

A Malayan Actor-Manager

By Sir Hugh Clifford

At Kota Bharu, the capital of Kelantan, some thirty years ago, the Powers of Wickedness in the High Places were at considerable pains to preserve a kind of cock-eyed, limping, knock-kneed, shambling morality which kept more or less even step with their conception of the eternal fitness of things. To this end, Yam Tuan Mulut Mèrah, the "Red Mouthed King," so called on account of his insatiable thirst for blood, did his best to discourage theft; and in pursuance of this laudable desire killed during his reign sufficient men and women to have repopulated a new country half the size of his own kingdom. Old Nek 'Soh, the Dâto' Sri PadiIka, who stood by and witnessed most of the killing, used openly to lament in my time that all the thieves and robbers were not made over to him instead of being wasted in the shambles. It was his opinion that, with so considerable a following, he might have set up a new dynasty in the Peninsula and still have had enough men and women at his disposal to make it possible for him to sell a batch of them now and then if ready money were needed. Nek Soh was a wise old man, and he was probably sure of his facts; but though his influence with his master, the Red Mouthed King, was great in most things, he was never able to induce him to forego his killings or to try the experiment. So the king continued to slay robbers, thieves, and pilferers, never pausing to discriminate very closely between those who were convicted and those who were merely accused, and occasionally extending the punishment to their relations and friends. Nek 'Soh silently bewailed the wholesale waste of good material on utilitarian rather than upon humanitarian pounds, and the bulk of the population thieved and robbed and pilfered as persistently and gayly as ever, for that was the custom of the country.

It must be confessed that the Red Mouthed King's attempts to effect a reform in the habits of his people were attended by no very encouraging result, and this perhaps is why he confined his attention to an effort designed to eradicate a single vice and in other directions was content to let the morality of Kelantan take care of itself. After many years, however, old Mulut Mèrah died, and his son and later his grandson, ruled in his stead. Nek Soh, now a very old man, continued to have a hand in the government of the country, but he no longer occupied the position of king's principal adviser. This post was held by a person upon whom had been conferred the title of Maha Mentri, which means "Great Minister"; and as he was young and energetic, and was, to all intents and purposes, the real ruler of the land, he presently launched out into a scheme of reform which was destined, as he forecast it, to work a revolution in the manners and customs of the good people of Kelantan.

Undeterred by the knowledge that mutilation, violent death, and an ingenious system of tortures, had proved quite powerless to cure the Kèlantan folks' innate propensity to misappropriate one another's property, Maha Mentri conceived the bold idea of converting the entire population, on a sudden, into fervent and fanatical Muhammadans. Now, judged as an exponent of Islam, your average Malayan peasant is wofully slack and casual, but the people of Kelantan are the dullest and least fervent Malays in the Peninsula. No more unpromising material for a religious revival could be found in any part of Asia, and any attempt to make such folk scrupulous observers of the Prophet's

law, by the local equivalent of an Act of Parliament, was foredoomed to failure from the outset. Nothing daunted, however, Maha Mentri insisted upon all men attending at the mosque on Fridays, for the recital of congregational prayer, and inculcated the breaking of the heads of recalcitrant church-goers; he observed, and personally superintended the observance of fasts; he did his best to prevent the use of silk garments by any save women, and this, be it remembered, in a country which is famous for its silk fabrics; he set his face against cock-fighting, bull-matches, ram-butting, human prize-fights, hunting, and the keeping of dogs, all the sports of the well-to-do, in fact; and while he pried into the home of every family in the capital, with the laudable object of ascertaining whether its inmates prayed regularly at each of the five hours of appointed prayer, he dealt an even more severe blow to the happiness of the bulk of the population by forbidding the performance of the *ma'iong*.

The *ma'iong* are heroic plays which are acted throughout the length and breadth of the Peninsula by troupes of strolling players, and they are specially dear to the natives of Kelantan. They are bastard off-shoots of the magnificent spectacular plays which, to this day, are performed in the palace of the king of Kambodia at Pnom Phen. These in their turn had their origin in the traditional and ceremonial dances enacted at Angkor, when that city of gigantic ruins was still the capital of a great Hindu empire, which extended over most of Burma, Siam, and Indo-China, and was established and ruled for several centuries by Brahmans who migrated from across the Ganges. Since the enslaved population rose in revolt against the twice-born tyrants, utterly destroying them and reducing their city to ruins, the plays have undergone many changes, and in our time the clown, who plays the part of low comedian, is called *Bram* in Kambodia. In the Malayan *ma'iong* he reappears as *Pran*; and this butt of the other actors, and object of the derision of the spectators, derives his title of infamy from the proudest caste on earth, who long ago at Angkor exacted the worship of the people, and by their oppression of them earned a hatred of which this grotesque piece of spite is the last surviving manifestation.

