

**A RESIDENCE IN THE WEST INDIES AND AMERICA,
WITH A NARRATIVE OF THE EXPEDITION TO THE
ISLAND OF WALCHEREN IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. II.**

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CHAPTER VIII.

Intention of Colonel Nicholson to visit Mr. Edmonstone - Voyage up the Demerara River — Negro Rowers — Fredestein Plantation — Reception by the Owner — Introduction to the Family — Dinner Party — Naked Female Attendants — The Young Widow and her Squirrel — A Happy Household — Visit to the Plantation — Cultivation of Coffee — Preparation of the Berries — Praise of Coffee — Departure from Fredestein — Practice of having Naked Female Domestics accounted for — Arrival at Plantation Georgia.

p. 150 MR. EDMONSTONE

Tranquillity being again restored to this agitated colony, the colonel determined upon going up the Demerara river, in order to visit his old and esteemed friend, Mr. Edmonstone, who was residing on his wood-cutting estate up the Mibiri creek. This gentle man had on several occasions shown great courage against the runaway slaves, and an intimate knowledge of their habits and manners, and proved himself a zealous defender of our authority and possessions. So early as 1801, he commanded a small party sent by General Hislop to attack a settlement made by some runaway slaves up this river, in which service he was severely wounded; and, in 1809, he was presented by the governor with a handsome sword, accompanied by a silver mug, in token of his esteem. It is my opinion that this trip was undertaken by our good colonel as much for the purpose of consulting with Mr. Edmonstone upon what had lately happened as for any pleasure he should derive from showing me this river.

Be the reason, however, what it might, the effect was the same, as the old steersman of the governor's boat, being consulted as to the best day and hour for starting, since the tide in these rivers must always be considered, he fixed on the second succeeding day at five o'clock in the morning.

Accordingly, on the 13th April, 1808, we embarked in the governor's tented boat, pulled by eight Negro slaves; and, running

p. 152 NEGRO SLAVES

up to plantation Rome, above the town, we here crossed the river to Diamond Point, on the left bank, up which we kept. As the sun increased in power the labour of our boatmen became more fatiguing. Colonel Nicholson and I breakfasted in the boat, and he ordered his servant, Ogilvie, to give the boatmen some thing to eat and a glass of rum each. After this refreshment, the bowman commenced with a verse of his own composition, which was repeated by the whole crew, and they made us laugh heartily at some of their Negro poetry, which was meant as a panegyric on the governor and myself. The heat of the day was overpowering, and every now and then one of these men, who were built like Hercules, would spring from the boat dripping with perspiration, and rising from the water immediately place himself again on his bench and pull with renewed vigour. These Negroes, in rowing, never stop from the moment they set out till the company is landed at the place of destination, and continue, even against the

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tide, tugging, sometimes night and day for twenty-four hours together, all the time singing in in chorus the most absurd verses composed by by themselves, to keep up their spirits. As soon as their labour is finished, their naked bodies dripping with foam and perspiration, they one and all plunge headlong into the river to refresh themselves, just as our post-horses are treated in England.

It was past three o'clock in the afternoon before we arrived at Fredestein plantation, where we found the owner, an old Dutchman, ready to receive us; and the colonel begged him to send a Negro up to Plantation Georgia to inform the owner that he would dine and sleep there on the morrow.

The scenery I have not hitherto mentioned, as it was thus far by no means so wild, picturesque, or beautiful, as that near the Corantine or Essequibo rivers; still cultivation, down to the water's edge. being far inferior to the plantations of Nature's making in this country.

p. 154 RECEPTION AT FREDESTEIN

On landing', we were received by a gentleman-like elderly Dutchman, the owner of the plantation, dressed in a West India garb, which is, a pair of thin white trowsers, with feet to them, instead of stockings, a shirt, but no neckcloth, a cotton dressing-gown or coat, with a straw hat, having a brim like an umbrella. He was gratified by the honour we did him, and, being followed by two young women, one with a large mug, the other with a tray and a couple of glasses, he begged us to drink to our better acquaintance. I found the liquor to be the most delicious sangaree I had ever tasted. He then proposed to the colonel to walk up to the house, where he would introduce us to the ladies. A straight avenue from the river led us to the doorway, beautifully planted with flowering shrubs.

Every thing on the outside bespoke wealth and comfort ; and, on reaching the inside, we perceived that the same neatness and excellent arrangement were still preserved. This and the Dutch Governor's house at Rome,

p. 155 INTRODUCTION TO THE FAMILY

near Stabroek, were the only two dwellings I had seen in this country in which there was any approach to the style and arrangement of European residences. On being ushered into the parlour, we there found seated four European ladies, to the eldest of whom we were introduced as the wife of our host, and to two pretty young girls as his daughters.

