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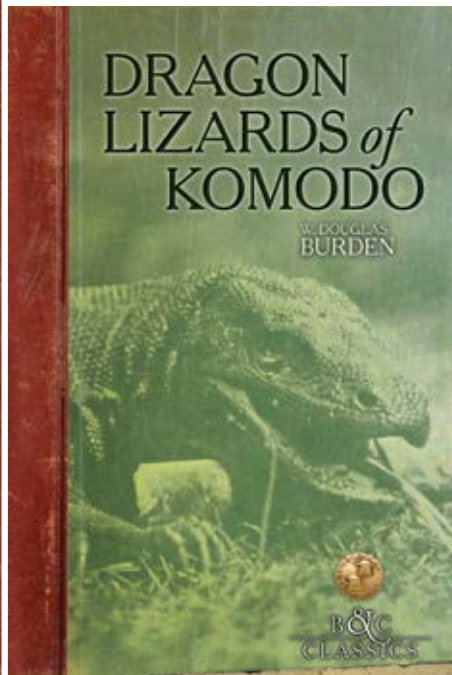
DRAGON  
LIZARDS  
OF  
KOMODO

THE B&C CLASSICS SERIES EXCERPT

# DRAGON LIZARDS OF KOMODO

W. DOUGLAS BURDEN

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## INTRODUCTION

If any man with sporting tastes and a real interest in natural history were told that true dragons were still living on a remote, little known island of the East Indies, what would he do? *Allow me to answer the question.*



With the help of the Dutch Government, Burden and his team were able to safely navigate the 700 miles from Batavia to Komodo.

First of all, he would try to make sure that the reports were founded on fact, and then, having satisfied himself, he would begin, a little secretly, perhaps, to lay his plans.

A man who has once lived in tropical jungles is a prey all his life, not only to recurring fevers, but to something perhaps more insidious; namely, a desire to return—a desire, I may say, that is difficult to deny. It was three years since I had been in the jungle—time enough to allow the imagination free rein.

So I came home one fine evening not long ago across Central Park and asked my wife how she would like to go dragon hunting. The idea fired her with enthusiasm; and, when I told her that these beasts were the very ones which had given rise to all the dragons of mythology and of the Chinese flag, she succumbed at once, and accordingly we began to concoct our plans.

First of all, I took the matter up with the authorities of the American Museum of Natural History, and such was the enthusiasm and backing of President Osborn and the Museum organization that from the start success seemed assured.

Then I wrote to Defosse, an old friend of mine, who has spent his life in the jungles of Indo China, whose skill at handling natives, and whose genius in the bush would make him of inestimable value. When this wonderful old hunter agreed to join us at Singapore, there was no longer any question of our being able to capture the animal alive. It would have been foolish, however, to

limit ourself to a collection of dragons. Few scientists have been to the Lesser Sunda Islands, the group to which Komodo belongs, and, as there are many geological and zoogeographic problems in this region, our opportunities were exceptional.

The birds of the Lesser Sunda Islands are well known. So, also, are the mammals, but, since only a few collectors of reptiles and amphibians have investigated the region, we determined to make it a herpetological expedition. Dr. E. R. Dunn of Smith College, one of the leading herpetologists of this country, had been dreaming of Komodo for years, so that no persuasion was necessary when we suggested that he accompany us.

The next question concerned motion picture photography. A moving picture record of the largest lizards in the world would make an important and necessary contribution. It soon became evident that a first-class camera man, taken all the way from New York, involved an enormous and quite unnecessary expenditure. Accordingly, with the assistance of Mr. Park of Pathé News, arrangements were made to secure at small expense a Chinese camera man from Pathé Frères, Singapore.

As for still photography, Mrs. B. had been preparing herself for some time past for just such an opportunity, and, under the instructions of a delightful old photographer, Mr. Heim, was already exhibiting unusual skill.

So much for the personnel of the expedition.

