

THE LLANOS OF VENEZUELA

A wall of mountains rising from the sea ^{stops} greets the incoming ship at La Guaydra; but beyond, Venezuela opens out into a vast sandy plain dotted with groves of palm trees standing erect in the wind. This region is known to all Venezuelans as Los Llanos, the plains, ^{to} to the outside world it is a world of romance in which the monstrous crocodile and the slender llanero, the plainsman, vie with each other for legendary honors; but to those who know the llanos it is also a land of the sweet singing turpial ^{of the} in its black and scarlet coat, the corocoro standing out its flashing rosette against a background of green, and the carefree llanero who sings amorous ballads with the same abandon as he does battle with man or beast.

So flat and extensive is the region, and at places so bare of vegetation that during the day its natural limits seem to be the encircling horizon of confused mirages, and at night these give place to the low-hanging polar star to the north, the southern cross to the south, and the glow of east and west marking where the stars rise and sun has set. A world of emptiness seems to ever stretch before one, for in the dim distance where earth should meet sky there is nothing but the illusion of limitless extension of space.

Actually it is bordered on the north and the west by the coastal cordillera and the Andes; and the Orinoco river flowing northward and then eastward marks its border on the southeast where loom the hills of Guayana. Southward the Venezuelan llanos stop at the Meta river, ^{but} the vast flatness continues on into Colombia and Brazil.

Were it not for the heavy rainfall during a few months of the year, from June until November, and the numerous rivers that are fed by the mountain systems and which cut the sandy plain into numerous bushbordered segments it would form a vast desert. As it is at the height of the rainy season it takes on the aspect of an immense lake studded with

numerous green islands, and during the dry season it takes on the aspect of a most arid region. When it is under water it is rich in life; but during the dry season sand storms, sand dunes, dried up water holes, bleached skeletons, burnt vegetation, a deserted countryside, attest to the little that keeps it from turning into a permanent desert. Then it is ^{what} ^{over} animal and human life does not emigrate crowds the river banks and mud holes.

Lying between the 6th and 9th parallels of north latitude, for the most part only a few hundred feet above sea level, it is literally enveloped in a tropical heat the year around. Temperatures are high and constant. During the rainy season the high humidity adds to the discomforts of the heat; but when the rains have stopped it is more pleasant. The trade winds assure a clear atmosphere and a constant breeze.

Although temperatures are very high, the climate is very comfortable *and conducive* with the exception of a few hours at midday when it is better to seek *to activity* *is quiet under the* the shelter of grass roof or, failing that, the shade of a bush. At night it may become even cold, especially if the sleeper is exposed to the winds which blow most violently in the morning hours. Thick blankets are needed, or good shelter. The latter has a disadvantage in that it permits mosquitoes to seek refuge also, and apparently heightens their zest for human victims.

There is always music in the air carried about by the winds to form a symphony of sound, ~~expressive of the spirit of the llanos.~~ Dominating all is the impudent roar of the araguato monkeys coming always from afar, ~~sometimes threatening, sometimes encouraging dancing in the moonlight.~~ The morning and evening hours are specially theirs. Then when most life is silent their raucous tones are raised and carried for miles by the

restless wind. In the laggons there are always the ducks who raise their ^(?)rabble voices in protest and fear at the approach of man; and on the sand ^(?)beaches, the sandpipers raise a din with their nervous screams; in the rivers the toninos ~~that~~ frolic and blow, and even the crocodile contributes its roar. The zorro, the jaguar, the puma, the bulls and cows with their bellowing, and the stallion with his whistle rise above all this to assert their existence. Even more pretentious is the sobbing of the ass that surpasses all others in volume and persistency. But there are creatures that slink silently along either ^{because of} in fear to make themselves heard or ^{because they} are in search of prey. Of these is the capibara, and the silent snakes, the turtles, the armadillos, the lumbering ant-bear, and scurrying lizards.

But in the llanos lives also man. ^{Formerly} ~~Once~~ the region was peopled entirely by primitive peoples eking out a living by hunting and fishing, but to-day most of it is in the possession of the llanero, a type to be found nowhere else. Spanish and Indian blood flow in his veins, and ~~because of that he views and listens to nature with proper understanding.~~ He is a child of the open vastness in which he lives. He views the colored panorama with pleasure and understanding, and lives with a courage that is not frustrated by the thought of death. ~~Nature is given meaning in his soul and is reshaped to satisfy his needs.~~ He has thrown no walls about himself, and responds to the world about him with perfect freedom given and expecting no censure. He breeds cattle, horses, asses, and with pitying humor the anomalous mule. ~~He breeds himself, and is satisfied.~~ ~~So~~ he composes ballads, ^{of} not to his war deeds which are taken in stride, but of his love deeds which he likes to remember. His wants are few, for he takes from the world that surrounds him all that it can offer to one who is interested in the present life. He ^{lives} leaves at peace

with all the world, and would rather share his fare and his song with another human being than to be at war with him. But ^{if} the latter be imposed on him then he will fight with an abandon that has been the marvel of history.

