

The Ūnka

By Frank Athelstane Swettenham, C.M.G.

THE other day I had to move from the house where I have lived for the last seven years, and in the consequent upheaval of accumulated rubbish—specially letters, papers, and books—I found a note, or, to speak accurately, two notes written on one sheet of paper, which brought vividly to my recollection an incident that occurred while I was living with one of the writers, Captain Innes of the Corps of Royal Engineers.

Innes and I had taken a house in Penang and had just moved into it. The house stood at the junction of two roads, it was surrounded by a large but neglected garden, and the place altogether resembled an Eastern Castle Rack-rent, an appearance partly due to the fact that it had not been occupied for some time. The garden was a veritable jungle ; but the house was large and roomy, approached by a rather imposing flight of steps which led into a great marble-paved hall, lighted by long narrow windows, glazed with small panes of glass. It was principally on this account that we named our new habitation the Baronial Hall.

I remember that the stables contained but three stalls, to accommodate Innes's one horse and my three ponies. I thought I might claim two of the stalls, but Innes's horsekeeper, a Sinhalese, in whom his master had more confidence than I had, insisted that

his horse was of a very superior breed, and must have one stall to stand in and another to sleep in, so I accepted the position and sent two of my ponies to live elsewhere. I cannot say that I felt all the compassion called for by the circumstances when, one night, some weeks later, as I was dressing for dinner, I heard a peculiar noise in the direction of the stable, and, looking out, I saw in the bright moonlight the Sinhalese, face-downwards, on the sand of the open space before the stable, while my pony, a not too good-tempered beast at any time, was apparently eating him and enjoying the process.

When we had rescued the horsekeeper and sent him to the hospital (where he remained a considerable time, and from which he returned happily drunk), I pointed out to his master that, if the wise old man understood the horse in his care, he was less well informed about the habits of my pony.

This incident, and the fact that Innes planted what should have been the lawn with guinea-grass, the favourite food of his too-pampered charger, are the only facts of any importance that I can remember, till the coming of the *únka*.

Únka is the Malay name for the tail-less monkey called by Europeans a Wah-Wah. I do not know where that name originated, but the creature makes a noise like the soft and plaintive repetition of a sound, that can be fairly put into letters thus—Wu', Wu'. When several *únka* get together in the jungle, in the early morning, they will sit in a high tree, in a circle, round one of their number, who pipes and sings and finally screams a solo of many variations, through which runs the simple *motif*, and, at a certain point, the others all join in, calling in loud and rapid tones—WU' WU' WU' WU' Wu' Wu' ; the first two or three cries delivered shrilly and slowly, the others tumbling on each others' heels. And then *da capo*, until the sun gets too hot, or they quarrel,

quarrel, or become too hungry or thirsty to go on; I cannot say for certain, for though I have watched and listened to the concert for a long time, I had not patience to wait till the end.

The *únka* is either black or fawn-coloured, he has extraordinarily long and strong arms and legs, a face of never-changing sadness, which may on occasion turn to an evil expression of vice and fury; but, in the main, the *únka* is a gentle and docile creature, easily tamed, and his only amusements seem to be, to swing himself with great leaps along a bar, to sing the Wu' Wu' song, or to sit in deep meditation, with his toes turned in, his head between his knees, and both hands clasped on the nape of his neck.

I was much shocked, one day, when I saw two small *únka* living in a tree in front of the house of a Malay headman. There was nothing very strange in the fact that these creatures should have been where they were, but, what was unusual to me, was to find that each was wearing a dress of cotton print, one blue and the other pink, with their heads appearing from the neck, their hands from the sleeves, and their legs—well, that was the worst of it, they were hanging by their feet, and I went away. As a rule, as I have already mentioned, they hang by their arms, but, then, with the exception of these orphans, I had never seen any *únka* in print gowns. It only shows how unwise it is to try and clothe all nationalities in the garments of Western civilisation.

Again, I remember an *únka* I used to know very well. He was a dissipated creature, and lived in a box on the top of a pole. There was a hole in a corner of the box, and into this used to be fixed a corked bottle of whisky and water, which gave the *únka* a good deal of trouble to pull out, but, once fairly in his hands, he made short work of the extraction of the cork and the consumption of the contents.

