

## APPENDIX B

LETTER FROM RUPERT DONOVAN, M.D.

Kamarang Mouth (B.G.)

August 14th, 1959

'Dear Mr Sander,

'The collecting trip that I outlined for you in my last letter from Paruima has proved a tremendous success, and, if all goes well, the plants should reach you within the next 3 weeks. All was not plain sailing, however, as you will hear.

'Paruima is an Amerindian mission station on the upper Kamarang, set on a large bend in the river from which the forest has been cleared. All around the mission is dense rain forest which is permeated by numerous boggy trails that connect the scattered Amerindian settlements in the area. The trail that I took lay alongside the rapids above the mission, and my two guides made little allowance for the fact that I was not used to walking in thick mud, and it wasn't long before I was severely out of breath. But we hadn't been walking for an hour before we came across a wide variety of orchids on the moss-covered trees that bordered the trail. At first there didn't seem to be anything very exciting until I suddenly became aware of a faint chocolate smell in the air—the more I tried to trace it, the more elusive it became. It was obviously a flower of some sort, and one of the guides, Albert, assured me it was an orchid which he had seen in flower on this part of the trail before. Then, quite suddenly, I smelt it again—a very powerful chocolate-vanilla smell and Albert asked "You smelling, sir?"; soon we found it—a magnificent plant of *Polycycnis vittata* with a spike of chocolate coloured flowers giving off a very powerful perfume. We also discovered some magnificent plants of *Coryanthes maculata*, *Peristeria guttata*, *Scuticaria steelii*, *Batemanian colleyi*, *Epidendrum radicans*, *Mormodes buccinator* and *Gongora atropurpurea*—not to mention a host of miniatures, *Stelis* and *Pleurothallis* species, etc.: Obviously we couldn't carry these plants with us on the journey, so we fixed them to a large tree to wait for our return.

'As I told you in my last letter, my real quest was for *Cattleya lawrenceana* on the Guiana-Venezuelan border. The plant is an inhabitant of the Venezuelan Grand Savannah—a 3,000 ft high plain that extends for hundreds of miles westwards into Venezuela. Paruima is about 1,500 ft so I was rather anxiously waiting the climb.



I had made a serious mistake in carrying my hammock and clothes which, after a very short time seemed to weigh a ton—the Indians don't mind how much they carry, and presume that you carry what you are physically capable of carrying or what you don't trust them to carry—they would never dream that you were trying to do them a favour! However, after many hours of stumbling along a very muddy trail, crossing numerous streams that served to keep one's feet permanently damp, and tripping over endless roots, we reached the base of the escarpment that leads to the savannah. To my horror, the Indians walked that same speed up the hill as they had along the flat, and in next to no time I was retching with exhaustion an awfully long way behind. After much resting and stumbling on we reached the savannah at 4 o'clock.

'Quite suddenly the forest stopped, and there, stretching as far as the eye could see, was a grassy plain, across which blew a delicious cool zephyr bringing a short-lived relief from the dampness of the forest. I say short-lived because at this time of year the savannah is made almost uninhabitable by biting insects. In the day-time there is the caboura fly—about the size of a greenfly—which leaves an intensely itchy bite and which occurs in quite overwhelming numbers, and at night there are mosquitoes which are avoidable with netting and sandflies which are not. All in all, by the time my hopelessly inadequate three-quarter bottle of insect repellent had run out, life became increasingly irritating.

'We were three days reaching the creek where I was assured the orchids could be found. The journey was a memorable one, as it was my first contact with tropical rivers in flood. The first river I crossed with two sticks as supports and one Indian on either side to catch me if I slipped—the second river was about twice as deep and twice as fast flowing, so, my nerves being not quite at their best, I decided to swim, and let the Indians make two journeys for my gear. Unfortunately I didn't realise until it was too late that the banks of the rivers were lined with razor-grass, and my gentle bare-footed skipping along trying to find a launching site was very painfully rewarded, and one of the cuts I got is now septic and has caused my foot to swell up and make walking almost impossible.

'The savannah has a very rich ground orchid flora, but apart from many *Catasetums* and *Sobralias* I couldn't recognise any other genera. Nevertheless, I have collected a representative selection for you.



