless, for that wisdom of the mule which men call stubbornness was invincible. And, frankly, it was lucky that I soon gained this conviction, as certainly the mule knew far better than I what should be done. 46

How strange all this sounds in this land of railroads, automobiles, omnibuses, and wheeled conveyances of every sort! yet there is more genuine travelling, more real travelling, in going from one place to another on the back of a mule than in being cooped for hours or days in a railway compartment whirled along at lightning speed. What does one learn about the country, what does one see of its beauty or of its peculiarities, in this latter case? It may be transportation, it may be locomotion, but it is not travelling.

If I were a man of ample means, I would certainly endow that splendid beast which carried me during so many days, or provide a pension for it, so that it might spend the remainder of its life in the enjoyment of meadows ever green, luscious with rich grass and sweet with the waters of rippling streams.

From Gambita on, our cavalcade had something of the aspect of a caravan. There were Alex, Raoul, and myself, besides our servant Fermin, four muleteers, and ten or twelve mules laden with our luggage, tents, provisions, arms, and so forth. This mob of travellers was so unusual that the simple folks in the villages through which we passed said that his lordship the Archbishop was no doubt on a tour. On hearing this, and finding that the people began to kneel by the roadside, rather than shatter their illusion, I—knowing that I was the most episcopal-looking of our crowd—decided to give my blessing, which I did with due unction to the kneeling maidens and matrons along the roadside. 47

From Gambita we shaped our course eastward. It was our intention to reach the Atlantic through the Orinoco River. We were seeking one of the many affluents of the river Meta, which is itself one of the largest tributaries of the Orinoco. The affluents of the Meta start on the eastern slope of the mountains which form the plateau of Bogotá.

After three days' ride from Gambita, we reached the estate of a friend near the town of Miraflores, where we had to prepare ourselves for the last stage of the land journey which would carry us through the dense forests bordering the lower eastern slope of the Cordilleras, and constituting a sort of fringe around the endless plains that extend for thousands of miles from the foot of the Cordilleras to the ocean. Across these plains flow the mighty rivers, their numerous affluents, and the countless *caños*, or natural canals connecting the rivers amongst themselves, and thus forming a perfect network of natural waterways. 48

At Miraflores we stopped for twenty-four hours to recruit our forces and prepare everything, not only for the last stage of the land journey, but for the long canoe voyage that lay before us.

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CHAPTER V

From Miraflores on, the descent was continuous. Before penetrating into the forest, we skirted the mountain for a good many miles. The road, barely 4 or 5 feet in width, had been cut out of the rock, like the cornice of a temple. On the one side we had the bluff of the mountain, and on the other a precipice of hundreds, and even thousands, of feet in depth. The inclination at times was so steep that at a distance the line of the road on the mountain seemed almost vertical, and the file of mules with riders or with loads on their backs appeared like so many flies on a wall.

Up to the time that we reached Miraflores, we had followed what in Colombia are called, according to the loyal tradition still living on the lips, if not in the hearts, of the people, 'royal roads,' or *caminos reales*. These royal roads are paths along the mountain slopes, said to follow the old Indian trails, and the Indians had a peculiar way of selecting their paths or trails. They seem to have been impervious to fatigue, and Franklin's adage, now accepted the world over, that time is money, did not obtain with them, for they had no money and abundant time. When an Indian wanted to cross a range of mountains, instead of selecting the lowest summit, he fixed his eye on the highest peak, and over it would wend his way. The explanation given is that thus he accomplished two ends—crossing the range and placing himself in a position to see the widest possible horizon. Be that as it may, the Spaniards who settled in the colonies accepted the precedent, and the result is a most wearisome and unpleasant one in the present day. 50

But if as far as Miraflores we had the so-called 'royal roads,' from thence on in an easterly direction towards the plain we lacked even these apologies for roads. From Miraflores towards the *llanos*, along the slope of the Cordilleras, extends an intricate forest in its primeval state. We had to fight our way through the underbrush amongst the trunks of the huge trees, and at times really battling for each foot that we advanced. However, our guides, who were expert cattle-drivers—large quantities of cattle being driven through these forests from the plains to the uplands—knew the forest so well that the obstacles were reduced to their minimum. 51

We rode in Indian file, the chief of the guides ahead of the line cutting with his cutlass, or *machete*, the branches and overhanging boughs, thorns, reeds, creepers, and the like, that might strike us in the face as we rode under them. Next to him followed two *peones*, who cleared the ground, if necessary, from fallen branches or stones against which our mules might stumble. At first this slow mode of travel was most interesting. The light scarcely filtered through the dense mass of leaves, so that we felt as if we stood constantly behind some cathedral stained-glass window. The air was full of the peculiar fragrance of tropical flowers and plants; the orchids swung high

above our heads like lamps from the vaults of a temple, and the huge trunks of the trees, covered with creepers studded with multi-coloured flowers, appeared like the festooned columns of a temple on a feast-day. 52

However, there were certain drawbacks: the ground was so wet and spongy that the feet of the animals sank into it, and progress was accordingly very slow. Now and then we would come to a halt, owing to a huge boulder of rock or large trunk of a tree barring the passage absolutely. It was then necessary for the guides to seek the best way of overcoming the obstacle. Frequently we had to alight from our mules, as it was dangerous to ride them in many places. The guides and the muleteers walked on the uneven ground—now stony, and now slippery—with the agility of deer, sure-footed and unconscious of the difficulty. I had to invent a means of advancing: I placed myself between two of the guides, hooking one arm to a guide's on each side, and thus, though frequently stumbling, I never fell, but it may be readily understood that this mode of progression was neither comfortable nor rapid.

Another inconvenience was found in the thorny bushes, prickly plants, and trees which it was dangerous to approach, such as the *palo santo*, so called because it is frequented by a kind of ant of that name, whose bite is most painful and induces a slight fever. 53

On the second day the guide who was ahead fired his gun, and, on our asking him for the cause, said:

'Only a rattle-snake!'

As a matter of fact, he had killed a large specimen, said to be seven years old, as shown by the seven rattles that were taken from its tail. These things did not help to make the ride through the intricate forest more pleasant. We longed to see the open sky, which we could only discern through the veil or network of leaves and branches, and, by a phenomenon of sympathy between the lungs and the eyes, it seemed to us that we lacked air to breathe. Now and then we would come to a clearing, but we soon plunged again into the thick of it, and felt like wanderers gone astray in an interminable labyrinth or maze of tall trees, moist foliage, and tepid atmosphere.

The guides told us from the start that it would take from four to five days to reach the end of the forest. On the fifth day, towards noon, almost suddenly we came upon the open plain. Our hearts leaped for very joy, and we hailed the vast green motionless solitude, that extended far into the horizon before our eyes like a frozen sea, with a shout of joy. The trees of the forest stood as in battle-line in front of the endless plain; the sun darted its rays, which shimmered in the countless ribbons, some broader than others, of the silver streams sluggishly dragging their waves along the bosom of the unending prairie. Copses of *moriches*, an exceptionally graceful species of palm, dotted the plains in all directions. They seemed as though planted by the hand of man to hide behind them a castle, or some old feudal structure, which our imagination reared complete, full-fledged, with its walls, its roof, its turrets, and its legends. The site looked as if prepared for a large city about to be built, and waiting only for the arrival of its architects and inhabitants, even as the white page tarries for him that is to inscribe upon it a living and immortal thought. 54

To continue our journey on the *llanos*, the assistance of the guides was even more necessary than in the thick of the forest. To attempt travelling on the *llanos* without expert guides would be like seeking to cross the sea without a compass. 55

Once in the *llanos*, we came within a few hours to the hamlet of San Pedro, a cattle-trading station consisting of a few thatch-roofed houses, almost deserted except during the various weeks of the year specially fixed for traders and breeders to meet. Here we were at last at the end of the first stage of our journey. It was New Year's Day. Behind us lay the maze of forest, the meandering trails and paths, the sheer mountains, the cold fertile plateau, the native city, and the dead year. Before us we had the unlimited plain, the wandering rivers, and there, beyond all, like a promise, tossing, heaving, roaring, the sea, vast, immeasurable, the open roadway to the shores of other lands, some of them free, some of them perhaps hospitable, all girdled by the ever-beating waves which now die moaning on the sands, now dash their fury into foam on the rocks of the shore. 56

CHAPTER VI

Before parting from our friends the mules, it may not be amiss to speak of the equipment for man and beast which obtains in Colombian Andine regions. The saddle used—sometimes native, sometimes European—offers nothing striking in its composition, only that it is provided with a crupper which must be very strong—strong as a braced strap—since in the steep ascents or descents the girth alone would be insufficient. The men wear leggings or *zamorros*, which, in fact, are rather seatless trousers than leggings, 2 feet wide, held together by a strap across the loins, the outside consisting of tanned hide with the hair on it, and the inside of soft leather. They have the advantage of being very easily put on and slipped off when the rider alights. The stirrups are a large shoe wherein the whole foot is encased, made of copper or brass. At first those unfamiliar with the roads find them awkward, bulky, and heavy, but one soon learns that they are an indispensable protection, a sort of armour or shield against the stones, trees, and sundry other obstacles which the rider's foot is bound to strike. The *poncho*, which is a rectangular piece of woven cotton cloth about 5 to 6 feet long by 3 to 3½ feet broad, with a slit in the centre, is worn by all riders, and a similar piece of india-rubber cloth, only somewhat larger, is carried strapped to the back of the saddle to be used when rain comes on. The real native accoutrement, in which the saddle differs, having a pommel and being high-seated in the back, is not complete without the lasso, made of twisted raw hide, kept soft and pliable by the frequent use of tallow, which is rubbed into it. The expert herdsman can throw the lasso a long distance, either across the neck of the horses or right over the horns of the cattle; their aim is unerring. They fasten the lasso to the pommel of the saddle, and turn their horses backwards so that they may better withstand the pull of the lassoed animal. Spurs in Colombia are frequently worn, especially when you 57

ride somebody else's hired mule or horse. The spurs are more formidable in appearance than harmful in reality; the rollocks, instead of being small with little pinlike pricks as in Europe, are huge in size, about 3 inches in diameter, and each prick about 1½ inches; they make a great rattle on the slightest provocation, but are less painful to the animal than the little European spurs. Apropos of this, I remember the case of an individual who, finding the Colombian spurs too heavy, only wore one, arguing that if he managed to make one side of his mule get along, the other side would be sure to follow, and hence only one spur was needed. 58

On arriving at the wayside *venta*, or inn—and Heaven only knows how elastic a man's conscience must be to bestow the name of inn upon many of these *ventas*—the first care of an experienced traveller is to see to the welfare of his mules and horses. If available, Indian corn, brown sugar of the species called *panela*, which is uncrystallized solidified molasses, and the best grass that can be got in the neighbourhood, are given to the animals. If there happens to be an enclosure, the mules and horses are let loose in it, so that they may rest more comfortably; but these enclosures are very frequently a delusion and a snare, as inexperienced travellers find when, on rising early in the morning the next day, they are told that the animals have jumped over the fence or broken through, or in some other way disappeared, whereupon the muleteers, with the boys and men available in the locality pressed into the service for the occasion, scour the mountains and the neighbouring forests in search of the missing animals, the search lasting at times four and five hours, during which the traveller frets, foams, and possibly, if he be quite natural and unspoiled by convention, swears. 59

But notwithstanding these drawbacks, there is a special charm about this mode of travelling. In the morning about four the traveller arises from his not too soft couch. The first breakfast is at once prepared, and whilst it is being cooked the *mañanas*, or morning greeting, is indulged in, consisting of a little whisky, brandy, *aguardiente*, rum, or whatever spirits happen to be available. The hour, even in the hot lands, is cool. The stars still shine brightly in the heavens, and, were it not for the testimony of one's watch, one would believe one's self still in the middle of the night. The mules are brought forward, given their morning rations, the luggage is strapped on the 'cargo' mules, as they are called, and the others are saddled, and if all goes well, towards five or half-past, the journey begins. 60

There is a characteristic odour in the temperate and low lands of the tropics at that special hour of morning, and the dawn is announced by a hum in the ear, which, whilst it is still dark, is not of birds, but of the thousand insects that inhabit the forest. Finally, when the sun bursts forth in all his glory, a hymn seems to start in all directions, and the mountains vibrate with echoes of universal animation from the grass and the bushes, the running streams, and the nests in the branches of the trees laden with life. In the cool air of the morning the mind is quite alert, and the climbing and descending, the fording of rivers, the crossing of ravines and precipices, the slow ascent of the sun in the horizon, the fresh stirring of the breeze in the leaves, the reverberation of the light on the drops of fresh dew still hanging from the boughs and dotting the many-coloured flowers—all these things induce such a feeling of communion with Nature that one feels one's self an integral part of the large, immense, palpitating life that throbs in every direction, and the conception of immortality seems to crystallize, so to speak, in the mind of the traveller; but, of course, familiarity breeds contempt, and things beautiful, though they are a joy for ever, might tire Keats himself through repetition, so that at times travelling in this wise often seems slow, and one longs for some other means of locomotion. Yet I cannot help thinking with regret of the days when one will ask for a ticket—railway, 'tube,' balloon, or whatever it may be—from any place on earth to any other place. When that day arrives, men will be transported more rapidly from one place to another, but the real traveller will have disappeared, as the knight-errant disappeared, as the gentleman is being driven out from the world in these days when all things are bought and sold, and kindness and generosity are becoming empty words or obsolete relics of a past that very few understand, and fewer still care to imitate. 61

On the very outskirts of the forest, within half an hour's ride from the long file of trees, we came upon a group of thatch-roofed structures which form the so-called town or hamlet of San Pedro del Tua, a meeting-place, as I have said before, for herdsmen and dealers, deserted at the present season; the only persons who had remained were those whose poverty—heavier than any anchor—had kept them on the spot away from the Christmas and New Year's festivities that were being celebrated in all the towns and villages of the neighbouring region. Our first care was to find a roof under which to pass the night. We inquired for the man in power, namely, the *corregidor*, a sort of justice of the peace, mayor, sheriff, all in one, an official to be found in hamlets or villages like that which we had just reached. It was not hard to find him, since there were only fifteen persons in the place. We had a letter of introduction to him, which made things easier. He immediately took us to the best house in the place, which happened to belong to him. He asked us what good winds had wafted us thither, and whither we went. As we did not care, until having felt our ground a little more, to state frankly that we wanted to cross into the neighbouring republic of Venezuela, one of us—the most audacious if not the best liar of the lot—calmly stated that we had come to the *llanos* for the purpose of selecting and purchasing some land, as we intended to go into the cattle-breeding business, and possibly into some agricultural pursuit or other. The *corregidor* said nothing, but an ironical smile seemed to flit across his lips. When we had become more familiar with things and customs in the plains, we understood why he had not replied, and the cause of his almost imperceptible smile. To purchase land in the *llanos* would be tantamount to buying salt water in the midst of the ocean! People 'squat' wherever they like in those endless plains that belong to him who exploits them. The cattle, horses, sheep, are the elements of value to which ownership is attached, but the grazing lands belong to one and all, and as matters stand now, given the scarcity of population and its slow increase, such will be the condition of affairs for many a long year to come. 63

Once inside the house that the *corregidor* had placed at our disposal, and feeling more at ease with him, we told him of our intention to go to Venezuela, and asked for his assistance. His name was Leal, which means loyal; its sound had in it the clink of a good omen, and later events proved that he deserved it. He told us that our undertaking was by no means an easy one, nor one that could be accomplished without the assistance of expert and intelligent guides. He added that he knew the various ways to penetrate from Colombia into Venezuela, and that if we would accept his services he would accompany us. I need not state that the offer was accepted with 64

alacrity.

In the short journey from the skirt of the forest to the hamlet of San Pedro del Tua across the *llano* itself, we had time to remark that its aspect, once in contact with it, was quite different from the beautiful velvety green waving in the sunlight, soft and thick, that we had seen from a distance. The ground was covered with a coarse grass varying in height and colour, we were told, according to the season of the year. A great many small pathways seemed to cross it in all directions, formed by the cropping of the grass and the animals that moved to and fro on the plains. We crossed various *caños*, which are natural canals, uniting the larger rivers. As we were at the beginning of the dry season, these canals were low, and we forded them without any difficulty, but in winter —that is to say, in the rainy season—they attain the dimension of large rivers, and travelling in the *llanos* on horseback then becomes most difficult. We came frequently upon copses of the *moriche* palms already described. In the centre of these copses one always finds a cool natural basin of water, which is preferred by the natives as being the healthiest and the sweetest of the locality—*agua de morichal*. There must be something in it, for the cattle also prefer this water to that of the rivers and *caños*. 65

To our inexperienced eye the *llanos* bore no landmark which might serve as a guide to our movements. After a copse of *moriche* palms came another one, and then another one, and no sooner was one *caño* crossed than another took its place, so that without guides it would have been impossible for us to know whether we were moving in the right direction.

Leal advised us to lose no time, as the journey we had before us was a long one. Now that we were close to the beginning of our canoe journey on the rivers, we at once set to counting the belongings we had brought at such great expense and trouble from the high plateau of Bogotá, which seemed ever so far away when with the mind's eye we beheld it perched like an eagle's nest high up on the summit of those mountains that it had taken us about eighteen days to descend. As every inch of ground that we had left behind had been, so to say, felt by us, the distance appeared enormous, and the old city and the plateau seemed more like the remembrance of a dream than of a reality. We drew up our inventory, and found that we were the happy possessors of about eight cases, 50 pounds in weight each, containing preserved meats, vegetables, and food of all kinds in boxes, jars, tins, and so forth. Next came about six large jugs or demijohns of native fire-water, or *aguardiente*, a most useful and indispensable beverage in those latitudes, and about half a ton of salt, a most precious article in that region. We were going across the plains where there are neither salt-water fountains nor salt-bearing rock deposits, and we knew that as an article of barter, salt went far beyond anything else that we might possess, hence the large quantity which we carried. Our arsenal consisted of four fowling-pieces, six Remington and two Spencer rifles, plenty of ammunition, cartridges, gunpowder, one dozen cutlasses, or *machetes*, and four revolvers. We also had a box with books, our trunks with clothing, rugs, mosquito-nets, waterproof sheets, a medicine-chest, and two guitars of the native Colombian type; but what rendered us most important and steady service during the whole of that journey was a certain wicker basket, 1 yard long, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a yard wide, and 10 inches in height, which contained a complete assortment of cooking utensils and table-ware for six persons—plates, corkscrews, can-openers, frying-pans, and all that one could wish to prepare as sumptuous a meal as mortal man could desire in those vast solitudes. The saucepans, six in number, fitted one inside of the other, nest-wise; they were copper-bottomed, and proved of inestimable value. The tumblers and cups were also nested—pewter ware with porcelain inside. Everything was complete, compact, and so solid that, after the long journey with its vicissitudes, the wicker basket and its contents, though looking somewhat the worse for wear, were perfectly serviceable. 66

Leal, a man of simple habits, who had never been in a town of more than 4,000 or 5,000 inhabitants, on looking at that display of superfluous articles, argued that we were altogether too rich, and that our movements would be greatly facilitated were we to dispense with, say, two-thirds of what lay before him on the ground. We pleaded that since the worst had been accomplished, namely, the transportation across land, roads, and mountain trails, we might as well keep what we had, and only abandon it when forced to do so. Leal nodded his head, as one who sees that it is useless to argue, and nothing more was said on the subject. 67

Everything was prepared on that New Year's Day to start on the next day for the neighbouring cattle-farm of Santa Rosa del Tua, situated on the river Tua, one of the affluents of the Meta, which itself is one of the most important tributaries of the mighty Orinoco. These arrangements and decisions once arrived at, it was deemed prudent to celebrate our arrival into the place, and the arrival on the scene of life of the New Year, by a banquet worthy of the double occasion. 68

A heifer was slaughtered. Leal brought upon the scene, in front of the house where we were stopping, the whole side of the animal trimmed and prepared for roasting; he had passed through it, skewer-wise, a long thin pole of some special wood hard and difficult to burn. A huge bonfire was lit on the ground, and Leal fixed the lower end of the skewer quite close to the fire, holding the side of the heifer now right over the flame, now at a certain distance, turning and twisting it with consummate skill. The air was soon scented with that odour of roast meat which so deliciously tickles the nostrils of him who has an empty stomach. Looking at Leal doing the roasting, I realized Brillat-Savarin's dictum: *On devient cuisinier, on naît rotisseur*. Leal, if not a born poet, was a born roaster. Soon the meat was ready; our plates, forks, and knives not being sufficient for the crowd, we preferred not to bring them forth. Large leaves, green, fresh, and shiny, cut from the neighbouring banana and plantain trees, were laid on the ground both as a cover and as dishes. Leal unsheathed from his belt a long, thin shining knife as sharp as a razor, and with wonderful dexterity cut the huge joint, separating the ribs, so that everyone could have a bone with a large portion of hot, steaming, newly-broiled meat. Bread was not forthcoming, but there was an abundance of baked and roasted green plantains, crisp and mealy, which did service for the best bread; at least, so we thought. As for meat, never in my life do I remember having enjoyed such a delicious morsel: so the banquet consisted of meat and roasted plantains *à discretion*. A bottle of rum which belonged to our stock, and which I had forgotten in the inventory given above, went round the guests of that primitive board, warming our hearts into conviviality and good-humour. Finally came the big bowls of coffee, prepared according to the local fashion, which deserves to be described. The coffee is roasted and ground in the usual way, but these operations are only carried out just before the liquor is brewed. In a large saucepan cold 69

water, sweetened to the taste with black sugar, is placed over the fire, and the necessary amount of ground coffee is thrown into it before it gets warm. The heating should not be too rapid; when the first bubbles indicate that the boiling-point is about to be reached, the saucepan is withdrawn from the fire, and a spoonful of cold water dashed upon the surface of the hot liquor almost in ebullition. This precipitates the roasted coffee to the bottom, and gives a most delicious beverage, which, though not as strong as the coffee distilled according to other methods, retains all the aroma and flavour of the grain. The method is a very good one in localities where delicate coffee-machines cannot be easily procured, and it is in truth nothing more or less than the method of preparing Turkish coffee, with less fuss than is required for the Oriental variety. 71

We had soon grown, in that very first day of our encounter with him, to like Leal and to wonder at his intimate knowledge of the plains, the forests, and the rivers of that vast region. He was not a Colombian; he had been born on the shores of the river Gaurico, one of the affluents of the Orinoco. From boyhood he had thus come into daily contact with the mighty rivers and the deep and mysterious forests that cover their shores. His plan was that we should first follow the river Tua down to the Meta. On arriving at this latter river, we should have to find larger canoes, which would enable us to reach the Orinoco. Once on the Orinoco we would arrive at the settlement called Urbana, where we were sure to obtain larger craft in which to go as far as Caicara. Here we might wait for the steamers that go to Ciudad Bolivar. As to the time required for this journey, Leal said that, barring unforeseen obstacles, fifty days might suffice for us to reach Ciudad Bolivar. The only inhabited places which we would come across were first San Pedro del Arrastradero, then Orocue, and finally San Rafael, the last Colombian settlements where troops were stationed, and on inquiry Leal stated that on the river Meta it was necessary to follow the only channel that existed, so that it would be indispensable for us to touch at the various towns he had named, as there was no lateral *caños* by which we might avoid them, should we want to do so, as was the case in other parts of the plains, where one might either follow the main stream or some *caño* or tributary. If we wanted to take another river route, we might, on reaching San Pedro del Arrastradero, walk a short distance of about a mile to the *caño* called Caracarate, which would take us to the river Muco, an affluent of the Vichada, almost as large as the Meta River, and flowing into the Orinoco. But, said Leal, if we follow the Vichada instead of arriving on the Orinoco below the rapids, we shall strike that river above the rapids, and these alone will entail more trouble and difficulty and require more time than any other part of the river. For the moment no decision was taken. The question was left open to be solved as might be most convenient at an opportune moment. 73

74

CHAPTER VII

Early next morning, January 2, we started from the village, and, after a short ride across the plain, reached the river Tua, at the house of a small cattle-ranch called Santa Rosa del Tua.

