

BALBOA OF DARIÉN:

Discoverer of the Pacific



by Kathleen Romoli

author of COLOMBIA: GATEWAY TO SOUTH AMERICA

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A magic quality—an aura of romance, a suggestion of legend—surrounds the name of Darién, the first mainland colony in the Western Hemisphere, and that of Balboa, the conquistador whose destiny was interwoven with its brief life. In 1510 Vasco Núñez de Balboa, a handsome, devil-may-care Spaniard, set out for immortal glory concealed in a flour barrel on a ship bound for the mainland. He was among the rugged *compañeros* who founded Darién; it was his leadership during the colony's early, difficult years that made Darién a crucial link in the chain of empire and exploration, and it was his discovery of the Pacific that has given both Balboa and Darién immortal fame.

The story of Balboa of Darién is gaudy and dramatic, with barely a pause between crises. It is a pageant roundly constructed, with thoroughly vicious villains and hot-tempered men fighting for wealth, and with a hero who combined vision and practical wisdom with a forcefulness that made him both "feared and beloved." In the few years that Balboa's star burned brightly Darién was a thriving settlement that set the example for the whole Spanish conquest in the New World, and when he died under the executioner's knife Darién died too and returned to the jungle.

JACKET BY PRANAS LAPÉ





Atlantic Ocean



BALBOA OF DARIÉN

To: Doctor Ricardo J. Alfaro -
a Scholar and a
Gentleman.

E.C. Lombard

September 1954.

BOOKS BY KATHLEEN ROMOLI

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COLOMBIA: GATEWAY TO SOUTH AMERICA

KATHLEEN ROMOLI

Balboa of Darién

DISCOVERER
OF THE PACIFIC



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FOR BILL

FOREWORD

THE PLEASURES and problems of historical research need no explanation to its addicts, and very little to people with a taste for detective stories. The sifting of evidence; the dogged pursuit of clues; the plausible testimony pulverized by a chance word and the respectable witnesses who turn out to be suspect; the establishment of times (where was the King on December 23, 1511?); the holy joy of finding a priceless lead in an apparently extraneous purchase of salt mackerel; the climactic moments when a dozen awkward pieces fall suddenly into a beautiful, logical whole—these belong to historical detection as much as to that of crime fictional or otherwise. So, of course, does the psychological side of investigation: history may follow a vast rhythm as the stars their courses, but its individual developments are largely the products of emotion.

The drawback—and the charm—in historical sleuthing is that so many cases can never be closed. The witnesses are dust, and some of the chief exhibits are missing. And whereas the evidence which is preserved may be abundant, it is frequently inaccurate and seldom impartial.

The story of Darién and Balboa in these chapters is founded on documents of the time and on the accounts of contemporary chroniclers. Indubitably authentic sources, they provide a remarkable amount of information, comparatively little of which can be taken

whole with simple faith. Part of the trouble is mechanical: a document may date from the time of the colony, and yet be the faulty copy of a lost original, to say nothing of the errors which blossom in more modern renderings from the difficult script of that period. Considering what some of the manuscripts that confront the paleographer are like, no one—except, possibly, another paleographer—can be hypercritical; nevertheless, at times the mistakes seem excessive even to the charitable. As to translations, charity can sometimes only draw a kindly veil; even those of eminent authorities can conceal traps for the unwary. Some slips are merely diverting: Harrisse's translation of *Punta de lobos marinos* (Point of Seals) as "Point of the Good Sailors," evidently inspired by the term "sea wolf" for an old salt, has a macabre charm when collated with the 1516 report of the expeditionaries who found so many sea wolves at the promontory that they killed sixty-six of them and brought their skins to Spain. But it is not so funny when his translation of a letter from the Bishop of Darién alters the meaning from beginning to end. And the translator who turned Martyr's description of Balboa as "an outstanding fighter with the sword" into "an egregious ruffian" has a good deal to answer for.

A far greater problem is, however, the rampant bias of contemporary letters and reports. A more contentious, invidious lot than the conquistadores would be hard to find; their representations to the authorities in Castile bulge with ulterior motives, so that they can be evaluated only when one has a fair idea of what axes are being ground, and why. Slander was common coin, and guided by the principle which promotes million-dollar damage suits in hope of getting ten thousand, they piled it on; their talent for omission, subterfuge, and bland prevarication is neutralized only by its obviousness. Since it is the official correspondence which has been preserved, and since in Darién this was predominantly the expression of a cabal to ruin Balboa, and since, furthermore, it was designed to present a peccant administration as just men made perfect, it is evident that reports cannot be taken straight. Depositions in lawsuits and in the *probanzas* by which veteran conquistadores set forth their merits are somewhat better: about as reliable as such testimony would be today. Finally, there are the honest errors—things forgotten or ill-remembered, or misunderstood when heard at second hand. No wonder one clings to the dry entries in

notarial registers with something like affection: if a shipmaster is buying salted flour for his forthcoming voyage, it is at least certain that he has not yet left; if he is found delivering goods and dispatches at the other end, he has undoubtedly arrived.

This brings us to the chroniclers. They were giants; we could not do without them, for lacking their narratives our knowledge of the early years of American colonization would be a skeleton affair. But here, too, one must keep in mind the maxim that should hang, in letters of gold, over every student's desk: "*It ain't necessarily so.*" Of the three prime chroniclers who tell of the Darién colony, one never saw the Indies; one knew parts of the Indies well, but not Darién; one was in Darién, but for no more than eleven months during the course of our story. In sum, eighty to ninety per cent of what they recount is hearsay. Two of them were influenced by strong personal prejudices, and the other got much of his data from tendentious sources. Sometimes they appear to have made an immediate record of what they learned, sometimes they are clearly at grips with inadequate notes—the kind of cryptic memoranda which seem perfectly sufficient when jotted down, and are later so baffling; all too frequently they rely on memory. All things considered, it is not surprising that they occasionally go astray; what is astonishing is the amount of information they amassed, and how much of it is substantially correct.

The fact that the chronicles are indispensable, that when they stand uncontradicted they must be accepted and when (as often happens) they contradict each other they must be weighed, means that the more we know about their authors, the better. The notes which follow are no more than a bare introduction.

The three prime chroniclers were, in the order in which they wrote: Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, called in English "Peter Martyr," who as cleric, humanist, papal prothonotary, counselor, and newsman spent the greater part of his life at the Castilian Court; Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who was Chief Inspector of Gold and Barter and Chief Notary of the Crown in Darién; and Bartolomé de las Casas, Protector of the Indians. With regard to Darién, a fourth annalist must be added to their number: Pascual de Andagoya.

Martyr, urbane, curious, and personally objective, was keenly alive to the import of what he was the first to call the "New World." He

made a point of talking with men home from the Indies, and even of getting them to put their recollections in writing—memoranda which, alas, he usually threw away as soon as read. He was on familiar terms with ministers, prelates, colonial officials; Columbus was his friend; he was allowed to read especially interesting reports from the New World—notably those of Balboa about the discovery of the Pacific—which vanished before others could consult them. And he wrote while events were still warm or, indeed, still in process.

But Martyr was a reporter, not a historian. He sent out a steady stream of newsletters (over eight hundred of them were published shortly after his death: the *Opus epistolarum*). His eight “Decades” on the New World, published complete as *De orbe novo* in 1530, were on much the same order—lengthy epistles written in installments, having all the freshness and faults of any reportage of happenings in an unknown and infinitely remote locale. In the letters he is direct and insouciant (“I’m writing this with one foot in the stirrup. . . . Good-by—take care of yourself.”), and, though sometimes pompous in the “Decades,” can also be sprightly: no mean feat when writing in Latin to popes and cardinals. With regard to Balboa his data is a kind of sandwich: an approving layer, which coincides with reports received after the discovery of the Pacific, between two unfavorable ones which reflect the communications of Balboa’s sworn enemies.

Oviedo was also at home in Court circles; he had been one of the lads chosen as companions for the heir apparent, Prince Juan, in whose household Columbus’ sons lived as pages. His direct interest in the Indies began when, at the age of thirty-six, he was appointed to the official posts in Darién. Clever, cultured, worldly, he had considerable humor, a taste for anecdote, and a healthy sense of his own importance. His prejudices were lusty, and never more so than in connection with Darién, where he was himself deeply involved with politics and personalities. He was a persistent man, and he had the courage of his preconceptions; twenty-five and thirty years later they passed, unfaded, into his chronicle. Some were in the category of fixations, but it is only fair to say that others were extremely sound.

At the same time Oviedo was in many ways particularly well informed. During his scant year there in 1514–1515 he had access to

all records, attended the meetings of what might be termed the governing board, made it his business to know what the Governor and his colleagues were up to, and although Darién was already under sentence of abandonment when he returned in 1520, he was still able to find out a good deal that could be learned only on the spot. He was an amateur naturalist of merit. And he is the only annalist who read the log of Balboa's expedition of discovery to the Pacific and the papers relating to the discoverer's judicial murder—both of which disappeared thereafter in suspicious circumstances. Most of what he recounts of Darién and Balboa was written around 1546.

Casas, the third of our chroniclers, was the son of a prosperous merchant with interests in the Indies, and a graduate of the University of Salamanca. He went to Santo Domingo in 1502; seven years later he became the first priest ordained in the New World. After two years with Velásquez in the conquest of Cuba, he renounced the land and serfs allotted to him there, returned to Hispaniola, proceeded to Castile in 1515 and, save for a few months in 1517, was in Spain until the latter part of 1520. In Cuba he had seen a great light; thenceforth his devouring aim was the freedom and well-being of the Indians. Vehemently rejecting the thesis that American aborigines were an inferior race predestined to servitude—unlike Moslems and Negroes, whose enslavement he approved and even promoted—he denied the right of Spain to New World dominion and furiously denounced the greedy cruelties of the conquistadores. Quite naturally his writings, especially a virulent little work published in 1552, enjoyed the most gratifying popularity in countries inimical to Spain; what is surprising is that despite his blazing attacks on his country and his countrymen, he lived long in security and honors.

Casas' noble, if restricted, obsession was inherent in everything he wrote; it accounts for his exaggerations and, at times, misrepresentations as well as for the limpid conscience in which he reveals some rather questionable methods used to his ends. Like most fanatics, he identified himself with the Divine intention; it followed that people who disagreed with him were wicked, and that personal piques were apt to take on the thunder of indignation in a sacred cause. Conversely, he had only good to say of certain deplorable persons who happened to favor him. No one has ever doubted that Casas was an

honest crusader, but it has been claimed that he was not an honest historian. The judgment, whatever his historiographical failings, is undue. Like so much criticism, it presupposes that the author's aim was what the critic thinks it should have been; it also ignores the facts of life.

Casas was not trying to be impartial. A fighter to the last, he was not only incapable of a coldly precise reconstruction: it never occurred to him that it would be desirable to attempt one. Secondly, he wrote the greater part of his *Historia* forty and more years after the events: starting in 1552, continuing with many interruptions for ten years, and adding further bits and pieces almost until his death, at the age of ninety-two, in 1566. In everyday life we do not expect unbiased total recall even of less combatively minded octogenarians. As for those long, ostensibly verbatim quotations of dramatic discussions occurring nearly half a century earlier, the scholars who grant them the accuracy of tape recordings are as unreasonable as those who damn them for deliberate distortions. What old warrior, in forty years, does not reshape memory nearer to the heart's belief?

Casas (he calls himself thus, not Las Casas) amassed an extraordinary amount of information, including quantities of documentary material, most of which—but not all—was collected in support of his theses. Certain tricks of style are useful guides: accounts of matters he learned about at second hand are in general positively phrased, and modifying as-I-recalls or if-memory-serves are attached to those he observed himself, suggesting that he made careful notes in the first case which in the second seemed unnecessary; “probably” or “my understanding is” in his lexicon means he does not know what happened and supposes the worst; the “it was believed” formula usually indicates that he is putting over a bit of Casasiana, possibly libelous. Concerning Darién, he was informed to some extent by personal acquaintance with Balboa and other actors in the drama, and to a greater one by Martyr's works and a lost manuscript called *La Barbárica* (written by Diego de la Tobilla, who went to the Isthmus in 1514), both of which he cites or paraphrases extensively. His style is involved, but it is also vigorous and vivid; he can display, if not exactly humor, at least a rather savage facetiousness; he was uncommonly widely read, he had a mind for detail and he was in and out of

the Antilles and Central America over a period of forty-five years. Many historians declare that, could they have only one chronicler, they would choose Casas.

Pascual de Andagoya, our last contemporary narrator, had no pretension of being a capital-letter chronicler: he merely wrote a memoir of what he had seen and experienced. But he saw more of the Darién colony, knew its contending personages better, took part in more of its expeditions, and told of it more equanimously than anyone else whose writing has survived. By some miracle he kept aloof from the clashing rivalries about him, despite close association with the chief protagonists. A minder of his own business, he was little given to judgment, which is why his occasional calm appraisals can be devastating. In fact, Andagoya had the makings of a first-class historian; it is a pity that he did not set himself to be one from the first, although the idea is a lot to ask of a nineteen-year-old recruit to adventure. His *Relación*, or part of it, has been included in modern works, and Markham made a translation of it. Considering Andagoya's career—he was later the forerunner of Pizarro on the Pacific coast and titular governor of a province—he deserves more attention than he has received. The note on him in the *Enciclopedia Espasa* is curtailed, inaccurate, and entirely silent about his writings.

The disappearance of so many key documents written by, or relating to, Balboa is as intriguing as it is frustrating. It is not the only loss: there is that of all the confidential reports sent by clerics and friars to their superiors in Spain, to say nothing of the total blank in so far as private correspondence is concerned. The thought of coming on a bundle of yellowed dispatches subtracted circa 1521 from the files, or the classic coffer of intimate letters by some gossiping colonist, is a researcher's dream of hidden treasure. Meanwhile the gaps in the evidence and those not always identifiable errors in the chronicles explain why no one describing the early years of Spanish rule in America can escape the nagging sensation—like a dull but persistent toothache—that any day some new find, some oversight of his own, will arise to smite him. It also explains the habit-forming stimulation of historical sleuthing: in the last analysis there is no such thing as a definitive history.

The statements in these chapters which are at variance with those in other books on the subject have been carefully verified. In the strictest sense few of them are "new": that is to say, the material for them can be found in documents which, with limited exceptions, are available in print. True, it seldom occurs in large, convenient hunks; mostly it is a matter of shreds and fragments, to be fitted together by the collating, or jigsaw, method. Nevertheless, first credit, and my gratitude, belong to the researchers and compilers whose dedicated labors have given us hundreds of volumes of true sources. It seems ungracious to remark that some of the most valuable documentation is attached to narratives which contain rather startling errors, and in any case it is beside the point: the documents are there, placed at the disposal of us all. In a few instances it has been impractical to cite all the references: e.g., a sentence about the family of the discoverer of Darién rests on gleanings from twenty-six separate notarial acts. Otherwise the sources are given in the notes.

Many chroniclers besides those given in the notes as chief sources relate the events of Darién, notably, Antonio de Herrera, *in extenso*, and Gómara, in admirably compact style. They will be found in the Bibliography, but because most of their material was taken from Casas, Martyr, and Oviedo, they are referred to only when they present credible particulars which do not appear elsewhere.

In the matter of proper names I have adopted the spelling most common at the time. Orthography of names was a rather casual business in those days (consider Shakespeare!), and when it came to unfamiliar Indian ones, any guess was good. There are at least a dozen ways of spelling Coquibacoa, including "Arcaÿ batoia" and "Argesibacoa." The question was, of course, complicated by the fact that many colonists were more at home with a sword or crossbow than a pen and that some eminent navigators were unable to letter their own charts, but even the most literate usually omitted the accent in writing Indian words and had a hit-or-miss way with cedillas—to occasionally disconcerting effect, as when a *çabra* (nobleman) turns up without explanation in an otherwise Spanish text as a *cabra*, or she-goat.

In translating letters and reports I have been literal rather than literary; the authors were often awkward writers, and to tidy up their style would be to misrepresent them. I have, however, supplied some

punctuation by way of marking a trail through the denser syntactical jungles. Any conversational quotes are so given in the chronicles or, more rarely, in correspondence. The maps are based on those made from recent aerial survey; routes of exploration and travel and the location of tribes and chiefdoms were determined from innumerable references in writings contemporary to their conquest, checked with later geographical data and to some extent by what I have been able to see myself of the country ranged by the men of Darién.

During the years of tracking and collating the material for this book I have had reason to be grateful to many more people than can be mentioned here; to each of them, this is a renewed expression of my appreciation. I wish, however, to thank especially the helpful friends in Colombia: the former National Librarian, Dr. Enrique Uribe White; the Director of the National Archives, Dr. Enrique Ortega Ricaurte; the President of the Colombian Academy of History, Dr. Luis Augusto Cuervo, and numerous members of the Academy; the Directors of the Geographical Institute of Colombia, Dr. Belisario Ruiz Wilches and Dr. José Ignacio Ruiz; and other kindly people who put their erudition and their own libraries at my disposal, and who patiently indulged me in those arguments which are so clarifying of one's ideas. I want, too, to remember three friends who are no longer with us: Dr. Laureano García Ortiz, Dr. Daniel Samper Ortega, and Dr. Julio Garzón Nieto, formerly Chief of the Bureau of Longitudes of the Ministry of Foreign Relations. My thanks go also to the President and members of the Academy of History of Panama for allowing me to attend their meetings, to the librarians everywhere whose assistance was above and beyond the call of duty—particularly, those of the New York Public Library—and to Jean Luburger Whitnack for her careful and constructive work on the manuscript.

K. R.

New York
1953

PROLOGUE

DARIÉN is a name of familiar romance, but it has come to have something the quality of legend: heroic, vaguely stimulating and as disembodied as Avalon or Xanadu. More often than not it stands for a single climactic moment, the discovery of the Pacific; and even that is haunted by the shade of "stout Cortez," magnificent on his misplaced peak. Yet Darién was important, and not merely as a springboard for one transcendent exploration. Moreover, its importance was much more than a passing quirk of destiny (although it was that, too, at the time), for its influence on the course of American history went on in widening circles long after Darién itself had sunk from sight.

Darién was the first mainland colony in the Americas, the capital of a vast and only partially defined dominion. It was an episcopal see with full chapter, and at one time, before the black death struck, it boasted three thousand Spanish residents, "some of the most splendid and select people ever to come to these Indies." Its vicissitudes were followed with vibrant interest in the palaces and counting houses and portside taverns of Europe, and its administration cost the Crown some fifteen thousand ducats a year in salaries. It was the mother of exploration and settlement from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego, and its story—at once a gaudy melodrama and an outline of early colonial methods—constitutes a small-scale working model, handy and complete, of the whole Spanish conquest in the New World.

The facts of Darién can be reconstructed with reasonable accuracy provided one keeps as close as possible to original sources. If there is a haunting suggestion of technicolor about them, the fault is in the modern view. Admittedly the story is out of line with much now passed as realism: it is roundly constructed, with proper villains and a more than proper hero; it presents adventure, disasters, plots, and difficult triumphs with barely a pause between crises, and it is generally prone to pageant. Nevertheless it is true. The hard-bitten *compañeros*, the loot (politely known as revenue) in piled-up gold and quarts of pearls, the greenhorn *caballeros*, haggard but haughty in mildewed elegance of silk and velvet, the ladies late of Their Highnesses' court or of the brothels of Seville, the busy bureaucrats deep in reports, corruption and red tape, were never half-tone subjects. But however fantastic, they were real.

For that matter, the setting itself was fantastic, not so much because it was untamed and exotic—a description then applicable to all the New World—as because it was so illogical.

At the southernmost corner of the Caribbean, where the plunging Colombian coast line meets the Isthmus of Panama, lies the Gulf of Urabá, a pocket of the sea between the mainland and the mountainous root of the Isthmus. The eastern side of the Gulf, inside Caribana Point, is a region of scrubby hills and broken, palm-fringed beaches, once the domain of the fierce Urabaes; the whole lower part is bordered by swamps, behind which stretches the half-drowned wilderness of the Atrato River Valley, half of the western, or Isthmian, side is taken up by the mangrove sloughs and wandering channels of the Atrato Delta. Above the delta there is a strip of rugged coast where the land climbs in ridges dark with rain forest to the crest of the barrier Sierra. This strip, from the Río Tanela to the limit of the Gulf, was Darién.

A more improbable site for a front-rank colony could not well be imagined. Darién had no decent harbor, no large rivers, little arable land. It dominated no trade routes, actual or potential. Ships had a hard time reaching it and a worse one getting away, and for any vessel too big to beach easily a stopover was fatal. Its climate was unhealthy and (most damning of all in that age) its mineral resources were insignificant. As if to complete the picture, its settlement, Santa María

del Antigua, was tucked away in a narrow, rather marshy valley five miles from the sea—a strategically inapt location where it was impossible to produce food for more than a few hundred people. Logic, however, has always put up a feeble show against chance and human daring; in the face of geographical reason Darién proceeded to establish itself as a crucial link in the chain of empire.

The protagonist of the Darién story was Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the handsome young swashbuckler who became one of the greatest figures in the panorama of discovery. The place and the man are so intimately bound that they cannot be viewed separately. Almost everything we know of Balboa is centered in Darién, as if he had no substance save in connection with it; and without Balboa, Darién might never have existed for history. He was with the armada which discovered it; nine years later he was among the *compañeros* who conquered it. It was occupied at his suggestion, he commanded it during the early years, and from it he went out to the explorations which culminated at the Pacific. Other conquistadores influenced events in the colony, some of them decisively: the green-eyed Governor Pedrarias, who was called the Wrath of God; the doughty Bishop; a host of maneuvering officials and colonists. But behind their actions one can usually find Balboa, whom they humiliated but could never ignore—a constantly determinant force by reason of the emotions he inspired. When he was destroyed, Darién did not survive him. The government moved to Panamá, Santa María del Antigua soon went back to the jungle, and in time the very name of Darién was taken away and given to other provinces.

The whole extraordinary cycle, from discovery to abandonment, lasted little more than twenty years, and less than ten of these enclosed all that is significant in the life of the colony and of its hero. It was enough. In the brief span allowed them, Darién and Vasco Núñez de Balboa achieved the dynamic immortality which outstrips mere fame, because Darién was “the beginning and foundation of all that was discovered and settled by Christians in Tierra Firme . . . and from that school of Vasco Núñez’ went forth captains and famous men for all that happened afterwards.”

I

SPANISH DOMINION in America, which began (like so many discoveries) as the unforeseen by-product of a search directed to other ends, was a haphazard development, growing from a foundling archipelago to a bicontinental empire mostly by chance and private speculation. This, indeed, was the only way it could grow. Aside from the difficulty of drawing up an official plan for nebulous possessions of unknown character and extent—something that even today's bureaucrats might find beyond them—the Spanish government was in no position to organize and finance systematic exploration. To be exact, there was no Spanish government for the first twenty-five years of American history, because Spain as we know it did not exist. Despite the unity which made Isabel of Castile and Fernando of Aragon, as rulers, almost a single entity, their respective kingdoms had not been amalgamated. In those first decades the New World realms belonged exclusively to Castile, a country so recently emerged from feudal anarchy as to be scarcely a nation.¹

It could be argued that if prolonged adversity is the stimulus to creative action in peoples, Castile was exactly primed for her new imperial role. Other indications of preparedness were, to put it mildly, slight, except for the special quality of her sovereigns.

When Isabel succeeded to the throne, eighteen years before Columbus discovered the Antilles, the kingdom of Castile and Leon was

little better than a collection of unruly states. The monarchy was bankrupt of prestige as well as treasury. The Moors still held Granada, the French were harrying Biscaya, some of the most powerful grandees were allied with the King of Portugal to seize the throne by force. The new sovereigns were young—Isabel was twenty-three, Fernando twenty-two—and they were bone poor. It is doubtful if they had been able to pay back the money they had borrowed to be married; certainly they were hard put to it to provide the bare necessities for their modest household. (Fernando's father, the old King of Aragon, could not help: he had just been reduced to pawning his fur cloak.) They were an unusually attractive pair, but they did not appear destined to remold their country and see it launched as a world power.

Fortunately, there was a great deal more to Isabel and Fernando than good looks and high intentions. The white-and-gold, picture-book Queen had a mind for government and the moral and physical force to back it. She could ride as fast and far as any cavalryman, and then sit up half the night over reports and dispatches; she demanded information and welcomed advice, and if in the end "she followed for the most part her own judgment," the judgment was generally good. Fernando—who has been a good deal maligned, owing to a tendency to accept the opinion of his bitterest adversaries as gospel—was a little more earthy than his queen, a little more elastic and somewhat less inclined to the discourses of "religious men and those of righteous life"—a pastime to which he was apt to prefer a hard game of pelota or a day's hunting. One does not associate Isabel with a sense of humor, but Fernando's was keen enough to let him enjoy the comic aspects of even his most unfortunate moments. "Well proportioned, with fine features and laughing eyes . . . he had a singular gift, that whoever talked with him straightway loved him and wished to serve him." Despite all this charm Fernando was both able and conscientious. He not only sought advice, but often took it. He tolerated an almost startling degree of plain speaking from his subjects, with whom he had, for the most part, the patience of a large dog in a yard full of scrappy terriers out to get the best bones. No one, however, could have called him ingenuous. And although the velvet glove was padded, the hand within was firm.

They had their faults. They made mistakes; the Inquisition, with its corollary anti-Semitism, stands heavy against their names. As one of their favorite courtiers remarked, their candor and promises were not always proof against the pressure of expediency, and they sometimes used dubious means to desirable ends—defects which might be described as endemic among people in their position. Yet, compared to their immediate predecessors and, indeed, to the majority of anointed rulers, they were paragons of virtue and enlightened efficiency. Had they been otherwise, the history of America would have had a different course.

In twenty years of skillful effort Isabel and Fernando gave their realms a methodical administration, impartial justice, sound money, and the merit system in civil service. An even greater achievement was implied in these reforms: the curbing of the near-independent power of the great nobles. Granada, last outpost of Islam in the Peninsula, had been taken. Castile did not look like a mother of empire in 1492, but she was beginning to look like a nation. She was able to grasp at the opportunities presented by Columbus' discovery. This initiative was due in part to a merciful ignorance of the measure of what she was getting into, and more directly, to the foresight of her sovereigns, who were remarkably prompt in asserting a right to whatever might lie beyond the Ocean Sea.

Columbus had barely had time to make his report before Isabel's claim was submitted to the Pope, who, as Vicar of God, to whom belongs the world, had a clear jurisdiction in the matter. The Pope, with almost equal celerity, issued a bull—or rather, three bulls—the gist of which was that Castile was mistress of all heathen lands lying beyond a meridian a hundred leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. To this Portugal objected; the west coast of Africa was her preserve, and she wanted more leeway. In 1494 the question was amicably settled in the Treaty of Tordesillas, by which the Line of Demarcation was moved westward to a meridian three hundred and seventy leagues (1374 miles) from the Cape Verde Islands and the Azores. Portugal was recognized mistress of everything east of the Line; everything west of it, "discovered or to be discovered" (exclusive of such Christian kingdoms as might be revealed), was to belong to the sovereigns of Castile "and to their successors forever and ever."

The next steps were to find out what had been acquired and to nail it down by markers and acts of possession pending actual occupation. These were not so easy. Armadas were expensive, and the treasury was in a chronic state of emergency. Isabel had borrowed to finance Columbus (though not on her jewels, for the sufficient reason that these were already in pawn), but borrowing has a limit. Nor could the still fragmentary "new realms" provide the capital: America, for the first forty years, was not the bonanza that is often supposed. Until 1502 it produced practically nothing, and in the period 1503–1525 the total Crown revenues received in Spain from the New World, on all counts, averaged a scant 40,000 pesos a year. The solution was to harness private enterprise.

Thus discovery became a business, and men sailed beyond the baths of all the western stars intent on a commercial gamble. The explorer was a licensed trader operating "at his own cost and risk," subject to official controls. He paid a royalty on all proceeds from his voyage (the classic *quinto del Rey*, or King's fifth) and kept the remainder for himself. At the same time he served as a royal agent ("our Captain") in staking possession of the lands he discovered, and he was bound to supply the government with charts of his explorations, copies of the ships' logs, and reports covering everything from his barter deals to the *mores* of the Indians. In the early days the explorer-traders were usually master mariners with a little capital who found additional funds for their ventures on a profit-sharing basis which often extended to arrangements with officers and crew. In due course they were followed by more ambitious entrepreneurs: the concessionaires who contracted to conquer, convert, and settle specific *gobernaciones*.

Until 1503 negotiation and regulation of overseas voyages were conducted for the Crown by Juan de Fonseca, "Bishop in charge of discoveries." From 1499 on, however, successive discoveries made evident that the Indies of the Ocean Sea were more than could be handled by a one-man bureau. It was also apparent, and more urgently, that the exclusive privileges granted to Columbus at the time of the first discovery could not continue to be the basis of colonial administration. A new approach, or rather a first considered approach, to the whole problem of the new realms was imperative.

With his discovery of the Antilles, Cristoforo Colombo of Genoa

had been transformed into the Magnificent Lord Don Cristóbal Colón, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of all lands discovered by him or through his diligence. The sweeping titles, thought up by Columbus himself, were to be hereditary,² and were accompanied by the right to one tenth of all revenues from the aforementioned lands, plus that of securing one eighth of all profits from trade by subscribing one eighth of the expenses. Conferred in a flush of enthusiasm and the belief that only a few islands were involved, the privileges soon proved excessively awkward, the more so as Columbus turned out to be a singularly inept administrator. As the profile of a vast new continent continued to unroll, they became grotesque. Columbus clung obstinately to the letter of the grants, liberally interpreted: anything discovered after he had shown the way should be added to his preserve (in 1502 he signed himself as, among other things, "Viceroy and Governor General of the Islands, and of the Mainland of Asia and of India"). He also tried to claim, as hereditary admiral, one third of the revenues from commerce in the Indies.

If ever expediency were justified versus promises, it was in this absurd situation. The sovereigns could not hand over the New World to Columbus and his heirs for all time; more immediately, they could not even leave him to rule Hispaniola. A majority of the settlers had rebelled against his authority, and to their complaints was added a rumor that he planned to deliver the Indies to the Republic of Genoa.³ Columbus was removed from the government of the colony, and the sovereigns, while they did not deny his privileges, gradually pared them down to relatively innocuous proportions. Meanwhile they set about organizing a system of colonial government. In 1502 Fray Nicolás de Ovando was sent to take over in Hispaniola,⁴ and in January, 1503, the Casa de Contratación de las Indias (the House of Trade of the Indies) was established in Seville.

The Casa de Contratación was entrusted to three executive officials: a treasurer, a factor, and an accountant-comptroller (*contador*). Subordinate officials with the same titles were attached to the administrations in the new realms. Almost at once the term "royal officials" came to mean those of the Casa exclusively. As the Casa evolved from an institution for fostering and supervising trade to an all-

embracing ministry of colonial affairs, the officials were invested with enormous power and responsibility. Before long the House of Trade blanketed every phase of the economy of overseas development, and its authority stretched to a good many political aspects as well. It was a clearinghouse for goods and treasure, both public and private. It collected royalties and revenues accruing from the colonies and managed Crown properties in the Indies. It controlled overseas shipping in all its aspects: letters patent and contracts, inspection, registry, insurance policies, emigration. It was a customhouse, a bureau of records, and a hydrographic office. It procured arms, stores, and ships for government service. It was a department of audit and accounts. It served as custodian and executor of estates, received all confiscate or embargoed goods. It maintained a school of navigation, filed and collated charts, and licensed pilots for the Indies. And its judicial powers were extensive.

Incredible as it may seem, the royal officials handled all this with considerable efficiency, and with a staff which most modern governments would consider inadequate for a subdivision in a quiet department. Their salaries were reasonable and their perquisites large; those in Spain were generally honest and their deputies in the Indies were usually venal.

When it came to the principles of colonial policy, Isabel and Fernando displayed their usual good sense. The Indies of the Ocean Sea might be strange and wild, but a healthy self-supporting community was much the same everywhere, and its foundations were industrious, God-fearing residents and a productive agriculture. Gold and silver were, of course, highly desirable, but at this stage they were seen as the frosting on the cake. Desirable emigrants (a category from which Jews, Moors, and most foreigners were excepted) were offered every inducement to settle permanently, particularly if they took their families. Every ship bound for the Indies carried seeds, plants, tools, and assorted domestic animals. Farmers, stockmen, and artisans of every trade were sent as favored colonists, if necessary on salary. No important settlement was without its doctors, pharmacist, and, of course, its priests and missionary friars—not to mention an infestation of lawyers. The Indies, in short, were to be made into a tropical extension of the mother country.

The Indians, to be sure, presented an exotic element for which there was no domestic precedent, but here, too, the King and Queen had sound ideas. The Indians would be absorbed into the general scheme as free subjects of the Crown, participants in the unity of religion, law, and culture with Spain. Their independence would be lost, but their souls would be saved. They would supply labor while enjoying the protection and spiritual guidance of their white masters, and thus by precept and example be converted into "Christian citizens."

The first part of the program went well in spite of the difficulty of regulating any frontiersmen—and especially, Spanish frontiersmen—in a generally ill-disciplined age, and later, of the disrupting effects of fabulous mining wealth. The colonists built cities "by and large as fine as any in Spain"; within the lifetime of the first settlers, Hispaniola was exporting hides, bacon, sugar in quantity, all from imported stock, and suffered from a glut of cattle. The great University of San Marco was founded only twenty years after Pizarro discovered Peru. Where the program broke down was in the part which referred to the natives; and this in turn was largely because the Spaniards in the Indies did not fit into the role assigned to them.

The colonists did not care about forming free citizens; they wanted slaves, or the reasonable facsimile thereof, known as *aborias*, so that they might live in a gentility to which many were unaccustomed. The Spanish workmen would not stay put: once in the Indies they developed an acute class consciousness and ceased to be laborers. In vain Fernando pointed out that a man who had worked with his hands until the day he sailed from Castile had no excuse for becoming a pretentious vagrant in Hispaniola. The settlers thought differently: If the better-off Indians kept slaves and shunned menial tasks, were Spaniards of the master race to be less than the naked heathen? The perils and discomforts of life in the new realms were accepted, but those who endured this life should be allowed to make a good thing of it. Colonial officials were equally unhelpful, for, favored by distance, they were masters of passive resistance to inconvenient instructions, and most humane instructions were inconvenient. Even the Indians provided some stumbling blocks, particularly those who refused to come to terms with either Christianity or the Christians,

and who exhibited cannibal habits highly unsuitable in free vassals of the Crown.

Against such odds the vision of sober colonies living by husbandry and pious paternalism was bound to suffer. The *repartimiento*, a colonial invention which signified a distribution of the Indians among the settlers, was adopted with enthusiasm and justified to the sovereigns on the ground that it was the only way to regenerate the inherently depraved aborigines. There were some doubts in Spain, however, and in time the repartimiento became the *encomienda*. This sounds much better, because an *encomienda* is a trust; the effect was the same, for if in theory the *encomenderos* were benevolent guardians operating (after 1513) under enlightened labor laws, in practice they worked the Indians as serfs, often literally to death.

What comfort the Indians received was almost all from the missionary friars. It is true that the Church approached the heathen in a manner more peremptory than persuasive: "You will compel . . . the barbarous nations to come to the knowledge of God," Pope Clement VII told Fernando's successor, "if necessary by force of arms." One cannot help noting a certain absence of loving-kindness in this shotgun salvation. It is true that many missionaries had a robust intolerance that matched to the line the narrow insensibility of the average conquistador. But it is equally true that there were many others whose fervor was tempered by compassion, who worked in consecrated devotion to all that was finest in their office, and who both taught and championed the Indians to considerable effect.

It is only fair to add that for all the insensate cruelty of the initial years the Indians under Spanish rule were more fortunate (or less unfortunate) than those of North America. They were not excluded from society, or barred from living in their own land; their souls were a matter of lively concern; their half-caste children were recognized. The Spaniards exploited and abused them, but they also married them.

Furthermore, conquest of Spanish America, as distinct from subsequent administration, cannot be said to have been molded by policies formulated in Spain. The policies existed, but the pattern was determined by the conquistadores.

The men who enlisted for the Indies were of all kinds: landless nobles and illiterate mercenaries, merchants and sailors, lawyers and

roistering soldiers of fortune. But almost all the captains and compañeros who went, eighty or a hundred or two hundred at a time, to invade and conquer a hemisphere, had certain fundamental characteristics in common. They were devout, rapacious, and incredibly valiant; they had a raw pride and an inborn flair for rather crude intrigue; they stood by each other in appalling hardship and were furiously jealous of each other's successes. The product of centuries of warfare and spare comfort, endurance was bred in their bones, violence was in their blood, and safety was the last of their ambitions.

They were also intensely practical. Underneath their matter-of-fact approach to extravagant undertakings lay what one can only call a lack of imagination, and this in turn was largely due to simple faith. Nothing could have been more useful. Their amazing self-confidence was not undermined by fearful speculation, and they were interested, but not in the least disconcerted, by the strange world they discovered. Prepared for marvels, they would have taken hippogriffs and dog-headed giants in stride: since God can create purple centaurs as easily as He could barnyard fowls, it follows that centaurs are as natural as speckled hens, only not so common. By the same token they were spared heart-searchings as to the moral issues involved. Subjugation of the New World was obviously not only a right but a holy obligation: had not Their Catholic Highnesses been divinely appointed as its overlords and as instruments for the salvation of its erring inhabitants? Men such as these were not the stuff from which staid agricultural settlements were readily made, but they were perfect tools for conquest.

The conquerors were at their best in hard times, when they pulled together in stoic comradeship. When things went comparatively easily, they turned on each other like sled dogs out of harness—and since anything short of life-or-death emergency was comparative ease in their way of life, the periods of agreement were limited. Because their personal animosities did as much to mold events as any other factor in the conquest, they are important. For the Spaniards, to whom fighting was a kind of bitter sport, a legal battle was as enthralling in its own way as physical combat. They went to court at the drop of a grudge, and their cases often passed to the Royal Council; frequently they forwarded their grievances to the King himself. Government was

still direct and personal; Castilians were accustomed to address themselves directly to the throne (when a decree was issued on horseshoes, the farriers waited on Isabel and Fernando to talk it over), and to do so in no uncertain terms. Their Highnesses dictated replies in about the tone of a company president to a subordinate who is also an old acquaintance; indeed, the letters of Fernando to officials and colonists in the Indies are at times so avuncular that one cannot read them today without feeling something of the respect, irritation, and affection that might be provoked by those of an elderly relative.

However exasperating a correspondence largely composed of complaints and accusations might be, it was informative and hence to be encouraged. Fernando and his ministers, wise in the perversities of their generation, could discount a good deal of it, but they could not ignore it. There was always a residue which required some action if the settlements were not to be left to their own unruly devices. Thus the spites and ambitions of men in the Indies, while they had little influence on long-range policies, affected so many government measures on current questions that it sometimes seems as if behind every official instruction one can glimpse some busy colonist contriving a rival's downfall.

