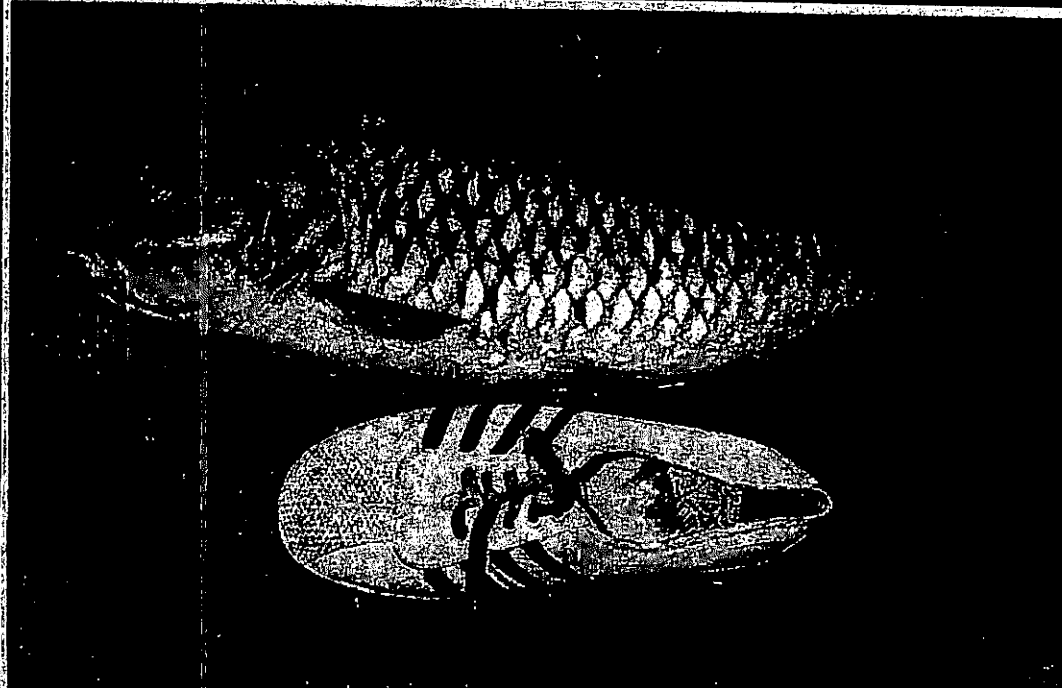
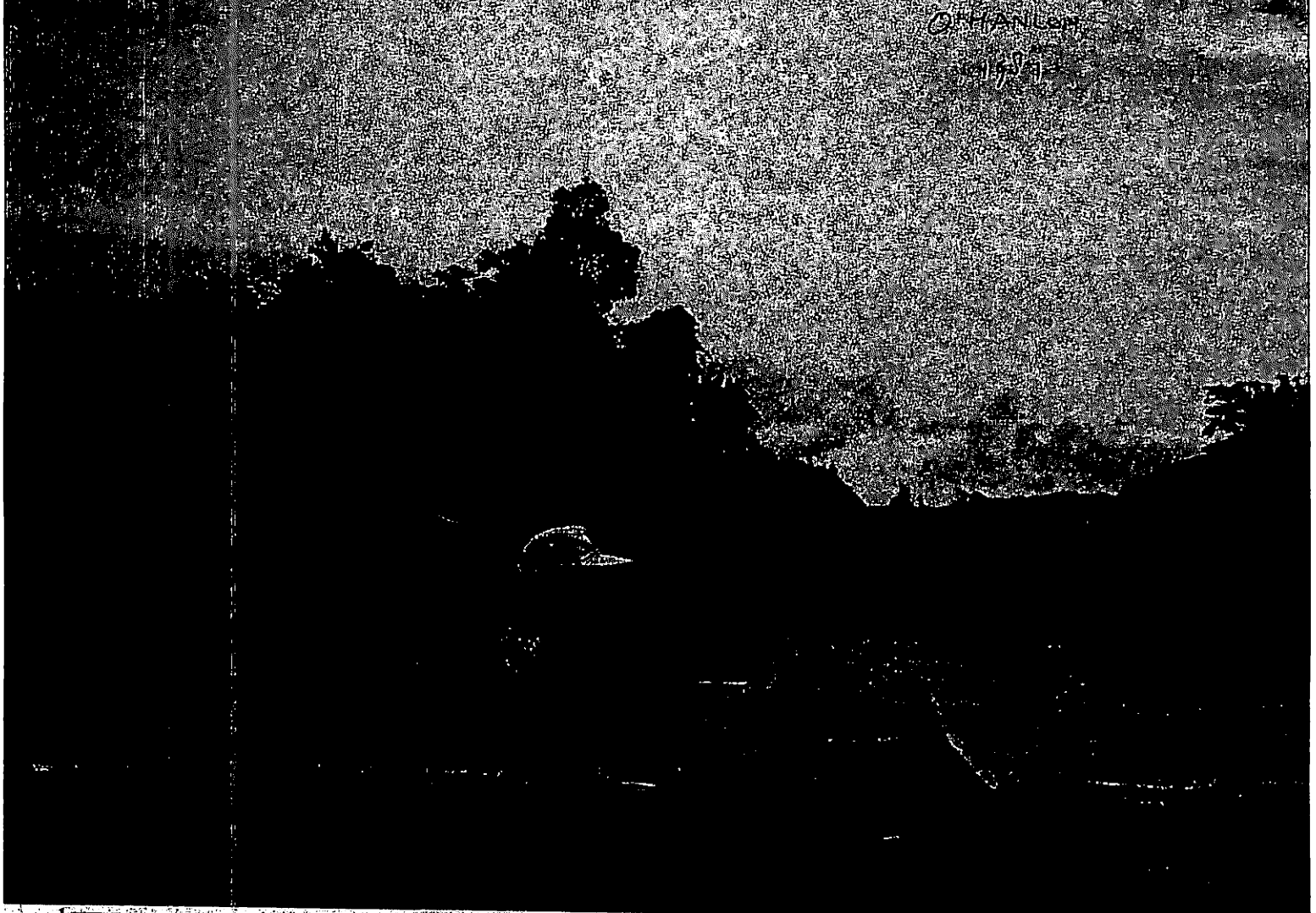