The fourth we found to be a blooming young widow, with a smiling and happy countenance: for, as Stedman says, a woman in this country does not mourn long for her husband; but, as soon as the funeral is over, begins to look round among the crowd for another. She was about my own age, spoke very good English, and was full of wit and fun. After a quarter of an hour's conversation, we were as intimate as if we had been acquainted for twenty years ; and it struck me that she, like the tropical mosquitoes, as I have before observed, had an instinctive preference for a young or newly-arrived European.

p. 156 DINNER PARTY

They all soon retired to take their siesta or forenoon's nap, during the excessive heat of the day. We assembled about five o'clock in the withdrawing-room, and were presently summoned to the dining table, which was abundantly covered with all the luxuries of this country. Four young girls attended us, as naked as they came into the world. I was astonished at such an exhibition before persons of their own sex; and, although I recollected Stedman's mentioning a similar circumstance, in his expedition to Surinam, I was rather startled at this unusual custom. Their little figures appeared beautifully formed, as they moved round the table, with my eyes fixed upon them; until the young widow, observing my abstraction and consequent silence, burst into a loud laugh, and made me blush exceedingly. I was determined to be revenged on her, and an opportunity soon offered itself. The four black girls, having placed a most delicious dessert on the table, left the room, when the widow, taking a

p. 157 THE YOUNG WIDOW AND HER SQUIRREL

squirrel out of a cage that hung in the room, brought it to the table, where she began kissing it and patting it in her lap, and then, placing the pretty little creature on the table, she left it to make its own choice among the fruit. After some graceful antics among the dishes on the table, it at last approached a high centre one, standing on a foot, which was filled with delicious sowarrow nuts, ready cracked; and, jumping on its edge to help itself, its weight overturned the dish and nuts on the table, with a noise almost equal to the upsetting of a cart-load of stones. The poor little squirrel was frightened out of its wits with the horrid racket they made tumbling on the table: with one spring it was on the floor, and with another it had hid itself beneath the drapery of its mistress. Clapping her hands down, she exclaimed, "Oh ! the beast!" Immediately throwing myself on one knee, holding my hand down to her feet, and looking at her in an arch manner, I said, "Shall I pull him down?" At this question.

p. 158 HAPPY HOUSEHOLD

our companions at the head and foot of the table burst into an immoderate fit of laughter, and I expected that the old colonel would have dropped off his chair; when the widow suddenly jumped up, and ran out of the room.

The two young ladies enjoyed the humour of the joke as much as the elders. The widow soon returned, smiling, with the squirrel in her hand, and many were the sallies that followed upon his impudence. We spent the evening in music, singing, and smoking, and retired to our hammocks about eleven o'clock.

Next morning, just at sun-rise, one of the pretty little black Venuses knocked at my door, and entering and tripping up to me with a cup of coffee on a silver tray, she smiled and offered it to me. "Well," said I, 'you all look very happy in this house.' "Yes," replied the poor girl, with an expression of joy in her countenance, "him all good. Missee good, Missee Chatrine good, Missee Sopic good, and Neger happy."

The party soon afterwards assembled, and

p.159 VISIT TO THE PLANTATION

a walk before breakfast was proposed. On turning round the back of the house, I perceived one of my friends, a red baboon or monkey, tied round the waist to a stump, on the top of which he was sitting. I found that this property was a coffee-plantation. The shrubs bearing- that berry were planted at regular distances, in large fields, on each side of us.

I picked some of the fruit to examine them, and found in each two grains, with their flat sides together, surrounded by a green husk.

The bushes were dark, covered with leaves, the under parts of which were much lighter than the upper.

The coffee-tree, or rather shrub, is not permitted to grow beyond the reach of man, to facilitate the gathering of it. Its leaves are of an elegant shape, the outside being polished like laurel. The berries grow on the stem, where the leaves sprout from it; each contains two kernels, which are first green and afterwards change to a beautiful red. A good tree is said to yield four pounds weight

p. 160 VISIT TO THE PLANTATION.

at each crop; and, like all other vegetable productions in this luxuriant climate, it bears two crops in the year - at Midsummer and Christmas.

On a large square, or rather oblong, piece of ground, surrounded with a broad trench, stood first the planter's house, with a straight avenue of orange-trees running from it to a bridge, which communicated with the fields, or plantation. On each side of this road were situated, close to it, the overseer's and book keeper's houses, with storehouses standing opposite to one another. Beyond these were the kitchen on one side, the storehouse on the other; then came the poultry-house and hog sty; next, the pigeon-house and granary. Behind these two rows of building on one side were the poultry-yard and the hog-yard.