The design woven by adventurers and kings, priests and savages, on a warp of chance and defiant nature, held much that was shocking even by the unexacting standards of its time. It was never pretty, and little of it was kind, but it has a somber magnificence which no other conquering possesses. And sordid or splendid, it is all displayed in Darién.

II

ON JUNE 5, 1500, one Rodrigo de Bastidas was granted license "to go by the Ocean Sea to discover . . . islands or firm land, in the Indies or in any other part." This was the beginning of the Darién story, for it was Bastidas' small armada, pushing two hundred leagues beyond the last charted coast, which discovered Urabá and the eastern Isthmus, and Vasco Núñez de Balboa was with it.

It is appropriate that this should be the first event in Balboa's life to which one can put a date and a description. At that, it was an unobtrusive debut. Balboa was not a prominent member of the expedition; he had signed on as *escudero*, one of perhaps half a dozen fighting men recruited for the voyage, and he apparently completed his service without provoking so much as an anecdote for reminiscent use in the days of his fame. So far as can be gathered, he was a devil-may-care young fellow of twenty-four or -five, quite untroubled by intimations of greatness, and distinguished from all the other impetuous hidalgos who soldiered for a living only by his looks and his skill with a sword. These, however, were remarkable. Even in a day when every gentleman was expected to be handy with his blade, Balboa's talent was judged extraordinary, and he seems to have exercised it with some enthusiasm. His humor was gay, but in his green years he went with a reckless chip on his shoulder, happily alert for anything from a duel to a free-for-all. As for his appearance, it was such as to move to admiration even those who disapproved of him.

Casas, who knew him, says that Balboa was "very tall and well built, clean-limbed and strong, with the attractive bearing of a man of clear understanding, and capable of withstanding much hardship. . . . Of very gallant mien, and feat, and handsome of face and figure." He was fair, with reddish-golden hair and beard, and observers were struck by his sinewy grace of movement and his persuasive trick of speech. This bountiful endowment, which was to stand him in both good stead and bad, was also durable: the description refers to him as he was ten or twelve years after he sailed with Bastidas, when he was a seasoned veteran of the Indies.

It has been conjectured that Vasco Núñez was driven to enlist with Bastidas by stepmother trouble. The drawback to this theory is that the stepmother is also purely conjectural. She has been deduced from the fact that Balboa had a brother named Alvar, who was born in 1499. This, however, may only mean that their mother extended child-bearing over a considerable period, and since no one knows when Balboa was born (the date 1475 rests solely on the shaky authority of a guess at his age made by Casas long afterwards) the period may have been shorter than is usually supposed. For that matter, Alvar may have been one of those extracurricular children with whom every

caballero of the time appears to have been supplied, and who were so often accepted amiably by the legitimate family.

Very little, in fact, is known about Balboa's early years. He was born in Estremadura (cradle of conquistadores) in the craggy, castled town of Jerez de los Caballeros. We are told that his father was Don Nuño Arias de Balboa, and his mother a lady of Badajoz. Beyond this, all that can be said of his parents is that since he was "*hidalgo y de sangre limpio*," they were patrician, Catholic, racially "pure" and properly married—a combination not too easily come by in fifteenth-century Castile. Two brothers are known besides the youthful Alvar: Gonzalo, who seems to have been the eldest, and Juan.¹ The family, originally Galician, had been rich and powerful. It was tintured with the blood of the Gothic kings and of the royal house of Leon; in the time of the great Adelantado Garci Rodríguez de Valcarcel y Balboa, and for a century thereafter, it had produced prelates and ministers who shaped history with strong hands. By Balboa's time most of the early luster had faded; his immediate family was undeniably noble, but it was neither wealthy nor influential.²

Vasco Núñez received the education proper to his station: that is, he was put to serve in a great household. (As Oviedo, always a bit of a snob, remarked, "He who has not been a page ever smacks of the muleteer.") The training of such *criados* began in childhood and continued until they were full-fledged esquires—a system which made friction with stepmothers or any other relatives extremely difficult. Balboa's patron was Don Pedro Puertocarrero, the deaf Lord of Moguer, a circumstance which may have had something to do with his decision to volunteer with Bastidas. Moguer, like its near neighbors Palos and Huelva, had a mighty maritime tradition and a special interest in the Indies. Its men had sailed with Columbus; the Admiral's favorite caravel was built in its yards, and in its church he made solemn thanksgiving in 1493. And it was a Moguer pilot, young Peralonso Niño, who came back from a shoestring voyage in the spring of 1500 with nearly fifty pounds of declared pearls—and, it was rumored, as many more in contraband.

The salt air of adventure which blew about Moguer might well have infected any young man of spirit, particularly Balboa, whose patron's ill-health now kept him from the campaigns which were an escudero's

business. On the other hand, special stimulus was hardly necessary in 1500, when a new fever for exploration was running in Castile.

The revival of interest in the Indies followed six slack years in which discovery had found few takers, for the first fine rapture of 1493 had evaporated in the disillusionment of the Second Voyage. Columbus might swear that Cuba was really Mangi Province in China, but the evidence was against him. Where were the noble cities of a million hearths, the crowded ports, the merchant-philosophers in their marble palaces, and the ladies "living delicately like royalty"? Europe knew quite a lot about China, and even about Mangi, and the islands of the Ocean Sea did not fill the bill. Far from offering the rich cargoes of the Orient, they appeared to produce nothing that could repay the cost and peril of the voyage except the raw material for slaves, and slaving had been forbidden. Bootleg voyages were made, and undoubtedly ranged farther than will ever be known, but legitimate enterprise fought shy, and an experimental lifting of restrictions in 1495 had little effect beyond arousing Columbus to outraged protest. At the end of 1499, however, the slump ended in a sudden rebirth of confidence and giddy hopes. Admiral Columbus, on his third voyage, had discovered Paria.

The Admiral's report of the new find was a characteristic medley of fact and vaulting fancy, woven with passages about the Earthly Paradise, the strange shape of the other hemisphere ("like a woman's breast"), and the natural lushness of a country blessed by a climate derived from its proximity to heaven. But it was perfectly definite about indications of gold, pearls in quantity, and barter-minded natives; moreover, it suggested—without much emphasis—that Paria might be part of a continent. The northern branches of the Orinoco pour into the Gulf of Paria, and although Columbus had not seen the river, he had reasoned its existence from the volume of fresh water which sweetened the sea. He was inclined to believe that it was the river which flows from the Tree of Life, but on the other hand its evident size indicated a drainage basin larger than any island could provide. This was big news; if the new coast was the "mainland to the south" of which the Indians (and, for different reasons, the enterprising Portuguese) often spoke, it meant unlimited possibilities.

The information, duly publicized, brought an immediate rush for li-

censes of exploration. The offices of the Bishop-in-charge-of-discoveries hummed with activity as potential captains discussed routes, royalties, financial guaranties, and the minutiae of tonnage, supplies, crews, and contractual rights. Bishop Fonseca was a moving spirit in the creation of the Casa de Contratación, and it may be surmised that the idea came to him when he was coping with the post-Paria boom in voyages.

Since Fonseca continued to be a force in the affairs of the Indies for sixteen years after the foundation of the Casa—during which he was the most potent individual influence in official circles on matters affecting the colonies—it is worth pausing to consider him.

The Very Reverend Don Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, “one of the most prominent nobles of these realms,” may be said to have begun his concern with the Indies in 1486, when he helped in the study of Columbus’ project for a westward passage. In 1500 he had just exchanged the see of Badajoz for that of Córdoba, but he carried his diocese lightly, as he did succeeding ones, and although he was for a long period chief royal chaplain, history never catches his executive figure in the tender attitudes of a shepherd of souls. “Very able in worldly business,” as a fellow prelate acidly observed, he devoted his remarkable talents to “matters more befitting a Biscayan than a bishop.” As chief royal advisor on colonial affairs, and later President of the King’s Council of the Indies, his judicial and political power was enormous. A big, sallow, arrogant man, Fonseca was reputed to be scrupulously just but seldom merciful in public life; in private, his many benefactions (which he strove to conceal) often extended to the transgressors he had condemned as judge-in-council. As for his priestly office he no doubt held it to be amply fulfilled, since the pious swashbucklers of Castile addressed themselves to conquest with a sword in one hand and the Cross in the other. The Bishop would have had only contempt for anyone satisfied to herd a single flock when he could supervise a mutton trust. Not everyone agreed with him on this point; in his latter years a friend told him that “candidly, everyone at Court says that you are a very solid Christian and a very indifferent bishop.”

The contracts which passed over Fonseca’s table were ingenuous but precise—as precise, that is, as was possible in dealing with

unknown quantities. The Spanish mind revels in juridical forms, and chancy adventure was never dressed with greater decorum than in these *capitulaciones*, encased in meticulous phrases like strange and dangerous women in starched chokers and steel-boned corsets. The agreement made with Rodrigo de Bastidas was not the first of the turn-of-the-century contracts, but it is said to have been the first to establish the rules for dual-purpose voyages of exploration and trade.

Bastidas, whose expedition was in most respects typical, or rather, prototypical, was himself unorthodox. He was neither a navigator nor a gentleman adventurer, but a middle-class notary with a snug practice in and about Seville.³ He had an enviable reputation for prudence and sober respectability. By 1500 he was married and was the father of a future bishop. Such mature and sterling worth suggests a graying, churchwarden type, one of those oversubstantial pillars of society who are more admirable than exciting. In point of fact he was still in his twenties, and obviously not too prudent to gamble his staid security in a perilous game. And although he was described as "of candid soul, and placid," he was no innocent. It took more than simple virtue to survive in the Indies, and Bastidas was to do better than survive: he took up residence and became rich.

Bastidas had many seafaring relatives and friends, but this is not enough to explain why he abandoned his sedentary calling for so extravagant an undertaking—or why, for that matter, he was considered a suitable captain for an expedition of discovery. At all events, he was an efficient organizer. Without apparent difficulty he secured his contract, his ships, some highly qualified officers, and a group of backers—the *armadores*—who provided funds for outfitting, all matters which often harried experienced captains to the point of collapse. Victuals and trade goods were purchased largely on credit; the *armadores* assumed the risks and the crews agreed to a share of the profits in lieu of pay. Final triumph, Bastidas persuaded Juan de la Cosa to go with him as partner and chief pilot. Cosa, familiarly known as Juan Viscaíno (Juan the Biscayan), was a master cartographer and one of the finest navigators of the time. A levelheaded fellow with an eye for business, he was dependable, courageous, and as undramatic as events would allow; he had sailed with Columbus in 1493 and with

Hojeda in 1499, and "he knew the regions of the Indies like the rooms of his own house."⁴

Stripped of its legal verbiage, Bastidas' contract was simple. He could go anywhere he liked beyond the Line of Demarcation, with the exception of coasts already staked by previous explorers, and trade for anything he fancied from gold to monsters. He was required to submit his armada to inspection before sailing and on its return; to carry Crown *veedores* (supervisors) on each ship to check all commercial transactions, and to deliver everything procured on the voyage to the officials in Cádiz. The quinto, which was not always a strict fifth, was in this case set at one fourth the net profits; the rest was for Bastidas "free and unencumbered." Finally, in consideration of his pledge to observe all the conditions and to offer ample security to the satisfaction of the Bishop, the notary was brevetted "our Captain of the said ships and of the people who go in them, with plenary authority and civil and criminal jurisdiction with all its incidental, dependent, emergent, adjunct and conjunct powers."⁵

The said ships were a *nao* and a caravel, plus a *bergantín* which was probably towed or carried aboard the *nao*. The *nao*, *Santa María de Gracia*, was the *capitana*, or flagship, owned by her master, Martín Boriol; the caravel, *San Antón*, seems to have been Cosa's contribution. At a guess, the flagship was between seventy and eighty *toneles* in burthen and around seventy feet in over-all length, and the caravel considerably less than that: small enough vessels in which to face the Tenebrous Sea, but perfectly adequate in the opinion of the men who sailed them. Pilots early learned to prefer caravels of under sixty *toneles* for the tricky work of exploration, and favored the diminutive bergantines for inshore reconnaissance.⁶ For that matter, ships which cannot have been much more than thirty-five feet over-all were sailed across the Atlantic without its causing remark, much less celebrity and civic receptions. Due allowance must be made for the superb seamanship of the times; nevertheless the stubby little caravels were swifter, more weatherly, and far handier than their appearance indicates.

A crew of twenty to twenty-five was about right for a fair-sized caravel, plus the officers: master, pilot, and boatswain. (The captain of a ship was not of its complement: he was someone named to general command for the duration of the voyage, and had no part in

her navigation.) Bastidas probably had forty-five to fifty men, from able seamen to cabin boys. In addition there were the Crown veedores, the *escribanos* or notary-clerks, the *escuderos*, at least one armador as supercargo, two or more priests, and an undetermined number of women. One would like to know more of these last, and about all the women who shipped for the Indies. They went with every armada, and were paid at the same rate as seamen, twelve *maravedies* a day; their duties, admittedly varied, included cooking, washing, and the like. They must have been sturdy, colorful creatures, these *bonnes à tout faire* who signed on for voyages to the unknown, yet they were taken so for granted that no more mention is made of them than of the cabin boys. All that is certain about those who went with Bastidas is that some of them got back safe—which, considering what happened to the armada, says a great deal for the resistance of the so-called weaker sex.

Contrary to common belief, Bastidas did not set out from Spain in October of 1500. On February 18, 1501, he was still in Seville, with Cosa and Boriol, registering a promissory note.⁷ However, the note must have been about the last piece of business before going to Cádiz (then the only port from which vessels might clear for the Indies), for the armada was away by the middle of March. Since it passed inspection promptly, we can be sure that it was presented in perfect order: seaworthy, new-rigged, cargo properly packed and stowed, crew as licensed, papers in order, and no contraband merchandise aboard for commerce in Hispaniola. Furthermore, at time of sailing every man who went with it was in a state of physical purification and spiritual grace. The last concerns of anyone bound for the Indies, after making a will, were (a) a purge, and (b) confession and communion, "because naturally the sea is very much kinder to empty stomachs than to the full ones of sinful men." What state they were in emotionally, as they watched their familiar world shrink and vanish behind them, can only be imagined, for it is a point skipped by contemporary accounts. It is safe to say that no one was entirely unmoved as the caravels, dressed with flags and streaming pennants, moved out of harbor and bowed to open water.

An Atlantic crossing was no longer, in 1501, an experiment; much of the dread and splendor of Columbus' first adventuring was gone.

Some of Bastidas' crew had been that way before and knew the islands that lie like an emerald necklace from Trinidad to Cuba; one pilot, Juan Rodríguez, had been at the discovery of Paria; another, Andrés Morales, had explored with the Admiral from 1493 to 1496; Juan de la Cosa had traced the coast as far as Coquibacoa and seen the Sierra Nevada towering to the sky. But no one had gone farther than Cosa; even the old hands could not have escaped feeling the exhilaration of a dangerous treasure hunt. One gathers that there was little thought of Cathay and the golden Orient, as when Columbus, discovering Cuba, "leaped ashore and asked the natives for Japan"; Bastidas' *asiento* listed an extraordinary variety of possible products, but there was no mention of silk and only a passing one of spices. It was, in spite of everything, a practical expedition, and speculation ran to native gold and pearls. These last seemed a sure hope; if they could be collected "by the bushel" near Paria and had been found by Cosa and Hojeda in Coquibacoa, doubtless the further coast also had its philoprogenitive oysters.

(Every informed person knew that tropical oysters, swimming about the sea in flocks under a queen-commander, were uncommonly responsive to the biological urge. Thus prompted, they made for the shore, there to mate with the dews of heaven and bring forth "their children, which are pearls"—white pearls, offspring of the morning, and dark ones born of twilight. All oyster children were valuable, even the deformed ones—victims of prenatal shock—known as *aljófara*, for pearls are not only to delight the eye. They are a potent remedy for hemorrhage and heart diseases, and for other ills which resist more banal medicines; best of all, "they comfort the spirit.")

Bastidas followed the usual outbound course: down to the Canaries for fresh meat, cheese, water, and wood, and then straight across to the Antilles. Here he discovered Barbados, then uninhabited, which he named after the "Green Isle" of legend and dismissed without interest, leaving it to be discovered afresh long afterwards. At the end of April or in early May the armada fetched Coquibacoa—the Goajira Peninsula, which bounds the Gulf of Venezuela on the west—and came to anchor off Citurma. This was the jumping-off place, the end of the map and the beginning of discovery. Keeping close inshore and putting in to any likely haven, the armada felt its way west, south, and

southwest along the coast of what is now Colombia; past the soaring bastions of the Sierra Nevada and the long beaches of Salamanca to the "Big River,"⁸ down to the great bay which Bastidas christened Cartagena, and so by islands and mainland shore to the Gulf of Urabá and the Isthmus. Something of what this entailed can be gleaned from modern sailing directions for the coast, which are so studded with warnings that it is hard to see how any pilot, navigating by primitive instruments without charts or even a vague knowledge of local winds, currents, and soundings, could take his ship safe from cove to bay to river mouth in detailed survey. Bastidas and Cosa were thorough; it took them five months to cover a distance that later caravels, with favoring weather, sailed comfortably in a week or so.

Not much is known of those months. At Citurma the natives were friendly, and Bastidas was able to get some pearls, though owing to the Coquibacoan oysters' careless habit of lying open in the sun, their children were apt to be more tanned than was desirable. Here, too, one of the crew elected to stay in order to qualify as a "tongue" (interpreter); he was found, intact, thirteen months later by another expedition and taken to Hispaniola. At Gaira, near Santa Marta (where Bastidas was one day to be governor), there was some unpleasantness with the Indians; at the mouth of the Big River the ships were caught in a fearful storm, and were saved only by a masterly display of combined piety and seamanship. Zamba and Bohío del Gato,⁹ two small havens just beyond the river, were remarkable only for the hostility of their shave-pate Indians, whom the Spaniards dubbed *los coronados* (the tonsured)—a name which has caused some historians to note that they "wore large crowns."

At Cartagena, where in aftertimes Spain built the "Pearl of the Indies," the greatest fortified port in the Americas, the armada lay over for two or three weeks. The magnificent landlocked harbor was inviting, but the inhabitants were not. Nothing would bring them to terms, or even to the state of wary truce which mutually inimical tribes commonly established for purposes of commerce. Probably the frustrated expeditionaries, who had been tantalized for months by the sight of golden ornaments with which their owners refused to part, became in the end too pressing. Before the armada left (about the twentieth of August) there was brisk fighting, which was repeated in

the near-by Islands of San Bernardo and of Barú.¹⁰ Bastidas wrote off the natives of these places as hopelessly rebellious cannibals, and the report was confirmed by following captains. The result was a rather apologetic decree, in 1503, which excluded the Caribs of Cartagena and the islands from the antislaving edicts.

There was one exception to the general ill-humor. Somewhere beyond the Río Sinú the armada anchored in the mouth of a river, near a large village whose inhabitants went so far as to provide a handsome banquet. The liquid intake was considerable, and the natives were so mellowed that they readily exchanged their worked gold for Spanish knickknacks. Before the ships could sail, however, the effects of the feast wore off, and in a morning-after mood "the Indians repented, and asked for their gold, and brought back the gewgaws and things which they had received. And Bastidas, that they be not aroused, gave back the gold and returned what they had given him." The sweet reasonableness of this story is unfortunately marred by a final sentence. "When he left," the chronicler continues, "he seized certain Indians, whom he bartered in the land where he got the large amount of gold that he brought back." The scene of this subsequent deal, if it ever took place, was Urabá.

The province of Urabá, on the eastern side of the gulf that takes its name, presented no particular attractions as seen from the water—the only viewpoint Bastidas considered safe. Nevertheless the Spaniards were enchanted with it, for the Urabaeas, though clearly resolved to contest a landing, were willing to trade. The arms-length barter yielded the expedition nearly 7500 pesos of wrought gold. Just what the haul meant in legal tender (23.75 carats fine) is impossible to say. The Indians nearly always alloyed their gold with copper, or with copper and silver, and the proportions of the alloy were variable. Presumably, since copper was much scarcer than gold (and correspondingly prized), the native smiths were not reckless with it. The alloy, or an object made from it, was called by the conquistadores *guanín*, a word they took from the name of certain flat ornaments common in Hispaniola and pluralized, Spanish fashion, to *guanines*. In time the term was narrowed to mean pieces assaying 14 carats or less. However, an admixture of copper was a minor defect in a glittering seventy-five-pound heap of guanines, particularly as they seemed

an earnest of greater riches somewhere near. If the otherwise scantily provided Urabae could use gold so casually, their natural supply must be enormous. This, at last, was discovery worth shouting about; small wonder that when the armada crossed to the western side of the Gulf, the still-dazzled expeditionaries found Darién an anticlimax.

No exact date can be put to the discovery of Darién, although it was probably in October of 1501. How long the expedition stayed, and what it did there, are points which must be left equally vague. Bastidas secured some native products—textiles, artifacts, a little gold, and a few pearls—but nothing to arouse remark after the barter in Urabá. Darién, like Balboa, made an inconspicuous entrance. One cannot blame the discoverers for failing to be impressed. The brief heyday of the Darién colony was a triumph of valor and dogged delusion over geographical fact, and it would have required clairvoyance rather than perception to foresee it. And Vasco Núñez de Balboa, that as yet unimportant young escudero, could never have guessed that on this unlikely stage he would play one of the great dramas of New World history.

The Indians of Darién were a milder people than those of the mainland coast, and they appear to have resigned themselves to the Spaniards after no more than a token resistance. Some of them embarked with the armada, presumably of their own volition, and were later left in Hispaniola. Casas tells of seeing them wandering about the streets of Santo Domingo, free, self-possessed, and naked save for a conical gadget which might be termed a fig leaf, but which a later observer described explicitly as an extinguisher. Bastidas had shown commendable restraint in respecting his guests' convenience: the extinguishers were made of gold. The amiable Darienes were evidently not without guile; they were quite as rich as the Urabae (whose mines were a figment of Spanish imagination), but the expeditionaries do not seem to have suspected it.

Ninety or a hundred miles northwest of the three rocky islets called the Farallones de Darién, at about Punta Portogandí, the armada turned back in forced retreat.¹¹ Castilian explorers were not easily discouraged by the malice of "sea and wind and evil people" specified in contemporary insurance policies, but they had no defense as yet against *broma*, the voracious shipworm which infests these waters.

Santa María and *San Antón* were found to be riddled with broma. Somehow Cosa got the wallowing craft to Jamaica and from there to Hispaniola—a notable feat on a largely uncharted course. Since Bastidas had no authorization to touch at Hispaniola, an attempt was made to patch up the ships at a little island offshore called Isla del Contramaestre (Boatswain's Island), followed by a forlorn one to continue the voyage. The armada lay over for a month at Cabo Canongía waiting for fine weather, put out again to sea, and was once more forced back by storms. Two months after landfall at Boatswain's Island, the spongy vessels quietly foundered in the Gulf of Xaraguá (Gonaïves), near what is now Port-au-Prince.¹²

It was about the end of February 1502 when the expeditionaries stood on the Haitian shore and watched their ships drown in shallow water, and Bastidas and Cosa did not reach Spain until the following September. The intervening months were not dull. There was first the seventy leagues overland to Santo Domingo, a route which four centuries later was still bad enough to be described as demanding "courage and determination on the part of the traveler," and in the course of which Bastidas mislaid one of the three detachments into which he had divided his company. And at the end of it there was more trouble. Official Santo Domingo was usually chilly toward explorers, and instead of being feted, Bastidas was first investigated and then tried for illicit entry and barter.

The charges against Bastidas were thin, but the *fiscal* (Crown prosecutor) embroidered them with art, apparently on the thesis that, having lost their ships out of sheer perversity, the entire company should have swum to Spain, or alternatively, have perished in perfect legality on the spot. The newly installed Governor of the Indies, Comendador Ovando, clearly rather embarrassed, upheld the fiscal, but sidestepped responsibility by remanding the case to the Royal Council in Spain.¹³ Some twenty-eight vessels of the great fleet that had brought the Governor and a crowd of new colonists were due to sail for home on July 1; Bastidas and Cosa were given passage on one of the smallest caravels, and their gold was sent with them under embargo.

Casas says that Columbus, who had appeared off Santo Domingo a few days before, bound for his fourth attempt to find the Grand

Khan and the Isles of Spice, sent a prophetic hurricane warning to the Governor, urging that the fleet lie over, and that his advice was ridiculed.¹⁴ However this may have been, the fleet put out as planned, and ran into an appalling storm off Puerto Rico. It was night; the flagship with its guiding beacon vanished in the screaming dark, and in a few hours all but seven of the ships were lost. That carrying Bastidas and Cosa outran the hurricane, and made port in Cádiz in September.

The sovereigns were in Madrid when they learned that Bastidas had returned and was being held in custody by the chief magistrate of Jerez de la Frontera. Conscious that this sort of thing was not calculated to further the cause of exploration, they ordered that he be set at liberty and sent, with Cosa, to join the Court at its next residence in Alcalá de Henares. It was also arranged that Bastidas should bring his gold with him, and put it on exhibition at all towns along the way. The journey, thus turned into a combined march of triumph and publicity campaign, may have taken a roundabout route; Bastidas and Cosa were not in Alcalá before February of 1503.

They were received with marked graciousness. Their expedition could not be called an unqualified success, but it was profitable despite the loss of the ships and the bulky cargo (mostly dyewood), it showed the enormous extent of the mainland, and it proved for the first time that the southern continent produced gold in quantity.¹⁵ The treasure brought from Urabá was not startling in itself; a shipment of gold from the recently discovered mines of Hispaniola which had gone to the bottom with the flagship had been twenty times as much. But viewed as a sample from a single village, it was stupendous. Commander and pilot were made much of, and each was granted a life pension of 50,000 maravedies a year—with the canny stipulation that they would be payable from the future revenues from Urabá.

Both Bastidas and Cosa applied, separately, for permits to return to Urabá. Bastidas offered higher royalties and as titular discoverer had the prior claim, but he was politely sidetracked. This, as it turned out, was a blessing: Urabá was to be the ruin of many an ambitious captain. Bastidas had been impressed with the opportunities for a smart man of affairs in Hispaniola. Acquitted of all charges against him, he went back to Santo Domingo in the summer of 1504¹⁶ and settled

down to accumulate a fortune. Juan de la Cosa got his contract, and an additional prize in the form of a brevet as *alguacil mayor* (chief constable) of Urabá, a position which promised financial returns as well as moral satisfaction. Thereafter Urabá was to be the dominant factor in his life, and indeed in his death.

As for Vasco Núñez de Balboa, he seems to have remained in Hispaniola, sharing the obscurity of hundreds of other young soldiers of fortune who scraped a living in the colony. He may have served in the dreadful campaign against the Indians sponsored by Governor Ovando, for when the natives had been "pacified" (with graveyard completeness), he was allotted some land in the newly subdued area as one of the founding settlers of a post called Salvatierra de la Sabana. Salvatierra was situated on an island-sheltered curve of the southwest coast, where Aux Cayes is now, and boasted some fine open land, a vast number of palm trees, and twenty white settlers, whose chief resource was pigs.

Here, very bored, Vasco Núñez raised hogs and debts, with special emphasis on the latter. Perhaps a place in the country was as risky for the amateur farmer then as it is now, although since the pigs fattened spectacularly on the palm fruit, and bacon brought inflated prices, it should have been good business. It may be that Balboa caught the passion for prospecting, in which some colonists amassed riches and many others lost everything they had or could borrow. Whatever happened in the shadowy years before Darién was ready for him, it brought only a drab kind of failure. In 1509 Balboa was hanging about Santo Domingo, the prisoner-at-large of his creditors—eaten with longing to get away from the island and totally unaware that destiny robed in tragedy and glory was just around the corner.

III

THE gold mines of Urabá were believed in as firmly as if they had been surveyed and sampled. That they did not exist and that the treasure of the Urabae was the product of generations of barter with

the interior were ideas which received little or no attention, although Queen Isabel sensibly observed that the next people to go there should make every effort "to see the said mines with their own eyes." This was exactly what a number of aspirant captains wanted to do. Out of a varied and eager field three were awarded contracts: Cosa, Alonso de Hojeda, and Cristóbal Guerra, each of whom had already made two voyages to the mainland beyond Paria.

The terms of the *asientos* with Guerra and Cosa were apparently identical.¹ Hojeda was a special case. He had been named Governor of Coquibacoa in connection with an abortive attempt at colonization of his discoveries around the Gulf of Venezuela in 1502. The title had not been revoked, and was now extended to include Urabá, and his agreements with the Crown were drawn accordingly. All three captains were allowed calls and commerce in Santo Domingo, equal rights of barter anywhere except in Columbus' preserves, and unlimited exploration and trade beyond Darién, and all were required to build a fortified post in Urabá or other convenient spot as a base camp. No provision was made for the eventuality that they would trip each other in simultaneous operations along the richer bits of coast, or worse, find themselves in Urabá together, there to dot the lonely shore with Spanish forts in triplicate—a prospect filled with dynamite.²

Thus in the fullness of time three armadas set out for the golden Gulf, but the intensive exploitation of Urabá and Darién did not develop as scheduled. Hojeda, the most favored, the least organized, and the last to leave,³ got no farther than Hispaniola, where (he claimed) his expedition was scuttled by Governor Ovando. He had not done with Urabá, but it was to be five years before he managed to set foot in it. Guerra went as far as Cartagena, where his career was terminated by a poisoned arrow. Cosa alone reached the Gulf of Urabá, so fulfilling the Queen's prediction that he would know how to carry out the venture better than anyone else. What is more, he built a fort there, although the site, construction, and occupation of it were none of his choosing.

The Cosa voyage, a crowded saga which may have included the first navigation of the Orinoco, has been curiously neglected, and such mention as it has received in modern times is usually erroneous.⁴ It is hard to resist telling a story that comprises practically everything

that could happen to an armada of exploration, but this is not the place to treat it as it deserves, for only a part of it relates to Darién.

Cosa left Spain with four ships, two of them bergantines, in June of 1504. He was in Santo Domingo in August, when Columbus got there with the survivors from his fourth voyage. From Hispaniola he seems to have made for the Orinoco, and to have sailed up the river for a hundred and fifty leagues.⁵ Doubling back to the Caribbean, he set his course for Urabá. After various stops—for pearls, for dye-wood, and at an island chiefly remarkable for its “snakes and dragons”⁶—he was in Cartagena at the end of the year or early in 1505. Here he found Guerra’s armada, which had left Castile three or four months after him. Rich in loot, but depressed by sickness, short rations, and the death of their commander, the Guerra expeditionaries wanted to go home. This suited Cosa perfectly, especially as he was able to make a deal to ship his bulky cargo direct to Spain. The two expeditions made a joint slave raid (Cartagena now being “a place appointed for slaves”), and after giving the homebound fleet what food he could spare, Cosa went his way without lingering to see it sail. He touched at the Sinú and at Isla Fuerte, and a few days later rounded Caribana head and came to anchor off the village now called Nicoclí, in Urabá.

There is a rather pedestrian, but possibly correct, account of the initial incidents in Urabá in Oviedo’s chronicle: a fight on landing, with capture of the hamlet near the beach; a night march on the chief village, guided by a co-operative prisoner, followed by a surprise attack before which the Indians fled, and thirty-six pounds of booty in gold masks and *maracas*. But an earlier reporter told the story before it had time to cool, and with considerably more color:

Having landed, they found many huts from which many Indians came forth to meet them, to accept them and do them honor. And they say that one of these had already foretold how certain ships were about to come from the east, from a great king to them unknown, who would have them all as his servants, and that the strangers would be all endowed with perpetual life and adorned in their persons with various vestments. They say, that having seen our vessels, their king said: Here are the ships that I told you about X years ago. The which king came with a breastplate of solid gold

fastened on his chest by a golden chain, and a mask of gold, and on his feet four gold bells weighing a marco each; and with him came XX Indians all with gold masks on their faces, sounding golden rattles which weighed 30 marcos each one. And when they saw men from the island [of snakes and dragons] with [the Spaniards], they turned hostile and began to fight our men vigorously with poisoned arrows. There were about 5,000 of them; of our people 140 landed and in hand to hand combat cut to pieces about 700, one of our men being killed by an arrow; then they went to the huts and took the king alive and rattles, masks, bells and the armature to the amount of 800 marcos.⁷

All this has a fine, firsthand flavor, but someone (perhaps a copyist) was too free with his zeros. The Urabae could never have mustered five thousand warriors, and seven hundred fatalities would have wiped out the village down to the last infant in arms. Also, the eight hundred marcos (410 pounds avoirdupois) of gold seem to have been nearer eighty. Incidentally, it would be interesting to know what the interval between the chief's prediction and its consummation really was: not "X years," obviously, but ten periods of time, since the numeral would be unmistakable even without an interpreter. Ten moons would carry foresight to the edge of prophecy; ten suns (expressed by sweeps of the arm) would mean no more than an efficient grapevine.

The mellow light in which Juan de la Cosa is usually displayed is markedly absent from Oviedo's narrative. The chronicler goes out of his way to present the Biscayan as a kind of seagoing gangster, hustling from assault to assault and possibly—this was pure supposition—hiding a good part of his loot from the accountants. The expedition's activities in Darién were an instance in kind.

Cosa, says Oviedo, had learned about Darién from the Urabae, and crossed the Gulf determined on a raid. Leaving the larger ships hove-to near the Farallones, he edged into the tiny estuary with the bergantines and the lifeboats, landed his men, and marched on the chief's village. The landing had been made in the small hours of the morning; the village was reached at dawn and attacked forthwith. The unsuspecting Darienes were easily defeated and their "king" captured (though he managed to escape afterwards); the booty in worked gold came to some twenty pounds. If Oviedo is right, this disgraceful affair

was the first contact between Castilians and the inhabitants of the small valley where Balboa was to conduct his school for conquerors. It is not known what Cosa and his companions thought of the place, but some of them were to know it well in the days of the settlement, among them the pilot Martín de los Reyes, Juan de Ledesma the fleet alguacil, and the captain of the flagship, Juan de Quicedo.

Cosa must have learned, at Santo Domingo, enough about Columbus' latest discoveries to realize that they touched those he himself had made with Bastidas, and that he could not continue for long to dodge along the coast pouncing on native villages in the dawn. He might have chosen to build his fort in Darién, or to make at once for Hispaniola and home, but for an unforeseen check. A lifeboat manned by sailors of Guerra's armada turned up at the estuary with bad news and an appeal for help. Guerra's flagship had been wrecked just outside Cartagena Bay; one of her sister naos, commanded by a certain Monroy, had then separated from the others and come after Cosa, and was now aground in Urabá. Why Monroy had turned to follow Cosa is not clear; the impression is that he was like a lost dog whose uneasy affections have become fixed on a reassuring passer-by, but since the two remaining ships of the armada went safely to Castile there was no apparent reason why he should not have gone with them. In any case the Biscayan had no choice but to adopt the foundling. He returned to Urabá, only to find that the nao, rotten with broom, was past salvaging.

Misfortune was soon followed by disaster. Cosa's own two naos were found to be in equally hopeless case; the pumps could not keep out the seeping water, and both had to be beached. A fort was now essential, for there were more than two hundred men, and the bergantines and the ships' boats could not hold more than half that number. Making the best of a desperate business, the expeditionaries unloaded and dismantled the useless naos, fashioned temporary shelters from the sails, and set about raising the mud and timber walls of an enclosure complete with "a very fine tower." Thereafter life in the fort became a monotonous endurance test. Harassed by the Indians, the Spaniards ventured on only one major sortie, to pan for gold near a lake. Their prisoners tempted them with tales of a gold-rolling river beyond the mountains where "each man, for little that he exerted

himself, could gather ten marcos in a day," but they were in no condition to accept the bait. Before very long, they knew that in a matter of weeks they would be able to leave Urabá: the transportation problem was being rapidly solved by an epidemic fever.

At the end of three months only a hundred men were left alive. Ten stalwarts elected to stay and hold the fort, with rations and ammunition for a year—a fantastic gesture, but not unique; the Spanish conquest offers parallel examples of suicidal hardihood. The rest embarked, the more able-bodied in the bergantines, the seriously sick in the flagship's lifeboat (apparently on the bleakly realistic theory that, since most of them were doomed anyway, they might as well go in one of the more hazardous craft), and the overflow in a smaller boat. Ninety-six days after the stranding of the naos, the little flotilla put out to sea, bound for Hispaniola.

It was a long and dreadful voyage. In the end one bergantín, packed to the gunwales, brought forty-four men to harbor in Azúa, near Santo Domingo; some time afterward the bigger lifeboat, which had been swept north to Cuba, limped in with fifteen more survivors. By January or February of 1506 Cosa was once more in Castile. The battered expedition had clung grimly to its treasure—11,850 pesos of wrought gold and thirty-five pounds of good pearls⁸—through all the catastrophes that had beset it, which explains why all the known survivors preserved unimpaired their appetite for voyaging, and why the Gulf of Urabá continued to be so attractive in spite of its undeniable drawbacks.

Not everything can be verified about Cosa's voyage, but several statements made in connection with it can be proven untrue. The river up which the armada sailed was not the Atrato: the report stated clearly that it was 600 leagues from Urabá. In any case the Atrato could not be explored for 150 leagues, least of all by ship, since that distance would put the explorer considerably beyond its mountain source. Amerigo Vespucci did not accompany Cosa: he is fully accounted for in Spain except for a short period from the end of September 1505 to March 1506, when it is just possible that he made a quick trip to Hispaniola and that he and Cosa returned from Santo Domingo together.⁹ Cosa did not make another voyage to Urabá in 1507–1508, and much less two such voyages, in 1507 *and* 1508, one

or both with Vespucci: there is ample documentation of the presence of both Cosa and Vespucci in Castile during those years. It is true that toward the end of 1506 a plan was afoot to send them to the Gulf with an armada of eight ships and four hundred men, but it never took solid shape. For reasons which will be explained, expeditions of exploration and conquest were suspended until 1508. Urabá, where the token garrison and towered fort were soon erased, was left to its own primitive devices for four and a half years.

Had conditions in Castile been normal in the period following Cosa's return, colonization of the mainland would probably have been pushed at once. But conditions were anything but normal. From the end of 1504 until the autumn of 1507 the country was in a state of disturbed uncertainty, when the powers and even the identity of the ruler were matters of question.

On November 4, 1504, Isabel died, and the throne of Castile and the Indies passed to her daughter Juana, wife of Felipe "the Handsome," whose father was Emperor Maximilian of Germany. Unfortunately Juana was mentally unbalanced, and her husband—who both bewitched and ill-used her—lacked the qualities which enabled Fernando to function so effectively as king-consort. Isabel, miserably aware of these facts, had at the last disposed that, should Juana be judged incompetent, Fernando should rule on her behalf. In December the Cortes met and decided the succession, declaring (a) that Juana was legitimate Queen of Castile, (b) that she was incapable of ruling, and (c) that Fernando should govern for her as regent. This left Felipe hanging angrily in mid-air, egged on to retaliation by his friend Louis XII of France, by his illustrious parent, and by a number of disaffected Castilian nobles—all of whom had axes of their own to grind.

