

*WHITE INDIANS  
OF DARIEN*

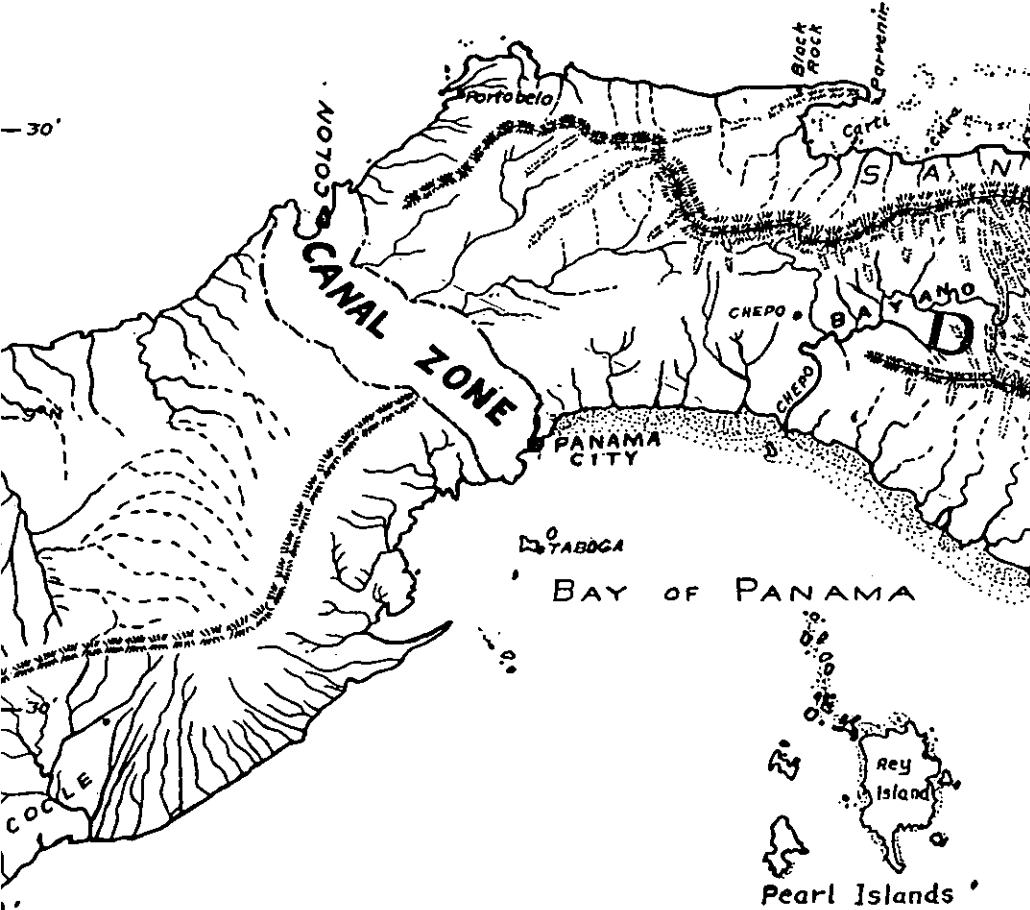
80°W

30'

79°

-30'

COLON  
CANAL ZONE



BAY OF PANAMA

GULF OF PANAMA

PACIFIC OCEAN

8°N

80°W

30'

79°

30'

78°

30'

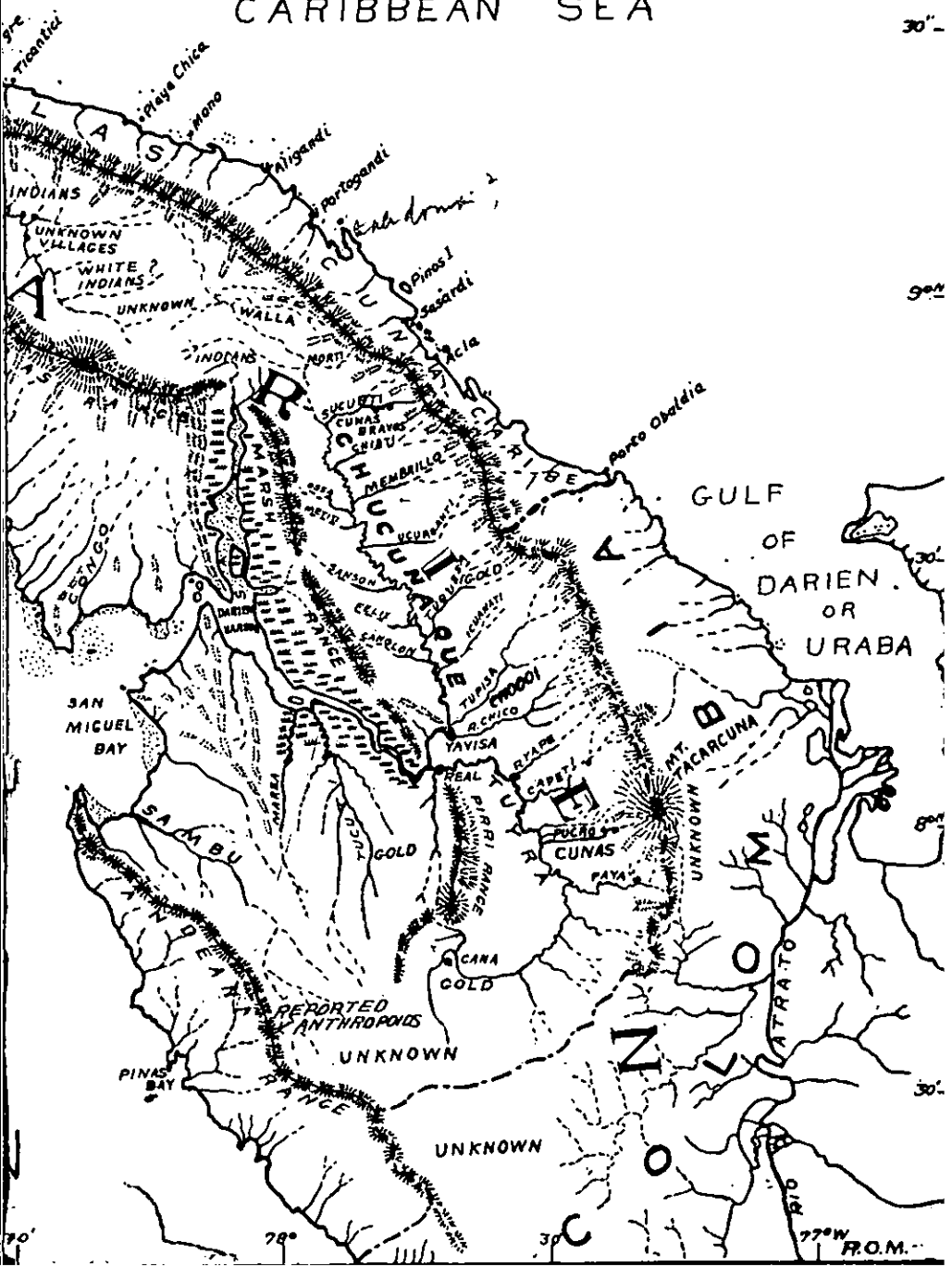
77°W

17<sup>th</sup>

CA

# CARIBBEAN SEA

30'



70'

78°

30'

77°W

R.O.M.



*"Mimi," White Indian Girl from San Blas  
Brought to the U. S. A.*

WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

Benton B. S. S. S.

---

WHITE INDIANS  
OF DARIEN

---

*by Richard Oglesby Marsh*



G·P·PUTNAM'S SONS  
NEW YORK

---

*COPYRIGHT, 1934, BY RICHARD O. MARSH*

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must  
not be reproduced in any form without permission.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
AT THE VAN REES PRESS

THIS BOOK  
IS DEDICATED TO  
PROFESSOR JOHN L. BAER  
ANTHROPOLOGIST AND ETHNOLOGIST OF THE SMITHSONIAN  
INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON, D. C.

*who*

*accompanied us on our scientific expedition through Darien, who was taken sick in the unknown interior valley of Darien, who was transported by us in a dug-out canoe hauled up the turbulent headwaters of the Chucunaque River to the southern foothills of the San Blas Mountain Range, who was then carried across the San Blas Mountain Range in a hammock slung from a pole supported on the shoulders of eight "wild" Tule Indians, who died on the Caribbean shore at the San Blas Indian village of Acla, and who was buried wrapped in an army blanket in a grave dug with our tin eating plates by Charles Charlton, Major Harry Johnson and myself, last remaining survivors of the fourteen scientists and army men who started on our exploration expedition.*

*He probably now knows those hidden secrets of interior Darien to discover which he lost his life.*



---

## CONTENTS

1	THE UNKNOWN VALLEY	3
2.	THE DEFENSES OF DARIEN	11
3	SOME TALES OF DARIEN	18
4.	THREE WHITE GIRLS	25
5.	A GLIMPSE OF THE CHUCUNAUQUE	33
6.	THE MARSH-DARIEN EXPEDITION	39
7.	AIRPLANE SURVEY	42
8.	MILITARY RED TAPE	51
9.	THE ISLAND OF THE MUSICAL ROCKS	58
10.	THE CHOCOI INDIANS	66
11.	AVELLINO'S HOUSE	76
12.	CHIEF MATA	84
13.	HARVEST FESTIVAL	93
14.	PUCRO	100
15.	"THE BIGGEST HOUSE IN ALL THE WORLD"	108
16.	PAYA	112
17.	CARMELITA	121
18.	CHIEF BIBIA	124

