

The Were-tiger

By Sir Hugh Clifford

I

In the more remote parts of the Malay Peninsula five and twenty years ago we lived in the Middle Ages, surrounded by all the appropriate accessories of the dark centuries. Magic and evil spirits, witchcraft and sorcery, spells and love-potions, charms and incantations are, to the mind of the unsophisticated native, as much a matter of everyday life, and almost as commonplace, as is the miracle of the growing rice or the mystery of the reproduction of species. This basic fact must be realized by the European, if the native's view of human existence is to be understood, for it underlies all his conceptions of things as they are. Tales of the marvellous and of the supernatural excite interest and it may be fear in a Malayan audience, but they occasion no surprise. Malays, were they given to such abstract discussions, would probably dispute the accuracy of the term "supernatural" as applied to much that white men would place unhesitatingly in that category. They *know* that strange things have happened in the past and are daily occurring to them and to their fellows. Such experiences are not common to all, just as one man here and there may be struck by lightning while his neighbours go unscathed; but the manifestations of electric force do not appeal to them as less or more unnatural than other inexplicable phenomena which fill human life with awe.

The white man and the white man's justice are placed by this in a position at once anomalous and embarrassing. Unshaken native testimony, we hold, provides evidence which justifies us in sentencing a fellow creature to death or to a long term of imprisonment; yet we hesitate to accept it or to regard it as equally conclusive when it points, no less unerringly, to the proved existence of, say, the Malayan *loup garou*. The Malays of Sâiyong, in the Pêrak Valley, for instance, know how Haji Abdullah, the native of the little state of Korinchi, in Sumatra, was caught stark naked in a tiger-trap, and thereafter purchased his liberty at the price of the buffaloes he had slain while he marauded in the likeness of a beast. The Malays of other parts of the Peninsula know of numerous instances of Korinchi men who have vomited feathers, after feasting upon fowls, when for the nonce they had assumed the likeness of tigers; and of other men of the same race who have left their garments and their trading-packs in thickets, whence presently a tiger has emerged. The Malay, however, does not know that his strange belief finds its exact counterpart in almost every quarter of the globe where man has found himself in close association with beasts of prey, but such knowledge would neither strengthen nor weaken his faith in that which he regards as a proven fact. The white man, on the other hand, may see in the universality of this superstition nothing more than an illustration of the effect of an abiding fear upon the human mind; but that explanation—if explanation it can, indeed, be called—does not carry him much farther along the path of discovery. Meanwhile, he has to shoulder aside as worthless masses of native evidence, which in any other connection he would accept as final.

II

The Slim valley lies across the mountain range which divides Pahang from Pêrak. It used to be peopled by Malays of various races—Râwas and Menangkâbaus from Sumatra, men with high-sounding titles and vain boasts wherewith to carry off their squalid, dirty poverty; Pêrak Malays from the fair Kinta Valley, prospecting for tin or trading skilfully; fugitives from troublous Pahang, long settled in the district; and the sweepings of Java, Sumatra, and the Peninsula.

Into the Slim Valley, some thirty years ago, there came a Korinchi trader named Haji Mi, and his two sons, Abdulrahman and Abas. They came, as is the manner of their people, laden with heavy packs of *sârong*—the native skirt or waistcloth—trudging in single file through the forest and through the villages, hawking their goods among the natives of the place, driving hard bargains and haggling cunningly. But though they came to trade, they stayed long after they had disposed of the contents of their packs, for Haji Ali took a fancy to the place. In those days, of course, land was to be had almost for the asking; wherefore he and his two sons set to work to clear a compound, to build a house, with a grove of young cocoanut trees planted around it, and to cultivate a rice swamp. They were quiet, well-behaved people; they were regular in their attendance at the mosque for the Friday congregational prayers; and as they were wealthy and prosperous, they found favour in the eyes of their poorer neighbours. Accordingly, when Haji Ali let it be known that he desired to find a wife, there was a bustle in the villages among the parents of marriageable daughters, and though he was a man well past middle life, a wide range of choice was offered to him.

The girl he finally selected was named Patîmah, the daughter of poor folk, peasants who lived on their little patch of land in one of the neighbouring villages. She was a comely maiden, plump and round and light of colour, with a merry face to cheer, and willing fingers wherewith to serve a husband. The wedding-portion was paid; a feast proportionate to Haji Ali's wealth was held to celebrate the occasion; and the bride, after a decent interval, was earned off to her husband's house among the newly planted fruit trees and palm groves. This was not the general custom of the land, for among Malays the husband usually shares his father-in-law's home for a long period after his marriage. But Haji Ali had a fine new house, brave with wattled walls stained cunningly in black and white, and with a luxuriant covering of thatch. Moreover, he had taken the daughter of a poor man to wife, and could dictate his own terms, in most matters, to her and to her parents.

