

Dodinga, 1858

BY PAUL MASON



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Next his things must be unloaded from the boat: butterfly nets, shotguns, specimen cases, the clutter of household objects he must haul everywhere. Back on the beach, Wallace sees the ruins of a Dutch fort above the bay, the stone walls long since toppled – by an earthquake, he thinks. Under the gaze of the distant volcano, tremors come often in these parts.

Wallace finishes the fetching and carrying, then rests in the shade of his new home. The air about the hut is heavy, the sunlight glaring, but a familiar chill grows in his bones. He shivers. Though birdsong calls him to the jungle, there will be no collecting today. New specimens will have to wait. He shuffles inside to collapse on the bed, limbs aching, annoyed – but he knows to let the illness run its course. When the fever takes hold, he can do little more than lie there and wait for it to pass.

Fever isn't the only thing that has kept him bedridden on his travels. Mosquitoes and sandflies attack his legs. Their angry bites become sores and then ulcers. In the heat, they sometimes grow so awful he cannot walk. More than once he has crawled on hands and knees. But these toils are worth it – for the butterflies alone. Each one is a treasure: the *Nymphalis calydonia*, pale blue and black, fluttering softly among the groves; the velvety darkness of the *Ornithoptera brookiana*, rare as a jewel, decorated with metallic green; the *Ornithoptera remus*, spotted with white, yellow, and fiery orange.

A rustling wakes him. Something is in the roof ... a large animal, crawling across the thatch. Wallace is sure of it. Dark, with splashes of yellow. A tortoise? On the ceiling? Then he sees bright eyes, a blunt head. Thick coils wrapped around a beam. A python!

Wallace calls out, "Here's a big snake." He shouts again. "A snake! A snake in the roof!"

A villager rushes in. He sees the python and staggers back to the door, begging Wallace to leave the room, too, but he doesn't have the strength. Outside, he hears confusion, a jumble of voices in consultation. At last, a brave villager appears with a noose attached to a bamboo pole. Wallace watches as his rescuer guides his stick towards the rafters, his movements almost imperceptible. Then all at once, he snares the head of the great snake. With a violent tug, he pulls the python cascading to the hard floor.

The stillness of the room is transformed. The snake thrashes, coils around a chair, and sends it crashing. It wraps itself around another beam, refusing to give quarter. Wallace can see the monster is big enough to consume a dog, a child. But the man holds on, heaving, heaving, until suddenly, he and the snake vanish.

Now Wallace understands. The fever is making him delirious. He has pulled the brave man and the python from his memory. It was never in this room at all but two years ago in Amboyna.

Other snakes rest in the shadows of his mind. Once, turning in for the night, Wallace had reached for what he'd thought was his handkerchief. His fingertips had found something cool and smooth that moved under his touch. He'd hurriedly pulled back. And there are often snakes the colour of dead leaves, gathered by mistake in his net; coils of bright green, hidden in the foliage, which Wallace does not see until he is right there. The snakes in the archipelago are abundant, yet life is a struggle. Why are some species more plentiful than others?

