

The Ghoul

By Sir Hugh Clifford

He had been sitting late upon the veranda of my bungalow at Kuâla Lîpis, which, from the top of a low hill covered with coarse pass, overlooked the long, narrow reach formed by the combined waters of the Lîpis and the Jêlai. The moon had risen some hours earlier, and the river ran white between the black masses of forest, which seemed to shut it in on all sides, giving to it the appearance of an isolated tarn. The roughly cleared compound, with the tennis ground which had never got beyond the stage of being dug over and weeded, and the rank growths beyond the bamboo fence, were flooded by the soft light, every tattered detail of their ugliness standing revealed as relentlessly as though it were noon. The night was very still, but the heavy, scented air was cool after the fierce heat of the day. I had been holding forth to the handful of men who had been dining with me on the subject of Malay superstitions, while they manfully stifled their yawns. When a man has a working knowledge of anything which is not commonly known to his neighbours, he is apt to presuppose their interest in it when a chance to descant upon it occurs, and in those days it was only at long intervals that I had an opportunity of forgathering with other white men. Therefore, I had made the most of it, and looking back, I fear that I had occupied the rostrum during the greater part of that evening. I had told my audience of the *pěnanggal*—the “Undone One”—that horrible wraith a woman who has died in childbirth, who comes to torment and prey upon small children in the guise of a ghastly face and bust, with a comet’s tail of blood-stained entrails flying in her wake; of the *mati-anak*, the weird little white animal which makes beast noises round the graves of children, and is supposed to have absorbed their souls; and of the *pôlong*, or familiar spirits, which men bind to their service by raising them up from the corpses of babies that have been stillborn, the tips of whose tongues they bite off and swallow after the infant has been brought to life by magic agencies. It was at this point that young Middleton began to pluck up his ears; and I, finding that one of my hearers was at last showing signs of being interested, launched out with renewed vigour, until my sorely tried companions, one by one, went off to bed, each to his own quarters.

Middleton was staying with me at the time, and he and I sat for a while in silence, after the others had gone, looking at the moonlight on the river. Middleton was the first to speak.

“That was a curious myth you were telling us about the *pôlong*,” he said. “There is an incident connected with it which I have never spoken of before, and have always sworn that I would keep to myself; but I have a good mind to tell you about it, because you are the only man I know who will not write me down a liar if I do.”

“That’s all right. Fire away,” I said.

“Well,” said Middleton. “It was like this. You remember Juggins, of course? He was a naturalist, you know, dead nuts upon becoming an F. R. S. and all that sort of thing, and

he came to stay with me during the close season¹ last year. He was hunting for bugs and orchids and things, and spoke of himself as an anthropologist and a botanist and a zoologist, and Heaven knows what besides; and he used to fill his bedroom with all sorts of creeping, crawling things, kept in very indifferent custody, and my veranda with all kinds of trash and rotting green trade that he brought in from the jungle. He stopped with me for about ten days, and when he heard that duty was taking me upriver into the Sâkai country, he asked me to let him come, too. I was rather bored, for the tribesmen are mighty shy of strangers and were only just getting used to me; but he was awfully keen, and a decent beggar enough, in spite of his dirty ways, so I couldn't very well say 'No.' When we had poled upstream for about a week, and had got well up into the Sâkai country, we had to leave our boats behind at the foot of the big rapids, and leg it for the rest of the time. It was very rough going, wading up and down streams when one wasn't clambering up a hillside or sliding down the opposite slope—you know the sort of thing—and the leeches were worse than I have ever seen them—thousands of them, swarming up your back, and fastening in clusters on to your neck, even when you had defeated those which made a frontal attack. I had not enough men with me to do more than hump the camp-kit and a few clothes, so we had to live on the country, which doesn't yield much up among the Sâkai except yams and tapioca roots and a little Indian corn, and soft stuff of that sort. It was all new to Juggins, and gave him fits; but he stuck to it like a man.

