

XVI

THE BLACK RIVER

The current is stronger than on the day of our arrival. Once more the banks are flashing by as we sail forward on our journey, but a pang of anguish fills me. My soul is rebelling. A voice in my mind keeps whispering. "...But where are you going like this? Why are you leaving? What else do you hope to find at your next destination? Did you lack anything among these forest people? Did they chase you away?..." Each question is like a knife through the heart, and despite all my efforts to think about something else, I cannot silence this mysterious inner voice.

I feel like part of myself has been left behind. It is true that these two months have counted enormously for us. This was not a normal call in a normal port, but something a lot more important, going much deeper into our search for the absolute.

Now, things can never be the same again. We had told ourselves that we had to go back to Europe. Why? I don't even know why. Not long ago, I would have answered that it is because my roots are there, but now I know that a man's roots are where he decides them to be.

We are shooting down the river, and have almost reached the mouth of the Siapa already. A few carbets appear in a clearing, in the same spot where we had been hammered down by the storm. The visibility had been too poor for us to see them. We do not stop, and continue on to the Casiquiare.

The water level is much lower, and though this part of the river seemed safe a couple of months ago, it is now studded with reefs. The

pass is fairly easy to find, but we can never afford to hesitate too long, or else we get stuck on the eddy-forming sandbanks in the middle of the waterway.

The Casiquiare is very wide here: it does not resemble the segment situated between Tama-Tama and the mouth of the Siapa. There are not so many twists and turns and the current is strong, so we go down the river at a much faster pace. We meet one of the large pirogues that bring fresh supplies to this region, from San Carlos on the Rio Negro. It is hugging the bank closely to ride the crosscurrents.

Suddenly, sprouting out of the verdant forest cover, we see a gigantic rock, an enormous mass of granite reaching for the sky like the fist of a giant shooting out from the centre of the earth. Such an extraordinary and unexpected sight is almost unreal. We are really navigating in a different world, on a different planet. We drop anchor at the foot of this amazing vision.

I could never have imagined this kind of landscape, this kind of direct connection to the divine. Perhaps this rock is the final resting place of some Amazonian deities. The place is magical. I am absolutely unable to tear my eyes away from the fantastic structure. I feel as though some kind of energy is radiating out of this rock, washing over me to the depths of my soul. How can this be?

The sun has set a long time ago, and the rock has turned into an impressive shadow silhouetted against the starry sky.

We stay there for two days. There is a village nearby, of Kuripako Indians. As an ethnic group, they are very different from the Yanomami. The forest around the village is dotted with huge parcels, where a variety of vegetables are grown, including manioc, bananas, oranges and pineapples. A tame otter follows the tender each time we go ashore. She then climbs onto the beach and runs after Michka, who is not quite sure whether she should attack or play with this strange animal, halfway between a dog and a fish.

Shortly after our departure, we reach Solano, a small town with a National Guard control station. We have to show them our pile of papers and authorisations, which they check and stamp one by one.

Our navigation is smooth and easy. The water levels are much lower than in July, but the river bottom is basically sound, and except

for a few places where the surface shows telltale signs of hidden rocks, we can progress without problems or pause. And so it is that only a few hours after leaving Solano, we reach the junction with the Rio Negro, a gigantic crossroads of waterways in the middle of the forest.

So here is another Amazonian giant, the child of two of the great ones: the Orinoco and the Amazon. What a funny feeling we have, being here! I cannot explain this emotion very well, the thrill I feel while contemplating these dark waters that have never been sailed until today.

One thousand two hundred and fifty miles stand between Manaos, and us, one thousand two hundred and fifty miles stretched out in the heart of Amazonia, about which we know absolutely nothing. The boat is speeding down the river. How strange is the dark colour of the water! We had seen such a thing once before, on the Atabapo river, just upstream of Puerto Velano. That river had been twice as black, to the point where we thought it was a kind of chemical pollution.

We get to a natural rocky barrier that seems to block the river, not an auspicious start for this new leg of our journey. We stop our progress by circling on the surface, observing this new obstacle with our binoculars. After hesitating for half an hour, we decide to try for a passage near the right bank.

The moment is nerve-wracking. The closer we get to this pile of rocks, the harder I find it to breathe; it feels like something is crushing my thorax. The depth decreases as the speed of the current increases, thus creating large eddies on the surface. Suddenly, we are literally sucked in by the fury of the torrent, everything is happening too fast for us to have time to think. Instinct takes over my intelligence, and directs the helm. A few seconds later, we are on the other side, in waters that seem extraordinarily calm by contrast. On our small-scale map, only a short transversal line barring the river marked these rapids. We keep going until we reach, a few hours later, the small town of San Carlos on the Rio Negro, just a few miles from the Brazilian border. A national guard is observing us with binoculars. We go ashore and present him our passports and the same pile of

authorisations, which are stamped one more time. Next, we go to the barracks to gather, hopefully, some information about the navigability of the river and the necessary formalities to get into Brazil, since we do not have a proper visa. The commander of this border unit is a captain we had already met in Puerto Ayacucho, a very friendly and competent black man, originating from Maracaibo. He explains that the formalities of entry into Brazil can only be dealt with in Manaus, and that the border is only guarded by one contingent of national guards. But he cannot tell us anything about navigation on the Rio Negro since he has never gone that way.

A few letters are waiting for us in poste restante, from friends, from Claudette's family, and from the Volvo headquarters, telling us that the breakdown of our reverse gear should not affect the other ones. So we might not be able to back up, but as long as we watch out for the oil level, everything else should hold on until Bélem.

In such long trips, receiving mail is like getting sweets for the spirit. We wait for it hopefully, and sometimes would be ready to sacrifice a whole week for a single one of these short letters, for a few banal words on the torn sheet of a notebook. These letters are not just a collection of news, or phrases jotted down on a piece of paper; they are thoughts, human warmth, and something hard to define, food for the soul.

This journey, this adventure, is solely the result of our own desires. But some people supported us, while others only tolerated our fancy, not to mention those who clearly held a grudge against us, as though our decision had thrown the entire family into disgrace. To listen to them, leaving everything behind to sail around the world is just not done, or rather, is not done anymore. For people who need adventure, there is always television, movies, even books. It would be ridiculous for people who have reached a certain position in society, who have the respectable future of an honest man ahead of them, to embark upon such an adventure. It is not serious, not responsible. And even if one gives no thought to one's own future, one should think about the consequences of one's actions on the lives of others before doing something that cannot be undone. These are the words that are

still resonating in my head, words that broke some personal ties as efficiently as an axe. Words I am always reminded of whenever letters arrive from my country.

In the local post office, we meet a man who says that navigation on the Rio Negro is impossible on the Brazilian side, that these are not rapids we might have to face, but waterfalls, and that only madmen could come up with the idea of going down this waterway. Not that he has ever been there himself, he says, but he has heard it from other people, people whose word can be trusted.

We stay in San Carlos for three days, then head south, still without any trustworthy information, any map, or any other document about this tributary of the Amazon. The National Guard sends a pirogue to escort us all the way to the border.

The banks are very picturesque, dotted as they are with small islands, themselves dotted with straw huts near the beaches. As we pass by, families come out and wave a piece of fabric to attract our attention. In the distance, a mountain stands out from its verdant setting, as impressive as the one we had seen on the Casiquiare, but higher and heavier. This is something we had not expected; this particular mixture of water, forest and mountains is really unique to Amazonia. The fact that the mountain is alone amidst all this greenery gives it even more majesty, and we are absolutely fascinated by it.

This is a surreal region, and were it not for the national guards sitting in the pirogue in front of us, our thoughts would have been lost in the clouds again.

