

The Further Side of Silence

By Sir Hugh Clifford

I

Some years before the impassive British Government came to disturb the peace of primitive nature and to put an end to the strife of primitive man, Kria, son of Mat, a young Malay from one of the western states, sneaked up into the Tělom and established himself as a trader on its banks well within the fringe of the Sâkai country.

Aided by a few Sâkai—feeble and timid jungle-folk, the aboriginal possessors of the Peninsula— but mainly with his own hands, he built himself a house with walls of thick, brown bark, raised to a height of some six feet above the ground on stout, rough-hewn uprights, and securely thatched with bĕrtam palm leaves. It was a rude enough affair, as Malay houses go, but compared with the primitive and lopsided architecture of the Sâkai it was palatial. The fact that this stranger had planned and built such a mansion impressed the fact of his innate racial superiority upon the jungle-dwellers once and for all. Here, they saw, was Genius, no less; though their language (which among other things has only three numerals and as many names for colours) contained no word even remotely conveying any such idea. The mere fact that their poor vocabulary was straightway beggared by the effort to express their admiration, left them mentally gasping; wherefore Kria, son of Mat, a very ordinary young Malay, endowed, as it chanced, with few of the forceful qualities of his race, found himself of a sudden an object of almost superstitious hero-worship.

Kria presently made the discovery anent solitude which is attributed to Adam. He was a Malay and a Muhammadan, to whom the naked, pantheistical Sâkai is a dog of indescribable uncleanliness. Thirty miles down river there was a Malay village where many maidens of his own breed were to be had, almost for the asking, from their grateful parents by a man so well-to-do as Kria had now become; but these ladies were hard-bit, ill-favoured young women, prematurely gnarled by labour in the rice-fields and tanned to the colour of the bottom of a cooking-pot by exposure to sun and weather. Ordinarily, however, the aggressive plainness of these damsels might not have affected the issue; but it chanced that the particular devil whose province it is to look after *mésalliances* was as busy here in this hidden nook of the forest as ever he is in Mayfair. It was surely by his contrivance that Kria, Malay and Muhammadan that he was, fixed his heart upon a Sâkai girl—herself the daughter of Sâkai, nude, barbarous, and disreputable—and the blame may with greater certainty be allotted to him, because Kria's first meeting with her was in no sense of his seeking.

He had come up the Tělom one day from his new house in a dugout imported from down-country, whose finish converted it, in the eyes of his neighbours, into a floating miracle. Kria sat lordly in the stern, steering the little craft with a heavy wooden paddle, while two sweating and straining Sâkai punted her forward against the rush of the current. He wore the loose blouse, serviceable short pants, huddled, many-coloured waistcloth, and the variegated cotton headkerchief which constitute the costume of the average up-country Malay; but judged by debased, local standards, Solomon in all his

glory could hardly be held to owe a heavier debt of gratitude to his tailor. The two men who worked his boat, for example, wore nothing save a dirty strip of bark cloth twisted carelessly about their loins, more, it would appear, for the advantage of having about the person something into which to stick a woodknife, or a tobacco-bamboo, than to subserve any end connected with propriety. Their bodies were scaly with leprous-looking skin disease, and the shaggy shocks of their hair stood out around their heads in regrettable halos. They were smeared with the gray dust of wood ashes, for it is the manner of these hill-folk to go to bed in their fireplaces, whereof the smoke, as their own proverb has it, is their coverlet. This, on their lips, is not a complaint, but a boast. Standards of comfort differ widely, and the Sâkai, simple soul, is genuinely impressed by the extraordinary convenience of thus being able to keep warm o' nights.

Suddenly, as the canoe crept round a bend in the bank, something plunged headlong out of the shadows and dived into the forest on the left. It leaped with a speed so startling, and was swallowed up so instantly, that it was gone before Kria had time even to reach for his musket; but the Sâkai boatmen, who, like the rest of their peoples had the gift of sight through the back of their beads, at once set up a succession of queer animal calls and cries which spluttered off presently into the hiccupping monosyllables which serve these folk as speech. A moment later a clear, bell-like call thrilled from out the forest, so close at hand that the surprise of it made Xria jump and nearly drop his paddle; and then came a ripple of words, like little drops of crystal, which made even the rude Sâkai tongue a thing of music, freshness, and youth. Next the shrubs on the bank were parted by human hands, and Pi-Noi—Breeze of the forest—emerging suddenly, stepped straightway into Kria's life and into the innermost heart of him.

She was a Sâkai girl of about fifteen years of age, naked save for a girdle of dried, black water weed, a string of red berries round her neck, and a scarlet blossom stuck in her hair. She stood there, poised lightly upon her feet, in the agile pose which enables the jungle-folk instantly to convert absolute immobility into a wondrous activity. Her figure, just budding into womanhood, was perfect in every line, from the slender neck to the rounded hips, the cleanly shaped limbs and the small, delicate feet, the whole displayed with a divine unconsciousness which is above mere modesty.

Her skin, smooth as velvet and with much the same downy softness of surface, was an even yellow-brown, without fleck or blemish, and upon it diamond points of water glistened in the sunlight. Her black and glossy hair was twisted carelessly into a magnificent knot at the nape of her neck, little rounded curls straying here and there to soften cheek and forehead. Her face, an oval of great purity, glowed with youth and life. Her lips had something of the pretty pout of childhood. Her chin was firmly modelled; her nose was straight, with nostrils rather wide, quivering, and sensitive; her little ears nestled beneath the glory of her hair.

