

III. The Rest of the Urubamba.

People react differently to shock. During the rest of the journey down the Urubamba I was chiefly conscious of an enormous gratitude for the quiet. Not merely for the absence of people asking questions and uttering exclamations, but for the absence for days of any sign of human habitation at all. You could sense the absence of predatory man in the fearlessness of the wild life. A tapir would stand on a little island and watch with placid curiosity as we drifted under its nose. A group of otters, more actively curious, would swim alongside, craning their heads out of the water to look at us and carrying on a lively conversation of squeaks. Turtles breathed heavily at us, and the water hogs ignored us completely.

The sounds of the river all seemed part of the quiet, toucans yapping in the forest, a shrieking flight of parrots rising from one spot to settle somewhere else, a squawk from a pair of macaws flying across the river, the creak of a woodpecker, the deep gong like note of a bird which I was told was one of the curassow family. We were wakened by the dawn chorus of the monkeys, not perhaps a very musical sound to human ears, but with a nostalgic quality. A monkey would start and the others would join in, one by one, until they were in full chorus, and then, one by one, they would drop out until the last songster ended in a series of grunts. Even the flat smack of a large fish jumping in the river seemed part of the pattern, or the pattering fall of a shoal of tiny fish driven into a flurry by our attempts to push our way up some small side stream. They leaped so high that they often landed in the canoe. Very lovely those side streams were with overhanging boughs through which a kingfisher would dart in a vivid flash of colour. Sometimes they widened into little pools, crystal clear, with a tiny cascade sparkling in the sun.

At first we always camped on the left bank of the river, the right bank being the territory of the Mascoz (sic), a fierce ~~group~~

people reputed to have kept themselves free from contamination by western civilisation by the simple expedient of putting an arrow into all unauthorised intruders, missionaries included. Our group of Machiguenga had no quarrel with the Mascoz, but another Machiguenga group were having a feud with them over a little matter of wife stealing. If you found yourself short of women you pinched some from a neighbouring tribe. Our one Spanish speaking Indian seemed to take the threat seriously. He pointed out that, in the dark, one Machiguenga looks very like another, and that, as Europeans, we were not likely to be popular. We soon left the Mascoz behind and from then on we had the river to ourselves.

We camped at night on one of the numerous little sandy or pebbly beaches, where the Indians built a fire of driftwood. With the rapidity of long practice they ~~ba~~ set up our little grass shelters, and then they went fishing. The shelters were made from a plant resembling pampas grass in growth, but with the ~~leaves~~ leaflets all in one plane. Half stripped stems were bent in the middle, the ends being stuck in the ground. Other stems were lashed to the apex, and fully leafed stems were used to finish off. They would leak in time, but they kept off quite a heavy shower of rain. When the fish was cooked they brought it to us. All I could find to do to make myself useful was to make coffee, which the Indians relished. ~~Sometimes~~ I would wander along a sandy beach feeling delicately with my bare toes for a spot where the ground seemed soft, and, digging down, I would sometimes come on a clutch of the round leathery eggs of a turtle. Ten minutes seemed the right time for a lightly boiled turtle's egg, but they scrambled much quicker. We still had a little fat that had not gone to the bottom of the river, as well as the coffee and a bottle of ~~liquid~~ sugar of honey. If anything was left of the evening meal we ate it for breakfast, otherwise we waited till the next evening meal. There were windfalls. Once the Indians shot a peccary. Once they cut down a chonta palm, whose young leaves lie ~~is~~ like a folded fan in an ivory sheath. Once we

passed a deserted Indian settlement, where there were still a few banana palms in bearing. Once the Indians found some nuts, and sat cracking them with their teeth. They gave me a handful, but I did not trust my teeth. I took a hammer to them. I hammered industriously, but in vain, while the Indians looked on and laughed. As we got to know each other better the ceremoniousness of their manner relaxed and they were prepared to laugh with and at us.

The river had lost its turbulence and there was little to do but steer. Sometimes the paddlers were silent for long periods, sometimes they talked amongst themselves, or held soft conversations with the birds. Occasionally I woke from this trance like existence to see myself, an intruder from an alien culture, drifting through the Amazonian jungle that had been the apex of my childhood dreams. These moments of self consciousness were rare and unexpected, and resulted in no increase of wisdom. On one occasion we were overtaken by a deluge of rain. Seeing some long deserted grass shelters on the bank, we beached the canoe and took refuge. I found myself in one of the shelters with an Indian, who kindled a small fire, and silently handed me a barbed arrow on which was impaled the fish he had shot with it. Docilely I began to toast the fish. We had no common language, but, when you have been cold and wet, and are now getting warm and dry, words seem an unnecessary form of communication. As we sat I looked at him, and, in imagination, at myself. A whole culture separated us, but for the moment it seemed unimportant. My skin was as dark as his, though of a slightly different colour. My hair wanted cutting, but his was longer. It waved down to his shoulders in a school girlish fashion that accorded ill with his masculine cast of features...to European eyes. (It was not the invariable hairstyle amongst the Machiguenga males, you also saw pudding basin cuts and neat pageboy bobs.) Both of us wore cushmas, he because it was his native costume and I because most of my wardrobe had gone to the bottom of the river. I had bought the cushma for a packet of needles and a small mirror, and I

