

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

## Monkey Cups



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Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project  
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published August 2009

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Corbel 11 pt

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"If a tree falls in a forest, and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?"

Peri turned back to the Doctor as he exited the TARDIS. If the Police Box-shaped timeship looked out of place in the verdant flora, the Doctor looked even more so. His pants were a bright yellow, his boots a deep crimson, and his waistcoat an unattractive mix of hues. His one concession to their latest destination was his change of jacket – spurred on by Peri's own beige safari suit; the Time Lord had swapped his garish, multicoloured frock coat for a khaki bush jacket. He brushed a bit of lint off his left epaulette, and closed the TARDIS doors.

"Huh?" she muttered.

"It's an interesting philosophical question," remarked the Doctor. "Can a sound be said to exist, without the presence of a witness?" He looked extremely pleased with himself. "There, that's stumped you, hasn't it? No pun intended."

"If you ask me," said Peri, raising her eyes at the Doctor's latest intellectual puzzle, "it doesn't matter whether there's anyone there. A sound's a sound, isn't it? I mean, you're a scientist, right?"

"Of course – although sometimes I prefer the term 'natural philosopher.'"

"So, it's just a question of physics, isn't it? The sound waves are still there, even if no one else is."

"Have you never heard of the observer effect, Peri?"

"No, I haven't," she sighed. "In any case, it seems to me that it's missing the point. There's always something in the forest to hear it."

"That is a good point," conceded the Doctor, which surprised Peri so much that she was lost for words. After a moment, as she glanced around, something caught her eye.

"A nepenthe!" she said, looking at an orange-red jug-shaped flower, its stem entwined around the bottom of a tree trunk. "That's amazing! So we really are in Borneo, then?"

"There's no need to sound so surprised," said the Doctor. "We are indeed in Borneo, as requested. British North Borneo, to be precise."

"I've never heard of it," she admitted.

"It'll be Sabah, part of Malaysia, by your time. We're still in the British colonial period here. It belongs to the British North Borneo Company."

"Great! So I'll actually get a chance to see a Rafflesia?" The botanist had been after a chance to study one of those legendary flowers for some time.

"I should think there's a good chance. In fact, it's probably only a matter of decades since old Raffles came here and discovered it himself."

"Actually," said Peri, not about to miss a chance to correct the Doctor, "it was discovered by Dr Joseph Arnold. Raffles just led the expedition."

"Oh, really?" said the Doctor, in his most unimpressed tone of voice. "I suppose that detail must have slipped my mind. Still, old Stamford did like to take credit wherever he could. I remember that one evening in Singapore –"

"Guess you're just not the expert on everything that you claimed, Doctor," interjected Peri, enjoying her little one-up.

"Well, where would the fun be in knowing everything?" said the Doctor, striding off deeper into the jungle. "Come on."

They walked through the thick undergrowth, smothered in a green darkness broken only by occasional rays of sunlight that managed to make it through the thick canopy. There was just enough light to see where to tread, and for a plentiful population of mosses, ferns and horsetails that drank all the sunlight they could catch on the forest floor. The heady, vegetable scent of the jungle was unmistakable to Peri; it was the smell of forests, gardens and arboreta, the places she loved from her time studying botany. She regretted letting her studies slip during her time with the Doctor. It seemed time travel just didn't leave you with enough time for such things. Now though, he'd brought her here,

just to let her find the flower. It showed just how kind the Doctor could be, underneath all the bluster and arrogance.

They came to a break in the canopy, the sunlight flooding in somewhat obscured from a distance by the profusion of plants competing for it. The world became suffused with a deep green tint, as if within an emerald. Negotiating their way through the flora, pushing creepers and stems out of the way, the Doctor and Peri found themselves in an open patch of ground, carpeted with mosses, at the foot of a vast tree. Peri gazed upwards into the spreading canopy, the light that broke through here allowing a better chance of seeing something new.

"An *Antidesma*, I think," she said. "Yellow-green leaves, sparse, breaking the canopy with its height." She stopped. "I almost sound like you when I talk about plants."

"I'd rather talk about that," said the Doctor, pointing into the thick throng of trunks to the left side. "Can't you see? There's something moving!"

There was indeed a good deal of movement in the bushes, and it seemed to be coming closer.

"Sounds like something pretty big," said Peri, a nervous hint to her voice, as twigs snapped and crunched under the feet of the approaching something.

"I say!" came a distinctive, nasal voice from within the scrub. "Is there someone there?" There were further sounds of crashing and cracking, as the owner of the voice fought his way through the undergrowth. "Just be a moment... dashed thicket... hold on, there..."

