

A Malayan Prison

By Sir Hugh Clifford

I have said that the Malays, taken in bulk, have no bowels. The story I am about to tell illustrates the truth of this assertion rather forcibly. The particular incident related happened on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula in the year of grace 1895. The native gaol, of which mention is made, was visited by me a month or two before I wrote the account of it; and it and its numerous counterparts continued to exist in some of the independent Malay States on the east coast, until the British eventually took charge of their affairs in 1910. It is useful to bear facts such as these in mind lest, in our honest solicitude for the rights and liberties of mankind, we should subscribe too enthusiastically to the dictum of the late Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman that good government can never be a satisfactory substitute for self-government. From this opinion thousands of my friends in Malaya would passionately dissent, and as to whether the craven wretches who thus submit to alien rule can plead any justification for their heresy, let the readers of this story judge. For the rest, I must frankly admit that it is not a pretty tale, and I would counsel persons who prefer to ignore the existence of uncomfortable things to give it a wide berth.

In one of the States on the east coast of the Peninsula there lived, some twenty years ago, a Râja who, though he was not the ruler of the country, was a man of exalted position and stood possessed of considerable power. This man owned much land, many cattle, several wives, a host of retainers, and a number of slave-debtors. Also his reputation for kindness of heart stood high among the people. This last fact is worth remembering, having regard to what I am about to relate. Native public opinion in no wise reprobated him for his share in the matter; which shows that when a Malay of standing bore the character of a brute or a bully he had earned it by the commission of atrocities for which simple people, like you and me, do not even know the technical names.

Upon a certain day a *kris* was stolen from this Râja, and suspicion fastened upon one of his slave-debtors, a man named Talib. As it happened, the fellow was innocent of the theft; but his protestations were not believed, and his master forthwith consigned him to the *pěn-jâra*, or local gaol. The tedious formality of a trial played no part in Malayan judicial proceedings, and nothing in the nature of the sifting of evidence was regarded as necessary. The stolen dagger was the property of a prince. The suspect was a man of no account. That was enough; and Talib went to gaol accordingly, the Râja issuing an order—a sort of *lettre de cachet*—for his admission.

To European ears this does not sound very terrible. Miscarriages of justice are not unknown, even in civilized lands; and in semi-barbarous countries such things are, of course, to be looked upon as being all in the day's march. Unfortunately, however, a *pěn-jâra* in independent Malaya only resembles the prisons with which white men are acquainted in the fact that both are places designed for the accommodation of criminals. Some ugly things are to be read in the pages of "It Is Never too Late to Mend," but the prison described by Charles Read might rank for comfort with a modern work-house beside the gaol in which Talib was confined.

It was situated in one of the most crowded portions of the native town. It consisted of two rows of cages, placed back to back, each one measuring some six feet in length, two feet in width, and five feet in height. These cages were formed of heavy slabs of wood, set close together, with spaces of about two inches in every ten for the admission of light and air. The floors, which were also made of wooden bars, were raised about six inches from the ground; and the cages, which were twelve in number, were surrounded at a distance of about two feet by a solid wall made of very thick planks of hard wood, mortised firmly together. No sanitary appliances of any kind were provided; and though a prisoner, once placed in a cell, was not allowed to come out of it again for a moment until the necessary money-payment had been made, or until death brought him merciful release, the precincts were never cleaned out, nor were any steps taken to prevent the condition of the captives from being such as would disgrace that of a wild beast in a small travelling menagerie. The space before the floor and the ground, and the interval which separated the cells from the wooden walls set so close about them, was one seething, writhing mass of putrefaction. Here in the tropics, under a brazen sun, all unclean things turn to putrid, filthy life within the hour; and in a Malayan *pěň-jára*, wither no breath of wind could penetrate, the atmosphere was heavy with the fumes bred of the rottenness of years, and the reeking pungency of offal that was new.

