

THE DIAMOND OF JERU

The Penan people of Borneo say that the forest and the earth will provide for you if only you will let them. I hadn't exactly found that to be true, but what did I know? I was an American, stopping briefly in their land and ignorant of their ways.

I was down to my last few coins when John and Helen Lacklan arrived in Marudi. I'd come down from Saigon to make my fortune but luck had not been with me. For over a year I'd been living like a beach comer who had accidentally found his way inland. There was a longing in me to make my way back home but no money to do it with. I told myself it was better to stay where I was and wait for an opportunity. Around Sarawak, in those days, a white man could go a long way just on confidence and the colour of his skin.

My luck paid off in this way: a friend in the government office offered to send me some tourists, Mr. and Mrs. John Lacklan. He had set me up, time and again, with minor engineering and construction jobs and was responsible for my having been able to keep body and soul together over the last few months. The Lacklans were an American couple, in from Singapore. They were recently married and, most importantly, they were looking for a diamond.

Now they find diamonds around Bandak, around Kusan, and near Matapura, to name only a few places. They also find some rare colors in the Sarawak River. Most so-called "fancy" stones are found in

Borneo, for diamonds come in a variety of colors, including black. But after looking over the possibilities they had come up the Baram River to Marudi or Claudtown, as some called it, and Vandover was going to send them to me.

It was late in the day and the wind picked up slightly, coming in over the river to where we sat on his porch near the old fort. "I told him about you," Vandover poured cold beer into my glass. "He wants to go up the Baram. You want enough money to get you home and . . ." he eyed me mischievously. "I suspect that you wouldn't mind having one more go at the river yourself. All the better if Mr. Lacklan is paying."

We toasted my good fortune and I let the beer slide back down my throat. Cold beer had been a rare and precious luxury in my world for too long. If everything worked out I would soon be done with Borneo and on my way back . . . back to the land of cold beer.

It was dark by the time I got home. I navigated my way across the room to the bed. Without lighting a lamp I undressed and lay back under the mosquito netting. Above my head fireflies cruised lazy circles against the ceiling, flickering, on . . . off . . . on . . .

Money to go home. A buck or two to help get my feet back under me at the worst. At the best . . . ?

I too had come to Borneo hunting diamonds. If you were lucky you washed them out of a river just like panning for gold. I had found a fortune of them, in a pool just below a dried up waterfall. I had spent a month in the bush digging them from the river, but ultimately, the river had taken them back.

Eager to return with my treasure and careless I'd put my canoe into a rapid at the wrong angle and almost lost my life. As it was I lost the boat, the diamonds, and most of my kit. A family of Iban pulled me from the water and took care of me until I was on my feet again. I was seven weeks getting back, nursing broken ribs and a persistent fever.

What money I had left had slowly trickled away; paid out to Raj, my house boy, and for food, drink, and Quinine. I've heard it said that, in the tropics, you rented your life from the devil malaria and Quinine was the collector. After my disaster on the Baram the disease had become a most demanding landlord.

But now I would have another chance. We would go upstream of the pool where I found my diamonds, closer to the source, the find would be better this time and I'd have Lacklan's fee even if we didn't locate a single stone. With the good feeling of money in my pockets I drifted off to sleep.

My place was a deserted bungalow which I'd adopted and repaired. When Lacklan and his wife appeared, I was seated on the verandah idly reading from Norman Douglas' South Wind.

They turned in the path, and I got to my feet and walked to the door. "Come in," I called out, "it isn't often I have visitors."

As they came up on the porch, I noticed that Helen's eyes went at once to the book I had been reading. She glanced up quickly, and smiled. "It's rather wonderful, isn't it?"

She was tall and lean, with fine thin limbs and dark blue eyes that shown in the shadow of her wide brimmed straw hat. She had a face like that of a model from one of those fashion ads but with more

character, faint friendly lines around the corners of her eyes and mouth, no make up. Her nose was large but perfectly shaped and her jaw betrayed strength, a strength that also was apparent in her body, beautifully formed but built for a life time of swimming and skiing. Her skin, where it disappeared under the fabric of her sun dress looked like it was taking on a healthy shade of copper from the equatorial sun.

She had commented on my book. "It's an old friend," I said, smiling.

Lacklan looked from one to the other of us, irritated. "You're Kardec?" he demanded. "I'm John Lacklan." He was tall and slightly stooped. A thin blue vein pulsed in one of his temples as he peered at me from behind glasses with round, nearly black, lenses. Vandover had told me he was an administrator at one of the big government labs back in the states. Atom bombs or something.

Lacklan pushed ahead, up the stairs. "I understand you're the authority on diamonds?" The way he said 'authority' indicated that he doubted it.

"Well," I hesitated because I was well aware of all that I didn't know. ". . . maybe. Will you sit down? We'll have a drink."

Raj was already at my elbow. He was a Sea Dyak, not over sixteen, but his mind was as quick and intelligent as anyone I've ever encountered.

"Scotch," Helen said, "with soda . . . about half."

Raj nodded and glanced at Lacklan who waved a careless hand. "The same," he said.

When Raj returned with our drinks, Helen sat there sipping hers and watching me. From time to time, she glanced at her husband and, although she said nothing, I had an idea that she missed nothing.

"You've been up the Baram, above Long Sali?" he asked.

"Yes," I saw no reason for explaining just how far I had gone. Marudi was a rough sixty miles from the mouth and Long Sali was a village a hundred and fifteen miles further up river.

"Are there diamonds up there? Gem stones?"

"There are," I agreed, "but they are scattered and hard to find. Most of the stones are alluvial and are washed out of creeks back up the river. Nobody has ever located their source."

"But you know where diamonds can be found, and you can take us to them. We're not wasting our time?"

In this part of the world I had become used to the culture of Chinese and Malay, Muslim and British, all of these groups had a sense of politeness or patience bred into them. In comparison the directness and force of Lacklan's questions was like an attack.

"You are not wasting your time," I assured him. "I've found diamonds. I can't promise, but with luck, I can find more. Whether they are bort or gem quality will be anyone's guess."

"You speak the language?" he asked.

"I speak market-place Malay," I said, "and a scattering of Iban. Also," I added dryly, "I know that country."

"Good! Can you take us there?"

"Us?" I asked cautiously. "Your wife, too?"

"She will go where I go."

"It's our project, Mr. Kardec," Helen Lacklan said. She stretched out a long, firm hand to show me the ring on her finger. An empty setting stared up at me like a blind eye. John gave me this ring five years ago. "We're going to find the stone together."

It was a wonderful, romantic, notion but far easier said than done.

"You know your business best," I said carefully, "but that's no country for a woman. It's a jungle, it's miserably hot, and there are natives up there who have never seen a white man, let alone a white woman. Some of them can't be trusted."

I was thinking of one nefarious old codger in particular.

"We'll be armed." His manner was brusque and I could see his mind was made up. I suddenly had a vision that both amused me and made me very nervous: John Lacklan as Henry Stanley blasting his way through the forests of central Africa. His chin was thrust out in a way that told me he was primed for an argument . . . I knew to never come between a man and his weapons, especially when he's a client. I turned to her.

"I don't want to offend you, Mrs. Lacklan, but it is very rough country, bad enough for men alone, and with a woman along . . ." I could see I was going to have to give her a better argument. "There will be snakes and leeches. I'm not trying to scare you, it's just a fact. We'll be on the water and in the water all day, everyday, and with the humidity we'll never get dry, not until we get back. We'll be eating mostly fish we catch ourselves and rice. There is the risk of infection from any cut or scrape and an infection while you're upriver can kill you."

She was quiet for a moment, "I believe I'll be all right," she said. "I grew up in Louisiana, so the heat and humidity . . . well, they are only a little bit worse here." She laughed and her teeth were white and perfect. "Really, Mr. Kardec, I'm quite strong."

"I can see that," I said and then wished I'd said nothing at all.

Lacklan's head snapped up and for a moment he glared at me. This man was deeply jealous, though Helen didn't seem the kind of person who

would give him reason. Of course, that very fact made her all the more attractive.

She caught his reaction to me and quickly said, "Perhaps it would be better if I stayed here, John. Mr. Kardec is right. I might make trouble for you."

"Nonsense!" he replied irritably. "I want you to go."

His eyes narrowed as they turned back to me and burned as they looked into mine. I couldn't tell if he was disturbed about my appreciation of his wife or because I'd made her consider not going up river with him or, and I only thought of this later, because I'd made her consider staying in Marudi where she would be on her own while we were gone.

"We will both go, Mr. Kardec. Now what will it cost me and when can we leave."

I explained what they would need in the way of clothing and camping gear. Warned them against wearing shorts, no reason to make life easy for the mosquitoes and leeches. And then told them my price.

"I get a thousand, American. The canoes, Raj, and four Iban crewmen, will run you six-fifty. Kits, food, First-Aid and mining supplies, maybe another three to three-fifty. Depends on who's palm I have to grease."

"Is that the best you can do." he objected. "You're taking more than half for yourself!"

"Look, Mr. Lacklan, I've been where you need to go. I've found diamonds . . . lots of diamonds. I lost them all but I know where they were. If it was easy, or cheap, I'd be back there working that stream bed right now instead of trying to make a deal with you."

I could see something behind his glasses. A calculation taking place, like in one of the computers he probably used at work, punch

cards feeding in data, tubes glowing with orange light. "All right." he said. "But how are we going to split up our take. After all, I'm paying for this expedition. I should get a piece of whatever you dig out."

I guess I recoiled a bit. Anyway, Helen looked at me in concern and Lacklan leaned back in his chair smugly. I hadn't really given it much thought. I'd figured that I'd take them there and they'd work the river in one area and I'd find somewhere else. I could see that this might lead to problems, especially once he realized that he could enlist the boat crews in the digging and panning.