The Malay renderings of these plays are of the most primitive character. They are performed inside a small square paddock, enclosed by a low bamboo railing, but otherwise open on all four sides, so as to afford the spectators an unobstructed view of all that goes forward within the enclosure. A palm-leaf roof protects the players from the sun by day and from the heavy dews by night; and whenever a *panggong* is erected upon a new site, the *pawang*, or medicine-man, who is also the actor-manager of the troupe, performs certain magic rites with cheap incense and other unsavoury offering to the spirits. This he does in order to enlist the assistance of the demons of the earth and air, and of all local deities, whom he entreats to watch over his people and to guard them from harm. The incantations of which he makes use are very ancient, and it is possible to trace in some of them a strong Hindu influence, but for the rest, the whole business is pure devil worship.

First he calls upon Black Awang, King of the Earth and Air, he who is wont to wander through the veins of the ground and to take his rest at the portals of the world. Awang, of course, is one of the commonest of Malayan proper names, and here it is obviously used as an euphemism substituted for a word which it is not lawful for men to utter. Next the *pawang* calls upon the Holy Ones, the local demons of the place, and finally upon his grandsire, Petera Guru, the Teacher who is from the Beginning, who is incarnate from his birth, who dwells as a hermit in the recesses of the moon, and practises his magic arts in

the womb of the sun; the Teacher whose coat is wrought of green beads, whose blood is white, who hath but a single bone, the hairs of whose body stand erect, the pores of whose skin are adamant, whose neck is black, whose tongue is fluent, whose spittle is brine. All these he prays to guard his people, and he then cries to them to fling wide the gates of lust and passion together with the gates of desire and credulity, and the portals of longing—"the longing which endureth from dawn unto dawn, which causeth food to cease to satisfy, which maketh sleep uneasy, which remembering maketh memory eternal, which causeth hearing to hear and sight to see."

Such shameless trafficking with spirits, which should find no place in the demonology of any good Muhammadan, was quite properly regarded as an abomination by the straitlaced Maha Mentri; and not content with prohibiting the performances of the *ma'iong*, he contrived to make life so singularly unattractive to the actors and actresses that many of them quitted Kelantan and trooped across the jungle-clad mountains which divide that state from Pahang.

Now, no matter what other faults are to be attributed to the people of Pahang, they cannot justly be accused of bigotry or religious fanaticism, so the players were welcomed with open arms, and from end to end of the land the throbbing beat of the *ma'iong* drums, the clanging of the gongs, the scrapings of the ungainly Malay fiddles, the demented shrieks and wailings of the *serunai*, which sounds like bagpipes in distress, the nasal chantings of the *prima donna*, and the roars of laughter which greet each one of the clown's threadbare jests, made merry discord in the villages. The gates of all the least desirable passions were flung unwontedly wide on this occasion, for hitherto the coming of a *ma'iong* had been a very unusual event in the interior, and a series of deplorable incidents were presently reported to me from many localities in the wide Pahang Valley. While the *ma'iong* was playing, and it played morning, afternoon, and evening, no one had any care for the crops; the women left their babies and their cooking-pots, and the elders of the people were as stage-struck as the boys and maidens. When the strolling players broke up their *panggong* and moved forward upon their way, having squeezed a village dry of its last copper coins, many of the peasants followed in their train, cadging for food and lodging from the people at the next halting-place, enduring every sort of discomfort, but unable to tear themselves away from the fascination of the players and the contemplation of the actresses. Many lawful wives found themselves deserted by their men, and the husbands and fathers in the villages had to keep a sharp eye upon the doings of their wives and daughters while the *ma'iong* folk were in the neighbourhood; for when once the drab monotony of their lives is accidentally disturbed, the morality of the Malay villagers, which ordinarily is far better than that of the townsfolk, goes incontinently to pieces like a stranded ship in the trough of an angry sea.

Of all the actor-managers who were then roaming up and down Pahang, none was so successful both with the playgoers and with the women, as Saleh or 'Leh, as he was usually called, Malay energy rarely being equal to time effort of articulating more than a fragment of any given proper name. In their mouths the dignified Muhammad becomes the plebeian "Mat"; Sulehmân—our old friend Solomon—is reduced to plain "Man"; Abubakar becomes "Bakar," Ishmail "Mail," "Patimnah," "Tunah," or even "Maj," and so on with all the sonorous nomenclature of the Bible and the "Arabian Nights." This is worth noting, because it is typical of the Malay's propensity to scamp every bit of

labour, no matter how light its character, that falls to the lot of man in this work-a-day world.

