

One Who Had Eaten My Rice

By Sir Hugh Clifford

The punkah swings freely for a space, then gradually shortens its stride; hovers for a moment, oscillating gently, in answer to the feeble jerking of the cord; almost stops and then is galvanized into a series of violent, spasmodic leaps and bounds, each one less vigorous than the last, until once more the flapping canvas fringe is almost still. It is by signs such as these that you may know that Umat, the punkah-puller, is sleeping the sleep of the just.

If you look behind the high screen which guards the doorway, you will see him; and without moving, if the afternoon is very warm and still, you may occasionally hear his soft, regular breathing, and the gentle murmur with which his nose is wont to mark the rhythm of his slumber. An old cotton handkerchief is bound about his head in such a manner that the top of his scalp is exposed, the short bristles of hair upon it standing erect in a circular enclosure, like the trainers in a garden of young *sirih* vines. On his back he wears an old, old coat of discoloured khaki, once the property of a dead policeman. The Government buttons have been taken away from him by a relentless inspector of police, and Umat has supplied their place with thorns, cunningly contrived pieces of stick, and one or two wooden studs. The shoulder-straps flap loosely, and their use and intention are problems that present a constant puzzle to Umat. A cotton *sarong*—not always of the cleanest—is round his waist, and falling to his knees, supplies the place of all other nether garments. For Umat is at once comfort-loving and economical, and Pahang by this time had become a free land in which a man might go clad pretty well as he liked, without some ill thing befalling him thereof. Less than ten years earlier, a man who went abroad without his trousers ran a good chance of never returning home again, for Pahang Malays were apt to regard any one so clad as a person who was no lover of battle. Among Malays—who are the most physically modest people in the world—it is well known that no man can fight with a whole heart and with undivided attention, when at any moment a mishap may expose his nakedness; and those who by the inappropriateness of their costume gave proof of their unpreparedness, simply invited the warlike persecutions of the gilded youth of the place, who were always ready to display prowess by mangling one from whom little resistance was to be expected. But in Kelantan, where Umat was born and bred, few men possess trousers, and no one who loves his comfort ever wears such things if he can help it. Below *sarong*, goodly lengths of bare and hairy leg are visible, ending in broad splay feet, with soles that seem shod with horn; for Umat could dance barefoot in a thorn thicket with as much comfort as upon a velvet carpet. He half sits, half lies, huddled up in a wicker-work armchair, his head canted stiffly over his right shoulder, his eyes tight shut, and his mouth wide open. Two rows of blackened tusks are exposed to view, and a fair expanse of gums and tongue stained a dull scarlet with areca nut. His feet are on the seat of the chair—one doubled snugly under him, the other supporting the knee upon which his chin may find a resting-place as occasion requires. The pull cord of the punkah is made fast about his right wrist, and his left hand holds it limply, his arms moving forward and backward mechanically in his sleep. It often

looks as though the punkah were pulling Umat, not Umat the punkah, so completely a part of the thing does he appear, and so invisible is the effort which he puts into his work.

At his feet, humming contentedly to himself, sits a very small boy, dressed chastely in a large cap and a soiled pocket-handkerchief; and thus Umat dreams away many hours of his life. If his sleeping memory takes him back to the days when he followed me upon the warpath, to one of the dirty nights when we went fishing together, or to hours spent in floundering through the rice-swamps or trudging over the grazing grounds and through the rhododendron scrub when snipe were plentiful and the bag a big one, the punkah leaps to and fro vigorously, taking an active part in the scenes of which he dreams. But when Umat's mind turns home again to the extraordinarily ill-kept hut in the corner of my compound, which he shares with his soft-eyed, gentle wife, Selema, and their children, and dwells upon hearty meals and quiet nights, then in sympathy the punkah moves slowly, sentimentally, and stops.

"*Tarek! Pull!*" cries a voice from the inner room, and Umat, awakening with a start, bursts into voluble reproaches, addressed to himself in the guttural speech of the Kelantan people. Then he very calmly relapses into slumber.

