

He of the Hairy Face

By Sir Hugh Clifford

If you put your finger on the map of the Malay Peninsula, an inch or two from its exact centre, you will find a river in Pahang territory which has its rise in the watershed that divides that state from its northern neighbours Kēlantān and Trēnggānu. It is called the Tēmbēling, and after its junction with the Jēlai, at a point some two hundred miles from the sea, the combined rivers are named the Pahang. The Tēmbēling is chiefly remarkable for the number and magnitude of its rapids, for the richness of its gutta-bearing trees, and as being the scene of some of the most notable exploits of the legendary magician Sang Kēlēmbai, whose last days on earth are supposed to have been spent in this valley. The inhabitants of the district were, in my time, a ruffianly lot of jungle-dwelling Malays, preyed upon by a ruling family of *Wans*—a semi-royal set of nobles, who did their best to live up to the traditions of their class. Chiefs and people alike were rather specially interesting because—though of this they had no inkling—they represented the descendants of one of the earliest waves of Malay invaders of the Peninsula—folk who came, not from Sumatra, as did the ancestors of the bulk of the natives of British Malaya, but from the islands of the Archipelago further south. In many localities the offspring of the earlier invaders have resisted conversion to Muhammadanism, and are regarded by the Malays of to-day as part of the aboriginal pagan population of the Peninsula; but the people of the Tēmbēling valley have embraced the faith of Islam, and their origin is not suspected by themselves or their neighbours. It is clearly to be traced, however, in certain peculiar customs that have been preserved among them, and by the use of a few local words, not generally understood of the people of the Peninsula, but common enough in northern Borneo and other parts of the Archipelago.

The Tēmbēling Valley is bisected by a set of rapids, which render navigation excessively difficult for a distance of some five miles, and above which large boats cannot be taken. Below this obstruction, the natives are chiefly noted for the quaint pottery which they produce from the clay that abounds there, and the rude shapes and the ruder tracery of their vessels have probably suffered no change since the days when the men who dealt with the middle men who trafficked with Solomon's emissaries, sought gold and peafowl and monkeys in the fastnesses of the Malay Peninsula—as everybody knows. Above the rapids the natives, from time immemorial, have planted enough *gambir* to supply the wants of the entire betel-chewing population of Pahang; and as the sale of this commodity brought in a steady income, they were for the most part too indolent to plant their own rice. Rice being the staple of all Malays, without which they cannot live, the grain used to be sold to them by downcountry Malays at an exorbitant price, and the profits on the *gambir* crop was thus skilfully diverted into the pouches of wiser men.

A short, distance upstream from the junction of the Tēmbēling and the Jēlai, and midway between that point and the big rapids, there is a straggling village called Ranggul, the houses of which, built of wattled bamboos and thatched with palm leaves, stand on piles upon the river bank, amid groves of cocoanut and areca-nut palms, fruit trees and clumps of smooth-leaved banana plants. The houses are not set very close

together, but a man calling can make himself heard with ease from one to another; and thus the cocoanut palms thrive, for they, the Malays aver, grow not with pleasure beyond the range of the human voice.

The people of Ranggul are no more indolent than other upcountry Malays. They plant a little rice in the swamp behind the village, when the season comes round. They work a little jungle-produce-rubber, rattans, *dâmar-pitch*, and the like—when the pinch of poverty drives them to it. The river is, of course, their principal highway, and they never walk if a boat will take them to their destination. For the rest, they take life very easily. If you chance to visit Ranggul during any of the hot hours of the day, you will find most of its male inhabitants lying about in their dark, cool houses, or seated in their doorways. They occupy themselves with such gentle tasks as whittling a stick or hacking aimlessly at the already deeply scored threshold-block with their heavy wood-knives. Sitting thus, they croak snatches of song, with some old-world refrain to it, breaking off, from time to time, to throw a remark over their shoulders to the women~ folk, who share the dim interiors of the huts with the cats, the babies, and the cooking-pots, or to the little virgin daughter,, carefully secreted on the shelf overhead amid a miscellaneous collection of dusty rubbish, the disused lumber of years. Here the maiden is securely hidden from the sight of the passing neighbour, who stops to gossip with the master of the house, and sits for a space, propped upon the stairladder, lazily masticating a quid of betel nut. Nature has been very lavish to the Malay, and has provided him with a soil that produces a maximum of food in return for a minimum of grudging labour; but, rightly viewed, he has suffered at her hands an eternal defeat. In the tropics, no less than in the arctic regions, Nature has proved too strong a competitor for mankind. In the latter she has forced men to hibernate, paralyzing their energies for more than half the year; in the former, she has rushed in to obliterate the works of human beings with so appalling a rapidity, if for a moment their efforts to withstand her have been relaxed, that here, too, they have abandoned the unequal contest. In the far north and in the tropics alike, it is men drawn from temperate climates, where they have learned to bend Nature in her weaker phases to their will, who have come to renew the struggle with weapons which they have wrested from the enemy in the course of the age-long conflict. But in neither instance can the newcomers look for active assistance from the people of the lands they have invaded. The cool, moist fruit groves of Malaya woo men to the lazy enjoyment of their ease during the parching hours of midday, and the native, who long ago has retired from the fight with Nature, and now is quite content to subsist upon her bounty, has caught the spirit of his surroundings, and is very much what environment and circumstances have combined to make him. Those of us who cry shame upon the peoples of the tropics for their inertia would do well to ponder these things, and should realize that energy is to the natives of the heat-belt at once a disturbing and a disgusting quality. It is disturbing because it runs counter to the order of Nature which these people have accepted. It is disgusting because it is opposed to every tenet of their philosophy.