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11/8/84



Two of the expedition's three Iban guides

The training area of 22nd SAS near Hereford is the best place on earth from which to begin a journey upriver into the heart of the Borneo jungle. The nearest I had ever come to a tropical rain forest was in the Bodleian Library, via the pages of the great 19th-century traveller-naturalists - Humboldt, Darwin, Wallace, Bates, Thomas Belt - and, in practice, a childhood spent rabbiting in the Wiltshire woods. My companion James Fenton, however (whose idea the venture was), enigmatic, balding, an ex-correspondent of the war in Vietnam and Cambodia, a jungle in himself, was a wise old man in these matters.

The soft-spoken major, veteran of Special Forces campaigns in Occupied Europe in the second world war, of the war in Malaya, of Jebel Akhdar, Aden, Borneo and Dhofar, was huge. It was vastly reassuring to think that so much muscle could actually squeeze itself into a jungle and come out again undiminished. And his office, hung with battle honours, Special Air Service shields emblazoned with the regiment's motto, *Qui ose gagne*, with a mass of wall charts

28. The commonest fish caught, the sebaran (clearly more than a foot long), was 'like a hairbrush caked in lard' to eat.

Sunday Times Magazine, 9.12.84

EASTWARD HO!

Last year two unlikely expeditionaries, the natural historian Redmond O'Hanlon and the poet James Fenton, set out with characteristic intrepidity – not to say foolhardiness – on a Quest; to the Heart of Borneo. Their Grail was equally implausible: a two-horned, hairy rhinoceros, possibly extinct in its native habitat. In the tradition the beast, if living, eluded them. But, kitted out by the SAS, properly provided with rod (unusable) and gun (impounded by Customs), they enjoyed Many Adventures; and Kept their Heads. And they came safely home, where O'Hanlon fashioned what befell them into a book. This is an extract

Text and photographs by Redmond O'Hanlon



BEING: FRITZ VOLLMANN/OLIVE COLEMAN LTD

Borneo. Dana (left) and Inghai, help the dugout through shallows. Above, Redmond O'Hanlon (left) and James Fenton; and the elusive rhinoceros

documenting the progress of his latest candidates; with cartoons of all the wrong ways to resist interrogation; and libricated with strictly practical works in natural history – on edible fungi, on traps and tracking and poaching, on different recipes for the cooking of rats and instructions on the peeling of cockroaches – was an impressive place.

"You'll find the high spot of your day," said the major, "is cleaning your teeth. The only bit of you you can keep clean. Don't shave in the jungle. The slightest nick turns septic at once. And don't take more than one change of clothes, because you must keep your Bergen weight well down below 60lb. And don't expect your Iban trackers to carry it for you, either: they have enough to do transporting their own food.

"So keep one set of dry kit in a sealed bag in your pack. Get into that each night after you've eaten. Powder yourself all over, too, with zinc talc – don't feel sissy about it – you'll halve the rashes and the rot and the skin fungus. Then sleep. Then get up at 5.30am and into your wet kit. It's uncomfortable at first, but don't weaken – ever; if you do, there'll be two

sets of wet kit in no time, you'll lose sleep and lose strength and then there'll be a disaster. But take as many dry socks as you can. Stuff them into all the crannies in your pack.

"And, in the morning, soak the pairs you are going to wear in Autan insect repellent, to keep the leeches out of your boots. Stick it on your arms and round your waist and neck and in your hair, too, while you're about it, but not on your forehead because the sweat carries it into your eyes and it stings. Cover yourself at night, too, against the mosquitoes. Take them seriously, because malaria is a terrible thing and easy to get, pills or no.

"Get some jungle boots, good thick trousers and strong shirts. You won't want to nancy about in shorts once the first leech has had a go at you, believe me. Acclimatise slowly. The tropics takes people in different ways. Fit young men may pass out top here and then just collapse in Brunei. You'll think it's the end of the world. You can't breathe. You can't move. After two weeks you'll be used to it. And once in the jungle proper you'll never want to come out.

"It's a beautiful country and the Iban

are a fine people. I was on the Baram myself, but to go up the Rajang and the Baleh will be better for your purposes. That's a good plan. The Baleh is very seldom visited, if at all, upriver, and the Tiban mountains should be very wild indeed. They look small on a map, those mountains, but they're tough going. One steep hill after another. And you have to be good with a compass. Any questions? No. Good. Well done, lads. Goodbye and good luck."