But it was the eyes of this child which chiefly seized and held the attention. Marvelously large

and round, they were black as night, with irises set in whites that had a faint blue tinge, and with well-defined, black eyebrows arching above them. Their expression was one rarely seen in the human face, though it may be noted now and again in the eyes of wild creatures which have learned to know and partially to trust mankind. It was at once shy and bold, inviting and defiant; friendly, too, within limits; but, above all, watchful and on the alert for fight or for defence at the least hint of danger. Her gaze was bent upon Kria,

and it seemed to him the most alluring thing that he had ever seen. As he looked, he caught his breath with an audible gasp of astonishment and delight.

Love at first sight is a disease very prevalent in Asia, for with the Oriental the lust of the eye is ever the mightiest of forces, and the sorry pretence that the mind rules the passions is not recognized by him as a tenet subscription to which is demanded by self-respect. The Malays name it "*the madness*," and by this Kria now was smitten, suddenly and without warning, as men sometimes are stricken down by the stroke of a vertical sun. Pi-Noi might be a daughter of the despised jungle-folk, an infidel, an eater of unclean things, a creature of the forest almost as wild as the beasts with which she shared a common home; but to Kria she was what the first woman was to the first man. She was more. Standing thus upon the river's brink, with her feet in the crystal ripples, with the tangle of vegetation making for her lithe figure a wondrous background, with the sunlight playing in and out of the swaying, green canopy above her head and dappling her clear skin with shifting splashes of brightness and shadow, she symbolized for him the eternal triumph of her sex—the tyrannous, unsought power of woman.

Pi-Noi, after looking curiously at the Malay, spoke to her countrymen in their own language, and Kria, who had acquired a working knowledge of the primitive jungle jargon, answered her himself:

"We are going up-stream to Chě-ba' Pěr-lau-i. The boat is large and your little body will not sink it. We will bear you with us. Come!"

She looked at him quizzically, and her face was softened by a little ripple of laughter. It was the first time that she had heard her native tongue spoken with a foreign accent, and the oddity of the thing amused her. Then she stepped lightly into the canoe and squatted in the bow.

The boat resumed its journey up-river, warring with the current; was tugged and hauled over fallen trees and round threatening ridges of rock; was towed up difficult places by long lines of rattan; was maneuvered inch by inch up rapids, where the waters roared furiously; or glided in obedience to the punters along the smooth, sun-dappled reaches; and all that dreamy afternoon Pi-Noi sat in the bow, her back turned to Kria, her face averted. She was almost motionless, yet to the Malay, whose eyes pursued her, she conveyed an extraordinary impression of being at once absorbed and keenly alert. Nothing that was happening, or that had happened recently in the jungle all about her, was hidden from Pi-Noi, though she seemed barely to move her head, and once she lifted her voice in a thrilling imitation of a bird's call and was answered at once from both sides of the stream. Though she sat consentingly in Kria's boat, he was subtly conscious that she was, in some strange fashion, an integral part of the forest that surrounded them; that she was a stranger to the life of mankind, as he understood it—the life of folk of his own race—who, at best, are only trespassers upon Nature's vast domain. He held his breath fearfully, possessed by the idea that at any moment this girl might vanish whence she had come, and thereafter be lost to him forever. He felt her to be as free as the jungle breeze, whose name she bore, and as little to be held a prisoner by the band of man. This added at once a dread and a new attraction to her physical beauty. Kria forgot the inherited contempt of the Malay for the Sâkai, the disgust of the Muhammadan for the devourer of unclean things, the conviction of his people that union with a jungle-dweller is an unspeakable abomination. He only remembered that he was a man, hot with love; that she was a woman, elusive and desirable.

II

Kria's brief wooing was purely a commercial transaction, in which Pi-Noi herself was the last person any one dreamed of consulting. The naked jungle-folk who were her papa and mamma developed unsuspected business aptitude at this juncture of their affairs, the number of knife-blades, cooking-pots, rolls of red twill, flints and steels, and the like, which they demanded, maintaining a nice proportion to Kria's growing passion for the girl. As this became hotter day by day, there was little haggling on his part, and presently an amazing sum (from first to last it cannot have fallen far short of fifteen shillings sterling) was paid to Pi-Noi's parents, to their great honour, glory, and satisfaction, and during an unforgettable forenoon the Sâkai of all ages and both sexes gorged themselves to repletion at Kria's expense. Then Pi-Noi was placed upon an ant heap, and a shaggy pack of hiccoughing male relatives girt the place about in attitudes of defence. It was now Kria's task to touch the girl's hand in spite of the resistance of her defenders. This is all that survives among the hill-people of the old-time custom of marriage by capture; and when the bridegroom is one of their own folk it still happens sometimes that he carries a sore and bleeding head and a badly bruised body to his marriage bed. The bride, at such times, darts hither and thither within the ring of her kinsmen, with real or simulated desire to evade her conqueror, till the latter has the luck to touch her hand or to bring her to the ground by a well-aimed blow from his club.

Kria, however, had an unusually easy time of it, for the Sâkai hold all Malays in awe, and Pi-Noi was hampered by the unaccustomed silk garments with which her husband's generosity had clothed her. Very soon, therefore, Kria, his eyes blazing, gave a great cry as he won a grip upon her wrist, and at once Pi-Noi, in obedience to established custom, submitted herself to his control. Hand in hand, the man and wife sped across the clearing in the direction of the river, with a string of hooting, gesticulating, shock-headed, naked savages trailing out behind them. Below the high bank Kria's canoe was moored, and leaping into her, they pushed out into midstream. Then the current caught them; the dugout became suddenly a thing instinct with life; a bend hid the Sâkai camp from view; and, amid the immense, hushed stillness of the forest afternoon, these two set out upon the oldest and newest of all pilgrimages.

