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Richard Spruce Edited by Alfred Russel Wallace

Excerpt

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CHAPTER XV

FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES UP THE SOLIMOËS:
FROM MANAÓS TO TARAPOTO, PERU

(*March 14 to June 22, 1855*)

[THIS chapter consists largely of a full and very descriptive Journal, which required comparatively little pruning; and this is supplemented by letters to Messrs. Teasdale and Bentham, giving to the former vivid sketches of scenery and of the passengers on the steamer, and to the latter an account of one of the numerous personal dangers of which Spruce had his full share, though from all of them he escaped with his life.]

VOYAGE UP THE SOLIMOËS

(*Journal*)

March 14, 1855.—Embarked on the *Monarca*, an iron steamer of 35 horse-power, built at Rio de Janeiro. We left the port of Barra at six the next morning, and I enjoyed much the rapid run up the Solimoës, contrasting strongly with the painful way in which we crept up in a canoe in 1851, when it took a week to reach Manaquirý. In the steamer we spent but ten hours. The river appears more

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than half full, and the current is strong. There are numerous floating trunks and small grass-islands. At night it was very dark, and we frequently struck against these trunks, sometimes with a considerable shock which made us all run on deck, but no damage was done. On the afternoon of the 17th we passed the mouth of the large river Purús, which enters from the south. It is not wide but brings down a large volume of white water.

Between Coary and Ega there is a long range of cliffs, which are much bored by kingfishers and by a small white-bellied sand-martin, scarcely larger than a humming-bird. . . .

On the 25th we reached São Paulo d' Olivença about noon. It stands on very high land, rising abruptly from the river about a hundred feet, but the site is flat and the village contains several regular streets, though the houses are mostly miserable. The great concourse of people here is owing to its being the residence of a padre who suits them excellently and conforms in everything to their way of life, *i.e.* he is a gambler and indulges in every other vice of the country.

I took a turn in the forest. The soil is a deep clay, in hollows scarcely passable in rainy weather. The valleys are all traversed by streams of clear water, and abound in tree-ferns, but apparently all of one common species. The caapoera vegetation is very luxuriant and comprised much that was new to me, especially a shrubby papilionaceous climber with delicate pinnate leaves (resembling *Abrus tenuifolius*) and largish scarlet flowers, which hung in large masses from the lower trees and bushes. Also a low Nonatelia (Cinchonaceæ) with

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large corymbs of pretty purple flowers. On one clayey slope was a large bed of Umirí (*Humirium* sp.) with ripe fruit, which the numerous cattle (belonging chiefly to the Padre) pick up as they fall. Two Monimiaceæ, one with very large Melastoma-like leaves and large fruits, I have not seen before. The other is very near a Uaupés species.¹

NOTES ON THE VEGETATION OF THE SOLIMOËS

The sloping banks clad with long grass form a strong contrast to those of the Rio Negro. On the islands the chief vegetation is *Salix Humboldtiana* and a *Cecropia*, with a rather inelegant bamboo supporting itself on them. The white trunks of the trees are very remarkable—actually white with a crust of rudimentary lichens, especially those of *Cecropia*. The foliage at this season is rather ragged and scanty, but when the rising or setting sun illuminates the white skeleton, the dots of green on the extremities of the branchlets have a pretty effect. This is particularly noticeable in places where the winds have broken off the tops of the trees.

Of palms the Murumurú is abundant. An elegant *Bactris* (probably *B. concinna*, Mart.) about 18 feet high grows in broad patches. It is abundant at Yurimaguas on the Huallaga.

A *Loranthus* with large red flowers tipped with yellow grows on many different trees—very often on *Imba-úba* and a species of *Maclura*. Several *Ingas* are in flower, and *Triplaris surinamensis* (*Polygonaceæ*) is frequent. The Arrow-reed abounds on low coasts and islands, and in similar places there are often low trees whose trunks are draped with a species of *Batatas*. Here and there in the gapó is to be seen a Nutmeg tree 50 feet high or more, its branches nearly horizontal, but often bent up abruptly into a vertical position about midway.

