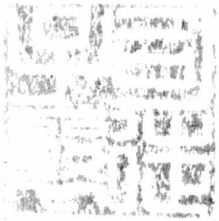
# BLACK BORNEO



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# ILLUSTRATIONS

# CHAPTER I

## BLACK BORNEO

THE only difference between an explorer and a tramp is an excuse. The tramp quite frankly tramps around; the explorer tries to justify it. Time was when all he had to do was go out and sit around some bar in Singapore and come back with some new tall ones. That wasn't bad. But now he has to show results. He has to drag in bones, hides, artifacts, ore samples, in fact turn himself into a geographical junk man. Worse, he is supposed to take scientific notes, draw maps, jot down stellar observations and otherwise conduct himself according to some approved bookkeeping system. And that, no matter how you look at it, is work.

I nearly had to give it up. The bones I found in China were too heavy to budge. I cracked up trying to fly a load of stinking lion hides out of Africa, though they smelled strong enough to take off under their own power. In Australia the choicest relics I found were a thousand miles from a water hole. It became so bad that I spent ten years behind a camera in Hollywood trying to figure an easy way out. Then quite by accident I learned you did not have to drag in a lot of junk if you just brought back the pictures. One ounce of film would replace a ton of bones. You still had to carry the camera, but at least you could always hire a boy for the tougher stretches. So I packed the cameras and started out.

At that stage I was an expedition in search of a backer. Then came one of the rarest discoveries in the history of modern exploration: I found a backer in search of an expedition, walking the streets alive and unprotected, just as if there weren't a thousand sharpshooting explorers dying to bring her back alive. She was Miss Leona Jay, who, according to her advertisement in a New York paper, was "tired of her social existence." She was willing, she stated, "to finance an expedition anywhere."

Finance! Anywhere! I had the answer to both. Dutch Borneo and Dutch New Guinea.

I wired, briefly mentioning something about filming head-hunters, but it was enough. We went to Borneo, stopping in Java on the way just long enough to get married.

In a way, that complicated matters. An explorer is supposed to spend his backer's money. If he doesn't, he is apt to lose standing. But when the backer becomes your wife it is obvious that some modifications are in order, and abruptly. Painful though it was, I changed my rosy clouds to black and white, and put the expedition on a self-supporting basis.

The new Mrs. Miller helped by promptly going down with malaria on the crossing from Semarang, Java, to Bandjermasin, Borneo. Not just a touch, but the real thing. Three months under close medical attention, the army doctor at Bandjermasin ordered, and that was the equivalent of a prison sentence from which there was no appeal. Three months on quinine, until her ears were filled with whistling dynamos and quarrelling canary birds; three months within range of an easy chair or a soft bed; no trekking through swamps or jungle while the fever stood ready to burst into flame the instant the doctor turned his back. And three months were all we had before the season changed. Rain and more rain, until the rivers became cataracts, the trails a quagmire. And the mosquitoes——!

In the end the doctor solved the problem by ordering me to get out of town and leave his patient alone.

"Run up and take your pictures," he urged rather bluntly.

"At least run," wheezed my bride.

What I was supposed to do was to make a trek into the heart of Borneo, up the Mahakam River, through Apo-Kajan territory and down the Boesang River to the coast again. Fabulous country, home of a great civilization dead for hundreds of years. In it were head-hunters, weird animals, weirder birds and things about which the natives only hinted. A land of *adat*, of superstition and decay. An uncharted wilderness in which man and nature recognized neither logic nor reasonableness. It was the Apo-Kajan.

Well, I could go up and look it over.

## CHAPTER II

### MUD—MORE MUD

OMENS and *adats* control everything in Dutch Borneo but the tides and the steamship captains. Sometimes it is hard to tell about the tides. The south-eastern coast between Bandjermasin and Samarinda is so low and swampy that the high-water and low-mud lines are lost in the elastic ooze, but as far as our skipper was concerned he didn't care. He would put his boat to the dock if he had to float in on the humidity, a not entirely improbable feat.

Since Captain Jan van Dyk was impervious to omens, we made the coastwise trip from Bandjermasin to Samarinda on schedule, and that is the only time I ever arrived anywhere in Borneo on time. Having reached the mud-hole, I could find no reason why promptness in this case carried any special virtue. There was nothing there, and the very few people were doing nothing about it. The few soldiers the steamer carried to serve as replacements at the port were in no hurry to go ashore. They would see enough of it later on. The soldiers being relieved to return to Java were in no hurry to come aboard. It was hotter on deck than in the garrison, and until the ship was ready to put out to sea they preferred to stay where they were. No hurry about the mail either. It was two months old already. Another couple of hours or days would not interfere with its staleness one way or another.