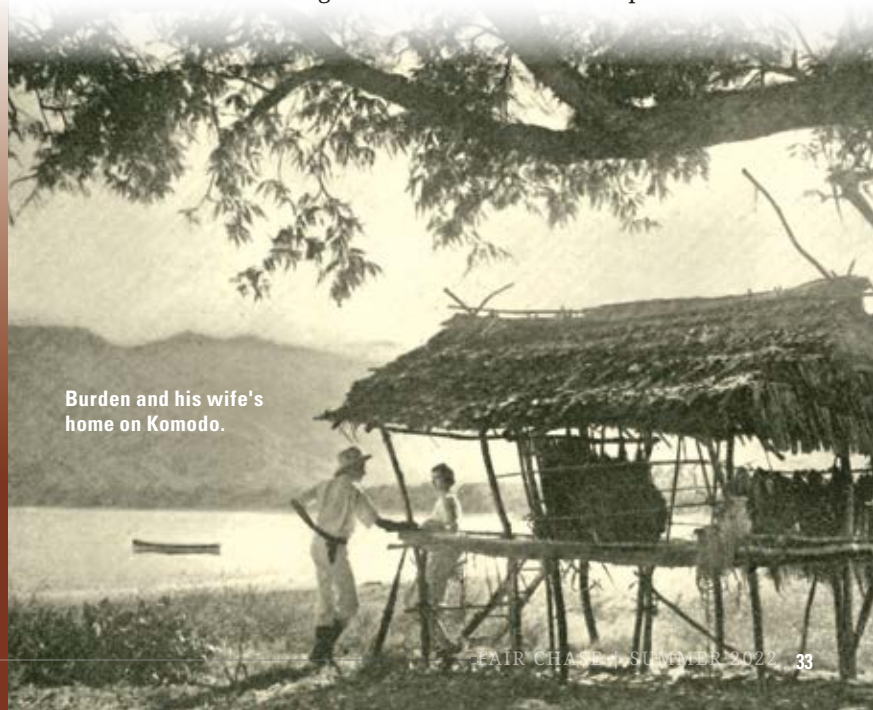


Defosse (right) and Burden discussing plans for capturing the dragon lizards alive.

The next question was, how were we to reach Komodo? An examination of some charts revealed an excellent harbor on the east coast of the island, but the sailing directions also spoke of sunken reefs and tidal currents which rendered navigation extremely hazardous. After a careful investigation of transportation facilities, it became evident that it would be essential to secure the cooperation of the Dutch Government. This very important phase of the preparation was taken up by the Hon. Richard Tobin, American Minister to The Hague, and the Hon. Joseph Grew, Under-Secretary of State. These two gentlemen took infinite pains and



The S.S. Dog on which we traveled more the 1,500 miles. She is seen here putting in her last supplies before leaving Souraboya.



Burden and his wife's home on Komodo.

trouble in our behalf, and as a result of their diplomatic negotiations, the Dutch Government was kind enough to present us with a beautiful little four-hundred-ton steam yacht which carried us not only the seven hundred miles from Batavia to Komodo, but away on out to the Island of Wetar, which lies at the extreme eastern end of the Lesser Sunda chain.

I mentioned above that I had been somewhat secretive with regard to our plans, and yet, while Dr. Noble—curator of herpetology in the American Museum—and I were working over the details of equipment, vague rumors of rival expeditions kept coming to our ears. In spite of all the precaution we took, the reader will be interested to hear that after we left New York no less than three expeditions suddenly announced to the newspapers that they were setting out to capture the huge dragons of Komodo.

I pictured all sorts of unpleasant episodes—Komodo is a small island. Three expeditions working there at the same time might have disastrous results. It was beginning to take on the aspects of a rush—not a gold rush, but a dragon rush.

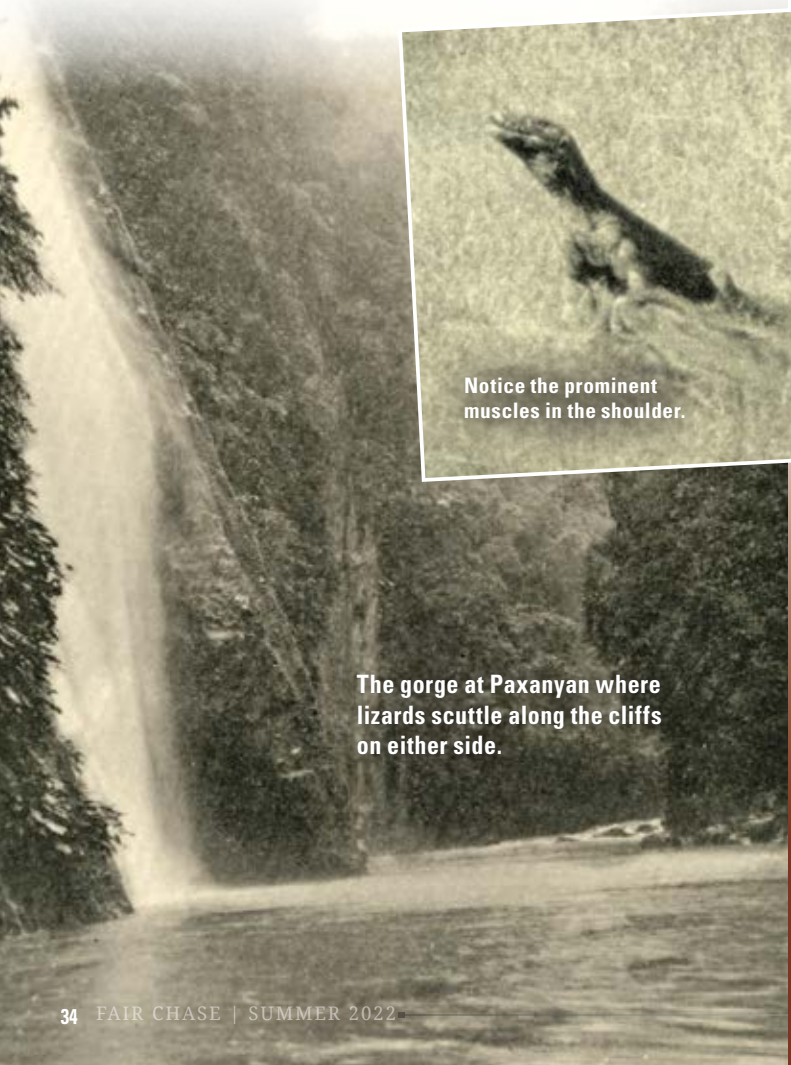
Before concluding this introductory chapter, I feel that a few words about the dragon lizards themselves are necessary. I have been asked repeatedly if it is really true that these beasts are prehistoric—that favorite epithet of the newspapers, and, for the reason that the term is rather meaningless, I confess to finding the question difficult to answer. In the literal sense, every living organism is prehistoric, for are we not all, man included, the outcome of millions of years of evolution? If, however, the word has come to mean great age with little change, it is correctly applied to these carnivorous lizards of