“Well, one evening when the night was shutting down pretty fast and rain was beginning to fall, Juggins and I struck a fairly large Sâkai camp in the middle of a clearing. As soon as we came out of the jungle, and began tightroping along the felled timber, the Sâkai sighted us and bolted for covert *en masse*. By the time we reached the huts it was pelting in earnest, and as my men were pretty well fagged out, I decided to spend the night in the camp, and not to make them put up temporary shelters for us. Sâkai huts are uncleanly places at best, and any port has to do in a storm.

“We went into the largest of the hovels, and there we found a woman lying by the side of her dead child. She had apparently felt too sick to bolt with the rest of her tribe. The kid was as stiff as Herod, and had not been born many hours, I should say. The mother seemed pretty bad, and I went to her, thinking I might be able to do something for her; but she did not seem to see it, and bit and snarled at me like a wounded animal, clutching at the dead child the while, as though she feared I should take it from her. I therefore left her alone; and Juggins and I took up our quarters in a smaller hut nearby, which was fairly new and not so filthy dirty as most Sâkai lairs.

“Presently, when the beggars who had run away found out that I was the intruder, they began to come back again. You know their way. First a couple of men came and peeped at us, and vanished as soon as they saw they were observed. Then they came a trifle nearer, bobbed up suddenly, and peeped at us again. I called to them in Sě-noi,² which always reassures them, and when they at last summoned up courage to approach, gave

¹ “Close season.” *i. e.* from the beginning of November to the end of February during which time the rivers on the eastern seaboard of the Malay Peninsula used to be closed to traffic on account of the North East Monsoon.

² One of the two main branches into which the Sâkai are divided. The other is called *Ti-mi-au* by the *Sě-noi*. All the Sâkai dialects are variants of the languages spoken by these two principal tribes, which, though they have many words in common, differ from one another almost as much as, say, Italian from Spanish.

them each a handful of tobacco. Then they went back into the jungle and fetched the others, and very soon the place was crawling with Sâkai of both sexes and all ages.

“We got a meal of sorts, and settled down for the night as best we could; but it wasn’t a restful business. Juggins swore with eloquence at the uneven flooring, made of very roughly trimmed boughs, which is an infernally uncomfortable thing to lie down upon, and makes one’s bones ache as though they were coming out at the joints, and the Sâkai are abominably restless bedfellows as you know. I suppose one ought to realize that they have as yet only partially emerged from the animal, and that, like the beasts, they are still naturally nocturnal. Anyway, they never sleep for long at a stretch, though from time to time they snuggle down and snore among the piles of warm wood ashes round the central fireplace, and whenever you wake, you will always see half a dozen of them squatting near the blazing logs, half hidden by the smoke, and jabbering like monkeys. It is a marvel to me what they find to yarn about: food, or rather the patent impossibility of ever getting enough to eat, and the stony-heartedness of Providence and of the neighbouring Malays must furnish the principal topics, I should fancy, with an occasional respectful mention of beasts of prey and forest demons. That night they were more than ordinarily restless. The dead baby was enough to make them uneasy, and besides, they had got wet while hiding in the jungle after our arrival, and that always sets the skin disease, with which all Sâkai are smothered, itching like mad. Whenever I woke I could hear their nails going on their dirty hides; but I had had a hard day and was used to my hosts’ little ways, so I contrived to sleep fairly sound. Juggins told me next morning that he had had *une nuit blanche*, and he nearly caused another stampede among the Sâkai by trying to get a specimen of the fungus or bacillus, or whatever it is, that occasions the skin disease. I do not know whether he succeeded. For my own part, I think it is probably due to chronic anæmia—the poor devils have never had more than a very occasional full meal for hundreds of generations. I have seen little brats, hardly able to stand, white with it, the skin peeling off in flakes, and I used to frighten Juggins out of his senses by telling him he had contracted it when his nose was flayed by the sun.

“Next morning I woke just in time to see the stillborn baby put into a hole in the ground. They fitted its body into a piece of bark, and stuck it in the grave they had dug for it at the edge of the clearing. They buried a flint and steel and a woodknife and some food, and a few other things with it, though no living baby could have had any use for most of them, let alone a dead one. Then the old medicine man of the tribe recited the ritual over the pave. I took the trouble to translate it once. It goes something like this:

“ ‘O Thou, who hast gone forth from among those who dwell upon the surface of the earth, and hast taken for thy dwelling-place the land which is beneath the earth, flint and steel have we given thee to kindle thy fire, raiment to clothe thy nakedness, food to fill thy belly, and a woodknife to clear thy path. Go, then, and make unto thyself friends among those who dwell beneath the earth, and come back no more to trouble or molest those who dwell upon the surface of the earth.’