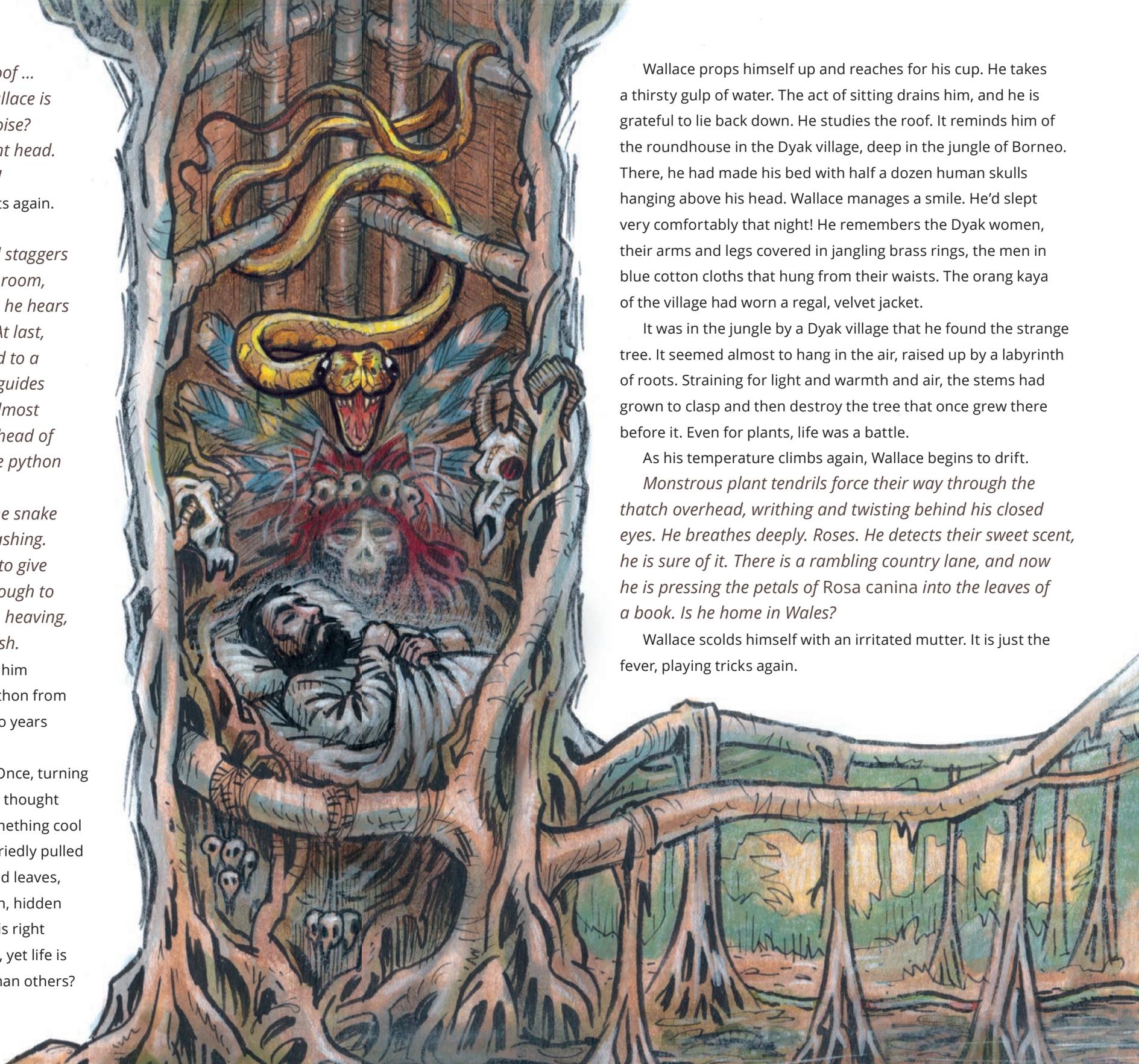
Wallace props himself up and reaches for his cup. He takes a thirsty gulp of water. The act of sitting drains him, and he is grateful to lie back down. He studies the roof. It reminds him of the roundhouse in the Dyak village, deep in the jungle of Borneo. There, he had made his bed with half a dozen human skulls hanging above his head. Wallace manages a smile. He'd slept very comfortably that night! He remembers the Dyak women, their arms and legs covered in jangling brass rings, the men in blue cotton cloths that hung from their waists. The orang kaya of the village had worn a regal, velvet jacket.

It was in the jungle by a Dyak village that he found the strange tree. It seemed almost to hang in the air, raised up by a labyrinth of roots. Straining for light and warmth and air, the stems had grown to clasp and then destroy the tree that once grew there before it. Even for plants, life was a battle.

As his temperature climbs again, Wallace begins to drift.

Monstrous plant tendrils force their way through the thatch overhead, writhing and twisting behind his closed eyes. He breathes deeply. Roses. He detects their sweet scent, he is sure of it. There is a rambling country lane, and now he is pressing the petals of Rosa canina into the leaves of a book. Is he home in Wales?

Wallace scolds himself with an irritated mutter. It is just the fever, playing tricks again.



Maybe he smells a *Therates labiata* out in the trees, flying from leaf to leaf? One can catch the beetle's scent long before spying its brilliant purple-black body. Wallace wonders if the rose smell of the beetle attracts the insects on which it feeds. Does it give the beetle an advantage? He takes another breath, decides there is no smell after all. Besides, that particular beetle is found on Ké, not on this island. So many different species in so many different places. *Why* is there so much variety?