I began rounding up my five-man crew hired in Java to serve as the nucleus of my expedition. My camera assistant, Wang Lo, half crook, half-breed Malay-Chinese, I found playing *tjempelik* with the Chinese members of the deck crew. If there is any way to cheat at *tjempelik* Wang Lo was doing it. He was surrounded by the earthly possessions of all the players, and seemed greatly relieved that I called him away when I did. A certain amount of suspicion in the air was proving hostile to his peace of mind.

The second member was Achmed, my Malayan boy, a veteran campaigner with the Dutch Colonial Army. I found him campaigning away in a deck hammock, automatically fanning away the flies from his face with a clocklike rhythm that in no way impaired his sleep. He could do things like that. Nothing bothered him. Boilers blowing up, cannibals heaving rock hammers, my dinners burning up—it was all the same to Achmed. Easy come, easy go—so what and allee same go to hell. I gave him a nudge and he slithered off without waking up. The other three Malayan boys were Admo, Wirio and Kitjil, who, aside from their separate names, might have been stand-ins or doubles or triplets for each other. They could fight like fiends, they were indefatigable on the march, they worked like dogs, and when standing watch they never slept. But when it came to personality they were three coffee beans. Stout fellows, though. Just poor company. Even as I turned to look for them I saw them trailing after Achmed, turning up their toes as their bare feet scorched on the hot deck.

That was my crew. Of course for travel in the interior I would have paddlers and carriers recruited from the Dyak villages, but the local boys would undergo a hundred per cent. change in personnel every few miles. The Dyaks have a quaint habit of picking off strangers found wandering around in the jungle, and no native was going to get far enough from home to qualify as a stranger. Social intercourse was limited to the village upstream and the village downstream. Thus residents of Village 1 might be friendly with those in Village 2, and Village 2 could be on familiar terms with Village 3, but, in spite of mutual friends in Village 2, warriors of 1 and 3 would always have a pot boiling for each other. It would be the job of my five aides to break in each successive crew—and stay out of pots.

By some freak chance, the river packet that was to take me upstream was waiting for the K.P.M. steamer when we pulled in. Tied right up to the dock. Not only that, but it was in working order, ready to leave the instant, or within three or four hours of the instant, that the transfer of cargo destined

for the up-river posts was completed. It was a stroke of luck that had me mystified until I learned that the packet had missed the previous steamer by so much that the skipper decided to wait for us and make up time by hauling two cargoes at once. It might strain his boat a little, but, after all, the thing had to sink some time. To this thoroughly sound logic I was forced to agree, and since the skipper had a miniature ice plant on board for the sole purpose of refreshing his gin splits, I was soon far from uncomfortable. That our abrupt departure denied me the pleasure of sight-seeing in Samarinda only added to my peace of mind. I could smell it.

The Mahakam River was at low tide. Three miles wide at high water, it was now a criss-cross of narrow channels and vast mud flats. Each mud flat steamed and reeked under the fierce sun, and each seemed to have a special flavour. Yet over and above the effluvium of the mud rode the mysterious scent of the Orient, the mystery consisting in so little smelling so bad. No, I had no urge to go sight-seeing in Samarinda.

I sat at the rail of the packet and looked on the far side where the steamer was lazily settling in the low water, looking as though it had just had a sunstroke and was glad of it. Such cargo as had to be unloaded was just hoisted to the deck and allowed to slide over the side. There a crew of Dyaks in a shallow-draught canoe tied right up to the ship and let the stuff pour in until the canoe was full. I saw a case containing a thousand-dollar camera and about five hundred dollars' worth of lenses come out of the hold, bang against the sluice rail and finally topple over the side just beyond the edge of the receiving canoe. A dozen men leaned over the gunwale, the canoe teetered in suicidal frenzy, one Dyak fell overboard, but the camera was safe. I took my gin split around to the other side of the deck. If I had to witness anything more nerve-racking than that, I would be a wreck before I started.

