

# UP THE ORINOCO IN THE EIGHTIES

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THE centenary of the death of Simon Bolivar, "the Liberator", who devoted his life to his ideal of independence for Latin America, has brought vividly to my mind a brief journey made many years ago, up the Orinoco, into the heart of his native province of Venezuela. We were living at the time in Trinidad; and, through the kindness of the owners of the steamer which plied regularly between Port of Spain and Ciudad Bolivar, were accorded the privilege of this trip to the Spanish Main.

The Spanish Main had long ceased to be the home of romance and chivalrous exploits, the enchanted land which had lured Sir Walter Raleigh and his luckless companions to disaster, and had sunk to the status of a very backward country, wavering continually on the brink of pointless revolution. Still, even so, enough of glamour lingered about the name to tinge the expedition with a thrill of adventure.

We left Port of Spain early in the evening, and our route was down the Gulf of Paria and through the Serpent's Mouth, the strait which separates Trinidad from the mainland of South America. Hardly had the engines started, and the quick dusk given place to night, when a large number of our fellow passengers, all of them Spanish creoles returning home, began to sling their hammocks about the deck, and retire to such rest as was permitted them by the gayer remnant of the group, who danced long and noisily to the strains of an indifferent orchestra.

When we came on deck after early coffee next morning, we were pushing our way up the swift current of the Macareo, one of the three navigable mouths of the Orinoco. There are eleven in all, but most of them are mere streams, oozing through the swampy ground which forms the delta of the great river. The Macareo is nearly one hundred miles long, and winds and twists through low, but heavily-timbered country. During high water, a great part of this forest is inundated. The Orinoco rises periodically, owing to the melting snows of the Andes. It reaches its greatest height in July, and begins to fall towards the end of August, and is lowest in January and February. At Ciudad Bolivar, there is a difference of sixty feet between these periods.

The trunks of the trees on either side of the river channel were everywhere hidden by flowering vines and hanging plants. On account of the high water (it was early August) and consequent strong current, our flat-bottomed steamer kept well in to the shore, which was at no place clearly defined. So close were we that, now and again, the branches of the trees brushed us in passing. The woods were full of vivid life. Red monkeys, very amusing in their antics, leaping acrobatically from limb to limb, gibbered at us derisively as they performed for our benefit. The increasing heat drove them to their lairs, and we saw nothing of them after the early morning, but the birds darted about every hour of the day. The brilliant and stately macaws, flying always in pairs, flocks of green parrots, white egrets, with tufted heads, black and yellow mocking birds, the golden oriole, the bell-bird, whose song resembles the note of a convent bell, and many other tropical varieties of the feathered tribe!

Several times a rude canoe appeared noiselessly beside us, slipping out from between the trees. The two or three natives each contained were of a most primitive type. They snatched greedily at pieces of bread and biscuit thrown to them from the deck, but at any further advance toward friendliness retired in haste to the safety of the tangled thicket. Recently I read an account of an expedition to the head waters of the Orinoco, the source of which it would appear has not so far been discovered. The article contains some pictures of natives called Guahariboos, who, while bold enough to take gifts, were very shy and kept in the shade. These pictures remind me very much of the people we saw. They had the same flat, expressionless faces, black, straight, and thickly-matted hair, and reddish skin, and, as to clothing, it was quite negligible.

The tribe of the lower Orinoco was called Guaranos, which was pronounced "Warrahoos."

The two or three villages seen from the deck of the *Bolivar* were composed of a few, very frail, thatched huts perched on poles. It was settlements such as these which inspired the first travellers to call the country "Venezuela", *Little Venice*.

The Guaranos placed their dead in their canoes, and then, after carefully encasing them in a preparation of pitch, laid them on a platform high up among the branches of the trees, and covered them with palm leaves. It was said that the poor wretches had been driven to make their homes in this impenetrable forest, in order to escape being commandeered during the recurrent revolutions.