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Then he used to be told to come down, and, when he reached the ground, he would turn a succession of somersaults with a grace and agility that would have made a London street-arab green with envy. But I confess it was the last act of the performance that I most enjoyed ; it was called "the bath." An old kerosene tin, one side of which had been cut away, was filled with water and the bath was placed on the ground in a suitable spot. As soon as it was ready, the *ŭnka*, who had watched the preparations with careful interest, walked slowly up to the bath (by the way, they walk on their hind legs usually, and drink from their hands), and, standing at one end of the tin, gripped the sides of the bath, at a convenient distance, with both hands and then slowly, very, very slowly, went head foremost into the water, turning, as he did so, a complete somersault, his dripping woebegone face appearing gradually from out the water, as he arranged himself to sit comfortably, with his back against the end of the tin and his arms hanging over the sides, exactly as a human being might sit in a bath. The *ŭnka* would recline thus, for about half a minute, looking the picture of extreme suffering and silent protest against the unfeeling laughter of the spectators. Then he suddenly jumped up, and springing with both feet on to the edge of the tin, gave a violent backward kick, that sent the water streaming down the hill and the bath rolling after it.

According to Perak tradition, the *ŭnka* and another species of Simian, called *siāmang*, rather blacker and more diabolical looking than the *ŭnka*, but otherwise not easily to be distinguished from the latter, lived originally in mutual enjoyment of the Perak jungles. Individuals of the two species quarrelled about precedence at a Court Ball, or a State Concert, probably the latter ; the quarrel was espoused with great bitterness by all the *ŭnka* and
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all the *siámang*, and, when the other denizens of the forest were worried beyond endurance, by the constant bickerings, murders, and retaliations of these creatures, an edict was issued by which all the *únka* were compelled, for all time, to live on the right of the Perak River and the *siámang* on the left—neither being allowed to cross the river.

A friend of mine who lived on the right bank of the river and wished to test the truth of this legend, made pets of a very small *siámang* and a rather large *únka*, for whom places were laid and chairs put at every meal. They were not confined in any way and their manners were indifferent, for, though they were served with every course at each meal, they seemed to take an impish delight in pulling the dishes out of the hands of the servants who passed within their reach.

As my friend was writing one day at a large round table, on which a number of official letters were lying awaiting his signature, I saw the *siámang* climb, slowly and without attracting attention, on to the table, where, for a time, he sat without stirring, regarding my friend with earnest and sorrowful eyes. Then, by degrees, he gradually edged himself towards the inkstand, and, when quite close to it, dipped his hand into the pot and carefully wiped his inky fingers in a sort of monkey-signature on each of the beautifully prepared official despatches. When, at last, my friend discovered what the *siámang* had done, and made as though to catch and punish his tormentor, the small imp disappeared over the side of the table, making piteous little cries, and the *únka*, who had been watching the proceedings through the window, came in and hurried his companion on to the roof, where they always retired to concoct some new outrage.

In spite of these signs of original sin, the *únka*, concerning which I have made these casual references, were, on the whole,
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of amiable dispositions. My own experience was, alas ! to be with one of a different type.

A Governor whose term of office was up, had arranged with a Malay Sultan to send him two *ŭnka*, to take to England, but, at the moment of his departure, as they had not then arrived, he asked me to take charge of them and forward them to London.

I consented, and, one morning a Malay appeared with a letter, and told me that the *ŭnka* had been landed from the vessel in which he had brought them from a northern State, and were at my disposal. I was busy, and told the messenger to take them to the Baronial Hall. As he was leaving, the man said I should find that the smaller of the two had lost his arm at the elbow, an accident which had occurred on the voyage, for the cages had been placed within reach of each other, and the larger monkey who, as the man remarked, was rather wicked, had induced his small companion to shake hands with him, and then abused his confidence by twisting his arm off at the elbow.

