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978-1-108-00729-0 - A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro

Alfred Russel Wallace

Excerpt

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TRAVELS
ON THE
AMAZON AND RIO NEGRO.

CHAPTER I.

PARA.

Arrival at Pará—Appearance of the city and its environs—The inhabitants and their costume—Vegetation—Sensitive plants—Lizards—Ants and other insects—Birds—Climate—Food of the inhabitants.

It was on the morning of the 26th of May, 1848, that after a short passage of twenty-nine days from Liverpool, we came to anchor opposite the southern entrance to the River Amazon, and obtained our first view of South America. In the afternoon the pilot came on board, and the next morning we sailed with a fair wind up the river, which for fifty miles could only be distinguished from the ocean by its calmness and discoloured water, the northern shore being invisible, and the southern at a distance of ten or twelve miles. Early on the morning of the 28th we again anchored; and when the sun rose

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in a cloudless sky, the city of Pará, surrounded by the dense forest, and overtopped by palms and plantains, greeted our sight, appearing doubly beautiful from the presence of those luxuriant tropical productions in a state of nature, which we had so often admired in the conservatories of Kew and Chatsworth. The canoes passing with their motley crews of Negroes and Indians, the vultures soaring overhead or walking lazily about the beach, and the crowds of swallows on the churches and house-tops, all served to occupy our attention till the Custom-house officers visited us, and we were allowed to go on shore.

Pará contains about 15,000 inhabitants, and does not cover a great extent of ground; yet it is the largest city on the greatest river in the world, the Amazon, and is the capital of a province equal in extent to all Western Europe. It is the residence of a President appointed by the Emperor of Brazil, and of a Bishop whose see extends two thousand miles into the interior, over a country peopled by countless tribes of unconverted Indians. The province of Pará is the most northern portion of Brazil, and though it is naturally the richest part of that vast empire, it is the least known, and at present of the least commercial importance.

The appearance of the city from the river, which is the best view that can be obtained of it, is not more foreign than that of Calais or Boulogne. The houses are generally white, and several handsome churches and public buildings raise their towers and domes above them. The vigour of vegetation is everywhere apparent. The ledges and mouldings support a growth of small

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ARRIVAL AT PARA.

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plants, and from the wall-tops and window-openings of the churches often spring luxuriant weeds and sometimes small trees. Above and below and behind the city, as far as the eye can reach, extends the unbroken forest; all the small islands in the river are wooded to the water's edge, and many sand-banks flooded at high-water are covered with shrubs and small trees, whose tops only now appeared above the surface. The general aspect of the trees was not different from those of Europe, except where the "feathery palm-trees" raised their graceful forms; but our imaginations were busy picturing the wonderful scenes to be beheld in their dark recesses, and we longed for the time when we should be at liberty to explore them.

On landing, we proceeded to the house of Mr. Miller, the consignee of our vessel, by whom we were most kindly received, and invited to remain till we could settle ourselves as we should find most convenient. We were here introduced to most of the English and American residents, who are all engaged in trade, and are few in number. For the four following days we were occupied in walking in the neighbourhood of the city, presenting our passports and obtaining license to reside, familiarizing ourselves with the people and the vegetation, and endeavouring to obtain a residence fitted for our pursuits. Finding that this could not be immediately done, we removed to Mr. Miller's "rosinha," or country-house, situated about half a mile from the city, which he kindly gave us the use of till we could find more convenient quarters. Beds and bedsteads are not wanted here, as cotton woven hammocks are universally

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used for sleeping in, and are very convenient on account of their portability. These, with a few chairs and tables and our boxes, are all the furniture we had or required. We hired an old Negro man named Isidora for a cook and servant of all work, and regularly commenced house-keeping, learning Portuguese, and investigating the natural productions of the country.

My previous wanderings had been confined to England and a short trip on the Continent, so that everything here had the charm of perfect novelty. Nevertheless, on the whole I was disappointed. The weather was not so hot, the people were not so peculiar, the vegetation was not so striking, as the glowing picture I had conjured up in my imagination, and had been brooding over during the tedium of a sea-voyage. And this is almost always the case with everything but a single view or some one definite object. A piece of fine scenery, as beheld from a given point, can scarcely be overdrawn; and there are many such, which will not disappoint even the most expectant beholder. It is the general effect that strikes at once and commands the whole attention: the beauties have not to be sought, they are all before you. With a district or a country the case is very different. There are individual objects of interest, which have to be sought out and observed and appreciated. The charms of a district grow upon one in proportion as the several parts come successively into view, and in proportion as our education and habits lead us to understand and admire them. This is particularly the case with tropical countries. Some such places will no doubt strike at once as altogether unequalled, but in the majority of cases it is

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APPEARANCE OF PARÁ.