"We'll split what we find, fifty-fifty" I said. "With the best stone to be for Mrs. Lacklan's ring." He was still gazing at me, one eyebrow arched above the round steel rim of his dark glasses. I gave in a little more, "I'll give Raj and the boat crews a bonus from my share."

Helen Lacklan turned to him, "That's fair, Darling, don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

We settled on a date, ten days from then, to leave. They went to the door and Helen hesitated there. "Thank you," she said graciously. "I enjoyed the drink."

They walked away toward the town.

It's maybe only once in a lifetime that a man sees such a woman, and I confess I looked after them with envy for him. It made my throat dry out and my blood throb in my pulses just to look at her, and it was that as much as anything else that made me worry about taking the job. A man needed all his attention on such a trip as this . . . and no man could remain other than completely aware of such a woman when she was near him.

Nothing moves fast in the tropics, yet despite that I had lined up the boats, boatmen and equipment within a week. Raj was instrumental in bringing everything together as always. Even when I had no money he stuck with me, 'You make better job, Boss,' he'd say when I pushed him to look for work elsewhere. 'We don't work much but we make lot's money!' I'm not sure that I'd have liked the irregular pay if I had been in his place. But Raj seemed to come alive when trying to figure out something he'd never done before and the jobs we got were always a challenge of one kind or another.

Around Marudi I caught sight of John and Helen once or twice, it wasn't a big place. He was not one to take his attention from whatever he was doing to nod or say hello but once or twice I got a smile from her. Then for several days in a row I didn't see either of them.

The day before we were supposed to leave I spotted the Lacklans coming up the path from town. And something -- their postures, the way they walked? -- told me the plan had gone wrong.

"Kardec?" There was a bluster in his manner that seemed ready to challenge any response that I might have. "We've made other arrangements. I'll pay whatever expenses you've incurred so far." Helen did not meet my eyes,.

"Other arrangements?" The answer was evasive. "You've decided not to go?"

"We'll be going, but with someone else. How much do I owe you?"

Frankly, it made me angry. The deal had been all set, and now . . . I stated my price and he paid me. Helen merely stood there saying nothing, yet it seemed she was showing a resentment or anger that I had not seen before.

"Mind telling me how you're going?"

"Not at all. But it doesn't really matter, does it?"

His very arrogance and coolness angered me, and also to have all my excellent planning go for nothing. "It matters a great deal," I told him, "There's one other man that would take you up river who is trustworthy, a native named Inghai, and he's down with a broken leg. If you go back in there with another native, you're a fool!"

"You're calling me a fool?" He turned on me sharply, his eyes ugly. For a minute I thought he was going to swing on me and I'd have welcomed it. I'd have liked nothing so much as to help him lose a few teeth.

Then I had an awful premonition. Jeru was up to his old tricks again. "Look," I asked, "Is it a native? Did he show you a diamond? A big stone? Something about twenty karats?"

They were surprised, both of them. "And what if he did?"

"You tried to buy it and he wouldn't sell. Am I right?"

"So what?"

"If I am right then this was the same fellow who guided two parties up the Baram before, one group from Kuching, one came over from Sibiu. None of them ever came back."

"You're implying that he had them killed? For what reasons? For the diamonds they found?"

"Diamonds mean nothing to him. I believe he used the one stone he has to lure them up river so he can murder them for their possessions."

"Nonsense!"

"He was an old man, wasn't he? With a deep scar on his cheek?"

Their expressions cleared. "No," Lacklan was triumphant. "He was a youngster. No older than your house boy."

So they had switched, that was all. The trick was the same. The stone was the same. And they were not the first to do it. It had been done by the Piutes in Colorado, eighty or ninety years ago, with gold nuggets for bait.

"Have it your own way, Lacklan. It wouldn't matter if you were going alone, but you're taking your wife along."

His face flamed and his eyes grew ugly. "My wife is my own concern," he said, "and none of your affair."

"You're right, of course, only I'd do a lot of thinking before I'd let bullheadedness risk my wife's life. Risk your own all you like."

"Nonsense!" Lacklan scoffed. "You're just trying to scare us to keep our business."

So they walked away and I could see Helen talking with him as they went up the road toward town. Whatever she said, I heard him answer angrily.

What the Lacklan's were getting into had a certain smell to it. It was the smell of an old reprobate named Jeru who was hidden out up-river with a small band of renegades. Jeru was reputedly the last of the old time Sea Dyak pirates and the story was that he had fled up river from the Brook militia and was living like a tribal chief with a group of followers who had been outcasts from their own longhouses. No one really knew if this was true but it was known that Jeru had appeared in the cities along the coast and lured people, usually foreigners, into the back country. And once they disappeared they never returned.

It had been years since the last time this had happened and the story had been spreading that Jeru might be dead . . . nonetheless, it had me worried.

That night there were four of us there on the verandah of the resident officer's bungalow. Van apologized for the deal with the Lacklan's falling through. "There's no accounting for people, I suppose."

I didn't mention John Lacklan's hair-trigger jealousy and the fact that I might have helped arouse it.

"I've got another possibility for you though," he said. "There's a canal job. It cuts through from one of the creeks about a mile above town. Hasn't been used in years but Frears wants it open again. I told him you could do it, bossing a native crew. It'll pay almost what Lacklan would but it will take longer. We'll get you home yet."

"Van," I said, "I'm worried. Their story sounded so familiar. Remember Carter? That was two years before my time, but he came down from Hong Kong on a vacation. He met some native down on the coast who had a big diamond and wouldn't sell it. The native agreed to show him where there were more. He went up river and was never heard of again."

"A few months later, the same thing happened to Trondly at Kuching. There was also that story about the two who went up country from Sibul and Igan, and another from Bintulu."

"That was Old Jeru. Word has it he's dead."

"Maybe. But this sounds like the same come on. And it sounds like the same diamond. Huge thing, high quality, native won't sell but he will take them to where he found it. If it's not Jeru then it could be someone else playing the same game. If a native finds a gem stone

and sells it, he spends the little he got, and that's the end of it. This way that stone represents a permanent income. Rifles, ammo, blankets, trinkets, food, clothing, tools and trade goods . . . and every few months a new supply."

"Fantastic idea." Vandover rubbed his long jaw. "It sounds like that old blighter of a Jeru, or his ghost. Maybe he figured he was getting too well known to keep doing it himself."

"It could be," Fairchild agreed, "you'd better call Kuching on it. Sounds to me like a police matter."

My Scotch tasted good, and the furniture on the verandah was comfortable. Turning the glass in my fingers, I looked over at Fairchild. "Using your outboard? It is a police matter but I don't think it can wait. That fathead can fry in his own juice for all I care, but I'd not like to see Helen Lacklan trapped because of him."

"Use it," Fairchild assented, "if Rector wasn't due in tomorrow I'd go with you."

By daylight the native huts, banana and rubber plantations were behind us. Only Raj accompanied me. Although a Sea Dyak of the coast, his mother was Penan, one of the forest people. His uncles had occasionally taken him off on long migrations following the wild sego harvest and he spoke a number of the inland dialects. He knew of old Jeru well and liked none of what he'd heard. From a *blotto*, the hollowed out tree trunk that is the native boat, he learned from three natives that the boy and his two white clients were six hours ahead of us.

Raj sat up in the bow of the canoe, on the other side of my quickly loaded supplies. The strong brown stream was muddy and there were occasional logs, but this outboard was a good one and we were making better time than Lacklan would be making. I did not attempt to overtake them because I neither wanted them to think me butting in nor did I want their guide to know I was following.

I was carrying a Mauser big game rifle, a beautiful weapon. It gave me a comforting feeling to have the gun there as I watched the boat push its way up the Baram. The river trended slightly to the south-southeast and then took a sharp bend east, flowing down from among a lot of eight thousand foot peaks. Mostly jungle, yet there were places where stretches of table land waved with grass. This was wild country, rarely visited, and there were small herds of wild pigs, and a good many buffalo.

We avoided villages as the necessary social activity that would accompany our stopping there would slow us down considerably. I made camp on a small island cut off from shore by a few yards of rushing water. We slung our hammocks, draped mosquito netting over them and slid into our dry clothes to sleep.

As we pressed on the river narrowed and grew increasingly swift. We were well into the Kapuas Mountains, the rugged chain that is the spine of Borneo and terminates in the thirteen thousand foot dome of Kina Balu. The air was clear and the heat less oppressive at the increased altitude. At times we pushed through patches of water flowers miles long and so thick it looked like we could have gotten out of the boat and walked.

I put on a bit more speed for the motor would soon be useless in the rocks and shallower rapids and I wanted to be able to catch up when necessary. We ascended cascades, the easier ones with the outboard howling at full throttle, the more difficult by shoving and hauling the boat through torrents of water streaming between the rocks and over low falls.

I wondered how the Lacklan's were making out, I couldn't really imagine John Lacklan in chest deep water pushing a canoe ahead of him. And, though she might be willing to try, I couldn't imagine him allowing Helen to do such a menial job. How they were negotiating the river was a question that worried me because if neither of the Lacklans were doing the physical work then there had to be more natives helping out besides just the one guide. The crew of the *blotto* had not mentioned the number in the crew and I'd heard no mention of an outboard like mine . . . that meant oarsmen and probably two boats to split the weight of both the men and supplies into manageable amounts. So that meant four to eight natives, I hesitated to guess at their tribe and if they were from Jeru's group that was probably a moot point.

"Raj?" I called forward, "How many boats do you think they have?" We were stopped in a shallow sandy part of the stream at the top of a rocky cascade. I was bailing the water from the canoe and Raj was carefully wiping off our equipment. We were both soaking wet.

"Two, boss."

"And how many men on paddles, four?"

"Six. Two paddle in each boat, one rests."

I looked up at him, narrowly. "How the hell do you know that?"

"I can see them!" He grinned at me and pointed . . .

