



There is only one way to pay a gentleman's debt of honor—De Horn's way.

JUNGLE WIRES

By CARL JACOBI

THE gasoline launch turned midstream under the watchful guidance of the Dyak steersman and headed for shore. Slanting rain pelted the broad river. Ahead, the jungle loomed dark, wet, and forbidding.

Bancroft, who until now had been drowsing in his canvas chair amidships, peered out under the soggy awning flaps and breathed a sigh of relief. The post was reached at last. He could see it clearly, the little jetty protruding into the silt-heavy water and the shack-on-piles showing a veranda through the thick foliage.

Five minutes later the launch nosed to the landing place, and Bancroft, a black poncho shielding his suit of duck, stumbled out. He stretched his legs wearily, waited for the Dyak to secure the painter and toss up his single bag of luggage. Not a particularly inviting place, this. But after the grueling trip he had had, any port was a welcome one. Even in a government launch an eight-day trek upriver in the midst of the rainy

season is no health excursion.

His sun helmet partially shielding his face from the driving downpour, Bancroft paced hurriedly the length of the slippery jetty to the clearing just beyond. At the shore edge a dripping, weather-scattered sign greeted him. It read:

DUTCH EAST BORNEO

TELEGRAPH CO.

STATION No. 5

Bancroft paused a moment to smile at the incongruity of English wording in a Dutch enterprise in the midst of a Malay-speaking world. They were lonely holes, these telegraph relay outposts. Twelve of them, at evenly-spaced intervals, stretched across the Borneo jungle from Bandjermasin to Bulungan. Two operators were stationed at each. It was their duty to prevent the Dyaks from tearing down the wires and insulators and to keep the Dutch government informed of native conditions and the all-too-frequent head-hunting outbreaks.

Bancroft braced his shoulders under the poncho and strode to the entrance ladder of the shack. Before he reached it, the door above burst open and two men appeared on the veranda.

"Hullo, there, Van Tromp!"

Bancroft chose to disregard the mistaken welcome until he had climbed the six bamboo rungs and let himself in the screen door. He stamped the water off his feet, shoved his helmet far back on his forehead, and said tersely:

"Van Tromp's laid up in Samarinda with a bad case of fever. I'm taking his place until he's on his feet again. The name's Bancroft. You're Stockbridge and De Horn, I believe?"

There was a moment of surprised silence during which the two men glanced at each other significantly. Then the shorter and younger man moved forward.

"I'm De Horn," the youth said, extending his hand. "This is Stockbridge. You sort of surprised us. Not used to strangers, you know. Come inside and have a drink."

IN silence Bancroft shook hands and followed the two men into the inner room, removing his poncho as he walked. He accepted the whisky that was poured for him, sipped it slowly and stood looking at his surroundings.

Over in a far corner a telegraph sounder rattled in a sounding box. Above the instrument desk, bracketed on the wall, a dismantled Hotchkiss machine gun gleamed dully. There were two bunks, two tables, several Singapore chairs, and a large cabinet which apparently contained everything from food to a rack of six revolvers. The side walls were covered with old magazine illustrations.

Bancroft put down his glass, accepted the proffered chair and came to the point abruptly.

"Eight days ago," he said, "you reported over the wire that trouble was brewing in the native villages in your district. That's why I'm here now instead of next month, when the regular government inspector usually makes the trip. What's the story?"

Stockbridge, a bulky, hawk-faced man with oily hair, beady eyes, and thin lips, slid a cigarette into his mouth and spoke for the first time.

"De Horn sent that fool message," he said. "I didn't. You came up from Samarinda on a wild goose chase. There're only three villages here and nothin' doin' in any of 'em. The Dyaks are quiet as

they've ever been."

"Quiet. Yes," De Horn agreed almost hurriedly.

Bancroft frowned. "You also reported queer messages coming over the wire, messages that suggested line tapping. Have you a copy of one of them which I could look over?"

