

COLLECTING ORCHIDS IN VENEZUELA

BY THE AUTHOR

After a not unpleasant trip of 15 hours from Los Angeles Airport, cramped in the usual Pan-Am bus style, but broken by a stop off at Guatamala city, my friend 'Wiggs' Williams and I were pleased to alight at Caracas Airport. We were delighted to find that 'Stalky' and Nora Dunsterville were at the Airport to meet us in the middle of the night. 'Stalky', who is known by this nickname, as his father was the original 'Stalky' of *Stalky & Co.* (Rudyard Kipling), has recently retired as managing director of Esso, the largest oil company in the world. He is also the government-appointed geographical surveyor and is known for his many explorations in Guyana. The lovely national stamps of Venezuela were designed by him.

It was swelteringly hot. The drive through the wonderful modern city of Caracas was exciting but the sight of the entrance to his most beautiful home, some 10 miles out of town up in the hills, was a great relief, for we were very tired.

The next morning through the variable-pitch formica window blinds I could not only feel the softness of the breeze but could see the morning mist over the hills beyond the dewy grass lawn surrounded by Bougainvilleas of many colours. I watched a small humming bird taking its breakfast from the Bougainvillea nearest to my window—a lovely sight.

We left Caracas at lunch time and had an interesting 300-kilometre drive to a little port on the South Atlantic called Puerto La Cruz, where we stayed overnight. On the way there we saw a number of Orchids, and an enormous quantity of Bromeliads. This road lies between the coastal road and the forest of Guatapo. From either side of the road there is dense tropical growth of great beauty. Banana plantations predominate in the areas near the small towns. Lianas and *Vanilla pompona* entwine the huge trees. In the area are many Orchid species *Sobralia* (*violacea*?) *Schomburgkia humboldtii*—of which we saw one in flower subsequently on a huge mango—*Scaphyglottis*—a very persistent weed!— and Gongoras galore. Maxillarias, a *Rodriguezia*, *Lycaste* (*macrophylla*?) *Cochleanthes* and Epidendrums are also to be found here and of course the ubiquitous *Epid. nocturnum*. Also *Catasetums* *Vanilla* (*penicilata*) and *Oncidium sphacelatum*.

The drive to the Orinoco through the savanna scrub to El Tigre and thence through the Llanos to the capital of Ciudad Bolivar proved uneventful. The best coffee I have ever tasted in my life was here at El Tigre, the Esso centre; at last I could see just a faint justification for that (to me) irksome slogan, 'Tiger in your Tank!' There were unattended booths on the roadside in the savanna with *Cattleya violacea* for sale. If one stopped, a seller would turn up from nowhere—in one minute flat! We crossed the great Orinoco into Ciudad Bolivar, where we stayed in the only air-conditioned hotel.

Cuidad Bolivar! The Orinoco! Magic words! Many times have I heard and read about this capital, the headquarters and rest centre for my grandfather's travellers after months of tracking or mule packing. The river, still very broad here, with its many tributaries and rapids, was known almost yard by yard to Grandfather's men (see *Sander, The Orchid King* by A. Swinson, Hodder and Stoughton, 1969). From our breakfast table next morning we could see porpoises sporting in the river, and yet that must have been well over a thousand miles from the estuary.

Soon after breakfast we were driven by friends of Stalky to the airport, where he had laid on a private plane—A Cessna four-seater (we were five up with the pilot. The Canaima landing strip is only a few hundred yards from the rest camp. The site is glorious and bathing is possible in a lagoon below the Falls.

Around Canaima and on the banks of the Carrao we found *Bifrenaria minuta* and *aurantiaca*, *Brassavola martiana*, *Batemannia colleyii*, *Aganisia* sp. (first described in the Botanical Register in 1839), probably *pulchella*, *Aspasia variegata*, *Otostylis lepida* and other species.

