

## THE DIAMOND OF JERU

When Lacklan brought his wife to Marudi, he was looking for diamonds, but when he learned he intended to take her up river with him, we decided he was a fool.

The northwest jungle of Borneo was no place for such a girl as Helen seemed to be, although as it turned out he was lucky to have brought her along.

Helen Lacklan was one of those lush and gorgeous blondes who take a tan so beautifully, and whose bodies are so magnificent that one never suspects them of brains. Moreover, she had the extraordinary faculty of always seeming perfectly neat and perfectly cool. In the sultry heat of the equator that isn't merely an achievement, it's a miracle.

Lacklan was a tall man, slightly stopped, his face betraying his arrogance and impatience. From the first I could see he was fiercely jealous of her, but I could not see that she gave him any occasion for it. Never have I seen a man so positive of his basic rightness on every question.

As I've said, he came to Borneo looking for diamonds. Now they find diamonds around Bandak, around Kusan, and near Matapura, to name only a few places. They also find some rare colors in the Sarawak River. Most so-called "fancy" stones are found in Borneo, for diamonds come in a variety of colors, including black.

Naturally, they sent him to me. I'd been in the East Indies almost a year and was ready to get out, but it was money I needed. And Lacklan had money.

Moreover, I wanted one more try up river myself. Diamonds had become a specialty of mine and that was why

they sent him to me. Since coming to Marudi, I had collected every iota of information on diamonds in that section of Borneo, and some of the facts began to add up very curiously to say the least.

Marudi was the principal town of the district, which means little. They do a bit of trade in beeswax, rattans, gutta-percha, rubber, camphor, edible bird's nests and some products of the mines, of which there were a variety. Gold, silver, cinnabar, iron, and even coal. A few coastal steamers come up the river but sometimes a full month would go by and there would be none at all.

My place was a deserted bungalow which I'd adopted and repaired. When Lacklan and his wife appeared, I was seated on the veranda idly reading from Norman Douglas' South Wind.

When they turned in the path, I got to my feet and walked to the door. "Come in," I invited, "it isn't often I have visitors."

When they came up on the porch, I noticed at once that Helen's eyes went at once to the book I had been reading. She glanced up quickly, and smiled. "It's rather wonderful, isn't it?"

My immediate reaction was surprise. It was my impression that a girl with her rather emphatic physical equipment would have time for little else. "It's an old friend," I said, smiling.

Lacklan looked from one to the other of us puzzled and irritated. "You're Kardec?" he demanded. "I'm John Lacklan."

"That's right. Matt Kardec. And it's nice to have you come over. This," I said, turning to her, "is Mrs. Lacklan?"

Lacklan wasted no time. "I understand you're the authority on diamonds?"

"Well," I hesitated over that one, "maybe. Will you sit down? I'll order a drink."

Raj was already at my elbow. He was a Sea Dyak, not over sixteen, but his mind was as quick and intelligent as anyone I've ever encountered.

"Scotch," Helen said, "with soda . . . about half."

Raj nodded brightly and glanced at Lacklan who waved a careless hand. "The same," he said.

When Raj returned with our drinks, Raj handed them around and Helen sat there sipping hers and watching me. From time to time, she glanced at her husband and, although she said nothing, I had an idea that she missed nothing.

"You've been up the Baram, above Long Sali?"

"Yes," I saw no reason for explaining just how far I had gone. Marudi was a rough sixty miles from the mouth and Long Sali was a village a hundred and fifteen miles further up river. Actually, I had crossed the island to Tarukan once, and had been down the backbone of mountains that divided Sarawak from Borneo proper for more than sixty miles.

"Are there diamonds up there? Gem stones?"

"There are," I agreed, "but they are scattered and hard to find. Most of the stones are alluvial and are washed out of creeks back up the river. Nobody has ever located their source."

"Good! Can you take us three?"

"Us?" I was surprised. "Your wife, too?"

"She goes where I go."

"You know your business best," I said carefully, "but that's no country for a woman. It's a jungle, it's

miserably hot, and there are natives up there who have never seen a white man, let alone a white woman. Some of them can't be trusted."

"We'll be armed." His manner was brusque and I could see his mind was made up. Perhaps they had already discussed the matter, but from all appearances, it would not have mattered to him what she thought about going. Nor would he have considered worrying about her. "You speak the language?"