This, then, was the place of confinement to which Talib was condemned; nor did his agonies end here, for the gnawing pangs of hunger were added to his other sufferings. He was handed over to the gentle care of the *pěr-tanda*, or executioner—an official who, in the independent Malay States, united the kindly office of life-taker and official torturer with the hardly more humane post of gaoler. This man, like most of his fellows, had been chosen in the beginning on account of his great physical strength and an indifference to the sight of pain which was remarkable even among an insensible people; and the calling which he had pursued for years had endowed the natural brutality of his character with an abnormal ferocity. He was, moreover, an official of the ancient East—a class of worthies who require more supervision to restrain them from pilfering than do even the Chinese coolies in a gold mine, where the precious metal winks at you in the flickering candlelight. Needless to say, the higher state officials were not so forgetful of their dignity, or so lost to a sense of propriety, as to pry into the doings of a mere executioner; so the *pěr-tanda* enjoyed to the full the advantages of a free hand. During the months of the year when the mouth of the river was accessible to native craft he had the right to collect dues of rice and fish from all vessels and fishing-boats using the harbour; but during the “close season,” when the northeast monsoon was raging, no allowance of any kind was made to him for the board of the prisoners in his charge. In these circumstances, since a *pěr-tanda* is not a philanthropical institution, it was only natural that he should pervert to his own use, and sell to all corners, the collections which he made during the open season, so that his household might not be without a sufficiency of rice and raiment during the dreary six months that the hatches were down for the monsoon. Death from slow and lingering starvation was, therefore, a by no means uncommon incident in the *pěň-jára*; and one of Talib’s earliest experiences was to witness the last agonies of a fellow-captive in an adjoining cell, who came from upcountry, knew no one in the capital, and so had died painfully of gradual inanition. Talib himself was a trifle more fortunate, for food was daily brought to him by a girl who had been his sweetheart before his trouble fell upon him; and though his hunger-pangs could not be wholly allayed by such

slender doles as she contrived to save for him from her own ration of rice and fish, he, for the time, was not exposed to actual danger of death from want. But always he was tortured by fear. He knew that the horror of his surroundings was growing upon the girl; that each visit demanded of her a new and a stronger effort, that other men were wooing her; and that sooner or later she would turn to them, and thrust from her mind the memory of the loathsome creature into which he knew himself to be rapidly degenerating. In that hour he would be robbed alike of his love and of his daily food.

The prisoner in the cage on Talib's left was little more than a skeleton when the latter first entered the gaol. He lay huddled up in a corner, with his hands pressed against his sunken stomach and the sharp angles of his bones peeping through his bed-sores—motionless, miserable, and utterly degraded, but stirred to a sort of frenzy, now and again, by the sight or smell of cooked food. Talib saved a small portion of his own insufficient meal for this man, for he was new to the prison, and had not yet acquired the brutal selfishness and indifference that characterized the other inmates; but the poor wretch was already too far gone for any such tardy aid to avail to save him. Though he snatched avidly at the stuff which Talib passed, in grudging handfuls, through the bars of his cell, it was with difficulty that he could swallow a grain of it. When, too, a little had at last been forced down his shrunken gullet his enfeebled stomach rejected it, and violent spasms and vomitings ensued, which seemed to rend his stricken frame much as a fierce gust of wind rips through the palm-leaf sail of a native fishing-smack. After a day or two he became wildly delirious, and Talib then witnessed a terrible sight. A raving maniac in a well-ordered asylum, where padded walls and careful tendance do much to save the afflicted body from the blind fury of the disordered brain, is an appalling thing to see; but in the vile cage in which this wretched creature was confined there was nothing to restrain the violence he was practising upon himself. With the strength of madness he dashed his head and body relentlessly against the unyielding walls of his cell. He fell back crushed and bleeding, foaming at the mouth with a bloody froth, and making beast noises in his throat. The *pěr-tanda*, attracted by the noise, rested his back against the surrounding wall and rocked to and fro, convulsed with laughter, each brutal jest that he uttered being greeted with obsequious titters from the caged animals around him.