Our progress is rapid and relaxing, as we are being guided and have no need to think about anything in particular. We reach the solitary granite mountain. In fact, this bizarre outgrowth, nestled in its green setting, marks the junction of three borders: those of Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia.

We stop at the last Venezuelan outpost for about an hour. The national guards are expecting us. They know that a "colleague from France," a "sergeant from the French Gendarmerie," is about to pass, since the captain of the San Carlos assignment has radioed them the information.

After stamping all our papers, the sergeant in charge of this post shakes hands with me and wishes us both the best of luck. Then, I am treated to a respectful military salute from every one of the guards. This improvised ceremony touches me deeply, going beyond the simple farewell of these men to the general farewell of the marvellous people with whom we have certainly experienced the best times of our lives.

We are sailing away rapidly, riding this very strong current. We reach the border, where the national flags of each country have been planted on each side of a small clearing by the river.

Our small-scale map ends here. All we have now is the map from our old dictionary, whose pages have been glued together by humidity. One thousand two hundred and fifty miles of navigation, summed up in an inch and a half.

Gradually, reefs appear, becoming more numerous as we progress, less visible too, but they do not hinder navigation very much, and within a few hours we have reached Cucuy, the first Brazilian post beyond the border.

Cucuy is a small village that owes its existence only to the company of foot soldiers who ensure the security of the border. The captain of this company has no difficulties in issuing us a pass that will allow us to go all the way to San Gabriel, a small town about a hundred and fifty miles downstream. He does not have a map of the river, he says, since all troop travel is done by plane. On the other hand, there is a large map of Brazil on the wall, much more detailed than the one in our dictionary, so I take a few notes on a piece of paper. The distance that still separates us from the Atlantic is impressive indeed. We leave the next morning.

We are not sailing so fast any more. The current is strong, but we keep the motor in low gear, so as to keep the boat more responsive to sudden manoeuvres. This part of the river seems sound enough. We go downstream for a good sixty miles without any pause, despite the presence of a few dangerous sandbanks. Our ascent of the Orinoco has initiated us to this kind of navigation, not so much skimming the

rocks, as we say, but rather going through them. I feel like a schoolboy being able to put to the test everything that his teacher told him. Eddies have a different appearance according to the nature of the river bottom and the depth of the reefs, and we can read them quite well by now.

For over five thousand years, both sea and river navigation were done without any documents or maps. What these people did not have on paper, they kept it in their heads. By dint of wanting to simplify everything, we have lost the gifts we were born with, though they can still be found in all the indigenous populations of the world, whether concerning navigation, or concerning a more general relationship with nature.

We do have to cross a few delicate passages, where rocks can be found piled up in the middle of the river. Sometimes we are blinded by the sun's reflection on the water, and by the time we can see our mistake, it is too late. Not having a reverse gear, we are forced to continue in the wrong pass, feeling our hearts beating faster and faster as we go over difficult eddies, but the depth is always great enough for us to avoid the submerged reefs.

A few days later, we arrive in San Felipe, a small fishing community about thirty miles upstream of San Gabriel.

The spot is magnificent. We drop anchor in a small recess of the bank, just behind an amazingly beautiful beach. Many people come and welcome us, warning us to be very careful when stepping in the water. There are no piranhas, but many rays, which are just as dangerous. We tour the village, exchange some fruits and vegetables, and ask about the state of the river as far as San Gabriel. We thus learn about a very dangerous spot, only a few miles downstream. We should not attempt to cross it alone, explains a fisherman, because we would almost certainly lose our boat. We need a guide who knows the passes well, someone we could trust. We are directed to a house next to the small chapel. The man who lives there greets us warmly, offering us a bowl of some delicious sweet mixture. We agree on a price, but since we have no Brazilian money, we will pay him with Venezuelan bills, and add some clothes for his family. We leave very early the next morning. The banks are flashing by, but we can see that they are

becoming more heavily populated as we go downriver. Our navigation is going so smoothly that I begin to wonder whether I really needed to pay for this man to help us.

But around the next bend of the river, we come face to face with a vast expanse of water that looks not like a lake, but like a gigantic cauldron filled with some hideous boiling preparation. We have never seen anything like it. We cannot see the slightest pass. The surface is bristling with oddly shaped rocks and dead tree trunks stuck on the half-submerged reefs. This is a sordid labyrinth, and the smell of death pervades the place. Our guide is concentrating. He crosses himself, then asks us in a tense voice:

"Your motor, is it any good?"

I tell him that we have never had any problems so far, that it should be fine, but who knows...

"You have enough diesel oil?" he continues.

On this, I can totally reassure him. We filled the tank yesterday. At any rate, it is too late already, since we are already caught up in this liquid hell. We are coming to an ugly pile of rocks surrounded by very impressive eddies. The man puts the motor in full throttle, and skirts around the islet.

We embark upon a diabolical route. We hug dangerous reefs, then circle back and head for a terrifying rock that we can only occasionally glimpse through the heavy turbulence around it. The current changes direction in a few places, and our progress is a constant fight. Other times, we are sucked by the torrents of water hurtling themselves through narrow bottlenecks.

For over half an hour we are slaloming madly, avoiding these rapids, skirting these sandbanks, and always crossing over the powerful swirls of this furious liquid mass.

"We call this the Flower Island Pass," says our pilot, after we finally manage to get out of this wasp's nest.

If the river has regained its initial calm, the banks are still extremely uneven and crenellated by a kind of rock-strewn lace.

In the middle of the afternoon, we drop anchor in a wide bay, not far from a small beach on which a few large pirogues have been run aground. We are in San Gabriel.

As soon as we stop the motor, a terrifying roar can be heard.

"These are the rapids," calmly states our guide.

"The rapids???"

I give him his money and we get off.

"The rapids are on the other side of San Gabriel," he adds as he is leaving. "The water level is already quite low, and they must be very strong."

We cross the small market town and find ourselves on the other side of a slope, on top of which is a Catholic mission. What we can glimpse through a curtain of coconut trees is straight out of the pages of the Apocalypse. These are rapids indeed, true rapids, not the simple acceleration of the current through some reefs, as we had got used to on the Orinoco and the Rio Negro so far. This is an actual drop in level, through which the entire river hurtles itself violently, forming terrifying rollers that crash loudly against a number of half-submerged reefs, and send heavy showers of foam flying up in the air.

This sends a cold shiver down my spine. This is impassable, there is no way we can go any further. We have reached the end of our journey on this river, and we will be forced to turn back now.

To turn back... And where would we go? Not to Puerto Ayacucho at any rate, since we cannot afford to cross back overland. We have been caught in a trap. We have two options: either we scrap the boat, or we spend all our money and have nothing left to live on. Were we so oblivious to reality, to get caught up in such a situation? Still, neither of us regrets anything, and the usual "had we known" are absent from our bitter discussion. We have been dealt a new hand in a game that was risky from the beginning. We were playing a sort of poker, but the cards were fixed in advance, without our knowledge. Things were going too well so far. We have had a number of fabulous experiences, but no one can avoid destiny forever. Is life itself not a giant game of cards, where a new card is laid down with each passing day? So our mad journey has come to an end. I don't want to think about anything today. Emotions are running too high, the pain is too sharp.

The sun goes down behind a thick wall of fog. We go back to the boat.

The following morning, we go to contemplate this diabolical passage a second time. We sit on a rock, not far from a local fisherman, and meditate.

The sun rises gently. The risings and settings of this divine star are certainly among the most beautiful sights we have had the chance of seeing during this journey. In the West, there is a kind of legend that in the tropics, the transition between night and day is very short.

