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GUATEMALAN INTERLUDE

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ALL COLLECTING, no doubt, yields a certain amount of adventure as a by-product; certainly plant collecting does. The search for new or rare species is bound to lead the collector beyond familiar environments to the extent that the unexpected becomes the expected. Little does the casual observer guess the circumstances behind a published flora's brief references to habitat. This is particularly the case with orchids for no family of plants rivals it for whimsy in either floral structure or its choice of habitat. After collecting in Guatemala over a period of some fifteen years I concluded that the one sure observation with respect to orchid habitats is: orchids are where you find them.

My introduction to the orchid family was itself an accident. Shortly after my arrival in the one-time village of Virginia I discovered the most pleasureable diversion the spot offered was the exploration of the surrounding "bush" with a superannuated polo pony. Riding along a trail one afternoon my eye caught a glint of white against the smooth bark of an old *amatle*. Turning back to examine it, I was surprised to find that what I had thought was a moth was actually a small plant with white inflorescence, all less

than three inches tall. There was something exquisitely gemlike and luminous about it, as if the whole plant were a confection of green and white jade. With utmost care I peeled it from the tree with the point of my machete and carried it back home in my hat.

It so happened that Lewis Knudsen of Cornell was in Virginia at the time and recognised it as an orchid, of an unimpressive botanical type. He suggested I send it to Oakes Ames at Harvard for identification. With many regrets and a sense of personal sacrifice I wrapped my treasure in cotton and sent it by air mail to Cambridge. The reply from Mr. Ames said the plant was *Ornithocephalus Pottsiae*, a specimen he had not had for some twenty years, and he suggested I keep my eyes open for further items. (Incidentally, that was the only orchid I ever found growing on a wild fig.)

My second contribution was a real "find". Clambering among the branches of an old mango tree near the Manager's House in Virginia a short time later, I noticed a branch sheathed with small, flat, leathery leaves with here and there a yellow starlike flower about 5 mm. across. By that time I had learned enough from the literature Mr. Ames had sent me, to be able to know an orchid when I saw it and this was an orchid in the smallest edition I had ever seen.

Upon receipt of this second offering Mr. Ames was jubilant in a nice New England way. I had supplied the missing link for a specimen minus flower which he had received from Honduras some years before. He kindly named the *Pleurothallis* for me and from that day forward the ranks of orchid collectors numbered an enthusiastic recruit.

It was my good fortune to be living on the coast when new lands were being opened up for banana plantations in the Los Andes district and the Oneida-Chickasaw rail connection was being built. Jungles were being cleared and it was an exceptional opportunity to be able to look over the prostrate giants of the forest and find epiphytes from the topmost strata of the jungle known previously only to discriminating monkeys. The abundance of material of botanical interest obliged me to keep notes and make sketches,



Pleurothallis Lewisae.—"From that day forward the ranks of orchid collectors numbered an enthusiastic recruit".
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not so much for any contribution I might make to a science whose language I did not know, as for filling the gaps in my own education. In time I began to make some headway in learning the intricacies of orchid taxonomy and later, with the aid of a magnifying attachment for a Leica, I was able to take photographs that were more reliable than my notes. Whenever I could find an obliging traveler en route to Boston I would send back notes, dried plants and flowers in alcohol, then eagerly await a report on my numbers.

For the three years that I lived on the north coast of Guatemala I never failed to scan the passing scene for orchids. They seemed ubiquitous. The Montúfar Flats, a forest-fringed savannah, about forty miles inland, yielded a great number of species, the most showy of which were *Schomburgkia tibicinis* (whose collection meant painful encounter with its black ant tenantry) and *Epidendrum atropurpureum*. In our own patio the crotons were hosts to a number of small *Pleurothallis*, *Lepanthes*, *Stelis* and *Leochilus* and a minute *Oncidium* whose blossom seemed as large as the plant. One curious species found in old *Bougainvillea* vines was *Campylocentrum Sullivani* which had no leaves but chlorophyll-bearing roots.

In the fall of 1931 my husband's work required our leaving the coast and living in Guatemala City. I was dejected in the thought that at an altitude of 5000 feet opportunities for orchid collecting would be limited. I was soon to have proof of my ignorance after the first circuit around the golf course in Pamplona where we had our home. Every *ciprés* in the vicinity seemed to harbor some species. At that time of the year *Notylia bicolor* made conspicuous patches of mauve on the bare tree trunks and higher up there were long sprays of *Oncidium leuchochilum* (one 17 feet long!) to tempt the collector. During my twelve years residence there my golf game never improved; my eyes had other occupation than being fixed on a small white ball.

