

merable swarms of ants during the navigation of the Cassiquiare; and the toldo, or roof of palm-leaves, beneath which we were again doomed to remain stretched out during twenty-two days, was with difficulty cleared of these insects. We employed part of the morning in repeating to the inhabitants of Esmeralda the questions we had already put to them, respecting the existence of a lake towards the east. We showed copies of the maps of Surville and La Cruz to old soldiers, who had been posted in the mission ever since its first establishment. They laughed at the supposed communication of the Orinoco with the Rio Idapa, and at the 'White Sea,' which the former river was represented to cross. What we politely call geographical fictions they termed "lies of the old world" (*mentiras de por allà*). These good people could not comprehend how men, in making the map of a country which they had never visited, could pretend to know things in minute detail, of which persons who lived on the spot were ignorant. The lake Parima, the Sierra Mey, and the springs which separate at the point where they issue from the earth, were entirely unknown at Esmeralda. We were repeatedly assured that no one had ever been to the east of the Raudal of the Guaharibos; and that beyond that point, according to the opinion of some of the natives, the Orinoco descends like a small torrent from a group of mountains, inhabited by the Coroto Indians. Father Gili, who was living on the banks of the Orinoco when the expedition of the boundaries arrived, says expressly, "that Don Apollinario Diez was sent in 1765 to attempt the discovery of the source of the Orinoco; that he found the river, east of Esmeralda, full of shoals; that he returned for want of provision; and that he learned nothing, absolutely nothing, of the existence of a lake." This statement perfectly accords with what I heard myself thirty-five years later at Esmeralda. The probability of a fact is powerfully shaken when it can be proved to be totally unknown on the very spot where it ought to be known best; and when those by whom the existence of the lake is affirmed contradict each other, not in the least essential circumstances, but in all that are the most important.