"You'll see, the sun appears and disappears all at once, in a few minutes..."

This myth is ill founded. Granted, it happens faster than under our more northern latitudes. That is a question of geometry. But we still have plenty of time to observe this marvellous golden disk sinking into the fiery horizon, or emerging above the dark silhouettes of trees. It can be seen as it slowly climbs up in the sky, amidst those deliciously fluffy clouds, white here, turning yellow and ochre over there. At this point, the wind seems to stop momentarily, perhaps in respect for this sacred moment of the day. Everything comes to a standstill, as though nature itself was fascinated by this daily miracle. It is almost like witnessing a goddess giving birth to a child god.

The fisherman is worried by our presence here at this early hour. He seems to be an Indian, perhaps a metis, dressed in European-style clothes and wearing a small canvas hat. He is pulling regularly on his line, catching a few lively fishes in the process. He greets us and asks whether everything is all right.

"They must be staying at the hotel," he says to himself, though loudly enough for us to hear and eventually respond to his declaration.

Portuguese is fairly easy to understand for someone who can speak a little Spanish. It is to Spanish what Creole is to French, a kind of idiom, mostly based on the same words and sentence structures, but with enough peculiarities to form what we call a different "language", though in reality it is nothing but a dialect.

At first, it almost sounds like German, with its broken rhythm and numerous consonants. But after a while, one gets used to it, and understands what a speaker is saying, as long as it's not too fast. To be able to understand people, to be able to establish a dialogue with them,

is something very important in the magnificent collection of life experiences that we call travel. Whether travelling on a good or a bad boat, alone or as a couple, for the young and the old alike, if the ability to communicate is lacking, the journey becomes useless, worthless.

I tell the man that we are on a boat on the other side of the rapids.

"Are you going to Manaos?" he asks.

"We would have liked to," I reply, "but with these rapids..."

The man does not react. He pulls on his line, reels in a small wriggling fish, and throws the line back in the river. Only then does he turn to us, saying:

"Go to this small shop next to the police station. There is a man there who might be able to help you. He has passed the rapids with big pirogues, and knows them well."

I pretend to be interested so as not to insult him, but deep down, I know without the shadow of a doubt that we could never make it down these particular rapids. I listen to the man as he explains how dangerous the place is, something we can agree wholeheartedly upon.

We decide to tour San Gabriel, which is two to three times bigger than San Carlos. The standard of living seems higher, the houses are nice ones for the most part, and cars are driving in the streets. This is because we are in a region where these men called "garimperos", or gold diggers, live. Each shop has a big sign that says "compra oro", and as soon as we walk into these shops, the first thing we see is a gun, next to a small scale used to weigh the gold. Here, gold is bought or sold for about a hundred and seventy pounds sterling an ounce, to be resold for almost twice as much in Bélem, Bahia, or Rio.

All the merchandise is very expensive. Everything comes from Manaos, and has been carried in small boats up to Camanaos, a village situated on the other side of the rapids. A sandy trail connects it with San Gabriel.

We go to the police station to inform them of our passage, and ask a few questions about the possible means of getting our boat across the rapids.

"This town is cut off from the rest of the world, and everything needs to be brought here by small towing boats, and that is, only when the water level allows it. This means all the trucks here are quite small," explains the local unit's commander. "The only solution for you would be to go down the rapids directly, something highly dangerous, but feasible. The water is quite low at the moment. Only last month, two gold diggers died in this evil pass. After their embarkation turned over, we saw the bodies bounce several times, as though ejected by the torrents' violence."

"Every year," he continues, "there are victims. If you still want to give it a try, then don't do it alone. Take a guide with you, there are a few who have passed the rapids on smaller boats, and they should be able to help you. You will have to pay, with no guarantees of getting to the other side, but this is only reasonable."

We go back to the boat holding two satellite photographs of the area all the way to Barcelos, about two hundred and fifty miles downstream, in case we manage to pass this obstacle unharmed.

For several days, we walk around the small streets of this town, with its whitewashed walls. Our vague desire to continue, to pay a pilot and to risk it all grows stronger every day. What seemed madness now appears logical, and even though this will be very dangerous, it is probably the best course for us to take. Once the first step is taken, there is no going back, and the first step was taken months ago. Risks are always part of an adventure.

Every now and then we go to the rapids to watch these enormous rollers crashing down to the lower level, wondering whether all this white foam might not soon become a future shroud for our boat...

Finally, one morning, we decide to go for it. We cannot hesitate forever. I find this kamikaze pilot the police chief had told us about. He is an Indian, living in this town like so many others who leave their forest behind to benefit from all the "advantages" of a system he will never fit in to. He lives in a hovel, with an old wrinkled woman. He immediately agrees to guide us. We settle on the price: two

hundred cruzados, or roughly twenty-five pounds sterling, which is the equivalent of one month's salary in the country. We add the fare of a return trip in a bush-taxi.

He comes back to the boat with me, and we leave immediately.

XVII

MAKE OR BREAK

We go up the river for a while; to get beyond a rocky point situated less than a mile upstream. This is only to test the motor, since nothing prevents us from cutting directly in the right direction. There is plenty of space and the water is smooth, which, when the current is this strong, means the river is deep.

We are progressing very slowly at first, but the man accelerates gradually. The rocks grow bigger. We start on a wide loop, skirt the pile of rocks, then go back in the opposite direction. It's in God's hands now. The water flows very quickly. Standing at the helm, the Indian is staring at the river. We can read his thoughts on his tensed up features. He might have passed these rapids several times already, but the place seems to worry him more than he had let on earlier. His only markers are the mountains we can see in the distance, in the shape of a reclined woman whose attributes have been described to us many times since crossing the border. He has to align one of these distant mountains with the nearby heights in order to find the pass.

The frightening roar of the rapids gets louder and louder. In the distance, the river seems to be split in two by a whitish crest. This is the foam from the first rollers, where the water violently throws itself against the first rocks of this mad pass. But we have no time to think about this: we are already there. The noise is deafening. We can clearly see the difference in the two levels. It goes down by eight feet in less than fifty metres.

The place looks like a chess game that has just started, with most of its more or less misshapen pieces ready to bang against each other. These ones are bristling with weird peaks and outgrowths; those ones show perforations covering their surface, monstrous scars, sometimes still purulent with oozing lichen. Some are brushing the surface, like horrible soldiers preparing an ambush. Others, on the contrary, stand gigantic and terrifying, seemingly wanting to threaten whoever might think of getting through.

The water is no less disquieting. We can see turbulence, foam, and rollers here and there. The boat is moving at a rapid pace.

I think I see the pass, between the shore of the island and a pile of great black rocks. The water there is calm, the surface of the river seems not to have the slightest wrinkle, but the Indian, to my great surprise, turns starboard, making headway for places I myself would never have dared to head for.

Gigantic whirlpools form in our wake, as though the lugubrious depths contained horrible underwater monsters determined to swallow us. It creates a pattern on the surface, exactly like those crevices that occasionally appear under the foot of mountain dwellers travelling up and down snowy massifs. The only difference is that here, the crevices close back immediately, as though attempting to better capture those who let themselves be caught.

To fall in the water would be a disaster.

We go around one of the rocks, then come back towards another, which we hug along the way. The current is not excessively strong, and even goes in the opposite direction in some places, but we have to fight to get through. It is an abominable labyrinth; the circuitous route affords us no mistake. There are no other options, it is this way which we must take, and no other.