19. FINAL PREPARATIONS	132
20. OFF ON THE "GREAT PUSH"	141
21. THE SUCUBTI AT LAST	152
22. THE "TERRIBLE" CUNAS BRAVOS	159
23. FLOOD ON THE SUCUBTI	166
24. DOWN TO THE SAN BLAS COAST	173
25. THE DEATH OF BAER	182
26. THE TULE CONGRESS	189
27. WHITE INDIANS AT LAST	197
28. CHIEF GOLMAN	205
29. THE BATTLE OF THE SCIENTISTS	212
30. "THE TULE PEOPLE MUST FIGHT"	221
31. PREPARING FOR WAR	225
32. THE TULE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE	235
33. WE DECLARE WAR	243
34. THE SAN BLAS WAR	254
35. INTERVENTION	263
36. PEACE	270

---

## ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>"Mimi," White Indian Girl from San Blas Brought to the U. S. A.</i>	<i>Frontispiece</i>
<i>Our First Trip to Yavisa</i>	<small>FACING PAGE</small> 26
<i>Negro Village of Yavisa, Last Known Outpost on Lower Chucunaque</i>	26
<i>A San Blas Village: Navagandi</i>	48
<i>View of San Blas Coast</i>	48
<i>White Indian Girl, San Blas Coast</i>	72
<i>White Indian Child Mendelian Recessive. Each Parent Had a White Indian Parent</i>	72
<i>Princess Carmeleta of Pucro</i>	102
<i>R. O. Marsh Being Decorated by Chocoi</i>	102
<i>Group of White Indians at Aligandi, San Blas Coast</i>	126
<i>Up the Chucunaque</i>	148
<i>Hard Going on the Chucunaque</i>	148
<i>Acla, San Blas Coast, Where Balboa was Beheaded and Where Dr. J. L. Baer, Our Scientist, Died</i>	156
<i>Mono, a San Blas Village Captured, Rebuilt and Dominated by Panamanian Negro Soldiers. This Village Was Recaptured by the Indians</i>	156

	FACING PAGE
<i>Last View of Professor Baer After Being Carried Across Mountains in Hammock</i>	186
<i>Professor J. L. Baer's Grave</i>	186
<i>San Blas Girls</i>	200
<i>Chief "Nelle," Chief of Portogandi, Great San Blas "Medicine Man"</i>	200
<i>A Mountain Walla Indian Girl from the Interior</i>	222
<i>Niece of the Great Chief Golman, Aligandi, San Blas</i>	222
<i>Captain Wells of U. S. Cruiser "Cleveland" and U. S. Minister South During the Intervention in San Blas War</i>	268
<i>Captain Wells and Officers. U. S. Cruiser "Cleveland" at Inter- vention in San Blas War</i>	268



WHITE INDIANS  
OF DARIEN





## CHAPTER I

### THE UNKNOWN VALLEY

\*

THIS story properly begins with a sextant "shot" of Mt. Porrás on the Pacific coast of Darien. If I had not taken that "shot" I would probably have made a superficial survey of the region, reported to my employers, Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone, that there was no suitable rubber land in Panama, and passed on to Liberia or the Philippines. As it was, my last sight of Panama was from the after deck of an American cruiser leaving Colon: President Chiari had proclaimed me an outlaw for "inciting to rebellion, murder and arson," and the Panamanian police had instructions to shoot me on sight if I ever set foot in the territory of the Republic again.

You will find "Mt. Porrás" on very few maps. Most of them show only a single range of mountains in Darien—the San Blas Range on the Caribbean side. Some more recent ones show two ranges, but most of them give a different name to the highest peak on the Pacific side of the Isthmus. Belisario Porrás is no longer President of Panama. To any one familiar with Panamanian politics this simple fact is sufficient explanation for the change of name.

At any rate a single tall mountain dominates the long range leading down the Pacific coast of Darien southeast from the Canal Zone. It stands up suddenly after the manner of South American mountains above a low, swampy shore line.

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

As my little Diesel coaster poked along toward San Miguel Bay, I amused myself by triangulating upon this peak and plotting my shots on a Military Intelligence map.

This map looked pretty good, nicely decorated with an accurate coast line and accurate-looking mountains and rivers in the interior. I knew, of course, that the details were largely supposition. No one on record had been five miles back from much of that coast since the Mayas. But I had no idea the whole thing could be wrong from start to finish. After all Mt. Porras was only a hundred miles or so from the Canal Zone.

But as soon as I got out the map and compared the mountains upon it with the mountains I could see with my own eyes, I realized that the accuracy ended not far from high-water mark. The peaks were spaced differently, and there were gaps where no gaps should be. So I determined my position accurately in relation to the coastline and took a shot at Mt. Porras, standing up sharp and clear on the northern horizon.

Then I sat down, killed time until the boat had covered enough distance to give a good base-line, and repeated the performance. I made three shots in all, to give an accurate check, and was just beginning to work out my figures when the boat rounded San Lorenzo Point into San Miguel Bay. Ordinarily I should have been in the pilot house watching the change of course. But my figures were more interesting. Quickly I checked them over, hardly able to believe what they showed.

There was no doubting the extraordinary conclusion. The whole mountain chain was thirty miles out of place! In fact it was a totally different chain, paralleling the one marked on the map. For four hundred years navigators had sailed down this coast. The "great powers" of the world had squabbled over the Isthmus of Panama. The Canal was the greatest engineering achievement of history. But no one had taken the trouble to find out if the mountains seen from the Pacific were

## THE UNKNOWN VALLEY

the same as those so carefully charted from naval vessels on the Caribbean side.

So absorbed was I with this discovery—an unmarked mountain range and probably a wide unknown valley a hundred miles from the Canal—that I was paying no attention to events nearer at hand. The boat had turned up into San Miguel Bay, and I came back to earth when a shout of angry protest arose from the seven Panamanian negroes of the crew. They had been recruited on the waterfront for a cruise along the coast. Only the mulatto captain knew our real destination, and he had been instructed to keep it secret as long as possible. Now he could do so no longer. He announced that we were bound for the Chucunaque River. The uproar from the negroes proved it was a good thing we hadn't broken the news to them sooner.

According to the negroes, the Chucunaque was about the worst place on God's earth. The people of Yavisa were "bush niggers"—descendants of run-away slaves and other outlaws. They had kept up their traditions meticulously and were still a very efficient gang of cut-throats and robbers. And behind them, further up the Chucunaque lived savage Indians perpetually on the warpath, to say nothing of a fine assortment of diseases, wild beasts, crocodiles, poisonous snakes, insects and other tropical details. In fact, the crew was loudly unanimous for going home.

It wasn't quite a mutiny. There were three and a half whites on board, counting the Captain. That's plenty to overawe seven negroes. But it looked like one for a while. The Captain had to argue, threaten, bully and reassure. Finally all was quiet again, and I returned to my calculations.

But not for long. Besides the seven negroes, there was one Indian in the crew, with straight features and long hair which identified him as a mountain type seldom seen on the coast.



## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

He had not joined the negroes in their noisy protest, merely stood silently scowling. Indians in general are not talkative. They prefer to act first and talk afterwards if they are still able to.

I looked up from my map-table when I heard a loud cry, almost the cry of a wild beast. Running toward me from the forward deck, his face twisted with rage, was the Indian, a long machete held above his head. I let out a yell, got my American companions behind me, pushed the map-table between us and the Indian, and prepared to meet his attack with a deck-chair. Our fire-arms were all below.

But I didn't have to use that deck-chair. The negro engineer raised his head from the engine-room hatch and sized up the situation in a flash. Quick as a cat he leaped up the companionway and tackled the Indian foot-ball fashion, bringing him down on the deck. The Captain pounced on him and soon had him trussed up from head to foot with ropes. Then at the Captain's orders he was tied to a stanchion and lashed with a leather whip until the poor devil was terribly scarred and nearly dead. He was then carried to the cargo hatch and thrown down flat on his back on the bottom.

The Captain came back from his task smiling with satisfaction. I asked what had provoked the attack. He shrugged his shoulders. The Indian, he said, came from the upper Chucunaque himself and was patriotic after a fashion. It was forbidden for outsiders to enter that territory. He had hoped to lead a mutiny and head us off. He might have succeeded too except for the presence of mind of the black engineer. If he'd cut off my head with that machete, the crew would probably have hopped on the band-wagon and looted the boat. Such things actually happen in Darien.

After the boat had quieted down, I leaned back in my

## THE UNKNOWN VALLEY

chair and took stock. This expedition was beginning to look good. All the way down the coast I'd been remembering weird tales about the mysterious land we were headed for. And now we had a mutinous crew, hostile tribes, an unknown valley to explore. At this point I'm afraid I rather forgot that Detroit and Akron were worried about their rubber supply. There might be much more interesting things than rubber-land in Darien.

I suppose I had better go back to the beginning and tell what brought me to the accessible but little frequented coast of Darien. It's a commercial story, but much more interesting than most. In summary it is this: that the United States which used eighty per cent of the world's production of rubber was getting worried about England, which at that time controlled almost the whole supply.

The history of rubber is a splendid example of English foresight and diplomatic-commercial adroitness. When rubber first became an article of commerce, it was produced almost entirely from the wild *Hevea Braziliensis* trees of the Amazon valley. After the invention of the automobile, the Amazon had a tremendous boom. Brazil realized that she possessed a monopoly and profited from it to the full.