The owner of the premises welcomed us most hospitably, and, to our joy, placed at our disposal two small canoes. No others were to be found there at the moment. However, they were large enough to carry us and our belongings, and accordingly we made ready for an early start next day.

The houses—or what serve for houses in the *llanos*—are built on the most primitive architectural principles. Poles, varying in thickness and in length, according to the proportions of the desired structure, are sunk into the ground at convenient distances, following the lines either of a perfect square or of a rectangle. Cross-beams are nailed or tied to the vertical poles at the required height; in the latter case the vertical poles are grooved, so as to give additional support. From the cross-beams on either side other beams are thrown, slanting so as to meet in the centre, thus forming the basis of the roof, which is again covered with reeds, upon which are placed several layers of palm-leaves, fastened by means of thin ropes to the slanting beams and poles; and thus the roof is completed. This finishes the house for use during the dry season. 75

During the wet season the sides are covered in the same fashion as the roof. The palm-leaf most used is that of the *moriche*, which abounds in the *llanos*.

When lying in the hammock during the dry season one feels the breath of the breeze as it blows across the plain, and may see the stars twinkling in the deep blue dome of heaven, like far-off tapers. The *llaneros*, or inhabitants of the plains, prefer to sleep in the open air, even without palm-leaf roofing above their heads. It is as though they felt imprisoned indoors, and pined for the ampler ether.

Here we had thus reached the last stage of our land journey. The real voyage was about to begin. 76

The reader who has followed me thus far will have gathered that there were three of us in this expedition—Alex, Raoul, and myself. With us came our servant Fermin, who adapted himself to the most urgent requirements, being now muleteer, now valet, now cook. Leal had engaged the services of several *peones* to paddle the canoes when we reached the Tua River; these numbered seventeen, so that, including Leal and ourselves, we formed a group of twenty-two men. The canoes were so small that we were packed like herrings, but, as it was impossible to obtain others, we had to make the best of them.

Raoul was a sportsman: more than once he had taken up arms against the harmless ducks that swarm at certain seasons of the year in the lakes studding the plateau of Bogotá. I had no personal knowledge of his powers, but, with the modesty and truthfulness characteristic of all hunters and fishermen, he carefully impressed upon us that he was a dead shot, and that when a bird, hare, or any furred or feathered creature, came within range of his gun its doom was certain. 77

Immediately upon our arrival at the river Tua, the shores of which are covered with a dense forest, he called our attention to the numberless birds to be seen, and as soon as he could manage it he left us, accompanied by one of the men, and was speedily lost to sight amongst the trees. Shortly afterwards the report of his gun reached us with such frequency that one might think he was wasting powder for mere love of smoke. By-and-by he returned, bringing with him about sixteen different birds of various sizes and kinds, sufficient to feed the whole expedition for one or two days. He was on the point of starting on another murderous excursion, when we remonstrated against the wanton destruction of animal life. Leal quietly observed that if Raoul thus continued wasting powder and shot he would soon exhaust our store of those indispensable articles, the lack of which might entail most serious consequences later on. On hearing this we held what might be called a council of war, at which it was decided that no more birds or game were to be shot than were absolutely indispensable. We were influenced 78 not so much by a feeling of humanity or love for the birds as by the fact that a long journey lay before us, that the loss of a canoe, the flooding of a river, or illness, or any accident that might befall us, would detain us for much longer than we had bargained. Raoul reluctantly listened to all these reasons, but, acknowledging their force, agreed to comply with them.

Our descent of the river Tua began next day. The waters were very shallow, owing to the dry season, and, as our men could not use their paddles, they punted the canoes down-stream. We were often detained by palisades which obstructed the current. These were formed by trunks uprooted from the shores by the river in its flood, and then jettisoned in the bed of the stream. In the dry season they stood forth like small islands, and gathered round them all the floating débris of the river. These palisades, with which we met very often, gave us a deal of trouble. We often had to jump out of the canoes and either drag or push them, as they would stick to the sandy bottom, and punting failed to make them budge. We took to this task cheerfully, and found it tolerable sport, until 79 one of our men was stung by a peculiar sort of fish, black and round, called *raya*. This lies hidden in the sand, and, when touched or trodden upon, stings, darting its harpoon into the ankle or the calf, leaving its point in the wound, a most painful one, which continues to smart for several days. The man, who was stung in our presence, cried and moaned like a child, so intense was the pain. After this we were decidedly chary of lending a hand in dragging or pushing the canoes, and—I must confess it to our shame—we would wade booted to the shore and wait till they had been got afloat again, rather than take the chances of being stung in our turn.

We had started at about six in the morning; towards five in the afternoon Leal began to cast his eyes about in search of a nice, dry, sandy beach upon which to pitch our camp for the night. So far we had always found some house or hut to sleep in; now, for the first time, we were faced by the necessity of camping in the open air without any roof whatever above our heads. We experienced a peculiar sensation of unwarranted fear—a dread arising, doubtless, from the force of habit in the civilized man, naturally averse to imitating the birds and the beasts, 80 which sleep under God's heaven and run all risks; but whatever our feelings, we were forced to accept the inevitable.

As soon as a satisfactory strip of beach was found, we jumped ashore. The canoes were dragged halfway out of the water, and tied with stout ropes to neighbouring trees to prevent their being carried away in case of an unexpected flood—by no means an impossible contingency. The men took out the mats upon which we were to sleep, and as there were swarms of the mosquitoes, sand-flies, and numerous insects which make life a burden in the early hours of the night on the shores of these rivers, the mosquito-bars, made of cotton cloth, were rigged up over the mats.

Fermin, who had been promoted to the rank of private cook for Alex, Raoul, and myself, prepared our supper, making use of the saucepans and sundry implements contained in our travelling basket. To prepare their meals, the men used a huge iron pot, which was soon tilted over a large fire.

We were four days on the river Tua punting or paddling, according to the depth of water. When we reached 81 the river Meta, we had already arranged the daily routine best suited to our requirements, and I might as well, once for all, describe it.

Our acting chief, Leal, ever watchful and alert, wakened us at about three in the morning. Every man had his appointed task: two of them prepared the indispensable coffee in the fashion of the land; others folded up the mats, the mosquito-bars, and whatever else might have been landed. Alex, Raoul, and I would in the meantime stand on the river brink, whilst two of the men poured upon us small cataracts of water drawn from the river in the *coyabras* or *totumas* cut from native gourds, which form an indispensable part of the domestic arrangements in the *llanos*. It would have been sheer madness to bathe in the river, with its *rayas*, or water-snakes, or perhaps some shy, dissembling alligator in quest of a tasty morsel.

Sandy beaches are the best places for camping on the shores of tropical rivers. They are dry, clean, soft, and perfectly free from snakes, scorpions, tarantulas, and all such obnoxious creatures, which are more likely to be found amongst the high luxuriant grass and the leafy trees. 82

Between four and five, as soon as it was ready, every man drank a large goblet of coffee and a small glass of aniseed *aguardiente*, which is said to be a specific against malaria. The men's faith in the virtue of the distilled spirit was astounding; they never failed to take it, and would even ask for more, lest the quantity given were not enough to protect them from the dreaded illness. Though the merits of quinine are more universally acknowledged, it did not seem to be as acceptable, nor to be coveted with equal greediness.

We generally started at about five in the morning, paddling steadily till about eleven, when we landed as soon as we found a suitable spot, if possible shaded with trees. Here we would hang the hammocks, prepare the midday repast, and wait until three, letting the hottest hours of the day pass by. At this time the sun seemed to dart real rays of fire upon the burnished waters, whose reflection dazzled and blinded our eyes.

About three in the afternoon we would start again for two or three hours more, until a convenient beach was 83

found; once there, the camp was formed without delay, the canoes tied up, the mats spread, and in a few minutes two huge bonfires, made of driftwood, sent their glad flames flickering in the night air. After supper we crept under the mosquito-bars, and waited for Leal to call us in the morning.

The seasons in the plains, as is well known, are sharply divided into dry and rainy. The first lasts from May to November, and the second from November to May. During the wet season it rains from eighteen to twenty hours out of the twenty-four; showers are not frequent during the dry season, but they fall now and then.

The third or fourth night that we spent on the banks of the Tua, I was awakened by feeling a moist sheet over my face, and at once realized that the heavy rain had beaten down the mosquito-bar. There was nothing for it but to cover myself with the waterproof *poncho*, sitting up for greater convenience, and disengaging myself from the fallen mosquito-net. There we all sat helpless under the dense cataract. The beach, slanting towards the river, bore with it the waters from the higher ground, and as my body made an indenture in the sand, I felt on either side a rushing stream. Fortunately, the shower was soon over, the bonfires were heaped with driftwood and blazed forth joyously. Coffee was specially prepared for the occasion, and we sat in the genial warmth of the flames until the sun burst forth on the horizon. That morning we did not start as early as usual: the tents and covers were spread in the sun, and after an hour or so were again dry and soft. Then we started on our journey, leaving behind us the discomforts of the night. The rain seemed to have gladdened the forest, and brightened the trees and bushes into a livelier green. During the journey we underwent a similar experience upon two or three other occasions.

As for food, we had a comfortable supply, and hardly a day passed without our having either some fine bird, or at times a larger piece of game in the shape of a species of wild-boar, fairly plentiful in that locality, the flesh of which is quite agreeable after one learns to eat it. Besides game, we also had plenty of fish. All this without counting the salt meat and tinned provisions. The birds most abundant were ducks of various descriptions, wild turkeys, and a beautiful bird of fine dark-bluish plumage, similar to a wild turkey, called *paujil* by the natives, the meat of which greatly resembles that of the pheasant.

At about this stage of the journey an incident took place which shows how even the humblest tasks in life require a certain degree of ability and experience. One day on the river Tua, Raoul—who, as I have said, was a great hunter before the Lord, and had no more esteem than most men for the milder arts—had brought down a beautiful duck of exceptional size, and of the kind known as ‘royal duck.’ Not satisfied with his triumph as a Nimrod, he took it into his head to cook the bird himself and rival the achievements of Vattel or Carême. He invited me to help him in his undertaking. My culinary attainments being purely of a theoretical kind, I promised him my moral support and hearty co-operation in the shape of advice. We invited Alex to share our wonderful supper, to which he replied that, being aware of the perils most incident to the efforts of inexperienced cooks, however enthusiastic they might be, he preferred the men’s supper, which, though humbler, was far more to be depended on. Heedless of this taunt, Raoul went on with his work. A pot filled with water was placed over the fire, and as soon as it was boiling the bird was plunged into it. In due course Raoul began to pluck valiantly; feathers black and bluish fell from his hand numerous as flakes of snow in a winter storm. When he began to tire after a while, I took the bird in hand, and continued the task, the feathers falling like dry leaves in the autumnal forest. After half an hour of steady work, when the ground was literally covered with black feathers, that blessed bird seemed untouched. We were beginning to feel anxious and hungry, and the tempting whiffs from the large iron pot, where the men were stirring their stew, stung our nostrils in a tantalizing fashion. However, it was now a question of pride and self-esteem, and we were bound to cook the bird at any cost. By-and-by Alex, holding a steaming plate in his hand, came to us and invited us to eat. Raoul rejected the offer, and though I was most anxious to accept it, I felt bound in loyalty to stand by him. We told Alex that we wanted to reserve the fulness of our appetite for our delicious bird, to which Alex replied that by the time that bird was ready we should certainly be hungry enough to devour it, leaving the bones quite clean. Raoul and I took turns at plucking the duck, which at last seemed to yield, showing a few whitish specks here and there devoid of all feathery covering. Seeing our plight, Fermin, who had stood by, not being called upon to help, seized the bird, declaring that we had allowed it to become chilled, and that the perfect plucking of it was well-nigh impossible. However, he undertook the job most courageously, and finally, taking advantage of the shades of night, which facilitated a compromise, we dropped that royal duck into the boiling water and pretended to enjoy our supper, such as it was, when ready. How much we ate is a question as to which I need not go into detail here, but I must own that in lying down upon my mat under the mosquito-bar I felt famished. From that day onwards both Raoul and I decided to forego all interference in matters culinary, beyond occasional advice. I have no doubt that, had Fermin or one of the men undertaken the task, we should not only have had our supper much sooner, but a dish fit for any man’s palate.

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CHAPTER VIII

On the fourth day, about two hours’ sail from the confluence of the Tua with the Meta River, we stopped at a large cattle-ranch called Santa Barbara. The owner invited us to a dinner—the inevitable dishes of the *llano*: meat roasted over a bonfire, plaintains and coffee.

The ranch consisted, we were told, of about 10,000 head of cattle, and was typical of the ranches to be found on the *llanos* of Colombia and Venezuela.

Here, in the person of what might be called the sub-manager, whose name was Secundino, we came face to face with a real tiger-hunter.

After dinner I asked Secundino how men fleeted the time away in that lonely region beyond the din of civilized life. His statements corroborated what I had heard before, that there is no ownership of land in the *llanos*; the herds graze freely over the plains, the animals being practically wild, and kept together by the presence amongst them of a few tame cattle which, being accustomed to the presence of man, will remain in the neighbourhood of the houses or *caneyes*. Another great attraction to the cattle is the salt which is strewn upon large slabs of stone or flat boards. By these two devices, thousands of animals are kept within a comparatively short distance of the ranch. 90

To enable each ranch-owner to brand the cattle belonging to him, *rodeos* or round-ups are held two or three times during the year. These *rodeos* are gatherings of the herds. The men ride out in all directions from the ranch, and drive the cattle towards the *corrales*. In this task they are greatly helped by the presence of the tame animals, which are easily led or driven as required, and are always followed by the others.

Once in the *corrales*, the branding begins. A red-hot iron is used, shaped either to form one or two letters or some special sign which constitutes the trade or hall mark, so to speak, of the respective ranch. The animals are forced to pass through a long, narrow enclosure between two fences, and are branded as they go by; but with animals that give a great deal of trouble a different method is followed. This consists in starting the bull, heifer, or cow, as the case may be, on the run. A man on horseback follows, and when both the horse and the bull have attained sufficient impetus, the man seizes the bull by the tail, and with a sudden twist turns it over on its side, jumping at once from his horse to pass the tail under the bull's leg; this compresses certain muscles, prevents all motion, and leaves the fallen animal helpless. The branding is then done without any difficulty, either on the fore or the hind quarters. 91

Secundino told us that this way of throwing the cattle down was not confined to the branding season, but that it formed a frequent sport amongst herdsmen in the plains, as it required great skill to accomplish it. Another sport in which he and his friends indulged, and which he described with great zest, was riding wild bulls. The process consists first in throwing the bull to the ground, whereupon a thick rope is tied as a girdle, only that it is placed quite close to the withers and right under the forelegs of the animal. All this time the bull has been held on the ground, bellowing and panting for sheer rage; as soon as the rope is ready, the intending rider stands by the side of the animal with his two hands stuck between the rope and the skin, on either side of the spine, and the moment the bull is let loose and stands on its feet the man leaps on its back. Then follows a wonderful struggle: the beast, unaccustomed to any burden, rears and plunges, springs backwards and forwards with great violence; the man, always spurred, increases the fury of the animal by pricking its sides. His two arms, like bars of iron, stand rigid, and man and bullock seem as though made of one piece. At last the bull is exhausted, and sullenly acknowledges the superior force of the rider; but it takes rare courage and strength to accomplish this feat. 92

After describing these and other pastimes, Secundino quietly added:

'Whenever my work leaves me time, I kill tigers.'

He said this unpretentiously, yet with a certain air of self-consciousness that must have brought the shadow of a doubting smile to my lips. Secundino saw this, and, without appearing to take notice of it, invited us outside the house, and showed us, at a certain distance from it, lying on the ground, ten tigers' skulls, some of which bore traces of having been recently cleansed from skin and flesh. 93

'You see,' he added, 'that I have some proofs of my tiger-killing!'

He told us that the tigers were the worst enemies of the cattle-farmer.

'Other animals,' he said, 'will take just what they want, but the tiger is fierce, cruel, and kills for the sake of killing. If he should happen to get into an enclosure containing twenty or thirty young calves, he will kill them all, and take one away with him. We are at open and constant warfare with the tigers,' he added, 'and there is no truce between us.'

The *llaneros* usually kill tigers by spearing them. Referring to this, Secundino said that doubtless it was more dangerous than shooting the beast down at long range with a Winchester or a Remington rifle; 'but,' he went on to say, 'powder and lead are expensive, cartridges are difficult to obtain, and when once exhausted your weapon is no better than a broomstick. The spear, however, is always ready, and never fails you. When I go out tiger-hunting I take my dogs, who follow the scent and guide me. I carry with me, besides the spears, a muzzle-loader, in case of emergency. The moment the dogs see the tiger they give cry; the beast seeks higher ground, and the fight with the dogs begins at once. The tiger is afraid even of a cur. The dogs that we have here are well trained, and though at times they are killed by the tiger, that seldom happens. I follow my dogs, keeping the animal well in sight, with my spear ready, and at the right moment dash forward and plunge it into his breast. If the blow is a good one, that ends it. Now and then it is necessary to fire the rifle into him; but this is a great pity, owing to the waste of lead and gunpowder.' 94

I am trying to repeat here word by word Secundino's quiet statement. It sounds fanciful and exaggerated, but all those who have travelled over the plains of either Venezuela or Colombia will have heard that such is the commonest mode of tiger-killing amongst the *llaneros*. The tiger of these latitudes, however, is not the same as the tiger of India and other parts of Asia. It is smaller, but not less ferocious; it is spotted, and not striped. The spear used is very long, made of very hard wood, and has a most murderous appearance. 95

Secundino, after telling me of his short way with tigers, asked me to handle the weapon, and generously gave me some instructions as to the exact poise to be adopted for striking a blow, explaining to me how dangerous it might be were I to forget the rules which he could recommend from experience. To begin with, I could hardly lift the spear, and, then, there was practically no chance of my ever going to seek a tiger in his lair. Secundino, however,

was profoundly in earnest, and, rather than disabuse him or hurt his feelings, I solemnly promised him that I would never kill tigers otherwise than in strict conformity with his advice, and that at the first opportunity I would practise throwing the spear and poisoning my body, so as to make sure.

Towards evening, as we were about leaving, when I was already seated in the canoe, whilst Leal was still ashore, I overheard these words passing between him and Secundino:

'How far are you going, Friend Leal?'

'Down to the Orinoco, to accompany these gentlemen.'

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'How are you coming back, by land or by water?'

'I do not know yet—that depends.'

'Well, all right; if you come this way, I should like you to tackle a horse that we have here, which no one seems able to ride, and which I dare not tackle myself.'

'Never you mind,' answered Leal; 'I will see to it when I return.'

Here was a revelation. Leal's prowess grew in our estimation. This guide of ours was called upon to break in a horse which Secundino, the tiger-hunter, whose title to the name, if devoid of diplomas or academic signatures, was vouched for by the ten tiger-skulls which we had seen, would not dare to ride himself!

On we went towards the Meta River, leaving our friends on the shore shouting to us messages of good speed. We soon noticed that our canoe, being lighter in draft, had left the other far behind it.

It darkened much earlier than we expected, and to our great regret we saw that the second canoe could not catch us up, which was annoying, as supper, beds, and everything else, with the exception of a demijohn of aniseed *aguardiente*, were in it. We landed at the first beach that we struck, hoping against hope that the stragglers might overtake us.

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Time had passed so agreeably at Santa Barbara, listening to Secundino's tales, that we had not noticed how late it was. It seemed to us, furthermore, that darkness had set in earlier than usual. On hearing some remark to that effect, Fermin observed that the sun had set for us that day earlier than usual. He laid stress upon the words 'for us,' and, on being asked what he meant thereby, said that the darkness had been caused by a cloud which had interposed itself between us and the setting sun, thus bringing night earlier than usual.

'What nonsense are you talking about?' said Raoul. 'There is no cloud in the matter; we went on talking and talking, and forgot the time.'

