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Pemangkat People of Borneo, 1937-1939
Part 2

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CHAPTER VII
Ismail

Ismail was the "djeramudi," the skipper of the motor launch that pulled the barges alongside the ships anchored in the bay, and back again into the little river where the customs warehouses were located. Besides Ismail there were two engineers in the boat. The boat was equipped with double Deutz engines; one for each propeller. Each engineer was in charge of one of the engines.

Ismail had a fine, almost white face and a slender figure. He always smiled but never talked very much. We got along fine.

When ships came in they had to pass a bar 10 miles out from our bay. The water from the Sambas River, at the mouth of which the bay was located, kept the channel between the bay and the sandbar deep enough for the ships to go through. On the sides of this channel, which was surrounded by wide muddy flats, Chinese fishermen had built bamboo fishing traps in which they caught shrimp. The river, which had been pushed back by the flood tide, really came pouring out during ebb tide, and carried the shrimp into the traps, since they were unable to swim against this strong current. There were no lights or beacons. When a ship wished to arrive or depart when it was dark, the captains would ask me to arrange for a red light to be put on one of the fishing traps, which would then serve as a beacon for them in the darkness.

Ships would always try to pass the bar one hour or more before high tide so that in case they got stuck on the bar, the flood tide would set them free again. Never would they try to pass during ebb tide.

One day a ship had arrived in the early morning and upon arrival, as was customary, I discussed the time of departure with the Captain and the Chief Officer, estimating the time needed for unloading and loading. We figured that it would be too risky to leave that same night, because we estimated the ship would not be ready in time to depart well before that night's high tide. So it was decided the ship would leave at daylight the next morning and the loading would be finished that night.

After I had signed all the necessary invoices, manifests and other papers, and when all cargo was alongside, around 6 o'clock that evening, I went on board with the motor launch with the papers. I wanted to say goodbye to the Captain and to ask him the expected time of arrival at the next port. I needed this information to send a telegram, giving the estimated time of arrival and particulars about the cargo.

When I came into the Captain's cabin he offered me a gin. I accepted, of course, since it was quite customary. However, he had already been drinking. I could see that he had had several before I had arrived. When the Chinese boy left the cabin with his order, the Captain started to tell me that my djeramudi was a lazy so-and-so. When I asked him what the trouble was, he told me that he had asked Ismail to put a red light on a fishing trap because he wanted to try to leave that same night instead of waiting until the next morning, as previously agreed upon. I did not like this a bit and could not understand Ismail refusing to do anything that was reasonable. So when the Chinese boy returned with the drinks, I sent him down to the motor launch to ask Ismail to come to the Captain's cabin. I did not touch my drink. When Ismail came, I asked him why he had refused to bring out a light. He said the sea outside the bay was getting too rough and it would be dangerous to go all the way to the nearest fishing trap which was about eight kilometers out. The Captain, who normally was a very reasonable man, had criticized Ismail, and, as such, my organization. Before giving him a chance for an argument, I stood up and told Ismail, "Let's go and try it together."

"Baik, Tuan" ("OK, Sir"), he said and we left the cabin, leaving an embarrassed Captain behind; he had not counted on this.

My father was a professional fisherman and sea captain. From the age of six he had taken me on many trips in the North Sea and the Zuyderzee. I had grown accustomed to the dangers of storms and rough seas. Captains and merchant marine officers, many of whom were farmer's sons who had gone to nautical college, have a habit of looking down on those that work in the company's offices and would call them "landlubbers." In my blood, however, was the blood of generations of sea captains, back to the days of three masted sailing vessels. It always hurt me whenever such a degrading remark was made. I took the wheel myself and off we went. The boat had a fixed canvas cover and was built to navigate in rough weather. Coming out of the bay, the sea was much rougher than I had expected it to be, and soon I was forced to tell the engineers to go at half speed. The waves got bigger and bigger and the boat would dive into these dark ugly waves; leaving me cold with sweat and fear, praying we would come up again. And we were not halfway yet. I realized the absolute folly of this endeavor. In the meantime, neither Ismail nor the engineers had spoken a word but I could feel their thoughts. Whatever their thoughts might be, I knew they would not protest. With their Asiatic stoicism they would have gone on to be drowned with me, if I was fool enough to go on.