In the distance, through some trees and across the river two boats were turning into the shore. I sloshed around for a better look. It was mid-afternoon and it looked like they were going to camp. There were two big dug-outs each with four people in them and as I watched the men in the bows jumped out and dragged the hollowed out logs up onto the shore. In one boat was a slender figure in a wide straw hat, that must be Helen, and in the other sat John Lacklan, wearing a cork sun helmet. For an instant his glasses flashed in the sun as he rose from the boat.

"We'd better pull out here and camp ourselves. I don't want to be seen."

We hauled the boat to shore, built a smoky fire to keep the sand flies away and as Raj began to make camp I took my field glasses and crept along the bank to a spot across the river from the Lacklan camp. I slid in behind a decomposing log covered in plates of bracket fungus and focused my binoculars on the beach across the river.

Two of the tattooed natives were cooking a pot of what had to be rice and another had walked upstream and dropped a line into the water, patiently waiting for a fish to strike. The three others had vanished into the forest. Lacklan was sitting on the sand jotting notes in a book or journal and Helen was tying up their hammocks. I put down the glasses and glanced around. My spot was back within the treeline and relatively dry, even so it wouldn't be long before the leaches got at me. The air over the river was thick with brightly colored butterflies, some as big as my hand. They fluttered in and out of patches of sunlight like continuously falling leaves. I squinted through the lenses again. Lacklan looked comfortable on his small crescent of beach. The fisherman and one of the cooks looked to be in their mid thirties, hard capable men, though small. Each had a *parang*

at his side and near the kit of one of the natives that I assumed had gone into the jungle was an old single barreled shotgun, it's stock held together with copper wire.

The fisherman looked up suddenly and the two other members of the boat crews came wandering back into camp. With them was a slight younger man whose posture was somehow more assertive than the older men, tough as they might be. This would be the boy I'd been told about. He wore a button down shirt that was missing most of it's buttons and was tucked into an old pair of dungarees. The clothes were cast-offs from someone down in the settlements but he wore them with a certain flair. Unlike the others, he did not have the traditionally pierced ears. Over his eyes he had on a set of sunglasses, the type that aviators tended to wear. The returning men sat close around the rice pot and the fisherman returned to his chore.

I was getting set to pull back into the trees and make my way back to our camp when I saw Helen walk away from the spit of beach across the river. She had obviously been waiting for the other men to come back, because as soon as they sat down she walked over to the place where Lacklan was sitting and spoke to him then she picked up a small pack and walked away.

She headed down river and in a moment was out of sight, lost in a tangle of vines and tree trunks. I slid back a ways then moved through the forest on my side of the river, trying to catch up. If she went too far I was afraid she'd see our camp. Unless the two of them ran into trouble I was not of a mind to try explaining what I was doing there to a paranoid little tyrant like John Lacklan. I moved down stream as quickly as I could without being seen. Noise wasn't a problem here because the river would drown out anything short of a gunshot.

I dodged back toward the water and crouched down. I couldn't see anything. Then, I noticed some movement on the bank up stream of where I had been looking. It was a piece of fabric moving in the breeze. The kacki blouse that Helen Lacklan had been wearing hung from a branch near a calm backwater. Now, what . . . ?

Alarmed, I almost stood up. Then there was a bursting spray of silver, as Helen's head appeared above the surface and shook the water from her hair. She swam for the bank and I would like to say that I was gentleman enough to avert my eyes when she climbed out but that in all honesty would not be true.

She fumbled with a pile of gray fabric on the sand that I now realized was the pants that she had been wearing, and then splashed back into the water with a bar of soap in her hand and began to wash.

The idea of a bath reminded me that I might not get one myself until I got back to Marudi, unless I could share Helen Lacklan's soap. An entertaining but not very realistic thought. Before I was tempted to watch when Helen climbed out again and got dressed, I slipped away from the riverbank and made my way back to camp.

The next day, travel was harder. We had to creep our way slowly up river, cautiously coming around every bend, always alert for the chance that John Lacklan's canoes had stopped or that there would be a stretch of river long enough for them to look back and see us trailing them. To make matters worse, although they were heavily loaded, there was an extra man to switch off paddling in each of their boats and in the rougher spots all of them, including John and Helen helped out. We had the outboard but I was afraid to start the damned thing because of

the noise. It had enabled us to catch up but now we merely had it's weight to contend with.

Mountains loomed up around us and the way was narrower. Somewhere, hidden in these peaks, I had heard there were huge caves. We were nearing the place where I had originally found my diamonds, a long day or two and we'd be there.

That gave me an idea. What would happen if I dropped into the Lacklan camp some afternoon and let them know my old diamond placer was nearby. John would almost certainly object but I wondered if he wouldn't be tempted to take a day or two out to see what might be found there. With luck I could derail the whole plan, if there was a plan at all. I leaned forward to speak to Raj. "Jeru's camp, does anyone know where it is?"

"No. Boss. Very far up river." He paused for a moment, "If I was a criminal I would not be on river. Police mans, they do not like to get out of the boat. They do not like jungle because their rifles are no good."

He was right, the limited light, limited range, and plentiful cover in the forest did reduce the effectiveness of firearms considerably.

"I have heard on the coast that the pirate Jeru went to a longhouse where all mans dead of sickness. He took longhouse for those who follow him. They are all very bad. They take heads, even now they take heads."

If Borneo is famous for one thing it is it's native headhunters. As romantically gruesome as the practice is it has been dramatically curtailed in recent years, at least along the coast. In the interior, the severed heads of tribal enemies are still kept for their magical power, and a freshly taken head has the most power.

The sun was just touching the rim of the mountains when Lacklan's boats tucked into the shore and Raj and I stopped paddling and let the current carry us back down stream about half a mile before finding a place to camp.

As was becoming my habit I took my field glasses and started up-river, out of camp. At the last moment Raj's voice stopped me for a moment.

"Boss?" I turned to where he was standing by the fire. "If there no trouble, we hunt for diamonds, okay?"

"Sure, Raj." I said. "We're up here, might as well." He was right. I'd given up the canal job to come after the Lacklan's, we were using up the supplies I'd bought for them and nothing lucrative awaited us back in Marudi. On the day after tomorrow I would drop in on my favorite tourists if I could get them away from their guides. Then we'd see if we could dig some diamonds. I didn't want to return from this fools errand with nothing. On top of it all I had a sixteen year old Dyak kid who thought I was just enough off my rocker that he had to remind me occasionally to keep my eyes on the target.

The river was wide here and, though I was farther away than the first time I had spied on the Lacklan's, the water was slow enough that I could hear some of what was going on in their camp. There was a clank of pots as one of the older men laid out his cooking supplies, the hard bark of an ax as someone back in the forest chopped wood.

Helen Lacklan sat in a patch of sunlight reading a book. From it's bright red cover and small size I recognized it as a popular guidebook on Indonesia and Malaysia. John Lacklan sat in the boat cleaning his gun. It looked from this distance to be a bolt action

Winchester, with an ebony cap on the forestock I figured that it was one of the fancier models. From its long barrel and scope and the fact that the Lacklans came from New Mexico I assumed that it was his prize gun for deer or big horn sheep . . . whichever, it wasn't the best weapon for the jungle. This was a place where speed and maneuverability counted most. As I watched he carefully depressed the stop and slid the bolt back into the rifle, then pressed five long cartridges back into its magazine. For the first time I was glad he was armed.

He tucked his cleaning supplies into a small pack and then stalked over to a mound of supplies and set the rifle down. He paused and made a comment to Helen but she barely looked up. He stood there, tension building up in him, for a moment but then broke off and went to the other end of the camp. I realized that I was witnessing an argument or the aftermath of one.

Over the wash of the river, slow and quiet at this point, I heard a man's voice raised in anger. Then John Lacklan was standing over Helen yelling and gesticulating wildly. His thin face was turning a dark red under the fresh burn he'd been getting and, although I couldn't understand the words, his voice was horse. Suddenly, Helen threw her book at him and leaped to her feet. The red covered guidebook bounced off of his shoulder and he backed up a step. She advanced towards him and it almost looked like she was daring him to hit her. They paused and he backed away. In some way, she had called his bluff.

I squirmed back into the shadows of the forest. At the last minute as I headed back to my camp I noticed the flamboyantly dressed Iban boy and two of the men from the boat crew standing in the tree shadows across from me. The older crewmen had averted their gaze with

expressions of shock and embarrassment on their faces; such outbursts of emotion as they had just witnessed were not considered at all acceptable in Malaya, but the boy studied them carefully and with a knowing smirk from behind his dark glasses.

I lay in my hammock that night wondering what would happen tomorrow afternoon when I faced them again. It was going to be awkward and I was going to have to act like there was never any problem between us. I didn't know if they would accept the story I was going to make up about deciding to use their supplies to look for diamonds, but it probably made more sense than what I was actually up to.

Had I really followed them hoping for the worst so that I could step in and rescue Helen Lacklan and make her husband look the fool that I took him to be? And if that was true how much of a fool was he? He had chosen another guide to keep his wife and I apart. I had thought the idea amusing at the time, then I'd thought it dangerous. I had had one short opportunity to appreciate Helen Lacklan and I doubted if she had given much thought, if any, to me. But here I was, following them through the bush and rapidly developing a case that would do a sophomore proud on a married woman I hardly knew. Paranoid he might be but I was beginning to guess few people called John Lacklan stupid.

Well, I would follow along for one more day, until we reached my old diamond placer, then I would do my best to divert them from whatever this Iban boy had planned. If they didn't want to follow me I would leave them to their destiny.

For better or for worse, I thought, I was back up river. Even though it had cost me all the supplies that Lacklan had paid for, supplies that I might have sold, and losing the canal cleaning job, I realized I'd better make the best of it. This was what I'd wanted all along; another chance at the diamonds. I drifted off to sleep as a soft rain began tapping at the shelter half strung over my mosquito net. Somehow I'd gotten what I'd wanted all along.

