I Saw

The Wild Men of Borneo

By Louis T. Talbot, D.D.

Dr. Talbot preaching to Dyaks who not many years ago were head hunters, with Mr. Mouw interpreting.

THE month of October, 1949, will always be remembered by me for one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. From the time our Catalina Flying Boat landed with a splash in the river at the drowsy old port town of Pontianak, on the west coast of Borneo, to the day when, two weeks later, we set forth on another leg of our missionary journey around the world, every moment was filled with incredible sights and sounds. For years I had read about the wild men of Borneo and their dense jungles in the uncivilized part of the Dutch East Indies, but the reality far exceeded my wildest imaginings. But the wonder of wonders that I beheld, surpassing all the natural phenomena and the amazing customs of the people, was the Dyak Christian church, which the missionaries have claimed from that wilderness for God. To see those men and women who such a short time before were savage head hunters, worshipers of the wild pig, believers in the efficacy of the blood of a chicken, and haters of their own kind, transformed into lovers of the Lord Jesus Christ, was a sight I would not have missed for anything. The work in Borneo is certainly one of the outstanding miracles of the grace of God in this generation.

Before I proceed with the story of my travels, I desire to pay tribute to that noble band of missionaries who are doing such a mighty work of God in those parishes which number thousands. I wish I knew the names of all of them, but I desire particularly to mention Mr. and Mrs. Buck, Mr. and Mrs. Williams, Mr. and Mrs. Schisler and, of course, our host and his wife, Rev. and Mrs. J. Arthur Mouw. I am proud to say Mr. Mouw attended the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. He has labored in those jungle fastnesses for seventeen years under the Christian and Missionary Alliance Mission. When I saw what had been accomplished under his leadership, I immediately placed him in the ranks of Adoniram Judson, J. Hudson Taylor, and David Livingstone. These missionaries are all held in highest esteem by the Dutch and native officials. Their exploits read like the Book of Acts, and my visit with them gave me an entirely new concept of the missionary enterprise. While they maintain a spiritual compensation which we at home cannot comprehend, still it is a difficult, dangerous, and lonely life, and they need our constant prayers.

Up the River

The flight from Singapore along the Malay peninsula over Sumatra to Java was inspiring. Flying rapidly to Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies, modern city. After spending two days there, we set off for Borneo. Since the pilot was an old Australian college friend whom I had providentially encountered in that “jumping off place of the world,” Dr. Bauman and I were permitted to sit beside him at the controls for the four-hour flight. I shall never forget the thrilling spectacle as we wheeled in and out among the great masses of white clouds. As there is no airfield at Pontianak, we came down on the river whence we were conveyed to a little wharf. Great was our joy to see among a group of bronze-skinned natives, Mr. Mouw and Mr. Buck. They welcomed us most warmly. We were also greeted by a young cloudburst, common to that region of 200-inch annual rainfall! Since the equator runs right through the town, we felt as if we were being ushered into a Turkish bath. But we had no time to lose. Hastily purchasing some provisions and loading them into the missionary launch, we started on our 250-mile journey up the Kapoeas and Belitang Rivers to Balai Sepoeak.

Five of us were on board the Kalam Hiedup (Word of Life)—the two missionaries, Dr. Bauman, a 16-year-old Christian Dyak boy, Rambu, and I. The craft had a fairly good motor, but since the river was running rapidly and we were traveling against the current, the best speed we could make was five miles per hour. Racks on the side of the boat served as sleeping quarters, and at the stern there was a little kitchen. But the most popular spot was the improvised shower bath which we frequented many times a day. It was only a little booth under a canvas containing a ten-gallon bucket of water and a can, but it provided marvelous refreshment in that steaming, sticky atmosphere. The method was simple: you soaped yourself, dipped the water out of the bucket and poured it over you, and it drained away through the cracks in the floor! You weren’t obliged to be sparing of the water, for Rambu was only too happy to draw more from the river for you.