We then came into a square patch of ground planted with orange and plantain trees. On one side of it were two rows of Negro huts, with gardens behind them; on the other side, the bruising-lodge, for separating

p. 161 CULTIVATION OF COFFEE.

the coffee-berries from their husks, and behind this the drying-lodge, having in its rear a square yard, covered with hard clay, upon which in the dry season the coffee was exposed to the sun. The stables, the hospital for sick Negroes, the sheep and bullock fold, were farther off, being close upon the rear face of the canal. The plan was regular and convenient; and the bridge, being made to draw up, might have contributed to the defence of this house and property. Some of these buildings are very expensive, such as the coffee-lodge, which latter had, as I was informed, cost nearly £5,000. On crossing the bridge to the coffee-fields, I found them as regularly laid out as lines and measurement could make them; each piece containing about two thousand bushes, growing at the distance of eight or ten feet from each other, which allows them room to spread out, although they are kept short, and also space for a man to walk round, to pick the berries, which are then taken to the bruising-lodge,

p. 162 PREPARATION OF THE BERRIES.

where the kernels are separated from the husk. They are next steeped in water to cleanse them, and then spread on the drying floor, which is exposed to the sun; or, in the wet season, put on large wooden trays, which, in case of rain, are immediately hauled under cover of the drying-house, and during this time they are turned every day with wooden shovels.

When dried, the berries are put into wooden mortars, and beaten with heavy wooden pestles, to divest them of a thin skin which unites the two kernels. At this work the Negroes beat in wonderful time, and always singing in chorus. The berries are next cleared from the chaff; and the whole, being picked from the broken ones, which

latter are used in the country, are packed in casks for exportation. Coffee is so well known in Europe that it is unnecessary to enter upon its qualities or effects upon the human frame. Bacon has asserted that coffee comforts the head and heart.

p. 163 PRAISE OF COFFEE

Willis declares that, if daily drunk, it wonderfully clears and enlivens the soul. Voltaire lived upon it; the studious and sedentary of every nation now resort to it to refresh the spirits, oppressed by study and contemplation; and I only hope that we shall never feel the want of it. We found the roads through this property bordered by rows of luxuriant fruit-trees: but, the sun beginning to dart down his penetrating rays, we returned to the house, where an excellent breakfast of pepper-pot, fish, fowl, and meats, awaited us ; the same four young Negro girls attending upon us in the same state of nudity as on the preceding day.

The planter now begged the governor to spend three or four days at Fredestein, which he declined doing at present, alleging that he was anxious to see Mr. Edmonstone, adding that upon any other occasion he should be happy to accept his invitation. "Then," said he, "on your return down the river, will you

p. 164 DEPARTURE FROM FREDESTSTEIN

do me that honour?" All the ladies now attacked him: and I was happy to hear him promise to remain with them for two days.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, the boat having been ordered to be in readiness, we took leave of this family, with whom we had only become acquainted on the preceding day, like old friends, with shaking of hands and kind wishes for each other's health expressed on both sides.

Our eight black men, giving way manfully to the oar, we soon lost sight of Fredestein and its fair inhabitants, who kept waving their handkerchiefs from the window in reply to mine. We found the tide running down; but, with the rise and weight of our boatmen's bodies, we made way against it.

I remarked to the colonel the indelicacy of having naked girls to wait upon us. His reply was to this effect. "When the Dutch were in possession of these colonies, it was their common custom; and this estate is perhaps

p. 165 ARRIVAL AT PLANTATION GEORGIA

the only one in which it is still kept up. The old planter is a Creole, and consequently wedded to ancient customs. The practice in question was adopted by the Dutch to prevent the girls having too early intercourse with the other sex, which spoils their shape, cramps their growth, and diminishes their strength. As they become old enough for marriage, they are each transferred to some Negro on the estate, who feels himself honoured by the alliance with a damsel brought up in the "big house:" but if the purity of such a girl is touched whilst attending her mistresses, which frequently happens, she immediately hides herself, and, after receiving a severe punishment, is sent into the fields to work, by way of degradation, and another is taken into the household in her place.

Thus the effect of this custom is, after all, not bad in such a climate. It was nearly seven o'clock before we landed on plantation Georgia, where we found an overseer ready to receive us, the

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owner of the plantation being in Europe; and he informed us that early this morning he had been prepared for our reception by the Negro whom we had sent up from Fredestein. After dinner we retired early to rest.