De Horn gnawed his upper lip nervously. "I'm afraid that report was a mistake," he said. "There have been some different messages, but they were simply code quotations on rubber prices coming down from Bulungan. I got a bit drunk one night, and I guess I wasn't exactly responsible for what I told the Samarinda operator. I flashed him the next day and told him to forget all I'd said. But it seems you'd been sent in the meantime. Sort of rotten for you—but you don't realize how the loneliness of this place—"

The young man was lying, there wasn't a doubt of it. Bancroft studied with interest the clear blue eyes, eyes that avoided his gaze, but showed no trace of alcohol, the strong jaw and the wide forehead. Something definite was wrong here. In the first place, rubber reports were seldom sent at this time of the year from Bulungan.

"How long you expecting to stay in the district?" Stockbridge put the question carelessly, as he shoved across the table a box of white cheroots.

"Not long," Bancroft replied. "You're sure everything is peaceful? No head-hunting? No sickness?"

Stockbridge shook his head. "Everythin' quiet," he said again. "Not even a wire torn down or an insulator swiped for I don't know how long. The Dyaks are afraid of us since I turned that machine gun on 'em a year ago."

"Then"—Bancroft leaned back apparently relieved—"I'll simply give the villages a look-see tomorrow, fill out a routine report, and head back for God's country. This is as far up the Mahakam as I'm detailed to go, thank heaven."

OUTSIDE, the darkness was thickening. The rain coming down even harder now drummed the thatch roof like distant thunder. For a quarter of an hour Bancroft smoked his cheroot and chatted with the two operators.

The cheroot consumed, he rose to his feet and reached for his canvas bag.

"Think I'll spruce up a bit," he said. "I always do at sundown. Makes the day seem shorter."

He paced quietly down the little corridor to the spare room in the rear that had been assigned to him, entered and closed the door. For a moment he stood there, feet braced far apart on the uncarpeted floor, brow furrowed in a deep frown. Then slowly he filled a basin with water, washed, and donned a fresh shirt.

“Odd,” he murmured, as he knotted his tie. “Damn odd. De Horn and Stockbridge don’t want me here any longer than necessary, that’s clear. But they’re both clumsy liars, and De Horn seems to have something on his mind.”

He brushed his damp hair, gazing unseeing at his reflection in the cracked mirror.

“Neither of them would mind getting out of here in a hurry,” he continued to himself. “With the kid it might be social starvation. But Stockbridge is too experienced for that. Yet it was De Horn who sent that message.”

He shrugged his shoulders perplexedly and strode back to the door. At the threshold he halted long enough to draw out his Webley revolver, glance carefully at the magazine and return it to the waist holster. Then, eyes narrowed, he returned to the main room.

The evening meal, an hour later, was held under the glare of a double carbide lamp. Stockbridge, made garrulous by several helpings from a bottle of whisky, punctuated his eating with a steady flow of talk. But it was strained talk, aimed apparently to thwart any questions Bancroft might ask.

“Twenty days’ sampan travel to the coast,” Stockbridge said thickly. “Nothing but jungle, heat, fever—and rain. Two operators in a relay station cut off from the world. It’s hell, I tell you. Me, I’m gonna quit soon.”

De Horn said little, ate even less, and nervously smoked one cigarette after another.

They went out on the veranda. The two operators took chairs. Outside, the rain had stopped, and Bancroft stared into the dripping blackness before him. Presently he excused himself, turned and strode back to his room in the rear.

TWO minutes later Bancroft was bent over the little dressing stand, unpacking something that lay wrapped in oilcloth at the very bottom of his canvas bag. He removed the cloth carefully, examined the contents. A curious object was revealed—a telegraph sounder. Also,

there were two coils of insulated copper wire, each with a weighted contact clamp at one end. Bancroft shoved the sounder into his coat pocket where the bulge would show least, then uncoiled the wires and began to wrap them loosely about his waist, pushing them under his shirt.

With a last glance at his appearance in the mirror, he turned out the lamp and returned to the veranda.

“Going down to the launch,” he said, as he stepped to the door. “Want to see how Sahar, my Dyak, is getting on. He has to sleep there, you know.”

He went down the ladder and strode toward the jetty, whistling noisily. A quick glance over his shoulder showed that Stockbridge had risen from his veranda chair and was moving into the inner room. At the edge of the clearing Bancroft stopped his whistling, slipped into the underbrush and began to pick his way silently parallel to the river shore. For a hundred yards he continued. Behind him the yellow glow from the lighted station shone fitfully through the dense bush.

