

NO WILD MEN IN BORNEO

By HILAIRE DU BERRIER

Ours is a very serious world. We are living in the crescendo of a great human catastrophe. Yet fortunately there are always some who see the bright side. Their humor, their story-telling talent make us relax and smile. This is what Hilaire du Berrier does with his story of Borneo—Borneo that may well be on the front pages in another few months.

Hilaire du Berrier, born on the edge of the Sioux Indian Reservation in North Dakota, has been a soldier-of-fortune, a painter, a writer, and a wanderer ever since they threw him out of military school in America.

One of his first jobs was demonstrating parachutes and hanging under airplanes on a rope ladder for a flying circus; his most amusing and least profitable one, he says, was representing French arms and Dutch airplanes in the Balkans with a Hungarian Baroness for a business partner. They gave dinners in twenty countries but never sold a gun.

He went through the war '35 and '36 in Ethiopia. He flew a pursuit plane in the Spanish Civil War, has lived in London and Paris and Monte Carlo, written articles on French Somaliland and Morocco.

In Paris du Berrier was a contributor to "Petit Parisien" and "Hebdo III", since then he has appeared in "Ken" and in "Esquire." The latter magazine will shortly publish a series of stories by him on European cities before the war.

Speaking of his experiences, he is immensely pleased when people call him an adventurer. Among princes, he says, it is a title, only among peasants an insult. He became a soldier-of-fortune because it seemed the only thing he could get into without having to join a union. It is really the world's oldest profession, half-way point between a firing-squad and a throne, nobler than diplomacy and fraught with danger, chief of which is always starvation.

Down on the Red Sea he became a Mohammedan; he believes the Arabs are right; a man should live by poetry and the sword.

He came to China in 1937 and got a job in the interior. Discharged, he was left to wander back to the coast as best he could when some Chinese decided he was a Japanese spy.

Later he became adviser to a Chinese general whom he worked six months for before he found out who the general was working for.—K.M.

One day I was sitting in the lounge of the Hong Kong Hotel. It is like a mother's knee to a stream of traders, arms salesmen, journalists, missionaries, officers, and wanderers in general, who have found the East hot or long or thirsty or rocky beneath their uncertain feet.

Its yawning doors promise the peace of a cloister and the shelter a portcullis gives. Inside a boy with soft slippers

will serve you a drink of anything ice will float in, under an electric fan ("foong tse-tse" to him) for a fraction of what the peace of mind it brings is worth.

As I was sitting, lonely as only a stranger can be lonely in a colony considered so unattractive by its inhabitants that anyone, who came there without having to, is taken for a spy, an American navy-wife came in. She

was also a leper by passport, so we doubled our strength by sharing a table.

A little later a Canadian appeared accompanied by a Scotsman, and since, in a case like this, one has to take the good along with the bad—they couldn't sit with the navy-wife without taking me into the fold as well—one of the pleasantest experiences of my life resulted.

They were sailing for North Borneo in three days, aboard the *Mau Sang*, a Jardine freighter under the command of Captain Jowett, and while Jack Ellis, the Canadian, was lying to the navy-wife, Bill Mercer, the Scotsman, painted such a desolate picture of Sandakan to me, I immediately wanted to go there.

It was the best investment I ever made. For surely in this warped world where most of a wanderer's jaunts are among unsympathetic strangers and resemble nothing so much as the promenade of a mongrel dog through exclusive residential districts with a can tied to him, meeting the sort of people you find in Sandakan is worth any price.

The problem of a visa was an obstacle, because unfortunately the old days when all a man needed to gratify wanderlust and ease his itching feet was the price of a ticket are gone forever. In these days you must have an excuse for wanting to go someplace, and just an impulse to take a boat ride and see what some little port in the seas' by-ways looks like is no longer considered a legitimate one.

The matter was debated for some time, and in all due fairness to the men who sit in hot offices and have to bother with such things, for they could have kept me from that voyage, they at last compromised and gave me a visa. The "loyal opposition" in the visa office was won over with the agreement that they would telegraph ahead and warn Sandakan I was coming. Officials there could watch me so I couldn't do any harm, and thus a visa wouldn't matter, anyway.

