PART I.

ROUGH NOTES of a JOURNEY through the WILDERNESS, from Trinidad to Pará, Brazil, by way of the great Cataracts of the Orinoco, Atabapo, and Rio Negro.

CHAPTER I.

New Year’s Eve, 1869, we lay at St. Thomas’s and witnessed a curious effect in the sky: a rainbow at night, caused by the moon-rays falling on a raincloud. On New Year’s morning we steamed from the harbour, the shore of which and the neighbouring cays were still strewn with the hulks, wrecks, and other débris of the previous year’s hurricane and earthquake, although now all seemed bathed in an atmosphere of undisturbed tranquillity. The Royal West India Mail ships in these latitudes are manned by blacks; it appeared quite natural to be again on the deck of the old “Tamar,” watching the dusky forms of the crew as they lounged or romped about the forecastle, like so many monkeys.
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Leaving the island of Santa Cruz on our starboard quarter, we sped along against a head wind. Some time after I had turned in, I was aroused by the report of the signal-gun, fired right over the port of my cabin: jumping into my slippers, I found we had arrived off St. Kitt’s. A good many vessels lay in the roadstead; and what appeared to be a town, slept on the lowland betwixt the water and the mountainous backbone of the island, over which rolled heavy manes of moon-lit cloud. The night was marked by a very beautiful, but here, not uncommon phenomenon; the top of each fleecy cloud was tinged with prismatic colours as it passed the disc of the moon. Next morning the sea-girt rock called Rodonda met our view; then Montserrat; and we coasted Antigua until we came to in the lovely cove-like entrance to the English harbour, with its crystalline water; there we landed mails. In the afternoon, looming suddenly through a mist of lake-warm rain, we saw the forest-covered coast of Guadeloupe, and I managed, as usual, to take a few rough sketches at any point of interest. The scenery was truly magnificent. Leaving at midnight, we proceeded to land mails at the Island of Dominica, from whence the gentle land-breeze wafted us that delightful fragrance peculiar to the tropical forests.

January 3rd.—Martinique by daybreak. We came to St. Lucia before noon, entering the beautiful harbour to remain the greater part of the day. When we were about to get under weigh, three masts, with long black spars, were visible, rounding
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the promontory, and a large war-ship swept majestically across the narrow outlet: she proved to be the "Royal Alfred," bearing the pennant of the Admiral of the West India station. We were, of course, boarded for mails, papers, &c. What a difference there is in the appearance of the boat's crew from an English man-of-war, on a foreign station, to the sailors belonging to any other power!

St. Lucia was my first vision of the tropics on my way to Central America. I was then enchanted; and though I have seen so much since the commencement of my travels, this isle still seems, above all places, to be transcendent in beauty; the very rocks are robed in the deepest green. Strangely enough, we rounded the S.W. end again (where stand the giant Pitons), at sunset, the same hour as on my introductory visit: these peaks rise abruptly from the sea to a height of 4,000 feet.

On the 4th we lay all day at Grenada, taking in coal, which gave any of the passengers so inclined a good opportunity for a run ashore. The quaint, clean little town is very ancient and picturesque; it is well situated in a fine bay, and, for the most part, on a small peninsula therein. In the morning we crossed the roughly-paved streets, ascending the side of the hill by a winding, but evenly cut, military road. The view from an old fort at the summit was worth the journey. In the afternoon we skirted the bay through thickets of mimosa and mangoe, interspersed with coco and other palms. I managed to have a swim; but coming unexpect-
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edly upon a shallow covered with sea-hedgehogs, I wounded my knee rather painfully.

We had on board a recruiter of the 4th West India Regiment, a very fine specimen of a West Indian soldier; his uniform excellently suited the exigencies of the climate, resembling that of the French Turcos. He might have passed for one of that dashing fraternity in Paris.

On reaching Trinidad I determined to deposit my baggage at the Custom-House by the water side, in order to be ready at the next opportunity for pushing on to the main.

I found that the steamer did not set out for Ciudad Bolivar before the 28th; and therefore, not desiring to remain stationary for such a length of time, I looked anxiously for a lancha or canoe, or anything in the shipping line that would answer my purpose, bound up the Orinoco.

9th.—I took Rogers (a young Englishman who accompanied me) away behind the town across the country, to try his powers of locomotion and hardihood, knowing that a somewhat fatiguing walk lay before us. We gained the summit of a hill towards the north, where a most beautiful view of the flat coast and the northern mountains was spread beneath us. I think that any companion was duly impressed that travels such as we had entered upon would be no light pastime for either of us.

Mr. Budge, of Port of Spain, kindly placed his cool little cottage at my disposal. I was glad
of this excuse to “clear out” of the Royal Hotel, as I found hotel life here, of necessity, expensive.

The town of Port of Spain, although not prepossessing from the water, is well laid out. The large number of East Indian coolies employed on the neighbouring cacao and sugar estates, give the streets something of an Eastern character: the town population is 25,000; and many more white faces are seen than in the other islands we touched at on our way.

Besides the conventional West Indian negro and the coolies, a sprinkling of Chinese is observable amongst the inhabitants; and I believe that the whole island population is some 90,000. I walked to St. Joseph’s, the site of the old Spanish capital San José de Oruña; and, in company with Mr. Budge, visited the valley of Diego Martin.

On the 11th my patience was rewarded; a small vessel turned up bound for the required destination; so I at once engaged with its captain to convey Rogers and myself as far as Barrancas, and thence to Las Tablas, near the mouth of the Caroni tributary. We hoped to arrive in eight days.

Next day we left Port of Spain, and El Capitan ran the little craft up a creek to take in provisions. We encamped in a mangrove swamp, no very delectable situation; for no sooner had the sun disappeared, than we were beset by innumerable mosquitos and sand-flies. The latter insects, though of the minutest proportions, cause much irritation of
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the skin; and aided in their attacks by some full-grown trumpeting mosquitoes, they rendered night hideous, and sleep quite out of the question. However, every disagreeable must come to an end, and so did ours at last: we struggled with difficulty out of the black mud, and, provisions on board, floated beyond the Chowan, as the detestable place is called.

Along the Trinidad coast, past the neighbourhood of the famous pitch-lake, the woods began to assume the primeval type. Cedras Point was rounded in the afternoon: the verdant green with which it is draped forms a peculiarly striking contrast to its own red colouring.

The complexion of the mighty Orinoco here tinges the water with yellow.

We passed the night at Cedras, swinging at anchor near the sandy shore.

13th.—We left behind us some surf-worn sandstone rocks, covered with pelicans, and stood across the gulf, beyond the long reef designated “The Soldier”; coming upon the well-defined line where the greener water of the sea is borne back by the yellow tide of the Orinoco. There was little breeze, and so swelteringly hot in our open boat, it was determined to gain the delta of the Orinoco by the Pedernales channel. The sandspits round the mouth were bright with scarlet ibis, egrets, &c. There are a few clearings just inside, and here we saw the Warraw or Guarrauno Indians (the tribe indigenous to these delta lands), in their