

Blond Indians of the Darrien Jungle

A Legend of Centuries Brought to Reality by the Discovery of a Tribe of Indians as White as Ourselves, and Speaking a Language Related to Ancient Sanskrit. They May Be Descendants of the Early Norwegians

By R. O. MARSH

TWO years ago, in the jungle of Darien, at a little frontier settlement named Yavisa, I was bargaining with the Negroid Indian chief of the village for a crew to take me up the Chucunaque River, when I saw three Indian girls appear from behind a hut, cross the village street, and disappear behind another hut on the other side. My sensations were those that a scientist would have if he were melting some lead and saw it suddenly change into gold, for I had as unexpectedly seen a legend of centuries become a reality before my eyes. These girls had white skin and golden yellow hair!

That was my first view of the now famous White Indians. A year later, following a second expedition, I came out of the same jungle, having seen four hundred of them, and bringing back to civilization two boys and a girl as living specimens for the scientists to study. For the last six months they have lived part of the time at my camp in Canada and part of the time in a home in Washington, D. C., where government experts and scientists in anthropology, biology, and genetics have been trying to decide whether they are biological "mutations" from brown Indians or are descendants of Norwegians who came to America long before Columbus's voyage.

When this article is published, I shall be in that region again, with several of these scientists, equipped to study these strange phenomena in their native land, and to explore their country, where they promise me we shall find stone ruins of cities their ancestors inhabited.

My astonishment at my first view of White Indians may be better imagined when I explain that Yavisa is at the head of navigation of the Chucunaque River in Darien, or Eastern Panama, and the farthest outpost of anything like civilization, in an unexplored tropical wilderness. Yavisa is peopled by Negroid Indian half-breeds, and is a trading post to which "tame" jungle Indians come to barter. The only white men that ever visit the place are a very occasional trader, or, as in my case, an engineer looking for rubber. I had as little reason to expect to see a white woman in Yavisa as David Livingstone would have had to meet Queen Victoria in equatorial Africa. And I had seen three! And savages, at that; for they wore only loin cloths, and stepped the jungle path with the free, natural grace of the Indian.

They had come and gone so quickly that I had only the one glimpse of them. But that glimpse was enough to excite my eager interest, for the legend of the White Indians is as old as American history, and in twenty years as a civil engineer,

practising my profession up and down both hemispheres, I had heard it on many occasions and in many lands from frontiersmen and natives. Columbus himself declared that he had seen them. Cortez found a hundred of them imprisoned in Montezuma's palace in Mexico City and venerated as "the children of the sun." Vancouver saw them on Vancouver Island in 1792, and Commander Stiles of our own Navy claimed to have seen the remnants of the same group in 1848. Humboldt saw about a hundred White Indians in Colombia.

STRANGERS MAY NOT ENTER

BUT, like every one else, I did not really believe in White Indians. I attributed the stories to hallucination, or to the mistaking of albinos or half-breeds for really white people. But the girls I had seen were not, I was convinced, any of these. I have seen thousands of half-breeds, of many mixtures, and there is an unmistakable something about them that reveals their hybrid origin. These girls gave no such impression. I asked the village chief about them, and he told me they lived in a hut outside his village, with a man of the same appearance. They did not mingle with his people, and he explained that no one would dare molest them, for fear of the vengeance of their tribe. They came, he said, from far inland, up the Chucunaque River, where no Negro or tame Indian dared to go, for the savages there had forbidden it and were warriors of such prowess that their edict was respected. No white man, even, had ever gone into that country and returned. A detachment of the Panamanian army had tried it and had been exterminated. The White Indians were a numerous tribe, he added, and were allies of the savage Wallas, Mortis, and Cunas Bravos.

I resolved to call upon the strangers. I followed the path the chief indicated, and in half a mile came on a little clearing, in which was a pole-and-palm hut, with its floor several feet above the ground and its "doorsteps" a log with notches cut in it for a foothold in ascending to the

entrance. After much calling in English and Spanish, the three girls appeared; and after many signs of my good intentions, they ventured to the ground and accepted the present of a handful of freshly minted ten-cent pieces. They let me look at their golden locks closely enough for me to be certain they were not dyed, and I was equally sure that the whiteness of their skin was not an artificial calcine. Their eyes were not black, but a light brown, proving that they were not the usual kind of Indian, nor, on the other hand, albinos either. It was growing dusk, but I managed to get some snapshots of them. They spoke neither English nor Spanish.

