

INDONESIAN ADVENTURE



Karl Eskelund

AUTHOR OF *HEAD-HUNTING IN ECUADOR*

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By Karl Eskelund

HEAD-HUNTING IN ECUADOR

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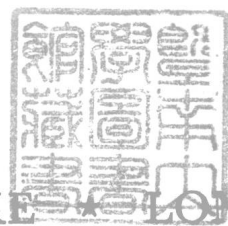
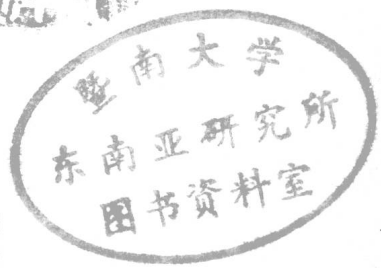
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PART I

Sumatra

One

My daughter Mei-mei has one deplorable weakness; she is almost as talkative as her father. When she wants to start a conversation she often asks: 'What do you like best of all?'

'You to keep your mouth shut,' I usually answer. Then she maintains a hurt silence for as long as she can bear it. A few seconds later she pops the question again: 'Tell me, Daddy, what *do* you like best of all?'

When I was a boy it was cider and Napoleon cakes. Later on it became travelling. I know of nothing better than standing at the prow of a ship and watching an unknown coastline take shape. The bookworm must feel the same way when he opens a masterpiece he hasn't read before, or the ladies' man when he meets a beautiful girl.

So I ought to have been perfectly happy that morning when we sailed down through the Malacca Straits on board the *Kirsten Maersk*. For once, Mei-mei had given her blessing to the journey—she had even begged us not to return too soon. 'Please don't come home next summer' was one of her last requests. If we didn't, we had promised her that she could fly to the Far East and spend her summer vacation with us.

The country we were to visit had haunted my imagination ever since I became interested in the world beyond Denmark. Once it was called the Dutch East Indies. That was where the spices came from, the Java coffee, the flame-shaped daggers.

'The Emerald Necklace of the Pacific' the poets called it. For three hundred years it was the exclusive treasure chest of Holland, and now it had suddenly become an independent country—Indonesia, the youngest country in the world.

We are all touched when we see a child take its first, wobbly steps. To watch a nation doing it is even more fascinating, for the least false step can mean so much more than a bump on the forehead.

However, I prefer the role of a neutral observer. If my own forehead were exposed to the knocks, my curiosity wouldn't be quite so strong. And it sounded as if you risked your life merely by stepping ashore on that former Dutch colony. The *Kirsten Maersk* had called there several times before, so the crew knew all about it. When they heard that we were going there, they almost crossed themselves. Indonesia! 'We don't envy you,' they said.

But why? What was wrong with Indonesia? They all began explaining at the same time. The third mate, a big, chesty fellow, drowned out the others.

'Listen to what happened to me on Sumatra, at Belawan—the same place you and your wife are getting off', he began. 'This here little monkey had sneaked into my cabin and pinched three cartons of cigarettes—I caught him with them under his skirts. We handcuffed him and sent for a policeman, but the one who came didn't know a word of English, so they began jabbering in their own lingo. The next thing was, the policeman demanded the key to the handcuffs, took them off the other fellow—and put them on me! Yes—I was dragged to the station and accused of trying to force an innocent Indonesian to sell cigarettes for me on the black market! Hours later I was let off with a warning.'

That was nothing compared to his experiences, said one of the sailors. A couple of trips ago he had gone ashore, also at Belawan. It didn't take him long to find a brothel. He paid in advance, and was just about to get his money's worth when he was set upon by a whole gang of Indonesians.

'I had to make a run for it with my clothes under my arm,'

he concluded. 'They pursued me all the way down to the ship. They aren't human beings, I tell you—it's a completely uncivilized country.'

They told us many more stories about corruption, robbery and murder. There was no law and order in the country, any more, they said. If we were wise, we would skip Indonesia and come along with them to Japan.

I pushed out my chest and told myself that I was descended from Vikings. The blood must have thinned with time, though, for I was far from happy when we saw the mountains of Sumatra appear on the horizon. Slowly, the shining dots at the foot of the hills turned into corrugated iron roofs on big warehouses. From the wharf, brown people glared up at us as if we were enemies.