From this side of the deck I had a look at the town. It was beautiful and poisonous. A metropolitan Mickey Finn. You could see all the glorious colours of the tropical flowers, you could feel the low, heavy viscosity of its civic atmosphere, and you could smell the smothering influence of the jungle on

sanitation. You could not hear much. Sound denotes a certain amount of activity, and of action the only sign was around the boats and that was far from high speed. Only the backs of the red shingled houses were presented to the river, and they had such a pronounced overhang one could only wonder uneasily as to the exact purpose of this architectural flourish.

In due course of time the tide returned, getting stuck in the mud occasionally on the way in. The steamer struggled back to an even keel, the mud scows made a few more hurried trips, the packet blew its whistle, and everything was ready for our departure. Sure enough, pretty soon the skipper tossed off the last of his drink and wandered into the wheelhouse sucking a cube of ice. That was the signal for the works to start. After a while a turmoil of chocolate-coloured foam boiled out from under the stern. By staring solely at the wake, one could build up a pretty fair illusion of speed, and it was only upon studying the shore that I discovered we were still stuck in the mud. This, however, was standard procedure. Pretty soon the churning screw had washed enough mud astern to scoop out a basin big enough to float the packet, and once this was accomplished it was a simple matter, requiring little more than a couple of hours, to buck our way into deep water.

For the accommodation of Dyak traders who wished to return to their upstream villages, the packet had a couple of tow ropes over the stern rail, and at the end of each bobbed a canoe full of unsmiling natives. Some of them had waited three weeks for the ride. They would not have missed it for the world—half the fun of trading at Samarinda was the free ride back—but to reveal any evidence of pleasure was against their nature. They just sat there like so many lumps and let the packet do the work. There was a certain amount of mind-over-matter logic in their passive acceptance of the ride. As explained to me by Taman Bok, one of the canoe leaders, it was their legs and arms which enjoyed the ride since they did not have to work, and arms and legs never betrayed pleasure in anything.

On board with me were a captain and lieutenant of the Dutch Colonial Army returning to their post at Long Iram with a band of new recruits. The officers were white, the recruits Javanese. Both officers were veterans of the Borneo interior, Captain Mulder in particular having spent several years on the upper Mahakam. Authorities on the country were what they should have been, and authorities they were, but not on the country. They could tell me to within a day how long it took to train a Javanese to shoulder arms, and they could tell me to within a vitamin or two how much it took to feed fifty men on the march, but they didn't care what country they went through while marching on vitamins. That I, the son of an army man, should ask questions like that hurt their feelings. I should know they were soldiers, not psychologists or crack-pot explorers. Soldiers in the full and only sense of the word. If they were assigned to stamp out head-hunting, they stamped out head-hunters. What matter if they were Kenja Dyaks, Poenan Dyaks or Bahau Dyaks? They hunted heads, didn't they? They had to be stamped out, didn't they? Then what difference did it make what else they were? About the country—was it rough, wet, full of underbrush or what was it like? There again I was wrong in asking questions not becoming an officer to answer. If the order was to go to a certain village, they went there. If the country was rough or wet, or full of underbrush, why, that made the trip a little harder, but hardship meant nothing to a soldier. If it was hard going, and they so reported, it would look as if they were complaining. If it was easy going, and they reported it, it was very likely they would never be given so soft a snap again. So why report that?

This attitude is typical of the tropical military man. My own father, who devoted his life to help build the Dutch East Indies, was as guilty of it as any. Sent on a mapping expedition in Dutch New Guinea one time, he was gone six months, returning at last with bales of maps. While they knew exactly what ground was covered, they had no idea in the world of what people lived there since my father's detail had scared all the savages out of the territory. Such an

attitude has its merits, but it has its limitations too. Just what they were I was to find out all too soon. Especially in regard to head-hunting. Of course, as Captain Mulder had said, he stamped out head-hunting wherever he found it, but since he could find it only where he happened to be, and since he couldn't be everywhere in a country five times the size of England, there was apt to be quite a bit of the practice flourishing around the very substantial edges.

