

## CROCODILES UNLI MITED



Orang Sungei

The scene.

A large untidy house leaf walled and thatched with palm fronds standing on stilts near the bank of a wide slow moving river. Dense jungle on the opposite bank towered two hundred feet high and continued unbroken to the horizon.

Behind that masses of steel blue clouds piled on themselves rolling in from the sea.

A midday sun hammered down on a powerful launch stopping at a raft tethered to the bank below, a young man got out, waved at the crew and walked up towards the house.

He came up the steps under overhanging bougainvillea out of the glaring overpowering sun into the cool of the verandah.

"Hello John, glad you made it. Good journey? No pirate scares I presume. It's very nice to see you again."

"Not bad, thanks, boring sweaty and hung over as usual. Don't know why I keep coming here. seriously though it's good to see you too." throwing down an overnight bag, he collapsed into a chair opposite his host.

"Well now James I hear you were nearly swallowed whole by a damn crocodile the other day." the tall blond haired man in long khaki trousers and a freshly sunburnt face said.

"Not quite like that John. Sit down I'll get you a beer." replied James a well built man wearing a long green checked sarong lounging back in a rattan armchair, his feet up on a glass topped table.

"No, you mean your dear old amah will do it. Anyway yes please."

"Kam Ling" James shouted over his shoulder.

A quiet voice replied from just inside the house, and she approached the verandah on bare feet without a sound.

"I think you have beer Tuan John." she said with a welcoming smile. Turning to James with a set expression, she continued "I see you have need one more same," in a soft bantering tone in Malay.

She vanished inside the house for a few moments and was back with Anchor beer in large bottles on a tray.

"Oh there you are. Why were you so long with the drinks then," James said jokingly without any malice. "I suppose there's enough curry to go round John will be here for a few days. Tell the Mem, we have a guest for a few days. Is she still in bed then?"

"God I had forgotten your dear wife, us boozing and gossiping here together without me asking about Caroline. How is she? I haven't seen here for ages, not since that last guest night in the Sports Club in town.

How's she coping with being the 'Mem' of a plantation Tuan in the ulu."

"Mmm she's quite enjoying some of it. But it's very rough and dangerous here sometimes. There's lots for her to learn, most of it's very strange for a nice girl straight from society life in England."

"Both of you are young and in love, it should be fun finding out together." said the newcomer.

"Trouble is I nearly killed her myself the other day on a wild trip down river, on the way back from a day to see my friend in the timber camp. I'd better tell you about that too in a minute."

"Come on James what's it all about then. We hear little bits of it in the club. One more of your adventures you lucky bloke, its better than any desk bound job."

James poured himself another beer, sipped it slowly and started,

"Well it's like this. I needed a survey done to see what I could solve in a certain logging problem. So I decided to go myself and do the job even though everybody said it was bloody dangerous, and it should be left to one of my assistants, poor sods." refilling the glass he continued "First we flew over the area a couple of times in the single engined Cessna."

"Oh crickey, you mean the float plane we've all had bloody hairy landings in before on that narrow bit of river here at your estate. Many's the time we thought our end had come, especially when the American ex Vietnam pilot had too much to drink the previous night. You could get drunk just breathing in the fumes in the cockpit" said John with a wry smile.

"I know but this time we felt reasonably safe. Well that is until he banked too sharply a couple of times to show us at close hand the features we were most interested in.

I must say flying over the jungle is a fascinating pastime, compared to slogging in it all day long. At normal cruising height of a few thousand feet, one of the things you notice is the amazing slash of a river in reddy brown wriggling its way, like a crazed snake to the sea which is bright turquoise blue. The river doesn't stop there of course, it is miles out into deeper water of blue before the brown gradually disappears.

The soft grey green of the jungle, the virgin sort of course, has a kind of texture you feel you want to reach out and touch, like millions of green sponges.

On the other hand you know the 'nipah' the primeval border round all rivers, coming after mangrove on the seaward side, is softer. Looks like living velvet, and displays patterns of the wind rolling over the surface moving the fans of leaf into dark and light, a beautiful sight." James downed his beer.

"I should know about bloody nipah, it's all you see for about six hours on your slow old launch on the way in here. I woke up in the morning off the mouth of your Segama and from there on until the jungle proper starts that's all there is. It strikes me as being a very dark satanic horror underneath, all mud and snakes I expect." said John rubbing his tender reddened face.

"Incidentally what we were trying to do was to look at the drainage of a whole area behind where we are now logging, to see if that small river the Sungei Marak might drain the other side of the ridge now being worked.

To cut through a ridge is hell as you know, mud and muck it makes using those bloody great TD 25 dozers, the ones we buy from you. They have to be moved through swamp jungle for miles, and despite the low pressure plates you advised us to use, they sometimes get 'lost'. That's to say they fall into bottomless mud holes. Telling a man from Lloyds that you've just lost a quarter of a million dollars worth of machine in a sticky brown swamp, that's not even on the map, can prove difficult."

"I should say so James. The last time your bloody lot of idiots did that, one fell in the sea being transferred here. I had to promise a replacement TD25 from I.H. themselves within the week. The nearest was in Singapore. It took all my influence to get you that one over on the next boat. The insurer was tearing his hair out."

"Think of the bonus you'll get out of selling us more tractors, never mind who paid for it." James joked, pushing another bottle across the table and said,

"So I thought I'd send a gang of my Ibans to cut a survey path straight up from the present logging area to find the Sungei Marak at the nearest point. In the hope that it would be better to log from that point forward down to the little river and out to sea that way, instead of using a longer route back down our present jungle rail to our main camp. It's a hell of a long and dangerously wobbly journey, now it's so extended.

It took them two weeks to get there and back. You know how fast they can move in their beloved jungle, it took us about ten minutes in the Cessna that day to cover the line they had been on.

Obviously they must have had a bit of fun on the way hunting a few pig, shooting monkeys and generally eating well.

They eventually stopped at a river swamp, presumed to be the Marak. It was bloody hell apparently, ghastly, one of the worst they had ever seen. Do you know the sort, where the river disappears into a mass of spear and bamboo grasses and water hyacinth matted together with no trees for shade like jungle clearing with underground water. Bloody boiling hot after the relative cool of the jungle.

I had a look on the map with them again, having listened to the way they described it. I was checking what I had seen from the air. I decided to go and look for myself, by an easier way of getting there to start.

We would go down the Segama out to sea, along the coast, and sail back up the little Sungei Marak as far as possible. Then go into the deep jungle from there, and cut our way back towards our logging area. It would save weeks of slog in from the working side, and might be a bit of fun to see a new river.

If it all worked out as I hoped, then we could haul the logs down from as far back as the watershed that had stopped the rail inland, to this little river, raft up the logs float them down the Marak to the sea. Join the big log towing tugs from the main camp, who'd tow both lots to town."

"I see then perhaps I wouldn't always like your job, that sounds grim. I'll go and shower soon", John took his glass and moved to the verandah rail sitting half in the hot sun his legs in the shade.

"I chatted to my Ibans who relished the thought of more hunting so we decided to take the small general goods boat.

It's about a twenty-five footer, with a tiny wheelhouse at the stern. Also it's also got one of those superb new Japanese diesel engines, very strong and seaworthy, but with a shallow draft to be able to get a long way up a river. In the open hold we fitted extra planks as flooring and a full length canvas canopy. In the end we looked like a wooden sea tent, but just the job to keep the sun and rain off us. Into her we packed boxes of food, clean water in jerry cans, and of course a large supply of beer in bottles. No need to worry about the carrying capacity, and as a base camp we would need all the comforts of home.

As usual we had between us a small arsenal of weapons. The Ibans carried their jungle issue Army short Lee-Enfields, .303's with hard ball ammo, useless really but they loved them especially for shooting pig. I of course took my trusty double barrelled shot-gun, with a good choice of cartridges. I've always felt safest, from my old jungle warfare days, with a pair of 00 gauge cartridges up the spout.

There's not many things in the world that could jump me in the jungle with that protection, or get to within ten paces of me anywhere else." James said as he stretched out along the rail, sarong tucked between his legs.

"I suppose that's also going to include our Moro pirate friends. You'd have to chance your luck against at sea on the way round to the mouth of that river Marak." said John again looking into the house at the sounds of the amah moving about. "I'm always terrified to come out by your boats since one of your towing launches was shot up by the bastards a few months ago."

"We'd only be at sea for a couple of vulnerable hours at the most. I felt damn sure me and my loyal bunch of Ibans would be more than a match for a boat load of Moros. They'd love a battle with somebody, it's all I can do to stop them going out from here looking for a fight with the Moros." replied James.

"But much more important in case there was any chance of some good shooting, my great hunter Ankam would have the honour of carrying the battered leather case with the brass corners. This holds the pride and joy of the longhouse, my double barrelled 470 Express elephant rifle made by Rigby the famous London gun maker."

"That's one of the most beautiful guns I've ever seen." said John "Haven't seen it for a while though."

"Yes, I think so too. It has the elegance of the fine English side lock shotgun. Then there's a rifle blade foresight and open backsight that I suppose are the only signs that betray it's fantastic power, apart from the massive weight when you handle her.

Those twin rifled barrels of dull blue menace. Just look at the cartridges for it." James showed John, taking one from a few which had been lying on the table in an open box. Some five inches long in dull brass topped with softly rounded copper jacketed lead bullets.

"These're carried by me and Ankam in our top pockets with soft leather between them to stop clanking about and to ensure that the

shape of the bullets is not spoiled. At their speed even the slightest dent could throw them off line, and when you are facing a life or death charge by some enraged animal this isn't a good thing.