“It was short and to the point; and then they trampled down the soil, while the mother, who had got upon her feet by now, whimpered about the place like a cat that had lost its kittens. A mangy, half-starved dog came and smelt hungrily about the grave, until it was sent howling away by kicks from every human animal that could reach it; and a poor little brat, who chanced to set up a piping song a few minutes later, was kicked and cuffed and knocked about by all who could conveniently get at him with foot, hand, or missile.

Abstinence from song and dance for a period of nine days is the Sâkai way of mourning the dead, and any breach of this is held to give great offence to the spirit of the departed and to bring bad luck upon the tribe. It was considered necessary, therefore, to give the urchin who had done the wrong a fairly bad time of it in order to propitiate the implacable dead baby.

“Next the Sâkai set to work to pack all their household goods—not a very laborious business; and in about half an hour the last of the laden women, who was carrying so many cooking-pots, and babies and rattan bags and carved bamboo-boxes and things, that she looked like the outside of a gipsy’s cart at home, had filed out of the clearing and disappeared in the forest. The Sâkai always shift camp, like that, when a death occurs, because they think the ghost of the dead haunts the place where the body died. When an epidemic breaks out among them they are so busy changing quarters, building new huts, and planting fresh catch crops that they have no time to procure proper food, and half those who are not used up by the disease die of semi-starvation. They are a queer lot.

“Well, Juggins and I were left alone, but my men needed a rest, so I decided to trek no farther that day, and Juggins and I spent our time trying to get a shot at a *seladang*,³ but though we came upon great ploughed-up runs, which the herds had made going down to water, we saw neither hoof nor horn, and returned at night to the deserted Sâkai camp, two of my Malays fairly staggering under the piles of rubbish which Juggins called his botanical specimens. The men we had left behind had contrived to catch some fish, and with that and yams we got a pretty decent meal, and I was lying on my mat reading by the aid of a *damar* torch, and thinking how lucky it was that the Sâkai had cleared out, when suddenly old Juggins sat up, with his eyes fairly snapping at me through his gig-lamps in his excitement.

“ ‘I say,’ he said. ‘I must have that baby. It would make a unique and invaluable ethnological specimen.’

“ ‘Rot,’ I said. ‘Go to sleep, old man. I want to read.’

“ ‘No, but I’m serious,’ said Juggins. ‘You do not realize the unprecedented character of the opportunity. The Sâkai have gone away, so their susceptibilities would not be outraged. The potential gain to science is immense—simply immense. It would be criminal to neglect such a chance. I regard the thing in the light of a duty which I owe to human knowledge. I tell you straight, I mean to have that baby whether you like it or not, and that is flat.’

“Juggins was forever talking about human knowledge, as though he and it were partners in a business firm.

“ ‘It is not only the Sâkai one has to consider,’ I said. ‘My Malays are sensitive about body snatching, too. One has to think about the effect upon them.’

“ ‘I can’t help that,’ said Juggins resolutely. ‘I am going out to dig it up now.’

“He had already put his boots on, and was sorting out his botanical tools in search of a trowel. I saw that there was no holding him.

“ ‘Juggins,’ I said sharply. ‘Sit down. You are a lunatic, of course, but I was another when I allowed you to come up here with me, knowing as I did that you are the particular species of crank you are. However, I’ve done you as well as circumstances permitted, and as a mere matter of gratitude and decency, I think you might do what I wish.’

³ *Seladang* The gaur or wild buffalo. It is the same as the Indian variety, but in the Malay Peninsula attains to a greater size than in any other part of Asia.

“ ‘I am sorry,’ said Juggins stiffly. ‘I am extremely sorry not to be able to oblige you. My duty as a man of science, however, compels me to avail myself of this god-sent opportunity of enlarging our ethnological knowledge of a little-known people.’

