

Jamaican sojourn

Final of a two-part series

by F. J. du Quesnay

After his long weeks at sea, Philip Henry Gosse finally had his first glimpse of Jamaica—Port Morant at night, with tiny lights sparkling like fireflies along the distant coastline. Just a shadowy, indistinct glimpse, yet it was able to fill his romantic mind with expectations of things to come, for he had high hopes of the beauties he would discover on the island.

His excitement was such that he tells us he could not sleep, and was on deck many times during the night, as if to pierce the veil of darkness and study the island of his dreams. At daybreak he was not to be disappointed, for the sight of Blue Mountain Peak towering majestically over the other mountains of the range filled him with delight and awe. Far away, too, he could see the city of Kingston while they were becalmed off Port Royal. Gradually a slight breeze sprung up which carried them into port.

Leaving the vessel there, he at last set foot on the enchanted isle, and while the others went on to Kingston, he spent hours roaming over the Palisades, studying the interesting flora and fauna. He mentions that it was barren enough, but describes the coconut palms, their fronds hanging over the water, and giant clumps of cacti. There were few shells on the beach but he found many types of sponges and coral.

Next day, December 7, 1844, they sailed on along the south coast, avoiding Kingston. At Alligator Pond they stopped for some days, and here Gosse took the opportunity to gather specimens in the surrounding countryside, enchanted by the wild orchids and butterflies he found.

Meanwhile, a planter at New Forest, hearing of Gosse's interests invited him to his house, sending a horse for him. The house, a splendid one in Colonial style was some distance away up the valley. Here he stayed a few days gathering orchid blossoms, assisted by a Negro groom whom his host had recommended. The groom, surprised by the naturalist's apparent mad behaviour, later confided to his master that "the strange 'Buckra' had taken trouble to get parcels of bush."

Gosse rejoined the vessel which

continued to sail from port to port towards the southwest of Jamaica. As the sailing was done mostly at night, he had other opportunities to gather specimens along the way before they reached Savanna-la-Mar the port of his final destination, on December 19. His acquaintance with missionaries on board the vessel was responsible for his decision to stay at Bluefields with Mr and Mrs. Coleman, themselves missionaries, as a paying guest. According to him, it was a happy accident, for he found the area a rich field for zoological investigation.

After spending a few days in the half-dead town of Savanna-la-Mar, the ship's captain lent Gosse the cutter, and he proceeded to his new home. He was met on the beach by many happy good-natured people, including several Negroes, who in their delight to have a visitor, competed for the honour of helping with his boxes to the house.

It was a solitary dwelling in a ruinous plantation, once an elegant greathouse, but since the abolition of slavery fallen into partial decay. This house was commented upon favourably by Scott in "Tom Cringle's Log" some years previously, but much had happened in Jamaica since those days, and by 1844 many sugar estates were desolate, the planters having ceased to live there, or had cut down expenses on maintenance drastically.

Still, he found the house large and pleasant, with a charming stream running near. His hosts gave over an entire suite of rooms to his use, one of which he used as a sort of laboratory to prepare his specimens before sending them home. Early in 1845, he engaged the services of an 18-year-old Negro lad, Samuel Campbell, to help him collect specimens. This young man had a real aptitude for this task, and became so proficient that finally he used to go on independent expeditions, adding not a few unique specimens to the collection.

During his moments of leisure, Gosse was fond of taking daily baths in the river at noon. Here he would lie under a small cascade for half an hour, screened by a cover of graceful bamboos. He attributed much of his good health here to this stream with its beneficial pure crystal water.

He soon began to send several

shipments from his collection to England, all of which eventually arrived safely. Never tiring of the wild beauty he found everywhere, his book — "A NATURALIST'S SOJOURN" — is full of charming descriptions of the breathtaking island scenery.

Seeking someone to share his enthusiasm for natural history, Gosse's enquires were eventually rewarded in the person of Richard Hill of Spanish Town. Gosse wrote to Hill in the autumn of 1845, receiving a most favourable reply. From then on this acquaintance ripened into a deep and lasting friendship. During this same autumn, Gosse had the opportunity to visit the north coast of the island. A friend offered him a seat in his gig, and he spent a short time in Montego Bay, but was disappointed, as he found that part of Jamaica singularly barren in its selection of specimens.

His health broke down somewhat in the early part of the following year, when he was troubled by fever and headaches. Deciding that he needed a change, he went to Savanna-la-Mar and took a vessel to Kingston. Arriving in the city at night, he went immediately to a hotel, but although he was tired, he found it impossible to sleep, as the heat troubled him after the cool of the country, and a group of billiard players kept up their noisy enjoyment long after he had retired.

Next day he rose early, and went for a walk around the dirty, unattractive capital. Here he sent a letter to Richard Hill telling of his arrival. Hill came to visit him, showing him around the city and taking him to the rooms of the Jamaica Society Museum, where he examined a collection of birds and plants.

They took the afternoon train to Spanish Town, where he was the guest of his friend. Here Hill entertained him by showing his own collection, later escorting him on a tour of the adjacent countryside. In all, he was away from Bluefields for about three weeks when, he tells us, he returned having fully recovered his health.

In June, 1846, he decided to bring his stay in Jamaica to a close — nonetheless, he found it difficult to leave having completely fallen under the spell of the island. Reluctantly, he bade a sad farewell to his dear friends in Bluefields, intending to take the packet sailing from Kingston. When he arrived in the city however, he found that he was late, for the boat had already sailed. Almost overjoyed he remained for a further two weeks, dividing his time between Kingston and Spanish Town, when he finally embarked on a vessel destined for England.

He was a man who loved Jamaica, who felt himself more than amply repaid for his useful labours, by its great beauty of scenery, its interesting flora and fauna, and the hospitality and friendship he encountered everywhere.