'The nights proved bitterly cold, and my entire wardrobe was often insufficient to keep out the chilling dampness of the night air. How the Indians ever managed to sleep with their thin, tattered clothes is still a mystery to me. Most nights, the three of us would all be squatting round the fire by about 4 o'clock in the morning, and it was in this homely atmosphere that I began to learn something of the Indian way of life and their opinions of the various Europeans and Guianese who visit them. There is no doubt that they regard all other peoples as physically weak—apart from a few outstanding exceptions such as the D.O. of the area—and that on the whole they are suspicious of black people. They are very trusting, however, and never ask for any advance payment if you hire them for a trip, although they have an ingenious trick of bringing all their friends along with them and expecting you to pay them as well. One outstanding virtue of the Indians is their simplicity—they can't hide their feelings and they usually say exactly what they think (possibly because their pidgin English doesn't give them much scope for nuance) which makes for very cordial relations as long as you all have the same end in view. I flattered myself that I was a great hit, until I discovered the real reason for their visit to the savannah in such awful weather—it was fish!

'The day before we reached "the creek", the Indians spent the morning weaving cane baskets for the orchids and also for the fish that they had come to collect. Game is very rare around the mission owing to the density of Indian population, and the river Kamarang is very poorly supplied with fish. I was rather surprised by the large size of their fish baskets and wondered whether they weren't being a little optimistic with such a short time and so little food between us all. But primitive fish like primitive people are not so wily as their educated brothers and a little worm on the end of a very obvious bent pin was attacked with remarkable vigour. I have never seen so many fish in such a small stream (about 3 yds. across) and there wasn't one fish left after the Indians had been at it for an hour or so—their haul was colossal, and it wasn't until the fish were all being smoked that the Indians deigned to look for some orchids for me.

'From a long way off, the creek appeared as a green line across the dull monotony of the savannah, and when we got there I found that the trees on either side were much smaller and drier than those of the rain forest and extended for some twenty or so yards on each side of the stream. After searching for an hour or so, both the Indians



came back with the rather astounding announcement: "No orchid", and looked at me as though to say:

"It's getting late, don't you think we ought to go home?" to which I replied with one which said:

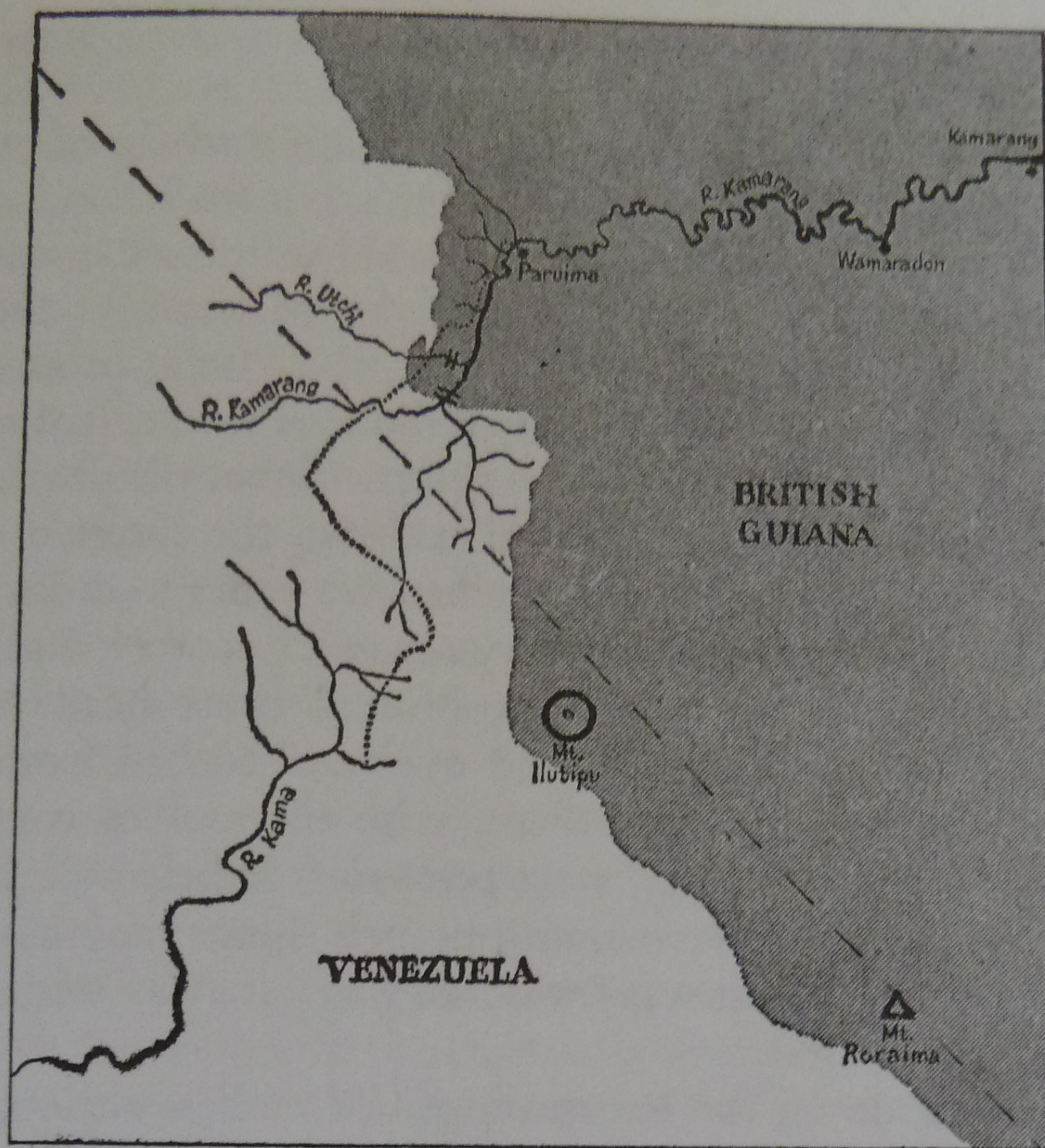
"We're staying here all night if necessary until you find some orchids" and without further ado we all set off for another try.

