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978-1-108-01196-9 - A Voyage up the River Amazon: Including a Residence at Pará  
William H. Edwards

Excerpt

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A

## VOYAGE UP THE RIVER AMAZON.

## CHAPTER I.

IT was a cold morning, the 9th of February, 1846, that we left New York, in the bark *Undine*, Capt. Appleton, for Pará. Our fellow-passengers were Mr. Smith, the U. S. Consul of that port, his lady, and two young gentlemen, in quest, like ourselves, of adventures. Scarcely out of sight of Sandy Hook, a furious north-wester burst upon us, and for a week we dashed on before it, at a rate to startle a landsman, had not the accompanying motion speedily induced that peculiar state in which one would as lief not be as be, and inclined to consider a bed beneath the waters as preferable to present torture. But the golden-haired spirit at the prow always smiled hopefully, and gallantly the noble bark sped onward to calmer waters and warmer skies. Here the sea was all loveliness, and, night by night, the scantily apparelled sky of the north was disappearing before the as steadily advancing brilliance of the tropics. We watched the gradual descending of the north star; and when at last it sank below the horizon, it seemed as though an old and familiar friend had deserted us,—one whose place was not to be supplied even by the splendour of the southern cross.

By the twentieth day we were near land, to the eastward of Salinas, having seen and enjoyed the usual sea-sights. Most memorable of these was a sunset, as we lay becalmed. The few snow-piled clouds that rested upon the water gradually became suffused with flame, and the sea's surface was a sheen of green and gold, varying from one colour to the other as the rolling of the vessel changed our angle of view. A vapour fringe of rainbow hues circled the horizon, more lovely because rapidly chang-

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ing, and beheld, as it were, through an atmosphere of floating golden particles. One by one the stars peeped out, and we fancied that we could detect a shade of sadness over their beautiful faces at having come too late.

We had seen sharks and brilliant-robed dolphins. A grampus had risen under the bow, and flying-fish had repeatedly flown on board. Many an hour we had whiled in fishing up gulf-weed, and in observing the different species of animals with which it was filled.

As we neared the equator, the water became luminous; the waves were crested with fire; the vessel's path was one broad track of light, and, as we took our shower-bath under the pump, liquid flames dashed over us, and every drop was a splendour. To heighten our interest in the phenomenon, a score of porpoises were playing about in every direction, their tracks a living flame, contorted, zigzag, like fiery serpents. Now they would shoot out, rocket-like, leaving trains of thirty feet; now, darting back, pursue each other round and round, till their path appeared a tangled skein of light.

The blue had changed to green; and long before land was visible the green had lost itself in the muddy brown of the Amazon. Everywhere were discernible currents, known from afar, by their different hues, and by the furious boiling of their surfaces. Old Ocean was battling with the King of Rivers. Tossed about in the commotion were vast quantities of drift wood, fruits, and plants. Huge fish-hawks were lazily flapping along. Gulls and terns were screaming.

In the night, a number of beautifully marked moths, attracted by our lights, visited us, and soon after daybreak an inquisitive humming-bird came for a peep at the strangers, flitted about us a little time, then darted away to his home.

Salinas is an island at the mouth of the river, conspicuous from a distance, owing to its broad, white beach. It is principally inhabited by fishermen. We observed a few red-tiled houses, and an ancient white church. Here, vessels bound to Pará usually take a pilot; but, owing to the vexatious delays often experienced, American captains prefer trusting to their own skill. Directly at the entrance of the river are two banks, Braganza and Tigoça, dreaded by sailors; beyond these the navigation is easy. Pará is situated about eighty miles above; but

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such is the force of the descending tide and current, that from twenty-four to thirty hours are frequently required to overcome the short distance.

It was delightful to find ourselves once more in quiet water, and a luxury only appreciable by those who have been rolled and pitched about, until every bone seems rheumatic, and every muscle jelly-like, to sleep as stilly as on land. We had anchored inside the banks: before daybreak we were again advancing; and, that morning, every passenger was early upon the look-out. The speedy termination of the voyage put us all in high spirits, and impatiently we snuffed the perfumed air that came wafted from the yet scarce visible shore. The island of Marajo gradually became distinguishable on the right, its tree-tops but just fringing the water. To the left, long, low islands extended to within a few miles of the city. All day our course was near these, and to one never before conusant of tropical luxuriance, and a truant from the wintry skies of the north, everything was enchanting.

