

Droit Du Seigneur

By Sir Hugh Clifford

One morning, not so very many years ago, old Mat Drus, bare to the waist, sat cross-legged in the doorway of his house, in the little sleepy village of Kědōndong on the banks of the Pahang River. A single wide blade of *lālang* grass was bound filet-wise about his forehead to save appearances, for all men know that it is unmannerly to wear no headdress, and Mat Drus had mislaid his kerchief. His grizzled hair stood up stiffly above the bright green of the grass-blade; his cheeks were furrowed with wrinkles; and his eyes were old and dull and patient—the eyes of the driven peasant, the cattle of mankind. His lips, red with the stain of areca nut, bulged over a damp quid of Java tobacco, shredded fine and rolled into a ball the size of a large marble. His jaws worked mechanically, chewing the betel nut, as a cow chews the cud, and his hands were busy with a little brass tube in which he was crushing up a fresh quid, for his teeth were old and ragged and had long been powerless to masticate the nut without artificial aid. The fowls clucked and scratched about the litter of trash with which the space before the house was strewn; and a monkey of the kind the Malays call *brôk*, and train to pluck cocoanuts, sat on a wooden box fixed on the top of an upright pole, searching diligently for fleas and occasionally emitting a plaintive, mournful whimper. In the dim interior of the house the forms of two or three women could be indistinctly seen, and their voices sounded amid the recurring clack of crockery. Now and again a laugh—the laugh of a very young girl—rippled out, its merry cadences striking a note of joyousness and youth.

Presently a youngster, brilliantly dressed in silks of many colours, swaggered into the compound. He carried a *kris* in his girdle, and a short sword, with a sheath of polished wood, in his hand.

“O Che’ Mat Drus,” he cried, as soon as he caught sight of the old man in the doorway.

“What thing is it?” inquired the latter, pausing in the preparation of his betel quid, and raising weary eyes to gaze on the newcomer.

“The Grandfather (Chief) sends greetings and bids you come on the morrow’s morn to the rice-field—you and all your folk, male and female, young and old—to aid in plucking the tares from amid the standing crop.”

“It is well,” mumbled Che’ Mat Drus, resuming his pounding stolidly.

“But listen. The Grandfather sends word that no one of your household is to remain behind. Do you understand? The womenfolk also must come, even down to the girl Minah, whom your son Dâman hath recently taken to wife.”

“If there be no sickness, calamity, or impediment we will surely come,” Mat Drus made answer, employing the cautious formula of his people.

“And forget not the girl Mînah,” added the youth. But here a third voice broke into the conversation—a voice shrill and harsh and angry, which ran up the scale to a painful pitch, and broke queerly on the higher notes.

“Have you the heart, Kria? Have you the heart to bring this message to my man. We are both of age, you and I. We know and understand. May the Grandfather die by a spear cast from afar! May he die a violent death, stabbed, bowstrung and impaled crosswise! May he die vomiting blood, and you, too, Kria, who are but the hunting-dog of the Chief!”

"Peace! Peace!" cried Mat Drus in an agitated voice, turning upon his wife a face that betokened an agony of fear. "Hold your peace, woman without shame. And Kria, do you tell the Grandfather that we will surely come, aye, and the girl Mînah also, according to his bidding; and heed not the words of this so foolish woman of mine."

"I care not to bandy words with a hag," said Kria. "But the Grandfather will be wroth when he learns of the ill things that your woman has spoken."

"They are without meaning—they are of no account—the words of a woman who is growing childish," protested Mat Drus. "Pay no heed to them, and I pray you, speak not to the Grandfather concerning them."

"She hath a wicked mouth, this woman of yours, and it is not fitting that such words should be spoken. I am loath to repeat them to the Grandfather: for were I to do so, a great evil would certainly overtake you. Show me that spear of yours—the ancient spear with a silver hasp at the base of the blade. I have a mind to borrow it. Ah, it is a good spear, and I will take it as an earnest of the love you bear me."

"Take it," said Mat Drus meekly; and Kria having possessed himself of this weapon, which he had long coveted, swaggered off to pass the word to other villagers that the Chief required their services for the weeding of his rice crop.

The sun stood high in the heavens, its rays beating down pitilessly upon the broad expanse of rice-field. A tall fence of bamboo protected the crop, shutting it off on the one side from the rhododendron scrub and the grazing-grounds beyond which rose the palm and fruit groves and the thatched roofs of the village, and on the other three from the forest, which formed a dark bank of foliage rising abruptly from the edge of the land which had been won from it by the labour of successive generations of men. The cubit-high spears of the *pâdi* carpeted the earth with vivid colour, absorbing the sun's rays and refracting them, and the transparent heat haze danced thin and restless over the flatness of the cultivated fields. The weeders, with their *sârongs* wound turban-wise about their heads to protect them from the sun, squatted at their work—men, women, and little children—the vertical rays dwarfing their shadows into malformed almost circular patches around their feet. They moved forward in an irregular line, digging out the tares by the roots with their clumsy *pârangs*.

