ALBERT BAKKER

Pemangkat People of Borneo, 1937-1939
Part 1

INTRODUCTION

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History is made not only by politicians and generals, but also by ordinary people. The people who struggle to make their lives worthwhile may not be aware of the connection between their own personal sorrows and joys and the broader public issues. They may be largely unaware of the larger socio-economic structures. Thus, for example, when historians discuss "colonialism" they are discussing an abstraction. Many aspects of the lives of ordinary people in colonial situations are simply human aspects of living, not directly linked to the larger structure. Nevertheless, the abstract social structure - however conceived - does have an impact, albeit a very subtle one. Such sweeping but heuristically fruitful categories as "colonialism" and "imperialism" are indispensable, despite the heterogeneity of everyday life. While we are somewhat more critical of "the sweeping descriptive categories by which nineteenth-century intellectuals had charted the development of their own era" (Schorske 1981: xix), we nevertheless find such terms as "individualism" and "socialism" to be helpful first approximations.

Our collective memory of historical events is shaped by historians and other intellectuals and scholars. They take the material they have at their disposal and shape it, form it until it tells a story. They keep what they find worthy of note and discard the rest. Until World War II it was common for historical scholars to mainly emphasize the lives of the great. With the notable exception of the *Annales* school in France, there was relatively little attention paid to contributions by ordinary people. Thus, for example, among the best sources of historical information are personal documents: letters, diaries, scrapbooks, photo albums, memoirs, and so forth. But it was relatively rare for historians to examine those archival materials when they only pertained to ordinary people, not the leaders and the decision-makers. It is one thing to carefully study the diary of a Prime Minister; it is quite another to study the letters of an ordinary businessman or housewife.

Yet a few pages written by someone who lived the events can be more valuable than pages and pages of analysis by someone who is attempting to recreate times gone by without having personally experienced them. That was recognized in the 1920s by certain American scholars of the so-called Chicago School, especially W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in their pioneering work on the Polish Peasant (1927). Thomas and Znaniecki cited very extensive passages from letters and diaries of ordinary Polish peasants in Poland and in Chicago. They regarded that material as their "data." They also recognized the value of literary attempts, such as poetry. They judged such literature not in terms of its literary merit per se, but in terms of its value as information that contained lived experience and real insight.

The following memories of the small city of Pemangkat in the late 1930s represent a historical document with sociological value. They are written in the form of short stories, and as short stories they can stand by themselves; but their real worth may be less literary than historical. These few words speak volumes about such topics as the position of the Dutch businessman in the colonial Indonesian community. We are given insights into ethnic and class relations. We see some glimpses of reaction and prejudice, but the general feeling one gets from reading these pages is that a thread of pure goodwill runs through the lives of most people, regardless of economic and political structures. That may be somewhat naive in certain respects, but we must remember that when we speak of colonialism in broad terms we are talking about a sociological abstraction that may not have been very clear to the people most directly involved. Moreover, when we speak of "exploitation" we must remember that the term has many meanings, both favorable and unfavorable. To exploit opportunities is not necessarily bad, especially if it does

not involve exploitation of people, either as individuals or as members of groups. Colonialism as a structure of relationships between people had a human face, as well as the more familiar side found in Marxian writings on imperialism.

The following stories were written down just before the death, on November 14, 1969, of Albert Bakker, my father. They tell about the life of Albert and his wife, Margaret (Geertje), in Pemangkat, West Borneo. Albert Bakker was an employee of the K.P.M. (Royal Packet Navigation Company, *Koninklijk Paketvaart Maatschappij*, the major national inter-island shipping company of the Netherlands East Indies. The K.P.M. linked the vast archipelago together in the days before commercial aviation; it was the major commercial link among the islands, in somewhat the same manner as the railroads (C.N. and C.P.) were for Canada in the nineteenth century. The K.P.M. is a symbol of the dualistic economic structure of the Netherlands East Indies in the 1930s.

Albert Bakker came to Southeast Asia - or "The Far East", as it was called in those days - in 1929. He was 23 years old. He first worked for the K.P.M. in Singapore, the city founded by Sir Stamford Raffles after the Dutch had been allowed to reclaim the East Indies. (Raffles was Lieutenant-Governor of Indonesia from 1811 to 1816 and founded Singapore in 1826.) While in Singapore, Bakker learned to speak English. He always retained a slight British accent. He grew to distrust many of the British Commonwealth merchants he had to deal with.

A man of average height, with a dark complexion and black hair, Bakker could easily have been mistaken for a Gujarati trader or a Saudi merchant except for his light blue eyes and his European manner. The son of a fisherman and sea captain, Bakker felt comfortable among the men who made their living through trade and commerce across the seven seas; but he felt proud of his educational accomplishments, exceptional for a boy from a relatively isolated part of the Netherlands, and he liked to deal with ships' captains when he went on board to check cargo and invoices. Perhaps some of his boyhood friends, when they first encountered him again in Singapore after several years, might have found him a bit arrogant. He looked quite dapper in his starched white tropical uniform and neatly polished black shoes, sipping a gin and tonic aboard some Dutch or English vessel, discussing the state of the world economy with a merchant marine officer.

