

# WILD VENEZUELA.

Interesting Adventures of a Bird Collector Along the Great Caura River.\*



IN no region of the world is traveling more full of incident, more prolific in peril or adventure, than in the dense tropical forests and along the mighty streams of the still practically virgin areas which form so large a part of the South American Continent." This is the language of Dr. Keltie, after he has read the adventures of Mr. Eugène André, understood his ambition to reach the summit of the yet unclimbed Améha, and followed him in his expedition far up one of the great affluents of the Orinoco. The writer cherished no dream of wealth to be discovered in the country of the Incas. He had made a trip to the country of the tonca bean two years before he undertook his more extended exploration, and on Mount Turagua had been inspired by the tales of an Indian guide to press his search deeper into the land for new species of birds, and to gratify an ambition to look upon the impenetrable forests of the Guianas from the top of one of its most commanding peaks. The Guianas is all that country lying between the Amazon and the Orinoco, and the Caura River is wholly within the boundaries of Venezuela.

Mr. André tells his fascinating story—sometimes as delightfully novel and absorbing as were the pages of "Robinson Crusoe" or "The Swiss Family Robinson" with a simplicity, directness, intelligence, and zest that contribute to its general interest without detracting from its scientific value. History and manners, as well as birds, beasts, and fishes, interest him, and he tells about all of them so as to interest his reader. As he is a philosopher, with a well-developed vein of humor, he makes light of such plagues as the maladministration of Venezuela, that burdens a country susceptible of rich growth under continuous peace and wise administration, and the other plagues of flies, mosquitos, ants, and other creatures that thrive in the tropics. Stopping at Los Castillos, before reaching Ciudad Bolívar, he tells about how Sir Walter Raleigh there assaulted the Spanish garrison, in 1618, and was defeated, with the loss of his son Walter, and later with the loss of his head for the disaster. The place is no longer called Guayana la Vieja, as it was then.

Ciudad Bolívar is a typical Venezuelan city, healthy with poor drainage and a miasmatic swamp ever reeking before it, while Los Castillos is unhealthful with good drainage and without a swamp. But Ciudad Bolívar is backward, like all towns in South America, which get nothing in the way of civic improvement out of the constant stream of taxes they pour into the Government coffers. There is some business at Ciudad Bolívar, and would be more, with a habit of tranquillity and an abandonment of protection and export taxes in an aggravated form. We get an insight into the national habit in the chapter in which Mr. André describes the prevalent passion for cockfighting and the care with which the fighting "birds" are bred and cultivated for bouts in which all classes of the population meet on equal terms. Then there are other games in which Venezuelans are so proficient that strangers are warned not to compete with them on short acquaintance. The tonca bean is the product in which the people along the Caura as far up the river as Suapure are vitally interested. Beyond the last tonca bean station there is nothing to show that civilized man once dotted the banks of that and other streams with mission stations blazing what was supposed to be the way to the coveted wealth of the Incas. At La Prision, many miles above, where the Caura contributes its waters to the Orinoco, Mr. André stopped long enough to make ready his expedition into the wilderness. He had been at La Prision two years before, and had cut his way through the jungle to reach Mount Turagua. From its summit and his Indian guide he had acquired an ambition to visit Mount Améha, and the homes of strange and isolated Indian tribes said to dwell near the sources of the Caura. The venture of 1900-01 was the result. While he lingered about La Prision he heard the call of the bellbird, lover of seclusion; he joined with the Indians in feasting on land tortoises; he sorrowed for the egrets, that are being slaughtered by the myriads to grace the bonnets of civilization; fought off the razor-back hogs that had the run of Dona Antonia's house, and theorized about the superior instincts of the ants, bees, and other insects that came under his observation. Birds of brilliant plumage and butterflies innumerable abounded. The butterflies favored the filthiest parts of the settlement. He saw rare specimens of the callistes and the king-tody, the latter bird a feathered dandy with a scarlet plume that invites the fly that is destined to be eaten if he comes within reach.

