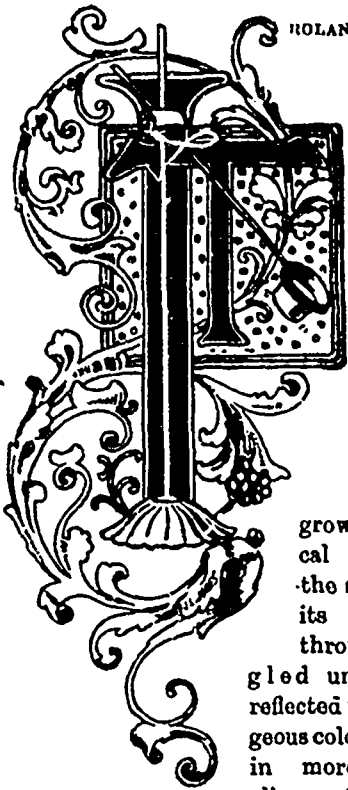


MY ABSENT HOST.

AN EXPERIENCE IN JAMAICA.

BY
ROLAND WOOLSEY.

IT IS HARD to realize here in Jamaica, resting in the shade of a gigantic cotton-wood tree and surrounded by the luxuriant

growth of a tropical forest, with the sun pouring its fierce rays through the tangled under-growth, reflected in many gorgeous colors unknown in more northern climes, that this is

Christmas Day as we know it at home.

The hill on which I am sitting, a thousand feet or so high, commands a magnificent view of Kingston harbor in which lie safely at anchor the war-ships of various nations, and merchant craft from all over the world, seeking cargoes of coffee, cocoa, pimento, bananas, oranges, and logwood. Beyond the red rock of Port Royal, the Caribbean Sea with its numerous reefs and cays, high rocks standing out like grim sentinels of the narrow passages to that ghastly hell on earth, the home and stronghold of the fierce pirates and bloody buccaners of long ago, through which not a few gallant ships laden with pieces-of-eight and priceless spoils from the Spanish Main threaded the tortuous way in the wake of their merciless captors, whose deeds have been the subject of many a thrilling story but of whom the worst was never told. Port Royal, once the "finest town in the West Indies and the richest spot on earth," now exists merely as a naval station with a fort and sailor's hospital, surrounded by a few miserable hovels, but still the abode of vice. The great earthquake of 1692 destroyed and almost submerged the town, of which the ruins are still visible under the green water. There is a story told in the Guide Book of a man "who was swallowed up by the earthquake and by the providence of God was, by another shock, thrown into the sea and miraculously saved by swimming until a boat took him up. He lived many years after in great reputation, beloved by all who knew him and much lamented at his death." I visited his grave at Green Bay, so there can be no question as to the authenticity of the story.

The hospitality of the Jamaican planter is proverbial and during my visit to the island I received many marks of kindness at their hands: but one case in par-

ticular is, perhaps, worth narrating, being rather interesting on account of its novelty.

I had left Kingston early one morning without very definite ideas as to my destination or direction, allowing my pony, a small wiry beast peculiar to the country, sure-footed as an ass and eminently adapted to climb the steep hills and endure the intense heat, to choose the way. That way led through "Mona," one of the few large sugar estates still in operation. Owing to the difficulty in obtaining the continuous labor necessary for the cultivation of cane coolies are imported by the government from the East Indies and hired out to planters. They are of much lighter build than the Jamaica negro and cannot match him for work when he feels like it, but that is not often.

After fording the Hope River, a zig-zag bridle-path makes an abrupt ascent of the foot-hills of the famous Blue Mountains. A heavy shower of rain, I supposed one of those sudden squalls common in these latitudes, induced me to seek shelter under a mango tree, but the downpour continued and I was soon wet to the skin, so I determined to push upwards, knowing there was no house for miles behind me and trusting there might be one further ahead.