"I speak market place Malay," I said, "and a scattering of Dyak. Also," I added dryly, "I know that country."

"Will you go?" he demanded.

"Not to take Mrs. Lacklan," I said, and then looked over at her. "I don't want to offend you, Mrs. Lacklan, but it is a very rough country, bad enough for men alone, and with a woman along . . . ."

"I'd as soon stay here, John," she suggested quietly, "and I think Mr. Kardec is right. I might make trouble for you."

"Nonsense!" he replied irritably. "I want you to go."

She turned to me. "Won't you reconsider then? I'd promise not to be any trouble."

"All right," I shrugged it off, "but remember, I'm not promising you any diamonds. Nobody can do that. You've one chance in a thousand of finding a stone of gem quality."

When he had settled the terms, they went to the door and Helen hesitated there. "Thank you," she said graciously. "I enjoyed the drink."

It is only once in a lifetime that a man sees such a woman, and I confess I looked after them with envy for him.

It made my throat dry out and my blood throb in my pulses just to look at her, and it was that as much as anything else that made me hesitate. A man needed all his attention on such a trip as this . . . and no man could remain other than completely aware of such a woman when she was near him.

Nothing moves fast in the tropics, yet despite that I had lined up the boats, boatmen and equipment within two days, and they were to join me for a last evening before we went up river. Yet as they walked up the path, I knew something had gone wrong.

"Kardec?" Then he saw me. "We've made other arrangements. I'll pay what expense you've incurred."

"Other arrangements?" I was puzzled. "You've decided not to go?"

"We'll be going, but with someone else. How much do I owe you?"

Frankly, it made me angry. The deal had been all set, and now . . . I stated my price and he paid me. Helen merely stood there saying nothing, yet it seemed to be her face was showing some resentment or anger that I had not seen there before.

"Mind telling me how you're going?"

"Not at all. But it doesn't seem to matter, does it?"

His very arrogance and coolness angered me, and also to have all my excellent planning go for nothing. "It matters a great deal," I told him, "there's no other white man available, and if you go back in there with a native, you're a fool!"

"You're calling me a fool?" He turned on me sharply, his eyes ugly. For a minute I thought he was going to swing on me and I'd have welcomed it. Until come to the

Far East, I'd been a fair to middling light-heavy. I'd have liked nothing so much as to see him lose a few teeth.

"Look," I said, restraining my own anger, "within the past four years several different groups have gone up country from this coast, and only two have come back, excepting myself. Those two had white guides."

"So what?" The words were a sneer. He didn't like me and he would have liked taking a poke at me. I knew that.

"Didn't this native show you a diamond? A big stone? Something about twenty karats?"

They were surprised, both of them. "And what if he did?"

"You tried to buy it and he wouldn't sell. Am I right?"

"And if you are?"

"And if I am right this was the same fellow who guided the parties from Marudi before, also from Kuching, from Sibü and Saratok. None of them ever came back."

"You're implying that he had them killed? For what reasons? For the diamonds they found?"

"Diamonds mean nothing to them. I believe he used the one stone he has to lure them up river so he can murder them for their possessions."

"Nonsense!"

"He was an old man, wasn't he? With a face like a dried prune?"

Their expressions cleared. "No," Lacklan was triumphant. "He was a youngster. No older than your house boy."

So they had switched, that was all. The trick was the same. And they were not the first natives to do that. It

had been done by the Piutes in Colorado, with gold nuggets for bait.

"Have it your own way, Lacklan. It wouldn't matter if you were going alone, but you're taking your wife along."

His face flamed and his eyes grew ugly. "My wife is my own concern," he said, "and none of your affair."

"You're right, of course, only I'd do a lot of thinking before I'd let bullheadedness risk my wife's life. Risk your own all you like."

"Nonsense!" Lacklan scoffed. "You're merely sore because you lost the business."

So they walked away and I could see Helen talking with him as they went up the road toward town. Whatever she said, I heard him answer angrily. Yet her words must have had some influence because that night I was talking to Vandover.

"Say," he said, smiling at me, "what was this story you told the Lacklans about some native luring white men into the jungle. They had it all garbled. Didn't sound like you, at all."