We think we're seeing the end of it when the flow of the river seems to get back to normal. But once we have passed all those twists and turns, the reefs reappear, bathed in occasionally furious waters, white with foam, rolling under the violence of these eternal attacks, and the game starts all over again.

Suddenly, it is as though a submerged wall rises up about fifty metres facing the stem, like in the hallways of ghost-trains, when cardboard silhouettes suddenly obstruct the way. It creates incredible

swirls and eddies that completely block the pass. Our pilot doesn't hesitate, and goes straight for the wall. I clench my teeth. It's not a pirogue in his hands; it's a sailboat drawing one metre of water! I must have repeated it to him at least ten times, could he possibly have forgotten it again? My insides are all knotted up, the beating of my heart gets faster, I can't believe it, this time we'll hit it for certain, I hang on...

The boat splashes about, as though shaken by a gigantic hand. It is awful, but once again nothing stands in our way and we get through. Have we just been lucky, or was it really the right pass? We will probably never know.

'When there is more water, it's easier,' he says quietly. 'It's a bit dry right now,' he adds, 'it's been over two months since the last rain.'

I swallow my saliva back, and take a picture.

We navigate like this for two hours, two stressful hours, sometimes frightening, where the mind alternatively questions our guide's true capacities, and sighs with intense relief after the safe passage of particularly difficult spots.

Two carbet appear in a huge clearing on the west bank. This is Camanaos. We are finally there. One last reef to avoid, a few hundred metres going against the current, and we drop anchor next to a small craft overflowing with bananas.

I take out my Brazilian money, pay the man, and bring him to the shore. He insists that there are more difficulties later on, dangerous rapids and invisible reefs, and that we should keep him with us. But the price he asks is too high for our limited budget. He cannot understand this, that a couple of gringos might not be millionaires, as all gringos are supposed to be. He regrets having only asked for two hundred cruzados. Perhaps he was not too sure of himself when we started out. Now that we are on the other side, he wants two hundred more. As I categorically refuse, he turns away without even saying goodbye.

There is nothing in Camanaos except for a small shop, one carbet, and a landing stage. It is the Brazilian equivalent of Puerto Velano. From here, we can reach San Gabriel by an overland trail that goes through the forest. Supplies are brought here on small boats from Manaus, six hundred miles downstream. It is not a pleasant place.

Getting off the boat is awkward, and a generator is running all night long to power two huge spotlights that are turned on day and night. For those who like to sleep at night, this causes problems.

We leave quite early the next day. There are indeed many reefs; the Indian's words were closer to the truth than we thought. We pass the first rapids, then the second ones. With our reverse gear still out of order, we are catapulted forward with each of these spurts, without being able to do anything except try to maintain our course in what we think is the right direction. In some places, eddies seem to be forming right under the hull. The black surface of the river foams until it resembles a huge boiling cauldron.

Fortunately, this part of the Rio Negro is settled quite heavily. We cannot go one mile without seeing inhabited straw huts, and as people are not used to seeing our kind of boat, they immediately jump into their pirogue to come and meet us. We ask them where to pass, where is the right channel that will get us through the infernal labyrinth. These channels have turned into a sort of Ariadne's thread for us. They tell us about the difficulties to come in this maze of scattered rocks and hidden threats, but not always clearly: the Portuguese they speak sometimes melts back into their Amerindian dialect.

We are sailing very slowly, rarely making more than fifty miles a day. Some segments are fine, when the river is so deep and wide, and its black surface so smooth, that the banks are perfectly reflected in it. We think our troubles are over, happily breathing normally again, but around the next bend the madness starts all over again.

Despite all this, we do manage to appreciate the extraordinary scenery. It is completely different from what we had seen in Africa or French Guiana. We are navigating in a new world, on a different planet. Ugly rocks, enormously swollen and oddly shaped, stand out from the harmonious colours of this quasi-Eden. Palm trees and coconut trees are cleverly intermingled with giant ferns, and fine yellow beaches come in startling contrast with the black waters of the Rio Negro. More often than not, a straw hut will have been built near the beach.

The fragrance of the forest is diffused in the ambient air, turning simple breathing into a truly voluptuous activity: we are literally crossing an ocean of tropical smells.

A few mountains stand out in the distance, in the middle of the Yanomami reservations. These impressive but distorted shapes are like monstrous eyesores piercing the gigantic carpet of this fabulous Amazonian forest. Just by looking at this incredible region, it seems possible to get a good idea of what its inhabitants must be like.

Once again, we come to a hazardous spot. The river is studded with rocks of many colours, yellow, white, and black, with a few being almost red. It looks like an avalanche of meteors has fallen here. Some rocks are just below the surface and create terrible turbulence. We can see the level drop beyond the rapids. Where should we pass, among all these swirls of dark water? Over there, I see one of the large pirogues that are used as floating homes by a number of metis families, covered with dried palms, and powered by a small but loud motor. She is being guided through the hideous maze of reefs.

Which way is she taking? I watch carefully through the binoculars. This boat has been sent to us by Providence. It got here just at the right moment, to act like a signpost. It begins a wide loop behind this large stone over there, skirts the little island, then weaves its way between three huge rocks piercing the surface of the water like giant picks. She goes straight for a while; later to make an acute turn that brings her back in the middle of the waterway.

I slow the motor down and we follow the same route. As we advance, our perspective of this dangerous web changes. It looks quite different from up close. The rocks are now enormous, gigantic, almost frightening. On the left, in a kind of recess, the base of one of these rocks is shaped like a long platform, only submerged by a few inches. There is almost no current there, and not too many swirls, which makes it very hard to see the danger. If the visibility were further reduced by bad weather, this reef would be a perfect boat trap.

We slalom between the three rocks and go straight for about thirty metres. A few cable lengths further, more eddies are visible. The river is split in two by wide foamy streaks, leading to a dead-end on the other side of the river. The channel is not very wide, but at least we can see it now.

The pirogue has disappeared around the next bend of the river. Night is about to fall, and we have to drop anchor. A few straw huts can be seen nearby, framed by vegetation, just above an immense beach of fine sand, coloured a brilliant gold by the setting sun. Some people are watching our manoeuvres from a big rock. I drop anchor in a depth of three metres.

A man arrives, paddling a small handmade craft. He must be in his forties. His skin is a vivid bronze, his brown hair smooth, and his face thick and fleshy. If some physiognomies cannot be mistaken for any other, this is one of them: here is a pure Indian.

He stands up, grabs the handrail, and surveys our boat for a brief instant, without uttering a single word. Then he fixes his gaze on the rigging. A light flexing of his big lower lip, accompanied by an almost imperceptible widening of his eyebrows, shows his amazement. He finally decides to speak:

"What is it?" he asks, pointing the body of the windmill affixed to the top of the mast, spinning like a top with the light roll of the sailboat. I explain what this device is used for, but that one piece is now missing. My answer seems to satisfy him.

"Where are you from?" he continues.

In a few words, I tell him about our journey from France.

"But I know France," he says, "I know where Europe is, yes... I am the village's primary school teacher."

Not much later, he leaves in the same way he came, nonchalantly displacing water with his small white wooden paddle.

The darkness of the falling night thickens gradually. In the west, only a thin red-orange line still marks the horizon. It is like a slow curtain call, accompanied by the hundreds of singing birds. Through the widely spaced branches of a giant tree, we can still distinguish a band of parrots. There are not many of them, only about ten or so, but their cawing is so intense it seems to fill the entire forest. Dusk has always been a time for animal madness; whistling, cheeping, singing and cawing, bursting out from everywhere at once. Far on the other bank of the river, deep in the forest, a few howling monkeys are loudly affirming their presence. We are sitting on the deck, breathing in this Amazonian breath, the forest's soul, spreading out in the ripening night.