Orchid Island (Rio Carrao). Just up river from Canaima about an hour's journey in the 8-metre dug-out the river splits into two to form Orchid Island. Not many decades ago this was filled with Orchids. Now, the trees are pretty well bare of plants. As we left the sandy beach for this mini-jungle and literally only two or three yards in from the shore, we actually found an Orchid! It proved to be an *Aganisia*, probably *A. pulchella*. We walked the length of the island before returning to the boat and continuing our journey upstream.

Tepuis are sandstone table mountains which come almost vertically out of the Guayana. The main forests around them are rich in Orchids. The first sight of this magnificent mountain rock I shall

never forget. Some 7,000 feet high, this particular Tepui has on its northern face the magnificent Angel Falls. These in wet weather fall a sheer 3,800 feet to end up in broken spray so fine as to appear to be mist in the cavernous forested bottom pool. The first man to land there was Angel who landed in his plane on a bog and was unable to take off. He managed somehow to descend safely on foot to the plateau below. Only two expeditions have succeeded in climbing this Table Mountain and the first one was led by Stalky. It turned out that the terrain, although intensely interesting, was not rich in Orchids.

The Ahonda Valley. Biting into the Auyantepui a little down river from the Angel Falls is a short valley and river known as The Ahonda and never previously explored. This was our main objective. Imagine our disappointment when we found that there was not sufficient water in the river to take the canoe up. It did not matter much, for walking either on the river bed or the huge granite rocks or just inside the forest proved most exciting and interesting and fairly fruitful in plants. It is strange how light and bright it is one foot down from the banks flanking the jungle and how different the whole feeling and climate is just *inside* the jungle where once more than ten feet from the river and the reflected light through the interstices of the branches, one can very easily get lost. We all had machetes to assist in making the path for our return journey easier. We found a number of epiphytes including Epidendrums, Aganisiyas, a Catasetum and what were probably Oncidiums on a huge boulder in the middle of the river, a boulder which had originated many decades ago from the top of the Tepui which now loomed almost vertically above us.

Drosera anglica. Perhaps the highlight of this exploratory trip up the Ahonda Valley was to me the discovery of a sundew and not the many Orchids. I found a large clump of it clinging to the edge of a bank thriving I should say in full sun some 10 to 12 hours per day and of a brilliant reddish colouring. I managed to bring back home in my sponge bag a large clump of it which survived for some time, but did not like my greenhouses. I thought it strange to find *Drosera anglica* in a tropical country, but apparently it is distributed in many parts of the world, although, of course, not previously recorded in the Guayana.

Downstream. The eve of our return to the camp at Canaima we came downstream in the twilight dark and camped on the left bank

of a beautiful sandy beach. Part of the beach was covered with large pebbles and in my life I have never heard such an enormous noise as was made by the miniature frogs which, however, I could never see, for they were beneath the pebbles. Even my torch failed to reveal them. The only noise I have ever heard so intensely loud was that of the cicadas south of El Tigre the sound of which one could hear clearly in the car above the whirl of the engine. Our supper that night was cooked on a stove on stilts. The wooden stilts and base of the fire being covered with flat stones. We had a terrific thunderstorm but this fire under the waterproof shelter was not put out. Our light attracted a visitor who did not, however, stay to supper. He was bound for the diamond panning area of the Carrao River some 60 kilometres upstream.

Eventually we reached the airstrip, and were flown back to Ciudad Bolivar where we had a wonderful reception. Then we had a fast drive across the plain to El Tigre, where we stayed the night, and reorganised our packing for the next day's fast journey to the coast to Maturin and thence by air to Trinidad. The half-hour's flight to Port of Spain is a beautiful one and one has the island and the mainland in view at the same time. The airport at Port of Spain was quite the loveliest small and tidiest airport I have seen. It was strange to be driving on the left again. One felt very much at home after the wilds of Venezuela.

Our host, George Black, one of the keenest amateur Orchid growers I know, has his home sited many hundred feet above the port. From his garden one can look across the Bay and in the distance see the mainland and mountains of Venezuela. An unforgettable scene in daylight and even more beautiful as the sun sets. A few hours later we were to enjoy the beauty of the lights of this very English town spread out below us and listen to the sound of calypso bands and voices which came clearly up to George's hide-out.