With a final, triumphant crack, the stranger slashed his way out of the bush, his machete cleaving the branches in two. A khaki-coloured figure emerged – a small man, slim, or rather, wiry, dressed in archaic bush gear. Of course, Peri realised, this was very probably state-of-the-art bush gear, right now. The little man stood for a moment, getting his breath back, and Peri thought that he looked exactly how one would imagine a Victorian explorer – right down to the pith helmet, thick grey moustache and the binoculars tied around his neck.

"Sorry about that, old chap," he said to the Doctor, who hadn't taken his eyes off the stranger. "Got a little caught up in there – path wasn't as clear as I thought. I say," he said, looking in Peri's direction, "a filly! Fancy seeing one of the fairer sex all this way out from Blighty!"

Peri had never been called a 'filly' before, and wasn't sure exactly what it meant, so decided not to take offence – for the time being. "Actually, I'm American," she said, to keep the dialogue open.

"Oh," said the stranger, a look of obvious distaste crossing his face, if only briefly. "And you, sir?" he asked the Doctor.

"I'm *not* American," he answered, firmly. "I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Miss Perpujilliam Brown. A pleasure to meet you, Mr...?"

"Crumb," said the man, his eyes once more trained, a little too intently, on Peri. "Professor Richard Crumb. Here on an exploratory mission from the Royal Society. You're not, ah, RS yourselves?"

"Strictly freelance, Professor Crumb," said the Doctor. "Miss Brown here is a botanist, while I am a doctor of many sciences."

"That so," said Crumb, seemingly more impressed with Peri than the Doctor. Somehow she didn't think that was down to her interest in botany. He'd barely taken his eyes off her since he'd emerged from the bushes.

"Is that object entirely necessary for a naturalist such as yourself, Professor?" said the Doctor, eyeing the rifle strapped to Crumb's back.

"Oh, this? 'S my pride and joy. Breech-loading, you know. Latest model. And you never know when such a thing may be necessary. Who knows, we might find ourselves up against a clouded leopard, and then you'll be jolly glad of it, I can tell you." Crumb reached to his belt, unbuttoned a pouch and removed a battered leather hipflask. He took a swig and proffered it towards Peri. "Drop of water, m'dear?"

"Uh, no thanks," she replied, not wanting to risk whatever Victorian germs the professor might be carrying (his breath didn't make the prospect of sharing any more attractive). "We're here to look for a Rafflesia," she volunteered, hoping to move the conversation along and hopefully get going.

"Ah, a cutting-edge botanist, I see," said Crumb, a genuine note of admiration in his voice, although his gaze still seemed firmly fixed at chest level. "Well, I had hoped to spot one myself. Perhaps we should move on? Light level's not bad right now, but it can drop very suddenly round these parts."

"I agree," said the Doctor, who wasn't used to meeting someone who could bluster more than him. "We should move on. I for one would rather keep moving, and get this underway before it gets even hotter." He pulled a spotted blue handkerchief from his back pocket, and wiped his forehead with it. His blond curls were drooping over his eyebrows.

The trio continued in their exploration of the forest. The going wasn't easy, the forest floor littered with matted leaves and festering mulch. The greenhouse smell of the jungle grew headier as they penetrated further into its mass. It was only a short while, however, before another, far more offensive smell began to reach them.

"Wait!" said the Doctor. "Can't you smell that?"

"Smell what, old boy?" asked Crumb, his tache twitching as he sniffed the air.

"Ugh, I can," said Peri, gagging a little on the stench.

"Noisome, noxious, like rotting flesh..." murmured the Doctor.

Realisation dawned on Peri. "Of course – a Rafflesia!" She took a brave sniff, and set off towards westwards. "The flowers produce the smell of rotting meat to attract flies for pollination. It's this way."

Clamping his handkerchief over his nose to protect his 'sensitive Gallifreyan olfactory system,' the Doctor followed, with Crumb close behind. In short order, Peri had stopped at the foot of thick, black-barked tree. The Doctor looked over her shoulder. A vast flower, a foot across, sat there, its reddish-pink petals glistening with moisture. Peri gingerly leant forward and brushed her fingers against a petal. It was coarse, almost leathery to the touch. She pulled back, away from the stench, turning back to the Doctor and Crumb and taking a deep breath.

"OK, I've found one! Now let's get out of here so I can breathe again!"

"Wait!" Professor Crumb pointed into the branches of the tree. Huddles in the shadows of the canopy, a hairy, reddish figure sat.

"I say!" said Crumb, "What a specimen!"