If you sail up the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, past the long sandy beaches, backed by a fringe of *casuarina* trees, which are the shores of Pahang and Trenggânu, you at last reach the spot where the bulk of the waters of the Kelantan River used once upon a time to empty themselves into the China Sea. The principal mouth is now a mile or two farther up the coast, but the groves of palm trees show that the people have been less fickle than the river, and that the villages have continued to thrive in spite of the fact that the highways of traffic have deserted them. It is here that Umat was born and bred, one of a family of fisher folk, successive generations of whom have dwelt at Kuâla Kelantan ever since the beginning of things.

If you look at Umat's round, splay-featured face and observe it carefully, you may read therein much that bears upon the history of his people. The prevailing expression is one of profound, calm patience, not the look of conscious waiting and of the pain of hope long deferred, which is the restless European substitute therefor, but the contented endurance of one whose lot is unchanging, whose desires are few, and who is satisfied to be as he is. It is a negative expression, without sadness, without pain, and yet sufficiently far removed from dullness or stupidity. It speaks of the long years during which Umat's forebears have laboured stolidly, have been as driven cattle before prince or chief, and yet have accepted their lot as they found it, without resistance or complaint, finding therein a fair measure of happiness, since the knowledge of better things has been mercifully withheld from them. A divine discontent may be the beginning of all improvement, but beyond all gainsaying it sounds the knell to placid happiness and content.

This is what one reads in Umat's face when it is in repose, but it is subject to the changes wrought by many emotions. Suddenly his features break up into a thousand creases, the brown skin puckering in numberless divergent lines, like the surface of a muddy puddle into which a stone has been cast. A noise like the crowing of a cock combined with the roaring of a bull accompanies this phenomenon, and you may then know that Umat's sense of humour has been tickled. It does not take much to amuse him, for, like most Malays, he is very light-hearted; and all Umat's world laughs with and at him. Almost every Kelantan fishing-boat that puts to sea carries its *alan-alan*, or jester,

with it, for toil is lightened if men be merry, and in days gone by Umat was one of the most popular and successful men of this class on the coast. A quaint phrase, a happy repartee, not always expressed in the most decorous language, the rude mimicry of some personal eccentricity, a play upon words, or a story with almost too much point in it—such are Umat's stock in trade, and the dexterous use of them has caused him to be well beloved by his fellows.

But, on occasion, he can be serious enough. As my raft whirls down a rapid, a clumsy punt sends it reeling to what looks like certain destruction. Umat's ugly old nut of a face sets hard. His teeth are clenched, his lips compressed tightly. His bare feet grapple the slippery bamboos with clinging grip, and his twenty-foot punting pole describes a circle above his head. Its point alights with marvellous rapidity and unerring aim upon the only projecting ridge of rock within immediate reach, and all Umat's weight is put into the thrust, while his imprisoned breath breaks loose in an excited howl. The raft cants violently, wallowing knee deep, but the danger of instant demolition is averted, and we tear through the fifty yards of roaring, rock-beset water, which divides us from the foot of the rapid, without further mishap. Then Umat's face relaxes, his queer laugh resounds, and he chaffs the man whose clumsiness has nearly been our undoing with unmerciful disregard for his feelings or for the more approved proprieties.

His promptness to grasp the nature of the emergency, and the quick, decisive action with which he meets it and averts catastrophe, have little to do with Umat himself. He owes them to his forebears the fisher-folk who, for many unrecorded centuries, have been accustomed to risk their lives on the dangerous river bars and the treacherous waters of the China Sea. If ready presence of mind in the face of peril, and a quick appreciation of the surest means of escape had not become for them an inherited instinct, the breed would long ere now have become extinct.

