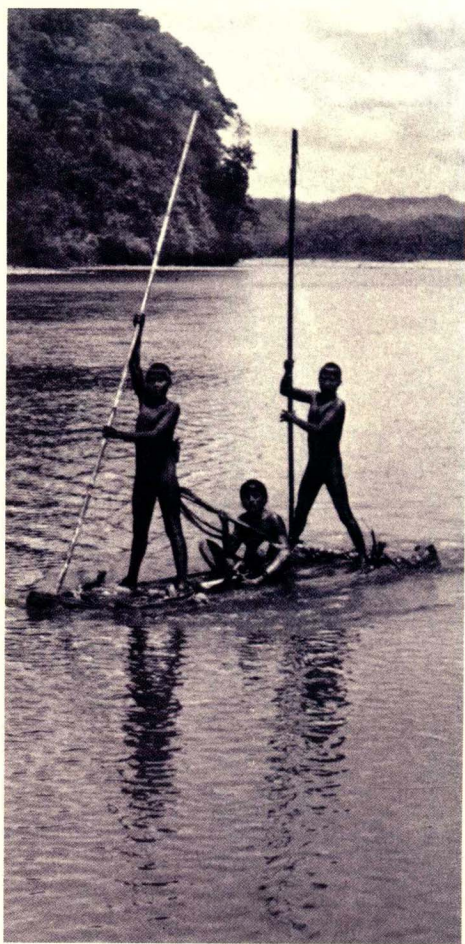


KEEP THE RIVER ON YOUR RIGHT



TOBIAS SCHNEEBAUM

"Since Gide, no journal has spoken more clearly or meditatively of the cannibal, civilized self."

—Hortense Calisher

KEEP THE RIVER ON YOUR RIGHT

Tobias Schneebaum

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Other Works by Tobias Schneebaum
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*Where the Spirits Dwell: An Odyssey in the Jungle of
New Guinea*

to Mary Britton Miller

"Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question. This question is one that only a very old man asks. My benefactor told me about it once when I was young, and my blood was too vigorous for me to understand it. Now I do understand it. I will tell you what it is: Does this path have a heart? All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are paths going through the bush, or into the bush. In my own life I could say I have traversed long, long paths, but I am not anywhere. My benefactor's question has meaning now. Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you."

Don Juan,
Quoted in *The Teachings of Don Juan*
by Carlos Castaneda

Author's Note

In 1955 I went to Peru on a Fulbright fellowship and spent the latter part of my time there deep in the jungle among the people described in this book. I was away from civilization for such a long time that the U.S. Embassy concluded that I had been killed, and there were announcements in the Peruvian newspapers and on the radio to that effect. Although I kept notes at the time, it has taken me all these years to come to the actual writing of the pages that follow. A considerable number of photographs of the Indians was presented to the National Geographic Society, in Washington, and other ethnographic materials to the American Museum of Natural History, in New York, when I first returned from Peru. Though I have altered time sequences in some places for narrative reasons, this story is based on what I witnessed, heard, and lived through. The names of the white people have been changed, as well as the names of the tribes themselves, and of the few places that would pinpoint the mission.

**KEEP THE RIVER
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1

Manolo came into the clearing below me a little while ago, carrying in the crook of an elbow a basket of tomatoes he had gathered for supper. Little Chako, naked, followed him like a puppy wagging its tail, waving in his right hand the miniature bow and arrows that Manolo had made for him yesterday. Manolo went directly toward the kitchen to leave his basket, while Chako ran down the narrow beach and into the river, where the intestines of a tapir floated around Patiachi's legs. Chako grabbed at the long intestine and ran with it downstream as if it were a piece of string, then returned to splash around Patiachi, who paid no attention to him. Chako opened one end of the intestine and let the rushing water pour through it, washing the waste downstream. Patiachi had been cutting the body of the tapir into small pieces, wrapping the pieces in succulent leaves, then stuffing them for storage into sections of bamboo. Wassen, the ancient Topueri who had arrived here at the mission yesterday morning, hobbled like some prehistoric man to the water's edge, picked up the severed head of the tapir, and, with its blood dripping down

his stomach and legs, wandered into the group of banana trees that hides the hut in which he is staying. Before disappearing behind the leaves, he turned to look at me, his eyes almost blank, his mouth a firm straight line surrounded by the six quivering, brilliant macaw feathers set into his flesh.