Returning to the boat, in which I had come from Panama to Yavisa, I told my two comrades of my find, but found them unimpressed. I might think what I pleased, but no White Indians for them. My invitation to join me in a visit to the clearing after dinner, to call on the man of the family, was greeted with emphatic refusal. I might go and get myself killed if I liked. And, indeed, their judgment on that point was better than mine. I went to the hut in the moonlight and called, and the man came out, not to greet me but to rush into the jungle. A little reflection convinced me that he would probably circle behind me and put an arrow into my back, so I lost no time in returning to the boat, no wiser than I had left.

BEAUTY OF PHYSIQUE

THE next morning, we made a one-day journey up the river beyond Yavisa. By noon we had come into a region that promised to disclose just such a valley of rubber lands as I had dreamed was there. I urged my companions to go farther. But they had had enough of jungles, and we turned back.

And, then, rounding a bend in the Chucunaque, we came head-on upon the most startling apparition I have ever seen. A canoe came toward us, and in the bow stood a naked savage with a white body, whose yellow hair, falling to his shoulders, was held in order by a gold

chaplet two inches wide encircling his head at the brow. He was of medium height, but magnificently developed about the chest and arms; and he stood as erect as a king. Behind him were a girl of ten and a boy of four, and in the stern his wife wielded a steering paddle. Not one of the four gave a start when they came suddenly upon us, and the man and

jungle rats," they exclaimed, "and we didn't come down here to get ourselves struck in the back with a poisoned arrow. Our business is law and rubber. There's neither here, and we're going home—to-night!"

And homeward we headed. It was a bitter disappointment to me to have my Panama rubber lands remain undiscovered.



woman did not vary a heart-beat in the rhythm of their strokes as they plied the canoe to pass directly by us. The man eyed us with a truly regal pride and disdain, and passed us by without troubling to turn his head to see whether or not we intended to follow. His whole manner said more plainly than words: "I am king here; what are you doing in my domain?"

This uncanny vision settled any doubts my companions had about exploring further. The tales of the Negroid chief, about the savages upstream, had been given a most startling confirmation. They had seen enough. "We are no

ered, after such an incomplete exploration. And my disappointment was doubled at my inability to follow the trail of the White Indians who, I now felt sure, were no mirage of fanciful pioneers but a scientific fact.

I lingered in Panama after my companions had gone on to the States. I told my friends in the Canal Zone Government about my White Indians, and I got the incredulous sympathy usually paid to a respected citizen who has gone a little off his head. They all believed that I honestly thought I had seen them, but they thought it was either "a touch o' sun" or that I had seen albinos or half-

breeds. The only exception to the chorus of doubt was General Babbitt, of our Military Service at the Zone. He said he was inclined to believe me, because one of his aviators had brought back a similar story. Lost in a fog bank south of the Canal, this flier had swung low to get his bearings and had come out of the cloud right above a big village in the jungle, and had seen dozens of white savages scurry to cover when this roaring monster from the skies had emerged into their sight. The General had always doubted the aviator's story until he heard mine confirm it.

A SCIENTIFIC SEARCH

RETURNING to the States, I interested new capital in a second expedition—the backers of my first one were polite but skeptical. I was now determined not only to prove that there were good rubber lands in Darien, but also that there were White Indians there. I am not a scientist, and I did not intend to have the credibility of this discovery rest upon my own unscientific observations. I therefore made the following proposition in identical terms to the University of Rochester, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian Institution: "If you will detail a scientist to accompany me on a thorough trip of exploration of interior Darien, I will deposit cash to your credit, before I start, sufficient to pay his salary and expenses for the entire time we are gone, and you will pay him yourselves from this fund. He will then be solely responsible to you. Furthermore, I will guarantee that he may leave the party at any moment that he feels the results of the trip do not justify him in continuing, or if he feels that any deception is being practiced."

All three institutions declared that this was a proposal that could not be refused. Especially so, because Darien is a sort of "missing link" in the scientists' knowledge of American fauna and flora. The animal and vegetable life of North and Central America is sharply differentiated from the corresponding life of South

America, and scientists have long hoped that unexplored Darien would some day reveal the transitional forms that would bridge this gap in natural history. The University of Rochester, therefore, detailed Prof. H. L. Fairchild, to study the geology and biology of this region; the American Museum of Natural History sent Dr. C. M. Breder, to study the snakes, fish, and invertebrates; and the Smithsonian Institution sent Prof. J. L. Baer, to study the men and apes from the viewpoint of the trained anthropologist.