We soon walked down the gangplank, each carrying a suitcase. Two soldiers in outsize khaki uniforms came towards us. Each had a finger on the trigger of a Sten gun. I began to perspire. I hate Sten guns; a mere hiccup can set them off.

We were led into a big shed where the Customs had their headquarters. It was not the most painstaking examination we had ever experienced. That was in China during the war and lasted for six hours. But this was the second worst.

The shadows were lengthening when they finally let us go. There are no hotels in Belawan, so we took a car to Medan, the largest city on Sumatra, lying nearly thirty miles inland. I collapsed on the seat, completely exhausted, but jumped up a few minutes later. The driver had jammed on the brake, and outside stood a man who was pointing a Sten gun at us. Their last warning on the ship—'You'll be dead before sundown'—flashed through my mind, but it was only a guard who wanted to search our luggage. I explained that this had already been done.

'Yes,' he replied in a mixture of Dutch and English, 'but only by the Customs.' He was from the Army; that was a different department.

Later he let us proceed—and half a mile further on we became acquainted with yet another Sten gun. Its owner



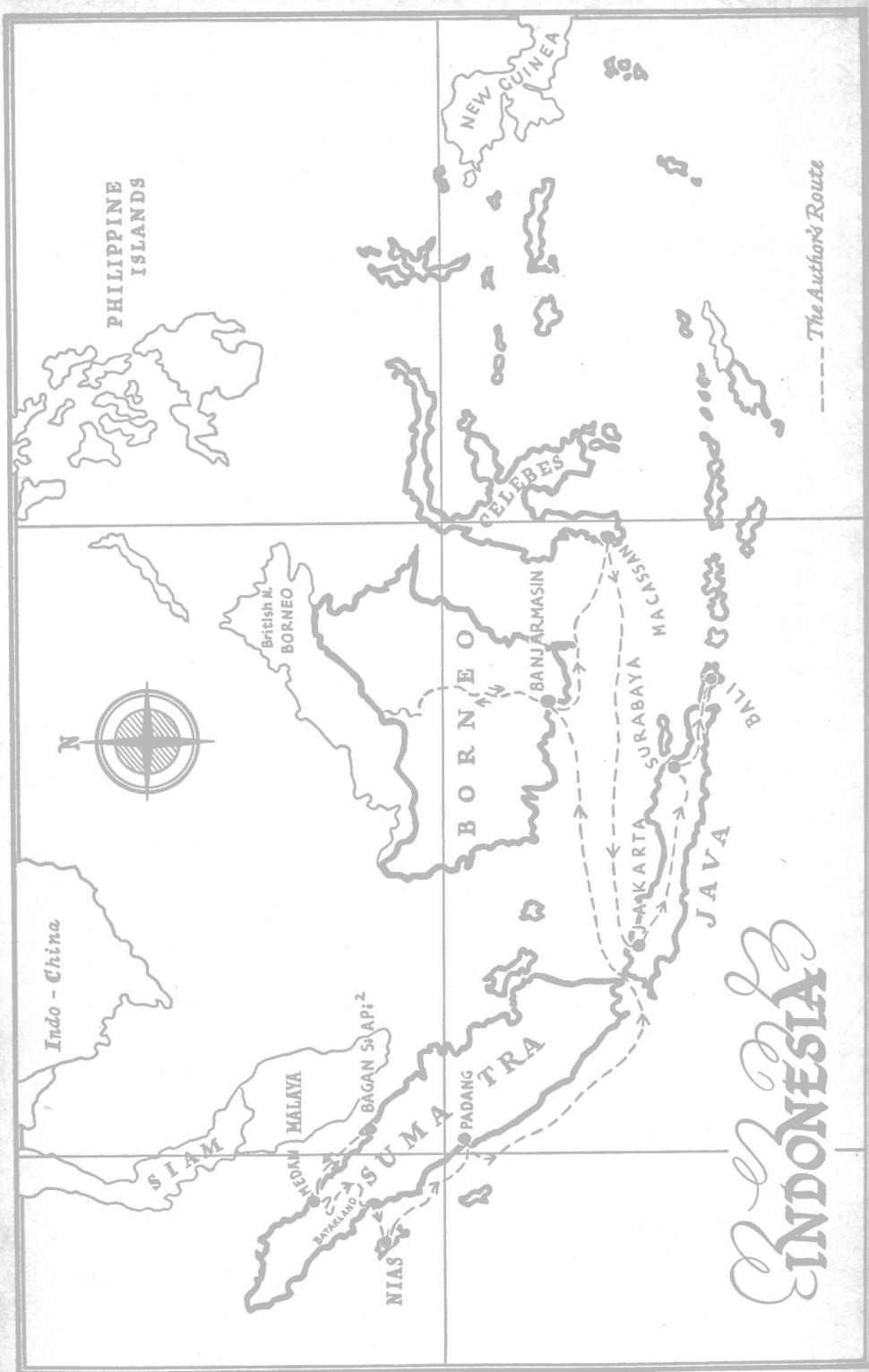
knew very well that both the Customs and the Army had been through our luggage, but that didn't help. He was from the police.

