

PREFACE

‘Climas pasé, mudé constelaciones, golfos inavegables, navegando.’—ERCILLA : *La Araucana*.

To read a book to which a friend has asked you to write a preface is an unusual—nay, even a pedantic—thing to do. It is customary for a preface-monger to look contemptuously at the unopened bundle of his friend's proofs, and then to sit down and overflow you his opinions upon things created, and those which the creator has left in chaos. I plead guilty at once to eccentricity, which is worse than the sin of witchcraft, for witchcraft at one time may have exposed one to the chance of the stake ; but eccentricity at all times has placed one outside the pale of all right-thinking men. To wear a different hat, waistcoat, or collar, from those affected by the

Apollos who perambulate our streets, to cut your hair too short, to wear it by the twentieth fraction of an inch too long, is *scandalum magnatum*, and not to be endured. So in confessing that I have read 'Down the Orinoco in a Canoe,' not only in the original Spanish in which it first appeared, but in its English dress, is to condemn myself out of my own mouth, to be set down a pedant, perhaps a palterer with the truth, and at the best a man so wedded to old customs that I might almost be a Socialist.

It is undoubtedly a far cry to Bogotá. Personally, more by good fortune than by any effort of my own, I know with some degree of certainty where the place is, and that it is not built upon the sea. My grandfather was called upon to mediate between Bolivar and General Paez, and I believe acquitted himself to the complete dissatisfaction of them both. Such is the mediator's meed

The general public, of whom (or which) I wish to speak with all respect, is generally, I take it, in the position of the American

Secretary of State to whom an office-seeker came with a request to be appointed the United States Vice-Consul for the town of Bogotá. The request was duly granted, and as the future Consul left the room the Secretary turned to the author of this book, and said: 'Triany, where in thunder is Bogoter, any way?' Still, Bogotá to-day is, without doubt, the greatest literary centre south of Panama. Putting aside the floods of titubating verse which, like a mental dysentery, afflict all members of the Spanish-speaking race, in Bogotá more serious literary work is done during a month than in the rest of the republics in a year. The President himself, Don José Manuel Marroquin, during the intervals of peace—which in the past have now and then prevailed in the republic over which he rules—has found the time to write a book, 'El Moro,' in which he draws the adventures of a horse. The book is written not without literary skill, contains much lore of horsemanship, and is a veritable mine of local customs; and for the moral of it

—and surely Presidents, though not anointed, as are Kings, must have a moral in all they write, they do and say—it is enough to make a man incontinently go out and pawn his spurs.

Thus, Bogotá, set in its plateau in Columbian wilds, is in a way a kind of Chibcha Athens. There all men write, and poets rave and madden through the land, and only wholesome necessary revolutions keep their number down. Still, in the crowd of versifiers one or two, such as Obeso, the negro poet, who, being denied all access to the lady of his love—the colour line being strictly drawn in Bogotá, as well befits a democratic government—brought out a paper once a week, entitled *Lectura para ti*, have written verse above the average of Spanish rhyme. Others, again, as Gregorio Gutierrez Gonzalez and Samuel Uribe Velazquez have written well on local matters, and Juan de Dios Carasquilla has produced a novel called 'Frutos de mi Tierra,' far better than the average 'epoch-making' work of circulating library and press.

Pérez Triana, son of an ex-President, and speaking English and Spanish with equal fluency, is a true son of Bogotá, and writes as easily as other people talk.

His book occurred in this wise. The usual biennial revolution having placed his enemies in power, he found it requisite to leave the country with all speed. The seaports being watched, he then determined, like Fray Gaspar de Carbajal, to launch his boat upon the Orinoco, and, that the parallel should be exact, write an account of all he saw upon the way. Few books of travel which I have come across contain less details of the traveller himself. Strangely enough, he rescued no one single-handed from great odds. His strength and valour, and his fertility of brain in times of peril, together with his patience, far exceeding that of Indian fakirs, are not obtruded on the bewildered reader, as is usual in like cases.