I decided to go back, but what worried me was how to turn the boat around. It is one thing to keep a boat straight heading against the oncoming wind and waves, but what would happen if the storm got her sideways? If it could still be done, it would be Ismail who would have to do it. He had handled that boat for years and knew exactly what she could take.

I said, "Ismail, do you think you can still turn her around?"

"Yes, Sir!" he said, and the characteristic big smile he usually wore came back to his face.

I turned the wheel over to him and when he turned the boat around beautifully, I finally relaxed and lit a cigarette. My hands were red from gripping the wheel. Only then did I realize how tense I had been. With the waves and the wind coming from behind, the boat danced back to the ship in less than no time. When we got there I thanked my boys for standing by me and all they said - "That's alright, sir." We, the four of us, represented the company and they knew we stood together.

Going up to the Captain's cabin, I was ready for him. If he gave me the slightest argument I would report him to the management. But he was a changed man entirely. I now believe that as a good sailor, he must have realized, even before me, what a foolish request he had made and the danger he had subjected us to.

He had sobered up completely and was very happy when I agreed to take him up on that drink.

CHAPTER VIII
The Black Dog

Of all my experiences in 18 years in the Far East, what happened with the black dog was one of the strangest.

When I took over the office at Pemangkat, my predecessor left me with the black dog. It did not have a name. It did not actually belong to him, but it was originally owned by a Swedish customs officer who had contracted Weil's disease in the newly opened swimming pool and had died of it. The swimming pool had never been used again. The dog reminded everyone of his strange death.

The dog came into my office the very first morning I started to work there. The door was open and it lay down behind the door, which stood open all day. The Chinese clerks told me that the dog had done this for many years.

In the Far East you have to be particularly careful about hygiene. When I noticed that flies were concentrating on the dog's ear, on which there was a bleeding sore, I decided to get rid of the dog.

At that time there was no Dutch civil servant at Pemangkat; the *Demang*, (*wedana*, or native colonial official), the head of all Malays in the area, was temporarily in charge. I called him on the phone and asked him to send over some policemen to take away the dog. He seemed most unenthusiastic, but after three phone calls, two policemen appeared one day and they chased the dog from my office. When the dog walked away slowly, looking very much offended, one of the policemen pulled out his revolver and aiming, pulled the trigger. But nothing happened. To this day I do not know if the gun was loaded. After this the policemen left, and the dog came back every day as if nothing had ever happened.

How many times I called the Demang's office, I do not know, but all I could find out was that no further action could be taken. The dog was now holy because the gun had refused to go off, and there was no policemen who would be foolish enough to hurt a holy thing.

Thoroughly disgusted, I discussed the problem one day with the customs officer, Targanski. Targanski suggested that I take care of this matter myself. As customs officer and harbour master he had several rifles and guns at his disposal, and he offered me the use of a gun. I now believe that Targanski was secretly enjoying my problem and wanted to see how I reacted. I told him I would do it, but that we had to wait until a time when

my wife would be away from the house. She was sentimentally opposed to any cruelty to animals, and although I did not enjoy hurting an animal myself, I felt that where our own health was concerned the dog should be sacrificed.

One hot afternoon, when it was extremely quiet around my office, I decided to act. Targanski brought me a loaded gun and when I took it and stepped on the little typing stool, next to which the dog was lying, Targanski, together with my Chinese staff, left the office, closing the door behind them. Our house, in which the office was also located, was built on poles. Once or twice a year, when there was an exceptionally high tide, the water would come all the way under our house. A bridge had been built over the pond around our house, leading from the steps up from the road onto the porch in front of the office.

I aimed right behind the dog's ear because I had been told that was the best spot to kill an animal. The sound of the shot was deafening, and then in a fraction of a second I realized how stupid I had been to have the door closed. I had visions of the wounded dog attacking me. One thing I knew, however, it was not dead. Slowly, as if blinded, it started feeling its way around. Passing the door it continued along the wall, leaving a trail of blood as it went. No sooner did I see my way clear than I escaped through the door. There were question marks all over the faces of Targanski and the Chinese clerks.

What had happened? I told them quickly and realized what a fool I had been not to fire another shot, for the dog had lain quite still for at least 15 seconds after my first shot. That was the time I had wasted worrying about the door being closed.