James and I drove out past the guardroom and the police post in a stunned silence, the back of the car bristling with serious dark-green and camouflage-brown equipment.

At Kuching we took two rooms in a lodging house. Shutting my door, I was undisturbed by a cockroach, as big as a mouse and markedly faster on its feet, which shot out from under the bed, brown-blurred its way across the linoleum and swung right through the door of the bathroom partition.

Following along behind, I was not disgusted by the stray faeces which lay on the tiles and which had obviously escaped

from the combined shower and lavatory exit hole in the corner. The cockroach must have gone that way, so presumably all could still be partially lost through the remaining passage. A gecko was enjoying itself, amplifying its chirps from a singing post somewhere in an overflow pipe. Bored mosquitoes drifted in and out of the broken window. As I watched, a bird that looked like a magpie flew, like a thrush, from the left, perched in a tree to my right, and began to sing, like a robin. The sweat trickled down my back. I decided to take a siesta.

I shut my eyes, and then opened them again. I was startled to see my tutor from undergraduate days at Oxford 15 years before, the kindly John Jones, standing at the end of the bed. His large head was unaccountably swollen to the size of a hundredweight sack; his eyes bulged like light bulbs. He put his knuckles on the mattress and leaned forward. "Yes, Redmond," he said, in his intense way, giving each word its full share of time in his mouth, "but what have you ever done in life?"

I sat up sharply; and my tutor disappeared. I decided that I was very

EASTWARD HO! continued
worried indeed. I went to the Bergen and, trembling slightly, drew out the whisky bottle.

That evening, we walked the temporarily half-deserted streets of Kuching.

"James", I said warily, "how's your dreamlife been? Did you have a siesta? Did you sleep this afternoon? Did you?"

"Just a bit," said James, "yes. I had a zizz. I read a little. I made some lists—we must remember to take cigarette lighters. And five cartons of ciggies."

"But did you dream?"

"I had a dream or two. The odd dreamette. Why? What's the matter?"

"Well—my old tutor called to see me. I sat up and he disappeared."

"Oh, that's simple," said James, grinning. "You wish to kill your father?"

"Don't be silly. Didn't you have a nightmare, too?"

"As it happens," said James, "I am much troubled by a leering Chinaman. But it's nothing to worry about. It's a common occurrence when you first come to the equator. The brain just cannot believe its own dials. It sits there and looks at its instrument panel and it says to itself: 'Hang on. We couldn't possibly have lost all that sweat from the tanks. And the temperature gauge has burst a thermometer. I don't believe it; and so the brain crash-lands itself, and then your old tutor pays a call. He's got a name, your old tutor. He's called a hypnagogic vision. But you soon recover.'"

The next morning I had a shave and a shower. I put on a white shirt, a clean pair of trousers, and James's Durham Cathedral School Choirboy's tie. I persuaded the poet himself, as one well-known to be Averse to Authority, to stay behind; and I walked up the hill to confront Immigration and The Police.

In my hand I carried my passport and a weighty piece of paper which I had just withdrawn from its protective wallet in my Bergen. Under duress, Christopher Butler, then Senior Proctor at Oxford, had equipped us with a talisman of medieval-looking splendour. Above the scarlet impression of the Great Seal of the University it proclaimed:

To Whom It May Concern

This is to certify that

James Fenton MA (Oxon),

and

Raymond O'Hanlon MA, MPhil,

DPhil (Oxon)

are personally known to me, and are members of the University of Oxford.

They are travelling in Borneo for Scientific purposes, and I would be grateful for any help and assistance you can give them.

I found Immigration and offered my passport to a young Iban behind the desk.

"I want permission to go up the Baléh to its headwaters and then to climb Mt. Mulu (Tiban)," I said. "James Fenton and I wish to re-discover the Borneo rhinoceros."

"Do you indeed?" said the clerk, smiling. "I am afraid that that is impossible. Out of the question. It is too far for us to reach you if you are in trouble. It is



No sooner had the expeditionaries hung up their river-wet clothing (they slept, dry-clad, in the insect-proof bashas, below, provided for them by the SAS) than it was aswarm with feeding moths—and inch-long elephant ants



very far, very far. It is expensive. It is dangerous. There are no maps. We will not allow it. The police will not allow it. So where else would you like to go?"

I placed the document in front of him. The paper stirred slightly in the air current from the ceiling fan. The red wax glowed in the sunlight filtering through the blinds. The clerk picked it up, read it, and disappeared into a back office.

In five minutes he returned.

"My name is Bidai", he said. "We will find you the best trackers in Kapit.

The best boat crew there is. I will bring them to your hotel to-night."

Bidai arrived with two other Ibans from his own department named Siba and Edward.

"Bidai has persuaded our *tuai rumah* to come with you", said Siba, shaking our hands. "He is what you would call a Headman, a Chief. He is much respected here, the Head-of-all-the Iban of Kapit. He used to be a great soldier. He knows the rivers. You will travel in a canoe he made himself."

"What about the others?" said James. "We'll need more than one, won't we?"