FROM THE MOUTH OF THE PURÚS TO THAT OF THE COARY

Very frequent in clumps is the fine Pao Mulatto, 50 to 70 feet high, with lead-coloured bark and large umbels of white flowers. A

¹ [Readers of Bates's *Naturalist on the Amazons* will remember that this was his farthest station on the river, that he stayed here five months (a year later than Spruce's visit), and that he speaks of its luxuriance in every department of natural history with the greatest enthusiasm, adding, that five years would not be sufficient to exhaust its treasures in zoology and botany. In particular, the numerous pebbly streams, and the magnificent vegetation on their banks, surpassed anything he had seen during his ten years of forest ramblings.—ED.]

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thickish Imba-úba (*Cecropia*) has the bark mottled with red and white as in the Bread-fruit tree. In some places is an Anonaceous tree, about 30 feet high, with a profusion of flowers in small axillary clusters on the upper side of the long branchlets. The solitary tall Assaí palm is very scarce, occurring only towards the mouth of the Coary.

A remarkable tree occurs below Coary, 50 feet high, the top spreading, the lanceolate pale green leaves clustered on the ends of slender twigs, the flower-stalks long, descending then ascending, growing on the main branches and trunk nearly to the base, fruits pendent, globular, size of an orange, but said when ripe to be much larger, having a hard shell with four seeds. It is probably a species of *Couroupita* (*Lecythideæ*).

Much wild Cacao is seen on the margins and as far within as the inundation extends—conspicuous from its young red leaves. There is generally much Castanha (Brazil-nut) in the forests.

At Tabatinga I gathered flowers of a small Composite tree growing 6 to 15 feet high and looking very like a willow. It is the *Tessaria legitima*, DC., and had been noticed from the mouth of the Japurá upwards.

A *Serjania* (*Sapindaceæ*) with large masses of red capsules is now very frequent, and a low *Copaifera* in flower grows here and there by the water's edge. The Pao Mulatto continues very abundant and our firewood consists wholly of this species. There is no handsomer tree in the gapó. It sometimes reaches near 100 feet high. It is branched from about the middle, and the top forms a narrow inverted cone. The surface of the trunk and branches is somewhat wavy or corrugated, but the bark is quite smooth and shining. When I went to Manaquirý in June 1851 the trees were shedding their bark, the process being a longitudinal splitting up in one or more places, and a rolling back from both edges of the rupture. The young bark thus exposed is green, but it speedily assumes a deep bronze or leaden hue, and finally a chestnut colour—hence its name.¹ Some small *Rubiaceous* trees have the same property; for instance, *Eurosmia corymbosa* and a tree in the forest at Yurimaguas, with leaves resembling those of a *Nonetelia*, but the bark is greener than that of the Pao Mulatto. With this latter tree, on the Solimoës, frequently grows the Castanheiro do Macaco, with globular brown fruits, probably a species of *Couroupita*.

JOURNAL (*continued*)

March 27.—At 4 P.M. we reached Tabatinga, the frontier town of Brazil, situated on the north

¹ [This tree was, later, collected by Spruce, and being new was named by Mr. Bentham *Enkylista Spruceana*. It belongs to the *Cinchonaceæ*.]

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bank, a miserable place containing scarcely any houses but those of the garrison, though a little to the eastward, across a small valley, is a village of the Tucáno Indians. The barracks consist of two small, low ranchos, and there is no fort, though I saw two or three pieces of cannon laid on the ground. The soil is clayey and the vegetation luxuriant.

Early on the 29th we reached Loreto, the first town in Peru and decidedly better than Tabatinga, having some good houses. The white inhabitants, however (even the Governor), are Portuguese.