“ ‘I thought you did not believe in God,’ I said sourly; for Juggins added a militant agnosticism to his other attractive qualities.

“ ‘I believe in my duty to human knowledge,’ he replied sententiously. ‘And if you will not help me to perform it, I must discharge it unaided.’

“He had found his trowel, and again rose to his feet.

“ ‘Don’t be an ass, Juggins,’ I said. ‘Listen to me. I have forgotten more about the people and the country here than you will ever learn. If you go and dig up that dead baby, and my Malays see you, there will be the devil to pay. They do not hold with exhumed corpses, and have no liking for or sympathy with people who go fooling about with such things. They have not yet been educated up to the pitch of interest in the secrets of science which has made of you a potential criminal, and if they could understand our talk, they would be convinced that you needed the kid’s body for some devilry or witchcraft business, and ten to one they would clear out and leave us in the lurch. Then who would carry your precious botanical specimens back to the boats for you, and just think how the loss of them would knock the bottom out of human knowledge for good and all.’

“ ‘The skeleton of the child is more valuable still,’ replied Juggins. ‘It is well that you should understand that in this matter—which for me is a question of my duty—I am not to be moved from my purpose either by arguments or threats.’

“He was as obstinate as a mule, and I was pretty sick with him; but I saw that if I left him to himself he would do the thing so clumsily that my fellows would get wind of it, and if that happened I was afraid that they might desert us. The tracks in that Sâkai country are abominably confusing, and quite apart from the fear of losing all our camp-kit, which we could not hump for ourselves, I was by no means certain that I could find my own way back to civilization unaided. Making a virtue of necessity, therefore, I decided that I would let Juggins have his beastly specimen, provided that he would consent to be guided entirely by me in all details connected with the exhumation.

“ ‘You are a rotter of the first water,’ I said frankly. ‘And if I ever get you back to my station, I’ll have nothing more to do with you as long as I live. All the same, I am to blame for having brought you up here, and I suppose I must see you through.’

“ ‘You’re a brick,’ said Juggins, quite unmoved by my insults. ‘Come on.’

“ ‘Wait,’ I replied repressively. ‘This thing cannot be done until my people are all asleep. Lie down on your mat and keep quiet. When it is safe, I’ll give you the word.’

“Juggins groaned, and tried to persuade me to let him go at once; but I swore that nothing would induce me to move before midnight, and with that I rolled over on my side and lay reading and smoking, while Juggins fumed and fretted as he watched the slow hands of his watch creeping round the dial.

“I always take books with me into the jungle, and the more completely incongruous they are to my immediate surroundings the more refreshing I find them. That evening, I remember, I happened to be rereading Miss Florence Montgomery’s “Misunderstood” with the tears running down my nose; and by the time my Malays were all asleep, this incidental wallowing in sentimentality had made me more sick with Juggins and his disgusting project than ever.

“I never felt so like a criminal as I did that night, as Juggins and I gingerly picked our way out of the hut across the prostrate forms of my sleeping Malays; nor had I realized before what a difficult job it is to walk without noise on an openwork flooring of uneven boughs. We got out of the place and down the crazy stair-ladder at last, without waking any of my fellows, and we then began to creep along the edge of the jungle that hedged the clearing about. Why did we think it necessary to creep? I don’t know. Partly we did not want to be seen by the Malays, if any of them happened to wake; but besides that, the long wait and the uncanny sort of work we were after had set our nerves going a bit, I expect.

“The night was as still as most nights are in real, *pukka* jungle. That is to say, that it was as full of noises—little, quiet, half-heard beast and tree noises—as an egg is full of meat; and every occasional louder sound made me jump almost out of my skin. There was not a breath astir in the clearing, but miles up above our heads the clouds were racing across the moon, which looked as though it were scudding through them in the opposite direction at a tremendous rate, like a great white fire balloon. It was pitch dark along the edge of the clearing, for the jungle threw a heavy shadow; and Juggins kept knocking those great clumsy feet of his against the stumps, and swearing softly under his breath.