Bakker worked in Singapore from 1929 to approximately 1932 and then went to Batavia, which was then the capital city of the Netherlands East Indies, to work in the main offices of the K.P.M. (Batavia is now called Jakarta.) As a handsome bachelor with a good income he must have enjoyed the carefree life of a colonial bureaucrat, but there were probably also lonely moments, and of course there was always a great deal of paperwork. Like most Dutchmen in Indonesia he learned Malayu, the local trading language used by coastal people in the archipelago, the ancestor of modern-day Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia. Many Malay words were part of his everyday vocabulary, even when speaking Dutch, English, French or German. Like most Dutchmen of his time, he did not learn Mandarin or any other Chinese language, even though much of the work involved contact with Chinese merchants and middlemen. Communication with the Chinese in the Netherlands East Indies was mostly in Malayu, although wealthier and more sophisticated Chinese Indonesians spoke Dutch fluently. There was much to learn in Batavia. The *totok* (a green newcomer) had to become acculturated before he could be trusted with a position involving more independent responsibility. Finally, in 1934 he was stationed in Pontianak, West Borneo, present day Kalimantan.

After two years in Pontianak he was allowed to go on a sabbatical leave, and he chose to go back to the Netherlands to take a vacation and to look for a wife. On February 8, 1937, he married Margaret Werkhoven. (The Friesian name Geertje is probably best approximated in English by Margaret.) They had known each other only a week before they got married, but with his sabbatical almost over Bakker was in a hurry. Her parents were more than a little bit worried by this sudden development, even though it was not all that unusual for Dutch women to go to Indonesia at that time. Yet somehow they trusted this dark stranger enough to let him take their oldest daughter to far off Borneo, perhaps never to be seen again. She would most certainly not be able to return for six years. Only 22 when she married, she went to the Netherlands East Indies knowing nothing whatsoever about it, yet trusting that all would be well. Remarkably, the experience was not seen as frightening but exhilarating, and perhaps it was that quality in her that convinced the 30 year old bachelor to marry. He also knew that if he did not marry a Dutch girl he might very well be tempted to marry a local woman, as many of his colleagues and friends had done. Somehow he had conservative enough ideas to resist that step, even though - or perhaps because - he already blended in so well.

The short stories presented here are about experiencing life in Pemangkat, West Borneo, near the border of British Malaysia (Sarawak). The young Dutch couple

lived among many different people. There are Mr. and Mrs. Liong Khun Hin, the Chinese export merchant and his wife. As important are Targanski, the customs officer, and his wife. We meet Mr. and Mrs. Hoekstra; Mr. Hoekstra is the "assistant resident," the highest colonial civil servant in the region. We also meet Mohabar the carpenter and Ahmat, a coolie. Ishmail, the "captain" (*djeramudi*) of the motor launch, and Sister Floribertha, the Catholic nun and nurse, are central characters in the stories. There is also a story in which the main character is not a person but a dog, a dog which represents one aspect of the animistic, spiritual side of Borneo.

The stories reveal Albert Bakker as a sensitive man, very aware of the mistakes that he makes, as when he tries to take the motor launch out to sea when the ocean is too rough, or when he tries to shoot the black dog. He is also humble about his successes, such as saving the carpenter's life and saving the life of a Chinese baby by risking disgrace.

The stories reveal Margaret Bakker as a woman who possesses pioneer spirit in full measure and who has very little if any sense of racial superiority or class distinction. It is somewhat amazing to find such a good match between two people who hardly knew one another when they decided to get married. But since they both came from the same class background, and since they both held common cultural definitions of marriage, perhaps their relationship is not altogether surprising.

The little human victories and defeats matter in these stories. The character sketches are brief and not particularly literary, but they are telling. We feel a sense of nostalgia for times gone by, what in Indonesian is called *tempo dulu*; there is also a bit of nostalgia for lost youth. There was a time when the grandson of a simple fisherman could feel that working in "the tropics" was not a matter of "colonial exploitation." Most of all, these stories are about a meeting of different subcultures and lifestyles. Different world views are thrown together by the rapid social change which goes with expanded commerce and increased communication. To a young Dutch observer the differences between world views must have been more than just "interesting"; it must have been a source of wonder and a reason to stop to ponder.

Here, then, are some stories about a town in Borneo in the 1930s and the people who lived their lives there, as seen through the eyes of one observer.

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CHAPTER I
Marriage

When I went home on leave for nine months in May 1936 I knew that, besides a lot of wonderful things I wanted to do, there was one thing above all - get married.

Being a bachelor until age 29 had had great advantages while I worked in Singapore. Moreover, I had promised my mother on her death bed, together with my oldest brother, to support two of my sisters, one being chronically ill and the other crippled. When Mother died the thought of leaving two girls behind penniless had worried her a great deal, and we wanted to give her peace of mind in her last hours. Consequently, I sent about a third of my salary home every month.

However, when I became assistant manager in a small white community in Pontianak, West Borneo in 1934, I had to live in a large company house; the busy social life in Singapore (such as tennis, swimming club, dances, etc.) came to an end. Suddenly life became very lonely. Coming home from my work to a big empty house at night became unbearable. After a while I was hardly home at night, always visiting my married friends, from all of whom I had standing invitations for cocktails and dinner.