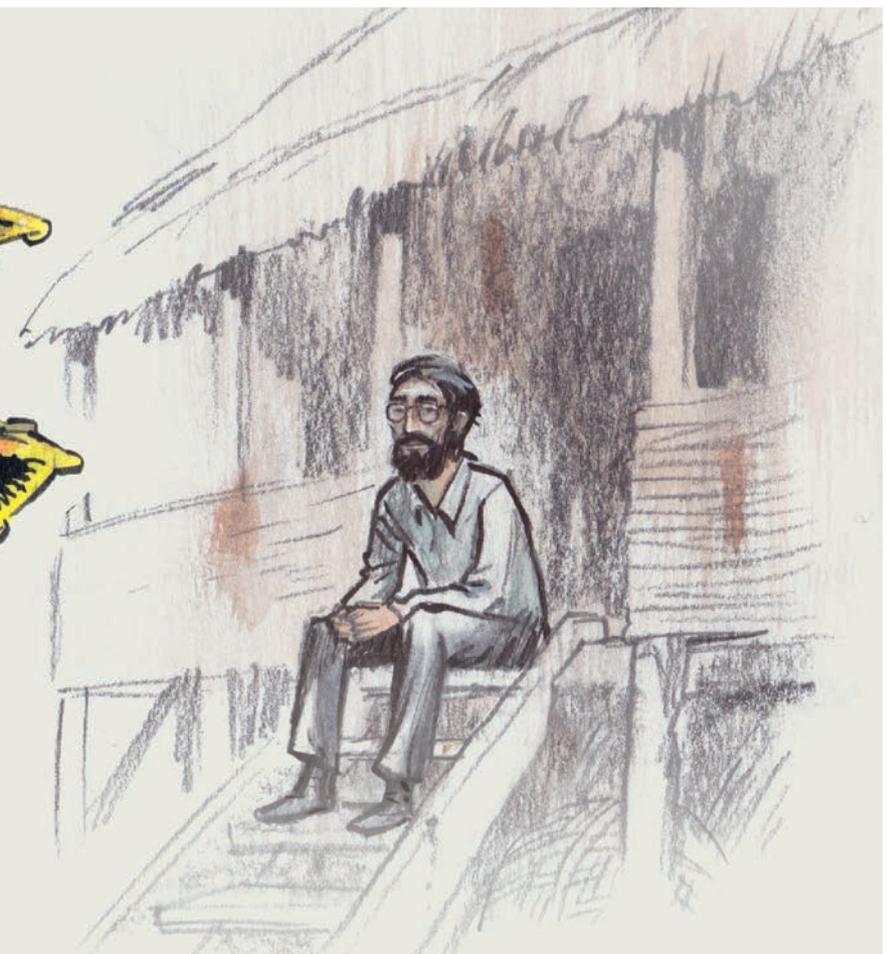
A man brings him a prize in steady hands: a large tree frog, deep shiny green. "It flew from a high tree!" the man tells him. Wallace thinks the man's imagination has got the better of him, but he spreads out the frog's toes and is astonished by what he finds.

Stretched out, the webbing on its feet is like sails, black with rays of yellow and wider than the frog itself. Wallace has never seen the like before. It is such an unexpected variation! How did it come to be? The man is right after all. This remarkable frog can fly! Just as webbed feet help others to swim, the webbing on this frog allows it to glide through the air from branch to branch.

A sudden thought strikes him, and Wallace pulls himself up. His notebook isn't there, and he is too weak to look for it. Surely gliding would give a frog that lived high in the trees an advantage – to escape the clutches of an enemy, the predatory claws of a bird? And the frogs with that advantage, those that can fly, would be more likely to survive than those that couldn't ...

Wallace is shaken from his thoughts. The bed trembles. The wood of the hut creaks and groans. Are these tremors another fantasy? He can hear the shouts of the village children as they run from their homes. Then the quaking stops almost as soon as it starts.

For now, he will remain in bed with just the fever and his thoughts. Wallace longs for the cool of the evening. If the illness loosens its grip, maybe he can work. He has so many ideas, so many questions. And now the answers start to tumble through his head like beetles.



Author's Note

Like the visions in a fever, this story is a delirious mix of fact and fiction. In 1858, the naturalist Alfred Wallace really did take to his sick bed, and it was while lying in a fit of fever that he finally cracked his theory of evolution by natural selection. But to be clear, the visions and memories experienced by my Wallace were not part of the real man's thoughts during his eureka moment.

However, the village of Dodinga and the reflections I record are based on actual events, as are the people, animals, and plants that Wallace saw during his travels. Some of the words and descriptions are also his own. In using them, I hope to provide just a small glimpse into Wallace's remarkable years in the Malay Archipelago.

illustrations by Gavin Mouldey

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by Paul Mason

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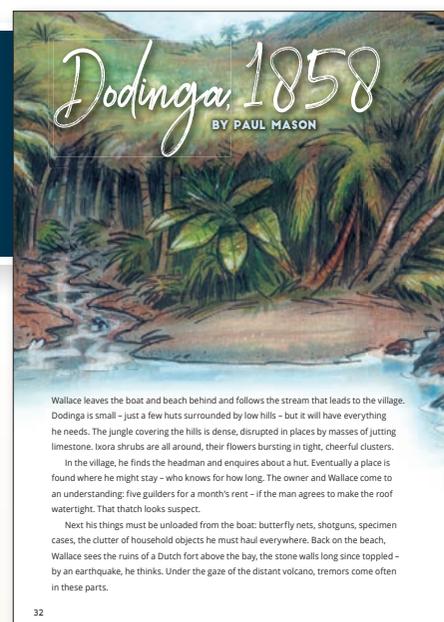
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