It was near to Christmas, December 22, 1900, when the three dug-outs and the party were ready. It was made up of nineteen "gentlemen" and one "lady," Indians and Venezuelans, except André, and two assistants. "The gentlemen," he says, "belonged in three categories—those without clothes, those with the remains of clothes, and those with clothes of a sort." The woman, taken along as an expert in the judging of rubber, proved "an apple

of discord," and was soon sent back when her expert knowledge was no longer needed. This was after the exploration of the Nichare, along which it was thought a supply of rubber of commercial value might be found and developed. The Indians paddled, pulled, and lifted the boats upstream, the most difficult of all the affluents of the Orinoco to navigate. Mr. André studied the Indians to some purpose. He has an opinion about what has long been described as universal indifference on the part of the American aborigines to things that ought to appear to them wonderful.

When I compare the pleasurable excitement shown by these people at the sight of such articles as cloth and beads with the behavior of one of their number who had been to Trinidad with me after my first visit to the Caura, I cannot help thinking that that lack of surprise at seeing for the first time the greatest works of civilization, which has been attributed by many writers to the Indian's aversion for showing surprise as being undignified, comes from an entirely different cause. In the case of Maite, the Indian who remained with me in Port of Spain, and whose emotions I had a great many opportunities of studying, I noticed that he expressed no wonder at seeing for the first time those things which one would have expected to have surprised him most. The steamers in the harbor, the locomotives on the wharf, were barely noticed; but when I took him to one of the large shops he expressed wonder and delight at the enormous quantity of cloth, beads, fish hooks, and knives which he saw. In this instance he was able to institute comparisons and take an intelligent interest in articles of which he knew something. It was different with those more complex works so far beyond his simple experience.

At the Falls of Para the party met with a formidable obstacle, and with great labor hauled the boats up from the lower level to the higher one about 800 to 1,000 feet above, but the naturalist was delighted with the profusion of orchids he found, the queer little Dolly Varden frogs he came across, the trees so filled with homes of the hang nests that there was not room for another nest. They hunted and feasted on tapirs, toiled over the perilous rapids of Arichi, and on April 10 came in sight of Améha. Then the story becomes exciting. While endeavoring to find a way to scale the palisade of Améha, the rainy season overtook them in all its fury. The lightning, wind, and downpour of water was terrific. Warned by the flooding of the river and the reduced store of provisions, they turned their way homeward, and in trying to pass the Arichi rapids the largest boat, carrying the collection of birds, plants, seeds, insects, herbarium specimens, samples of rock, and, most valuable of all, the journal of the naturalist, with extensive notes, with photographic plates of views of the most interesting points, besides clothing, hammocks, and some provisions, was lost. There remained provisions for eight or ten days, and they were 200 miles from the nearest station at which they could expect to obtain help. Some of the party were too ill with fever to work, and with supplies of game cut off by the almost total disappearance of birds and the inability to catch fish in the swollen river, the party began to starve. Sugar and salt gave out. In despair the party separated, five men deciding to take the chance of reaching their destination by abandoning the river and endeavoring to cut through the forest to Mura. Maite, the guide, went crazy and died, starved to death. After nearly a month of most painful experience André and his companions reached La Prision on May 25. He at once sent back a search party for the men who had taken to the woods, but they could not be found and have never been heard from.

Ill-disheartened at his misfortune, anxious about the fate of the wanderers in the forest, Mr. André lingered while waiting with the Waiomgomos at Mura, studying the Indian habits of life and industry. At Puerto Antonio Liccioni he heard of the death of Queen Victoria and said good-bye for the time to the Caura. Although the loss of the boat, with its valuable collections, was a great one, the expedition was not a failure. A definite idea of the country was obtained, the birds taken below the Nichare, including some new species, were added to the Tring Museum, and the author, still undaunted, cherishes an ambition to revisit Améha and to yet reach the distant villages of the Indians among the long unexplored Parime Mountains. The readers of this book will gladly follow the story of his next attempt, for he is a good story teller as well as a courageous explorer.

\*A NATURALIST IN THE GUIANAS. By Eugene André, F. R. G. S., F. Z. S., M. S. A. With a Preface by Dr. J. Scott Keltie, Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society. With Fifty-four Illustrations and a Map. Pp. xiv.-310. Cloth, 8vo. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.50.