The next morning we get off and walk towards the few dwellings that are there. A young woman greets us. Very few people are there at the moment she says, only a few children and their teacher, and another woman who stayed to take care of the village. Everyone else has gone to their parcels, and will only come back next Saturday.

In the middle of the village is a carbet much bigger than all the others. In front, a very large door lets us see the small tables behind which some children are sitting. The school is facing a sandy area where the goals of a football field have been marked with two posts driven into the ground. The lesson can't be all that interesting, since all the children are looking at us, some of them craning their necks so far out that it looks painful. The schoolmaster comes to meet us.

It is indeed the man in the pirogue. He greets us, then takes us to his house, a large carbet without doors or windows, without any walls or partitions. This gives a rather strange atmosphere to the whole, especially given the rather modern furniture we can see from outside. There is a table, a painted sideboard, a kind of large breadbox, and a very long bench on which we sit down. He seems very happy to welcome us into his home, and asks us about our travels and about France. He does not speak Spanish, but pronounces everything very clearly, syllable by syllable, so that we can understand him without too many problems.

We question him as well. Where are the people of the village? What are they doing? Does he know anything about the river, upstream from here? And what ethnic group does he belong to?

This last question surprises him:

"I'm not an Indian," he says, almost violently. The Indians live over there, in the forest. I am civilised. I'm the school teacher, and I go to mass every Sunday..."

This is something very hard for us Westerners to understand, that people could go so far as to disown their origins. This dark light we call civilisation has blinded more than enlightened them.

"I'm not an Indian," he adds very abruptly, "no, I'm...I'm 'caboclo'."

"Caboclo." This is a word we hear for the first time. What is a "caboclo"? We dare not ask him any more details on this subject,

seeing that it rubs him the wrong way. After exchanging a few trinkets for some fruits and vegetables, we go back to the boat.

This is a marvellous place, and we would like to stay longer, but we still have a long way to go before reaching Manaos, and with such a complete lack of information as we have, we cannot predict how long this leg of the journey will take us. The schoolteacher tells us that we should have no problems after Santa Isabel, but he has never been there. Also, the water level will have gone down at least another metre by the end of next month. A metre being exactly the depth of our boat, we cannot afford to linger on, and so weigh anchor early in the afternoon.

As we keep going down south-eastwards, it seems that navigation is becoming easier, that the reefs are further apart, and it is not as dangerous, unless of course this is only due to our getting used to the local conditions. Whatever the case may be, our daily mileage increases, and we might reach Santa Isabel earlier than we first thought.

We do reach another tricky pass. The reefs are not as scary as those we met after San Gabriel, but the atmosphere of the place is so strange that we decide to drop anchor next to a sandy hillock, on top of which a few dwellings have been built.

It is not a beach, as we had thought in the late afternoon sun, but an enormous flat white rock, sloping gently into the black waters of the river. We get off on this kind of pedestal the village has been built on.

The place seems deserted. The carbets are empty; no one is there. In the distance, some choral singing can be heard. We had forgotten it was Sunday, but I guess everyone has gone to mass. We skirt round the dwellings and reach a small palm-covered house. A large redwood cross is standing in front of it. We wait in the shade of an enormous mango tree.

Mass is over, and people are coming out of the chapel. The children see the sailboat and run to the bank, followed by a few adults. Others come towards us. They are all well dressed, wearing clean trousers and pressed shirts. A circle forms around us. An old man is asking questions: Where are we from? Where are we going? And first

of all, are we Catholics? I answer affirmatively. The old man pulls a wry face. Then why didn't we go to mass, to sing and pray with them, as all Catholics must do once a week?

Such a question is embarrassing. My Portuguese vocabulary, still very weak, does not allow me to discuss such a subject. And anyway, what could I tell them without being hypocritical? Of course I am a Catholic, as I am French, as I am from Champagne. But I could as easily be named Abdullah, have a slightly darker skin, and kneel three times a day facing the east... This bizarre game called destiny has dealt me different cards, that's all! I do not disown my religion, but after four years of travelling and living among other people, other cultures, a certain evolution has taken place in my mind, and things now appear under a different light. The source of light is the same, but comes from a new angle.

But what would be the point of telling them all this? Life's experiences only enrich those who live them. For the others, they can merely be used as indications, though this is often useless. A soul's evolution must follow its natural course; to each one his appointed day, to each one his appointed time. It is like the slow needles of old mechanical clocks: to push them would simply put them out of synch.

How could I explain, without angering this man who has never left his little island, that as far as I am concerned, all religions, all doctrines are good, as long as they are sincere and disinterested, and aiming for good. Even atheism. Especially atheism. No belief in nothing, to hope nothing from the beyond, to expect death to bring only the darkness of one's sepulchre, and yet to be kind, humble and charitable. Is there anything more sublime? And after all, it might be better not to believe in God rather than to believe in God, as children believe in Santa Claus; naivety is not a virtue.

The man watches me being lost in thought.

An old woman, probably his wife, shows us a beautiful branch of "poupognes", these small yellow balls, about the size of nuts, which are delicious when boiled in water. She would like to sell it to us, but we have no more Brazilian money, so I suggest trading it for some interesting trinket we might have on board. One of the men, younger than the first one, hands me a jaguar skin, and asks what I

would be willing to give in exchange. I propose giving him a shirt, or a woman's skirt. Let's go see, he says. We go back to the boat. The man is following us in a large pirogue, painted in yellow. A second pirogue follows, with the old woman and her husband, as well as a few other people.

While Claudette is looking for things to trade in the cabin, I ask a few questions about the channel. Where should we pass? What is the best way to reach Santa Isabel? The man with the jaguar skin tells me it is very simple: I need to skirt the small island from the left, between two large rocks we can barely glimpse from here. I thank him. We trade with them, weigh the anchor, and leave.

We are approaching the passage this good man pointed out to us. The absence of a reverse gear forces us to be more careful. Claudette is keeping watch with the binoculars, and something is bothering her.

"Oh no," she says, "it's not possible... I think I see reefs..."

I take the binoculars to see for myself. Effectively, we can see some eddies on the surface. The depth may be sufficient, but we cannot tell from here, because the reflection of the sun on the water makes it hard to see things clearly.

The current is strong and we are getting closer quickly despite the motor running at low speed. The swirls are only about sixty metres away. Unfortunately, these are not the kind of shifting eddies that indicate a certain depth, but rather those of barely submerged reefs, with foaming rollers to top it off. This is impassable.

I push the helm starboard and push the throttle lever. Smoke comes out of the motor. We turn, but are still being carried towards the diabolical trap. We are now only thirty metres away. The sailboat is only beginning to stem, slowly, very slowly. This is not a good feeling. It is like being in one of those nightmares where you are frantic to escape some mysterious danger, yet are prevented to do so by something like a magnetic fluid in the air that keeps you rooted to the spot, unable to move.

The only problem is that this is not a nightmare. We are not dreaming. The danger is right behind us and we are completely stalled in our escape, despite the motor running at full throttle. We could not possibly drop anchor, the reefs are just too close. The current is too

strong, the boat refuses to stem, and we are basically stopped. I turn portside. The sailboat turns slowly, but we are losing ground. We get closer to the big rock, almost skimming it. As I had thought, the current is a bit weaker here. We start moving away from this trap, inch by inch. The motor is steady, but the simplest mechanical problem would turn into a catastrophe.