I secured also the cooperation of the War Department and the Department of Commerce at Washington, the Canal Zone Administration, and the Panama Government. These connections added to my party Major Omer Malsbury, topographer; Major H. B. Johnson, naturalist; Lieutenants Townsend and Rosebaum; and Dr. Raoul Brin, botanist and soil expert, detailed by President Porras of Panama. I took along also a newspaperman, and Mr. Charles Charlton, representing the Pathé motion picture people. Altogether, my party numbered eleven whites and thirteen Negro laborers obtained at Panama.

The War Department placed at my disposal two airplanes, with which I made a reconnaissance flight from Panama City, ascending the Bayano River to its headwaters, and descending the Chucunaque River to a point near its mouth. In less than one day I covered in the air more territory than the expedition later covered in four months through the jungle. I traveled in the first plane as pathfinder, and the second plane followed about half a mile in the rear. When I saw something I wished to have photographed, I got my pilot to sweep low and circle over the spot, which was a signal for the second plane, containing the photographer, to follow our example and take the pictures. An army topographer, in my plane, made notes of the geography of the country as we raced along. In this way we got a very fair record of the mountain ranges and water systems of the whole region.

The first fruit of this flight delighted

me very much, for it proved my surmise about the nature of the interior to be correct. There were two mountain ranges, one paralleling the Atlantic coastline and the other the Pacific. Between them lay a level valley, twenty-five miles wide and nearly one hundred and fifty miles long.

But I was even more excited by the evidences of human habitations of a much higher type than those of any Indians I had ever seen before. Time after time we would see a village below us, not a few huts carelessly huddled together but many dwellings set in orderly rows upon a geometric pattern and dominated by a great communal house big enough to foregather all the hundreds of inhabitants of the village. Some of these tribal assembly places were built on hill-sides, so that they were in effect three stories high. In several villages, the inhabitants appeared much fairer than Indians I had known; though we never got a close view of them, for when we swooped from a thousand feet to two hundred above ground, they disappeared like gophers into their holes, going doubtless into the jungle to escape this fearsome apparition from the skies. Months later, I talked to inhabitants of these villages, whose recollection of my aerial visit was still a fresh memory of terror.

A HAZARDOUS JOURNEY

I SHALL only sketch the long, disheartening, toilsome journey that led at the very end to the White Indians. We made friends with the Chocoi Indians near Yavisa, and learned much about their customs. We also learned that our coming on this second expedition had been broadcast by word of mouth throughout the interior, and that we should be opposed at every step of the way. The reason for this antagonism is a high tribute to the character of the Indians. Except for the Chocois themselves, all the tribes of Darien are monogamous, and they have, besides, quite the highest standard of sexual morality I have encountered anywhere in the world. When I say this, I do not except the white men

of the United States. These savages rigidly apply the "single standard" of morals, and the only punishment for infidelity is death. Proof, or even reasonable circumstantial evidence of it, is invariably followed by the punishment. The result is that the offense is very rarely given. The story that had preceded us into the jungle was, that we were coming to kidnap their women; and the opposition that dogged us all the way through the country was based on this report. After we left the friendly and polygamous Chocoi, no member of our party saw a single native woman until after we had reached the Atlantic Coast, and then only after all but three of us had gone on back to Panama and I had proved to the head chief that I was genuinely interested in the welfare of his people.

After we left Yavisa for our plunge into the jungle, we were subjected to continual surveillance of the most trying kinds. Every night our ears were filled with weird forest cries from upstream and below—whistlings that we mistook for bird-calls until we observed that they came in mathematical combinations which clearly proved their human origin and that they were signals between unseen observers. In the morning, we would find their footprints on the river banks, and we would also find wild turkey feathers stuck in patterns in the mud, as witchcraft magic to hinder our progress. At the mouth of the Tuquesa River, we surprised a party of Cunas Bravos who had camped there to ambush us, and of whom we had received warning from a friendly Chocoi chief.

DEATH IN THE EXPEDITION

THEN we had sickness to contend with. Dr. Brin got malaria and I sent him back to Yavisa with one canoe and its crew. He returned to Panama and died the day after his arrival. Farther upstream, Dr. Baer was infected by flies that bit his arm after they had settled on a tumor in a monkey he was dissecting. We were now too far inland to send him back, and for weeks his sufferings were a