The power of these beauties is awesome. An elephant hit full on the shoulder will be blown over on its side, that's the sort of impact there is. That in essence is it's superiority, nothing gets up even if not hit accurately the first shot. It's a fine elegant and deadly form of insurance to have at hand, add to that my eyes and ears Ankam and I feel as safe as it's possible to be.

So apart from the four Ibans including Ankam, there was the serang, a Moro himself, he would drive the boat and be navigator, and at the last moment two Orang Sungei insisted on coming."

"What does Orang Sungei mean." asked John

"They're literally 'men of the river', to me that means experts at hunting crocodile.

They rarely ever live ashore, but whole families exist in their long prahus, twenty maybe thirty feet long, a few feet wide with an attap roof, usually now a small outboard to drive them. They cook, sleep, breed and work all together in that cramped space. Amazing.

One of them is Din, a man who I have been buying small rough cured salted croc skins from. It's a special size, they've showed me how to catch by hand, so as not to spoil the skin, bloody hairy business that was too. When you see the teeth on even tiny new born baby crocs you wouldn't ever try their hand catching method, at least not without their help.

Do you remember I bought some to send home to my mother, posted them from Sandakan. Wonderful quality about two feet wide the opened out skin, tiny platelets on the skin, and all of it can be used even the back. Excellent for hand bags and shoes. The big buggers aren't much use, the skin on the back is like armour plating, so all you can use is the belly skin and that's only good for suitcases sometimes.

Anyway these two Sungeis wanted to come as they said there would be good crocs up the Marak, and it would save them many days paddling in their little prahus. Besides they assured me that I would only be safe if one of them came with me.

Well we set out, the journey round by sea took the whole day as usual, very boring sitting roasting in the sun or lying sleeping under the awning up front.

But I suppose we were lucky and this time we didn't see a single other boat, nor any pirate ships much to my Iban boys disappointment and my relief frankly.

The entrance to the river was the usual confusion, miles and miles of bloody mangrove and nipah, shimmering in the distance like a green line on the horizon. All of it looks the same from a distance. So you lie off looking through glasses and still not seeing any break to show where the river entrance is, one single line of green scum in a heat haze.

Then suddenly our ex-pirate noticed a nipah nut floating in a sort of slick of muddy water in the sea, plus a few twigs and other odds and ends of jungle rubbish. He spun the wheel and turned without hesitation, followed it towards the shore and there we were at the entrance to the river we wanted, the Marak.

Mangrove soon gave way to nipah, as usual full of monkeys and nowhere to stop just mud and roots and crocodile slides. At the sight of these the old Orang Sungei Din got wildly excited and kept pointing out the various tracks as we passed. To me I couldn't see much but to him it seemed to be the full family history of numerous crocs and were well worth investigation. I told him we would look on the way back.

We pushed on up river for quite a few hours. Everybody on full alert to see if there was anything to shoot to eat, but it was too early in the day and too hot. At the start of nice friendly jungle with trees and firm ground we tied up the boat and stopped, to make food and rest up for the trials to come."

"What on earth do you do out in the open in the jungle like that at night, it must be pretty spooky." asked John. "I must go and have a shower in a minute, come and keep talking to me. I am dying to hear the next episode."

The two men got up and went through the house. At the end of the long cool corridor a large room with attached bathroom opened out through mosquito screen doors onto it's own verandah, which also had a group of chairs similar to where they had come from.

James flopped down again immediately with a sigh. John went into his room stripped and soon the sounds of water flapping to the floor and splashing to the ground underneath indicated the use of the chinese shower. This consisted of a large jar in the corner of a bare room with a slatted floor, water scooped by a small plastic bucket and flung into the air whilst trying to duck underneath to catch falling cleansing cooling reviver.

"That night" shouted James above the din of falling water "I sat about and watched the sunset. Jungle calls died down to be replaced by a cacophony of sounds, those frogs and cicadas echoing back and forth in the narrow open space of the river. I must say the most surprising difference is the loss of light, as the river is only a few yards wide where we tied up.

It's very quickly very dark, as of course you have so little sky above you. In places the trees from either bank touch at the top like being in a tunnel. This worried our Moro sea farer as he couldn't see the sky with the familiar stars. He was scared stiff to be so far inland, anyway he thought being in the jungle at all was mad and refused at any time to leave the boat even for a pee. He hid under a blanket in the wheel house and slept.

Then the next thing you get is a new noise, which soon penetrates your brain, the whine of the mosquitos, and the silent attack of aggas, sand flies. I slapped and swiped all night until I had to get in under my net eventually to get any peace.

Two of the Ibans went off hunting as soon as we had fed. They took torches and used the tiny dugout that we had towed with us, to hunt along the bank for the plandok, you know the mouse deer, at night it visits the river to drink.

The prahu is like the one I showed you last time made for me by my hunters. It's just enough for two men, about ten feet long hollowed out from one log without extra plank sides. 'One arse wides' I call them. I can only just jam my backside in, if you fart they'll turn over. To have to paddle, and like the the locals stand up and down in them, is a bit of an acquired skill.

That night I sat up chatting on a stool in the wheelhouse the light from the open fire in a half kerosine tin at the stern just behind me threw an eery glow up into the overhanging trees. Up forward they had left a small oil lamp that flickered and wavered in the slight night time breeze making great ghostly shadows in the grey black night air."

"What do you talk about all this time with your people. You're so lucky to be good at Malay you know. I wish I'd more time to pick it up, but then I can see you are forced to by your job and I'm just lazy." came John's voice through the waterfall noises off.

"Oh well. The main thing is to realise it's everybody second language so it's kept fairly simple. The serang is Moro so he speaks that and Tagalog, the Ibans and the Sungei have their own but at least the official language is Malay, and me makes four in one small group. I think we've got fourteen major languages on the estate, luckily for me Malay and English covers everybody. So you talk in very simple concepts, about hunting and the family. Any way at this point I was talking to old Din the croc expert. Hell what tales he could tell.

It's there he told me about some of the biggest crocs they know of come from these waters. He maintains the biggest ever seen were longer than the biggest prahu on the river, about twenty five feet. That means they are about four feet thick in the middle, belly on the ground. How incredible if it's true.

Many a hunt was told in endless detail. I found out his people firmly believe crocs will not eat them, they carry a potent charm against that around their necks, despite being good Muslims. Because of this then Din will dive for crocs without fear.

As with all Muslims I've met in the backwoods it's only a thin veneer over the older and more potent beliefs of animism. At least the Ibans are original and openly full time animists, I love them for that.

Whilst we gossiped he showed me his harpoon head, he was sharpening it carefully to a fine point on a stone whilst talking to me, it was a simple single barb affair. They take one of our rail spikes, you know the sort, we use thousands of them in our jungle rail laying. We actually get them from UK from one of the oldest exporters who have been sending this stuff round the world for the last hundred years, to all the railways of the Empire. The spike is painstakingly beaten and then hardened into this fine blade point over charcoal, using crude feather bellows on a little forge they carry in the prahu they live on. Until it's about six inches long, three fingers wide blade with the barb starting from the tip well spread.

At the other end a hole is drilled, how I don't know, and a thin plaited rope is attached. This is apparently woven from the roots of a certain tree that they say has enormous strength in water. I'm sure it's the same one our rafting boys use on the logs, to tow them in pairs to the ship before using wire hawsers for the sea trip. It's red fibrous and quite light, a coil of it he had in the boat was not long maybe about twenty feet length. I asked him why.

'Oh', he said, 'we harpoon the croc at night he goes straight down to the bottom and then we swim down the line to him and tie another rattan line to haul him up with later.'

What the hell happens, I said, if it is just lying on the bottom with it's jaws open wide, you'd swim right in, all he has to do is shut his mouth for a free supper. I looked over the side at the river and in the half dark it's full of peat and silt and you can't see two inches in the murk.

'They just never do was his quiet reply.'

"Thank God for that!" said John appearing from his bathroom still wet and now also wearing a sarong only "I feel better after the sticky journey in your dreadful boat."

"So the next morning bright and early we set out, after a hearty breakfast of rice and cold meat. The boys the night before had got two plandok, and a small iguana which they roasted whilst I was asleep.

We tied up the boat firmly to a log in the middle of the river and left the serang, one of the Orang Sungei, and two of the Ibans as guards.

Carrying guns and only a few provisions and a cook pot, we started in the little dugout, two Ibans one Sungei and old fat arsed me. There was only about an inch of freeboard much to everybody's amusement. After a while the jungle closed right over the river and we virtually hacked our way from then on sitting in the prahu.

That was the first day, at night we made a small shelter on the bank had some hot food and slept.

Next day we pressed on. From then on it was absolute bloody hell, you wouldn't in any way have volunteered for this, it was not nice.

For two days we hacked and pulled the prahu standing in the river, rather than sit in it. Then we got to the famous grass swamp. In the stinking heat we spent the whole time in the water up to our necks just to keep going we had to hang on to the prahu for support. It was in this shit I noticed Din looking with special interest at certain points in the grass.

Once I was having a fag, sitting on a half submerged log. He carried on looking for himself at something in a big clump which had a small stunted tree growing in the middle, although it seemed to be in the middle of the river. Then he tells me that was the most important breeding place for the crocs, he has just seen the biggest nest he has found for years. He wanted to drop in on the way home to steal the babies." James laughingly uncrossed his legs off the table and John asked,

"Do you mean that you had been all that time in water that had breeding crocs, don't mamma crocs get just a bit shirty at somebody poking in the happy home?"

"Yes I think they do, but I was so shagged out that I couldn't care less, and when we did eventually break through the swamp I was able to find the far end of the survey path the Ibans had cut.