We sailed out of Hongkong on the eleventh of November. I have never been able to understand why more people do not take that trip, for you could not live in any hotel in Hongkong as cheaply or as well as you could on that boat. Of course the stretch of sea between Hongkong and the Philippines is one of the roughest bodies of water a man with the whole world to choose from could ever hit on for a joy-ride, but life in Hongkong wasn't any too smooth either. Dooley, the first-mate, an Irishman born in India and hence known as Dooley Sahib, said he had stuck his hand out on the bridge and caught a fish. But after three days of this you go through a passage called the "hole-in-the-wall," between two Philippine Islands, into the Sulu Sea. Days begin to get warmer, seas bluer, and stomachs less acrobatic.

Along about 4:00 p.m., little Captain Jowett, Commodore of the line and one of the finest skippers that ever wore gold braid, will send a boy down to ask if you would like a drink. This happens every afternoon. It gets kind of lonely up in the Captain's quarters, and the Skipper can tell a story with the best of them. When he finishes he turns his blue eyes on you and says: "Now what do you think of that, lad?"

And if you are truthful you answer: "Skipper, just knowing you is better than a Cook's tour."

Jack Ellis, the second officer, and Bill Mercer, whom I had met in the hotel, each had their own idea of a "NEW DEAL" we were going to work out for ourselves.

After the Skipper went to bed at night, I would climb up on the bridge where Ellis was on watch. From the cabin of Dooley Sahib, back aft, came the strains of grand opera on a gramophone; Dooley had all of them, catalogued and filed neatly in a cabinet facing his library. If there wasn't music, Dooley would be reading, a drink in one hand, a book in the other, and his bald pate, smooth as a billiard ball,

nodding when it pleased him. Dooley had read everything.

Up on the bridge Ellis would point out the stars, Orion's belt and Aldabaran and Castor and Pollux, and while explaining the mysteries of stellar navigation, he painted a glowing picture of how we would scour the China seas if we could only get the Chinese to let us take over one of those torpedo boats they had stored in Hongkong.

Afternoons while Ellis was sleeping, Bill Mercer, (or Tuan Mercer, hereafter, for Tuan means master and all foreigners are Tuan in Borneo) would lean over a ship's rail, under an awning on the leeward side and tell me how we could make a lot of money without any work, or at least not much:

A prospector's permit only costs five Straits Dollars. We could either shake a pan, like this: he showed me how. Or we could build a cradle: he drew a diagram. Or we could make a box sluice, like this, and I could carry the soil in buckets and dump it in the sluice while he poured water over it from some other buckets and at night all we had to do was pick the gold out. If we didn't want to carry the soil and water, we could hire the Dusans to do it. Dusans are the tribe around Sandakan.

Now between Captain Jowett's stories, Dooley Sahib's humor, Ellis whispering adventure in one ear and Tuan Mercer promising untold wealth in the other, with nothing to interrupt any of it but sleep, good meals, and drinks the ship's officers insisted on paying for, just for someone new to talk to, Raymond Whitcomb never conceived any entertainment program to match it.

After five days land began crowding down on us, islands became more numerous, and turning the bend beneath the leper colony, a beautiful green cliff rising out of the sea, we saw a few brown roofs between sea front and jungle and Tuan Mercer said this was Sandakan.

North Borneo, as few know, is not properly speaking a British Colony. It is the last of the old British Charter Companies, and practically everything in it is controlled by the all powerful Harrison and Crosfield Company. The Governor is chosen by the Charter Company, subject to approval by the British Government. Timber and rubber barons have built huge estates, founded industries, and created employment for the natives.

There are no railways in British North Borneo. Sandakan, the capital, is only a map's pin-prick, a niche for man to anchor a ship in, a clearing, and a handful of homes which a jungle is continually trying to push into the ocean.

Over the town are the same stories and emotions and problems we find over larger towns, only more personal because the radius is so small.

There is a hotel in Sandakan, but hospitable planters rarely let a stranger stay in it. A few hours after the boat docked, the Captain sent word that Tuan Walker, the rubber planter, had invited us to dinner for the following night. I had never heard of Mr. Walker, but he had heard a stranger was in town, and a stranger is better than a batch of new magazines in a place like that.

Sandakan would be an ideal spot for some old-time Western cowboy to ride the grub-line. A man can live there for his first month on invitations.