“Just as we were getting near the child’s grave the clouds obscuring the moon became a trifle thinner, and the slightly increased light showed me something that caused me to clutch Juggins by the arm.

“ ‘Hold hard!’ I whispered, squatting down instinctively in the shadow, and dragging him after me. ‘What’s that on the grave?’

“Juggins hauled out his six-shooter with a tug, and looking at his face, I saw that he was as pale as death and more than a little shaky. He was pressing up against me, too, as he squatted, a bit closer, I fancied, than he would have thought necessary at any other time, and it seemed to me that he was trembling. I whispered to him, telling him not to shoot; and we sat there for nearly a minute, I should think, peering through the uncertain light, and trying to make out what the creature might be which was crouching above the grave and making a strange scratching noise.

“Then the moon came out suddenly into a patch of open sky, and we could see clearly at last, and what it revealed did not make me, for one, feel any better. The thing we had been looking at was kneeling on the grave, facing us. It, or rather she, was an old, old Sâkai hag. She was stark naked, and in the brilliant light of the moon I could see her long, pendulous breasts swaying about like an ox’s dew-lap, and the creases and wrinkles with which her withered hide was criss-crossed, and the discoloured patches of foul skin disease. Her hair hung about her face in great matted locks, falling forward as she bent above the grave, and her eyes glinted through the tangle like those of some unclean and shaggy animal. Her long fingers, which had nails like claws, were tearing at the dirt of the grave, and her body was drenched with sweat, so that it glistened in the moonlight.

“ ‘It looks as though some one else wanted your precious baby for a specimen, Juggins,’ I whispered; and a spirit of emulation set him floundering on to his feet, till I pulled him back. ‘Keep still, man, I added. ‘Let us see what the old hag is up to. It isn’t the brat’s mother, is it?’

“ ‘No,’ panted Juggins. ‘This is a much older woman. Great God! What a ghoul it is!’

“Then we were silent again. Where we squatted we were hidden from the hag by a few tufts of rank *lâlang* grass, and the shadow of the jungle also covered us. Even if we had

been in the open, however, I question whether the old woman would have seen us, she was so eagerly intent upon her work. For full five minutes, as near as I can guess, we squatted there watching her scrape and tear and scratch at the earth of the grave, with a sort of frenzy of energy; and all the while her lips kept going like a shivering man's teeth, though no sound that I could hear came from them.

"At length she got down to the corpse, and I saw her lift the bark wrapper out of the grave, and draw the baby's body from it. Then she sat back upon her heels, threw up her head, just like a dog, and bayed at the moon. She did this three times, and I do not know what there was about those long-drawn howls that jangled up one's nerves, but each time the sound became more insistent and intolerable, and as I listened, my hair fairly lifted. Then, very carefully, she laid the child's body down in a position that seemed to have some connection with the points of the compass, for she took a long time, and consulted the moon and the shadows repeatedly before she was satisfied with the orientation of the thing's head and feet.

"Then she got up, and began very slowly to dance round and round the grave. It was not a reassuring sight, out there in the awful loneliness of the night, miles away from every one and everything, to watch that abominable old beldam capering uncleanly in the moonlight, while those restless lips of hers called noiselessly upon all the devils in hell, with words that we could not hear. Juggins pressed up against me harder than ever, and his hand on my arm gripped tighter and tighter. He was shaking like a leaf, and I do not fancy that I was much steadier. It does not sound very terrible, as I tell it to you here in comparatively civilized surroundings; but at the time, the sight of that obscure figure dancing silently in the moonlight with its ungainly shadow scared me badly.

"She capered like that for some minutes, setting to the dead baby as though she were inviting it to join her, and the intent purposefulness of her made me feel sick. If anybody had told me that morning that I was capable of being frightened out of my wits by an old woman, I should have laughed; but I saw nothing outlandish in the idea while that grotesque dancing lasted.

"Her movements, which had been very slow at first, became gradually faster and faster, till every atom of her was in violent motion, and her body and limbs were swaying this way and that, like the boughs of a tree in a tornado. Then, all of a sudden, she collapsed on the ground, with her back toward us, and seized the baby's body. She seemed to nurse it, as a mother might nurse her child; and as she swayed from side to side, I could see first the curve of the creature's head, resting on her thin left arm, and then its feet near the crook of her right elbow. And now she was crooning to it in a cracked falsetto chant that might have been a lullaby or perhaps some incantation.