The road ran through a tunnel formed by a forest of trees which stood in long, neat rows. Each trunk was encircled by a wound which led down to a little cup. These wounds yield a whitish milk, rubber, the greatest source of wealth on Sumatra.

Every once in a while the green monotony was broken by bright colours: sarongs wrapped around slender natives. They moved with the light, graceful steps that one sees only in Asia. The women carried clay pots or large bundles on their heads and swung their hips enticingly. They were very dark and looked almost like Hindus, but there was a difference. Here were none of the wandering skeletons one sees everywhere in India.

When it was almost dark we reached a city which made us ask: what on earth is this doing here in Indonesia? Medan has nearly half a million inhabitants, and looks as if the Dutch and the Chinese had divided it between them. It was they who created it. A little more than half a century ago there was nothing here but jungle. Then came the European rubber-hunters, followed by yellow coolies from Canton and Foochow, and together they changed the jungle into a gigantic park. Then their ways parted—the Europeans became plantation-dwellers, the Chinese used their savings to open small shops which later became rich business establishments.

Half of Medan was built for the whites and came to look like a Dutch suburb. We drove along a broad boulevard, past bungalows surrounded by well-kept gardens. Bicycles and three-wheeled rickshaws were practically the only vehicles. Bare feet pushed at the pedals; it wasn't always so easy, for most of the drivers wore narrow sarongs. The men had on black Moham-medan caps, and sideways on the baggage rack sat the wife or girl-friend, sticking out her legs to keep her balance. Even the man who lit the street lamps was on wheels; he came cycling with a long pole with which, in passing, he managed to light the gas flames.



PHILIPPINE
ISLANDS

NEW GUINEA

CELEBES

British N.
BORNEO

BORNEO

BANJARMASIN

MACASSAR

SURABAYA

JAKARTA

JAVA

BALI

MALAYA

BAGAN SIAPUR

SIAM

MEKONG

BAHMAN

NIAS

SUMATRA

PADANG

Indo - China

--- The Author's Route

INDONESIA

The road turned and suddenly became a narrow street. Bright lights replaced the semi-darkness. The houses had moved closer together and now formed an unbroken row. All the noise of Chinatown broke loose. Our car could only crawl through the milling throng. Most of the people wore the long, wide trousers of the Cantonese. The Chinese make up close to a third of the population of Medan. The thought made my mouth water. Where there are Chinese, there is also Chinese food.

The car turned down a quiet villa road and stopped in front of some low red buildings. This was the Hotel de Boer, once the pride of the Dutch on Sumatra. There was still a little of the old splendour left. A barefooted servant in a white uniform led us through a long corridor and opened a door for us. We stopped at the threshold, taken aback. The sitting-room alone was the size of a two-room apartment, the bedroom even bigger. There was also a dressing-room and a private bath. In a corner of the bedroom was a separate little house, its walls made of wire-netting to keep out mosquitoes. On each of the two beds inside lay a Dutch wife—a thick, bolster-shaped cushion, almost a yard long. Many people in Indonesia, especially the Europeans, sleep with their arms and legs around such a pillow, which absorbs the perspiration and protects them from the dangerous chill of dawn. The cushion got its nickname because it is white, plump and immobile.

The question was: could we afford all this? Behind the door we found a list of rates. For room and board, the charge was a guinea a day for the two of us if we figured at the black market rate of exchange, which everyone did except the officials.

'Skaal!' we said to each other a little later as we sat in the lobby, raising big glasses of foaming beer. There was a lot to celebrate. Was it really only this morning that we had left the ship, trembling? Now we laughed at the thought of our nervousness. Indonesia seemed to be quite a nice country after all—and cheap.

We looked at the other guests. Most of them were big, robust people, red in the face. Without batting an eye, they