There were four of us there on the veranda of the resident officer's bungalow. "Van," I said, "I believe you'll all agree that I've devoted a lot of time to tracing diamond stores?"

"No doubt about it. But this yarn is a bit thick, isn't it?"

"Remember Carter? That was two years before my time, but he came down from Hong Kong on a vacation. He et some native down on the coast who had a big diamond and wouldn't sell it. The native agreed to show him where there were more. He went up river and was never heard of again."

"A few months later, the same thing happened to Trondly at Kuching. There were two who went up country from Sibü and Igan, and another from Bintulu. All had the same story to tell before they went up river."

"You think it was the same old native? The same diamond?"

"What else? A native finds a gem stone and sells it, he spends the little he gets, and that's the end of it. This way that stone represents a permanent income. Rifles, ammo, blankets, trinkets, food, clothing, tools and trade goods . . . and every few months a new supply."

"Fantastic idea." Vandover rubbed his long jaw. "Sounds like something that old blighter of a Jeru might cook up."

"It could be," Fairchild agreed, "you'd better call Kuching on it. Sounds to me like a police matter."

My Scotch tasted good. Turning the glass in my fingers, I looked over at Fairchild. "Using your outboard? Fact is, I'm thinking about following them up river. That fat head can fry in his own juice for all of me, but I'd not like to see Helen Lacklan trapped because of him."

"Use it," Fairchild assented, "if Rector wasn't due in tomorrow I'd go with you."

By daylight the native huts, banana and rubber plantations were behind me. The strong brown stream was muddy and there were occasional logs, but this outboard was a good one and we were making better time than Lacklan would be making. They had started several hours before me and were making good time. I did not attempt to overtake them because I neither wanted them to think me butting in nor did I want old Jeru to know I was following.



My bolt gun was a .45 Colt automatic with four extra clips, and I was carrying a Mannlicher big game rifle, a beautiful weapon. It gave me a comforting feeling to have the guns there as I watched the boat push its way up the Baram. The river trended slightly to the south-southeast and then took a sharp bend east, flowing down from among a lot of eight thousand foot peaks. Mostly jungle, yet there were places where stretches of table land waved with grass. This was wild country, rarely visited, and there were small herds of wild elephants, and a good many buffalo.

Only Raj accompanied me. Although a Sea Dyak of the coast, he spoke a number of the dialects and had been with me on my earlier trips. He knew old Jeru well and liked him none at all. From a blotto, the hollowed out tree trunk that is the native boat, he learned from three natives that the boy guiding the group was Jeru's nephew and that all the boatmen were from his village.

The river narrowed and grew increasingly swift. We were well into the Kapuas Mountains, the rugged chain that is the spine of Borneo and terminates in the thirteen thousand foot dome of Kina Balu. The air was clear and the heat less oppressive at the increased altitude.

It was Raj who sighted the boats, concealed under overhanging brush on the riverbank. It was almost at the base of a huge tapan tree. Concealing our own boat, we started toward Jeru's village.

Nobody needed to tell me what we were walking toward. We were miles from any possible aid, in an area where it would be extremely difficult to prove any crimes against the natives. We faced a situation from which we must extract ourselves by our own abilities . . . or die.

At the same time, old Jeru was cunning. He had been careful to cover his actions, careful to avoid coming too often to the same port to recruit his prospective victims, careful to see that no attention was directed to himself. It had been my own curiosity about the origin of the various diamonds reported that had drawn my attention to him . . . but of this he was unaware.

John Lacklan and his wife stood in the center of the clean-swept village compound. Around them clustered the villagers, their faces hard with greed and evil with murderous eagerness. Jeru's nephew had disappeared and they stood alone. Even as we reached the edge of the compound, we saw several stalwart black fellows push their way to the front rank of the natives.

"Which one of you will show us to the stream where the diamonds were found?" Lacklan asked.

There was no reply, no sound but a faint shuffling of feet on the hard ground, only silence and watching eyes. Helen said something to Lacklan, but he shook his head. For the first time, he seemed to be aware of his danger.

"I'll pay well," Lacklan persisted, and for him his voice was surprisingly mild, "who wants to show me that stream?"