Faced with the prospect of unequal war, Fernando hit on a scheme to cut the ground from under the Hapsburg feet by an alliance with France, based on marriage with Louis' young niece, Germaine de Foix. The deal was one of his rare instances of political insensibility. He was frank to a fault as to his motives ("You, my son," he wrote to Felipe, "by delivering yourself over to France have obliged me to contract, much to my regret, a second marriage . . ."), but he does not seem

to have realized the resentment it would arouse in Castile. For the moment, however, it worked; in November, Felipe formally recognized Fernando as king-regent.

The Catholic King was not usually ingenuous, but he apparently believed in Felipe's good faith, for he urged him to bring Juana home: "Come, my son, come to receive my embrace." Felipe came, while Fernando was in Aragon with his bride, but he was not in search of paternal embraces. Still less was he concerned with establishing Juana's legal competence. The handsome Hapsburg entered his wife's realms with a full court and three thousand German infantrymen, to which he proceeded to add six thousand additional troops, recruited through the feudal lords who supported his cause. When he finally consented to an encounter with his father-in-law, it was to offer a choice of war or capitulation.¹⁰ Fernando chose the latter.

It is probable that Fernando never showed to better advantage than in this moment of defeat, when he contrived to preserve not only his dignity but his sense of humor. The young prince received him surrounded by mailed vassals and backed by an army alerted for action; Fernando, urbane and faintly ironic, with his unarmored attendants mounted on mules, made the apprehensive choreography of force look silly. Four days later he renounced the regency, although he succeeded in keeping the grand masterships of the knightly orders as well as half the revenues from the Indies as willed to him by Isabel: in the circumstances, a notable feat of negotiation. Two months afterwards he sailed from Aragon for Naples.

Felipe's reign lasted less than seven weeks, which was enough to demonstrate that the idea of putting this brash young Teuton over Castile had not, after all, been very bright. When he died, on September 25, 1506, he was mourned only by the distraught Queen and a disconcerted clique of favorites—mostly Flemish imports. Juana, a figurehead sovereign, but the only one in sight, then cloistered herself in her apartments, from where she emerged just once to exercise, with staggering lucidity, her royal powers. This single assertion of authority was as unexpected and as devastating as an earthquake: she annulled all appointments made after her mother's death, reinstated all Isabel's advisors and officials, and referred all Crown business to her father, relapsing thereafter into mulish silence.

For three months the country was governed (not without difficulty) by a board of regents presided over by Archbishop Cisneros, Primate and Chancellor of Castile. The Cortes, which had approved the provisional government only until the end of the year, then allowed it to expire by default. Castile was left with a full complement of functionaries and no co-ordinating authority, a singular situation due largely to the conviction that Fernando would hurry back in answer to the summons sent him by Cisneros and other supporters. But Fernando (who would have made a superlative poker player) lingered in benevolent detachment in Italy, writing suave, uneager letters full of confidence in Castilian loyalty to the Queen.

Meanwhile, Fate dealt neatly into Fernando's hand, for times in Castile were bad. To the inevitable lawlessness and assorted conspiracies were added a near famine (crops had failed for the third consecutive year) and an appalling epidemic of plague. A sure, experienced ruler was needed, and instead there was Juana, who persisted in wandering about Castile with her husband's confined corpse. By August of 1507, when Fernando judged the time ripe, he was able to re-enter the realms in the guise of a magnanimous monarch graciously acceding to popular demand. Heaven was evidently on the King's side, for his return coincided with the end of the plague and a bumper harvest.

While all this had been going on, exploration had been in abeyance. (The plan to send Cosa again to Urabá with Vespucci had originated with Cisneros, whose warrant to dispatch expeditions lapsed with the provisional government.) In November the King summoned four of his most eminent pilots to confer with him in Burgos on measures to further discovery and development in the new realms. Columbus had died in 1506; the four top men now chosen as consultants were Juan de la Cosa, Amerigo Vespucci, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, and Juan Díaz de Solís. All were in the confidence of the royal officials, who had used them on various occasions as advisers and special agents, and who doubtless briefed them thoroughly before sending them off to Court. What with difficult communications and normal bureaucratic delay, it was February of 1508 before they were in Burgos—Cosa and Vespucci with a strongbox containing a remittance for the King of 6000 ducats, sent by the Casa de Contratación.

The conferences in Burgos were not only with the navigators, and some decisions taken at the time were probably reached in private sessions of Fernando and Fonseca: notably, the appointment of Columbus' son and heir, Diego Colón, to replace Governor Ovando in Hispaniola. Other measures bear the pilots' stamp. The office of pilot major was created and entrusted to Vespucci. Pinzón and Solís were authorized to look for the elusive westward passage to the Orient, and left the same year to explore west and north from Cape Gracias á Dios in Honduras. Cosa was given an important part in an ambitious plan for settlement and exploitation in Tierra Firme.

The new project for colonization of the mainland had been submitted by Diego de Nicuesa, a wealthy resident of Hispaniola, in his own name and that of Alonso de Hojeda. It divided the whole stretch of coast from western Venezuela to Cape Gracias á Dios into two immense gobernaciones; one, from Coquibacoa to the Gulf of Urabá inclusive, to be administered by Hojeda, and the other, from the Gulf to northern Honduras, by Nicuesa.¹¹

So far as Hojeda was concerned, title was already established; the rights granted to him in 1504 were essentially the same as those embodied in this latest contract, and his brevet as governor of Coquibacoa and Urabá had never been revoked. He could even advance a certain merit as second-run discoverer, because one of his ships had repeated Bastidas' course in 1502; and although the excursion had been made without his authorization, he was technically responsible for it. No one except Bastidas could better claim rights in the territory, and Bastidas had long since given up any thought of such action. (Cosa was not in the running, because with all his signal qualities he fell short on social position. He was not gubernatorial timber, and he knew it; the Biscayan sailed with Hojeda, partnered him, fought beside him, and financed him, but when he addressed him, he said "Sir.")

Nicuesa's grant was a horse of another color. It had no foundation in any previous achievement, and it was territory which had been discovered by Columbus with particular pride. The enchanted Admiral, exploring his personal Asia along the Central American coast on his fourth voyage, had decided that Veragua, on the Isthmus between Chiriquí Lagoon and the Río Chagres, was really the Golden Chersonese, and that in the mountains near by must lie Aurea, site of

King Solomon's mines. The six hundred and sixty-six hundredweight of gold sent to Jerusalem in a single shipment, the three thousand hundredweight willed by King David to Solomon, had all come from Aurca—Josephus said so. "I esteem the commerce of this port and the mines of this land," Columbus had concluded, "far more than all that has been done in the Indies." One can understand why Fernando wanted to serve notice that this prize was outside Diego Colón's inheritance, but not why he thought that Colón would carry out his instructions to give every assistance to the interloping concessionaire.

Approved in principle early in May, the concessions were set forth in a double contract which was signed and sealed on June 9, 1508. The *capitulaciones* were much more comprehensive than any previously drawn, and contained the stipulation that Juan de la Cosa should be Hojeda's associate and lieutenant-governor, while retaining his rank of alguacil mayor.

When Fernando put his hand to the document to sign, "I, the King," he started a train of events which did, at last, produce a colony in Tierra Firme. It is possible, however, that both he and the Governors of Urabá and Veragua would have torn up the contract had they foreseen that the net result of eighteen months' preparation, two armadas, seven or eight million maravedíes' investment, and nearly eight hundred lives, was to be the settlement in Darién.

IV

THE concessions of Urabá and Veragua were to run for four years, reckoned from the date of disembarcation. Each Governor was required to build two forts, of which one had to be completed within a year and a half—solid structures capable of insuring the safety of their settlements. This was almost the only obligation imposed by the contract, aside from the limitations, controls, and royalties to which all expeditions were subject. The quinto on trade and barter was to be one fifth the first year and one fourth thereafter, calculated on the gross proceeds; that on mines (the rights to which were, for some

reason, conceded for ten years) was one tenth the first year, one ninth the next, and so on to a flat fifth for the last five years.¹ Colonists would earn title to the lands allotted them and could sell them at expiration of the contract; they would be exempt from taxes except on products sold and would enjoy the same privileges as the residents of Hispaniola.

No limit was put on the number of men who could be enlisted, save for an elite to be recruited in Hispaniola. This was restricted to six hundred, and was to be composed of propertied settlers who would be permitted to keep their land, mines, Indians, and rights in the island colony while absent in Tierra Firme. It was hoped that these desirably solvent and experienced recruits, tempted by the double indemnity, would do much to guarantee the success of the new ventures. The King promised to pay passage with forty days' food for two hundred men from Spain, and passage with fifteen days' food for six hundred from Hispaniola, and to supply each man with light armor. He also agreed to provide for each fort four small cannon, twenty hand guns, iron shot, and a thousand pounds of powder.

The Governors could take forty slaves from Spain, and might capture as many more as they liked in Cartagena and the adjacent islands, paying royalties on them "as on any other merchandise"; they could take four hundred Indians from the islands near Hispaniola (by unspecified methods of persuasion) and forty expert native miners from Hispaniola itself. They were also allowed, by special decree, twenty-six mares and, in the course of their four-year contract, could import twenty stallions—a rare item, because the government of Castile was engaged in an intensive effort to increase breeding in the home realms. Finally, they were assigned Jamaica as a supply island, with the obligation to build there another fortified post.

The *asiento* was excellent from the point of view of the concessionaires, and sufficiently inviting from that of pioneers who wanted to get in on the ground floor of promising colonies. As seen by "the Young Admiral," Diego Colón, it was infuriating from first to last.

Colón, who had inherited his father's red hair and pigheadedness without his genius, cherished in his tight little soul the ambition to re-establish for himself the fabulous privileges once granted to Co-

lumbus—together with such amplifications and additions as his fertile fancy dictated. In Columbus, avidity had been strongly tinctured with mysticism: the Indies were Galatea to his Pygmalion, and the explorers who followed him were violators not so much of a discovery as of an invention, patented on earth but expressly inspired by heaven. Diego was more practical, but not less determined, and the astounding insolence with which he expressed his claims would have shocked his father immeasurably. In 1508 he started suit against the Crown, demanding effective instauration as “Viceroy and perpetual Governor of the islands and mainland, both discovered and yet to be discovered, west of the line which passes 100 leagues beyond the Cape Verde Islands.” The demand (which ignored the Treaty of Tordesillas in favor of the Pope’s first bull) was elaborated to give him absolute jurisdiction and the maximum financial return—a return which Columbus had estimated at about twenty-five per cent of the net proceeds from all sources, including commerce, anywhere in the New World.

Obviously any monarch would have been insane to accede to such pretensions, and should have been deposed at once had he done so. It was also clear that Fernando was under no compulsion to send young Diego to Hispaniola: he could have abrogated the decree of privileges on the ground that it was inimical to the national interest, or he could have used a rather obvious legal loophole to declare that only the rank of admiral was hereditary. Colón, however, ignored the obvious. He sailed for Hispaniola without gratitude, determined—explicit instructions to the contrary—to hinder to the utmost the Governors whose concessions in Tierra Firme were symbols of the limits set to his power and profit.²

The armadas for Urabá and Veragua were scheduled to sail in March of 1509. They did rather well to get away only six months late. Judging from the records which have been preserved of expeditions of the period, any captain who had gone through the business of assembling, financing, manning, and supplying a fleet must have sailed to face cannibals and hurricanes with a sigh of relief. Cosa, it is true, had time to spare, but his armada was almost painfully modest compared to that of Nicuesa. He spent the interval on a mission for the Casa, fetching from Portugal two vessels bought for official use in

Hispaniola, where the violent hurricane of 1507 had destroyed most of the ships based at the colony.

Nicuesa, who had both money and credit, said that he laid out nearly five and a half million maravedies on his expedition. How many ships he armed is an open question—his contemporaries credit him, variously, with five, seven, or twelve—but the most reliable information seems to be that he took six from Spain and added a seventh in Hispaniola. The Hojeda-Cosa armada is generally said to have left with a caravel and two bergantines, but quite possibly was limited to the bergantines; it acquired another caravel in Santo Domingo.

The combined fleet, accompanied by the two Portuguese caravels destined for service in Hispaniola, sailed from San Lúcar de Barrameda about September 9, 1509, and from Cádiz, where the fleet had to pass inspection, a few days later. The date of arrival in Santo Domingo is not known, but Nicuesa, at least, could not have been there before November. Six weeks, including the usual stop at the Canaries, was considered good time for the outward voyage, and Nicuesa paused to shanghai a hundred and fifty slaves on the island of Santa Cruz (St. Croix), and stopped again in Puerto Rico to sell some of them. This was a mistake; Santa Cruz was not appointed for slaves, as Diego Colón was delighted to point out, and Nicuesa was charged with illegal raiding, denounced to the King, and forced to relinquish his captives.

Alonso de Hojeda and Diego de Nicuesa may have been firm friends at the time they negotiated their agreement for the twin concessions, but in Santo Domingo, when both were struggling to complete their armadas, they were like rival fighting cocks. In some ways they were extraordinarily alike. Both came from the solid second-line nobility, and had been pages and squires to grandees of the bluest blood; both had gone to the Indies to make the fortunes they lacked at home. The difference in their ages was slight, and they were both under middle height, muscular, and singularly handsome. With this, however, the resemblance ceased.

Hojeda, in whom "all bodily perfections that a man may have seemed joined, save only that he was small," was as valiant, enterprising, and unsuccessful a conquistador as ever swaggered through the Indies. Fighting had been his business, and he was as perfectly con-

structed for it as a pocket dreadnought, while his grace and prowess in the furious sports of the times were famed in Castile as in the New World. Inevitably he made enemies, but his friends were both eminent and loyal; the King thought highly of him, and he had even won the armored heart of Bishop Fonseca. Hojeda had captained three unprofitable expeditions: in 1499, with Cosa, when in six weeks or so he sailed from Surinam to the Goajira Peninsula rapidly bracketing Columbus' Paria discoveries and himself discovering from Isla Margarita to Citurma, and then spent five months hanging about the headquarters of the anti-Columbus faction in Hispaniola;³ in 1502, when he attempted to colonize in Coquibacoa, and in 1505, when, bound for Urabá, he was held up in Santo Domingo by Ovando.

The first of these voyages was quite evidently undertaken primarily in order to check on the Admiral, of whom alarming reports had been received in Castile. The second ended with Hojeda a prisoner of his mutinous partners, of whose trumped-up charges he was convicted in Hispaniola and acquitted on appeal by the Royal Council. With regard to the third, he brought suit for damages against Ovando: "on one count for 30,000 *castellanos* and on another for 4000 ducats and on another for 500,000 *castellanos*, which he says he failed to make and spent because the said Ovando did not allow him to make a certain voyage."⁴ These tidy sums, which added up to about 240,000,000 maravedies, would have made up very nicely for Hojeda's disappointments—had he been able to get them.⁵

Diego de Nicuesa was quite as ornamental as Hojeda ("one of the handsomest men in Castile"), and almost equally skilled in jousting and fencing; he had a pretty talent for ballad-singing to his own guitar accompaniment, and he liked to show off his excellent horsemanship on a fine mare. He also had considerable business acumen behind his fashionable façade; starting from scratch, he had become in only six years one of the richest men in Hispaniola. But he had had none of the grim preparation for his new undertaking that years of struggle and frontier leadership conferred.⁶

With Diego Colón in the saddle in Hispaniola, the two Governors-elect found final organization of their armadas to be a day-to-day battle against official opposition. Their every move was hampered; their creditors were encouraged to be difficult; worst of all, they were

not allowed to enlist the six hundred self-financing, seasoned colonists on whom they had counted. Moreover the Young Admiral appointed a lieutenant of his own to take over in Jamaica—one Juan de Esquivel, a caballero of whom Casas has some gruesome tales. After a few weeks of this humiliating obstacle race, Hojeda and Nicuesa were raw-nerved and truculent. Hojeda, meeting Esquivel in the street, threatened to have his head if he occupied the supply island; Esquivel shrugged it off, and remembered. Before long the two Governors were snarling at each other over the money given to Nicuesa from the royal treasury for the keep of the men in both armadas, over procurement of a certain caravel which both of them wanted, over the division of the two hundred men brought from Spain, of whom Nicuesa had taken a hundred and fifty, over getting hold of the best volunteers from Hispaniola. When Nicuesa demanded that the Gulf of Urabá be included in his gobernación, a duel was narrowly avoided.

Juan de la Cosa managed to prevent an open break by getting the bristling contentents to recognize the Atrato River as their common boundary. It was Hojeda who made the concession; his title covered the Gulf of Urabá, and by compromising he gave up Darién. Seven months later King Fernando, informed of the controversy, confirmed Hojeda's right to the whole Gulf. His *cédula* was important, although, by the time it reached the Indies, events in Tierra Firme had gone far beyond proper little decrees and council resolutions.

Although relatively few of the six or seven hundred men who signed on in Hispaniola could contribute more than their persons to the undertakings, almost all of them were *baquianos*. A baquiano was the opposite of a *chapelón*, or tenderfoot, and worth ten times as much in a pioneering venture; chapelones were a trial and a danger, and were apt to die before they learned to be useful. And Nicuesa, at least, had several officers who were financially useful. His lieutenant governor, Lope de Olano, a Biscayan who had once belonged to the anti-Columbus faction in Hispaniola, was both baquiano and a man of substance (in 1503 he had been guarantor for Bastidas); the *alcalde mayor*, or chief justice, was Alonso Núñez, ex-councilor of the city of Madrid; Juan de Ledesma, who had backed both Bastidas and Cosa and been alguacil of Cosa's armada of 1504–1506, appears to have paid for a caravel, bought in Nicuesa's name, of which he was master.

Hojeda and Cosa, whose armada and prospects were less brilliant, did not do so well in the way of investing colonists. Juan de Quicedo, who had been appointed chief royal veedor for both gobernaciones, may have been of some assistance; as Cosa's flag captain four years before, he had proof that Urabá could pay well. His only known contribution, however, was a third interest in a small caravel owned jointly with Cosa and a certain Pedro Martínez, notary of gold and smelting for Tierra Firme, which the three had permission to keep in Tierra Firme for their private use and profit. This little caravel, and Quicedo with it, may have stayed in Santo Domingo for some months after the armadas left for Tierra Firme. Hojeda got another in Hispaniola—snatching it from under the nose of Nicuesa, who also wanted it—and so far as can be ascertained he had only three ships, a caravel and two bergantines, when he went to Urabá.

Each Governor secured in Santo Domingo one special partner who was willing to put capital into the enterprise for a proportionate share in the profits. Nicuesa's man was Rodrigo de Colmenares, an hidalgo of some education and, it developed, few scruples; Hojeda contracted a clever lawyer named Martín Fernández de Enciso, who was given the office of *alcalde mayor*. These last-minute adjutants were to join their respective commanders as soon as they could assemble more ships and men. Both of them were to have far more to do with the colonization of Tierra Firme than either of the concessionaires.

By some miracle of energy and determination the expeditions were ready to clear from Hispaniola early in December. Hojeda and Cosa completed their arrangements (including the settling of Cosa's wife and family in Santo Domingo) a little before Nicuesa, and sailed on or about December thirteenth,⁷ setting their course for Cartagena. Into the caravel and two small craft they had fitted two hundred and twenty men, the assorted supplies for the colony, a number of live pigs and chickens, and twelve brood mares. Thus equipped, they planned to subjugate a savage and reluctant land of indefinite extent and incalculable hazards.

The departure of the Veragua armada, achieved with considerable difficulty, took place eight or ten days later. Nicuesa spent the interval in a frantic serial effort to appease creditors egged on by Colón; the last summons was served when he was actually aboard, with the bulk

of his fleet already away. A kindly friend stood surety (at which Nicuesa burst into sobs of relief) and the Governor of Veragua literally ran to his waiting bergantín, "looking over his shoulder to see if any other writ of attachment were following him." Partly from reaction, his attitude once he had boarded his flagship was so crassly dictatorial that most of his officers and pilots—who had forgotten more about exploration than Nicuesa ever knew—were alienated at the outset.

The Governors left behind two volunteers who had been eager to accompany them. One, prevented by an injury to his knee, was Hernán Cortés, who had wanted to go with Hojeda. The other, who was not permitted to leave because he could not first settle his debts, was Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

Nicuesa followed Hojeda's course, bent on collecting some slaves in the designated zone and on underlining his claim to Darién by entering his gobernación from the Gulf of Urabá. He reached Cartagena just in time to be of assistance to Hojeda and just too late to save Juan de la Cosa.

Hojeda and Cosa had made Cartagena on the fifth day out. Tempted by the harbor, the easy-seeming country, and the recollection of Guerra's enormous loot, the Governor wanted to establish there his first fort and settlement; Cosa was all for going first to colonize in Urabá, "where the people are not so ferocious and have not such bad poison." Hojeda insisted on his idea, and a first raid on the villages close by, which netted sixty captives, only whetted his appetite. When he gave the order to march with seventy men on Turbaco, a village of a hundred *bohíos* ten or twelve miles distant, Cosa protested, but elected to go with his chief. This gallantry was unfortunate; like so much spontaneous heroism, it was noble in intent and disastrous in its results.

Forewarned, the Indians left the village, only to return and fall on the invaders as they scattered to look for treasure. After prolonged fighting Hojeda charged through the thick of the attackers and escaped, "flying as if on wings." Cosa, stubbornly covering for his captain, was killed. As he lay dying from innumerable poisoned wounds, he saw one Spaniard still alive and manfully defending them both, ". . . and

he said to him, 'Brother, since God has preserved us until now, put forth your strength and save yourself, and tell Hojeda how you left me at the end.' And this man alone, we believe, escaped out of them all, he and Hojeda."

Search parties from the ships found Hojeda crouched in a mangrove swamp, his sword still in his hand and on his shield the marks of three hundred arrows. Told that Nicuesa had arrived, he at first refused to come out, sure that his rival would rejoice in his humiliation. In this he miscalculated; he had not considered the exquisite satisfaction to be had from conscious—and public—magnanimity to a fallen adversary. As a matter of fact, Nicuesa behaved beautifully. As described by Casas the meeting of the two Governors on Codega beach had the mannered grace of a minuet and the elegant wordiness of eighteenth-century drama. They advanced on one another, embraced, shed some appropriate tears, and immediately burst into long speeches in which the most elevated sentiments bloomed in ordered, if somewhat ungrammatical, luxuriance.

"There must be a great difference," declared Nicuesa, his feet planted in the sand as on an invisible platform, "between the treatment gentlemen accord each other when they see he whom they once disliked in need of help, from that of when they were quarreling and had the faculty to revenge themselves. Because besides being baseness and vileness of heart and a degeneration from the virtues of his ancestors," he continued, warming to his theme in a welter of syntax, "it would be cruelty, and a deed of men without reason, to afflict those whom affliction has already plunged into anguish . . ." and so on.

The upshot of all this eloquence was a joint punitive expedition four hundred strong, led by Hojeda and Nicuesa on their mares. Marching by night, they assaulted Turbaco before dawn; alarmed macaws screamed a warning from the trees, but the Indians had no time to escape. "By ten o'clock in the morning, there was not in the whole town one Indian alive, large or small." Hunting for loot, the soldiers found Juan de la Cosa. His body was tied to a tree, so horribly bloated and contorted that even the case-hardened *compañeros* could not bear to look at it, and "as full of arrows as a hedgehog."⁸

Nicuesa refused to wait to bury Cosa, and without pause for food or rest the men were marched back to the coast. The two Governors

said good-by at the shore, and made haste to leave Cartagena and its bloody memories. Casas heard that Nicuesa's share of the loot came to 7000 pesos; Oviedo, always Nicuesa's champion, says that he nobly declined to accept so much as a peso; Martyr, perhaps the best informed on this point, states that there was very little loot to divide, and that of poor quality.

The depleted Hojeda expedition made for Urabá. A week or so later, after a brief stop at Isla Fuerte, it rounded Caribana head and came to anchor just inside the Gulf. The banner of Castile and Leon was raised on a low hill above the beach, at or near the spot where Cosa had camped in 1505, and the post was named San Sebastián de Urabá. The day of the arrow-martyred saint falls on January twentieth, and according to Spanish custom, this should be taken as the approximate date of the landing. It is possible, however, that another reason for honoring St. Sebastian was the hope that he would have a protective feeling for Christians exposed to perils with which he was peculiarly able to sympathize.

Shortly afterwards Hojeda sent the caravel back to Hispaniola with some gold and slaves to pay for more supplies and with a letter for a ship-owning friend of Haniguayana named Bernardino de Talavera, urging him to come to Urabá with provisions and volunteers. This caravel presents a minor problem. She apparently arrived, for Talavera went to join Hojeda, in such fashion as to achieve permanent notoriety: Having sold his ship just before receiving the letter, he first tried to get her back (allegedly, by simple seizure) and when this failed, stole a nao which was loading in Salvatierra in which he made off with seventy companions for San Sebastián. Furthermore, the caravel from Urabá seems to have carried the news of Cosa's death—but to whom, it is impossible to say.

Colón asserted that no news whatever was received in Hispaniola from either Hojeda or Nicuesa from the time they left for their gobernaciones until after February of 1511. As late as June of 1511, Fernando was anxiously lamenting, to Colón and to the Governors themselves, this alarming silence. Yet somehow the King had learned that Cosa was dead, and had ordered certain payments made to the widow. One can only conclude that the caravel, if she did arrive, took no official correspondence of any kind, and, still more remarkably,

that her entire crew contrived to maintain a clamlike secrecy about their experiences.

Back in Urabá, the hundred and forty remaining colonists built a stout timber "tower" and thirty huts for dwellings, relatively cheerful in the belief that Enciso would soon be there with his supplementary armada. But as the weeks passed with no sign of him, the situation became rapidly worse. It was found impossible to live off the country; the Indians rallied to defend their fields, and raids proved both costly and ineffectual. A crocodile ate one of the precious mares, thus destroying half the value of the others by demonstrating to the natives that the strange monsters were vulnerable. Disease was rife. By May, food rations had been cut to almost nothing. Men died raving of hunger, of fever, and of poisoned arrows, and those who buried them were envious, "because they thought that with death they could be at rest."

At some time during these months Alonso de Hojeda came nearer death than ever in all his years of perilous adventuring. (Gossip said that an outraged husband was at the bottom of it; Hojeda had an enterprising way with native women.) The Urabae provoked a sortie, and as usual Don Alonso led the charge, "running like the wind," exactly as the Indians had foreseen. At the first thicket four bowmen in ambush let fly their arrows, piercing his thigh from side to side. Carried back to the fort, he showed the mettle that made him something of a legend in his time: he ordered his surgeon, Alonso de Santiago, to apply white-hot irons to his wounds. Maestre Alonso refused, protesting that "with such firing I would kill you," and Hojeda turned on him furiously:

"Be that as it may," he said with deadly force, "I solemnly swear to God that if you do not do as I say, I will command that you be hanged."

The surgeon reconsidered. Disdaining to be bound or held, the little Governor lay without a whimper while the flesh was charred deep on either side of his leg. He recovered.

Early in May, a nao stood in from sea and came to anchor below the camp.⁹ Talavera had come, and "joy was indescribable and incalculable" over his cargo of bacon and cassava. The *compañeros* were in no mood to care, if they ever knew, how the meat and flour, or

even the nao, had been procured. The crew of the Stolen Ship, for their part, were rather less uplifted. Urabá was considerably less attractive than it had appeared from a distance, and before long they decided that the rigors of the law in Hispaniola were to be preferred to the hardships of San Sebastián. When they left, the Governor went with them.

Hojeda intended to make a quick trip to Hispaniola for supplies and fresh recruits. The *compañeros*, who from sheer misery had been ripe for mutiny, approved the plan; they agreed to remain for fifty days in San Sebastián in hope of relief, and for his part the Governor gave them written permission to go where they chose without further obligation if no help had come when the time was up. The most forceful of the surviving colonists was named lieutenant—Francisco Pizarro, the illiterate soldier from Estremadura who was to be one day the conqueror of Peru.

Seven weeks was a short time for all that Hojeda proposed to accomplish—so short that one wonders if he really believed he could carry it out. He probably hoped that Enciso would arrive to save the situation; at all events, when the due date came he was fighting a way with his shipwrecked companions through the treacherous swamps along the coast of Cuba, and he did not reach Hispaniola until late March, or more likely April, of the following year. But seven weeks was an aeon to hold out in San Sebastián. When they had passed, only eighty Spaniards were left alive, and late in July, or early in August, Pizarro gave the order to abandon the fort. They still had the two bergantines; Pizarro and forty-one others went in one ship, and though they would have despaired to know it, they were to find themselves back in Darién before two months were gone. The thirty-eight men and two women who went in the other bergantín, in charge of a certain Valenzuela, were more unfortunate. Their vessel was not, as Casas states, capsized in a cross sea by “a whale or other large fish” with the loss of all on board, but their end was almost equally disastrous. Swept by wind and current, the ship had fetched up on the coast of Cuba. Nine men had died on the way, and the remaining voyagers had fallen victim to the Indians in battle or in slavery. Three years later Velásquez found the only survivors, in servitude to a chief not far from the place where Havana was founded: two women and a

sailor named García Mejía. Perhaps the women, one of whom was rather well on in years, concluded that their sufferings were not vain, for they were immediately supplied with the essentials for their rehabilitation—clothes and, much more important, husbands.¹⁰

On September seventeenth or eighteenth, Pizarro and his companions were beating up the coast just past Cartagena when their tired eyes fell on what must have seemed the most beautiful sight this side heaven: the sails of Enciso's ships, five days out from Santo Domingo, bearing down from the northeast. Overjoyed at the prospect of getting the food and help which would enable them to continue their voyage with good chance of making Hispaniola safely, they put about and followed the two vessels into Cartagena harbor. As it turned out, their joy was premature. They knew the horrors of Urabá, which they presumed forever behind them; they knew the terms of Hojeda's final dispositions, and that they were now free of obligation to the concession and its governor. But they did not yet know the *bachiller* Enciso.

V

THE armada of the *bachiller* Enciso, a *nao* and a *bergantín*, had sailed from Santo Domingo on September 13, 1510, with a hundred and fifty-two new settlers for Urabá. One hundred and fifty of these were regularly enlisted recruits, duly registered and approved. The remaining two, even the lesser of whom was to accomplish much more in the way of practical conquest than the *bachiller* himself, were Vasco Núñez de Balboa and his yellow dog, Leoncico.

The ships were well out at sea before Enciso was aware of the two irregulars, for the sufficient reason that until then they had been hidden from creditors, bailiffs, and other impediments to embarkation in a cask originally designed to carry flour. A less picturesque getaway, such as walking on board to say good-by to someone and then failing to walk off again, had not been possible: Colón had the ships under close surveillance against just such eventualities, and Enciso was almost equally alert for fear some legal infraction would be seized on

as an excuse to keep him in Hispaniola. The flour cask was an inspired solution. Helped by a friend among the recruits named Bartolomé Hurtado, Vasco Núñez was able to fool the local authorities and the bachiller in relative comfort.¹

The departure was as significant for him as a new birth, and almost equally bare of material equipment. Aside from Leoncico (whose subsequent career removes him from the category of mere possessions) Balboa had nothing but the clothes he wore and his sword—a situation saved from routine success-story drama by the picaresque comedy of the moment. Plenty of great men have begun penniless, some of them fairly late in life, but none, perhaps, have taken off for immortal glory in a barrel. What he thought, as he crouched in the dark with his dog between his knees, no one can say. He could follow the process of sailing by ear—the scrape of lighters against the wales, the creak of windlasses, shouts and curses and laughter and long-accented chants. A swing and strain told when sail was half set, a steady whisper marked by the beat of sweeps meant that the vessel was moving out of the river under the grim walls of El Homenaje; the noises as canvas was full set, the shock of meeting open water, and the first free tremor of the leaning hull said when the ship was away. Balboa may have spent the hours before he felt safe in showing himself, worrying over the approaching interview with the bachiller, but judging from what one learns of his character in the years which followed, it is probable that he simply went to sleep.

Had Enciso been of another stamp, Vasco Núñez would doubtless have got off fairly easily. The bachiller, however, was an almost ludicrously self-important martinet in the first flush of command. When the government cutter sent to see the armada on its way had turned back, Balboa emerged prepared for a chilly reception and the likelihood of some disciplinary medicine, but he must have been surprised at the fury which met him on the quarter-deck. Enciso had been *burlado*, and to be touched by ridicule, or even by the ridiculous, was unbearable. He lashed out in a tirade wherein he so far forgot his judicial position and training as to declare that Balboa had earned the death penalty, and would be left to perish on the first desert island.

It was a highly pictorial scene: the raging alcalde, Balboa standing blond and tall with his dog beside him, the grouped officers, and

on the deck below the men crowding close to listen; a scene bright with color under the arching sails and the cobalt-and-pearl of the Caribbean sky. It is doubtful, however, if anyone noticed the setting; what interested the recruits was to see how their commander met his first test. All things considered, he could hardly have done worse. The men heard him without approval, and some of them boldly spoke out on behalf of the stowaway, arguing that a superlative fighting man with years of experience in the Indies was an asset to be valued. They may have added that Leoncico was also a desirable addition to the force; trained war dogs were hard to come by, and was not he the worthy son of Becerillo, Ponce de León's wonder dog? (Later, when Leoncico was drawing crossbowman's pay, no one questioned that he earned it several times over.)²

Enciso saw the force of these arguments, and besides, there were no desert islands immediately handy. He yielded, but he did so as unpleasantly as possible. His conduct of the incident achieved the effects which might have been expected; the first seeds of dissatisfaction were planted in the *compañeros*, and Balboa, whom he now detested, was raised from insignificance to something resembling a popular hero. Nor was his next recorded initiative calculated to improve his position. Reaching Cartagena still in evil humor, he proceeded to mishandle Pizarro and the other survivors of San Sebastián with what, in the circumstances, was almost perverse stupidity.

Enciso's first reaction to the bitter story told by Pizarro and his crew was to accuse them of lying and threaten to put them in irons as deserters or worse; his second, after reading Hojeda's instructions, was to refuse to honor the release and to order them back to Urabá. Protesting as one man, the unhappy refugees begged to be allowed to go to Hispaniola, or at very least to Veragua; as a last resort, they even offered their gold as the price of liberty. It was all useless. Enciso merely replied that he was now acting head of the *gobernación*, and that as such his commands were final.

At first glance it seems odd that anyone should go to such lengths to saddle himself with a group of worn-out, resentful subordinates. But Enciso had his reasons. If he could carry on in Urabá, his share of the take would be much more than had been envisaged when there were a hundred and eighty more people among whom to divide the

spoils, and he might be able to make his pretension of deputy governor stick, thus stepping into Hojeda's shoes—a beautiful thought. He wanted all the men he could get, particularly seasoned recruits who knew the ground. On the other hand, it would have been dangerous to allow the offended colonists to carry tales of him to Santo Domingo. Quite apart from the fertile inventiveness of Spaniards bent on defamation, his right to take over leadership in the concession was too thin to withstand the pressure for which Colón would have been charmed to find an excuse. Enciso was not Hojeda's deputy; he was only the chief justice of a no-longer-existing colony by appointment from a no-longer-functioning governor. His position was that of an impressive equestrian statue from which someone has removed the horse.

The armada lay over in Cartagena to repair a lifeboat. The job took three days, during which the work party was surrounded by a silent throng of watchful Indians. The Spaniards, also silent, pretended not to notice their audience, but they probably established a record for speed which few carpenter's gangs have equaled. On the third day of this rather morose pantomime, the alarm was given that ten natives were menacing two workmen who had gone for water. The bachiller's anemic rise to this minor emergency argued ill for future crises. He "left the ship with many armed men, advancing little by little towards the Indians with great fear of the poisoned arrows." The men of Urabá must have remembered Hojeda, running like the wind before his soldiers. However, it was just as well that Enciso was not precipitate; the Indians turned out to be friendly and by the time he approached on his slow-motion charge, the Caribs and the carpenters were on the best of terms. Enciso subsequently took great credit for his skill in winning native good will, but the whole story seems a little odd, and one wonders how he acquired "the Indian girl I captured in Cartagena," who, he said, claimed to have accounted for eight Christians with her own bow.

On one of the last days of September the armada sighted the low hills of Urabá. The dismal forebodings of the returning colonists were realized even sooner than they expected: rounding the point into the Gulf the flagship went aground on the inshore shoals, and immediately broke up under the combined action "of wind, waves, tide and undertow." Most of the men reached shore, although they were "nearly all

naked”—presumably because they had stripped in order to swim better. The total salvage from the flagship amounted to seventy or eighty swords, twelve barrels of damaged flour, a few cheeses, and a little soggy hardtack. To complete the desolation, the Urabae had burned the fort and the thirty shacks. The familiar story began over again: a stranded Spanish force, hostile natives, famine, fever, desperation.

Enciso was quite unequal to handling the seamy side of conquest. His life in the Indies had been civilian, for it was perfectly possible for a prominent lawyer to reside in Santo Domingo in his time without encountering anything more martial than a courtroom brawl, and—with the income the bachiller said he earned—to do so in considerable comfort. When he did gird himself to lead a hundred ill-armed *compañeros* on a foraging raid the party was ignominiously routed, “not by 1000 or 2000 men armed with arquebuses and other artillery, but by only three naked Indians.” The colonists, forlornly camped among the ruins of San Sebastián, were not disposed to make excuses for their inadequate commander. They watched him fumble, their eyes hard with judgment; it was whispered from man to man that the *alcalde* mayor was plotting to escape with a few favorites in one or both of the bergantines, and some said that it would be better to forestall him and get away themselves, leaving him in the suffering he had refused to credit.

A few weeks of this was enough to take a good deal of the starch out of the bachiller—so much that he was willing to listen to advice. What is more, he listened to it from the man he disliked most, the exasperatingly successful stowaway Vasco Núñez de Balboa. Balboa did not know very much about the Gulf region, but he evidently knew more than anyone else in San Sebastián, and his counsel was simple and convincing.

“I remember,” said Balboa, “that years ago, when I came along this coast exploring with Rodrigo de Bastidas, we entered this Gulf; and on the western side, on the right [i.e., northerly] hand as it seems to me, we went ashore; and we saw a village on the far side of a large river, and a land very cool and abundant for food. And,” he added with emphasis, “the people there did not put poison on their arrows.”

This was enough for the expeditionaries, to whom the other shore

sounded like Paradise after the one they knew. They would cross the Gulf and start afresh. In two sentences, in less than a minute, the destiny of Darién had been decided.

The western side of the Gulf was, by virtue of the pact between the Governors of Tierra Firme, Nicuesa territory. But it was Hojeda territory according to the contract with the Crown, against which no private agreement would be valid, and thus open to occupation by the Urabá colonists. Some seventy-five men were left to hold San Sebastián; the rest—all that could be carried in the bergantines and the lifeboat—sailed over to take possession of the promised land. Balboa must have supplemented his first advice with more detailed information; at any rate, the Spaniards seem to have made directly for the small Río Darién, where the principal village was some way inland.