The girl went willingly enough, for she was exchanging poverty for wealth, a miserable hovel for a handsome home, and parents who knew how to get out of her the last ounce of work of which she was capable, for a husband who seemed ever kind, generous, and indulgent. She had also the satisfaction of knowing that she had made an exceedingly good marriage, and was an object of envy to all her contemporaries. None the less, three days later, at the hour when the dawn was breaking, she was found beating upon the door of her father's house, screaming to be taken in, trembling in every limb, with her hair disordered, her garments drenched with dew from the underwood through which she had rushed, and in a state of panic bordering on dementia.

Her story—the first act in the drama of the were-tiger of Slim—ran in this wise:

She had gone home with Haji Ali to the house in which he lived with his two sons, Abdulrahman and Abas, and all had treated her kindly and with courtesy. The first day she had cooked the rice insufficiently, and though the young men had grumbled Haji Ali had said no word of blame, when she had expected a slapping, such as would have fallen to the lot of most wives in similar circumstances.

She had, she declared, no complaint to make of her husband's treatment of her; but she had fled his roof forever, and her parents might "hang her on high, sell her in a far land, scorch her with the sun's rays, immerse her in water, burn her with fire," ere aught should induce her to return to one who hunted by night in the likeness of a were-tiger.

Every evening, after the hour of evening prayer, Haji Mi had left the house on one pretext or another, and had not returned until an hour before the dawn. Twice she had not been aware of his return until she had found him lying on the sleeping-mat by her side; but on the third night she had remained awake until a noise without told her that her husband was at hand. Then she had arisen and had hastened to unbar the door, which she had fastened on the inside after Abdulrahman and Abas had fallen asleep. The moon was behind a cloud and the light she cast was dim, but Patimah had seen clearly enough the sight which had driven her mad with terror.

On the topmost rung of the ladder, which in this, as in all Malay houses, led from the ground to the threshold of the door, there rested the head of a full-grown tiger. Patimah could see the bold, black stripes that marked his hide, the bristling wires of whisker, the long, cruel teeth, the fierce green light in the beast's eyes. A round pad, with long curved claws partially concealed, lay on the ladder-rung, one on each side of the monster's head; and the lower portion of the body, reaching to the ground, was so foreshortened that, to the girl, it looked like the body of a man. Patimah stood gazing at the tiger from the distance of only a foot or two, for she was too paralyzed with fear and could neither move nor cry out; and as she looked, a gradual transformation took place in the creature at her feet. Much as one sees a ripple of cool air pass over the surface of molten metal, the tiger's features palpitated and were changed, until the horrified girl saw the face of her husband come up through that of the beast, just as that of a diver comes up from the depths through still waters. In another moment Patimah understood that it was Haji Au, her husband, who was ascending the ladder of his house, and the spell which had held her motionless was snapped. The first use which she made of her recovered power to move was to leap past him through the doorway, and to plunge into the jungle which edged the compound.

Malays do not love to travel singly through the forest, even when the sun is high, and in ordinary circumstances no woman could by any means be prevailed upon to do such a thing. But Patimah was distraught with fear; and though she was alone, though the moonlight was dim and the dawn had not yet come, she preferred the terror-haunted depths of the jungle to the home of her were-tiger husband. Thus she forced her way through the brushwood, tearing her clothes, scarifying her flesh with thorns, catching her feet in creepers and trailing vines, drenching herself to the skin with dew, and so running and falling, and rising to run and fall again, she made her way to her father's house, there to tell the tale of her appalling experience.

The story of what had occurred was speedily noised abroad through the villages, and was duly reported to the nearest white man, who heard it with the white man's usual scepticism; while the parents of marriageable daughters, who had been mortified by Haji

Ali's choice of a wife, hastened to assure Patîmah's papa and mamma that they had always anticipated something of the sort.

A really remarkable fact, however, was that Haji All made no attempt to regain possession of his wife; and this acquires a special significance owing to the extraordinary tenacity which characterizes all Sumatra Malays in relation to their rights in property. His neighbours drew a natural inference from his inaction, and shunned him so sedulously that thenceforth he and his sons were compelled to live in almost complete isolation.

But the drama of the were-tiger of Slim was to have a final act.