But the madman was oblivious of him and of all things. Once more, as the frenzy took him, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat, he flung himself at the bars, and after another fearful paroxysm, fell back inert upon the floor. For hours he lay there exhausted, but wildly restless; too spent to struggle, and too demented and tortured to be still. He moaned, he groaned, he raved and cursed with vile and filthy words, bit and snapped like a dog in its madness, strove to gnaw the loathsome rags which had long ceased to cover his nakedness, and then again was still, save for the incessant rolling of his head, and the wilder motion of his eyes, which blazed with fever. The *pěr-tanda*, wearied by so tame an exhibition, withdrew to his house; and a little before the dawn, when the chill breeze, which comes up at that hour out of the China Sea, was making itself felt even in the fetid atmosphere of the place, his reason, for a space, returned to him, and he spoke to Talib in a thin, faraway voice, his words punctuated by many gasps and sighs and pauses.

"Little brother," he whispered, "do you also watch? For not long now shall your elder brother endure these pains. The order is come. Have you any water? I thirst sore. No matter, it is the fate to which I was born. The hair of the heads of all men alike is black, but the lot of each of us is peculiar to himself. . . . Listen. I stole five dollars from a chief.

. . . I did it because my wife was very fair, and she abused me, saying that I gave her neither ornaments nor raiment. . . . Brother, I was detected, and the chief consigned me to the *pěn-jâra*. . . . I knew not then that it was my wife, and none other, who gave the knowledge of my theft to the chief, he in whose household I had been born and bred. . . . He desired her, and she loved him; and now he has taken her to wife, I being as one already dead, and the woman being legally divorced from me. They said that they would set me free if I would divorce her, and I let fall the *talak* in the presence of witnesses, thinking thereby to escape from this place. But . . . ah, brother, I thirst. Have you no water? . . . While the woman was yet bound to me, she sent me food by one of the chief's slaves, and it was from him that I learned the plot that had undone me. . . . I thirst, I thirst. Have you no water, little brother? . . . After I had divorced her the rice did not come any more. . . . I want water. My mouth is hard and rough as the skin of a skate, and it is dry as the fish that has been smoked above the fire. Have you no water? . . . Ya Allah! Maimûnah, heart of my heart, fruit of my eyes! Water, I pray you. Water. Water. O mother! O mother! O mother of mine! Water, mother! . . . I die . . . I die . . . mother . . .”

His voice trailed away into inarticulate moanings, and in an hour he was dead.

Next day his body was carried out for burial, and for a time his cage remained untenanted.

On Talib's right a man was confined who was so haggard, meagre, filthy, diseased, and brutal in his habits that it was difficult to believe that he was altogether human. His hair fell in long, tangled, matted, vermin-infested shocks, almost to his waist. His eyes—two smouldering pits of flame—were sunken deep into his yellow parchment-like face. His cheekbones were so prominent that the sharp edges seemed about to cut their way through the skin, and his brows jutted forward like the bosses on the forehead of a fighting ram. The dirt of ages festered in the innumerable wrinkles and creases of his body; and he hardly moved, save to scratch himself fiercely, much as a monkey tears at his flea-infested hide. A small ration of rice and fish was brought to him daily by an old and withered hag—his wife of former years—who made a meagre living for him and for herself by hawking sweet-stuffs from door to door. She came to him twice daily, and he flung himself ravenously upon the food with guttural noises of satisfaction, devouring it in bestial fashion, while she cooed at him through the bars, with many endearing epithets, such as Malay women use to little children. Not even his revolting degradation had been able to kill her love, though its wretched object had long ago ceased to understand it or to recognize her, save as the giver of the food which satisfied the last appetite which misery had left to him. He had been ten years in these cages, and had passed through the entire range of feeling of which a Malay captive in a native gaol is capable—from acute misery to despair, from despair, by slow degrees, to stupid indifference and dementia, until at the long last he had attained to the condition which Malays call *kâleh*. This means a complete insensibility, a mental and physical anæsthesia so absolute that it reduces a sentient human being to the level of an inanimate object, while leaving to him many of the disgusting qualities of an ape.

