

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.

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.

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!

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 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.

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. 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.

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.

‘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.

‘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 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.

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 admira-

tion 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.

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 re-asserting 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.