"Our *tuai rumah* Dana has picked two young men from our longhouse," said Edward. "Leon is strong. Inghai is small, a good bow look-out. He can concentrate all day. You'll be in good hands."

We left Rumah Pengula Jimbun, the last Sea Dyak longhouse upstream on the Baléh River and set off in our dugout canoe up-river towards the interior where neither Dana nor Leon nor Inghai had ever been. For us the unknown had begun at the coast, at the delta of the great river Rajang; for them the unknown began now.

After about 10 miles, the hill paddy fields gave way to well-established secondary forest, ground whose vegetation had not been slashed and burned and cleared for a one-year's crop of rice for 50 years or so, and then the primeval jungle began. The river seemed to close in on us; the 200ft-high trees crowded down the slopes of the hills, almost to the water's edge, an apparently endless chaos of different species of tree, every kind of green, even under the uniform glare of a tropical sun; parasitic growths sprouted everywhere, ferns fanned out from every angle in the branches; and creepers as thick as legs gripped each other tangled down to the surface of the water, their tips twining down in the current like river-weed.

The river itself began to turn and twist, too, the banks behind us appearing to merge together into one vast and impenetrable thicket, shutting us in from behind just as the trees ahead stepped aside a meagre pace or two to let the river swirl down ahead. The outboard motor, manned by Leon and set on a special wooden frame at the stern of the canoe, pushed us past foaming little tributaries, islets, shingle banks strewn with huge rounded boulders, half-hidden coves scooped round by whirlpools.

We really were voyaging upriver—at first I thought it an optical illusion, but no, the canoe was actually climbing up a volume of water great enough to sustain an almost constant angle of ascent, even on the stretches of water between the jagged steps of the rapids.

Spits of land had formed wherever smaller streams joined the main flow, and here driftwood was piled, stacks of hardwood planed smooth by the rush of floodwater, flung together, bleached grey by the sun. We stopped by one such pile to hide a drum of petrol. A monitor lizard, reared up on its front legs, watched us for a moment with its dinosauric eyes and then scuttled away between the broken branches. A Brahminy kite, flying low enough for us to hear the rush of air through the primaries of its wings, circled overhead watching us, its flecked-brown belly white in the sun, before it soared away, emitting its shrill call like a buzzard.

Farther up, the rapids began to

EASTWARD HO! continued

become more numerous and more turbulent and, at each one, as León drove the canoe for the central cascade of the current at full power whilst Dana and Inghai, their back muscles bunched, poled the bow to the left or the right of each oncoming rock, heavy waves of water would crash over and into the boat.

James, sitting opposite me on the duckboards in the centre of the canoe, facing upstream, was reading his way through Pat Röger's new edition of the complete poems of Swift, a straw boater on his bald head, his white shirt buttoned at the neck and at the wrists.

"Some of this juvenilia is pretty feeble," James would mutter, displeased. "Quite so. But—er—James?"

"Yes?"

"Rapid 583/2, Green Heave Strength six-out-of-ten, is approaching."

With a second or two to spare, James would shut his book, mark his place in it with a twig, slip it neatly under an edge of the tarpaulin, place his left buttock upon it, shut his eyes, get drenched, open his eyes, squeeze the water from his beard with his right hand, retrieve his book and carry on reading.

At four o'clock in the afternoon we entered a wider stretch of river where a tributary joined the main stream and a low ridge of shingle had formed down the centre of the water course. Dana decided to make camp.

"Good fishing. Very good," said León, looking at the swirling white

water, the fallen trees and the eddies by the far bank.

We pulled the canoe well out of the water and tied its bow-rope high up the trunk of a tree, in case of floods in the night, and then stretched out on the sand for a rest. Butterflies began to gather. Hundreds of butterflies, flying at different heights and speeds, floating, flapping awkwardly in small bursts, gliding, fluttering like bats, winnowing, some flying fast and direct like a wren in trouble, they made their way towards us and settled on our boots and trousers, clustered on our shirts, sucked the sweat from our arms. There were whites, yellows and blues; swallow-tails, black, banded or spotted with blue-green; and, just outside the clustering circle of small butterflies, the magnificent species which Alfred Russel Wallace named after James Brooke, *Troides brookiana*, the Rajah Brooke's birdwing.

Dana, León and Inghai, drawing their parangs from their carved wooden scabbards, set off to cut down the saplings for our pole-beds, and I decided it was time that James and I taught them how to fish to maximum effect, like Englishmen. But first a little practice would be necessary.

Withdrawing quietly behind a massive jumble of boulders, well out of sight, I unpacked our precious cargo. Two new extendable rods, the toughest in town. A hundred yards of heavy line. A

heavy bag of assorted lead weights. A termite's nest of swivels. A thornbush of hooks. Fifty different spinners, their spoons flashing in the sun, all shapes and all sizes for every kind of fish in every sort of inland water.

"The trouble is," said James, flicking a rod handle and watching the sections telescope out into the blue beyond, "my elder brother was the fisherman. That was his thing, you see, he filled that role. So I had to pretend it was a bore; and I never learned."

"What? You never fished?"

"No. Never. What about you?"

"My elder brother went fishing."

"So you can't either?"

"Not exactly. Not with a rod. I used to go mackerel-fishing with a line. All over the place."

