FANG AND CLAW

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WITH FERRIN FRASER

Illustrated

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LIFE in the jungle is a constant struggle for the survival of the fittest. It all looks very beautiful to the casual visitor to the Far East who happens to get to the edge of one of the great forests, or perhaps even goes a short way up a jungle trail. He sees deep green shadows and weirdly lovely and fantastic formations of creepers and vines and ferns. Occasionally he catches glimpses of gorgeous-coloured birds—red and green and yellow plumage flying through patches of golden sunlight. He sees and hears cute little rhesus monkeys playing and chattering in the trees, and if he is lucky he may even hear the sweet, musical call of the argus pheasant coming through the mists of dawn.

But the casual visitor always misses the struggle for life constantly waged in the jungle. Events may be moving very smoothly for some animal or bird. He discovers good feeding, builds a fine nest or den, finds a compatible mate, raises a young family—and then the jungle, like Alice’s Queen, roars with terrible suddenness, "Off with his head!" And his head invariably comes off.

After more than twenty years spent mostly in the jungle country of southern Asia, I still love it. It’s savage, wild, ruthless; it’s dangerous as only poisonous malarial swamps and animal-infested forests can be dangerous. But it’s rugged, virile and strong as the earth it grows from. Anyone with red blood in his veins can’t help but thrill to
untracked territory, and feel awe and respect for a jungle that stretches hundreds of miles ahead of him, parts of it unknown and unexplored, knowing that perhaps he is the first man to set his foot in this particular patch of damp turf.

If Ali, my Number-One boy, spoke slang he probably would say: "My tuan—he nuts about jungle!" Ali is in a position to know. He has been with me on expeditions capturing wild animals and birds for many years. He has seen with me the great terai of Nepal, the dense jungles of Ceylon and Sumatra, the wilds of Borneo, as well as the deep, green, creeper-twisted forests of his native Malaya.

He knows my habits now, and my love for this land where I have spent so many years. But I'll never forget the look on his round, brown, Malay face when he was learning the queer habits of his strange white tuan. The greatest of all his shocks came with my institution of the Sunday Walk.

We had been working hard all week in my permanent camp in Northern Johore with a gang of natives building log traps for black leopards. We had caught our leopards on Saturday—two fine specimens—had carried them back to camp on poles and put them in cages we had built. And then, early Sunday morning, I called Ali.

"Come on, Ali," I said, "let's take a walk up the jungle trail."

I think for a moment he thought I was gila babasa, which is Malay for "slightly mad." He had never heard of the postman taking a hike on his vacation. Malays don't take any hikes or do any kind of work that can be avoided.

"Tuan not feel well?" he asked.
"I feel grand, Ali. I just want to saunter through the jungle and look around."

He knew then that I was not just gila babasa, but plain gila. He came along, a queer look on his brown face which suggested that he was ready to run at the slightest strange gesture I might make.

Ali and I have had many Sunday morning walks since then, but to this day I don't think he understands that it is simply because I love the jungle, like to observe its dark interior and watch what goes on in its shadows, that makes me hike an unnecessary four or five miles through early Sunday morning heat.

A Malayan jungle is a fearsome thing to the uninitiated. On both sides of the trail—a trail probably made by animals hundreds of years ago—the trees grow so thickly together that you have the feeling of being encircled by a wall of black trunks. Between them are tangled masses of bushes and undergrowth, and swaying down from their branches are matted screens of vines and creepers. The most awesome thing about it is that you know this dense, weird growth goes on for miles and miles in all directions, a perpetual twilight of leaves and ferns that is practically impenetrable except by the trail on which you've come.

If you have keen eyes a walk up a jungle trail toward some native village or rubber plantation can be as interesting as a three-ring circus. In fact, more goes on around you than ever occurred in sawdust rings. You merely need to have eyes to see it, and know where to look.

The first Sunday walk that Ali and I took when Ali thought I was gila is typical of many. A great many things happen every day and hour in the damp shadows of a jungle,
things which mean life, survival, or death in the grim struggle of jungle creatures.

We had gone perhaps half a mile from camp—a camp which had comfortable chairs, lamps, a stove, even ice brought up from Johore Bahru twice a week—when I noticed what looked like a shadow moving on the narrow trail ahead. It was crossing the cleared space obliquely, and for a moment I thought a python was climbing in the branches of a tree overhead and throwing his moving shadow on the ground below.

But on going closer I saw that it was no shadow at all. It was an actual moving thing, joined yet disjointed, with one purpose, yet with millions of individual units to carry out that purpose. An army of marching red ants.

I have seen many armies of marching ants. Sometimes they cover vast distances on their tiny legs. They move in a steady column about eight inches wide, which may be a mile or two miles long. It is difficult to estimate the number of ants in one of these armies, but five hundred million would be a fair guess. They advance as nearly as possible in a straight line, and instead of going around obstacles, they go over them. I have seen columns of ants moving steadily and smoothly over immense jungle logs, and even up and down the sides of tall rubber plantation fences.