I was struck by the lack of advertisements and also by the strange sound—to me, new—of the steel limbo bands. The air was fresh and yet sweetly warm. Right in front of me as I looked out I could see the Southern Cross.

This delightful garden includes many hundreds of species and hybrids of orchids which we were to see in the morning in their full glory. Many of the hybrids were new crosses made by George Black himself and include such strange crosses as a *Cymbidium* with a

Grammatophyllum which has already flowered, and an *Ansellia* from Africa with a *Cymbidium* from Queensland, another miraculous cross he has actually flowered.

The town, which we went through on our way out to the southern part of the island to search for Orchids, is extremely lovely. The first trip to the south brought us to the magnificent forests of Rio Caro. The first 15 miles were fairly well cultivated but beyond that the forest opened up in its natural state and yet the road we used, although narrow, was excellently metalled. The sugar plantations and small plots of vegetables had given way within 20 miles to the full forest. The houses along the roads were now considerably dispersed and attractive to look at, if small. They showed a certain prosperity and the children about exuded happiness and goodwill. Some 40 miles out the dwellings were mainly small shacks, and even here we came across the large oil pipe lines: one of the oldest oilfields in the southern hemisphere. It was strange to see the booster pumps right in the thick of the forest, like so many weird monsters, many of them dating back 40 years and still methodically pushing the oil down to the port and waiting tankers. It was strange to think that the trees here which were huge and generally in perfect condition should be in such contrast to the poor trees of the much burnt out forests of Venezuela which we had so recently been through. Many of these trees carried Orchids and I will list a few.

The most notable species we found in Trinidad was a patch of the now very rare *Paphinia cristata*. I had the pleasure of finding these few plants still growing on a felled tree in one of the last remaining patches of a few acres of the original forest in the central plain. This has by now been totally destroyed to provide small holdings of from 2 to 4 acres for the unemployed natives to farm. As the subsoil is heavy clay, there is virtually no means of ever making the soil fertile—unless it be for pig and poultry runs. It is to my friend, George Black, that the Island Administration owes the breeding of a tropical pig, a short life's work which together with Orchid growing were George's two hobbies. Other Orchids found were *Oncidium papilio*, *Xylobium*, *Cyrtopodium parviflorum*, *Dichaea*, *Coryanthes*, *Aspasia*, *Vanilla inodora*, *Stanhopea eburnea*, *Epidendrum nocturnum*, *E. atropurpureum*, and *ferrugineum*, *Notylia*, *Pleurothallis* and *Lockhartia*.

One of the most inconvenient and painful obstructions in this forest was the 'Prickma' Palm. Our friend, Wiggs, most unfortun-

ately slipped down a gully and slithered along a 'Prickma' Palm which proved most painful. It took days before poor Wiggs got rid of his last spine and he must have had 30 or 40 of them in his body. One of the best sights I have seen was Gees, one of Mr. Black's native employees, scrambling up the trees for Orchids. Back at home later that evening we were given the most glorious dinner á l'Anglais and we appreciated the reason why George married his wife! The girls who served us were first-class and loyal members of the household—and they certainly knew how to cook.

The next day we went to the northern end of the island and climbed the tallest mountain in the island, Mt. Arupa. Here in these forests we found innumerable Orchids, including the lovely *Oncidium papilio* growing on fiddle trees. Here the Orchids are not limited to the trees but there are a number growing in the savannas below, in particular *Otostylis lepida*, a lily-like Orchid which was, unfortunately, not in flower. This plant is subject to a lot of swamping and very difficult to grow under cultivation as I have found out.

Back again in George's lovely home, evening drinks, a shower and change for dinner, where we met a considerable number of George's friends, nearly all of them interested in plants and in some cases Orchids—a real gardening crowd! And what can compare?

And now the sad last journey to the airport and a plane back to Heathrow. I wondered as we drove along in a heat of about 90° what the temperature would be like in London on the day of my arrival, May 1st. It turned out to be the hottest day of the year in London!



Epipendrum cochleare