IN MALAY FORESTS

SIR GEORGE MAXWELL K.B.E., C.M.G
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To most people the Malay Peninsula is only known as the long narrow strip that, on the map of Asia, runs down into the sea beyond the bulky V-shaped projection of India, and divides the Indian Ocean from the China Sea.

Passengers by the mail-boats for the Far East, though they approach it at the islands of Penang and Singapore, see of its length during their voyage down the warm smooth waters of the Straits of Malacca but little save a continuous range of distant mountains bathed in a haze of purple, blue, and grey.

He whose business or pleasure takes him on one of the local steamers sees a little more. In the foreground there is, on the west coast, an unbroken line, level as that of the sea, of dark-green forest. This is the mangrove belt, which grows on the alluvial soil brought down and silted up by the rivers, and which ends where the sea begins. Behind this line rises a range of heavily-timbered mountains, and behind this yet another range; and on all sides the horizon is bounded either by forest-covered mountains or by forest-covered plains.

It is almost the literal truth that the whole peninsula is covered with forest. It is not that the country is uninhabited, for it has a population of some hundreds of thousands; but it is that the inhabited area, every yard of
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which has been won from, and hacked out of the forest, is infinitesimal in comparison with the extent of the forest that remains untouched.

Throughout its hundreds of miles of length and breadth the Malay Peninsula is practically one vast forest. The great alluvial tin-fields of Kinta, Larut, Selangor, and Seremban, where tens of thousands of Chinese coolies strip the surface to lay bare the ore, are really mere patches; and the towns, palatial and magnificent though the buildings of some of them are, are nothing more than specks in an expanse that sweeps from one Sultanate to another, and is only limited by the sea.

Our railways and roads run through forest, and our mines, plantations, and towns are bounded by it.

It is, however, difficult at first to realise the environment of the forest. When the newcomer has left his steamer, and the railway has taken him to the town which is his destination, it is possible that he may fail to appreciate the most wonderful of all the new sights around him; he may, and most frequently does, accept the dense mass of trees and vegetation that shuts in the railway line as "the jungle," and consider the timber-clad mountains merely in the light of scenery.

In a Malay village one may better realise the manner in which the forest hems in the cultivated area. The settlement is generally situated on the banks of a river. By the water's edge are the houses, built under the shade of fruit-trees, and behind them are the flat, irrigated padi-fields. On all sides this area is shut in by a dark heavy line that uprears itself, around and above it, like the walls of a prison. This line is the forest edge; and thence the forest spreads in every direction, miles upon miles, until some other village is reached; there it opens out again, and sweeping round the clearing, as a wave encircles some ocean rock, closes in again behind it and continues, over mountains, over plains, until the sea is reached.

But it is when he views it from a mountain peak that the stranger can best see the extent of the forest. He will
then discover, what the Malay can never for a minute forget, that he lives his life in the midst of a forest which is as much apart from him as it is around him. The fact that it extends, interminable, far beyond the horizon on every side, then for the first time makes its indelible impression upon his mind.

This other wonderful thing he will perhaps first realise: the forest is an evergreen; the season, whose changes in the cultivated area turn brown soil to the tender green of the young padi shoots, to the richness of the colour of the swelling plants, and to the golden wealth of the ripened grain, fails to touch the forest. Neither the season, nor the flight of time, leaves a mark upon the forest; virgin in the days of which we cannot guess the morn, virgin in our days, virgin it will remain in the days of generations yet unborn.

On the slopes of the nearest spur each individual tree stands clear, each giant form showing the swelling roundness of its wealth of bough and leaf. Tier upon tier, the trees stand thickly massed, without a break, from the level of the plain to the height of the topmost trees that show their heads against the sky-line. Deep, dark, sombre green is the colour of this near range; here and there one may catch glimpses of lighter shades, a few scattered patches perhaps of sage green where some trees, after fruiting, are putting forth a new flush of leaves; possibly there may be a speck of vivid red that marks a tree whose young shoots assume an unusual colour. But the contrast only accentuates the prevailing tone.

Beyond these hills, which are not perhaps more than a few miles away, rises a range that is clad in purple. At this distance the mass of tree shows through the clear atmosphere, not with the shape of each individual tree, but with a uniform raised and rounded roughness that covers alike mountain crag and mountain ravine.

In some places in the plains between the two ranges one may perhaps see the lighter green that marks a
cultivated area, or a gleam of white sand where alluvial tin-mines show like islands in the sea.

Beyond the purple mountains rise other ranges, and though, of course, you cannot see it, you know that the forest sweeps on through wide hidden valleys and wonderful places rarely trodden by man, until it reappears in sight upon another range.

The mountain-chains melt from purple to blue, and as they recede the roughness of the forest covering becomes a velvety pile, and then an even softer texture; and finally, where grey mists melt and dissolve in the distant haze, it is not easy to know which is forest and which is sky.