Near the centre of the largest field a temporary but had been erected, walled and thatched with palm fronds. Within it was garnished with a ceiling-cloth of white cotton, from which on all sides depended wall-hangings of the same material and of many colours. The only furniture were the sleeping-mat and pillows of the Chief, and numerous brass trays, covered by square pieces of patchwork, and filled with food and sweetmeats specially prepared for the occasion. These reposed upon a coarse mat fashioned from the plaited fronds of dried *měng-kûang* palms. In the interior of the Malay Peninsula in those days the luxury accessible to even the richest and most powerful natives was of a somewhat primitive order; but to the eyes of the simple villagers the interior of this hut represented as advanced a standard of comfort and civilization as did the *château* of a noble in pre-revolutionary France to the peasants who dwelt on his estate.

About noon the Chief emerged from his hut and began a tour of inspection among the weeders, throwing a word to one or another of the men, and staring boldly at the women, with the air of a farmer appraising his stock. Half a dozen well-armed and gaudily clad youths followed at the heels of their master.

Old Mat Drus and his son Dâman, with three or four women, were squatting near the edge of the jungle, weeding diligently, and as the Chief drew near, Mînah, the girl who had recently married Dâman crept a little closer to her husband.

The Chief halted and stood for a while gazing at the group of toilers. He was a big, burly fellow, of a full habit of body, and well past middle age. He had a large, square, brutal face, garnished with a ragged fringe of beard that proclaimed his Sumatran descent, and his feet and hands were of unusual size. When he spoke his voice was harsh and coarse.

"What is the news, Mat Drus?" he asked, employing the common formula of greeting.

"The news is good, O Grandfather," replied Mat Drus, stopping in his work, and turning submissively toward the Chief. All the rest of the party, squatting humbly in the dust, moved so as to face their master, the womenfolk bowing low their heads to evade the hungry eyes of the Chief.

"Who is this child?" the great man inquired, indicating Mînah with his outthrust chin.

"She is the wife of your servant's son, O Grandfather," replied Mat Drus.

"Whose daughter is she?"

"She is your servant's daughter, O Grandfather," an old and ill-favoured woman made answer, from her place at Mat Drus's elbow.

"Verily a *sâlak* fruit," cried the Chief. "An ugly tree, thorny and thin, are you, but you have borne a pretty, luscious fruit."

The weeders laughed obsequiously.

"How very witty are the words of our Grandfather!" ejaculated Mat Drus, in a voice carefully calculated to reach the ears of his master. The Chief did not even condescend to look at him.

"Dainty Fruit," he said, addressing Mînah, "you are parched by reason of your toil and the heat. Come to my hut yonder, and I will give you delicious sweetmeats to slake the thirst in that pretty throat of yours."

"Don't want to," mumbled the girl.

"Nay, but I bid you come," said the Chief.

"Go, child," urged her mother.

"Don't want to," the girl repeated, edging more close to Dâman, as though seeking his protection.

"What meaneth this?" roared the Chief, whose eyes began to wax red. "Do as I bid, you daughter of an evil mother."

"She is afraid," pleaded Mat Drus in a trembling voice. "Be not wroth, O Grandfather. She is very young, and her fears are heavy upon her."

"May she die a violent death!" bellowed the Chief. "Come, I say. Come!"

"Go, child, go," urged all the women in a chorus of frightened whispers; but the girl only nestled closer to her husband.

"Are your ears deaf?" cried the Chief. "Come forthwith, or in a little you shall be dragged to my hut."

"Have patience, O Grandfather," said Dâman sulkily. "She is my wife to me. She doth not desire to go. Let her be."

"Arrogant one!" screamed the Chief. "You are indeed a brave man to dare to flout me. Already I hear the new-turned earth shouting for you to the coffin planks. You shall lend a hand to drag her to my hut."

At the word Dâman leaped to his feet. Until now, like the rest of his fellows, he had squatted humbly at the feet of the Chief—a serf in the presence of his lord; but now he stood erect, an equal facing an equal—a man defending his womenfolk from one who sought to put a shame upon them and upon him.