A high pitched crack of thunder brought me awake just before dawn. I lay listening, waiting for the echoes to roll back from the mountains or down the river canyon. Through some trick of the rain or the forest vegetation the echo didn't come. I thought about returning home with the money from a diamond find in my pocket . . . I thought about returning home with enough to explain my having disappeared into the Far East for almost two years.

An hour later when the gibbon monkeys began to noisily greet the sun, Raj rolled out of his hammock and made up some breakfast. We didn't take long to get packed. I walked up the river bank, the water running slightly higher because of last night's rain, just far enough to see if the Lacklan's had left camp yet. Their boats were gone so we pushed out into the stream and dug our paddles in against the current.

Around us the forest released great plumes of steam as the sun's heat cut into the trees. Trunks, some two hundred feet tall, leaned out over the water leaving only the narrowest slot of sky overhead. In the jungle itself one rarely could see more than sixty yards without the view being blocked by the growth. Even the tops of the trees were

obscured by a much lower canopy with only the massive trunks hinting at the true size of the forest giants.

We pushed past the Lacklan's campsite from the night before. They must have had an early start because their fire was cold, not even a thin line of smoke rising from behind the piled up rocks they had used as a hearth. The shadows between the boles of the trees behind their camp were black as night, the few penetrating rays of the morning sun overshooting this area to glance off the emerald leaves of the higher forest.

Suddenly, I stopped paddling. The canoe lost momentum and Raj looked around quickly.

"Boss? What's wrong?"

Hidden under the trees, deep within the shadows but not quite deep enough to keep the morning light from revealing it, was the stern of a *blotto*.

"Turn in!" I commanded and we made for the shore.

Leaving Raj to haul our boat out of the water I grabbed up my gun and splashed up onto the rocky beach. I hit the darkness of the forest and froze, letting my eyes adjust.

The two dug-outs rested in narrow lanes between the trees, back along the shore were drag marks from where they had been pulled out of the water and across the mud flat to the jungle. Everything, supplies, mining equipment, camping gear, everything but the paddles were gone!

Could they have headed away from the river to a legitimate place to placer for diamonds? Had they hidden the canoes or just pulled them away from the rising waters of the river? I walked back out to their camp site.

The fire was dead and there was no sign it had been doused with water. They had not had breakfast.

Then I saw it. Shining brightly in a patch of sunlight; the answer to my questions . . . the worst answer to my questions. A long thin cylinder of brass. I picked it up and turned it over. It was stamped .30-06. The empty cartridge casing smelled powerfully of gunpowder even in this dampness. It had not been thunder I had heard just before dawn. It had been John Lacklan's rifle!

I had tracked animals while hunting in Arizona and Nevada but following a trail in the jungles of Borneo was a different experience altogether. Luckily, the Lacklan's and their captors had left camp after the rain stopped and they were not trying to hide their trail. The fact that there were ten of them heavily laden with the goods from the canoes helped also.

Raj and I were burdened only with water, light packs, our *parangs* -- Raj's being more along the lines of a traditional headhunting sword, thus larger than mine -- and my rifle.

They left occasional slip marks in the mud, breaks or machete cuts on protruding branches and vines. The trail was not hard to follow. But another problem soon became apparent.

Away from the river we found ourselves climbing a tall ridge cut by many small streams. The trail then followed the top of the ridge as it switchbacked along between the Baram river on one side and a deeply cut canyon on the other. Visibility was so limited and the landscape so broken that although I could easily follow the trail or backtrack my own path I had no idea which direction was north, south, east or west. I could barely tell which way was up or down river unless I could see the water close up and by now we were hundreds of feet above the banks. To make matters worst it was dark, dark as deep twilight, and the

humidity had increased tremendously. I was overheated, slick with sweat, and making far too much noise as I pushed along the trail.

Raj was doing better than I and it wasn't only because of his youth. Although he had lived his life in Marudi he often went with his uncles to the forest and had some of the natural ease of the jungle peoples. He seemed to be able to naturally place his feet in the most solid spots whether we were climbing over rocks covered with wet moss or skirting a deep bog of leaf mold. I dropped our pace to the point where I could follow him more exactly and, in relative silence, we pressed on.

By noon we seemed no closer to our quarry and I was down to the last of my canteen. We stopped by a brook that cascaded down the dim mountainside and had some dried pork while I boiled water on a tiny gas stove I had bought for the Lacklan's. I didn't always purify my water when I was in the bush but this would be a disastrous time to get sick so we waited while the stove hissed and the pot finally boiled. Raj harvested a vine growing nearby and after pounding it with a rock he made a paste that we rubbed on our legs. "*Kulit elang*," he said. "Will help a couple hours, Leeches don't like." We pressed on.

The dim light under the tree canopy was fading and the black cicadas had started their rasping, throbbing, chorus when we reached what seemed to be our destination. We were on another river, much smaller than the Baram, and tucked back in the trees at the edge of a gravel bank was a decrepit longhouse. Dug-outs were pulled up on the bank and all around the main dwelling stretched a wasteland of squalor

such as I had only seen in the native villages that had become ghettos because of their closeness to the large coastal cities.

The last of the sunlight was striking the overgrown slopes of the nearby mountains and the river valley was in shadow but I could barely make out overgrown fields and collapsed farm huts behind the ring of trash that had been ejected over the years from the longhouse. In most cases a Dyak longhouse is a fascinating structure; They are built up, off the ground and out of the flood plains on stilts, sometimes as much as twenty feet high. The interior of the building is twenty feet from floor to ceiling and often over one hundred feet long. It's roof and sides are made of a kind of native thatch or sheathed in tin, where available. Although surrounded by farming huts and storehouses it is the communal dwelling for the entire village.

This longhouse was one of the smaller ones and obviously very old. One corner was drooping dangerously on poorly repaired stilts and in this and other areas the verandah had all but given way. Across the distance I could hear harsh laughter and a slight strain of *sapeh* music on the wind, lights could be seen coming on through the doors and breaks in the walls.

Raj edged closer, he seemed jumpy, his fingers toyed with the hilt of his *parang*.

"You were right, Boss." He whispered, although we were a good half mile away. "This is the longhouse of *Tuan Jeru*."

I was surprised by his use of word *Tuan* which indicates respect and by his nervous whisper. I had seen Raj stand calmly by and thrust the same *parang* he was now nervously tapping deep into the side of a boar that attacked one of our workmen on a construction job. He had then pivoted like a matador and finished the enormous animal off when

it turned to attack him instead. He had been barely fifteen at the time.

"Are you afraid of going in there? Tell me why?" I wasn't feeling too good about it myself but I figured I better know as much as possible.

Raj's chin came up and the dying light in the sky glinted in his eyes. "I am not afraid of any man!" he stated flatly. "But it is said that *Tuan Jeru* is a *bali saleng*, a black ghost, that he has killed many mans and taken their blood to bless the buildings of the English and Dutch and now for the oil companies."

"Do you believe that?" I demanded. "You've worked with me on many buildings. Have you ever seen a foreigner take the time to make a sacrifice of blood or anything else?"

"No . . ."

I wasn't sure that this was really the right argument to use and I actually had a fair amount of respect for the beliefs of Raj and his people but if he went in there scared, witch doctor or not, Jeru would take advantage of the situation.

"How many do you think are down there?"

"If the stories are true, twenty man, maybe ten womans, maybe more."

"What else do the stories say?" I asked.

"The mans of *Tuan Jeru* are *sakit bati*, they are killers and rapists from the oil camps and towns on the coast. No village would have them. They are collectors of blood and they take heads to make magic."

"Do you want to stay here, guard our backs?" I gave him a chance to get out with honor.

"I will go with you, Boss." The boy said.

"Good. Now, what do you think is going on down there?"

"I think they have big Arak party. Everyone get very drunk. They have all new trade goods, shotgun shell, fancy rifle. I think we wait."

"What about the Lacklan's? Will they be all right?"

Raj paused, he wanted to tell me what I wanted to hear but he knew I would press him for the truth. "I don't know, Boss." He said. "I think maybe they cut off mans head. The woman, I don't know . . . These people, they not Iban, not Kayan, not Kelabit," he named off the three major tribal groups, "they something different now . . . outlaws, you know. I bet they get drunk like Iban though, you'll see."

I hoped so, because outlaws or not I was betting that just like a normal village they had plenty of dogs and roosters. The typical longhouse celebration in Sarawak was a roaring drunk and I hoped that was what they were building up to because otherwise we weren't going to get in there without raising an alarm.

I wanted to be ready when the moment came, so we moved in closer, carefully waded across the stream and circled away down wind of the skeletal silhouette of the longhouse. We settled down just inside the secondary tree line and waited to see what would happen. The noise from inside was getting louder and I was sure that Raj had been right about them working themselves up to an all night drunk. I just wasn't sure what was going to happen to John and Helen . . . or when.

They might be dead already and I couldn't wait much longer without trying to find out. I decided to split the difference; wait another half hour but if I heard a commotion I'd go in with the rifle and hope for the best. If there were twenty men in the longhouse at least five would have the cheap single shot shotguns that were common in the back country of Borneo. Someone in there had possession of

Lacklan's deer rifle and certainly there would be a full complement of spears, blowpipes and machetes. My only hope was to get in and get as many of them covered as possible before anyone thought to grab a weapon. It wasn't much of a plan; get in fast, get out fast and put my confidence in the local *arak's* potency.

Now, in my experience, *arak* has the punch of the best (or worst, depending on your expectations) moonshine. It seemed to have the chemical properties of torpedo fuel or the infamous "Indian whiskey" that was made in the old days in Oklahoma. One shot would make you stagger, a couple more would make you stupid. Imbibing further could leave one blind or even dead. Waiting for a level of intoxication that would give me an edge was a risky business.