The second morning we had left the Macareo and were in the main stream of the Orinoco. The river was now nearly four miles

wide, and the low marshy jungle had disappeared and given place to more open, elevated plains, dotted with groves of trees. These *llanos* form a great part of Southern Venezuela, and are the grazing ground of the countless herds of wild cattle.

Quite early in the day, we made our first stop, at the little ramshackle town of Las Tablas, near the mouth of the Caroni. This was the furthest point reached by Sir Walter Raleigh. All that is romantic about the Orinoco is linked with the name of this gallant adventurer. We are accustomed to think of him as the gay courtier, sailing forth with high hopes, dazzled by the gleam of fairy gold, dauntless and undismayed. But the story was a much sadder one. On his first visit to Guiana, he had threaded his way through the intricate mazes of the Orinoco delta, as far as the mouth of the Caroni, but had not been able to take his boats up that river on account of the water falls, and returned to England with rumours of gold mines, but nothing more definite. Then came his twelve years in prison, from which he was released on condition that he find the mines, but without fighting the Spaniards, with whom the king was on friendly terms.

Weakened by age and infirmities, and attacked by fever, Sir Walter remained in Trinidad with the larger ships, while a company, including his son Walter, went up the river to the mouth of the Caroni. In a skirmish with the Spaniards, young Walter was killed; the mines were not found, and the party returned to Trinidad, where Keymis, the leader of the fruitless expedition, committed suicide. Broken in health, bereaved of his beloved son, sad at heart, Sir Walter turned his face toward England, knowing that death awaited him, and three months after he landed he was executed.

At Las Tablas, the roar of the falls that baulked Raleigh's ascent of the Caroni can be distinctly heard, and the cloud of mist rises in full view, but a turn in the river hides the actual cataracts themselves. The force generated is so great, however, that it is a long time before the two rivers mingle their streams, and the dark brown Caroni, and the light yellow, muddy Orinoco flow side by side for miles.

I do not know when or by whom the Caratal mines were eventually discovered; but at the time of our visit they were among the richest in the world, they were making enormous fortunes for their owners, and, in spite of primitive workings, the daily output was almost beyond the dreams of avarice. We took on board at Las Tablas a great quantity of gold bricks, each wrapped in canvas, with a wooden float attached. They were heaped up on the deck, and guarded night and day by two silent, armed men. I seem to

to remember that they wore broad-brimmed, black sombreros, and that the effect was awe-inspiring. I enquired lately about these mines, and was told that they are never heard of now.

About four o'clock of the second day, we arrived at Ciudad Bolivar, where we were to remain several days. The first name of the city was *Angostura*, which means "narrows," and at this point the river, which both above and below is between three and four miles wide, contracts to little more than half a mile. Bolivar is situated on the side of a hill, and in the eighties had paved streets and brick sidewalks. The houses were built of stone and white-washed, with flat roofs, where the families gathered in the cool of the day. Many of the roofs, as well as the courtyards, had shrubs and flowers. The outside windows were protected by iron bars giving, with the strong, heavy gates into the courtyards, a grim appearance to the streets. There were no wheeled vehicles, and heavy loads were carried either on donkey's backs or on men's heads. Many of the merchants were Germans, but the population, for the most part, consisted of Spanish creoles, with a slight mixture of Indian and negro. The business methods were so leisurely that the shops were shut between ten and eleven for breakfast. A broad street called the Alameda ran along the river bank, shaded by trees, and with shops on one side. Here the fashionable youth took the air, lounging in the shade. The city boasted a bronze statue erected to the memory of its most famous citizen, to do honour to whom the name had been changed from *Angostura* to *Ciudad Bolivar*.

Simon Bolivar, the greatest of Venezuelans, was born in Caracas in 1783. He came of a rich and aristocratic family. While in Europe, pursuing his education, he became imbued with the ideas on liberty so much in vogue at the time, and consecrated his life to securing the independence of the Latin American States. From this ideal he never deviated, and to it he sacrificed his prospects, his fortune and his life. . . Like most militant patriots, he suffered many vicissitudes, at one time driving through the streets of Caracas, his chariot drawn by the garlanded daughters of the noblest families, and hailed as a conquering hero; at others, fleeing for his life to the mountain passes of the Andes.