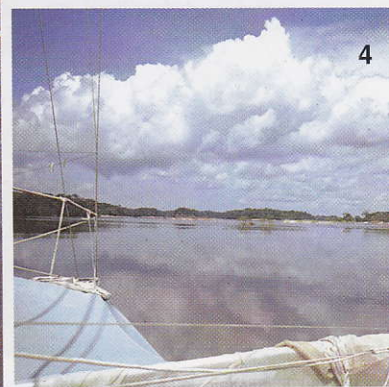
The distance to these rocks is increasing: forty metres, then fifty. As we get farther, the speed becomes normal again. The depth increases, from two metres to five, then to seven.

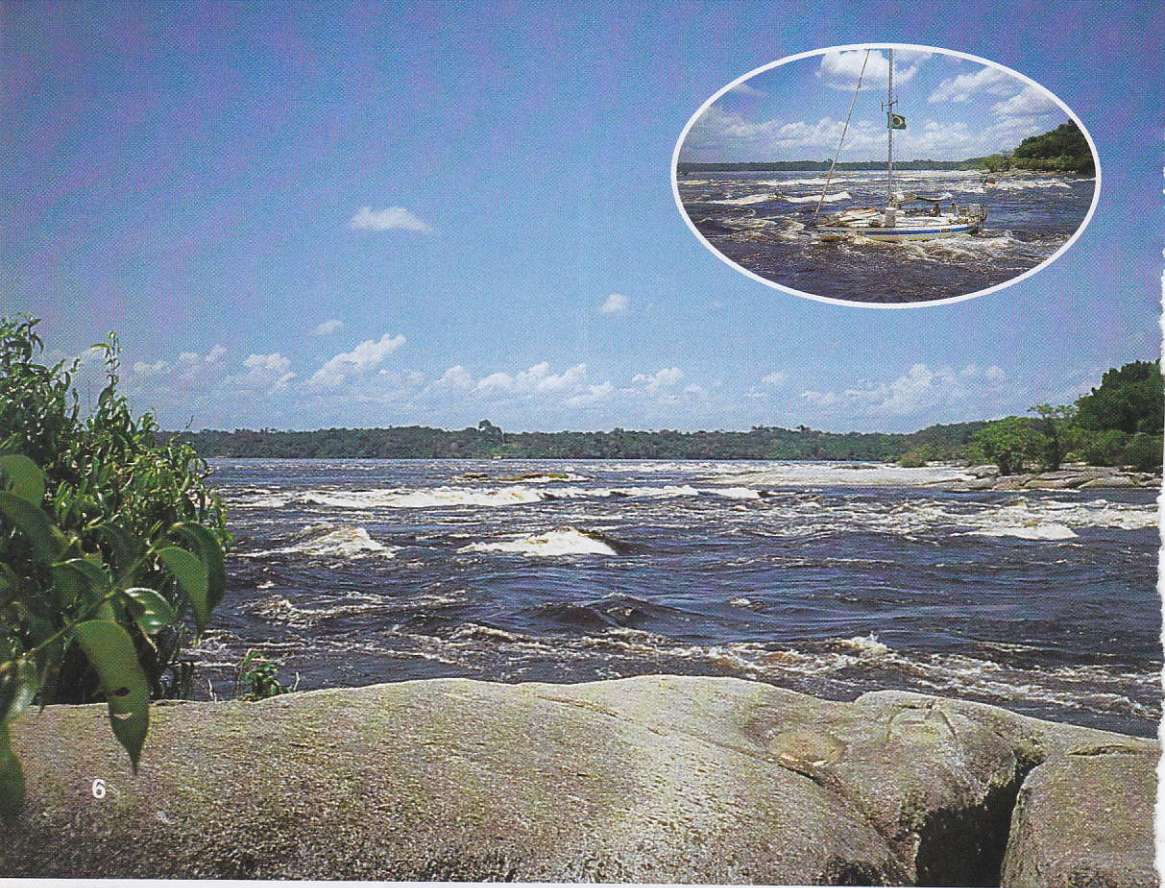
We finally get out of this awful spot. We skirt round the island, on the right this time, and continue our journey. Santa Isabel must be pretty close now. We feel completely out of danger, and, like anyone who has just emerged victorious from a difficult battle, we also feel invincible. The hardest part is behind us and whatever lies ahead can only be easier. We have won this round. Or so we think.

Our respite is unfortunately very brief. More rocks make their appearance shortly afterwards. Again, many different avenues seem possible, but we are saved by the people in the pirogues or on the banks telling us which way the channel is. The right channel this time. This whole sector is an inferno, full of pitfalls that leave no space for error. Without the locals' help, we would not have been able to get anywhere.

The last ten miles are nerve-wracking. This is the final highlight of an already impressive fireworks display. It is all there, a real barrage of fire, where the enemy strikes with all its might in a final attempt to block our way. We are under an incredible amount of stress for two hours, two hours spent slaloming madly between the reefs and the rapids, skirting massive rocks, crossing over enormous eddies, and threading our way through this scattering of small islands. One test rapidly follows the other, and it feels like we are in the middle of a final exam, a comprehensive review of everything we have learned so far, which we will either pass or fail.

At last, behind yet another rocky island clouded in turbulence, a white building appears on top of a promontory: Santa Isabel.



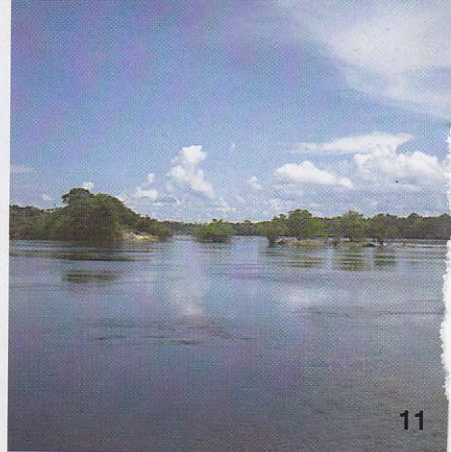




8



9



XVIII

THE RIVER OF SAND

Part One

Santa Isabel! From the beginning of this epic expedition, this name has represented the end of our difficulties, the sign of our success in this crazy enterprise. To reach Santa Isabel, according to all the Brazilians we had met, meant to win the game, so we are understandably overjoyed to be here. This morning, the refrigerator was put to work, and a bottle of champagne is cooling inside it. Real champagne, not this fizzy white wine that can be found in some Venezuelan shops. A local wine grower had given us three bottles upon our departure from France. Also, we have to obey the tradition surrounding one's first crossing of the equator. When this takes place at sea, a number of baroque ceremonies must be executed. For the first time, this line will have been crossed on a river, and we have the honour of inaugurating this new tradition.

In fact, the equator is north of San Gabriel, but it seemed a bad idea to celebrate this before crossing the rapids. A feast before a battle is never a good omen, so we wanted to reach Santa Isabel before opening this precious bottle from home.

We drop anchor in a depth of seven metres, facing a long row of wooden craft. People are watching our arrival. Children come running and pirogues circle the boat. We are kindly hailed:

"Born dias frances..."

Santa Isabel is only a very small town, a few parallel rows of identical houses separated by dusty streets, on which bicycles and carts are circulating alongside pigs, stray dogs, and raggedy children. There is nothing to see here, just a few poorly stocked shops, and five or six pubs. There is not even a vegetable market.

It is noon. As in San Gabriel, we can hear a pleasant chime. It comes from the beautiful church adjacent to that white building we had seen from afar. The soft music is broadcast over a few speakers, and is followed by an "Ave Maria" jointly recited by a man and a woman. On the bank, people stop whatever they are doing and cross themselves in the typical but complicated way of South Americans, and then stand still with bowed heads for the duration of the prayer.