When I got home in the evening I found the small *ŭnka* looking very sick, and he died the next day ; but his murderer was a very fine specimen of the fawn-coloured *ŭnka*, about two feet high as he sat on the ground, with an expression of countenance that I did not altogether like. However, he was allowed a certain length of cord, and lived in the coach-house, where I often went to see and feed him, and he received my advances, apparently, in good part. One day, however, he escaped, and I had to call in the services of two time-expired Indian convicts to catch him. The servants declined to have anything to do with him, and said he was very wicked and tried to bite them, even when they gave him food, so I determined to put him back in his cage. I anticipated no difficulty, but, as he hesitated to go in,
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though everything had been done to make his cage look attractive, I put my hand on his back and applied a very gentle pressure. In an instant he turned round and bit me badly, in return for which I gave him a good beating and determined I would not trouble about him any more. I gave up my visits to him, but, whenever he saw me at any distance, even if it were through the venetians of a window, he would turn his back on me, seize one leg with both hands and, looking through his legs, make horrible faces in a way that I thought very rude and ungrateful.

After a fortnight he got away again. I felt it was more than likely that the servants had connived at his escape, and I was inclined to say with Mr. Briggs, "Thank God, he's gone at last."

I said that the Baronial Hall stood in the angle of two wide and much frequented roads. The front road boarded a picturesque bay of the sea, but, behind the house, was a large cocoanut plantation, and here the *únka* took up his quarters and lived for six months or more. Once, when I returned to the house after a week's absence, I found a crowd of half-caste boys throwing stones at the *únka*, who sat at the top of a cocoanut-tree and regarded them with far from friendly eyes. I sent the boys away, but I realised that the owner of the plantation might object to the *únka*, as he was probably doing, making free with the fruit of this grove.

I saw no more of my charge, and left Penang on a political mission to Perak, where I remained some time.

Landing, on my return, I went to the quarters of a friend who was the head of the Police Force, and he told me, amongst other news, that, only an hour before my arrival, some Eurasian boys had brought to him the *únka*, dead, and tied on a stick, saying that he had attacked them, and bitten one of their number very
badly

badly in the hand, and they had been compelled in self-defence to kill him. Henry Plunket (the Superintendent of Police) said that this was evidently not the whole truth of what had occurred, but the injured boy talked of claiming compensation from me, though, no doubt, the *ūnka* had been made the victim of a combined attack. Bearing in mind what I had seen myself, some months before, I thought that was extremely probable, and, having inspected the body, a piteous object tied to a long stick by the ankles, while the arms had been pulled as far as possible above the head, and there fastened round the stick by the wrists, I went home, Plunket undertaking to get the *ūnka* stuffed in an attitude of deep humility, with his formidable teeth carefully concealed.

Early the next morning a servant told me that two Eurasians wanted to see me. I told him to ask them in, and a boy and a man made their appearance. The boy's hand was in a sling, but otherwise he seemed well enough.

I said, "What can I do for you?"

The boy replied, "Your monkey has bitten me."

I remarked, "And you have killed the monkey."

There was a brief silence and I said, "Tell me how it happened."

"I was going home from school," said the boy, "walking along the high road in front of this house, when the monkey, who was sitting up in a cocoanut tree, caught sight of me and came down and bit me."

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"How did the monkey get into the road?"

"He climbed through the hedge."

"Were you the only person on the road?"

"Oh, no; there were many others."

"Then

“Then why did he attack you?”

No answer.

“Is that all you have to say about it?”

“Yes.”

“Then I wish you good-morning.”

Here the man broke in with, “What are you going to give the boy?”

To which I replied, “Nothing, in the face of such a story as that. But what have you to do with it?”

“I have come as the boy’s friend,” he said, “and if you don’t pay him compensation, he will sue you for damages.”

“He must do what he thinks best,” I said, “but I would advise him to prepare a more probable story than that he has just told me. Monkeys do not come down from the tops of cocoanut trees to bite inoffensive little boys who are walking on the high road.”

Seeing there was nothing more to be got out of me my visitors departed, and I, forgetting the unspoken dislike of the *únka* for myself, mourned his loss, and felt satisfied he had been done to death by the boys of the neighbourhood.

At that time the judge of the Small Cause Court was a magistrate who had had a great deal of Indian experience before coming to Penang, and, a few days after my interview with the boy, this official called at my office, and said: “I want to have a few minutes conversation with you about a matter that concerns you personally.”

I said, “Pray, sit down. I suppose the boy who was bitten by the monkey has been to you?”