Some five and fifty years ago, when Che' Wan Ahmad—who subsequently was better known as Sultan Ahmad Maatham Shah K. C. M. G.—was collecting his forces in Dungun, preparatory to making his last and successful descent into the Těmběling Valley, whence to overrun and conquer Pahang, the night was closing in at Ranggul. A large house stood at that time in a somewhat isolated position, within a thickly planted

compound, at one extremity of the village. In this house seven men and two women were at work on the evening meal. The men sat in the centre of the floor on a white mat made of the plaited leaves of the *meng-kûang* palm, with a plate piled with rice before each of them, and a brass tray, supporting numerous small china bowls of curry, placed where all could reach it. They sat cross-legged, with bowed backs, resting their weight upon their left arms, the hands of which lay flat on the floor, with the wrists so turned that the fingers pointed inward. They messed the rice with their right hands, mixing the curry well into it, and expressing the air between grain and grain, ere they carried each large ball of it swiftly to their mouths, and propelled it into them with their thumbs along the surfaces of their hollowed and closely joined fingers. If rice is your staple, it is almost a necessity that you should eat it in this fashion, for when a spoon is used it is aerated, windy stuff of which it is impossible to consume a sufficient quantity. As for the cleanliness of the thing, a Malay once remarked to me that he could be sure that his fingers had not been inside the mouths of other folk, but had no such feeling of certainty with regard to the spoons of Europeans.

The women sat demurely in a half-kneeling position, with their feet tucked away under them, ministering to the wants of the men. They uttered no word, save an occasional exclamation when they drove away a lean cat that crept too near to the food, and the men also held their peace. Malays regard meals as a serious business which is best transacted in silence. From without there came the hum of insects, the chirping of crickets in the fruit trees, and the deep, monotonous note of the bullfrogs in the rice-swamps.

When the men had finished their meal, the women carried the dishes to a corner near the fireplace, and there set to on such of the viands as their lords had not consumed. If you had looked carefully, however, you would have seen that the cooking-pots, over which the women presided, still held a secret store reserved for their own use, and that the quality of the food in this *cache* was by no means inferior to that of the portion which had been allotted to the men. In a land where women wait upon themselves, labour for others, and have none to attend to their wants or to forestall their wishes, they generally develop a sound working notion of how to look after themselves; and since they have never known a state of society, such as our own, in which women occupy a special and privileged position, it does not occur to them that they are the victims of male oppression.

Each of the men had meanwhile folded a lime-smeared leaf of the sink-vine into a neat, oblong packet, within which was enclosed parings of the betel nut and a fragment or two of prepared *gambir*, taking the ingredients of their quids from the little brass boxes in the clumsy wooden box that lay before them on the mat. Next they had rolled a pinch of Javanese tobacco—potent stuff which grips you by the throat as though you were a personal enemy—in a dried shoot of the *nîpah-palm*, had lighted these improvised cigarettes at the damar-torch which provided the only light, and at last had broken the silence which so long had held them.