Some chroniclers say that Chief Cemaco of Darién mustered five hundred bowmen, sent his noncombatant subjects to a safe retreat, and gave battle at once. Casas presents a somewhat different version, based on "my old notes made on hearing the accounts of people who were there." According to these, Cemaco was at first extremely conciliatory, so much so that with more grace than foresight he presented the Spaniards with eight or ten thousand pesos of gold. This immediately provoked insistent questions as to the source of the metal, and after a feeble attempt at convincing his interrogators that it came from heaven, the chief told them that the large pieces were from a place twenty-five leagues distant, and the small ones from near-by rivers. Pressed, he at first consented to serve as guide to the gold fields, but his subjects objected so strenuously (on the grounds that once the invaders found the mines it would be impossible to get rid of them) that, caught between two fires, he took flight. Cemaco tried to hide with a vassal headman, was discovered and captured, kept his secret under torture, and at length escaped to gather his warriors and give battle.

Grouped on a low hill, Cemaco's five hundred fighters were not a reassuring sight, and Enciso was not the man to overlook its gloomier implications. He ordered his men to their knees, and with them implored God to give them victory, swearing to send a pilgrimage and rich votive offerings to the Virgin revered in Seville, Nuestra Señora

del Antigua, in whose honor they would name the settlement and to whom they would dedicate its church. Enciso also required his soldiers to take oath that they would fight to the death, "neither fleeing nor turning their backs."

The action which followed was hardly worth all this preparation. The Darienes cannot have been ignorant of the poison which made the neighboring Urabae's arrows such deadly weapons, but they had not imitated the alien invention—an odd lack of precaution which would be much odder were it not so persistently illustrated through military history. Moreover, they were not inherently a warlike people; until the Christians came they did not need to be, for, in contrast to many tribes of Tierra Firme, they lived at peace with their neighbors. The Spaniards inflicted heavy casualties, and before long Cemaco and his remaining troops were in headlong retreat. The invaders occupied the deserted village near by, and found it gloriously stocked with food. Next day, scouting about the adjacent country, they came on more houses, standing singly or in small groups, and collected a quantity of cotton cloth, woven garments trimmed with fur, hammocks and other effects, and more worked gold. They must also have rounded up a good many prisoners, for Enciso later congratulated himself on his treatment of some homosexuals among them: "When I took Darién, we seized them and burned them; and when the women saw that we burned them they were happy about it." His distribution of pronouns is revealing.

(Sodomy was not considered particularly vicious by the Indians, whether or not Enciso was right in believing that the feminine contingent considered it unfair competition. It was probably practiced less than their conquerors believed. In Spanish eyes it was the most heinous of crimes. The penalty, established by a law of 1254 which began with an embarrassed apology for mentioning so "unsavory" a matter at all, was death of a peculiarly dreadful and protracted sort for both parties.)

Joined by the men who had been left in San Sebastián, the colonists elected to stay in Cemaco's village, which offered ready-made shelter and fields for crops. No document or chronicle gives the date of its taking, but it was evidently some time in November of 1510. Apparently there was some idea at first that the actual settlement might be

built elsewhere: Oviedo says that it was not until some months later that Balboa—to the fore as always in any decisive development in Darién—dedicated it to the Sevillian Madonna and changed its name from La Guardia (the Garrison), Enciso's original choice, to Santa María del Antigua del Darién. With this ceremony the site which had seemed good to an Indian clan—decently retired, good water, enough land for their simple needs—was fixed as that of the first colonial capital of mainland America.

The location is still marked on modern maps, but unfortunately in the wrong place: usually on the sea at the edge of the Atrato Delta, occasionally down in the delta marshes, or where remains of early missions have been found. When labeled: "Ruins of . . ." the error is doubled; built of wood, cane, and thatch, Santa María left no conveniently indicative ruins, and its durable equipment such as forges, church bells, smelter, and the like were taken to Panamá when the seat of government was moved. However, despite the absence of these aids and of such local maps as were made (two of them by Balboa), the clues provided by the settlers themselves and by the mariners who visited it can be pieced together to establish very nearly the real site.

According to the people who were there, Santa María was: 1) twenty-five miles from the bay at the head of the Gulf, and about fourteen from its western entrance, then considered to be at Punta Goleta; 2) on an exact parallel with the three Farallones, which can only have been the present Islas de Titumate; 3) at a distance from the coast variously stated at from under four miles to over eight, probably in reference to two different routes; 4) connected with the coast by two separate trails, one to the small estuary at the river mouth and the "Big Beach" (the Playón), and the other to "the port"; 5) shut in by hills in such fashion that the sun shone on it directly only in the middle hours of the day; 6) on a fork of the Río Darién, small and usually limpid, about a league from its confluence with the main stream. It was also said that the Río Darién had no connection with the Atrato and that it was barely large enough at its best for a native canoe. There are plenty of other confirmatory indications, but since the key ones are in happy agreement it is superfluous to go into them here. They all point to a location on the fork of the Tanela River sometimes called Lajas, a narrow valley walled east and west by hills.

"The port" must have been either La Gloria or Triganá, also called Puerto Escondido.³

The restorative effects of comparative security and regular meals were almost immediate, and organization of the colony proceeded in an atmosphere of brisk initiative. However, the initiatives of Enciso (now once more his usual arbitrary self) were at odds with those of the recruits. When he issued an edict forbidding individual trading for gold on pain of death, and capped this by taking possession of all the accumulated treasure, the colonists' resentment boiled over. The ban on private barter conformed to the royal instructions, but the penalty did not, and in any case Enciso's right to formulate edicts was questionable. Moreover, every *compañero* knew the laws on warfare, which, on the premise that "gain is a thing which all men covet, and much more those who wage war," decreed that the spoils should be divided among the soldiers within nine days of completing the action. Enciso may have argued that the pay-off could not be made in Hojeda's absence, but the men thought they knew what his real motive was. The *bachiller*, they believed, was planning a quiet getaway in the bergantines with the gold and a few friends, and they proposed to make sure that he did not succeed.

Thus it was that when the settlers met, as was customary, to elect municipal officers, Enciso was not invited; in fact, lest he dispense with formalities and come anyway, he was not even informed. To his lasting outrage the leaders of the opposition walked off with the elections. The results were: joint *alcaldes*, Vasco Núñez de Balboa and Benito Palazuelos; treasurer, Hojeda's physician, Doctor Alberto; *alguacil*, Bartolomé Hurtado; *regidores*, Diego Albítez, Martín de Zamudio, Esteban Barrantes, and Juan de Valdivia. Zamudio was subsequently promoted to be co-*alcalde* in place of Palazuelos. The *alcaldes* were combination mayors and city magistrates, the *alguacil* was a kind of sheriff, and the *regidores* were aldermen—although anything further from the conventional aldermanic type than these battered, hot-tempered, iron-boweled men would be hard to imagine.

The newly installed officials took over with a firm hand and that devotion to conventional forms so notable in the conquistadores when engaged in unconventional activities. They also took over the bergantines, just to be on the safe side. Enciso protested every step of the

way. He accused the council of rebellion; the council replied that, since he had no true authority, there could be no rebellion against it. The recruits had promised obedience to Hojeda, who had disappeared, and eventually to his lieutenant governor, Cosa, who had died. Enciso insisted that he was now Hojeda's substitute, with full power in the Governor's absence; the colonists laughed and asked to see his brevet. That was impossible, said the bachiller stiffly, it had been lost when the nao was wrecked. (He later claimed that Hojeda had sent him a power of attorney by Pizarro, but at the time no one seems to have taken the assertion seriously.) In after years Enciso declared that he arrested some of those responsible for seizing the boats, and that they had submitted lest they be hanged. The bachiller was very free with his threats of capital punishment—which, incidentally, he was not empowered to apply—but if he did manage this countermeasure, its effect was brief.

Matters might have come to a quick climax had not conclusions been postponed by a happy diversion. In the latter part of November, Nicuesa's adjutant Rodrigo de Colmenares arrived, en route to Veragua with long-overdue supplies and reinforcements.

To do Colmenares justice—always a slight effort in view of his double-dealing record—the eleven-month delay in leaving to join his chief was not his fault. Like Enciso, he had been tied down by Diego Colón's obstructive tactics. The Young Admiral had not relinquished his claim to Tierra Firme; on the contrary, he had renewed his demand that the contract with Hojeda and Nicuesa be canceled and the territories assigned to him in their stead. Meanwhile he had continued to do what he could to further the failure of the concessions, encouraged by a total lack of news from either gobernación. In the summer of 1510, however, dispatches had come from the King which were enough to give pause to even Colón.⁴

Fernando was willing to concede something in the clause regarding propertyed recruits from Hispaniola, reducing the number to two hundred; at the same time he confirmed the Governors' right to enlist as many other residents of Hispaniola as they liked. Nicuesa's slaves from Santa Cruz should be repatriated, but they were to be "replaced from other regions." As for Jamaica, it had been assigned to Hojeda and Nicuesa for the good reason that it would be useful to them: neverthe-

less, Colón could send a veedor there to see that no "scandals" developed. His Highness' further remarks were straight to the chin: Colón, whatever his personal opinion might be, had no excuse for failing to carry out his instructions to assist the Governors of Urabá and Veragua, "because it is my will now as always that what I order be agreed with any person whatsoever should be fulfilled," regardless of hypothetical drawbacks. "I command and charge you," His Highness continued, "that without waiting for further letters or orders from me, you fulfill with the said Hojeda and Nicuesa everything contained in the said pact and contract, without fail in any particular, and that you give them all favor and help that may be required to expedite their business, in such fashion that they have no cause to say that because of impediments placed for them there, they give up the performance of their obligations."

This plain speaking was backed up by a letter to Miguel de Pasamonte, Treasurer of the Indies and powerful confidant of the King, enclosing letters patent for the use of Hojeda and Nicuesa in case they had difficulty in getting clearance for their recruits, together with a memorandum of confidential instructions for them. For all that events had overrun these provisions, they were indicative of the King's state of mind, and Colón (who undoubtedly knew about them) was jarred into compliance. Enciso was able to get away in the second week of September, and Colmenares sailed a month later.

Colmenares had a vessel "bought with his own money," and was accompanied by another ship which was either chartered or licensed by the officials of Hispaniola. Years afterwards he claimed that he lost 2000 castellanos in the expedition: five hundred for purchase of the ship, fifty a month for the time of waiting, and a thousand in food-stuffs which spoiled. (The castellano was at this time a money of account peculiar to the Indies, equal to a peso of gold.) This estimate is not to be taken literally, if only because Colmenares made no formal claim on the loss when he was in Spain in 1513. It is true that the second ship vanished from the record after leaving Darién, so that one may fancy her a kind of Flying Spanishman forever sailing her phantom courses. But Colmenares' caravel returned safe to Hispaniola, making money on the voyage. Moreover, staple provisions were not perishable, and Colmenares certainly reached Darién with a full cargo

which he sold at scarcity prices. What he did lose, but failed to mention in his memorials, was a considerable portion of his men at Gaira: forty-one by the lowest count, eleven of them because Colmenares, having seen the others of the landing party killed by the Indians, made sail and ran, leaving them to their fate.

After a stormy voyage the armada made Urabá about the middle of November. Reconnaissance ashore revealed the charred ruins of San Sebastián, and near them the evidences of a lately abandoned camp. This had all the earmarks of recent tragedy; ordering signal fires to be set on the beach, Colmenares hurried to the safety of the ships and had the cannon fired in unison so that any chance survivors might know that there was a Spanish armada at hand. Across the Gulf the men of Darién lit answering beacons, and a mutually satisfying reunion followed. "One side was hungry for gold and the other for food"—in the circumstances a situation which guaranteed an instant entente.

The men from Hispaniola now learned for the first time that Hojeda had left his concession, while the colonists discovered that their chief was still missing. It looked very much as if the Governor of Urabá had vanished for good, in which case his gobernación had no technical title to exist. For that matter, even its material survival was problematic without an officially recognized leader capable of insuring its support. Yet now, when the worst seemed over, the settlers hated to give up what they had won. Enciso they did not want, and in any case his standing and resources fell short of the requirements for captain general of a colony exposed to sabotage from Santo Domingo. What to do?

The dilemma revived a project which had received some consideration in the days preceding Colmenares' arrival. Why should not the Darién settlement throw in its lot with the Veragua gobernación under Diego de Nicuesa? Weighing the alternatives, the *vecinos* of Santa María found this idea more attractive than any other which had occurred to them. Nicuesa's concession was richer, his expedition larger and better outfitted than Hojeda's had been at their best; Nicuesa himself was as powerful and influential as Hojeda, and much more wealthy. (Colmenares had probably told the colonists that royal cédulas had been received in Santo Domingo which confirmed

Hojeda's jurisdiction over the entire Gulf; they seem to have been sure that Darién was a thing to be offered, not yielded.) Enciso and Balboa, for once agreed, were against the plan, but they did not press their opposition. It was finally voted that when Colmenares went on to join his chief, one or two representatives of Santa María del Antigua should go with him, bearing an invitation to the Governor of Veragua to annex Darién.

The official delegation consisted of Colmenares, the bachiller Diego del Corral, Francisco de Agüeros, and Diego Albítez. Each of the ambassadors was privately determined to turn the mission to the best possible account for himself, and none of them had any conception that their ambitions, like the colonists' reasonings, were erected on an imaginary base.

The vecinos of Santa María, under the misapprehension common to the unfortunate that their case was unique, pictured Veragua as a flourishing enterprise. In point of fact it had folded quite as disastrously as San Sebastián, with greater loss and less present hope. Far from being able to foster another settlement, Nicuesa was in urgent need of help if there were to be anything left of his venture save bones in the Isthmian beaches and rusty souvenirs to decorate native bohíos.

VI

THE misadventures of Nicuesa and his men are told at considerable length by three chroniclers who knew the Governor and talked with survivors of the expedition. Their narratives are in frequent disagreement with each other, with such scanty documentary evidence as we possess, and sometimes with the author's statements on another page, but they are as one in depicting the catastrophic quality of a story somber even among the dark tales of the conquest.

Hardship and hazard were normal concomitants of every pioneering venture in the Indies, where no one could expect colonization without casualties. Nevertheless the impression is inescapable that a large part

of the disaster in Veragua was attributable to the Governor himself. Diego de Nicuesa was not only inexperienced; he had neither the emotional nor, it would seem, the mental stability for the task in hand. Amateur psychiatry is an indiscreet game, but one cannot help being struck by the increasingly abnormal behavior of the Governor of Veragua in the thirteen months of his command. The armada was barely away before the expeditionaries were aware that he had suffered a sea-change: the witty courtier, the shrewd man of affairs disappeared, to be succeeded by a hectoring autocrat who insulted his officers, contradicted his pilots, made his own (erroneous) marks on the charts, and treated his men with rasping severity. He was to display this humor throughout, briefly punctuated in moments of exaltation or despair by attitudes equally distressing. It is not surprising that when the time of his last need came, there was no one to lift a hand to save him.

The Veragua fleet may have touched at Urabá, but its first stopover was just above the Gulf, in the Bay of Anachucuna. The anchorage was christened Puerto de Misas, in memory of the first mass to be said in the concession. Here it was decided to divide the armada: Nicuesa and his lieutenant governor, Lope de Olano, would go on with the smaller vessels to explore the coast, while the naos would follow at leisure. The plan was basically sound but badly elaborated, for it included no system for maintaining contact between the advance party and the main fleet—an error which King Fernando remarked when he read Nicuesa's report.

The scout detachment consisted of a caravel (temporarily promoted to flagship) and two bergantines. Several veterans of Columbus' fourth voyage, including one, and possibly two, pilots, went with it, and when in due course the flotilla came abreast of the Río Belén, they advised the Governor that he had reached his destination: this harborless coast was Veragua proper, and the lofty sierra to the southwest was that which the Old Admiral had described as heavy with gold for as far as a man could march in twenty suns. Nicuesa denied the identification, and the more the old Fourth Voyage hands insisted, the more obstinate he became. The pilots "did not know what they were talking about"; he, Nicuesa, had a chart and a description of the coast

from the hand of Columbus' brother Bartolomé: Veragua was farther on. The ships were ordered to hold to their course, while the outraged pilot of Olano's bergantín remarked bitterly that if this were not Veragua they could chop off his head.¹

That night there was a storm, and the ships were separated. Olano rode out the blow in the shelter of an island, and next day fell in with the second bergantín, piloted by Pedro de Umbria. The flag caravel had vanished, and after a fruitless search—the extent and sincerity of which is a matter of controversy—Olano and Umbria turned back to locate the rest of the armada. They found the naos at the Chagres, lying up for overhaul after the passage from Puerto de Misas. The Lieutenant Governor's efforts to rejoin his chief may have lacked conviction, but at all events they satisfied the members of the expedition, including the Crown officials and a relative of Nicuesa named Cueto, who had been left in temporary charge of the naos. After talking the situation over it was decided to stick to the original plan, and with Olano in command the ships proceeded to Veragua. Nicuesa, if he had survived the storm, would realize in time that he had overshot the mark, and return to the appointed rendezvous.

The Río Belén was a few miles short of the true gold river, but Columbus, the ghostly guide of the expedition, had declared that it offered the only harbor in Veragua. He had also said that it was a very good harbor, a statement on a par with his assertion that the local Indians, who had driven him away by force, were the meekest of people. The river basin was shut in by a pounding bar too shallow to admit more than a small caravel, and that only when weather and tide were favorable; outside, the open shore was beaten by surf. The landing had to be made in the ships' boats, and one (Olano's) capsized with the loss of fourteen men. The naos, already damaged by shipworm, were soon beached and broken up.

Without ships the five-hundred-odd expeditionaries had little choice as to where they would settle. Martyr says that Pedro de Umbria, "being of irritable disposition," set out in a boat with twelve companions to establish an independent colony somewhere else, only to be drowned with all but one of his men in crossing the bar. Elsewhere, however, Martyr states that Umbria had been authorized to scout on behalf of the colonists. This is a more credible version; surely no one,

however irritable, could think to conquer a wild and hostile country with a dozen friends in a rowboat.

For some reason food was scarce, although the armada should have been provisioned for a full year. The first huts, erected on a beachy point, were swept away in a storm. It rained almost incessantly, insects were a torment, and before long, fevers and jungle sores were rife. "In tribulation many died," and it was noted, disquietingly, that they all died at low tide. This led to another disturbing discovery: the bodies buried in the sand "were eaten in eight days as if they had been interred for fifty years." "They took it for an evil sign"—no doubt remembering the ominous portents and prophecies made in Hispaniola before the armada sailed, when a sword-shaped comet flamed in the sky, and astrologers and savants declared that Nicuesa went under a baleful star.

Olano did as well as could be expected in these trying circumstances. He had stronger houses built on higher ground, started work on a tower atop a hillock, saw that land was tilled and sown to corn, and, using lumber hewn from local timber and salvaged material from the naos, set about making a new caravel. (The comparative ease with which Spanish carpenters could put together a seaworthy craft on any tropic beach is a continual marvel.) He also took an expedition to investigate the Veragua River, where the paramount chief of the region, El Quibián, had his capital village some miles from the sea. The Spaniards were not looking for trouble; their target was the place, six leagues beyond the village, where Bartolomé Colón's sailors had quarried nuggets with pocket knives, and they earnestly hoped that the Quibián would be in a tolerant mood. In this they were disappointed, for the chief came out to meet them with a body of warriors that compelled respect; he was not particularly eager to fight, but seemed determined to do so if required. Fortunately the river lay between the two forces, a barrier which permitted both sides to renounce battle with dignity and relief. Olano contented himself with taking one of the Quibián's outlying strongholds, where he installed a reluctant garrison under a certain Alonso Runyelo. This outpost, a huge circular bohío over a hundred feet in diameter, was surrounded by a hundred and twenty spaced posts, each tastefully garnished with a human head. Oviedo remarks that it made "a very nice fort," adding

that the Old Admiral had given it the gentle name of Santa María de Redonda.

Meanwhile Nicuesa and his crew were enduring worse hardships than any in Veragua. The caravel had evidently passed Chiriquí Lagoon and Almirante Bay without sighting them, since even Nicuesa would have had to recognize those keys to the geography of the coast. As it was, the Governor sailed close-hauled for two days to see if the bergantines would catch up with him, and then continued his stubborn course away from his goal. How far he went cannot be said with certainty—perhaps the better part of the way to Cape Gracias á Dios. One of his mariners, Cristóbal Gómez, testified that they got 120 leagues (440 miles) beyond Veragua, and from the earliest days of Spanish conquest in Honduras the name of Nicuesa was given to a bay not far south of the cape. If Gómez' estimate was exactly right, the farthest point was the Río Grande, which Columbus had called the River of Disasters after losing there a boat and two sailors; on the old maps, however, it was marked as a "gulf," and considerably farther north.

At all events, after some time Nicuesa put into harbor inside a river mouth. The river had been high, but it went down abruptly and left the caravel resting on the bottom; her seams opened, and the next freshet finished her off in a sudden roll of water and debris. As her cables snapped, a sailor jumped overboard with a line, only to be swept away by the current; another took his place and succeeded in fastening a hawser to a tree, thus saving all the others. The Spaniards faced the situation with the practiced valiance of their kind. Someone swam out and salvaged the sails to make haversacks and clumsy shirts (the castaways were, as usual, naked); the current brought them the ship's boat, bottom up, and a cask of flour and one of oil.

Thus outfitted, Nicuesa, pigheaded in the grand manner, gave the order to go not back but forward—or so it would appear from the accounts of his adventures. But in view of the evidence as to how far he sailed, it is probable that he really turned south. By this time the mariners who had been with Columbus must have enlightened him on his position beyond possibility of contradiction.

Looking remarkably unlike conquerors, the company followed

along the shore, plodding endlessly through dark sand, stumbling over drift and rocky headlands. Diego Ribero, one of Columbus' veterans, went with three other sailors in the dinghy, and ferried the others at streams too deep for fording—a difficult task on that coast and, if it is true that the boat would hold only five people, a prolonged one. After Ribero, the most useful member of the party was a dog, “who was good company in their extreme necessity,” and procured the last square meal they were to have for a long time. He flushed a deer, and when it took to the water “he did not fail in his duty, though he could barely stand for weakness”; he swam after it and towed it back by one ear. Luckily the Indians were not in evidence; their only recorded victim was Nicuesa's page, killed by an arrow from ambush, perhaps because he wore a white head covering and seemed important.

The deer was secured just at the entrance to the bay now called Bluefields, which the Admiral had christened San Mateo because he was there on September twenty-first, St. Matthew's day.² Either his Fourth Voyagers failed to realize that the point opposite was not a continuation of the mainland (things look different from the land) or more likely, it merely seemed wiser to stick to the seacoast rather than detour around the bay. The company crossed to the opposite point, and found themselves on Isla del Ciervo (Deer Island). And here the Governor called a halt. It is about three hundred and fifty miles from Deer Island to Veragua.

The island was pleasant-seeming at first, but it was not an ideal camping spot for men without provisions, without gear for fishing or hunting, without clothes or shelter, and, after a time, without a boat. They ate shellfish, lizards, insects, and finally roots, grass and leaves; their only water was from a brackish swamp. There, but for an act of well-considered insubordination, the history of Diego de Nicuesa might have ended—which might, on the whole, have been the lesser evil. The Fates, with the malice of mousing cats, chose to let him go, taking as their instruments Ribero and the other mariners who had managed the dinghy. These stout fellows had become increasingly disgusted with the fatalistic inertia which had taken possession of the Governor, by which the whole company appeared destined to passive suicide. One night they took matters, and the boat, into their own hands and made off to try to reach the armada. Incredibly, they succeeded.

Nicuesa damned them for deserters, but he owed them his life and those of many of his companions.

Ribero and his mates cannot have had an easy voyage in their cockleshell, but they were better off than the desolate band left behind. Prisoned on their island, that emaciated, ulcer-blotched, naked crew could not have been recognized as part of the "*muy lúcida compañía*" that had started from Hispaniola. Some died of fevers; some lay in the final apathy of starvation; some had moments of aimless violence and ran pointlessly from side to side of the island shouting prayers like curses. The more reasoning of them discussed, weakly, the building of a raft, got together a bundle of poles, and then were too feeble to save it when it drifted out of their hands.

One phenomenon, named Gonzalo de Badajoz, still had some strength left. Aided by two other supermen, he managed to fell a tree and burn out a crude canoe, in which the three tried to reach the mainland with the project—this time duly authorized—of backtracking to Veragua in search of help. Their clumsy tub turned over, but they all got to the coast and started walking south. A native chief who had been paddled down-river to inspect his fisheries saw them and sent them food, and thus fortified, they survived to be picked up by the bergantín which came from Veragua to rescue Nicuesa.

Lope de Olano, informed by Ribero of the Governor's plight, may have felt only a tempered joy at his chief's survival, but he lost no time in saving him. A ship, or ships, dispatched under the guidance of Ribero, reached the island—strange to say, without untoward incident—and not long afterwards Nicuesa disembarked in Veragua.

The uses of adversity were ever bitter to Nicuesa, and rescue did nothing to improve his disposition. It was immediately apparent that the colonists were not to be commended for having saved him; they were to be punished for not having done it sooner. Olano was sentenced to hang as a traitor; his failure to find the flag caravel after the storm had been deliberate, the Governor declared; moreover, he was responsible for all the suffering and loss of life in Veragua as on the island, since if he, Nicuesa, had been in charge all would have gone well. The more prominent expeditionaries were accessories in crime; they too should pay with their lives for not having forced the Lieutenant Governor to search for his chief. (No mention was made of

a commander's duty to his subordinates, or of the fact that Nicuesa had, in effect, abandoned his.) The appalled colonists, finding their appeals for mercy without effect, finally hit on an argument more persuasive: "If famine and constant calamities cut down our number on the one hand, and cruel sentences kill us on the other, who, señor, do you expect to serve you and companion you? There is no doubt whatever but that your lot would not be happy, nor would you be spared still greater hardships."

Nicuesa retreated, but no farther than he had to. Olano, reprieved but not forgiven, was kept in irons; some of his supporters were condemned to unspecified penalties; and Nicuesa, if he refrained from the gallows, "became from then on most intolerant, ill-tempered and intractable, and treated the few men who were left to him very badly and with harshness, not considering the starvation and affliction which they had endured, or that to see one another die every day was torment enough and to spare." And die they did, for the Governor drove the sick as hard as the well. "They believed that he used them badly of set purpose, to revenge himself on them because they had not gone to look for him."

Nicuesa now announced that the colony would be moved immediately to a new location. There were good reasons for a change, but the colonists suspected that the decision was only another form of punishment. Belén was indisputably bad, but who could say that another place might not be worse? And how could they give up their maize, now almost ripe for harvest? That corn was more than food: it was a symbol, the proof of something accomplished despite enemy nature and enemy Indians and even enemy stars. Besides, for all its cruelty, this was the land of riches. "Men will gather gold there . . ." Columbus had promised, "a packload of gold in one day . . . gold with which a man does all he desires in this world and can even lift souls to Heaven."

Arguments and pleas had not the slightest effect on Nicuesa, although he did consent to allow some of his people to remain in Belén until they had gathered the crops and finished building a second caravel. He intended to establish himself at, or near, Portobelo (just east of the Panama Canal), and on the basis of what was known of that bit of coast the plan was much sounder than most of his ideas.

Portobelo harbor was safe and deep, the inhabitants were numerous and their agriculture extensive, and the islands which lay just around the headland were so well tilled and productive that Columbus had named them and the anchorage in their shelter the Islands and Port of Provisions (de Bastimentos).

What spoiled Portobelo for Nicuesa was that the inhabitants were not only numerous but belligerent, and unlike the river tribes, they lived directly on the sea, where they could repel invasion before it began. When the Governor, who had already sent a detachment ahead from Veragua, got there with sixty men on the second trip of the bergantines, he was driven off with the loss of twenty *compañeros*. Wearily continuing his course, he came to another, less attractive harbor and—so Casas says—exclaimed: “In the Name of God, let us stop here!” And God’s Name, *Nombre de Dios*, it has been called ever since.³ Either the advance party had already gone there, or it had been picked up in Portobelo, for, except for those who were to follow only after gathering the harvest, all the surviving expeditionaries were now in the new location.

Nombre de Dios was no improvement on Belén. Foraging raids, mostly conducted by Badajoz, gave slight results beyond the obvious one of antagonizing the Indians, and once more the settlers were without food or native laborers. A little palmito meal was coveted “like manna from heaven”; a skeletal dog for the pot brought 20 *castellanos* (about \$93) in gold, and the water in which his mangy skin was boiled was worth a *castellano* a bowl. A pair of toads sold for 6 ducats, as a special favor to a sick man because he begged so hard for them, and it was said that a group of thirty Spaniards “rabid with hunger” came upon the decomposing corpse of an Indian, ate it, and died of the moral and physical effects. In these conditions the work of building a fort atop the hillock chosen by Nicuesa for the purpose was unbearable, but the Governor allowed his tottering men no respite; when they pleaded that they were at death’s door, his answer was: “Get out! Get along to the dying ground!” “They cursed and abhorred him, holding him to be their bitter enemy, nor did they find in word or deed of his a crumb of comfort.” So scourged, they finished the timber fort before the end of December.

It is in *Nombre de Dios* that we first hear of a lady among the

colonists: Doña Inés de Escobar, wife of the elderly veedor, Juan de Quicedo. Doña Inés was no weakling, and was, indeed, to prove very nearly indestructible; nevertheless, it is hard to visualize this mature gentlewoman crawling unnoted and unsung about Deer Island as, clad in a scrap of dirty sailcloth, she grubbed with other castaways for worms and roots. It is possible, of course, that she was in Belén, but there is no mention of her there, or of the veedor, who should have been to the fore in moments of decision. The explanation would seem to be that the Quicedos left Hispaniola some time after the rest of the armada, in the little caravel owned jointly with Cosa and Martínez, and that they joined Nicuesa after the colony was in Nombre de Dios.

Before starting from Belén, Nicuesa had written letters asking for aid from Hispaniola, and a long and querulous report for King Fernando. These he seems to have entrusted to Cueto, who was to go to Hispaniola with Ledesma in the Veragua-built caravel. Reports, though often compiled gradually, were usually dated only at the last moment before dispatch; Nicuesa's bore the date of November 9, 1510, and he appears to have left Belén almost immediately after.⁴ Ledesma and Cueto carried out their assignment successfully, but either they delayed departure or their voyage was slow, for they did not reach Santo Domingo until sometime after February 19, 1511. The report for the King, forwarded from Hispaniola in May, was delivered in Spain in July.

Fernando replied promptly in his best vein, a compound of comfort, criticism, and advice. Nicuesa was commended for all he said he had achieved and commiserated for what he said he had suffered; it was well to have punished those who deserved such measures, but on the other hand "you should endeavor not to give occasion for indiscipline"; after all, had he remained with his fleet he would have been spared both personal hardship and the necessity of punishing anyone, not to mention the apparently imminent risk of total failure. It was also essential that he treat the Indians with the utmost consideration, respecting scrupulously their liberty and property, so as to win their friendly co-operation. The King promised to issue fresh orders for assistance to the concessions and to instruct Esquivel to step up production in Jamaica and shipment of foodstuffs to Tierra Firme. Thus

aided and advised, Nicuesa might by God's grace save his gobernación and receive from it such recompense as would make all the hardships seem worth while. As for the expeditionaries, Fernando (who had learned a great deal more about the colony and its governor than was set forth in Nicuesa's report) was addressing a letter to them, expressing his appreciation of all they had done in his service.

Fernando sent off the promised instructions at once, couched in terms calculated to compel respect. But before the cédulas were penned, before even the reports which prompted them had started on their way from Santo Domingo, there was no longer a functioning gobernación in Veragua. There was no longer even a governor.

VII

SOMETIME in January of 1511 a bergantín from Nombre de Dios, out on a foraging trip to the islands near by, sighted and signaled two Spanish ships that were passing some distance offshore. The vessels were those from Darién with Colmenares and the nominating committee, bound for Veragua and still happily unaware of the irony of their quest for support and protection from Diego de Nicuesa. Putting about, they entered the harbor to receive a delirious welcome from the few score wretched survivors who now comprised all the colony.

How many of Nicuesa's men were left is uncertain. According to the most conservative estimate, three hundred and eighty had died in the twelve preceding months, and other calculations set the toll much higher. However, some of the presumably softer members of the company had come through the ordeal fairly well: the elderly veedor and Doña Inés; an unspectacular but resistant priest named Sánchez, who was just beginning a career of wild and unwilling adventure; and a friar, Gerónimo de Aguilar, whose subsequent life was to be pure melodrama. Olano, too, had survived. The emissaries from Santa María del Antigua found him in the plaza, where he was kept shackled like a delinquent slave and forced to grind palm meal all day for a public spectacle. (Oviedo cites this as an example of mercy,

Nicuesa "being compassionate by nature," but considers the kindness excessive.)

The Governor's reaction to salvation could hardly have been more unfortunate. That laconic poise which distinguishes heroes of fancy in similar circumstances would have seemed silly to any conquistador, but Nicuesa did not get over his emotion in the usual flood of tears and then relax. In Martyr's words, "after having wept and sighed and poured out complaints, after having overwhelmed his rescuer Colmenares with thanks and having almost rolled at his feet, Nicuesa, when the fear of starvation was removed, before he even laid eyes on the colonists of Urabá, began to talk freely of his projects of reform and of his intention to take possession of all the gold." Absorbed in the delightful prospect of recouping his fortunes in Darién, he failed to note a growing chilliness in his audience; the impression given by the chroniclers is that he was garrulous to the point of babbling, and that everything he said was wrong.

The men from Santa María listened and exchanged shocked comments, their enthusiasm effectively quenched. Quicedo, who had conceived a violent dislike of the Governor "for reasons of honor" (Doña Inés was perhaps younger than appears?), listened and took mental notes for future use. Lope de Olano heard, and contrived to have an illuminating chat with the emissaries, and to entrust them with letters for his fellow Biscayans in Darién—communications bound to have considerable effect in view of Biscayan clannishness and the fact that one of the addressees, the alcalde Zamudio, was a kinsman. All this spelled trouble, but it might not have been past remedying had not Nicuesa been inspired to a culminating piece of ineptitude. He disposed that the arrival in Darién should be made in installments, and that he himself would arrive last, "to be received with arches of triumph."

The arrangement was impeccable from the point of view of protocol: first a bergantín with Albítez and Corral, then another with the chief veedor, and finally the Great Man himself. It was also guaranteed to insure an inimical atmosphere in Santa María before the Governor could set foot there. This latter aspect of the matter did not occur to Nicuesa, from whose triple-plated complacency Olano's parting shot, "Does he fancy that Hojeda's men will receive him as

we received him when he came, broken, to Veragua?" glanced off unnoticed. He meant to give the Darienites time to prepare for his advent in suitable fashion—and this, as it turned out, was precisely what he did. Preparations started as soon as the vanguard arrived to enlighten the colonists as to the reforms they might expect under the new regime, and as to the character of the prospective regent.

Vasco Núñez de Balboa, like many another officeholder when warned of an approaching ax, is said to have done a good deal to crystallize anti-Nicuesa feeling by confidential, man-to-man conversations with the vecinos. Whatever his activities, he worked with the current. Nicuesa was damned out of his own mouth. His intention to confiscate the gold touched every settler in his most sensitive spot; his vague talk of disciplinary measures was a menace; his plan to dislodge the strongest men from the settlement and send them to replace the garrison in Nombre de Dios made every able-bodied compañero his enemy. The Biscayans, led by Zamudio, formed an irreconcilable block. Enciso, much as he hated the existing order in Santa María, foresaw worse things under Nicuesa and came out strongly against admitting the Governor, thus achieving brief harmony with his rivals. Colmenares may have refrained from campaigning against his chief, but his attitude is sufficiently clear from the unflattering picture of Nicuesa given by Martyr, whose principal informant he was. Even the two nominating delegates who had wangled positions for themselves before quitting Nombre de Dios—Albítez, who had been promised the post of alguacil, and Diego del Corral, slated for alcalde—now felt that these honors would be bought too dear. If there were any dissenting voices when the colonists decided to deny entry to Nicuesa, they were not recorded.

It should be noted that the decision was in no sense a revolt. Nicuesa had no vested rights in Darién, and the men who had enlisted under Hojeda owed him no allegiance. To rescind an invitation is not elegant, but neither is it criminal. As Casas remarked, the measure of Nicuesa's stupidity was that, having received a lifesaving offer, he talked before any formal agreement or oaths of fealty had been made: "At least," the chronicler commented, "he might have dissimulated until after he had been accepted."

The colonists knew that their refusal to carry out their proposal

could not be held to be a breach of loyalty. On the other hand, the Governor of Veragua was a personage, and he might insist on standing on the letter of the invitation. In the circumstances they felt that their determination would look better if it were done up in quasi-judicial wrappings and tied with red tape. It was therefore dressed in a ceremony in the settlement church which satisfied the Spanish hankering for legalistic forms, lent a becoming tone of righteousness to the whole affair, and insured that no one could disclaim his personal responsibility should he later think it convenient to do so. The proceedings were very solemn: a cloth was spread before the altar, and on it a cushion holding a crucifix, "as is done on Holy Thursday or Good Friday"; one by one, in order of rank, the vecinos advanced and swore by the Cross not to receive Don Diego de Nicuesa as governor—first the alcaldes, then the treasurer, the alguacil, the regidores, and lastly the compañeros. The vow had been put in writing by the notary Hernando de Argüello, and each man after he pronounced it set his signature or his mark to the document.¹

Thus when Nicuesa, bursting with confidence and unpopular projects, dropped anchor in the estuary of the Río Darién a few days later, the colonists met him in very different guise from that he had expected. They were armed and threatening, and when a spokesman stepped forward it was not to deliver a flowery address of welcome, but to shout a harsh injunction against landing. Don Diego was shocked into conciliation.

"Señores," he called back, "you sent to summon me, and I come in answer to your summons. Let me land, and we will talk things over, and you will hear me and I hear you, and we will come to an understanding, and afterwards you can do what you like with me."

The men of Santa María would not listen. That night the bergantín lay hove-to outside the estuary, and next morning Nicuesa edged it inside again, hoping for a change of heart. A group of compañeros made beckoning gestures from the beach, and he put off in the dinghy with pathetic eagerness, but their faces must have warned him as he stepped to shore. The Governor of Veragua took to his heels. Either he had built up his strength astonishingly in the previous weeks, or terror lent him speed, for he ran so fast that the men in armor could not catch him.

This was too much for Balboa.

"You go too far," he told the excited *compañeros* distastefully. "Let him alone."

As a matter of fact, Balboa was feeling rather sorry for Nicuesa. The weakest point in his character—one that was to cause him infinite trouble and be his ultimate undoing—was a lovable and unfortunate inability to keep his animosities alive. By nature singularly unvindictive, he seemed to hold the misguided doctrine that an adversary once defeated is thenceforth innocuous, and repeated lessons to the contrary did nothing to alter this habit of mind. Now, having no experience of the Governor's temper when his crest was high, he found it impossible to believe that anyone so beaten could be dangerous, and went so far as to suggest that nothing in the communal oath forbade allowing Nicuesa to remain as a guest.