Leh was a man of many accomplishments. He played the fiddle in excruciating wise to the huge delight of all the Malays who heard him; he had a happy knack of imitating the notes of birds and the cries of wild and domestic animals, and as the *pran* in the *ma'iong* he was genuinely funny. In order to act this part, he used to put on the grotesque mask which is assigned to it by tradition, a thing of a violent red colour with a piece of dirty sheepskin for the hair, and prominent forehead, bulging eyes, and foolish, inflated cheeks, which together give to the uncovered, lower part of its wearer the appearance of an impossibly receding chin; and thus arrayed he interwove with his appointed dialogue a succession of pungent and frequently unprintable topical jokes, which he improvised with an astounding facility. Above all he was a skilled rhapsodist, and with that mellow voice of his would sing the wonderful story of Awang Lotong—the Monkey Prince which is a bastard, local version of the *Ramayana*—until the cocks were crowing to a yellow dawn. He travelled with me on one occasion for a fortnight and I had the whole of this folktale written down from his dictation. When completed it covered sixty pages of foolscap of fine Arabic manuscript, which compresses a great many words into a surprising small space; yet Leh, who could neither read nor write, knew every line of it by heart and could be turned on at any point, invariably continuing the story in precisely the same words. He had learned it from an old man in Kelantan, who in his day was reputed to be the last surviving bard to whom the whole of the tale was known. It was one of the most plain-spoken pieces of literature ever committed to writing, abounded with archaic phraseology, and the corrupt Hinduism to be traced in it lent it a very special interest. In due course, I sent the manuscript with a translation and elaborate notes to the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society by which learned body the whole thing was presently lost with the usual promptitude and despatch.

It was always a marvel to me that Leh escaped having some angry man's knife driven, into his body during his wanderings through Pahang, for the Malays of that state were accustomed to discourage too successful lovers by little attentions of the kind, and Leh was adored by the women both high and low, throughout the length and breadth of the country. Whether he owed his survival to cunning or to sheer force for Pahang. As soon as the worthy Maha Mentri had been laid in his grave, the reaction which always follows a paroxysm of religiosity set in with full force, and Kelantan became forthwith a pleasant land for unregenerate folk to live in. The five hours of appointed prayer were suffered to slip by unregarded of the people; no man troubled himself to fast more than his stomach thought fitting; and the music of the *ma'iong* broke out anew, flinging wide the gates of all the unmentionable passions.

In this new and joyful Kelantan, Leh found himself very much in his element. His wit and his many accomplishments caused the old pillar dollars, which in those days were the standard currency of the country, to come rolling in, and he was thus able to go forth among his fellows lavishly clad from the waist downward in a profusion of gaudy silk *sdrongs* and sashes, such as the Kēlantān folk affect. From the belt upward he went naked, of course; for unlike most Malays the people of this state never wore coats, though these exotic garments were occasionally used by the *râjas* and nobles at court functions when strangers chanced to be present.

It was never Leh's habit to keep all his good fortune to himself, and not only a select few of the king's dancing girls, but a goodly troop of other dames and maidens—who should rightly have been occupied exclusively with their lawful lords and masters—came in for a share of the spoil. Given a well-set-up figure, a handsome face, gay apparel, a witty tongue and a superfluity of ready money, and a far less clever and engaging fellow than Leh, the strolling player might confidently reckon upon a brilliant series of successes at the court of a Malayan king. He came upon the scene, moreover, at a time when the soul of the Kelantan people was stretching itself luxuriously after its release from the moral bonds with which the Maha Mentri had fettered it, and it was not long before the best favoured, half of the female population of Kôta Bharu, a town famous for the beauty of its women, were, to use the Malay phrase, “mad” for Leh. The natives of the Peninsula, who are philosophers in their own way, recognize that love, when it wins a fair grip upon man or woman, is as much a disease of the mind as any other form of insanity; and as it is more common than most other forms of mania, they speak of it as “the madness” *par excellence*.