The talk flitted lightly over many subjects, all of a concrete character; for talk among natives plays for the most part around facts, rarely around ideas, and the peace of soul induced by repletion is not stimulating to the mind. Che' Sëman, the owner of the house, and his two sons, Awang and Ngah, discussed the prospects of the crops then growing in the fields behind the village. Their cousin, Abdullah, who chanced to be passing the night in his relatives' house, told of a fall which his wife's step-mother's brother had come by when climbing a cocoanut tree. Mat, his *biras* (for they had married two sisters, which

established a definite relationship between them according to Malay ideas), added a few more or less repulsive details to Abdullah's description of the corpse after the accident. These were well received, and attracted the attention of the two remaining men, Pôtek and Kassim, who had been discussing the price of rice and the varying chances of *getah*--hunting; whereupon the talk became general. Pôtek and Kassim had recently come across the mountains from Dungun, in Trěnggânu, where the claimant to the sultanate of Pahang was at that time collecting the force, which later invaded and conquered the country. They told all that they had seen and heard, multiplying their figures with the daring recklessness common to a people who rarely regard arithmetic as one of the exact sciences; but even this absorbing topic could not hold the attention of their audience for long. Before Pôtek and Kassim had well finished the enumeration of the parts of heavy artillery, the hundreds of elephants and the thousands of the followers, with which they credited the adventurous but slender bands of ragamuffins who followed the fortunes of Che' Wan Ahmad, the master of the house broke into their talk with words on a subject which just then had a more immediate interest than any other for the people of the Těmběling Valley. Thus the conversation slipped back into the rut in which the talk of the countryside had run, with only casual interruptions, for many weeks.

"He of the Hairy Face¹ is with us once more, Che' Sěman suddenly announced; and when his words had caused a dead silence to fall upon his hearers, and had even stilled the chatter of the women and children near the fireplace, he continued:

"At the hour when the cicada becomes noisy, I met Imam Sidik of Gemuroh, and bade him stay to eat rice, but he would not, saying that He of the Hairy Face had made his kill at Lâbu yesternight, and that it was expedient for all men to be within their houses before the darkness fell. And so saying, he paddled his boat down stream, using the "dove" stroke,² Imam Sidik is a wise man, and his talk is true. He of the Hairy Face spares neither priest nor prince. The girl he killed at Lâbu was a daughter of the *Wans*—*Wan Esah* was her name."

"That makes three-and-twenty whom He of the Hairy Face had slain in one year of maize," said Awang, in a low, fear-stricken voice. "He toucheth neither goats nor kine, and men say he sucketh more blood than he eateth flesh."

"It is that that proves him to be the Thing he is," said Ngah.

"Your words are true," said Che' Sėman solemnly. "He of the Hairy Face was in the beginning a man like other men—a *Semang*, a negrit of the woods. Because of his cruelty and his iniquities and the malignity of his magic, his own people drove him forth from among them, and now he lives solitary in the jungles, and by night transforms himself into the shape of Him of the Hairy Face, and feasts upon the flesh of human beings. This is a fact well known and attested."

"It is said that it is only the men of Korinchi who possess this art," interposed Abdullah, in the tone of one who seeks to be reassured.

¹ *Si-Pūdong*—He of the Hairy Face—is one of the names used by jungle-bred Malays to describe a tiger. They will not use the beast's ordinary name, lest the sound of it should reach his ears, and cause him to come to the speaker.

² The "dove" stroke is a very rapid stroke made with the paddle lifted high in the air, and driven into the water and drawn back with great force. It is always used for the finish of a canoe-race. The origin of the term is unknown.

"They also practise magic of a like kind," rejoined Seman. "But it is certain that He of the Hairy Face was in the beginning a *Semang*—a negrit of the woods; and when he goeth abroad in human guise, he is like all other *Semang* to look upon. I and many others have come upon him, now and again, when we have been in the forests seeking for jungle-produce. He is old and wrinkled and very dirty, covered with skin disease, as with a white garment; and he roameth alone naked and muttering to himself. When he spies men he makes haste to hide himself; and all folk know that it is He who harries us by night in our villages. If we venture forth from our houses during the hours of darkness, to the bathing-raft at the river's edge, to tend our sick, or to visit a friend, Si-Pûdong is ever to be found watching, and thus the tale of his kill waxeth longer and longer."

"But at least men are safe from him while they sit within their houses," said Mat.

"God alone knoweth," answered Che' Seman piously. "Who can say where safety abides when He of the Hairy Face is seeking to glut his appetites? He cometh like a shadow, slays like a prince, and then like a shadow he is gone. And ever the tale of his kills waxeth longer and yet more long. May God send Him very far away from us! *Ya Allah!* It is He, even now! Listen!"