One night a fine young water-buffalo, the property of the Headman, Penghûlu Mat Saleh, was killed by a tiger, and its owner, saying no word to any man, constructed a cunningly arranged spring-gun over the carcase. The trigger-lines were so set that if the tiger returned to finish his meal—which, after the manner of his kind, he had begun by tearing a couple of hurried mouthfuls out of the rump—he must infallibly be wounded or killed by the bolts and slugs with which the gun was charged.

Next night a loud report, breaking in clanging echoes through the stillness an hour or two before the dawn was due, apprised Penghûlu Mat Saleh that some animal had fouled the trigger-lines. The chances were that it was the tiger; and if he were wounded, he would not be a pleasant creature to meet on a dark night. Accordingly, Penghûlu Mat Saleh lay still until morning.

In a Malayan village all are astir very shortly after daybreak. As soon as it is light enough to see to walk, the doors of the houses open one by one, and the people of the village come forth, huddled to the chin in their *sĕlîmut*, or coverlets. Each man makes his way down to the river to perform his morning ablutions, or stands or squats on the bank of the stream, staring sleepily at nothing in particular, a motionless figure outlined dimly against the broad ruddiness of a Malayan dawn. Presently the women of the village emerge from their houses, in little knots of three or four, with the children astride upon their hips or pattering at their heels. They carry clusters of gourds in their hands, for it is their duty to fill them from the running stream with the water which will be needed during the day. It is not until the sun begins to make its power felt through the mists of morning, when ablutions have been carefully performed and the drowsiness of the waking-hour has departed from heavy eyes, that the people of the village turn their indolent thoughts toward the business of the day.

Penghûlu Mat Saleh arose that morning and went through his usual daily routine before he set to work to collect a party of Malays to aid him in his search for the wounded tiger. He had no difficulty in finding men who were willing to share the excitement of the adventure, for most Malays are endowed with sporting instincts; and he presently started on his quest with a ragged following of nearly a dozen at his heels, armed with spears and *kris* and having among them a couple of muskets. On arrival at the spot where the spring-gun had been set, they found that beyond a doubt the tiger had returned to his kill. The tracks left by the great pads were fresh, and the tearing up of the earth on one side of the dead buffalo, in a spot where the grass was thickly flecked with blood, showed that the shot had taken effect.

Penghûlu Mat Saleh and his people then set down steadily to follow the trail of the wounded tiger. This was an easy matter, for the beast had gone heavily on three legs, the off hind-leg dragging uselessly. In places, too, a clot of blood showed red among the

dew-drenched leaves and grasses. None the less, the Penghûlu and his party followed slowly and with caution. They knew that a wounded tiger is an ill beast to tackle at any time, and that even when he has only three legs with which to spring upon his enemies, he can on occasion arrange for a large escort of human beings to accompany him into the land of shadows.

The trail led through the brushwood, in the midst of which the dead buffalo was lying, and thence into a belt of jungle which covered the bank of the river and extended upstream from a point a few hundreds of yards above Penghûlu Mat Saleh's village to Kuâla Chin Lâma, half a dozen miles away. The tiger had turned up-river after entering this patch of forest, and half a mile higher he had come out upon a slender foot-path through the woods.

When Penghûlu Mat Saleh had followed the trail thus far, he halted and looked at his people.

"What say you?" he whispered. "Do you know whither this track leads?"

His companions nodded, but said never a word. They were obviously excited and ill at ease.

"What say you?" continued the Penghûlu. "Do we follow or not follow?"

"It is as you will, O Penghûlu," replied the oldest man of the party, speaking for his fellows. "We follow whithersoever you go.

"It is well," said the Penghûlu. "Come, let us go."

No more was said when this whispered colloquy was ended, and the trackers set down to the trail again silently and with redoubled caution.

The narrow path which the tiger had followed led on in the direction of the river-bank, and ere long the high wattled bamboo fence of a native compound became visible through the trees. Penghûlu Mat Saleh pointed at it, turning to his followers.

"See yonder," he said.

Again the little band moved forward, still tracing the slot of the tiger and the flecks of blood upon the pass. These led them to the gate of the compound, and through it, to the *'ârnan*, or open space before the house. Here the spoor vanished at a spot where the rank spear-blades of the *lâlang* grass had been crushed to earth by the weight of some heavy body. To it the trail of the limping tiger led. Away from it there were no footprints, save those of the human beings who come and go through the untidy weeds and grasses which cloak the soil in a Malayan compound.

Penghûlu Mat Saleh and his followers exchanged troubled glances.

