



I was at Singapore, meditating a return to Batavia, when a letter from Brassard changed my plans. Him I had met up in the Philippines, had again foregathered with him down in Java, and had thereafter been cast-away with him in a prahu on one of the Nicobar Islands; so that, taking into account the shifty, risky, uncertain life of the tropic-roving white man, we were fairly enough entitled to write ourselves down old friends.

Brassard was half-a-dozen kinds of 'ologist' but 'geo' was the prefix for the capacity in which he was now, he wrote, representing an English mining syndicate, up amongst the central wilds of the Malay Peninsula.

"But they've been misled by reports," ran Brassard's letter. "I'd engage to carry away in my hat all the copper that's ever likely to be turned out here. Still, as I am here, I mean to stay for a time, to study the place and people. It's only about a hundred miles, either East or West, to the coast, and Malacca's not more than a hundred and thirty miles South East, still, it's the wildest kind of region you could conceive, and I don't believe any white man has ever set foot here before. The people are primitive, and would almost make you believe in the yarns about men with tails up hereaway. And, after all, why shouldn't -- but of that later on. For I say unto thee, O man of investigatory proclivities! -- come thou up hither, and thy servant shall show thee strange things. Get round, first, to Malacca, and Valentine and Crabbe -- I've written to them -- will find you guides and start you on the journey."

If Brassard had calculated on strongly exciting my interest, he had not been mistaken. Here he was, to all appearance, right up amongst the Jacoons, about whom -- tall legend aside -- so

much mystery was wrapped, and so many queer stories were told. Next boat to Malacca saw me *en route*.

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Valentine and Crabbe, in the person of Crabbe — a leathery ancient to whose appellation a terminal “d” might have been added without material misdescription — were dubious. They could find guides, it was true; but for the trustworthiness thereof they couldn’t, and wouldn’t, undertake any responsibility. Had Mr Brassard written to them to get me fixed up for the journey, I asked.

“Oh, yes; but — ”

“Then, but me no buts! — you find the guides, and I’ll take the chances!”

Next morning, accordingly, I started, in company with three wild-looking, inner-jungle men, a half-bred Burmese from the border, and a decent-looking Perak Malay.

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The journey — despite old Crabbe’s misgivings, and more to my own disappointment than otherwise — was uneventful enough. But the difficulty of the jungle made progress so slow that nearly a month elapsed before we reached a small river which my Malay said ran into the lake we were bound for. It was a narrow stream, crawling sluggishly between two dense walls of gloomy jungle, and I wasn’t sorry after another couple of days’ difficult travelling along its bank to strike a more cheerful prospect. The sun was sinking behind us as we emerged suddenly upon a gentle treeless slope, and saw his rays reddening the canvas of a little clump of tents, a quarter of a mile away across a smooth, dark sheet of water. By the time we had coasted round the lake-shore to the camp, it was all but dark, and I didn’t half like the way in which a crowd of dimly-seen wild figures gathered round us as we approached the tents. Next moment, however, Brassard’s hearty voice reassured me.

“You won’t be sorry for coming, old man. This is entirely fresh ethnologic ground, as far as I know. Very curious people, these — although they don’t rejoice in caudal appendages.”

“Friendly?”

“Yes; friendly, as nearly all savage peoples are until they have had some experience of civilised man’s charming little ways. In fact, their complete unsuspectingness is one of my reasons for supposing that my own unworthy skin was the first “white” one they’d ever set eyes on” – and Brassard grinned at the application of the term to his mahogany face and hands. “But, attend to the inner man now – my fellows will look after you chaps – and when you’ve had some supper and a smoke, I’ll introduce you to local rank and fashion. You’ll have to do the amiable signs, though. Tried ’em with everything Malayan – from Tagal to Bugi – and couldn’t make anything of it.”

Supper over, we went outside, and, in the light of a huge fire on the lake bank, the people crowded round me more curiously even, Brassard said, than they had round him.

“Took me to be a solitary freak of nature, I expect,” he added, “but now that you’ve turned up, they’re all the more astonished to find that there’s actually a breed of the strange animal. Here; this is their head man – *‘instar omnium,’* so to speak. What d’you make of him?”