There is also another type of man in the llanos, a type that is fast disappearing, the aborigine. Today he is to be found only between the Arauca and the Meta rivers, but formerly he was master of all of the llanos. Those that are left breed no cattle, do not cultivate the soil. They live as did their ancestors. Among these only two peoples have survived, the Yaruros and the Guahibos. It is the former who consider themselves to be the children of Kuma, and who are the subject of this study.

War and slavery, attending the invasion of European soldiers of fortune, began to decimate the indigenous population of Venezuela in the early part of the 16th century. Under the pressure of European arms and cupidity neither the warlike Caribs, the more peaceful Arawak, nor any of the other peoples were able to hold their own, and tribal group after tribal group disappeared with remarkable rapidity. Even after the missionaries succeeded in introducing more gentle methods of subjugation and in prohibiting their further enslavement, the aborigines continued to be exposed to various forces, political and cultural, that have led to their extinction in some cases and to their assimilation in others. Only a few have survived as distinct ethnic groups and strangely enough these have been noted for their utter primitiveness. Among these are a few bands of Yaruros that roam that portion of the llanos lying in the state of Apure.

The Yaruros are a primitive folk--among the most primitive of contemporary peoples, if they are to be judged on the basis of their economic

life alone. Those surviving today are but sad remnants of a once numerous people that believed the world had been created especially for them. They have little understood the racial and cultural upheavels of the past four centuries, but though menaced with complete extermination, they have remained steadfast in their refusal to give up their identity as an independent people and faithful to their traditional mode of living. They have had to resist soldier, priest, adventurer, and cattle breeder but have yielded little besides their lands. The newcomers are masters of the soil they have trod upon, but not of the Yaruro soul.

Having tremendous odds against them, we can only marvel at the tenacity of these primitives. What is there about their racial and cultural makeup that is indestructable before the admittedly materially superior European people and their civilization, before its proven ruthlessness?

For, today as of yore, the Yaruros are ^{wear no clothing} naked and construct no permanent shelter; they are nomadic and for food they depend entirely on the hunt of the crocodile and turtle and the gathering of roots and fruits; they make fire by rubbing two sticks together; the men live with the parents of their wives without ever speaking to or looking upon their mothers-in-law; they are obligated to marry their cousins; they must have had ^{those who would become} revelations in order to become priests; their children are left to give free play to their impulses without fear of adult admonishment; they believe in nature as a thinking living entity; they are individualists and follow the biologic principle of the survival of the fittest; and they commit themselves to primitiveness by believing that their mode of life is best. In short, they are the antithesis of civilized humanity. Yet for centuries they have lived under the threat of the European sword, gun, and the cross, and have been in touch with European social

and religious institutions. ^{II} Theirs is a precarious but romantic existence. Their main pre-occupations are the daily dinner and the intimate relationship existing between themselves and their Gods. They seem to live in a subjective Universe undistorted by human creations and human fantasy, although an objective world presses hard upon them. A death which will return them to the paradise of their Gods and which will reunite them with their ancestors is their great hope. Daily they receive the greetings of their mother Goddess written in the colored western sky after the white sun has fallen below the horizon, and nightly they lie on the white sands, ^{examining} under the star-studded heavens, watching for messages of comfort from their Gods and their dead relatives. Often, the Mother Goddess Kuma, and the other Gods pay them personal visits, and then indeed they are happy. But, until death comes, the problem of the daily dinner remains and morning brings the daily toil for its acquisition.

Once the Yaruros roamed over a vast region, ^{the greater portion of the lands of Apure, but that was when, from their point of view,} that is, when the world was a better place to live in. ~~Then came the strange bloodthirsty, immoral, avaricious white man and~~ the aspect of their universe was changed. ^{with the coming of the Europeans whom they consider to be bloodthirsty, immoral, and avaricious.} Hope of living was replaced with the fear of extinction; the open spaces were no longer theirs to wander in and to enjoy; and many strange diseases appeared among them. The world of men became changed, but they noticed that the aspect of the world of nature remained the same. In this way they have found assurance that the world to which their souls will go after death is undefiled, and that their Gods still watch over them. Today they are limited to the region drained by the Capanaparo and Sinaruco rivers; and the near future will undoubtedly see their complete extermination.

and in the early morning hours - the cold penetrates
thick blankets. At midday the heat is most intense driving
man to the shelter at ~~to the shelter~~
~~all forms of life except the ever troublesome mosquitos, to~~
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