"Mackerel fishing! Now you tell me!" said James, looking really quite agitated and frightening a bright orange damselfly off his hat. "Still," he said, calming down, "if they could do it it can't be that diffy, can it?"

"Of course not—you just stick the spinner and swivels and weights on that end and swing it through the air."

The heat was unbearable. The fiddling was insupportable. The gut got tangled; the hooks stuck in our fingers; the knot diagram would have given Baden-Powell a blood clot in the brain. We did it all and forgot the nasty little weights. But eventually we were ready to kill fish.

Standing firm and straight, James cast the spinner into the river. It landed in the water straight down at the end of the rod. Clunk. James pulled. The line snapped. We went through the whole nasty rigmarole again, with fresh swivels, weights and spinner.

"Try again. Throw it a little further."

James reached right back and then swung the rod forwards and sideways as if he was axeing a tree.

At that very moment, it seemed, the Borneo Banded Hornet, *Vesta tropica*, sunk its sting into my right buttock.

"Jesus!" I said.

It was huge and jointed, this hornet, flashing red and silver in the sun.

"You are hooked up," said James, matter-of-factly, "You have a spinner in your bum."

There was a weird, gurgling, jungle-sound behind us. Dana, León and Inghai were leaning against the boulders. The Iban, when they decide that something is really funny, and know that they will laugh for a long time, lie down first.

Dana, León and Inghai lay down.

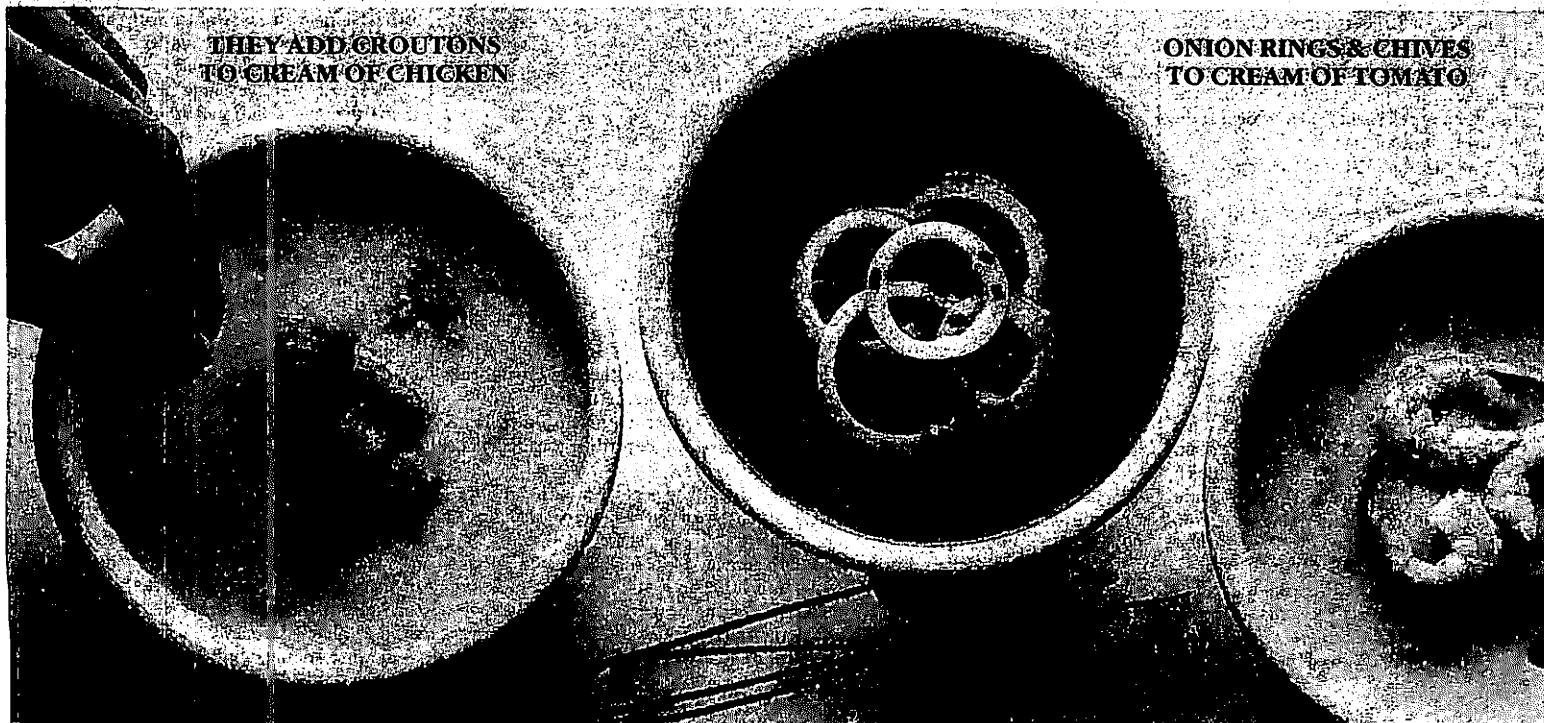
"You should try it with harpoon!" shrieked León, helpless.