We came ashore, down a rickety dock and through a gate, up a narrow street to the village square where a Chinese was sleeping in a ramshackle car.

The Skipper majestically beckoned: "Tain Fook, a taxi." I don't know why he said "a" taxi. It was "the" taxi; and another interesting point to Tain Fook's taxi service was: he gave you a detailed resumé of the local gossip while driving. He would be invaluable to Somerset Maugham, if it weren't for the fact that Somerset Maugham has

already gleaned Sandakan of its confidences once and so doesn't dare come back again.

With Tain Fook telling us who was going to have a baby and who else was contemplating matrimony, the rattling car wound its way up a brown road, stopped for a minute by the entrance to Government House while the Skipper pointed out a small building. Said he: "Now the visitor's book is in there. You go in and sign it while I wait for you here. They don't like me around there because I'm not a Christian. No sir, I tell you I am not a Christian. Those Christians would crucify you without a qualm——."

As the car went on its way again, the road got narrower and more crowded by the jungle. It seems that as the colony was building that road, money got scarcer as the road went inland, and eventually it just dribbles off into jungle. Once in a while a little mouse deer runs across it, about twelve inches high, with legs the thickness of a cigarette and hoofs the size of your fingernail. He is a timid creature who calls to his mate by tapping one hoof. The Dusans will linger over a tender morsel of one and tell you the mouse deer's enemies are their enemies. A brief look at an intruder and the mouse deer dashes into the dense undergrowth by the road side.

Many of Martin Johnson's settings were faked on the edge of this road that old-timers in Borneo won't risk leaving for a short-cut.

From time to time you pass small groups of convicts wearing broad head-pieces to protect them from the sun, marching docilely along behind a Sikh guard with a rifle and bayonet. They are supposed to be working, pushing back a forest, but as the car passes they lean on their shovels to watch it. Both they and the Sikhs grin and wave to Tain Fook. Once when two groups of convicts were working together the two Sikhs got in an argument and started fighting, whereupon the convicts separated them and marched them

back to the prison, complaining that they couldn't work with guys like that.

Where the side-road turns off to Tuan Walker's plantation, a narrow-gauge track, about two feet apart, runs beside it. Tuan Walker has a little railway, run by a motor-cycle engine, that he uses when the big rains are on, and at the end of it there is a spacious Borneo house, a box-shaped structure, peaked to cut the rain and with three sides verandah.

A radio blares in the corner, but war and the Japanese are remote things, like the hardships of Napoleon's retreat from Russia.

When he wants more ice in his drink he asks for "stone water." If problems arise among the natives, Tuan Walker, who has spent twenty-nine years of his fifty-seven in Borneo, hears the case and pronounces judgment, and just off-hand I should say Tuan Walker must be extremely lenient, for he confided that he had liked every American he ever met.

Whisky and soda in Borneo is called a "stengah," and drinking it, the favorite indoor pastime of the colony, is known as getting "shikkerred," so unfortunately I can only give an account of the first part of the numerous dinners that were given for me in Sandakan.

Next morning Tuan Mercer started designing the sluice we were going to build. And that evening I dined at Leila Lodge, the largest home in Borneo, with Tuan Phillips, manager of one of the local companies. A hundred and fifty people at a time have been invited to Leila Lodge for cocktails back in the days when Sandakan was booming.

Now Tuan Phillips has a grand piano in one corner where he stops en route to the bathroom to play a bar or two of Rachmaninoff's prelude. A firm in England sends him out twenty or thirty pounds worth of books at a time, which he loans to his friends. If they don't

bring them back it is all right, they can't stray far in Sandakan.

Tuan Phillips has wandered in his day also, through Abyssinia and Arabia and Somaliland. All the legendary figures that have sprung up in the Near East and the Far were friends of his, and sometimes his neighbors will tell you: "You know, Phillips was a spy in Arabia during the war." He wasn't, and they don't mean any harm by saying he was; it just makes him a better story, and everyone takes it as that.

"Colonel Lawrence?" he says. "Why, of course I knew him. But Arabic scholar? My foot! He spoke Arabic like—," and here his eyes wander around the room till they come to rest on Dooley Sahib's bald head: "—like Dooley Sahib speaks English."