One fact that became obvious to me after traversing that area, day after day, month after month and year after year: an orchid collector in the highlands of Guatemala could work over an area for years without exhausting the possibilities for finding all the available species there. And

indifference to all but the showiest species of orchid was as universal among foreigners as among the lifelong residents.

As an example of this, every spring toward the end of the dry season the Pamplona golf course would be dotted with myriads of small white flowers that apparently sprang up over night and disappeared in a few days. The flowers looked like stylized fleur-de-lis and occasionally a golfer would remark about them or clip the tops with a swing of an iron but never once guessed the plant was an orchid: an aphyllous *Spiranthes*, *S. trilineata*.

Excursions into the surrounding hills in search of plants became a favorite pastime for the entire family and the four-year-old that couldn't distinguish between an orchid or a bromeliad at fifty paces and twenty miles an hour was left at home. One region that proved an orchid bonanza was one called Las Nubes about twenty miles from the City at an altitude of 8,500 feet. This yielded a quantity of both epiphytic and terrestrial orchids until clearing and grading despoiled it.

In contrast to the rather sparse occurrence on the coast, there were places in the highlands where one could see massed displays of orchids that rivaled those of horticultural shows. My first experience of this kind was seeing a steep cliff on the road to Antigua covered by an inaccessible curtain of *Epidendrum Lindleyanum*. *Sobralia macrantha* in an abandoned railway cut near Quezaltenango was another memorable sight and *Laelia rubescens* in calabash trees transformed the plains of Metapán into a "reasonable facsimile" of a peach orchard in Michigan. In Cobán I once visited a garden where hundreds of specimen plants of *Lycaste virginalis* had been collected for retailing. They made a splendid spectacle but a sad one in view of the fact most of them were doomed to eventual neglect and death.

Certain days of collecting have left an indelible stamp on my memory. One such day was a rainy 15th of September, Guatemala's Independence Day, when we were collecting in the region called Chuikabal, on the road between Coatepeque and Quezaltenango. While looking over a ravine in that beautiful rain forest of the Pacific slope we suddenly

saw a pair of quetzales winging across the gap in the trees, a rare and unforgettable experience. It was in this region of lush, king-size vegetation that I saw a road gang caught in a sudden shower, scurry to the right-of-way to cut rain-coats from "cacaxte" (a *Xanthosoma*) and *Gunnera*. I collected acorns in this district that were as large as a child's fist and when gilded made impressive Christmas tree ornaments we still use. Orchids were numerous but in most cases the trees in which they grew were too high for collecting, and the species had to be noted and recorded by the aid of binoculars.

Another day of collecting at ascending altitudes was spent in the Department of Jalapa starting from the Aseradero of San Vicente, altitude 3,500 feet, in a magnificent pine forest. My hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Lind Pettersen, furnished me with a burro and a mozo and we explored the region up to 8,500 feet. Halfway up this ascent we came to a beautiful open forest of oaks with an undergrowth of bay that suggested the woods of northern Florida. Here were trees crowded with a *Brassia* which for want of a better name we called Rockettes because of the inflorescence which looked like two perfect chorus lines. An enormous specimen of *Acineta* was also found here and a number of terrestrials including the lovely *Crybe rosea*. Higher up the trees became more and more scattered and the collecting poorer. The ascent ended on a broad plateau in the clouds, a grim desolate landscape fringed by stunted oaks that had bent under the constant flagellation of the winds until the picture looked like a Doré illustration from Dante's *Infierno*.

To my lasting regret I was never able to return to San Vicente in the dry season when I am sure an entirely different collection might have been made. There was one plant I left behind which piqued my curiosity to a point of mental unrest that persists to this day. Coming down the trail on muleback I saw a grey-green rosette of leaves marked with distinctive whitish striations. (I had seen the plant once before near San Juan Sacatépéquez and had left it in hopes of getting it later when in flower). I could see from the remnants of an inflorescence it was an orchid. From the urgent quality of mule language the mozo was using to insure our making connections with my train, I