It was just after I had let off the most fabulous bout of bad language to express my feelings to the savannah for the flies, bogs, razor grass, etc., that I saw a miserable black orchid about 20 ft up the branch of an old tree. I yelled for the two Indians and after much scrambling and poking we got the plant down and imagine my delight when, after scraping of the fungus that was strangling it, I uncovered a very sick but genuine specimen of *Cattleya lawrenciana*. I can't tell you how exhilarating that moment was, when after months of planning and organising I had at last found the plant which had been the goal of the trip—suddenly the savannah seemed a wonderful, exciting place, full of fantastic orchids. Within an hour we collected fifty magnificent plants of *lawrenciana*, they seemed to be everywhere. But that wasn't all—we found *Epidendrum aromaticum*, which has the most exquisite perfume of all the orchids we found—and, most exciting of all, on an isolated tree we found an enormous bunch of *Coryanthes* in flower, and the flowers were pure white! The whole plant was a pale yellow, instead of the normal green, and there wasn't a speck of colour on the flowers or spike. Naturally I took a number of colour photos to convince you of this incredible find; although I searched the whole creek, I never found another plant of *Coryanthes*—so this could well be an isolated variant. For two days we collected vigorously, and discovered *Epidendrum crassilabium*, *Trichopilia fragrans*, *Rodriguezia secunda*, *Scaphyloglottis prolifera*, *Trigonidium obtusum*, *Hexadesmia sessilis* and numerous others which I could not recognise.

Keeping the plants proved very difficult, as it rained every night, and many of the plants rotted, but by building a special stage to put them on, we managed to keep the majority in excellent condition, waiting until the last possible moment before cutting off the back bulbs and packing up the plants for the long trek home to Paruima. By this time we were very short of food, and all our clothes were wet through, but what with the fish and the orchids we were all three very satisfied with the trip.

