

Benedict Roezl (1823-1885)



BENEDICT ROEZL IS KNOWN AS PERHAPS THE MOST INTREPID ORCHID COLLECTOR who ever lived. Born in Prague, Bohemia, he became interested in horticulture at twelve years of age.

I started in my horticulture career in my thirteenth year—in 1836. I was apprenticed in the gardens of the Count of Thun at Tötschen, in Bohemia, from which, after three years, I went to the gardens of the Count Paulikowsy, at Medica, Galicia. At that time these gardens contained the largest collection of plants in Europe, and I was there enabled to gain most of my botanical knowledge of plants. After staying three years I went to the far-famed gardens of Baron Von Hugel; from there I went to Telsch, in Moravia, to Count Lichtenstein, and from there to Ghent, to M. Van Houtte, where I stayed five years. I was *chef de culture* in the School of Horticulture of the Belgian Government. After this I served for two years, but I could no longer restrain my ardent wish to see the tropics, and I proceeded via New Orleans to Mexico—this was in 1854. In Mexico I started a nursery for European fruit trees; there also I collected a large number of Mexican Pines.

Roezl, though a large, self-possessed man, was conspicuously noticeable because of an iron hook in place of his missing left hand. This feature was a source of wonder to the many primitive tribes with whom he spent a great portion of his life. Speculation existed for many years

as to how the hand was lost, for Roezl himself seldom mentioned it. In a rare interview he admitted:

I invented a machine for extracting and cleaning the fibre of Ramie and Hemp, and took out a patent for my machine from the Government of the United States on September 17, 1867. The Agricultural Exhibition awarded a diploma for it in February, 1868. This discovery was the cause in 1868 of the loss of one of my arms. Many people in Havana solicited me to exhibit my machine there, and I was asked by some gentlemen to try if the machine would extract the fibre from *Agave americana*. The result of the trial proved my assertion, that the fibre would come out green, was correct; but in endeavouring to show that they were right in their assertions they managed in some way or the other to fasten some screws tighter, so as to get the cylinders closer together, and I, not knowing this, in putting a leaf between the cylinders (making 360 revolutions per minute) lost my left arm.

Shortly afterward he began an incredible life of plant collecting. Employed by Messrs. Sander & Co., for forty years he criss-crossed the American continent, doing practically all his traveling by horse or on foot. A full account of his travels, adventures (he was robbed seventeen times), and plant discoveries would require volumes. In brief, his travels encompassed the following: from Mexico to Cuba; to California via New York, traversing the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada; to Panama and Colombia, from whence he forwarded 10,000 orchids to Europe; to Santa Martha and Río Hacha, where he collected 3000 odontoglossums; to Panama, San Francisco, and Washington Territory, collecting conifer seeds in the latter; back to Southern California, Panama and Buenaventura; through the state of Cauca to Antioquia, collecting large quantities of *Masdevallia*, *Miltonia vexillaria*, and *Cattleya warscewiczii*; thence down the Magdalena River to Colon and Panama; to North Peru and across the Andes; back to Payta and Buenaventura; then to Europe for four months to see his parents. On 3 August 1872, he went from Liverpool to New York and Colorado Territory; then to New Mexico and the Central American Sierra Madre, sending back 3500 more odontoglossums; again to Panama and into Venezuela, from whence he forwarded eight tons of orchids to London; from there to St. Thomas and to Havana and Vera Cruz, then to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and into the state of Oaxaca, in Mexico, sending back, in all, ten tons of cacti, agave, and orchids; from Mexico City to Vera Cruz, and on to New York; back to Panama and Peru; across the Andes to Tarma and Chanchamayo, bringing back 10,000 various plants; thence back to Lima and southern Peru, to Morienda, Arigipa, and Lake Titicaca; across the Illimani Mountains to the province of Yungas; back to Lima and Payta, and again across the Andes to Guayaquil, Ecuador; down the Chimborazo; back to Guayaquil and the Valley of Cauca; and,

finally, back to London. He discovered about 800 species of flowering plants and trees entirely new to horticulture. Among the orchids named in his honor are *Selenipedium roezlii*, *Bletia roezlii*, *Pleurothallis roezlii*, *Masdevallia roezlii*, *Miltonia roezlii*, *Pescatorea roezlii*, and the genus *Roezliella*, besides many other valued hardy and greenhouse plants.

On his infrequent visits to London, Roezl particularly enjoyed stopping in at the auction rooms where his shipments were eagerly purchased by enthusiasts ever alert to obtain strange new offerings. A popular man with the wealthy estate owners and their growers, he relished discussing the various aspects of orchidology with them. His uncanny "sixth sense" about orchids delighted his employer; when a new orchid appeared in London during one of his visits, he and Mr. Sander would study it carefully and, if it had originated in an area where he had traveled, Roezl could usually deduce its place of origin. On his return to that particular area, more often than not he would relocate the plant in question.

During his last years he resided in his beloved Prague. There he died in October 1885. Among those eminent persons who attended the funeral was the kaiser himself. A statue was later erected to his memory in Prague—evidence of the high esteem accorded a native son.

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