Quite naturally, as soon as the Brazilians knew what a gold mine they had under their control, they passed drastic laws to prevent the seeds of the *Hevea Braziliensis* from finding their way to other countries. But here entered the wily British. Long before the automobile created a large market for rubber, the British government with characteristic foresight had sent a representative to Brazil to smuggle a few of the precious seeds back to England. Some of them were cultivated and studied under glass at Kew Gardens in London. Others were sent to the East. From these were propagated large scale

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

plantations in Ceylon and British Malaya and later with British capital in the Dutch East Indies.

When these plantations were set out, there was comparatively little demand for rubber. But about the time the first of them came into bearing, the automobile arrived on the scene, and the two industries grew up together. So much we owe to British foresight. Without it we should have had to wait many years for our cheap cars.

The war boomed the rubber business further. The plantations were expanded fantastically, often wastefully. But after the treaty of Versailles the demand kept up, even grew. The prevailing price was about twenty cents a pound, which allowed the neat profit of one hundred per cent.

At this point a new factor entered the game. The war left the British Empire in debt to the United States to the tune of billions of dollars. When the United States refused to cancel the debt, the British agreed to pay six billions over a period of sixty-two years.

How were they going to do it? Economists shook their heads and said it couldn't be done. The British Empire had no such favorable trade balance, and it did not intend to ship us the major part of its gold production. But Stanley Baldwin and Montague Norman of the Bank of England returned to London not at all worried. They had a plan to make the Americans themselves pay the debt.

This plan was the soul of simplicity. The Stephenson Rubber Restriction Act of 1922 organized the British plantations of the Far East under government control and limited strictly the amount they could export. Its announced purpose was to "stabilize the price of crude rubber at thirty cents," a modest profit of two hundred per cent. But it didn't stop there. Almost at once the price shot up to \$1.21. No wonder the British government was not alarmed about how to pay its

## THE UNKNOWN VALLEY

debt. The United States then consumed upwards of 600,000,000 pounds a year. The excess profit on rubber would pay off the whole six billion dollars in ten years.

Of course, as soon as the beauties of this maneuver were clear to the American automobile and tire manufacturers, tremendous pressure was brought to bear on Washington to do something about it. In 1923 Senator McCormick secured passage of a bill appropriating \$500,000 to devise means of breaking the monopoly. The War Department became interested because of the military angle. The Department of Commerce under Secretary Hoover started a campaign to tell the American public why the price of their tires had jumped so tremendously.

This was where I came in. I had been interested in rubber for many years, had visited the plantations in Ceylon and Malaya, had "run" wild rubber trails at the headwaters of the Amazon. From the first it had seemed to me that eastern Panama was the logical place for American rubber developments. I could see no practicality then, and can see none now, for American plantations anywhere except in the Caribbean region. The Far East, because of cheap labor, can produce at the lowest price all the rubber the world needs. The only justification for American plantations is to prevent monopolistic price fixing and to secure a supply in war-time.

Rubber is a vital commodity in time of war, as Germany learned to her sorrow. The only war the United States need fear is from a combination of Europe on one side and Japan on the other. With such an alliance against us we would only fool ourselves in thinking that we could maintain open communications with either the Philippines, Liberia, or the Amazon.

So our problem was to produce rubber as near home as possible. Natural conditions demand that the plantations be

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

within ten degrees of the equator. The soil must be rich, deep, and well-drained. The rain-fall must be at least one hundred inches and must be well distributed over the year. These conditions limit the available rubber areas to the Caribbean countries from Venezuela to Nicaragua. Of all of these I was convinced that eastern Panama, or Darien, was the most suitable.

I had converted my senior partner, General G. W. Goethals of Panama Canal fame, to this belief. Goethals had sent me to Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce. Hoover sent me to Harvey Firestone and Henry Ford. And the upshot of the matter was that in 1923 I arrived in Panama with a small expedition to look for suitable rubber lands. I had two American companions, a rubber buyer recently returned from Singapore and a lawyer whose job was to pass on the titles, if any, to the lands we might locate. We combed the better known parts of Panama without result. The region between the Canal and Costa Rica was too irregular for large-scale rubber growing. The only other chance was Darien, the almost unexplored section toward the Colombian border.

---

## CHAPTER II

### THE DEFENSES OF DARIEN

\*

TO the English speaking public Darien has just one connotation—"stout Cortez," who we all know never went near the place. So we change "Cortez" to "Balboa" and close the discussion. There is little more accurate information forthcoming. Darien is a disembodied name to the outside world. It is identified with no products, people, popular history or anything else.

And the curious thing about it is that the nearer you get to Darien the deeper the mystery becomes. The Americans in the Canal Zone know almost nothing about the place. The Panamanians know only parts of the coast line and a set of weird and terrifying yarns. The area contains no officials, no government. The ships of the world pass only fifty miles away, but none of them ever stops.

It seems rather incredible that such a large unknown region should exist within a hundred to two hundred miles of the Canal Zone—probably one of the half dozen best-known places in the world. But Darien in that respect is rather like the squalid slums under the Brooklyn Bridge, which are entirely mysterious to the strap-hangers who pass above their roofs. It is one of the numerous "blind spots" of Latin America, although every one passing through the Canal has seen its blue mountains from the sea.

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

This condition is due to no mere accident or oversight. Darien is protected from all except the most determined explorers by an extraordinary combination of circumstances. To judge from the map, you'd think it possible to walk right across the isthmus. The maximum width is little more than a hundred miles. But a majority of those who have tried this jaunt are no longer with us.

Travel in Darien has numerous difficulties, some of them common to all Tropical America, some of them peculiar to itself. First of all comes the jungle, which has to be seen to be appreciated. There are jungles and jungles. Some of them are very pleasant when a trail is already there. But when there is no trail, they are apt to be unadulterated hell.

The jungle of Darien is about the worst on the list. Even the Indians seldom try to force their way through it. They use the rivers wherever possible, for the swiftest, shallowest mountain brook is preferable to the tangle of vines on land. With an efficient gang of machete-wielders a white man can cover only a mile or two a day if all goes well. After a fortnight the jungle mats together again as tightly as ever. There are insects and disease to consider. You can't hope to live off the country. There are numerous watercourses and bottomless swamps. There are jagged mountains veiled in a thick felt of wire-like vines and razor-sharp grass. All in all, the land route to Darien is rightly considered impossible. Perhaps the Maya civilization or one of its forerunners extended into the region. But since that time it is safe to say that no one has traversed much of the interior by land.

In general the rivers are the only highways of such tropical regions, and when they fail, a blind spot remains long after adjacent areas have been penetrated. These blind spots rarely appear on the maps. Almost all of South America has a rather "explored" look to judge from the maps, which are

## THE DEFENSES OF DARIEN

uniformly covered with a network of elegant rivers, meticulously marked in all their meanderings. Do not be deceived. The Latin American governments hate to admit that they are not familiar with their own countries, so their cartographers fill in the blanks with rivers—usually the only details shown. Often these pass gayly through mountain ranges without a quiver. Many of them flow into the wrong ocean or at right angles to their real courses.

Even where the rivers have really been followed to their sources, the country back from the banks may remain almost wholly unknown. A jungle river is only a narrow strip of water between two vertical green walls. The smaller rivers are green tunnels. The explorer learns nothing about what lies ten paces behind the banks. He may pass within a stone's throw of a ruined stone city. He may fail to observe a whole mountain range. There may be open grass lands a few rods back from the swampy banks—or lakes—or cultivated fields. Much of South America has been explored in this way, which leaves it practically as unknown as ever.

But in the case of Darien, not even the rivers have been followed to their sources. There are two reasons for this—the peculiar geography of the region and the equally peculiar Indians. We'll take up only the geography now. We'll have plenty to say about the Indians later.

Take a look at the map. Start at the Pacific entrance of the Canal and follow the coast-line toward the southeast. After you pass the mouth of the Chepo River, you are looking at unknown country. The numerous ships bound for Peru or Chile pass outside the Pearl Islands, leaving the inner channel to rare coastal boats. Beyond the Rio Chepo the coast is wholly uninhabited except perhaps for a few renegade negroes. No one attempts to land on it, for the shore is bordered by broad strips of swamp and liquid mud. The rivers running down



## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

from the Porras mountains are too small for any kind of navigation. Some cartographers decorate this coast with the names of towns, but in doing so they are either using their imaginations or erecting monuments to Spanish settlements long since abandoned.

The first point of interest on this unapproachable coast is San Miguel Bay, which opens through a tortuous channel into Darien Harbor, a magnificent landlocked basin of deep water surrounded by highlands. Into it flow two large rivers—the Savanna from the north and the Tuyra from the south. The Tuyra is fairly well-known—for these regions—because a gold mine at Cana on its upper waters was worked in ancient as well as recent times. But it was not thought to lead to the interior behind Darien Harbor, only southward toward Colombia.

To judge from all previous maps the Savanna was the logical entry into the interior, and the most casual glance at this river shows why it is not a feasible route. It is not, in fact, a river at all. From the gap between the Porras mountains and the "Marsh Range" (named after me by President Porras and now called something else) the Savanna is nothing but a wide "glacier" of bottomless liquid mud flanked by brackish swamps. At the time of the full moon the twenty-three feet maximum tide of the Pacific brings a roaring flood of water up over the "glacier." Only for an hour or two is it deep enough to float a canoe, and it runs in a new channel every month.

Even a highly skilled Indian couldn't make the whole passage on a single tide. He would have to wait, stuck in the slimy ooze, until the water came back. He would have to carry food and water. He would run the risk of getting into a false channel and being marooned for a solid month until the next spring tide. No human could walk or swim in that mud. If

## THE DEFENSES OF DARIEN

he did manage to reach the swampy shore, he would be little better off. He would have plenty of crocodiles as playmates, but his chances of getting out alive would be very small. So the Savanna River route, which looks so good on the map, is a delusion.