About an hour later two men staggered out on the verandah and hung over the railing. They alternated between what sounded like telling jokes and laughing hysterically with being violently ill. After three or four rounds of this odd combination of social interaction they parted, one going back into the light and noise of the longhouse, the other slumped, snoring against the railing. The sound of the crowd inside had taken on a harsher tone and I figured I'd better move in before something bad happened . . . if it hadn't already.

Touching Raj on the shoulder I slipped past him and made my way down towards the river. We crept in past the outer circle of trash and one of my worst fears came suddenly true.

Three dogs rushed us out of the darkness under the longhouse. Barking and snarling they rushed through the moonlight like dark missiles, low to the ground . . . missiles with pale flashing teeth.

I took a swipe at the first with my rifle butt and connected heavily. It backed off yelping. Raj moved quickly, snatching up the

smallest of them by grabbing a fist of flesh on either side of the dog's neck just below the ears. He spun in a tight circle with the frantic beast snapping in his outstretched arms and let go, hurling the dog out into the river. I clubbed with my rifle again and, drawing his *parang*, Raj swatted an animal with the flat of the blade. The two remaining dogs backed up, growling but no longer willing to attack. I was just beginning to curse our luck and wonder if we should either hide or charge the ladder to the longhouse when a door above us slammed open and a man staggered out onto the verandah and called out into the night in what sounded like Iban.

Instantly Raj answered in an angry, adult tone I'd never heard him use before. The man above us muttered something and then whistled sharply and called out some kind of command. We stood frozen in the darkness as he wandered back inside and closed the door.

Raj heaved a sigh of relief and I turned to peer into the darkness where he was standing. "What, in the name of God, was that all about?" I demanded.

He laughed, a giddy, semi-hysterical cackle. "I told him to call off his damn dogs!"

We were a moment getting our wind back then we worked our way under the longhouse and edged toward the back where, because of the slope of the gravel, the stilts were not so long. The ground beneath the building stank from garbage and worse. Above us feet tramped rhythmically on the ancient plank floor and shrill voices cried out. Towards the back the floor was low over our heads and then I was boosting Raj onto the verandah, and swinging up myself. Moving

carefully on the weathered boards we eased up to a crack in the wall and peered in.

The light was probably dim but, with our pupils dilated by hours in the darkness it was blinding. Raj backed up for a moment and I blinked and squinted. In the center of a seated group a dancer leaped and whirled, his moves theatrically depicting . . . something, I couldn't tell what. There were men and women in the room, but fewer women than I had thought. Bottles, mostly old beer and wine, were laying about. Some were obviously empty others still in use. I knew from past experience that they no longer held beer or wine; they had been filled and refilled time and again with *arak*.

The dancer disappeared from view and another took his place. He was a thin old man but he moved with an energy that, while not youthful, was surprisingly vigorous. He whirled and stomped, spinning a *parang* over his head with a glittering flash of steel. I suddenly saw that the dark area that I had noticed on one side of his face was not a shadow or a tattoo but a deep and twisted mass of scar tissue. He mimed climbing onto something higher than himself, something that moved unsteadily. He fought, he carried something away. He was raiding a ship or a boat . . . this must be Jeru! Not only was he here, still alive after all these years, but he was telling his story in a dance.

I bent to Raj's ear. "Is that him?"

The boy nodded, his body alive with fear and excitement.

"You watch our backs," I told him. I didn't want him working up a scare by watching this man that he believed to be a witch and I didn't want both of us to be night blind.

When I turned back to the crack Jeru was hacking his way through the forest and then something . . . he mimed men marching and everyone laughed. He was showing them he'd been chased by soldiers, paddled up

a river, cut off men's heads with his *parang*. He stepped out of sight for a moment and came back with a long Japanese military rifle. He shook it in the air and then after handing it to someone, mimed cutting off what I surmised to be the Japanese soldier's head. He pointed to the roof with a harsh cry and, crouching, I could see a cluster of dark spheres hanging from the rafters. Severed heads. No doubt the unfortunate Jap was one of them.

The story continued with Jeru finding something in a stream. He held the imaginary something up to the light, turning it this way and that. He reached for his neck and pulled a leather strap off, over his head. In a setting or basket of leather there gleamed a stone.

This was it. The huge diamond that he had used for many years to lure men up river, never to return. A diamond of fabulous size and quality, so the story went, from where I was all I could tell was that it was large and wrapped in braided strings of leather. It glowed rather than flashed, for this was a raw stone with none of the facets of a cut one, but there was a white fire hiding deep within it.

The old man took on a posture of humility, he moved stiffly, portraying a sense of age that obviously was not his natural state. Again, he got a laugh. He was showing the stone to someone, offering it, walking away as if disinterested, then leading them on. He took an old stove-in pith helmet from the place it hung on the wall and wore it for a moment as he paddled an imaginary boat. Then he was himself again and beating his companion to the ground he drew his *parang* and cut off the man's head.

The audience was silent now and a sense of tension penetrated the wall and clutched at my heart. Even Raj, eyes turned to the night, could feel it and he moved closer to me, his hand on his knife.

John Lacklan staggered into view, pushed along by the rough shoves of the boy who had been his guide. His hands were tied, his clothing torn, his body scratched and bruised. How badly he had been treated I didn't know; the trip through the jungle might have left him in the condition that he was in. I admired him in that moment, though, for he held his head high, in his eyes was the hollow look of fear but he didn't beg, or cry, or even tremble. He was keeping himself together although I thought I could tell that it was a near thing.

Without looking away I ran a shell into the chamber of my rifle and set the safety. I wasn't at all sure about my original plan of barging in and spiriting them away, there were easily as many shotguns in the room as I had expected plus the Japanese rifle and the boy carried Lacklan's Winchester over his shoulder. Not only were there more guns than I would have liked in the room but several were cradled in the hands of Jeru's outlaws, held causally but ready for use.

The boy stepped in behind Lacklan and kicked the back of his left knee, knocking him to a kneeling position. Lacklan started to get back up but the boy unlimbered the rifle and poked him hard in the kidney with the muzzle. John Lacklan gave a choking cough of pain and collapsed back to the floor. Old Jeru whirled his *parang* and then tested the edge against his thumb.

"Find me a door!" I whispered to Raj. "Damn quick!"

Now there was a commotion somewhere in the room. "Get off me!" I heard Helen call out. Then she lurched into view, a portly Iban trying to drag her down by one arm. She shook him off, he was surprised, I think, by that same physicality that had caught my attention. She was bigger than he was and lithely powerful.

"Stop it! You stop this!" she yelled at them. Raj was back tugging at my sleeve but the boy, sunglasses pushed up on his forehead, stepped in quickly and pressed the rifle barrel against Helen's throat . . . even if John Lacklan got his head cut off I wasn't going in there if it risked Helen's getting killed.

The boy yelled at her in Iban then in English. "Sit, Missey. You sit or I kill you." He jabbed at her with the gun barrel. "Everybody die, you don't sit down."

She didn't even move.

"You can't kill him. Take our things, our money. You can't kill him!" She cried.

"We're Americans, damn it. Let us go or you'll regret this." John's voice wavered.

In my travels around the world I've noticed that identifying yourself as an American never helps, it just makes the locals get violent or want more money.

The boy shrugged, "We kill Englang, Dutch . . . America, who cares." He suddenly spoke in his own tongue for a moment and everyone laughed. Old Jeru the hardest.

"You don't want John's head." Helen spoke in a manner that let me know she wanted all to hear. "I know that Dyak tribesmen only take the heads of powerful enemies, of warriors. The head of a strong man is magic but a weak man . . . a weak man is nothing. My husband is not a warrior, he's not even a strong man. Did he walk here? No. You had to carry him over the last hill . . ."

"Be quiet, Helen!" John hissed. "Don't make this any worse than it is."

But she ignored him. "He's a scholar. What are you going to say? There are the heads of the Japanese soldiers, we fought their

machine-guns with knives but we won. There is the head of the man who read books, aren't we brave!"

The boy turned to Jeru and they spoke quietly for a moment. Others in the crowd seemed a bit nervous. The bottles started being passed around again but with them there started a low mutter of conversation..

Jeru spoke and the boy turned to Helen with a smirk. he spoke in Iban to the crowd and there was scattered laughter but it sounded forced. He said to her, "We cut off head; see what happens. No magic, we throw out!"

"No!" she cried and started to say something else but John bellowed at her.

"Helen, shut up! Just shut up!" He was almost crying in fear or frustration. He lurched to his feet and the boy smashed the butt of the rifle into the pit of his stomach. I was ready to move and Raj was even tugging me toward the door when Helen threw herself on the boy. Jeru knocked her to the floor but John charged him. With his hands tied all he could have done would have been to knock Jeru down but the old man deftly rapped John Lacklan on the head with the butt of his *parang* and Lacklan went to the floor, out cold.

Jeru hawked and spat. Then with a further growl of disgust he dragged Lacklan into a corner and dropped him. He motioned to the boy and the young man lead the quietly sobbing Helen to the same spot then they both stepped forward to the seated group and took up *arak* bottles.

I got the feeling that there had been a reprieve of sorts and I'd better make the best of it. Pulling myself away from the scene beyond the crack in the wall I let my eyes readjust to the darkness. When my vision started to come back I motioned Raj ahead of me, "Let's get on the ground, we've got to get to work."

We dropped down under the longhouse and I made my way back to the spot where the broken floor sagged toward the mud. This whole corner of the building was ready to collapse and I figured that it would be unlikely that anyone would be using it for anything. I shrugged out of my pack and dug out my mountaineer stove. I pumped up the pressure and fired it. Using the light from the flame I found a place where several broken logs and a piece of the *attap* thatch wall all lay together. I wedged the stove into the broken wood just under the thatch and let the plume of fire bite into the thatch.

I grabbed Raj and lead him back to the spot where we had climbed onto the longhouse verandah.