This brief moment of contemplation being over, I open the bottle and fill our glasses with the wonderful bubbly liquid.

Vava is on board. Vava is a Brazilian of Venezuelan origin, who has only been living in Santa Isabel for a few years. He works in the town hall, where he says his responsibilities are enormous. He has seen boats like ours in his home country, and this is the reason he came to see us. He could not believe there could really be a sailboat in such a remote corner as Santa Isabel. He tells us about the "caboclos". They are metis, of mixed Amerindian and Portuguese blood, and are scattered along the banks of the Rio Negro and the Amazon. Unless we go inland, we will not meet pure Indians anymore.

He has gone down the river to Manaus before, but that was a long time ago. We should be able to go downstream no matter what the season is. But the water level is quite low, lower than it usually is at this time of the year. This rivers' ebbs and flows whether high or low are extreme. However, with just a one metre draught, we should not have any problems, he says. Still, it would be better if we had a map of the river and its main channels, the ones used by the supply barges, since we still have about four hundred and fifty miles to go before reaching Manaus. There are rocky spots ahead, he adds. For about twenty miles, we will have to be very careful.

Vava invites us to drop anchor in front of his house, situated a few hundred metres downstream, so that we may meet his family. We politely decline. We simply do not have enough time, given that we would like to be out of this area before the river gets too dry.

We leave Santa Isabel the next morning, after getting the captain of a supply barge to trace the outline of the channel on one of our satellite photos. The man is sure of himself, showing no hesitation as to which island we should skirt round. He tells us he has been navigating between Manaus and Santa Isabel for fifteen years, so our trust is complete.

The rocky part is less dangerous than Vava had led us to believe. There may be a few reefs and a few places where the current accelerates, and where we hesitate a couple of times, but this is nothing compared to what we have gone through upstream of Santa Isabel.

Gradually, the landscape is changing. The large rocks and straw huts disappear. Up until now, we were meeting people everywhere; we could stop almost any time to ask someone for directions. But now, we are navigating in a deserted area, sailing dozens of miles without meeting a soul. The contrast is eerie. What will we encounter next?

We are now entering the area covered by our satellite photos. The channel traced by that man is apparently the right one. The depth is always sufficient. Little by little, the islands multiply. These are very large islands, several miles long, very wide, densely covered with vegetation, and criss-crossed by numerous streams flowing into the Rio Negro through some superb openings out of luxuriant tropical walls.

We hug the left bank. The riverbed is going up slowly: seven metres, then five, until we are navigating over less than three metres of water. The channel must be slightly starboard. I push the helm. The depth goes back to five metres in the middle of the river. Behind us, a small boat is rapidly approaching. It is a small barge, pushed by one of those wooden boats that were everywhere in Santa Isabel.

Its motor is very powerful. Already it is coming abreast of us. It must be moving at more than ten knots, leaving a trail of big waves on the black surface of the river, which then crash impetuously against the verdant banks.

But... Where is the barge going? It hugs the right bank then comes back to the left, slips between two islands, and disappears. The sound of its powerful motor weakens as the gap between us increases. The sailboat rocks on the waves it left in its wake, and that are only

now reaching us. Where did it go? We decide to ignore what has just happened and to follow the directions of the man from Santa Isabel.

The current is weak, and the depth only three and a half metres. I go back closer to the left bank. Claudette is at her usual place on the last step of the companionway, watching both the echo sounder, above the card table, and the surface of the river, perfectly smooth, which seems to say:

"Go ahead, everything is absolutely fine..."

At this moment, the alarm of the echo sounder goes beep-beep-beep... The depth has gone up to two and a half metres. I push the helm starboard, start to turn around, and come back in the middle of the waterway. The depth is the same, and the alarm is still going off. We are coming close to the bank.

"Two and a half metres," states Claudette.

We have to accept the facts: this is the wrong channel. The man made a mistake, but it might just be a question of which island we should have skirted around last time. Maybe we will be on the right channel after the next bend. There is still a metre and a half below the hull, so we might be able to pass. We continue.

We have barely covered a hundred metres when the bottom is rising up again.

"Two metres, a metre and a half!" exclaims Claudette in a stunned voice.

We have to turn back. I grab the helm, push the throttle lever until the motor starts smoking, but I have no choice, the gyration radius necessary for such a manoeuvre is very important when one is without a reverse gear... During the first part of this manoeuvre, we are being carried by the current and by inertia.

"It's going back down!" yells Claudette, "Two metres and a half, three metres..."

I declutch the motor, push the helm to the other side, and let the boat drift. It was certainly a sandbank, and we have passed it. The echo sounder now reads four metres. We press forward. The banks are magnificent but absolutely uninhabited. Every now and then, we see a rough kind of shelter standing in the middle of a small clearing, made from tree trunks and palm leaves, but without the slightest sign of human activity. The river remains fairly shallow; obviously, we are not on the channel.

We decide to go left beyond the tip of the island. The riverbed is very irregular, the depth oscillating between two and five metres. We must absolutely not veer from the route we have been traced, even if it is not entirely accurate, since it is the only reference we have concerning this unbelievable region. The river is over twelve miles wide around here, but with all these islands dividing it up, we feel as though we were crossing an enormous and endless delta, not a gigantic river.

We are sorry not to have taken the same path as the barge. We might not have been able to follow it, but it was certainly the right way to go. The bottom seems to have stabilised itself at about two metres now. I go back and forth between the two banks. The bottom goes down to three metres, then up again to two. This could not possibly be the correct route. We continue nonetheless.

We bear left again after passing yet another island, hoping to find this damned channel.

The alarm shuts off. The bottom has dropped to four metres, then five. I hug the bank closely: this seems to be the way to go.

Michka is suddenly on alert. She rushes up on all fours and runs on the deck, barking loudly. Over there, on the opposite bank, I see a miserable straw hut, next to which another dog is barking agitatedly. This animal could not have been abandoned, so this means there are people living here. I push the helm starboard. The sailboat cuts across the middle of the river. The bottom comes up to two metres then goes down again to five.

We are on the other side. A man is busy fishing from a small pirogue. Our appearance generates no surprise, and he barely throws us a glance. He keeps on fishing, lost in the contemplation of this thin thread sunk into the water. We drop anchor a few cable lengths from his house. I silence Michka, though the other dog shows no sign of reciprocating. It is a large grey-white dog, a cross between a griffon and a spaniel. The creature is extremely gaunt, nothing but skin and bones.

The state of the hut is critical. The dried palm roof has caved in here and there, and though an attempt at making repairs has been made a long time ago, by now, we can see through a covering of poorly placed leaves.

This pretence of a roof is in keeping with the structure it is supposedly protecting. A few worm-eaten planks of wood have been attached to the two main pillars, thus forming the only wall of this miserable dwelling. A hammock is suspended between two more pillars. A rusty mess tin rests on some kind of stairs.

A few branches of wood, half-charred, are burning in the middle of a large pile of embers facing the hut. A second dog arrives, identical to the first one, and also barking desperately.

