
BLACK OPAL

by

Jimmy Brook

"The fire of the earth that man so often dreams of
and schemes of, is often a fire that can burn
in a way not expected."

CHAPTER ONE

Rain was lashing down. In the gloom against the wooden veranda post, a momentary glare showed the face of a man as he lit a cigarette. Then it was gone, nothing left to betray his presence. The noise on the galvanised roofing, was constant. A continual drumming, with veils of water, falling straight down, all along the front of the building. Guttering was not a priority in such an outpost of humanity.

Not a light out there, only palm trees and exotic shrubbery close by, quickly blending into a blackness. It was this man's turn, tonight, to stand out here, and wait. As it was every night this week. The moisture got into everything, even the cigarette he was smoking. It spluttered, and died. He hurled it out into the night.

There was one consolation on these occasions. No mosquitoes. No drone to distract your brain. Still that would come, when the rain eased. And it would. Daylight would be a relief, but it would also bring the heat. Sometimes one became wetter in the humidity, than just standing in the falling cascade of water.

Suddenly he stiffened. It was definitely something. A fleeting movement; felt it. Now nothing. He watched, but only saw vague watery shapes of vegetation, through the rain. Visibility was poor, only a few dozen metres at the best. Nothing.

He straightened up, and turned to walk the length of the veranda. A ritual he employed to keep the damp out of his bones. In that same instant, he saw it again. A tree moved. He moved his body as close as he could to the post, in a slow movement. A full minute passed. His eyes started to swim, as he stared into the blackness.

Then it was real. A figure, crouching, moved from the blackness, and crossed through two large rain puddles, leaving short lived ripples. Tell tale signs, if one is there in that microsecond of their existence, to observe such. He was. The figure climbed up on a drum and heaved his lithe body out of sight, through the opening at the side of the shed. In this tropical climate, windows paid little part in a building, especially one that housed a generator and fuel drums.

The observer, reached down and removed a .45 revolver, from a hip holster. The cover was never buttoned down. Snakes were fast, and you had to be just as fast. Pulling his wide brimmed hat down hard, he quickly stepped off the boards into the mud and slosh, that once was a path. The rain masked any noise he made, but there would have been little. Years of living in extreme conditions, and a need to survive, had taught him well.

He walked quickly to the side of the shed, and stood listening against the wall. He knew he wouldn't hear much in the rain, but a single word coming to his ears, was all that was needed, to tell him that he had missed the other shadow. Silence.

The rain was easing. Every muscle of his was taunt, as he took slow, deliberate steps towards the opening. He should have crossed to the brick building to the right of the veranda, and woken the others. But he didn't. By that time the intruder would have vanished, to come again perhaps, and succeed in his purpose.

A scraping sound reached his ears, and the noise of a falling object, maybe a spanner, hitting the floor. He froze mid step, revolver aimed at the opening.

A small, quiet banging, muffled. He raised his head to the bottom sill, and slid a hand up the side, feeling for the switch, he knew was somewhere here. He couldn't find it. Moving to the side, he cautiously stood up, and put his arm inside. The rain stopped, and he cursed inwardly. He would lose the cover of noise. Some frogs started up a rapid croaking.

His fingers slid over the industrial switch. With the revolver pointed at the opening, and his heart pumping so loud, he felt it must give him away, he started to pull down on the toggle.

Pain. A violent push on his shoulders, and he was forced on to the window ledge, winding him. His finger, on the trigger, lost control, and a loud explosion followed. The flash only added to his spinning head. A cry from inside the darkness of the room, as small sinewy hands grabbed his shoulders and yanked him backwards and into the mud. A light appeared, then others, off to his right. Yelling. Next minute, the opening was framed by a black shape, that crouched there, momentarily like an ape, framed for an exhibition. Then a sound behind him, and he instinctively rolled, as a heavy object hit the ground where he was only a split second ago. Voices growing louder.

The shape jumped, stumbled, but quickly regained it's stance. One arm was hanging down and the other, he couldn't see it in the dark.

Then the sound of running feet, and he was left alone. Water seeped into his clothes, and his ears, and his ribs ached. A torch shone into his face, and he screwed up his eyes, against the intrusion.

"You alright?" A gruff voice he couldn't place.

"Think so." Then a hand grabbing his, and pulling him upright.

"What happened? Saw the tail end of somebody disappearing into the jungle."

The voice took on a familiar tone, and Rory Mason struggled to his feet, one hand on his chest. The other should have held a weapon, but didn't. Matt had a torch in one hand, and a machete, in the other.