'No, sir,' Fermin said, without moving a muscle; 'I know what I am talking about. The cloud was formed by the feathers of that bird which we tried to pluck yesterday; they are so many that they darken the light of the sun!'

Up to this day I cannot say what happened. I do not know if we mistook the hour of the day and were overtaken by night, or if, in truth, as Fermin asserted, the wrathful ghost of the mishandled duck spread its black feathers above our heads, thus forming a mantle like the mantle of arrows which the Spartan warriors asked the Persian invaders to fire at them, so that they might fight in the shade. This problem, which contains historical, astronomical and atmospherical elements, will remain for ever as dark and mysterious as the feathers of the dead bird.

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CHAPTER IX

Night soon asserted her sway. The blue vault of heaven, alive with innumerable stars, was clear and diaphanous; no cloud was to be seen. The evening noises died away, and the dead silence was only broken now and then by a vague rumour wafted mysteriously through space—the wash of waters on the shore, or possibly the lisp of forests by the river. We gave up all hope of the other canoe arriving that night, and faced the inevitable—no supper, no beds. As in our own canoe we carried a demijohn of *aguardiente*, one or two generous draughts were our only supper. We were not hampered by excess of riches or of comforts; as to the selection of our beds, the whole extent of the beach was equally sandy and soft; but, having slept for many nights on the shores of the Tua, and knowing that we were at its confluence with the Meta, for the sake of a change—a distinction without a difference—we stretched ourselves full length on the side of the beach looking to the Meta River.

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The water-course, practically unknown to civilization, appeared to me as I lay there like a wandering giant lost amidst the forests and the plains of an unknown continent. The surface of the waters sparkled in the starlight like hammered steel. My thoughts followed the luminous ripples until they were lost to sight in the darkness of the opposite shore, or, wandering onwards with the flow, melted into the horizon. Whither went those waters? Whence came they? What were their evolutions, changes, and transformations? Idle questions! Flow of life or flow of wave, who but He that creates all things can know its source and its finality? Idle cavillings indeed!

Suddenly, as drowsiness had begun to seize me, a wonderful phenomenon took place. There from the midst of the waters arose an indistinct yet mighty figure; high it stood amidst the waters which parted, forming a sort of royal mantle upon its shoulders; it gazed upon me with the sublime placidity of the still seas, the high mountains,

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the unending plains, the primeval forests, and all the manifestations of Nature, great and serene in their power and majesty. And the figure spoke:

'Listen to me, O pilgrim, lost in these vast solitudes; listen to the voice of the wandering streams! We rivers bring life to forest and valley; we are children of the mountains, heralds of continents, benefactors of man. My current, powerful and mighty though it seems, is but a tiny thread of the many streams that, mingled and interwoven, so to say, go to form the main artery of whirling, heaving water called the Orinoco. From north and south, from east and west, we all flow along the bosom of the plains, after having gathered unto ourselves the playful streamlets, the murmuring brooks that swell into torrents and dash down the mountain-sides, filling the hills and the intervening valleys with life and joy. They come from the highest slopes—nay, from the topmost peaks crowned with everlasting snow, the sources of our life; down they rush, and after innumerable turns and twists, after forming now cataracts, now placid lakes, reach the plain, and in their course they broaden the large streams which in turn merge with others in the huge basin, and form the vast artery that drains the surface of a great part of the continent, and bears its tribute to the Atlantic Ocean. Yea, verily indeed, we rivers are as twin brothers of Time; the hours pass and pass, ceaseless as our waves; they flow into Eternity, we into the bosom of the great deep. This land, the land of your birth and of mine, to-day an unknown quantity in the history of the world, is a destined site of a mighty empire. The whole continent of South America is the reserve store for the future generations of millions of men yet unborn. Hither they will come from all parts of the world: on the surface of the globe no more favourable spot exists for the home of mankind. Along the coast of the Pacific Ocean runs the mighty backbone of the Cordillera like a bulwark, high, immense, stately; above it, like the towers and turrets in the walls of a fortified city, rise the hundred snow-capped peaks that look east and west, now on the ocean, now on the ever-spreading undulating plains, and south and north to the line of mountains extending for thousands of miles. 102

'In the very heart of the tropical zone, where the equatorial sun darts his burning rays, are the plateaus of the Andes, hundreds of square miles in extent, with all the climates and the multitudinous products of the temperate zone. In the heart and bowels of the mountains are the precious metals coveted by man's avarice and vanity, those forming the supreme goal of his endeavours; and the useful—indeed, the truly precious—metals, coal, iron, copper, lead, and all others that are known to man, exist in a profusion well-nigh illimitable. The trade-winds, whose wings have swept across the whole width of the Atlantic Ocean, laden with moisture, do not stop their flight when the sea of moving waters ceases and the sea of waving grass begins. Across the plains, over the tree-tops of the primeval forests, shaking the plumage of the palm-trees, ascending the slopes of the hills, higher, still higher, into the mountains, and finally up to the loftiest peaks, those winds speed their course, and there the last drops of moisture are wrung from them by that immeasurable barrier raised by the hand of God; their force seems to be spent, and, like birds that have reached their native forest, they fold their wings and are still. The moisture thus gathered and thus deposited forms the thousand currents of water that descend from the heights at the easternmost end of the continent, and convert themselves into the largest and most imposing water systems in the world. Thus is formed the Orinoco system, which irrigates the vast plains of Colombia and Venezuela. Further south, created by a similar concurrence of circumstances and conditions, the Amazon system drags the volume of its wandering sea across long, interminable leagues of Brazilian forest and plain. Its many streams start in their pilgrimage from the interior of Colombia, of Ecuador, of Peru, and of Bolivia, and these two systems of water-ways, which intersect such an immense extent of land thousands of miles from the mouth of the main artery that plunges into the sea, are connected by a natural canal, the Casiquiare River, so that the traveller might enter either river, follow its course deep into the heart of the continent, cross by water to the other, and then reappear on the ocean, always in the same boat. 104

'If the wealth of the mountains is boundless and virgin, if on the slopes and on the plateaus and the neighbouring valleys all the agricultural products useful to man may be grown—and the forests teem with wealth that belongs to him who first takes it—if the rocks likewise cover or bear immense deposits of all the metals and minerals useful to man, the lowlands and the plains offer grazing-ground for untold herds of cattle and horses, and further to the south beyond the Amazon, running southward, not eastward like the Orinoco and the Amazon, the Parana unrolls its waves, which, after leaving the tropic, enter the southern temperate zone, irrigating for untold miles the endless pampas of Argentina and Uruguay. In very truth, this continent is the Promised Land. 105

'In your pilgrimage along the waters of the Orinoco, you will see all the wonders of tropical Nature. Now the forests will stand on either bank close along the shores in serried file, and moving mirrors of the waters will reflect the murmuring tops of the trees, noisy and full of life as the winds sweep by in their flight, or else the frowning rock, bare and rugged, will stand forth from the current like the wall of a medieval castle. Now the trees will open a gap through which, as from under a triumphal arch, the current of a river, a wanderer from the mysterious and unknown depths of the neighbouring forests, pours forth into the main stream and mingles with the passing waters, joining his fate to theirs, even as the High Priest of some unknown creed might issue from the temple and mingle with the passing crowd. Some rivers that reach the main artery have had but a short pilgrimage, the junction of their many waters having taken place at no great distance from the main stream; others have had a long wandering, sometimes placid and serene, sometimes amidst rocks and boulders, with an ever frenzied and agitated course like the lives of men striving and struggling till the last great trumpet sounds. The course of the river will be studded with islands large enough for the foundation of empires, and before reaching the sea the river will extend and spread its current into a thousand streams, as if loth to part from the Mother Earth it sought to embrace more firmly in its grasp, and our waters will flow into the unplumbed deep, there to mingle with those of all the rivers, whether their course has been through lands alive with civilization, swarming with multitudes of men on their shores, laden with the memories of centuries and famous in history, or whether they, like us, have wandered through vast solitudes where Nature is still supreme in her primeval pride, as yet unpolluted by the hand of man. There we all meet, and to us what men call time and its divisions exist not, for all the transformations that affect mankind are as naught to us who form part and parcel of Nature itself, who only feel time after the lapse of æons which to the mind of man are practically incomprehensible. Seek to learn the lesson of humility, to acknowledge the power of the Creator, who gave to 107

man what we rivers and all other material things can never hope for—a future beyond this earth, higher, brighter, infinite, eternal.'

The figure seemed to sink slowly under the mantle of waters that had covered its shoulders; the sun was rising in the eastern horizon, the rumour of awakening Nature filled the air with its thousand echoes, and drifting rapidly towards us we saw Leal with the canoe that had remained behind the night before.

On telling Alex, Raoul, and Fermin my experience, and asking in good faith what they had thought of the visitation, they looked askance at me. It seems that sleep had overpowered them; they had not seen the river-god of the Meta, and irreverently set down the whole occurrence to the quality of my supper the preceding night. It is ever thus with unbelievers; they will seek some material or vulgar explanation for that which they cannot understand and have not seen. 108

That very morning, after the necessary arrangements and the usual morning coffee, we started down the Meta River. If we might have called the navigation on the Tua somewhat amphibious, navigation on the Meta, specially for such small craft as we possessed, seemed to us as on the open sea. Our first care was to seek larger canoes. Leal guided us through one of the neighbouring *caños* to a cattle-ranch, where he expected to suit our requirements. This *caño* chanced to be famous for its snakes, principally of the kind called *macaurel*, a dark brownish species, varying from 2 to 4 and 5 feet in length, and from $\frac{1}{4}$ inch to 2 inches in diameter. When in repose they coil themselves around the branches of the trees, and their bite, if not cured immediately, is fatal. Leal shot one of the horrible reptiles in the body; the linking of the rings that take the place of vertebræ being thus unloosened, the coils became wider, the animal lost its grip and fell into the water, staining it with a blue-greenish reflection of a metallic hue. It seems that one shot of the smallest size is sufficient to kill these snakes, provided it breaks one of the rings above mentioned. I shuddered as we passed under the trees, knowing that many of these dreaded reptiles must be above our heads. The *caño* in some parts was so narrow and the forest so dense that it was impossible to avoid the overhanging branches, and when I thought that we should have to go over the same route next day, disgust and a feeling of dread took possession of me. By the time we reached our destination, after a journey of eight or ten miles, over twenty of these creatures had been brought down. We obtained two large canoes, which seemed to us like veritable ships or floating palaces compared to the little craft we had used for so many days. We turned to the river Meta, and did not feel safe until we had left the *caño* behind, and could breathe once more in the open air on the bosom of the large river, with only heaven above our heads. 109

The Meta River, which flows entirely upon Colombian territory, describes large winding curves in its course eastward towards the Orinoco. Its banks are high and well defined, its channel fairly steadfast even in the dry season. This is not common, most of these rivers often shifting their course, to the despair of pilots and navigators. Both sides of the Meta we knew were occupied, or, rather, frequently visited, by various wild tribes. Now and then Leal would point out a part of the shore, stating that it belonged to some ranch, but how he could know was a mystery to us, as no visible difference existed.

The temperature, though quite hot in the middle of the day, was agreeable, and even cool, in the early morning and a greater part of the night. The trade-wind, which blows steadily every day during the dry season, at times gathered such force that we were compelled, going against it as we did, to wait long hours for it to subside. Our canoes were not so arranged as to enable us to hoist sail and tack against the wind.

On the river Meta we observed a large species of fish, which, had we been at sea, we should have identified at once as porpoises. The men told us that they were called *bufeos*, and in reality came from the sea, having ascended the waters of the Orinoco for thousands of miles, and branched off into the Meta River. One of the men, illiterate like all his fellows, but versed in forest, mountain and plain lore, stated that those *bufeos* were the friends of man; that they loved music and song; that they would follow a boat or canoe whence the echoes of singing or of some musical instrument could be heard for miles and miles at a time; that when they were present in the water the alligators and all the other enemies of man kept away, or were driven away by the *bufeos*; and that whenever by chance the fishermen caught one of these, he would at once release it in remembrance of their friendship for mankind. These were, therefore, our old-time friends the porpoises. 111

The simple tale of the man, one of our paddlers, who had never been in a city in his life nor seen any of the wonders of our times, to whose mind such words as civilization, Fatherland, and religion, as well as many others that form the glib vocabulary of modern man, were mere empty sounds or air, could not but set me a-thinking—first, as to the value of those words. Fatherland, our country, his and mine, yet how different the conception, and how those consecrated, holy words are abused by the tricksters, great and small, who control and exploit mankind for their own benefit! Patriotism should consist in justice and equality of rights and tolerance to all, whereas, in fact, it is but a mask for the greed and avarice of the strong. My countryman is he whose ideals are identical with mine. What makes another being my fellow-man and my brother is an identity of ideals, not a concurrence of geographical conditions of birth. If he who is born ten thousand miles away in an unknown climate and in a different latitude shares with me the love of justice and of freedom, and will struggle for them even as I would, why should we be separated by conventional distinctions which benefit neither him nor me nor justice nor freedom as ideals? 112

I thought, are these lands and this vast continent still virgin in the sense that humanity has not exploited them? are they to be the last scene of the stale criminal imposture now called civilization? Are men to come by thousands and by millions to these plains and these mountains, and settle on the shores of these rivers, bringing with them their old prejudices, their old tyrannical conventionalities, the hatreds that have stained history with blood for hundreds and for thousands of years, rearing on these new lands the old iniquities, calling them fatherlands, baptizing their crimes with holy words, and murdering in the name of patriotism? If such is to be the future of these lands, far better were it that the mighty rivers should overflow their course and convert into one immense lake, twin brother of the neighbouring sea, the vast plains, the endless mysterious forest; and that 113

the immense bulwark of the Andes, aflame with a thousand volcanoes, should make the region inhospitable and uninhabitable to man: for of iniquity there is enough, and no more should be created under God's heaven.

But the tale set me also a-thinking of the power of tradition and the beauty of song. If my memory plays me no trick, Arion, homeward-bound from the Court of Corinth, and laden with gifts of a King who worshipped song, was seized and thrown into the sea by the crew, but the listening dolphins or porpoises, grateful for the heavenly message thus delivered by him, bore him ashore and saved his life. So, more or less, runs the classical tale; and here in the wilds of America, from the lips of an unlettered woodman, the same beautiful conceit, clothed in simple words, had rung in my ears. The power of song, the beauty of the legend, had filtered itself through hundreds of generations from the days of our mother Greece, the mother of art and of beauty, across the mountains and the years and the seas and the continents, and the legend and the allegory were alive in their pristine and essential characteristics in the forests of tropical America. This gave me hope. If the power of things ideal, of things that have in them the divine charm of undying force, overcomes time and distance, why should not the ideal of righteousness, of liberty, and of justice prevail? And the vast continent of South America, why should it not be the predestined home of a happy and regenerate humanity? The trade-winds which come from the old world and across the ocean are purified on the heights of the Cordilleras. Even so humanity in that pilgrimage that is bound to take place ere long, as the ancient world begins to overflow, may regenerate itself and establish liberty and justice in that new world. If these be dreams, awakening were bitter.

We soon heard that it was easy to reach one of the affluents of the Vichada by crossing the plains for about a mile overland, and, all things considered, decided to abandon the Meta River, even though the journey might be longer than we had at first intended. Thus, on the fourth day of navigation down the Meta we stopped, and at a place known as San Pedro del Arrastradero, where we found quite a large settlement, about 150 people, we left the Meta behind us and at once made ready for our journey through the Vichada, as large as the Meta, we were told, and inhabited by numerous savage tribes. This gave additional interest to the journey, and we looked forward to it with pleasure.

CHAPTER X

The settlement of San Pedro del Arrastradero—or of Arimena, as it is also called—lies on the right shore of the River Meta about 150 miles from its confluence with the Orinoco. Within a very short distance of the Meta at that point, less than a mile to the south, the *caño* of Caracate branches towards the Muco River, which, flowing to the south-east, joins the Vichada; the latter, of about the same volume as the Meta, flows south-east till it strikes the Orinoco above the rapids. The Meta and the Vichada and the Orinoco form a triangle, of which the last named is the base. The Vichada enters the main stream some fifty miles above, and the Meta about 200 miles below, the series of rapids which divide the river into the Lower and the Upper Orinoco.

Scattered far and wide at long distances apart on the plain which borders the Meta are numerous cattle-ranches, and on its very shores are settlements testifying to the effort of civilized man. But the new region that we were about to enter, irrigated by the Muco, the Vichada, and their affluents, is absolutely wild, and has seldom been crossed by white men other than stray missionaries, or adventurous traders in search of cheap rubber, resinous substances, tonga beans, hammocks, etc. These the Indians exchange for trifles, or implements which they prize very highly: to the wild inhabitants an axe, a cutlass, a knife, are veritable treasures, distinguishing their owner among his fellows.

The tribes along the shores of the Meta River were known to be mostly hostile and aggressive. Travellers on that river always, if possible, pitch their camps on islets in mid-stream for fear of night attacks, and even then they need to keep strict watch and have their arms beside them. It is dangerous for small expeditions to cross the part of the river below San Pedro del Arrastradero.

But the tribes along the region that we were about to cross, though no less primitive than the others, are mild and easily amenable to civilization. They are numerous, and under good guidance might be advantageously employed in useful work, might be taught to gather the natural products abounding in the forests, and cultivate the soil systematically. Their present notions of agriculture are elementary; they only practise it on a very small scale, relying principally on what they can hunt and fish.

At San Pedro we found an individual who for over thirty years had been in the habit of travelling on the Muco and the Vichada, often going as far as Ciudad Bolivar, near the mouth of the Orinoco. He had amassed a little fortune by trading with the Indians. He spoke their dialect, and practised polygamy in accordance with their unsophisticated rites and customs. It was said that he had a great number of children along the shores of the river; he could therefore recommend us to his family, so to speak. His name was Gondelles. He had often accompanied the missionaries who had attempted to preach the Gospel among the savages, and, unless Rumour was a lying jade, he had himself strenuously endeavoured to observe that Divine precept which refers to increasing and multiplying the human species!

The Indians of this region are specially expert in weaving beautiful hammocks from fibres of the various kinds of *maguey* or *agave* plants, or else extracted from the leaves of the *moriche*. The most prized, however, are those made of fibre of the *cumare* palm, soft and pliant as silk. A large and comfortable hammock woven of this fibre will take up the smallest possible space and last longer than any other. These Indians are also skilled in canoe-making; with their primitive stone instruments, aided by fire, they will make admirable canoes of one piece, hewn from the trunk of a tree. These canoes at times are so large that they will seat from twenty to twenty-five men

comfortably, but most of them are small craft easily handled, holding six or eight persons at most.

Some of the men who had accompanied us thus far now refused to continue the journey. We were informed that it would be comparatively easy to replace them with Indians who would accompany us for four or five days at a trifling wage. The tribes being numerous, it would not be difficult to find new hands at each stage. 120

The wage of our new canoe men was always paid in kind: a handkerchief, a pound of salt, an empty bottle, a strip of gaudy silk—we had still some London cravats—were the most coveted articles. The idea of equity and work done for value received does not exist amongst the Indians. We soon found that it was folly to give them the article agreed upon until the work was done; for once the men had received what they coveted, they would abandon us, stealthily leaving the camp in the dusk at the first landing, and sometimes even rushing into the jungle in broad daylight.

So now with a full crew, now crippled, we managed to continue the journey, first for six days on the Muco, and then on the Vichada, the navigation of which proved to be much longer than we had expected.

The general aspect of Nature on these two rivers differed very little from what we had seen on the Meta. The shores of the Muco are generally covered with mangroves that push far into the current their submerged network of roots and branches, of which one must steer clear, as they are hiding-places for snakes, and are apt, if struck unexpectedly, to capsize the canoes. These beautiful clear waters, so harmless, so placid, in appearance, are in truth full of danger. Apart from alligators and water snakes, they abound in a species of small fish called *caribe*, which attack men and animals, especially if they find a sore spot in the skin. They swarm in such quantities and are so voracious that a bull or a horse crossing the river, if attacked by these fish, may lose a leg, or receive such a deep wound in the body that death is inevitable. No less perilous is the electric eel, which, on being touched, gives a shock so strong that the man or animal receiving it generally falls into the stream. Even tigers are known to have been struck by these peculiar fish, and it is said that some have been drowned, being unable to recover themselves in time. 121

During the month of January the turtles begin to lay their eggs. Our attention was called to a specially bright star in the horizon, which the men asserted only appeared in that month of the year. It was called the star of the *tereceyas*. The *tereceya* is a small species of turtle, and much prized, and with reason, on account of its exquisite flesh. On more than one occasion, quite unexpectedly, the canoes would be steered ashore, the men would jump on the sand and run as if guided by some well-known landmark. After a few yards they would stop, and, digging in the sand with their hands, would extract a nest full of *tereceya* eggs, the contents varying from fifty to over a hundred. Their experienced eyes had seen the tracks of the *tereceya* on the sand. These turtles, like all others, lay their eggs once a year on the sand, and cover them up carefully, leaving the cares of motherhood to the forces of Nature. Once hatched in this fashion, the young turtles must shift for themselves, and their instinct tells them that their numerous enemies lie in watch for their awakening to active life. The moment they break the shell they make as quickly as they can for the neighbouring waters, where they are comparatively safe. 122

If the inhabitants of those regions lack book-learning and knowledge of things in which their more civilized fellow-creatures are versed, Nature and the life which they lead have given them a keenness of sight, of hearing, and of touch far beyond the average citizen of town and village. I often noticed of an evening, as the canoes were being tied and hoisted halfway out of the water, that the men walking along the beach would mutter to themselves, or call the attention of their fellows to the sand, which to me seemed smooth and uniform. Pointing to the ground, they would say, duck, turtle, tapir, alligator, wild-boar, deer, tiger, and so forth. The tracks which they saw were, so to speak, the visiting-cards of animals which had spent the day on the beach where our camp was pitched at night. 123

When we first came in contact with a real wild Indian I experienced a feeling very difficult to describe.