I was now 29 years old, and when I had come out to the Far East I was just 22, having signed a contract for six years. The economic crisis in the early thirties forced the company to extend our stay another year. Finally in May 1936, after working hard for more than seven years, the day had come for me to go on nine glorious months of paid leave. (Transportation was also paid, by the company, to and from Holland.)

Before boarding the ship in Singapore I ran into Mr. and Mrs. White, whom I had known well during the time I worked in Singapore. They were the nicest people you could ever meet. Mr. White was secretary to the City of Singapore and he had married a beautiful White Russian girl from Shanghai. A large number of Russians, who had escaped from the Communist revolution, then lived in Shanghai. Mrs. White was a brunette, and with them was another White Russian girl from Shanghai, a gorgeous blonde. We had drinks together on board ship and when the Whites heard I was hoping to get married, they recommended her very strongly. She was going to Paris for a while to get new ideas for her fashion shop which she owned in Shanghai. They were all going to Europe on a French liner, whereas I was going on a Dutch ship. The blonde gave me her address in Paris and asked me to visit her there, but I never did.

The first night on board ship out of Singapore, there was a dance and I met a pretty little Dutch girl. She looked a little young, so when I asked how old she was she said 18 and she would be 19 in a few days. She introduced me to her mother who, being the wife of the general manager of a large import-export company, was sitting with the Captain and Chief Engineer. The next day, while strolling around the deck, I saw her mother sitting in a deck chair along with some other ladies. I stopped to pay my respects, and learned that her mother and father were very good friends of our Executive Vice President in our main office in Holland. She also told me that she was a heart patient and would appreciate it if I would entertain her daughter as much as I possibly could, since she was only 15. This cut out all possible thoughts of a marriage, but as a gentleman I kept my promise, much to the chagrin of all the other ladies on board who, out of spite, accused me of being a cradle snatcher. I met her again 10 years later and she still looked only 18, although she was married and had two children.

That summer I spent on the island of Terschelling where I was born, which is now known as a summer resort. Soon the word got around that I was looking for a wife. Maybe I was too critical, but it seemed that all the girls that I liked were either married or engaged, except the ones under 18 and that was too young.

I had a most enjoyable summer on the island, but when September came with its cold weather, and all the summer guests were leaving, I went to Amsterdam. There I rented an apartment and lived the life of a rich playboy. I met several girls, but married none. About three weeks before I had to return to the Far East I had given up on getting married at all. Physically I was in terrible shape as a result of too much night clubbing, smoking, drinking, and all that goes with it. I decided to say goodbye to my father, who was 70 and living on Terschelling. After that I intended to spend two weeks in Chamonix in the French Alps to get back into physical condition before boarding my ship in Genoa for Indonesia. As far as women were concerned, I had come to the conclusion that I would never find the right one. I was like a horse buyer, checking everything: the legs, ankles, character, and all the other desirable qualities. I needed somebody stable because I myself was pretty fickle by that time, and with somebody unstable our marriage was bound to be a failure. Anyway, my attitude became "why marry as long as I could have pretty well any girl I wanted."

The last night, visiting my father on the island, we talked all night. I had no time to shave because the boat left early in the morning. I had one more goodbye call to make - my college girl friend. She had been engaged

to a man of my age for seven years. He had studied law and finally graduated as a lawyer. I had seen her a couple of times and had asked her to break off with this fellow and marry me.

It was a cold January morning and there was a lot of snow outside. I was sleepy and felt unclean. My face looked gray, unshaven and swollen. I almost missed the train bringing me to my final destination, because I did not know I had to change trains. The train was an old one with small compartments, and I had just enough time to jump into the only compartment with the door standing open. While catching my breath, I studied my fellow travellers: two alarmingly beautiful girls and a country woman. There was something wrong with the country woman's ticket and I helped her straighten this out with the conductor. When he had left, I checked out the girl sitting across from me. She was a well-dressed brunette in her early twenties, beautiful and sexy. European girls are not bashful and when they want something they are not hypocritical about showing it. Boy, did she show me. Don't forget, I had practiced this game for the last eight months.

Then I looked at her hands, which were beautiful, there was one thing wrong with them, there was a golden band on the ring finger of her left hand. This could mean one of two things. If she was Catholic she was married, but if she was Protestant she was engaged; it made me sick. Wasn't there one woman who could be faithful? I stopped looking at the lady across from me and glanced at the one on my right.

This young lady had apparently used her time to size me up, but when I looked in her direction she suddenly became very busy. She opened a briefcase and pulled out a folder which, when she opened it, I saw was a play. In this way she gave me ample time to look her over. I liked what I saw. Her hair was blonde without bleach, her features were clean and her skin very fine, without the use of any cosmetics. She wore a blue suit, like that of a stewardess, and a white blouse with the cutest little white tie. She was innocence and cleanliness personified.

My opening was very easy. I had noticed that the play was written in Friesian, which the Friesians maintain is a language. Some other people call it a dialect. I had gone to school in Harlingen, which is one of the oldest cities in the world. There was an amateur show group there which gave its performances in the Friesian language, so I simply asked her if she belonged to this group. This started an animated conversation and before I realized it we had reached Groningen, our final destination. I helped her with her coat and suitcase, and before I had put on my own coat she had disappeared in the crowd on the platform of the station. I rushed to the exit and caught her there in time. (I now believe she had counted on it!)