Umat, however, has at his command pluck of quite another stamp—the courage which is no mere flash in the pan, born of excitement and an instinct of self-preservation, but is long enduring when beset by a danger before which a man must sit down and wait. It is no light thing to stare death in the eyes for days and weeks on end, to expect it in some cruel, violent form, and yet to possess one's soul in patience, and to keep a heart in one's body that does not sink and quail. Yet Umat has successfully withstood this test, and though the limitations of his imagination doubtless made the situation easier for him than it would be for a white man, cursed with the restless brain of his kind, he fully grasped the risks to which he was exposing himself. All his light-heartedness vanished, for unlike my friend Râja Haji Hamid, whose eyes never danced so happily as when danger was afoot, Umat came of a class to whom a gamble with death is a hated thing. For once the look of calm patience had deserted him, for he was enduring consciously, and by a hundred tokens it was evident that his nerves were strung like a bow. In a word, he detested the whole position; but though nothing bound him to it except a sentimental conception of loyalty, he never attempted to bridge from it.

But Umat's face is capable of yet another change. When his brown eyes blaze, when his features are distorted with excitement, and a torrent of hardly articulate words burst headlong from his lips, you may know that Umat is angry. A tumult of wrathful sound at the back of the bungalow, where the servants congregate in the covered way which joins the kitchen to the main building, begins the uproar, and if you fail to interfere, some Chinese heads will infallibly be broken in several places. On inquiry it will prove that the

cook has accused Umat of adulterating the milk, or that the water coolie, whose business it also is to make the kerosene lamps smell and smoke, has charged him with purloining the kerosene. No words can describe Umat's fury and indignation, if he be indeed guiltless, which is very rarely the case. If, on the other hand, the counts brought against him be true, he is a bad liar and his manner speedily betrays him, while his wrath fails to convince. Presently he will produce the bottle of lamp oil from the folds of his *sarong*, and laughing sheepishly, will claim that praise should be his portion, since it is only half full. He will hang his head, assuming an attitude of exaggerated humility, while he listens to my biting comments upon his grossly immoral conduct, ejaculating from time to time the question: "Where should the lice feed, if not upon the head?" and five minutes later the compound will be ringing with the songs he loves to bellow. It is not possible to abash Umat.

I first met him in 1890 when, after a year spent in Europe, I returned to Pahang for a second tour of service at the ripe age of twenty-four, and took charge of the districts which form the interior of that country. I was very lonely. I had served for a long time as political agent at the Sultan's court before the British Government assumed a more active part in the administration of the state, but at that time I had had with me some thirty Malays who had come from the other side of the Peninsula to share my fortunes and to keep me company. These were now scattered to the winds, and I had none but strangers around me. There were a few mining-camps spattered about the district, but of the Europeans who lived in them I saw little, except when I visited them. The Pahang Malays eyed us with suspicion, and stood aloof, for their chiefs did not encourage a friendly attitude toward a set of intruders in whose presence they saw a menace to their power and privileges, while the peasantry had still to learn that we were able to deliver them from the oppression to which custom had almost reconciled them. For a space, therefore, I was in a position of quite extraordinary isolation, and I found the experience sufficiently dreary.

Pahang had had an ill name on the east coast of the Peninsula any time during the past three hundred years, and until the white men "protected" the country in 1889, few strangers cared to set foot in a land where life and property were held on so insecure a tenure. Soon, however, the whisper spread through the villages of Kelantan and Trenggânu that work found a high price in Pahang under the Europeans, and a stream of large-limbed Malays, very different in appearance from the slender, cleanly built natives of the country, began to trickle over the borders. On this stream Umat was borne to me, and so long as my connection with Malaya remained unsevered he remained with me "inseparable as the nail and the quick," to use his own expression.

Umat, in the beginning, was just one of my boatmen, the folk in whose company I explored all the rivers in the interior of Pahang. No map of the country existed in those days, and I had a notion—the soundness of which was subsequently demonstrated—that the time would come when a thorough knowledge of the local geography would be of great importance and military value, and that at such a season native guides would be unprocurable. I spent about eight months, therefore, in punting up and paddling down the streams, which in those days formed the principal highways in the interior, and in trudging through the jungle from watershed to watershed. Most of the Malay villages, of course, were situated on the banks of these rivers, but there were a certain number of

inland settlements, and a network of narrow footpaths linked each set of habitations to its fellows. A thorough examination of these necessitated a great deal of travelling and camping, and as the local Malays were not greatly interested in my doings, I got together a pack of men, mostly natives of Kelantan, to work my boat on the river, and to carry my baggage when I tramped.

