

## XXII

### THE WEST INDIES TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO

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*De Pradt, Archbishop of Malines [born 1759 and died 1837], in his work on colonies :*

“ Negro labor is indispensable in colonies.

“ Either you must use negroes or abandon the colonies.

“ I can no more think of San Domingo without negroes than Brie without plows.”—Vol. I., p. 259.

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Voyage of Père Labat—Extraordinary Luxury—Treatment of  
Natives

**D**OES anyone seek luxury of living on the high seas—let him not look for it on the modern steamer, but on sailing ships. Such has been my experience—which, if anybody question, let him consult the Dominican missionary (Labat) as to how he fared, in 1693, on his sixty days’ voyage from France to the West Indies. He writes of the daily fare:

“ When Mass was said, we sat down to breakfast. We had usually ham, or a ‘*pâté*’ with a ‘*ragoût*,’ or a ‘*fricassée*’; butter and cheese, and ‘*surtout de très bon vin*,’ and bread, fresh morning and evening.”

Dinner was served immediately after the observation at noon, and consisted of a “*grand potage avec le bouilli qui était toujours d’une volaille, une poitrine de bœuf d’irlande, du petit salé, et du mouton, ou du*

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*veau frais, accompagné d'une fricassée de poulets, ou autre chose."*

This was followed by "*un plat de rôti, deux ragoûts et deux salades; pour le dessert nous avons du fromage, quelques compôtes, des fruits crus, des marrons et des confitures.*"

Our epicure goes on to explain how it is that salad appears so often, by telling us that they had on board. . . . "*bonne provision de beteraves, de pourpier, de cresson, et de cornichons confits,*" and two big beds of "*chicorée sauvage en terre,*" which latter were deemed so precious that the captain ordered a sentinel to watch them day and night lest sailors or rats molested them. And when one box of salad was used up: "*Nous y semâmes des graines de laitues et de raves que nous y eumes le plaisir de voir croître et de manger avant d'arriver à la Martinique.*" "And thus it was," says he, "that we never wanted salad, a refreshing treat to which no one can be indifferent on long journeys." Amen, say I, and the echo of this Amen, I can imagine coming from every traveller who has sat down, day after day, to the steamer's meals of bad coffee, bad eggs, bad butter, bad potatoes, bad everything; and always apologized for by the stewards, on the ground that, "It's very hard to keep things fresh, etc.," a feeble bit of mendacity that deceives no one but him who is making his first voyage. Père Labat's supper was commonly, "*une grande soupe avec une poule dessus; deux plats de rôti, deux ragoûts, deux salades et le dessert.*" As the reverend gentleman has passed into history as an excellent judge of what should appear at table, it is worth add-

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ing that, in his opinion, the meals were "*parfaitement bien servie et avec beaucoup de propriété.*" As there were twelve at table, the captain appointed their seats to them, in order that they might always have their own napkins, which we learn were changed *twice a week.*

Who would not to-day be satisfied with half the luxury accorded the poor missionary of two hundred years ago!

And as to wines—they lived in a community that even Horace could not have complained of; for each, with one exception, brought a goodly supply of his own. They tossed the keys of their wine-chests overboard and made a common cellar. Our apostolic epicure tells, with gusto, how they teased the *one exception* in their convivial twelve. He was the supercargo. One fine day the balance of the mess got into his wine-chest, drank up his stock, and refilled his flagons with salt-water!

Labat wasted no charity on the English and tells this story of their alleged barbarity, based upon the testimony of "*temoins oculaires et dignes de foi*"; that they were in the habit of executing such negroes and Indians as had offended them, by passing them through the crushers of the sugar-mill, as we pass wet garments through a clothes wringer—the victims being tortured, inch by inch, as the horrible cylinders revolved. "*Je ne sais si on peut inventer un supplice plus affreux!*"

"Say what you will of iron-works, glass-works, and other such industries," remarks this missionary, "there are none worse than a sugar-mill; for the first-

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mentioned exact but twelve hours' work a day, but this last exacts eighteen, and of the six hours allowed these wretches, you must deduct the time for supper and frequently the time they have to spend in hunting crabs, for many masters give their slaves only a little *magnoc flour*."

Labat says that the slaves were called half an hour before day so as to be ready for morning prayers, which function sometimes required a considerable time, because in the "*maisons bien réglées on fait un petit Catechisme pour les nouveaux négres qu'on dispose au baptême, ou aux autres sacremens, quand ils sont baptisez.*"

Those who were to work at the sugar-works, either the furnaces, the boiling-house, or the mill, went there and remained until six o'clock at night, working continually, and not being allowed a single minute for meal time: whatever they got being gulped down in snatches while they continued their work, under the lash of the overseer.

The pious father not liking to have his slaves "*faibles et chancelans faute d'un petit secours,*" sent them at noon a dish of farina mixed with bouillon, a piece of salt meat, and some vegetables, accompanying it with "*un coup d'eau de vie,*" by which, no doubt, he got better work from his hands.