By guess and a little map reading I could tell where we had got to. I could certainly confirm back at home with the detail I had found, what we could do. We struggled back down the swamp river, Din didn't find any babies out of eggs so we were saved an early death, this time. At last I dragged myself out of the little prahu onto the boat.

I haven't been so glad to see a nice dry place to sit down in a long while. The boys on the boat had heard us coming and had big bowls of steaming rice, and fish caught that day, in a raging hot curry to greet us. I flopped down on my bed under the canopy and slept like a log for a few hours.

Come on now John, what about going and seeing if there isn't a nice curry by dear old Kam Ling at the front verandah"

Both men in the same sarongs and bare feet retraced their steps through the house and called in at the kitchen to take two more bottles of beer from the fridge with them. James sat on the edge of the chair legs tucked in under him, as the sweat gently ran down his back and through the hairs on his chest.

"I shouldn't drink in the sun too much. It makes me sweat within a few seconds of swallowing now," said John. "I'm not as used to this as the old hands like you."

"It shows you are in good health I would be more worried if you didn't run with sweat like that. Alright Kam Ling we'll eat on the table out here thanks." James called out. "Anyway I decided to pull out of the river late in the afternoon hang around in the mouth and sneak out at night for the dash back to our Segama river.

A few hours sail down river sitting in the bow again cleaning the guns with oil after their soaking of three days in water and we arrived at the edge of the nipah and tied up.

We cut a few down so that the bow was well into the bank hoping we couldn't be seen from the seaward side by passing itinerant pirates with nothing better to do than have a bit of a shoot out.

Dusk falls quickly as you know but as I was just pulling on a light jersey to keep out the sea chill I noticed Din scrambling about in the small prahu at the stern.

'Come on Tuan you have always wanted to see a great Orang Sungei catch a crocodile. Well it's good moonlight tonight. Jump in.'

No thanks I tried to say, but then all the Ibans join in with their bantering tone which has no respect for rank.

'Go on sir everything will depend on you. Din will surely kill one if you're there.'

Well as I said the bloody prahu is just one arse wide and to climb into it is difficult enough. I'm assisted with hoots of laughter into the stern and handed a huge wide bladed paddle as I'm the one to do the steering end.

What about my gun I said, I'm not going unarmed with this maniac croc chaser. At first they tried to hand me my beautiful elephant gun but I said if, and more likely when, I fell out of the prahu it would be a terrible loss. So I took the shot gun instead.

If I had to fire I'm sure the recoil would blow me out of the prahu or blow it over with me still wedged in, both would have the same effect. Finally a torch is given to me with instructions from Ankam as to how to hold it under the two barrels in front of the left hand

grip. The theory is that anything in the beam of the torch will be hit. I loaded 00 gauge and took some single bullet cartridges, just in case.

We pushed off and paddled for some long while down stream still heading for the sea, after the first bend we were alone in the soft inky darkness of the shadow of the nipah leaves.

I could hear the far off wave sounds of the sea, out in the middle the silver light of the moon was glistening on the water. Din kept the prahu in the shadows I would have preferred to be where I could see better. In whispers he told me that he was looking for a certain croc, he'd seen it's tracks on the journey in. It would be looking for prey on the mud banks."

"How good are you at paddling James, I've never mastered the art at all, I usually end up going in circles, let alone in a canoe you can't afford to wobble about in. I suppose if you've survived this long it must be one of your attributes."

"Yea" replied James " The whole art at the stern is to dig deep with the paddle pull hard and at the last moment turn the blade in the water away from you to cancel out that tendency. At night you have to make sure your thigh is over the side as you sit cross legged, so the paddle rests on you. As you pull and turn it can't clank against the side and make a sound. That sound would carry miles at night on the still air, but I remember Din carefully telling me that it will carry a fair way underwater to the crocs.

I tried desperately all the time not to disgrace myself by making a fatal bodge of it. I remember at the time thinking the worst danger we were in was that a mangrove snake would fall in the prahu and we wouldn't have much time to draw a parang and kill it again without me falling in whilst trying. Just then Din staring fixedly ahead said in a loud whisper

'Tuan' Tuan over there....there' pointing with his harpoon arm

I could just make out his arm pointing slightly to the right of our our line. My shot gun was across my lap so I just pointed the torch with my left hand in the general direction not thinking what I would find....

Bloody hell there was a pair of huge yellow eyes about the size of soup plates on the water. They were feet apart and my fevered brain was doing overtime imagining the size of what must be behind them.

'Keep the torch in his eyes and paddle quickly' croaks Din again,

I am trying to make my jelly of a brain do all these things at once, clutch the gun I couldn't remember if it was loaded, paddle with the right hand, keep the torch pointed and pull towards this monster of the deep.

I couldn't help thinking we should be withdrawing until we could see better, say in daylight, and from the deck of a battle ship preferably.

I notice that Din is now perched on his haunches right on the tip of the bow with his harpoon in his right hand. He paddled with his left hand with great skill and then all of a sudden we were right alongside those eyes.

I'm sure Din could feel me shaking in the prahu as I felt us touch the beast very gently with the bow. In the spill of my light and it's reflection off the water. I saw him strike, a short stab movement the prahu didn't even quiver. Those eyes disappeared in a swirl of water that rocked us.

I waited for the fearful back lash of the tail I expected, by now I had managed to get the gun up and ready to fire, at what I couldn't imagine.

Nothing. Just the sounds of the night round us as usual, nothing else stirred. The line in the bow had gone out into the black murk with only a whisper of travel.

Still nothing. This was the bit that frightened me the most I suppose I thought the croc would erupt out of the black soup, and turn us over with an idle flick of his tail and bite us in half. Our prahu would have fitted in that mouth. I gripped the edge of the prahu with deep apprehension.

Din stood up turned round and said loudly,

'We've got that one. What do you think of that?'

How the hell do you know I asked him very quietly.

'Oh I got him just right, in the best spot. You were clever Tuan to get me so well placed in the right position and the torch kept him well dazzled.'

What happens now, I ask.

Din to my amazement dived over the side and disappeared in that horrible murky water his hand on the now taught rope from the bow, which bobbed up in the air with the loss of his weight. I bloody near fell out then.

As soon as he was underwater I yelled at the top of my voice calling for our big boat to come and get me. Luckily of course we hadn't gone all that far and I feel relieved when I could hear the diesel cough into life immediately. It soon found me from the light of my torch, the crew also turned on the spotlight to see us. It was then I saw Din with his arms resting on the edge of the prahu looking at me and grinning.

'Don't worry Tuan he's dead, we'll pull him up in the big boat when it's light in the morning.'

"How the hell do you manage to get in the scrapes, and more important how do you stay alive. I'm sure your lucky lives must be more than two cats by now.

Do you think he'll get eaten alive one day, Kam Ling." John greeted the amah as she bustled about the table laying out the curry, plates and bowls of rice.

"He OK Tuan. He have very powerful joss his side, when he born in China. I know I see plenty escapes. He very lucky man." she replied in a mixture of Malay and a little English.

"Just to finish anyway we helped Din haul this bloody great croc out of the deep with all the boys shouting and yelling with excitement. It took some doing I tell you, the weight was terrific and we didn't have a hoist. It finally appeared on deck in the bow, it was so big that we had to let it fall into the hold where I was supposed to sleep. It was about twelve feet long and about a couple of feet thick in the middle.

I forbade him to start skinning it there and then next to my bed.

Many days later Din turned up at the estate to show me the skin, I felt really proud of that nights work. He'll have earned a few bucks out of it too. I didn't want to buy the skin, it was too big and could only be used for luggage. It's really funny I had to go down to the jetty to talk to him, they hate to walk anywhere. As I squatted to see in under the roof of the prahu to call him I noticed a huge chunk missing out of the side of his old prahu. I swear you could see teeth marks in it.

What's this, I joked. Didn't this crocodile know about your people's special agreement with them Din.

'Oh well Tuan, the odd one is a bit bad tempered that is if you don't get it in the right spot like I showed you. It was my young son dealing with one the other day. You see he hasn't had much practice. Still it has made a bit of a mess of the plank there I know.'

The thought of what a fifteen footer would have done to us in a ten foot dug out a quarter of the size of Dins prahu left me thinking perhaps it is always best to be with the expert, especially at night.

Here come on John, drink up lets send for Caroline and tuck into the curry."

From a bedroom off the main room a tall fair woman appeared walking slowly, bare foot, running her hands through her sleep tousled hair. She was also wearing only an Indonesian batik sarong, but rolled and tucked up over her bosom. On the verandah she smiled at James and said,

"Hello darling, I'm so sorry I seem to have overslept again. It's been so hot today hasn't it. Hello John nice to see you, hope you're staying for some time, not rushing to go back are you?" She leant over kissed James and ruffled his hair. He did not get up but John had gallantly stood and shook her hand rather formally.

"I haven't seen you for so long Caroline. Wasn't it that rather drunken do at the Sports Club. Don't say that was the last time you managed to get out to town from this 'hell on a river' then." John remained standing until she had sat down on a chair facing the two men, leaving them on the cooler inside of the verandah. John looked beyond her at the jungle and said,

"How are you finding this strange life. I must say you look good on it. I suppose it leaves a lot of time for sitting in the sun reading good books. Suntan is looking good I must say.

Now what's this your young man is saying about having put your life at risk already.

I mean every time I come out here I put my life at risk just to try and sell this lot a few tractors. I'm forced to do it by my company, but you volunteered. Does old Tarzan here protect you Jane?"

"As a matter of fact yes. The incident you might be referring to, James was quite a hero.