Suddenly we saw the front paws and the head of the dog coming through the window next to my desk. It must have circled the whole office, finding the only opening. We all looked to see if it could get out. It seemed impossible for a heavily wounded animal, but it did get out and fell about six feet to the ground. I aimed and fired a second shot, apparently missing. Slowly it walked away and crossed the other bridge, which led from our yard onto the road. I ran through the office and the house to the back porch, and just when it hit the road I fired again. This time I must have hit it because the dog fell down. I was certain it was dead now. But no, it stood up and again walked away. By this time I felt sick. I could not fire again. I hated myself for doing this in the first place. I don't remember what really happened afterwards, other than that we discussed this whole thing at length. Targanski kept smiling, showing his white teeth, and I hated him.

A trail of blood in the office showed us where the dog had moved along the wall. The world map behind my desk was sprinkled with blood. Luckily none of the papers on my desk, which were the monthly papers for Head Office, had been touched.

But I thought I had succeeded in one thing at least: the dog was gone and did not come back.

One day Targanski came to my office and reported that one of his men, who lived close to the swamps where only coconut trees grew, had seen the dog there half buried in the mud. We all thought it would die there.

But then about three weeks later the dog was seen at the market, not only alive but with all its sores cured. I could not believe it, but in a way I felt very much relieved. I almost hoped it would come back to visit us, but it never did, at least not during the daytime.

Then one night, when a ship came in at 2 o'clock in the morning, I turned the lights on in the office, and when I opened the front door there was the dog again. Looking healthy, with a beautiful skin and no sores. Slowly it stood up, looked me straight in the eyes and walked away. This went on for the rest of the time I spent in Pemangkat, it always looked at me and walked away.

My wife told me that as soon as I left to go to the ships, the dog would come back, but when I was there, it always walked away, which gave me the queerest feeling. Nevertheless, I never again asked Targanski to borrow a gun. Its potential health hazard no longer seemed important. Later, as a prisoner of war under the Japanese, I sometimes thought about the dog which had survived our foolish attempts to kill it.

CHAPTER IX
Ahmat's Sacrifice

When my wife returned from Jakarta where she had gone to get pediatric help for the baby, she had taken along with her a Javanese woman who was going to be our cook. She was very poor and the only clothes she had were a sarong and *kabaai* (*kebaya*, blouse) my wife had bought her. We had very nice servant quarters built onto the house, but in those two rooms she must have felt too lonely to sleep that first night.

Mohabar had gone on a month-long vacation. Ahmat, one of the coolies, had gone to live in his hut on our lot during Mohabar's absence.

In the tropics it used to be the tradition to always get up at sunrise and drink coffee on the porch. Dawn is one of the nicest moments of the tropical day, when it is still comparatively cool. Nature gradually comes to life as the sun rises above the horizon.

When we got up the next morning, to our surprise we

saw the cook sneak out of Mohabar's cabin. We knew that in the Far East love is not a long drawn-out affair. But the first night - that was really fast work! Of course it was none of our business, and when Mohabar came back and cook asked us if Ahmat could move in with her, we had no objection.

Ahmat was not one of the brightest boys, but he was loyal and very willing. When after a few months cook showed signs of expecting a baby, I called Ahmat into my office and asked him if he was going to marry cook. He smiled very happily and said he would be delighted to do just that. However, there were some religious difficulties. She was a Mohammedan - Islamic - and he was a Dayak. In order to find a priest to marry them, he had to become a Mohammedan, which meant he had to be circumcised. He asked my advice on what he should do, so I told him to go ahead and find a priest who would attend to converting him. Some time later he came to see me again and informed me that the local priest had refused to handle his case because the girl was already pregnant. He had however found a *dukun* - a witchdoctor - in a smaller village who would do it for 10 guilders. I advanced him the money and gave him a day off. All seemed to be well; more money (in advance) was asked for, to arrange for the wedding.

Then, when a few days later I watched the coolies unload a barge, I noticed the strange way Ahmat staggered under a bag of rice, his face twisted in pain.