Someone materialised from the bushes behind him. It was Spikey, the other worker at the site. "Gone. Never catch him in this." His cockney accent sounding out of place, in the surrounding darkness, as it competed with a chorus of frogs and insects and

other indistinguishable sounds of the night.

Rory took the torch, and peered into the opening of the shed. "One was in here," he yelled. "Bastard. Had a mate outside. Didn't see him."

He found the switch, and pulled down on it. A feeble light, high up in the gabled roof, pushed the darkness into the corners. A lizard, scurried across the floor. "Christ." He withdrew his body, and ran around to the door. The other two, followed.

The bolt was thrown back and he ran in, stopping at the generator. It wasn't running, the diesel motor, silent on its concrete block. It never was run at night, to save fuel. The batteries, a row of wet cells on the shelf at the side, satisfied their requirements.

At the base of the generator, three sticks of dynamite were lashed together and forced into one of the windings. There was a long fuse, and on the floor, a cigarette lighter.

"Very crude, but effective." Matt's voice echoed in the metal building. Its drawl betrayed the Australian's origin. "This would have wrecked the geny, and without it, no dredging. What happened?"

"Standing on the veranda, as usual. We thought we might have problems, as you know, but you never think it would happen. Saw someone head for the shed, out of the bush, and go in the window." Rory was looking at the dynamite. He withdrew it from the machinery, pulled out the fuse, then looked at Matt. "Smart. Thought he was alone, and catch him. Had someone outside. He pushed me against the frame, and then dragged me down into the mud. Tried to mash me with something, but I rolled just in time." His chest was aching, and he needed a cigarette. Probably not a good combination, but what the hell.

"Heard the shot," said Spikey.

"My gun?" and Rory headed for the door. He was back in a minute, holding a dripping weapon. "Lucky. Flew out of my hand when I fell back. I think I could have winged one, the one inside."

Some blood was found on the sill, but even in daylight, it would be unlikely to see any in the dripping foliage.

"Police were right, after all," said Matt, "didn't believe them at first. Europeans aren't exactly welcome in this country. Well not up in the highlands, anyway. Malaysians like them in the

cities, for business reasons. I suppose we're tolerated, 'cause no local would waste his time pulling tin out of the river."

Rory laughed. "Still wouldn't surprise me if it was the police behind it. Ahmed wasn't smiling the other week, when we picked up the diesel, and drove straight past his truck. Nothing moves in Asia unless it's greased.

"Tell that to the company." Matt spat on the floor, and walked outside.

CHAPTER TWO

The following week went by without incident. Rory had driven down to Pakanbaru, and reported the incident to the police station. He stressed the attempted murder angle. Again the police captain seemed indifferent. They worked a long way up in the mountains, away from the coast, he said. It was one of the risks they should be prepared for. Rory saw a doctor, who poked and prodded, and said there was nothing broken.

They worked the dredge, together. It was long hours, and the humidity was unbearable, even at that altitude. They kept a rifle handy, but no trouble presented itself. Rory had decided, after his contract expired, to go back to Sydney, and have a holiday. He'd been up here for three years, moving around. It wasn't an easy life. Hard work, and difficult locals. The labourers needed constant supervision, and anything not tied down, walked. That's why the current dredge on the Kampar River, only employed locals when the tin was to be stacked and loaded on to the truck. The actual dredging could be handled by three people. The money was good, but that was not why he was here.

Four years ago, whilst at Mt. Isa in far western Queensland, his wife, was killed. He was devastated. She was driving down to nearby Cloncurry to see her sister. The police said she hit a kangaroo and lost control. She skidded into a tree and died instantly. Part of him also died, that day. Rory finally decided, after two months, it was too painful to stay.

He flew to Brisbane, and signed up with Oceanic Mining, to work on river dredging in Borneo and Sumatra. The pay was good, and the conditions were rugged. Fist fights, both on and off the job, were common, as were the use of knives. He had had his nose broken; his fingers broken, and was stabbed in the arm. But he stayed on. The pain of going back, had not yet subsided.

The old Malay, who brought the vegetables and fruit, each week, was a variation in their routine. He arrived, driving an old two wheel cart, the ox pulling it, long passed it's used by date. It saved buying in town, and it was fresh.

About ten days after the attempt on the generator, after they had finished the day's work, the squeaking of wheels on the dirt track, winding through the palms and lush foliage, was audible. What was different this time, was the girl sitting up front.

There was no sign of the old man. She pulled up. Not so young, thought Rory, as he could now see. More like 20 or so. The short stature, often did that.