The only possibility left is the Tuyra, and here we will discover the real reason why interior Darien had never been explored. According to all the maps published before I made my "shots" on Mt. Porras, the interior contained a single mountain range, nearer the Atlantic than the Pacific. If such were the case, there was no reason to think that the Savanna did not drain the logical area behind what appeared to be its own headwaters. The Savanna was effectively blocked by the mud. The Tuyra was thought to lead far to the southeast. No one suspected that the interior contained a wide level valley which could be entered by the Chucunaque, one of the many branches of the Tuyra.

Now to describe briefly the people of Darien—or rather the people of the coasts, for I was the first to learn anything much about the tribes of the interior and what I found will appear in later chapters. The northern, or Caribbean, coast is peopled by an extraordinary nation of Indians who call themselves "Tule" but are more generally known as the San Blas Indians. The Spaniards appeared early on the San Blas Coast, looking for gold as usual. But they found little, and presently the Indians got together and drove them out with great slaughter. From that day to this the "Tule people" have maintained their independence except for sporadic recent encroachments, of which more anon.

When the Tules finally got rid of the Spaniards, they set about taking steps which would preserve them in the future. Very wisely they did not refuse to trade with their late enemies, but they would never allow a trader to spend the night

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

in their territory or go back into the interior. This law has been enforced rigidly upon every one with the exception of myself, and my dealings with the San Blas Indians were wholly unusual. As a result no one explores interior Darien from the Caribbean. It just isn't done.

On the Pacific side, along the shores of Darien Harbor and on the Tuyra River, you will see on the map the names of a number of villages. The inhabitants are "bush niggers"—in general as primitive as their ancestors in Africa and much more primitive than the Tule Indians. I shall call them negroes from now on. They have practically no Indian blood, a few traces of Spanish, but to all intents and purposes they are negroes.

Usually these negroes speak a debased dialect of Spanish, wear the rags of civilized clothes, and otherwise consider themselves outposts of civilization. But they have practically no contact with the outside world, and their filth, laziness, and cowardice make them very little help to an explorer.

The rest of the Pacific slope is inhabited by rather peaceful and harmless Indians known as Cholas or Chocos, very different both physically and culturally from the Tules on the other side of the Isthmus. They are generally not considered dangerous, certainly not those on the waterfronts, although a number of travelers who have ventured into the interior of their territory, among a kindred people calling themselves Chocoi, have not returned.

The only town on the Chucunaque, chief branch of the Tuyra, is Yavisa, a negro settlement of a few score filthy bamboo huts. Above it is the dead-line for negro settlement. No Yavisan has ever been above the Membrillo, a tributary of the Chucunaque, except a few that went with me; and none care to go. It has been traditional, beyond the memory of the in-

## THE DEFENSES OF DARIEN

habitants, that the negro caught above the Membrillo does not see his friends again.

The history of exploration in interior Darien is brief and to the point. There is a common factor in all the stories. In 1871 President Grant sent a certain Captain Selfridge with three hundred and seventy American sailors down the San Blas Coast and later up the Tuyra to survey the route of an interoceanic canal. They penetrated a little above Yavisa, but fell back with nothing but a good crop of alibis. In 1907 the German government sent seven "scientists" into the region from the Caribbean side—probably for the same reason. One fell sick and had to return early. The rest have not been heard from since. The San Blas Indians might be able to tell what happened to them. A little later thirty-five Panamanians attempted to ascend the Chucunaque in search of a "river of gold." Five returned alive. Soon after, three American adventurers from the Canal Zone repeated their attempt. Not one came back. So the Yavisa negroes are quite content to cultivate their gardens in peace, not at all curious about what may lie up the river above their village.

Thus the interior valley of Darien was protected by three lines of defense, besides the fact that no one clearly realized it was there at all. First, it was unapproachable by land. Second, the river which was supposed to lead to it was impossible to navigate. Third, the Indians had made good their policy of discouraging explorers. It was no wonder then, that this "blind spot" existed within a few hundred miles of the canal.

---

## CHAPTER III

### SOME TALES OF DARIEN

\*

SO much for geography, economics, and history. I hope I've convinced the reader that Darien is not merely a part of the Canal Zone. But even if I have not, we'll return to my little coastal boat—diesel engine, negro crew—as she makes her way down the mud-fringed coast from Panama.

As soon as the docks and roofs of Panama City disappeared in the distance, all sorts of fascinating tales began to creep back into my memory about the mysterious land we were bound for. There is something about the sight of unexplored country which encourages uncritical belief, and back from the shore line the coast between the Chepo River and San Miguel Bay is as unknown as the day when Balboa stood on that well-known peak. Panama City is full of tales about it. No one who has lived in the Zone could have failed to hear some of them.

First there were the tales of gold—like those many other glittering tales heard all over tropical America. Rivers of gold, cities of gold, golden men, golden streets. There is certainly gold in Darien. The single mine at Cana on the upper Tuyra produced \$11,000,000 worth under British auspices in recent times, and much more under the earlier Spaniards. That was just one mine. There is plenty more waiting for the man who can find it and bring it out. I have found ample evidence of

## SOME TALES OF DARIEN

gold myself in many streams. All the Indian tribes possess golden ornaments. There are persistent tales of secret mines which were worked long before Columbus.

But unlucky is the white man or negro who goes into Indian country to look for gold. He is at once singled out for special treatment. Gold is an old story with the Indians. They realize clearly that most of their troubles in the past were caused by it. They understand the process. First comes the single prospector. Then comes the armed expedition which kills their men, rapes their women, and burns their villages. Then come the negro laborers imported to work the mines. Then mongrelization, misgovernment and oppression. So when a prospector appears in their country the Indians first give him fair warning to go back, and if he refuses, they "take steps." Every so often a tale drifts back to Panama City of an adventurous prospector who has disappeared into unknown territory with a spade and pan and not returned.

So much for gold. There are better tales for the more romantic and the less commercial. Here's one for the archeologist. The Indians on the Pacific coast believe firmly that somewhere in the tangled wilderness behind the mountains there is a stone city still inhabited by its builders—Mayans or some race equally mysterious. It has never been seen. The coast Indians are *persona non grata* in the interior. They only repeat the tales which have drifted out for them from the unknown.

And here's a tale for the big-game hunter who is tired of slaughtering inoffensive and accessible beasts in well-known Africa. In 1920 while I was in Panama an old and experienced American prospector, Shea by name, came to me with a strange story. He had just returned from a trip to southeastern Darien. With another American he had ascended the Sambu River which enters the sea on the southern shore of San Miguel Bay. The country here was, and still is, wholly unknown. Even

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

the mountain range back from the coast did not appear on the maps. Shea and his companion worked their way with great difficulty to the headwaters of the Sambu, and there they became separated. The other American has not been heard from since.

When Shea lost his companion, he lost his canoe and most of his equipment. So instead of attempting to return down the Sambu, he decided to force his way to the Pacific across the "Andean Range" to the west. He reached the divide in a state of exhaustion and by a stroke of luck stumbled on an old Indian dugout abandoned on the bank of a small river running into Pinas Bay. It was nearly dark, so he camped for the night at a considerable altitude not far from the divide.

All that night he heard the footsteps of a large animal in the jungle above his camp. And when dawn came, he heard a curious chattering sound. He looked up and saw standing on the top of the bank an animal which appeared to his unscientific mind to be a cross between a negro and a gigantic ape. It was six feet tall, walked erect, weighed possibly three hundred pounds and was covered with long black hair. It was glaring down at him and chattering its teeth in rage.

Shea whipped out his revolver and shot it through the head. It tumbled down the bank and lay still beside his canoe. When Shea recovered from his fright he measured the animal crudely. It was heavily built like a gorilla, but the big toes on the feet were parallel with the other toes, as in a human being, not opposed like thumbs, as in all other monkeys and great apes.

Unfortunately Shea was too exhausted to bring any part of the animal back to civilization. He barely managed to get down to Pinas Bay on the Pacific and attract the attention of a coaster which took him to Panama more dead than alive. I saw him many times after that in the hospital where he

## SOME TALES OF DARIEN

eventually died of chronic malaria. Almost his last words were a solemn oath that the story of the "man-beast" was true.

Of course, my first reaction to this story was extreme skepticism. But I found to my surprise that many trustworthy men who had penetrated into the little-known parts of tropical America did not share my disbelief. The "man-beast" is reported to have been seen in many locations. A Spanish gold-hunting expedition in the seventeenth century reported that it had shot fourteen of them not far from this same Pinas Bay. The Indians from Ecuador to Nicaragua assert that the creatures inhabit isolated jungle-covered mountains, as do the gorillas in Africa. Nothing will persuade an Indian to spend the night on such a peak.

When I returned to Washington and mentioned the matter to Dr. Hough of the Smithsonian, I did not get the pitying smile I was expecting. On the contrary he said he had been getting reports of this sort for twenty years and was inclined to believe that there was something in them. Dr. Anthony of the New York Museum of Natural History has a story to tell of encountering a large unknown animal near the summit of Mt. Tacarcuna on the Colombian border. A Frenchman claims to have shot one in Ecuador.

The "man-beast" has nothing to do with this narrative proper. I never saw one myself. But the tale is a good illustration of how little is known about this part of the world. No explorer need sigh for more worlds to conquer. Instead of spending time and energy on the uninhabited and exceedingly barren polar regions those explorers could well turn their attention to tropical Latin America, where much richer fields await them.