I never thought I would be saying that about any man, but in this case I have to admit he did impress me, but then I am biased. Living at home I didn't have to rely on somebody to save me from dragons or in this case very nasty crocodiles."

"Come on now lets have the story then I can't wait to find out how he would get a medal from you." said John now sitting comfortably in his chair.

For a moment Caroline concentrated on filling her plate from a mass of food on the table. A well piled plate in front of her and a small beer passed to her by James she started her story between forkfuls.

"I suppose it's typical of the life I am going to have to put up with. One day I am just thinking of settling down with a good book in the garden when my man here tears up in his Land Rover and announced that we had got to go down river to see his friend Ron.

You remember in the morning at seven they all talk on the radio together and then report to the head office in town. I never get up. Most times I don't even hear him come back to the house for coffee after his early morning start.

I don't think I will ever get used to the business of going to work every day of your, I mean his life, at five thirty in the morning. Before I got here I didn't know that time existed, except perhaps on the way back from a party or a hunt ball."

James laughed and turned to John and said,

"I never did tell her she would come to a place where the boss has to be there before his labourers, and leave after they've all finished.

What actually happened was that I was on the radio that morning, when Ron mentioned it was his birthday. He'd not got anybody from the old country to drink a bottle of decent whisky with him.

He lives with that Cocos girl called Norlian, she's OK but a bit hard to communicate with on a chatty level. She's gorgeous to look at I admit, and pretty good in the sack I should imagine but small talk's not her strong point. Drinking whisky isn't one of her skills."

"Don't be so sexist James. I can't speak Malay at the moment but I managed to get on with her quite well. It's nice for me to see another woman too you must understand. I love seeing her children, her youngest a pretty girl is a delight. I am going to be her Godmother, I've started to take books for her to learn from. I'll take down more childrens books for them to teach her English from."

"Ok. So then I decided to go and join him in a little celebration. I can tell you at six thirty in the morning this beautiful lady of mine is in no state to be discussing anything. I dashed off to the office, saw the labourers go to work in the fields, and told the staff I was going down river to see Ron and to get my speedboat ready and filled up with petrol.

Rushed back here again and by then I was ready to go. It came as a slight surprise to Caroline but I must say she was quick on the turn round and we were off within the hour."

Caroline chipped in quickly, throwing her head back in a charming laugh, and said,

"It's a question of 'Me Tarzan you Jane, get in um boat I go' sort of stuff. I forgive him really because he's always so considerate having given an 'order which must be obeyed' that I've got use to it now.

I mean everything was done for me the food and nice drink all prepared and waiting in the boat when we got there. I suppose I should be glad, all I seem to have to do is take myself there and sit.

I wasn't used to this you know, I was a perfectly capably young woman in London. I could do everything for myself and I was very good at it too. I ran my own business and didn't have anybody to help me. Still it's nice to be spoiled at times."

"Well thank you Ma'am, I hope to do better in the future." said James whilst chewing a chicken leg and dripping the curry juice down his bare chest.

"If I may continue" said Caroline, "We set out in his speedboat.

First I have to tell you I hadn't been in any outboards before. Now they are the bane of our lives, we seem to use them everyday for something. They are noisy and unreliable, I hate them.

I quite like the little boat James has, it's aluminium and very neat, has a canopy for me not to get sunburnt, but goes far too fast. Like most men it's his toy, and it's to show off in.

But the choice is, as you know John, either a short time in agony and din or ten hours in comfort on the small launch they keep here. I take the speed boat.

I might point out that on the stern of this little boat it says 'for use with eighteen horse power outboard', in tiny letters underneath 'for use by experienced owners to twenty eight horsepower'. What my young Tarzan has got on the back is a big shiny black sexy fifty horsepower Mercury. I know its got electric start and six cylinders, it's the latest and the fastest. I've learnt a bit since I arrived." She paused and finished her curry poured herself another beer. "On the down river trip with the current I must say it's exhilarating. At times tearing round corners in four wheel drifts, just missing logs and skating between twigs and great big dolops of hyacinth, any of which would cause us harm if not break the split pin. Some of it on the staights rushing along with the wind in your hair just watching the raw beauty of the jungle parade past you.

Oh yes, it was on this trip I saw the most fascinating thing.

As we passed one of the long bends we were well out in the middle when James spotted two creatures in the river looked as if they were swimming and fighting. He knows I am fascinated by the wildlife here and slowed down immediately. As we drifted nearer I began to make out what was going on. It was these terrible iguanas, bewak, they call them here. James has always warned me about them and we have to guard our puppies under the house. In case they might get taken by these beastly lizards, when the

mother is away hunting with him. I thought they were only about three feet long, I've seen our dogs attack one. The Ibans are always catching them to eat, they say they're delicious.

But I tell you I was terrified these were at least twice that size, if not more. They hiss and fight with a rattling noise on land but these two in the water were taking great hunks out of each other, obviously fighting over a female. Suddenly we spotted her sitting on a dead tree hanging out over the river."

"Don't be fooled love, those bastards can tear anything apart and although they usually go for carrion they're quite capable of attacking live animals twice their size. You remember when we lost those two Filipino pearl divers who used to dive on contract for the lost logs on the bottom of the river at the dumping point. We think one of them got stuck in the mud and half drowned.

His friends dived all night to try and find the body. In the morning we found two bewaks that size tearing it to pieces on the river bank. We think he might have staggered to the surface and flopped on the mud to recover and they went for him. What a way to go. I suppose tho' its no different from being attacked by a crocodile in the water." said James wisely watching his beautiful wife with glowing pride. She continued,

"I must say I was scared as we drifted towards the log, it glared at us with bright red glittering eyes and that flickering tongue. I began to panic at the idea of the boat not restarting and James having to stop along side the log. One touch of the button we fired up and then the two in the water who had been thrashing away at each other disappeared underwater.

We sped on down the river, it takes normally about three hours in all. If you stop you bake in the sun, if you keep going you bake but the wind makes it feel cool on the skin.

I love that trip most times, passing by all those magnificent trees. I try to remember the names and types but there are so many. James only really knows a bit about the ones they fell and pull out with your nasty smelly tractors. There are lots of really beautiful ones that grow along the river bank, I am always surprised to see how many flower, not like in England in a season but randomly and some I gather only every ten years or so.

Sometimes James takes me in the jungle with him when its safe, there I've seen some of the different fruit trees and the beautiful blossom they sometimes carry. The little wild bananas especially with that lovely purple excrescence like a highly excited male....." she giggled and finished "Nob!"

"Well it's true, that's what the Iban call it. I really laughed the first time I heard it, but to spare the blushes of this gel from the sheltered counties of England I refrained for some time. But when I was describing how the young Iban puts a palang through his dick in order to give the woman a big thrill then it slipped out. God what a terrible pun...

"It's true." James fell back in his chair laughing.

"I was fascinated by that legend, but I gather it's fact. But of course James would have to tell me. The men drill a hole in their penis and fit various objects in to satisfy the women. They range from great pieces of ivory or wood to sort of ticklers of feathers and fish scales and fur pieces. I don't know why the Iban girls are in need of such added thrill or perhaps us civilised women are missing out on something. Anyway once I asked James if he loved me that much if he would submit to the ritual and I would then see if I liked it.

No, joking aside it seems barbaric and from my point of view highly unnecessary as long as the man can satisfy the woman in other ways. But if it's a 'quick wham bang thank you M'am' as James calls it, then I suppose the added thrill might be worth it. "

"Look here this is degenerating into a technical discussion on the sex habits of my dear old Ibans. I much approve of their stance on the whole question, lots of free love in the trial period, if they like each other then they get on with it. No arranged marriages there for them, and the girls have total free choice and as much say in everything, as ours do.

But to go back to the palang the men insist that their bossy women demand it and in their society, the word of the girls runs strong. It's another way of proving their man hood. So they are suppose to sit in a cold stream until the offending member is freezing cold, and a bit shrivelled. Then they put it on a log and drive this dirty great thorn from the laka vine through it in one bash, wriggle it about a bit and then bind it up. Some days later they put wider and wider bits in like extending the earlobes until the optimum diameter is achieved."

"Hell's teeth, that makes the ckeeks clench just to hear you say it." John shivered and made a mocking gesture of nailing with his hands.

"That shows real devotion, but what happens to the odd bloke that dies of septicemia, I don't suppose they tell you too much about them do they. However we digress... carry on if you please Caroline dearest."

"Screaming on down river, and I mean screaming, the engine at ten thousand revs, and my brain. It takes about two hours I suppose to clear the jungle proper along the bank, and then it's the start of the nipah. After the differences in trees and monkeys and birds full of life and colour, when one see the dark green satanic mass all the same height same colour, it all changes. It's the nipah leaf they collect and split for the roofs isn't it, so there are often boats parked in the edge cutting and collecting. This time we didn't even see any of these.

The best thing down there when you get past the nipah to the mangrove nearer the sea, is the red monkeys, and some times the most stunning displays of egrets. Sitting all over the odd real tree waiting to fly somewhere, then sweeping in circles of white over the green, so pretty.

But my favourite is always the ugly but amusing proboscis monkeys. Sometimes we see whole troops of them, and when you slow down the old and huge male with the biggest flap of a nose, usually at the top of the tree screams at us, then everywhere bursts into life. The little ones run yelling to the protection of the mothers and the older males look fiercely out of the trees and leaves at you, they're so sweet. If you're lucky there'll be lots in the river swimming and playing about, it's very funny to see them trying to get out of the water. How they don't get all eaten by crocodiles I don't know. Especially as I now know a bit more about what happens down there. You should see it when the 'old man' as he is called I believe, blows up about his great big conk and yells at us. Its then that James' men always try to persuade him to stop and let them shoot a few of them."