"You stay here. When I come back I'm going to be coming fast, if anyone needs help getting off the porch you help. If you run into any of Jeru's people . . ."

"I know what to do, Boss." He tapped the hilt of his *Parang*.

"Right. If I'm not with you go straight up the hill and follow the crest east, Okay?"

I pulled myself up onto the aging boards again and, careful to walk along a cross piece so as to make less noise, I slid up to the wall and took a fast glance through the crack. Heavily tattooed bodies moved back and forth, momentarily obscuring my vision. Nothing much was going on but more people were up and around. Well, that couldn't be helped.

I moved along the wall to the door that Raj had found. I breathed deep and waited for the fire to catch. Suddenly there was an excited burst of Iban from inside the building, the sound of running feet and a breaking bottle. It was only then that I smelled smoke. There was a rush of feet and a door in the front of the place crashed open. I couldn't see what was happening but I figured someone was

going for water. I didn't move until I heard the crash of the floor giving way.

I hit the door and came into the big room with the Mauser up, sling around my left arm. The long room was filled with smoke and the back, where I had started the fire was listing. Flames were beginning to take the roof. An older man stood right in front of me with a bottle in his hand, he seemed to be standing back bemused while the main crowd moved towards the blaze. I dropped the rifle from my shoulder and clipped him on the side of the head as I went past.

A woman tore by me and in the confusion didn't even seem to notice that I was there. Someone seemed to have fallen through the burning floor and that was fine with me. I dropped beside the Lacklan's pulling my knife.

Lacklan twisted around in panic and kicked at me with both feet as I reached for his arms. Helen got it first.

"John stop! It's help."

I grabbed one of the kicking feet and cut off the ropes that bound them, when they had tied his feet I didn't know. She extended her hands to me and I quickly swiped the blade between them catching the bindings by luck. Then there was the roar of an explosion and a scattering of bird shot tore into my boot and ankle like a swarm of angry bees. I dropped the knife and turned bringing the rifle up.

A short, tattooed native struggled to reload his crude shotgun. Others stood behind him frozen, but they were all looking at me. Suddenly one of the men in back came up with the Japanese rifle, I didn't even know I had him in my sights until I squeezed the trigger.

The concussion in the long room was even louder than the shotgun. The rifleman went down and all hell broke loose. Men and women scattered, two shotguns belched fire in the light of the roaring flames throwing huge plumes of white smoke. I wasn't hit but burning paper and powder smoldered in my clothes. I put three shots into the crowd as fast as I could work the bolt and then I was pushing Lacklan toward the door and praying that Helen was following. In my last look the room was an inferno of flame, burning thatch falling from the ceiling. Around the cluster of heads hanging from the rafters wasps swarmed in panic, driven from their nests in the empty eyes and mouths by the heat and smoke.

We crashed out into the fire-streaked night. Lacklan stumbled and a man dropped a bucket of water and came at me with a knife. I deflected it with my rifle barrel and kicked him hard on the hip. He fell and I gave him another in the face. The gun was empty and I had no time to reload.

I pulled Helen past me, pointed to the end of the verandah and yelled, "Go! Find Raj!"

I turned, knowing that to run at that moment would be the end of me. Three men rushed forward in the shifting light and I went to meet them. I clubbed and punched and kicked and bit. One cut me across the back. Then I was on the wooden floor slamming my knee into his midsection. My rifle flopped uselessly, it's sling still entwined with my arm.

There was a flare of light and an explosion of wood. One of my attackers threw himself off of me and there was Jeru, standing over me holding a pistol so ancient it must have come to Sarawak with the first white rajah. I twisted sharply, Jeru fired again, missing. He struggled to cock the enormous relic, twisting the cylinder by hand. I

scrambled sideways, put a knee into someone's stomach, suddenly, I was fighting with one of the men who attacked me again. We struggled, turned, and then hit the railing of the verandah. With a splintering crash at least twenty feet of it let go and we were falling.

In mid air I pushed away from the man I was fighting, hit the ground and rolled. My rifle, still bound to my arm by a twist of the sling, rapped me on the back of the head. My vision went gray but I heard Jeru's gun bellow and the hard bite of black powder hit my nostrils. He was leaning over the railing peering into the darkness, the torn side of his face a dark knot of rage. I grabbed my rifle and ran underneath the burning longhouse.

Flames licked along the floor above me. The structure groaned as walls twisted and buckled. In back, the corner where I had started the fire was dark. Someone had managed to put out the flames, a futile gesture for the fire had spread to the rest of the building.

I made it to the darkness and looked back. The dim forms of Jeru's men began to appear in the fire light. Some ran off toward the river, probably for more water, but four or five of them started forward under the building, coming after me.

I'd had just about enough. I snapped four fresh cartridges into the Mauser and dropped a fifth into the chamber. I backed up further into the darkness and brought the rifle up. I took aim at the first man, then shifted to one of the pilings beside him. I fired and splinters flew. They dropped to the ground but then came on, worming their way forward through the debris under the longhouse. The first had a shotgun and the second man carried a long blow-pipe with a spear blade bound to one end. I squinted, fired, and the heavy bullet took the blow-pipe man in the top of the shoulder as I had intended then

burned the back of his calf. He screamed, and I ran, blindly, up hill into the jungle.

I nearly took a header into some kind of hole, leaves whipped my face, and I slowed down. I cursed myself for not killing both of the men I'd shot at under the longhouse. I had a total of nine bullets left, three in the gun and six jingling in my pocket, I couldn't afford to waste them.

I had to find Raj and the Lacklan's. If they hadn't made it out I'd have to go back . . . I wasn't looking forward to suicide.

I cut left along the hillside, heading in the direction they would have taken if they had gone straight up the hill. I stopped to catch my breath and found I couldn't keep my knees from shaking. I squatted down, sucking in the thick air, and felt the prickles of adrenaline recede from my limbs. I had shot a man. Several actually, but one of them I had killed for sure. Unbidden, a phrase that my father had used came to mind, 'if you fool around with a band-wagon, you're liable to get hit with a horn.' It wasn't as amusing as it had been but I was realizing that it didn't only apply to me getting into this situation, it applied to those poor chaps I'd shot, too.

Those men down there had lived as traditional Iban and Kayan or whatever. Some, perhaps many, had traveled to the cities and oil fields to try a different kind of life. But somewhere, something had gone wrong. Instead of staying on to collect their paychecks, instead of returning home to farm and fish, they had come here. In a country that was virtually without violent crime they joined with a man who made a living robbing tourists and diamond hunters. A man who was

continuing to take heads not of his enemies in war, a practice, if not what I would call civilized, then at least honored by Iban tradition.

Helen had thought quickly back there. She'd confronted that old witch doctor with his own hypocrisy, given other circumstances it might have been funny. It was something else too, though. Some of those men in there had believed in what she'd said. There was magic in the head of a brave enemy. To take a man's head was, in a strange way, actually an honor. If you had a vision of yourself as a warrior you didn't kill tourists. Helen might have planted a seed of doubt in a few of the men down there. Either old Jeru might have fewer followers come morning or they'd all be coming after me, the more honorable enemy.

I started up the hill again, going slowly in order to make as little noise as possible. In the dark phosphorescent mushrooms glowed dimly. The sounds of insects and animals filled the night, covering the noises that I made but also covering the sounds of anyone who might be following me. It felt like hours since Raj and I had the fight with the dogs but I could still occasionally see the moon through gaps in the trees; I didn't know what time it was but it had been headed down as we approached the longhouse. Higher and higher I climbed, pulling myself along using the trunks of the smaller trees and rocks and handfuls of undergrowth. I was exhausted, my legs were shot, and my arms and lower legs were covered with leaches.

Finally I reached the bare crest of the ridge and looked out across a vast panorama, dimly lit by the setting moon. I turned east and started climbing again.

When the landscape was left in blackness, when the last of the silver light had faded from the sky, I rested. I carefully cleaned the leeches off by feel. One leg was puckered with bird shot but most of it had not penetrated my boot. I stopped myself from touching it. I

knew Borneo, it was going to get infected and the less I scared myself the better. I got up and pressed on and it was only a few hundred yards further when I heard voices ahead.

It was Raj and the Lacklan's, and they had collapsed at the foot of a rock outcropping, half dead from exhaustion. "Raj?" I called out; I didn't want him taking a swipe at me in the dark.

"Boss?"

"Yeah. Hold on I'll be over there in a minute." I picked my way across the rocks toward them.

It was a subdued reunion. We were all dead tired from running and climbing over a thousand feet of mountain. I'm not sure that Helen and John had realized what was going on yet. They were just happy to be away from Jeru's longhouse and all in one piece.

Not long after I got my breath back, I began to notice that it was cold. Now, there's not too many places on the island of Borneo where you could say that but we were well over eight thousand feet and we were all dressed for the heat. To make things worse we were all worn out and the clouds were beginning to pile up against the mountain range, I could feel the moisture on my cheek and lips and when I looked up the stars were dimmer. Raj's teeth were chattering and the Lacklan's were huddled together strangely, Helen was curled up close to him but John was positioned almost as if he was trying to pretend she wasn't there. Well, whatever they were going through was their problem. I was worried about the cold.

"Let's get up," I told them. "We're going to go on a bit farther."

They looked at me uncomprehendingly, but Raj stumbled to his feet and picked up our packs, he had brought mine along from the longhouse somehow.

"Mr. Kardec?" Helen was sitting up, "I don't know if my husband can . . . he hurt his leg before we got to that village."

"Let me see it." I said. "We have to go on. We need some shelter or at least a fire and some food."

Lacklan pulled away from me as I squatted down beside him. "I can make it. I don't need help." Then he said, "I don't need your help."