Still other things came into my mind as we sailed down the coast, and the unnamed mountains of Darien paraded into sight. Perhaps not so important as the foregoing, but inter-



## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

esting nevertheless. There was the rumored picture-writing of the Tule Indians, which might hold the secret of the ancient Mayan alphabet. The terraced pyramids reported from the jungle. The weird lizards which skate upright on the surface of the water. The rocks in Darien Harbor which give forth music like great organs at high tide. There were plenty of things in Darien to take a rubber-hunter's mind off his humble business.

And then, of course, there were "white Indians." All Latin America is full of tales about them, from Mexico to the headwaters of the Amazon. The natives are almost universally convinced of their existence. It's a rare exploration tale which doesn't contain a discussion of them. Darien was said to be one of their chief centers.

But no living reliable person had ever seen a white Indian. No one had ever brought one out to civilization. And the whole subject had been so confused by unskillful fakers and fruitless quests, that the white Indians had become the type example of traveler's tale. The man who claimed to have seen them was considered *ipso facto* a liar, and the man who believed that some one else had seen them was considered gullible.

So I did not take the white Indians any more seriously than the "man-beast" or the stone city of the living Mayans. The fact that the Panamanians believed in them did not influence me. I knew a lot of other impossible myths which the Panamanians believed.

I had two American companions on this trip to Yavisa, but I am going to leave them nameless, for they don't fit very well into a story of tropical adventure. One was a Firestone rubber-buyer, whose experience had consisted of sitting in the bar of the elaborate Raffles Hotel at Singapore, changing into his thirty-five white linen suits (so he said) and examining

## SOME TALES OF DARIEN

sheets of crude rubber brought in for his approbation. His qualifications as an explorer approached the vanishing-point. The very sight of the jungle made him ill.

The other man was a lawyer—and nothing is more pathetic than an American lawyer in Latin America. My lawyer had been instructed to pass on titles and report on “law and order.” His experience so far had indicated that there were at least ten titles to every piece of land in Panama, and no “law and order” whatever beyond sight of the Canal. His hopes were dwindling away.

After the somewhat ominous episodes of the near-mutiny and the machete attack of the patriotic Indian, my companions developed considerable pessimism. There was no decent rubber land, they said, in sight on the shore of San Miguel Bay. Nothing but swamps backed up by tumbled hills. As for law and order—they didn’t see any either.

I hadn’t felt it necessary to pass on to them the more picturesque fears of the crew—about the piratical nature of the Yavisa negroes or the reputation of the Indians in the interior. But they must have gathered a general impression, for as we penetrated deeper into Darien Harbor, their doubts grew loud. The channel was obviously dangerous from a shipping point of view—scoured by tremendous tidal currents which whirled the boat about like a chip in a mill-race. The rainfall might be adequate, but to judge from the character of the vegetation, it seemed to be concentrated in a single season. My belief in an unknown interior valley did not impress them. It might be there all right, but there was nothing to show that it was not cut up into ravines and ridges like the rest of Panama. My own enthusiasm, of course, was increasing. I was anxious to make a determined assault on the interior valley. But I think my companions realized by this time that rubber had taken a subordinate position in my mind.

## *WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN*

They were all for returning at once to the Canal Zone, where khaki uniforms on every street corner give a splendid sense of security.

During the several days while we were feeling our way up the 110 miles of interior waterways, my companions sank deeper into a nervous funk. They did not remove their clothes at night, not even their shoes. They locked themselves into their hot, stuffy, little staterooms instead of making themselves comfortable on deck. They never went ashore at the picturesque settlements of perfectly harmless Chola Indians. These silly precautions had the usual effect of increasing their nervousness, and they were soon in a very unhappy state of mind. As an ultimatum they announced that they would go to Yavisa only because they agreed to. But unless the terrain improved greatly from a rubber growing point of view they would depart at once and condemn as hopeless the whole Republic of Panama.

---

## CHAPTER IV

### THREE WHITE GIRLS

\*

FINALLY we arrived at Yavisa, a straggling collection of some fifty ramshackle bamboo huts beside the stream—black babies everywhere, flies, mangy dogs, garbage, rubbish and mud. We anchored in mid-stream and I went ashore alone in our small dingy, fully prepared for some sort of piratical attack. But nothing unpleasant assailed me except some stupendous bad smells. Yavisa was far from attractive, but the inhabitants seemed peaceful in the extreme. I decided that the crew had been exhibiting the universal tendency of primitive people to suspect their neighbors. Both they and the Yavisans were degenerate blacks, less civilized than when they came from Africa. They felt about the next tribe over the horizon as their ancestors had felt for thousands of jungle years.

I had no difficulty finding the headman—an old negro who seemed to possess a measure of authority. He showed me proudly around the village, pointing out the local features of interest like a New Yorker showing off the Empire State building. Yes, he admitted, there was certainly a wide fertile valley up the Chucunaque. He had been part way up toward it; but the savage Indians up-river would kill any negro who ventured above the Membrillo tributary.

While we were discussing these matters, we reached the upper end of the village, where the jungle began again. I

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

wasn't paying much attention to the scenery. Yavisa could be duplicated a hundred times in Panama. But for some reason I happened to look into a small clearing which extended a few yards into the encompassing jungle. I don't think I rubbed my eyes. People don't do that. But it is a figure of speech well fitted to the occasion.

Across the narrow clearing were walking three young girls, perhaps fourteen to sixteen years old. They wore nothing but small loin-clothes. And their almost bare bodies were as white as any Scandinavian's. Their long hair, falling loosely over their shoulders, was bright gold! Quickly and gracefully they crossed the open space and disappeared into the jungle.

I turned to the negro headman in amazement. *White Indians!* The one tale of Latin America in which no respectable explorer dares to believe!

The headman did not seem to consider the sight unusual.

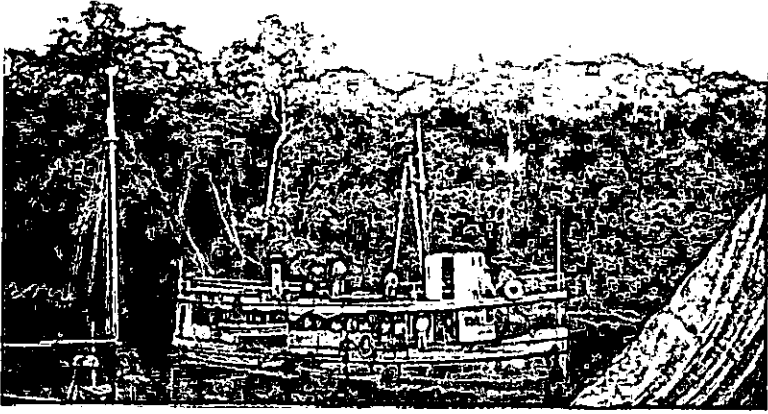
"They come from a tribe which lives in the mountains up the Chucunaque," he said in explanation. "Before this they haven't come so far down the valley. But a little time ago they built a house above our village, and families of them come down to trade with us. Some are white. Some are dark like other Indians."

"Take me to their house," I asked.

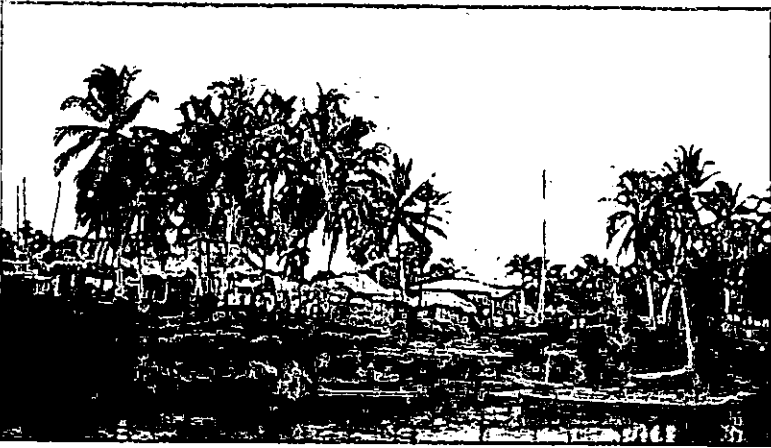
The negro shook his head with great decision. "No. They would kill me," he said. "They will kill any black man if he goes near their house. But perhaps they will not kill you. You are white. Just follow the trail the girls took."

Without thinking of possible consequences I followed the trail into the jungle.

This act was not nearly as rash as it seems, and as it probably seemed to the headman. Long experience with little-known Indians in other parts of Latin America had taught me various things about them. When they are in contact and



*Our First Trip to Yavisa*



*Negro Village of Yavisa, Last Known Outpost  
on Lower Chucunaque*

### THREE WHITE GIRLS

conflict with blacks, they are apt to be comparatively friendly toward Europeans of fair complexion. Furthermore I was dressed all in white—the color of peace in the jungle. Khaki is the color of the professional soldier throughout the Americas, and is no color to be worn in any free Indian country unless the wearer is well prepared for trouble. Also I carried no fire-arms. I was not hunting, and there is nothing to fear from wild animals in any American jungle.

The trail was a well-beaten path along the river-bank. After passing through dense jungle for a quarter of a mile it ended in a clearing on the edge of the water. In the center was a typical Indian house of the smaller type—platform of split palms on posts six feet above the ground, thatched roof, open walls. A notched log served as front steps.

The three girls I had just seen were kneeling on the platform arranging some grass mats. At my appearance they jumped to their feet and seemed about to leap from the platform into the jungle beyond the house.

I approached them slowly, smiling my best. Gradually their fear changed to curiosity, then to interest, then to friendliness. They began to giggle like school-girls and finally broke out into gay laughter, apparently more amused by my appearance than afraid of me.

