

PLEASANT HOURS

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AMONG THE DYAKS.

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The most fertile country of the Eastern tropics is perhaps the island of Borneo, with its magnificent forests, and its climate of perpetual summer, which on the high mountains becomes an everlasting spring, cool enough to make the night pleasant and yet sufficiently warm to ripen an abundance of wild-growing fruits.

And yet that favoured land is avoided by the seafarers of civilized nations on account of the incomparable savagery of the natives. Here and there on the west coast European merchants have established small trading posts, but the south and east, and the vast interior are peopled by tribes who employ their leisure in mutual butchery, and esteem a man's rank according to the number of human skulls he has gathered in his store of war trophies.

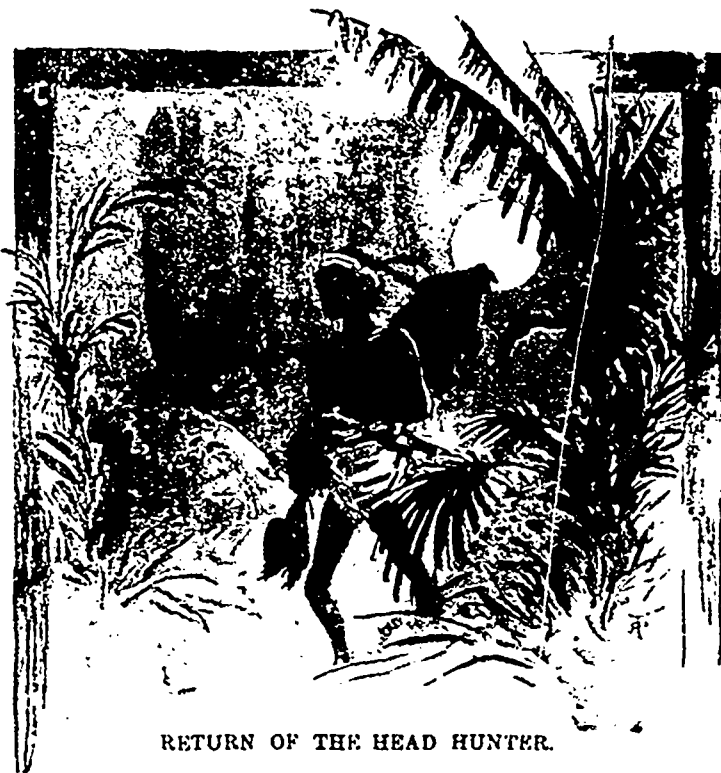
The rivers of the north coast are lined with sandbars, where gold has now and then been found in considerable quantities, but even the knowledge of that fact rarely tempts adventurers to explore the wilderness farther than a few miles from the coast. A few years ago a party of enterprising traders from Singapore made the attempt at the dryest season of the year, but their experience obliged them to return in less than two weeks.

The party comprised two Englishmen, one Chinese cook, and five Malay sailors, and they had washed out about ten ounces of gold, when one of their Malay comrades was found dead at a spring not more than a hundred yards from their camp. His wounds made it doubtful if he had encountered a tiger or a Dyak assassin, and a dog, whose sagacity they hoped would discover the trail of the murderer, followed an apparently fresh track through the jungle for about a mile and a half, but then refused to go farther, as if he had scented the presence of an ambushed foe.

Was it a tiger? One of the Englishmen decided to solve the mystery, and finding his countryman disinclined to share his adventure, he accepted the offer of the Chinese cook, who had visited this coast before, and proposed to avenge the Malay by a still hunt in the cool of the evening.

Dr. Carter, the other Englishman, who had assumed the command of the expedition, warned them not to stray too far from camp, and to return at the first sign of serious danger; so, after reconnoitering the ground for half an hour, they agreed to climb two trees overlooking the glade where the dog had betrayed his misgivings. Yah-Sing, the Chinaman, mounted a palm tree at the head of the meadow, while Fred, as the young Englishman was called by his comrades, clambered up a teak-wood tree a little farther down.

