'SINCE THE BEGINNING'

A TALE OF AN
EASTERN LAND

BY

HUGH CLIFFORD

Author of 'In Court and Kampong,'
'Studies in Brown Humanity,' etc.

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Since the Beginning such has been the Fate
Of Man, whose very Clay was soaked in Tears,
For when at first of common Earth they took
And moulded to the stature of the Soul,
For Forty Days, full Forty Days, the Cloud
Of Heaven wept over Him from head to foot.
And when the Forty Days had passed to Night,
The Sunshine of one Solitary Day
Looked out from Heaven to dry the weeping Clay.
And though the Sunshine through the long arrear
Of Darkness on the Breathless Image rose,
Yet for the Living, well the Wise Man knows,
Such Consummation scarcely shall be here.

Salaman and Abíal.
PART I

‘THE FATE OF MAN’
CHAPTER I

SITTERS BEHIND THE CURTAIN

This choice was never offered me before;
For me the infinite Past is blank and dumb:
This chance recurreth never, never more;
Blank, blank to me the infinite To-Come.

And this sole chance was frustrate from my birth,
A mockery, a delusion; and my breath
Of noble, human life upon this Earth
So racks me that I sigh for senseless death.

*The City of Dreadful Night.*

The night had fallen,—the soft, fragrant, enervating, voluptuous night of the Malay Peninsula,—and the floods of vivid moonlight were pouring down upon the squalid native town. All along the river bank, a belt of hot air, risen from the surface of the water, hung motionless to a depth of sixty feet, so rigidly defined that a man might stand on its edge with one cheek fanned by the cool night air, and the other exposed to a breath as from some unseen furnace. Overhead little feathery flakes of snow-white cloud were drifting lazily across broad fields of sky, of a
blueness so dark, and deep, and intense, that its real
colour seemed only half revealed. The stars, killed
by the moonlight, flickered pale and uncertain in spite
of their dark background, and a long silent line of
flying foxes trailed across the heavens in single file,
their black wings flapping slowly and methodically.
The night was full of noises: the croaking of a
million frogs, all talking at once, came from the
swamp-land behind the town; a night-jar sounded its
monotonous note, like the ring of a stone sent skimming
over the surface of thin ice; a dog bayed at the moon
with the dismal howl of the outcast pariah, and every
cur within hearing joined in the song, till the town
became a very Babel of ugly sound. In his boat on
the river a solitary Malay lay rocking on the tide,
bellowing a love-song for all the world to hear, but
secure in the knowledge that it would reach the ears
of her at whom it was aimed, without any one being
made aware of her identity. From one of the huts in
the town came the faint tingle tangle and twang of
a Chinese lute, the melody recalling to some senti-
mental yellow exile the land of his birth, and the mud
homesteads of Southern China.

The crazy palm-leaf sheds, of which the town
mainly consisted; the black nibong piles driven into
the river bed, on which many of the houses were
supported; the litter of trash, inseparable from human
dwellings where men live as they please, in defiance of
all sanitary principles; the confusion caused by the
presence of impossible objects in all manner of im-
probable places; the lean yellow curs hunting and
nosing in the garbage;—all these things could be
seen with marvellous distinctness of detail. Yet the tender softness of the moonlight hallowed everything upon which it fell, hiding an unsightly corner here with a broad black belt of shadow, mitigating the harsh ugliness of a line there, turning an open drain to the likeness of a slender stream of quicksilver, and almost succeeding in beautifying hideousness itself. This moonlight of Asia is typical of the glamour which will always hang about the rags of the East while our World lasts. Viewed at the right time, and seen in this deceptive light, all manner of things in themselves hopelessly evil and unlovely have power to fascinate as far more attractive objects too often fail to do. This is the reason that may be seen to lie at the back of half the misfortunes, and ninety per cent of the tragedies, in which Europeans in Asia become involved. The atmosphere is apt to destroy a man’s ability to scale things accurately; it deprives him of his sense of proportion, and considerable confusion in the meaning of such words as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ not infrequently results. If this be borne steadily in mind, an explanation may be discovered for many things, which otherwise cannot be easily understood or forgiven by the stay-at-home White Man; and where there is an explanation, some measure of extenuation may also, perhaps, be found.

The compound of the King of Pēlēsu occupied a couple of acres of ground on the river bank near the straggling native town. It was surrounded by a high stone wall, which, with the Malay’s characteristic disregard for sightliness and symmetry, was patched in
places with bamboo fencing. The whole was overgrown with tattered masses of creepers, which showed a faint grayish-green in the tender moonlight. The principal building in the enclosure was of stone, ornamented with fantastic designs in blue plaster, showing that its architect had been a Chinaman. Half a dozen Malay houses built upon supporting piles, and covered with nipah-palm thatch, occupied spaces within the compound. Each building had apparently been constructed with a total disregard for the position occupied by its fellows, so that they presented the appearance of having been tipped out of a bag, and suffered to remain where they chanced to fall. The earth within the enclosure was covered with rank grass, and littered with reddening cocoanut husks, broken crockery, and a profusion of miscellaneous trash. Near the wide gate of the compound, facing the river, a dozen gaily clad youngsters, armed with kris and spear, squatted on their hams smoking, chewing betel-nut, and gossiping listlessly.

In a small room opening from the main apartment of the largest of the Malay houses, two native women were sitting huddled together, in the dim light cast by a dâmar torch stuck crazily in a clumsy wooden stand. Both women were clad in sârongs of many colours, fastened securely about their waists, and in long cotton blouses buttoned at the neck, the sleeves clinging tightly to their arms. The elder was nearly forty years of age—the late Autumn of life for a native, who begins her experiences as a marriageable girl in the early teens. She was pale and thin of face, with large, sad, dog-like eyes, and a mouth stained scarlet