I reached into my pockets and brought out a handful of shiny Panama dimes which I carried for just such occasions. Many tropical Indians value such coins as ornaments or make them into ear-rings, bracelets, etc. . . . The girls descended the notched log one by one and gathered around me with every expression of confidence. I divided the dimes among them, and they laughed over their new treasures like the trusting children they were.

I tried to talk to them in Spanish but got no response. Then I tried English, French, and some very crude German.





### THREE WHITE GIRLS

around a bend in the river. No suitable rubber land was in sight, my companions agreed, and if there *were* rubber land, it would take an army to conquer it before the first tree could be planted. Loudly they insisted that the trip was over. They pronounced Darien without rubber land and without law. They were determined to start home at once.

My tale of the white Indian girls did not interest them in the slightest. They were not "damned jungle rats," and they wouldn't go further up the Chucunaque for a million dollars. If "the Old Man"—meaning Henry Ford—wanted that place explored, he would have to hire another outfit.

I pleaded with them—I think in a rather calm manner at first. But when I saw I wasn't getting anywhere, I tried stronger measures. In fact, I told them that before I'd allow the boat to drop down river, I'd go below and smash the Diesel engine. In which case we would have to stay at Yavisa a long, long time. That calmed them. It would have calmed me too if it had been actually carried through. So we compromised on staying in Yavisa until five o'clock the next afternoon. This would give us time to return to the Tuyra before sunset. It isn't pleasant to risk the snags of the Chucunaque in the dark.

We had a comparatively peaceful supper—not exactly cordial however. Soon darkness came. Then a glorious full moon. My companions retired to their stuffy cabins (fully dressed, as usual), while I set up my army cot on the after deck and got down to my lightest pajamas.

But I could not sleep. I thought of the undiscovered valley just beyond; then of my little friends, the Indian girls with Swedish complexions. Then I suddenly remembered. Good Lord! What about the poor Indian trussed up in the hold! I got my flash-light, went down the companionway, and woke up the negro engineer.

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

Yes, he said, the devil was still in the hold. No. He had been given no food or water. If he were still alive when the boat got back to Panama City, the Captain was going to turn him over to the police. He'd better die quick.

Without saying another word I slipped the engineer an American five-dollar bill. That's a language all Panamanians understand. I told him I wanted to see the Indian. There was a locked bulkhead door between the engine-room and the cargo-hold. The negro engineer unlocked it, and I entered. There lay the Indian, still tightly bound, flat on his back, but alive. When his eyes met mine, they were dull and lifeless as a toad's. The fires were out. He knew he was going to die. I was just another of his tormentors.

I went back to the engine-room and told the negro to get me some water. When it came, I went back to the cargo-hold and knelt beside the Indian. He watched me distrustfully. Then I cut the ropes around his arms and put the water to his lips. He gulped it down eagerly, his eyes wide and incredulous. Then I cut the rest of the ropes. He sat up. Like two flashes of lightning his eyes came alive with amazement and wondering gratitude. That look will remain with me to my last day as one of my pleasantest memories.

In a whisper I told the engineer to go up on deck. Then I took the Indian by the hand and led him to a side hatch which opened on the river from the engine-room. Some people say Indians are stolid and unemotional. They would change their opinion if they had seen the expression of this one. I motioned to the hatch, and he plunged through it into the river with a clean splash. It might have been one of the crocodiles forever cruising around the boat.

I watched him disappear in the darkness. Then I went up to the pilot-house to find the Captain sitting with a pot of his eternal black coffee. He poured out a cup for me. Not

## THREE WHITE GIRLS

a word passed between us, but I put twenty-five dollars in American bills in his hand. We sat for half an hour without a word, drinking cup after cup of thick coffee, a rather puzzled look on the Captain's face. Then I left with a "*Buenas noches, Capitan.*"

When I left the Captain, I intended to sleep. But there are times when sleep comes only to the very unimaginative. I was in an uplifted state of mind. A few miles away lay an unexplored, mysterious country. Who knew what it might contain? I may be a confirmed romantic, but the thought kept me wide awake.

It was one of those perfect nights which happen only in the tropics. From the steep, wooded hillside opposite Yavisa came the twittering and squawking of birds—the chattering of little fruit monkeys, and the lion-like roars of big howler monkeys. Some insect, probably a cicada, kept whistling for all the world like a toy steam-engine. All the jungle is full of life on a moonlight night. Only men sleep.

I pulled on sneakers and stepped over the side of the boat into a small dingy and rowed ashore. Yavisa was asleep. Even by moonlight it looked like what it was—the hideaway of the descendants of runaway slaves and negro outlaws. I passed through the street of filthy bamboo huts in a moment and found the trail I had taken by daylight. I had reached the little Indian hut in the clearing and was standing before the notched log before I realized the rashness and bad manners of my action. It was nearly midnight. No one in the jungle makes a call after dark for any ordinary reason. Certainly not in pajamas where young girls are involved.

But I had come too far to turn back. To retreat suddenly, I thought, would be to admit that my motives were not the best. So I called and waved a white handkerchief. I knocked on the notched log. Not a sound from above. Then suddenly

## *WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN*

the body of a full-grown man, whether white or dark I could not tell, crashed into the jungle from the platform. Then again total silence.

At last I realized that I'd better get out of there. My motives were certainly suspected. The man was perhaps circling around to cut me off, and might send an arrow or a dart through me as I returned to the village. Ignominiously I retreated down the trail, reached the boat in safety, kicking myself for my foolishness, and managed to get a little sleep during the rest of the night.



## CHAPTER V

### A GLIMPSE OF THE CHUCUNAQUE

\*

AS soon as it got light the next morning, I fixed the Elto motor to the stern of our little flat-bottomed skiff, and loaded into her ten gallons of gasoline and a basket of lunch. I had decided to take the negro engineer up the Chucunaque with me. He seemed to have more courage and ability than any one else in the outfit.

But to my surprise my American companions appeared on deck and asked if they might go too. Probably they were a bit ashamed of the appearance they had made the day before. Neither of them was really lacking in courage. I should give them a good deal of credit for finally coming through. This jaunt up the Chucunaque probably looked a lot more dangerous to them than it did to me. I had been in the tropics long enough to learn to take negro accounts of savage Indians with a grain of salt.

The four of us got away early and started up stream. We had no particular difficulty in negotiating the rather mild rapids above Yavisa, and then we entered into smooth, deep, almost slack water. It was a beautiful stream, about a hundred yards wide with occasional easy rapids followed by long stretches of still water. Here and there were little clearings with plantations of corn, plantains, and other native crops. In the center of each was a thatched hut like the one occu-

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

pied by the white Indians. Every now and then we caught glimpses of a naked brown body disappearing into the green tangle of the surrounding jungle. How they must have marveled at the out-board motor, the first to enter their river! But they made no move to attack us. The "dead-line" of the Membrillo lay far above.

The bordering hills which came right down to the river's edge at Yavisa fell back as we ascended. Through gaps in the jungle caused by small tributaries we could see the mountains miles back. The river bed was of shale in horizontal layers. The banks were of rich sandy loam ten feet thick—plenty of room for the central tap-root of the rubber tree.

More perfect rubber land could not be found in all the world. The giant Cuipo trees proved that the rainfall was ample. Splendid mahoganies five or six feet in diameter rose fifty feet to their first branch. Wild rubber trees grew on the banks, their feeder roots exposed by erosion. The ground was high and well-drained, with a uniform gentle slope to the encircling mountains. Even the lawyer grew enthusiastic.

But I couldn't keep my mind on rubber. The Chucunaque Valley is one of the most beautiful places in the world, and it seemed especially beautiful to me because I was one of the very few white men to see it. The trees along the shore were full of singing birds. (It's an ancient slander that tropical birds don't sing. They do.) Troops of different sorts of monkeys scolded us from the banks. There were hanging-oriole nests, and great black-and-white herons roosted on the taller trees.

Occasional tapir tracks led down to the water and re-appeared on the farther bank. The tapir is to me one of the most fascinating of all animals. He is a pachyderm, related to the elephant. He is as big as a small cow with a figure like a fattened hog. He may weigh six hundred pounds, and leaves a three-toed track like a gigantic bird.

## *A GLIMPSE OF THE CHUCUNAQUE*

Among other things he has solved one of nature's greatest problems—how to get across rivers. When he comes to one, he merely walks down the bank into the water, continues walking on the bottom under water, no matter how deep it is, and out on the other side. You can see his tracks in the mud in the middle of the stream.

By noon we had made twenty-five miles without any trouble at all. We landed on the bank and had lunch. Our perfect rubber-valley was there all right. Perhaps the lawyer was working out questions of land titles, labor, transportations, and defense. But I had ceased to care if Akron got its rubber or not. I didn't want this lovely wild valley to be overrun by thousands of degenerate Jamaica negroes like those who worked on the Panama Canal. I didn't want its harmless and attractive Indians oppressed and exterminated. It was "my valley." Already I was feeling possessive toward it and its people, although as yet I knew very little about them. I had deduced its existence from a distance. Now I had seen it, and the sight of it was good.

After lunch we returned down stream. With our rudimentary equipment it would be impossible to go farther, for the river was narrowing and the rapids becoming more formidable. The return trip was quick and uneventful and we were back at Yavisa by late afternoon.

Our little trip up the Chucunaque had certainly been peaceful enough. We had caught glimpses of a few Indians, but they had shown no signs of hostile intentions. I was wondering a little, when we approached our boat, what it was the Yavisa negroes were so much afraid of. They were convinced that up the river lived a particularly dangerous tribe of warlike Indians—white and brown. We hadn't seen any, but my companions were still convinced of their existence and their dangerousness.