March 30.—Coasting the south bank of the river, the land being somewhat high and settlements more frequent. The vegetation here was more new and striking than any I had seen during the voyage. A little inland grew a very handsome palm (*Attalea*), resembling the *Palma Yagua* of the Orinoco, but rather smaller and with pendulous bunches of small hard red fruits.

Here I first saw the *Bombonaji*, a palmate-leaved *Carludovica*. It grows on steep red banks, and is submersed when the river is at its height. Several other trees in flower and fruit were quite new to me.

In the afternoon we reached *Cochiquina* on the south bank, inhabited by *Mayironas*, that is, Indians from the *Rio Mayo*. At this season there is a small lagoon between it and the river which makes it difficult of access. The Indians are numerous, and apparently very submissive to the *Gobernador* (the only white inhabitant) and to their *Curácas* or chiefs, who go about with polished walking-sticks headed with silver. There are plenty of pigs and fowls. The houses are kept in better repair and

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the weeds kept down more than in Brazilian villages. About 1000 sticks of firewood were embarked here in two hours.

On April 1 we reached Iquitos, a considerable village on the north bank at the mouth of a small stream of black water. It contains many people of mixed race, besides a great many Iquitos Indians who inhabit the western portion of the village.¹ Here I first saw the fruit of a remarkable palm-like Pandanaceæ (*Phytelephas*) allied to the plant that produces the vegetable ivory.

On April 2, reached Nauta, on the north bank, a few miles above the mouth of the Ucayáli, which enters from the south—a river equal in size to the Marañon itself. Nauta stands on rising ground from 30 to 60 feet above the river. The soil is sandy with some mixture of clay near the river. At the back the ground goes on gently rising for a considerable distance, only interrupted by rivulets. In the second growth on old clearings, the most curious feature is the absence of *Selaginella*, so constant in such places on the Amazon and Rio Negro. There is, however, a common *Adiantum* and a low tree-fern.

[As the steamer went no farther, Spruce had to wait a fortnight at Nauta before he could hire two canoes with the necessary Indians to take him and his goods up to Yurimaguas on the river Huallaga. In the intervals of this work he collected such

¹ Iquitos is now a town of about 10,000 inhabitants. It is the capital of the Peruvian province of Loreto, and the centre of the rubber trade of the Ucayáli, the Napo, and all the higher tributaries of the Amazon. There is a monthly communication with Pará by river steamers, while at longer intervals steamers make the through journey from Liverpool to this inland port within sight of the lower ranges of the Andes.

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plants in flower as were new to him, and noted several others, but as he does not seem to have reached the virgin forest these were not very numerous. He notes generally that the river-bank vegetation was here identical in its main features with that of the river below. In a small side-channel near the village he noted a twining *Bignoniaceæ* with long white flowers in axillary clusters resembling those of a *Posoqueria*; a sweet-smelling *Calyptrium* (*Violaceæ*); a *Maclura* laden with pendent catkins, like those of a hazel; a spreading tree with clusters of winged fruits, apparently one of the *Ulmaceæ*, and several others not in flower which were quite new to him.

The Journal of his voyage (now in canoes) continues :—]

April 16.—Left Nauta at noon. Passed along low shores. Besides the *Salix Humboldtianæ*, two other willow-like trees were noticed for the first time. At 8 P.M. reached four low huts or tambos, where we stopped for supper and for the night. I went back to the canoes, but the zancudos were terrible and I got no sleep. Next day the river continued rising, but last year's flood-mark is still 6 feet higher.

April 18.—At 8 P.M. reached San Regis, one of the most ancient pueblos (villages) on the river. I slept in the convent, which dates from the old missionaries. The roof was of very neatly woven Irapai (a species of *Pandanaceæ*).