"Come, let us ascend into the house," said the former; and forthwith led the way up the stair-ladder of the dwelling where Haji Mi lived with his two sons, and whence a month or two before Patîmah had fled during the night time with a deadly fear in her eyes and an incredible story faltering upon her lips.

The Penghûlu and his people found Abas, one of the Haji's sons, sitting cross-legged in the outer apartment, preparing a quid of betel nut with elaborate care. The visitors squatted on the mats and exchanged with him the customary salutations. Then Penghûlu Mat Saleh said:

"I have come hither that I may see your father. Is he within the house?"

"He is," replied Abas laconically.

"Then, make known to him that I would have speech with him."

"My father is sick," said Abas in a surly tone, and again his visitors exchanged glances.

“What is that patch of blood in the *lâlang* grass before the house?” asked the Penghûlu conversationally, after a slight pause.

“We killed a goat yesternight,” Abas answered.

“Have you the skin, O Abas?” enquired the Headman. “I am renewing the faces of my drums and would fain purchase it.”

“The skin was mangy and therefore we cast it into the river,” said Abas.

The conversation languished while the Penghûlu’s followers pushed the clumsy wooden betel-box along the mat covered floor from one to the other, and silently prepared their quids.

“What ails your father?” asked the Penghûlu presently, returning to the charge.

“He is sick,” a rough voice said suddenly, speaking from the curtained doorway which led into the inner apartment.

It was the elder of the two sons, Abdulrahman, who spoke. He held a sword in his hand, a kris was stuck in his girdle, and his face wore an ugly look. His words came harshly and gratingly with the foreign accent of the Korinchi people. He continued to speak, still standing near the doorway.

“My father is sick, O Penghûlu,” he said. “Moreover, the noise of your words disturbs him. He desires to slumber and be still. Descend out of the house. He cannot see you. Attend to these my words.”

Abdulrahman’s manner and the words he spoke were at once so rough and so defiant that the Headman saw that he would have to choose between a scuffle, which would certainly mean bloodshed, and an ignominious retreat. He was a mild old man, and he drew a monthly stipend from the Government of Pêrak. He did not wish to place this in jeopardy, and he knew that the white men entertained prejudices against bloodshed and homicide, even if the person slain was a wizard or the son of a wizard. He therefore decided in favour of retreat.

As they were climbing down the stair-ladder, Mat Tahir, one of the Penghûlu’s men, plucked him by the sleeve and pointed to a spot beneath the house. Just below the place in the inner apartment where Haji All might be supposed to be lying stretched upon the mat of sickness, the ground was stained a dull red colour for a space of several inches in circumference. The floors of Malayan houses are made of laths of bamboo laid parallel one to another at regular intervals and lashed together with rattan. The interstices thus formed are convenient, as the slovenly Malays are thereby enabled to use the whole of the ground beneath the house as a slop-pail, waste-basket, and rubbish-heap. The red stain, situated where it was, had the appearance of blood— blood, moreover, from some one within the house whose wound had been recently washed and dressed. It might equally, of course, have been the rinsings of a spittoon reddened by the expectorated juice of the betel nut, but its stains are rarely seen in such large patches. Whatever the origin of the stain, the Penghûlu and his people were afforded no opportunity of examining it more closely, for Abdulrahman and Abas, truculent to the last, followed them out of the compound and barred the gate against them.

Then the Penghûlu, taking a couple of his people with him, set off on foot for Tanjong Mâlim in the neighbouring district of Bêrnâ, where lived the white man under whose administrative charge the Slim valley had been placed. He went with many misgivings, for he had had some experience of the easy scepticism of white folk; and when he returned, more or less dissatisfied some days later, he learned that Haji Ali and his sons

had disappeared. They had fled down river on a dark night, without a soul being made aware of their intended departure. They had not stayed to reap their crop, which even then was ripening in the fields; to dispose of their house and compound, upon which they had expended. not only labour, but “dollars of the whitest,” as the Malay phrase has it; not even to collect their debts, which chanced to be rather numerous. This was the fact which struck the white district officer as by far the most improbable incident of any connected with the strange story of the were-tiger of Slim, and for the moment it seemed to him to admit of only one explanation. Haji Ali and his sons had been the victims of foul play. They had been quietly done to death by the simple villagers of Slim, and a cock-and-bull story had been trumped up to account for their disappearance.

The white man would probably still be holding fast to this theory, were it not that Haji Ali and his sons happened to turn up in quite another part of the Peninsula a few months later. They had nothing out of the way about them to mark them from their fellows, except that Haji Ali limped badly with his right leg.