"The last time I did that, on a long river trip up the Segama, we had monkey for the next three days and they kept the skin for making into hats which end up looking like ginger wigs. You've never seen anything so silly as a tattooed Iban wearing what looks like a ginger wig with its tail down the back of his neck like a crazy Davy Crockett." he interrupted to say.

"Well I don't allow any to be shot whilst I'm around it's unnecessary and I understand they're a rare breed. We're probably lucky living here to be able to see then so often." Caroline said very seriously, "By now we are in the half nipah and half mangrove. I agree with you John the most gloomy and depressing and dangerous looking environment there is. Underneath you can see sometimes land, and sometime only the bare mud as the water flows in and out of these roots which look as if Arthur Rackham has gone mad in illustrating. In there as you slow down the mudskippers with the bulging eyes watch you, I have seen brightly coloured snakes, huge frogs, beautifully marked pythons and of course the crocs.

And then as soon as there are banks of sand and mud on the big sweeping corners you see crocodiles, hundreds. I've seen some massive ones and I haven't been here long."

"I must say Caroline's right, the day we went down we saw some real whoppers. As the boat approaches, those up the bank asleep their heads at the top, they flip up and round and scuttle or slide into the water. The speed of these things over the ground is nothing short of amazing.

I pointed out as best I could after those days with the experts, the Orang Sungei, the size of the slides from the river showing the difference between the medium sized crocs up river compared to the bigger and stronger estuarine ones we were passing at that moment.

Apparently although capable of eating anything, from dead elephant and all the other silly buggers that come down the edge of the water in the evening, the reason for it's extra size is the abundant stock of fish in and around the estuary and the ease with which they can get them. Also as they live for very long times it seems possible there is a monster or two lurking around here."

"Anyway I thought this was anything but an academic exercise in nature study.

It's just another thing in travelling down there, we have enough trouble as it is with the pirate problem. I get worried stiff every time James goes down there or goes out to sea. I've heard the most terrifying stories since I have been here."

"Well you know it's nothing, it's happening all round this coast. Where we landed up river when we first came, the tiny little village on the coast. Can you remember John, it's only a few months before I brought Caroline to this benighted dump that the Moros hit there with American heavy machine guns. Killed eighty people including women and children in the harbour in boats alongside, and on the road leading up to the town. As they blazed their way in from the jetty, the Police ran for the jungle, most of the rest huddled under the counters and they took the bank apart. Got away with lots of money and gold and set off back across the Sulu sea.

It is still the same here as the days when Rajah Brook took on the pirates for the Sultan of Brunei. They can't control them at all, even with patrol boats of the Navy and the Police. One day they are fishing over here the next day they come back as bloody pirates. I hear the senior circuit judge down in Tawau, one of the traditional sort tried to arrange for the old law of hanging pirates on the end of the jetty in chains to warn off the others. Bloody good idea as far as I can see, but dear old British law has moved on from those wild times it seems. Pity, nobody told the women killed in the last raid they'd given up capital punishment.

I bet you if we become a Muslim state when they join with Malaya they will bring back that with the flogging and the hand chopping off. A good thing too."

"How barbaric do you mean to say that sort of thing is still done"

"Of course Caroline. The Saudis and others with strict adherence to the code of Islam have done it for centuries and still keep it up, they say tho' that there aren't many thieves in Ryadh. It does just go to show that deterrence works. We're far too lenient these days.

Still enough of that get on with the story dear we're about to dash off in a minute and take John up to the jungle before its too late. I want him to see one of his tractors hard at work.

"As I was saying. Oh yes. Then we get to the mouth of the river, that dangerous place you call the 'Kuala' by the time we get there I've had enough of the outboard screaming in my ears, then I dread the little waves. It's I suppose where the river starts to be affected by the sea, or the wind or something but whatever it produces little waves a few inches high. At the speed we go the aluminum boat being so short rattles over them like sitting on a tin tray being dragged over cobbled streets with potholes.

I hate it, my liver gets 'shaken not stirred', it feels as though I have been in a cement mixer for a day with stones going round in it. I usually get a stitch after ten minutes or so. My terror of being in the place where the pirates are most likely to get at us is surpassed by a wave of pain.

As soon as we turn into the little side river to the timber camp I am OK again, by this time there's only that short burst up to the camp. Mind you this is really hairy stuff, bends are sharp, frequent and the river is very narrow compared to the Segama. We skim and howl round these like a racetrack and trees flash by much quicker when you're that close up. Early on we see lots of monkeys on the river bank, once I saw a huge pig with big tusks. James of course tried to make me steer and let him fire, I feigned idiocy at driving and by that time we had missed the pig who had lumbered off into the greenery behind him.

So now we are nearly at the camp we have come to visit, and once again I have my heart in my mouth. If they mistake us for the pirates then they might fire at us as we arrive. He adores his Ibans I know and for good reason, but one day they will make a mistake and then be sorry afterwards. They've had dozens of attacks down there so you can't blame them for being a bit trigger happy.

When I first came we used to go mostly by the little diesel launch and arrive every time after dark, that's the most dangerous of all of course. Great dazzling searchlights on you and yelling and shouting in about three languages at once.

Still this time it's very simple they had been warned by Ron to expect us, in fact he was standing there, hand on gun I noticed just in case, but all was well.

In fact more than that, two of the guards who used to be here were jumping up and down at the end of the jetty at the thought of seeing their old hunting friend here. Grinning all over their faces shaking hands almost before our host could get a word in edgeways."

"That was old Lanau he was with me for a few years we did a lot together before I married you. We hunted for weeks in those bad old days, at the time I learned a hell of a lot from him.

Then Ron needed a really reliable guy to head up his Home Guard team down there. Lanau had been in the famous Sarawak Rangers serving in Malaya, he was good with other Ibans, they respected his time in the army. They're a bloody handful my boys if they don't look up to their leader, they are too independent minded to be a well disciplined squad. But you can't have anybody in the world better if they have decided to follow for their own good reasons. I was lucky and earned their respect quite early on in my time out here. Mostly through the ability to shoot straight and hit what they pointed out to me. After that we had a few dust ups with the pirates, we got to trust each other implicitly so I am biased as you so rightly say."

"Dear old Ron is brave enough to give me a kiss on the cheek this time, anything to do with women of his own kind and he's as shy as anything. He left England long ago, he's too used to grabbing beautiful local girls. I gather he had a big reputation in his day for the old routine. 'Scrub her up and send her to my tent' type of approach.

Still I'm so pleased he's relaxed enough to greet me in such a civilised way. One day he'll spend long enough time in Gloucestershire to catch himself a nice country girl and bring her back here as company for me." Caroline smiled as she sat back and stared out over the river.

"No bloody chance of that I can tell you. Norlain has been putting 'the obat' in his food for so long now he's got no chance of breaking away from her. Besides I think he dotes on the child, what's her name"

"You are dreadful James, you never have learnt that poor little girl's name. What the heck you're going to be like with your own I don't know. What's all the nonsense about poisoning his food, I don't believe a word of it"

"Another time then I will tell you about him, it's really the same as the Somerset Maugham story, he's totally incapable of breaking with her. He's tried twice to my knowledge.

We were convinced he wouldn't come back last time from leave and he'd met some dishy bird on the way home on the plane. One day after he left Norlian sat on the river bank and told his Head Mandor that she'd put the strongest love potion, 'obat', in his last meal she could get from the old magic man, the pawang up in the ulu. He would definitely return to her. Of course old Dollah believes in it anyway, he's from the same tribe.

So he comes back despite young nubile English girl's entreaties to stay in UK and marry her. He even thought of bringing her out here as soon as he got back and settled in. No hope, Norlian was waiting for him on the jetty, child at hand. He followed her up that very same path we were walking on, and that was the last we heard of young white lady." James said.

"Still she seems to look after him very well, both physically and mentally as far as we can tell. So what are you complaining about. If anything I think I'd better learn these black arts in case James decides to go after some old flame of his I haven't been told about.

By the way John does he have any deserted maidens sculling around in this neck of the woods? He swore all of his were left behind in Malaya and aren't likely to turn up bearing bundles of joy in sarongs on their backs!"

"Not that I know of my dear, but if you ever find one pass her on to me I'd like to try and see what the fatal fascination is. Apart from yourself they must be a wonderful alternative to the carping bitchy and gossiping white wives that pass for women in town." said John who had remained silent for some while.

"So we walk up that boardwalk to Ron's house, past all those lines of houses, I never cease to be amazed at the variety of people he has on his camp. There are a dozen aren't there.

Lots of the women call out to me and dear Ron replies for me because my Malay is still useless, lots of smiles and laughter, especially the children who want to come and talk to me.

One day when I am more fluent in Malay I'll set up clinics on the estate where they can come and talk about family and children's things and then I can advise James on what is happening.

Actually I think James is doing a fantastic job with the women he's got on the estate at the moment. They seem to be very happy and content, the children well looked after.

That's another subject. Sorry darling, I'm getting on my high horse a bit now. So we have got to Ron's house. Just as we are going up the steps he said to go with him quickly to look at something. I can't imagine what he was going to show us. He muttered something about keeping 'them' under the house.

He's had all sorts of wounded animals and babies of what the hunters killed. I assumed it was one of these.

You remember his bear, that dreadful black thing that tries to cling to your legs and cries until you feed it condensed milk, either that or it tries to rape all women by going straight up the skirt, wet nose to the fore, but with definitely the wrong intentions. Ron thinks this is very funny. I don't, and told him so last time, so it's usually locked away when I come.