I think Umat divined that I was lonely, and he may even have dimly realized that I was an object of pity, for he used to creep into my hut in the evening, and seating himself upon the floor, would tell me tales of his own country and people until the night was far advanced. His dialect was strange to me at that time, and the manner in which he eluded some of his vowels and most of his consonants was at first a trifle bewildering. It took a little time to master the phonetic law which caused *anam* (six) to shrink into *ne*, and *kerbau* (buffalo) into *keba*, and his vocabulary was rich in local words; but I let him talk, and in the end learned not only to understand, but actually to talk this new and barbarous brand of Malay to which he was the first to introduce me.

Thus Umat and I became friends, and life was a thoughtless dreary because he was at hand. He taught me a number of things which I did not know before, and his folklore and his dialect furnished an interesting study that served to enliven hours of solitude that at times were almost overwhelming.

Then came a period when trouble darkened the land, and the disturbances which I had foretold, but in the imminence of which I had failed to persuade any one to believe, broke out in earnest. The warpath was to me a wholly new experience, but I had no alternative but to go upon it, and Umat elected to trudge along at my heels while most of his fellows made tracks for Kelantan, bearing with them the tidings that Pahang was once more living up to its ancient reputation. The dreary business dragged on for months and threatened to be endless, but Umat stuck to me through bad and good fortune alike with dogged perseverance. The official theory, to which I was never able personally to subscribe, was that certain bands of evilly disposed people were rebelling against the Sultan, whose country we had “protected” for very sufficient reasons, but very much against his will. But in Pahang, until the white men came, for thirty long years no dog had barked save with its ruler’s leave, and to me, who had lived in the country in its pristine condition under native rule, it was patent that disturbances of the magnitude we were facing could never have broken out if they had lacked royal approval and inspiration.

In the spring of 1892, however, I found myself back at Kuâla Lipis, my old headquarters in the far interior, surrounded by a very restless and excited population, and with written instructions “to treat all the chiefs as friendly, until by some overt sign they prove themselves to be hostile.” These precious words, to which, as most public servants will recognize, there clings the genuine Secretariat odour, are enshrined in my memory, but at the moment the humour of them was wasted upon me. A thrust between the ribs with a *kris* was the sort of “overt sign” which our neighbours were likely to give us. For this we sat down and waited.

I had two white men with me—a doctor and an inspector of police, both full of pluck and of the greatest assistance to me; about twenty Sikhs—overgrown Casabiancas every one of them, who would have stood upon the burning deck till they were reduced to cinders any day if the order to quit it had failed to reach them; and half a dozen panic-stricken Malays, recruited in the Colony to serve as constables, and about as much good as the proverbial sick headache. We had at our disposal a big, unwieldy stockade, built to

surround certain government buildings, badly situated, and much too large for efficient defence. The force at my command was quite inadequate to hold it in any circumstances, but our only chance of making a stiff fight of it lay in guarding against a surprise.

The chiefs from all the surrounding districts, accompanied by great gatherings of their armed followers, swarmed into the little town, and presently began to build stockades in all the positions which commanded our defences. This was done, they said, in order to prevent the rebels from occupying these points of vantage, but the statement was unconvincing. Numbers of them visited me daily, trying to obtain money and supplies, posing as our allies with a contempt for my understanding which they barely troubled themselves to conceal, and showing me by a hundred subtle indications that they believed themselves to hold me in the hollow of their hand. My principal preoccupation was to keep them and their armed parties out of my stockade, and to this end I lived in my own bungalow, which was distant from it a matter of a couple of hundred yards. My Chinese servants had come to me, a day or two after the arrival of the chiefs, and had mentioned that they understood that there was to be a battle that afternoon. After lunch, therefore, their spokesman remarked, they proposed, with my leave, to run away and hide themselves in the jungle. That would have meant that each one of them would have had his throat cut; but as they were frightened out of their wits, though not out of their good manners, and I feared that they would try the experiment, I put them into a boat which happened to be going down-river, and so shipped them into safety. Thus I was left alone in my bungalow, save only for Umat, and he and I kept watch, turn and turn about, for a matter of several weeks. He cooked my rice for me, and squatted on the mat beside me while I slept, and whenever a chief and his truculent crew overflowed into the bungalow, Umat sat by fondling his weapons.