When that glow had disappeared entirely, Bancroft drew from his pocket a flashlight and sent a white ray stabbing the darkness above him. Back and forth he moved it, outlining the vines and creepers overhead. Suddenly he murmured an exclamation of satisfaction.

There they were, two black threads running from tree to tree through the inky jungle: telegraph wires that connected Bandjermasin with Samarinda and Samarinda with Bulungan on the east coast. The white insulators seemed strangely out of place in the maze of green.

Bancroft fell to work quickly. With the aid of the steel-like vines he lifted himself up a near tree, climbed until his outstretched hands reached the taut wires. Using a pocketknife he scraped off two lengths of insulation and then, removing the wires from his waist, slipped the copper contacts over the bare sections and pressed the clamps securely. He trailed the wires down to the ground, hiding them as well as he could in the vine entanglement. A hollow log came into the glare of the flash next. Bancroft carefully took out his sounder and placed it under this wooden protection, connecting the wires to the binding posts.

Immediately the sounder broke into a rapid series of clicks. With the flash resting on the log, Bancroft got a notebook and pencil from his

pocket, his ears strained to catch each word of the coded message.

Two minutes later the sounder stopped, and he stared down at his scribblings. They were short and significant.

—is here now but suspects nothing. Will probably stay two days, three at most. Sampan of samples well hidden in village. Can place at least a thousand more for high price. But hold all shipments until I advise you.

A LONG time the government inspector sat there, mouth screwed tight while he read and reread what he had written. Then slowly he disconnected the sounder, snapped off the flash and headed back for the post.

Morning, and the rain began again. The odor of damp rot, which Bancroft knew so well and hated, rose up like a fog from the floor of the jungle. Concealing his impatience at the forced postponement of the village inspection trip, the government inspector strolled out on the veranda.

De Horn was there, slumped in a wicker chair, cleaning a long-barreled Luger automatic. Inside, in his bunk, Stockbridge still snored loudly.

"Gets pretty monotonous here with nothing to do," Bancroft said. "Suppose you'd like it better if the Dyaks weren't so quiet."

De Horn looked up and smiled shortly. "I'd hardly say that," he answered. "But this way it's like sitting on a dynamite box. You never know when the natives will change their minds. They hate the idea of these relay stations being here in their country. And they hate the Dutch military outposts along the river even more. They'd be only too glad to wipe them all out."

"Have they ever attacked here at No. 5?"

"Once." The youth fumbled nervously for a cigarette. "That was a year ago, before I came. Stockbridge was here alone then. He killed hundreds of them before they could get within striking distance. Parangs or blowpipes don't exactly compare with a machine gun, you know."

Bancroft nodded. "It's a good thing," he said, looking sharply across the table, "that they haven't rifles. There'd be a different story then."

De Horn started and a slow flush mounted in his cheeks. He dropped his eyes, started to reply, then broke off, listening. From the inner room had come the sudden chatter of the telegraph sounder.

"That was Munpore talking to Samarinda," De

Horn explained, a moment later when it stopped. "Munpore is a couple of hundred miles east of here, deep in Taban territory. The operator was reporting bad flood conditions in his district."

Bancroft crossed his legs thoughtfully. He didn't offer to inform De Horn that he understood code as well as Dutch or Malay, but this time the young man was speaking the truth.

AT noon, with tropic suddenness, the rain ceased. Bancroft donned a pair of mosquito boots and made ready for his trip of inspection. Two of the villages were within walking distance, but the third and largest was five miles upstream. He took the launch.

He spent only an hour in the first two kampongs. The first, on the south bank of the river, was quiet and fairly clean. The second, on the north shore, was an odorous collection of huts and filth. In both villages he was received without question. Yet Bancroft was struck with the feeling that the peacefulness was only a mask fashioned with native cunning to trick him.

The third village was thriving under the tribal rule of Kota Noh. Kota Noh had been warned twice to desist in his attempts to gather heads, especially white heads from the military posts downriver. A few hideous native skulls still adorned the outside of the long house, but otherwise everything appeared in complete submission to the Dutch government.