I am at a loss to describe the changing beauties of scenery developed by each bend in the path, the lovely colors of the foliage dripping with crystal, the stately palms, the waving bamboos, yam plots, reminding one of Kent hop gardens, the mountain side covered with verdure and gay with the brightest tints, here and there little waterfalls flowing from the heart of the mountain through delightful grottoes, laughingly losing itself among the maidenhair and hartstongue to reappear on the face of the bare rock, passing again out of sight with a pleasant gurgling sound on its way to the winding river below, sparkling in the sunshine, gleefully rushing in cascades over its stoney bed to the ocean; above, the purple peaks coyly hiding their heads in the clouds, inviting the traveler to penetrate their ether veil.

Upward and still upward I climbed for an hour or more before seeing any sign of human habitation, when a sudden turn brought me to a negro hut. My knock was answered by a black girl, bare-footed, her petticoats hitched up in the peculiar style of the women here and a colored handkerchief wrapped around her head. From her I learned that "Massa Duncan," a white planter, lived about a mile further on. Following her directions, in due time I reached a roomy-looking cottage, with roses, honeysuckle, and jasmine, surrounded by ruins of stone outhouses, an old mill, a rumstill, a dilapidated-looking well and other relics of a once prosperous sugar estate. But the place seemed deserted.

"Massa Duncan not at home, sar," was the news that presently greeted my appearance. This was a dilemma I was not prepared for, but I was wet and I was hungry, so bidding the darkie lead my horse under cover, I took the liberty

of inviting myself into "Massa" Duncan's abode. It was late in the afternoon; the place was miles away from everywhere. I was in for it now. There was a dash of adventure about the whole business, so I determined to see it through.

"Massa" Duncan was apparently a bachelor; anyway there were no signs of anything feminine about, but many evidences to the contrary, so I plucked up courage, decided to do the best I knew how, under the circumstances, and proceeded to make myself at home, comforting myself with the reflection that if "Massa" Duncan did turn up he could only kick me out. A tour of investigation discovered some dry clothes which I appropriated, not, indeed, without many misgivings when I found that the collar of the shirt was several sizes too large for me, the trousers somewhat long in the leg, and the sleeves of the jacket needed turning up to prevent them falling over my knuckles. "Massa" Duncan was a bigger man than I, that was certain, and I trembled in my borrowed slippers. Still, with a creepy feeling, of course only the result of my recent soaking, I tempted fate. It was neck or nothing now and I concluded I might as well die full as fasting. In the larder were eggs, butter, ham, tea, and other provisions, but the staff of life was wanting.

"Dars a shop roun' de corner, sar," volunteered my dusky friend, so I despatched him with a shilling and he mounted a mule and rode away while I drew a chair out on the piazza, picked up the *Strand Magazine*, lighted my pipe and watched the sunset. Anything more beautiful it would be hard to conceive; perched in a little hollow among the hills, looking down many hundreds of feet over the gorgeous dripping landscape, the rich reds and deep greens relieved by the lighter shade of the cane fields; this was surely one of the most lovely spots on earth.

I contained my soul in patience for upwards of two hours; it must have been a very long way around the corner, but by and by the nigger turned up again with some hot loaves, steaming from the oven, and in a few more minutes I was feasting on tea, goat's milk and fried eggs, at "Massa" Duncan's expense. I think I never enjoyed a meal so much in my life. The rest of the evening I smoked and meditated with "Marcus Aurelius," smiled over "Pickwick" and read "Far from the Maddening Crowd," a book I thought eminently in keeping with its surroundings.

Mr. Montgomery Brandon confided to me that he was left in charge during his master's absence, presumably he took me for a friend of the family, a delusion which I was at no pains to dispel.

"Massa's bed's ready for ye, sar," he informed me when I had satisfied the cravings of hunger, and I turned in later and slept the sleep of the just.

The sun was shining brightly when I awoke the next morning; my own wet clothes were hanging out to dry, so I resumed my host's garments, made a hearty breakfast of butter, toast, ham

and Blue Mountain coffee and leaving a card of thanks for "Massa" Duncan, my absent host, I resumed my journey in search of further adventures among the hills of this tropical paradise.

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