Adventure with a Sandbar

When we started up the river in the late afternoon of the seventeenth, it looked very picturesque and peaceful. Along the banks grew the graceful palms and stately banana trees, and in the distance we had glimpses of huge rubber plantations. Occasionally we observed an impressive dwelling with a veranda reaching to the bank—home of some plantation owner or official—and there were many quaint huts of Malay coolies who work from daybreak to dusk cutting the rubber trees and collecting the sap that we at home may run our cars on real rubber tires! In the moonlight the river was a yellow ribbon.

A head hunter—“the wild man of Borneo.” In the background are Christian Dyaks.
As we continued slowly up the river, we plied the missionaries with questions. Our hearts were moved as they rehearsed God’s ways with them throughout the years, and told almost unbelievable tales of these twice-born men.

One day Mr. Mouw shot a monkey in the top of a tall tree in the forest. Quickly Rambu swam over and retrieved it. It was skinned, and soon monkey stew was cooking in our little kitchen. This was a special treat for me for my birthday which I celebrated on the third day of our river trip! Yes, I ate it, but my stomach asked many questions. At least, it was different from my usual birthday dinner at home!

About 7:30 on the evening of October 20th we reached Mr. Mouw’s station. Mrs. Mouw had prepared a delicious American meal which tasted like manna from heaven to us. After a good night’s sleep, we prepared for our next great adventure—the trek into the jungle.

### Deep in the Jungles

About noon the next day, after the “tenderfeet” had been equipped with heavy clothing and stout boots, the two missionaries, Dr. Bauman and I, accompanied by eleven Dyaks with monky packs on their backs, took the narrow path above the Mouw’s houseboat home, and immediately plunged into the jungle. Our objective was the Christian Dyak churches, the first of which was thirty miles away, and could only be reached on foot.

My powers of description fail in picturing a jungle like that—as primitive as it was at its original creation. A footpath twelve inches wide had been gouged out by the natives. Beneath our feet lay a web of inextricably-entangled roots which caught our feet and gave us no end of trouble. In addition, there were tough grasses, moss, vines and ferns. Over our heads hung an impenetrable thicket of trees and vines, striking us in the face, and shutting out air and light. Everywhere were inch-long ants, spiders, scorpions, and millions of mosquitos and fleas. We knew there were pythons, boa constrictors and king cobras lurking in the bush, but fortunately we did not encounter them. It had rained heavily the night before, and although some branches had been laid lengthwise along the path, they did not help much. We walked in ooze, occasionally sinking to our hips and once to our waists in the water. Mr. Mouw told us he often went down as far as his arm-pits, so we were thankful to be spared that. It was unbearably hot and humid. When we came to a pool, I could not resist plunging in, clothes and all. It was a great relief, and in a short time my

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clothes were nearly dry, except my shirt which was always dripping with perspiration.

The Longhouse

By mid-afternoon we reached a Dyak village and had our first view of that unique structure, the longhouse, which is really a house on stilts. As it is constructed to enable many families to live under one roof, it is practically a village in itself. Some are as long as 250 feet, and have doors at both ends. Built high off the ground, they are entered by notched logs. A corridor runs the length of the building onto which the beliks, or private apartments for each family, open. These beliks usually consist of one room. On one side of this central runway is an open veranda the floor of which is built of willows, overlaid with grass matting. Much of the Dyak life is spent in the longhouse. There they chop wood, weave baskets, make their long knives, rear their families, conduct community gatherings and celebrate their feasts.

Since this was a Christian village, the Dyaks gave us a royal welcome by serving native tea and rice balls, and some of the boys climbed up in the palms to see how much they appreciated our visit and how the mothers pushed for ward the babies' hands for us to take. They sang and testified and then we followed suit, and no ill effects followed our first Dyak meal.