Komodo. For the truth is that they are the oldest of living lizards, dating as a genus back to early Eocene time, the beginning of the age of mammals. In other words, the ponderous reptiles that we watched and caught and killed among the volcanic pinnacles of an East Indian island are, with only a few specific differences, exactly the same as those that were crawling around over the face of this earth over sixty million years ago. It is interesting to note, however, that the species *komodoensis* is not the largest which the genus has evolved. There was one still greater which we know lived during the Stone Age of man, in northern Australia. This beast was thirty feet long and weighed, it has been estimated, over three thousand pounds. I was glad we did not find them disporting themselves on Komodo.

It may be well to mention briefly how these

Komodo lizards happened to be discovered. Komodo, as I have already stated, is a very small island twenty-two miles long by twelve in width. Until recently, it was uninhabited, and as it is very difficult to reach, no naturalists, not even A. R. Wallace, the most famous traveller in this region, had set foot on the island. In 1912, some pearl fishermen anchored in a harbor there. These men substantiated native rumors of the dragons, with the result that P. A. Ouwens, of the Zoological Museum at Buitenzorg, Java, sent collectors to Komodo. When these men brought back a few specimens, Ouwens published the first description of the animal, which he called *Varanus komodoensis*. Then came the war, and the dragon lizards were temporarily forgotten.

Not long ago Dr. Noble told me about *Varanus komodoensis*, and the island of Komodo. Soon afterwards we



The gorge at Paxanyan where lizards scuttle along the cliffs on either side.



Notice the prominent muscles in the shoulder.



Lizards can be seen prowling over the rugged mountains of Komodo. The lizard below has a whole boar in his mouth. The tail of the bait is visible under the lizard's neck.





Mrs. Burden with one of the smaller lizards that she shot.

were making our preparations for departure.

My wife and I sailed from San Francisco for China, where we expected to join Dr. Roy Chapman Andrews, and with him to go for a few days up into the Gobi Desert to see the wonderful work that the Central Asiatic Expedition was doing there. Dr. Dunn was sailing by way of the Indian Ocean. We parted company in New York and set out in opposite directions to meet on the other side of the world.

The Expedition was successful in its purpose of securing, dead and alive, a representative series of these antediluvian monsters. We brought home fourteen specimens, two living ones for the Bronx Zoo, and twelve dead animals for an exhibition group in the American Museum of Natural History.

Yet many interesting questions relative to *Varanus komodoensis* remain unanswered. In spite of a careful study of these lizards—or dragon lizards, as they are called, for they are the largest lizards in the world—we still have much to learn. We do not know, for example, what age they attain. Whether the two beasts that reached the zoo were ten years old or a hundred, we have not the

slightest idea. Moreover, it is a curious fact that Komodo is geologically recent. Thus, we have a very ancient animal living on a young island: that is, an island that has recently risen above the level of the sea. How did he get there? Whence did he come? Why is he restricted to Komodo and a few small neighboring islands? What conditions have enabled him to survive in this isolated district? The journey to a distant land often entails unsought adventures and strange experiences. Travel in the Far East is always thrilling, but when the Far East is at war, the excitement is redoubled. With this brief introduction, let us turn, therefore, to the adventures that even made the outward trip to Java unusually fascinating. ■

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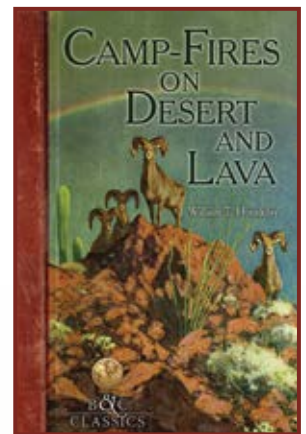
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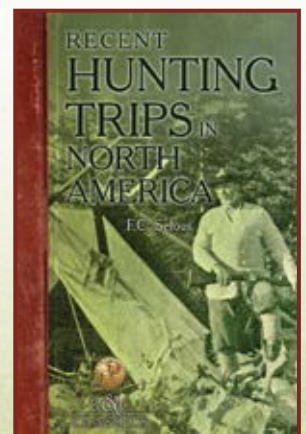
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