Here was a being whose appearance was identical with our own, save for details of colour of skin and other trivial distinctions which could not affect the essential organic elements; yet he awakened within us a curiosity akin to that with which we gaze at a wild animal in some zoological garden. What a deep gulf yawned between that forlorn brother and ourselves! The work of generations, the treasures heaped up by man for man during centuries of struggle and endeavour, hopes and fears, disappointments, traditions, ideals, conventionalities, all that constitutes civilization; the higher belief in a Supreme Being, the evolution of habits, the respect for established laws and regulations, the reverence for sacred things—all that world essential to us was as naught, absolutely non-existent, for that naked fellow-creature who stood before us, unprotected, lost amid the forest in a climate unfavourable to man. There was no one to help him, or make any effort to improve the natural forces within him, none to lift his soul into a higher and better world. Curiosity gave way to pity. The labour of the missionary—of the ideal missionary—became holier and greater in my eyes. Here was a field of promising harvest for a real worker. 124

One clear and fragrant night, when all the camp slept, the bonfires half out, the river a few feet off, as I lay awake thinking of the world to which we belonged, so different from our present surroundings, so distant that it seemed a far-off cloud in the sky, something that had gone by, and which could never be reached again, I suddenly remembered the words uttered by one of our men when we landed that afternoon upon the beach. He had clearly enumerated a long list of animals whose tracks were upon the very sand covered by my body. Logic took possession of my brain with overpowering rapidity. The alligator, the tiger, and their numerous companions have visited this beach; they may again visit it during the night. What is to hinder them from doing so; and in that case, what is to protect me from their attack? Little did I care for the wild-boar, the tapir, or the deer—I knew they would be as scared of me as I was of the other animals; and so, after this attack of fright, my imagination worked till the sweat began to run clammy on my forehead. It seemed to me that from the neighbouring forest a veritable Noah's-ark of living, rushing, roaring, famished beasts, multiplied by my fancy, and numerous as the 125

progeny of Gondelles, came upon us. I almost felt the hot breath and saw the glistening eyes of the tiger outside the thin partition of cotton of my mosquito-bar, heard the awkward shamble of the alligator's body, and felt the unpleasant, musky odour of the huge lizard an instant before it crushed my bones between its jaws. Unable to master myself, I sat upright, and would have yelled from dread but for the spectacle that met my eyes in the moonlight, flooding the surrounding scene. There to right and left of me snored all my companions; the river shone brilliantly, the breeze blew softly, no one stirred. This absence of fear on the part of those who were perfectly familiar with all the dangers of the region reassured me completely. Oh blessed snores and valiant snorers! My peace of mind returned, and, lying back upon my sandy couch, I lustily joined the tuneful choir. 126

Community of danger constitutes the most acceptable guarantee; no man ever thinks of ascertaining who drives the locomotive that is to whirl him and hundreds of his fellow-creatures at lightning speed through glade and forest, over bridge and under tunnel; no man questions the capability of the captain responsible for the steamship and for the lives of thousands of his fellow-men; the most distrustful of us never gives a thought to these points. Why? Because we know that the driver or the captain, as the case may be, stakes his own life. Each humble boatman who listened to Cæsar's proud assurance that the skiff could not sink because it carried him and all his fortunes equalled Cæsar in self-esteem, for the lives of those poor mariners were as dear to them as Cæsar's life could be to him. The truth of my assertion that community of danger constitutes the acceptability of a given guarantee is demonstrated when, for instance, a traveller entrusting his life on a railway or a ship to the agent of a company advances or lends money to the same company. Then comes the hour of discrimination. All the appliances invented by that most wonderful engine of human ingenuity, the law of commerce, which in its numerous forms rules the world paramount and supreme, are brought to bear. No one's word is accepted as sufficient; documents, signatures, seals, formalities, numerous and complicated, are employed as a delicate proof of the trust that the man of the world ever places in the good faith of his brother before God. This suspicion is responsible for an enormous amount of expense and trouble which, were good faith more abundant or were belief in its existence general, might be applied to relieve misery and sorrow. If the action of humanity all the world over in this dreary endeavour to protect man from the rascality of man be justified, we are, indeed, not very far removed in truth and in essence from the savages of the forest, who seize what they need and prey upon each other according to the dictates of nature. If beauty be but skin-deep, civilization is not more profoundly ingrained, and the smallest rub reveals the primitive ravaging beast. Yet I may be mistaken; perhaps it is not distrust which begets all those precautions, but something so noble that I dare not presume to divine, much less to understand, it. 127

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CHAPTER XI

Though several years have elapsed since my journey across those wild vast regions, the remembrance of them is most vivid and clear in my mind. It seems to me that everything in that period of my life, landscape and human beings, forest and plain, stream and cloud, mountains and breezes, all, all are still alive; they form part of the panorama or scene wherein my memory keeps them immortal, abiding for ever as I saw them, though unattainable to me. What was, is; what was, must be; so I imagine. Memory is in this respect like the artist. The sculptor or the painter seizes one moment of life, fashions and records it in marble or in bronze, in line or colour, and there it remains defying time, unchanging and unchangeable. The gallery of the mind, the vast storehouse of the past, is infinite. It keeps in its inmost inexhaustible recesses the living record of our life, the tremulous shadowy hues of early night deepening into the dark, the glory of the rising sun casting its veil of light upon the waves, the sensation of the breeze as it fans our heated brow after an anxious night, the thunder of the ocean or the deafening tumult of frenzied crowds in hours of national misfortune or universal anger, the last parting word or look of those who are gone before, the blithe greeting of him who comes back to us after years of absence and of sorrow: all these manifestations of life, the ebb and flow of joy and happiness, of pain and grief, stand individualized, so to speak, in the memory, and nothing, save the loss of memory itself, can change them. Nothing so dear to the heart as those treasures; against them time and the vicissitudes of life are powerless—even as the lovers and the dancers and the singers and the enchanted leafy forest in Keats' 'Grecian Urn.' That love will know no disappointment. Sweet as songs heard may be, far sweeter are those unheard of human ear; beautiful as are the green boughs of the forest, far lovelier are those whose verdure is imperishable, whose leaves will know no autumn; and sweeter than all melody, the unheard melody of those flutes, dumb and mute in the infinite harmony which man can imagine, but not create. Our own mind keeps that record of the past; hallowed and sacred should it be, for therein our sorrow may find relief, and our joy purity and new strength. 130

Beautiful indeed were our days. Gliding softly over the waters, we would read, and there, in forced and intimate communion with Nature, would seek our old-time friends the historians, the poets, the humbler singers that had charmed, or instructed, or taught us how to live. The lessons of history seemed clearer and more intelligible, the puissant and sonorous voice of poetry sounded fitly under that blue sky in the midst of those forests, even as the notes of the organ seem to vibrate and echo as in their very home, under the fretted vault of some Gothic temple. The majesty of surrounding Nature lent an additional charm to the voice of the great ones who had delivered a message of consolation and of hope to mankind. We lived now in Rome, now in Greece, now in modern Europe, and frequently the songs of our own poets filled our minds with joy, as the twitter of native birds when the sun rose and the morning sparkled, bedewed with jewels that night had left on leaves and flowers. 131

One day, when we had grown expert in bargaining with the Indians, shortly before sunset a solitary Indian paddled towards our camp. He had been attracted by the novel sight. We had learnt that within the memory of living man no such large convoy as ours had passed through those waters; groups of eight or ten men in one canoe were the largest ever seen—at least, the largest groups of strangers. Here was a small army, with two large canoes and great abundance of strange and wonderful equipment—boxes, trunks, weapons, cooking utensils,

many men with white faces and marvellous strange array; indeed, enough to attract the attention and curiosity of any child of the forest. The canoe upon which the Indian stood was barely six feet in length—so narrow and shallow that at a distance he seemed to stand on the very mirror of the waters. He carried a large paddle, shaped like a huge rose-leaf somewhat blunted at the end, and with a very long stem. He plunged this gracefully in the water on either side, seeming hardly to bend or to make any effort, and in feathering there appeared a convex mirror of liquid glass, upon which the sunlight fell in prismatic hues each time that his paddle left the water. He drew near, and stood before us like a bronze statue. He was stark naked, save for a clout round his loins. On his brow was a crown of tiger-claws surmounted by two eagle feathers. Across his neck, hung by a string, was a small bag of woven fibre containing a piece of salt, some hooks made of bone and small harpoons which could be set on arrows, and two hollow reeds about an eighth of an inch in diameter and four or five inches long. By means of these reeds the Indians inhale through their nostrils an intoxicating powder, in which they delight. The man was young, powerfully built, about five feet ten in height, and well proportioned; his teeth glistening and regular; his eyes black and large, gleaming like live coals; he was a perfect incarnation of the primitive race, and the hardships and exposure of his past life had left no more trace on him than the flowing waters of the river on the swan's-down. 133

Guided by our civilized instinct, which in these utilitarian days prompts man to seek in whatever meets his eye, first and foremost, not its beauty or the symbol which it may represent, or the tendency towards something higher which it may indicate, but its utility, following this delightful system of our latest Christian civilization, I, in common with my companions, at once decided to exploit that simple spirit and press him into our service. Being unable to bargain ourselves—which was lucky for him, for in our enlightened way we should have driven a harder bargain than our men—we entrusted the task to Leal. 134

The Indian, also true to his instinct, immediately indicated—first by signs, and then by word of mouth, when he saw he was understood—that he craved a part of the innumerable riches before his eyes. He really did not ask for much; he wanted some salt, a knife, a piece of glass like a small mirror that he saw glittering in the hands of one of our men, and whatever else we might be willing to give. He was told that he could have all that he asked and more. He smiled broadly, and a light of joy came over his face. These were signs truly human, not yet trained into the hypocritical conventions of well-bred society. As he stretched forth his hand, he was told that the gift was conditional—that he must earn the articles he coveted, that we expected him to sit beside the other paddlers and help to carry us for two or three days, whereupon he would receive these rich gifts from our prodigal bounty. 135

This statement seemed to our Indian interlocutor absurd, just as something utterly incongruous and ludicrous in business would strike the mind of a London banker. In his primitive mental organism the idea that one man should work for another was something that found no place. Those forests, rivers, and plains were his home; he roved free and fearless through them, alone or in the company of others, each one of whom provided for himself. A bargain—that basis of civilization, of culture, that great agent of progress and of human development—was something which he could not understand. The essence of the fact, and the fact itself, were beyond him. We could see the struggle between his greed and his love of freedom. The riches that we offered him tempted him far more than glittering diamonds on the counter of a jeweller tempt a vain woman or a burglar at bay. Yet he overcame the temptation. The glad smile vanished; his face darkened with a look that we could interpret as reproach, and possibly contempt; he silently lifted his paddle, and with two strokes sped his canoe into mid-stream. Without glancing backwards, giving now and then a tremendous stroke, he disappeared in the distance. The rays of the sinking sun reddened the waters of the river and the surrounding horizon; the Indian, upright in his canoe, seemed as if clad in a sheet of flame, and finally vanished as though consumed in the crimson glow. The sun itself in the western horizon resembled a huge ball of red-hot iron, as if the Cyclops and the Titans, after playing, had left it behind on the bosom of the endless plain, flat and still as the sea in a calm. 136

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CHAPTER XII

The course of the rivers on the *llanos* is far from being as straight as the proverbial path of righteousness. They meander, wind, and turn about, so that when on a sharp curve one often sails almost directly against the main direction of the waters. The Indians take short cuts overland which enable them to travel much faster than the canoes. Thus the news of our coming preceded us by several days, and long before we reached the mouth of the Vichada all the tribes had heard that the largest expedition known in their history was on the way.

For reasons which he explained to us afterwards, Leal had, without consulting us, informed the first Indians whom we met that ours was a party of missionaries. I do not suppose that he went into any further details. In the mind of the Indians the remembrance of missionaries seems to have lingered from the days when Jesuit missions were established on nearly all the principal rivers of the Orinoco watershed. From the time of the Independence there have been no regular missions following a consistent plan and belonging to a special organization. Now and then desultory attempts have been made without any appreciable results. But the Indians respect the missionary; possibly they also fear him, and, as we could observe later on from our own experience, they expect from him gifts not only of a spiritual, but of a material kind. 138

The result of all this is that a missionary is more likely to be welcomed and assisted than any other traveller. This was what guided Leal in what he considered a harmless assertion—a pious fraud, in which the fraud is more obvious than the piety.

Be it remarked, however, that neither my companions nor I had the least responsibility for Leal's action. When

travelling along the mule-tracks leading to the plains, public opinion, or what under the existing circumstances took its place, had assigned to our expedition an episcopal character. This assimilation to the Church seemed to have been our fate. Here again we were incorporated in its fold in an official capacity, so to speak, without the least intention or effort on our part. When we learnt what Leal had done, it was too late to withdraw, and we resigned ourselves to our new ecclesiastical honours with proper humility. 139

It is said that men may be great, some because they are born great, others because they achieve greatness, and others yet again because greatness is thrust upon them. In the present instance the clerical character was thrust upon us. We—at least, I can answer for myself—tried to live up to the new dignity, not only inwardly, but outwardly, assuming, as far as circumstances would permit, the sedate and reverent, contemplative demeanour which so well suits him who devotes his life to the welfare of others, seeking to guide them to heaven by an easy path, no matter at what cost of personal sacrifice or discomfort to himself.

Strange, however, that this self-sacrificing mood adopted in imitation of true priests, who despise the comforts and joys of life, should have been assumed in our own spurious case for the special purpose of increasing those worldly comforts and material joys! 140

We soon discovered, to our amazement, that our new position was far from being a sinecure.

One day we were waiting for the noon-day heat to pass, having halted on a *poyata*, the name given to small beaches that seem to stretch like a tongue of sand from under the very roots of the forest into the river; we had fled for shelter to the coolness of the high vaulting trees, from whose trunks the hammocks swung invitingly. The blue heaven appeared like an enamelled background beyond the lace-work of the intertwined leaves and branches. The fires burned brightly and cheerily, their flames pale and discoloured in the bright glare of the sun; the pots simmered, and soon tempting whiffs were wafted by the lazy breeze that hardly stirred, welcome heralds of good things to come. The stomach reigns supreme just before and after a meal, which, if it be assured to a hungry mortal, constitutes for him the most satisfactory event in the immediate future, calming his anxieties or blunting the edge of care; and after it has been eaten, the process of digestion, which for the moment monopolizes the principal energies of the organism, seems to cast a veil over the unpleasant aspects of life, and to soften the thorns that beset our path. 141

Some General of the Confederate Army in the United States, who had retired to his lands after the final collapse of the South, used to remark that one of the saddest things for an old man who had been very active in former years was to receive the frequent news of the death of former comrades and companions. 'Whenever such news reaches me,' he went on to say, 'I always order two pigeons for my dinner; they are so soothing!'

In the midst of our pleasant expectations we found ourselves suddenly invaded by a swarm of Indians, male and female of all ages, who came either from the forest or in canoes. They pounced on us so swiftly that we were practically swamped by them in an instant. They at once began to beg for presents, to touch and smell any of the articles belonging to us that they could, and they certainly would have taken everything had it been possible.

The men were all in the primitive attire of the proud Indian whom we had been unable to press into our service a few days before. The women wore tunics made either from coarse cotton stuffs obtained from the traders, or from a sort of bark, pliant and fairly soft, called *marimba*. Some of the women were accompanied by two or three children. 142

With the tribe—for it was a whole tribe that had fallen upon us—came a man dressed in trousers—the regulation article such as you may see in any civilized capital—and a woollen shirt of a deep red hue. He was the chief of the tribe, and had donned that garb in our honour.

The captain told Leal that the various mothers who had brought their children were anxious to have them baptized. Leal replied that the matter would be attended to on our return trip, arguing furthermore that the three reverend missionaries should not be disturbed as they lay in their hammocks, for though, had they been ordinary men, they might be thought to be asleep, yet being persons of eminent piety it was more probable that they were entranced in meditation. Leal backed his plea with a gift, a most wonderful argument which carries conviction to wild Indians almost as quickly as to civilized men. The chief did not insist, and for the moment we were left to our pseudo-religious and silent contemplations. 143

Shortly after, however, an Indian mother, with one child in her arms and two in her wake, proved obdurate and relentless. Her thirst for the baptismal waters—at least, on behalf of her children if not of herself—must be slaked at all costs. All Leal's efforts proving fruitless, he ended by telling her that I was the chief missionary. Once recognised as a pillar of the Church, I was prepared for any sacrifice of self, so that on the Indian woman approaching me I got ready to perform whatever ceremony she might want to the best of my ability. She was not only prudent and cautious, but distrustful. She pulled my hat off, and ran her fingers swiftly through my hair. On seeing that I had no tonsure—her mimic was as clear as speech—she flung my hat violently on the ground, gesticulated and shouted, attracting the attention of all her companions.

Here was a complication for which we had not bargained. If there were great advantages in our being taken for missionaries, there was also great danger in being exposed as sham missionaries. Something must be done to remedy the evil. Leal at once bethought himself of an expedient; he took the Indian woman towards the hammock where Alex slept in sweet oblivion, unconscious of what was going on around him. She at once dragged off his hat, and on finding a head brilliantly bald almost fell prostrate. Hierarchy, or what in her savage mind stood for it, evidently grew higher with the size of the tonsure, and here the tonsure was immense. Had she known the various dignities into which the Catholic priesthood is divided, she might have taken Alex for the Pope. Be that as it may, she was satisfied. Alex, on being informed, swallowed the pill gracefully, and prepared to do his duty. 144

The woman brought forward her smallest child. Here again new difficulties ensued. We held a council of consultation as to the *modus operandi*. Opinions differed widely, and were supported vehemently, as is sure to be the case when all those discussing a given subject happen to be equally ignorant. Finally some sort of plan was adopted, and the child was baptized in accordance with a rite evolved from our own dim recollections, with such modifications as seemed most fit. 145

There under the blue heaven, with the broad winding river at our feet, close by the dense, darkening forest that lay behind us, its branches overhead forming a panoply of green, studded with the gold and yellow and blue flowers of the numerous creepers, we performed the ceremony of baptism, initiating the young savage into the Church of Christ our Lord with a feeling of deep reverence, intensified by our own sense of ignorance. Let us hope that the solemnity of the act, which flashed before us like an unexpected revelation, compensated for any involuntary informality.

But after the water had been poured on the babe's head, and the ceremony had, as we thought, come to an end, the mother would not take her child back. She had evidently seen other baptisms, and our christening was not up to her standard. She made us understand that on former occasions 'book reading' had taken place: such was Leal's interpretation of her words.

We had come to look upon this Indian woman as an expert critic. Through unpardonable neglect, which to this day I cannot explain satisfactorily, we had neither a breviary nor a prayer-book with us, so we laid hands on the next best thing, bearing in mind what a stickler for detail this Indian woman had proved to be. A book of poems, an anthology of Spanish poets, gilt-edged and finely bound, stood us in good service. Alex opened it at random, and read a short poem with due and careful elocution for the edification of the new little Christian. 146

The ceremony had to be performed eight or ten times. After the third child we gave them only one stanza apiece, as our ardour was somewhat chilled.

When all the children had been christened, the chief claimed the 'usual' gifts. He soon explained to us that it was customary for the missionaries to make presents to the parents of the children newly baptized. I had begun to admire the zeal of these mothers in quest of a higher religion for their children; this demand showed that their fervour was accompanied by greed, being thus of the same nature as that species of 'charity with claws'—the Spanish *caridad con uñas*. Trifles were distributed amongst the mothers, and the tribe disappeared, rejoicing in their possessions, for to these folk the things were no trifles, and, let us hope, exultant in the acquisition of eight or ten buds destined to bloom into Christian flowers. 147

History doth indeed repeat itself, and humanity imitates humanity heedless of time and space. If I remember rightly, Clovis, justly anxious for the conversion of his legions to Christianity, presented each dripping warrior after baptism with a tunic—a most valuable article in those days, when Manchester looms did not exist and all weaving was done by hand. Those pious paladins, it is said, were like our Indian friends of the Vichada, always ready to be rechristened on the same terms as before—that is to say, in exchange for a new tunic. Yet, for all their sameness, things do somehow change with time. In these two instances we have the Church as a donor, and the new proselyte as a receiver of presents more or less valuable. Once the conversion fully assured, what a change in the parts within a few generations! The Church gives naught; at least, it gives nothing that is of this world. On the contrary, it takes all it can; the people are led to heaven, the poorer the easier, for in the kind and capacious bosom of Mother Church they are to deposit all worldly goods which might hamper their flight to higher regions. A beautiful and wonderful evolution, and we had not far to go to see it in full play and force. The savages of the Colombian plains are still in that primitive pitiful state when they have to be bribed, so to say, into the fold of the Church; many of the civilized people in the towns and cities obey and respect that Church which holds sway supreme over them in life and in death, guiding, controlling, saving them. Happy the nations where the chosen and appointed servants of the Most High, disciplined into some sort of priesthood or other, undertake the pleasing task of saving their reluctant fellow-men at the latter's expense, but with the sure and certain faith of those who know that they are working for justice and for the happiness of their fellows, though these may choose to deny it. Happy, thrice happy, lands where the invasion of diabolical modern ideas has been baffled, and the good old doctrine of abject submission still rules! 148

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CHAPTER XIII

Whenever we started afresh in the morning, or after any temporary halt, the man at the prow of the canoe would call out, '*Vaya con Dios*,' and the man on the stern, who steered with a paddle far larger than the others, would reply, '*y con la Virgen*' ('God go with us,' 'and the Virgin,' respectively). The fair Queen of Heaven, being thus commemorated, piety was wedded to chivalry.

The days followed each other in seemingly endless succession, like the windings of the river. Familiarity with the ever-varying aspects of Nature begot a sense of monotony and weariness. The forests and the prairies, dawn and sunset, the whole marvellous landscape, passed unheeded. We longed to reach the main artery; the Orinoco was our Mecca, apparently unattainable. Fishing and hunting had lost zest, and become simple drudgery, indispensable to renew our provender, as in the long journey nearly all our stores were exhausted. 150

Raoul and Leal frequently shot at the alligators, which, singly, in couples, or in shoals, basked in the sun in a sort of gluttonous lethargy, with hanging tongues and half-closed eyes. The huge saurians, when hit, would turn over and make for the water, except on rare occasions when the bullet entered below the shoulder-blade, this being a mortal wound.