We held to the ridge and we kept climbing. I needed some place to camp and this was probably not the place to find it but the slopes on either side of us were too steep to negotiate in the dark, especially given our condition. I was beat, every muscle hurt and my body begged to stop moving. John had turned his ankle and could walk only with difficulty but he and Helen were managing the altitude the best, after all, they lived near Santa Fe, over a mile above sea level. Raj was cold and something else was bothering him but he wasn't ready to talk about it. He helped John Lacklan along and kept his mouth shut.

Something was going on between John and Helen; she had tried to help him at first but he was having none of that. Finally, she gave up and he was on his own for awhile but then, because he was stumbling badly Raj offered to help and he'd accepted. Helen came up to me in the dark, she took my hand and pressed the haft of my knife into it. I returned it to its sheath.

"Thank you," she said. After that she walked with me more and more and, while I liked that in some ways, it disturbed me too.

During a pause to rest I got Raj aside and questioned him on what went on before I joined them. "Nothing," he said. "They just act like they having big fight but they don't fight, they don't talk."

"Did they ask what we were doing here?"

He laughed softly. "Oh, yes. I tell them that you come to save them from the *bali saleng*."

For a Dyak, a people who tend to tell you only what you want to hear, Raj is sometimes too straight forward.

We came to the rocky upthrust of another peak, it's blackness vaguely defined in the starlight, but there was shelter here, a bowl of rocks and within it, the black mouth of a cave. From the sounds in the jungle below I could tell it was still a couple of hours until dawn. Huddled just inside the entrance we rested and I emptied my rucksack onto a rock. I used some peroxide on my leg and poured some across the cut in my back, then got up. With the empty bag I headed back into the night.

"Mr. Kardec, where are you going?" Helen's voice spoke out of the darkness.

"To find some fuel, I'll have to go down into the forest a ways."

"Are we still in danger?"

"I don't know. Come morning I expect they'll be after us."

"And they'll find us, too." Lacklan mumbled softly.

"But will they come up here?" she asked. I read that many of the tribes feel that there are spirits in the mountains especially the peaks and will never go there."

I had heard the same. The natives were very aware of the *Toh*, the spirits of the forest and mountains. An area that was rarely visited was often considered to have dangerous *Toh* and was therefore avoided. It was Sarawak's version of our own self-fulfilling fear of

the unknown. The high mountains were reputed to be the home of powerful *Toh*.

I didn't reply as I thought about it. I hoped she was right.

"So, maybe this place is safe. At least that's what I read." she was looking for some reassurance but she didn't get it from her husband.

"You and that confounded guide book," he snapped. "We don't know that will work!"

"Well if that confounded guidebook is where she learned about headhunting, it probably saved your life." I'd had enough of Lacklan's attitude and he wasn't a potential client anymore. "Jeru wasn't even going to sharpen his *parang*."

"I'm glad you enjoyed that at my expense. I'll have you know that the weapons I've made could blow this miserable island off the map."

I was amazed. He was fuming because she had told that bunch of renegades he wasn't a warrior. He was an ego-maniac and a fool. Or maybe just a brilliant man who was so small inside that he had become lost in the forest.

"Mr. Lacklan," I told him. "I don't know if you're suicidal or exactly what your problem is but I look at life this way -- an adventure is something you return home to tell about. If you don't make it back, it's just an exotic funeral. Be happy Helen did what she did. I am. If she hadn't I might have died because I was stupid enough to try and help you."

"And why did you come after us? Because you are the good Samaritan? Or because you are after my wife?"

"John!" Helen flinched and I could see that he'd aimed that barb more at her than me.

"I don't know," I said, "but this late in the game I'd be a fool to try to figure it out." I grabbed up the knapsack and headed out into the darkness. I started down the slope and Raj came scrambling after me. I hadn't planned on his coming but was just as happy, I knew he would be very uncomfortable if the Lacklan's decided to continue the fight.

The purple light of pre-dawn was just coming to the sky as we made our way along the mountainside about one hundred feet above the forest. I was headed toward an area below us that I had glimpsed from the ridge, it was lighter in color and I was sure it was a rock slide. Where it had hit the trees we might find some downed wood.

Sure enough, it was a slide. A huge lip of rock had flaked off and gone crashing down into the jungle. Underneath the scar were the dark mouths of several caves, probably connected to the cave above where the Lacklan's waited. Thirty feet into the treeline we found all the wood we wanted, picking out the dry pieces was easy for little of it was damp. I figured that we were so high that we were above most of the rain that soaked the lower elevations, either that or we were just lucky.

We gathered as much wood as we could fit in our packs and turned to go back up the mountain. For an instant Raj froze and so did I. Between ourselves and the brightening sky was a moving, flickering black cloud. There were bursts of darkness against the sky, a sound like water rushing up a shallow sandy beach; wings, thousands and thousands of wings. The dawning sky was darkened with bats. A thin cloud rising over the jungle, they coalesced into a dense riot of swooping, dodging confusion directly over us. Their wings cupping the thin air they streamed toward the mountainside. Under the scar of the

fallen brow of rock, they flew. Pouring into the cave mouths just above us.

Then from above us I heard a thin scream. Raj and I looked at one another then I grabbed up my rifle and took off up the hill. The gun and the wood and the previous twenty-four hours of clambering up and down hillsides slowed me down. However, we made it to the top without having to ditch our loads and I eased around the rocks, rifle at the ready.

The Lacklan's were well out of the circle of rocks and away from the cave, crouched behind the rocks and harried looking. I almost laughed but couldn't summon the energy; a miniature tornado of bats fluttered and turned around the tunnel entrance, the last stragglers of the mass from below using the back door.

I'd had enough alarms for one day. Leaving Raj to start a fire in a small pocket in the rocks I went back into the cave and refilled my pack with it's supplies. I ducked and shook my head as the last of the bats flew past but I got my rope, stove fuel, first aid kit, and most importantly the little food I'd been able to bring along.

We warmed ourselves silently around the fire, the Lacklan's didn't seem to feel like talking and I didn't feel comfortable conversing with them either. I shared our dried pork and heated two cans of condensed soup over the fire. It wasn't much and it wasn't very good but it was all I had and we needed anything we could get. When we were done I put out the fire. I hated to do it as we were all chilled but the sun was coming up and our smoke might have been visible. In the tree tops below us the gibbons began their whooping cries, staking their territory for the day.

"We're going to have to keep going," I said. "We're not safe until we're back on the river and we won't be safe even then." I looked in their eyes and was afraid of what I saw.

John, with his leg barely capable of bearing his weight, was nearly finished. Helen would go on without complaining but she couldn't go further without rest. Raj could do what was necessary, he'd shut his mind down and go at it like a Chinese coolie, he'd survive if he could, regardless of the suffering. I hoped I could do the same but I wasn't sure.

"We'll be okay," I said, standing up. I looked out across the high ridge and the forest and clouds that swept away in both directions and I realized we weren't going to make it.

All we needed was rest. All we needed was to move slowly and accommodate John's injury. All we needed was time and I saw then that we were out of time.

Off down the backbone of the mountains, three miles away but plainly visible as the sunlight poured across a low shoal of clouds to the east, was a group of men. They were coming up the ridge towards us and there was an easy dozen of them . . . more men than I had bullets, more men than I cared to engage even with my pockets full of ammunition.

"Raj!" I called. "I think we've got trouble." Instantly he was beside me, John and Helen not far behind. I pointed, "Is that Jeru?"

"Yeah, Boss."

"What are we going to do?" This question was from Helen but there was no panic in her voice. She stood there, dirty, clothing torn, having had no sleep, and little rest . . . it was an honest question, she was ready to get started.

"I hold them off as long as possible. You get out of sight; retreat into the cave. Take my rope, I believe there's a way out down below."

"You believe?" John was belligerent.

I shrugged. "With any luck they'll be satisfied with me and they won't know where you've gone."

"You'll be killed!" Helen grabbed my arm and turned me toward her. Her eyes searched mine, for what I didn't know; it was one of those moments when men and women have different things in mind.

"I might be. With luck I can kill enough of them that they decide I'm not worth it."

John shifted on his bad leg. "How much ammunition have you got?"

"Nine rounds."

"She's right, you'll be killed."

"You got a better idea?"

Nobody said anything. The men on the distant ridge were getting closer.

I turned. "Let's start by getting out of sight." I ripped open my pack and pulled out the bottle of stove fuel. Going to where we'd had our fire I picked up a fair sized branch and blew on the white coals at one end. Ash flew away on my breath and deep in the darker cracks flickers of red glowed. I poured a bit of the fuel on the branch right up near the sparks and I blew again. In a minute I had a flaming torch.

The cave angled down turned and then dropped off abruptly, a black shaft corkscrewing downward. It would be a nasty climb but that in itself might save us. Bats skittered nervously on the ceiling, they didn't like the smoke from my torch.

"Raj," I called. "Get me my rope." He wasn't behind me, only the distant forms of the Lacklan's peering in from the entrance. "Raj?"

I cursed and tossed my torch down the shaft. It fell, bounced, flared and went out. In the darkness I could see reflected daylight deep in the shaft. Well, the lower cave was a way out, that was something in our favor. We could run, or they could. It wouldn't be much of a lead but it would hold off the inevitable an hour, three? It would hold off the inevitable for them, not me. I headed back out of the cave. "Damn it, Raj, where's my rope?"

When I got to the entrance he was holding it in his hands but that was all. He looked at me strangely.

"Come on!" I insisted. We had to get him and the Lacklan's started or this would all be for nothing.

"I stay with you, Boss."

"This is no time for loyalty or bravery or whatever it is, Raj. If you don't go with them they'll never find the boats. Get going!"

He shuffled forward, hesitated . . . he was scared!

I moved over to him and spoke softly, "What's wrong?"

"I go. But this not good. You think *Toh* big joke. I hope you right."

Suddenly I had an inkling of an idea. Maybe we could get out of this, all of us. If it worked it was going to take brains, and luck, and courage. But I'm better at courage when I think I've got a chance.