Impervious as a hedge, tall trees shot up their arrow-like stems; broad palm-leaves undulated with every breath. A thousand shades of green were enamelled with flowers, in red, and white, and gold. The loud notes of the toucans, the shrill cries of parrots, greeted our welcome; and about the vessel twittered delightedly numbers of martins, the same old friends who used, at home, to disturb us in the early morning. Here and there, little patches of clearing, and haystack-shaped huts, indicated the home of some ease-loving Indian. Some of these huts consisted merely of a few poles, covered with palm thatch, but, occasionally, a delicious little retreat would peep at us through the almost concealing shrubbery, surrounded by a grass-plot, and overshadowed by the huge leaves of the banana or the feathery tufts of the cocoa-tree. In front of one hut, upon a grassy knoll facing the river, stood a large cross, designed to warn away any evil spirit that should venture there. Happy ones! none but fairies and good angels should be welcome to such a paradise.

Often we saw men and women walking upon the beach, or variously employed, and it was amusing to observe their pantomimic movements. Huge canoes, hollowed from single trees, and with mat sails, crept alongshore; and the first strange voice that we had heard since leaving New York hailed us from one of these with the friendly "O Amigo."

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Twenty miles below the city, a number of islands are sprinkled about the channel, one of which was pointed out as the last resort of the inhabitants of Pará, when the city was sacked by the rebel Indians a few years since. Upon that lovely spot of green five thousand persons died of exposure and starvation.

Pará is situated upon a little bay, forming a safe anchorage, and is visible, from below, a little more than ten miles. At about that distance is the Quarantine, not now a terror to travellers. Here, a little boat, rigged with two antique triangular sails, and manned by negroes bare to the waist, pulled alongside, and left with us a custom-house guard, who was to prevent intercourse with the shore.

Night was coming on, but still there was light enough to display to our eager eyes the position of the city, nestled in its bed of green, and smiled upon by an archipelago of islands. Rain commenced pouring, and we were fain to go below. The guard at the fort bid us pass on, and by eight we were anchored off the custom-house. It was too late for a visit, and we turned in, impatient for the morning. All night long church-bells were ringing and clocks striking, and, at intervals, we could distinguish the notes of a bugle or the loud cry of the patrol; all doubly cheerful, after the mournful wailing of the wind through the rigging, and the monotonous dashing of the sea, which had been our melancholy lullaby for so many weeks.

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## CHAPTER II.

WE had arrived in the midst of the wet season, and all night the rain poured incessantly. But as the sun rose the clouds broke away, and our first view was rendered still more agreeable by the roseate mist that draped the tree-tops and lingered over the city. Anchored about us were vessels of various nations and strange-looking river craft, under whose thatched roofs whole families seemed to be living, and upon which green parrots and macaws were clambering and screaming.

Canoes, bound to the market, were constantly passing, loaded with all kinds of produce. Fine-looking buildings, of three and

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four stories' height, faced the water, all yellow in colour, and roofed with red tiles. Vast cathedrals and churches, covered with the mould of age, shot up their tall spires, their walls and roofs affording sustenance and support to venerable mosses and shrubs of goodly size. Garden walls were overhung with creeping vines, like ancient ruins. Vultures were leisurely wheeling over the city, or in clusters upon the house tops, spreading their wings to the sun. Mid the ringing of bells and the discharge of rockets, a long procession was issuing from the church of San Antonio; and a Babel of sounds from dogs and parrots, and strange tongues, came over the water.

At about nine o'clock the doctor of the port visited us; and soon after an official of the custom-house examined our passports, and left with each of us a notification to present ourselves, within three days, to the chief of police, and to obtain from him a licence of residence. We were then pronounced at liberty to go on shore.

It was low tide, and, as no wharves run out for the convenience of vessels, we were obliged to land at the market-place, the Punto de Pedras, a long narrow pier. It would be impossible to conceive a more utterly novel tableau than here broke upon us. It was an introduction, at once, to half that was curious in the city. Files of canoes skirt the whole length of the pier, high and dry above the water. The more fortunate occupants who have sold their wares are variously engaged: some sleeping; others preparing their morning meal; others combing and arranging their luxuriant tresses—for even an Indian woman has a little vanity; and others, the most of all, chattering with their neighbours, or screaming in shrill tones to friends on shore. Here are negroes of every shade of colour, from the pure Congo to the almost pure white; some buying, some selling. There stands one, with his basket of coarse cotton-cloth and his yard stick; and close by an old wench is squatted by a pot of yellow soup, the extract of some palm-nut. Here are strings of inviting fish, and piles of less captivating terrapins; coarse baskets, filled with *Vigia* crabs, the best in the world; and others of palm-leaves, fashioned like a straw reticule, are swelled out with the delicious snails. Monkeys, fastened to clogs, entice you to purchase them by their antics; and white herons, and various other wild birds,

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by their beauty. Everywhere, and most numerous of all, are the fruit-dealers; and for a mere nothing all the luxuries of this fruit-prolific clime are yours. Beautiful bouquets of flowers invite a purchaser; and now, for the first time, you observe the singularly neat appearance of the women, each dressed in white, and with a flower in her hair, and you remember that it is a holiday. Oddly dressed soldiers mingle among the crowd; inquisitive officials peer about for untaxed produce; sailors, from vessels in the harbour, are constantly landing; gentlemen of the city are down for their morning stroll; beautiful Indian girls flit by like visions; and scores of boys and girls, in all the freedom of nakedness, contend with an equal number of impudent goats for the privilege of running over you.