With the strong current aiding them, they had only a journey of a few hours to make, a time short enough for any lovers' transit, though Kria was busy steering the boat, and Pi-Noi sat in the bows helping to direct its course by an occasional timely punt. He had won his heart's desire, and the home to which he was bearing his love lay close at hand; yet even during this honeymoon journeying down the clear, rapid-beset river and through the heart of that magnificent wilderness of woodland, Kria had leisure in which to experience the assaults of a mysterious and perplexing jealousy. He was as utterly alone with the girl as if they two were the first or the last of their kind to wander across the face of the earth; yet he had an uneasy consciousness that Pi-Noi had companions, invisible and inaudible to him, in whose presence he knew himself to be *de trop*. In spite of her silence and immobility, he knew instinctively that always she was holding intimate commune with animate nature in a language which had its beginning upon the further side of silence. It was not only a tongue which he could not *hear*. It seemed to cleave an abyss between them; to wrench her from his grasp ere ever he had securely won her; to lift her out of his

life; to leave him yearning after her with piteous, imploring face upturned and impotent, outstretched arms.

Suddenly the thought of this girl's elusiveness shook him with a panic that checked his heartbeats. She was journeying with him now of her own free will, but what if her will should veer? What if the lures of the jungle should prove too strong for such spells as his poor love and longing could lend him wit to work? What if that cruel wilderness whence she had come should yawn and once more engulf her? As Kria steered the boat with mechanical skill, and, watching the girl with hungry eyes, knew himself to be by her totally forgotten, he experienced with new force and reason the dread which alloys the delight of many a lover even in the supreme moment of possession—the haunting terror of loss. Kria went in fear, not only of Time and Death, those two grim highwaymen who lie in wait for love; there was also the Forest. Every last, least twig of it, every creature that moved unseen beneath its shade, was his enemy, and it was through long files of such foemen that he bore the bride they threatened to ravish from him. And thus—the girl abstracted and aloof, the man a prey to besetting, though as yet vaguely formulated, fears—Kria and Pi-Noi wended their way downstream, through the wonder of the tropical afternoon, to begin in their new home the difficult experiment of married life.

III

Pi-Noi was very much a child, and, childlike, she found delight in new toys. The palatial house which now was hers; the wealth of cooking-pots; the beautiful Malay silks which Kria had given to her; the abundance of good food, and Kria's extravagant kindness, were all new and very pleasant things. She was playing at being a Malay housewife with all the elaborate make-believe which is a special faculty of the child mind. She would load her small body with gay clothes, clamp ornaments of gold about her wrists, stick long silver pins in her glossy hair, and strut about, laughing rapturously at this new, fantastic game. But throughout she was only mimicking Malayan ways for her own distraction and amusement; she was not seriously attempting to adapt herself to her husband's conception of femininity. She would often cross-question Kria as to the practices of his womenfolk, and would immediately imitate their shining example with a humorous completeness. This pleased him, for he interpreted all this irresponsible child's play as the pathetic efforts of a woman to fulfil the expectations of the man she loves.

The illusion was short lived. Very soon Pi-Noi, the novelty of her new grandeur wearing thin, began to be irked by the tyranny of Malayan garments. All her life she had gone nude, with limbs fetterless as the wings of a bird. For a space the love of personal adornment, which is implanted in the heart of even the most primitive of feminine creatures, did battle with bodily discomfort; but the hour came when ease defeated vanity. Kria, returning home from a short trip upstream, found his wife, who did not expect him, clothed only in her water-weed girdle, lying prone in the sun-baked dust before their dwelling, crooning a strange ditty to herself, and kicking two rebellious bare legs joyously in the air.

He was horribly shocked and outraged; for though a naked Sâkai girl was one of the commonest sights in the valley, this girl was his wife, and he had been hugging to his heart the belief that she was rapidly developing into a decorous Malayan lady. Also his eye, which had become accustomed to see her clad with the elaborate modesty of his own

womenkind, saw in her pristine nudity an amazing impropriety. Feeling wrathful and disgraced, he rushed at her and tried to seize her, but she leaped to her feet in the twinkling of an eye and eluded him with forest-bred ease. He brought up short, panting hard, after an inglorious chase; and much petting, coaxing, and pleading were needed before he could lure her back into the house and persuade her to don even one short Malayan waist skirt. He had to fight his every instinct, for he longed to take a stick to her, being imbued with the Malay man's unshakable belief in the ability of the rod to inspire in a wife a proper sense of subordination; but he did not dare. Malayan women accept such happenings with the meekness which experience reserves for the inevitable; but in the forest Pi-Noi had a protector—a protector who never left her.

The compromise of the short waist skirt duly effected, things again went on smoothly for a space. Kria suspected that Pi-Noi broke the inadequate compact unblushingly whenever he was absent; but he loved the girl more madly every day, and was not looking for trouble, if it might by any means be shirked.

Some ten days later another incident occurred to break upon his peace. Pi-Noi, in common with all the people of her race and other nocturnal animals, was a restless bedfellow, waking at frequent intervals through the night, and being given at such times to prowling about the house in search of scraps of food to eat and tobacco to smoke. Kria detested this peculiarity, since it emphasized the difference of race and of degrees of civilization which yawned between him and his wife, but he ignored it until one evening, when he had waked to find her gone, and had wide-eyed awaited her return for something over an hour. Then he went in search of her.