Our beds had been expertly set up: two poles run through the specially-designed tubes of the SAS tarpaulins to form a stretcher, itself supported on a rectangular frame, a four-poster, lashed together with rattan strips and awaiting only a mosquito net and a cover. Tying the net and the canvas roof to the sur-

"The things some co

THEY ADD GROUTONS
TO CREAM OF CHICKEN

ONION RINGS & CHIVES
TO CREAM OF TOMATO



EASTWARD HO!

rounding trees with parachute cord; a small bed-length of insect-free security emerged in the jungle. Campaign-proved, everything fitted, tied together, overlapped, held fast.

Dana and Leon had almost finished the building of their own shelter. Having constructed a platform of poles about 2 ft off the jungle floor, they were laying a lattice-work of branches to make a sloping roof. Inghai returned from the hillside with bundles of enormous palm leaves, and the structure was complete. Lying inside on a leaf-bed, one's feet towards the 4ft opening overlooking the river, the roof coming down at a bright green angle tight above one's head, it seemed the childhood tree-house par excellence.

Dana then began to build his own little house: 6ft tall, 2ft square, with a conventional triangular roof and a small platform half-way up, its use was not apparent. For the spirits? For heads that might saunter by?

"For fish," said Leon. "for smoking fish. Now we show you how to fish like the Iban."

Taking their wooden harpoons from the canoe, Leon and Inghai dived into the river; and disappeared completely, like a pair of Great Crested Grebe. A full 40 seconds later they bobbed up again, right over on the far bank. Leon stood up and held an enormous fish above his head, harpooned through the flank. Inghai, as befitted his size, held up a tiddler. Much



The coming of men with clothing was an ecological bonanza: crowding butterflies jostled to be first to gourmandise on sweaty shirts; put out to dry yelling in Iban took place.

Leon and Inghai returned with six fish, all of the same species, sebarau, handsome, streamlined, and armoured with large silver scales and adorned with a bold black bar down either side.

Inghai collected driftwood and made two fires, one on the beach and the other at the base of the smoking-house. Leon gutted the fish, cut them into sections, placed some in a salting tin, some on the smoking-rack, and some in a water-filled cooking pot. Two ancient cauldrons,

slung from a high wooden frame, bubbled over the fire: one full of fish pieces and one full of sticky rice.

We ate. The sebarau was tasteless, which did not matter, and full of bones, which did: It was like a hair brush caked in lard. James made the same discovery.

"Redmond, don't worry," he whispered, "if you need a tracheotomy I have a Biro-tube in my baggage."

It was time to go to bed. Slinging my soaking clothes from a tree with

parachute cord, I rubbed myself down with a wet towel and, naked, opened my Bergen to pull out my set of dry kit for the night. Every nook and cranny in the bag was alive with inch-long ants. Deciding that anything so huge must be the Elephant ant, and not the Fire ant, which packs a sting like a wasp, I brushed the first wave off my Y-fronts.

Glancing up, I was astonished to see my wet clothes swarming with ants, too; a procession of dark ants poured down one side of the rope and up the other, and, all over my wet trousers, hundreds of different moths were feeding.

Slipping under the mosquito net, I fastened myself into the dark-green camouflage SAS tube. It seemed luxuriously comfortable. You had to sleep straight out like a rifle; but the ants, swarming along the poles, rearing up on their back legs to look for an entry, and the mosquitoes, whining and singing the various tunes of their species in black shifting clouds, could not get in.

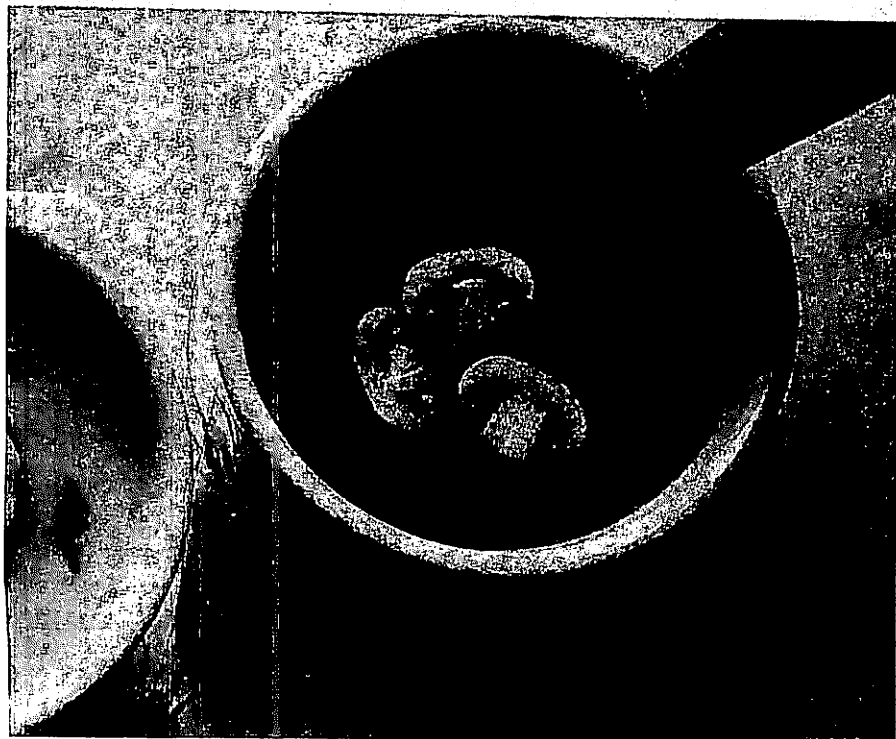
"Eeccccai—yack yack yack yack yack!" Something screamed in my ear, with brain-shredding force. And then everyone joined in.