drain on our sympathies and his helpless weight an additional burden to be carried across portages in the tropical heat. Often the shallow water and the fallen tree trunks across the stream made travel so difficult that two miles was a hard day's journey. Our difficulties daily increased, and our store of supplies fell lower. When we pitched camp at the mouth of the Sucubti River, we decided that we must strike across the mountains to the Atlantic Coast and end our travels as soon as possible. We established relations with a native sub-chief, who spoke English. His one anxiety was to get us out of the country. If we had not been so heavily armed, we learned afterward, we should have been rushed and massacred; but the natives knew every detail of our equipment, even to the dynamite we carried, and were afraid to try it. He guaranteed safe conduct to the coast if we would promise to leave. I sent a scouting party of three men, under native escort, to the coast to explore the trail and to telegraph Panama for medical aid and supplies. One of these men deserted at the coast. The others came back, and led us over the trail. Dr. Baer died soon after we sighted salt water. The Government ordered the soldiers with me back to the Zone, and I was left at Caledonia Bay with only Charlton and Johnson. Not one White Indian had we seen, and we were regarded with suspicion and hatred by the natives. Except that I had pretty well assured myself that the interior was suitable for rubber plantations, and that Dr. Baer's and Dr. Breder's researches had been productive, the expedition was a pretty sad wreck.

But from this point on, the luck turned. I had learned from the sub-chief of the Sucubti that all the tribes of Darien yield allegiance to a head chief whose title, in their language, is Ina Paguina. He is the latest of a long line of hereditary overlords who have ruled the country as feudal chiefs for many centuries. His seat of government is at Sasardi, an island on the San Blas coast. I got word to him that I wanted an audience with

him. This was arranged, and accompanied by Charlton and Johnson, I sailed over to his island.

CONVINCING THE HEAD CHIEF

THROUGH an interpreter, he asked me why I had come to his country. I determined to drop all effort to be diplomatic and to try the effect of blunt frankness. I told him that I had come to look for rubber lands in the interior and that I had been opposed at every step. I told him I was the friend of his people and would treat them fairly, but that he was mistaken in trying to keep the white men out of his country, because when they got ready to come nothing could stop them. I had learned to admire the high intelligence and character of his people, and if he would cooperate with me in the scientific work I wanted to do, I would do my best at Panama and Washington to have his country set apart as an inviolate home of the Indians, under the protection of America and Panama. He liked my frankness, and explained why I had been opposed. The Panama Government had seized some of his islands nearest the Zone, and had instituted "schools" and local "government," under Negroid police supervision, that were really cloaks to enslave the men and debauch the women. He resented the degradation of his people, and he and they had resolved that all white and black men were evil and to fight their coming to the death.

After long negotiations, he became convinced of my good faith, and called a congress of his chieftains to discuss my plan for an Indian sanctuary. The chieftains came from all parts of the Atlantic coast of Darien, and I was astonished to learn of the high level of political organization they had achieved. Not only did they have an hereditary feudal government, but courts of law with a recognized code of precedents. Every tribe also sent at least one young man forth to see the world, and these youths had traveled as sailors to New York, San Francisco, London, and, some of them, around the world. The Ina Paguina even had a secret service in the City of Panama that

kept him advised of the intentions of the Panamanian Government toward his people. He knew all about the progress of the white men in the arts of war and peace, and had foreseen the approach of the day when his own domain would face exploitation and his people the common fate of the Indian. The congress of chiefs approved my plan to enlist aid for the preservation of their country.

Then I asked to see the White Indians. At first they denied their existence, but I proved to them that I knew better. I also explained their scientific importance, and their value in creating American interest in all the Indians, by their demonstration of the reality of the links connecting the Indian to the white man by the ties of blood. This argument won them, and word was sent out to bring them in.

OUT OF THEIR FASTNESSES

WHITE Indians now appeared, to see us, by the score. They came from the mountains of the San Blas coast, from the interior, and some even from the islands themselves. Within a few weeks I had seen four hundred of them—men, women, and children. I talked to them through interpreters, photographed them with the motion picture camera, examined them carefully and assured myself that they were neither painted nor dyed, and learned a good deal about their customs, local status, and biological character. Like all the Indians of the San Blas coast, brown as well as white, they proved far superior in intelligence and character to any other Indians I had ever encountered, either in North or South America, and not excepting the Pueblos of our own Southwest. Their civilization was far more advanced, and their political practices, ethical standards, and practical arts more perfected. Their treatment of women and children alone would set them apart. I never saw a woman or child among them who did not look happy. They speak of their women as "flowers," and their manner toward them is as gentle and considerate as one would expect from that poetical

idea. When I persuaded an old chief to be photographed, he insisted that I wait till his little granddaughter could be brought to stand with him, and the picture of his affectionate pride in her and of her happiness to be beside him would do credit to the heart of any people in the world.

