

The Incredible Brazilian: The Beautiful Empire

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The Beautiful Empire is Brazil and in the second half of the nineteenth century the money is growing on trees – the rubber trees whose precious sap is wanted all over the world. Drawn by rumours of fabulous wealth to be won there, Europeans pour into Amazonia – hardheaded businessmen and romantic adventurers come to make their fortune in the New World and other are fleeing disgraces in the Old. And with them come their pretty daughters, their ambitious wives and their whores.

In the thick of it is Gregório Peixoto da Silva Xavier, the Incredible Brazilian. While laughing at the extravagance of Europeans and incensed by their insularity he grows rich as they do, except that only a small fraction of his fortunes comes from rubber. As proprietor of a fleet of luxurious floating brothels, Gregório becomes one of the richest men in Manaos, and also the most powerful, for there is no magnate whose secrets are hidden from him. He watches the fabulous city of Manaos, with its marble opera house and its countless mansions, rise from the jungle. He mingles with the Europeans who, intoxicated by their success, wash their feet in champagne and send their laundry to Paris and at last, when the crash comes, he sees them scurrying home bankrupt while the jungle reasserts its savage rule.

But Gregório is never just an observer – adventures, amorous and otherwise, are always cropping up … In this incarnation he survives the Paraguayan war through the good offices of the celebrated Mrs Lynch, Irish mistress of the enemy president; on a brief journey into the interior he is taken for a god and involved in a revolution; he meets and marries Claire, the greatest love of all his lives; narrowly escapes a match with priggish Johanna and carries on a perpetual war with Gloria, the passionate redhead who cannot decide whether to love or hate him. And, almost inadvertently he helps the mysterious Mr Wickham to bring about the downfall of the Brazilian rubber trade.

Praise:

'The Beautiful Empire is like some richly coloured collage of velvets, braids and sequins, being pretty, exotic, sad and endlessly exuberant' The Financial Times

'This is an unusually intelligent historical romp ... and effectively evocative' The Daily Telegraph

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