Coming back to the docks through the night, a motor-cycle went putt-putt-putt in the distance and Dooley Sahib muttered: "Tuan Mercer calling for a mate."

When one wants a hair-cut one doesn't go to the barber shop in Sandakan. One sends for Lopez, the barber, and he comes on a bicycle. While he cuts your hair he tells you what the Governor thinks of the situation or how the "Affair Gibby" is coming along.

The "Affair Gibby" is an old story, older than Somerset Maugham whom a hundred "Gibbys" have sworn to shoot if he ever comes East again.

It seems that the current Gibby had gone home on leave, leaving a pretty Malayan housekeeper and four little children to keep things going until his return. Back in London, with a new contract in his pocket and a raise in pay, he fell in love with the first white girl he saw and up and married her. Now as their boat approached Singapore tension on the island rose:

"Will he tell his wife? How adroitly will he get the housekeeper out of the house and upcoast before his bride gets there? What sort of a settlement will

he make the Malayan girl?" It is a situation most of them have been through themselves, and they chuckle at Gibby's discomfiture. In London it looks easy, a bagatelle, but as the boat nears Sandakan it is not so simple. And if Gibby isn't fair to the Malayan girl and her children the colony will all be with her. They are just people in Sandakan.

What the wife will say when she learns the Dusan language and starts picking up scraps of conversation is the prime subject of speculation among the women. It is a problem most of them understand also. Those who couldn't take it are gone and those who could are always interested in seeing how it works out this time.

From Lopez, the barber, and Tain Fook, the taxi-owner, Sandakan learns what is happening. Incidentally, you never pay Tain Fook cash. You sign a chit for your taxi bill, then forget all about it till the day you leave. Tain Fook will meet you at the dock. Lopez, the amiable Philippino, will have told him you are leaving.

The new lad in the Customs office went to a dinner one night at Government House, and on his way home, just gentlemanly "shikkered," he stopped for a last drink with agreeable companions. Tain Fook knew where; he took him.

And next morning, still in evening clothes, he showed up in church leading a demure little Malayan by the hand, in her best waist and sarong, with all her gold trimmings. She didn't want to come, but the Customs boy told her he would beat her ears off if she didn't go to church on Sunday, like a lady, so she went.

Customs Tuan listened attentively to the service, the little Dusan girl looked at her hands, some of the congregation snickered, and those who weren't there got the details from Lopez.

Customs Tuan went home on the next boat. This was Sandakan.

The American navy-wife we had the drink with in Hongkong hadn't seemed so beautiful when he was there, but back in Borneo every day made her seem more wonderful to Mercer.

He leaned over the design of the box sluice he was drawing, chewing the end of a pencil and thinking, his mind about equally divided between prospecting and the destroyer commander's wife.

Suddenly he said: "Yes sir, she is pure gold, no matter where you bite her."

Days passed. Captain Jowett looked for an alligator skin for his wife. Tuan Mercer changed his mind and decided on a cradle instead of a box-sluice. Dooley Sahib asked the Skipper: "Sure, an' what would you be wanting with an alligator?" Scornful of alligators was Dooley Sahib, except as pets.

"Ay, if I 'ad one," he said, "I'd 'ave his teeth pulled out when 'e reached the age of belligerency. Then I would 'ave him a false set made by a dentist, which same I would take away from him when it came time to sleep." Good old Irish, bald-headed Dooley!

He took me to a show one night, a cinema, where they showed trailers of all the films for months to come, a Mickey Mouse comedy, a newsreel two years old, and an ancient feature picture all jumbled up together.

As far as the natives were concerned who make up the bulk of the audience, it was all part of one long picture and their interpretation of it was probably better than the original. Trailers are made up of high lights, women slapping each other, men shooting, cars veering around corners; and the quiet natives looking at these things, sort of regard them as "newsreels" of the life wild men live outside of Borneo. Foreigners lost all faith in what they saw in movies after Martin Johnson and his wife made a film on the edge of town, but the natives are still unspoiled because they didn't recognize it.

Tuan McCloed rubbed whisky on Dooley's bald head while Mercer tried to sell him some stock in the prospecting company, to which Dooley Sahib replied: "An' as if it isn't enough, 'aving to live in a bloody place like this without the likes o' ye bedevilin' an' bewilderin' me!"