Like all the others, very short – not more, perhaps, than four feet eight inches – the chief was well-found and straight-limbed, but darker-skinned than any Peninsular native I had yet seen. His features, too, were more Melanesian than Malayan, though his coarse black hair hung down his back in Dyak fashion. But then, again, when he made me what I suppose to be a speech of welcome, his language, though I didn’t understand a word of it, was strongly reminiscent, in its general sound, of the Papuan tongues of Ké and the Aru Islands. So that – with a man unquestionably native to the Malay Peninsula, yet representing unmistakable Papuan affinities – I was fairly puzzled.

“I can’t place them!” I said, as I looked and saw that a description of the chief would practically serve for all the rest – no women were visible – except that his loin-cloth was curiously worked with red and yellow parrots’ feathers, and his neck adorned with a heavy triple circlet of crocodiles’ teeth.

Presently others came forward and spoke; but, though

their intentions were obviously friendly, the expression thereof would have remained a sealed book to us but for Molauk, my Malay; who, after listening carefully for a space, held up his hand.

“Some of this talk I can understand, Tuan. In my youth I lived with Harutas, up in the north. Taller were they than these people, and less dark of skin, but very like was their tongue unto this speech.”

“It is good, Molauk. And what say they?”

“That thou art welcome. Tuan—thou and the other white master. Also something about a god there is, and a feast, and — something about water and — sacrifice, I think it is.”

“Probably sacrifice to a water-god,” I said to Brassard afterwards when we had returned to the tent. “Possibly the deity of the lake to be propitiated, as amongst some of the Dyak tribes, with fish taken from his own waters. It will be interesting.”

It was — very interesting; though not exactly in the way we expected.

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A pestilent noise of gongs called us forth next morning, and from a multitude of flat-topped bamboo huts we found the population pouring forth; the little men in grass loin-cloths, and still tinier women in blue drapes that covered half the figure, diagonally, from left shoulder to right hip and reached barely to the knees. The man's weapons, we were interested to observe, were almost entirely bone-pointed spears, and rudely-carved disc-headed clubs; no metal to be seen, except about half-a-dozen rough iron spear-heads, probably obtained from some tribe nearer the coast.

“Obviously a still quite primitive people,” Brassard said, as we followed the stream of the crowd; Molauk asking questions as we went, and translating to us as much as he could understand of the replies.

The god didn't live in the main lake, it seemed, but in a small water adjoining thereto; and the sacrifice, Molauk coolly added, was to be a young woman.

"A woman!" said Brassard and myself in a breath. "A live woman, do you mean?" I added, and Molauk, having further inquired, said — "Yes, Tuan; a live virgin to the god — that's the opening of the feast."

"By Gad!" and Brassard looked at me — "if this thing is true, it shall never open!"

I nodded. "Of course not, if we can prevent it."

"We have our revolvers," he said, "and, if you'll keep on and watch the proceedings, I'll slip back for our rifles. Keep Molauk with you to explain" — and away rushed Brassard the impetuous.

Molauk looked after him half-scornfully. "The white masters are foolish," the Malay said. "To save one life they would take twenty! And the girl would die after all! There she is!"

We had now reached the top of a slope, apparently artificially constructed, and saw below us a rudely circular piece of water, about fifty yards in diameter, and connected with the main lake by a narrow opening. Across this opening was a bamboo framework, and out of the centre of the enclosed space rose a remarkable looking post, standing about twenty feet out of the water, and topped with a small platform, like that used by rope-walkers. At the edge of the water, just below us, was a bamboo raft, on which — in company with a little white-haired ancient in a curious conical rattan hat, and a couple of younger men with long poles — was the intended victim, a girl fantastically decked at neck, wrists, and ankles with bunches of red feathers, and with what looked like a bleached child's skull fastened on top of her head. A mere child, indeed, she looked, herself; though she was doubtless of the pubertic age always selected for such savage functions, she was no bigger than a European girl of ten.