was finding it extremely useful and very comfortable. Like him I was barefoot, my footgear having been reduced to one pair of high heeled slippers and a single sandshoe. Unlike him I did not paint my face. This was appropriate. I was a woman and face painting was a masculine form of adornment. At first I had supposed that the patterns had a tribal significance, but I was told that they were a matter of individual fancy. They used two colours, the red dye, derived from the achiote plant, with which they also dyed their clothes, and a black dye, which came from a fruit the size of an orange. The black dye was antiseptic and also an excellent insect repellent. When travelling overland the Indians sometimes painted their arms and legs with it to keep the insect life at bay, but, as a commercial product, it had the disadvantage that, once black, you stayed that way for a considerable number of days. Patterns might be simple or intricate, a red circle on either cheek and a cross on your chin like one of our crew, or an elaborate tracery in black running in two bands across your face like another, or indeed anything you fancied. My companion had not bothered with a pattern but had contented himself with a hectic flush on either cheekbone.

What were his intellectual curiosities? When he and his fellows pointed to the stars what did they make of them? What were his social attitudes? Was he pro-Pereira, or anti-Pereira in his view of white civilisation? Of his superstitions I knew at least one. He believed together with the rest of his tribe that, if a married man touched the body of someone who had been drowned, his eldest son would be drowned within the year. Was he married and, if so, did he have one wife or two? There was nothing but the necessity for providing for her to prevent him from having two, but many Machiguenga seemed to rest content with one.

"Why should I want two wives," an elderly chief said to me subsequently, "My old woman is good enough for me." But he was more of a sophisticate.

I could not ask my friend of the shelter any impertinent questions of this kind, so we sat in a companionable silence till

the rain stopped. When the fish was cooked we shared it.

We came to the territory of the Piro Indians and drew near to the outposts of white civilisation. The first of these was at Sepa. A syndicate of Polish American colonisation had sent a commission to Peru in 1927 and obtained a concession in the eastern montaña for agricultural colonisation. The plantation at Sepa was part of the scheme. Was is the operative word. The colonists were just not the right type. They drifted away one by one and were at that time wandering jobless in Peru. Another settlement further down on the Ucayali River was however still operative. My remaining white companion was of Polish origin and had been appointed Polish consul in spite of repeated refusals. It was suggested to him that, since he was coming this way, he might look in and see what was happening to the colonisation scheme. It did not seem very profitable to inspect a Polish colony in which there were no Poles. It was the hope of finding some food that really led us to call in, and we were a little taken aback when a trim figure in European clothes ran down the bank to greet us. This was the Peruvian Administrator, who had stayed behind after the colonists had left because, he said, he could not bear to see a beautiful plantation go to rack and ruin. He cultivated the land with Indian labour, which he paid in kind having no cash. The Campa Indians, kin to the Machiguenga, were fine fellows, but he had no use for the Piro Indians whom he suspected of wanting to remove him by a slow poison. All the food he ate was cooked in previously boiled water by two of the no longer wanted wives the Poles had left behind them. He appeared to have a whole bevy of Indian women of this category, not to mention their offspring. He even had a crippled Indian girl, who had been rejected by her tribe. One of the pleasant features of Peru was the readiness with which its inhabitants absorbed any surplus children into their large, easy going households.

We were pressed to stay for the night. The Administrator was a loquacious man and he had months and months of conversation to catch up on. He lent us a whole house, and, feeling a little

conspicuous in my cushma, retired to my room to change into one of the two respectable dresses that, having been packed separately, had escaped the river. As I put the finishing touches to my toilet the door burst open and a group of Piro Indians entered and stood staring at me without a word. Disappointed in what they saw, they left as abruptly as they had come, and I could hear them going down the passage. Another door open^{ed} and there was an outburst of chatter. They had been baptised into the Christian faith and now had a baby requiring baptism. For this a suitable godfather was required, and, having heard of the arrival of two white strangers, they were inspecting us. Being a woman I was no use to them, but my companion was just what they sought, no irresponsible boy, but a man of mature years. The baptism took place forthwith. The Piro Indians had had considerable contact with white people, and the white people, as not infrequently seems to be the case, did not seem to think that it had improved them, to which, when white people complain, one can only say, "you did it."