"She rocked the child slowly at first, but very rapidly the pace quickened, until her body was swaying to and fro from the hips, and from side to side, at such a rate that, to me, she looked as though she were falling all ways at once. And simultaneously her shrill chanting became faster and faster, and every instant more nerve-sawing.

"Next she suddenly changed the motion. She gripped the thing she was nursing by its arms, and began to dance it up and down, still moving with incredible agility, and crooning more damnably than ever. I could see the small, puckered face of the thing above her head every time she danced it up, and then, as she brought it down again, I lost sight of it for a second, until she danced it up once more. I kept my eyes fixed upon the thing's face every time it came into view, and I swear it was not an optical illusion—*it*

began to be alive. Its eyes were open and moving, and its mouth was working, like that of a child which tries to laugh but is too young to do it properly. Its face ceased to be like that of a newborn baby at all. It was distorted by a horrible animation. It was the most unearthly sight.

“Juggins saw it, too, for I could hear him drawing his breath harder and shorter than a healthy man should.

“Then, all in a moment, the hag did something. I did not, see clearly precisely what it was; but it looked to me as though she bent forward and kissed it; and at that very instant a cry went up like the wail of a lost soul. It may have been something in the jungle, but I know my Malayan forests pretty thoroughly, and I have never heard any cry like it before nor since. The next thing we knew was that the old hag had thrown the body back into the grave, and was dumping down the earth and jumping on it, while that strange cry grew fainter and fainter. It all happened so quickly that I had not had time to think or move before I was startled back into full consciousness by the sharp crack of Juggins’s revolver fired close to my ear.

“‘She’s burying it alive!’ he cried.

“It was a queer thing for a man to say, who had seen the child lying stark and dead more than thirty hours earlier; but the same thought was in my mind, too, as we both started forward at a run. The hag had vanished into the jungle as silently as a shadow.

Juggins had missed her, of course. He was always a rotten bad shot. However, we had no thought for her. We just flung ourselves upon the grave, and dug at the earth with our hands, until the baby lay in my arms. It was cold and stiff, and putrefaction had already begun its work. I forced open its mouth, and saw something that I had expected. The tip of its tongue was missing. It looked as though it had been bitten off by a set of shocking bad teeth, for the edge left behind was like a saw.

“‘The thing’s quite dead,’ I said to Juggins.

“‘But it cried—it cried!’ whimpered Juggins. ‘I can hear it now. To think that we let that horrible creature murder it.’

“He sat down with his head in his hands. He was utterly unmanned.

“Now that the fright was over, I was beginning to be quite brave again. It is a way I have.

“‘Rot,’ I said. ‘The thing’s been dead for hours, and anyway, here’s your precious specimen if you want it.’

“I had put it down, and now pointed at it from a distance. Its proximity was not pleasant. Juggins, however, only shuddered.

“‘Bury it, in Heaven’s name,’ he said, his voice broken by sobs. ‘I would not have it for the world. Besides, it *was* alive. I saw and heard it.’

“Well, I put it back in its grave, and next day we left the Sâkai country. Juggins had a whacking dose of fever, and anyway we had had about enough of the Sâkai and of all their engaging habits to last us for a bit.

“We swore one another to secrecy as Juggins, when he got his nerve back, said that the accuracy of our observations was not susceptible of scientific proof, which, I understand, was the rock his religion had gone to pieces on; and I did not fancy being told that I was drunk or that I was lying. You, however, know something of the uncanny things of the East, so to-night I have broken our vow. Now I’m going to turn in. Don’t give me away.

Young Middleton died of fever and dysentery, somewhere upcountry, a year or two later. His name was not Middleton, of course; so I am not really “giving him away,” as he called it, even now. As for his companion, though when I last heard of him he was still alive and a shining light in the scientific world, I have named him Juggins, and as the family is a large one, he will run no great risk of being identified.