These are the only people visible as I sit here this afternoon to begin writing. I had lain awake through most of last night with thoughts of what I must put down. Ideas ran around my brain, and I tried to form the phrases through which I could convey exactly what had been happening within me while I was out there in the jungle all alone on my way here. It is difficult, almost impossible it seems to me now, to put it all into words that are meaningful. I will skip over what seems to me non-essential: the truck ride down from the top of the Andes, extraordinary as it was; the hotel at the end of the line, amusing as it was; the people I spoke to, strange and charming as they were; all are vague to me now, are part of a world that I have chosen to reject, to leave behind, as if my life began again the moment I started off in this direction.

This mission, where I now sit and write, is a place I had heard of from an archeologist, up in the mountains, with whom I had stayed some days. He had taken me around to Incaic ruins he himself had discovered, so that I could make drawings of them for him, and then had sent me to the Father Superior of the Escuela Santa Gloria, in Cuzco, who kept saying to me, "Just follow the river, just follow the river, you

can't miss it. It's very easy. Just keep the river on your right." He himself had never been to the mission.

The hotel, at the very end of the dirt road in the little town of Pasñiquiti, was a combination convalescent home, bordello and pension for the men who worked in the haciendas in the area. It was a noisy, cheerful place—so crowded, the night I arrived, that it was hours before I had a chance to talk to the owner. He laughed at me.

"You'll die. You'll be killed!" he said. "No one has ever gone there alone. No gun? No machete? You are crazy!"

He tried again in the morning to dissuade me, and he looked sad and bewildered as he gave me some dehydrated farina.

"Keep as close to the river as you can. You will lose it sometimes, because there is no beach for long sections, and the water will be deep. It will take you four, five, six days, maybe longer. I only went once myself, many years ago, with the padre himself and six Indians. No one has gone that way in many months. You are mad."

Climb a mountain. Enter a jungle. Cross the empty quarter of Arabia. Why? Sitting here a month later, healthy and happy, still excited, I can ask that question—why? Yet all I can do is ask it, for I have no answer. It never seemed possible that anything could happen to me. Somewhere, in another lifetime, I once read that the jungle either accepts you or rejects you. Did it accept me? or did I accept it? Does it matter? I

walked on thinking only that I was on my way, to something.

The trail began several feet behind the hotel, just across a rope bridge that bounced and swayed with each step. It was a clear, well-traveled trail for the first couple of hours, and ran along the side of a hill. The trail was there for no reason that I could see. It ended at a cliff, high above the river: my guide. I slid down over loose earth, holding on to roots and bushes that helped slow my descent. Almost before I knew what was happening, thorned bamboo had caught at my clothes, thistled plants and tree trunks had left splinters in my hands, twigs had come out at me to scratch my face.

At the bottom of the cliff was a beach. That looked better right away. There were two white herons standing in shallow water. The sun was warm and pleasant as I began to walk over the small stones that almost completely hid the sand. Soon the stones seemed like giant rocks and I tripped over them. The sunlight on the river dazzled me and every minute took longer to go by. At times the beach disappeared, and I crossed hip-deep water to get to the other side. I came to the abandoned hut that had been described to me as the place to enter the jungle. It was some minutes before I found the trail. Reeds that had been cleanly cut with a machete showed me, finally, where the opening was, and into the mass of foliage I went.

The air was cool, and it took me several seconds to become accustomed to the darkness. Then I stood

staring into a world of green. This was no forest to swing through at the end of a vine.