The journey back was a nightmare. Nature was trying her hardest





to make life impossible—the flies were everywhere, getting into eyes and nose, biting mercilessly on every square inch of exposed skin. Of course, it had to be Saturday sometime or other, and it happened on the way back. Paruima mission is a Seventh Day Adventist one, and on Saturday nobody does any work, so we spent a day with an Amerindian family in what must be the most fly-ridden spot on the whole savannah sporting the fiercest sandflies I have ever encountered. Of course the two Indians spent the night in one of the houses while Joe Soap shared an exposed lean-to with the cattle. When I couldn't stand the cold any more, I laboriously set to work trying to light a fire—an art at which the Indians are remarkably adept, but which finds me at my most clumsy—nevertheless after many minutes and many matches I at last got a spurt of flame going and put some water on to boil . . . well, perhaps it was some sort of punishment for my bad language that just when the water was on the boil and everything was ready to make some tea, one of the logs supporting the billycan rolled over and all the water spilt into the



fire neatly putting it out and robbing me of a desperately needed cup of tea!

Soon we were on our way again, and with the help of one of the villagers got across the first river by canoe, but the second river was far too high to cross and we had to stop and wait for the water to go down, which it fortunately did over night. Meanwhile, the Indians took me to see the falls where this river, the Utchi, tumbles 720 ft into a steaming chasm in the heart of the rain forest. It was a magnificent sight as the swollen river hurled itself over the precipice with a deafening roar that echoed for miles down the forested valley. It was lucky that I didn't join it, for when we came to cross the river the current was terrific and half-way across I got stuck and couldn't move. While trying to change position, I came head on to the current and was relentlessly pushed over and bashed from rock to rock down the rapids. The Indians, who themselves were having the utmost difficulty crossing, were powerless to help and if it hadn't been for a well-placed overhanging branch things may have turned out very differently—as it was I was lucky to get away with a bruised knee and strained ankle.

The journey down the Paruima seemed endless although it was all downhill. The paths were even wetter than before and we slipped everywhere, but at least our previous orchid collection had survived and I made arrangements to have them collected later that evening. By the time I got back I could hardly walk, and it was as much as I could do to stagger up to the mission and buy something to eat, because my food had run out 2 days ago and I'd been living on baby milk flavoured with tea!

Next day I and the orchids spent 16 hours sitting in a very small dug-out canoe while the two Amerindians paddled us back to Kamarang where I hoped to catch a mid-monthly flight if there was one. It says a lot for the Amerindians that they can get things organised very quickly if you implore them hard enough, and that they will paddle a canoe for 16 hours virtually non-stop for the princely sum of 4 shillings. We left as soon as it was light with the river still covered by a diaphinous mist that made us shiver in its chill dampness. The canoe must have been the smallest in the village—there was a majestic 3 in. of freeboard and not an inch to stretch or alter position. Nature was at her most boring, as though, like the Indians, she too thought it was a stupid thing to hurry and wanted to try and show me the folly of my ways; not a bird, not a butterfly,



nothing except the endless brown river getting imperceptibly wider as the day went on. The paddlers seemed to go slower and slower, the heat was unbearable as was the wretched position to which I had resigned my body for the journey. Dusk brought a strange relief, and as the shadows lengthened and the frogs began to croak, the river became alive with peculiar sounds; every little stream sounded like a waterfall, strange night birds wailed across the eerie blackness, shrieking parakeets shattered the calm, and gradually the air became colder. The front paddler turned and asked me for a torch as he was trying to find the entrance to a fast-flowing stream that cut off one of the bends in the river. The beam of the torch was like a formless disc on the forest wall, too pale to reveal any colour and too small to give anything a recognisable shape.

‘Then, suddenly, we were in the rapids, rushing frantically along; the Indians having lost control of the canoe were yelling and screaming at each other, desperately trying to dodge the huge rocks round which the canoe was whisked by the racing water. Straight ahead the torch beam picked out a huge tree that had fallen across river and in an instant the canoe was thrown sideways against it and lurched over to one side. As the water poured in, we forced the canoe away from the tree and immediately were hurled back into the main-stream and out into the inky river once more. We had passed through the short cut in 15 seconds.

‘So much for the quest for *Cattleya lawrenceana*—fifty plants in good shape waiting for the next plane to take them to Georgetown and then to you, plus, of course a great variety of other plants which I know you will be interested in having. My next collecting trip is to the Rupununi savannah to get you *Cattleya superba* which you requested, and after that a trip to the coastal rivers to get you *Oncidium lanceanum*, more *Coryanthes*, more *Scuticaria*, etc.:

‘I’ll be writing in a fortnight or so when I’ve finished the next trip—till then, all the best.

Yours,

Rupert.’