Still no voice lifted, and then suddenly a young boy darted from the crowd and jerked the rifle from Lacklan's hand. He was totally unprepared for the action, his attention centered on the warriors, and he lost balance and almost fell, yet he grabbed wildly at the rifle. Yet even as his hand shot out, a big native bumped into him and knocked him off balance to the ground. He fell hard, and all laughed.

Helen Lackland stood very still, poised, erect, waiting. She had no idea what to do and, obviously, she was frightened, yet I never admired her more than in that moment. And then the natives started to crowd forward.

Stepping from the jungle, I shouted.

A dropped bomb could have startled them no more. With shrill cries of astonishment and alarm, they turned around to face us. With Raj carrying my rifle at port arms (how I wished it was a shotgun!), I walked to the center of the crowd and took my stand beside Helen Lackland.

Lacklan was getting to his feet. His face was gray and his eyes glittered. Blood trickled from a cut on his cheekbone. "You, is it?" he glared at me. "Did you put them up to this?"

"John!" Helen was shocked. "What are you saying? They've come to help us!"

"Have they?" Lacklan stared at me, eyes narrow with dislike. "I prefer to wait and see."

Ignoring him, I turned to her. "Mrs. Lacklan," I spoke quietly, we were afraid of this and followed you. We told them at Marudi, but there is no chance of help. We shall have to get out of this on our own."

"Give me that gun," Lackland said angrily, "I'll show you how to get out of here!"

"If you'll look," I said grimly, "you'll see at least ten guns among the natives. At this range, we wouldn't have a chance."

Jeru had come from his hut and his staring eyes were cold as those of a snake. He was cunning as a forest and twice as vicious, but I knew that my arrival must present a problem to even his savage and primitive kind. Never

before had he been followed? Were the white men growing suspicious?

All around me was the evidence that my suspicions had been correct. The rifles, several hatchets, a brass lantern or two, articles of clothing . . . the village was crammed with loot. Was I the only white man? Or had others come? Were others still coming?

"Jeru," I said, using all the authority I could muster, "return Tuan Lacklans rifle. We go now to hunt for diamonds."

He made no move, just stood there looking at me out of that dried prune face, yet if we could just make the boats. . . .

"Look!" Lacklan grabbed Helen's arm excitedly. "Look at the size of that uncut diamond hanging on Jeru's neck!"

"That's not a diamond," I said, never taking my eyes from Jeru, "it's quartz, or something."

"Spirit rock!" Raj whispered to me, "that sekali kuat spirit."

"What does he say?" Lacklan demanded.

"He says that rock has a very strong spirit. This is a new one on me."

"I think I know." Helen stared curiously at the stone. "It looks like chalcedony. It's probably an enhydros."

Lacklan looked at Helen as if he had never seen her before. "What's an enhydros? I never heard the word. What does it mean?"

The natives were edging nearer. Never in my life had the feel of a Colt in my holster been so good. Yet no matter how fast I shot I'd be lucky to get more than two or three of them before they closed in . . . and then we wouldn't have much time.

Like that . . . it was no way for a man to die, no way at all. This was a situation where mere nerve and a gun wouldn't help. They were too close, there were too many of them. They were altogether too close.

"There's water inside such stones," Helen was speaking quickly, "when the stone is moved, the water often moves. Primitive people often believe a spirit is imprisoned in the rock."

My .45 slid into my hand. Lacklan was staring at the natives his jaw muscles working. "Jeru!" I yelled. "The rifle!" My gun was trained on his chest. "Return the rifle and call off your people or I shoot the orang batu!"

That stopped them. Most of them knew some Malay, and they would certainly know what I meant by the Man of the Rock."

"No good," Jeru stared at me sullenly, "you maybe kill me. Rock dead. The Man of the Rock is gone."

Lacklan was looking longingly at my pistol. I could see the fear and impatience riding him.

Helen looked at Jeru's crystal, but she spoke to me. "Would it help," she suggested, "if you could put the spirit back in the rock? It can be done."

If there was fear in that girl it did not show. If she was trembling it was not in her voice. Here was a woman to walk beside a man, not behind him . . . and certainly not one who would always be fighting to get ahead of him.