The trail itself was a tunnel through a solid mass of wild growth. Reed, cane, and paca, the thorned bamboo, shot straight up, and curved on top under the weight of the fanning leaves. Massive bushes huddled together beneath towering trees. There were elephant ears so large I could have disappeared behind a single one. Great ribbons of roots curved between the brush. Vines with sharp leaves curled around tree trunks or, leafless, hung down from great heights like rope, reaching down to attack a stump, a branch, an arm twisting upward with sprays of pink petals. Small plants and shoots came up everywhere; over every inch of earth there was a tangled screen of dead twigs, branches, leaves. The smell of decay mixed with the dampness. Rotting trees slanted through the jungle. Poles of lifeless cane criss-crossed over the trail. Yellow moss crept over bark; mushrooms clustered in cracks.

Walking was slow. Vines tripped me, the paca tore my clothes. I sank in mud up to my knees; I crawled under interlacing saplings and swordlike caña-brava. The undergrowth caught at my knapsack and held me. Streams cut through the bush; some were only ankle deep, others were up to my waist and were cold and swift. Trails ended at these streams, and I was frustrated trying to find them again in the confused tangle of foliage on the other side. I went downstream, upstream, back and forth, looking for a sliced stalk of

cane that meant a human being had once passed through. I breathed heavily, thought Damn! Maybe that hotel owner was right after all, but I quickly pushed that aside, certain that I would find the trail again and thinking, always: Don't panic, don't panic.

There were spiderwebs everywhere, often like a veil of gauze hanging across the trail. They left irritating fibers on my face and hands. There were small hairy spiders with long hairy legs, black shiny scarabs that I was too exhausted to examine but vaguely remembered from Egyptian paintings, beetles mottled yellow and black, giant beetles the color of gold, hosts of insects so strange they seemed like miniatures of monsters come from Mars. Blue grasshoppers jumped at almost every step I took, sometimes showers of them.

While walking, I was too absorbed with the trail itself to look or listen. I watched where I put my feet, and I bent low or crawled to keep from being scratched and torn. Only when I sat to rest or eat a disc of bread, the only food I had with me besides the farina, did sounds and sights become distinct. Chattering, howling monkeys grouped in trees and scurried along branches. Macaws screeched angrily. Wild turkeys rested high above me. Iguanas and small lizards raced noisily over dried leaves. The monkeys followed when I moved. The trail ran uphill and down, slippery, treacherous. Moss-covered logs spanned rivulets as bridges.

Late that first afternoon I came upon a lean-to made by passing Indians. It was no more than a few leaves tied to branches, held at a slant by thin poles.

The patch of earth beneath was not comfortable. It was made as a shelter against the rain, and that night it rained heavily.

It is difficult for me now to remember my thoughts during that first night as I lay there, shivering slightly with cold. I wasn't happy and now I want to forget that time, to push it away as if it had never been. Of course, nothing happened; there were no snakes, no tigers, no headhunters, no tarantulas. Yet my mind overflowed with all these possibilities, and I must have lain awake for four or five hours before exhaustion forced me into sleep. During those sleepless hours, my eyes opened at every suggestion of movement that came my way. The rain stopped after a while, but drops of water, falling from the growth above, struck the leaves of the lean-to with force. Relax, I kept telling myself. Breathe deeply. Close your eyes and shut your ears. Breathe and sleep. It has been a long and tiring day, not the easy kind of day you'd expected. There is no need to push on. There is plenty of food. Relax. You'll get to the mission all right. No need to worry. Easy, take it easy. Don't walk so fast. Breathe in. Out.

When I got up in the morning, my shoulders ached, the muscles of my legs ached. Even my brain seemed to ache. My lips were cracked and my body was covered with scratches. I found a river, not my guide, and bathed and soothed myself in its waters. I sat and ate a chunk of farina and drank the water of the river. The sun was already high above the trees. In spite of my physical discomfort, I felt fine.