Seeing that I wasn't going to get any information that might help me on my trip, I decided the only thing I could do was to see that they did not get anything out of me that would help them on theirs. They were demons at whist. I was a novice and due for a trimming. It was not long in coming. In the shade of the wheelhouse they took all my available change and were starting in on my camping equipment. That was when I went into a huddle with Wang Lo. He had some dice made of solid ivory, he said. I tried them out with highly satisfactory results, so much so that I finally came to the conclusion that if those dice were solid ivory they were made from the crookedest elephant ever shot in Burma. I never dared use them for profit. A few passes in the evening to recoup my losses in whist during the afternoon was about all I cared to strain my luck, or my competitor's gullibility. However, it was enough that I maintained my *status quo.*

On the schedule, it was three days between Samarinda and Long Iram, which meant that at some time or other a skipper, probably running ahead of a couple of squadrons of head-hunters, had made it in three days. As far as we were concerned, about the end of the fourth day we were still forty miles above Samarinda while a couple of Chinese traders on board manipulated their abacus accounting systems until they registered a profit. There were no cargoes to be taken aboard; they would be picked up on the return trip. But in the meantime the Chinese wanted to be sure they would not be cheated, in case there was a cargo waiting for them. Their Oriental concentration on profit reminded me that I wasn't making any. Sitting about on deck losing money on

whist and picking it up again on craps was all very well for an explorer financed by an armchair adventurer or a scientific foundation, but it wasn't the right attitude for a man married to his backer. My conscience woke up and pretty soon I was downright uncomfortable, even with a gin split in my hand. The upshot of it was that I decided to begin my exploring before I got there.

The river, for instance, flowed between banks that had trees on them. No one had ever noticed the trees. The trees had birds and monkeys in them. No one had paid much attention to that before. The monkeys had fleas on them, but only the monkeys had ever noticed that. I got out my telephoto lens and went to work.

Life on the river became something to be seen and not endured. A tropical river, winding and twisting from a bed of gold and diamonds somewhere up in the unknown and mysterious interior down to a vast mud flat at Samarinda. I ought to be able to do something with that. Documentary stuff. From mud to riches and back again. With this as my theme I started wasting film in earnest.

I am not one to worry much about themes. My idea for years has been to get the picture, and if it doesn't have a theme of its own, strong enough to stand on its own two legs, then throw the thing away. However, in this case I felt Borneo needed some extra help in the way of explanatory notes. Of all the islands in the Dutch East Indies, poor old Borneo is the most misunderstood. Most of what people have heard about the island can be attributed to circuses, side shows and freak exhibits, where the wild man of Borneo, the Missing Link and other profitable forms of showmanship can be exploited without danger of a libel suit.

The truth of the matter is that Borneo is not a new country emerging from the age of dinosaurs, but an old civilization returning to the Stone Age. Everyone knows of the crumbling temples of Burma, of the ancient temples of the Incas and the Mayas, of the Pyramids of Egypt, but few have ever heard of the Borneo temples that were already falling apart when the others were being built. Yet I have

seen them. Many museums are proud of their samples of Borneo art. Borneo's art died thousands of years ago. What exists today is but a copy of an awesome artistry, the creative genius of which has been dead these many centuries. My observations lead me to believe that at copying patterns handed down from generation to generation, Dyaks are extremely clever, but at originating anything they are utterly lacking in creative ability. They are in deadly fear of novelty, and in this fear lies the key to the riddle of Borneo. Travelling along the smooth reaches of the lower Mahakam River, I could feel it. Farther up it became an oppressive weight, and in the Apo-Kajan it was almost thick enough to be seen. But here and now I was doing my work from a deck chair.

In all the history of exploration—and a grim, bloody history it is, explorers say—nothing has been found to rival a good, canvas-backed deck chair on a river packet as a vantage point from which to make discoveries. A dog team might have its points. I don't want to know. A camel caravan, they tell me, is mighty romantic, but you never can tell when one of the beasts will turn and snap off your arm. Auto caravans are rough, especially when all have to get out and push, which is most of the time. It's a certainty that you can't enjoy a good scotch-and-soda galloping through country on horseback, and if you're flying over strange territory you have to stay sober. Now take the deck chair. You sit there, preferably in the shade, with a palm fan in one hand, something cooling in the other. Pretty soon you round a point, and there is something new to look at. You take a good look, maybe shoot a few feet of film, and settle back for another couple of hours till the next bend is rounded. Suppose you see something out of the ordinary. If you are in your canoe you feel bound to investigate, even though it means crawling through the mud, getting stuck in the dense river brush, tangling with snakes and otherwise reducing yourself to a miserable state. But on a packet you settle down comfortably and go right on. Your conscience doesn't bother you. You know you can't stop the boat even if you want to. Which you don't.