The colonists were in no mood for kindly concessions, and they did not share Vasco Núñez' benevolent optimism. When Nicuesa abjectly begged to be admitted on any terms, "beseeching them to take him as *compañero* if they did not want him for governor," they refused. Mindful of his lightning recoveries from despair to arrogance in the past, they said that "if he went in by the sleeve he would end by coming out at the neck." Nicuesa groveled; if they would not have him as a *compañero* and free, would they not let him stay as a prisoner, if need be in irons? He would rather die in chains in Santa María than of hunger or an Indian arrow in Nombre de Dios. And he had lost so much money! Twelve thousand castellanos his expedition had cost—all wasted and without profit.

This sort of thing was little calculated to win either respect or sympathy. The jeering crowd was openly contemptuous and nearly out of hand. Francisco Benítez, a loud and easy-mouthed fellow, shouted something like, "We don't need a dirty dog like you among us!" and Balboa, in a blaze of anger, ordered that he be given a hundred lashes, undeterred by the fact that Benítez was a friend of the co-alcalde Zamudio. (Zamudio did not protest, but Benítez paid back with interest later on.) The lesson checked the drift toward violence, but Balboa knew that he could not control the men indefinitely; his power was too new, and although the colonists had stumbled on practical democracy, its theory was too alien for them to have any

ingrained deference for authority which they themselves had conferred. He therefore advised Nicuesa to return at once to his ship and in no circumstances to leave it unless he, Balboa, were present.

Back in the safety of his bergantín, Don Diego immediately felt the stimulation which possessed him after every relief from peril. The Darienites would weaken, and he would take them unawares and force them to yield. In pursuance of this plan he posted the fifty cross-bowmen he had brought with him in the canebrakes near the landing place, with instructions to attack at his signal, ordered dinner, and with rapidly rising spirits sat down to await developments.

In the course of time, down the trail from Santa María came three regidores: Barrantes, Juan de Vegines, and the ex-ambassador Albítez. If we believe Oviedo's none-too-reliable narrative, proceedings were conducted with oppressive politeness and extreme duplicity on both sides. (Oviedo imputes the duplicity only to the regidores, but remembering the bowmen in the canebrake, one must allow an equal measure to the Governor.) The regidores hailed Nicuesa, apologetic and reassuring: he must forgive the colonists misled by fellows of the baser sort; all the best people were on his side, and really wanted him for governor. Nicuesa fell for this without a struggle. "Señores," he called eagerly, "do you command that I come ashore, or will you do me the favor of coming aboard and we will dine together?" "Señores, as Your Grace commands." "No, señores, as is your pleasure." "Señor, it must be only as you desire." After this Alphonse-and-Gaston exchange, which completely canceled Balboa's warning in Nicuesa's mind, the unfortunate Governor, misjudging to the last, hastened to land and so "to fall into the hands of those who were dying to ruin him."

The arrival of more men, led by Zamudio, marked the end of this drama within a drama. Nicuesa, roughly enjoined to leave at once and forever, rallied in the certainty of disaster to accuse his tormentors wildly of imaginary crimes: of invading his territory, of treason, of rebellion against God Himself. His voice was drowned by the compañeros' clamor, his hidden bowmen made no move to help him, and before an hour had passed he had been hustled aboard the bergantín and escorted to the mouth of the estuary. Unable to face the

tribulations in which he had left his men in Nombre de Dios, he announced that he would go to Hispaniola.²

In the morning—Saturday, March 1, 1511—Don Diego de Nicuesa sailed on his last voyage. Nothing was ever heard of him or his crew again. A legend grew up that the ship had been wrecked in Cuba, and that a tree had been found there with the inscription: “Here perished the unfortunate Nicuesa,” but it was proven fake. Oviedo suggests that they may have put in to Cartagena and been killed by the Indians of Caramairi. The truth was never known. Half a century later, when it was only part of an old saga and anyone’s guess was good, Benzoni polished off the incident with snappy inaccuracy: they landed for water, were attacked by the Indians, were eaten down to the last man, “and that was the end of Diego de Nicuesa.”

The foregoing follows in the main Casas’ account of the last act in the tragedy of Nicuesa. Oviedo, that rampant partisan, has a much more succulent tale of infamy and wronged innocence in which Vasco Núñez plays the part of a villain whose villainy is both involved and superfluous. The story, given largely in conversational quotes, apparently originated with Alonso Runyelo. In it Nicuesa was Balboa’s guest in Santa María, and after “eating at the same table and sleeping in the same room” for two or three weeks, the two planned a coup. (“What is it worth to you if I make you governor?” “Anything you like, if you do it quickly and obey my orders.”) Balboa agreed to find out who was for Nicuesa and who against, and then to see that all the opposers were confined to their quarters under pain of death. The supporters would thus have things their own way; Runyelo, as go-between, would tell the Governor when to act.

This decided, Balboa told Nicuesa to return to his ship “so that they won’t see us together and suspect me”—a rather excessive precaution for men who had been sharing the same room for weeks. Whereupon, “with the cunning of a fox,” he did exactly the opposite of what he had promised: he shut up the pros and unleashed the contras, after which he sat down to a social evening at home and let nature take its course. Runyelo was sent to tell Nicuesa to trust only the regidores and the doctor; the regidores and the doctor perfidiously

lured the Governor ashore, and it was all over but the shouting. On being told what had happened, Balboa's only comment was: "Alonso Runyelo, this Governor of yours has been exceedingly imprudent"—to which the righteous Runyelo "did not reply a word, because he knew the iniquity and the times."

It is almost a pity to pass up such a good story, but it will not withstand inspection. The ceremony of repudiation was a matter of record, and the judicial investigation of the affair (conducted at a time when Vasco Núñez was fair game for any accusation) found that no one could be singled out as specially culpable in a course of action which was, after all, not without some excuse.

The third contemporary narrative of Nicuesa in Santa María is in Martyr. It is brief, damns both Nicuesa and Balboa (the latter as a bullying jack-in-office who intimidated the respectable colonists), and is more interesting for what it reveals of Martyr's informants than for the record of events. These informants were Enciso and, more especially, Colmenares, who were engaged at the time in trying to ruin Balboa while advancing their own interests. Martyr, writing while the interviews were fresh, mirrors their line of campaign.

Considering that Enciso decorates himself with the white flower of a blameless life, it is reasonable to ask what explanation he offered of his part in Nicuesa's ouster. What did that upright judge say he was doing in those agitated days? So far as any records show, he said nothing at all. Oviedo, his "intimate friend," says that he was marking time throughout in confinement aboard a bergantín which had been calked with a blunt iron so that the seams would not hold, but this handsome alibi is unsupported even by Enciso. Martyr, Casas, and Gómara are as one in stating that he took active part against Nicuesa. Certainly in all the accusations which he later composed against Vasco Núñez and the men of Darién he avoided the whole subject of Nicuesa with care and considerable skill, devoting himself with single-minded persistence to his own affairs.

The bachiller's affairs were matters of money and prestige, but mostly money. His unpopularity in Darién had begun on what might be called general terms; what set the seal on it was his proprietary attitude toward the colony's treasure. Had there been any lingering doubt in the settlers' minds about his intentions, the injunction which

he served on them after they had excluded him from the roster of officials would have instantly dispelled it.

The terms of this demand, according to the bachiller's own statement, were as follows: (a) the elected officials were to refrain from exercising their functions; (b) the two bergantines and the lifeboat were to be given into Enciso's keeping; (c) all gold in the treasury was to be handed over to him at once. Alternatively, as a substitute for items (b) and (c), the bachiller presented another demand: that all the loot, less the King's quinto, be divided into three equal parts, two of which should be given to him outright as compensation for his ships and their equipment; and that, of the remaining third, he be given the captain-general's share, described as "*una joya y cuatro suertes*"—a jewel and four lots. The proposal had a certain grandeur. By Enciso's own calculation it would have given him 5590 pesos—a return of 357 $\frac{2}{3}$ per cent on his declared investment—and left rather less than twenty-four pesos apiece for the other participants in the taking of Darién.

The bachiller cannot have been under the delusion that he would get what he asked for, and if he had been, the colonists would soon have disabused him. When he continued to make a nuisance of himself, they took him into custody and drew up a bill charging him with the very crimes with which he taxed the council: usurpation of authority, violation of contractual rights, and attempted misappropriation.

The investigation ran to a foregone conclusion in an indictment. After a little, however, Enciso was set at liberty on condition that he leave the colony, "which was just what he wanted most." At this point Balboa suffered one of his typical, by-gones-be-by-gones relaxations, and persuaded the vecinos to offer to let the bachiller stay after all, as chief justice or as alguacil mayor.³ Perhaps he was influenced by the thought that a clever and vindictive lawyer could be more harmful outside the colony than in it, but this was an idea that had already occurred to Enciso. The bachiller was not tempted by the chance to live in Santa María as second fiddle to Vasco Núñez, and, declining the invitation, he arranged passage for himself and his two Spanish servants to Hispaniola on Colmenares' caravel. He left just a month after Nicuesa, his ultimate destination Castile.

Two other prominent members of the colony sailed at the same

time: the joint alcalde, Martín de Zamudio, and the regidor, Juan de Valdivia. Both went as procuradores of the settlers, Valdivia to enlist the help of the officials in Santo Domingo and to return as soon as possible with supplies, and Zamudio to present reports, petitions, and an offering of selected guanines weighing nearly thirteen pounds to King Fernando in Spain. The reports, which were to be shown also to Diego Colón and the Treasurer Pasamonte in Hispaniola, were apparently composed as from the settlement officials in a body. It would be interesting to know how they were written; they must have included mention of the late unpleasantness with Nicuesa and some explanation of the falling-out with Enciso, and one can imagine the studious collaboration among the more literate vecinos as they prepared an account which would produce the desired effect. The petitions were the usual requests for royalty reduction and other helpful concessions, and seem to have been substantially those granted in June of 1513. There was also a long letter directed to the King by the veedor Quicedo containing "the relation of all that had happened since he left Hispaniola." Since Quicedo was an experienced and much-respected official of the Crown, his report did much to shape opinion in Castile. The text is not extant, but its tenor is clear, and it was not such as to aid and comfort Nicuesa. Finally, Zamudio carried a special plea from the colonists as a whole: that His Highness name a governor for Darién, preferably in the person of their own choice, Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

No one was elected to take Zamudio's place in Santa María, and Balboa was thus left sole alcalde and, in effect, absolute commander of the colony. The change was more apparent than real, for, although the two had been technically equal in office, Balboa, "who was very clever and had more innate ability, was everything." (The ability was indisputable; cleverness, on the other hand, is not the attribute suggested by a study of Vasco Núñez' character. Balboa's outstanding mental quality was common sense. This, however, he possessed to a remarkable degree. In a milieu where it was in notably short supply it made him well-nigh unique.)

Balboa's undivided rule in Darién began on April 4, 1511. He was to be supreme there for just over three years—the years of his true glory.

VIII

THE nao from Darién, luckier or better navigated than so many east-bound from the Isthmus, made Hispaniola without mishap, and also without haste. It was not less than seven weeks before Enciso, Zamudio, and Valdivia reached Santo Domingo.¹ The greater part of the time seems to have been spent in Cuba, some of it in the village of Macaca, just east of Cape Cruz.

The *cacique* of Macaca was a friendly soul, known to the Spaniards as Comendador—a name bestowed on him in recognition of his qualities at the time Comendador Ovando was governor in Hispaniola. For motives connected with a miraculous image of the Virgin which, left to him by a pious castaway, had thereafter confounded his enemies and insured his supremacy in the region, Comendador was a fervent Christian, and for ten years he had looked after such Spaniards as came his way with generous hospitality. His most recent guests, prior to those from Santa María del Antigua, had been in special need of his care. Enciso and his companions, hearing about them, must have identified them as Alonso de Hojeda, Talavera, and their crew.

For the men from Darién the days spent in Macaca were both agreeable and edifying. There were two priests in the party—one of whom, named Juan Pérez de Zaldondo, was to return to Santa María four years later as dean of the cathedral chapter. Comendador, who had recently had an outstanding demonstration of the power of his protectress, seized the occasion to have everyone within his sphere of influence baptized. The visit took on the air of a revival meeting, with eighty or a hundred baptisms a day, and since each convert made a gift of “a fowl or a fish,” the Spaniards lived high. When they left, one *compañero* accepted a pressing invitation to remain as religious instructor of the Macacans; in view of what he had been through, one can understand that the offer had considerable appeal.

When the bachiller and the procuradores got to Santo Domingo, they undoubtedly heard from Hojeda a detailed account of his adven-

tures after leaving San Sebastián. Even for the Indies, where travel and expeditions were born to trouble, they had been sufficiently unpleasant to occasion considerable attention.

The Stolen Ship had come to grief in Cuba at Xagua (Cienfuegos), and her stranded company had taken the only course open to them: they had marched eastward along the shore in the general direction of Hispaniola. Almost immediately there had been conflict between Hojeda and Talavera, both of whom claimed command. Hojeda asserted that Talavera, having set himself up as captain, "tried to kill me"; Casas says that Hojeda was forced to walk in chains, which were removed only when his help was needed to repel Indian attackers, and gives a spirited account of the pugnacious little Governor offering to fight Talavera and his entire company—in pairs: "Come on, you double-crossing traitors, come on two at a time, and I'll fight the lot of you to the death!" On the other hand, someone (Esquivel?) charged that Hojeda had callously abandoned Talavera, taking with him the able-bodied members of the party.

Quite aside from these quarrels the journey along the Cuban coast had soon become pure nightmare, for the way was often marshy, yet they dared not leave the shore. Then the Big Swamp began. For the first days they expected to come through it as they had others; a week later, when it was impossible to consider turning back, they were still floundering in its dim mazes. Sometimes they waded, waist-deep; sometimes the bottom fell away beneath their feet. At night they wedged themselves into the twisted mangrove roots to seek "a most unquiet, sad, and bitter sleep." Hojeda, the "*devoto de la Virgen*," carried an image of the Madonna, cunningly worked in Flanders and very holy, which had been presented to him by Fonseca. A dozen times a day he propped the glowing figure before him, vowing that should they be saved by Her divine aid, he would offer the sacred likeness to the first village they encountered.

The heavenly mercy came at last, but only after thirty dreadful days in the swamp. Thirty-five men won through to solid ground and a blessed track which led to the village of Cueyba where, at the first bohíos, they collapsed. Fortunately the natives of Cueyba were unspoiled by prior contact with Christians; they took the Spaniards in, cared for them, and after a time guided them on to Macaca. Here

Comendador provided a seagoing canoe to take a messenger to Esquivel in Jamaica, and in due course a ship came to carry them to Esquivel's camp. In Jamaica, Hojeda was supposed to have a certain authority, particularly as the King had told Colón that he might send no more than an inspector to the island. But Esquivel, who knew he had Colón's backing, proceeded to behave like a governor, and even dared to arrest Hojeda as well as Talavera and to hold some kind of trial. Exactly what happened is obscure; at all events, Hojeda was in Santo Domingo before the first days of May, 1511.²

The Flemish Virgin stayed in Cueyba. The Indians built a shrine for Her, adorned with striped and painted cloths, and on festival nights, when her moon stood high above the pointed roofs, they composed little hymns in her praise, and danced in honor of the Queen of Heaven. Casas saw Her when he went that way two or three years later and, with less than his usual sensibility where the Indians were concerned, attempted to get the image in exchange for one he carried, "which was also holy, only not so much so." The proposal sent the cacique into hiding with his treasure, where, deaf to reassurance and excuses, he remained until Casas was safely out of his domain.

With Hojeda and Enciso both in Hispaniola the next development should have been a concerted effort to re-establish the gobernación of Urabá as originally planned. That nothing of the sort took place is a puzzle in two parts.

Until this time Hojeda undoubtedly meant to go back to Urabá. On May fifth he wrote a report to the King in which he stated his intention, asking for a prorogation of the time allotted for building the forts and for other assistance; about the same time Colón told Fernando that he was lending Hojeda a caravel to go to his concession. And from that date forward there is not a single reference to indicate that Hojeda had either rights or interest in his gobernación. The inference is that his withdrawal was the result of conversations with Enciso and the representatives of the colony, but it is hard to see why. Hojeda's contract still had two and a half years to run, and the chances of success were certainly brighter than when he left San Sebastián. A settlement had been established, and the King had confirmed that it was in his territory;³ the reports of gold were borne out by the present which Zamudio was taking to Fernando. And although over a hundred

and eighty Urabá recruits had been lost in one way or another, the men who had gone with Enciso and Colmenares and those from Nombre de Dios had more than made up for them.

One explanation often stated or implied—Hojeda's early death—can be ruled out. Alonso de Hojeda did not die until the end of 1515 or the early part of 1516. Nor was his health seriously affected; almost the only incident recorded of his last years is when he routed a number of footpads who waylaid him one dark night as he returned from a social evening, chasing them at full speed and pricking their flying rears with his sword. A more likely answer is that Colón decided that the time was ripe to insert a viceregal wedge in Tierra Firme, and took steps to eliminate Hojeda. In May he declared that he was helping Hojeda; a few months later the caravel had been lent to Valdivia, excessively damaging accusations against Hojeda had been forwarded to Spain, and Colón had confirmed Balboa as commander in Darién.

The other half of the riddle is the unobtrusiveness of Bachiller Enciso during the months he was in Santo Domingo. Usually a difficult person to ignore, he might not have existed. As chief justice of Urabá with a financial stake in the colony, as leader in the taking of Darién, he should have been much in evidence; as a man with a whole set of grievances, he should have been loudly proclaiming his wrongs. One can understand his silence about Nicuesa, a subject that everyone from Santa María, including the crew of the nao and the two priests, seems to have treated casually if at all. But why was he not now preferring the charges and demands of which he was afterwards so prodigal? Later he was to be an unforgiving accuser; why do we not find him taking action against the representatives of Darién while in Santo Domingo, when it would have been both logical and safe? The documents of the period which we possess give no hint of a solution, for the simple reason that they do not refer to him at all. Whatever the motive, the normally assertive bachiller appears to have been, during three or four crucial months in Santo Domingo, as retiring as any violet.

Partly because of this curious restraint, and partly for more positive reasons, the procuradores Valdivia and Zamudio were uncommonly successful. Representatives of an orphan colony to which Colón insisted he was *in loco parentis*, they found in the Young Admiral a

sympathetic friend. Colón immediately agreed to give Valdivia a ship and provisions, apologizing for the fact that he had only a very small caravel on hand at the moment and promising more substantial relief as soon as he could find ships for the purpose. Furthermore, he approved the colonists' request that Vasco Núñez be left in charge in Darién. In a formal document—of doubtful validity but great moral effect—he named Balboa acting captain of the colony, and entrusted the brevet to Valdivia for delivery.

The procuradores were still more fortunate in winning the support of Pasamonte, the Aragonese Treasurer of the Indies, who "had so much credit with the King that . . . almost all the disposition and government of the Indies was ordered according to his report and opinion." Pasamonte had a private cipher for communicating with Fernando and with Fernando's secretary, Lope de Conchillos (another Aragonese), and the King told him frankly that "there is no one [in Hispaniola] on whom I rely as on you."

In view of the Treasurer's influence on developments in Tierra Firme, it would be helpful to know if his opinions—which were positive but not always permanent—were as disinterested as Fernando believed. Unfortunately one cannot be sure. Pasamonte was described by his contemporaries as learned, prudent, wise, venerable, virtuous, "notably honest," and a force for good government; it was added that "he was believed to have been chaste all his life." He was also presented as a cynical, venal, and unscrupulous fellow who kept a harem of native girls of whom he was morbidly jealous. The second, and minority, opinion sounds like simple spite; nevertheless it was fairly generally rumored that the Treasurer was, if not exactly bribable, at least appreciative of timely gifts. If this were true, the story that Balboa and the council thoughtfully sent him a present of guanines by Zamudio was probably also true; it would have been only prudent to remember the susceptibilities of the King's right-hand man in the Indies. Conversely, it is improbable that the offering, if made, was what determined Pasamonte's attitude.

The Treasurer had his own reasons for supporting Balboa. An important, though undeclared, part of his duties in Hispaniola was to keep a curb on the Young Admiral (their momentary harmony over Darién was purely coincidental), and he realized that Hojeda and

Nicuesa, as aids to that end, were badly bent reeds. Hojeda, hung up in Santo Domingo without men or money, was in sufficiently bad case; Nicuesa, presumably back in Nombre de Dios, was in even worse one. Should the settlements in Tierra Firme be left leaderless, Colón would have an undeniable excuse for personal intervention. On this basis almost any recognized captain was better than no captain at all. Balboa—competent, popular, and independent—would be a most desirable stopgap, particularly as his appointment could be neatly removed from Colón's control by a duplicate brevet from the King.

Swimming with the current, the procuradores from Darién were able to finish their business in Hispaniola by the end of August. Valdivia left in the caravel provided by Colón a few days later, with food for Santa María and the brevet for Balboa. Martín de Zamudio sailed for Spain about September twelfth, on one of three ships which made port together in Castile before the middle of November. Happy in the knowledge that the same ships carried the official dispatches from Santo Domingo containing unanimous recommendations of the Darién colonists in general and Vasco Núñez de Balboa in particular, he probably was unworried by the fact that Bachiller Enciso, still under an eclipse, also went with the fleet to Castile.

King Fernando, ruler of Castile, Aragon, and southern Italy, fourth ranking sovereign of the Christian world, could not dedicate all his time and thought to Tierra Firme, or even to the New World colonies in general—a fact which sometimes escapes those who consider his conduct solely from the viewpoint of their own exclusive interest in the Indies. He had, however, thought a good deal about Urabá and Veragua, increasingly uneasy at the total lack of news from either colony. When the letters written in Hispaniola in January and February of 1511 merely confirmed the continuing blackout, he was seriously alarmed. "I am most worried over what may have happened," he wrote to Hojeda in June. "I am, and will be, in the greatest anxiety until I hear."

Two weeks later three packets of dispatches from Hispaniola were delivered to the royal officials in Seville. They had left Santo Domingo on May seventeenth in the care of Pedro de Arbolancha, Assistant Contador of Hispaniola and special emissary to the King, and they

included three letters from Colón as well as the first—and so far as is known, the last—reports from the Governors of Tierra Firme: Nicuesa's of November 9, 1510, and Hojeda's of May 5, 1511. The King was in Tordesillas, where he received them, together with a covering letter from the Casa officials, sometime after the middle of July.⁴

This was certainly news, but not the kind to set Fernando's mind at rest. It told nothing of what had passed in Urabá after Hojeda left San Sebastián, nearly a year before he made out his report, or in Veragua after early November of 1510; and from what it did tell the inference was inescapable that subsequent happenings had been unfortunate. Both Governors expatiated on their sufferings, on the perfidy of their subordinates, on the obstructiveness of Diego Colón; Hojeda denounced Talavera and Esquivel; Nicuesa complained that his Indians in Hispaniola had been confiscated. They were naturally reticent about their own shortcomings; nevertheless a discerning eye could see that neither Governor had been a wise commander, and that their intentions to proceed with their enterprises had slim chance of success.

Fernando replied to all the letters on July twenty-fifth. To Hojeda, as to Nicuesa, he was sympathetic but admonitory: the supplementary arms and armor requested would be supplied, "but you must pay the cost, because as you know, the contract with you has been entirely fulfilled"; Colón would be again instructed to collaborate, "and he will do so, because I am telling Pasamonte to attend to it"; unless valid objection were offered by the royal officials in Hispaniola, an extension would be granted of the time stipulated for building the forts. Talavera would be dealt with as he deserved, "but you must excuse much in similar uprisings, for when captains who lead people are eager to conduct themselves well, such things do not befall them." The King repeated his injunction to treat the Indians with kindness, and concluded on a paternal note: "Be ever careful and diligent . . . inform me very fully about everything . . . I will command that you be considered and favored."

A letter to the Young Admiral and the officials was less benign. It was not enough to have provided a caravel for Hojeda; they ought to have tried to secure loans for the colonies, and if unsuccessful should

have used money from the royal treasury "that those desperate people should not perish." They must give Hojeda and Nicuesa more valid assistance: placate their creditors, return their Indians, see that they get the utmost from Jamaica, and in general take every possible measure in support of the two gobernaciones. The officials had suggested that it might be advisable for the Crown to take over direct administration of the concessions; let them submit a plan, and it would be considered. For the meantime their duty was to save as much of the settlements and as many of the settlers as possible.

Diego Colón was hauled on the carpet in a separate dispatch stiff with displeasure. The King was "not satisfied"; the calamities in Tierra Firme lay in great part at Colón's door, for "it is held certain that had you dispatched that armada with the diligence and ability that was requisite and that I commanded of you, it would not have come to such harm." He must do his utmost to repair the damage and to compensate the Governors for the loss and inconvenience sustained. "Do this in such fashion," Fernando ended curtly, "that I may know from deeds the eagerness you say you have to serve me and carry out my commands."

Fernando rounded out a heavy day of correspondence with a cédula to the Casa de Contratación. "The defeat and ill-fortune suffered by the people in Tierra Firme has weighed upon me greatly," he wrote. "There seems to be nothing for it at present but to favor Nicuesa and Hojeda so that the collapse of what they have done should not be complete, until such time as we know whether there is gold in those wilds, and in what quantity, and what measures they might take to extract some profit from those regions." The Casa should send a ship with provisions to Urabá and Veragua and take steps to stimulate enlistment. "It seems to me," Fernando suggested, "that you ought to advertise . . . the great indications of gold . . . in addition to such other things as you see are apt to invite people to go to Tierra Firme." In the emergency the stringent emigration controls could be relaxed: "Do not insist, as heretofore, in wanting to know just who they are, particularly if they be laborers."

Six weeks later Fernando was wondering if it were any use attempting salvage. He had talked with Pedro de Arbolancha, the procurador of the Hispaniola colony who had brought the dispatches about

Veragua and Urabá. Arbolancha's information was, of course, no more recent than that of Hojeda and Nicuesa, but there was a lot more of it. The men who had reached Santo Domingo from Belén and San Sebastián—Ledesma and his crew, and those of the Hojeda-Talavera party who escaped—had talked, with the freedom and scorn of understatement common among survivors of desperate ventures, and the essence of what they said was that the concessions offered negligible profits at appalling cost. It is probable that Arbolancha was accompanied by some of these survivors; at all events, after hearing the oral accounts, the King wrote again to the Casa. "The Tierra Firme affair is most ruinous, and the route is long and little traveled," he said; "for this reason, do not be at pains to send ships with provisions for our account, but let some of the merchants go if they want to."

Arbolancha's opinion can be clearly deduced, and it carried weight. He was a trusted *criado* of the King; he had eighteen years' experience of the Indies; while serving as assistant *contador* of Hispaniola he had contrived to keep free of politics, enjoying the confidence of Pasa-monte, the good will of Colón, and the respect of the settlers—a truly notable achievement. But Fernando had other reasons for his new coolness toward the mainland concessions and, more particularly, the concessionaires. He had received written, though possibly unofficial, reports damning both Governors, including a virulent attack on Hojeda which smells strongly of Esquivel, or rather, of Colón labeled as Esquivel.

The Governor of Urabá was accused of conniving with Talavera to steal the ship; of tormenting friendly Indians; of executing and mutilating his own men without trial; of indiscriminate looting and wholesale rape; of declaring he would seize bread and ships in Hispaniola, San Juan, and Jamaica, and finally, of threatening to behead Colón and to abduct Colón's wife Doña María de Toledo. The charges were grotesque; on the other hand, it was always possible that, under the strain of successive disasters, Hojeda had gone mad. Much upset, Fernando passed the accusations on to the newly appointed appellate judges of Hispaniola, ordering them to see that justice was done.⁵

Nearly two years had now passed since Nicuesa and Hojeda had left Hispaniola for their *gubernaciones*, during which nothing had been heard from or of the concessions which was not distressing, vexatious,

or both. Thus when the procurador, Zamudio, arrived with his reports, supported by the emphatic recommendations of Colón and Pasamonte, the effect was immediate. The officials of the Casa forwarded the dispatches to the King on November seventeenth by the courier Collantes. Collantes, who was something of an institution in Castile, was evidently told to rush the mail pouch through, and years of shuttling between Seville and the temporary abodes of the Court had kept him in training. A one-man Pony Express, he averaged better than seventy miles a day in the saddle, and handed the dispatches to Fernando's secretary on the morning of November twenty-third—"at 11 A.M.," His Highness noted, struck by the speedy delivery.

Zamudio followed less precipitously, starting from Seville on December third and reaching Burgos two weeks or so later. He presented the letters and petitions from the colonists of Santa María, the gold ornaments, the report from Quicedo, and his own oral relation, in a pre-warmed atmosphere of satisfaction and approval. Within a few days the King had taken steps to suspend the Urabá concession as such. Hojeda was ordered to leave everything and return to present himself at Court, and Balboa was formally confirmed Governor of Darién.

After further thought Fernando concluded that the gobernación of Veragua should be written off, and the remnant of Nicuesa's expedition incorporated with the Darién colony. Nicuesa was recalled to Spain, and his men (with the exception of Olano) were advised to go to Santa María del Antigua, placing themselves under Balboa's command. Olano was to come to Castile for examination of his case. Balboa and the officers of Santa María were instructed to receive the men of Veragua with comradely consideration, "because otherwise I shall be annoyed, and dispose differently as is most conducive to our service."

If this last phrase is an allusion to the hostility toward Nicuesa, it is the only such reference to be found in the cédulas of this period. And since the King knew what had occurred, his silence on the subject is an eloquent expression of opinion. Also, because Fernando always tried to be fair, it indicates that no one spoke up to defend the ex-Governor, and much less to accuse the Darienites of deliberately sending him to perish in a leaky bergantín. In this regard it may be

remarked that Enciso had been in Spain for three and a half months when the dispositions concerning the Veragua gobernación were made.

The cédulas which recalled Hojeda and approved Balboa as his successor in Darién were dated December 23, 1511, in Burgos.

"I have seen what the officials of Hispaniola wrote," Fernando told those of Seville, ". . . how, until arrangements are made from here, the people of Darién have resolved to take as governor and alcalde mayor one Vasco Núñez de Balboa, a person with whom they say everyone is content. I also saw your opinion on this, in which you say that they decided well, and I intend to dispose accordingly, to the effect that the said [Balboa] remain in that office until such time as I order otherwise and appoint someone else, which will be done." This was at the end of November; it was only after the King had listened to Zamudio and read Quicedo's letter that his intention crystallized in a royal brevet naming Balboa Captain and interim Governor of Darién.

The decree, the existence of which was long in question, was first published by Altolaguirre y Duvalé in 1914; and although Altolaguirre does not remark it, there are some odd circumstances connected with it. (What appears in the printed text to be the oddest—a date line from Zaragoza—is only a transcriber's mistake; the document is dated from Burgos.) Why did the King, writing to Diego Colón on the same day the brevet was signed, say nothing about the appointment and limit himself to the remark that he would make arrangements for Tierra Firme as might appear most convenient? Why, when he wrote again to Colón a month later, did he say only that "it was a good measure that you took, that Vasco Núñez remain in charge there for now, until someone be provided from here"? He was equally reticent in letters of the next months. And—since if Fernando did not trust Colón he had other channels of communication—how was it that Balboa knew nothing of his appointment until the middle of 1513, although he had received cédulas of later date six months before?

Having registered these nagging question marks, to be returned to later on, we can consider the decree which rewarded Zamudio's mission and Balboa's dearest hopes:

The king. For the present, until such time as we command that a governor and court of law be provided for the province of daríen

which is in the tierra firme of the yndias of the ocean sea, it is my pleasure and will, considering the competence and ability and fidelity of you vasco nuñez de valboa and knowing that it will be to our service, that you be our governor and captain of the said island and province and judicial authority in it. And by this my cedula I command that whatever persons of whatever estate condition pre-eminence or dignity they may be who are or might be in the said province of darien, shall have and hold and accept you during the said time as our captain and governor of it, and shall treat with you in all cases and matters pertaining to the said office of governor, and that they shall behave towards you and execute and obey your commands in all things as to our governor. For the exercise of the said mandate in the form stated above and for the execution and performance of it, I give you by this my cedula complete authority with all accessory and dependent rights thereto adjoint or conjoint, *e los unos ni los otros no fagades ende al.*⁶ Done in burgos xxiiij day of december of the year dxi I the king—by command of his highness / lope conchillos countersigned by the bishop

The investiture, for obvious reasons, was a temporary expedient limited to the colony in Darién. Royal governors were not chosen lightly or on hearsay; Colón's claim to Tierra Firme had yet to be judged by the Royal Council, and there had been no time to consider so important a reform as the organization of Urabá and Darién as a Crown colony. Within its confines, however, the brevet was unequivocal. For such time as it remained in force, Balboa was endowed with supreme power—civil, judicial, and military—in the exercise of which he was responsible, not to Colón, but directly to the King.

The decree must have been dispatched in proper course; Fernando's subsequent cédulas to Balboa addressed him as "Our Captain" in the identical form which had been used for Hojeda and Nicuesa. Somehow it was delayed in transit, for it was not delivered in Santa María until 1513. Had it been known earlier in Darién, the colony would have been saved much bitterness; perhaps the smoldering enmities which broke out later would never have been kindled.

IX

IN Santa María del Antigua the months which followed Nicuesa's departure were so unwontedly gratifying that it seemed as if the wretched Governor had taken the bad luck of the colony with him. The vecinos felt that they had at last turned the corner—happily unaware that, for them, corners were to be only an infrequent punctuation to long stretches of misfortune.

For some time the men had been restless in the narrow confines of the settlement, eager to explore and exploit fresh fields. Balboa, "who could not sit still even while his bread was baking," was as impatient as the rest; besides, he knew that idle, well-fed *compañeros* meant trouble. An expedition was clearly indicated: one of those *entradas* which so usefully combined duty, profit, and Christian propaganda, while keeping the colonists occupied and out of mischief. The undertaking had been planned, and a goal decided upon, before Nicuesa arrived, and no sooner was Bachiller Enciso out of the way than it was put into effect. The objective was Careta, the next chiefdom to the north, about eighty miles away by land and twenty less by sea.

Balboa may have remembered Careta—it is uncertain whether Bastidas visited it on his voyage of discovery—or it may have been selected simply because it was at once the easiest and the most promising district to reach from Darién. The colonists undoubtedly had been told about the swamps and savage inhabitants of the Atrato Valley to the south, and the barriers of sea and mountain lay east and west. In any case, the latter direction was guarded by Cemaco, and a scouting party led by Pizarro toward the chief's retreat had limped back in bad shape after an encounter with his forces. (They told a tall tale of the havoc they had wrought among the enemy, but Balboa did not congratulate them. He gave Pizarro a dressing-down for having abandoned a comrade, and sent him back to get the wounded *compañero*, who justified the rescue by recovering.) Careta, on the other hand, could be reached with little difficulty, and its ruler was reported to be both more important and less bellicose than his confrere of

Darién. Balboa mustered a hundred men and set out in late April or early May of 1511.

Careta, like Darién, consisted of a strip of territory between the summit of the coastal range and the Caribbean. Its principal port was that inside Punta Sasardí,¹ and its capital lay in the hills some twelve to fourteen miles inland. The Spaniards, following their usual confusing custom, referred to the port, the chiefdom, the principal village, and the ruler, indiscriminately, as "Careta," but the chief's real name was Chima. Chima could boast two thousand warriors, and it was fortunate for the expeditionaries that when they made their entrada he was engaged in hostilities with Ponca, a hill chieftain whom the Caretaes considered a barbarian, and who, like so many barbarians, was extremely hard to subdue. The situation, when Balboa arrived, seems to have reached an uneasy stalemate.

Every conquistador was avid for treasure, but for the men of Darién the prime consideration at this time was food. "We have held provisions in more account than gold," Balboa told the King, "for we have had more gold than health"; and, having taken Careta village with little effort, food was the first thing they demanded of the chief. Chima protested that he had none to give; the war with Ponca had hindered the sowing, and other Spaniards had taken his reserve supplies. This was construed, rightly or wrongly, as a mere excuse, and the chief with his whole family was put under arrest.

(The "other Spaniards" must have been Enciso and his fellow travelers, who, since they took sixteen days to make Cuba in a favorable voyage, clearly stopped off somewhere en route.)

As has already been noted, there are frequently two or three main versions and several sub-versions of events in Tierra Firme, and the occupation of Careta is a pretty example of history by hearsay. The chroniclers agree, however, that Balboa found helpful compatriots already installed there: three of Nicuesa's men who had deserted on the way to Veragua, and found refuge and rank with the Indians. They had adapted themselves to their new environment without reserve, and prospered in the process. One, named Juan Alonso, had been made captain of Chima's warriors, and all were "as naked as the Indians and as plump as the capons that housewives fatten in their cellars." These unanticipated friends were extremely useful to Vasco

Núñez, but whether this was solely by amicable liaison work or whether there was cynical betrayal of the chief on the part of Juan Alonso, is a matter of which chronicler you read.²

On the evidence, the most benign account appears the most credible. According to this, Balboa released the chief and his family as soon as he learned of the kindness shown to the refugee Spaniards, and cordial relations were immediately established. Certainly Chima became Balboa's devoted friend and adherent from that time forth, and it is hard to believe that a proud chieftain would have fallen on the neck of an invader who, having defeated him by treachery, subsequently ill-treated him. Eager to please, the chief also embraced the Christian faith, and as the first important convert was baptized with the name of the Catholic King. Thereafter, Chima was officially Don Fernando to his conquerors.

Conducted to Santa María as a hostage, Chima-Don Fernando remained as a guest. When he left, it was as a liege ally. He had concluded a pact with Balboa—whom he called *Tibá* (great chief)—with which both sides were immensely pleased. The Caretaes were bound to clear and plant land near the settlement, to help out with food from their own stocks until harvest time, to serve as guides when necessary, and to make themselves generally useful; Balboa, for his part, promised to take a force against Chima's enemy Ponca, and mop him up to the mutual satisfaction of both contracting parties. Considering that the chief had paid a handsome tribute in gold, the advantage seems to have been heavily on the side of the colonists, but Chima was entirely content. He was free, he had not been pressed for more gold than he had been prepared to contribute, and he was about to be relieved of the harrying raids of Ponca's mountaineers.

Before long, Chima returned to his village to see to the planting and to dispatch laborers to Darién. Before he left he sealed his alliance with Vasco Núñez by the closest tie he knew—he gave a daughter to the white *tibá*.

No one has described this living pledge of friendship, or even given her a name. She was very young, and, it is said, beautiful. She was not Balboa's only love—for which he had reason to be thankful later on—and because of her few years she lived in his house for some time as his ward. But she grew up to be both desirable and constant, and

because of these qualities she was to be, in the end, an instrument in his death.

Vasco Núñez sent what provisions he could spare to the garrison in Nombre de Dios on two occasions, and finally brought all the survivors of Nicuesa's settlement to Darién. The first relief seems to have been dispatched before the start of the *Careta* entrada, and the bergantines returned with distressing news of the Veragua colonists. "If I had not succored them," Balboa wrote to the King, "they were already lost, for five or six were dying every day from hunger, and the Indians were closing in on them." In addition, they had been quarreling among themselves, principally over the scanty rations, which the alcalde, Alonso Núñez, and Gonzalo de Badajoz doled out in microscopic quantities; before the third trip of the bergantines from Darién the rank and file had seized both the provisions and the officers. By this time it was evident that Nicuesa was not going to turn up in time to save them, and they asked nothing better than another home and a new commander. By July or August the last of them were in Santa María del Antigua.