Anyway we peer in the gloom under the house at some chicken wire enclosures, last time I seem to recall there were a dozen scrapping dogs and some puppies. I mean worse than James, he keeps a full hunting pack under ours. This time I look in the dark can't see a thing, then he rattled the posts the house sits on.

I saw in some mud there were three small crocodiles, they opened their mouths and hissed, or snarled as I think of it. Only a few feet long they might be but they made me jump right backwards practically fell into Ron's arms as he was behind me.

He explained he had thought he might try growing them to full skinning size himself and sort of start a croc farm. He said the kuala was full of huge unsaleable ones, but he could produce a fair income if he could get them to survive from tiny to the optimum size. He could be onto a fortune for nothing. So he's got all the croc catchers looking for babies for him now."

"That's why that bugger Din was looking so hard for the babies when we were in the nursery swamp on the Marak, I hadn't thought of that until you mentioned it. The old crook, we damn nearly get eaten by irate mothers just to flog them to my old mate Ron for him to make his nest egg from." James sounded genuinely cross.

"I looked at them in their cage they looked so sweet they're greenish on top and light yellow underneath, when you see them on those banks grey and black and evil looking you can't imagine anything more dangerous.

By the time I had got to the top of the steps there was Norlain in her best party dress, all shiny and made up, doing her best to be the hostess, looking absolutely gorgeous. I could hardly recognise her, she has a wonderful smile and she immediately grabbed me by the hand and led me to the sitting room they have just finished air-conditioning. She wanted to ask about the latest fashions in England, and to gossip as they all do.

I wanted to sit outside with the men folk. I was hot from the journey, but to have to sit straight away in freezing cold room is too much. Besides which she is the most brilliant gardener and her verandah is the finest I've ever seen anywhere. I love just sitting back and watching what goes on through the dapple and colour of those gorgeous Guinea creeper flowers, and look at the orchids she has collected.

I don't know, but I think I should write on her behalf to Kew Gardens. Some of them might be rare, as they have come down in trees felled in deep jungle and never seen the ground from two hundred feet up. I'm sure she could make a fortune on, but it probably won't work out. Somebody usually steals them if they haven't been seen before. Best to forget it and enjoy looking at them when I go there, it's one of the bonuses of living in this weird remote place. Now by the time I got back to the verandah..."

"I know what she's going to say, by the time she got free of the women's talk in the inner sanctum we were well into the first bottle of Scotch and a few beers to wash it down with." James was now standing by the verandah rail and continued, "After a while the head mandor Dollah arrived. I know him quite well, a bit of a crook, but an open crook he's been doing it for so long it seems like his due. He brought a few of his folk, the rail mandor, and the senior 'serang' the captain of the biggest of the towing boats which was in at the time.

They are pretty good really. Just come have a few drinks to be sociable and to see me, sit around for a while and they slide off. But when old Ramasamy the dresser came for his drink it degenerated into a full blown session talking of the good old days. Both of us Europeans have been in planting or timber all our life. The others, the locals, had always been associated with people similar to us. The old tales flowed thick and fast.

Did you remember old so and so?"

Do you recall the time when so and so did this or that?"

Tales of war, of hunting, of womanising, but mostly of legendary drinking habits of the ruling classes of the East. How they kept going at the rate those blokes did I have no idea. Half a day with these men would fell a normal young man in the city these days.

How much of it is exaggeration I can't tell, but I can tell you I've seen some of the most dreadful drinking sessions in my time." James concluded and John nodded in agreement.

"Me, I get bored to sobs after a few hours and usually go to bed. Then James gets furious and wants me to stay there with him to support him as his wife. Such nonsense, at home when I left, that sort of thing had died a death and everybody was doing their own thing, male or female.

We weren't expected to hang about as the goods and chattels or mere decorations of some ruling male. Most of us had perfectly viable careers, we certainly did not sit at home looking beautiful, whilst our hero did his stuff. Then to come back for the little woman to lick his boots, cook his meal and give him a massage and provide sex as an alternative to a good drink with the lads."

"Blimey Caroline I didn't know you felt so strongly about that sort of thing. What the hell are you going to do out here, the last of the male bastions. I didn't think James was particularly that sort either." John protested.

"No he's not, but he's weak when it comes to the pull of the others who are entrenched in that sort of nonsense. Still I have to admit that when it's a matter of life and death out here then I would have to bow to his superior skills and strength, so I take orders from him on that basis most of the time. But in our future life together I expect to be treated as a thinking individual."

"So we got fairly pissed sitting talking and gassing mostly about things the women didn't care about or know anything about. Norlian took Caroline to see the bear, the crocodiles again, the garden and to look at the children of her wash amah. One of them was very sick and she advised her to see an specialist next time they were in town, I assumed she was having an interesting time.

We certainly were over our few drinks.

Whilst the girls talked and walked and went down to the lines, we sat on where we had started, on the verandah, drinking steadily.

The birthday boy finishes his whisky, then another I had brought him, a fine malt from the Isles, a lovely smokey peaty tasting one from a small distillery. We went through that in short order too." James looked at John for approval, Caroline laughed at both of them, and carried on,

" Then sometime during this marathon session we were expected to provide food for the hard core of drinkers. Luckily Ramasamy's wife had foreseen this and Norlian always has some curry going for her numerous relatives in the kitchen. So with out the men having to stop at all there was produced in front of them a magical collection of dishes of the inevitable curry. I must say that Cocos Islanders food with lots of fish and that lovely rich coconut they add, it is such a nice change.

They managed to slow down a while to consume huge platefulls each of this and then decided to have just one more drink before James and I ought to have set off for home.

Going up river it was going to take us an hour or so more than the down trip of about three and a half hours. But once again the danger was being in the open stretch of water at the wide mouth of the river in case the wretched pirates were lurking there. James always reckons his speedboat could outrun most of their long boats because they're built for the sea crossing even though they have these massive black outboards strapped to the back.

I'm getting very worried by this point and James is in full flow, not about to take any advise from his new wife.

So I had a word with Norlian she called up one of her relatives and they said that they would send one of the young men that knows the river well to come with us. If necessary drive instead of James, who I have to admit is not too drunk but has had a massive amount to drink by this time.

We all troop down to the jetty. There everybody seemed to have turned up to see us off. Lots of the men have been with James up here on the estate, all Norlians back room relatives came for the walk to the jetty. Quite a crowd.

It's late afternoon, the heat is terrific. We had some water bottles given to us for the journey, of course James took another bottle of beer with him as he puts it 'just in case'. Many's the time I have said just in case of what.

God was I going to learn what the meaning of that phrase was.

Another thing I've never seen ever seen this man of mine with out his beloved knife at his side, only in town wearing his slacks or a suit does he ever leave it off. I mean that one over there lying on the rail. It cost him a fortune to have made specially. It's part of him now.

We always have to check that we've got torches, rope, spare split pins for the outboard and lots of little things I didn't bother to take much notice of. James always says that we live in a very dangerous world and have to be prepared every minute for the unexpected. Still talking ninety to the dozen, he staggers into the speed boat, lots of shouting and cheered from the shore. This time I gave Ron a big kiss and thanked him for the day, I spent a few minutes with Norlian telling her I would be down again soon to see her and try to learn a bit more Malay with her.

By now its very nearly dark and the nice Iban at the guard post is setting up his gun in the sand bagged bunker. He tells James to hurry up because if we didn't leave immediately it would be too dark to let us back in, if we find any desperados in the kuala. In other words if we left then we couldn't turn and go back to the camp, because after dusk everything is fired on whether it looks friendly or not."

"There's a reason for that Caroline. Once a small boat left there in the afternoon, potted down the river and got shot up by the Moros. They threw the crew overboard jumped in the boat wearing some of their clothes and hats. They steamed back up river to the camp who looked at the boat and assumed it was the same blokes coming back. Said they left somebody behind, the outboard was faulty, or whatever, they got right up onto the jetty before they let fly. Killed lots on the way to the office caused havoc there. They took the safe out and blew it up with gelignite, jumped back on the boat and were back in the Philippines within four hours.

That was some time ago before we got the Ibans here, our own private army, to fight back. The next time we had a bit of a blood bath, the Moros lost two men and we had the measure of them for the first time. That was when Ron had been here for a while too."

"I must say I was jolly glad to have young Salleh with us. He knows the river like the back of his hand, and most important he knows how to use a torch properly. I'm hopeless at that, last time I did try James shouted at me all the way home. Salleh's been sitting in the back of the boat out in the sun, waiting patiently, all the time they were giggling and talking before we eventually started off.

The first part of the return down Ron's little river was with the sun setting in the far distance over the tops of the big trees at the river side. So we were soon running in the half dark, the boat singing along.

There's nothing so creepy as those massive trees hemming you in. They seem to be so close at night, but then there's nothing, no life to be seen. Just a great black cardboard cutout against a duck egg blue sky as the sun is behind them. Tearing round those tight bends Salleh sitting up in the back shone his torch occasionally on the water to point out floating logs and other things that would cause is trouble. He was marvellous, not keeping the torch on too long other wise James' night vision would be impaired, but just long enough to spot the obstruction.

Goodness but James was brilliant. He was volubly drunk at the jetty when we left, and yet now minutes later he's driving our the speed boat with dare devil aplomb. How he does it I don't know. How long his liver is going to last I can't tell but then everybody here seems to drink the same way and most of them are fit and tough as old boots.

He laughed and joked with Salleh in the back, they seemed to be talking nonstop over the high pitched scream of the engine. We shot out into the big black void that was what you call the kuala, the mouth of the Segama. Then I suppose we started the run up the main river itself.