It was a gamble, but what else had we. "Jeru," I spoke contemptuously, "The Man of the Rock has left you because of your wickedness," I spoke in Malay, "but I know that he and at least some of the tribe would comprehend me. "You are evil. You have murdered and robbed from your

friends the white men how came in peace. You have enriched some of your tribe by theft, but the spirit of your tribe has gone away. You are alone now. Sickness and death will come upon your village unless the spirit returns. Many sons will die. The strong men of the village will die. The game will go from the forests and the fish from the river. There will be hunger and evil in your huts, and there will be evil and death in your hearts."

Malay is a rolling and beautiful language when spoken well. Their eyes were upon me, struggling to follow. I knew enough of the words were known to them to give them at least the sense of what I spoke.

"You lie!" He said it without strength, sullenly, resentfully, fearing in his heart that what I said was true. There was murmuring among the people.

"I do not lie! The spirit of the rock is friendly to the white man and to the white woman. We can bring him back to your village if your hearts are right. If he does not return, your village will die and the ants will pick over your bones and the people of Jeru will be no more."

Whatever it meant, I was gaining time. In the back of my brain, there was a vague recollection that certain quartz crystals contain water or liquid carbon dioxide, and sometimes these are seen as floating bubbles with the rock. Once that water is gone, however. . . .

They stared at me, dark superstition stirring within them. Jeru was old and wise, yet superstitious as the rest of them. To these people each rock, each tree, each mountain held a spirit. Yet the spirit of this rock which Jeru wore from his neck was one where the spirit could be seen. It was there, they knew it was there. How long it

had been in the village, no man could guess, but now the spirit was gone.

"Only we who are close to the spirit can induce him to return." Their eyes were upon me, haunted, staring. Out of the side of my mouth I said, low-voiced, "Lady, you'd better be right! What's the gag? How's it done?"

She, too, whispered. "I'll need a kettle or pot—one with a lid. The stronger the better. And a hot fire."

Among the objects in the village was a large iron pot with a lid that I had already seen. Suddenly, I stepped forward. "Now!" I said, and knew if this didn't work I was going to kill old Jeru, at least. "Bring the rifle to me! You!" I pointed at one big Dyak. "Bring that pot! You, you, and you! Build a fire! Gather stones to place under the pot. Quick!"

They moved almost without thinking, and I turned swiftly on Jeru. "I have no anger for Jeru nor for his people. I shall induce the Man of the Rock to return, but he will stay with you only so long as you do not evil to the white men who are your friends. The things you have stolen, all must be returned to Tuan Vandover to free you of evil!"

Other villagers had turned now and were helping to build high the fire. They were excited as children. This was magic, and magic they longed to see. "Got the rock, Matt," Helen told me, "and put it in the pot about two-thirds full of water. Put the lid on and weight it down with rocks, then boil that water and hope!"

"If steam or pressure split that stone," I said, "we'd better be the first to know!"

"I've seen it done with a pressure cooker," she said, "My Dad was a mineralogist."

Then the water was boiling and the lid of the kettle weighted down I stepped back and faced the flames. "Now don't laugh," I said, "they need something to impress 'em!"

With my hands outstretched toward the flames, I repeated Hamlet's soliloquy in solemn tones, really hamming it up, but good.

In all this time there had been no word from John Lacklan. He stood back at one side, glowering. Maybe I wrong the guy, but I doubt if he even thought of the time we'd gained, of the fact that we might pull them out of the hole. All he was thinking about was that I had been right about Jeru and the diamond and that it was his wife and I who were doing something about it. What was cooking in that narrow skull of his I couldn't guess. I only hoped he'd save it until we were out of here.

"What if this doesn't work?" he sneered.

"You better pray that it does," I replied shortly.

He started at Helen. "You never told me you knew anything about stones!"

"You never gave me a chance, John," she said quietly, and then she lifted her eyes to his, "I was really in love with you, John, but you made it harder and harder to stay that way. You never let me help you, John. You always knew. You always had to be right. Even as a little boy, if you couldn't pitch you wouldn't play."

We watched the flames around the kettle. How much steam would build up inside? How much pressure? How much would it take? I knew nothing of such things. Nor was there, I expect, any general rule. The problem of each stone might be original and different.



Slowly, as the time paused, the natives began to gather around. "Raj," I whispered, "if anything goes wrong, it's every man for himself."