He also fed all the little children at noon, relieving the parents of this necessity, so that when the day's work was over, the mothers had but to hunt their babes amidst the soft crushed cane, "*où ils les trouvaient endormis, pour les porter coucher à leurs cases.*"

Great indignation bursts from Père Labat, when he

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tells his readers that silk culture had been abandoned in the West Indies in 1694, and abandoned simply because ants and other nuisances had fastened to the eggs and cocoons and injured them. "But," says he, "we could in the past, we can now, and it will always be easy in the future, to check this evil, and as we have found means of protecting many other things from the ravages of these pests, so shall we also protect the silkworm." And he foresees great profit from this culture, because the climate promises a continual crop, the mulberry-trees having always leaves, and the eggs, therefore, being able to hatch as soon as made. With bitterness, Labat tells how "*Le Sieur Piquet de la Celle Commis, Principal de la Compagnie de 1664,*" joined with his wife, both being from Provence, in the making of silk, and did so well that he sent some skeins to Colbert, "*Ce Ministre incomparable,*" who showed them to Louis XIV., with the result that the good colonists received from the Grand Monarch five hundred écus, equivalent to about 1,500 francs of modern money, which was primarily intended to encourage the Provençal couple in their good work and establish a valuable outlet for fresh capital and industry.

"Nothing in the world," says this Reverend Economist, "would have been better for the kingdom and our colonies, for we would then have found at home what we now get from strangers who *enrich themselves at our expense.*"

In 1699 the tobacco-loving world was paralyzed by the conclusion reached by the Medical College of France, to wit, that the use of tobacco shortened life,

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and, for the moment, those who lived by trading in this small vice, thought that they had nothing but bankruptcy before them. "For," says Labat, philosophically, "*tout le monde veut vivre, et comment espérer une longue vie après un arrest si solonnel?*"

But the general panic was allayed, according to our reverend historian, by calling the attention of the public to the singular fact, that the gentleman who sustained most conspicuously that tobacco was a deadly weed ignored in an equally striking manner the precepts he laid down for others. We are told that "*son nez n'était pas d'accord avec sa langue: car on remarqua, que pendant tout le temps que l'acte dura, il eut toujours sa tabatière à la main, et ne cessa pas un moment de prendre du tabac.*"

With this, a reaction set in, and, to believe our clerical friend, the present use of tobacco is infantile compared to what prevailed in the golden age of French letters. People used the drug then "*avec une espèce de fureur, qui ne permit plus de distinguer ni les lieux, ni les temps, ni les âges, ni les sexes, ni les tempéraments, ni les personnes.*" People indulged in snuff in walking, talking, eating—even at their prayers—and some were known to wake up in the night in order to have a pinch. People wondered they had lived so long without tobacco, and became convinced that they would die if they ceased to use it. "People went so far as to use snuff in church, in the very presence of God, whom one adores there, and the *Sacrifice redoubtable* which is offered there not being enough to inspire the proper respect and attention that believing Christians should have." Some Popes launched

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Bulls at the practice, but it ended, needless to say, in Smoke!

Labat visited Grenada in 1700 on his way from Barbados, and the contrast to him was so painful that he could not but give vent to his disgust. "The English," he says, "are far ahead of us in taking advantage of their opportunities, and if Grenada belonged to them it would long ago have altered appearance and become a rich and mighty colony. Instead of this we have done nothing to take advantage of what we have here, and in spite of the many years we have been in possession, the country is still uncultivated, ill-populated, without comforts, without trade, poor, its houses, or I should say rather huts, badly built and worse furnished—in short, almost in the condition they were in originally (1650) when M. du Parquet bought the island from the Caribs."

The wine merchant in the reign of Louis XIV. appears to have had a conscience differing but slightly from that of his descendant, for Labat, who understood what a good cellar meant, says that no West Indian should buy Bordeaux wines from merely looking at the labels—he should taste them himself. The consumption of wine, he says, was enormous in his day, and he dares not repeat what the customs officers told him under this head, lest he be "suspected of exaggeration." He drank there not only the Bordeaux and Cahors brands, but also those of Provence, Languedoc, Italy, Spain, Madeira, Canary, Portugal, the Rhine, Neckar, Moselle, Burgundy, and Champagne—a goodly assortment for that day.