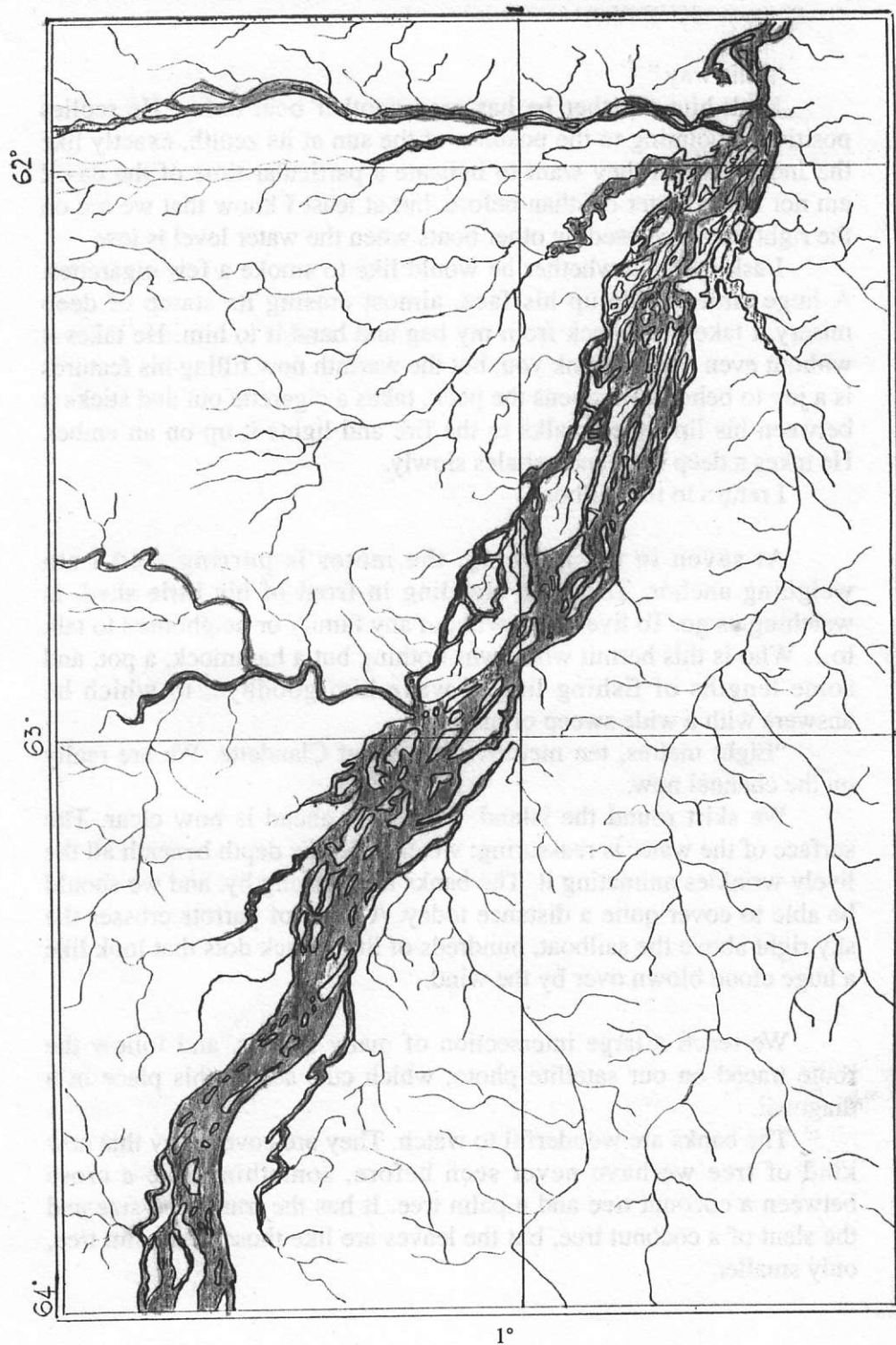
I think the man has caught a fish. He is pulling up the line and putting it away, then comes back to his little hut. I get down in the tender and go see him. I get off on a muddy beach where his pirogue has been run aground. The dogs are furious, but the man holds them back with a few violent words.

The ageless man may be wearing rags, but he stands up straight and holds his head high. There is nothing more moving than dignity under the coat of misery. His white hair and wrinkled face do not seem to be the result of passing time; something else can be guessed at behind his mask of old age and pain. He looks at me, his features absolutely still and his lips perfectly straight, but with a hint of a smile in his eyes. At any rate, there is not a trace of aggressiveness in his demeanour.

He does not say a word, waiting for me to begin. I greet him, and explain what we are doing here, with a lot of gestures. I ask him to tell me how to get back to the channel. He looks at me without answering. He seems caught up in a torrent of mysterious thoughts. I start my explanation again from the beginning, trying to be as clear as possible. His dogs are sniffing my clothes, probably detecting Michka's smell on them. The man points to the river.

"Go straight..." he says, "it's very easy."

I take out the satellite photo and show it to him. He takes it, turns it one way and thinks for a couple of minutes, then turns it the other way. With my finger, I show him exactly where we are among all the little blotches representing the various islands, but he does not seem to understand what it is that I want. Most likely he has never seen a map, and wonders what this strange picture might be. He gives it back to me then points to the river again.



The River of Sand

"This way."

I ask him whether he has seen another boat today. He replies positively, pointing to the position of the sun at its zenith, exactly like the Indians when they want to indicate a particular time of the day. I am not much better off than before, but at least I know that we are on the right way, one used by other boats when the water level is low.

I ask the man whether he would like to smoke a few cigarettes. A huge smile lights up his face, almost erasing its stamp of deep misery. I take out a pack from my bag and hand it to him. He takes it without even saying thank you, but the warmth now filling his features is a joy to behold. He opens the pack, takes a cigarette out and sticks it between his lips, then walks to the fire and lights it up on an ember. He takes a deep drag and exhales slowly.

I return to the sailboat.

At seven in the morning, the motor is purring, and I am weighing anchor. The man, standing in front of his little shed, is watching us go. To live there, without any family or neighbours to talk to... Who is this hermit who owns nothing but a hammock, a pot, and some lengths of fishing line? I wave him goodbye, to which he answers with a wide sweep of his arm.

"Eight metres, ten metres..." reads out Claudette. We are really on the channel now.

We skirt round the island. The route ahead is now clear. The surface of the water is reassuring; we can feel the depth beneath all the lively wrinkles animating it. The banks are flashing by, and we should be able to cover quite a distance today. A mass of parrots crosses the sky right above the sailboat, hundreds of little black dots that look like a huge cloud blown over by the wind.

We reach a large intersection of many islands, and follow the route traced on our satellite photo, which cuts across this place in a diagonal.

The banks are wonderful to watch. They are covered by this new kind of tree we have never seen before, something like a cross between a coconut tree and a palm tree. It has the trunk, the size and the slant of a coconut tree, but the leaves are like those of a palm tree, only smaller.

The alarm of the echo sounder goes off.

"Three metres!" cries out Claudette.

I must be too close to the bank. I turn starboard and the sailboat moves towards the middle of the river.

"Two and a half metres..." announces my wife.

Dammit! What is going on? Where is the channel? I make a ninety-degree turn and come back in the opposite direction. The current is strong. I increase the speed of the motor, and the boat increases slightly. The bottom comes down to three metres. I try to go back to the middle of the waterway, but there is no point, the depth over there is the same. We are reaching the opposite bank, and the echo sounder is still only reading two metres.

Maybe we should have gone behind this big island, the extremity of which is only a few cable lengths to our right. We can clearly distinguish its sandy tip, lined with a few bushes. We were there just fifteen minutes ago. I head back in that direction.

The echo sounder is stuck on three metres. It is evident that the channel is coming to an end just a little further on the left; we should be able to find its extension not far from here. We are going upstream very slowly, and it takes us more than half an hour to retrace what had barely taken ten minutes to cover in the first place.

"Three and a half metres" says Claudette.

The only piece of electronic equipment on board has finally ceased its stressful beeping.

"Four metres, four and a half metres..." she continues happily. This is the channel; we are on the right track again.