"Eeccccai—yack yack yack yack yack te yooo!" answered every other giant male cicada, maniacally vibrating the tymbals, drumskin membranes in their cavity amplifiers, the megaphones built into their bodies.

"Shut up!" I shouted.

"Wah wah wah wah wah!" said >>>

oks do to our soups."



Rumour has it that some of you are adding more than just water to our condensed soups.

The examples shown are just the tip of the iceberg.

We've heard that you add crumbled bacon, chopped basil, sour cream, even flaked almonds as a garnish.

Not that we're complaining.

If you've got the imagination, we've got the soups.

Campbell's
The soup for cooks.

4,000 assorted frogs in chorus.

"Stop it at once!" yelled James.

"Clatter clitter clatter" went our mess flies over the stung, being nosed clean by tree shrews.

The Iban laughed. The river grew louder in the darkness. Something hooted. Something screamed in earnest further off. Something shuffled and snuffed around the discarded rice and fish bits flung in a bush from our plates. A porcupine? A civet? A ground squirrel? The long-tailed giant rat? Why not a Clouded leopard? Or, the only really dangerous mammal in Borneo, the long-clawed, short-tempered Sun bear?

I switched off the torch and tried to sleep. It was no good. The decibel-level was way over the limit allowed in discotheques. And, besides, the fire-flies kept flicking their own torches on and off; and some kind of phosphorescent fungus glowed in the dark like a 40-watt bulb.

I switched on again, clipped the right-angled torch on to my shirt, and settled down for a peaceful bed-time read.

At dawn the jungle was half-obscured in a heavy morning mist; and through the cloudy layers of rising moisture came the whooping call, the owl-like, clear, ringing hoot of the female Borneo gibbon.

Replacing the dry socks, pants, trousers and shirt inside two plastic bags inside the damp Bergen, tying them tightly to keep out the ants, I shook the wet clothes. A double-barrelled charge of insects propelled itself from inside my trouser-legs. I groomed my pants free of visible bugs, covered myself in SAS anti-fungus powder until my erogenous zone looked meat chunks rolled in flour, ready for the heat, and forced my way into clammy battle-dress for the day. It was a nasty five-clock start; but in half an hour the mist would be gone, the sun merciful, and the river soaking one anyway.

After a breakfast of fish and rice, we repacked the dugout and set off upriver. The gibbons, having proclaimed the boundaries of their territories, ceased calling. The world changed colour from a dark watery blue to mauve to sepia to pink and then the sun rose, extraordinarily fast.

Gradually, the rapids became more frequent, more difficult to scale. Leon would align the boat carefully in the deep pools beneath each one, open up to full throttle on a straight run, shut off the engine, cock the propeller well up out of the water as we hit the first curve of white foam, grab his pole as Inghai and Dana snatched up theirs, and then all three would punt the canoe up, in wild rhythm with each other.

They were lean, fit, strong with a lifetime of unremitting exercise, their muscles flexing and bunching, etched out as clearly as Jan van Calcar's illustrations to *De humani corporis fabrica*. But we were about to discover the one disadvantage in their fondly mistaken idea of ourselves,

the present misconception in the ancient myth of their oral tradition, that the ancestors of their race had been white, and giants, as strong and courageous, as all-powerful as we, too, must be.

The solid tree-trunk keel of the dugout began to thud against the boulders beneath the cascades of water, lightly at first, and then with alarming violence as the day wore on. We had to jump out beneath each rapid, take the long bow rope, walk up the stones strewn down beside the fall, wade into the deep current above and pull, guiding the bow up.

The water pushed irregularly at our waist and knees, sometimes embracing us like a succubus, sometimes trying a flowing rugby-tackle, sometimes holding our ankles in a hydrolastic gin-trap, but never entirely friendly. With nothing but locked spines and clamped cartilages we leant back against the great flow of water on its way to the South China Sea, against the forward pull of the rope; itself tugging and slackening as the poled boat broke free or stuck fast.

The river twisted and turned and grew narrower and the great creepers, tumbling down in profusion from 200ft above our heads, edged closer. We had to jump out into the river more often, sometimes to our waists, sometimes to our armpits, guiding the dugout into a side channel away from the main crash of the water through the central rocks, pushing it up the shallows.

"*Sayiu, dua, tiga-batal!*" sang Dana, which even we could reconstruct as one, two, three, and push.

The Iban gripped the round, algae-covered stones on the river-bed easily with their muscled, calloused, spatulate toes. Our boots slipped into crevices, slithered away in the current, threatened to break off a leg at the ankle or the knee. It was only really possible to push hard when the boat was still, stuck fast, and then Headmaster Dana would shout "*Badas!*" "*Well done!*" But the most welcome cry became "*Npan! Npan!*", an invitation to get back in, quick.