We would sit listening to the even stroke of the paddles on the sides of the canoe and the drowsy sing-song of the men.

Frequently, towards sundown, we heard the deep note of tigers in the forest, and always the confused uproar of a thousand animals, frogs, crickets, birds, ushering in the night.

Besides alligators and wild-boar, the only other large animals which we frequently saw were the harmless tapirs.

Snakes are not abundant on the Vichada, yet it was on the shores of that river that we came to quite close quarters with a water-snake of the boa constrictor species. The reptile was found coiled not far from our halting-place. Raoul at once fired his fowling-piece at short range, blinding and wounding it. He then discharged the five bullets of his revolver into the snake, and the men completed the work, beating it with their paddles. When stretched out, it measured some 16 feet in length, and was of corresponding thickness. 151

These snakes, though not poisonous, are dangerous if hungry. They lurk at the drinking-places, and when a young calf, deer, or any other small animal comes within reach, they coil themselves round it and strangle it. They devour their prey slowly, and then fall into a sleep, which is said to last for several days.

In all probability, the snake we had killed must have been at the end of one of these periods. Much to our astonishment, notwithstanding bullets and blows, the snake began to move in the direction of our hammocks. Had this not been seen in time, it might possibly have coiled itself around some unwary sleeper. More blows were administered, and this time the animal seemed quite dead. However, it managed to roll into the river, and on striking the water appeared to revive.

This was our only meeting face to face with a denizen of these forests and rivers, and I can truly say we longed for no closer acquaintance with them. 152

For obvious reasons of prudence, we soon made up our minds never to pitch our night camp on beaches easy of access to the Indians settled along the shores, but during the day we would frequently halt at their settlements, and this enabled us to see a good deal of their mode of life and peculiarities.

We found the tribes docile and friendly, rather inclined to be industrious in their way than otherwise.

The Indians of the Vichada basin are the bakers, if I may so call them, of that great region. The bread which they prepare is made from the *mañoc*, or *yuca*, root, which grows in plenty along the banks of rivers and streams. There are two kinds of *mañoc*, one sweet and harmless, the other bitter and poisonous, yet it is from this latter kind that the *casabe* is prepared. The root, varying in length from 2 to 3 feet, with a thickness of from 1 to 3 inches, is grated on specially-prepared boards of very hard wood. Thus a whitish pulp is obtained, which is then compressed in a most primitive manner. A hollow cylinder, made of matting of coarse and pliant straw, varying in length from 4 to 6, and sometimes 8, feet, and in diameter from 5 inches upwards, is filled with the pulp, sausage-wise. The cylinder is then hung from the branch of a tree, or a beam conveniently upraised on a frame; it is then stretched and twisted from below. The juice of the pulp flows through the mesh of the matting. When all the juice has been extracted, the pulp is emptied into large wooden basins, and is soaked in water, which is run off, the operation being repeated several times. The poisonous element, soluble in water, is thus eliminated, and the pulp is ready. It is then spread on a slab of stone, thin and perfectly even, called *budare*, which stands over a fire. The *casabe* is soon baked, generally in round cakes from 12 to 18 inches in diameter, and from half an inch to an inch in thickness. After baking it is stored in special baskets, called *mapires*, where it can be kept for months, as it stands all weathers and is impervious to moisture. It has the taste and the consistency of sawdust, and hunger must be very keen for any novice to relish the food. Yet it is most nutritious, and after a while replaces biscuit and bread, especially when these are not to be found! Not only the Indians, but even the white men, or those who call themselves civilized in that vast region, use *casabe* exclusively. Wheat flour is soon spoiled in that hot, damp atmosphere, where there are no facilities for protecting it against moisture and vermin, and though corn might be abundantly produced, there are no mills to grind the meal. Population is so scarce, and the few inhabitants are so far apart, that it would not pay to set up the necessary machinery. Nature seems to overwhelm man, who drifts back easily into primitive conditions of being. 153

The Indians also prepare *mañoc* flour. The method is the same as in the case of *casabe*, only that before baking the pulp is allowed to ferment to a certain degree; after that it is baked and reduced to powder. This powder, mixed with water, makes an acid, refreshing drink. If sugar or molasses be available, they are added.

As I have said before, the Vichada Indians are expert weavers of hammocks, and carvers or makers of canoes. They fell a large tree, and, after months of labour, produce very fine canoes. The canoes, the hammocks, and the *casabe* and *mañoc* are sold to traders who realize large profits. A pair of trousers and a hat to the captain of a tribe are deemed a good price for a small canoe. Such articles as a cutlass, or an axe, are most highly prized by the Indians, and are paid for accordingly. It is pitiful to learn how these poor savages are cheated, when not robbed outright, by the pseudo-Christians who come in contact with them. 154

They also manufacture torches from resinous substances extracted from the forests. Some of these substances are excellent for caulking purposes, and, as they are found in great abundance, should constitute an important article of trade. A torch made from *peraman* about 3 to 4 feet in length, lighted as night set in, would burn with a brilliant yellow flame, and throw a strong glare over the camp in the small hours when the bonfires had been reduced to embers.

We had been on the Vichada about twenty-five days, when one of us developed symptoms of fever, and as these increased within the next twenty-four hours, we looked about for some convenient spot where we might rest for a few days, lest the attack might become really serious. It was our intention to build up some sort of hut—a comparatively easy matter, as some of our men were old hands at that kind of work. Fortunately for us, 155

however, we met coming from the mouth of the Vichada a Venezuelan *mañoc* trader, who was sailing to one of the Vichada affluents, where he expected to receive a load of *mañoc* and *casabe*. The man's name was Valiente. He had three canoes and ten men with him. We were delighted to meet him, as it had been impossible for us to gather correct information from the Indians.

He told us that we were still two or three days' journey from the Orinoco, advised us not to put up at any of the beaches, but to push on to within a few hours of the mouth of the Vichada, where, on the left bank, we would find an abandoned *caney* that had been built by cattle-ranchers some years previously. He had just been there. It was possible, he added, that we might find some Indians in possession, in which case we should enforce the right of the white man and drive them out. At any rate, the *caney* was on high ground, the forests around were clear, and we should find it far more comfortable than anywhere else in that neighbourhood. 157

Following his advice, we hurried on as fast as we could, promising to wait for him at Santa Catalina, that being the name of the place. Valiente thought that he would start back in six or eight days.

In due course we reached Santa Catalina. On the high bluff, about 300 yards from the shore, we saw the welcome outlines of a *caney*; it showed unmistakable signs of having been built by white men. We could see from the river that it was inhabited. This was not so pleasant, but we had made up our minds that we would take possession of the *caney* with or without the consent of its occupants. If soft words proved insufficient, we were bound to appeal to the last argument of Kings and of men at bay—force.

I really did not feel inclined to violence; peaceful means and diplomatic parleying seemed to me preferable, but as we had no choice, following the practice sanctioned by experience, of preparing for war if you want to insure peace, we decided to make a great display of force, even as the Great Powers, with their military and naval manœuvres—a show of teeth and claws to overawe the occupants of the *caney*. 158

We moored on the bank near by. Notwithstanding my appearance, which, as I have chronicled in these pages, had warranted the belief in others that I belonged to the holiest of human professions, I was told off to ascertain whether we should occupy the premises peacefully or by force. I donned a red shirt, suspended from a broad leather belt a most murderous-looking cutlass and a six-shooter, cocked my hat sideways in a desperado fashion, and, full of ardour, advanced, flanked on either side by Leal and one of our men, each of whom carried a rifle and the inevitable *machete*. Verily, we looked like a wandering arsenal!

Remembering that the actor's success is said to be greater the more he lives up to his part, I endeavoured to look as fierce as possible, and tried to call to mind scenes of dauntless courage, assaults of fortresses, heroic deeds from my historical repertory. I must have succeeded, for I felt uncommonly brave, particularly as there seemed to be no danger warranting our preparations. 159

Unfortunately, I happen to be afflicted with myopia, which at a certain distance blurs the outline of objects large or small.

As we continued to advance I could distinguish that someone was coming towards us. My courage evaporated; I felt sure that this must be some hostile Indian intent on hindering our access to the longed-for *caney*. I would fain have turned tail, but vanity, which is the source of nine-tenths of the displays of human courage, pricked me on. My ears awaited the wild whoop of the advancing Indian, and my eyes were prepared to witness the onslaught of his ferocious braves from the neighbouring bushes. Yet the die was cast, and forward we went.

Imagine my surprise when, from the approaching figure, still indistinct and vague to my short-sighted eyes, a greeting of the utmost courtesy in the purest Castilian rang forth in the air of the clear afternoon. I shall never forget it. Those words in my native tongue, uttered in the midst of that wilderness, 500 leagues from the nearest town or civilized settlement, conjured up in one moment cherished memories of a distant world. 160

Greatly relieved, I put aside my weapons of assault and destruction, which, to speak the truth, were most inconvenient to walk in.

I knew before, and am more convinced than ever since that day, that I am not compounded of the clay of heroes: in which I am like the rest of the world. Peace and peaceful avocations are much more in my line. I love heroes—military ones especially—in books, in pictures, or in statues; as every-day companions, I believe—not having met any heroes in the flesh—that they must be unbearable. They really owe it to themselves to get killed or to die the moment they have attained their honours. They are sure to be ruined if left to the vulgarizing influences of daily life, mixing with the rest of humanity in every-day toil and strife. You cannot have your bust or portrait in Parliament or Assembly, your niche in the cathedral or in public hall, and your equestrian statue with your horse eternally lifting his fore-legs for the edification of coming generations, and at the same time insist on walking about the streets in the guise of a commonplace mortal! If you live in bronze and marble, if your name fills half a column of the encyclopædia, and appears as a noble example in the books in which children are taught to consider brutal violence the highest evolution of human intellect and action, you cannot ask your humble companions on earth to put up with you in their midst. Heroes should find their places, and stick to them, for their own greater glory and the comfort of their fellow-men. 161

The gentleman whom we met was named Aponte, and came from Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. He had been appointed to the governorship of the Amazon Territory. After spending several years in its capital, San Carlos, he became afflicted with cataract. People told him that the Vichada Indians cured cataract with the juice of certain herbs, which they kept secret. He had arrived at Santa Catalina about ten days before us, accompanied by his sister and a young Corsican who had been in his employ at San Carlos. An Indian woman from one of the tribes had taken him in charge, and made daily applications of some milky juice extracted from plants, and, strange to say, he found relief. I have since heard that he is completely cured. 162

An oculist, who travelled through those regions two or three years later, investigated the truth of these alleged cures, and found them to be authentic. He could not, however, induce the Indians to tell him what they use. This knowledge of the virtue of plants amongst the Indians is found in nearly all tropical lands. Quinine, to which humanity owes so much, was also an Indian secret, and was discovered by a well-known combination of circumstances. Towards the middle of the eighteenth century, in one of the Peruvian States, the Indians were treated very cruelly by their masters. The daughter of the house won the love of the Indian slaves by her kindness and charity. It had been noticed that no Indians died from malarial and other fevers, which proved fatal to the white men, but what means they employed could not be learned either by threats or entreaties.

The daughter of the cruel master was taken ill. Her nurse, an Indian woman, gave her some concoction which saved her life, but would not reveal the secret for years. On her deathbed she told her young mistress what plant it was that the Indians employed against fever. Thus the *cinchona*, or Peruvian bark, was discovered. In the Choco regions in Colombia, which teem with snakes, the Indians know not only the plants that cure the bite and counteract the poison, but those which confer immunity. They also have a combination of substances forming a sort of paste, which, when applied to the wounds and ulcers of man or animal, however sore they may be, exercise a healing and immediate action. 163

I had an uncle, Dr. Triana, well known to European botanists, and especially to collectors of orchids, to several varieties of which his name is linked (the numerous varieties of *Catleya trianaensis* are named after him). He lived for a long time in the Choco region, and brought back large quantities of this paste, which he used with success in cases of wounds and ulcers, both in Europe and America, but he could never persuade the Indians to tell him its exact composition.

The young Corsican whom we found with Mr. Aponte was a sort of globe-trotter, jack-of-all-trades, hail-fellow-well-met with everybody. He was an explorer, a dentist, could serve as barber if required, had acted as clerk to Mr. Aponte, had with him a fairly well-stocked medicine-chest, and proved to be a first-rate cook. He either knew something of medicine or made up for ignorance by his daring. At any rate, he took our sick companion in hand, administered to him some of his drugs, and in two or three days restored him to perfect health. This was a great blessing. Thus disappeared from our horizon the only ominous cloud which darkened it during those days of so much sunlight and freedom. Those who know not what tropical fevers are can form no idea of the dread that their presence inspires when one sees them stealthily gaining ground. At times they act slowly, and give one a chance of struggling against them, but often they develop with lightning rapidity, and a man in full health and in the bloom of life is cut down suddenly in a few days or in a few hours. 164

Figarella was the name of the Corsican 'doctor' who enlivened the few days we spent at Santa Catalina with his songs, his tales of Corsica, the narrative of his adventures, true and fanciful, in all parts of the world, and who managed to prepare sumptuous dinners with turtle eggs, wild-boar meat, fresh fish, and other ingredients, picked up the Lord only knows where. I often had qualms that he must be drawing too freely on his medicine-chest, but the dishes proved palatable, and as we survived from day to day we have nothing but thanks and gratitude to the friend whom we met in the midst of those wilds, with whom our lives came in contact for a few days, who then remained behind to work out his own destiny, as we ours, even as two ships that sight each other for a moment in mid-ocean and then both disappear. 165

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CHAPTER XIV

Friend Valiente turned up at Santa Catalina, his canoes laden with *mañoc* and *casabe*, two days after our arrival.

Though the ranch had been abandoned for some time, stray cattle, more or less wild, roamed about the neighbourhood. Leal and Valiente soon lassoed a fine heifer, which, slaughtered without delay, replenished our commissariat. We celebrated a banquet like that held on New Year's Day at San Pedro del Tua. We still had a little coffee, but of rum, which had then formed such an attraction, only the fragrant memory remained. Its place was supplied with what was left of our last demijohn of aniseed *aguardiente*.

As Valiente intended following the same route, we decided to wait for him. He knew that part of the Vichada and the Orinoco well. There were several small rapids which it was not advisable to cross without a pilot. 167

Two days after leaving Santa Catalina we struck the Orinoco, with a feeling of boundless joy. It seemed to us as if we had reached the open ocean, and the air itself appeared purer, more charged with invigorating oxygen.

After a short spin from the mouth of the Vichada, we reached Maipures, where Venezuelan authorities were stationed. Knowing that Venezuelans, as a rule, are inclined to be less reverent and respectful towards the Church and its servants than the average Colombian, we abandoned our ecclesiastical character, dropping it, as Elias dropped his mantle upon earth, on the waters of the Vichada, where it had done us such good service.

It was indispensable that we should find a pilot for the rapids. It seems that in former days the Venezuelan Government kept two or three pilots at Maipures, but we found to our sorrow that they had disappeared long since. However, not far from Maipures we were told that we should find a man named Gatiño, one of the best pilots on the river. We at once started in quest of him, and found him in the thick of the forest about a mile from the shore. He was gathering tonga beans, and had formed a little camp, accompanied by his family, which consisted of his wife, two children, a boy and girl of fourteen and twelve respectively, and two smaller children of five and six. He agreed to take us across the rapids, provided we would wait at Maipures until he could pack his beans and gather some india-rubber extracted by himself. As there was no help for it, we agreed to wait. 168

Maipures turned out to be nothing but a group of some fifteen or twenty tumble-down, rickety houses, inhabited by about a score of people, amongst them the prefect or political representative of the Government. He received us most cordially, and placed one of the buildings at our service. I believe both Valiente and Leal gave him to understand that we were high and mighty personages representing the Colombian Government on a tour of inspection through the lands awarded to Colombia by a recent decision in a case of arbitration between the two republics, handed down by the Queen of Spain. Maipures, where the functionary in question was supreme, came within the new jurisdiction, and possibly the belief that we might exercise some influence in maintaining him in his important office may have had to do with his courtesy and goodwill towards us. It was lucky, however, that such an impression was created. Shortly after our arrival he informed us that the Governor of the Amazon territory had just communicated to him orders to prevent all travellers on the river from ascending or descending the stream—in a word, to keep them as prisoners at Maipures. On reading the Governor's note to us, he argued, 'This cannot apply to you, for, being Colombians, you are outside the Governor's jurisdiction.' Here, again, as when conferring ecclesiastical dignity upon us, Leal had acted with prudence and foresight. 169

At Maipures we felt, as we never felt before or after during the journey, the presence of the numerous insects, and noticed that these winged creatures worked with method and discipline. The *puyon* sounded the charge shortly after sunset, attacking without haste and without rest during the whole night. At dawn it would retire to camp, sated with our gore. The post of honour was taken by the sand-flies, which would remain on duty during the earlier part of the forenoon. In their turn they were replaced by some other arm of the service during the hot hours of the day, and so on till nightfall, when the *puyon*, refreshed and eager, would again fall upon his prey. There is no greater regularity in the change of guards at a fortress than is observed by these insects in their war upon men and animals. 170

The mosquito-net was the only real protection. Some relief is obtained by filling the room with smoke from smouldering horse or cattle manure, but the nauseous smell and the ammonia fumes made the remedy worse than the evil. We also feared to share the fate of herrings and other fish subject to the process, and preferred the seclusion of our mosquito-bars.

These, however, were all minor troubles, mentioned here as a matter of record. From our temporary abode we could hear the distant thunder of the rapids, as of batteries of cannon in a great artillery duel. The waters of the Orinoco, suddenly twisted into a narrow bed, wrestle with the boulders of granite scattered in the channel, which they have frayed through the very heart of the huge basaltic mountains.

Life in those regions, from what we gathered, is as wild, as untamed, and irresponsible as the rivers or forests, and as the animals that roam in them. Violence and force are the only law, greed is the sole guiding principle, amongst men. The functionaries in most cases are only authorized robbers and slayers. The Indians, being the most helpless victims, are plundered and murdered, as best suits the fancy of those representatives of organized Governments, whose crimes remain hidden behind the dense veil of interminable forests. 171

When news of any of these misdeeds does chance to reach the official ear, the facts are so distorted on the one hand, and there is so little desire to investigate on the other, that no redress is ever obtained.

Whilst at Maipures there came in a man from San Carlos, the capital of one of the Amazon territories. He told a gruesome story. The Governor of that province, whom he represented as a prototype of the official robbers just mentioned, had exasperated his companions by his all-absorbing greed. The Governor seized all the tonga beans and india-rubber extracted by the poor Indians, who were forced to work without any pay, unfed, whip-driven. His companions, who expected a share in the plunder, conspired to murder him. He was known to be fearless and an admirable shot. One night, however, his house was surrounded by a score or so of his followers; a regular siege ensued; the young Governor kept his assailants at bay for several hours. He was accompanied by a young Spanish ballet-dancer, who had followed his fortunes undaunted by the dangers of that wild land. She would reload the guns whilst he scanned the ground from the only window of the room. One of the assailants crept upon the roof of the house and shot him from behind. He died in a few hours. The canoes laden with all kinds of produce despatched by him—not down the Orinoco, for he feared they might be seized on the long journey through Venezuelan territory, but through the Casiquiare to the Amazon—were said to be worth £40,000 or £50,000. Even if not accurate in all its details, which I repeat from the statement of the new arrival at Maipures, this instance gives an idea of the conditions that prevail in those localities. 172

True to his word, Gatiño turned up at Maipures on the third day, and we continued our journey at once. 173

The rapids of the Orinoco break the open current of the river for a distance of some forty or fifty miles. The Maipures rapids are from five to six miles in length. The river then continues its quiet flow for about twenty or twenty-five miles down to the rapids of Atures; thence it flows to the ocean without any further obstacle of importance.

Gatiño had his own canoe of a special type, much larger than ours, very deep, heavy, capacious, and comfortable. It was the real home of his family.

I asked him why he did not settle somewhere on the banks of those rivers. He told me that both on the Orinoco and on the affluents there were numberless spots on high ground, free from all floods, abundant in game, within easy reach of good fishing, healthy and cool, where he would fain settle. 'But we poor wretches,' he added, 'have no rights. When we least expect it, up turns a fine gentleman sent by some Government or other with a few soldiers; they lift our cattle and steal our chickens, destroy what they do not take away, and compel us to accompany them, paddling their canoes or serving them as they may want without any pay. Whenever I hear,' he went on to say, 'that white men in authority are coming along the river, I start immediately in my canoe through the *caños* as far inland as I can. The wild Indians and the savages are kind and generous; it is the whites and the whites in authority who are to be dreaded.'

Gatiño was himself a full-blooded Indian, but, having been brought up on some settlement, he considered himself a civilized man, and in truth it was strange to see how he practised the highest virtues of an honest man. He loved his wife and family tenderly; he worked day and night for their welfare. He longed for a better lot for his children, the eldest of whom 'studied' at the city of San Fernando de Atabapo, the only city which he knew of by personal experience. As it consists of eighty or a hundred thatch-roofed houses, one may well imagine what the word 'city' implied in his case; yet his thoughts were constantly centred on the learning which that child was storing to the greater honour and happiness of his wandering family. Reading and writing formed the curriculum of that university, possibly because they marked the limit of the teacher's attainments; but let us be ashamed of mocking the humble annals of so good a man. 175

I cannot forbear mentioning an incident, a parallel to which it would be difficult to find amongst nominally civilized folk. One of our men who had accompanied us from San Pedro de Arimena, knowing our plight and our dependence on Gatiño, took him aside, informing him that we had plenty of gold, and that as one of us was ill, and we desired to reach the open river as soon as possible, it would be easy for him to name his price. He suggested that Gatiño should charge one or two thousand dollars for the job, which we would be bound to pay. Gatiño not only did not improve that wonderful opportunity, but he forbore from telling us of the advice given to him. He charged us 100 dollars, a moderate price for the work, and it was only when on the other side of the rapids that Leal learned the incident from the other men.