Matt, who spoke a reasonable Malay, asked where was the other man, and relayed to Rory and Spikey, that he was sick. She was his niece.

She unloaded the provisions, and Rory left her in the kitchen. Matt did a cursory check that no weapons were in the baskets, then retired to the brick quarters.

Rory was finishing the daily journal, at the small desk they had in the equipment store. A bit of dust on the desk top, blew up, and he turned around, to see her standing at the doorway, hands together. He thought she had gone.

"What do you...," then stopped, as he realised she didn't speak English. He searched his mind for some Malay words.

"You want?" she said, in a lilting but accented voice.

He just looked at her, not comprehending her question, at first. Then in one graceful move, her arms went up, and with it the sarong she wore, fell to the side. She had nothing else on. The light from the other room, streamed through, highlighting her young body.

He had stood up, and faced her, still not saying anything. He felt himself being enchanted, with what he saw. An aching, so long denied, since his wife had gone, was taking over his body. He pulled his T-shirt over his head, as she walked towards him, hands locked behind her, a delicate smile on the girl's lips.

As he reached out his hands to touch her body, she brought her hands around to the front. He was mesmerised. The touch of her left hand ecstatic. He saw her right hand, too late. A long thin blade, streaked forward. He started to twist, but it had already entered his stomach. Even before the pain had registered, he was

pushing her away in one big effort. A warm trickle on his belly, and dizziness engulfing him, only accentuated the terrible sharp, searing pain, below.

He had a vision of her, bringing her hand forward again, then a loud explosion. The knife seemed to wilt, then she fell forward, knocking him back. His last vision, was a figure at the door with a gun, smoke curling up. Then he was on his back, the smell of vanilla, strong to his nostrils, then blackness.

CHAPTER THREE

Rory woke up, and wished he hadn't. The nausea and pain in his stomach, almost too much to bear. He was being thrown from side to side, as the truck lurched at a very fast speed, along the rutted road. Each roll, caused more pain. He dry retched. A smelly towel, was wiped across his face.

He focused his eyes, as best he could, and saw, the smiling countenance of Matt. Someone else was driving, but he couldn't see. The pain in his belly was sharp, and when he coughed, he felt like. He didn't know what he felt like.

"Easy there, fella," said Matt, "don't move none." He quickly pinned Rory's shoulders, as a bump lifted him and everything else in the truck, into a weightless position, then just as quick, turned the gravity back on.

Rory felt the blood seeping through onto his trousers. He was somewhat relieved that Matt was there. Matt was always turning up when things got a little rough. His first week at the dredge could have been his last. A bucket shackle came undone, just as Rory was climbing out of it, after inspecting some timber caught in the top. As he toppled out, he grabbed a line, more by instinct, than planning. Then he felt himself being pulled sideways, as the swinging bucket, pendulumed back. He would have probably died from the collision, if he hadn't been moved. It was Matt who had seen what was happening, and grabbed the line.

Then there was that time when Spikey stayed to mind the site, and Matt and he went in to pick up some needed food and extra reagents. Two muggers jumped him, as he went to get into the truck, they had left in a side lane. Then Matt came around the corner, and charged like a buffalo on heat. One of the assailants, went down with Matt's first punch. The other fled.

Then the truck skidded to a halt. They had reached the river crossing. Up to a year ago, there was a precarious one lane wooden bridge, that just managed to support the truck, it's groaning and creaking, giving everyone a worry. Then the monsoon came, and the rain never stopped. The frail structure ended up somewhere down the coast. A new one was being thought of, but in the meantime, a small barge covered at the top, and just big enough to take a vehicle, was used. A local ferryman manually pulled the craft and any cargo, across, using a fixed rope.

Three months ago, the rope broke, and the truck plus Spikey and five locals, ended up 200 metres down stream. It took 4 hours to winch the vehicle up the bank and make it's way along to the road.

"How is he?" It was Spikey.

"Still with us, but he's still bleeding. You go back. I'll get one of the boys from the village to ride with him."

Matt pushed the mattress, which was covering a motor cycle, around Rory.

"If you recon' you'll be OK." Spikey sounded unsure.

"Yep. Get back up there, before they try something. And take the rifle." He pulled it out from the back, and Matt yanked the 125cc Yamaha off the tray, down the plank Spikey had just laid. "Go."