"Yes, Tuan." He looked at me briefly. "If all not well they be very angry. They think much of Orang Batu. Him all right, you be very big man."

There was no use delaying. It was now or never. Some time had passed, and now all waited. Slowly, with a long stick, I moved the fire away, then pushed the rocks from the top of the kettle and pushed off the lid. Instantly, steam billowed up, a great gust of it, and muttering some audible words, using two sticks as tongs, I fished in the kettle for the rock, then lifted it out.

Helen moved close beside me. The steam cleared . . . she gave a little gasp.

My mouth was dry. Turning slowly, with infinite care, I looked over the faces that stared at me. They ringed us around, their eyes wide, expectant. Old Jeru was in the front rank, and now he stepped forward. "How is it with the Orang Batu?" he asked.

Helen said nothing and some native shifted his callused feet on the hard earth. The only good thing was the feel of that Colt in my hand. Helen was looking at the rock again.

"Matt!" Her voice was excited. "Look!"

But I had seen. . . .

There was one tall, intelligent looking man of some forth years in the group. He had fine features and a strong body. I had noticed there was no friendliness visible between this man and Jeru.

"The Man of the Rock has come back to you," I said, "and he will stay and bring prosperity to your village as long as there is no evil among you."

Jeru took a hesitant step forward, hand outstretched to receive back the fortune of the village, but taking the crystal, I stepped past him and placed it in the hand of the tall man of whom I had noticed much. "You," I said, "will be the keeper of the Orang Batu. Jeru brought only evil to your village. You will keep this and you will speak with the words of the Orang Batu!"

Sure it was politics! But there was concentrated evil in the face of the old devil Jeru, and no man with such a face could be liked . . . the tall man, however, was different . . . besides, in case of a fight it is always wise to have the young and strong on your side.

Jeru? He stepped back like I'd slapped him, actually seeming to shrivel. The new chief was no dope. He stepped out and accepted the rock and looked at it, and when he moved it there stirred under the thin surfaces of the rock, a small shadow shaped like a man. The natives crowded around to look, and like Carol Sandburg's Fog, we departed on cat feet.

Oh, yes! I did linger . . . just a moment longer.

So that was the story we told the \_\_\_\_\_, and it was the story we talked about, Fairchild, Vandover and I, in the later hours. "What a man couldn't do," Fairchild said, "with a woman like that!"

"What you could do, Fairchild. Or Kardec. Not Lacklan."

"What do you mean?"

Vandover stoked his pipe. "He's all ego, yet she saved his life, pulled him out of the mess he got them into. He'll never forgive her."

Then I remembered what he had said when we got into the boat. "I supposed you two are satisfied," he'd said, "being the whole show."

The next time I saw her it was morning. She came down the path of the bungalow alone. "We're flying out," she said, "I've come to say goodbye."

"I take back what I said, that this country isn't for a woman like you."

She smiled at me, a little forlornly, I thought. "No, Matt, you were right." Her eyes met mine. "I lost a husband here, Matt."

"Hadn't you lost him before?" I asked gently.

She hesitated, looking out over the garden. "Maybe. Or he lost me, or something."

"Sorry," I said, but I lied in my teeth, and she knew it.

"You made the trip for nothing," she said, "It wasn't fair."

"No," I told her, "not for nothing."

She looked at me, hesitated, then said quietly, "Matt, I'd never suggest such a thing to John, but you . . . you're a bigger man. John would never accept anything from me, not even . . . partnership. But Matt, I . . . I'm a wealthy woman, Matt, and I heard you were guiding us just for passage money. Would you let me pay it to you now? You earned it, you know."

She was a very beautiful girl. A very wonderful girl. A very desirable girl. "It won't be necessary."

"You're not just proud? You could pay me back if you liked?"

"No, it isn't being proud. Remember, when I hung back a bit at the village?"

"Yes, of course." She was puzzled.

My hand came from my pocket. "Never under rate a man who has lived as I have, Helen. Just as a man who has lived as I have would never under rate a woman as lovely as you." I smiled. "In this sort of life, well, one always . . ." I opened my hand.

On my palm lay, an easy twenty-five karats . . . the diamond of Jeru!

THE END