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

The return to Panama City was an anti-climax. We dropped down to the mouth of the Chucunaque at dusk, and here we should have anchored for the night. But the Captain, the crew, and my American companions were all bent on getting as far away from Yavisa as soon as possible. So we ran down the treacherous Tuyra all night, aided by an intermittent moon, bumping numerous logs and snags, and made the deep water of Darien Harbor by daylight. From there to Panama City we ran into bad weather and had to anchor over night in the lee of one of the Pearl Islands.

At Panama City my two companions decided to condemn the whole Republic of Panama for large-scale rubber growing. There might be rubber land in plenty, they admitted, but Henry Ford was no *Conquistador*.

This took something of a load off my mind. I have spent much of my life surveying wild parts of the world for various commercial interests, but I have never wholeheartedly applauded the onward march of civilization. In tropical America the net result is usually the replacement of the attractive free Indians by a degenerate population of negro semi-slaves. Indians are too independent and self-respecting to work under such conditions. They prefer to emigrate or die. Negroes hate work, but they can be driven to it.

So my American companions got on the first boat for the United States, leaving me behind to figure out how I could get back to the Chucunaque under more broad-minded, less commercial auspices. The first thing I did was to call on Governor General Morrow (brother of Dwight Morrow) to give him a report of my geographical findings. In the course of our conversation I mentioned finding a strange type of white people in the interior. And here I got my first sight of an expression I have seen on many men's faces since. It may be



## A GLIMPSE OF THE CHUCUNAQUE

described as "sad." Governor Morrow was skeptical. He was nice about it. He didn't want to hint that I was lying or in the last stages of malaria. But his face showed plainly that the very mention of white Indians was painful to him. I shut up completely. A year later he was to give my white Indians a splendid reception in the Administration Building of the Canal Zone. But now he was "sad."

Next I called on General Babbit, Commandant at Quarry Heights and ranking army officer in the Zone, through whom I had borrowed my map making instruments. I gave him a copy of my map, a complete geographical report on what we had found and said I would like to tell him about some strange primitive white people we had encountered—if only he wouldn't be "sad" about it.

At once he was all attention. General Babbit was both a soldier and a scholar (a not too common combination), with a hobby for ethnology. I wish there were more like him in the service. The U. S. Army has missed some rare opportunities for valuable ethnological work in the Philippines, Panama, and Nicaragua.

"Go ahead and tell me," he said. "I'm interested." So I told him all I knew—almost. As my Indian friends are fond of saying—"Never tell anybody all you know."

"Marsh," he replied. "I believe you, and I'll tell you why. As you probably know, we maintain a secret wireless station on the Caribbean coast near Colombia. At least it's supposed to be secret. About twice a month we send an airplane down there with mail. These planes are supposed to fly first to Colon, then follow the Caribbean coast to the station. Just recently I sent a Lieutenant Arnold on the trip. He broke the rules and flew straight across the interior. The clouds forced him to fly very low. When he returned, he reported orally to me that he had passed over a village in the interior which was

## *WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN*

inhabited by white-skinned people living like Indians. Arnold is one of my best men. What are you going to do about it?"

I told him that I was going back to the United States and organize a scientific expedition to comb interior Darien.

"Good!" he said. "I'll give you all the assistance the Army can supply."

My next expedition was off to a flying start.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE MARSH-DARIEN EXPEDITION

\*

SOME day some one will write a book about scientific expeditions and how they are organized. But I'm not going into this interesting subject here. I got my expedition moving finally, and have nothing to complain about.

The first thing I did after reaching the United States was to report to my employers, Ford and Firestone, advocating a thorough investigation of Darien, not only from a rubber point of view, but in a well-rounded scientific manner. Darien was one of the "blind spots" of the western hemisphere, about which we knew almost nothing.

But Ford and Firestone were not interested. They were concerned only with rubber, and they had decided, on the recommendation of their representatives, to abandon Darien. They offered to send me to the Philippines, to Liberia, or the Amazon. But I refused, as I had determined to get back to Darien as quickly as possible.

I was no longer interested primarily in rubber, although I realized that its consideration was necessary to help secure financial support. Fortunately another great industrialist, who happened to be a personal friend of mine, provided ample funds for the new venture.

The University of Rochester, the American Museum of Natural History of New York, and the Smithsonian Institution

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

of Washington, D. C., designated competent scientists to join the expedition. The Departments of Commerce and War at Washington gave their support. President Belisario Porras of Panama enthusiastically coöperated, as did the Canal Zone administration. Our personnel, assembled on the Canal Zone, was as follows:

1. Leader: Richard O. Marsh.
2. Prof. J. L. Baer, anthropologist and ethnologist, representing the Smithsonian Institution.
3. Dr. C. M. Breder, Jr., ichthyologist and naturalist, representing the American Museum of Natural History, New York.
4. Dr. H. L. Fairchild, geologist, representing the University of Rochester, N. Y.
5. Dr. Raoul Brin, botanist, and soil expert, representing President Porras of Panama.
6. Charles Charlton, photographer.
7. Paul Benton, writer.
8. Major Harry Johnson, retired army man, naturalist and taxidermist.
9. Major Omer Malsbury, topographer and engineer, representing the Canal Zone Administration.
10. Lieutenant Glen Townsend, on the staff of General Connor, representing the U. S. Military Intelligence.
11. Lieutenant Rosebaum, U. S. Army, West Pointer, representing the U. S. Military Intelligence.
12. Corp. Murphy, U. S. Signal Corps, wireless operator.
13. Private Pabom, orderly to Lieutenant Townsend.
14. A Panaman military captain, name withheld, representing the Government of Panama.

Others: A Panama cook and cook's assistant, two Alabama negroes, several Panama negro laborers.

## THE MARSH-DARIEN EXPEDITION

We were splendidly equipped with all reasonable requirements. The scientists had the necessary instruments and paraphernalia. From the States we had brought two of the latest model Elto outboard motors—a vast supply of presents for the Indians:—trinkets from the ten-cent stores, knives, machetes, axes, tools, two portable victrolas with a large and varied assortment of records.

In the Canal Zone we were given the privileges of the Government Commissary Stores and we stocked up with tropical supplies—medicines, food, bolts of gay cotton cloth, fireworks, mosquito bars, gasoline and oil in sealed five gallon cans, etc.

The War Department had given us access to the army supply warehouses on the Canal Zone. From there we got tents, cots, a portable military kitchen, a field radio set, and other useful things. We had fire-arms and ammunition enough for a field military force, as indeed we technically were through special authorization of President Porras.

Best of all, General Patrick, in charge of the Air Service of the War Department at Washington, had provided us with letters instructing the Army Air Service of the Canal Zone to give us all reasonable assistance and coöperation.

But unfortunately for us my friend General Babbit had been succeeded as Commander in Chief of the American military forces in the Canal Zone by General Sturgis—a “hard boiled” soldier with apparently no interest in any field outside of his military duties, unless it were golf, which engrossed most of his attention.

---

CHAPTER VII  
AIRPLANE SURVEY

\*

AS soon as I got to the Zone, I paid formal calls on Governor General Morrow, General Sturgis, and President Porras. Then I took my letters from General Patrick to Major Walsh, ranking commander of the Canal Zone Air Force, who proved very enthusiastic. I explained that I first wanted to make a reconnaissance flight right down through the heart of interior Darien and verify the existence and extent of the interior valley I had found a few months before. On later flights I wanted to skirt the flanks of the mountain ranges and locate from the air all interior Indian villages and settlements, so we would know what to aim for with our land expedition.

Of course, in all interior Darien there is not a single location where an airplane can land, either on the ground or on water. The land is covered with high dense jungle, while the streams are too narrow, too crooked and with too many rapids and snags to permit a landing by hydroplane. The reconnaissance trip as blocked out would cover between four hundred and five hundred miles, nearly the maximum range of the planes then available on the Zone.

But Major Walsh asked— "When do you want to start?" I replied, "As soon as possible." "All right," he said, "be on the Coco Solo flying field at 7 A.M. tomorrow and we will be ready for you."

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

mountain range, running due east and about 2,500 feet high. To the south we could see the beginnings of another range, rising from low hills to tall peaks farther on. Directly below us the Bayano River ran crookedly through a deep gorge in a tangle of ridges and spurs branching off from the two ranges. For many miles it was white with swirling rapids, snags, and rocks. One mystery at least was cleared up. Those rapids are the reason why the northwestern entrance into the central valley of Darien has been so effectively blocked against four centuries of Spanish and Panamanian exploration. It would be hopeless to attempt them by canoe. The land route would be impossible even without opposition from the Indians. The airplane is the only method which can cope with the difficulties of the upper Bayano.

This rugged land and almost impassable river course extended for about fifteen miles, apparently totally uninhabited.

All this time I was plotting on my map the topography of mountains and valleys, noting principally the increasing magnitude of the mountain range to the south—a range not shown on any existing map of Darien.

Then the transverse broken ranges fell back from the river course and we entered over a wide open valley continually becoming more level between increasingly high and sheer knife-like parallel ranges twenty-five miles apart. To the southeast the unknown range culminated in an immense three-peaked mountain which was certainly the peak I had triangulated on from the Pacific side several months previously. The river below, now flowing through flat land, took the sinuous curves of a huge snake.

We continued to fly southeastward, keeping near the center of the great valley and between the diverging main tributaries of the Bayano. The northern tributary soon branched into the foothills of the main San Blas Range, and we lost sight of it.