At the word a dead silence, broken only by the hard breathing of the men and women, fell upon all within the house. Then very faintly, and far away upstream, but not so faintly but that all could hear it, as they listened with straining ears and suspended heart-beats, the long-drawn, howling, snarling moan of a hungry tiger rose and fell above the murmur of the insect-world without. The Malays call the roar of the tiger *äum*, and as they pronounce it, the word is vividly onomatopoeitic, as those of us who have heard it in lonely jungle places during the silent night watches can bear witness. All who have listened to the tiger in his forest freedom know that he has many voices. He can give a barking cry, which is not unlike that of a deer; he can grunt like a startled boar, and squeak like the monkeys cowering and chattering at his approach in the branches overhead; he can shake the earth with a vibrating, resonant purr, like the sound of distant thunder in the foothills; he can mew and snarl like an angry wildcat; and he can roar almost like a lion. But it is when he lifts his voice in the long-drawn moan 'that the men and beasts of the jungle chiefly fear him. This cry means that he is hungry, but also that he is so sure of his kill that he cares not if all the world knows that his belly is empty. There is in its note something strangely horrible, for it is as though the cold-blooded, dispassionate cruelty, peculiar to the feline race, has in it become suddenly articulate. These sleek, glossy-skinned, soft-footed, lithe, almost serpentine creatures torture with a grace of movement and gentleness in strength which have in them something infinitely more terror-inspiring than the blundering charge and savage goring of the gaur, or the clumsy tramlings and kneadings with which the elephant destroys its victims.

Again the long-drawn moan broke upon the stillness. The water-buffaloes in the byre heard it, and were panic-stricken. Mad with fear they charged the walls of their pen, bearing all before them, and a moment later could be heard plunging wildly through the brushwood and splashing through the soft mud of the *padi*-fields, the noise of their stampede growing fainter and fainter with distance. The lean curs, suddenly awakened, whimpered miserably and scampered off in every direction, while the sleepy fowls, beneath the flooring of the house, set up a drowsy and discordant screeching. The folk within were too terror-stricken to speak; for extremity of fear, which lends voices to the animal world, renders voluble human beings dumb. And all this while the cry of the tiger

broke out again and again, ever louder and louder, as He of the Hairy Face drew nearer and yet more near.

At last it sounded within the very compound in which the house stood, and its sudden proximity caused Mat to start so violently that he overturned with his elbow the pitch-torch at his side, and extinguished the flickering light. The women, their teeth chattering like castanets, crowded up against the men, seeking comfort in physical contact with them. The men gripped their spears, and squatted trembling in the half-light cast by the dying embers of the fire, and by the flecks cast upon floor and wall by the moonbeams struggling through the interstices of the wattling and the thatch of the roof.

"Fear not, Minah," Che' Seman whispered, in a hoarse, strained voice, to his little daughter, who nestled quaking against his breast. "In a space He will be gone. Even He of the Hairy Face will do us no hurt while we sit within the house."

Che' Seman spoke with his judgment supported by the experience of many generations of Malays; but he knew not the nature of the strange animal with which he was now confronted. Once more the moan-like howl set the still air vibrating, but this time its note had changed, and gradually it quickened to the ferocious, snarling roar, which is the charge-song of the tiger, as the beast rushed at the house and flung itself against the bamboo wall with a heavy, jarring thud. A shriek from all the seven distraught wretches within went up on the instant; and then came a scratching, tearing sound, followed by a soft *flop*, as the tiger, failing to effect a landing on the low roof, fell back to earth. The men leaped to their feet, clutching their weapons convulsively, bewildered by fear and by the darkness; and led by Che' Seman, they raised s~bove the wailing of the women, a quavering, half-hearted *sôrak*—the Malayan war-cry, which is designed as much to put courage into those who utter it, as to dismay the enemy whom it defies.

Mat, the man who had upset the torch, alone failed to add his voice to the lamentable outcry of his fellows. Seeking to hide himself from the raging brute without, he crept, unobserved by the others, up into the shelflike loft, in which Mînah had been wont to sit, when strangers were about, during the short days of her virginity. This place consisted of a platform of stout laths suspended from the roof in one corner of the house, and amidst the dusty lumber that filled it, Mat now cowered, sweating with terror. A minute or two of silence and of sickening suspense followed the tiger's first unsuccessful charge. But presently the howl broke forth anew, quickened rapidly to the charge-roar, and again the house shook beneath the impact as the weight of the great animal was hurled at it. This time the leap of Him of the Hairy Face had been judged more surely; and a crash overhead, a shower of leaflets of thatch, and an ominous creaking of the beams apprised the cowering folk within the house that their enemy had secured a foothold on the roof.