He hunted through the hut in vain; passed to the door, and finding it open, climbed down the stair-ladder into the moonlight night. A big fire had been lighted that evening, to the windward of the house, in order that the smoke might drive away the sandflies, and in the warm, raked-out wood ashes Kria found his wife. She was sleeping "as the devils sleep," with her little, perfectly formed body, draped only by the offending girdle, stretched at ease upon its breast, and with her face nestling cozily upon her folded arms. All about her the soft gray ashes were heaped, and her skin was seen, even in the moonlight, to be plastered thickly with great smears of the stuff. To Kria, a Malay of the Malays, whose only conception of comfort, propriety, and civilization was that prevailing among his people, this discarding of his roof tree, this turning of the back upon decency and cleanliness and convention, was an incomprehensible madness, but also an act of unspeakable perversity and naughtiness. White with anger, he looked at the sleeping girl, and even as he looked, warned by the marvellous jungle-instinct, she awoke with a leap that bore her a dozen feet away from him. One glance she cast at his set face, then plunged headlong into covert.

Wrath died down within him on the instant, and was replaced by a great fear. Frantically he ran to the spot where she had vanished, calling upon her by name. In vain search he wandered to the edge of the clearing, and so out into the forest, pleading with her to return, vowing that he would not harm a hair of her head, cajoling, entreating, beseeching, and now and again breaking forth into uncontrollable rage and threat. All night he sought for her. The cold gray dawn, creeping up through banks of mist, to look chillingly upon a dew-drenched world, found him, with blank despair in his heart, with soaked clothes and sodden flesh tattered by the jungle thorns, making his way back to his empty house with the plodding pain of a man in a nightmare. A last hope was kindled as

he drew near—the hope that Pi-Noi might have crept homeward while he wandered through the night looking for her—but it flickered up for an instant only to die, as the fire had died above the gray ashes which still bore the imprint of her little body.

Kria, sitting lonely in his hut, looked forth upon a barren world, and saw how desolate is life when love has fled.

IV

As soon as Kria had pulled himself together sufficiently to enable him to think out a course of action, he set off for the Sâkai camp, whence he had taken his wife; but her people had, or professed to have, no news of her. She had always been *liar*, they averred—more *liar* even than the rest of her people. (*Liâr* means “wild,” as animals which defy capture are wild.)

“The portals of the jungle are open to her,” said her father indifferently. He was squatting on the ground, holding between his crooked knees a big, conical, basketwork fish-trap which he was fashioning. He spoke thickly through half a dozen lengths of rattan which he held in his mouth, the ends hanging down on either side like a monstrous and disreputable moustache, and he did not so much as raise his eyes to look at his son-in-law. “She will come to no harm,” he grunted. “Perhaps presently she will return.”

But Kria did not want his wife “presently” or perhaps”; he wanted her now, at once, without a moment’s delay. He explained this to the assembled Sâkai with considerable vehemence.

“That which is in the jungle is in the jungle,” they said oracularly. Folk who are *liar*, they explained, are very difficult to catch, resent capture, and if brought back before their wanderlust is an expended passion, are very apt to run away again. Then the laborious business of tracking and catching them has to be undertaken anew, to the immense fatigue and annoyance of every one concerned. It is better, they urged, to let such people grow weary of the jungle at their leisure; then, in the fullness of time, they will return of their own free will.

The limitations of their intellects and vocabularies made it impossible for the Sâkai to express themselves quite as clearly as this, but the above represents the gist of their dispassionate opinions. They took several torturing hours and innumerable monosyllables to explain them to Kria, who gnashed and raved in his impatience.

“Pi-Noi is so excessively *liar*,” said that young woman’s mamma, speaking with a sort of dreamy indifference while, with noisy nails, she tore at her scaly hide. “She is so incurably *liar* that it would be better, *Inche*, to abandon her to the jungle and to take one of her sisters to wife in her stead. Jag-ok^N here,” she added, indicating with outthrust chin a splay-faced little girl, who, in awful fashion, was cleaning fish with her fingers, “Jag-ok^N is hardly to be called *liar* at all. Besides, she hates being beaten, and if you use a rod to her, she would make, I am convinced, a very obedient and amenable wife. We will let you have Jag-ok^N very cheap—say half the price you paid for Pi-Noi, her sister.”

But Kria did not want Jag-ok^N, who was ill favoured and covered from tip to toe with skin diseases, at Ray price at all. He wanted her sister, who was still to him the only woman in the world. The slack indifference of the Sâkai maddened him, and in the end he threatened to trounce his father-in-law soundly if that worthy cider did not forthwith aid him in tracking the recalcitrant Pi-Noi.

In an instant A-Gap, the Rhinoceros, as Pi-Noi's papa was named, was standing before Kria, shaking as a leaf is shaken, for the Sâkai's inherited fear of the Malay is an emotion which has for its justification a sound historical basis. Immediately the whole camp was in a turmoil; the danger call was sounding, and those of the Sâkai to whom escape was open were melting into the forest as swiftly and noiselessly as flitting shadows. A-Gap and two younger men, however, squealing dismally, were clutched by their frowsy elflocks, hustled on board Kria's canoe, and soon were paddling rapidly downstream in the direction of his house. The hour of their arrival was too late for anything further to be done that day, so Kria spent a miserable night, and awoke next morning to find that the three Sâkai had disappeared. They had cut a hole in the bamboo floor, and had dropped noiselessly through it on to the earth beneath, what time Kria had been tossing upon the mat which he had placed athwart the doorway. They had arrived at two conclusions: firstly, that Kria was mad, which made him a highly undesirable companion; and, secondly, that if he caught Pi-Noi he would very certainly kill her. They were convinced of his insanity because he was making such an absurd fuss about the recovery of a particular girl, when all the time, as everybody knew, there were hundreds and hundreds of others, just as good, to be had for the asking. Their reasonable fears for Pi-Noi's safety were based upon the argument that a person who would beat a man would certainly kill a woman. On the whole, they concluded, it would be at once more wholesome and more pleasant to go away now, and to avoid Kria for the future.