The next day cook came to my office and said "*Mintah obat,*" which means - "Please give me medicine." I had a small dispensary with iodine, vaseline, aspirin, bandages, cottonwool and a few other items. Although I had no specific medical education, I knew enough to handle simple cases. Of course when cooked asked for medicine, I had to know what it was for. She said it was for Ahmat and to just give her some medicine. She acted very strangely and I told her I wanted to see Ahmat. Reluctantly she led me into their quarters, where poor Ahmat sat on the floor, his legs crossed under him, as is a native custom. Show me - I said and when he pulled back his sarong, there was a blue lump the size of a small chicken egg under his penis. This had caused the skin around it to become very tight. The only thing I could think of was vaseline. So I took cook back to the office, gave her a full pot of vaseline and instructed her to apply the vaseline gently and keep it under vaseline continuously.

Two days later Ahmat was back at work. My reputation as a (witch) doctor had gone skyrocketing and patients started coming in by the dozens from all around, until a few days later a man from a Madurese *prahue* (*perahu, proa,* sailing boat) showed up minus three toes on his left foot, which he had accidentally cut off with a hatchet while cutting wood. I told two men to hold him, while I poured iodine on the wound, after which I bandaged his foot. The Madurese are a fierce seafaring folk from the island of Madura, north of Java. They think nothing of killing. When the man left after my treatment, his swearing did not sound pleasant. It was then I decided to restrict my first aid treatments to my own personnel.

Ahmat and the cook were happy and very devoted to us. With both of them earning well and paying practically nothing to live, cook looked wealthier every day, with nicer clothes and more and more jewelry.

When transferred to Jakarta we took them with us, and the cook helped my wife with the baby until we all left the ship. One hour later she gave birth to her own baby. It remains one of the mysteries of the Orient how that woman could have delayed the birth of her baby until her duties to her mistress were completed.

CHAPTER X
Mohabar

As an employee of the K.P.M. (Royal Packet Navigation Company), it was one of my duties to supervise the loading and unloading of the ships. There was no harbour with a wharf to moor the ships, but they anchored in a beautiful bay at the mouth of the Sambas River. To load and unload the ships I had nine barges and a motor launch. The launch was used to pull the barges in and out of a little river.

For the repair and upkeep of the barges, I had a carpenter whose name was Mohabar. Never in my life have I met a man to whom I became so attached. Malayo-Polynesian people are on average not taller than 5'5" - most of them are smaller - but Mohabar was 5'7". He was a mixture of two ethnic groups: the Dayaks, the "headhunters" of Borneo, and the Buginese, the "pirates" of Celebes. He was of a muscular build, his face almost like that of some African Negroes, but with fine features, his hair curly and always closely cropped.

It is difficult to describe how you can become so fond of a man. Yet when Mohabar disagreed with me, he would always tell me. He only did that when he knew I was going to make a mistake. His loyalty was unlimited. He was always there when I needed him and never in the way.

One night when all the barges were full, having just unloaded a ship, Mohabar, with the two watchmen, banged on my living room door. He was afraid one of the barges had sprung a leak. I ran outside with them and ordered the custom seal broken, and the men to start

unloading. In less than 30 minutes, 200 bags of sugar each weighing 100 kilos (or 200 pounds) were unloaded. Each of the coolies carried one on his back, but Mohabar took two at a time. He was a strong man.

Yet he could be so gentle. When our daughter was born, he surprised us one day with a beautiful baby stool made of teak, the very hard wood used to repair the covers of our barges. He had no children of his own, and he would look at our daughter with great tenderness.

Because ships would arrive at all hours during the day or night, Mohabar and his wife had come to live in a large cabin (pavilion) next to our house. When I would get a phone call from the next station, Singkawang, at 2 o'clock in the morning informing me that I could expect a ship at 3 o'clock, it was Mohabar who saw to it that all the coolies and the motorboat crew were there in time.

After we had been in Pemangkat for about a year, Mrs. Mohabar came to see me one morning as I was sitting at my desk. This was highly irregular, even though I saw her almost every day. She was an introvert, and although she and my wife would have talks, she never spoke to me other than the normal politeness of "good morning," etc. She was pretty and almost white of skin.

I asked her what she wanted and she told me she would like to have an advance. When you run a business in Indonesia, you are used to such requests. It is no exception, but the rule. When there is a death in the family, a wedding or a birth, advances are asked for and given. A mother-in-law very often dies three times a year to help qualify for an advance. When I asked Mohabar's wife what the advance was for, she told me it was to give a *selamatan*. A *selamatan* is a feast attended by a priest and friends. With the eating, there is music and praying. When I asked "What is this *selamatan* for?", she replied "For Mohabar's funeral."