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only in time that the various peculiarities, the costume of the people, the strange forms of vegetation, and the novelty of the animal world, will present themselves so as to form a connected and definite impression on the mind. Thus it is that travellers who crowd into one description all the wonders and novelties which it took them weeks and months to observe, must produce an erroneous impression on the reader, and cause him, when he visits the spot, to experience much disappointment. As one instance of what is meant, it may be mentioned that during the first week of our residence at Pará, though constantly in the forest in the neighbourhood of the city, I did not see a single humming-bird, parrot, or monkey. And yet, as I afterwards found, humming-birds, parrots, and monkeys are plentiful enough in the neighbourhood of Pará; but they require looking for, and a certain amount of acquaintance with them is necessary in order to discover their haunts, and some practice is required to see them in the thick forest, even when you hear them close by you.

But still Pará has quite enough to redeem it from the imputations we may be supposed to have cast upon it. Every day showed us something fresh to admire, some new wonder we had been taught to expect as the invariable accompaniment of a luxuriant country within a degree of the equator. “Even now, while writing by the last glimmer of twilight, the vampire bat is fluttering about the room, hovering among the timbers of the roof (for there are no ceilings), and now and then whizzing past my ears with a most spectral noise.” The city itself has been laid out on a most extensive plan; many

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of the churches and public buildings are very handsome, but decay and incongruous repairs have injured some of them, and bits of gardens and waste ground intervening between the houses, fenced in with rotten palings, and filled with rank weeds and a few banana-plants, look strange and unsightly to a European eye. The squares and public places are picturesque, either from the churches and pretty houses which surround them, or from the elegant palms of various species, which with the plantain and banana everywhere occur; but they bear more resemblance to village-greens than to parts of a great city. A few paths lead across them in different directions through a tangled vegetation of weedy cassias, shrubby convulvuli, and the pretty orange-flowered *Asclepias curassavica*,—plants which here take the place of the rushes, docks, and nettles of England. The principal street, the “Rua dos Mercadores” (Street of Merchants), contains almost the only good shops in the city. The houses are many of them only one story high, but the shops, which are often completely open in front, are very neatly and attractively furnished, though with rather a miscellaneous assortment of articles. Here are seen at intervals a few yards of foot-paving, though so little as only to render the rest of your walk over rough stones or deep sand more unpleasant by comparison. The other streets are all very narrow. They consist either of very rough stones, apparently the remains of the original paving, which has never been repaired, or of deep sand and mud-holes. The houses are irregular and low, mostly built of a coarse ferruginous sandstone, common in the neighbourhood,

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ENVIRONS OF PARA.

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and plastered over. The windows, which have no glass, have the lower part filled with lattice, hung above, so that the bottom may be pushed out and a peep obtained sideways in either direction, and from these many dark eyes glanced at us as we passed. Yellow and blue wash are liberally used about most of the houses and churches in decorating the pilasters and door and window openings, which are in a debased but picturesque style of Roman architecture. The building now used as custom-house and barracks, formerly a convent, is handsome and very extensive.

Beyond the actual streets of the city is a large extent of ground covered with roads and lanes intersecting each other at right angles. In the spaces formed by these are the "rosinhas," or country-houses, one, two, or more on each block. They are of one story, with several spacious rooms and a large verandah, which is generally the dining-room and most pleasant sitting and working apartment. The ground attached is usually a swamp or a wilderness of weeds or fruit-trees. Sometimes a portion is formed into a flower-garden, but seldom with much care or taste, and the plants and flowers of Europe are preferred to the splendid and ornamental productions of the country. The general impression of the city to a person fresh from England is not very favourable. There is such a want of neatness and order, such an appearance of neglect and decay, such evidences of apathy and indolence, as to be at first absolutely painful. But this soon wears off, and some of these peculiarities are seen to be dependent on the climate. The large and lofty rooms, with boarded floors and scanty furniture, and

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with half-a-dozen doors and windows in each, look at first comfortless, but are nevertheless exactly adapted to a tropical country, in which a carpeted, curtained, and cushioned room would be unbearable.