All this I must have taken in in a flash; for, though the polemen were pushing off even as I reached the top of the bank, before the raft was three yards away I was at the bottom, shouting "Stop!" The word, of course, was not understood; but, in obedience apparently to the gesture, the polemen ceased to push; then, at a sign from the little old image in the

candle-extinguisher cap, they set the raft ahead again towards the post in mid-water. I whipped out my Webley and levelled at the old man, but unconcernedly he looked back at me. He probably hadn't the remotest idea what the curious-looking thing in my hand was; and then the girl! — she didn't appear to be particularly discomposed over the matter. Surely, I thought, there must be some mistake -- but then, as the thought held my hand, a shot rang out from behind me. Brassard, arriving in hot haste, had let drive and missed, and, before he could fire again, he disappeared beneath the score of struggling little figures that bore him to the earth and held him there. Instinctively I raised my pistol, but this time Molauk held my hand.

“Not so!” he said. “It would be madness! As it is, I think not they will hurt us -- but they fear to let Brassard Tuan make that noise and flame again.”

It was so. Brassard, as soon as he had been secured hand and foot with rattans, was no further molested; nor do I think that I should have been interfered with at all, had not Molauk, for my own sake, given the little men a hint. At all events, before I could make up my mind what to do, I, too, was trussed like a fowl and seated on the grass beside Brassard.

“Gulliver and the Lilliputians over again!” he said ruefully. “But, perhaps — Molauk doesn't half understand their tongue perhaps they're not going to drown the poor creature, after all. She doesn't seem frightened, at all events.”

No, they were not going to drown her, it seemed. The raft was now at the post in mid-water, and the polemen were raising a light bamboo ladder. This they rested against the top of the post, and the girl, amidst a tremendous burst of gonging and yelling from the surrounding banks, stepped upon it and ascended -- slowly, but without apparent reluctance -- to the platform. Then the raft backed out and was poled ashore again, and again rose from the beholders a clamour by contrast with which the little priest's voice sounded afterwards strangely small and far-away, as he recited something in the way of an incantation. Motionless the girl stood with folded arms, outlined against the lucent sky; and breathlessly Brassard and myself watched and waited for we-knew-not-what of the uncanny and

inconceived.

Thus passed a minute. Two. Five. Ten. Then came a sudden swirl of the water near the foot of the post, and out of the breathless sickly silence arose once more that infernal din, as, from a strange dark snout, projected barely above the surface, there leaped straight at the figure on the platform a thin, bright jet of water that knocked the girl from her perch; and, hardly had the victim's heavy plunge broken the surface, when there was a mighty rush just under it, followed, in the place where she had fallen, by the momentary upheaval of a huge fan-shaped object that I did not immediately recognise for what it was — a gigantic fish's tail. Not that of a cetacean, the plane of which is always in the horizontal plane of the body. This was in the vertical plane thereof, and was consequently that of a true fish. But, of what fish? I almost forgot the fate of the unfortunate girl as I ran over the possibilities. No; there wasn't any fresh-water — but, stay — the peculiar shape of that tail was somehow familiar to me. Ha! — and the jet of water — "I have it!" I exclaimed aloud.

"Have what? — an explanation of this horrible thing?" Brassard asked as his bonds were being removed — now that the great ceremony was past interfering with.

"Tell you, later on," I said, as I in turn was being emancipated.

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"Well," said Brassard, as that night we smoked and reviewed the situation, "it's no use saying so now, and I suppose you acted for the best, but, if I'd been you, I'd have been a little more prompt with the pistol."

"I'm glad I wasn't. I've been prompt enough with it before now — to my sorrow. And your promptness didn't pan out too well, either."

"That's so," said Brassard with a laugh that changed to a sigh. "And I suppose, as we did our best for the unfortunate girl, the best thing to do is to forget the incident. But, about the explanation you thought you'd hit on?"

"Light the lamp," I said, and when it was lit I got out my sketch book. Brassard looked over my shoulder as I drew.

"That's a curious looking fish," he said presently. "In nautical phrase, he draws a lot more water aft than for'ard."

"Just describe the thing, now, as I've drawn it," I said.

"Well, he's a podgy looking chap with an infernally contemptuous expression of countenance — that projecting underlip, I suppose, and he deepens out a lot from head to tail — ending nearly square off, with said funny little tail stuck in the middle. Odd looking customer altogether. What might his name be?"

"Well, his proper scientific style and title is *Toxotes jaculator*, Esquire, though you're more likely to know him as the archer fish."

Brassard dropped his bantering tone. "To be sure," he said. "I've seen him in Queensland. Pops a fly off a branch six feet away with a drop of water."