Though armed, and carrying on one occasion so much lethal stuff as to resemble, as he says

himself, a 'wandering arsenal,' he yet slew no one, nor did he have those love adventures which happen readily to men in foreign lands from whom a kitchen wench would turn in scorn in their own native town: nothing of empire and little of patriotism is there in his book. In fact, he says that those who are his countrymen are those who have the same ideals as himself—a cursed theory which, if it once obtained, would soon abolish Custom-houses, and render armies useless, make navies all to be sold for scrap iron, and would leave hundreds of patriotic sweaters without a platitude. What chiefly seems to have appealed to this unusual traveller was the strangeness and beauty of the long reaches on the interminable waterways, the brightness of the moon, the thousand noises of the desert night, the brilliant birds, kaleidoscopic fish, and the enchantment of a world remote from all that to a really well-constituted modern mind makes life endurable. At times, although I tremble as I write, it seems to me he doubts of things which we all take on trust,

such as the Stock Exchange. Even the army is not sacred to this democrat, sprung from a shameless State in which there is no King, and which, consequently, can never hope to contemplate a Coronation show, for he retails a joke current in Columbia, but which, I think, if duly followed up, might be encountered in Menander, or, at the least, in Aristophanes. A Columbian Mayor of a town sent to the President a hundred volunteers, with a request that all the ropes should be returned. Jokes such as these cannot be helpful to a State; in fact, a joke at all is to a serious man a rank impertinence, and if an author wishes to obtain a place within the ranks of Anglo-Saxon literature, he should not joke at all, or, if he does, joke about fat or thin men, bald heads or sea-sickness, or on some subject which the great public mind has set apart for wit. However, as a member of the Latin race, it cannot reasonably be expected of him that at one bound he should attain unto the fulness of our Anglo-Saxon grace.

The careful reader of this book may possibly be struck with the different point of view from which a Latin looks at many questions which to an Englishman are set immovably as the foundations of the world, embedded in the putty of our prejudice.

For instance, on arriving at the open plains after a tedious journey across mountain ranges and through forest paths, the thing that interests the author most is that the land in the Columbian llanos is not held in many instances by individuals, but that so scant is population that it is open to all those who choose to take it up. This does not strike him as a folly or as affording room for speculation, but simply as a fact which, on the whole, he seems rather to approve of, but without enthusiasm, looking upon the matter as a curious generality, but not inclining to refine or to reduce it to any theory in particular. A state of mind almost impossible for Saxons (Anglo or Celtic), who, as a general rule, seem quite incapable of looking at a proposition as

a whole, but must reduce it to its component parts.

The voyage in itself was memorable, for no one of the party seems to have been the least the kind of man who generally ventures upon journeys of the sort, and furthermore because, since the first conquerors went down the river with the faith that in their case, if rightly used, might have smoothed out all the mountain ranges in the world, no one except a stray adventurer, or india-rubber trader, has followed in their steps. Leal, the jaguar-hunter, who slew his tigers as I have seen them slain in Paraguay, on foot, with a forked stick in one hand and in the other a bamboo lance; the Indian guide Gatiño; and the young Venezuelan Governor of a State, who, shut up in his house, fought to the death, his mistress, an ex-ballet dancer, handing him up loaded guns, are to the full as striking characters as I have met in any book of travels outside the types that crowd the pages of the 'Conquistadores' of America. The naked Indian in his canoe, before whose

eyes the immeasurable wealth of powder, looking-glasses, a red flannel shirt, and other treasures, rich and rare to him, were spread, who yet had strength of mind to scorn them all rather than pledge his liberty for two days' paddling, is the kind of Indian that merits such a chronicler as he has found. Long may he paddle on the *caños* and the *aguapeys*, and die, still crowned with feathers and with liberty, as did his fathers, by some forgotten beach or by some *morichal*, where parrots chatter and toucans flit through the leaves, and humming-birds hover like bees above the tropic flowers.

What most delights me in the book is that the author had no settled plan by means of which he strove to square the circle of the globe.

'We wandered,' as he says, 'with the definite aim of reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Beyond that we did not venture to probe too deeply the mysterious and wonderful manifestations of Nature, but took them as they appeared to our limited means of vision and understanding, and sought nothing beyond.'

A charming way to travel, and a wise, and if not profitable to commerce, yet to literature, for books writ in the fashion of this brief record of a trip through the great waterways of Venezuelan and Columbian wilds, although perhaps not 'epoch-making,' yet live and flourish when the smart travellers' tales, bristling with paltry facts and futile figures, which for a season were sea-serpents in the press, have long been pulped to make the soles of ammunition boots.

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