The next day at lunch we decided to get married. I had not even kissed her yet! I had a heck of a time getting permission from my future in-laws, who weren't all too happy to accept a stranger taking their daughter thousands of miles away from them so quickly.

When I called my father long distance I had to reach him at the butcher's shop across the street. He did not have a phone. The butcher came back and told me he should take the message. I insisted father should come to the phone himself. I told him I was getting married the next week to a very fine girl and I asked if he could come to the wedding. He said, "If you think she is OK, she must be all right. I am very happy about it, but the weather is pretty bad and I feel a cold coming on."

Within two weeks we were married (Feb. 8, 1937) and on our way to Genoa, to catch a boat to the Far East. This was our honeymoon trip and everything went fine. Sometimes I forgot that I was married, but she was always there to remind me!

When we arrived at the small island of Sabang, a bunker station which lies just north of Sumatra, I received a letter from management appointing me as manager of our Pemangkat office for a year. Pemangkat is a small town on the west coast of Borneo just south of British Sarawak, with a lot of copra export.

This appointment made me very unhappy. I knew West Borneo. I had been assistant manager in Pontianak, the largest city in West Borneo, for the last two years, before going on home leave. I understood management's reasoning, but I just couldn't see this young blonde Dutch girl with no knowledge of the Far East and no other white people closer than 20 miles, happy living "among the natives" in a very primitive way. But I had underestimated this girl; I did not know much about pioneer spirit.

I had only know those white women in the Far East who were spoiled, with lots of servants and everything a bit more luxurious than at home. For that they suffered the heat, the mosquitos, and all the other inconveniences connected with living in the Far East. They played cards or went swimming or shopping in the morning, slept in the afternoon and when their husbands came home, oftentimes dead tired, they were ready to go. Many marriages went wrong because the husbands were unable, after a hard day of work, to keep pace with their wives sexually. There were, in these lands where there were few women, always enough bachelors to take the place of husbands.

Looking back over the years, our 21 months in

Pemangkat, West Borneo brought us close together in happiness and sorrow, with no outside interference from family or friends. What happened during those 21 months is the story I hope you will enjoy reading.

CHAPTER II
Pemangkat

We arrived at Tanjong Priok, the Port of Jakarta, Java, where we were met by several of my old friends. They all complimented me on my marriage and on the choice I had made. We stayed in Jakarta for about a week in a hotel. Since there were no furniture stores in West Borneo, we went to a Chinese furniture store, where we were asked to design our own furniture. This we did on the spot, which did not take us more than an hour. It is amazing how confident you are when you are young. When the furniture arrived in Borneo five weeks later, it was exactly as we had designed it.

We left Jakarta on a boat for Pontianak, West Borneo. The other passengers on the boat were the president of the bank in Pontianak and his wife, as well as the manager of an import-export company and his wife, both couples having been my intimate friends when I was a bachelor. I could not but feel that the men liked my wife, but the two ladies were a little jealous. I had always been their dancing partner at the club. My wife kept knitting baby clothes at a jet rate and I now realize she must have been nervous and not too happy, especially when we were reminiscing about the good times we used to have.

A big surprise awaited us upon arrival of the ship at Pontianak. My former boss, who liked practical jokes, had spread the rumor around that I had married a widow with seven children. All 300 white people in Pontianak had come to the wharf to see this. When I came down the gangway with my wife, some thought that this was one of the daughters. Life in the Far East in a small colony like Pontianak used to become dull and oppressive, and any excuse was used to break the monotony. Most of these people had seen me off when I had gone on leave nine months before.

After one day in Pontianak we were off to Pemangkat, one hundred and seventy five kilometers away in a taxi. I believe my wife enjoyed this ride more than the luxuries on board ship or the sophisticated life in Djakarta. She was thrilled when our car had to cross a river on a very primitive ferry. She was excited to see the different styles of native dress.

We arrived at our company house in Pemangkat around 5:30 in the afternoon and there another surprise awaited us. Our predecessor was having his furniture auctioned off. I stopped outside to talk to him and the staff, three Chinese clerks, who had received their education at the Catholic Mission.

After a quick introduction, my wife ran inside the house to see if we could buy anything; she loves auctions. Between a mixed crowd, mostly Chinese, there were two young Dutchmen, one a banker and the other a young civil servant. There was always a shortage of white women in the Far East, and there were only one or two in the whole of Dutch West Borneo. No wonder these two boys became tremendously interested, so when I stepped in a few minutes later and my wife introduced me to them as her husband, it was impossible for them to hide their disappointment.

That night we slept in the Pasangrahan, which is a small government hotel. Very soon, however, we moved into our house, our furniture consisting of two chairs and a bed borrowed from the Customs Officer, with a packing case for a table. We lived like that for five weeks until our own furniture arrived.

From our predecessor we had inherited a Javanese couple as house servants. Our Eurasian neighbors, the customs officer and his wife, were a big help. Words cannot describe what these fine people did for us in their very unobtrusive way. Targanski was slightly built, the son of a Polish planter and a Javanese girl. His face was very refined.