Kria, unaided, tried some very amateurish tracking on his own account, his great love setting at naught the Malay's instinctive horror of entering the jungle unaccompanied. He succeeded only in getting hopelessly bushed, and at last won his way back to his house, almost by a miracle. He was worn out with anxiety and fatigue, foot-sore, heartsore, weary soul and body, and nearly starved to death. The Sâkai seemed to have vanished from the forest for twenty miles around; his trading was at a standstill; he was humiliated to the dust; and his utter impotence was like a load of galling fetters clamped about his soul. Yet all the while his love of Pi-Noi and his hungry longing for her were only intensified by her absence and her heartlessness. He missed her—was haunted by the sound of her voice—was tortured by elusive wraiths of her which emerged suddenly to mock him from the forest's pitiless depths.

V

The moon had been near the full on the night when the wanderlust, as the Sâkai called it, had come to Pi-Noi. A little crescent was hanging just above the forest in the wake of the sunset before Kria received any hint of her continued existence. Returning one evening to his house from a visit to his fish-weir, he found on the threshold a small heap of jungle-offerings—wild *duri-an* and other fruit, the edible shoot of the *ibul* palm, and a collection of similar miscellaneous trash. At this sight the blood flew to Kria's face, then stormed back into a heart that pumped and leaped. These things shouted their meaning in his ears.

Trembling with joyful agitation, Kria passed to the inner room of the house, and examined Pi-Noi's store of clothes. Not only a silk waistcloth, but a long blouse, such as Malayan women wear as an upper garment, were missing. Evidently Pi-Noi was bent upon doing the thing handsomely now that she had decided upon submission, and to that end was pandering with a generous completeness to his absurd prejudices on the subject

of wearing apparel. Also she must be close at hand, for it was unlikely that she would stray far into the jungle clad in those delicate silks.

Pi-Noi's surrender was an instant victory for her. No sooner had Kria made his discovery than, with a wildly beating heart, he was standing in the doorway, calling softly, in a voice that shook and failed him, using a pet name known only to Pi-Noi and to himself. All his rage, all his humiliations, all his sufferings were forgotten. He only knew that Pi-Noi had come back to him, and that all at once he was thankful and tearful and glad.

"Chêp!" (Little Bird!) he cried. "Chêp! Are you there, Fruit of my Heart? Come to me, Little. One! Come, O come!"

From somewhere in the brushwood near at hand came the sound of musical laughter—the laughter of a woman who knows her power, and finds in its tyrannous exercise a triumph and delight.

"Is there space in the house for me?" she inquired demurely, tilting her head and gazing at him in mockery, while again a ripple of light laughter broke from her lips. "Or shall I go to my other house . . . the forest?"

Kria, his Withers wrung by the conviction of her elusiveness and his own impotence, tortured, too, by a fear lest even now some capricious perversity might induce her again to desert him, could only stammer out wild protestations of love and welcome. The girl was thoroughly aware that she was complete mistress of the situation, and even Kria was tempted to believe that he, not she, was the wrongdoer. In moments of rage, during her absence, he had often promised himself that, if he ever laid hands upon her again, he would give her the very soundest whipping that the forest had ever seen administered to an erring wife; but now these vows were forgotten. All he desired was to have her back, on any terms, at any price, at no matter what sacrifice, of pride, of honour, of self-respect. Even in that instant of passion and emotion he saw, though dimly, that this woman was killing his soul.

Reassured at last as to the amiability of Kria's intentions, Pi-Noi drew near him after the manner of other wild forest creatures, her every muscle braced for flight; and then she was in his arms, and he had borne her up the stair-ladder with infinite tenderness, crooning and weeping over her with broken words of love.

VI

Thus began the years of Kria's slavery—only three little years of life, as men count time, but an eternity; no less, if judged by the number and violence of the emotions packed within them. While they lasted, periods of almost delirious delight alternated with seasons of acute mental suffering and moral struggle. Sometimes for six weeks or more at a time Pi-Noi would live contentedly under his roof, and he would strive to trick himself into the belief that the wanderlust was dead in her. Then, upon a certain day, his watchful eyes would note a subtle change. She would be lost to him, sitting in the doorway of the hut with parted lips, while into her eyes there crept a dreamy, faraway mystery. The depths of her absorption would be so profound that she would take no heed of words addressed to her; and Kria would know, in his miserable heart, that she was listening to the voices which begin upon the further side of silence, and was holding inaudible commune with the forest world. He would guard her then stealthily, sleeplessly, so that

his business was neglected, and his body was parched with the fever bred of anxiety and want of rest; but sooner or later nature would overcome him, and he would awake with a shock from the sleep of exhaustion to see Pi-Noi's scattered garments heaped about the floor, and to find that the girl herself had once more eluded his vigilance.

Then would pass weeks of misery, of fierce jealousy, of rage, of longing, of fear, for he was racked always by the dread lest this time she should not come back. But through all he loved her, hating and crying shame upon himself because of his love; and so often as she returned to him, so often was her sinning ignored. He dared not punish her with word or blow. The forest was her ally and his bitter enemy. It afforded her a refuge too accessible, secure and final.

It was during one of these periods of anguish that Kria received the first visit that had been paid to him by men of his own breed since his arrival in the valley. After days of watchfulness Pi-Noi had eluded him that morning, a little before the dawn, and when Kria had awaked from slumberings which had been a mere ravel of nightmares, it had been to the knowledge that the grim forest had swallowed her, and that yet another season of misery, of torturing imaginings, and of suspense lay before him. A couple of hours later his unexpected visitors arrived.