Spikey roared away, back along the twisting dirt track, and was lost to sight in the thick vegetation, and approaching twilight. Matt took one look at the prone person, laying in the back, and jumped in, revving the engine, and frightening some birds nearby. He wasn't going anywhere, as the barge was still not across. But it gave him confidence, that something was happening. It would be a little while before he reached Pakanbaru, and he only hoped, Rory would still be with him. One of the company rules, was that no matter what, one person had to remain on site. Whether this incident justified breaking the rule, Matt and Spikey weren't sure.

As soon as the two planks were put into position, Matt had the truck on them and on top. He was out and pulling on the rope, much to the surprise of the old villager, the planks left floating on the dark water. On the other side, he drove into the village, and waving a small bank note in his hand, yelled in the local language, for a volunteer. Most people melted away, but a lanky teenager, took the money and jumped in the back. He sat next to Rory, and Matt roared off. Tall people were unusual, so a

little European blood was obviously in the family. This also helped in defying whatever local taboo had been put in place, against the miners.

It was almost dark now, and Matt was thankful that the worst section, was over. Still a country road, this stretch saw more use. He only hoped some water buffalo wasn't standing on the road. at this speed and in the dark, the truck wasn't going to come off lightly, in a collision. Two or three times he skidded on the loose gravel, and grazed a palm tree when he hit a water crossing and the front wheels left the ground.

The forest closed around them, the shadows like long hands, trying to grab the truck. Then a break, and the glint of moonlight on water, as rice paddies, some terraced up the side of hills, were passed. The shapes of houses, and a few lights, as they passed kampongs. Then the rain started. Soon it was pelting down, forcing Matt to slow. Already water was starting to cover the road, covering holes and gutters. Matt cursed. In the back, the boy was holding Rory, as best he could.

The tar started less than 3 kilometres from town, and was so full of pot holes, Matt drove on the side verge. He had to slow down in town. It had been market day, and despite the darkness, was still thronged with people, cars, and bicycles. He dodged them all except for a cart loaded with bamboo poles, and being pulled by a not so quick Indonesian. It tipped, and there was much yelling. There was no time to stop.

All local colour for a tourist, but not to the locals. Everyone was there for a purpose. Matt's purpose was to get through the throng and hope the doctor was at the medical centre.

Medical centre may have been an euphemism. A converted house, with a dedicated Chinese doctor, and little else. The usual long queue were sitting on the veranda, and inside, even at this hour, but Matt ignored them and rushed straight into the surgery. Kevin Lim looked up in surprise, as did his assisting nurse. They were bandaging a young child's arm.

"I need a hand. Rory's outside, and he's bleeding everywhere."

The doctor, an ethnic Chinese aged about 30, said something to the nurse, and then stood up and followed Matt outside. When he saw the patient, he yelled to two teenagers, passing at that moment, and the four of them, carried Rory inside, and onto a table, in the back room.

"What happened?", but as he pulled away the crude bandages, the

young doctor knew the answer. He's seen many such injuries, since his return to south east Asia, from medical school in Australia. He could have had an appointment to the largest hospital in Singapore, but instead, chose rural areas. The noble spirit of helping the less privileged, still burned strong. Money had not yet apparently swayed his ideals.

"A woman came onto the site," said Matt, "and before he realised it, had knifed him. Would have finished him off, but I arrived just in the nick of time."

"He needs surgery. Nothing major was cut, by the look of things, but I doubt if I can stop the bleeding all together." The doctor finished putting on some bandages, and peeled off his gloves.

"Where?"

"The nearest decent hospital is Singapore. Not long in a plane. Your problem is finding a plane, and encouraging the pilot to fly at night. Must be tonight." The Chinese had blood over his shirt and trousers, but he seemed oblivious to it.

Matt looked bewildered. "Help me here, Doc. The company will pay, but it takes time to get money and an aircraft."

The doctor looked outside at the waiting line, and shut the door. "There's a Cessna on the strip now. He's flying out at daylight with something or other down to Padang. You hear things in a town this size. I'll try ringing him. Otherwise you need to get something from Singapore. Not ideal for your friend here."

Matt sat down, and went to light a cigarette, but thought better of it. Kevin Lim went outside. He was back inside three minutes.

"Got him. He was waiting on a call. Inconvenience to his charter, tomorrow; against rules taking off at night, and leaving the country without clearance. Bottom line is \$2,000 American, cash up front."

"Bloody hell. Where can I get that, this time of night?"

"Cheque book?" asked the doctor. Matt nodded.

"Give me a company cheque, now, for \$2,500 US. I can get your money in 15 minutes."

Matt didn't even query the amount. He had been in this part of the world, too long, and realised everything had a price. His friend and work mate weren't negotiable.

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