April 19.—Just before 6 P.M. we reached some dry ground, where among lofty trees a space had been cleared sufficient to accommodate a few palm-leaf shelters. Under one of these I slung up my

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mosquito-net, large enough for a whole family. Charlie and I stowed ourselves beneath it, having first spread on the wet ground three layers of palm-leaf mats, and over these our blankets. The heat was almost insupportable early in the night, but afterwards the temperature was agreeable, and the shelter from dew and gnats was a luxury, and I enjoyed a fair night's sleep.¹

April 21.—Reached Parinari, a rather populous pueblo on a low site scarcely raised above the river at flood. The inhabitants are all Indians except the Governor, who is a Zambo named Don Domingo Mayo. We found the people beginning their Easter feast, the Cura of Nauta being expected on the following day. Both men and women had their faces painted red or white in lines and dots, while many were already half intoxicated.

The Governor was not an amiable character. He was very distrustful, and was especially afraid that on account of his colour due respect should not be paid to him as governor, and was also jealous of his wife and of her daughter (a girl of fourteen). He was also in constant fear of his life (though, I believe, resolute to defend it), and not without reason, for his rule over the Indians was a most severe one. I could not help admiring the facility with which he, alone and without assistance, kept some hundreds of Indians in order. He told me, however, that he had several times had to defend his life against them, and not long ago a number of them came on him with pikes; but the

¹ "Charlie" was an English sailor Spruce had found at Barra do Rio Negro and had engaged as an assistant. His story and fate are described later in letters to Mr. Bentham.

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mere pointing his gun at them generally sufficed to put them to flight. Once, however, at San Regis, they closed upon him and he had to stab one of them with a sword and then stamp upon his body, at which sign of determination the rest fled.

He told me that the inhabitants of Nauta, San Regis, Parinari, and Urarinas are Cucãma Indians from La Laguna and Santa Cruz on the Huallaga river. It is remarkable that the language of the Cucãmas is so like Tupí (or Lingoa Geral of Brazil), that when I made use of the little I had learnt of the latter on the Rio Negro, the Cucãmas understood me perfectly, and I in like manner understood most of what they said. The nouns are often absolutely identical, the verbs mostly differing only by a few letters, and the grammatical construction similar. The only other remnant of the Tupís I have heard of is the small tribe of Tupi-nambaras at the back of Villa Nova on the Amazon, but they seem to have become so mixed with black and white, that in 1850 I sought in vain for any pure Indians of the tribe there. These Cucãmas have no record of their origin, as have those of Yurimaguas.

Left Parinari late on the 22nd, and the next day passed along a coast rich in palms, such as the Paxiúba and Urucurí (*Attalea* sp.), and on the very margin clusters of the elegant *Bactris concinna*, its slender stems of some 6 feet high crowned by pale green regularly and closely pinnate fronds, beneath which hung on a short stalk dense clusters of black fruits. Very rarely I saw another *Attalea* more resembling the Jagua of Venezuela.

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April 25.—Stopped to cook our breakfast this morning on a bit of dry land (inundated only in the highest floods) where the forest was lofty and not much obstructed by twiners. One very fine Pao Mulatto, perhaps not less than 100 feet high, had a mass of broad strips of shed bark at the base. I picked up a piece of this, and while examining it heard a rattling in the place whence I had taken it. Stooping down, I saw that I had uncovered a large rattlesnake, who was raising himself up and poisoning his head for a spring at my leg, which was not more than two feet off. I retreated with all speed and fetched my gun from the canoe, but on returning the snake had disappeared.

On the 26th we reached Urarinas, a small pueblo about the size of San Regis, and already referred to as having a common origin.

April 28.—About noon to-day we spied a band of peccaries crossing the river towards our side, and already beyond the middle. With considerable difficulty we secured nine of them by the use of our guns and cutlasses. One of the largest boars, when wounded, was very fierce and tried to climb into the canoe, and had he not been speedily killed might have wounded some of the men seriously with his large keen tusks, of which, as is well known, even the jaguar is afraid. As we did not reach a place where we could prepare and cook them till early the following afternoon, the meat had already become too tainted for salting, but we had a meal of it, and the remainder was all cooked and eaten during the succeeding night by my Indians and the villagers.

We had entered the Huallaga river during the