"That's an orang utan, isn't it Doctor?" asked Peri, no zoologist but not without a little knowledge.

"Indeed it is, Peri," said the Doctor, looking admirable at the creature. "Magnificent beings. Still going strong right now, before humans totally subsumed their environment in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries." He held his hands out, palms upward. "Come on, little lady. We won't hurt you. Come out and say hello."

"How can you tell it's a female, old boy?" asked Crumb.

"Oh, essentially the size, and the gentler morphology."

"And," suggested Peri, "although it's dark, I can see she's lacking something vital for a male."

"Indeed," harrumphed the Doctor and Crumb together, under their breaths.

Slowly, cautiously, the orang moved down the branches, gripping with her fingers and toes equally. She turned her purplish-grey face towards the three of them, then turned back to her adjust her footing. She gently reached down to a lower branch, plucking a nepenthe flower that had grown along the length of limb. Slipping back into the darkness, she pressed the flower to her thick lips, and up-ended it.

"Is she drinking?" asked Peri.

"Believe so," said Crumb. "They call them monkey cups, you know."

The orang dropped the empty flower, turning away and climbing upwards as it fell towards the forest floor. As Peri watched her, she noticed how graceful she was, in spite of her strange, squat shape.

Suddenly, a deafening crack rung out behind them. The orang utan fell from her branch, landing with a thud in the ground by their feet. Stepping back hurriedly, they both turned to Crumb, who was repositioning the rifle on his back. The Doctor stepped up to the man, standing just inches away from him, his head leant so he could stare into the shorter man's eye.

"Why did you just do that?" he bellowed in Crumb's face.

"I say, old boy..." spluttered the naturalist. He dithered, lost for words. Peri couldn't help noticing how threatening the Doctor could appear. He had a lot of height and weight to put behind himself. He was pretty hard to stand up to. Crumb seemed to gather a bit of courage. "As I said, old man, I'm here to collect specimens. I'm going to take that pongo back to Blighty. The Society should certainly be impressed."

"And that's reason enough for murder?" demanded the Doctor, not breaking eye contact with Crumb for a second.

"S'only an ape, Doctor. What's all the fuss?"

The Doctor looked ready to launch into one of his patented moral lambasting, but stopped suddenly, distracted. "What's that sound?" he said, his tone changed from furious to questioning.

"What sound?" said Peri, watching as Crumb stooped to pick up the body of the orang utan. "Heavy blighter," he muttered under his breath.

"Movement in the bushes," said the Doctor. "Someone's coming!"

There was little time to react to this, as all around them the undergrowth parted to reveal youthful warrior natives. Their delicate Asian features and relatively short stature didn't make them appear any less threatening, as they sported vicious looking wooden spears. Peri hoped that the red colouring on their woven clothes was only dye.

The natives pushed out of the bushes, their spear tips perilously close to the three explorers. Peri backed away from the fiercely sharp blade in front of her, standing as close as she could to the Doctor, his presence reassuring against the threat. Crumb hoisted the corpse of the orang over his shoulder, and stepped back to join them, as the warriors closed in.

The warrior who stood in front of Peri, presumably the leader of the party, began to speak, his voice low, saying a series of heavily accented foreign sounds.

"It's all right," said the Doctor. "We're not here to harm you. We didn't know that this was your territory."

"Doctor, I don't think they speak English!" said Peri.

"They don't have to," he replied. "Calm down. Let the TARDIS do its work."

In the fear of the moment, Peri had forgotten that the TARDIS translated alien languages for her. She expected to hear a language that she didn't understand, and so she did. Forcing herself to relax (as much as she could), she let the alien timeship translate for her.

"Ari ni penatai ruan?" said the leader. "Where are you from?" he repeated.

"That may take a little while to explain," conceded the Doctor. "Let's just say that we are from a distant country, and that we had no idea that this was your land. We apologise – we don't want any trouble."

"You understand these people?" said Crumb.

"I'd be happy to translate for you," said the Doctor, "provided you're not going to get us into any more trouble."

"Me? What trouble have I caused?"

"I rather suspect that it was your gunshot that drew their attention, don't you?"

"Well, I s'pose it might have been," mumbled Crumb.

"Who are they?" said Peri, as the warriors began talking among themselves, presumably deciding what to do with these strangers.

"Sea Dayaks, no doubt," said Crumb, with something of a sneer in his voice.

"I believe they prefer to be known as Iban," said the Doctor. "They've lived in Borneo for a long time, and at this stage of history aren't exactly used to seeing Caucasian faces."