The inhabitants of Pará present a most varied and interesting mixture of races. There is the fresh-coloured Englishman, who seems to thrive as well here as in the cooler climate of his native country, the sallow American, the swarthy Portuguese, the more corpulent Brazilian, the merry Negro, and the apathetic but finely formed Indian; and between these a hundred shades and mixtures, which it requires an experienced eye to detect. The white inhabitants generally dress with great neatness in linen clothes of spotless purity. Some adhere to the black cloth coat and cravat, and look most uncomfortably clad with the thermometer from 85° to 90° in the shade. The men's dress, whether Negro or Indian, is simply a pair of striped or white cotton trowsers, to which they sometimes add a shirt of the same material. The women and girls on most gala occasions dress in pure white, which, contrasting with their glossy black or brown skins, has a very pleasing effect; and it is then that the stranger is astonished to behold the massy gold chains and ornaments worn by these women, many of whom are slaves. Children are seen in every degree of clothing, down to perfect nudity, which is the general condition of all the male coloured population under eight or ten years of age. Indians fresh from the interior are sometimes seen looking very mild and mannerly, and, except for holes in their ears large enough to put a cart-rope through, and a peculiar wildness with which they gaze at all around

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VEGETATION.

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them, they would hardly be noticed among the motley crowd of regular inhabitants.

I have already stated that the natural productions of the tropics did not at first realize my expectations. This is principally owing to the accounts of picture-drawing travellers, who, by only describing the beautiful, the picturesque, and the magnificent, would almost lead a person to believe that nothing of a different character could exist under a tropical sun. Our having arrived at Pará at the end of the wet season, may also explain why we did not at first see all the glories of the vegetation. The beauty of the palm-trees can scarcely be too highly drawn; they are peculiarly characteristic of the tropics, and their varied and elegant forms, their beautiful foliage, and their fruits, generally useful to man, give them a never-failing interest to the naturalist, and to all who are familiar with descriptions of the countries where they most abound. The rest of the vegetation was hardly what I expected. We found many beautiful flowers and climbing plants, but there are also many places which are just as weedy in their appearance as in our own bleak climate. But very few of the forest-trees were in flower, and most of them had nothing very peculiar in their appearance. The eye of the botanist, indeed, detects numerous tropical forms in the structure of the stems, and the form and arrangement of the leaves; but most of them produce an effect in the landscape remarkably similar to that of our own oaks, elms, and beeches. These remarks apply only to the immediate vicinity of the city, where the whole surface has been cleared, and the present vegetation is a second growth. On proceeding a few

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miles out of the town into the forest, which everywhere surrounds it, a very different scene is beheld. Trees of an enormous height rise on every side. The foliage varies from the most light and airy to the darkest and most massive. Climbing and parasitic plants, with large shining leaves, run up the trunks, and often mount even to the highest branches, while others, with fantastic stems, hang like ropes and cables from their summits. Many curious seeds and fruits are here seen scattered on the ground ; and there is enough to engage the wonder and admiration of every lover of nature. But even here there is something wanting that we expected to find. The splendid Orchideous plants, so much sought after in Europe, we had thought must abound in every luxuriant tropical forest ; yet here are none but a few small species with dull brown or yellow flowers. Most of the parasitic plants which clothe the stems of every old or fallen tree with verdure, are of quite a different character, being ferns, *Tillandsias*, and species of *Pothos* and *Caladium*, plants resembling the Ethiopian lily so commonly cultivated in houses. Among the shrubs near the city that immediately attracted our attention were several *Solanums*, which are allied to our potato. One of these grows from eight to twelve feet high, with large woolly leaves, spines on both leaves and stem, and handsome purple flowers larger than those of the potato. Some other species have white flowers, and one much resembles our bitter-sweet (*Solanum Dulcamara*). Many handsome convolvuluses climb over the hedges, as well as several most beautiful *Bignonias* or trumpet-flowers, with yellow, orange, or purple blossoms. But most striking of all are the passion-flowers, which