In August, land for crops and grazing, and urban lots for building were apportioned among the *vecinos*, the men of Veragua sharing on equal terms with the others; early in September the corn was planted. With the settlement thus organized, Balboa set out to fulfill his agreement with Don Fernando, transporting his force as far as Puerto Careta in the bergantines.

Ponca lay west of Careta village, on the other side of a low but rugged pass. Its river—every chief was lord of a river—was probably the Moretí (Mortí), a fork of the Chucunaque. There was a trail of sorts over the pass, which the Spaniards were to know almost as well as the streets of Santa María in years to come, but it was hard going for white soldiers, and the colonists scrambled rather than marched for two days to reach their destination. Their laborious progress was noted, and Chief Ponca, wisely deciding that this was a moment for discretion rather than valor, had gathered his people and taken to the forest before they arrived. The *compañeros* ransacked the deserted bohíos, found a tidy amount of gold overlooked in the hasty evacuation, and burned the village.

The Ponca affair had not been heroic, but Chima was delighted. He now proposed to negotiate a visit to Chief Comogre, whose domain, called Comogra, adjoined his own on the north. Comogre was out of the Ponca class; he was a powerful ruler who commanded numerous vassal lords and headmen and had three thousand fighting men. He was on good terms with Careta, and Chima wished to keep him that way, so that on all counts it was advisable to treat with him in proper diplomatic fashion. The ambassador chosen to approach him was a *jura*—a noble of princely blood—who had once lived in Comogra, and who had learned to like the Spaniards when Nicuesa's deserters stayed in his house after their escape from the armada. He carried out his mission admirably.

The state of Comogra extended from the Caribbean across the mountains to the Bayano River, and along the coast from the bay now labeled Mazargandí to Playón Grande or beyond. Its capital was on the fork of the Bayano known as Matumagantí, where the forested hills gave way to the relatively thickly populated central valley—now unbroken jungle, but then in great part open land where the principal villages, connected by trails, were often no more than six to ten miles apart. Comogra had two "ports," and in later years the colonists sometimes entered by that not far from Mazargandí, which they called Puerto Perdido. But the favored route from Careta was through Ponca, thence from the headwaters of the Chucunaque over the divide to the Quiquimipití (or Quiquinibutí), down this to the Río Cañazas and on to an affluent called Navagantí, up the Navagantí eleven miles to a creek, and then twenty miles overland to the Matumagantí. (The river names are all of more recent date than that of the Darién colony.) According to a later report, the total distance was about a hundred and forty miles; one can only suppose that the shorter route via Puerto Perdido was exceptionally arduous.

Balboa's entry into Comogra had the feudal flavor of a suzerain's visit to a puissant vassal prince. Some way outside the capital he was met by the chief in person, accompanied by his seven sons and by all the local gentry. It was an elegant, not to say an imposing, reception. A Comogran notable dressed in his best was splendid from the skin out: his body freshly painted with designs in black and red, a fringed cotton tunic falling below his knees, and on his head a diadem of

woven cane and feathers. In his nose and ears, around his neck, clasping his arms and legs, he wore as many ornaments as he could afford and was physically able to carry without undue fatigue. The chief was, of course, even more ornate. His ornaments were larger, richer, and heavier; graduated necklaces of jaguar teeth lay in a zigzag pattern on his chest; he wore a golden crown and carried a slender scepter made of gold.

After an exchange of compliments, translated by Juan Alonso, the guests were escorted to the village. For once the Spaniards were frankly impressed. The green meadows of Comogra were a grateful sight to eyes long held to mountain and jungle, and the spaced bohíos were numerous and well built, but what struck the *compañeros* speechless was the palace of the chief. This super-bohío was a hundred and fifty paces long by eighty wide, constructed of heavy timbers, the upper part made of wood cunningly interlaced to form a kind of loft; its beams were carved and its floor "artistically decorated." The building was surrounded by a stone wall. Nothing to approach it in size and craftsmanship had yet been seen in the Indies, and the colonists gazed on it marveling and somewhat daunted.

The inside of the palace was in keeping with its exterior. It was partitioned into a great many rooms and corridors, and Comogre saw that his visitors were shown them all. They were even taken to the "very secret" Hall of the Ancestors, which was hung with the mummies of departed chiefs. Wrapped in cloth of painted cotton woven with gold, pearls, and "stones held precious," their shriveled faces covered with golden masks, the fire-dried bodies swung gently from ropes fixed to the roof, like rich bales of goods in a spectral warehouse. Death was a familiar story to Balboa and his men, but the mausoleum made them uncomfortable, and they were relieved to move on to more congenial storerooms: those in which the chief kept provisions and liquors.

Here were stores to make a colonist's mouth water: piles of corn, white, yellow, red, and purple; woody-looking yucca and *arracacha* roots; turnip-like *ajes* and mounds of those little orange-colored potatoes that make ordinary white ones seem insipid; peanuts and *cápera* seeds; green and red *ajís*; coconuts, pineapples, *anones*, and less familiar fruits; smoked venison and pork, dried fish, corn meal in

baskets, bundles of herbs. Another room held ollas and jars of maize beer and a surprising assortment of wines, "both white and red."

That evening there was a banquet. The Indians lived rather sparsely as a rule, but they were always happy to have warrant for a rousing feast, and this was an Occasion. For the still more spare-living colonists, it was a revelation. Better-nourished men than they would have found it memorable, thanks to Comogre's dual determination to dazzle his guests and at the same time win their regard.

No one, alas, has described this particular feast in detail, but from gleanings here and there in letters and chronicles it can be pretty faithfully reconstructed. There was nothing exotic about the menu, which consisted of soup, fish, game, meat, vegetables, bread, fruit, and wines; many of the recipes which have come down to us sound as familiar as yesterday's lunch. The quantity and diversity of the dishes would, however, put a modern provider to shame: half a dozen kinds of fish, boiled, roasted, and grilled; meats for every taste; a succession of wines, and three times as much of everything as could be consumed at a sitting. The food was placed in calabashes and on leaves, ranged down the center of trestle tables, and each place was set with a bowl of water, a small lump of salt, and a drinking cup. Some of the cups were of fiber, incredibly finely woven; the most beautiful were made of small, highly polished gourds lavishly trimmed with gold.

It is to be hoped that the Spaniards did not forget their manners before this unaccustomed plenty, for the Indians were rather careful of the niceties. Each man removed his more encumbering ornaments and his nose ring before sitting at the table. The technique for eating such things as stews without implements was to make a spoon of two curved fingers, dip a little out of the common bowl, and pop it into the mouth with a rapid sidewise motion as if passing the fingers across the lips. Before the next dip, fingers were rinsed in the individual finger bowls. How the colonists managed one can only guess; no doubt they were awkward enough to give rise to a good deal of the laughter that came so easily to Indians unspoiled by fear. There were frequent toasts of the bottoms-up sort, and as the cups were drained the attendant women took them away and washed them before refilling them.

All this, delightful as it was, constituted no more than a garnish to

the solid satisfactions of the visit. The white tibá secured three prizes: a formal alliance, clinched by baptism of the chief, who was christened Don Carlos after the Spanish heir apparent; a gratifying present of gold and seventy slaves by way of tribute; and, best of all, the sensational information that another ocean lay just the other side of the range of hills visible to the south.

The news was not, of course, a bolt from the blue. The existence of seas beyond the known Atlantic was generally recognized, since Asia looked on them and Tierra Firme was not Asia. For that matter, Columbus had reported that another sea could be reached in only nine days' march from Chiriquí Lagoon; the odd thing is that this intelligence, which was perfectly correct, did not feature in the contract made with Nicuesa, even though the chief desideratum was an uninterrupted water route.³ One can only suppose that Columbus' unfortunate insistence that Honduras was China, and the Isthmus the Malay Peninsula, from whose farther side the river Ganges was but a ten-day sail, discredited all his geographical conclusions.

Balboa does not appear to have considered the startling implications of what he had learned. At any rate, when he reported it to the King it was without (so far as is known) any reference to the Orient. One reason was probably the direction indicated; the Pacific is indeed south of the middle Isthmus, hence its first name of "the South Sea," and everyone knew that Asia was to the west. Moreover, he was neither an inspired dreamer nor a savant, but a practical, practicing conquistador concerned like his men with opportunities he and they might grasp. The proximity of another sea was thrilling news, but what was of immediate, absorbing interest was the assurance that its coast was inhabited by chiefs of fantastic wealth.

Their informant was Comogre's eldest son, "a wise young man" named Ponquiaco, who had been thoughtfully considering his father's visitors. His conclusions were brought to a head by a regrettable scene which reflects no credit on the colonists. They had been weighing the gold presented by Comogre—a proceeding which must have appeared crude to the Indians, who valued workmanship far more than mass—in order to set aside the quinto and apportion what was left among themselves, and in the course of the operation some lively disagreements had developed. Ponquiaco watched them disgustedly and de-

cided that such appetites were best directed away from Comogra.

Sending the scales flying with a sweep of his hand, the young Indian addressed the *compañeros* as they gaped above the bright objects scattered on the ground. Martyr remarks that his language was choice, and if it was anything like the polished periods which the chronicler puts in quotes, the adjective was deserved.

"What then is this, Christians?" Ponquiaco's speech began. "Is it possible that you set so high a value on so little gold? Yet you destroy the artistic beauty of these necklaces, melting them into ingots. If your thirst for gold is such that to satisfy it you molest peaceable people and bring misfortune and calamity among them, if you exile yourselves from your own country to search for it, I will show you a land where it abounds and where you can satisfy your thirst . . ." There was much more of this, and few orators have had a more enthralled audience, or, for that matter, one which paid so little attention to style and delivery and so much to what they considered the meat of the subject.

The other ocean, it was learned, was only three suns' march from the hills bordering the farther side of the Bayano Valley, and the hills could be reached from Pocorosa, the next province west of Comogra, in a single day. The direction indicated gave the conquistadores their name for the Pacific: the South Sea. And everywhere—everywhere beyond Comogra—there was gold, both raw and worked, as common as iron in Biscaya. Ponquiaco's talents as a promoter were considerable.

All the rivers of the southern watershed rolled gold in fat grains; every chief was opulent. Pocorosa was very rich; his neighbor, Tubanamá, was even richer; the chiefs of the sierra were obliged to store their treasure on racks because it was too voluminous for mere baskets, and those of the other coast possessed such fabulous collections of wrought gold that sight of them "would make us go out of our minds." As for pearls, so many of them were gathered in the islands—easily reached by canoe on that always calm sea—that no Indian was without them. The Spaniards would need a thousand men to vanquish the "mighty kings" who would try to bar their way, but Ponquiaco himself would be charmed to guide an expedition, and to provide a Comogran contingent as auxiliaries.

The Indian was not speaking of the Inca Empire, although that is what Casas deduced, to the confusion of later historians. He was talking about tribes he knew, "people who go naked and live as we do," with whom Comogra had warred and traded for generations. The mighty kings were the chiefs of Pocorosa and Tubanamá, a little way down the valley, traditional enemies whose decisive defeat was Ponquiaco's frankly avowed reason for co-operation. The chieftains of the sierra, cannibal invaders who had conquered the hill tribes in order to exploit their mines, lived near enough for regular commerce by way of the Cañazas, a fork of the Bayano. And in describing the pleasant, mannerly magnates of the other coast, who abstained from eating the slaves they got by barter, the Indians of Comogra meant those living along the shore of the Isthmus toward the west—which is all that Balboa and his men understood them to mean.

For the colonists it was quite enough. They stayed only a few days more in Comogra, checking and completing the information received, and then returned to Darién in soaring spirits with their slaves and gold. When they got there, they found that Valdivia had already arrived from Santo Domingo with almost everything needed to complete their felicity: a few volunteers, enough food for present satisfaction, the promise of generous help soon to come, and Colón's approval of Vasco Núñez de Balboa as captain of the colony. Decidedly, the tide of fortune was setting their way.

Thus in November of 1511, Santa María del Antigua was a cheerful place. There was still discomfort—it rained incessantly, many people were sick, and Valdivia's small supply of food was quickly exhausted—but the vecinos bore their trials with good humor and a phenomenal absence of internecine squabbles. Hope is more than bread or ease, and in Darién hope seemed very close to certainty. There would be plenty in the settlement: the promised relief would soon be there, and the corn was already high. There would be wealth for everyone, for the news gathered in Comogra, once known in Hispaniola, would surely bring the necessary reinforcements.

Indeed, the colonists had reason for congratulation. They had shelter, slaves, field labor, growing crops; they were assured of official favor; they were free of undesired commanders and also, apparently, of censure for having got rid of them. The man they had themselves

chosen had been confirmed as captain. They could count on two of the strongest chiefs as (in the vague but convenient terminology of dominion) subordinate allies—a guarantee of security and a promise of future assistance. And there was over sixty thousand pesos of gold in the treasury.

X

LARGELY because Colón, for reasons of his own, did not follow up his initial burst of encouragement for Darién, it was to be nearly two years before the settlers were able to act on the information received in Comogra. And even when they did, and when the Pacific had been discovered and the colony strengthened, the establishment of Spanish rule in the Isthmus was a creeping process.

Had Tierra Firme been a sparsely inhabited territory with lands empty for the taking, or alternatively, had it been organized in subjection to only one or two absolute rulers, its conquest could have been relatively easy. But it was settled country—the pre-Columbian population of the Isthmus alone was greater than that of North America from Mexico to the Arctic Circle—and it was composed of a mosaic of separate states, each with its sovereign chief. Some of the chiefdoms were little more than hunting and fishing preserves, some were so developed as to impress invaders still mindful of the duchies and fiefs of Europe, and every one of them had to be tackled as a distinct unit.

It is obvious that this political incoherence, while providing an ideal setup for plundering raids, did not lend itself to decisive actions effective over large blocks of territory. Balboa, it is true, obtained friendly suzerainty over thirty “provinces,” creating a zone wherein the Indians were “like lambs” and “five or ten Christians, or one alone, could travel as safely as a thousand.”¹ But this nucleus was lost when Governor Pedrarias and his cohorts came to scourge the tribes to revolt. The subjection of the heathen is seldom a gentle business; in Tierra Firme, where each small subdivision presented a fresh

problem, it was an untidy, bloody business of destruction and piecemeal seizure.

In some districts—specifically, the Atrato Basin—the conquistadores' worst hazard was the land itself, defiant then as now of the white man and all his works. At times luck (usually bad luck) decided the issues. In general, however, it was the human factor which determined the course and quality of conquest. The virtues and defects of the Spaniards, their habits and preconceptions, are demonstrated at every turn, but they are only one quantity in the equation. It is time to look at the other: at the Indians. We will do so through the eyes of the colonists, who observed more than might be suspected from most modern anthropological studies.

The settlers knew nothing of the minutiae of ethnology. All Indians were sons of Ham (they themselves stemmed from Japheth), who "retained some Judaic vestiges from their ancient progenitors," and whose ramifications since Ararat were of minor importance.² But although their interest and descriptions were anything but scientific, they were authentic, and they are preserved by Oviedo, Andagoya, and to some degree by Casas and Martyr.

Of the inhabitants of the southern mainland the colonists did not have much to tell. They learned little of Cenú save the inconvenient military prowess of its warriors, and dismissed the equally recalcitrant natives of Urabá and much of the Atrato as incurably evil down to the last predestined infant. They say enough, however, to confirm the distribution of racial groups. The Indians of Cenú, the "province" which occupied the upper and middle valley of the river Sinú, were Carib, and so were those of Urabá,³ the Cordillera, the upper Atrato and most of the Pacific coast south of the Isthmus: comparatively civilized in Cenú (the Catío Caribs),⁴ savagely primitive in the west (Citaraes, Chocoas). Those around the mouth of the Sinú were of a different race—perhaps Arawak, since the Arawak word for "chief," *guaxiro*, was sometimes heard in Darién, though expressly defined as a foreign term. The lower Atrato Valley was Cuna; Abibaibe, Abraibe, Dabaibe, Abanumaque, Abraime were Cuna words. Bea and Çorobari, along the delta between Darién and Abraime, were Carib again—strangely softened and unusually attractive, using neither poisoned arrows nor bitter manioc, and apparently intermixed with Cuna, but

still basically Carib on the evidence of their place names and the one or two words of their language which are recorded.⁵

The Indians of the mountain chiefdoms on the other side of the divide from Darién and Corobarí were a mixed lot, many of them ruled by fairly recent "barbarian" invaders from farther south. Rather curiously, there is no mention whatever of any natives living between Santa María and Careta.

Naturally enough, the settlers' information was mostly about the tribes with whom they had constant contact, those living in the territory from the lower delta to the south-central Isthmus, and especially about those of Cueva—the Indians they knew best, treated worst, and admired even as they destroyed them.

Cueva, in colonial parlance, was one of three main divisions of the Isthmus, the other two being Veragua and Coiba. Although the name "Cueva" is often used as if it applied to the whole eastern Isthmus, this is not strictly correct. It was a linguistic rather than a geographical definition; that is, its people all spoke, with local variations, "the language of Cueva." Its heart-land was the valley of the Bayano and its farther limit was the Bay of Capira, and the province of Peruquete, some twenty-five miles west of Panamá. Cueva proper did not include the Caribbean coast westward from Nombre de Dios, or the Pacific slopes west of Darién, although the tribes living in proximity to the Gulf of San Miguel were nearly all Cuevan. Veragua, in its narrowest sense a single chiefdom on the river of that name and in its widest a gobernación which extended far north to Cape Gracias á Dios, was by now commonly taken to be the Caribbean slope between Nombre de Dios and Almirante Bay. As for Coiba, the word merely signified "far away" or "far-off place," and had been adopted by the Spaniards from an early misunderstanding of the remarks of Atlantic-coast Indians. It began where "the language of Cueva" ended, its boundary with Veragua was the crest of the mountains, and its farther limits were unknown; its peoples spoke a variety of tongues and sometimes differed sharply in physical traits from one province to the next. Some of them, perhaps most, seem to have been of Nahuatlteca stock.

The "Cuevans" are not only the Indians of whom most is told; they are also the most intriguing, partly because of their relatively high culture and partly because their racial affiliations are unestablished.

This does not mean that they have not been assigned to a racial group; modern ethnology has, in fact, assigned them to several—Arawak, Chibcha, and more commonly Cuna. But the very widely adopted Cuna identification is at least questionable, aside from the fact that the origin of the Cunas themselves is a matter of controversy. The Cuevans lived next door to Cunas and had constant intercourse with them, but their social structure was entirely different, and so was their language. No philologically minded colonist compiled a Cuevan grammar, but the small vocabulary that has been preserved is perfectly instructive on this point. The Cunas certainly inherited the earth in the Isthmus as far as San Blas, but the process started after Darién was only a memory.

The trouble is that a good many students have been misled by early sources which are not early enough. Here are some of the recorded changes in the distribution of peoples before 1535: The Urabae had retired to the hills of Abibe and their land had been occupied by the Indians of Bea and Corobarí; Urabaibe was deserted; the Chuchureíes, tall, light-skinned people “from Honduras way” who were in possession around Nombre de Dios in 1515, had been wiped out; the Pearl Islands, well populated at the time of their discovery, were uninhabited; Caribs from the high country “just back of Darién” had moved south to seize the region around the Gulf of Cúpica and were already menacing the Cuevan states around the Gulf of San Miguel. Careta, which could muster two thousand fighting men in 1511, was reduced to a few people in the more inaccessible hill country. The Cuevans were well on the way to extinction; the great chiefs who could boast five thousand warriors when the Spaniards came had no more than five hundred or a thousand subjects all told.

According to their conquerors, the Cuevans (the unscientific term must serve in lieu of a better) were an uncommonly handsome lot: well formed, straight, swift and supple in movement, with good features and skins of a tawny golden color. In fact their only defect seems to have been their teeth, which were almost uniformly bad. The men were taller and sturdier, “more men,” than those of the Antilles. It might have been added that the women were more women; for they appear to have been charming creatures who displayed unexpected aspects of sophistication. Smallish, large-eyed with thick and often

wavy hair, they had beautiful narrow bodies of which they were inordinately proud and on which they lavished endless care. They bathed five or six times a day and spent hours grooming their hair with combs of macaw wood; they applied perfumed ointments to keep their skins smooth and unblemished, and removed every trace of body hair with depilatories and tweezers. They took extraordinary care to preserve the shape of their admirable breasts; the wealthier matrons used brassieres of intricately worked gold, "for they thought it shameful to have a wrinkled or flabby bosom."

The younger women, believing firmly in enjoying life and maintaining their girlish figures, often achieved that difficult combination of aims via herbal contraceptives or, in the last necessity, an abortive. There was nothing furtive about this; the girls' frankly expressed attitude was that youth is for fun and freedom—"let the older women have children." Either their fears of losing their beauty were groundless, or nature and art together served them well: it was noted that even after childbirth they were like adolescents.

The Europeans who remarked these qualities usually had every reason to know whereof they spoke, but even a casual observer could not miss much. The sole garment, a wrapped *enagua* of brightly colored cotton rather like a sarong, covered ladies of quality from waist to ankle, but on less exalted women it came only to the thigh, and young girls were apt to dispense with it altogether, "for as they do not know what shame is, so they do not use any defense for it." This happy ignorance was reflected in their behavior, which was apparently similar to that noted by a later observer, a British pirate: "They are very modest, and tho' they will lay hold on any Part of a Man, yet they do it with great simplicity and Innocence." One is reminded of the philosopher who asserted that what the world needed was less chastity and more delicacy.

The women showed a flattering preference for Spanish lovers, although they were inclined to snub mere *compañeros* in favor of men of higher rank, and an Indian mistress was generally faithful to her lord "if he be not long absent, for they have no desire to be widows or chaste nuns." And from the colonists' point of view there was much to be said for a ménage with an Indian girl, or possibly two Indian girls, if only for practical considerations. They were neat and com-

petent housekeepers, they served as interpreters and go-betweens, and their dispositions were beyond cavil.

Amiability, in fact, was a general characteristic, and so were good manners. Despite the tendency to intertribal fighting, the Cuevans very rarely quarreled among themselves, and if a disagreement did arise it was referred to the chief, who disposed of it by final decision within three days. The women carried out the most arduous tasks "cheerfully, and as if it were their pleasure," and the men were invariably gentle with them, being "kind and loving . . . even when drunk." No one ever heard a cross word between husband and wife.

Their villages were simple—Comogra was evidently the show place of Cueva—and even the capitals were small, for the Indians lived mostly in small groups near their fields. They were primarily an agricultural people, and cultivated not only numerous kinds of maize (their chief staple) but a variety of vegetables, herbs, and fruits, as well as a fine quality of cotton. They kept fowls (probably curassow, guan, and the like), domesticated peccary and various animals of the guinea-pig order. Their houses were rectangular and usually partitioned into several rooms, and both the surrounding ground and the dwellings themselves were scrupulously clean and tidy. Nor was the tidiness a matter of having nothing to keep in order; the Cuevans were quite civilized enough for the self-imposed servitude of possessions. Furniture was not complicated: a number of seats and taborets made of sections of log, some built-in racks, perhaps a platform bed near the fire, and a hammock for each member of the family down to the baby still strapped to its backboard. The problem was storage. In that climate almost everything had to be guarded from rain and insects, and the number of belongings to be taken care of was astonishing.

There was the bulky gear: hunting and fishing nets of different sizes and meshes, canoe paddles and poles, wooden hoes and planting sticks, the yokes and big covered baskets (*habas*) used for baggage on the trail, the tall ollas called *toreba* for water and maize beer, the loom and dye pots and grinding stones. There were weapons: heavy two-edged war clubs called *macana*, fashioned from the iron-hard wood of the black palm; spears for war or hunting, tipped with bone or shell, some of them with multiple barbs carved into the wood itself; throwing sticks known in Cueva as *estólica* (the *atlatl* of the Aztecs)

and darts to go with them—plain darts of wood or reed for business, and whistling ones for sport or mockery. (The Cuevans used neither bows nor blowguns.) There were skeins of cotton, *maho* and other fibers; bundles of reeds and split cane; bales of raw cotton, as well as all the pots, gourds, baskets, and utensils needed for keeping and preparing food. And to all these were added the innumerable small things that in a cupboardless, drawerless, closetless dwelling must have been a housewife's nightmare, such things as battens and shuttles, spindle, whorls, and distaff, clay rollers for printing fabrics, tools of bone, shell, and stone, cosmetics and medicines—not to mention articles of adornment, at thirty to fifty pounds of assorted ornaments per person.

The noble savage is frequently less egalitarian than is imagined, and the Cuevans had a strictly class society. The aristocracy was as follows: *queví* or *tibá*—paramount ruler; *saco*—minor chief or headman; *jura*—member of a reigning family; *çabra*—knight. The wives of all nobles bore the title *espave*; slaves were called *paco*. Çabras were so created for outstanding military merit; the action on which the honor was based had to take place in authorized combat under the chief's own eyes. All rank was hereditary, and passed to the eldest legitimate son; if there was no legitimate male issue it might go to a daughter, and, failing direct heirs, it passed to the son of a sister, for "the son of my sister is undoubtedly my [blood] nephew and the grandson of my father, but about the son or daughter of my brother there could be some question."

Nobles did not marry out of their class, although a chief might so far condescend as to take the daughter of a çabra as consort. The Cuevans practiced what might be called modified monogamy: that is, they had only one wife with whom they went through a nuptial ceremony, but the more affluent maintained a number of auxiliaries. The concubines were expected to serve the legal spouse and to make themselves generally useful about the house; they and their children inherited nothing on their lord's death, but were suitably taken care of by the recognized heirs.

The chief was supreme in peace or war. His decisions were unappealable, but they were not taken without consultation or, in the administration of justice, without a public trial. There was little crime,

perhaps because retribution was both rapid and severe. One of the gravest offenses was theft, for which the penalty was amputation according to a nicely graduated scale—a finger for petty pilferage, a hand for something more serious, and so on up to the maximum of both arms. The culprit was obliged thereafter to wear the late bit of his anatomy suspended from a cord about his neck, presumably until it dropped off from natural causes. Only the chief could execute sentence on a noble, although when capital punishment was called for he might limit himself to a symbolic blow and leave the *coup de grace* to the executioner. The guilty noble, and his family with him, lost rank in this world and the next.

The religion of Cueva was not exacting, and followed a more or less standard pattern. The Cuevans believed in a Creator named Chipirapa (or Chipipipa), a detached Being not incapable of error who confined his attentions to the weather; in the sun and moon as deities (the latter female, whereas the Cunas held the moon to be a male god); in a tutelary deity called Tuíra, who dispensed good and ill. The Spaniards admitted the existence of Tuíra, though not, of course, his divinity; he was clearly Satan in one of his many impersonations. This accounted for the accuracy of his prophecies, communicated through his priests. (When God took the trouble to give him the lie by upsetting the preordained course of events, the priests merely explained that Tuíra had changed his mind.) With typically diabolic cunning Tuíra manifested himself to his deluded people in a form calculated to please and reassure: he was seen as a beautiful boy-child with the feet of a bird. There was also a Cuevan version of the universal mother-and-child myth.

Medicine men were called *tequina*, a word meaning master, which was also given to master craftsmen or even to particularly skillful hunters. A tequina began his training as a child, proceeding to a long novitiate which concluded with a hermitage of two years in the forest. During these last years he ate nothing that contained blood, saw no woman, and talked only with the master who came at night to teach him the priestly mysteries. This completed, he was qualified as a practicing tequina and absolved from the bonds of abstinence, a freedom of which he took full advantage. When he invoked Tuíra and spoke with the voice of the god, or when he pronounced the spells and

exorcisms no layman might repeat, he inspired a fearful awe. As a healer, however, he leaned more on medicines than on incantations.

Tequinas did not have a monopoly as doctors; there were many wisewomen and "curers" who also knew how to treat the sick. The Indians had a remedy for almost every ill to which native flesh was heir, many of them extremely efficacious. The chroniclers' descriptions of some of these are echoed by the pirate doctor who was struck with the effect of a bitter-calabash enema in cases of "Torsions of the Guts, or Dry Gripes," and with the miraculous healing properties of certain herbal poultices applied to gaping wounds. And this only touched the fringe of the Indian pharmacopoeia. The Cuevans also had a pretty knack for surgery. Their treatment of a fracture, for instance, has hardly been improved upon: they set it, splinted it, bandaged it, and immobilized it in a cast of clay and plant gums. When operating they anesthetized the patient with narcotics, closed severed blood vessels with a gelatinous or resinous substance, disinfected the wound and sutured it—or, if suture was impossible, made shift with fresh rubber latex to hold the edges together. When the operation left a bad scar, they handled it in the most approved manner by supplementary surgery.

The best of medical care, even reinforced by magic, cannot always succeed, and when death is inevitable it should be accepted without dismay. The plebe dispensed with ceremonies, and a man met his end alone. Family and friends carried him—pallbearers of the still-quick—into the forest and left him in his hammock with a little food and water to begin the journey to the other world. If he recovered, he was welcomed back to the village with honor and rejoicing. Nobles, on the other hand, died in their homes and were accorded proper funerals and delightfully convivial wakes.

Customs differed from district to district. In the Bayano Valley, and in most of Cueva, deceased chieftains were cured like revered hams: decked in their richest ornaments, wrapped in the finest of cloths, they were suspended over a pair of dripping-trays surrounded by glowing embers and well dried out, after which they were wound in more cloths and hung in a special room with their smoked predecessors. The preserved tibás were ranged in chronological order, either in hammocks or swung from the roof, and a space was left for any

who had died in such fashion that his body was lost. The rites were sorrowful until the dried tibá had been aligned with his forebears, but once this was done, they turned into a rousing feast and dance—the King is dead; long live the King! A year later subjects and such neighboring chiefs as were friendly at the time gathered for a particularly gay commemorative festival, which may have celebrated the arrival of the departed in heaven.

(The Indians believed in heaven, which was like earth minus earth's defects, and in a shadowy afterworld inhabited by spirits who were either ineligible for paradise or were delayed in reaching it. Their untutored minds had not conceived the savagery of hell.)

Chronicles of the Darién colony describe in some detail burials in which the wives or concubines of a dead chief, and a number of his slaves, accompanied him to the other world. Such mass suttee was not, however, a Cuevan custom, and the fact that in Cueva it was said to exist only in Panamá and Pacora raises a doubt that these adjoining chiefdoms were perhaps a "foreign" enclave. In certain parts of Coiba and in the mountains southwest of Bea and Corobarí it was observed with varying rites, of which the least distressing was probably that whereby the richly adorned women and, at a suitable distance, the slaves drank themselves into complete insensibility, whereupon the assembled mourners paused in their feasting to give them respectful burial. It might be imagined that inasmuch as only preferred women and serfs died with their lord, there would have been a marked cooling of devotion when the end seemed near, and that foresighted concubines would have made themselves disagreeable well in advance. Actually, it was considered the height of good fortune to be thus assured of eternal felicity and social prominence, and the thirty or forty people who might elect, or be elected, to go with an important chieftain to an Indian Elysium did so in the best of spirits.

The funeral rites of the chief of Pocorosa were witnessed by Andagoya. The ceremonial curing took place in a house. Around the body sat ten or twelve nobles, draped in black cloth which covered even their faces; no one else was allowed to enter the room. Outside, the mourners stood crowded. At intervals the great drum was struck, and as the sound died, a tequina lifted his voice to chant a chapter of the dead tibá's life and glories, pausing for the antiphonal responses of

the mourners. Two hours after midnight the people gave a great howl. A deep silence followed, and then, with laughter and drinking, the festive part of the wake began, although the black-clad watchers still kept their guard. In Pocorosa it was customary to burn the chief's body at the year-end commemoration, together with some food, arms, models of canoes, and such other effects as he might need until he reached the land of immortals.

Feasts of any kind, from the banquets which the chief sometimes offered to his people as purely social occasions to full-scale tribal gatherings, were noisy, strenuous, alcoholic, and the Indians' principal recreation. Weddings—no more animated than funerals and hardly more festive—were splendid excuses for entertainment. Guests came from far and near, each with his finery packed in a basket and each with a gift. When everyone was ready, the father of the bride and the father of the groom began an energetic *pas-de-deux*, dancing until, sweating and exhausted, they could consider their part of the proceedings to have been carried out with proper zeal. The two young people, who had not seen each other during the eight days of premarital seclusion imposed on the bride, now advanced toward their perspiring parents who, kneeling, formally presented their children to each other. This ended the ceremony.

With much shouting and joking the young men seized their stone axes and rushed to cut a clearing for the new family's plantation, after which everyone went for a swim. The banquet and dance followed, during which all weapons were checked with a custodian as a precautionary measure. Unlike war dances, these were taken part in by both men and women, moving hand in hand a few steps forward, a few steps back, while singing responses to the couplets chanted by the master of ceremonies. An old woodcut illustrates such an occasion: faithful to the spirit, if possibly shaky as to factual detail, it depicts a scene strongly reminiscent of Kentish yokels in a May festival on the green, an illusion enhanced by the resemblance of the tribal drum to a keg of beer.

Divorce was fairly easy, and was usually obtained on grounds of childlessness, "for which each party blamed the other." The Cuevans also swapped wives, either because they were bored or because their inveterate love of barter got the better of them. In these deals the

trader who got the older wife was considered to have made the shrewder bargain; she was apt to be better trained, less jealous, and more constant.

Among the most solemn ceremonial feasts were those connected with a declaration of war. The great drum boomed a thunderous summons, the tribesmen assembled, and after a secret council (cabinet meeting) and a larger council of nobles and headmen (joint session of congress) the decision was taken and the feast began. To thudding drums, the whine of Panpipes and flutes, the deep bray of conch shells, and the clatter of maracas, the tequina chanted an account of the matter, reporting to the rank and file the action to be taken. Chicha flowed, torches flared against the darkness, while hour after hour a circle of men, arms locked across each other's shoulders, shuffled and stamped a battle dance. The chants turned to sagas of tribal glories and forecasts of coming triumphs, tired priests were relieved by assistants, dancers dropped out overcome with beer and fatigue and were replaced by fresher men, but not until the sky flushed over the forest and the sun-god appeared did the feast end. Later in the day the old men who had been delegated to stay sober and keep the minutes briefed the more active participants, whose memory of the decisions arrived at was understandably hazy.

Any Indian considered unnecessary labor silly, but it is obvious that life was not all feasts and jolly funerals. Girls were early taught to cook, to draw maho fiber, to grind meal, to spin thread and dye the skeins, to make wine and chicha. It was the women's business to mix *thyl* for tattooing, red *bixio* and dark blue *xagua* for body paint, and to decorate their male relations with becoming designs. On the march, women carried the loads, usually slung from either end of a shoulder pole, and women did the planting and harvesting. All in all, one wonders how those pleasure-loving girls found time or strength for anything but duty. The men provided game and fish for the pot; cleared, burned off, and turned the land for sowing; made canoes, tools and weapons; built the houses; fashioned utensils and ornaments; made camp and set up the hammocks which their wives had packed all day.

They did a little gold-working, but their choicest pieces were imported—some from Urabá, more from Dabaibe; the bracelets and

leg bands of gold, pearls, and colored stones came from the Pacific coast. The provenance of the magnificently executed gold-plated objects which so intrigued the colonists is not stated, and the secret of their manufacture without mercury has only recently been discovered.⁶

The Spaniards, who loathed manual work themselves, complained bitterly of the Indians' light-minded preference for games and amusement over slave labor under a Spanish master, but they say little as to what the games were. One consisted of a sham battle with cane staves which was real enough to leave wounded and even dead on the field and which was the pedestrian counterpart of the favorite Castilian sport called *cañas*. No doubt Cuevans played that almost universal game with disks of clay, the principle of which is a kind of cross between horseshoe pitching and bowls. Target practice and shooting contests were both instructive and diverting, and a drive for deer or even a day's fishing (shared by the women and children) became agreeable picnics. In fact the gregarious Indians had the knack of turning work into pastime, thanks to a habit expressed by "Let's make . . ." instead of "I must make . . ."

There appears to have been little or no use of violent intoxicant drugs in Cueva, and one finds no mention of frenzies resulting from such things as *datura*, *toluachi*, or *peyotl*. They chewed coca, of course, to alleviate fatigue and hunger—toasted, with a little lime from powdered shells to bring out the alkaloid. They occasionally put themselves to sleep with aromatic fumes of *guaymaro* burnt on the family hearth, which gave off a smell that the Spaniards found worse than any insomnia, and very rarely they took narcotics to induce visions. And, of course, they used tobacco.

A quiet smoker in Cueva was such an odd proceeding, involving the maximum of trouble with the minimum of result, that one wonders how the Indians evolved it. Only one of the company actually handled the tobacco (called by them *cohiba*), which was rolled into a thick cheroot some three feet long and "as thick as a man's wrist." The host lighted one end of this cigar-to-end-all-cigars, damped the next section to prevent it from consuming too quickly, and then inserted the burning end into his mouth. At the same time he puffed the smoke into the faces of his expectant friends, who cupped their hands about their mouths to receive it. This remarkable trick must have required long

and painful practice, but it was common to many tribes. For that matter, in certain out-of-the-way parts of Colombia cheroots are still smoked lighted end inwards, although the effete moderns do not attempt to manage one as big as a baseball bat, blowing outward the while.

The Cuevans had no writing of any kind. The pieces of paper (or, lacking paper, *caney* leaves) with signs on them which the white men sent to one another were clearly magic; it was the paper itself that talked—how else could a man in Darién know what had happened in Careta, though he had never moved from his own house? Moreover, it was probable that the enchanted papers could make it very uncomfortable for anyone who treated them ill or delayed them on the way; couriers traveled fast and carried them tenderly, just in case. No doubt the missives could talk also to Indians if they chose, but the chief who tried to start a conversation with one reported that it was arrogant and uncommunicative.

Nothing is told of a calendar or method of counting, although it is possible that a system noted near the Pacific coast many years later, while not in the Cuevan tongue, had its counterpart in Cueva. Cumbersome but logical, it proceeded by tens; eleven was “ten one,” twelve was “ten two,” and so on. By the time the count reached, say, thirty-six, one had to say “*tula boguah anivego indricah*,” accompanying the words with three sharp hand-claps, one for each ten, and a finger tally for each unit above that. It is not surprising to learn that the average Indian could handle only modest numbers, and that a maximum of one hundred was attained only by gifted mathematicians. Any large quantity was expressed by taking a lock of hair and shaking it; the bigger the lock, the greater the number.

With true Hamitic perversity the Indians did not embrace the doctrines of Christianity with the convinced fervor they should have displayed. Could it have been because the methods and manners of the Spaniards were unpersuasive? Oviedo, who was not above slave-driving, execution, and grave-robbing himself, remarks reprovingly that he never saw a perfect Christian among the Indians, “though they had acquaintance and knowledge of Christians.”