Such a state of things, however, caused much dissatisfaction to lime rest of the male community, and the number of the malcontents received constant recruits as the madness spread among the women. The latter, as time went on, became more and more shameless and reckless, and threw off all disguise, for they were too numerous for any unorganized system of wife and daughter beating effectively to cope with the trouble. When they were not occupied in waylaying Leh in sending him notes or presents, in making assignations with him, or in ogling him as he swaggered past their dwellings, cocking a conquering eye through the doorways, the ladies of Kôta Bharu were now frequently engaged in shrill and hard-fought battle one with another. Each woman was wildly jealous of all her fellows, mother suspecting daughter, and daughter accusing mother of receiving more than her fair share of Leh's generous and widely scattered attentions. Many were the scratches scored on nose and countenance, long and thick the tussocks of hair reft from one another by the combatants, terrible and extravagant the damage done to one another's *rival wardrobes* by the infuriated ladies; while the men beholding these impossible goings-on with horror and dismay, said among themselves that Leh, the warden of the king's dancing girls must die.

He was a hefty fellow and known to be a good man of his hands, wherefore, badly as they all felt about him, no one saw his way to engage him in single combat, though there were half a hundred very angry husbands and lovers who were anxious to take an active part in assassinating him. At last a committee of three specially aggrieved citizens was appointed by general consent to act for the rest, and they lay in wait for Leh during several successive evenings, hoping to catch him returning alone from the *ma'iong* shed.

It was on the third night of their vigil that their chance came. The moon was near the full, and the heavy shadows cast by the palm fronds lay across the ground like solid objects. The footpath, which leads from the main thoroughfare into the villages around Kôta Bharu, branches off some twenty yards from the spot where the watchers lay concealed. The committee of three sat huddled up just within the clustering compounds, hidden from sight by the patch of shadow cast upon the bare earth by a neighbouring house, and the vivid moonlight revealed every detail of the scene around them—the yellow, sun-baked soil, the green of the smooth banana leaves, even the red of a cluster of *rambut-an* fruit on a tree near at hand.

Presently the sound of voices talking and laughing light-heartedly came to the ears of the listening men, and as the speakers drew nearer the committee of three were able to distinguish Leh's mellow tones. At the parting of the ways he turned off by himself along the footpath, his companions keeping on to the main road. Leh took leave of them with a farewell jest or two, which sent the others laughing upon their way, and then he strolled slowly along the footpath humming the catch of a song under his breath. The three in the shadow of the house could see the colour of the gaudy cloths wound about their enemy's waist, the fantastic peak into which his handkerchief was twisted, the glint of the polished *kemuning* wood and the gold settings of his dagger hilt, and the long, broad-bladed spear that he carried in his right hand. They watched him drawing nearer to them, still humming a song, and with a half smile upon his face. They allowed him to come abreast of them, to stroll past them, still unsuspecting of danger; but no pity for him moved them. All had been injured in too deadly a fashion by this callous, light-hearted libertine, who now went to the death he knew not of with a smile on his face and the stave of a song upon his lips.

As soon as he had passed them the committee of three stepped noiselessly out of the shadow, poised their spears aloft, and plunged them into Leh's naked brown back. As they struck they rent the silence of the night with their *sôrak*, a war-cry into which they compressed all the pent-up hatred of their victim which had been devouring their hearts for months. Leh, giving vent to a thick, choking cough, fell upon his face, and a few more vigorous spear thrusts at his prostrate body completed the work which the committee of three had been appointed to perform.

They left the body of Leh, the strolling player, lying where it had fallen, face downward in the dust of the footpath; and though the king did all that lay in his power to secure the detection of the murderers, and though his efforts were seconded by half the women in the town, the men who had planned the deed kept their secret well, so no punishment could be inflicted upon those who had actually effected the assassination of the warden of the king's dancing girls.

In the eyes of Malayan justice, however, if you are unable to punish the guilty, it is better to come down heavily upon the innocent than to let everybody get off scot free. The house near which the body of Leh had been found happened to be tenanted by an old crone, her widowed daughter, and three children of tender age. That they were not concerned in the murder was obvious; but none the less their abode was taken as the centre of a circle of one hundred fathom' radius and all whose houses chanced to lie within its circumference, whether men or women young or old, whole or bedridden, mothers great with child or babies at the breast, were indifferently fined the sum of three dollars each, a large sum for a Malayan villager of those days to be called upon to pay, and producing, from the king's point of view, a refreshingly big total, when all heads had been counted, for in the neighbourhood of Kôta Bharu the people herd together as closely as kline in a byre.

This system of wholesale mulcting was recognized in Kèlantan as having several advantages attaching to it. In the first place, it did something to enhance the revenues of the king, which was a matter of moment; and for the humbler folk, if a man chanced to have a quarrel with a neighbour, with whom he was otherwise unable to get even, he could punish him by the simple process of leaving a corpse at his front door. In a land where human life was as cheap as it used to be in Kelantan, this was not a difficult matter

to arrange, and if the corpse chanced to be that of yet another enemy, two birds, so to speak, could be killed with a single stone. Which is economical.