At last there came a day when the greatest of all the chiefs had arrived, and presently a message reached me from him saying that he was too ill to come up the hill to see me, and inviting me to visit him in the town. The position was not pleasant. A refusal was out of the question, for having regard to the characters of the men with whom we were dealing, any sign of timidity would, I knew, precipitate a conflict. An ostentatious display of fearlessness is, on such occasions, the only safe card to play with a Malay, and I knew that though the war party among the younger chiefs was daily gaining strength, the biggest man of the lot was hesitating, and, as I thought, capable of being talked round.

Accordingly, I sent word that I would come; issued written instructions to the white men in the stockade on no account to quit the defences in order to attempt a rescue if things went ill with me, since that would mean the destruction of all; armed myself carefully, and prepared to set out. A minor chief with a few followers came, according to custom, to escort me to the town, and just as I was starting, Umat, armed with *kris* and spear, and with a set look of resolve upon his face, fell in behind me. I stopped and took him aside.

"It is not necessary for you, to come," I said. "If all goes well, there will be no need of you. If aught goes amiss, what profits it that two should suffer instead of one?"

Umat grunted, but he did not turn back.

"Return," I ordered. "I have no need of you."

But Umat showed no sign of obeying me.

"*Tuan*," he said, "for how long a time have I eaten your rice when you were in prosperity and at ease? Is it then fitting that I should quit you in a day of trouble? *Tuan*, where you go, there I go also. Where you lead I follow."

I said no more, but went upon my way with Umat at my heels. His devotion not only touched but fortified me. He was taking voluntarily risks which I was running because circumstances left me no alternative. Moreover, he, I knew, believed himself to be going to certain death, whereas I was backing my own conception of the psychology of the men with whom I was dealing, and saw in the action I was taking the one chance afforded to me of saving myself and those under my charge from a violent and unpleasant end.

The interview with the chiefs was a long one, and throughout it the knowledge that Umat's great, fleshy body was wedged in securely between my enemies and the small of my back gave me an added confidence which was worth many points in my favour. The decision, whether it was to be peace or war, lay with the Dâto' Maharaja Perba Jelai—the great territorial baron whom I had come to see—who was, under the Sultan, the practical ruler of the whole of the interior of Pahang. This man, before British influence had been extended to the country, had been the object of the Sultan's jealousy and had seen encroachments upon his authority by more than one royal favourite attempted and encouraged. Several of these upstart chiefs were among the leaders of the present revolt, and the son of one of them was now heading the local war party at Kuâla Lipis and was being warmly seconded by the Dâto's own promising heir. That these youngsters had the Sultan's influence at their back was also obvious; but my chances of success lay in my ability to discredit them and to convince the Dâto' that he was being made a cat's-paw of by his old enemies and their astute master.

Hardly had the interview opened before Mat Xilau, the youthful leader of the war party, cut abruptly into the conversation. Assuming an air of incredulous astonishment, I ignored him and turned to the Dâto'.

"I came hither," I said, "to see you, to discuss matters with those possessed of knowledge and understanding, not to bandy words with babes. Is it fitting, then, and is it approved by ancient custom, that one who has but recently been weaned, one whose age is that of a season of maize, should disturb with his babble the grave conferences of his elders?"

I was laying myself open to an obvious retort, but I question whether this occurred to my audience, and the appeal to custom, which is the great Malayan fetish, was a sure card. Mat Kilau was promptly suppressed, and with him the war party was silenced at the outset.

This point gained, I next addressed myself to a statement of the case as it presented itself, I averred, to the eye of common sense.