He achieved his purpose. The Republics threw off the yoke of Spain, but the disillusioned "Liberator" realized before his death that he had gained freedom for a people unprepared to use it. "Those who have toiled for liberty in South America have ploughed in the sea," was the cry of his broken heart.

For a time, at the height of his power, Bolivar set up his capital at *Angostura*.

Venezuela, though rich in natural resources, has never made much progress. Misruled by unscrupulous governors, it was always breaking out into revolutions. It is true many of them were of the comic opera variety. This kind of thing may be illustrated by the following incident which happened during our stay. A travelling company had staged a performance in a local theatre. A woman on the floor of the house fainted, and an officer, who had a small body of his men in the gallery, noting the confusion, ordered his men to fire. Mercifully they were stopped in time, but a panic ensued, and great excitement, and the chance of the occurrence giving rise to a revolution was a topic of heated conversation for some time.

Another famous citizen of Bolivar, whose monument adorned the cemetery, was Dr. Siegert, who introduced to a thirsty public Angostura Bitters.

The Orinoco is navigable for large vessels about three hundred miles. Ciudad Bolivar is two hundred and forty miles from the mouth. Lying beside us at the quay were some small boats which had come through from the Amazon, some interlacing streams toward the head waters connecting these two mighty rivers.

One day we were called in great excitement to view a baby alligator which had been lassoed as it sunned itself on the float of the paddle-wheel. It was a mere infant, but had a full grown temper, manifested in the angry snapping jaws and cruel eye. It was a relief when it was restored to its native element. We had seen several large creatures floating past like logs, and some of the men had taken shots at them. There is one spot, somewhere near the eye, where the tough hide is vulnerable. If, when the alligator is floating on the river, this spot is exposed, a practised marksman may sometimes hit it.

Quite the most interesting event of the whole trip was the taking on board of our living cargo of wild cattle, which was to supply the meat market of Trinidad. Cattle-raising was a prosperous industry of Venezuela. The herds had been introduced as far back as 1548.

The *llanos* were on the opposite side of the river from the city, so we steamed across and tied up at the corrals. When all was ready, the steam whistle sounded a warning over the hills. In a short time two generals appeared, riding slowly along a path which wound down the hillside. They were followed by 50 or sixty head of cattle. The cattle would follow a horse anywhere, even into the river. When the beasts were all enclosed in the corral, an old, well-trained ox was led up the gangway, and the others driven after him. When a sufficient number had been passed up, the negroes

set up shouts, hooting and hallooing, and in this excitement the poor creatures were forced into their places. This was repeated until all were on board. Between the shouts of the drivers and the animals' cries, pandemonium reigned.

There was not a great deal to occupy the attention of children. The weather was very hot, and one walk through the city streets satisfied our curiosity, and watching the loafers sleeping away their time on the Alameda soon ceased to absorb our interest. Had it not been for the evenings, we should have been excessively bored; but when the work of the day was over, and our friend the Scottish engineer strolled out on deck, slowly filling his pipe and with a quizzical gleam in his eye, we knew we were in for an evening of enchanting entertainment.

I can see it yet. The dim, shadowy deck, from the far end of which the ejaculating chatter of the Spaniards came as a pleasant murmur, the noisy river rushing past on its eager way to the sea, the black heavens pierced by brilliant southern constellations and quick flashes of distant lightning, and we children gathered round! Fit setting for the tales he told. Tales of the strange uncertain country, of hairbreadth escapes from alligators, and of the electric eels which carried death in their touch, of the quick, easygoing, excitable, and sorely misgoverned people, of the frequent futile revolutions, and of the sudden terrifying thunderstorms. He had the gift of the story-teller, and an enthralled audience. It is true that he adorned his facts to please his hearers, but that only enhanced their fascination for us, who hung upon his words, and counted this the best hour of the day.