Indeed, a great many of the habits of the white God’s followers shocked the natives intensely. War, slavery, torture, loot, amputation

as punishment—these Spanish customs were like their own, and in themselves quite admissible. But the Spaniards were without moderation. They took too much; they ill-treated their slaves; they waged war on people who had never offended them, and, fewer in numbers than a Cuevan subtribe, laid claim to limitless territory that they had never seen and could not use; they were insatiable in victory and in vengeance. They were crude as well as greedy, destroying in their furnaces the golden objects wrought patiently to beauty; they quarreled among themselves. Finally—and this was almost their most damning trait—they spoke falsely and broke their promises. (Casas tells with patent glee of one Indian who declared: “Yes, I am already something of a Christian because I can lie a little; soon I will know how to lie a lot and be very much a Christian.”)

The conquistadores claimed that the Indians could die at will, merely by making up their minds to it, and that they frequently did so out of sheer spite just to inconvenience their Spanish masters. The thing is quite possible; it cannot have required much will power to leave the kind of life endured by most of the enslaved. Left to themselves, however, they were long-lived. One may discount the later statement that “the people here live to 150 and 160 years of age”—the author, a Scot who obviously lacked the caution of his race, also remarked that the Indians were “five or six feet high”—but it seems to be true that a woman was found near San Blas who had six generations of living descendants. Asked the eternal question: To what did she attribute her great age? she replied succinctly: To keeping away from liquor and Christians.

The crone was doubtless right, and the Christians might have profited by a similar policy with regard to the natives, for each had secret weapons which neither could control. Syphilis, which among the Indians seems to have been an affliction about on a level with sinus trouble, ravaged the unaccustomed Europeans: “. . . out of a hundred men, only one escaped—if the other party did not have it,” Casas says. The incidence was not, of course, as high as all that, or even the semi-immunized Indians would have shown more of its effects. Also, it must be remembered that there were native prostitutes in the Indian villages called in Cueva *yracha*, a pluralized form of *yra*, woman (indicating not several women but one who was, so to speak,

a woman many times over), and no doubt the girls offered by hospitable chiefs to Spanish soldiers were often *yrachas*. The native remedy for the ill was made from *guayacán* (*lignum vitae*), and adopted by the Spaniards under the name of *palo santo* it soon became a stand-by in European pharmaceuticals. The rapidity with which the new disease spread in the Old World can be judged by the fact that one Juan Gonsalvo, who started shipping *palo santo* to Europe in 1508, made a fortune of three million gold florins from the trade.

In exchange for the pallid spirochete and other infirmities proper to the Indies, the Spaniards brought their own maladies, against which the Indians had no inherited resistance. What are known as children's diseases mowed them down in swathes, and smallpox all but wiped out whole populations. The conquerors destroyed the natives by what they euphemistically called "pacification" and by pitiless forced labor, but it is doubtful if any of their voluntary methods were as deadly as the sicknesses they transmitted.

These, then, were the Indians of Cueva: a handsome, cheerful people, skillful to make the country serve them, brave against familiar dangers, given to hospitality, kind and quick to laughter. ("A poor naked people contented with their fate.") Neither their simple virtues nor their unforgiving hostility once they had been goaded to hatred could save them from the white men's cruelty. They were doomed because they were not quite poor enough or savage enough, and because their lands lay across the path of conquest. Any survival was through absorption by the Cunas, who succeeded them—the Cunas who resembled them in so many ways, but who, luckier and more adaptable than they, learned to be dangerous while still on the fringe of the exploited region, and moved into Cueva when it no longer mattered to the conquistadores.

Perhaps the Cuevans did not matter either; their culture was a small thing to lose compared to the civilizations of Mexico and Peru and Yucatán. But they deserved to live. One wonders if the missionary friars told them that the true God marks every sparrow's fall, and what they thought of it.

XI

THE tide of prosperity and good luck on which Santa María del Antigua had ridden for eight months turned at the end of November 1511. There was a particularly heavy storm; the streams, swollen by three months of rain, overflowed their banks, and when the waters went down all that was left of the ripening fields—planted, of necessity, at the wrong season—was a soggy waste of mud and twisted corn-stalks.

The colonists were caught off base. They had not thought it necessary to hoard the provisions brought by Valdivia; the harvest would soon be ready and they had Colón's promise of ample supplies to come. Colón, however, had done nothing whatever to carry out his obligations, and by December the shadow of hunger lay once more over the settlement. Balboa determined to send Valdivia again to Hispaniola. This time the procurador would carry the King's quinto, and with it the news of the Other Ocean—together, enough to persuade the most tepid bureaucrats that Darién (and Vasco Núñez) were worth cultivating with more than phrases. Sure of his ground, Balboa asked for five hundred or a thousand men, veterans from Hispaniola trained to frontier action, and as much as possible in the way of ammunition, arms, and provisions. He also dispatched a transcript of the proceedings against Enciso, probably with the idea of spiking any attempt on the lawyer's part to return now that prospects were bright in the colony.

The royal fifth, being in this case a fourth, came to 15,000 pesos. It was "good gold," and 150 pounds of it could hardly have failed to arouse the kindest feeling in every official breast—had it ever arrived. But not one grain of it reached the royal treasury.

Valdivia set out from Darién on January 13, 1512. With him, besides the crew, went a Franciscan friar named Gerónimo de Aguilar and two unnamed Spanish women. Since Valdivia carried, in addition to the quinto, a heavy consignment of private gold from various vecinos, his little vessel was beyond doubt the richest ship that sailed the

Ocean Sea.¹ It was wrecked some hundreds of miles north of Urabá, on the reefs known as the Vipers. The survivors crowded into the lifeboat, and after thirteen dreadful days were deposited by the current on the coast of Yucatán, where they were promptly captured by the Indians. It was a year before Vasco Núñez learned that his envoy had never arrived in Hispaniola, and longer still before the authorities in Santo Domingo and Castile knew that a treasure ship had been sent from Santa María. When this information did reach the King and the Casa, it was given to them so overlaid with virulent accusations against Balboa that much of its good effect was nullified. The informants had jumped to the conclusion that some wreckage seen in Cuba was that of Valdivia's ship, and it was not until 1519 that the whole story was known.

In February of 1519, Hernán Cortés sailed from Cuba for Mexico. Two years before, Francisco de Córdoba had brought back from Yucatán a tale of Indians who hailed the Spaniards: "Castilán, Castilán," and although Grijalba, coasting from southeastern Yucatán all the way to Tampico the following year, found no trace of Christians, Cortés was instructed to search further. His first stop was at the island of Cozumel, near the top of the peninsula, where he learned that there were indeed "bearded men" living not far away. They could be reached from the coast "in a matter of two suns' journey," and they had been serving native masters for seven years.

Cortés wrote all about it to the King and Queen: how he sent some Indians to the mainland with a letter for the castaways, and three days later two bergantines, "on account of the coast being very dangerous, as it is," for larger vessels; how after waiting six days (at Punta de Catoche) the bergantines returned without news, and how he determined to go in person with his whole fleet, regardless of danger—a debatable decision—and was providentially prevented by bad weather when actually under way. "That contrary weather," Cortés wrote, "was held among us, and truly, to be a very great mystery and miracle of God"—for the next day a canoe under sail reached the island, and in it was Fray Gerónimo de Aguilar, onetime of Santa María del Antigua del Darién.

Fray Gerónimo did not look like a Franciscan, or for that matter like a Spaniard, and he had almost forgotten how to behave like one.

As he came ashore, his paddle over his shoulder, one sandal tucked into the band of his breechclout, he was not recognized as a European until he stammered words in his half-forgotten mother tongue: "God and Holy Mary and Seville!" The commander was notified, but when Cortés looked at him he saw only a native branded as a slave, and asked what had become of the Spaniard. "And the Spaniard, hearing him, squatted down as the Indians do and said, 'I am he.' "

Aguilar had been found by Cortés' native messengers in the house of Chief Taxmar of Xamanzana, not far from Punta de Catoche. He was a captive, but a favored one; according to Herrera, his position was approximately that of chief eunuch. This was the direct reward of virtue. The friar's continence, at first regarded with incredulous suspicion, had been subjected to tests which would have strained the well-known resistance of St. Anthony; it had emerged triumphant, and the chief, delighted to find the right man for an exacting job, had made him Keeper of the Household and Harem. Reluctant to lose a servant who might well be irreplaceable, Taxmar had at first objected to releasing Aguilar, but in the end the parting had been amicable, and Fray Gerónimo had proceeded to the neighboring state of Chetemal to give the glad news of deliverance to a fellow castaway, a sailor of Palos named Gonzalo Guerrero. More adaptable than the celibate friar, Guerrero was living in complete content with a Mayan wife and family: equally successful, he had been made war captain to Nachantán, Lord of Chetemal. He firmly refused to be rescued.

"Brother Aguilar," he said comfortably, "I am married; I have three children; I am considered a chief and a captain in time of war. Go you with God; I have my face tattooed and my ears pierced . . . what would the Spaniards say to see me thus? And you see my three little sons, how pretty they are! I beg of you, give me for them some of those green beads that you carry, and I will say that my brothers sent them to me from my own land."

Guerrero's wife ("a rich lady") was more outspoken. One gathers that if enaguas had strings, the sailor was tied to hers.

"Well, look at this slave who comes to summon my husband!" she cried in anxious fury. "Go away, you, and don't try any more of this talk!"

The fate of the other survivors of Valdivia's ship is told in strong

colors by several of the chroniclers. Seven or eight of those in the life-boat had died before reaching land; three, Valdivia among them, had been offered as sacrifices to the Mayan gods and been eaten afterwards in a ritual feast. Aguilar and six others had escaped from the pen in which they were confined and had found refuge with other chiefs, thus saving themselves from a culinary end, but they had all, with the exception of Guerrero and the friar, succumbed thereafter to disease or exhaustion. The story is artistically satisfying; but it should be noted that Cortés, in his contemporary report, is silent about anthropophagal rites and says only that Aguilar's companions were so widely scattered throughout the interior that their rescue was not feasible.

Vasco Núñez never knew what happened to his old friend Valdivia. Two months before Aguilar told the story to Cortés, Balboa's headless body had been laid in an unmarked grave in Acla. But that was in 1519; in 1512, when Valdivia sailed from Santa María del Antigua, the hungry but hopeful colonists saw the future as desert wanderers see the promised land: luxuriant, kind, and peculiarly their own.

Meanwhile, there was no point in hanging about the settlement, "eating the air on promise of supply." If the lords of the Other Sea could not be faced without reinforcements, there were regions more at hand as yet unexplored: those lying south of Darién. The colonists had undoubtedly heard enough about them from the Indians in the settlement to know that an expedition there would not be comfortable, but since information provided by the natives was always colored by an urgent desire to persuade the white men to go somewhere else, it is probable that no one realized how arduous an undertaking it would prove to be. On the other hand, Balboa may have felt that anything was better than trying to keep all the settlers, idle and short-rationed, in harmony at home. He organized a force of a hundred and sixty men, appointed Rodrigo de Colmenares his second-in-command, and with a bergantín and a small flotilla of canoes set out about the middle of March.

The date of the expedition has been frequently misplaced, apparently because Oviedo says (in another context) that Balboa first saw the Atrato on St. John's day, June 24, 1510. Since this is impossible—

in June of 1510 Balboa had not yet left Hispaniola—it has been assumed that Oviedo meant to write “1512” and that the amended date marks not only Balboa’s first sight of the great river but also the start of the entrada. The first of these suppositions may very well be true; the last is an error. Padre Sánchez, who accompanied the expedition, declared in a sworn deposition that it lasted for seven months, and although he came back with the rear guard, he was in Santa María by early October.

Another misconception has led the exploring campaign to be labeled “the Dabaibe Expedition.”

In succeeding years an El Dorado-like legend grew up among the Spaniards about the golden city of Dabaibe: a strong and glittering place of palaces and treasures east of the Atrato, where a tutelary mother-goddess was worshiped in a temple of fabulous splendor. Martyr, evidently fascinated by the subject, is a mine of fact, fancy, and general confusion about it, and the information regarding it which is scattered through his “Decades” is warranted to entertain and mislead. The germ of the seductive myth can be found in Balboa’s report to the King of January 1513, where, however, it is no more than a résumé of data obtained on the expedition concerning a particularly prosperous village at the foot of the Cordillera on the Río Sucio. It has been assumed that Dabaibe—the visionary city rather than the real village—was the lure which drew the colonists to explore southward. But as Balboa himself makes perfectly clear, the place meant nothing to them before they started. Indeed, it is only on this basis that the entrada makes any sense: Balboa did not go to Dabaibe; what is more, he did not try to do so.

So far as any record shows, the colonists until this time had seen no more of the Gulf of Urabá than had been revealed in crossing from San Sebastián to Darién. They knew, of course, that there was a Great River; they had confirmation of the existence of rich mines in the country to the south (the “mines of Urabá,” which, it developed, were a long way from the land of the Urabaes), but Hojeda’s abortive attempt to reach them had been the last in that direction. They now proposed to find out what the Gulf was like, what profit they could wrest from its bordering chiefdoms, and how—or whether—they could get to the gold country.

Not all Caribbean bays and gulfs are scenic havens painted in green and sapphire. The Gulf of Urabá has moments of beauty, but mostly it is a drab expanse, brazen in the sun or dreary in lashing rain. Two thirds of its shore is swamp blanketed with mangroves and vegetable debris. It affords poor shelter from the trade winds and is subject to miniature hurricanes off the land known as *chocosanas*; its entrance is made dangerous by incompletely charted shoals and submerged reefs; its surface is strewn with drift. The expedition eventually landed on the eastern side near the head of the Gulf, almost the only bit of relatively solid shore not dominated by the malevolent Urabaes.

From here Balboa passed to Ceracana, a Cuna province, whose chief, Abraibe, lived about twenty-five miles from the Gulf on the river now called León. Ceracana appears to have extended from the Atrato east to the base of the Sierra de Abibe and south as far as the Río Sucio. A soggy, miasmic region, for the most part quite uninhabitable, its main product was fish. It was not, however, as indigent as might be imagined. The Spaniards found the capital village deserted (thanks to a timely warning from the still unreconciled Cemaco), but in rummaging through the houses they found seven thousand pesos of guanines, which they appropriated together with some of the large canoes called *uru* and a quantity of baskets and fishing nets. These last were particularly well made, and there were so many of them that Balboa named the river the Río de las Redes—the River of Nets.

It is not known how long the expeditionaries spent on the River of Nets, or how far they went, or whether the entire force took part in the exploration. At some point Balboa divided his company, leaving a third of the men with Colmenares, but it is impossible to say with certainty when this was done, or what Colmenares' activities were during the time he was on his own. Martyr, whose newsletter account of the expedition was based on what Colmenares told him in 1513, was somewhat confused (which, considering his ignorance of Tierra Firme and his informant's penchant for doctoring reports, is not surprising), and subsequent versions have been largely and often carelessly based on Martyr. As a result, Colmenares is variously said to have been: (a) the true discoverer of the Río León, and (b) absent from this exploration because engaged in an independent trip up the Atrato. A study of the sources, however, seems to establish that Col-

menares took part in the trip up the León; that while Balboa interrupted his entrada to return briefly to Santa María, he led a company by land "toward the mountains of the eastern coast [of the Gulf]"; and that when the two were again united, it was in Urabaibe at the village of a chief called Turvi—in other words, at or about the present Turbo.

Balboa's purpose in returning to Darién was to deposit the loot taken in Ceracana and to check on what was happening in the settlement. The decision was obviously wise, but it turned out to be unfortunate. As the canoes put out into the Gulf they were caught in a sudden violent storm; "everyone thought to be drowned, but by divine dispensation, Providence did not will that more than those who went in the canoe that carried the 7000 pesos should perish, and thus neither the gold nor these men were seen again." (Casas always saw and applauded the hand of God in the disasters which befell the conquistadores.)

Finding that nothing of moment, either good or bad, had occurred in Darién, Balboa set out for the second part of his program. Picking up Colmenares and his detachment at Turvi, he proceeded to exploration of the Atrato. If this was when he christened the river in honor of St. John, it was the twenty-fourth of June when the expedition passed through the delta channels to see its four-mile-wide open reaches. The name San Juan did not endure—after Pedrarias came everything which recalled Balboa's achievements was blotted out if possible—and for a long time the Spaniards referred to it as the Great River of Darién, but the best name for it was one of several used by the Indians: (T)Ata-dó, the Grandfather Water.

The Atrato is a slow-moving, majestic river, fourth largest in volume of South America, and is described (by the U. S. Hydrographic Office) as "resembling the lower Mississippi in its grandeur of proportion, its long reaches, its width . . . and its great depth." Eminently navigable, its silted mouths have been allowed to remain so for the reason that its immediate environs offer so little to navigate to or from. The Atrato Valley is not only hot, rank, and walled off from the interior by the tremendous Cordillera Occidental of the Andes, it is also one of the wettest spots on earth. It is wet because the rainfall averages about four hundred inches a year, and because the whole lower basin, where the fall in elevation is only one in twelve

thousand, is a waterlogged maze of streams, bayous, and overgrown morasses. At best, there are few places below the middle river where a landing is possible. At frequent worst, the Atrato overflows for miles on either side; the morasses become lagoons and the lagoons spreading lakes, and the observer has the haunting impression that the smallest earth movement would send the sea crowding inland to turn the Isthmus once more into a grotesque peninsula.

In spite of the difficulties, Balboa seems to have surveyed the country with care. There is a ring of first-hand knowledge painfully acquired in his letter to the King of the following January: "Going by land, it is necessary to march three leagues away from the river, and at times five or eight . . . one can manage to embark on the river occasionally by some estuaries that flow into it, which one cannot do at the main river because the area around it is under water, but the nearest place one can embark by the estuaries is half a league distant." And, lest Fernando should fail to realize what these aquatic marches implied, "Your Royal Highness must not suppose that the swamps of this land are so easy that we idled pleasantly through them, because it often happened that we went a league, and two, and three in bogs and water, naked, with our clothes bundled together on bucklers on top of our heads; and, having emerged from one swamp we entered into others, and in this manner marched two or three or ten days."

Some eighty miles from the Gulf the explorers came to a large river which enters the Atrato from the southeast. It is now called the Río Sucio (the Dirty River), but Balboa, who thought it very beautiful, named it in more genteel fashion, Río Negro. Camp was made on an island formed by the branching waterways around the river junction.² The island was well grown with *cañafístula* trees, and the compañeros, flinging themselves on the fruit with the brief enthusiasm of ignorance, learned the hard way that this variety of *cañafístula* is purgative. "Their guts dissolved away," Casas says succinctly, and they thought to die ignominiously on the spot.

Having recovered from this shattering experience, the purified expeditionaries were ready for an essay in conquest. Dabaibe could have been reached in two or three days up the Río Sucio, but they were not yet interested in Dabaibe.³ Instead, they advanced on a province which lay on the west bank of the Atrato, almost opposite

the island, whose ruler was called Abanumaque. The capital of Abanumaque was more a district than a village, consisting of five hundred or more houses in widely separated groups, but it offered little resistance. The Indians took flight, were pursued, turned at bay, and were quickly defeated. Someone lopped an arm off the chief, which angered Balboa, but the victim survived the amputation and contrived to make his escape. Less determined or less agile, the chief's son was captured, and was later taken to Santa María. The beaten Indians were either very poor or very clever, for the Spaniards could find no treasure in their village. As usual, however, there was plenty of information about gold elsewhere, and Balboa decided to go a little farther in search of it.

Leaving half his men in Abanumaque, he went on up the Atrato with the rest of the expeditionaries, guided by one of his recent captives. Some forty miles farther on, the guide turned them into a tributary river, and after a short distance pointed out the village of Abibaibe.

Most of the delta and river Indians had some cropland well back on high ground, but they built their villages in the swampy bottoms, preferably where there were close-growing palms which could be trimmed off to make firm foundation columns twenty or thirty feet tall. In Abibaibe, perhaps because of a scarcity of palms, the natives were tree dwellers. They had selected as the site of their capital a piece of semidry land at a fork of the river, where some giant trees lent themselves to the purpose, and built their houses solidly on beams laid across the branches. Many of the airy bohíos were large structures partitioned into several rooms, and all had attached storerooms where everything except wine could be kept in easy reach. (Wine, it appears, became turbid when the wind swayed the trees, and so was stored at ground level as in cellars.) When the river was high, the canoes were moored to the family tree with all the convenience of a basement garage. The houses were reached by rudimentary ladders formed of lianas, a pair for each dwelling to allow for two-way traffic, and the easy, simian grace with which a woman carrying a baby could swarm up to her front door was "something to see."

Abibaibe was won with axes. The inhabitants had retreated to their homes and drawn the ladders up after them, and a preliminary parley

with them had ended in a stalemate. Balboa peered upward, urging the chief to come down and be friends; the chief peered from his tree and begged the strangers to go away and leave him in peace. The Spaniards became threatening; the Indians, who felt entirely safe, were defiant. At last the order was given to cut down the trees. When the chief saw how the Spanish steel bit into the foundation of his refuge, "he changed his mind and descended, accompanied by his two sons, and they proceeded to argue about peace and gold."

Chief Abibaibe declared that he was not interested in gold himself, and thus never had bothered to collect any, but he was quite willing to tell where it could be obtained. From him Balboa got most of the astonishingly accurate information on the topography and mines of the Cordillera, and on the chiefdom of Dabaibe, which later blossomed lavishly into the legend of a golden city. Abibaibe added that he was afflicted by some "vary carib" neighbors who were extremely rich, and suggested hopefully that the Spaniards go and wipe out these undesirables; he, meanwhile, would make a trip to the mountains and bring back a tribute of gold. Neither of these projects was carried out. The chief departed and was thereafter seen no more, and Balboa, after going a little farther upriver and finding only empty houses, returned to Abanumaque.

As Balboa later remarked when pointing out his merits to the King, something always went wrong when he was not in personal command. The garrison in Abanumaque had got into trouble during his absence. Discipline had been lax; the men had been allowed to go off raiding on their own, and one party of ten led by a certain Raya had come upon Chief Abraibe and been soundly trounced. Raya and two others had been killed.⁴ This was bad, but the real gravity of the incident was its effect on the river Indians, who until then had been more or less paralyzed by the belief that the Spaniards were invincible. It now appeared that the strangers, for all their strength and arrogance, for all their weapons that shouted death, were vulnerable as other men. The word spread, and was to pass from generation to generation; thereafter the Atrato was a death trap for Christians.

The first sequel was a mass attack on the garrison, organized by Abraibe, Abanumaque, and Abibaibe. Abraibe, still smarting from the loss of seven thousand pesos of gold and elated at having polished off

Raya, was the moving spirit; his plan was to fall on the camp before Balboa could return from his foray upriver. Casas, who could never resist a chance to adorn a tale when he could thereby point a moral, and who was leaning heavily on Martyr's account, written in Latin, here gives way to fictional quotes:

"What misfortune is this, brothers, that has come upon us and our houses?" Abraibe declaims. "What have we done to these people who call themselves Christians—which we do not admit—that they should thus alarm and afflict us, who live in peace and tranquillity without offending them or anyone else? Until when must we endure the cruelty of these men who so perniciously ill-treat and persecute us? Would it not be less dolorous to die once than to suffer what you, Abibaibe, and you, Abanumaque, and what Cemaco and Careta and Ponca and all the other kings and lords of this our land have suffered from these cruel people, and have wept over with such grief?"

Casas gives a good deal more of this silver rhetoric, all packed with social significance. Abraibe certainly did not deliver it—not, at least, in the language of a papal prothonotary or a crusading Castilian bishop—but whatever he did say was effective. The outcome was that five or six hundred painted warriors, naked and yelling, rushed the Spanish camp in the dawn. The garrison, however, had been jolted into watchfulness, and by happy coincidence had been reinforced the day before with a troop of thirty men sent ahead by Balboa. The Indians were routed so completely that Balboa's irritation on learning of the Raya incident was tempered by the belief that native resistance had been broken. He wanted to leave a permanent post in Abanumaque as a base for future operations, and if he could not have friendly Indians about it, the next best thing was to have defeated ones.

The future operations were to be based on data gathered from Abibaibe and confirmed by other Indians whom Balboa had induced to talk by various methods, "some by torture, others for love, and others by giving them things of Castile." The information thus extracted was almost as enticing as that on the Other Sea.

Dabaibe, it was learned, was the chief of a large and populous country in the foothills of the Cordillera, whose capital was two days' journey by canoe up the Río Sucio. He was almost incredibly rich, not because he had mines of his own, but because he had established a

near monopoly on manufactured gold. He drove a thriving two-way trade; bartering skillfully fashioned guanines for the textiles, salt, fish, and other products of the coast, and exchanging a part of this merchandise, plus tasty young lads for eating, good-looking girls (not for eating), and wrought gold, for raw metals from the mines of the Cordillera. His smelter and his hundred craftsmen were never idle, and hundreds of pounds of dust and nuggets were laid up in his strong-house. Dabaibe's sources of supply, Balboa told the King, were in a range of mountains, "apparently the loftiest in the world," which began about twenty leagues inland from Caribana and ran southward, no one knew how far. The slopes above Dabaibe were heavily forested, but those beyond the cloud-hung crests were open, even bare, and it was there, high up towards the summit where "the sun strikes them in rising," that the mines were located. "According to the information I have," Balboa wrote, "these mines are the richest in the world." He added that they were owned and exploited by "a very carib and evil people who eat as many men as they can get." This was fact-finding at its best; the wealth of Dabaibe may have been overestimated (no one was ever able to verify it), but the mountains, the mines, and the cannibals were all as described.

Bartolomé Hurtado was appointed commandant of the camp in Abanumaque, and thirty iron-souled *compañeros* agreed to stay with him—plus Father Sánchez, who stayed, but without any appreciable conviction. Thirty men were not many for the job in hand, but even this meager force was soon sharply cut. A few weeks after Balboa had left, twenty-one of them, "who were sick or something," got permission to go back to Darién. Hurtado, with nine durable and indomitable companions, remained to keep the standard of Castile flying over a savage wilderness inhabited by ten or fifteen thousand hostile natives.

The twenty-one sick-or-something *compañeros*, with twenty-five captive Indians, crowded into one big canoe and bowled happily downstream—but not for long. Their enemies were waiting; paddling out from hiding in the half-submerged tangle of vegetation that edged the river, they attacked the canoe from all sides. The Indians were usually hopelessly outclassed on land, but on the water the odds were reversed: the Spaniards, wedged in their unstable craft, could not fight, and when pitched into the river most of them could not swim.

Only two escaped, clinging to some driftwood and camouflaging themselves with branches; miraculously, they managed to struggle back to Abanumaque with news of the disaster.

Hurtado was not easily shaken, but even he could see that it was a good time to leave the Atrato. The departure was spurred when inquiry (of a somewhat forceful nature) disclosed that the river chiefs were consolidating their alliance with the idea of killing every white man in Tierra Firme. Twelve battered soldiers and an unhappy priest, they girded themselves to make a run for the settlement. The Indians let them alone, by accident rather than design, and a few days later they reached Santa María del Antigua. The first expedition to the Big River was over.

The entrada had closed in deficit, with little to show for seven difficult months and thirty or more lives spent in its accomplishment. Balboa had, it is true, achieved the goal of most explorers: ample information about a potentially valuable country. But it was hard to say how, or when, he would be able to profit by his knowledge. For in the last months of 1512 Darién was in worse case than at any time since the settlement had been founded.

XII

SANTA MARÍA DEL ANTIGUA skirted the cold edge of annihilation in October of 1512, and brushed by unscathed.

The allied chiefs who had sworn to destroy the colony—Cemaco, Abraibe, Abanumaque, and Abibaibe—had planned their campaign with care. According to one source, they had five thousand warriors and a hundred large canoes, with which they proposed to launch a concerted attack on the settlement by land and sea. The role of each war captain was assigned, a supply base was established at a place called Tichirí, and even the division of the prospective spoils was precisely laid down. Had they struck at once, they could hardly have missed success. They delayed in the belief that no odds were sure so long as Balboa was in command of the colony—an eloquent tribute—

and on Cemaco's advice determined to eliminate the white tibá before moving on Santa María. To this end Cemaco sent forty of his subjects to the settlement, disguised as voluntary laborers, instructing them to lure Balboa to the fields to inspect the crops, and there assassinate him. The rest, it was felt, would be easy.

The scheme worked up to a point; no one questioned the fifth column's bona fides, and Vasco Núñez was induced to go out alone to look at the corn. But when the Indians saw him riding toward them they were afraid. Forty picked men, keyed to action and answerable to an absolute and angry overlord, convinced that the death of one individual would insure their freedom, they yet did not dare to raise a hand against him. Balboa rode back untouched, and the chiefs were forced to realize that with all their cautious foresight, they had underestimated the intangible power of prestige.

In the end the great rebellion failed before it began—partly from overorganization in the leisurely native fashion, but mostly because of Balboa's personal charm. In short, because of a girl.

The girl was a slim brown *espave*, a willing captive in Vasco Núñez' house, young, pretty, and very much in love. Balboa called her Fulvia, and "had so many attentions and so much esteem for her that it was as if she had been his legitimate wife." Fulvia had a brother who adored her, and this brother was one of Cemaco's vassals. He was in the habit of stealing into the settlement to visit her, profiting by the fact that to the Spaniards one Indian looked very like another and that a noble without his regalia could pass very well for a naboria. When the assault on Santa María was imminent, he managed to come and warn Fulvia.

"Dearly beloved sister," he began (in Casas' words), "listen well to what I am about to tell you, and see that you keep it secret, for on it hang the lives and liberty of us all . . ." An account of the plot followed.

Cemaco's jura must have been very young, or he would have known his folly. Fulvia was faithful to Balboa, and since the obverse side of loyalty is betrayal, she promptly told him everything she had learned. Then, instructed by her lord, she sent for her brother again, saying that she wanted to run away and hide with her own people. The young man came, was duly captured, and under pressure revealed everything,

including the responsibility of Cemaco for the attack on the compañeros returning from Abanumaque and for the attempted assassination of Balboa. Balboa at once marched with seventy men on Cemaco's village, some ten miles from the settlement, where he seized the chief's locum tenens and a number of other Indians, and then proceeded to Tichirí, where Colmenares, guided by Fulvia's unhappy brother, had gone with sixty men in four big canoes. The headman of Tichirí was in charge of the allies' supply dump, but in the belief that the rising was unsuspected he had been given no extra troops to defend it. Balboa easily took possession of the place, while Colmenares saw to the execution of the headman and four "officers." Finding their plot discovered and their supplies gone, the chiefs lost heart; the rebellion melted to the sullen peace of impotence, and the Spaniards returned to enlarge and strengthen the fort in Santa María against future danger.¹

The Indians had not yet been gathered in battle array, and Balboa had moved fast on learning of their project; nevertheless the almost unopposed capture of Cemaco's lieutenants and of Tichirí, which could only have been accomplished by coming on them unobserved, is an illustration of a frequently renewed mystery:

How was it that the Spaniards contrived to surprise the natives with such apparent ease? Granted that some baquianos had become versed in jungle craft, how could eighty or a hundred compañeros, carrying awkward weapons, encumbered by armor, accompanied by porters, dogs, and at times several horses, march by night over rough and unfamiliar terrain to catch the Indians napping in the dawn? At times they repeated the trick with half a dozen villages, all within a radius of twenty-five miles, finding each one wrapped in unguarded slumber. It is true that the Indians' dogs—or, at any rate, the only dogs of which we are told—were barkless. Small ("like little wolves"), shy, and affectionate, they were kept solely as pets; they could give no alarm and when attacked by the Spanish war mastiffs they died in silence. Yet the fact that their dogs were mute does not explain the persistent unpreparedness of a people who must have known that they had lost the safety of isolation. Where was that ever-watchful, all-seeing-yet-unseen intelligence service of the aborigine, in which we have been taught to believe so implicitly? What about the hidden

scouts, the drums that talk across the hills, the smoke signals, and the runners grim with warning? What about the telepathy dear to countless travel tales? All these primitive precautions seem to have been lacking, and for years, up and down the Isthmus, the white men continued to take the somnolent natives unaware.

The concrete threat of an Indian war did no more than highlight an already perilous situation. Evidently Colón had no intention of honoring the King's orders or his own pledged word; the absence of any reaction to the gold and information sent with Valdivia suggested that they had not reached Hispaniola. To have survived two long years of almost utter neglect was a miracle that could not continue indefinitely; somehow the outside world must be aroused to save the colony. Another delegation would have to be sent to Santo Domingo and Castile.

There were no seaworthy ships left in Darién, but the settlers managed to put together a solid clumsy vessel from the better parts of the two last bergantines, rigged with rope of maho fiber and equipped with a stone anchor. In this makeshift craft an embassy, driven by the daring that lies along the edge of desperation, would attempt to reach Hispaniola. If successful, it would proceed to report directly to the King.

This decided, the question of who should represent the colony at Court became acute. Balboa wanted to go. He felt sure that if he could talk to the great ones who controlled the Indies he could awaken them to enthusiasm. No one knew as much as he about "the secrets of the land," for the sufficient reason that he had published as little as possible of what he learned; no one, certainly, could convey as convincingly the singular merits of that deserving caballero, Vasco Núñez de Balboa. The colonists, however, vetoed the suggestion. Some of them were jealous; a few were already actively plotting to use the eventual emissaries as agents in Balboa's undoing and their own subsequent rise to power. But the majority were honestly afraid to see him leave. Even the recalcitrant *compañeros* had, as it were in spite of themselves, a blind reliance on his ability to keep them, if not safe, at least alive. Whoever went to Castile, it must not be Vasco Núñez.

For some time Santa María rocked with the devious joys of an election campaign. The candidacy of Nicuesa's ex-alcalde, Alonso

Núñez, was seriously considered, but Núñez had a wife in Madrid, and it was felt that he might forget the colony in the renewed pleasures of home. Finally it was voted to send Juan de Quicedo, the veedor. He had the King's ear, he was unfit for active service, he was used to the ways of bureaucracy, and he was a baquiano in the discovery and trade of the Indies. Furthermore, his wife Doña Inés, that robust conquistadora, would stay in the settlement as a guarantee of his return. Meanwhile his office would be filled by Andrés de Valdarrábano, the royal escribano.

One old man, voyaging in a jerry-built bergantín, was a bad risk: there must be a second, more vigorous procurador. After more argument and wire-pulling, Rodrigo de Colmenares secured the commission. He had a certain standing as Nicuesa's ex-lieutenant, and, as he pointed out, deserved consideration from the Crown for his thirteen years' service "by land and sea" during the wars in Italy. His interests were bound up in the colony, where by Balboa's favor he was rich in property and naborias. Balboa had every confidence in him—but so, unfortunately, had Balboa's enemies, and with far better reason. These last, an ambitious clique holding the potential menace of most aggressive minorities, had not yet come into the open, but they appear to have reached an understanding with Colmenares before he sailed.

The more obvious turns of history always prick one to wonder what would have happened *if* . . . What would have happened if Vasco Núñez had been able to go to Court? Perhaps the whole inept and bloody tragedy of the early exploitation of the Isthmus would have been avoided; perhaps, confirmed in his command, Balboa would have discovered middle America and Peru, and grown old in honor as Viceroy and Marquis of the Farther Indies. On the other hand, of course, he might have failed in his mission and retired to provincial obscurity; he might never have discovered the Pacific. But history knows neither hypotheses nor alternatives; the facts are that Balboa stayed in Darién and that Quicedo and Colmenares went to Castile—Colmenares, at least, with the concealed and burning determination to supplant his chief as far as possible by whatever means he could find.

The vecinos took up a collection to pay the procuradores' expenses and a suitable salary, and at considerably greater sacrifice contributed thirteen bushels of corn meal by way of provisions for the voyage.

Three hundred gallons of drinking water were stowed in the bergantín, which was then taken to the mouth of the estuary. Balboa gave the envoys his reports, the petitions from the colonists as a body, five hundred pesos of raw gold from the mines for the King, and his blessing, and watched them embark without other apprehension than for their safety. On October twenty-eighth, with a crew of eleven and three miserable Indians, Quicedo and Colmenares set their patched sails and stood away for Hispaniola. According to Colmenares, they left only a hundred and sixty Spaniards in Darién.

All things considered, the voyage went remarkably well. After the usual stopover in Macaca, where Chief Comendador's hospitality was still holding out despite the frequent strains to which it was subjected, the procuradores made port in Santo Domingo fourteen weeks after leaving Santa María. Not long after, they were able to get passage with a home-bound armada which reached Spain in early May of 1513.

Colmenares and Quicedo employed their time and talents to remarkable effect during the weeks they were in Hispaniola. They convinced Pasamonte that Balboa was an unscrupulous bully who should be removed from his post with all dispatch—or, at any rate, they convinced him that Balboa should be so presented to the King. The Treasurer duly wrote to Fernando on these lines, with such apparent outrage that His Highness was seriously impressed. Diego Colón opposed this offensive against the man he had designated as his lieutenant in Tierra Firme, but Colón was discredited by his own behavior and by Pasamonte's insistence that he was trying to inch his way into direct control of the mainland—which was true enough.

The dispatches from Darién and from Santo Domingo, together with comments and suggestions from the officials of the Casa, were forwarded to the King from Seville on May nineteenth. They produced instant results. Fernando was ripe for action on Tierra Firme, and while he may have been slightly bewildered by the sudden *volte-face* of opinion about Balboa, he could not fail to be disturbed. Before the procuradores arrived at Court, in the middle of June, he had taken measures to meet the situation. In fact he had taken more measures than they liked, and Colmenares, for one, found his plans for power reduced to the soured dreams of impotent ambition.

Back in Darién, the days that followed the procuradores' departure

were tense and troubled. Hungry men are always difficult, and the vecinos of Santa María had been hungry for a long time. Raw-nerved and miserable, many of the colonists were half persuaded by the rebel group which was conspiring to overthrow Balboa.

The number of active malcontents was not large—perhaps ten or fifteen all told—but a little positive discontent can leaven a large amount of passive endurance, and as always, there were many fence-sitters poised to help the winners in a showdown. The ringleaders of the conspiracy were the *alcaldes* and *regidores* of the settlement, whose taste of authority had whetted their appetite: the *bachiller* Corral, a certain Alonso Pérez de la Rúa, Luis de Mercado, and Gonzalo de Badajoz, plus an unnamed *escribano* who had been tempted “because he was poor and young.” Needless to say, the intrigue was decked with the trappings of legal forms. Corral, Pérez, and the rest thought up lurid accusations against Balboa, and the callow notary set them down over his seal as the findings of a “secret investigation.”

Diego del Corral, who had come to Darién with Colmenares, who had shared his hot-and-cold attitude toward Nicuesa, and like him had remained to enjoy office in the settlement when the Governor had been ejected, was the brains of the faction. Wellborn, trained to the law, and at this time about thirty years old, he was not physically enterprising; the nearest approach to an *entrada* he ever made seems to have been an inspection tour just south of Darién in 1522, when he succeeded in provoking a previously peaceful tribe to rebellion. None of his record is pretty, and some of it is singularly ugly, as when he connived with a hostile native chief against his own countrymen. His most notable trait was a tireless talent for slander.