I was completely stunned. Mohabar, who had been alive and kicking the previous day - dead! I could not believe it. It seemed like an ugly joke. My three Chinese clerks were as stunned as I was. Without a word I left my desk and went to their cabin. There indeed, on their bamboo bed, lay Mohabar in his shorts, eyes closed and seemingly dead. As a boy born on an island, I had learned how to find out for sure if a drowned man is dead, by holding a small mirror in front of his mouth. I ran back to the house and got a small mirror from my wife's purse. I forced open Mohabar's mouth, and behold, the mirror steamed up! Now I had to act fast: they were going to bury him in a matter of hours. In the tropics, a man is buried the same day he dies. I ran back to the office and called Sister Floribertha at the Catholic Mission Post, about three kilometers away. She and I had worked together on some other medical cases. She asked me a few questions and told me she would come if I sent a cab for her. She never charged anything, but I had to take care of her transportation.

When Sister Floribertha arrived, a crowd had gathered around the cabin. Both she and I were highly respected, but to interfere with the dead was another matter. At that time I never thought of the consequences should we fail - it was Mohabar, my friend, who was foremost in my thoughts.

Sister Floribertha, in her immaculate Catholic nun's garb, carrying an old-fashioned doctor's bag, entered the cabin with me. Mrs. Mohabar greeted us with a hostile look in her eyes. Sister Floribertha did not hesitate - she was prepared - she pulled a huge syringe from her bag, put a long needle into it and the plunged the needle directly into Mohabar's heart and squeezed the fluid into him from the syringe. The syringe was not yet empty when Mohabar started to flicker his eyes. He was alive again! I almost kissed Sister Floribertha.

I called the doctor in Singkawang and asked him what to do. He suggested that I send Mohabar over to the hospital for observation. I was so happy that I gave Mrs. Mohabar an advance out of my personal funds, and arranged for transportation to take them to the hospital.

In the afternoon three days later, while I was working in my office, who walked in but Mohabar, all dressed up like a native sultan. He had a big smile on his face, showing his perfect white teeth.

"Tabeh tuan!" (Hello Sir!), he said, "Here I am ready for work again."

When I questioned him as to whether he had been medically discharged, he answered "no." But, he said, he could not stand it any longer. Never in his life had he had to go to the bathroom on a certain instrument. Moreover, three days in a room was too much for him. Asked how he got out without the doctor's permission he said, "Sir, the windows were left open at night, and what is easier than to leave through such a window?" There was Mohabar all dressed up when everybody else was working, with a big grin on his face. We were all so relieved that he was well again. The whole thing was so funny that the Chinese clerks started laughing. This encouraged Mohabar to tell us what he thought about hospital life. I had to beg him to stop because we were all almost hysterical with laughter.

I later questioned the doctor as to the nature of Mohabar's strange illness. He thought it might have been caused by sexual over-exertion. I will never know. It is certain that there are many mysteries in the Far East which will never be completely understood.

About half a year later, when our daughter contracted dysentery, I requested a transfer to Jakarta. We left for the ship by car, and when we passed our house on the way from the government hotel, there stood Mohabar, his wife, and a young girl who had looked after our daughter and helped my wife. I stopped the car to say a last goodbye to those three, who had been so close to us during the 21 months we had been in Pemangkat. There was no barrier as far as race or creed was concerned - just simple human beings having meant something to each other for a certain period in their lives, saying goodbye - perhaps forever.

Mohabar was so overcome with emotion that he started to cry while kissing my hands. This was too much for me; I felt the tears coming to my eyes. I stepped on the gas, and off we went, leaving behind us so many, many dear memories.

GLOSSARY OF MALAY TERMS AND PLACE NAMES

tuan	sir (lord)
tabeh, tabah	hello, goodbye, au revoir
dayek	Dayak, a tribal people from Borneo
djeramudi	captain of a motor launch
pasangrahan	a small hotel run by the government
guna guna	black magic
selamatan	feast
Pontianak	largest harbour on west coast of Borneo
Pemangkat	small city close to the Sarawak border in Borneo
Sabang	**city**
Tanjong Priok	largest harbour of Java (Jakarta/ Batavia)
Singkawang	small city on west coast of Borneo
Sambas River	on the border of Sarawak, British Borneo
Madura	island north of Java, home of the Madurese
wedana	Javanese term for a native district head