The plantation was in apple pie order. It grew rice, which in this area gives three crops a year, coffee, which bears in three years, and cocoa, which bears in five. The straw from the rice was laid down as litter to smother weeds. Maize was planted to shade the young coffee and cocoa plants, and guava was planted alternately with them to give shade later on. The guava had no economic value, but grows fast and does not exhaust the soil. When the cocoa tree was big enough the guava was cut down to leave the regulation twelve paces between the trees. Other crops abounded, oranges, lemons, mandarins, papaya and pineapple, as well as rubber, cotton and yucca. Of bananas there was an incredible variety, red bananas and yellow bananas and bananas that stayed green even when ripe, cooking bananas and eating bananas, bananas as long as your arm and bananas as short as your finger. There were fibre plants for rope and even a sample of the plant the Indians use to provide a substitute for soap. A wonderful place. Why had the colonists left?

That night from 7 p.m. to midnight the Peruvian Administrator told us why. I found it difficult to follow much of his rapid

Spanish, and was left with the impression that all the colonists had been "men of honour and men of heart", and that this had led to incessant quarreling, during which they had brandished revolvers. A more probable explanation is that they were just not the type to take root in the soil.

The other Polish colony, which we visited later, had had its ups and downs, but still held on. At Sepa there had been a plantation already in existence, but Cumaria had to start from scratch. The original directors had gone, and the place was controlled, quite unofficially I imagine, by a Catholic priest, who appeared to have weeded out undesirable elements, and who helped the more promising to get established out of his own pocket. He had grand schemes, a food producing settlement on the river, a road to the interior with a view to the growing of corn, and ultimately an exploitation of the natural products of the forest. What he lacked was capital. His house was built entirely of red cedar, and was most attractive.

At Sepa we had been ~~most~~ hospitably entertained and we left with gifts; a woven bag, made by the Piro, from one of the Administrator's housekeepers and a pottery bowl from the other. The Campa carpenter asked what he might give me and I ~~asked for~~ ^{obtained} a new handle to my geological hammer, a beautiful handle made from quinia wood, red, springy and resistant. The Administrator came with us for some distance down the river, still talking. Conversation was apt to be intermittent since his motor boat, "Marguerita," was giving trouble, and the last we saw of him was a lonely figure tinkering with the engine and crooning sadly "Marguerita, Marguerita, que tienes?"

We caught up with our other canoe at a point where the Urubamba, the Tambo and the Ucayali Rivers meet. The small white settlement of Athalaya was situated a little way up the Tambo, and had been quite an important centre during the rubber boom. It depressed me beyond reason. After the clean life of the river it seemed extraordinarily squalid. The place was full of sickness, and it was not enlivening to be told that it would be wise to set

before dropping into the valley where San Ramon lay, and the pilot kept on delaying the flight in the hope that the weather might improve. We had rooms in the aviation building and lived in a permanent state of being packed up ready to leave at a moment's notice. A woman of the settlement gave us meals and did her best to persuade me to part with one of my two ~~respectable~~ dresses, which she seemed to think the height of fashion. I found it surprisingly difficult to readjust to the ways of polite ~~society~~ society. I wobbled about in my high heeled shoes, finding them an idiotic form of footwear. I found myself resenting the miserable basinful of water I was expected to wash in ~~after~~ after having a whole river at my disposal. But, above all, I found it agonising having to sit on an upright chair after so much squatting on the ground.

It is fascinating to fly over Amazonia in a small open plane, looking down on the vast expanse of forest threaded with silver streams. Once again I was impressed by the variety of shades of green, but I was a little startled when we appeared to be descending airily amongst the treetops. My fellow passenger yelled in my ear that there was a colony somewhere down there, and, since it certainly looked very threatening over the mountains, I assumed that there was somewhere the pilot thought he could land. There was in fact a clearing in the trees, and, after a series of kangaroo bounds we came to rest, surrounded by all the local inhabitants, and began to settle quietly into the soft ground. The colony, formerly known as Puerto Leguia, had now become Puerto Inca. It had no regular air service and our pilot had never landed there before and looked as though he hoped never to land there again. The colony had been started originally by a fraudulent Italian, who had sold numerous tracts of land on a glowing prospectus to various credulous persons, who were now thirsting for his blood. The colonists included Germans, north Americans and Italians. I wonder what it has become since then.

It stayed fine, and next day we took off about 4 p.m.,

It had stayed fine, but the ground was still soft, & the strip did not allow much space for getting up speed before rising to clear the forest trees which hemmed us in. The pilot, who had been growing gloomier and gloomier, asked us to send all but a minimum of our luggage down river and jettisoned the heavier part of the mail. We made it, but not with very much to spare. They were charming those young Peruvian pilots and very proud of their record of difficult flights without accident.

After that a stretch of road in a car, ~~and~~ a day in the train and modern technique had landed us back in Lima. The revolution was still going on, and Lima was under martial law. I had almost forgotten the revolution.