"Not with a drop — with a tiny jet. And what we saw today was the same jet on a colossal scale."

"Just so. And you think it came simply from a big — *Toxo* — what's the rest of him?"

"*Toxotes giganteus*, let us say for the present. But I'd like zoologically to settle the matter, so I want to know if you'll help me tomorrow. I understand from Molauk that local orthodoxy forbids anybody, under the most fearful penalties, from going near the sacred waters on the day after the sacrifice."

"Lest they should disturb the god's digestion, I suppose. Well, you and I will chance that, and the tabu aforesaid will secure us from interruption. How are you going to set to work?"

"With a pig and a hide rope. Molauk tells me they feed the god mostly on squeakers, and he's to have one ready in the morning before any of these people are astir."

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With the first glimpse of dawn we were on the alert, and presently Molauk came gliding through the dimness with a bundle containing a young pig, so swathed and muffled that a

stifled snuffling was all that could be heard from within. Bidding Brassard bring his rifle -- I wanted some fancy shooting -- I shouldered a coil of small hide rope, and we stole noiselessly away along the lake shore.

Twenty minutes brought us to our destination, and we lost no time in getting out to the central post. Up the sacrificial ladder then went Molauk with the pig, now freed from its wrappings, and giving tongue for all it was worth; which was just what I wanted. I then cut off what I judged a proper length of rope, threw it up to Molauk, and directed him to make one end fast to the pig, reeve the other through the bamboos of the platform, and secure it so as to leave length enough to let the little porker dangle ten feet down -- about half way to the water.

With Malay deftness it was quickly done; Molauk came down to the raft, and we pushed off to a distance of about ten yards, leaving the pig saluting the now rising sun with some ear piercing remarks on the situation.

"If he keeps up that row," I said, "we shouldn't have long to wait."

We hadn't. Suddenly, but gently the raft heaved under us, as some huge body drove along beneath; then just above the surface appeared the ugly snout we had seen before, and like the jet from a fire hose, a straight, swift shaft of water struck piggy from his perch. Instantly, at the spot where, but for the rope, the porker would have fallen, the water churned and boiled in strong commotion as a monstrous head showed for a second and then sank out of sight again.

"Ready now," I said to Brassard. "I expect we'll see more of him in a twinkling" -- and, even as I spoke, a body as large as a bullock's hove itself all but clear of the water, and fell back with a mighty splash, but not before Brassard's ready Winchester had made its loud remark.

"Hit him?" I queried.

"Hit him!" echoed Brassard. "Hit a house. I couldn't miss him. Ah! there you are! Cooked all right."

We poled over to where the huge fish lay wallowing feebly upon its side, got the rope round the small of the tail, and towed the mass to the bank. Then I produced my sketch of the

night before, and all doubt was set at rest that we had before us a Brobdignagian replica of the little fish that cruises round plant-edged margins to stalk the unsuspecting fly.

“A creature of half a dozen ounces, at most,” Brassard said, “and this chap weighs — ?”

“Afraid to guess,” I answered. “What thinkest thou is the weight, Molauk?” I added in Malay; and Molauk, after due consideration, answered that it could not be less than ten picuis — about one thousand three hundred pounds — an estimate which, as the fish measured roughly twelve feet long by a yard thick, and nearly five feet deep in the hinder part, was possibly even under the mark.

“Your shot was a bit of an ‘outer’ after all,” I said to Brassard, “but you’ve evidently broken the spine — which is a pity, as regards the skeleton.”

“Skeleton!” Brassard turned and stared at me. “Do you propose to prepare the skeleton?”

“Certainly. Otherwise we’d hardly get people to believe — ”

Brassard’s laugh interrupted me. “Look here, old man — what kind of a ‘cide’ would you call a god killer?”

“‘Cide’? Oh, I see. Why, a ‘deicide,’ I suppose.”

“Exactly! Well, we’re deicides! We’ve killed this people’s god; and if you stop here to make a skeleton of him, the chances are they’ll make a skeleton of you. See?”

I saw. It would have taken at least a week without acids to denude and clean the bones, and within a couple of days at most, our awful deed would be discovered. Which was why the “Deicides,” after making a long round so as to return to camp from the other side, promptly shifted said camp, and made thereafter record time to the bounds of civilisation.