The party consisted of three Malays—Kûlop Rîau, a native of Pêrak, who in those days was reputed to be the most noted master of jungle-lore in the Peninsula, and two young men from the Jêlai Valley in Pahang. They had come to search for gutta in the forests of the Têlom, and for loot in the Sâkai camps.

With the frankness which distinguishes Malays, and a lonely man's craving for sympathy, Kria forthwith related to these strangers the story of his married life and all the ignominy which was his, at the same time asking their advice as to the action which he might most fittingly take. Kiilop R!au was cynical.

"She is only a Sâkai," he said. "Why do you not kill her and thereafter seek a wife among the maidens of the Jêlai Valley? That were more proper than to suffer yourself to be thus villainously entreated by this jungle-wench."

Kria hung his head. He could not bring himself to reveal the shameful secret of his love; but Kûlop Rîau, whose experiences were not confined to the forest, looked at him and understood.

"These jungle hussies," he declared with the dogmatic assertion proper to an expert, "these jungle hussies are often deeply skilled in witchcraft, and it is plainly to be discerned that this wench has cast a glamour over you. Brother, I apprehend that it would be wise to slay her, for your soul's sake, as speedily as may be, else surely you will be a thrall to her magic in life, and in death you will most unquestionably go to stoke the fires of the Terrible Place. Therefore, it were wise and wholesome and not unpleasant to kill her with as much speeds thoroughness, and circumspection as may be possible."

But Kria, who loved the girl, not only in spite of her heartlessness, but *because* she so tortured him, would have naught of counsels such as this. If Pi-Noi had abided with him after the constant fashion of other wives, it is possible that his passion would have spent itself, and their union would have become a mere embodiment of the commonplace. Despite her beauty and grace, he might easily have grown weary of this woman of a lesser breed if he had ever possessed her utterly, but the very insecurity of his tenure of her lent to her an added and irresistible fascination.

Something of this, vaguely, and gropingly, was forced upon the understanding of old Kûlop Rîau, who was thereby completely convinced of the accuracy of his original diagnosis. That the witch should be a Sâkai, an eater of unclean things, fore-doomed in common with all her race to burn eternally in Hell by the wise decree of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, and that her victim should be a Malay and True Believer, shocked his every racial and religious prejudice. Though, on his own account, he had constant dealings with jungle demons —the which is an abomination—he suddenly recalled the fact that he was a Muhammadan, and as such recognized that Kria's position was at once humiliating and highly improper.

"In any event, it were well to know how she passes the days during which the jungle claims her," he said. "It seems to me that this hussy has kept you too long in ignorance of the naughtiness of her heart, the degradation and ignominy of her behaviour, and the extraordinary vileness and impropriety of her carriage."

"I would very willingly learn why she thus leaves me and what she does at such seasons," said poor Kria. "But the forests are vast, and she vanishes into their depths even as a stone sinks through still waters and is lost to sight. She is one of the wild things of the jungle, and if she has a mind to keep her secret, who shall wrest it from her?"

"It is very plainly to be seen, brother, that you are village-bred," said Kûlop Rîau with immense contempt. "The portals of the jungle are not flung wide for you. The Spectre Huntsman and the Forest Fiends do not count you among the tale of their children. If this were not so.

But the thing is too simple to demand explanation!"

"But you . . . cried Kria breathlessly. "You, could you track her? Could you answer for me all these intolerable questions?"

"That could I, and with ease, were I minded to take so much trouble," said Kûlop scornfully. "But I have come hither to transact business of mine own. However, such is the love I bear you, little brother" (the two had met for the first time that day) "that I might turn me aside from mine own affairs to do you this service—at a price."

The concluding words awoke Kria's keen commercial instincts, and a very pretty piece of haggling forthwith ensued. But even here Pi-Noi shackled him. He loved her, and his necessity was old Kûlop's opportunity, as that astute worthy very perfectly perceived; wherefore the price, paid in rubber, which Kria drew with many sighs from his hoarded store, proved in the end to be frankly extortionate. He longed to lay at rest, once for all, the cruel ghosts of the imagination which had haunted him, but now that the chance of discovery had come to him, he was oppressed by terror at the thought of what it might reveal.

Time was precious if Pi-Noi's trail was to be struck while it was still fresh, and a short hour sufficed for preparations. Then the party, Kûlop leading, with his long muzzle-loader on his shoulder, Kria following, and the two Jêlai youngsters bringing up the rear, left the clearing and entered the forest. Old Kûlop had made a cast round the clearing while the others were busy packing the rice and the cooking-pots, and he had hit off the line which Pi-Noi had taken at the first attempt. A trail once struck by a man of Kûlop's skill and knowledge of forest-lore, few accidents less efficient than an earthquake or a cyclone would suffice to check or stay him.

Pi-Noi's spoor proved at the first singularly clear. She had so long been convinced of her complete immunity from pursuit that she had become careless, and had made use of none of the precautions for the confusion of her trail such as are supplied by the baffling woodcraft of her people. This was as well, and saved the trackers much time; for the very existence of the Sâkai, it must be remembered, has depended for hundreds of years upon their ability to evade Malay slave-hunters.