As to "*Eau-de-vie, et de toutes sortes de liqueurs,*"

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both French and foreign, "*la consommation qui s'en fait passe l'imagination; tout le monde en veut boire, le prix est la dernière chose de quoi on s'informe!*"

This part of the world must have been the paradise of traders in 1694, for Labat wrote: "*Les toiles les plus fines, les plus belles mousselines, et les mieux travaillées, les perruques les plus à la mode, les chapeaux de castor, les bas de soye et de laine, les souliers, les bottines, les draps, de toute espèce, les étoffes de soye, d'or et d'argent, les galons d'or, les cannes, les tabatières et autres semblables bijoux; les dentelles les plus fines, les coiffures de femme, de quelque prix qu'elle puissent être, la vaisselle d'argent, les montres, les pierreries, en un mot, tout ce qui peut servir à l'habillement des hommes, à l'ameublement et ornement des maisons, et surtout aux parures des femmes; tout est bien vendu chèrement et promptement.*"

"For," continues our philosophic celibate, "the sex is the same all the world over; vain, wayward, ambitious. The tradespeople have no fear of losing when they sell to them for their particular purposes, for if their husbands are a little *difficile* on this point, *elles ont toutes naturellement des talens merveilleux pour les mettre à la raison, et quand cela manque, elles savent en perfection faire du sucre, de l'indigo, ou du cacao de Lune avec quoi elles contentent les marchands, qui accoutumés à ces manœuvres leur prêtent la main et leur gardent religieusement le secret.*"

This making of sugar, etc., *de Lune* was the expression in that day for making it illegally, or more plainly for stealing it, and the recording friar tells us that wives in the French islands never told their hus-



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bands by any accident the real price of what they bought, but made up the difference to the tradespeople by conniving with them to steal from the plantation produce at night. The term "moonlighting," as used in the regions where illicit whiskey is made, helps one to appreciate the origin of the term.

Père Labat said, in 1700: "The air of St. Kitts is very pure, the result of which is that good blood is produced there, the complexion of the women is admirable and their features most regular. Both sexes are full of wit and vivacity, and they all have perfect figures." An old proverb had it that St. Kitts produced nobility; Guadelupe the bourgeois; soldiers in Martinique, and peasants in Grenada.

The monkeys that now form such a feature of the islands, notably in the ruins of old Fort Charles, are said to have had their beginning in a number of tame ones that were released from private dwellings in one of the numerous early wars. Even in Labat's time they were a great plague by their clever thieving, and when he went on a shooting party after them, he and his friends had some of the feelings associated with driving out a common enemy. But, in spite of their roguery, the priest's heart was touched when he found that he had shot a mother whose monkey baby clung to her neck even after she was dead and could with difficulty be removed. This little monkey was, however, taken home and turned out a delightful little companion.

His friend, Père Cabasson, had a monkey so devoted to him that he would never leave him, and when the Père had to go to his church service he would lock up

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his monkey in his study to prevent his following. Once the monkey escaped, and having, it seems, concealed himself above the pulpit, did not show himself until the sermon commenced. Then coming out to the edge of the pulpit roof, he watched his master carefully and commenced to imitate his gestures—at which the congregation naturally laughed. Father Cabasson, who did not dream of the source of this entertainment, reproved them, at first in moderate tones; but finding that shouts of laughter grew in intensity as he progressed his displeasure took the shape of *sainte colère*, and he began a most energetic crusade against their want of respect for the word of God. His gestures grew more violent, so did the grimaces and postures of the monkey, and so did the laughter of his congregation. His attention was finally called to his monkey, and at this he could not help joining in the laugh with the rest. There was no means of getting at the animal, and he therefore, on the spot, dismissed the congregation: “*n'étant plus lui-même en état de le continuer, ni les auditeurs de l'écouter.*”

A priest so conversant with the world and the flesh as Father Labat can never fail to interest when describing social features of life. He was an admirer of the English in many respects—perhaps the best evidence we have of this is the detailed manner in which he tells his countrymen how British houses might be pillaged.

In St. Kitts he enjoyed English hospitality and carried away some impressions, such as that the good people here had handsome punch-bowls, understood the ingredients very well, and how to entertain their

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friends about it—a feature of St. Kitts which years have in no wise dimmed.

The English ladies, he observed, carved with much skill and grace, and stimulated their guests to drink by setting them a good example in this respect. This I hope is exaggeration.

Of the men he says that, “As they are all rich they love to display their generous way of living, and have their cellars well stocked with a great variety of wines from the most distant corners of the earth.”

He noticed at dinners that Englishmen treated their clergymen with scant consideration, and adds, “*Je ne sais si c'est par irréligion, ou si c'est la conduite des ministres qui leur attire ce mépris.*”

Of the adorable St. Kitts ladies he says, “*Les femmes Anglaises sont habillées à la Française, du moins leurs habillements en approchent beaucoup. Ils sont riches et magnifique et seraient d'un très bon goût, si elles n'y mettaient rien du leur; mais comme elles veulent toujours encherir sur les modes qui viennent de France, ces hors-d'œuvres gâtent toute la simetric et le bon goût qui s'y trouverait sans cela.*”

He says also that he never in his life saw more *franges d'or, d'argent, et de soye qu'il y en avait sur ces dames*—in fact he describes them as being decked in them from head to foot, although he admits that their linen is very fine—also their lace.