The old chief pompously escorted Bancroft into each thatch hut, grinning suavely. He was greatly disappointed that the government inspector could not stay in his village for the night. He was disappointed that the government inspector did not care to share a gourd of native rum with him. And he hoped very much that the government inspector would return soon.

All of which Bancroft took with a large grain of salt. He noted as he went down to the launch that the Dyak chief apparently had forgotten to include in his tour a small hut set apart from the others.

Smiling grimly, Bancroft ordered Sahar, his steersman, to let the launch drift downstream until a bend in the river hid them from sight. Then, choosing a spot where the shore reeds massed thickly, he directed the native to head for the bank. He leaped out, fastened the painter to a shoot of bamboo and plunged on foot into the jungle. Kota Noh didn't know it, but his kampong was to

undergo two inspections that day instead of one.

An hour passed before Bancroft returned to the launch. His clothing was torn, and his face and hands were scratched from the dense bush. In his eyes was a grim look.

Once more he ordered the launch downriver, docking at the telegraph station jetty.

Neither of the two operators was in sight on the veranda. Bancroft paused a long time, filling his pipe, making sure his movements were unobserved. Then he darted across the clearing and pushed his way through the foliage to the hollow log that housed the sounder.

Connected, the instrument remained silent. Bancroft waited impatiently. He was working on a hunch. Hunches were rare with him, but when they came they usually brought results. Ten minutes passed.

Frowning, the government inspector slipped back to the clearing and cast a hasty glance toward the shack. But his arrival had gone unnoticed; the place brooded in silence.

He returned to the sounder, checked the wires. Then without warning the instrument broke into a spasmodic rattle.

When, seconds later, the message was completed, he puffed his pipe thoughtfully and sat there considering. The second message was as short as the first. It read:

Three sampans with one thousand ready to leave here as soon as you advise. If all goes well, can you meet me at Kampong Nanaoh? Then overland to Sambilioen and a ship. Remember we split fifty-fifty.

A slight smile touched the corners of Bancroft's lips as he disconnected the sounder and stood up. The situation was clearer now, considerably clearer. There remained, in fact, only a few details to complete it. He went back to the telegraph shack.

RAIN came again while the three men were eating their evening meal. It descended in a torrent of fury from a thunder-split sky, and De Horn hurried to let down the canvas shades on the veranda. With all outside drafts cut off, the air in the station became sweltering.

Stockbridge poured himself a stiff drink from the whisky bottle, drank it, and wiped the sweat from his neck.

"Filthy weather," he said. "No rain until the

rainy season, then there's so much of it, it gets into a man's soul. I tell you these jungles are no place for whites. Even in Sumatra it ain't so bad. There's roads there, and you can get back to civilization. Here you can sit and rot for all the company cares. Well, I'm quittin' soon, and I'm gettin' out. Sidney maybe, or Wellington. Any place just so's it's—"

"Money?" interposed Bancroft softly. "You'll need money, you know."

Stockbridge swung around. "I'll have money," he snapped. "And I'll know how to use it, too. No drink, no gambling until I'm outta this rotten country. Then I can raise hell."

For a long time Bancroft sat still, thinking. He rose presently, walked to his room in the rear and returned with something clenched in his hand.

"Just remembered I had this along with me," he said. "Did either of you two ever play *main po*? I haven't all the pieces, just the cubes and the die. But we can make a board easily enough. What say to a game?"

Stockbridge glanced across at the brass cube and smiled with the eyes of an experienced gambler. De Horn shook his head.

"I never played," he said.

Accepting the ensuing silence for agreement, Bancroft cleared off the rough table, shoved it directly under the carbide lamps and marked off a four-foot square, dividing the top into four triangles by means of two diagonal lines. He numbered the triangles from one to four. Then he turned to De Horn and quickly explained the rules of the Malay game.

With only half interest, Stockbridge began by placing a stack of coins on number three. Bancroft spun the brass cube, picked it up and dropped the smaller, inner cube out, exposing the red-and-white die. Stockbridge lost.

"What odds?" the operator snarled angrily. "And how high do we go?"

"Three to one," Bancroft replied, smiling. "Make your own limit if you wish."