At a distance of some eight miles from her starting point (it took Kûlop Rîau and his party nearly five hours to reach it) she had stopped in a little open glade of the forest to dance ecstatically with her slender, bare feet upon the rich, cool grasses beside a stream, which tumbled downward, with a mighty chattering, in the direction of the Têlom. Here she had bathed luxuriously in the running water, had stretched herself to enjoy a sun-bath upon a flat rock in midstream, and thence had pounced upon and captured with her hands a huge, fruit-eating *krai* fish. She had carried the creature ashore, had cleaned it and scraped off its scales, and pulled some rattan from the jungle, and had fashioned therefrom a knapsack into which she had stowed the fish. Thereafter she had climbed a *hibiscus* to rob it of its blossoms for her hair, had danced again in sheer joy of being alive, and then had continued her wanderings.

The tracks, as old Kûlop Rîau pointed them out to Kria, one by one, told the story of this little halting with such distinctness of detail that Pi-Noi's husband could picture to himself every act and motion of his wayward wife; could almost visualize her, alone and wild with joy, in that hidden nook of the jungle; and found himself understanding for the first time something of the exaltation and exhilaration of spirit that had been hers as she entered once more into her birthright of forest freedom.

At this point Kûlop Rîau found it difficult to pick up the trail afresh. He took wide casts up and down stream, examining both banks closely, but for nearly an hour he was at fault. He quested like a hound, his shoulders hunched, his head low-stooping from his thick neck, his eyes intent, fixed for the most part on the ground, but throwing now and again quick glances to the right or left. All the while he maintained with himself a monotonous, unintelligible, mumbled monologue. Kria, following him closely and straining his ears to listen, could catch here and there a familiar word, but the speech as a whole was an archaic jargon from which no single strand of connected thought was to be unravelled, and the old tracker was seemingly deaf to all the eager questions addressed to him.

The Jêlai lads, shuddering a little, whispered to Kria that the Jungle Demons had entered into and possessed the body of the old tracker, and one of them fell to repeating the names of Allah and his Prophet fearfully, under his breath. It was a nerve-sawing experience to find one's self thus cast away in the trackless forest with this inspired demoniac for one's sole guide and leader; but Kria was not greatly impressed. He knew Pi-Noi.

At last, about a mile upstream, Kûlop Rîau suddenly became rigid as a pointer, and stood glaring at a spot on the left bank where a hanging leaf oozed sap from a bruised twig. He broke forth into a low rumble of unintelligible gibberish, and drew himself with many grunts out of the bed of the stream. No other sign of Pi-Noi's passage was visible to his companions, but Kûlop Rîau, though he still muttered ceaselessly, trudged forward now with confidence. A quarter of a mile farther on he drew Kria's attention, by a

gesture, to a tiny mucous smear on the bark of a tree. The fish, bulging through the meshes of the knapsack, had left that mark. The trail was Pi-Noi's.

The afternoon was now far advanced, and when next he struck a stream, Kulop called a halt and bade his companions cook the evening meal. He himself crossed the rivulet and entered the forest beyond, returning later with word that the trail was easier over yonder, and that he had learned its general trend.

The meal was eaten almost in silence, for Kûlop Rîau, when possessed by his Jungle Spirits, was an awe-inspiring companion. Kria and the Jêlai lads, too, were fagged and weary, but since the moon was near the full, their leader would not suffer them to rest. Pi-Noi had gained a long start of them, which they must try to recover.

Kria, worn out body and soul, was racked by an agony of baffled curiosity as he stumbled on and on, and watched the old tracker bristling, with many growls and grumblings, over each fresh secret that the spoor revealed to him. It was evident that he was reading in the invisible signs which he alone had the power to interpret, some story that excited him strangely, but he did not heed and seemed not even to bear the eager questions with which Kria plied him.

About midnight he called a halt.

"There is still plenty of light," Kria protested.

"Here we will camp," Kûlop Rîau reiterated with a snarl.

"But—" Kria began, when the other cut him short.

"When you are in childbed, do as the midwife bids you," he said; and ten minutes later the old man was fast asleep, though even in his slumber he still muttered restlessly.

The dawn broke wan and cheerless, the feeble daylight thrusting sad and irresolute fingers through the network of boughs and leaves overhead. A dank, chill, woebegone depression hung over the wilderness. The riot and the glory of the night were ended; the long ordeal of the hot and breathless day was about to begin. The forest was settling itself with scant content to its uneasy slumbering.

After the manner of all jungle-people, Kûlop Rîau awoke with the dawn, and an hour later the morning rice had been cooked and eaten. The old tracker prepared himself a quid of betel nut with great deliberation, and sat chewing it mechanically, his body swinging slowly to and fro, his eyes nearly closed, his lips busy, though none save vague sounds came from them. Kria, watching him with growing irritation, for a while was fearful to disturb him; but at last, unable longer to endure the delay and suspense, he burst out with an eager question.

"When do we take up the trail anew?" he asked. Kûlop Rîau, coming up to the surface slowly from the depths of his abstraction, gazed at Kria for a space through unseeing eyes, while the question that had been spoken filtered through the clouds obscuring his brain. Then he jerked out an answer of five words:

"When you are in childbed!" and closed his mouth with a snap, not even troubling himself to complete the proverb.

Once more Kria knew himself to be impotent. Here again he had no course open to him but to sit and wait.

The long, still, stifling day wore toward evening, minute by minute and hour by hour, while the four men lay under the shelter of a rough lean-to of thatch, inactive but restless, and Kria thought bitterly of the amount and value of the rubber which he in his folly and trustfulness had handed over to Kûlop Rîau in advance. Late in the afternoon that worthy

spoke to his companions for the first time for many hours, bidding them prepare food, and a little before the sunset, after the meal had been despatched, he rose to his feet, hiccoughed loudly, stretched himself elaborately, and made ready to resume his march. In an instant Kria was by his side, with an expression of joyful relief, but Kûlop told him curtly to bide where he was.