We entered a wide reach of foaming water. The choppy waves, snatching this way and that, had ripped caves of soil out of the banks, leaving hundreds of yards of overhang on either side. There was an ominous noise of arguing currents ahead. With the canoe pitching feverishly, we rounded a sweeping bend; and the reason for the agitated river, the unaccustomed roar, became obvious. The Green Heave ahead was very much higher than any we had met. There was a waterfall to the left of the river course, a huge surging of water over a ledge, with the way to the right blocked by thrown up trees, piles of roots dislodged upstream, torn out in floods, and tossed aside here against a line of rocks. There was, however, one small channel through, a shallow rapid, dangerously close to the main rush of water, but negotiable, separated from the torrent by three huge boulders.

Keeping well clear of the great whirlpool beneath the water fall, Leon, guided

between rocks by Inghai's semaphore-like gestures, brought the boat to the base of this normal-size rapid. Dana, James and I made our way carefully up with the bow rope, whilst Leon and Inghai held the dugout steady.

Dana held the lead position on the rope; I stood behind him and James behind me. We pulled, Leon and Inghai pushed. The boat moved up and forward some 15ft and then stuck. Leon and Inghai walked up the rapid, kneeling, hunching and shoving, rolling small rocks aside to clear a channel. We waited on the lip of the rock above, pulling on the rope to keep the longboat straight, to stop it rolling sideways, tiring in the push of water round our waists. At last Leon and Inghai were ready. But the channel they had had to make was a little to our right as we looked down at them, a little to their left, a little closer to the waterfall. To pull straight we must move to our right. Dana pointed to our new positions.

It was only a stride or two. But the level of the river-bed suddenly dipped, long since scooped away by the pull of the main current. James lost his footing, and, trying to save himself, let go of the rope. I stepped back and across to catch him, the rope bound round my left wrist, snatching his left hand in my right. His legs thudded into mine, tangled, and then swung free, into the current, weightless, as if a part of him had been knocked into outer space. His hat came off, hurtled past his shoes, spun in an eddy, and disappeared over the lip of the fall.

His fingers were very white; and slippery. He bites his fingernails; and they could not dig into my palm. He simply looked surprised; his head seemed a long way from me. He was feeling underwater with his free arm, impossibly trying to grip a boulder with his other hand, to get a purchase on a smooth and slimy rock, a rock polished smooth, for centuries, by perpetual tons of rolling water.

His fingers bent straighter, slowly edging out of mine, for hour upon hour, or so it felt, but it must have been in seconds. His arm rigid, his fingertips squeezed out of my fist. He turned in the current, spread-eagled. Still turning, but much faster, he was sucked under; his right ankle and shoe were bizarrely visible above the surface; he was lifted slightly, a bundle of clothes, of no discernible shape, and then he was gone.

"Boat! Boat!" shouted Dana, dropping the rope, bounding down the rocks of the side rapid, crouched, using his arms like a baboon.

"Hold the boat! Hold the boat!" yelled Leon.

James's bald head, white and fragile as an owl's egg, was sweeping round in the whirlpool below, spinning, bobbing up and down in the foaming water, each orbit of the current carrying him within inches of the black rocks at its edge.

Leon jumped into the boat, clam-

bered on to the raised outboard-motor frame, squatted, and then, with a long, yodelling cry, launched himself in a great curving leap into the centre of the maelstrom. He disappeared, surfaced, shook his head, spotted James, dived again; and caught him. Inghai, too, was in the water, but, closing with them for a moment, he faltered, was overwhelmed, and swept downstream. Leon, holding on to James, made a circuit of the whirlpool until, reaching the exit current, he thrust out like a turtle and they followed Inghai downriver, edging, yard by yard, towards the bank.

James, when we walked down to him, was sitting on a boulder. Leon sat beside him, an arm round his shoulders.

"You be all right soon, my friend," said Leon. "You be all right soon-lah, my very best friend. Soon you be so happy."

James, bedraggled, looking very sick, his white lips an open O in his black beard, was hyper-ventilating dangerously, taking great rhythmic draughts of oxygen, his body shaking.

"You be okay," said Leon. "I not let you die my old friend."

Just then little Inghai appeared, beaming with pride, holding aloft one very wet straw boater.

"I save hat!" said Inghai, "Jams! Jams! I save hat!"

James looked up, smiled, and so stopped his terrible spasms of breathing. He really was going to be all right.

Later on James, covered in butterflies, was reading *Les Misérables* and looking a little miserable himself.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not too good, Redmond. I get these palpitations at the best of times. I've had attacks ever since Oxford. I take some special pills for it but they're really not much help. In fact the only cure is to rest a bit and then be violently sick as soon as possible."

"Can I do anything?"

"No", said James, pulling on his umpteenth cigarette and concentrating on Victor Hugo.

He was, I decided, an even braver old wreck than I had imagined. Looking fondly at his great bald head I was really fairly pleased with Leon for helping the future of English literature; for preventing the disarrangement of all those brain cells; for denying all those thousands of brightly-coloured little fish in the shallows the chance to nibble at torn fragments of cerebellar tissue, to ingest synapses across which had once run electrical impulses carrying stored memories of a detailed knowledge of literatures in Greek and Latin, in German and French, in Spanish and Italian. But all the same, I wondered, what would we do if an accident befell us in the far interior, weeks away from any hospital, beyond the source of the Baleh, marching through the jungle towards the Tiban range and well away, even, from the stores in the boat?●

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