In the end we never dipped a pan. Tuan Mercer agreed we would stand more chance of striking gold if the Rajah of Sarawak had more daughters. Still that ticket to Sandakan was a good investment.

A few nights before I went away, it was the day Americans call Thanksgiving and eat turkey, the natives in Sandakan and all the islands around celebrated the feast of Hari Raya, marking the end of the Mohammedan holy month.

The foreigners in the capital (about fifty) contributed to a fund. The natives cut fronds from the big fan-palms, put up some tents and strung lights in a clearing in the forest. A board dancing floor was layed and some whisky (a taste acquired from pinching odd nips from master's bottle) set on a table loaded with native fruits and cakes.

A Dusan with a wicked knife-scar on his throat beat a monotonous time on a tom-tom, while another sawed chords on a violin. Dignitaries wearing black, half-tarbush skull caps, sat along one side. Other men stood behind them, women across the tent.

It was like a Gauguin painting: night and a drum pounding in the tropics. Native girls in sarongs and all their jewelry, gliding in a slow, shuffling dance, drugging themselves with music.

You could feel the tom-tom pounding in your temples, little feet hypnotically shuffling beneath a sarong, zig-zagging among the dancers in a long glide, now standing motionless, only arms moving. It went on hour after hour, hypnotic.

Expressionless faces and a beating tom-tom and a violin, and outside was a jungle and up above was a moon.

Tuan Mercer drank with a boy who worked for him, his boy's guest for a night, and the boy smiled. On this occasion he could say anything to his boss he wanted to, but it took some time to get up courage; then he said: "Tuan Mercer, you have best heart, hardest tongue, I ever see."

Profanity is the only form of self-expression most foreigners have in a place like this, but their boys know they don't mean it. All in all, from every aspect, Hari Raya was more fun than any Thanksgiving I ever went to.

But next morning at breakfast Captain Jowett said he was glad we were leaving. He liked Sandakan all right, but the *Mau Sang* didn't. No mother ever loved a first-born child more than the Skipper loved that wave-scarred, rusting hulk of a freighter. He wouldn't have traded it for the *Queen Mary*.

Rowing out to it in a sampan with a setting sun silhouetting it against the sea, you could see his lips moving and his head nodding as he admired it. He whispered, as though he were imparting a confidence: "You know, lad, a strange thing happened to me last night. Yes sir, a strange thing, lad. I was coming back aboard ship, and as I looked up at her bow there, like one would look at a lady, I saw her hawser pipe wink at me.

"Yes it did, lad. I said: 'What's the matter, lass?' and she said to me 'When are we going back to Hongkong?'

"I said: 'Sure now, an' don't you like this place, lass?' and proud as you please, she up and answered me: 'Not a bit of it, I don't. There's barnacles on me bottom and blisters on me top, and I want to get away from here, I do.'

"'Ay, lass,' I said, 'as soon as we are loaded we'll be going back to Hongkong, and by Friday night we ought to be on our way.'

"'Are we going back to the old buoy?', she asked, and I told her ay, we'd be back at the old buoy. 'Why, lass, do you like the old buoy?' I asked her, and she answered: 'Ay. I'm well-known there. I know all the big ships and all the little ones and they all know me. I'm happy at the old buoy.'

The old skipper turned his blue eyes questioningly on me and asked: "Now what do you think of that, lad?"

The last time Ellis and I rode from the Sandakan docks to where the *Mau Sang* was anchored out in the harbor, it was night, and each drop of phosphorescent water from the boat's oars fell on the black-green surface of the sea like a golden coin on a roulette table.

It was a dark night but the sea was so full of phosphorus it lit up the prow and sides of our boat and left a blue-gold wake behind us. I reached over and scooped up a handful. It was the nearest I ever came to touching gold in Borneo.

Looking at it I thought: What a shame, Travelogue-Fitzpatrick always says: "And so we reluctantly leave the island of———behind us," and then sails out in the afternoon. What he misses by never leaving at night!

Early next morning we went away, but some day I am going back to that place.

Besides, I have wondered ever since what Gibby's wife did and what Gibby told her. That affair of Gibby's was a story that Sandakan and I read together, up to the climax. Then I went away and Sandakan finished it alone, leaving me still wondering what happened.