"I don't expect they're used to seeing people shoot down the local wildlife, either," said Peri.

"Actually, they seem quite impressed by your handiwork," muttered the Doctor. "It's the sort of thing that would appeal to a bloodthirsty warrior."

"In that case, tell them that this is a gift for them," said Crumb. "I know how the tribal mind works."

"I sincerely doubt that, but it's worth a try." The Doctor proceeded to talk to the lead warrior. "I think you've got yourself a deal there. If you hand the body over, they say they won't hurt us. Although they still want us to go with them."

"Better than the alternative," said Peri. "Hand it over!"

Crumb struggled to hold out the heavy corpse to the leader, who gestured to his warriors to take the bounty. As it was passed over, Peri noticed a glint of silver on the orang's left wrist.

"Doctor!" she said, "It's wearing something! Like a bracelet, on its arm, look!"

"So she is," said the Doctor, intrigued. "I wonder where it got that from."

"Probably just some trinket it stole," suggested Crumb. "Like a magpie."

"Perhaps..." murmured the Doctor, but he couldn't speculate any further, as two warriors jabbed at him with their spears, the points coming dangerously close to piercing the fabric of his waistcoat.

"All right, all right," he said, "there's no need for that, we're coming."

The three of them walked ahead as the Iban warriors, trying not to trip over the gnarled undergrowth as they were marched onwards. Two warriors walked ahead of them, stealing glances back and all around, preventing them from running ahead away from their captors.

"Couldn't we take them, Doctor?" muttered Crumb under his breath. "There're what, six of them? Three of us, and we have the rifle, they don't seem to have cottoned on to what that is."

"As you say, there are six of them, and they are armed," responded the Doctor.

"And I really don't like the look of those spears," said Peri.

"I think it would be prudent to wait till we get to their village," said the Doctor, "where we can sort this out with whomever's in charge."

"I think the big guy who was threatening to take my eye out with that spear is in charge," said Peri.

"Oh, he'll just be the leader of this hunting party. No, there'll be an elder or chief back at their settlement. I'm sure he'll listen to us, and let us on our way."

They marched ahead for a good ten minutes, the going getting slightly easier as they went. The trees were thinning, the greenish light that suffused the forest lightening.

"I don't think we can be too far now," said the Doctor, with an air of confidence that Peri hoped wasn't misplaced.

As they continued in their trek, they became aware of a low rumbling sound, seemingly emanating from all around them. The noise grew louder, and the Iban stopped in their tracks. Crumb almost walked into the back of one of the warriors who was guarding the front.

"Doctor, what is it?" cried Peri, as the noise grew further.

"I'm not sure!" shouted the Doctor, over the now deafening clamour. "I think it's coming from –" The sound suddenly stopped. " – up there," the Doctor finished, at a more respectable volume.

As the entire group followed the Doctor's cue and looked upwards into the canopy, a final, eardrum-piercing crack of thunder rung out. The trees around them moved – uprooted and flung

sideways, creaking in protestation. Soil, leaves and humus was sprayed through the air, clearly visible in the now dazzling sunlight, shockingly bright without the diluting effect of the canopy.

The light shimmered, dimming once again as a vast structure descended from the sky. An iridescent circular machine, spoked like a bicycle wheel, turquoise blue lights radiating from cracks and partitions in the silvery surface, it hovered some distance above the distressed forest roof. The six Iban ran, screaming, their spears dropped on the ruptured ground in their hurry to escape.

"What in God's name...?" croaked Crumb, staring at the overwhelming sight above him.

"It's just a spaceship, Professor," remarked Peri, affecting an air of nonchalance to cover her own concern – although she actually felt considerably more comfortable confronted with an alien spacecraft than with a rabble of tribal warriors. "Any idea who it is, Doctor?"

"None at all, I'm afraid," he replied. "Certainly advanced, but I can't say I recognise the design or technology."

There was a flash of light – a bolt of electric blue from the belly of the craft – and, with a pop of displaced air, there in front of the three of them stood the occupant of the ship. Short, squat, with bluish skin and shaggy red hair, he stood naked save for a thin silver bracelet, and a grey holster and belt around his waist. With one hand he held a sleek silver pistol; with the other, he scratched his flabby left breast.

"It's an orang utan," said Peri, after a moment of baffled silence.

"Hello," said the Doctor. "I imagine you're looking for your crewmate. Honed in on her comms bracelet, no doubt."

"Indeed," said the orang, in what sounded like a cultured, European voice. He waddled over to the body of his comrade, dropped like a sack of rubbish on the forest floor when the warriors fled. "Who did this?" he demanded.