The White Indians occupy a peculiar status among their brown kinsmen. They are as proud and war-like as the San Blas themselves, and they maintain their feudal independence with as savage fearlessness. Both races try hard to maintain the integrity of the racial strains. Where propinquity over-rides the racial barrier and a White Indian marries a Brown Indian, the children are light brown and the grandchildren sometimes are white and sometimes are brown—apparently following the Mendelian Law of inheritance in this respect, by which the normal expectation would be that one child in two of such a union would be white, if any occur at all. But at the age of puberty, the white children of these mixed unions are required to go to the tribe of their white parent and are there raised as White Indians, while the brown children are raised with the brown tribe. This practice explains why the White Indians have persisted down the ages as a homogeneous white race in the midst of the overwhelming preponderance of reds and yellows and browns that numerically dominated the Western Hemisphere.

In the next article I shall deal more at length with the fact that the White Indians have always dominated the other Indians intellectually, and have created all the real civilizations that flourished in prehistoric times in Mexico, Central America, Peru, and Brazil. Incidentally, these Indians speak a language which, I am told, is closely related to the ancient Sanskrit.

In appearance, the White Indians duplicate the characteristics of the three I first saw at Yavisa. Their skin is a true white, and shows the pink glow of the blood beneath, as no pigmented skin of any colored race does. Their hair is literally the yellow of yellow gold. It would give a wrong impression to describe

it as red or as tow. It is the true blond of the northern Caucasian. Their eyes are hazel, which means that they show light brown on a blue ground.

These positive characteristics dispose of the old theory that they are albinos. The eyes of albinos are pink, because they have no pigment in the iris or retina, and consequently the blood in the capillaries of the retina shows through. The hair of albinos is white, because here again all pigment is absent.

One characteristic of the White Indians does immediately suggest the albino. This is the squinting of the eyes. But any American who has traveled our own Western deserts knows how quickly he himself adopts this habit to protect his eyes from the glare of the unclouded sun. And in the tropics, the actinic rays, which provoke the irritation of the eye nerves that causes this habit, are much more intense than they are in Arizona. Even a black-eyed Caucasian finds them distressing, even when he wears a helmet. It is no cause for surprise, then, that the hazel-eyed White Indians, living near the Equator and going about bare-headed, should develop a drooped head and a squint of the eyes to protect them from the sun. When I took my three specimen White Indian children to Canada last summer, they soon got rid of the habit and showed no more evidence of it than do the natives of Canada.

VISITORS TO AMERICA

FOLLOWING the congress of Indian chiefs on my plan to help them form an Indian sanctuary, they provided me with three children to bring back to America for scientific study. These are a girl of sixteen and two boys of ten and fourteen. They provided also an adult couple of brown Indians to act as their guardians, an English-speaking San Blas Indian to act as interpreter, and two leading young chiefs. This is the party I brought back with me to Washington. The Ina Paguina himself planned to come, but the Panamanian Government refused him a passport on the ground that his resistance to the "pacification" of the

San Blas islands made him legally an outlaw.

Next month I shall have a second article in the *World's Work*. In that I shall describe the language and traditions and music of the San Blas Indians, and the reasons for the two theories the scientists advance to explain their origin. I shall also describe more fully my plan to persuade the American Government to acquire by purchase the territory occupied by the White Indians, the San Blas, the Cunas Bravos, the Mortis, and the Wallas, and to have it set aside as a permanent and inviolate sanctuary for these remnants of the most advanced aborigines of the Western Hemisphere. Their lands are of little industrial value, so that no loss to the economic progress of the world will be entailed by segregating them from exploitation. These Indians, on the other hand, offer the most promising field yet opened up for finding the answers to two of the most fascinating mysteries of science: first, how white men evolved from the primeval brown race, and second, what the facts are behind the still undeciphered remains of at least two great white-influenced civilizations that once flourished in our continents, the early Mayan of Central America and the Pre-Incan of Peru. It behooves us to keep intact these few tribes whose culture marks them as probably the only remaining inheritors of the traditions that can unravel the mystery. If, as now seems possible, we can work out the answer through a study of them, we shall be able largely to write the authentic story of those prehistoric Americans, who wrote hieroglyphics as complex as the Egyptian, who were astronomers of the first order, who built walled cities, practiced mummification, performed delicate surgical operations on the skull, had a systematic science of pharmacy, originated the use of quinine, cocaine, valerian, and a dozen other standard drugs, wrought gold into beautiful ornaments, cut and polished and wore diamonds and other precious stones, and altogether were a people of as high development as were the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians.



WHITE INDIANS with YELLOW HAIR



While he was bargaining with a native chief in the Darien jungle, R. O. Marsh had his first astounded glimpse of a white skinned girl with golden hair, an Indian girl. Half incredulous, yet hopeful, he headed an expedition to confirm the legend of centuries. In the following pages are his photographs.