FOR two hours the three men sat there, sweating in the sultry heat, watching the little colored die as it dealt out the tides of fortune. When the game finally ended Bancroft was unconcerned over the fact that his loss had been considerable. He was far more interested in the methods the two operators had used against him.

Stockbridge had played recklessly from the

beginning, betting wildly, yet with a certain system, accepting his occasional losses in bad humor, laughing coarsely when he found he had won. Once, when he thought neither of his opponents was looking, he had called a five, a four. De Horn, on the other hand, had played an honest, conservative game throughout. Yet he had not hesitated to take a long chance when Bancroft had him in a corner. These facts were most interesting. To Bancroft they were an excellent piece of character portrayal. He knew where he stood.

The government inspector sat on the veranda for an hour after the two operators had gone to their bunks. He pulled up the canvas flaps. The rain had ceased and starlight filled the sky. Twice he filled and lighted his pipe. At length he knocked the ashes from the bowl, rose and strode to his room in the rear.

He undressed quietly, donned pajamas and lay down on the cot. For another hour he lay there wide awake. The rain stopped, and from the main room of the telegraph station came the sounds of two men breathing heavily in sleep.

Not until the hands of his watch pointed to two thirty did Bancroft show signs of action. Then he rose and, barefoot, moved lightly to the door. He lifted the latch, slid the barrier open an inch at a time, listening. Silence, broken only by the occasional cry of a hornbill somewhere in the surrounding jungle, met his ears.

Slowly Bancroft made his way down the short corridor to the center room. He stopped at the threshold, peering through the semidarkness at the shadowy outlines of the two bunks. The breathing continued regularly.

Like a shadow the government inspector melted across the floor to the instrument desk. Before him, indistinguishable in the gloom, the sounder, switches, and key were silent pieces of brass.

He moved his hand forward, felt for the switch, pushed it open, and grasped the knob of the telegraph key. He flashed a last glance over his shoulder, listening to the men's breathing. Then quietly he began to tap out a message.

It was short, composed of only two call letters, and Bancroft repeated it three times at spaced intervals. Then he closed the switch, muffled the armature of the sounder with his finger and waited.

Almost immediately the sounder answered, repeating the call letters, spelling out: "Go ahead."

There was a glint of excitement in the

government inspector's eyes as he seized the key again. His lips were clamped tightly together.

Arm motionless, fingers moving by only the flexibility of his wrist, he resumed his careful tapping. For many moments he continued, spelling out words and sentences, forming a coded message with an experienced touch.

The interruption came without warning.

"Get away from that key!"

BANCROFT whirled to see a hulking shadow rise from one of the cots, jerk erect, and begin to approach.

"Get away from that key, you damn sneak!"

Bancroft answered quietly:

"The game's up, Stockbridge. I just informed the Kentsan operator of the whole game of blind man's bluff that's been going on here for the past weeks. Kentsan, you know, is the Dutch military outpost downriver. It happens to be quite near where your accomplice tapped the wires and made arrangements to send you one thousand rifles. That accomplice and those rifles will be in the hands of the Dutch government before morning."

Stockbridge drew up short and jerked in his breath heavily.

"Rifles," Bancroft continued in a steady voice. "British Lee Enfield rifles, Mark VI, short magazine improved type—better guns than the Dutch police has. It was quite a game, Stockbridge, but you played too high. I saw the samples in Kota Noh's kampong yesterday. Pretty things, they were, and I'll wager the natives were ready to pay a pretty price for them. No wonder you were planning to give this country the go-by. One thousand armed, bloodthirsty Dyaks wouldn't make this station any health resort. But once away, you didn't care what happened. Stockbridge, you're under arrest!"

For a moment the figure in the gloom stood rigid. Then with a roar he closed in.

The operator struck Bancroft hard in the abdomen, shot his hands upward, clawing for the government inspector's thick throat. Bancroft coughed as the wind rushed out of him. He stumbled to the floor. In an instant the two men were rolling over and over, exchanging blows. Bancroft was no weakling. He had kept his weight down to a wiry one hundred and eighty pounds, and he had kept away from native rum. Yet the man who sought to kill him now was a caged tiger with

a tiger's strength in his arms.