Behold a war had broken out, and certain evilly disposed persons were fighting the British Government. Either this was being done by the Sultan's orders, or it was not. If it were, doubtless the Sultan had issued his mandate under his seal, thus assuming responsibility for all that might befall. If the Dâto' would produce such a document, I should have no further word to say. No written order, I was told, had been received; and this I was prepared to believe, for the Sultan was far too astute a person to commit himself in such a fashion.

"Then," said I, "suffer me, as an old friend, to give you this much counsel. Turn a deaf ear to any alleged verbal command, for if you act against the British now, and have no

formal mandate from the Sultan for your action, you, and you alone, will be held responsible. At this moment I and the men with me are few and weak; we are a tempting morsel for the youthful, the warlike, and the unwise—like the bait that killed the shark. You can kill me now.” (The Dâto’ politely hastened to disavow any such desire.) “You can kill me now, you can kill the men in my stockade to-morrow or in a day or two; but that will be only the beginning. If we fall, in a little space more white men than you have ever seen or heard of will come pouring over the hills. They will burn your villages, fell your cocoanut groves, kill your cattle, and they will never rest until they have hanged you by the neck until you are dead, for the war will be your war, and in the absence of a mandate from the Sultan nothing will clear you of guilt. Even were the Sultan openly at your back, you would, at the best, be banished to some distant island, as is the white man’s way. It would indeed be sad,” I concluded, “if such calamities should befall because the advice of hot-headed youngsters had been suffered to prevail over the wise deliberations of their elders.”

This was the gist of my argument, but Malay fashion, we talked about and about it for hours. In the end, however, words prevailed, and Umat and I won through. The Dâto’ dispersed his followers, while Mat Kilau and the bulk of the war party retired to a village some twenty miles distant, where they placed themselves astride my lines of communication. From this place, a couple of months later, I had the satisfaction of dislodging them with a portion of the force sent across the mountains to the relief of my stockade. For the moment, however, all immediate danger of an attack on Kuâla Lipis was averted, and that night Umat made darkness hideous by the discordant snatches of song with which he celebrated our diplomatic victory, betokening the reaction occasioned by the unstringing of his tense nerves.

Later I became resident of Pahang, and Umat came with me to the capital, and lived there for some years in a house in my compound, with Selema, the Pahang girl, who made him so gentle and faithful a wife. It was soon after his marriage that his trouble fell upon Umat, and swept much of the sunshine from his life. He contracted a form of ophthalmia, and for a time was totally blind. Native medicine-men doctored him, and drew sheafs of needles and bunches of thorns from his eyes, which they declared were the cause of his affliction. These and other miscellaneous odds and ends, similarly extracted, used to be brought to me for inspection at breakfast-time, floating most unappetizingly in a cup half full of oily water; and Umat went abroad with eye sockets stained crimson, or yellow, or black, according to the fancy of the native physician. The aid of an English doctor was called in, but Umat was too thoroughly a Malay to place much trust in the simple and untheatrical prescriptions provided for him, and though his blindness was relieved, and he became able to walk without the aid of a staff, his eyesight could never be wholly restored to him.

But Umat was of a sanguine temperament, and even when his blindness had continued for years, and each new remedy had proved to be merely one more disappointment, he clung unshakenly to the belief that in time the light would return to him. Meanwhile, his life held much enjoyment. All through the day his laugh used to ring out, and at night-time the compound would resound to the songs he loved to improvise which had for their theme the marvellous doings of “Umat, the blind man, whose eyes cannot see.” His patience had come to the rescue, and the sorrow of his blindness, accompanied as it was with a sufficient wage and no great measure of physical exertion, was a chastened grief

which he bore with little complaining. He had aged somewhat, for the loss of sight made his face look graver, heavier, duller than of old, but his heart remained as young as ever.

And good things have not held quite aloof from him. One day, as I sat writing, Umat erupted into the room, and presently the whole house resounded with the news that he expected shortly to become a father. The expression of his face was a queer medley of delight, excitement, and pride, blent with some anxiety for Selema; and when he spoke of the child, whose advent he prophesied so noisily, he became almost sentimental.