“This time,” he said, “I go forward alone. One may not scout in this forest with three pairs of feet crashing through the underwood at one’s heels like a troop of wild kine. Stay here till I return.”

Without another word, he lounged off, with his long musket over his shoulder, and was soon lost to view. He went, as the Sâkai themselves go, flitting through the trees as noiselessly as a bat.

“Did I not say truly that he is possessed by the Demons of the Forest?” said one of the Jêlai youths. “*Ya Allah!* Fancy going into this wilderness alone for choice, and with the darkness about to fall!”

Thereafter followed for Kria a miserable night, for while the Jêlai lads slept beside him, he lay awake, a prey to a thousand torturing thoughts and memories, and oppressed by a load of vague forebodings.

VIII

Kria awoke in broad daylight to find old Kûlop Rîau, his dew-drenched clothes soiled with the earth of the jungle, bending over him with a light of wild excitement and exultation blazing in his eyes.

“Come, brother,” he said. “I have found the wench. Come!”

Without another word, he turned away into the forest, Kria following him as best he might, binding about his waist as he ran the belt from which hung his heavy woodknife.

Kûlop strode along at a great pace for a matter of two or three miles, now and again directing Kria’s attention to some trifling mark on earth or trunk or shrub which told of the passing of Pi-Noi.

“See here, brother,” he said, indicating a place where the grass had much the appearance of a large hare’s form. “There was one awaiting her. He sat there for a long time, listening for her coming, and there was much joy in that meeting. Behold here, and here, and here, how they danced together, as young fawns caper and leap—the hussy, your wife, and this youth of her own people. Like goes to like, brother, and a wild woman seeks ever a wild man, in no wise respecting the laws of wedlock. This wench has betrayed you. See, here they cooked food, yams of his gathering and the fish that she had brought, and he fashioned a nose-flute to make beast noises with, and thereafter there was more dancing, ere they bathed together in the stream, the shameless ones! and moved forward again, heading always for the Great Salt Lick!”

Kria, rent by devils of jealousy and rage, his face drawn and ghastly, his hands opening and clenching convulsively, said never a word; but his eyes took in each detail of the story recorded by the clear imprints upon grass and earth, and the yielding mud at the river’s brink. Mechanically he followed Kûlop Rîau when the latter once more dived into the underwood.

“From this point,” the old man was saying, “I abided no longer by the trail. They were making for the Great Salt Lick, and thither went I by a circuitous path of mine own contrivance. This time we go by a shorter route. Come.”

Five miles farther on the forest thinned out suddenly and gave place to an irregular space, roughly circular in shape, the surface of which resembled a ploughed field. Though the red soil was rich, barely so much as a tuft of grass grew upon it—a strange sight in a land where green things sprout into lusty life almost as you watch them; for this was one of the natural saline deposits not infrequently found in Malayan jungles. Hither flock all the beasts of the forest, from the elephant, the rhinoceros, and the tiger to the red dogs, the tiny mouse-deer no larger than a rabbit, and even the stoats and weasels, to lick the salt and to knead and trample the earth with countless pads and claws and hoofs.

Kria looked out upon the place, and as he looked his heart stood still, while for a moment all things were blotted out in a blinding, swirling mist of blood-stained darkness. He reeled against a trunk, and stood there sobbing and shaking ere he could muster force to look again.

At the foot of a big tree some twenty yards away the body of Pi-Noi, its aspect strangely delicate and childlike, lay coiled up in death. There was a little blue hole below her left breast where the cruel bullet had entered, and the wild swine and the hungry red dogs had already been busy.

Kria, reeling like a drunken man, staggered across the open space toward the dead body of his wife.

Kûlop Rîau stood looking on with the air of a craftsman surveying his masterpieces.

Dazed and broken-hearted, Kria stood for a space gazing down upon his wife’s peaceful face. It seemed to him as though she slept, as he so often had seen her sleeping in that house to which her fitful presence had brought such an intoxication of delight; and suddenly all anger was dead within him, and there surged up in its place all manner of tender and endearing memories of this dead girl who had been to him at once his torture and his joy.

With a face livid and working, he turned savagely upon Kûlop Rîau.

“And the man,” he cried. “What of the man?”

“He lies yonder,” said Kûlop Rîau, with the triumphant air of an artist whose work can defy criticism, and he pointed with his chin, Malayan fashion, in the direction of a clump of bush near the edge of the salt lick. “I shot him as he fled. See, they were camped for the night in the man-nest which they had built for themselves in the tree fork up there, animals and strangers to modesty that they were!” He expectorated emphatically in token of his unutterable disgust.

Kria strode to the spot, gazed for an instant, and then gave a great cry of pain and rage and misery.

“The man is her brother,” he yelled. “And you—you have killed her who was guiltless of all sin!”

“Is that so?” said Kûlop calmly. “Then, very certainly, it was so decreed by Fate, the inscrutable, and by Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate! Also you are well rid of this jungle hussy who, in the end, would, beyond all doubt, have dragged your soul to. . . . Have done! Let be! Are you mad? Arrrrgh. . .”

But Kûlop Rîau spoke no other word in life. When the Jêlai lads tracked and found them, both men were dead and stiff. Kûlop still grasped the woodknife which he had

plunged again and again into Kria's body; but the latter's fingers were locked in the old tracker's throat in a grip which, even in death, no force could relax. None the less, though they could not separate them, they buried them both—since they were Muhammadans, and, as such, claimed that service at the hands of their fellows. But Pi-Noi's little body they left to the beasts of the forest which in life had been her playmates.