"Raj, if you're worried about the spirits, what about them?" I pointed out at the ridge. Jeru and his men were out of sight, negotiating a low spot, but I doubted we had more than half an hour. "Is Jeru afraid of *Toh*?"

He frowned, "Maybe . . ." Then he looked up at me squinting. "His mans, they afraid, I think. Jeru he make obat, a spell, he say he *Bali Saleng*. He say what he does okay, but all mans still afraid."

"Good." I said. "Come with me." I snatched the coil of rope out of his hand and I ran to get my stove fuel.

"What's going on?" John Lacklan grabbed at me but I avoided him.

"I've got an idea!" I said and tossed him my rifle. "If they get within five hundred yards shoot once, I'll be back."

"Tell me what you're up to, damn it!"

I didn't tell him, I was already headed down the slope towards the mouth of the lower caves. I hoped he would show good judgment because as soon as I was over the edge I could no longer see the oncoming men.

Raj and I put our backs into it. We pulled three big partly rotten logs up the hill to the caves, both of us straining like a team of oxen on the rope. We laid a fire just inside where the tunnels converged and got it burning then tossed every branch we could find up into a pile along side it. We worked, getting everything into position and doing a fair job of it until I heard the boom of the Mauser.

I tossed the fuel bottle to Raj and took off running. "Don't do anything until you hear me whistle," I yelled back. I hit the mountainside and scrambled, arms and legs tearing at the earth and rock. I must have had my second wind but my muscles felt strange and hollow, it was not a good feeling.

I paused just under the lip to get a lung full of air then, hugging the ground, my leg throbbing, I slipped over the top. John was down inside the pocket of rocks where we'd had our fire and Helen was right behind him.

"What's happened?" I whispered.

"They're close. I shot and they went to ground."

"Okay. Give me the rifle. Stay clear of the cave mouth but if anything happens to me get back in the cave and stay there no matter what happens."

"What are you going to do."

"Put on a show," I said and taking a deep breath, I stepped out.

"*Tuan Jeru!* Come out and face me!" I stood there the Mauser slung diagonally across my back. I would have rather left it with Lacklan but if they hadn't seen it on me they would have suspected an ambush.

After a moment there was a motion in the brush and the slight form of Jeru appeared with the boy in the aviator glasses at his side. They started for me across the last few feet of the rocky ridge. Jeru wore a wood-sheathed *parang* on one hip and the ancient pistol on the other. The boy carried Lacklan's rifle. They stopped a short distance away.

"You speak poorly." sneered Jeru, commenting on my fragmentary Malay.

"I speak this language no better than I have to," I said loudly, my main audience was Jeru's followers, "but I speak the language of the spirits well. My *obat* is as good as yours in this place. Go away from here. Go and leave us to ourselves. The gods of this mountain do not want you!" I pinched my fingers together, placed them between my lower lip and upper teeth and whistled as loud as I could.

The boy took a step back and shook his head in shock. He brought up the long rifle but I didn't move. I tried to calmly stare him down . . . I was sure I was going to die.

Then there came a sound from the cave like a sudden rush of wind. In the boy's glasses I saw reflected a momentary flash of orange flame in the tunnel mouth. Raj, on my signal had poured the entire bottle of stove fuel on the fire.

With a rush like a great wave crashing on a reef the bats vomited from the cave. They came piping and flapping blindly into the morning sunlight driven by the smoky fire that Raj was now stoking with all the wood he could find. With the lower entrances to the tunnels blocked by smoke and flame they sought the upper opening in numbers that were terrifying to behold. They were a great disoriented black cloud that shot from the hole in the mountain top as if from a high pressure hose. They fluttered and dove and poured into the sky above our heads.

Jeru crouched in surprise and I stepped in and before the boy could pull the rifle's trigger I slapped the barrel aside and kicked him in the groin. He went down, leaving me with the gun and I saw two of Jeru's men racing away down the ridge their tattooed backs glistening with the sweat of exertion and fear.

I turned to the old man and with a whining growl he drew his *parang*. He cut at me with such speed that I barely could move in time, shoving the rifle sideways into the blade. There was a ringing of steel and Lacklan's gun was torn from my grasp falling to the rocks at my feet. Jeru reversed and I leaped back, the blade slicing air near my belly. He was fast; for an old man he was awfully fast.

I got my knife out and took a cut at him but he thrust along my arm, his blade leaving a trace of fire and a line of blood on my skin . . . he was better at this than I was. Better by a long shot.

He stabbed and cut. We fought back and forth there on that high ridge with a clear sweep of forest below us on one side and the white glare of the clouds beneath us on the other. And then he cut me, the

knife grazing my chest, the blade momentarily catching on the Mauser's leather strap, and it was all over. His blade snagged and I caught his arm and was behind him in one movement. It was my fight then and for him it was hopeless. As good as he was with a knife, he was an old man. I was stronger than he was and I was heavier too. I broke his arm but there was no give in him so I clipped him on the jaw, a punch that would have put away a much bigger man, and I'm not proud to say that I broke that too.

He was unconscious. I was down, the world spinning around me, my chest bloody, my arm bloody, too bloody. The boy scrambled away, whining. There was the sound of gunfire. Helen was standing over me working the bolt on John's fancy rifle. Brass flew, bright against the sky. Men fled downhill, disappearing into the trees.

They broke open the first-aid kit, poured something in my wounds that hurt more than the knife had. Raj was getting me on my feet and my head was clearing, I had never really been out, just gray for awhile, like I'd held my breath too long.

We were at the edge of the slope when I remembered. I pulled away from Raj's hands and went back. Jeru moaned when I turned him on his back. He looked at me, eyes no longer full of anger but neither was there fear. He waited for me to do whatever I had to do. It took only a moment.

"Thank you, Tuan Jeru." I told him. "Go to a village where no one knows you, live your days as an old man should. Cross my path again and I'll take *your* head and hang it on my porch."

I left him there, bats circling above him, and I staggered off after the others. We went down past the cave where the fire still burned but now low and dying. Then we were in the jungle and soon it was darker and hotter.

It was two days back to the boats. Two days of struggle and pain. John Lacklan and I setting our pitiful pace. His leg was swollen and my cuts and the places where the buckshot hit me had become infected. As much as I disliked the man he had a certain kind of toughness. It was the toughness of the littlest kid on the team or perhaps the brainy child that nobody liked . . . but he wasn't going to let that leg stop us. I had to make myself keep pace with him.

The boats were intact. In this I was surprised for I was sure that even if we got to the river without another fight I thought they would have stolen or destroyed the boats. I guess with their burned longhouse, several dead and wounded leader they had enough to deal with. Raj took us down river in the bigger dugout with Fairchild's motor jury-rigged to the stern. On the trip down river I got sicker and they tell me when I arrived in Marudi I was unconscious and running a high fever. For the second time in two years I had returned from upriver barely alive. But this time I had the difference.

I lay in bed and got better. Vandover came down and brought the doctor. He shot me with penicillin, cleaned my wounds and dusted them with sulfa, then they sat on the verandah and drank the last of my scotch. I stared at the peeling paint on the ceiling.

She came to visit me an hour before the mail boat left for Singapore. The room was closed and dark but sunlight blazed through every crack in the shutters. She was dressed in a white traveling outfit and as she stood in the doorway she was a vague figure beyond the patched mosquito netting. I sat up.

"Mr. Kardec?" She came into the room, taking off a large pair of dark glasses. "I just came to thank you. You saved our lives." I could see that the wedding ring, with its empty socket, was missing from her finger.

I wanted to make some kind of smart comment but I didn't really know what it would be. "How's your husband?" I asked.

"He's got a bad sprain. All that walking we did made it worse. We're leaving today . . ." She stopped for a moment, holding on to some kind of feeling, I couldn't tell what.

"He won't talk to me," she said. "It's like I did something unforgivable back there but I don't see that I really had a choice."

"I think he's trying too hard to be a strong man." I thought this was right, it felt right. "Something inside of him is desperate. He's barely holding onto something but I don't know what it is. He'd of rather died back there than be saved by you."

"John was so brilliant. You should have seen him when we met. They all listened when he spoke, Oppenheimer, Doctor Teller, even General LeMay."

"This is a different world, Helen. You knew that, I could see it. Sometimes when there is nothing between you and nature you find out things about yourself you wish you didn't know ... sometimes when you look at yourself you are smaller, in the scheme of things than you thought you were." I shifted, sitting up a little farther, leaning back against the headboard. "There's been a time or two when I found myself in the middle of a dark forest praying for god to save me. You have to accept your fear and survive. It's not about your image of yourself it's just about getting back in one piece."

"I guess so," she said.

We were both silent for a moment. Then she straightened up, all business.

"We should pay you, at least what we were going to for guiding us. We owe you that, and more."

I carefully moved the mosquito net aside and swung my feet to the floor. The cut under my bandages pulled tightly and it burned, but it was a healing pain.

"I don't want any money," and then before I could take it back, I said, "I did it for you. I don't want to lose that."

She crossed the room and bending down, she kissed me. For just a moment she held my face in her hand. "What will you do?" she asked. "How will you ever get home?"

I didn't really wonder how she knew this, I expect Vandover or Fairchild must have told her . . . it didn't matter. I sat straighter, trying to feel the strength in my body. It was there, not much, but coming back. I opened the nightstand drawer.

"Never under rate a man who has lived as I have, Helen. Just as a man who has lived as I have would never under rate a woman like you." I grinned. "I'm not proud and I do what it takes to survive." I held out my hand and opened it to show her. It was ironic, when I had gone into the forest for personal gain I had returned with nothing but when I had gone intending to help others somehow I had been rewarded.

On my palm lay, in a setting of woven leather, the thong broken from when I had torn it from his neck. . . . the diamond of Jeru.

THE END