## AIRPLANE SURVEY

I was there at 7 A.M. next morning. Major Walsh had provided two De Haviland two seated open planes. They were the type referred to by pilots as "flying coffins," but were the best planes then available on the Canal Zone. Their maximum range of flight was only from five hundred to six hundred miles.

My plane was piloted by Lt. Birnn. The other plane, piloted by Lt. Curry, carried Sgt. Dawkins, an expert military photographer, and was equipped with a large military airplane camera. I had with me a cavalry topographical outfit, sketching board, compass, telescope, and clinometer. The plane, of course, had its aneroid for altitude determination.

It was arranged that the plane carrying Lt. Birnn and myself should lead the way about a quarter of a mile ahead of the second plane and that when we made a circle or a spiral downward, it was to be a signal for the following plane to take a photograph.

We hopped off from Coco Solo and headed for France Field, the airport at the Pacific end of the Canal. Here we filled the tanks with gas and oil and hopped off again for unknown country. At last we were on our way to Darien.

We headed a little north of east, toward the inland village of Chepo a few miles from the river of the same name. This village is the eastern limit of the settled and occupied area around the Canal Zone and is connected with Panama City by a dirt road passable at times. The country between is fairly level grassland, locally known as "the Savannas" and devoted chiefly to cattle raising.

After passing Chepo, we headed due east up the Bayano valley. The terrain changed to dense jungle. For fifteen miles or so we could see unmistakable negro huts and small plantations along the river banks. Then they disappeared abruptly. We were over free Indian country.

About ten miles north of us was the main San Blas



## AIRPLANE SURVEY

Along the banks of the southern tributary, known to the Darien Indians as the Cañaxa, and along one of its northerly branches, we could sight almost continuous plantation clearings surrounding large Indian houses—extending almost fifteen miles. These houses were rectangular, very large, with walls rising flush from the ground, but never congregated closely together in village groups, as is characteristic of the Tule settlements everywhere else in Darien.

Soon we approached the ultimate headwaters of the Bayano River system. My two pilots had been skeptical of my theory of a great interior valley containing the river systems of both the Bayano and the Chucunaque. They relied upon the standard published maps of the Republic of Panama, with their imaginary topography of interior Darien, which showed a massive mountain range separating the headwaters of the two river systems. Just before our flight they were still arguing as to whether we would have to climb two or three or five thousand feet to cross that divide.

But there was no such mountain divide. The two valleys merged into each other imperceptibly, the small streams winding about so intricately that it was impossible to tell to which river system they belonged. We were now twenty miles to the east of the great mountain peak in the southern range, and presently we could see a gap in the ridge, four miles wide and extending clear down to sea-level. Through this gap we could get a clear view straight south as far as the eye could reach. This was the Savanna River. If it were a river of water instead of a river of mud, the Savanna would be a very easy entrance into the mysterious country we had just flown over. But until some sort of mud-boat is invented, it will offer no help to the explorer.

North of the mountain gap, within the interior valley proper, the headwaters of the Savanna rise into beautiful

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

higher land. In fact, from an airplane above, it is impossible to distinguish between the upper headwaters of the Bayano, the Chucunaque and the Savanna.

On a lower tributary, unmistakably an affluent of the Savanna, we discovered another group of entirely different settlements. These were large isolated houses on both banks of the river, separated from each other by a couple of hundred yards, some round, some rectangular, all elevated upon posts above ground, and surrounded by extensive plantations. They were unmistakably Chocoi Indian settlements—the largest and most prosperous looking found anywhere in Darien.

On through the interior valley we flew, now bending more to the southeast. Darien as a whole describes a quarter-circle segment of arc, with the westerly end at the top of the circle and the easterly end at the right of the circle—an arc extending well over into the Atrato River basin of Colombia, three hundred or more miles in total length.

We were now unmistakably over the southerly headwaters of the Chucunaque River. On the river branch below, which I later identified as the Artigarti, we soon passed over an enormous “long house,” on the south bank facing the tributary, but with no surrounding smaller houses or plantations. Months later we found a similar great isolated “long house” among the Cuna Indians of the Pucro River, which was used as a ceremonial tribal house or meeting place for neighboring tribes on special rare occasions.

Several miles further on we passed over a small, apparently deserted village, also on the south bank. Four rectangular Tule type houses in good condition fronted on the river thirty or forty yards back from the bank, but the paths from the houses to the river were overgrown with jungle grass. There were no canoes on the shore in front—always an invariable

## AIRPLANE SURVEY

sign of the presence of inhabitants. The village was unmistakably abandoned.

I speculated on whether war, famine, or disease had depopulated that substantial looking little settlement. Later I was to realize that it may have been merely one of the "suburban type" villages prevalent among the Tules, which are occupied only during certain seasons of the year.

From the remote headwaters of the Chucunaque, clear down almost to Yavisa near its mouth, a distance of over fifty miles in an air line, we saw no more villages, plantations, or evidences of human habitation. The main valley of the Chucunaque is, as far as we or any one else knows, uninhabited. Yet for agricultural purposes on a grand scale, it is the most favorable region in all Darien.

The valley here was nearly thirty miles wide, and very level. The Chucunaque described great sinuous loops and curves, as customary with a river flowing through flat land. The main San Blas mountain range to the east averaged perhaps 2,500 feet high, with individual peaks of nearly five thousand feet.

The Pacific side range had settled down to a quite uniform ridge of about 1,500 feet elevation. No low gaps through the San Blas Range could be seen from our course, but three more appeared in the Pacific Range. They were smaller than the great gap of the Savanna, but like it dropped down almost to sea-level. They corresponded exactly with my observations from the boat as it ascended the Tuyra River.

We kept over the Chucunaque, which here flows nearer the Pacific Range than the San Blas Range. The Pacific Range was a smooth sheer upthrust wedge with a sharp crest and no foothills, while the San Blas Range showed many irregularities, numerous foothills, and small lateral valleys. We learned later that there were plenty of Indians on these small streams, but

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

the wide level valley of the Chucunaque itself was wholly uninhabited.

Without seeing a house or a clearing we arrived over that part of the river which I had explored in the skiff five months earlier. I had planned to circle and dip in salute over the house of the white Indian girls on the outskirts of Yavisa, then proceed on south another fifty miles to the ancient gold mine at Cana, returning over the central valley to the Canal Zone. I had not completed my mapping, and there were many things I wanted to get a second look at.

But suddenly Lieutenant Birnn waved his hand frantically and passed back a written note. "Radiator leaking. Engine getting hot. Don't know when it may stall."

Sure enough! I held my hand out over the edge of the cockpit and could feel the fine spray blown back from the engine. Our planes were equipped with the old-type "pre-historic" water-cooled motors.

I was bitterly disappointed, but this was no place for a stalled engine. I wrote back, "Use your own judgment." I was no aviator, just a passenger. Lieutenant Birnn answered, "Think we'd better make for the coast. May pick up a boat if we crash."

The plane swerved sharply to the right and headed westward for one of the low gaps in the Pacific Range. Soon we were over the brackish swamp between the mountains and the Tuyra. The indicator on the engine thermostat rose to the red "danger zone" and stayed there. We headed out to the coast through Darien Harbor and San Miguel Bay.

A plane with a faulty motor over inhospitable country is a poor observation post. There is too much on the observer's mind. I got only a brief look at the country to the south of the Tuyra, but this was enough to confirm my suspicion that the maps of it were wholly imaginary. Then we swung north-



*A San Blas Village: Navagandi*



*View of San Blas Coast*

## AIRPLANE SURVEY

ward toward Panama City. We saw nothing of importance on the way—in fact we were thinking more about the motor than about the muddy coast-line beneath us.

The motor did not fail. The leak did not enlarge and we arrived in Panama City with the gas nearly gone and the radiator practically empty. Twice had I been driven back from interior Darien. Once by the fears of my “rubber expert” companions. The second time by the threat of a leaky radiator. I was to break that spell on the next venture.

Now let us briefly review the results of this four hundred mile reconnaissance by airplane over Darien.

We found an interior level valley approximately one hundred and twenty-five miles long, averaging twenty-five miles wide, extending from thirty miles east of the Chepo River to the mouth of the Chucunaque River. The highest elevation of this valley, in the neighborhood of the headwaters of the Bayano, Savanna and Chucunaque rivers, was not over three hundred and fifty feet above sea-level.

This valley was protected from the north and east by the continuous curved San Blas Mountain Range, guarded by the coastal San Blas Indians who permitted no strangers to penetrate through their territory.

On the south and west it was protected by the high and impassable “Porras-Marsh” Range, containing four low gaps, one exuding the “mud-glacier” of the Savanna River, and the other three debouching into impassable, brackish, crocodile-infested swamps extending to the Tuyra River and Darien Harbor.

The western entry to the valley up the Bayano is blocked by fifteen miles of transverse mountain ridges through which the Bayano cuts a gorge almost impassable for any party carrying a large amount of equipment.

## WHITE INDIANS OF DARIEN

The southeast entry up the Chucunaque offers the only feasible route of entry for a large party; but the lower Tuyra with its bordering low brackish swamps, swift current and recurrent tidal bores, is a difficult and tedious passage for any craft not propelled by a modern engine powerful enough to "buck" those alternating currents. No wonder this interior valley has remained practically unknown until the present day.

The great bulk of the Chucunaque valley we found apparently uninhabited until we neared its mouth at Yavisa. As for the parallel mountain ranges and their slopes, we still had no direct knowledge as to whether or not they were inhabited. Close inspection of those flanking mountains had been left for later reconnaissance flights.