Talib himself had as yet reached only the first stage of his suffering, and the insistent craving for one breath of fresh air grew and grew and gathered strength, until it became an overmastering longing that day and night cried out to be satisfied. His memories tortured him—memories of the chill morning hour at which he had been wont to step forth from his house into the dusk of the dawning, and to make his way to the river which

poured its cool flood seaward beneath the curtain of white mist; of the long slanting sunrays beginning to dry the dew, as he walked through the wet grass to the rice-fields behind the village; of the return home, as the heat became intense, with the pale and cloudless sky overhead, and the vivid green of the vegetation covering all the earth; of the long, lazy hours spent in the cool interior of the thatched house; of the waning of the day, as the buffaloes began to troop down to water; of the falling of the night, with its smell of wood-smoke and the cooking meal; of the deep sleep that used to come to the sound of the humming chorus from the insect world without. For these things meant for him liberty—the freshness and cleanliness of God's good earth—all the common happenings which had made life beautiful, but which till now he had never thought about or prized. At last he could no longer restrain his passionate desire to escape, if only for a few hours, from the horrors of the *pěň-jâra*, and, reckless of consequences, he told the *pěr-tanda* that if he could be taken to a place a day's journey up the river, he could set his hand upon the missing *kris* which, he said, he had hidden there. He was perfectly aware that the dagger was not, and never had been, buried at that spot, for he knew as little concerning its whereabouts as the *pěr-tanda* himself. He could foresee that his failure would be followed by worse punishment. But he heeded not. He would breathe the fresh, untainted air once more, would see once again the sky arching above him, would hear the murmur of running water, the sighing of the wind through the fruit trees and its stir among the fronds—would be quit for a space of the horrors and the putrefaction of his surroundings, and would see, smell, hear, and enjoy all the sights, scents, sounds, and familiar things for which he hungered with so sick a longing.

Accordingly, the chief having been communicated with, he was one day taken upriver to the place he had named; but the reek of the cage clung to him, and the fresh air was to him made foul by it. The search was fruitless, of course; he was beaten by the boatmen, who had had their trouble for nothing; and, sore and bleeding, he was placed once more in his cage, with the added pain of heavy chains to complete his sufferings. An iron collar was riveted about his neck, and attached by ponderous links to chains passed about his waist and to rings around his ankles. The fetters galled him, preventing him from lying at ease in any attitude, and they speedily doubled the number of his bed-sores. The noisy, bloated flies buzzed around him now in ever-increasing numbers, feasting horribly upon his rottenness, as he sat all day sunken in stupid, wide-eyed despair.

A Chinese lunatic had been placed in the vacant cage on his left—a poor mindless wretch who cried out to all who visited the prison that he had become a Muhammadan, vainly hoping thereby to meet with some small measure of pity from the worshippers of Allah, the merciful and compassionate God. The bestial habits of this man, whose mental disease was intensified by his misery and by the disgusting character of his environment, imported a new horror into Talib's life; but he himself was fast sinking into the stolid, animal existence of his right-hand neighbour. I saw him, precisely as I have described him, and learned his story, in April, 1895, and since the state in which he was awaiting his lingering death was at that time independent, I was, of course, powerless to effect his deliverance. Of his end I know nothing, but his future held no prospect of release, and the best that one could hope for him was an early death, or failing that, a speedy arrival at the happy condition which is locally called *kâleh*. To add to the horror of it all, there were two women and one small child confined in the cages at the time of my visit, but upon their sufferings I have refrained from dwelling.

Readers of this true tale will perhaps realize how it comes to pass that some of us men of the outskirts—who have *seen* things, not merely *heard of them*—are apt to become rather strong “imperialists,” and to find it at times difficult to endure with patience those ardent defenders of the Rights of Man, who bleat their comfortable aphorisms in the British House of Commons, and cry shame upon our “hungry acquisitiveness.”