I can never see properly in the dark and just have to trust to the expert I'm with. I kept peering out of the canopy to make out the sides of the river and all I could really recognise was the deep black of the trees against the falling light of the sky.

As you know the sunsets here are sensational. Looking back to the sea you get the full show. I used to listen to this man eulogising to me, as we lay on a beach on our honey moon how romantic the sunsets could be in his precious Borneo. I suppose was rather taken with the bloke anyway, so I allowed for the exaggeration factor. I have to admit I was completely wrong. They are and always have been just as he said, stunning. Don't you agree John." He nodded muttered his agreement and Caroline continued, "These two men are concentrating hard on the driving, I lounge back looking over James shoulder watching the greatest light show on earth. I mean you've seen it too John. It really does go green, a pale indescribably beautiful green, a wash of the lightest water colour, above this the reds and yellows are laid on, band by band until above you sometimes it's a sheet of bright orange.

God if only I could paint, I could spend the next ten years trying to show those not as lucky as me seeing this every evening.

So we race on. The boy is using his torch to show James the possible hazards in front of him, once or twice we missed huge bits of tree. Not twigs, lumps of tree with all the branches attached and the roots the other end. They swirl down the river filling the whole width at times.

How we got round them I dare not look most of the time. The most disconcerting was to be flung left or right as they spotted bits at the last moment. Then it was a question of yanking the wheel over and praying the propeller would not get caught as it skidded past.

For about the next half hour we went on like this, then we could see the edges coming a bit closer which meant we were in the river proper. So with less worry of pirate seeing the light the lad at the back stood up leant over from the back seat. He put his elbows on the canopy roof to rest the torch on, and I suppose to have the cooling wind blow through his hair.

He probed around in front of the speedboat with the beam, looking for bits of logs, large lumps of water hyacinth are easy to spot. What was our undoing was half submerged. We reckon it must have been one of our own logs, broken away from a raft and was only just showing above the water. He shouts a warning we swerve hard to one side, I think he fell over at the back to one side and that turned the boat over at full speed.

All I remember next is hitting the water upside down a dreadful whack. The next thing I'm in black warm water trapped inside the boat. I was very lucky as I sank a bit straight away. The boat canopy must have been torn off in the impact, I didn't have to make any effort to get free, that was a real piece of luck, or pure instinct."

"Yes I'm sure Caroline's right we hit the water flat out at about thirty knots flipped over on my side and ploughed in. The canvas ripped straight off and I smashed my face on the dashboard. I got to the surface with no sign of Caroline, pitch bloody black. No sign of Caroline, my god I was certain I'd killed her, I didn't know where the hell she was."

"Poor James, do you know what had happened. I felt as I sank in the water that my beautiful gold watch he gave me as one of my first presents after we met was slipping off my wrist and I stayed underwater to refix it. It was half way off into my hand when I caught it. In that amazing moment of great danger all I could think of was that precious watch and what James would say to me if I lost it. Isn't that marvellous.

I swam to the surface. Then I panicked, I couldn't see James anywhere. Looking round I shouted and screamed and shouted. I couldn't see him or the boy. What had happened of course was that he was now under water trying to get in beneath the boat to get me out."

"True, in the confusion I dived three or four times, thinking she was stuck in the bows. The boat which was still afloat of course, buoyancy tanks in the thwarts and the front. So I put my knife in my teeth and dived to cut her free as I thought. My heart froze. I thought croc might have got her already, bloody hell I was furious with myself, if I could think at all. Suddenly I heard this banshee wail and I knew then she was OK. I swam round and we hung onto each other in sheer relief."

"I was shaking with fear by the time James got round to me, I thought we would die, I had never been in such a situation before. It's here I suddenly realised how much I depended on him in all situations like this. I just had to sit and wait to be told what to do next. I realise how totally dependent I was. Even if I had swum to the shore how could I survive the night.

Anyway there he was as usual with that damn knife in his teeth like a bloody pirate, but at least we had got each other as they say in all good novels. It was ages before we realised that neither of us had given a moments thought to the poor boy. He was in fact clinging to the boat waiting to be told what to do as well. What a responsibility we all are to him, I thought, we're waiting to be given our orders.

So we swam very slowly to the river bank, pulling the boat. James explained to me there were useful things on board that we might need. Apart from the fact if it had been left it would have drifted out to the kuala and the fishermen or at worst the pirate Filipinos would have taken the engine.

Then it occurred to me that we were now in the place where I had seen all those massive crocodiles that morning. I clutched at James and said as we pulled the boat along.

I asked, what about the crocs? This blighter grinned and said we'd got a fair chance of getting to the bank before they came and had a look at us to see if we are suitable food. 'By the way that's why we are hanging onto the side of the boat and not flapping to much on the surface'. Apparently they pick up on the vibrations of dying animals quicker so we had to swim slowly and not splash. What a time to tell me that!

I can't tell you how awfully frightened I was at the time, I almost fainted. 'Oh come on woman its not as bad as all that were nearly there. Look there's the bank now,' he says.

The bank, not the nice forest like jungle but a stretch of unbroken nipah all the same, all waving their hand like fronds gently at us, not a proper dry piece of land to be seen."

"I was looking frantically for a decent place to land. Low down in the water I couldn't see a bloody thing, I was having to hurry 'cos although I couldn't tell her we had very little time before some fifteen foot garbage disposer arrived to take chunks off us. This was right slap in the place where most of them went for fish and to find two or three tasty bodies to drag off into the nipah to consume would be their lucky day." James added quietly.

"Anyway we get to the bank with all limbs still intact. Tying the boat to a bit of root, James hauls us both out to flop exhausted and very relieved on some dry ground. As it happens by luck or his good eyesight we had ended up under a small tree, one of those stunted little things that occasionally exist in the blanket of nipah. All I could do as to put my back against that wonderful tree and watch as James fiddled about in the boat looking for the torch and some rope or whatever he needed.

Seconds later the terrible whine surrounded me. Thousands I mean hundreds of mosquitos had found me, I smacked and squirmed but I found out rapidly that shorts are very attractive to the onlooker but leave far too much to attract the attentions of those awful mozzies. Somehow James had found a sarong in the baggage and I wrapped that soaking wet over my legs. I was shivering with the cold, I don't know why it wasn't any colder than usual. I think it was just shock.

"At the time all I could worry about was to get a fire going as soon as possible. Firstly to keep off the damp cold at night after our soaking and to get some smoke going to keep away the mozzies. By now as Caroline says they were a damn nuisance, it wouldn't be long before some other varieties made their presence felt and her skin isn't hardened up like us old soaks.

We used to say that if you drank enough whisky they would drop dead on landing on your skin from the fumes we sweated. I dragged poor young Salleh over and sent him off to look for some dry wood, not very likely or easy but to give him something to do. Luckily my lighter had got plenty of petrol in it, but the bloody flint was sodden. Funnily Salleh smokes too and had lighter with a spare flint in the base so we fished that out put it in mine and by some miracle we managed to get a few twigs to fire up. The torch of course went as the little twit hit the water and he let go. So it was even more important that we get the fire going."

"As he said I was very glad of the fire to get warm and to sit in the choking smoke to keep off the bugs. Then John we come to the funny bit, at least that's what I hope I can feel about it now. James made us all go and collect wood now it had started and when asked why said bluntly 'we have to stay alive.'

So I stumbled about in the bases of nipah, just beyond our dry part. I was petrified and hardly moved more than a few feet, there seemed to be few bits there, but then I went on the river side and found some broken branches from the tree I had sat under.

I suppose it was then I noticed that where we had climbed up out of the water first was an easy muddy slope into the water, under my tree and further on the nipah grew out of a bank which fell the few feet straight down to the river.

Oh look, I said the bank has fallen in here shouldn't we try and pull the boat up here....Very quietly James says 'that's why my dear girl you are collecting wood. That's a croc slide and you are standing on, his trail into the nipah behind you. If he comes up out of the water we will be in trouble enough, but if he comes from the stuff there at the back he will be determined to get to the safety of water and we're in the way God help us.'

I looked, and there sure enough in flickering light of the small fire, he pointed into the stygian gloom under the stumps of the nipah, was a trail all muddy and wet and very wide. Going on that theory we were sitting in the direct route of a ten ton crocodile who would at best resent our presence and at worst stomp down and eat us for a late supper. I shook with sheer terror. The lad babbled away about his father and what was James going to do next, even I didn't sound as bad as him I thought. Still there we were both hanging on his every word. Don't like to admit it but....

In the light of the fire I looked around and realised how lucky or clever we were to have found one of the only bits of dry land for miles, the base of this little tree had a patch of ordinary soil around it, probably no bigger than this verandah, walling us in were the smelly nipah stumps.

You know at that level and that near their great stumps of bases are grey brown rotting smelly blobs, the straight green stems grow out of that for ten feet before they become those waving beautiful fronds we know so well from a distance. Well we're down in the smelly end. In between these, as I thought, all those muddy channels, grey and slimy and full of the dangers that might come.

I took one more look there and shot back to huddle round the fire, what a relief that was."

"My goodness Caroline what a state you must have been in, I don't think I would have coped too well with your situation. What happened then?" said John sitting forward in his chair listening intently.

At this point Kam Ling bustled out from the house to clear away the dishes.

"You had enough to eat. I suppose Tuans want more beer, you want coffee Mem?"

"Yes please Amah, that was simply lovely I really enjoyed the curry, you're so clever. Will you keep the rest for tomorrow. No I suppose they will want it tonight again. Do you darling?"

"Of course what do you think a curry is for, three times round and then it's getting the proper taste in it. OK Kam Ling, everything alright out the back, what's all the chatter out there having a party are we?"