I was watching the ants when Ali touched my arm and pointed toward the underbrush.

"Here come Pangolin!" he whispered.

I watched a little scaled animal move out on the jungle trail and look about. Ali and I stood so still that he didn’t notice us. But he saw the ants all at once, and he moved toward them eagerly.

Now a pangolin is the red ant’s deadliest enemy. He is
commonly called the scaly ant-eater, for a very good reason. He is armour-plated with scales like a fish, only these scales are strong and hard as metal. He can move them at will, open them wide by the use of skin muscles such as the porcupine employs when bristling his quills, or shut them tight as little steel doors. When in danger he rolls himself into a ball with his scales tightly closed, and it takes a pretty husky animal to penetrate that metal-like coat-of-mail to the flesh below.

The pangolin is a steel-grey colour that blends nicely into the jungle foliage. He has a stream-lined body and a long, powerful tail more useful than ornamental. He can climb trees like a cat, and often feeds on buds and the insects that swarm over the great ferns that grow from the water-soaked crotches of the jungle trees. He can attach his long, strong tail to a limb, swing head downward, and with his long, sticky tongue capture and devour insects from the tree trunk.

I was interested to see what this pangolin was going to do with this army of red ants. Here was a meal all ready-made and waiting for him on a jungle platter—if he could handle it. I doubt if that pangolin had ever seen so much food before in his life. Millions of ants were swarming steadily by, and all he had to do was stop and eat.

But this pangolin was a gourmet. Perhaps he objected to lapping up bits of jungle dirt with his dinner. At any rate, he didn’t start eating. He walked up to that moving column of ants, watched it a moment, then calmly lay down across it.

The ants never paused. The pangolin apparently was just another obstacle to be crossed, and they started crossing. But now the pangolin slyly opened his scales and
left them open. This meant that the ants had the feel of flesh under their tiny feet and instinct told them to start biting the enemy that lay in their path. Thousands of ants swarmed over that pangolin. They gathered in groups under every scale on his body to pinch and bite away at his tough hide.

The business moved along very nicely for a time—until the pangolin decided he had enough ants under his scales. Then he closed them tightly, and with what looked like a smile of satisfaction on his long snout, calmly arose. He had his dinner now—under his scales—the question was, how would he eat it?

It didn't take long to decide that. Perhaps he had eaten many delicious Sunday dinners in the same way. There was a little water hole on one side of the trail—rain water that had collected in a swampy hollow—and the pangolin walked over to it, waded in and lay down.

He opened his scales. The ants caught beneath them floated to the top of the water in a mass. Opening his mouth and putting out his long, sticky tongue, he devoured a nice, water-washed dinner. It was very convenient for that pangolin, but tough on the ants.

Ali and I stepped over the still moving army of ants and continued up the trail. Patches of yellow sunlight fell through the dark jungle leaves overhead and splashed on the damp ground. Ferns waved a frond at a time. Vines and creepers swayed back and forth with nothing visible moving them.

We had gone about a quarter of a mile when I heard what sounded like a sharp hammering on cement. It came from a little to the left, and above. We stopped and looked
FRANK BUCK AND TWO OF HIS NATIVE “BOYS” STRUGGLING TO PUT AN ESCAPED PYTHON BACK IN ITS BOX

This snake, weighing close on 300 pounds, managed to lift the lid from the box, but was caught before it could do serious damage.
up. I knew the sound, and I wanted to get a glimpse of the hornbills.

They were about thirty feet up on the side of an immense jungle tree. A hornbill was perched on a limb clasp ing it with his claw-like bird’s feet, and with his wide, huge beak he was hammering at what looked like cement—and was almost as hard—in the side of the tree. I heard other sounds from inside the tree itself, and I knew that his wife was helping him tear down that wall of hardened mud from within.

“Little hornbill also inside,” said Ali.

There was, of course. Hornbills—large birds, almost as big as eagles—breed very strangely. A pair will fly about the jungle together until they find a large hollow tree. It has to be a pretty big hollow, and even this doesn’t satisfy them for a home. They go inside together and clean the trunk out, peck away every bit of decayed wood with their strong bills and drop the pieces outside. Then they build a nest, solid but soft nest of dead, damp leaves and moss.

When the home is completed according to the best hornbill specifications, the female hornbill goes in and sits down. Life becomes pretty easy for her from then on and mighty tough on the old man. Papa hornbill works like a beaver to protect his family; or maybe it’s just that he doesn’t trust his wife. At any rate, he makes countless journeys to the nearest swamp or creek, brings damp sticky clay a mouthful at a time, and literally seals up his wife on her home nest.

He leaves a hole just big enough for the female’s beak to come out, and then he sets himself to work to feed that beak. It takes a lot of frogs and mice and jungle fruit to satisfy the appetite of a lady hornbill, and the old man has