Here was a test which not many men brought up in the midst of civilized life could have withstood. 176

Gatiño and his family will ever remain in my mind as a bright, cheerful group. Alas for them, lost in those solitudes amongst wild beasts and wild Indians, and subject to the voracity of the white men, who become more ferocious than the worst tiger when their unbridled greed has no responsibility and no punishment to dread!

We had three canoes (including Gatiño's) to take down. We were obliged to empty them completely. The men carried everything on their backs along the shore, whilst the canoes shot the rapids.

When I saw Gatiño on the first rapids, I believed him to be bent on suicide. At that point the river, cut and divided by the rocks, left a narrow channel of about 300 feet in length close in to the shore. Thus far the canoes had been dragged by the current and held by means of ropes. On reaching the channel, Gatiño manned the canoe with four men at the prow, and sat at the stern. The canoe, still tied by the rope, which was held by four men, was kept back as much as possible from the current, which increased in speed at every inch. At the end of the channel the whole river poured its foaming volume into a huge, cup-like basin, studded with rocks, where the water seethed as if boiling. From the basin the river flowed on placidly for several miles. This was the end of the first rapids. 177

Halfway down the channel the men let go the ropes, and the canoe, with its crew, seemed like a huge black feather upon a sea of foam, and the whole length of the channel, white and frothy, appeared like the arched neck of a gigantic horse curved to drink from the waters below. The waters, before entering the basin, formed a small cataract shooting over the protruding ledge. The canoe fell into the basin, and seemed about to be dashed against a rock that stood in its way. On again striking the waters, Gatiño gave the word of command, and the four men began to paddle steadily and with great force, as if to increase the impetus. Gatiño remained quiet and motionless in his place, holding his paddle out of the water ready to strike. At a given moment he uplifted it, thrust it deeply into the waves, and moved it dexterously, so that the canoe turned as if on a pivot, and quietly glided along the rock upon which it would have been dashed into a thousand pieces. 178

Gatiño explained to me that it was necessary for the men to paddle so as to give the canoe her own share in the impetus, and make it more responsive to his steering.

Though he assured me that there was no danger, and though the journey along the shore was tiresome and slow, I did not venture to accompany him when shooting the other rapids before reaching the open river.

The Orinoco has drilled an open passage-way through a spur of the mountains at Maipures. The struggle between the waters and the rocks must have lasted centuries.

'Here shalt thou halt,' said the rock.

'Further will I go,' replied the river.

Like the spoils of battle on a stricken field, the shattered rocks stud the current, which sweeps roaring and foaming around and over them. They resemble the ruins in the breach of a battered bastion. The river is the victor, but, as will happen when two great forces counteract each other, the result is a compromise, and the course of the stream is deviated. The difference of level from the beginning to the end of the rapids is in itself not sufficient to cause the violence with which the waters run. It arises from the sudden compression of the powerful volume of waters into a narrow space. The waters rush through the openings made in the rock with a deafening sound, torn by the remnants of pillars in the bed through which they pass. They fill the air with the tumult of their advance; one would say an army was entering a conquered city, quivering with the rapture of triumph, lifting up the thunder of battle, Titanic bugle-calls, and the pæans of victory. After each one of these narrow breaches in the wall of granite the river plunges into deep basins, where the foaming waters soon sink into their former quiet flow. The soldiers have crossed the first entrenchments, and collect their forces before the next assault. Soon the margins on either side begin to hem in, the waters stir more rapidly, and soon again the mad rush, the desperate plunge, the wild, roaring, irresistible onslaught, and again through the very heart of the mountain into the next basin. Finally, after storming the last redoubt, the river, like a lion freed from the toils which imprisoned him, leaps upon the bosom of the plain, bounding forward in solemn flow towards the ocean. The clear tropical sun reflects itself on its ever-moving bosom, even as the clouds and the forests, the 180

mountains and the birds on wing. The wandering mirror keeps on its course, being, as Longfellow has it, like unto the life of a good man 'darkened by shadows of earth, but reflecting an image of heaven.'

CHAPTER XV

We spent ten days in covering the distance from the upper to beyond the lower rapids, walking whenever it was impossible to use the canoes, which were drifted by the current or shot over the rapids. The delay was due chiefly to the loading and unloading of the canoes, and the necessarily slow transportation of packages, bundles, and sundry articles along the shore.

The banks of the river on either side along the whole length of the rapids are high and rocky, sometimes extending for a mile or two in flat, grass-covered, wavy meadows, and then rising in small hills, abrupt and ragged on the very edge of the water. This is specially the case in the narrow part of the gorges. The grass in the small meadow-like plains is the same as on the shores of the Meta, and the whole aspect of the region, bare of large forests, is that of a field in a civilized country. 182

A few days after leaving Maipures we noticed, to our joy, the absence of mosquitoes and other such tormentors. They seemed to have been blown away by the wind, which had freer scope in the more open stretches along the main river.

We missed the soft couch of the sand beaches to which we had become accustomed, the thin layer of sand or earth being powerless to soften the bed-rock on which we now had to stretch ourselves, but the flight of the mosquitoes and their companions more than made up for this.

Our commissariat had dwindled to utter meagreness; we had neither sugar nor coffee, and *casabe* was our only bread. The last drops of *aguardiente* had been drained at Santa Catalina. At Maipures we had obtained a drink which they called white rum—in truth, pure alcohol, which we had to drown in three times the quantity of water before we swallowed it. Our cigars, cigarettes and tobacco were all gone; they were part and parcel of an enchanted past—smoke wafted heavenward like so many of our hopes and illusions. We had obtained native tobacco, with which we made cigars or rolled cigarettes out of newspaper clippings. Thus we consumed many a literary article or political effusion which it would have been utterly impossible to utilize in any other way. Corn-cob pipes also came in handily. 183

Game, furred or feathered, was not to be found on the shores of the rapids; we had to rely principally on fishing, which was most abundant in the quieter pools and basins. We ate all sorts of fish, some of admirable quality, especially the *morrocoto*, far superior to the French sole or the American shad, blue fish, or Spanish mackerel. If Marguery could meet with it, his immense renown would increase tenfold, as with this fish at his disposal he would be certain to evolve what from a culinary point of view would amount to an epic poem of the most sublime order. Such, at least, was my opinion when eating that fish, with my imagination duly fired by a voracious appetite and a lack of material condiments which gave rise to dreams worthy of Lucullus in exile.

Rice and salt we had in plenty; butter, oil, and lard were unknown quantities. Had we been in Lent, necessity would have enabled us very easily to observe the ordinance of the Roman Church with regard to abstinence from meat. We thought of this, and although we were not sure of our dates, we at once decided to offer up our enforced diet in a truly Catholic spirit in atonement for some of our many sins! May our offering prove acceptable! 184

We did not go to sleep as readily on our new hard beds as on the sand. The clearness of the air and freedom from insects also contributed to long watches, which we spent in listening to the far-off roar of the river pealing incessantly through the night air, whilst Gatiño would tell us about the life of men and beasts in those territories. The voice of the river seemed like the distant bass of a powerful orchestra, all the high notes of which had been lost in space.

Gatiño was familiar with the rivers that flow into the Orinoco above its confluence with the Vichada, and the numerous *caños* which intersect that region were so well known to him that on one occasion, when flying from some Governor on his way to the upper territories who was anxious to obtain his services as a guide, Gatiño had managed to lose himself in such an intricate maze of *caños* and water-ways, and, finally, in a small lagoon, unknown to all except the wild Indians, that the Governor had given up the chase in despair. He had travelled on the Casiquiare and the Rio Negro, and had visited the Upper Amazon. According to him, the Upper Orinoco and its affluents are as abundant in india-rubber forests as the Amazon and its tributaries, the Putumayo, the Napo and the Yarabi. The gum or india-rubber is identical in quality with that of the best species of Para. In some places the trees grow so closely that a man may extract from twenty to forty pounds of india-rubber a day. Besides large virgin areas rich in india-rubber forests, in other parts *piazaba* palm forests stretch for hundreds of acres at a time. This *piazaba* is used for matting, broom-making, and twisting of ropes and cables. It is perfectly impervious to moisture, and is even said to improve instead of rotting in water. Not far from where we were in one of the *caños*, the *piazaba* forest followed the water-course for a distance of, Gatiño said, 'twenty twists.' An odd system of measuring, but the only one at his command. 'Twenty twists' might be five or twenty miles, according to the size of the curves. These forests further contained infinite abundance of sarsaparilla, tonga bean, *peraman* and *caraña*, the resinous substances used for caulking and torch-making. Gatiño himself exploited those sources of wealth as far as his own personal means and limitations would allow him. He stated his willingness at any time to guide us to the spots where rubber, tonga bean, and so forth, could be found, adding that he knew we would treat him well, but that he would never consent to act as a guide to others, especially to 185

the white men in official positions who now and then appeared along the river. These he held in special abhorrence, and no doubt their doings justified his feelings.

Gatiño's statements as to the wealth of the Orinoco were perfectly truthful. It seems strange that such vast sources of wealth should remain practically unexploited. The rapids of the Orinoco act as a barrier, before which traders and explorers have come to a standstill. Some sixty or seventy years ago cart-roads existed on the shores along the rapids; these were built by the missionaries, and parts of them are still intact. Vegetation being weak on the hard soil of those banks, it would be easy to re-establish them. The great obstacle, however, is to be found in the numerous affluents which fall into the Orinoco along the rapids. The missionaries had large pontoon-like rafts on which they transported their carts from one side to the other. Were this primitive service started once more, the flow of natural products extracted from the forests would soon establish itself from the Upper to the Lower Orinoco. 187

One day, having left our canoes behind, we arrived at the shores of the Cantaniapo, a clear stream flowing into the Orinoco between two stretches of rapids. No tree shaded us from the fierce glare of the sun. The waters murmured most invitingly on the pebbles of the beach. On the other side was a sort of shed, a vestige of former splendour. A small canoe was moored alongside, tied with a *piazaba* rope to the trunk of a neighbouring tree. So near, and yet so far! We should have to wait, perhaps, broiling in the sun for hours, till our canoes arrived. 188 Whilst we discussed the arduous architectural problem of building a tent with such articles as coats, india-rubber waterproof sheets, and so on, a noise as of a body falling into the water drew our attention to the river. Leal, holding his *machete* between his teeth, was swimming *llanero* fashion—that is to say, throwing each arm out of the water in succession, and covering a distance equal to the length of his body at every stroke. The peril, potentially speaking, was extreme; one never knows whether the alligators and other inhabitants of those waters may or may not be at hand. Yet Leal did not seem to care. Fortunately, he soon landed on the opposite shore, jumped into the canoe, cut the rope and paddled back. On our remonstrating with him, he argued that the danger was slight; alligators hate noise, and he had taken care to be as noisy as possible.

'Furthermore,' he added, 'I had my *machete* with me.'

We stopped that night under the shed. Gatiño came in due time. We particularly wished to bathe in the transparent waters of that river, not as Leal had done, but in our usual prudent way, standing on the shore far from all possible danger. 189

The next morning we saw the only living tiger which met our eyes during that long trip. Early, before striking the camp, the shout went forth—'A tiger! A tiger!' There, at a distance of about 150 feet from us, on a small protruding ledge which plunged into the river, forming a sort of natural drinking-place, stood a beautiful specimen of the native tiger. The wind, which, as Leal told us, blew from the land, carried the scent in the wrong direction, and this explained the tiger's visit. On hearing the shout, Leal sprang up and seized one of the rifles. The tiger looked towards our group and turned tail, bolting in the direction whence he had come, behind a clump of bushes. Leal followed him. We soon heard a shot, and after a few minutes Leal returned, disgusted. He had only wounded the animal. I argued with him that we were most thankful to the lord of the forest for his abrupt courtesy in leaving the field entirely to us, as, had he felt inclined to enter into closer relations, we might have found it awkward, to say the least.

Valiente had come with Gatiño. Our belongings seemed to him, as they had previously seemed to Leal, an abnormal accumulation of wealth. We had kept with us, not knowing whether they might again be required, our riding-saddles. My own was large, comfortable, and soft, a work of art in its way. Valiente seemed to admire it. The remarks which he made deserve to be noted here. 190

'This saddle is certainly very fine and comfortable; but how do you manage when crossing a river? Do you not find it very heavy on your head?'

I could not understand what he meant, until I remembered that the *llaneros*, when swimming across a river, generally carry their saddles on their heads to keep them dry. At first I thought Valiente was 'pulling my leg.' A mere glance at my person should suffice to persuade anyone that not even the furious onslaught of a regiment of Cossacks would induce me in any circumstances to plunge into a river where there was a chance of meeting alligators and such-like; I was still less likely to venture on such feats with the additional burden of a heavy saddle on my head. However, Valiente was perfectly in earnest, and meant no harm; so I assured him with perfect calm that I had never noticed on any occasion, either in or out of the water, that the saddle was a heavy one. 191

'Possibly,' I added, 'it is a question of habit.'

'May be,' he said, 'but it would be a long time before I got used to it. Look at my saddle!' he went on to say; 'it only weighs a fourth of yours. Still, I should like to try yours, not for real hard work—branding, lassoing, or rounding up cattle—but just to prance round the town on a good horse and charm the girls. That's about what it's fit for!'

That day, marked in the calendar of our memory as the 'tiger day,' our supper consisted of boiled rice and *casabe*. Somehow or other there had been no fishing. Yet we did not grumble; custom had taught us to be easily satisfied. We learned from Gatiño that within twelve miles from us the Atures ruins were to be found. Behind the thick forest which separates it from the river stands a short range of high cliffs. They are the last spur of the chain through which the Orinoco has drilled its way. At a height of 600 to 700 metres on the vertical wall, so straight and smooth that it seems to have been polished all over by the hand of man, there appear, carved in the very substance of the rock, a huge alligator and two human figures, standing near its head and tail respectively. All are of colossal dimensions. According to the measurements of other travellers provided with the 192

required instruments, the length of the alligator exceeds 500 feet, and the human figures are of proportionate size. It is difficult to understand what sort of scaffolding was used to carry out this work at such a height, no support or traces of support of any kind in the rock being apparent; what instruments were used for the carving, and what purpose the whole work served: all this is very perplexing.

Footprints of human endeavour, thoughts of past generations entirely lost to our minds, left there in the midst of the forest, marking the passage of men who must have been powerful at a period so remote that only these traces remain. What more eloquent proof of the nothingness, the vanity, of our own ephemeral individual life!

The mere magnitude of the work carried out demonstrates that in those regions, totally deserted to-day, where Nature has reasserted her absolute sway, and where the wanderer has to fight for every inch of ground in the jungle and the thicket, there must once have been multitudes of men educated in certain arts—arts which in their turn must have been links in a chain of sequence indispensable to their own existence, as isolated effort in one direction would be incomprehensible. Nothing of those myriads of men survives beyond this dumb expression of their thoughts and aspirations. 193

Were those figures carved on that huge wall, on the virgin rock of the mountains, hundreds or thousands of years ago? Who knows? Who can tell?

With the rapidity inherent to human thought, my mind sped to the pyramids of Egypt, the ruins of Babylon and Nineveh, the buried cities of Ceylon, the excavated temples and palaces in Yucatan and elsewhere, wherever vestiges of vanished generations are found.

That sculpture on the rock on the shores of the Orinoco brought to my mind the dying lion cut into the granite on the banks of the Lake of Lucerne, as a symbol of respect and admiration to the loyalty and steadfastness of the compatriots of William Tell, who died for a cause upon which judgment has been passed in the minds of men and in the pages of history. I could not help thinking that perhaps when Macaulay's famous New Zealander shall stand upon the broken arches of London Bridge to gaze at the ruins of St. Paul's, when England and London shall have crumbled into potsherds, so in years to come some native of these Orinoco regions, then populous and civilized, may sail on the cool waters of Lucerne and interrogate the mute rock, anxious to know the allegory embodied in that dying lion holding in its claws the shield which bears the three secular lilies of old France. Even as the rock was mute to us, so shall the rock again be mute to him who thousands of years hence may question Thorwaldsen's sculpture. The efforts of man are powerless against time and oblivion, even though they choose the largest, the most lasting manifestations of Nature for their pedestal. 194

Time passes grimly on. The endeavours of pride, of flattery, of gratitude, the emblems of glory, all become dumb and meaningless. Egyptian hieroglyphics, figures and signs carved in monoliths or pyramids or in the rock of the mountains, after the lapse of what, to the world, is but an instant, all become confused, vague, and undefinable. The seeker and the student find all those attempts to perpetuate the memory or the aspirations of men, now on the burning sands of the desert, now decked in the foliage and wealth of Nature, aggressively reasserting her empire, now in the naked summits of the uplifted mountains—yea, the seeker finds them all; but he knows not whether they be expressions of human pride anxious to survive the life of the body, or whether they be witnesses of servile flattery paying tribute to the mighty, or the grateful offering of nations to their heroes and their benefactors, or the emblem of some dim forgotten religion, whose very rites are as unintelligible to living men as is the mystic power which once gave them force. 195

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CHAPTER XVI

With the accession of Gatiño and his family and Valiente and his men, our numbers had gradually increased, and the camp at night had quite a lively aspect. The men would tell their adventures, and conversation frequently turned on local topics. We had gradually drifted into practical indifference concerning the doings of that distant world to which we belonged, and towards which we were moving. Newspapers, letters, telegrams, the multifarious scraps of gossip, the bursts of curiosity which fill so great a part in the life of modern man, had totally disappeared as daily elements in our own. To tell the truth, I did not miss them greatly. I have always thought that the daily newspapers are thieves of time, and cannot but approve the system of a certain friend of mine, an Englishman, who, residing in New York, had no other source of information for the world's news than the weekly edition of the *Times*. He was dependent on it even for the news of American life and politics. 197

He argued that the ups and downs of a given event were of little interest to him.

'All that one need know,' he said, 'is the upshot, the crystallized fact, without wasting valuable time in the slow developments which, at times, are pure inventions of the editor—"padding," as it is called. I am a little behind-hand at times,' he remarked, 'but at the end of the year I make it up, balance the account, and start afresh.'

Certainly if all the attention given to local news of no importance, or to descriptions of fires, crimes, and sundry topics which never change in essence and vary solely as regards names and secondary details, were devoted to studying something useful, the average mind of the great newspaper-reading nations would not have been degraded to the depths revealed by a glance at a collection of the newspapers and reading matter on the bookstalls of any railway-station in France, England, or the United States, where the flood of trash and sensationalism swamps and carries away with it public intelligence, or what stands for it. 198

Gautier used to complain of the curse of the daily press.

'Formerly,' he said, 'every human being brayed in his own original asinine way. Now we only get variations on the leaders in their respective newspapers!'

The great French writer expressed the simple truth in a pointed way. The cheap press, like cheap liquor, is a public calamity.

Our men poured forth personal impressions of Nature. The world varies in size and in beauty in proportion to the eye and the mind that contemplate it. In Leal's and Valiente's conversation especially there was something like the voice of the forest and the murmuring waters. They had lived to some purpose in those deserts, and to them cities, railways, palaces, sea-going ships, and all the other methods of modern locomotion—material civilization, in fact—were as wonderful as the beauties and splendours of Eastern tales are to us.

Talking about tigers, Leal told us that they roamed all over those plains, especially on the banks of the Meta and the Orinoco, where the forests intersect breeding and grazing plains. The cattle-ranchers must be ever on the watch, and from instinct and experience the cattle acquire a natural spirit of defence without which the losses would be far heavier than at present. 199

Whenever the cattle scent the approach of the tiger, they crowd together, the young calves in the centre, the cows and young heifers covering them behind their bodies, and the bulls pacing around and outside the group like sentinels before a tent. There is no exaggeration in this tale. Leal assured us that he had himself seen these preparations on more than one occasion.

The tiger, whose daring and ferocity are multiplied tenfold by hunger, frequently attacks the group: then ensues a life and death struggle. The tiger tries to jump upon the bull sideways or from behind, whilst the bull strives to face the tiger constantly. As the latter is far more agile and can leap from a long distance, he frequently lands upon the bull, sometimes breaking his spine with the blow. If he misses, the bull gores him. Occasionally both animals die, the tiger in its death-struggle tearing the bull's neck open with its claws.

'More than once,' said Leal, 'have I found the two enemies dead in a pool of blood side by side.'

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The tigers also crouch in the bushes close to the drinking-places, and jump upon the animals as they lower their heads into the water. They rip open the necks of their victims, drag them into the jungle, and there devour them.

The hunters know that a sated tiger is far less daring than a hungry one, and they frequently place a calf or some other easy prey within his reach. After his meal he is hunted down, but Leal added that this is not considered fair play amongst thoroughbred *llaneros*; it is a trick unworthy of a real sportsman.

The tigers live exclusively upon other animals. They prefer cattle, and have a special predilection for donkeys and mules; they are gourmets. The choicest morsel to their taste seems to be the fat neck of donkeys and mules; they have, too, a pretty taste in turtles. They can crush the back of the younger turtles not yet fully developed. These awkward amphibians rush, if their ponderous movements can be so described, into the water for fear of the tiger. There he is powerless to harm them.

The alligator rivals the tiger in voracity and fierceness. They are sworn enemies, and attack each other whenever they meet. The odds are on the tiger's side if the struggle be on land, and in favour of the alligator if the pair meet in the water. The tiger seeks to turn the alligator over on his back, or to get at the body towards the stomach, where the softer skin can be penetrated by the tiger's claws, which disembowel his enemy. The alligator defends himself by striking terrific blows with his tail, and seeks to scrunch the tiger between his formidable jaws. Fights between them, Leal said, are frequently seen on the beaches, and are a fascinating though ghastly spectacle. 201

The tigers frequently cross rivers infested with alligators, and display a really marvellous cunning in avoiding their enemy in his own element. The tiger will stand on the beach at a given point of the river, and there roar with all his might for an hour or so on end. The alligators, in the hope of getting at him, congregate in the water at that particular point. When the members of the assembly thus convened have, so far as the tiger can judge, met at the appointed place, he starts up-stream along the banks as rapidly as possible, and crosses two or three miles higher up. There are two details to be noted: first, the stratagem by which the tiger misleads his enemies; and, second, his choice of a crossing-place, so that the alligator would have to swim against the current to get at him. 202

Both Leal and Valiente had the true cattle-breeder's love for cattle, which to them are man's best friends.