Through this motley assemblage we picked our way, accompanied by Captain Appleton, to the house of Mr. Norris, the consignee of the *Undine*. Mr. Norris received us with all the warmth of an old friend, and immediately insisted upon our making his house our home. It *was* a home to us during our stay at Pará; and the generosity of Mr. N. has placed us under obligations easily understood by those who, like ourselves, have found a home and a friend among strangers.

Our first excursion extended no farther than the garden at the rear of the house; but even that little distance opened to us a new world. It was laid out in home style, with neat walks and raised flower-beds. A number of curious birds were skulking among the shrubbery, or stalking along the path with the dignity and self-possession of birds at home. This domestication of wild birds we afterwards found to be common throughout the province. They are restrained from truancy by the high fences that surround the gardens; and ibises and spoonbills, varieties of herons, rails, *et multi alii*, are as frequently seen as domestic fowls. But the legitimate occupants were of greater interest than these strangers; and here grew in perfection the banana, the orange, the fig, the tamarind, the cotton-tree, the sugar-cane; and over the fence, on the soil of a neighbour, a lofty cocoa-tree displayed its clusters of ripening nuts. Instead of the puny sensitive-plant, that in the north struggles almost hopelessly for frail existence, a giant shrub threw out its nervous arms, all flowering, and the attraction of passing butterflies.

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Amid this profusion, there was nothing to remind us of the home that we had left ; but afar off, in one lone corner, stood a solitary stalk of Indian corn, lank and lean, an eight-foot spindling, clasped nervously by one sorry ear. Poor thing, it spoke touchingly of exile.

Passing out of the garden, our next visit was complimentary to an eel : not one of the unhallowed denizens of muddy ponds or stagnant waters, but an electrical eel, large and handsome, swimming about in his tub of clear rain water with the grace of a water king. This fellow was about four feet in length, and along his whole lower part extended a wide fin, by whose curvings he appeared to propel himself. We often afterwards amused our leisure in observing this eel, and in experimenting upon his electrical power. This did not seem to be concentrated in any particular part or organ, for, touch him where we would, the violence of the shock seemed the same, and equalled an ordinary shock from a machine. When very hungry, or particularly spiteful, he would transmit his power through the water to a considerable distance. His usual food was crabs, and, when these were thrown in to him, he swam towards them, stunned them by a touch of his head, and either caught them immediately, or allowed them to fall to the bottom of the tub to be devoured at leisure.

These eels are common in the small streams about Pará, and, indeed, throughout the whole northern part of the continent, and they often attain great size. One that we afterwards saw at Senhor Pombo's was about six feet long, and five or six inches in diameter. We heard frequent accounts of their power over large animals in the water. The negroes catch them by first teasing them, until they have exhausted the electrical power. We ate of them at different times, but they were too fishy in taste to be agreeable without strong correctives.

Near by was disclosed to us a young anaconda, nicely coiled up in the bottom of a barrel, and looking as innocent as a dove. This fellow was pointed out as something rather diminutive, but to our unfamiliar eyes a snake of ten feet length seemed very like a monster. His customary food was rats. These snakes are kept about many houses in Pará for protection against rats, and two which had escaped from Mr. Norris's barrels now prowled at large, and effectually cleared the premises of these vermin.

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They are perfectly harmless, and never molest domestic fowls or animals upon the premises, excepting now and then a young chicken.

This day was a festival. The saint was popular, business was suspended, public offices were closed, and the whole city was preparing to do him honour. Such days in Pará always end in processions, and when, late in the afternoon, the crackling of rockets and the sounds of martial music proclaimed the procession already formed, we walked to the Rua da Cadeira, the Broadway of Pará, and took our stand among crowds of citizens, all apparently as much interested as ourselves in the coming events. The balconies above were filled with gaily dressed ladies, and bright eyes were impatient to pay their homage to the benignant saint, or to exact a homage, more sincere, perhaps, from their own admirers below.

