

THE DEVIL'S EAR TREE

By Thomas H. G. Aitken

From my window I look out onto a wide expanse of grass in the center of which stands a magnificent 100 foot tree ; the girth of its trunk at waist level is 26½ feet and the branches overshadow an area a good 150 feet in diameter. The spacious savannah, however, is dwarfed by this massive specimen of *Enterolobium cyclocarpum*, commonly known as the Devil's Ear tree. Its vernacular name is derived from the curious shape of the large, flattish, crinkly, mahogany brown fruits (4—5 inches across) which bear a resemblance to a human ear lobe. This monstrous tree of the family Mimosae represents a world of its own in the many creatures and plants which are closely associated with it.

The short massive trunk soon divides into several high arching branches (veritable trees in themselves) which end in graceful stems clothed with tiny, feathery leaves. These are lost in the dry season, at which time the fruits appear and are conspicuously outlined against the blue sky overhead.

Many animals feed and shelter in the old tree. Pygmy owls are to be heard calling from the heights. Corbeaux and hawks occasionally perch on the larger branches. Palm Tanagers, Blue Jeans, Peppershrikes, Yellow Warblers and Orioles dart here and there among the foliage. Troops of Smooth-billed Anis sometimes leave their savannah hunting grounds to perch in the tree if danger threatens. A Cayenne Swift has hung her pendant nest of woven *Tillandsia* seeds and feathers under a heavy branch. Manicous hide in the heights and Streak Lizards scurry about the trunk, dropping their eggs in cracks in the bark. The black bees have a nest high up on an exposed branch and dark wavy lines of termite galleries weave latticed patterns on the grey bark of trunk and branches. On the ground, large green *Ameiva* lizards emerge from burrows dug amongst the exposed gnarled tree roots to search for food in the thick grass.

Likewise, many plants enjoy the protective custody of the Devil's Ear. A giant vine searches for the sunlight in the highest branches. A parasitic treelet has established itself near the base where the main branches first divide. Higher up are the epiphytes. Here are to be found the wild pines : *Tillandsia utriculata* (dominant), *T. elongata* var. *subimbricata*, *T. fasciculata*, *T. juncea* and *T. flexuosa* ; also the Monkey Cup (*Catasetum macrocarpum*) and several other orchids (*Epidendrum stenopetalum*, *E. rigidum* and *E. Hartii*) ; the small aroid (*Anthurium gracile*) ; two species of fern and the string-like cactus (*Rhipsalis casutha*).

When the rains come, fresh green leaves appear. The giant takes on the majestic lines of a cathedral vault and provides welcome shade for the world below.

Note : The tree in question stands in the grounds of the Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory, on the bank of the Maraval River in Port-of-Spain. A companion tree, equally large, is growing just south of the laboratory grounds.

Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory,
Federation Park,
Port-of-Spain,



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