He rushed off to the most famous midwife in the place, and presented her with the retaining fee prescribed by Malay custom—a small brass dish filled with leaves of the *sirih* vine, and six pence of our money. The recipient of these treasures is thereafter held pledged to attend the patient whenever she may be called upon to do so, and after the child is born she can claim further payments for the services rendered. These are not extravagantly high, according to European notions, two depreciated Mexican dollars being the charge for a first confinement, a dollar or a dollar and a half on the next occasion, and twenty-five or at the most fifty cents being deemed an adequate payment for each subsequent event.

When Umat had “placed the *sirih* leaves,” he had done all that was immediately possible for Selema, and he sat down to endure the anxieties of the next few months with the patience of which he had so much at his command. The *pantang ber-anak*, or birth-taboos, hem a Malayan husband in almost as rigidly as they fence his wife, and Umat went in constant dread of unwittingly transgressing any of the laws upon the nice observance of which the welfare of Selema and the future of their child depended. He ceased to shave his head, foregoing the cool comfort of a naked scalp. He dared not even cut his hair, and a thick, black shock presently stood five inches high upon his head, and tumbled raggedly about his neck and ears. Selema was about to become the mother of his first-born, and for Umat to cut his hair in such circumstances would have been to invite disaster. He would not kill the fowls for the cook now, nor would he even drive a stray dog from the compound with violence, lest he should chance to do it a hurt; for he must shed no blood and do no injury to any living thing during his wife’s pregnancy. One day he was sent on an errand upriver, and did not return for two nights. On inquiry it appeared that he camped in a friend’s house and learned next day that his host’s wife was also expecting shortly to give birth to a child. Therefore he had had to spend at least two nights in the house. Why? Because, if he had failed to do so, he might have brought death to Selema. Why should this be the result? Allah alone knoweth, but such is the teaching of the men of old, the very wise ones who lived aforetime.

But Umat’s chief privation was that he was forbidden to sit in the doorway of his house. This, to a Malay, was serious, for the seat in the doorway, at the head of the stair-ladder which leads to the ground, is to him much what the chimney corner is to an English peasant. It is here that he sits and looks out patiently at life, as the European stares into the heart of a fire; it is here that his neighbours come to gossip with him, and it is in the doorway of his own or his friends’ houses that the rumours that fill his narrow world are borne to him. To obstruct a door-way at such a time, however, would have been fatal to Selema’s prospects, and almost certain death to her and to her child; so though the restriction robbed his life of much of its comfort, Umat submitted to it with meekness.

His wife, meanwhile, had to be no less circumspect. She bridled her woman's tongue rigorously, and no word of disparagement of man or beast was allowed to pass her lips. Had she miscalled or depreciated any living thing the consequences, as was well known, would have been that her child would have reproduced the defects upon which she had commented. This, it will be noted, represent Jacob's wands driven hilt-deep into the ground. She was often dropping with fatigue, and faint and ill before her hour came, but she dared not lie down upon her mat during the hours of daylight lest she should fall asleep, in which case evil spirits would almost certainly have entered into her unborn child. Therefore, she struggled on till dusk, and Umat did his clumsy best to comfort her and to lighten her sufferings by constant tenderness and care.

One night, when the moon was nearly at the full, the town suddenly broke out into a tumult of discordant sound. The large brass gongs, in which the Chinese devils delight, clanged and clashed and brayed; the Malay drums throbbed and thudded; and a tremendous clamour was raised by thousands of human voices lifted in shrill and strenuous outcry. The jungle on the distant bank across the river echoed and reechoed the noise, till the air seemed to be quivering with its vibrations. The moon, which is beloved by all dwellers in the tropics, and is especially dear to Oriental lovers, was suddenly seen to be in dire peril, for before the eyes of all men the jaws of that infamous monster, the *Gěrhâna*, could be seen to have fastened themselves upon her, and were swallowing her inch by inch. Even the Chinese, who are astronomers and had learned how to foretell eclipses while our forebears were still very rudimentary folk, firmly believe in this legendary causation of the phenomenon, and all men are enjoined to aid the moon on such occasions by raising a tumult that will frighten her assailant away. So now all the people shouted, while the gongs clanged and the drums were beaten, until the terrified dragon withdrew, and the moon was seen sailing unharmed across the sky, looking down in love and gratitude upon her children, to whose aid she owed her deliverance.