Because my wife could not speak Malay, it was agreed that in the beginning I would arrange everything with the servants as far as buying groceries, cooking, and housework was concerned. I realize now that this must have been disappointing to her, but she was never bored. She would visit with the wives of my Chinese shippers or wander around the little town. One day she told me that she had taken a picture of a native woman carrying two buckets of water on a bamboo yoke. She talked to these people without knowing their language but her warm personality radiated friendship. She had been invited into their little cabin and had drunk tea out of an empty cigarette can. If somebody had told her about race discrimination she wouldn't have known what it was.

A few months later a young civil servant was appointed in Pemangkat, and he happened to be from the same city as my wife. The two wives, although completely opposite in character, got along fabulously. Both young ladies were expecting.

Another great diversion for us was the ships' officers. They would either come ashore and play tennis, after which we would have cocktails and dinner at our house, or we would be invited on board for dinner. Being the only girl my wife would be spoiled by all, and on her

first birthday in Pemangkat we had nine officers - from the captain down - for dinner. Once a month there was a party in the club in Singkawang, a community of about 50 Europeans, and the two Dutch boys, whom she had met on the day we arrived, were always there. They came to visit us quite often, the banker opening his office in Pemangkat in the afternoon during week days. Other visitors would include travelling salesmen from import companies. One special visitor was the Jewish jewelry peddler. He would always stay for dinner and tell us all about the outside world. Every time he came I bought some beautiful gifts for my wife. The priest from the Catholic Mission also liked to visit; he would immediately take off his habit once in our living room, smoke one of my cigars (in his striped pyamas) and enjoy a cop of coffee. He had been in West Borneo for forty years and preached in Chinese to his Chinese congregation.

When Princess Beatrix was born, we were invited to the Residents' (high civil servant in that area) house for a big celebration party. On our way home my wife told me that during the party she had been invited to the kitchen, where the wife of the resident told her that she should not mix too much with the wives of the non-commissioned officers. This was the first sour note in our life in Borneo. She was worried that she might have hurt my career. I told her that she could mix with anybody she like and to hell with Mrs. Resident. In fact, her husband was a decent guy and he and I were good friends. Other friends were the military doctor and his wife. All these people were going to play an important part in our lives, especially the doctor and the Catholic mission nurses.

When my wife was about five months pregnant, she suddenly got a terrific pain in her left ear. I asked the chief engineer, who does the doctoring aboard a ship if there is no real doctor, for some hydrogen peroxide, but this made the pain worse, so I called the doctor. He gave her something for the pain, but she became deaf in her left ear. The doctor told me that holes had been burned in her eardrum, and that very possibly she would lose the hearing in her right ear as well when the baby was born. This greatly upset me; she had studied music from the age of 11. One of the things I loved about her during our short courtship was her singing, especially when she accompanied herself on the piano.

I decided to send her to an ear specialist in Java. When she came back the diagnosis of this famous ear specialist was the same as that of our doctor. She remained cheerful. Just the idea that she would never hear the voice of her own baby made me feel terrible. I bought a big radio on which we could pick up all the stations in Java so she could at least hear music for another four months.

One extremely hot Sunday afternoon, when a tropical storm was brewing, about five weeks before the baby was expected, I was catching up on my bookkeeping in my office. She called me to join her for tea on the porch and when I did not come quickly enough she got mad. When I finally came she was crying so I took her in my arms and asked her what was wrong. It was the oppressive heat, the humidity, her heaviness, and the loneliness. The crying helped her to get out of this mental depression, but while holding her in my arms I had noticed that her whole body was shaking violently in nervous spasms. She had stopped crying now but the nervous reflexes had not. I was desperate! I called the doctor and he and his wife drove the 30 kilometers on a bad road in 15 minutes. It was decided that they would take her with them back to Singkawang, just in case the baby was born prematurely. I could not go because I had a ship coming in that night. Two days later she was home again and five weeks later a very healthy nine pound girl was born in the Catholic Mission Hospital in Singkawang (Nov. 15, 1938). We named her after my mother. It is an unusual name, even in the Netherlands, but I loved my mother very much. She had 13 children and died at 56. My wife agreed that our first child should have my mother's name: Wietske (pronounced like "wheat"-ska).

CHAPTER III
Wietske

I was worried about that week starting November 17, 1938, and I had asked the doctor what to do if the baby arrived with no doctor around. He told me not to worry and to drive my wife over to the hospital in Singkawang on Saturday, November 13th. Since we had no car yet, I borrowed a little Ford from a Chinese friend. We checked into a twin-bedded room in the Catholic Mission Hospital. These rooms, if not otherwise occupied, were also rented out to travellers. Sunday night at 2 a.m., or rather Monday morning, the baby was born and I was allowed to be present while my wife gave birth. At about 3 a.m. both my wife and I went back to our room, two very, very happy people.

Later that day the doctor and my colleague in Singkawang went to register the baby, after which I treated them to a bottle of champagne in the club. During the war the Japanese burned all documents, so my daughter will never be able to get a birth certificate.