Such is the view that lies beneath your eyes as you stand upon a mountain peak some four or five thousand feet above the plain. But so deep, so soft is the mantle of forest, that you may fail to realise the grandeur of the mountains. They have not the austerity that belongs to nakedness. To right and to left, where the mountain spurs run out and down to the plain, your eyes rest on slopes which, though steep perhaps, are softly undulating. Each tree melts gently into its neighbour, or partly hides it; all is green and harmonious, and the mountain offers a face which appears to be as smooth and unbroken as a pasture land. But sometimes you may see how deceptive this appearance is. It has been raining, and a great cloud comes slowly swimming landward from the sea. The direction that it takes will bring it within a mile of you. As it approaches the mountain you wonder what will happen,—whether it will rest against the mountainside, or whether it will roll upwards through the trees. But to your amazement, when the cloud edge touches the mountain it does not stop. Then you see that the whole cloud is swimming on into the mountain. What has happened is that a mountain ravine has acted as the channel up which a current of air is rushing skywards from the plain, and into the ravine the cloud is being slowly sucked. As the cloud enters, its shape and size and colour help your eye to see both sides of the ravine,
and you may vaguely estimate the depth and width of the valley that had been strangely invisible although so close. But as soon as the cloud is past and gone, the trees on both sides of the ravine seem to leap together; and, though you now know exactly where to look, waving branches and woven leaves defy your efforts to say where the entrance is. You then wonder how many similar places are hidden around you, and picture to yourself the great sea cloud hemmed in by the sides of the ravine and still swimming farther landward.

There is another time when you may have a revelation. A few minutes after sunset the westward facing mountains blaze with the refulgent glory of an afterglow. A rosy light probes the secrets that the forest hides from the noonday sun—the grandeur of wide valleys that wind an intricate way into the inmost heart of the mountains; the mystery of little deeply-shaded tributaries that fall into them on either side; the vastness of untrodden ravines and gorges; the majesty of unscaleable precipices; the terror of long straight scars that tell of landslides where trees and soil and rock have slipped in hideous disaster, leaving a wound that has cut to the very bone. For a moment all is revealed—the mantle of forest does not avail against this searching light, and you may well think that it is in the sweet exposure that the mountains blush.

But come down from the mountain peak, and walk alone along a forest path. Though it is midday it is very sombre. The sun cannot pierce the dense foliage of the branches of the giant trees, and so heavily do shadows lie upon shadows that the very green seems almost black. The sheltered air is fresh and cool, and there is an almost perfect stillness. Underfoot, except where the path is trodden bare, is a matting of dead leaves and of sweet damp moss. The track upon which you stand is a foot or perhaps a foot and a half wide, and at the height of your body the width of the open way is perhaps three feet. The daily passage of the Malays keeps back the
encroachment of brambles and forest creepers. But the track is only wide enough and the opening only high enough to allow a man to pass. You could not ride even the smallest and handiest of ponies along it.

To right and left of the path the forest appears to be almost impenetrable. The trees grow so thickly together that you are closed in by a small but unbroken circle of tree-trunks. Between the trees there are tangled masses of bushes, briers, and saplings. Rattans and creepers of every kind crawl along the ground and among the trees, sometimes hanging in heavy festoons and sometimes tense with the pressure that they exert. So thick and strong is the mass of creepers that when a wood-cutter has hacked through a tree-trunk it is often kept upright by the ligaments that bind it to the surrounding trees. After an hour's walk along a forest path, a casual observer might say that, so far as he could see, the forest contained no flowers, no butterflies, no birds, no life of any kind. But if you sit upon a fallen tree-trunk and look around, you may see a little more. High in a tree, and almost out of sight, you may see an occasional flower, and lower down perhaps, your eye may light upon an inconspicuous spray of blossoms that a careful scrutiny shows to be a miniature orchid. There are few butterflies in the forest, but now and then, if you are by one of the openings among the trees, which are to the winged creatures what the paths are to us, you may see a moth or butterfly pass by flapping its heavy velvet wings. You seldom hear a bird, but if you are quiet and wait long enough some tiny sun-bird may come your way, or, perhaps some weird bird with light-blue eyes and an enormous tail; or a jungle-hen may creep out from under a bush, and scratch for ants' eggs in an open space where a tree has fallen. The only other thing that you will see, except an occasional lizard, will be ants, and perhaps a millepede. If you know where to look for them, you will see the tracks of four-footed animals, but you will not see the animals themselves.
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But in a forest which you know to be so vast and so boundless you have a right to expect more than you have seen. Ants, a butterfly, even a bird, do not and cannot represent the life of this great gloomy place. But more you cannot see. You are the centre of a small circle whose radius varies from fifteen to thirty yards. Inside this circle you can see more or less distinctly; outside it everything is hidden. Even so huge an animal as an elephant is sometimes invisible at fifteen yards, and almost always invisible at thirty yards. Wherever you go you carry with you that little circle outside which lies the unknown. The path that lies behind you is, as soon as it passes outside that circle, as full of the unknown as the path before you or the tangle on either side. So little do you see that the feeling comes over you that you are alone in the midst of mysterious, hidden things. The feeling that immediately follows this is that these mysterious things are not merely hidden, but are specially hidden from you. The circle that moves with you is the veil built up against you. You could imagine that you were a trespasser, or at all events were regarded as such. Then you have the horrible feeling that from behind the tree-trunks watching eyes are looking upon you. It is bad enough at any time if you are alone and all is quiet; it is worse as the sun sinks and light fades; it is worst if by any ill chance you happen to know that you have lost not only your way but your sense of direction.

At all times you may see things happen of which the reason is hard to divine. Though not a breath of air can be felt to move, a frond of a palm may begin to sway gently and rhythmically backwards and forwards while all the other fronds of the same tree remain as motionless as the trees around. You examine the palm to see if there is possibly a rat or some other animal at its base, but can discover nothing. Sometimes one single leaf amidst the numbers on a branch may begin without apparent cause to be violently agitated, and will as suddenly stop.
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