'They give us milk and meat and cheese,' Leal would say; 'they help us to cultivate the ground, and their very presence drives away fevers, mosquitoes, and miasmas. We and the cattle are allies against the boas, the tigers, the snakes, and all the beasts without which these lands would be a real paradise.'

The tales of our friends sounded most wonderful in Fermin's ears. He was a townsman, accustomed to bricks and mortar; furthermore, he was naturally sceptical as to all that he heard, and felt rather small at seeing our men's familiarity with things and manifestations of Nature which to him were so strange and new.

Fermin came from the city of Medellin, where he had spent most of his life. It is a typical old Spanish town of the central tropical belt. It nestles amongst the hills, 100 miles from the left bank of the Magdalena River, at a height of about 4,500 feet. The ground around is mountainous. The valley is small and beautiful, with numberless streams coursing down the hills, and luxuriant vegetation in perpetual bloom. 203

Prior to this journey, Fermin's travels had never taken him beyond his own province. Like all Colombians, he had been a soldier at some period of his life, a 'volunteer' of the type described in a telegram (very well known in Colombia) which a candid or witty—the distinction is at times difficult—mayor sent to a colleague in a neighbouring town: 'Herewith I send a hundred volunteers; kindly return the ropes!' Having joined the army in this wise, it is not strange that Fermin left it as soon as he could. His military career was no longer and no more glorious than Coleridge's.

Continental Europeans are wont to grow amusingly solemn and censorious when they hear of the system still obtaining in many parts of Spanish America for the formation of armies which are chiefly engaged in the civil wars that devastate those countries from time to time; this system is nothing more nor less than the press-gang method practised all over Europe not so long ago. But between this press-gang, which suddenly compels a man to join the ranks destined to fight, and the conscription, which forces him into the army whether he likes it or not, I can only see a difference of detail, but none in essence. Individual liberty is as much violated in the one case as in the other. In both cases the weak, the helpless, and the poor are the prey of the more cunning and more powerful, and as for the causes at stake, whatever the name or pretext may be, if the whole question is sifted, greed and ambition masquerading under some conventional high-sounding name will be found to be the real and essential motors. Militarism is a form of exploitation of mankind which adds human blood to the ingredients productive of gold and power to others; it is nothing but an engine of plunder and of pride, the more disgusting on account of its sleek hypocrisy. Your money-lender frankly tells you that he will charge you three, four, or five per cent. per month, and despoil you of house and home if you cannot pay; this, though cruel, is frank and open and above-board. But your advocate of militarism will despoil you like the cosmopolite Jew, telling you that glory shall be yours, that patriotism and the holy traditions of religion, the dynasty, the empire, or the nation, as the case may be, are at stake, and that it is necessary for you to risk your skin in consequence. With such baubles and clownish maunderings men have been led on, and are still being led on, to cut each other's throats for the personal benefit and satisfaction of their leaders, who give them a bit of ribbon or stamped metal if they survive and have luck. Meanwhile the exploiters sit safe on their office chairs, pocket the shekels, and chuckle at the pack of fools, the smug middle-class flunkies, and the dirty, bamboozled millions, the cannon fodder, fit only for bayonet and shrapnel. 204

After leaving the army, Fermin, who by trade was a journeyman tailor, had joined the remnants of a wrecked theatrical company, a group of strollers travelling through the towns and villages of his province, and giving performances from the modern and the ancient Spanish repertory, to the enjoyment and the edification of the natives. 205

He had been in my service for over a year, proving himself admirable as a valet, and certainly very plastic, for during the journey he had been by turns muleteer, amateur paddler, fisherman, hunter and cook.

The people of his province, a hardy mountaineer race, so prolific that population doubles itself every twenty-eight years, are known all over Spanish America for their readiness at repartee, the frequent metaphors that brighten their daily speech, and a knack of humorous exaggeration.

Fermin, referring to one of the men whose idleness he criticised, said, 'That fellow is so lazy that he cannot even carry a greeting!' and talking of the wonderful climbing ability of a certain mule, he said that, if it could only find the way, it would reach the gates of heaven and bray in the ears of St. Peter!

One evening, during a lull in the conversation, Fermin, who had quietly listened to tales of fierce tigers, chivalrous bulls, alligators, and many other natives of forest or stream, burst forth, saying that he also knew of some wonderful beasts; but I prefer to quote his words as nearly as possible. 206

'The truth is,' said he, 'that before starting on this trip I knew nothing about tigers, alligators, boas, and so forth, except from picture-books. I had even thought that people lied a great deal about those animals, but sight has now convinced me of their existence. I have no doubt they are to be found somewhere in my native province, but it is not about them that I am going to talk. I will tell you something which will show that we, too, have wonderful animals in our part of the country.'

'Some years ago I was the first lover in a theatrical company which, though modest in its pretensions, scored great success wherever it played. One night, in the mining region near the Cauca River, we were forced to sleep in the very shed where we had performed the comic opera entitled "The Children of Captain Grant," a most popular seafaring tale set to music.

'Mosquitoes were as abundant and aggressive as anywhere in the world, but they seemed to me to have far stronger lungs than those of these localities. Anyhow, there was a specially sustained high-sounding ring in their little trumpets, so that they formed a sort of orchestra beneath the moon. 207

'One of the lady artistes held the doctrine that life was sacred in all its manifestations; that man has no right to kill any animal, however small it may be, so she did not kill the mosquitoes that swarmed around her, but tried to blow them away with her fan. However, as some of them alighted on her forehead and on her hands, she would take them carefully between thumb and forefinger and place them on the side of a basin half filled with water, moistening their wings so that they stuck and remained harmless for the time being.

'The smokers amongst us—all the men, in fact—after lighting their cigars or cigarettes, threw their wooden matches into the basin, a necessary precaution lest the thatch-roofed shed might catch fire.

'In the earlier part of the night the mosquitoes made sleep almost impossible, and there we lay on the ground or upon canvas stretchers snoozing and tossing about, waiting for the morning. As night advanced, with the arrival of a welcome breeze, they seemed to diminish in numbers. I began to doze, but was awakened by one of my 208

companions who called my attention to the echo of distant music, sweet and low, a harmony of lutes and soft recorders, whose sounds were wafted on the wings of the night air. We went out of the shed, and the sounds ceased. On returning to it we heard the melody again. This was a mystery. Nearly all our companions were asleep. We were determined to ascertain whence the music came, and, on investigation, found that the blessed mosquitoes, placed by the charitable and humane artiste on the sides of the basin, had contrived to build a raft with the fag-ends of matches, on which, waiting for their wings to dry completely, they were whiling the night away gaily singing the most popular ditty in our operetta, descriptive of the joys of life on the ocean wave!

'This will show you,' Fermin added, 'that, though we have neither tigers, nor boas, nor turtles, nor fighting bulls, nor alligators, in our province, our mosquitoes beat all yours in talent and ability!'

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CHAPTER XVII

Not far from the Atures rapids, we stopped at Puerto Real, a short curve in the river where the waters penetrate into a sort of bay justifying the name of 'port,' but with no other title to it, for no human habitation, not even the humblest hut, exists on either shore. Here the canoes were laden permanently, as the river flowed straight to the ocean, free from all rapids except at a few narrow places where the current is swifter. These, however, did not call for the precautions of the past days.

Leal considered his task at an end. We were on the open Orinoco in the Republic of Venezuela, and in the hands of a guide as careful and expert as Gatiño. This led Leal to return. In vain did we seek to persuade him to accompany us, to enter Colombia by the Magdalena River, thence to Bogotá, and then by the road we had followed to San Pedro del Tua. He would not abandon his companions, and decided to go back by the identical route we had followed. We deeply felt parting from that noble companion whose quiet, unobtrusive courage, whose skilled prudence and ready intelligence, had not only contributed greatly to our comfort during the ninety odd days that he had been with us, but had doubtless saved our lives on more than one occasion. 211

As a proof of the extent and value of his services, I will quote a letter received many months after in Europe, when, in the midst of modern civilization, the events and occurrences of my journey through the tropical regions of South America seemed more like a dream than a reality. Alex, who had returned to Bogotá, wrote as follows:

'I have just received a letter from Leal, dated from his home at San Pedro del Tua. You will remember that he left us with fourteen of our men, to return by the Vichada and the Meta. On the very day of their departure, whilst they were ascending the rapids, and we proceeded on our journey down-stream, only a few hours after bidding us farewell, one of the two canoes, carrying seven men, struck the trunk of a tree lying under the water, and capsized. The men were all good swimmers, and soon overtook the canoe, which was drifting with the stream. After a good deal of trouble, they succeeded in turning it over. Whilst they were getting back into it, they were attacked by two enormous alligators which sought to overturn the canoe, striking it furiously with their tails. One of the sailors was struck on the head and stunned, losing his grip, and before he could be pulled in the other alligator cut his body in two, as if with a saw, crushing him between its jaws, so that the man was actually devoured in the very presence of his companions.'

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On reading these tragic details, I felt a cold shiver run through me, like a man who sees lightning strike an object close to him, or feels a murderous bullet whizz past his head. A retrospective fear seized upon me at the thought of the many nights spent on the lonely beaches, and the numberless times that our canoes had struck submerged rocks or trunks of trees. Surely a kind Providence had watched over us during that long journey. 'The child's heart within the man's' revived in me, with the faith in God learnt from the lips of my mother, and my soul went to her who, during those long, anxious days, had prayed night and day to Him above for the safety of her absent son. 213

Greatly diminished in numbers, we continued downwards, hoping to strike some camp of tonga-bean-gatherers, the harvest season having just begun.

If the Meta had seemed large and mighty to us, the Orinoco bore the aspect of an inland sea. The breezes and the hurricanes blow upon its billows and dash them into surf on the bank; the trade-winds—our old friends of the Meta—reappeared on the Orinoco, only far stronger than before. One would say that they spend their force in the long journey, and are somewhat weary in the upper regions. It is impossible to make any progress in the teeth of the trade-wind. With a stern or a side wind the canoes hoist their sails and travel with the speed of birds on the wing. The great force of the wind is generally felt during the middle hours of the day; it lulls in the morning and afternoon.

Far more frequently than on the Meta we were forced to wait for hours on the sandy desert beaches, or close in to the shore covered with jungle, waiting, waiting for the wind to sink. The worst feature of these breezes is that they raise a great quantity of sand to a height varying from 2 to 3 feet. 214

Cooking becomes impossible, as the wind blows the fire out, scattering the embers and the logs, and unless rocks or trees be available on which to sit at a certain height, one is compelled to stand, as it is impossible to breathe the air, which is impregnated with sand. At such times we were compelled to make our meals of *casabe* dipped in water, and drink more freely of the white rum which took the place of warmer food and drink. Once we were kept

thus imprisoned for nearly thirty hours; our helplessness against the elements exercised a most depressing influence.

The tonga bean, called in Spanish *zarrapia*, constitutes a most important article of trade, and is obtained in large quantities on the shore of the Orinoco and of many of its affluents below the rapids. It is said to abound also in the Upper Orinoco, but there it is seldom gathered.

The tonga-tree is large and leafy, very similar to the mango-tree. The branches, which spread over an area of 20, 30, or 40 feet, are covered with thick foliage, and the yield of fruit is enormous. The fruit resembles the mango in shape and appearance. Under a sweet pulp, quite palatable, is found an oval nut, identical with that of the mango, and inside this nut, which has the consistency of a walnut, is encased a small elongated bean of a pink colour. It soon turns dark red when exposed to air and sun. The trees shed the fruit in the months of February and March; the men gather it from the ground, clean off the pulp, and break the nut with stones. This must be carefully done to avoid breaking the bean, which is then placed in the sun on dry, untanned hides, and after two or three days packed in bags ready for transportation. 215

The tonga bean is chiefly used in perfumery, and is a very good substitute for vanilla.

We were told that the exports averaged, at the prices then ranging, a yearly output of £100,000 to £150,000. I understand that the price has fallen considerably of late years, but as the gathering costs very little, and the transportation, owing to the numerous waterways, is cheap, there must still be great profits in the business. 216

Traders flock from the different parts of the river to certain well-known camps, from which they branch off into the forests, bringing back the bean for sale to the camps. Although the Venezuelan Government has more than once granted special privileges and monopolies to individuals and companies for the exploitation of the tonga bean, its gathering is practically free, as it would be next to impossible to watch over such vast uninhabited areas where men can easily conceal themselves in the forests.

Our progress was far slower than before, as we generally lost half a day waiting for the breeze to fall. This was owing principally to the size of our canoes, too small for navigation in a high wind.

In due time we came upon the first camp, a most welcome sight to our eyes; a whole village of tents stood pitched on the bank of the river, and upwards of twenty or thirty canoes were moored along the shore. Amongst them we saw a small one-masted schooner, which raised its graceful lines above the surrounding small craft. We gazed upon it with covetous eyes, and decided to make every possible effort to acquire it, if it could be had for love or money. 217

We did not attract any attention at first; the people in the camp thought that we were tonga-bean-gatherers like themselves, coming from some point above; but they showed great interest and courtesy on hearing that we came not only from beyond the rapids, but from the upper affluents of the Orinoco. We soon closed a bargain for the schooner, into which we transferred our belongings, and the next day the three small sails were let loose to the very breeze that, during the past few days, had nailed us to the shores.

Besides the schooner, we obtained a supply of provisions, though not as much as we wished. The traders had only what they needed, and were loath to part with them, especially as we were going towards the centres of supply.

In the course of a day or two we stopped at a large flat island, some twelve miles in length, as we were told, and varying from two to four miles in breadth; this is known as the Beach of Lard (*Playa de la Manteca*). This island is the laying-place of hundreds of thousands of turtles, which come to it every year in the laying season. The island belongs to the Government, who place a small detachment of soldiers to watch over it. The traders buy the right of working a given section of the ground. They dig out the eggs, from which the oil is extracted. It is used for cooking, and is a substitute for lard and butter—hence the name of the beach. 218

The turtles swarm in myriads, and are forced by those coming up behind them to go further into the island. After laying their eggs they seek the water, but are so numerous that it is necessary for the soldiers and traders to keep a pathway open, otherwise many of them could not get back to the river.

It is a marvel to see countless acres of ground covered with turtles as thick as the stones of a pavement; and the fact might be incredible if it were not vouched for by so many travellers.

A turtle lays, according to its size and age, from fifty to three or four hundred eggs. The men—traders or Government agents—are free to take as many turtles as they like; the eggs are the only article of barter upon which a price is set.

Some idea of the number of turtles laying eggs on the beach may be gathered from the reckoning of a French traveller who investigated the subject. 219

The oil extracted from the eggs is gathered in demijohns holding on an average seven gallons each, and the average yield of a good year is about ten thousand demijohns. Each demijohn requires from four to five thousand eggs; ten thousand demijohns represent from four to five millions, which means that there must be from four to five hundred thousand turtles. The tale seems extravagant.

It is needless to say that we took in as large a supply of turtles and of eggs as we could carry. The sailors of the schooner were delighted at the prospect of turtle meat and turtle eggs *ad libitum*. The eggs are boiled in salt water, and keep for a practically indefinite period.

The capacity for eating these eggs shown by the natives of those regions seems to be unlimited. I could not understand, looking at the size of the men and at the young mountain of turtle eggs before which they sat, and which disappeared after a period of sustained assimilation, how it was possible that they did not swell outwardly or explode. Here was a case in which the envelope was, to all purposes and appearances, smaller than the contents assimilated—a problem for some sapient naturalist to investigate whenever he may chance to stray into those remote regions. 220

It is said that the turtle yields seven kinds of meat, and that in the hands of a good cook it is transfigured into calf's head, veal, tender loin steak, chicken, venison, pork, and (naturally) turtle meat. Be that as it may, notwithstanding the uncouth and, to some, repulsive appearance of the animal, it is evident that the various parts of its body are not only palatable, but may be disguised to imitate the varieties mentioned, a peculiarity which in its turn works inversely, as in the well-known case of mock-turtle soup.

The turtles we bought were placed on their backs, which seems to be the universal method of keeping them all the world over. There in the bottom of our schooner the poor beasts had ample opportunity to watch the flight of clouds by day and the grouping of the constellations by night. I fear, however, that they did not improve their time with the study either of atmospherical changes or of astronomical wonders.

Fermin rapidly learnt how to cook and prepare turtles in the various native ways, to which he added devices of his own, reminiscent of the preparation of other meats and dishes in his native province. 221

The change of diet was most welcome at first, but after the fourth or fifth day the very name of turtle was revolting. Fermin was told that, if nothing else but turtle was to be found, we preferred to fall back on boiled rice and *casabe*. Relying, however, on his ability and the protean plasticity of turtle meat, he insisted on serving some of it as wild-boar flesh, and only upon a formal threat of shooting, or being left tied to the trunk of a tree along the shore, like a new Andromache, did he cease his attempts to deceive our palates. Thus, notwithstanding the plentiful supply of turtles and turtle eggs, we drifted back to the diet of *casabe*, boiled fish and boiled rice.

We had hoped to strike some cattle-farm, but we scanned the horizon in vain. The plains and the forests rolled before our eyes, an interminable blank for our purposes.

Finally, as everything happens at last, our expectation was gratified; near the confluence of our old friend the Meta with the Orinoco, we came upon a cattle-ranch where we obtained corn, molasses, eggs, lard, cheese, coffee, and the whole side of a recently slaughtered heifer. 222

I can readily understand that persons of a delicate taste, should they happen to read these awkwardly penned lines, must feel disgusted at the recurrence of such vulgar and material details. Their amazement will certainly be great, for in all probability they will be surrounded by all the comforts and the luxury of civilized life. There is no harsher censor of the misdeeds or faults arising out of somebody else's hunger than the drowsy philosopher who passes judgment in a comfortable armchair after a plentiful meal; his untempted rectitude makes him the austere critic of failings and weaknesses in others. However, the opinion of those immaculate beings, with their hot-house virtue, safe from wind and wet behind glass panes, receives precisely the attention it deserves.

Still, I admit that, after having crossed those regions, it were better if I could describe what I saw in a series of pen-pictures which would unroll before the reader in sequence or harmonious groups the numerous sublime aspects of Nature; it were far better that, even as the essence retains the perfume of the flower, the written word should convey to other minds the deep impression left upon my own by the mysterious murmuring forest, the invisible wind whose breath so often cooled my forehead, the constant throb of the wandering waves pent within their narrow channels, the infinite azure of the sky, and the numberless sounds and rumours, now soft, now deafening, which fill the air in that world still free from the burden of civilization, living the life of untrodden Nature, a link in the endless chain of existence ravaging on death, with the great drama of being made manifest in a thousand diverse shapes. 223

Happy were I could I seize one single note from that vast symphony, capture it, and fix it with my words! Vain wishes!

We passed from those solitudes, leaving no more trace behind us than the clouds in the sky, and although the impression of the greatness and the majesty of Nature sank deeply into my heart, so that at times my soul, returning to the days of the past, loses itself in the depths of the forests and the summits of the mountains, follows the course of the rivers, or bathes itself in the pure atmosphere of the free and boundless plain, whenever I seek to utter my inmost feelings, so that others may feel and understand with me, only the faintest shadow of my thought falls on the blank page. The gift of seeing and of feeling, and of creating what we have felt and seen so that others in their turn may feel a similar impression, has been given by the Almighty only to those few chosen artists and men of genius who throw upon the work which they create 'the light that never was on land or sea.' I must perforce limit myself to the humble narrative of our daily life. I have no higher ambition in writing these pages, and I shall be fortunate if I meet with readers who understand my motive. 224

The schooner took us down to La Urbana (a settlement with urban pretensions); it boasts some *adobe* houses covered with tiles, and a small church. Here we abandoned the schooner, and were obliged to take to a far smaller canoe—large enough, however, for navigation on the Orinoco—in which we proceeded to Caicara, where we expected to meet the steamers plying between Ciudad Bolivar and the Apure River.

The journey from La Urbana to Caicara passed off without any incident. On jumping ashore at this latter point we hoped that we were leaving our canoes for good, and that the rest of the journey to Ciudad Bolivar would take place by steam.

The people received us very kindly, and, though the town was far from modern or rich, we enjoyed some comforts that we had lacked during the long journey which lay behind us.