The twilight faded into dusk, but the moon was up, and the hunters had agreed to keep watch for at least two hours after sunset. The moon rose higher, and Fred thought that at least one of the two hours must have passed, when he happened to spy a dark form crawling out of a thicket into the clearing, and soon after a second shape, equally dim and noiseless, emerged from the dense shade of the jungle, and followed the first across the meadow. If they



RETURN OF THE HEAD HUNTER.

were tigers, the leader seemed to be the mankiller, and there was a good chance for a shot; but what could be the matter with Yah-Sing? Only a few minutes ago, Fred had seen the moonlight gleam on the bright rifle barrel of his companion, but that gleam had vanished. Had the Chinaman fallen asleep? There was no time for hesitation, and after a last glance in the direction of the palm tree, Fred rested his rifle in the fork of a projecting branch, aimed carefully at the shoulders of the first tiger, and pulled the trigger.

Almost like an echo of the shot a chorus of fierce shrieks startled the ear of the young hunter, four—five—six forms, not of tigers, but evidently of more dangerous enemies, rose from the bushes, and made a simultaneous rush upon the teak tree. Fred at once saw that he would not have time to

reload, and that there was not a moment to lose; so, seizing his gun by the muzzle, he pushed the branches out of the way and leaped down, in the hope of saving his life by a rush for the thicket.

A swarm of keen-eyed savages at once started in pursuit, but he had the advantage of being able to rush ahead in any desired direction, while his pursuers were frequently obliged to stop and listen for the sound of his footsteps, and when Fred at last crouched down exhausted, he had gained a start of nearly half a mile, and could afford a few minutes' rest. Was there any risk of his track being followed by moonlight through such thickets? The Dyaks seemed to have discovered his trail somehow or other, for their voices came nearer, and soon after two dark forms stopped near a tree only about a hundred feet

from the bush he had chosen for his hiding-place. One of them put his head to the ground, and seemed to listen. Fred hardly dared to breathe, when suddenly the report of rifle shots boomed up from the direction of the coast, and the next moment the two Dyaks had vanished in the darkness.

Besides scaring off his pursuers, those shots revealed the direction of the camp, and twenty minutes after, Fred regained the open beach of the seashore, and picking his way along the strand, soon saw the watchfires of the bivouac. His hail was promptly answered, and the first who met him at the gate of the stockade was his friend, Yah-Sing, who had reached the camp half an hour ago. The Chinaman's keen eyes had at once recognized the crawling night prowlers, and keeping absolutely still, he waited till the sounds of the man hunt had died away in the distance, and then quickly slipped down and struck a bee-line for the bivouac.

"Good you came, much right time," said he, in broken English, "we soon need help, you mind me, you see they come to kill us all before morning."

"He is right," said Dr. Carter, "they always put off a risky job till dark, and they will tackle us either this night or the next. At all events, it can do no harm to get our howitzer ready."

"We have powder enough to scare them," said Fred, "but no ammunition. It wouldn't do to use our rifle balls."

"No, indeed," said the doctor, "it is much the best for us if we can frighten them off without killing anybody. Let's load up the gun with broken sea shells and coarse sand; that will scare them enough for one night, and before to-morrow evening we can be under weigh for Singapore, if things should get too hot for us in this jungle."

"Hadn't we better keep up a good look out, then?"

"Yes, certainly, but you must be pretty tired after your foot-race. You and old Sing had better turn in and get a nap, and let me mount guard for the next three hours. It must be near midnight, anyhow."

For about an hour and a half Dr. Carter made the round of the camp, listlessly and scanning the edge of the jungle with anxious eyes, but only the flash of the firefly gleamed from the thicket, and the

chirp of the crickets and the wail of the wood owl were the only voices of the night.

Judging from the upward decline of the southern cross, the morning could not be far off, and the general silence would before long have cast its spell of drowsiness over the solitary sentry, when his ear caught the low rustling of branches in the top of a tree at the upper end of the camp. Crouching down in the shadow of the stockade, the doctor saw a head peep from the foliage and disappear again, as if the adventurous spy had satisfied his curiosity at the first glance.

The doctor cocked his rifle, but on second thought, slipped around to wake all his comrades, well knowing that the first shot might prove the signal of a general attack.

"Light the fuse and stand by that howitzer, Fred," he whispered, "the rest of those night birds may not be far off. Now look out!" Raising his rifle, he aimed



DYAKS OF SARAWAK BORNEO.