Tuesday morning I went back home, but before leaving I treated myself to a hot dish of fried rice and a

bottle of beer in a small Chinese restaurant. There was a young Chinese woman sitting at another table and I was so crazily happy that I had her sent over a bottle of beer. She completely misunderstood me because she came over to my table and suggested we go to her house together. I explained to her that I was married, that my wife just had a baby, which was the reason I had sent her over a bottle of beer. She said she understood all this, but she still could not see why I could not come over with her to her house. I beat it and drove back home.

Within a few days I was back visiting my wife. It was very painful to feed the baby and there were red spots all over her breast. The doctor had gone on an expedition inland and could not be reached. The nearest doctor was 50 miles away at Sambas. He was a Javanese doctor and I had met him before. At my request he came over immediately. He was about five feet tall and I can still see him put his small brown hands on my wife's white breasts. He asked the head nurse, Sister Helene, for some kind of medicine, and she answered that they had it but had not used it for 20 years, looking at me with questioning eyes. I said go ahead do what the doctor ordered. The medicine was some sort of clay or plaster. This the doctor said should be kept on the breasts for a number of days. He never sent me a bill and he had come 50 miles. When the stuff was removed all infection was gone and we could go home.

In the meantime the military doctor had returned. Since breast feeding had gone down to zero, I asked the doctor what kind of milk I should buy to feed the baby, there being no fresh milk in Borneo. He said any milk would be O.K. so I bought a box of the most expensive Swiss milk named Bear Brand. Our doctor friend was a good obstetrician, but a bad pediatrician, as we learned to our great sorrow.

The civil servant's wife had delivered her baby three weeks before our little daughter was born. They had a boy and both babies were beautiful and healthy. Every week the two women would walk to the local mission post to have the babies weighed. This was to become a terror. Their baby put on weight regularly, and ours stayed the same. I became hysterical, watching every move my wife made with the baby like a tiger, and practically accusing her of not knowing how to bring up a baby. I followed a course on the radio by a pediatrician on how to bring up a baby. The doctor, on his monthly visits for a cup of tea or a drink, hardly looked at the baby. I begged him to do something, but he just shrugged his shoulders and said the baby was O.K. I knew it was not O.K. For several months now, the skin on her little behind had been sore, while both my wife and I did everything we could to prevent or cure this. I became a nervous wreck and my wife suffered silently, almost afraid of me because she feared I might eventually have a violent reaction.

One Saturday we made up our minds. My wife was going to take the baby to Batavia (Jakarta) on the boat leaving Monday and consult a special pediatrician. That Sunday the doctor came on one of his social calls. It is one of the most painful things to tell a doctor that you have no confidence in him any longer, but when we told him what we were going to do he was very cheerful about it. When I walked him to his car he looked at the baby, who was in her basket under a low palm tree in the garden, and he observed: "If she goes on Monday you might still be in time, a week later might have been too late." I had to restrain myself; I wanted to knock his head off right then and there.

A month later my wife returned from Java with a healthy baby. She had gained several pounds and now my wife had a special formula. The Swiss Bear Brand milk had been much too fatty.

In the meantime something wonderful had happened. After my wife and the baby had come home from the Mission Hospital in Singkawang, one evening when I was working overtime in my office catching up on my books, my wife came in and asked me if she could use my telephone. She called Sister Floribertha at the local mission for some cotton wool. When she hung up, I asked her in which ear she was deaf. She said, "My left - no, my right - no, my left - oh, I am not deaf on either side." While we were anticipating complete deafness, the deafness in her left ear had completely disappeared. We danced around the office and celebrated with a good drink. Later, when we were living in Jakarta I called on the ear specialist and asked him how he could have ever told her that she might expect complete deafness when the baby was born. He informed me that this was almost a miracle, it had happened only once before in his long career.

CHAPTER IV
The Chinese Baby

One day when I came home for lunch, I noticed that something was worrying my wife. She did not come right out with it, but when I kept pressing her to tell me what was bothering her, she gave up and burst into tears.

There were two movie theaters, if you could call them that, in Pemangkat and once a week they would show an American film, which would be announced a few days in advance with billboards and posters. The ladies, Mrs. Hoekstra the wife of the assistant resident, and my wife, would take their baby carriages and for lack of better

amusement, walk over to the Chinese market to see what film would be shown. They could then, of course, talk Mr. Hoekstra and myself into going on Saturday night.

That morning they had been on such a mission and my wife, who is democracy personified and always wants to share her happiness with others, had struck up a conversation with a Chinese woman, who ran a little vegetable and fruit store next door to the movie house. Most Chinese people in the Far East run some sort of business, and in order to keep an eye on their babies at the same time, they wrap the baby in a piece of cloth fastened at the top with safety pins, and then this bundle is attached to a spring taken out of an old alarm clock or something of that sort. This spring is nailed to the ceiling and each time the baby cries, a little touch with your hand will move the baby up and down and up and down, and this movement is repeated until the baby falls asleep. Many baby sitters or angry parents in other countries could learn something from this example of Chinese ingenuity.

When mothers discuss babies, there is no such thing as race discrimination, at least with my wife. The Chinese woman must have recognized some of that warm feeling which my wife radiates, because otherwise she would never have confessed her worries. More than any people in the world, it seems, the Chinese lock their troubles up inside and do not ask for sympathy.