Though eight weeks had passed since the news of the death of the Governor of San Carlos had reached Maipures, nothing was known about it at Caicara. This will give an idea of the abandonment in which those vast territories are left by those under whose political authority they live. Grave international complications with the neighbouring States might arise from disturbances like that at San Carlos, and yet the news had only come down by mere chance, brought by travellers who had no personal interest in it. 226

Finding that there was no certainty as to the steamers likely to touch at Caicara, we reluctantly decided to take again to the slow and sure method of canoeing, rather than wait for him who had not promised to come, and thus we proceeded on our journey in the same canoes that we had imagined we were abandoning once for all two days before. A feeling of discontent began to possess us. It was not that we were dissatisfied with the kind of life, nor that we had become over-sensitive to the privations inherent to it, nor that we complained of being plain squires compelled to adopt the practices of knight-errants, such as not eating off linen, nor sleeping on comfortable couches, nor under roof of house or mansion; no, our great longing arose at the thought of those far away in the civilized world, to whom our long silence must necessarily be a source of anxiety. For the rest, however, the life we were leading had become a sort of second nature, and we found it by no means disagreeable. We ate with healthy appetites, and when night came, stretched on our matting, we heedlessly let the wind fold its wings or shriek into madness, whilst the river either murmured gently along like a stream across the green meadow or lashed into fury like a lion. 227

We rowed or sailed as the river and the wind permitted, gaining ground without the loss of an available minute, with the tenacity of one who has a given task to accomplish, and wants to perform it with the least possible delay. One night, shortly after halting, a shudder of delight ran through us on hearing one of the men exclaim, 'Steamer coming!' We turned in the direction pointed out by him, but saw nothing. However, we had learnt by that time to trust to the keener senses of the natives. Shortly afterwards, with ear to ground, we heard, or thought we heard, a far-off indistinct vibration as of the paddles of a steamer striking the water. The sound soon became unmistakable. Here was an unexpected redemption. From sheer joy we ceased the preparations for our evening meal. To attract the attention of those on board the steamer the bonfires were piled up high, and, to leave no possible loophole to adverse fate, Alex and four of the men sailed into mid-stream, so as to be quite close to the craft. Soon it loomed majestic and welcome to our eyes. The pennant of whitish smoke rose in the still blue night, and floated as a signal of welcome. The boat advanced steadily; we could see the people on board. That rather undersized vessel was to us, for the moment, the great in fact, the only—steamer in the world. We fired our revolvers. Alex and his men bawled themselves hoarse. No sign of recognition came from the steamer as she ploughed on swiftly, relentlessly, disdainfully, soon to be lost in the distance. This was wanton cruelty, and, as we thought at the time, a sin against human nature. Our feelings were not such as might be commended to the attention and imitation of Sunday-school children! Our language was decidedly 'unfit for publication.' According to the reckoning of our men, which events proved accurate, we should require twelve days more to reach Ciudad Bolivar, whilst the steamer, sailing day and night as it could, even against the breeze, would cover the distance in forty-eight or sixty hours. It is well that we possessed no magic powers enabling us to destroy, as if with a thunder-bolt, for in that case the steamer would not have reached its destination. So it generally happens in life when the action of others foils our little plans or obstructs our way. Looking solely to our own side of the question, we are apt to make no allowance, and attribute to utter perversity what from the standpoint of the other side may be perfectly reasonable. As revolutions are frequent in those latitudes, and as steamers had on several occasions been seized by parties of men ambushed on the shore, the captain of the steamer probably thought that prudence and caution were his safest guides. He may have believed that, besides the small group which he saw in the canoe and on the shore, a formidable host might be lurking in the forest, and under those circumstances his behaviour is perfectly intelligible. 228

As we approached the end of our journey, our impatience and anxiety grew keener. Up to that time we had never lost our equanimity, and now, when we could reckon with a fair degree of accuracy the date of our arrival at Ciudad Bolivar, the smallest obstacle or detention irritated us beyond measure. Yet all things end. On April 20 we arrived at a small outlying village three hours from Ciudad Bolivar. 230

Our approach to a civilized community awakened slumbering feelings of vanity, and for the first time during many months we bethought ourselves of our appearance. I had an authentic mane on my head; our beards were thick and bushy as the jungle on the banks of the river. Such clothes as we had could hardly have passed muster under the eyes of the most lenient critic. Most of those that we possessed at starting had been left behind amongst the Indians, in payment of work, and what little remained had not been improved by the moisture of the climate. On taking stock, I soon found that my dress coat and trousers—evolved by some London artist—were the only decent clothes left to me; yet I could not screw up courage to don them, as I feared that if, after several months' journey through the wildest regions of South America, I jumped ashore at noonday on the banks of the Orinoco in a swallow-tail, the authorities would probably provide me with free board and lodging in some cool lunatic asylum! We consoled ourselves with the thought that we were clean, and thus near to godliness, and that we could soon replace our patched and tattered clothes at Ciudad Bolivar. 231

I have forgotten to mention our visit to the cattle estates of General Crespo, at that time President of Venezuela, a typical son of the *llanos*. These estates had a frontage of twenty-five leagues along the river, and extend Heaven only knows how far into the interior. The manager, or *major-domo*, told us that the herds on those estates numbered upwards of 200,000 head of cattle. The figure appears fantastic, but the fact that at that time 1,500 three-year-old bullocks were exported monthly to the neighbouring West India Island, principally Trinidad, may

serve as a basis for calculation.

On that eventful 20th of April the breeze blew tantalizingly against us, yet we would not be detained, and decided to advance in its very teeth. The men jumped ashore and pulled the canoes with ropes. The city, built as upon a terrace, soon appeared in the distance, its white, red-roofed houses standing out under the clear sky like dabs of paint upon a blue canvas. Behind the town the hill continued to rise, and opposite the city the river itself, 232 encased into a narrow space, is only one-third of a mile broad. It was a delight to look once more on houses, towers and churches, and other signs of civilized life. The sight was an enchantment after the eternal panorama of forest, mountain, plain and river. We had a feeling akin to that of Columbus and his companions when the watch shouted 'Land! land!' We could echo those words in their full significance. The struggle was at an end; river, forest, rapids, fevers, wild beasts, poisonous snakes, savages, and all the obstacles that lay behind us, were over, leaving no further trace than the dust along the roads or the foam of the waves on the sands. Thanks to the Divine protection, we had reached the end of an adventurous journey full of possibilities of mishap and of danger, and all that had taken place was simply as a memory in our minds.

We attracted great attention on landing, and were soon installed in one of the good hotels of the towns. We stared with something like wonderment at mirrors, tables, sofas, as at so many good old friends from whom we had been long separated. In us, primitive man had very soon reasserted full sway, and we had to make some effort to 233 return to the habits and customs of civilized life. As soon as we could, we placed ourselves in the hands of a barber in the town. He had been told of our great store of luggage, and, inquisitive as all men of his profession are, on hearing one of us humming for very joy under his razor and shears, asked (I know not whether in innocence or banter): 'How many of you are in the company, and what opera are you going to begin with?' To this I replied: 'We are not an opera company, but a circus, and our performances will begin shortly; we are on the look-out for a clown.' He did not proceed with his cross-examination.

Ciudad Bolivar is famous in the annals of Venezuelan and Colombian history. It bears the name of the emancipator of those regions. Formerly it was called Angostura, which means 'the Narrows.' In 1819 one of the first Colombian Congresses was held at that city, and its deliberations, which soon crystallized into action, brought about the expulsion of the Spaniards after a daring and sanguinary series of campaigns. The very 234 men who sat at Ciudad Bolivar, 300 miles from the shores of the Atlantic, ended their military campaign on the plateau of Ayacucho in 1824, having marched thousands of leagues across plain and forests, snow-capped mountains, precipices, jungle, fighting for every inch of ground against the stubborn soldiers of Spain in one of the most heroic and tenacious struggles on both sides that are to be found in the annals of history.

The river, as I have stated before, narrows after its long pilgrimage, and, even as a regiment which closes its ranks, rolls its waves in denser array opposite the city. No sooner does it reach the outside limits than it broadens again, and, after running through fertile plains and swampy valleys for a distance of 600 kilometres, reaches the sea. The normal depth opposite Ciudad Bolivar is 120 metres. During the rainy season the level rises from 10 to 20 metres.

Verily the Orinoco is a living, wandering sea of fresh water gathered from the northern plains of South America, which forms the tribute of those lands to the Atlantic Ocean. We had just followed it in its pilgrimage for a 235 long part of its course. We had known it in tempest and in calm; we had watched the dawn gilding its throbbing waters or the twilight covering them with flickering shadows; we had listened to the whispering of the winds and the roar of the hurricane along its shores; we had seen the monsters which roam in its waters, admired the river's Titanic sport, dashing in the rapids, or its majestic quiet in the deep basins of granite where the current seems to rest before leaping in a wild onslaught through the cañons; and now we saw it majestically unroll before our eyes in the august pageant of its last procession to the ocean. We could not but think that, if that great artery of palpitating life which vibrates through the centre of the continent had stood us in such good service, its possibilities for the development of those vast unknown territories, when once appreciated by humanity, were practically unlimited. To our mind's eye, prophetic with desire, the vast solitudes we had left behind became resonant glad with the presence of myriads of men; the forests were cleared, the plains tilled, and a happy and prosperous nation, the outcome of the present struggling democracies that own those lands, 236 increased by swarms of immigrants from distant overcrowded countries, reared its cities and towns along the banks of the river which, in its immutable, defiant majesty and power, still rolled to the sea, serving men, but remaining a bond of union, a mighty link between the Cordilleras and the ocean.

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CHAPTER XIX

I have thus far sought to give an idea of my personal impressions during a journey most memorable to me; and I am aware that I bring no new or useful contribution from a scientific point of view. We had no instruments of observation, not even an ordinary every-day compass, enabling us to fix the cardinal points with certainty. Furthermore, had we possessed more complicated instruments, we were too ignorant to use them. Let these remarks be borne in mind should errors of appreciation be noticed, as certainly they exist, in this disjointed narrative.

We wandered on with the definite aim of reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Beyond that we did not venture to scrutinize too deeply the mysterious and wonderful manifestations of Nature, but took them as they appeared to our limited means of vision and understanding, and sought nothing beyond. 238

However, before closing these pages, assuming that some kind reader's patience may have enabled him to

accompany me thus far, it may not be amiss to give some accurate data which I take from the admirable monograph entitled 'South America: an Outline of its Physical Geography,' published in the *Geographical Journal* of April, 1901, by Colonel George Earl Church, a book which might be called 'South America in a Nutshell,' wonderfully accurate and concise, and worthy of the highest praise.

The total length of the Orinoco is about 1,500 miles, but if measured by its Guaviari branch it is several hundred miles longer. It reaches its maximum height in August. To its point of junction with the Guaviare it takes a north-west course. Ninety miles before its union with that stream it receives its principal eastern affluent, the Ventuario. From the Guaviare it runs north nearly as far as the Apure, where it suddenly turns east. Between the Guaviare and the Meta the course of the river is obstructed by the Maipures Rapids, which extend for a 239 length of four miles, with a total fall of about 40 feet. Below this the Atures Rapids cover a distance of about six miles, falling about 30 feet. Navigation is then free for about 700 miles, as far as the rapids of Cariben, within six miles of the mouth of the Meta. The river at this point is about a mile wide. Its course continues to the north, and at the mouth of the Apure it is two miles wide in the dry season, and about seven when in flood. At Cariben it rises 32 feet; but at the Angostura, or 'Narrows,' 372 miles from the sea, it has risen to 60 feet. It enters the sea by its main trunk, the Boca Grande. About 100 miles above its mouth it throws off a branch northward to the Gulf of Paria, also 100 miles in length. Six other considerable arms find their way to the ocean across a vast delta about 7,000 square miles in area. The Boca Grande is the deepest and main navigable entrance at all seasons, the muddy bar usually maintaining a depth of 16 feet. The basin of the Orinoco covers an area of 364,500 square miles.

The principal affluents flowing from the Andean slopes are the Apure, the Arauca, the Meta, and the Guaviare.

The Apure is 695 miles long, of which 564 are navigable. The Apure in its turn receives numerous 240 tributaries, some of which are navigable for short distances.

The Arauca, the Meta and the Guaviare, are also navigable.

The Casiquiare Canal unites the upper Orinoco with the Rio Negro branch of the Amazon. It is about 300 miles long, with an average depth of 30 feet, and has a strong current in the direction of the Negro. The list of affluents of the Orinoco and of its tributaries would be a very long one, and would serve no useful purpose here.

Evidently the Orinoco and the Orinoco system, with their innumerable ramifications in all directions, form a basis for the easy exploitation of the vast sources of natural wealth which exist in the immense territory through which their waters flow.

That territory lies within the borders of the Republics of Colombia and Venezuela. Up to the present neither nation has seriously attempted to utilize the valuable elements so bountifully offered by Nature. In the matter of navigation, ocean-going steamers sail frequently as far as Ciudad Bolivar. From this latter point river 241 steamers ply once or twice a month up the Orinoco, turning into the Apure as far as San Fernando de Apure, and during the tonga-bean harvest follow the course of the main river generally as far as the Caura, where the harvesters established their central camps a good many years ago. An effort was made to establish navigation on the Orinoco and its affluents above the rapids, and also to run small steamers in the navigable part between the Atures and Maipures rapids; but the French company, which held a charter practically placing the whole region at its disposal, failed of its object, after spending a considerable amount of money. During our journey, in several places we could see, rotting in the sun, the remnants of broken-down steamers, which appeared uncanny objects in those surroundings. The rapids, acting as a barrier, have deterred traders and explorers. The upper part of the Orinoco is the most abundant in natural wealth. As I have had occasion to note in these pages, india-rubber, *piazaba*, tonga bean, resinous and medicinal plants, are found in practically unlimited quantities along the shores of all the rivers above the rapids, and the small proportion which is gathered is generally shipped 242 through the Rio Negro by way of the Amazon, as traders prefer that long and tedious journey to the difficulties of the Orinoco Rapids.

Yet to give life to the Orinoco, to establish a stream of natural products down its waters, and to facilitate the opening of the forests and mountains beyond the rapids, it would not be necessary to carry out work of a very stupendous nature, beyond the resources of the peoples and the nations most interested in the work. A cursory glance at the elements of the problem reveals the possibility of carrying out a plan, the general outlines of which might be the following:

A line of steamers should be established plying at least twice a month between Ciudad Bolivar and the highest accessible point for navigation below the Atures Rapids.

The old road along the rapids, which extended from that highest point of navigation to beyond Maipures where the river is again free and open, should be reconstructed. A railway could be built along either shore, the ground being mostly level and hard. It would not be necessary to undertake great engineering works, and the road-bed itself would require neither deep cuttings nor terracing, nor expensive culverts and works of drainage, and the few bridges required, being of short span, would not run into high figures. 243

Steam navigation should also be established beyond the rapids on the rivers forming the upper basin. This could be done at first by means of small steam-launches such as are used in the affluents of the Amazon River, but the service should be carried out faithfully and periodically, even though at first freight and passengers were lacking. People in Spanish America are generally very sceptical as to these enterprises, but once a feeling of confidence was created, explorers would flock both from Colombia and from Venezuela, as they would know that they would have an outlet for whatever products they might gather.

The Indians on the Vichada, and even those on the Meta, would supply abundant labour, and the exports of

natural products would soon furnish all the freight that might be desired to make the whole arrangement of steamers above and below the rapids, and the railway along the same, a paying concern.

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A line of steamers should also follow the course of the Meta River as far as La Cruz, a port situated about ninety miles from Bogotá, thus tapping the import and export trade of the most thickly-populated region of Colombia, the inhabitants of which in the three provinces of Santander, Boyacá, and Cundinamarca, are over 1,500,000 in number.

Supposing four steamers to be needed for navigation on the lower river and on the Meta, to be bought at Ciudad Bolivar at a cost of £10,000 each, £40,000 would be required under this head. Taking the length of the railway at 60 kilometres, including the bridges, at a cost of £2,000 per kilometre, £120,000 would be required for the railway; and supposing that ten small steam-launches of twenty to thirty tons burden were started for the rivers on the upper basin, £20,000 would be required—in all, £180,000 for the whole undertaking.

The preceding figures are not imaginative, and might, perhaps, be reduced in actual practice. If it has been possible to raise the capital required for the construction of a railway of upwards of 200 kilometres in length along the shores of the Congo, where climate, distance, and natives combine to establish far more serious obstacles than exist on the Orinoco, should it not be possible to find the capital for the establishment of modern means of transportation in a region which offers far brighter and surer prospects than the Congo? Let it be remembered that from Colombia and from Venezuela civilized white, coloured and Indian labour could be found in abundance, and that Europeans engaged in the undertaking, and provided with steamers, could in two days, if on the Meta, reach the high and healthy plateaus of Bogotá and find themselves in a civilized community where they would lack none of the luxuries or comforts of their own land; and that in the Lower Orinoco they would have Ciudad Bolivar, to which the same remarks, barring the advantage of climate, may be applied. The two Governments of Colombia and Venezuela, equally interested in the development of the Orinoco basin, might unite their efforts and guarantee in a form satisfactory to European capitalists the paltry yearly amount required to pay the service of interest and sinking fund on the £180,000. Taking the interest at 6, with a sinking fund of 1 per cent., £12,600 yearly would be required—that is to say, £6,300 for each Government. I know that at the present moment such a task would be well-nigh impossible, but I also know that if a sincere effort were made, notwithstanding the universal feeling of distrust, it would be possible to create securities specially applicable to this purpose, which would satisfy the most exacting capitalist.

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In the midst of the daily turmoil and agitation and sanguinary struggle which constitutes the life of those democracies, these problems, urgent and vital as they are, pass unheeded; and the more the pity, for in their solution lies the basis of a permanent peace. Prosperity begets abhorrence of internal revolutions. The development of Mexico is a case in point, from which Colombia and Venezuela might take heed. Woe to them if they do not! The world begins to sicken at the very mention of the constant strife which converts into a positive hell those regions where Nature has shown herself prodigal beyond measure in all her gifts. Not only the valley of the Orinoco, with its boundless prairies, its dense forests, and its innumerable affluents, but the uplands of the Andine regions and the plains extending in Venezuela towards the North Atlantic or Caribbean Sea, and in Colombia to the Pacific Ocean, are coveted by nations where humanity is overcrowded by races which would fain establish colonies in those regions. The development of humanity cannot be stayed; the human wave, even as the stream of water contained by a dyke, will sooner or later break through the walls that imprison it and flood the surrounding country. It were well for men animated by real patriotism in Colombia and in Venezuela to ponder over these possibilities, so that the two nations might themselves open the flood-gates for immigration without delay, so that the new-comers would prove a fresh source of strength and power, helping to build up on the basis of the now existing nations free and mighty commonwealths, rather than as conquerors, who (whether they come from the North as wolves in sheep's clothing under cover of the Monroe doctrine, or from across the ocean, driven by necessity stronger than all political conventionality) would come as masters.

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Now is our accepted time. The moments are counted during which the danger may be averted and the inevitable turned to account; but, alas! feuds and errors deep-rooted in medieval soil, luxuriant in this our twentieth century, darken the minds of men, influence their judgment, turn away their activity from the real aims that would lead their nations to greatness, and force them into barbarous struggles which the world regards with amazement and brands as crimes against mankind.

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CHAPTER XX

After a week in Ciudad Bolivar, we bethought ourselves of continuing the journey to the sea. Civilization had reclaimed us for her own, and rigged in European attire, such as befits the tropics, with all the social conventionalities once again paramount in our mind, we set forth on that, the last stage of the journey. We had been, not a nine days' but a nine hours' wonder in the historical town which rears its houses and churches alongside the narrows of the majestic stream. Early in the afternoon of a dazzling tropical day, cloudless, blue and hazy from the very brilliancy of the air, we stepped into the large steamboat that was to carry us to the neighbouring British island of Trinidad, once also a Spanish possession. The usual events accompanying the departure of all steamers from the shore repeated themselves: clanging of chains, shouting of orders, groans of the huge structure, shrill whistles, and that trepidation, the dawn as it were of motion, something like a hesitation of things inert apparently unwilling to be set in motion, which is the life of matter inanimate; then the steady throbbing of the machinery, the stroke of the paddles, splash, splash, until regularity and monotony are attained, and the ship, wheeled into midstream after describing a broad arc, set the prow eastward with the current to the ocean.

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We looked at the town as it dwindled indistinct, seeming to sink into the vast azure of the horizon, swallowed in the scintillating folds of the blue distance. We sat on the deck as if in a trance. Shortly after starting, wild Nature reasserted her sway, and the small oasis built by the hand of man in the heart of the untamed region, seemed to us who knew how unmeasurable were those forests and those plains, like a tiny nest perched on the branches of a lofty and over-spreading *ceiba*. A feeling of superiority over our fellow-passengers unconsciously filled our breasts. For were we not boon companions, fellow-travellers, tried and trusted comrades of those rushing waters? Had we not shared their pilgrimage for days and days, in calm and in storm, in sunshine and in darkness? Had we not slept on their bosom or travelled upon it for countless hours, till the secret of their mystery and the joy of their wandering had penetrated into our very soul? What knew they, the other travellers of a few hours, of the intimate life of those waters which we had watched, gathering their strength from all the points of the compass, swelling the current of the central stream, mingling their life with it, now as rivulets, now as rivers, now placid in the embrace, now plunging, foaming, as if loath to loose their identity? Yea, verily, we were comrades, fellow-pilgrims, with the splendid travelling sea, there on its final march to the boundless deep. 251

Forest and plain, marsh, morass, jungle, succeeded one another in interminable procession, and the setting sun now broke its ray on the low-lying hills, now reverberated on the far-off marshes on either side of the current, tinging them with a crimson glow. Towards sunset the whistle of the steamer frightened a flock of flamingoes gathered to roost, as is their wont when the shadows of evening approach. The whole flock sought refuge in flight, and their widespread wings, as they rose before us, seemed like a huge transparent pink curtain lifted before our very eyes, rising higher and higher until it vanished in space. 252

Night fell upon the scene. First the stars and then the moon kindled their beacon fires, dispelling darkness into a semi-obscurity fraught with mystery, embalmed with the effluvia from the forest and the river. We felt like a shadow crossing the wilderness. The littleness of self, the insignificance of the human being, became overwhelming.

What could it matter if that daring shell with its human freight were dashed to pieces against a submerged tree and swallowed in the waves? Nature, impassible, would take no notice of the event; in far-off homes sorrow would fill the loving hearts. The river would be looked upon as a grave, wondrous vast, where a dear one had found his rest, but the river itself would suffer no change, and our world of hopes, ambitions, infinite longings, would leave no more trace than the smallest bubble of the floating foam.

And thus the morrow came. With the light of day the circle of the horizon broadened; we were out at sea, no trace of land was visible. The waves tossed the struggling craft tenderly, gliding under its keel, the wind caressed the flying pennants on the mastheads and seemed to whisper promises of freedom as it rustled through the rigging. The mighty river had disappeared, paying its tribute, like a human being to the grave, to Father Ocean. And the long journey which lay behind us was nothing more than a dream in our memory, for things dreamt and things lived do so intermingle their identity in our minds that the attempt to disentangle their threads were useless. And so we drifted into the broad, unmeasurable expanse of waters which seemed to palpitate and tremble as with the touch of life under the glorious rays of the morning sun. 253

THE END

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