Back and forth they surged, Stockbridge panting hard as he flailed his arms.

"You may have spoiled that gun deal," he snarled. "But you'll never get back to Samarinda to crow about it."

Bancroft snapped out his right fist, followed quickly with his left. A brutal kick struck him in the groin, sent a wave of nausea surging through him. Vaguely as he fought, the government inspector was aware of De Horn standing in the darkness beside his bunk, watching them like a wooden image.

Lips cut and bleeding, Bancroft waited for an opening. And presently one came. Stockbridge slipped his iron hold, lunged sidewise in a frantic attempt to plant a finishing blow on the inspector's jaw. With a quick movement Bancroft rolled over twice and leaped to his feet. He jerked backward, rested against the instrument table, waiting for the second attack.

Four feet away the gun-runner operator swayed clumsily as he staggered erect. He spat blood from his mouth and roared profanity. Then he whirled and lunged for the near wall, one arm extended above him. A moment he clawed there, jerked at something that seemed fastened on a level with his head. He ripped it clear and stood framed in the doorway. Soft light from the sky gathered around him to reveal what he held in his hand: a native parang, the curved blade gleaming.

Bancroft stared with a sudden loss of hope. He knew that running or lunging to one side would be futile. A thrown parang reaches its mark quickly. And Stockbridge had spent enough time in these jungles to learn the proper method of handling one.

For an instant Stockbridge poised motionless, gloating over the opportunity that was his. Then he spat blood again and jerked his arm back for the throw.

But he got only halfway. A deafening roar split the silence of the station. A streak of orange flame spewed through the darkness, coming from the direction of the wall bunks.

Stockbridge seemed only surprised at first. He stood there, the parang raised in his hand, his legs stiff. Then, with a low moan, he swayed and crashed heavily to the floor.

Even as he fell, Bancroft leaped to his side, wrenched away the native knife and pinioned the man's arms to the floor. Stockbridge struggled,

then fell back limp. A bullet had struck him in the shoulder almost at the base of the throat.

The government inspector struck a match and lighted the carbide lamps. His hands were trembling slightly as he turned and looked across the lighted room.

Five feet away, still by his bunk, stood De Horn. The youth's face was dead white. A curl of smoke was rising upward from the bore of his Luger automatic.

"Is—is he dead?" he asked huskily.

Bancroft shook his head. "No, not dead," he replied slowly. "But the fight's all taken out of him. Thanks, son. I won't forget this."

MORNING of the next day found Bancroft and De Horn on the veranda. Outside, the rain was falling again. Inside, Stockbridge lay in his bunk, his shoulder swathed in bandages, his feet manacled to the wall.

"I knew about those rifles eight days before you came," De Horn was saying. "I'd noticed Stockbridge acting queerly, sending strange messages over the wire for some time. Then one came through to us. Stockbridge broke the circuit so that it wouldn't continue farther down the line, and I knew by the touch to the brass that it wasn't any regular station. The natives in Kota Noh's village were growing impatient, too. The old chief and three of his warriors came up here and demanded to talk to Stockbridge in private. I listened in, found he had promised to sell them a large number of rifles sent to him by an accomplice nearer the coast. He had already delivered a sampan load of samples to their kampong. But the big shipment had been delayed.

"I worried myself sick about it for two nights and finally reported the matter to Samarinda."

Bancroft nodded as he slowly filled his pipe and ran a lighted match over the bowl.

"And you didn't mention Stockbridge's name in your report, not wishing to be a snitch. You figured you could scare him out of it, make him turn straight before an official investigation came. That's clear enough. But why did you still hold out on me when doing so placed you under suspicion, too?"

For a moment De Horn looked across the table. Then he leaned back and pressed his fingertips together slowly.

"A long time ago," he said, "when I first came

here, Stockbridge saved my life. It happened out there on that path leading from the clearing to the jetty. A thirty-foot python dropped from a tree and wrapped itself around me before I could get out of its way. Stockbridge shot the thing. It was—”

Bancroft nodded gently as he blew out a cloud of fragrant tobacco smoke. “It was a gentleman’s debt of honor,” he said. “I would have done the same thing, son.”