First Night in the Jungle

After supper, the people gathered in the longhouse veranda for a service. They sang and testified and then we (Continued on Page 17)
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spoke with Mr. Mouw as interpreter. One of their gurus (teachers) followed and the service finally came to an end. When the benediction was over, we expected the people to retire, but they sat silently watching us. We finally asked Mr. Mouw when they would depart so we could get some sleep, and he calmly informed us that they would not go until we were in bed! So there was nothing for it but to take off our shirts and shoes and climb under the mosquito nets on the army cots they had set up in the corridor for us! It was our first experience of retiring in the presence of more than one hundred people. At four o’clock in the morning, while it was still pitch dark, I heard a loud flapping which woke me with a start. I looked over to see if something was wrong with Dr. Bauman when this old rooster began to blow his horn. This was the signal for the greatest bedlam I ever heard in my life. All the other chickens, dogs, pigs and ducks joined in the chorus and kept it up for three hours. The livestock are literally thrown under the longhouses at night; some of these houses have nearly a hundred dogs which are kept for hunting the wild pigs.

Evidently this stir of animal life was the alarm clock for the entire village, because in a moment all were getting ready for what proved to be a prayer meeting. At 5:30 A.M. all were gathered together at the end of the longhouse singing hymns and asking God’s blessing upon them and their visitors. They presented their needs in detail to the Lord, including sick chickens, pigs about to litter, and all their personal problems. They receive answers, too!

Dyak Christian Churches

We left Rasa Terbang Saturday morning. Stiff, aching all over, with blistered feet, we found it hard to hit the trail again. But we plodded on as before until we came to a typical Dyak bridge, consisting of a log with a single rail, over which hung a sign, Selamat Datang (Peaceful Coming). This was Bethel, the first of the Dyak churches we were to visit. News of our approach had been heralded and soon the clearing was filled with hundreds of excited, chattering Dyaks. A Sunday School chorus of young Dyaks sang a welcome song. Then the entire group sang hymns after hymn in their native tongue. They have no songbooks, but they have committed to memory nearly three hundred of our beloved church hymns. Their singing lifted our hearts and moved us deeply.

Again for at least fifteen minutes we went through the ceremony of shaking hands with everybody. But though our arms ached afterwards we could not but reflect that a quarter of a century ago these former wild men of Borneo

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...would have been taking our heads instead of our hands. What God hath wrought! We took many pictures, some good ones of Mr. Mowul pulling teeth. Can-thored in lack take it? He pulls out their molars without any anaesthetic, and there are no outcries of pain, either.

The churches have been established in as nearly central locations as possible to serve all of the longhouses. Consequently, some members have considerable distance to the services so on Saturday evening quite a procession starts out for the house of the Lord. Each family brings his own supplies and erects a little bamboo shelter in the clearing about the church in which to sleep and prepare food. The church is the heart and soul of the Dyak Christian's life.

The Bethel Church, which is typical of all the Dyak churches, was constructed by two hundred Dyak Christians without cost to their Mission. Made of bamboo and rattan, it is not unlike one of our park pavilions, although erected high off the ground. It contains no nails and no seats except two benches for the elders who assist in prayer and personal work.

Dr. Bauman preached at the Saturday evening service with about five hundred present, the men sitting on one side of the church, the women on the other, and the children down in front. Although the service lasted for hours, the conduct of those children was beyond reproach. About thirty men responded to the invitation. Decisions are not easy, for something is expected of them in the way of Christian living if they profess conversion. Most souls are saved through personal work of the Christians, and after the Dyaks accept Christ, they come to the services. That is the reason the church has grown to a membership of 4,000 in only 17 years of missionary work.

Saturday night we stayed in a building near the church and very early Sunday morning we were awakened by the familiar gong calling us to morning prayer. The requests were given, and then everyone prayed aloud at the same time, their voices swelling to a great crescendo as they brought their burdens to the Lord. We were deeply impressed with their utter devotion to God, and their simple faith in Him.

Sunday morning I preached at Pinto Elok, with Mr. Mowul interpreting (see cut). Monday we reached Lando Nabung, a church only three weeks old, and the Dyaks accept Christ, they come to the services. That is the reason the church has grown to a membership of 4,000 in only 17 years of missionary work.

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