Immediately succeeding a fine military band walked a number of penitents, wearing crowns of thorns, and almost enshrouded in long black veils. It was evident enough that peccadilloes were not all confined to the whites, for, below the veils, bared feet displayed as many hues as we had seen in the market-place. These penitents surrounded a tall banner, borne by one of their number, who staggered beneath its weight; a fair penance for many a hearty sin.

Friars, with corded waists and shaven crowns, and priests in long black robes, came next. Little angels followed, bright, happy things, and beautiful, as though they had come down to cheer the present sufferings of the weary one who bore his cross behind. Each wore upon her head a crown of flowers, and exquisite devices decked her white gauze dress. Wings of a butterfly, or some shorn Cupid, told how she came; she bore a wine-cup in her hand, and, as she stepped, tiny bells sent out low music. She was unaccustomed to our rough walks here, and, at her side, a seraph boy guided her faltering steps.

Then came the Christ, bending beneath the heavy cross. The crowd was stilled, the Host passed by, and respect or adoration was testified by raised hat or bended knee.

A number of other figures succeeded, and the line was closed by the troops. A few whites followed, curious as ourselves; but the whole negro and Indian population were drawn along, as a matter of course. Nearly all the negro women were profusely



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ornamented with gold, partly the fruit of their own savings, and often the riches of their lady mistresses, who lend them willingly upon such occasions. Some wore chains of gold beads, passing several times about the neck, and sustaining a heavy golden cross. All wore ear-rings, and the elder women, both black and Indian, overtopped their heads by huge tortoiseshell combs. The Indian girls, who were in large numbers, were almost always beautiful, with regular features, fine forms, black lustrous eyes, and luxuriant locks that fell over their shoulders. Many women carried upon their heads trays, covered with a neat towel, and well provided with temptations to errant coin.

At intervals along the street were little buildings, in which temporary altars were fitted up in all the glare and gaudiness of wax candles and tinsel. Every one raised his hat upon passing these, and the more devout knelt before them, depositing some coin at their departure.

In the evening the churches were brilliantly lighted, and in the alcoves, before the images of the saint, knelt crowds of ladies, the élite of Pará. At each altar priests officiated, their attention much distracted between the fair penitents at their side and the dulcet tones in the money-plate before them.

Another procession, by torch-light, closed the exercises, and at last, wearied with sight-seeing, we wended our way homeward, to the embrace of luxurious hammocks, that gently received us without the usual misadventure of the uninitiated and uncautioned.

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### CHAPTER III.

THE popular name of this city, Pará, is derived from the river, its proper designation being Belem, or Bethlehem. Caldeira, in 1615, entered what he supposed to be the main Amazon, and learning from the natives that this was, in their language, the King of Waters, called it, appropriately, Pará; or rather, to hallow it by a Christian baptism, the Gram Pará. Continuing up the river, this adventurer at last fixed upon a site, near the junction of several streams, now known as the Guamá, the Acará, and the Mojú, for a city that should thereafter be a

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glory to our Lady of Belem. Our Lady is still the patron saint, but the name of her city is almost entirely forgotten in that of Pará.

We will not recount the long series of events that have transpired since Caldeira here first planted the cross. They would be of little interest to the general reader, and we prefer to look at the city as it now is, merely making such allusions to the past as shall serve to render description more intelligible.

The only event that requires particular mention is the Revolution of 1835 and the following year. The President of the province was assassinated, as were very many private individuals of respectability, and the city was in possession of the insurgent troops, assisted by designing whites and Indians. All the citizens who could fled for their lives; many to Portugal, and many to the United States and England. The whole province, with the exception of the town of Cameté, upon the Tocantins, fell into the hands of the rebels, and everywhere the towns were sacked, cities despoiled, cattle destroyed, and slaves carried away. The rebels were constantly quarrelling among themselves, and several presidents succeeded each other. At last, after this state of anarchy had continued nearly eighteen months, President Andrea arrived from Rio Janeiro with a sufficient force, and succeeded, without much difficulty, in recovering possession of the city. One by one the inland towns returned to their allegiance. The disastrous effect of these disturbances is still felt, and a feeling of present insecurity is very general, but still Pará has fully recovered her former position, and may retain it if the provincial government guides itself with sufficient discretion.

The whole Amazonian region is low, and the site of the city boasts no advantage in this respect, being at most but a few feet above the level of the river at flood-tide. Everywhere nature displays the most exuberant fertility, and this, which, in most countries between the tropics, is a prolific source of pestilence and death, is here so modified by other elements as to be a blessing. During the rainy season, when, for several months, rain falls daily, and for several weeks almost incessantly, the surface of the ground is never long covered with water; for, so sandy is the soil, that no sooner have the clouds broken away than the waters have disappeared, and, excepting the bright jewels that