"No Tuan just amah from your assistant come see me, I feed her and her husband tractor driver. You get fried rice and a special fish, tonight you have guest here I not serve twice curry.." She flounced off through the door muttering to herself.

"Oops. Put my foot in it again, just because you're here John we have to have the full show. Anyway I like leftover curry. So, well have another beer and hear the rest of the tale of bravery and derring do on the Segama. I begin to like this it looks as though I am being appreciated at last." James laughed and patted the seat beside him.

Caroline slid herself in beside him her legs draped over his and put an arm round his shoulders, kissed him on the cheek and hugged him. Turning to John she was now able to see out over the view and said,

"Sometimes I wonder what the hell I am doing in this place, I had no idea that it would be like this. No that's wrong, I must say James described it exactly as it is. I just thought he was showing off and it couldn't be anywhere as bad or as dangerous as he portrayed.

Well it is, and it's likely to be the same for a long time yet isn't it my dearest."

"Yup."

"Oh yes, to get back to the dodgy bit down on the kuala, a desperate moment had arrived.

I was in agony from the bites and was more concerned with this and the effects on my precious skin than the difficulties we were facing. By this time James had pulled bits and pieces from the boat, and had the spare tanks of fuel. So with some ash from the fire and petrol he smeared my face and legs with this foul stink, I must say it was a relief for a while. The mozzies didn't like that bit as he said not to go too near the fire for a while.

He and Salleh were now cutting nipah fronds down and stripping the leaflets, as a by product of that I had a sweet smelling clean bed of green to sit on. I watched fascinated as they sharpened the ends then told me to put them in the fire, keep turning them, and this would burn and harden the ends. I did this for a while and then foolishly asked what for.

I was smartly told that they were spears, we only had two parangs in the boat, one James' inseparable companion and one other the lad had with him. Now I realised to my eternal shame it wasn't so macho to carry weapons but an essential. This sort of thing could happen to James any time any day, in fact every day he went to work this could happen or worse.

Some of the petrol was fed on the fire to help burn up some big bits of wood we had found, by now we had a good blaze going. The pretty sparks flew out of our little clearing over the river like little red stars, but now the sky had cleared of evening cloud and the real ones were flashing through. Sitting there if one could ignore the wet and bites it was very romantic. An unbroken bowl over us in the deepest purple, its rim the black silhouettes of the nipah, sprinkled with glittering stars and far off in the horizon a moon starting to flow its silver over the river.

For while we stood and cuddled each other leaning against the tree looking across that great black surface and watching as it changed to from a flat threatening space to a place where magic must exist.

In the distance the sound of the sea came in on a very gentle breeze, I was transported and relaxed with James."

She hugged James close to her, his face enclosed in her arms for a moment, she went silent. He reached up with his arms and pulled her off the edge of the chair into his lap, and for a while they lay together. She looked into his eyes and kissed him passionately. Swinging round to face John again she said,

"Sorry about that. I was remembering something I will never forget."

"Its lovely to see you two, I am very jealous." John filled his glass and for a while there was a pause as the three of them contained in their own thoughts watched the empty sky.

A solitary bird high above the river circled slowly, a mere dot in the massive blue heavens, blazing down on them, almost taking their breath away with the heat that now wafted onto the verandah.

"He was holding me in his arms telling me some sweet things, when suddenly he turned me and pushed me the other side of the fire near the tree and on the river side. Curtly ordered to stay that side and take a spear. 'Come here lad', he barked and threw a lot of petrol on the fire which roared for a while. 'Keep putting on wood, go on as fast as you can you two. Hurry.'

I asked what's going on, of course hurt at his change of voice. 'Do as I say and if any thing happens, what ever happens to me stay that side of the fire. You Salleh go with her. Use your spear if needed and take the other parang. Get on with it NOW!'

James leaped round the other side of the fire from us, facing the jungle and crouched with this huge spear thing listening. I was absolutely juddering with fright at this, it wasn't helped by his curt orders. It must be something important.

As I thought about this, totally confused, out of the pitch black at the back came a huge open jaw.... I screamed. All I heard was.. 'Shut up...'

Out of that channel of slime at the back had come an enormous crocodile. It made this terrifying noise a grating hissing, I froze.

James stood his ground. It sort of lunged at him, he stabbed out with the spear. It dashed at him and he manoeuvred himself to be in front of the danger and directly opposite me. The croc by this time was right out of the nipah and across our clearing. I mean that too, it was the width of our space, it stood up on its legs, bowed legs like a bull dog. The thing stood half James' height, but it's jaws seemed to be wider than he was tall. You could see all those fearsome teeth so clearly. It's massive tail was still partly in the nipah stumps at the back it was lashing this about the noise was amazing.

Then there was a big rush by the croc at James.

I screamed and started to move round the fire to help him I think. Salleh grabbed me weeping, saying, 'don't go Tuan say stay here.'

I started to fight to pull away when I saw James lean forward with his spear into the side of the croc and sort of steered it past him like a picador on horse back does the bull. It shut it's jaws with a crash and tore past him down the slide into the river. It disappeared with out a splash.

I screamed again. He yelled at me 'shut up and stay where you are.' I can't look round to watch you.' At Salleh 'hang on to the Mem'.

We waited and waited, James went forward to where the big one had come out and stooped down into the space listening. I called out for him to come back. Where are you going come back, I kept saying.. I think he said something rude at this point and I clutched the tree and prayed. Oh God, I prayed don't send another croc, not another croc.

After what seemed like an eternity he came back over to us and gave me a hug to comfort me and said he didn't think there were any more to come out.

He hoped it was just the mother croc on her own, he maintained it was a breeding ground at the back. We had picked just about the worst place to be stranded.

I'll never, never until I die, forget the sight of that prehistoric beast in the firelight coming out of the darkness and slime facing James, the shadows on the wall of nipah made everything look twice the size and twice as frightening. The speed and size of the dragon attacking my knight in khaki was terrifying. I just pray I never have to go through that again.

In the end we came out of it unscathed but mainly to the calm and order of his way and I suppose skill of survival.

Stone age time really if you think about it."

She bent her head over James again her voice had failed with emotion and she clung to him for a while.

"Come on now it wasn't that bad, we didn't spend much longer before me boys turned up to rescue us."

"I shivered in his arms for the rest of the night. We watched the dawn come up. In the midst of danger and disaster the arrival of that magnificent sun to give its usual display as usual. Almost anything can be forgiven to see that, but thank goodness far off we could hear the loud thud of a small diesel coming down river.

Even that was not as simple as it seems. James made us douse the fire and hide in the nipah where he had cut us a sort of hiding place.

Just in case it was a Filipino boat on it's way back from cutting nipah leaf for roofing as usual. They are opportunist and the sight of just three people and a valuable engine to be had might have made them turn out their guns and bump us off.

As it was you can hear the noise of a diesel engine for ages before it arrives. You know the river bends and turns almost back on itself. The sound carries quite incredibly in the morning so still and with the low mist on the water. I expect they were only a few hundred yards away across the jungle, but miles of river to travel.

Then I heard the most weird noise ever. It seem to be like a deep horn being blown, but whooping in the way those gorgeous gibbons do as they wake in the morning.

Do you know what as soon as James heard that he hugged me, we did a little dance around on our few square feet of dry land. He knew you see that it was his Ibans. He explained what they do is reverse a shot gun and blow up it like a trumpet but imitating the wah-wah. The sound carries for miles in the jungle, even further over the river. What an enchanting sound.

Thank goodness for his devoted bodyguard again."

"Once again the boys to the rescue. My orders are that if anyone is two hours overdue what ever the reason then searchers set out. Lots of times we have come on the missing boat a few bends from home. If he's broken a prop or had an accident then we don't mind, better safe than sorry. But I tell you I get bloody mad if we've turned out on a night when it's pouring with rain and spent the while night looking for them, only to find out that they never set out. Then there is f.....ing hell to pay.

Bloody old Ted did that once to me, he spent the next three weekends in the foulest new felled clearing I could find measuring drains. Bloody near boiled his brain in it's box that did, christ I was cross.

He'd forgotten and went on drinking with his old mate on a timber camp on the other river from Ron's and just stayed the night. Enough said.

Good old Caroline, she's a very brave woman as well as being very beautiful. I don't know anybody else who would have put up with that cock up with such good temper, even managed a few jokes during the night.

I hope I haven't put her off for life about travel in speedboats 'cos that all we've got for the river.

Now we can go to town on the float plane as you know. Still one day that's going to have to ditch with somebody on board, its come pretty close on many occasions."

"Well well what a story to tell your children. What a place you have to put up with. I think you're wonderful Caroline I really do. Next time you visit the metropolis of Sandakan I'll return the compliment and you can stay in my house. We've got a swimming pool now in the garden, the company decided that it was such a strain being here that they would give us a few perks. Do you know

the worst adventure we've had in that was one day one of the gardeners killed a small snake crossing the pool. What a feeble comparison we office wallahs are to you."

"Oh John don't mention snakes to me, I live in mortal fear of them all day long here, but that's another story. It's late now I'd better go and have a shower and freshen up.

Darling will you come for a rest this afternoon or are you taking John straight to the tractors?"

"Go on, you have a shower and lie down. We'll go for a small trip, but be back soon. What say we have afternoon tea on the verandah. See if you've still got a bit of that cake left, I fancy that this afternoon."

Caroline untwined herself from James, kissed him and skipped across the floor to their room humming a Beatles tune.

"See you this later this afternoon and I'll bore you with the time I caused James such terrible embarrassment on my first few days here with snakes. Poor man, I let him down dreadfully. See you when you come back."

"James you're a lucky devil to have such a fantastic wife."

"I know."