But during the period that her fate had hung in the balance Selema had been thrust into the empty fireplace and had sat there, under the shadow of the tray-like shelf depending from the low rafters, trembling with fear of the unknown. The little basket work stand, upon which the hot rice pot is wont to rest, was put on her head as a cap, and in her girdle the long wooden rice spoon was stuck daggerwise. Thus equipped she remained motionless and silent during the whole period of the eclipse. Neither she nor Umat had a notion why it was necessary to do these things, but they never dreamed of questioning the custom that prescribed them. The men of olden days have decreed that women with child should behave in this manner when the moon is in trouble, and the consequences of neglect are far too serious to be risked; so Selema and Umat acted accordingly to their simple faith.

Later came a day when Selema nearly lost her life by reason of the barbarities which Malayan science holds to be necessary if a woman is to live through her confinement without mishap. Great bands of linen were passed around her body, and the ends were pulled at, tug-of-war fashion, by rival knots of aged crones. She was roasted over a charcoal brazier till her skin was blistered and she was well-nigh suffocated. She was made the victim of other indescribable horrors, and tortured in divers ways. Umat's brown face was gray with fear and anxiety, and drawn and aged with pain. He paced restlessly between his hut and my study, retailing to me realistic details of the enormities being perpetrated by the midwife and her assistants, and he poured the tale of his

suspense into my ears, and wet the floor mats with his great beady tears. Hours passed, and at last a feeble cry came from Umat's house, a thin wailing which brought with it such relief that I, too, found the apple lumping in my throat. Umat, beside himself with delight and almost delirious with joy at Selema's trial being over, rushed to me with the news that a man-child had been born to him, and that his wife was doing well. He was like a mad thing, laughing through his tears and sobbing in his laughter, the most triumphant parent that I have ever seen.

Thereafter, nightly, for many weeks, the cries of Awang—as the boy was named—broke the peace of my compound during the midnight hour. Malayan custom was still busy with him, and the poor little wretch was being bathed ruthlessly in *cold* water, after being dragged out of his sleep for the purpose, and then was dried by being held face downward over a charcoal brazier. The pungent smoke choked his breath and pained his eyes, but he contrived to survive this and other drastic experiences, though he bawled his protests and disapproval with a pair of sturdy lungs. Only a percentage of Malayan children live through the attentions of their mothers, but Awang was among the survivals, and as soon as he was old enough to be allowed out of the house, he became Umat's constant friend and companion. Long before he could speak he and his father appeared to have established a complete understanding, and later you could hear them holding long conversations together, on the matting outside my study door, for hours at a time.

As Awang grew big enough to use his legs, he used to patter nimbly round Umat with an air which had in it something of protection. He was generally mother-naked, save that now and again a cap was set rakishly upon one side of his little bullet head, and when I spoke to him he used to wriggle in a most ingratiating fashion, and thrust his small hand halfway down his throat in his embarrassment. Umat delighted in him, and his eyes followed him constantly, and though they were very dim, I used to fancy that he saw Awang more clearly than anything else on earth.

In the fullness of time I was transferred from Malaya to another part of the Empire, distant from it a matter of some nine thousand miles, and shortly afterward Umat elected to return to his own country, taking his Pahang wife and his several children with him. He had saved a little money—some of it come by none too honestly, I shrewdly suspect—and in Kelantan he entered into possession of certain ancestral lands. I still hear tidings of him occasionally, and I learn that he has blossomed out into a sort of minor headman, his authority being mainly based upon his intimate knowledge of the curious ways of white men. It is hardly likely that he and I will ever meet again, but I shall always recall with tenderness and gratitude the man who, having eaten my rice when I was in prosperity and at ease, held that it was “not fitting” to quit me in time of trouble.