It may have been indirectly through this unsavory *hidalgo* that Vasco Núñez learned of the plot against him. Corral had forgotten “a poor, honest, and virtuous” wife in Spain for a fascinating young *espave* from Bea, the delta chiefdom five or six leagues from Santa María. He had the girl baptized, named her Elvira, and lived under her slim brown thumb for twelve years. No doubt those two classically christened favorites, Fulvia and Elvira, often met to gossip and compare notes, and as we have seen, Fulvia kept Balboa well informed.

Vasco Núñez, “all his faults observed, set in a notebook, learn’d and conn’d by rote,” was the prime objective, but the rebels’ first

overt move was an attempt to seize Bartolomé Hurtado, the alguacil. Hurtado was Balboa's friend as well as chief constable of the colony, and it was good tactics to get him out of the way; besides, Pérez de la Rúa had conceived for him a special antipathy. Balboa, warned of the scheme, moved first and clapped Pérez in jail, whereupon the other conspirators rushed to arms and sallied forth to free their companion. The colony jail was at that time a stout wooden cage set up in the middle of the plaza. When the rebels reached the square, they found the way barred by Balboa and a company of loyal followers, and as the two angry groups confronted each other the fate of the settlement hung for a few moments in precarious balance. Fortunately (and surprisingly) the calmer heads among the vecinos managed to make themselves heard. These sensible fellows pointed out the folly of a battle which could have no victory, since the few who survived would inevitably fall victim to the Indians. Brought up short by the logic of this argument, the contenders agreed to an understanding.

With some formality a peace was negotiated: Balboa promised to release Pérez, and the rebels promised to cause no more trouble. Balboa kept his word; his adversaries drew up plans for a fresh revolt before twenty-four hours were out. They began by capturing Hurtado, but were induced to let him go after half a day. This did not mean that they had thought better of their project; they had merely decided to concentrate on the main part of it. Thus simplified, it had two aims: to depose and imprison Balboa, charging him with misconduct and crooked division of the spoils, and to take over the spoils themselves—ten thousand pesos of gold—and apportion them according to their own fancy.

Here Balboa had an uncharacteristic moment of inspired duplicity. With full intelligence of the reborn plot, he pretended ignorance, and let it be known that he was going that night on a hunting trip. In the evening he set out for the *monte* in seemingly guileless confidence; with the contents of the treasury in mind, he was gambling that the conspirators would grab the rope so conveniently offered and hang themselves forthwith. This they obligingly proceeded to do; having rifled the strongbox, their division of the treasure caused such an uproar that a deputation was sent scurrying to find Vasco Núñez. Escorted to the settlement to be met by an armed and acclaiming

crowd, he had no need to urge resistance to the insurgents; his problem was to prevent too drastic reprisals against them.

The ringleaders were put in jail, and Balboa appointed two prominent colonists to investigate the case and draw a bill of indictment to be sent to Spain. He would have done better to hold onto his ebbing anger, profit by public resentment, and as *alcalde mayor* conduct a quick trial to a foregone conclusion. He had no power to execute capital sentence, but he could, with general approval, have remanded the culprits to Colón and been well rid of them. Unfortunately, Balboa was temperamentally incapable of this kind of precaution; however bitter in the heat of a quarrel, he could never keep his resentment sharp and his guard up once the quarrel seemed over. Now he soon relented and released the prisoners in the custody of the Franciscan friars, thus preserving enemies in the colony who were to do him infinite harm later on.

Even Balboa, however, recognized the venomous capacities of the *bachiller* Corral. He attributed them largely to Corral's profession: troublemaking, he felt, was an occupational defect of lawyers in general. "One grace I would implore Your Highness," he wrote soon after the abortive revolt, "and that is, that no doctor of laws or of anything else except medicine should come to these parts of *Tierra Firme*, on pain of heavy penalty . . . because no *bachiller* comes here who is not a devil, and they lead the lives of devils; and not only are they evil, but what is more they devise and employ methods which result in a thousand lawsuits and iniquities."

This was plain talk, if no more so than that which reached the King about the lawyers who infested *Hispaniola*. Nevertheless, had Balboa known as much when he composed it as he did two years later, he might have searched for stronger terms.

Relief came at the end of December, by which time, as Balboa remarked, the colonists "were in such straits that had it delayed much longer it would have been superfluous, because there would have been nothing left to relieve." It was brought by two vessels from *Hispaniola*, which appear to have been the *bergantín* and *caravel* which Colón had assured the King (in October of 1512) he was preparing to dispatch to *Tierra Firme*. If so, Colón's merit was limited to issuance of a

license, at least with regard to the bergantín. The little vessel was on a private trading venture at the cost of her commander, a baquiano of Hispaniola named Sebastián de Ocampo.

Hidalgo, pilot, and man of substance, Ocampo had gone to the Indies with Columbus in 1494, and had lived there ever since, not entirely by choice. In 1501 a Spanish court had condemned him to death *in absentia* "because of a certain question . . . with Juan de Velásquez," and the sovereigns, "moved by certain just reasons" (Ocampo had been a criado of the Queen), had commuted the sentence to perpetual banishment to the New World realms. He must have been pardoned later. He was apparently under no cloud in 1508 when Governor Ovando commissioned him to circumnavigate Cuba and verify if it were an island;² he was associated with Pasamonte in business, and when he came to Darién he planned a subsequent voyage to Castile. He knew everyone of importance in Hispaniola, and with many of them (including Nicuesa) had participated in commercial enterprises. He may have been friendly with Balboa in the island, or he may only have been predisposed in his favor because he was a fellow Galician—a good enough argument for the regionally minded Spaniards. In any case, he became Balboa's confidant and ally during his stay in Santa María.

Casas, confusing these two ships with others which went to Darién some months later, says that they had been sent for the account of the authorities in Santo Domingo with a hundred fifty new settlers. He also says that they delivered to Balboa the brevet of captain general of the colony, which, "it was said," had been issued by Pasamonte by virtue of a general authorization from Fernando to appoint officials in Tierra Firme. "The joy and pleasure which Vasco Núñez received at seeing himself thus exalted was beyond measure," Casas adds, ". . . because until then he had maintained his usurped authority over the Spaniards by force and cunning."

This is all wrong. Balboa had been governing by appointment from Colón ever since September of 1511, and while his emotions on receiving the King's commission as captain general (something Pasamonte was never empowered to bestow) were doubtless all the chronicler describes, he did not experience them at this time. This is clear from the text of his monumental letter to Fernando dated Janu-

ary 20, 1513, and sent off with Ocampo. He acknowledges Fernando's cédula about taking in the men from Nombre de Dios, which, it is true, addresses him as "Our Captain," but it is evident that he saw no more in the title than acquiescence in Colón's stopgap appointment, or he would not have devoted so much—far too much—of his letter to efforts to get royal approval as commander in Darién. He is careful, too, not to call himself more than "Alcalde Mayor." He mentions official aid only to complain of its absence, and new recruits only to emphasize the need for them. What he does say is that the settlement, "as badly sustained from Hispaniola as if we had not been Christians," has survived only by divine mercy and his own unrelenting ability, and that of the pitifully few settlers left in the colony not more than a hundred are "fit for war."³

Balboa must have had by now a very fair idea of Colmenares' and Quicedo's relations with the insurgent vecinos, and hence of what the procuradores would say about his rule in Darién. He knew that his enemies intended to forward the record of their "secret inquiry" to Castile. His own counterinformation would, of course, arrive at the same time, but it was doubtful if it would weigh enough against information plus two flesh-and-blood persuaders. What he needed was a good personal representative to offset Colmenares and Quicedo—and, another proof of the special grace he believed God vouchsafed him, there was one to his hand: Sebastián de Ocampo.

It is probable that Balboa's proposal to Ocampo to serve as his procurador to the King was accompanied by a promise of substantial reward contingent on his success. But Ocampo was not a man to accept such a mission for purely mercenary reasons. The fact that he did accept (to say nothing of his subsequent behavior) is proof that he was convinced of Balboa's worth. Thus when he left Santa María, he carried 370 pesos of mine gold for the King, some samples of native products, a branded slave who was to explain native methods of washing metal, and full power to negotiate with Fernando on Balboa's behalf. It was not his fault that the careful plan went wrong, or that the evidence and inducements offered by Balboa reached the King too late to be of any appreciable use.

XIII

BALBOA was not a polished writer, but he was a remarkably copious one. The dispatches addressed to the King in January included at least five from his hand, of which only one—the general letter dated January twentieth—has survived. The others were: “another letter giving an account of all that has happened here,” a memorandum devoted to Nicuesa’s faults and errors, “an inquiry and report of my life and my very great and loyal services which I have rendered Your Highness in these regions of the Indies,” and “an account of what transpired in consequence of [the insurgent colonists’] iniquitous inventions.”

Nothing can compensate for the loss of the account of everything that had happened in Darién, or of the memorial of Balboa’s life and services—or for that matter, for that of all save one of his other reports and letters to the King and the royal officials. Some twenty-five of them are known by reference or in secretarial summaries, but the originals and textual copies early vanished from the files, together with his correspondence with Hispaniola and any documents he drew for use in Darién. Such wholesale disappearance suggests that the two which have been preserved escaped an otherwise efficient purge by an oversight for which one must be grateful. The letter of January 1513 is not Balboa’s prize report (one would gladly exchange it for that describing the expedition to the Pacific, or for the all-inclusive one he compiled in 1514 for his successor’s guidance), but it covers a good deal of ground. Moreover, it is a singularly revealing bit of writing. Balboa emerges from its pages in a portrait of unposed candor: brave, resourceful, ambitious, unsubtle; a magnificent frontier leader with considerable intelligence, unusual common sense, and the diplomatic finesse of a single-minded elephant.

The letter is about fifty per cent impersonal information, twenty-five per cent projects and requisitions, and twenty-five per cent campaign for a Crown appointment as captain-commander in Darién. These proportions are not immediately apparent, because Balboa,

who clearly disdained such things as rough drafts and revision, set down what he wanted to say as it occurred to him, and arguments in favor of a royal brevet occurred to him with great frequency. Declarations of his merits and cross-referenced recitals of his predecessors' defects are inserted wherever there is an opening for them, and often where there is none, and since both are laid on with a trowel the effect is a little obsessive. It must be admitted that when squarely on this tack Balboa does not appear at his best, at least to modern eyes. On the other hand, it is possible that his contemporaries, accustomed to the intemperate and prolix style of the times, did not find him specially heavy-handed. No one expected humility from a candidate for office—certainly not in the Indies, where the meek inherited nothing and the modest flower was inevitably stepped on.

Hojeda and Nicuesa, Balboa said, had been irresponsible, cruel, and incompetent. Nicuesa, especially, had shirked leadership of dangerous or merely arduous entradas, shuffling off his duties onto subordinates, with the results that might have been expected. Neither Governor had had any thought for the safety of the people under his command, or any compassion for their suffering; on the contrary, both had "used them like slaves," and their tyranny had been aggravated by occasional crass favoritism. Furthermore, they had refused to portion out so much as a *real's* worth of the loot among the *compañeros* entitled to it, so that the men "were so dejected that they did not care about taking gold even if they saw it lying next to them." Such behavior in a captain would be detrimental anywhere; in a country like Tierra Firme it was fatal. Architects of their own disasters, Nicuesa and Hojeda had achieved nothing, and between them they had lost eight hundred men, most of whom had not even received Christian burial.

(Much, if not all of this was true enough, but Balboa might have left out the passage in which he says that "their presumption and arrogance were such that they fancied they were sovereigns of the land and should rule . . . from their couches, and so they did; and as soon as they got here they thought they need do nothing but give themselves up to dissipation." Even in Castile, the picture of the Governors lolling in wanton ease in San Sebastián and Veragua must have raised a smile.)

In contrast to all this he, Vasco Núñez, had been ever diligent in good works. "Night and day I think of nothing save how I may help and protect . . . these few people whom God has spared us." "I do not stay in bed while the men go out to raid . . . they have not gone in any direction that I did not go before them, even opening trail by my own hand." "I cared for the people whom Nicuesa abandoned as if I had been responsible for them and had myself brought them from Castile by authority from Your Very R.H." "I, my lord, have always seen to it that everything obtained up to now, after the part belonging to Your V.R.H. is set aside, be very well distributed . . . the gold to those who went to take it, each according to his person, all remaining satisfied and content." "I have tried, wherever I have gone, to see that the Indians be treated very well, allowing no harm to be done to them, always dealing honorably with them, and giving them many things of Castile to attract them to friendship with us." If the situation of the colony was still precarious, Balboa declared, the fault lay in past misgovernment and present neglect; but for his efforts and ability, "it would be a marvel if anyone were left alive."

It had not been easy, and Balboa was at no pains to make it appear so. The marches "by rivers and marshes and forests and mountains," the "evil nights and . . . days when one must risk death a thousand times," the repeated crises "when we were in such extremity that we thought to die of hunger," the desolation of an outpost left to perish by those charged with its support—were depicted with simple force. Against this background, "Consider, Your Highness, what I have accomplished and discovered, and [how I have] sustained all these people, without any help save that of God and my own industry." These were not empty claims ("in proof, I submit the deeds"); His Highness had only to compare Balboa's record with those of the Governors to see who served him best.

Having set forth his qualifications as eloquently as possible, Balboa added one final, transcendent argument for leaving him in charge: the manifest design of the Almighty. God, who had made Fernando master of Tierra Firme, who had preserved Santa María del Antigua despite mundane neglect, had chosen as His instrument Vasco Núñez de Balboa. "For this above all I give Him much praise and thanks every day of the world, and count myself the most fortunate man ever

born on earth. And since it has been Our Lord's will that by my hand before another's such great beginnings should have been made, I beseech that Your V.R.H. deign to dispose that I may carry it to completion." Fernando would be well served to second the divine intention: "I dare promise that if Your V.R.H. be pleased to send me troops, I will through Our Lord's goodness discover high things whereby may be secured so much gold and such riches that with them may be conquered great part of the world . . . and if this be not accomplished, I have nothing to offer but my head, which I put as forfeit."

On practical subjects Balboa shows a different quality; in fact, the more practical the matter treated, the better he appears. His geographical data were extremely good, for all that they had been given to him in unfamiliar languages and referred in great part to regions he had not yet been able to visit, "since," he remarked, "a man gets as far as he can, not as far as he would." Most of his estimates of distance check to within a few miles of scientific measurement. When he enlarges on descriptions of what he has seen, in the valley of the Bayano and that of the Atrato, he is at once accurate and vivid. If some of his information on mines and treasure was too optimistic, he had excuse: he believed what the Indians told him about them, and he knew that the future of the settlement hung on making Fernando believe it too. Gold was still the only convincing reason for trying to maintain a colony in that remote wilderness, and the only inducement which would bring men to risk their lives there.

All the rivers of the Pacific slope, and many of those in Careta, Comogra, Pocorosa, and Tubanamá, were reported to be heavy with gold in very beautiful grains. Darién itself contained many rich mines; twenty streams bearing gold had been identified south of the settlement, and thirty more issued from the coastal sierra; even Abanumaque, so unprofitable when discovered, was said to show great promise. The fantastically rich mines in the Andean Cordillera east of Dabaibe were reputed to produce nuggets as big as oranges, and the whole upper Atrato was a vast alluvial gold field. Recovery of the metal was simplicity itself, Balboa added, by native methods of panning or even by a kind of seining, and it was said that in some parts good results were obtained by merely burning off the grass from previously flooded areas.

(The information about the mines of the Cordillera and the upper Atrato was reasonably correct. Unfortunately, the men of Darién were never able to verify it, and more accessible sources belied Balboa's hopes. The Spaniards were indefatigable prospectors, and during the life of the colony they worked hundreds of claims in and around Darién, but from the eastern Isthmus they were able to extract between 1511 and 1520 only 41,000 to 42,000 pesos of legally registered raw gold.)

Balboa's goals were the Other Sea and the auriferous Cordillera, which in his opinion could be exploited only if two key positions were occupied: Dabaibe (a glorious prize in itself) and Tubanamá on the Bayano. Stating his program and specifying what was needed to put it into effect, he writes with point and almost terse assurance. Here he is not pleading or persuading—he is telling the King, and his approach is summed up in his own words: "Take it from me, Your Highness, as from one who knows . . ."

Because I desire that the things which I have begun here should flower and come to that state which is consonant with the interests of Your V.R.H., I wish to inform you what is expedient and necessary to command be provided for the present . . .

Until such time as the land is known and it is seen what there is in it, the principal requirement is that a thousand men should come, [recruited] from those who are in Hispaniola, because those who might come from Castile would not be worth much until they became accustomed to the country, and for the present would destroy themselves and us who are here with them.

Your V.R.H. should command that for the time being this land be supplied with provisions directly by Your V.R.H. This behooves you in order that the land be explored and its secrets known, and by it two results will be attained: first, much money will be earned in goods; and the other and principal is that, being provided with food, it will be possible to do and discover great and very rich things.

At the same time it should be provided that plenty of materials for building small river vessels be constantly available here . . . [words missing] . . . an abundance of tar and nails and sails and cordage. It is necessary that some master workmen should come, who know how to build bergantines.

Your Highness must order that two hundred crossbows be brought, made exactly to specification with very strong stocks and fittings . . . [words missing] . . . very quick-shooting and not above two pounds in weight. And from these much money would be made, because here everyone is happy to have a crossbow or two, since in addition to being very good weapons against the Indians they keep those who can own them supplied with plenty of birds and game. Two dozen very good lightweight espingards are needed, made of bronze because the iron ones are ruined at once by the heavy rains and eaten with rust. Your Highness should command that two dozen hand guns be made, of bronze because those of iron get ruined; it is enough that they be twenty-five to thirty pounds in weight, and long, so that one man can carry one of them wherever needed. And very good powder.

As soon as more people come, a fort must be built in the province of Dabaibe, as secure as possible because the country is well populated with evil people; another fort should be built at the mines of Tubanamá in the province of Comogre . . . and these forts, most puissant Lord, cannot be constructed at present of masonry or adobe, but must be built of a double palisade of very strong timber filled in the middle with earth mixed and packed, and surrounded by a very good secure fosse . . . and from these two forts, the one in Dabaibe and the other in the province of Comogre, we will go out through the land, and learn the secrets of it and of the Other Sea which is on the south side, and everything else that is needful.

Your Highness should order that artisans come to keep the crossbows in repair, because every day they get out of order on account of the heavy rain.

In everything that I have said, money will be made, and it need cost Your V.R.H. nothing except to command that the necessary reinforcements be provided; for I dare undertake, through Our Lord, to carry out everything that in these parts behooves the service of Your V.R.H.

Balboa's ideas as to suitable boats for use on the Atrato were as definite as his other concrete plans. Exploration, he said, could be done only in native dugouts not above thirty inches wide, since the narrow, vegetation-choked channels which had to be penetrated to reach firm ground were closed to larger craft. For postexploration

service, however, he proposed to build boats on the order of the lighters common in Spain, five and a half feet in the beam and long enough to be rowed by twenty oars; they would be fitted with sail for use at the season of the northeast trades, when vessels of up to seven toneladas' capacity could navigate the river under canvas if helped with the oars at some of the bends.

For their part, the colonists had formulated certain petitions expressed in a separate document, "the greater part of which," Balboa said, "it is best that Your Highness should concede." The vecinos wanted permission to take as slaves the Indians of Caribana and the lowlands east of the Atrato as far as Dabaibe and, since it would be impossible to control them in Darién, to sell or exchange them in the Antilles. The concession would be amply justified, Balboa urged, because the Indians in question were cannibals, wholly unprofitable, killers of Christians, and in general more deserving of total extermination than of mere servitude in exile. Once far from their own country they could be used to advantage by the Spaniards of other settlements, who would in turn send their difficult captives to Tierra Firme. Stretching a point (and his own claims to kindly fair-dealing), he suggested extending the scheme to include the natives west of the Gulf of San Blas, on the curious grounds that their land was rugged, jungled, cut-off, and fruitless.

Two other collective requests are seconded. The first was that the quinto on plunder be reduced from one fourth to one fifth: Balboa advised the King to grant it in his own interest, because the men were reluctant to jeopardize their lives in entradas unless the returns were high, "and nothing done unwillingly is ever done well." The second item was less important: that miscellaneous loot such as cloth and household effects be left to the settlers free of tax.

Before closing, Balboa made one recommendation and one vibrant plea. With regard to the recent attempted revolt, he urged that the guilty be punished not only in vindication of his authority but as necessary policy, since otherwise "no governor who might come here would be spared rebellions." And he begged that practicing lawyers, those demons in human form, be barred from the colony.

The two ships from Hispaniola left Darién in the last week of January, carrying, in addition to Balboa's dispatches, the representa-

tions of the frustrated rebel group. These last seem to have been: the writ of the so-called investigation organized by that deviser of iniquities, the lawyer Corral, which constituted a bill of accusal against Vasco Núñez; a request that some "prominent" person be appointed captain general of the colony; and a letter or letters for Colmenares designed to provide ammunition for the anti-Balboa campaign at Court. Sebastián de Ocampo bore a notarized power of attorney from Balboa, clearly defining the matters he was to treat with the King, and probably, for his personal use, a voluminous memorandum of "the whole truth" as communicated to him in conference with his principal.

Ocampo took his obligation very seriously; the pity was that his luck did not match his loyalty. He never saw the King, although he was able to insure tardy delivery of Balboa's letters, and when his reports were read, events had overrun them. Stranded in Cuba on the return voyage from Darién, he did not get to Hispaniola until sometime in October, and when at last he arrived in Spain he was desperately ill. For months, as he lay helpless in Seville, the guest of his cousin Alonso de Noya, he continued to plan a journey to Court. Availing himself of the privilege allowed the infirm, he bought an ambling saddle mule to carry him to Valladolid.

By June 1514 Ocampo knew that he would never go anywhere again. Summoning a notary, he transferred his power of attorney to his cousin Noya and to Francisco de Cobos, assistant royal secretary for the Indies, charging them to treat diligently of "the matters contained in the said power and no more. . . . And because he could not sign this, being sick and weak, the witnesses of this document signed for him." Even then he could not die tranquil. Again calling the notary, he dictated a letter to Noya, then absent from Seville. In it he repeats his instructions about representing Balboa, binds himself to pay a 50,000-maravedí indemnity if the terms are not fulfilled, and promises to Noya for his trouble "my dun mule, saddled and bridled, plus forty gold ducats." That is really all, but the letter is very long. One seems to hear the tired voice stumbling on, saying over and over the same exhortations and promises, in an increasing confusion of juridical provisions, urgency, and dun mules. He died a few days later.

A staunch and honorable gentleman, Sebastián de Ocampo. One hopes that Balboa learned eventually of his faithfulness.

In Santa María the early months of 1513 were relatively serene and almost entirely unrecorded. With the exception of a long anecdote about a marauding “tiger”—an episode which may have occurred later in the year—events must be pieced out from stray references in legal documents, *cédulas*, and “proofs of merit,” confined almost entirely to ships and incoming colonists.

(The tiger was, of course, a jaguar—a bold fellow whose nightly raids decimated the small stock of domestic animals and were believed to have included human victims. He was finally trapped in a camouflaged pit and stoned to death. The settlers ate the meat, which they said was like beef (an indication of how long they had been deprived of the genuine article), and stuffed the skin to send an interesting, if rather gamy, present to Colón. Trackers found the animal’s den, occupied by two newborn cubs whose mother was fortunately elsewhere; the babies were taken to the settlement to have iron collars riveted about their necks and then returned to the den. Subsequent investigation revealed the collars and their attached chains, but no vestige of the jaguar widow and orphans.)

Soon after the departure of the Ocampo ships, a Crown caravel came, bringing Alonso de Quiroga, who had originally been appointed *veedor* of barter and fort-building in Veragua. Quiroga collected 894 pesos in guanines for the royal quinto, started back to Hispaniola, and was never heard from again.¹ The next vessel appears to have been the caravel *Chapinera*—master, Alonso Martín Aparicio—with a cargo of pork and cassava from Hispaniola. Two other royal caravels, *Santa María* and *San Juan*, arrived with nearly a thousand pesos’ worth of bacon and flour from the King’s hacienda, sent by the officials of Santo Domingo; both were lost on the return voyage, one off Cuba and one on the coast of Yáquimo. No one mentions starry omens in this year, but mariners must have wondered: yet another ship came, later in the year, and was wrecked at the mouth of the estuary. She was owned and piloted by Juan de Castañeda, who got safe to shore with forty men who had come to settle in Santa María.

The dates of these arrivals are nowhere stated, but the approximate times can be deduced from clues embedded in scattered documents and letters. The same is true of the most important armada to reach Darién in 1513. This consisted of two ships (possibly the two already

mentioned, *San Juan* and *Santa María*), which had been dispatched by the *oidores*, the appeal judges who had recently been installed in Santo Domingo with ample powers to supplement, and curb, the government of Colón. The vessels brought a large number of new settlers—four hundred, according to Juan de Ledesma, who piloted one of them, a hundred and fifty by Casas' more acceptable estimate—conducted by a master mariner named Cristóbal Serrano, and including a well-to-do hidalgo named Diego Hernández. Serrano and Hernández, both good men who were to be prominent in the colony, were very different types. Serrano, a stolid, shy fellow of few words, had already achieved a prosperous position in Hispaniola, and in Tierra Firme proved himself a capable leader of expeditions, agreeably averse to politics and skulduggery. Hernández was a well-educated young man “of diligence and good conduct, and very well outfitted.” He had gone from Seville to Hispaniola with Nicuesa, had been providentially prevented by illness from continuing to Veragua, and now arrived with a number of retainers, thoroughly armed and equipped. Balboa made him escribano of justice and public documents.

Although there is no record of even the month in which the *oidores*' ships reached Darién, it was probably not before June. In any case, it marked a great change in the colony, for Serrano delivered the King's cédula naming Vasco Núñez de Balboa Their Highnesses' Captain and interim Governor in Tierra Firme.²

This was the time of Balboa's rejoicing. Although command of the colony had been conferred on him by both popular vote and vice-regal commission, neither source was particularly solid. Democratic processes lend themselves to pulling down as readily as they do to building up, and the validity of any appointment made by Diego Colón in Tierra Firme could be questioned on several counts. True authority came only from the Crown; moreover, without a royally designated administration, the colony existed in a kind of official limbo. The King's brevet certainly gave Balboa “immeasurable pleasure,” but it also gratified the settlers, who felt that Santa María now had identity and status. “With this joy and gaiety, those who wished him ill were set at liberty and reconciled with him,” Casas writes, “though whether the reconciliation was fictitious or real I cannot say.”

Unclouded moments are always brief, and this one was soon

dimmed by a shadow of coming events. "A short time later . . . or perchance by those same ships," Balboa received letters which indicated that his tenure would be short.

It has been presumed that the chief informant was Zamudio—which is quite likely—and that the burden of his letter was that the King, influenced by Enciso, had turned sharply against Balboa, which is untrue. Enciso was influencing no one seriously at the time the letter must have been dispatched from Castile, least of all the King, who was busy with a minor war and spent the last five months of 1512 in the field. Nor did Fernando evidence any displeasure toward Balboa in this period. What Zamudio could have said was that the King, plagued by three years of failure, conflict, and confusion in Tierra Firme, and wary of Colón, was resolved to make a fresh start with a governor of unassailable position and no factional allegiances. The post had, in fact, already been offered late in 1512 to a caballero of Avila, Comendador Don Diego del Aguila—a nobleman so neutral that little is known of him beyond his family's extreme piety. Aguila had declined, but it was to be supposed that His Highness was looking for someone else both eligible and willing.

This was disturbing intelligence, the more so as it undoubtedly coincided with news of what Colmenares and Quicedo had been up to in Santo Domingo, as well as of the way the Young Admiral, with his megalomaniac demands, was forcing the King's hand. Colón had, in fact, reached a point where speculation ran on the chance that he would attempt a coup in Tierra Firme. The prospect was not such as to induce Fernando to prolong there an unorthodox regime under a makeshift governor. Even now a new captain general might be under commission, and whoever he might be, he would certainly bring his own officers and a large number of followers. The existing order in Darién would be swept away; another leader and other troops would discover the high things and great riches, reaping where they had not sown.

Considering these things, Balboa came to a momentous decision. He would stake everything on a magnificent gamble—now, while his achievements would have the weight and luster of his position as the King's acknowledged representative. He would cross the mountains and find the Other Sea.

The men of Santa María approved the plan. If the undertaking was hazardous, the prize was well worth a risk. The advantage of snatching the gold and glory of the Other Sea before an influx of undeserving strangers arrived to share in them was obvious; the most illiterate *compañero* could do the simple arithmetic which divided the spoils by the low denominator of present numbers as against an alternative represented by hundreds of additional shareholders. The provinces of the other coast had been described as powerful states—but when, in the process of conquest, did the soldiers of Castile hesitate to invade a powerful country from which they anticipated golden rewards? After all, the inhabitants of the south coast were said to be courteous and amiable, and experience proved that courtesy and amiability in the Indians contributed notably to their undoing. If Tubanamá barred the high road to any force of less than a thousand men, they would by-pass Tubanamá.

Moreover, conditions in Santa María were more favorable than they had yet been in its tormented existence. There were about four hundred Spaniards in the settlement, and—a unique circumstance—they had been well fed for months. The natives along the “North Sea” as far as Pocosora were friendly, and could be counted on for assistance; the hostile tribes of the Atrato might in time attempt another offensive, but it seemed likely that they had not recovered sufficiently from the rout of the previous year to be a serious menace to the garrison left in Santa María. In short, if the settlers were to bring off the exploit on their own, it was now or never.

Once the expedition had been agreed upon, preparations were set on foot at once. It was decided to strike across the mountains from Careta, passing through Ponca, and Chief Chima was advised to hold guides and porters in readiness. Two hundred men were told off to remain in the settlement, including, of course, all those implicated in the late insurrection; reconciliation did not extend to admitting them to a share in the plunder and credit from this supreme entrada. About the middle of August a transport column of *naborias* and slaves was dispatched to Chima’s village, whither the expeditionaries would go by sea, in nine canoes and a small ship.³ When everything was done, on the last day of August, the men who were to leave attended a special mass, made their confessions, and received communion.

On Thursday, September first, Balboa and one hundred ninety picked companions⁴ embarked at the river mouth, and set forth for Careta, the Pacific, and immortality.

XIV

THE route selected by Balboa had several disadvantages, not least of which was that of conducting to the poorer part of the other coast. It was more rugged than that by the Bayano, and less settled. But it was short and, traversing no important chiefdoms, comparatively safe; the low Careta-Ponca pass could be traveled in two days and Chima's guides were familiar with the country.

There is a popular tendency to think that Balboa, going out into a blank unknown, struggled for nearly a month of uninterrupted marching to come, with wild surmise, upon an unguessed ocean. It should be remembered that he not only knew what he was going to discover, but also, thanks to his native friends, pretty much what he would find along the way. Furthermore, although it took twenty-two days to reach the Pacific, not more than nine or ten of these were spent in marching.

The nine canoes reached Careta on September fourth, and the ship one day later. Vasco Núñez lost no time in social amenities with his quasi-father-in-law. He wanted to be well away before the specter of another governor could materialize to hamstring his venture. The urgency which made him undertake the entrada in spite of the season—the tropical “winter” was due to begin—drove him out on the trail within twenty-four hours of reaching Chima's capital. Half of the men brought from Santa María were detailed to stay in Careta, which thus became the base camp. The others made up the actual exploring force: ninety-two men-at-arms and two priests, pledged to claim an ocean and all its coasts for their King.¹

The little company of Spaniards was escorted by hundreds of native porters, servants, women, and hangers-on; strung out in single file their column must have stretched for over half a mile. An observer stationed beside the path would have seen the ingredients of the Con-



quest pass by in less than an hour: soldier-colonists of all sorts and degrees, some in steel cuirasses, ridged casques, and boots, but more of them at ease in cotton shirts and skimpy breeches, their feet in *alpargatas*; priests with their cassocks tucked high for marching, their faces as tanned and their eyes as wary as those of any *compañero*; Indians bent under the burdens of the vanquished, carrying the instruments of further vanquishment—armor, bags of gunpowder and shot, baskets and jars of food, trade goods, camp gear; the leashed war dogs, more terrible than guns and crossbows, and chief among them Balboa's Leoncico, who drew a bowman's pay.

Ponca, the first objective, was reached on Thursday evening after two days of stiff marching. As usually happened when the Indians were not taken by surprise, the Poncans had deserted their bohíos for the shelter of the forest. The expeditionaries settled down to wait for their messengers to find the chief and persuade him to return. Vasco Núñez was, by universal judgment, a restless man, happy only when employed in something constructive—preferably something which required physical effort—yet he could be extraordinarily patient in his dealings with the natives. It was one of his best cards. Other captains, greedy for quick profits and mindful only of the present gain, wrought havoc and passed on rather than lose a day; Balboa would wait, on hope of conciliation, aware that for the Indians time had small reality and that much of their hostility was bred of fear.

Chief Ponca, at length reassured, came back to the village five days later, on September thirteenth. Balboa ignored the delay, greeted him with ceremony as an overlord welcoming an honored vassal, and presented him with coveted gifts: cotton shirts and glass beads for elegance, little bells for fun, and iron hatchets for solid use. These methods worked like a charm. Beaming with good nature, Ponca responded with a number of pieces of finely wrought gold. Furthermore, after confirming the information about the Other Sea, "he told Vasco Núñez in secret many things that he was rejoiced to learn." It is interesting to speculate on how much of Balboa's success should be traced to Careta's daughter and to Fulvia, who had taught him to understand the people whose lands he invaded.

Ponca played host to the Spaniards for another week. On the morning of the twentieth, having sent twelve of his men (the sick list) back

to Careta, Balboa left for Quareca. This was the first piece of real exploration, but Ponca had given full instructions about the route and had supplied guides to insure that there was no mistake. The chief was not prompted by pure altruism; Torecha, lord of Quareca, was his enemy. The distance was not great, as miles go, to Torecha's village—no more than ten leagues—but it was the hardest part of the journey. For five days the Spaniards struggled through wild and hilly country, thickly forested and cut by rivers. The Indians, unencumbered by clothes, used the rivers as roads, for it was easier to clamber over rocks and fallen trees, to wade the shallows and swim the deeper spots, than to force a way through the forest. Weary and dripping, the *compañeros* ploughed doggedly after their guides, averaging at best five or six miles between dawn and dark. The general direction was southwest; across the Chucunaque and the headwaters of the Artigatí and the Sabanas. On the evening of September twenty-fourth they came to Quareca.

The village of Chief Torecha lay in the hills called the Sierra de Quareca, and although its altitude cannot have been great, the air was fresh and pure after the steamy jungles of the middle Isthmus. The *compañeros*, impervious to heat, complained that it was disagreeably chilly; but they can hardly have suffered much, for their stay was both brief and uncommonly active. It started with a battle. The inhabitants were Caribs—no doubt some of those barbarian invaders mentioned by Ponquiaco—and Torecha, braver and more ingenuous than Ponca, stood his ground backed by six hundred warriors armed with bows and arrows. Balboa (who saved his patience for uncertain or remissive chiefs) attacked at once. After a short but heavy skirmish, in which Torecha and a number of his men were killed, the Spaniards occupied the *bohíos*.

Once in the village, the expeditionaries made a discovery which shocked them inexpressibly. Certain Quarecan patricians were given to homosexuality; Torecha's own brother and two other *çabras* were found dressed in women's enaguas. "The abominable sin" admitted no forgiveness. Without compunction, Balboa ordered that the *cama-yoas* be given to the dogs. (The rather more horrible penalty prescribed by Spanish law would have taken too long to execute.)

After the summary reform of Quarecan morals, a little looting, and

a careful check of his data on the route to be followed, Balboa is said to have pushed on from Quareca on the day after his arrival, September twenty-fifth. This is the day enshrined in history as that on which European eyes first saw the Pacific Ocean—or more exactly, when they first looked on it from the Western World. Oviedo, who once had in his keeping all the documents of the expedition, including the journal kept by Andrés de Valdarrábano, notary and official recorder of the entrada, tells the story:

There in Torecha he left part of the troops, and departed with about seventy men;² and on the twenty-fifth of the month, the same day that he left, he reached the bohíos and seat of the chief named Porque, who had absented himself. Balboa did not bother with him, but passed on, pursuing his journey in search of the Other Sea. And on a Tuesday, the twenty-fifth of September of that year one thousand five hundred and thirteen, at ten o'clock in the morning, Captain Vasco Núñez, going ahead of all those he was conducting up a bare high hill, saw from its summit the South Sea . . .

Only two moments in recorded discovery can match this: that when Columbus, peering across the water in the moonlight, saw the low shore of Guanahaní straight before *Santa María's* dipping bow; and that when Magellan, after six months of voyaging, knew that he had truly sailed around the unknown to meet the known. These were greater achievements, but there was a special quality in Balboa's moment because he was alone. Just for an instant, as he stood there solitary between earth and sky, the immensity that stretched away below him was his and his only, vast and inviolate.

And immediately he turned toward the troops, very happy, lifting eyes and hands to Heaven, praising Jesus Christ and His glorious Mother the Virgin, Our Lady; and then he knelt down on both knees and gave much thanks to God for the grace He had shown him in allowing him to discover that sea, and in doing so to accomplish so great a service to God and to the Catholic and Most Serene Kings of Castile . . .

And he commanded that all those who accompanied him should kneel down likewise and give the same thanks to God, and should pray very devoutly that He permit them to discover and see the

great secrets and riches which lay in that sea and coast, to the greater exaltation and growth of the Christian faith and for the conversion of the Indians native of those austral regions, and for the great prosperity and glory of the royal throne of Castile and of its princes present and to come.

Everyone did so very willingly and joyously, and then the captain caused a fine tree to be felled, of which was made a tall cross which was planted and fixed on that same place and high hill from where that austral sea was first seen. And because the first that was seen was a gulf or bay entering into the land, Vasco Núñez commanded that it be called the Gulf of San Miguel, because it was the feast of the archangel four days later. And he also commanded that the names of all the men who were there with him should be written down so that the memory should remain of him and of them, because they were the first Christians who saw that sea; all of whom sang the hymn of the glorious holy doctors of the Church, Ambrose and Augustine, as a devout priest who was there, named Andrés de Vera, sang it with them, saying: "*Te Deum laudamus: Te Dominum confitemur.*"

Perhaps the list of discoverers was only drawn up afterwards, but it is pleasanter to think that it was there, under the still-green Cross on the hilltop, that Andrés de Valdarrábano sat down to write in fair script the names of the sixty-seven "caballeros and hidalgos and worthy men who were present in the discovery of the South Sea with the magnificent and most noble lord captain Vasco Núñez de Balboa, Governor for Their Highnesses in Tierra Firme."

One can picture the battered compañeros, still somewhat moist-eyed, tearing themselves away from the panorama of descending ridges and distant silver water to bend over the escribano, making sure that the memory of them should endure, while the Indians squatted beside their loads a little way off and watched the white men's magic with attentive eyes, wondering what these ceremonies meant for good or ill.

Having thus registered the discovery with both heaven and earth, the sixty-seven immortals marched down to a village near the shore of the Gulf, in the territory of Chape. The inhabitants had fled, but the empty bohíos made an excellent place to camp while waiting for the men left in Quareca to come up. On September twenty-ninth, as