The fragmentary, throaty *sôrak*, which Che' Seman had urged his companions to raise, died away into a sobbing silence, disturbed only by the sound of breaths drawn thickly and by the hysterical weeping of the women. Then all were smitten with dumbness, as gazing upward in awful fascination, they saw the thatch torn violently apart by the great claws of the tiger. There were no firearms in the house, but instinctively the men clutched their spears, and held them in readiness to resist the descent of their assailant; and thus for a moment all remained spellbound, with their eyes fastened upon the horror above them. A flood of moonlight, infinitely quiet and peaceful, poured in upon them through the yawning gap in the thatch, and against it the immense, square head of Him of the

Hairy Face was darkly outlined, the black bars on the brute's hide, the flaming eyes, and the long cruel teeth being plainly visible, framed in the hole which its claws had made.

The timbers of the roof bent and cracked anew under the unwonted weight, and then, with the agility of a cat, He of the Hairy Face leaped lightly down, and was in among them before they knew. The striped hide was slightly wounded by the upthrust spears, but the shock of the beast's leap bore all who had resisted it to the floor. The tiger never stayed to use its jaws. It sat up, much in the attitude of a kitten playing with a ball of worsted dangled before its eyes, and striking out rapidly and with unerring aim, speedily disposed of all its victims. Che' Seman and his two sons, Awang and Ngah, were the first to fall. Then Iang, Che' Seman's wife, was flung reeling backward against the wall with her skull crushed out of all resemblance to any human member by a single, playful buffet from one of those mighty pads. Kassim, Pôtek, and Abdullah fell before the tiger in quick succession; and Mînah, the little girl who had nestled against her father for protection, lay now beneath his body, sorely wounded, almost demented by terror, but still alive and conscious. Mat, cowering on the shelf overhead, and gazing fascinated at the carnage going on below him, was the only inmate of the house who remained uninjured.

He of the Hairy Face killed quickly and silently while there were yet some alive to resist him. Then, purring gently, he passed from one crumpled form to the other, sucking at the blood of each of his victims, after the manner of a mongoose. At last he reached the body of Che' Seman; and Mînah, seeing him draw near, made a feeble effort to evade him. He pounced upon her like a flash, and then, under the eyes of the horrified Mat, an appalling scene was enacted. The tiger played with and tortured the girl, precisely as we have all seen a cat treat a maimed mouse. Again and again Mînah crawled laboriously away, only to be drawn back by her tormentor when he seemed at last to have exhausted his interest in her. At times she lay still in a paralysis of inertia, only to be goaded into agonized motion once more by a touch of the tiger's claws. Yet, so cunningly did he manipulate his victim, that—as Mat afterward described it—"a time sufficient to enable a pot of rice to be cooked" elapsed ere the girl was finally put out of her misery.

Even then, He of the Hairy Face did not quit the scene of slaughter. Mat, lying prone upon the shelf, watched him through the long hours of that night of terror, playing with the mangled corpses of each of his victims in turn. He leaped from one to the other, apparently trying to cheat himself into the belief that they still lived, inflicting upon them a series of fresh wounds with teeth and claws. The moonlight, pouring through the torn thatch, revealed him frolicking among the dead with all the airy, lighthearted agility and grace of a kitten playing with its own shadow on a sunny lawn; and it was not until the dawn was beginning to break that he tore down the door, leaped easily to the ground, and betook himself to the jungle.

When the sun was up, an armed party of neighbours came to the house to see if aught could be done to aid its occupants. They found the place a shambles, the bodies hardly to be recognized, the floor-laths dripping blood, and Mat lying face-downward on the shelf, with his reason tottering in the balance. The corpses, though they had been horribly mutilated, had not been eaten, the tiger having contented himself with drinking the blood of his victims, and playing his ghastly game with them till daybreak interrupted him.

This is, I believe, the only well-authenticated instance of a tiger attacking men within their closed house in the heart of a Malayan village; and the circumstances are so remarkable in every way, that it is perhaps only natural that the natives of Pahang should

attribute the fearlessness of mankind, and the lust of blood displayed by Him of the Hairy Face, to the fact that he was no ordinary wild beast, but a member of the human family who, by means of magic agencies, had assumed a tiger's shape, the better to prey upon his kind.