The story was that about six weeks before she had lost a child of about two years, and now her six month old baby was seriously ill; she was afraid it would die if nothing was done. With the instinct of a mother, she did not mind humiliating herself by asking a strange white woman for help.

When finally my wife had told me the story and had stopped crying, I knew I was in for it. Even realizing these things happen every day to thousands of Chinese, and all the trouble I might get myself into by interfering should my efforts fail, I knew I could not back out of this. It would stand between us all our life. The reason I say there might be trouble if my efforts failed is that in the 1930s many Chinese and other Orientals were extremely superstitious, regardless of any religion they might have. If I took a hand in this and it failed, I would be considered a man who brought bad luck. It would seriously hurt my business relations with the Chinese merchants, who were my main business contacts.

All this raced through my mind when I called Sister Floribertha of the Catholic Mission. She appeared to be completely familiar with the case. She told me without further ado that the baby was going to die. When I asked her if there was nothing that we could do, she replied, "Yes, I can save the baby if I can have it in my clinic, without interference, for at least six weeks."

She also said that she had already tried this but the father had refused. In fact, she had given up this case. Having gone that far, I went all the way, regardless of the consequences. Instead of visiting the Chinese grocer, I sent out one of my Chinese clerks to bring the husband to my office. I had a very high standing among the Chinese population. The Chinese importers and exporters with whom I did business were the wealthiest men in town, and some of the respect shown for them must have rubbed off on me. Also, of course, I was the local representative of the only steamship company coming into this city.

I am afraid I treated him rather rudely, although I did try to do it in a very dignified manner. I was deadly serious when he came in, and more or less ordered him to sit down. I then asked him if he knew his baby was going to die. In an almost toneless voice he said he knew. I then told him that there was one chance to save the baby's life, but only with his full cooperation, to which he agreed. I now believe he would have agreed to anything.

I then had to be very rude and told him that the baby was going to go in the Catholic Clinic for a period of six weeks and that he was not permitted to visit the baby during that time. Sister Floribertha had insisted upon this, because she was afraid he would take the baby back half cured or feed it something which would affect its health. He very meekly agreed to whatever I wanted to do. In fact, I believe he was happy that someone had taken the responsibility off his shoulders.

I then instructed my senior Chinese clerk, who was Catholic (having been brought up by the Catholic Mission), to accompany the man to his home or shop and bring the baby to Sister Floribertha.

About three weeks later we visited with Sister Floribertha and she told us that the baby had much improved and was out of danger. Three more weeks on a good diet would make it completely healthy again.

When the six weeks were past, a huge basket with the most delicious fruits obtainable in that area was delivered to our house by the grateful parents who, through my wife's sympathy for other human beings, had saved their baby from death, and perhaps their marriage from failure.

CHAPTER V
Mrs. Liong Khun Hin

Besides Pontianak, which was the capital of West Borneo, there were three coastal towns. Although

Pemangkat was the smallest of the three cities, it was rapidly becoming the most important port of export, surpassing Sambas and Singkawang. The reason for this was the saving in shipping charges, which were free in Pemangkat and cost five guilders per ton in Sambas and Singkawang. Those five guilders could be saved because the shippers brought their product alongside our ships with their own barges. In Singkawang, where the ships were anchored off the coast at sea, company barges had to be used.

The result of all this was that copra (dried coconut) was hauled from way inland, either in carts by land or by sea in little boats, and delivered to the shippers' warehouses.

All five copra shippers were Chinese. The total shipment of copra was about 2,000 tons per month, and Liong Khun Hin alone shipped about half of that. Consequently, he was my most important client.

Chinese merchants seem to be either very fat or very thin, and Liong Khun Hin was the very thin type; I do not think he weighed more than 100 pounds. Originally Liong Khun Hin had been a goldsmith and he still owned a jewelry shop, but in a few years he had come up so fast as an exporter that most of his activities were directed to his export business.

Partially because Liong Khun Hin was my largest shipper, my wife and I socialized with him. We also got to know Mrs. Liong Khun Hin. Normally one never meets the wife of a Chinese merchant, but Mrs. Liong Khun Hin was one of the very few exceptions.

She had been a Chinese opera singer and on one of his trips to Singapore, Liong Khun Hin, who was a widower at the time, had met and married her. She brought with her a convenient amount of money and jewelry and a very sharp business mind. There is no doubt in my mind that the fast growth of Liong Khun Hin as an exporter was for the most part due to this alliance with Mrs. Liong Khun Hin.

Although the two women were a complete contrast in physical appearance - she was small with dark hair, and my wife tall and blonde with a typical Dutch face - they hit it off amazingly well from the very start. She was delighted to help my wife get acquainted with the different kinds of Chinese food. There are so many things a European or American girl has to learn when it comes to life in the Far East.

Similarly, Mrs. Liong Khun Hin learned a few things from my wife. She had always worn Chinese Shanghai dresses which were very becoming to her, hiding her bent legs, but now she suddenly started wearing regular dresses.

We were invited for dinner many times, and after a few months a big dinner was given in our honour, to which they invited all the European business men and their ladies from miles around. The most delicious Chinese foods were served and liquor consisted of champagne only.