“Peace, Dâman! Have patience!” cried Mat Drus, his voice shaking with terror; but his son had no thought to spare for any save the Chief just then. His clear young eyes looked unflinchingly into the brutal, bloodshot orbs set in the sodden, self-indulgent face of his enemy, and the Chief’s gaze faltered and quailed. Dâman’s palm smote his wooden dagger-hilt with a resounding slap, and the Chief reeled hastily backward, almost losing his footing. The youngster, inspired by the passion of fury and indignation that possessed him, was lifted out of himself. The traditions of a lifetime were forgotten, together with the fear of rank and power that custom had instilled into him. The peasant had given place to the primordial man, fighting for his woman against no matter what odds, and had the two been alone it would, in that hour, have gone ill with the Chief.

The latter’s armed youths surged up around their tottering master, and the coward felt his courage returning to him when he realized that they were at band.

No word was spoken for a little space, as the enemies eyed one another; but Minah, crouching close to Dâman’s mother, whimpered miserably, though a thrill of love and admiration ran through her as she marked the bearing of her man.

Suddenly Kria, who stood a little to the right of the Chief, raised his arm in the act to throw, and the intense sunlight flashed for a moment on the naked blade of a spear—a spear with a silver hasp which, until recently, had been the property of Dâman’s father. Kria’s eye sought that of the Chief, and the latter signalled to him to ‘use his weapon. Immediately the long spear, with its shining blade, flew forward with incredible velocity, like a snake in the act of striking; but Dâman leaped aside, and the missile hissed harmlessly past him.

“Strike with the paralyzer,” yelled the Chief; and at the word one of his youths ran forward and stabbed swiftly and repeatedly at Dâman with a long, uncanny-looking weapon. It was a very long forked spear, with two sharp blades, barbed and of unequal length; and in spite of Dâman’s frantic efforts to avoid the thrusts of his assailant, the longer of the two points was presently driven deep into his chest. He was now powerless, for the barbed tip could not be withdrawn, and the sharp point of the shorter blade prevented him from running up the spear, and getting to close quarters with his *kris*, as has frequently been done in the Peninsula by one mortally stricken.

The women screamed shrilly, and Minah sought to run to her husband’s aid, but those around her held her fast in spite of her tears and struggles. The weeders from all parts of the field had assembled, and stood watching the unequal fight, the men standing aloof, murmuring sullenly, but not daring to interfere, the women huddled together in terrified groups, wailing piteously—and above the tumult the coarse laugh of the Chief rang out.

“Verily a fish at the tip of a fish spear! Watch how he writhes and wriggles! Have a care not to kill him until we have had our sport with him,!”

But Dâman, who had not uttered a sound, was still fighting gamely. He soon found that it was impossible for him to wrench the barbed spear from his breast, and seeing this, he threw his *kris* violently in the face of the man who had stabbed him. The snaky blade flew straight as a dart, and the tip ripped open the cheek and eyelid of Dâman’s assailant. Blinded by the blood, the latter dropped the end of the spear, and Dâman now strove

manfully, in spite of the agony it occasioned him, to wrench the blade free. This was an unexpected turn for affairs to take, and the Chief's laughter stopped abruptly.

"Kill him! Kill him!" he screamed to his men; and forthwith Kria, who had recovered his weapon, stabbed Dâman full in the throat with the broad spear-blade. The murdered man collapsed on the ground, giving vent to a thick, choking cough, and no sooner was he down than all the Chief's youths rushed in to whet their blades in his shuddering flesh.

Mînah, distraught with grief and horror, threw herself prostrate upon the ground, seeking to shut out the sight with her tightly clasped hands; and as she lay on the warm earth, the wailing of the women, the rough growlings of the men, and the soft whisperings of the steel blades, piercing the now lifeless body of her husband, told her that all was over.

The day waned, the darkness shut down over the land, and the moon rose above the broad, still river, pale and passionless, looking calmly down upon a world which, bathed in her rays, seemed unutterably peaceful and serene. But all through that night, and during many days and nights to come, the pitiful wailing of a girl broke the stillness of the silent hours in the neighbourhood of the Chief's compound. It was only Mînah mourning for her dead, and taking more time than her friends thought altogether necessary to become accustomed to her surroundings as one of the household of the Chief.

Her new lord was not unnaturally annoyed by her senseless clamour; and beating, he discovered, tended only to increase the nuisance. But crumpled rose leaves are to be met with in every bed of flowers, and the Chief had, at any rate, the satisfaction of knowing that for the future the season of weeding would be a merry time for him, and that all would be conducted with seemliness and with order, without any risk of his peace or his pleasure being further disturbed by rude and vulgar brawls.