The Doctor took a small step back, his eyes fixed on Crumb, now a little to the front of the group. The naturalist spluttered a little at the creature standing in front of him.

"I, uh, well, I mean to say..."

The orang ran his rough fingers over the bracelet on his fallen comrade's arm, and stood back. The body vanished with the same blue flash that had brought the new arrival to the forest.

"She was here as a cultural investigator," said the orang. "She volunteered to make the first landing on this planet. We detected advanced life forms in this region of the planet – we did not realise that they were still living at a nomadic, subsistence level. With so few here, it seems unlikely that they shall have a chance to advance further." He looked up at the group, focussing intently on the petrified Crumb. "Yet we detect hundreds of millions of your kind on this world. It is perplexing. On my world, the naked ground apes are simple, backward creatures, living in small, squabbling packs. Yet here, you cover the globe."

Crumb, stuttering, spoke. "We – we are the superior life here," he said.

"Yet you murder an innocent explorer, without provocation." The anger in the orang's voice was unmistakable. "I see that, in spite of your apparent success on this planet, you ground apes remain the vicious predators you are on my world."

"I'm sorry," implored Crumb, "but I didn't know! We have a civilisation here – your kind do not!"

"In that case," said the orang, "I shall deal with you as I would a murderer on my own planet. You shall be executed." He held his gun up, pointed square at Crumb.

"No, you can't!" cried Peri, not wanting to see even someone like Crumb killed in front of her.

"Wait!" said the Doctor. "I am not of this world – scan me if you wish to confirm this. I may appear like these 'naked ground apes,' as you call them, but I am an altogether different form of being. In my time, I have encountered thousands of intelligent species, of all forms and varieties – yet I keep returning to this planet. And why? Because these people, seemingly savage though they are, are capable of great good and compassion. The course of evolution may have run differently on your world,

but here, these creatures are just beginning their struggle to form a true society. In time, they shall recognise the sanctity of all life on this planet. This man acted no better or worse than he knew how. Accept his apology, and allow him to learn from his mistake.”

“You speak eloquently,” said the orang. “Very well – I shall stay the execution. However, my crew shall demand a return for this injustice.” He lowered his pistol, stroking his broad face with his free hand. “We came here to find new life. Perhaps the murderer could be our specimen.”

“I say, I don’t think that’s on – ” interjected Crumb.

“What would happen to him?” asked the Doctor.

“Doctor – you can’t!” said Peri. He couldn’t let this alien take Crumb away, to experience who knew what!

“He would be returned to the homeworld,” said the alien, “to be kept in our national zoo. He would be studied in comfort. He would not be harmed.”

“And your crew would accept this as just?” said the Doctor.

“I believe so,” said the orang.

“I’m sorry Professor,” said the Doctor, “but I think it’s zoo or death.”

“But Doctor, you can’t send me with that thing!”

“I’d try to be polite to your new owner, Professor. Oh, and I don’t think you’ll be needing this.” The Doctor unbuckled the strap that held the rifle to Crumb’s back, removing the firearm.

“Doctor, I – ” Crumb couldn’t finish his objection, as he and the orang vanished with a final blazing bolt of blue.

Standing in the eerie quiet of the jungle, Peri rounded on the Doctor.

“I can’t believe you just let that happen!” she said.

“Oh, I think it might do him some good, Peri. Nice advanced society, should put things in perspective. Think of all the scientific papers he’ll be in! He’ll wow whatever societies of science they have there. And he’ll always have plenty to eat!”

The Doctor turned, beginning to retrace his steps.

“Now, let’s go back to the TARDIS. We might find some more Rafflesia for you.” He paused. “Just be careful of the wildlife, won’t you?”

## About The Author

Daniel Tessier is just starting out with TDWP - this is his first contribution to the range. His next story shall be "*City of the Dragon*" in the upcoming Season 37. Some of his other Doctor Who fiction can be found on *The History of the Doctor* website at [www.doctorwhoreviews.co.uk](http://www.doctorwhoreviews.co.uk), along with his regular review articles. He is also the author of "*Auld Lang Syne* , a story featured in the Shelf Life anthology, a work to raise funds for the British Heart Foundation in memory of author Craig Hinton.



# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



The Doctor and Peri take a trip to nineteenth century Borneo in search of the fabled Rafflesia flower - a seemingly harmless trip that takes a turn for the worse when they encounter British explorer Professor Crumb and a group of deadly Iban warriors.

However, the true threat is something very different - something that isn't human. The travellers discover that evolution doesn't always run quite the same course across the Universe...

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project