It was a standing joke that the best way to show the Chinese that you really appreciated their food was to burp repeatedly. A girl who had just arrived from Holland, and upon whom we impressed this seriously, reacted quite beautifully by burping all the time. Nevertheless, we were the only European couple in Pemangkat at that time, and Mr. and Mrs. Liong Khun Hin considered it a great honour to have us there with them.

Even though Mrs. Liong Khun Hin never missed an opportunity to show us how Western she was, she sometimes fell back on her old customs. One day when she was about to take a trip to Singapore the customs officer, Targanski, pointed out to me that she was wearing no jewelry. This was indeed strange, because as a sign of her wealth she would always wear as much gold and as many diamonds as possible. Targanski said, "I want you to be there when she returns from Singapore." This was easy for me, since I always met the ships upon arrival. When she came back she looked like a Christmas tree, everything around her fingers, wrists and neck glimmered and glistened. In her own way of thinking there was nothing wrong in doing this, on the contrary, she was sure she could be a respected lady and do things like that.

When my wife had our first baby, she was admitted to the Catholic Mission hospital in Singkawang and stayed there about 10 days after the baby was born, as was the Dutch custom. Some months later Mrs. Liong Khun Hin, who was always expecting babies but had never been in a hospital for that reason, decided to go to the hospital to have her latest baby. So far she had had her babies at home and was up and around a couple of hours later. By having her baby in the hospital she had reached the highest of social standards, and that was proof enough that her husband was the wealthiest merchant of them all. She came home, however, after four days, telling us how much money she had saved by getting out six days sooner than my wife.

When after 21 months we left Borneo, being transferred to Java, we had our last dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Liong Khun Hin. I had asked them to make it a small dinner just for the four of us and not to invite any other guests. We left behind us two people who had come very close to us, notwithstanding the great differences in background. We learned later that when the Japanese military landed in West Borneo they killed Liong Khun

Hin and all the other prominent Chinese merchants. After trying to get along with the Japanese for a short time, Mrs. Liong Khun Hin finally gave up and committed suicide.

CHAPTER VI
The Storm

That Sunday in September 1937, the weather was unbearably hot. In the tropics, where it is always hot in the coastal areas, the heat can sometimes become almost suffocating, especially when the temperature goes up into the nineties and the humidity is very high. Very often this climaxes in a tropical rainstorm, after which everything feels refreshing again.

My wife, who was seven month pregnant, was suffering tremendously. She asked me if we could not go out in the bay for a while in the rowboat. It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and I figured that if we rowed slowly over the mudbank (which was flooded at high tide), we could reach the mouth of the Sambas River when ebb tide started, so we could nicely drift back with the current of the river.

Although it was still warm, there was a little breeze on the water and slowly I rowed, chatting with my wife. She was much happier now and got all excited when she could recognize certain landmarks. The water was as flat as a tablecloth, everything was so peaceful and quiet until we came to the river. I got the boat into the middle of the stream but suddenly we found ourselves in the middle of high waves. A heavy wind had come up and wind and stream were opposing each other, which always causes big waves.

From a completely peaceful atmosphere we suddenly found ourselves in a most hazardous situation, and there was no time to lose, the water was coming in over the side of the boat. I had already told my wife, trying not to show my fear, to sit at the bottom of the boat. It was impossible for me to row properly with the heavy oars and the only way to get out of this was to scull the boat (with one oar at the back), which I had learned to do as a young boy. If you know how to do it right you can move a boat even faster than with rowing, because the movement is continuous, whereas with rowing you have to lift the oars out of the water after every stroke.

I decided to try to get back to the shallow mudbank where we had come from, and where there was hardly any current at all. There were two things I had to do, get the boat out of the turmoil of wind and water, and keep my wife under the impression that there was no danger at all. Luckily I was in good physical condition and I put everything I had on that oar, joking to my wife on the side, asking her to keep bailing the water out of the boat.

After about half an hour of crucial sculling, I finally got the boat back out of that crazy turmoil and was able to relax a little. The water on the mudbank, which had been flat, was now choppy, but it was nothing compared to the whirlpool of waves and water in the river channel. It also had started to pour and my wife had to continuously bail the water from the boat. All that could happen now was that we could get stuck on the mudbank, which would be completely dry at low tide. In that case we would have to wait until the new tide would set us afloat again. My wife remained sitting at the bottom of the boat and I continued sculling because we had to go against the wind; the oars were too heavy for me to row. All of a sudden it became dark, which meant it was after 6 o'clock. In the tropics, around the equator, the sun comes up at six and goes down at six, without a long twilight as in countries located further north or south of the equator.

I sculled and sculled. There seemed to be no end to it, but finally we reached the mouth of our own little river and there, unbelievably, came our mo[illegible] launch with Mohabar standing on the front deck. After that my ordeal was over in a matter of minutes. Mohabar had talked to our servants, and when we were not back after dark he had warned Ismail. They decided to go out and look for us.

When I got home, my wife screamed when she looked at the inside of my hands. There was hardly any skin left. Only then did she realize the danger we had been in.

I was exhausted and could not even eat. After my wife had bandaged my hands, I went straight to bed and I slept for 18 hours solid. The weather was cool now.

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