“He has,” said the magistrate, “and he wishes to summons you for damages.”

“He is quite at liberty to do so,” I said, “but I can’t imagine any

any one placing any credence in the cock-and-bull story about the monkey coming down out of the tree, and attacking him as he passed on the high road."

"Oh, but I assure you," said the man learned in the law, "that is not at all an improbable story. I knew a road in the Province so infested by monkeys that they used to come out of the jungle and snatch the baskets of fruit out of the hands of people going to market. No woman could pass there alone, and the men used to go in parties for mutual protection."

"Of course, if you know that," I said, without betraying the thoughts that were in me, "I have nothing more to say, but I have heard the details of what really occurred from an unbiassed spectator, whom I can produce as a witness, and the boy's story is very far from the truth."

"Then what is the true account?" said the magistrate, "for I shall not issue a summons without good cause shown."

"I am told," I said, "that this boy and another were playing in the cocoanut plantation, behind my house (not their plantation, by the way, they were trespassers), and the monkey was sitting in a high cocoanut tree hard by, watching the boys and thinking about nothing at all. The boys, as boys will, began to quarrel, and from abuse they soon came to blows. Now," I said, "when the monkey saw that he came down the tree."

"Ah! he came down the tree," broke in my friend.

"Yes," I said, "the man who saw it all says he came down the tree, but the boys continued to fight and took no notice of him. Then the monkey, who was a particularly intelligent beast and had lived with respectable people, felt he ought to interfere, because he knew it was wrong of boys to fight, and had seen them beaten for doing it. He, poor thing, could not speak to them, but he walked up, waving his hands like this"—here I suited the action

to the word—"as though he would say, 'Stop! you must not fight any more.'"

"What!" interrupted the magistrate, "he went like this!" as he repeated my action.

"Yes," I said, "so I am told by the man who saw it all. The monkey went close up to them in his anxiety, and then either the boys misunderstood him or, what seems more likely, they were really bad boys, and disliked the monkey's interference, for one of them, the boy who has been injured, slapped the monkey in the face."

"Slapped him in the face?"

"Yes," I said, "so the man says who told me the story. And then what could you expect? The monkey, finding his good intentions misinterpreted and himself made the subject of a cowardly assault, bit his assailant—bit him badly in the hand."

"Ah! he bit him in the hand?"

"Yes. And one must make some excuses for him," I said, "because, after all, one ought not to expect too much from a monkey."

"That," said my friend, as he got up and took his hat, "is an entirely different account to the one I heard, and I wish you good-morning."

"Of course, of course," I said, as I shook hands with him, "I thought you would like to know the facts." And, as I closed the door and resumed my seat, I fell a-musing on the curious ways of the *ûnka*, and the advantages to be gained by a long experience of monkeys.

For months I heard nothing more about the boy and his complaint, but some one told me that, when he went again to my experienced friend, he had been driven from the presence with what is called "a flea in his ear."

Without

Without my realising that the change meant anything to me, a new judge of the Small Cause Court arrived from England about this time, and replaced the Indian officer. The new comer, of course, knew nothing about monkeys, and when, just as I was starting on another expedition to the Malay States, I was served with a summons claiming damages for the injury done to Master Fernandez by a dangerous beast described as my property, I could only ask Innes to put the case in the hands of Counsel, and trust to my advocate's skill and the harmless, even pitiful appearance of the stuffed *únka*, whose counterfeit presentment I suggested should be produced in Court, as a last resort.

My journeyings took me finally to Singapore, where I told this veracious story, and consulted both the Chief Justice and Attorney-General, who assured me that I had no legal responsibility in the matter; indeed, I did not quite understand how the complainant was going to prove that he had been bitten by my *únka* at all, or that I could be said to own, or keep, a creature that for six months had lived by his wits, in a neighbouring plantation. However, it is the unexpected which happens, and I tried to bear the news with fortitude when I received from Innes the following letter and its enclosure. I never quite made out what became of the stuffed *únka*, but I suppose he is preserved with the records of the case in the archives of the Penang Court.

“PENANG.

“23rd September, 18—.

“MY DEAR SWETTENHAM,

“You will gather from the enclosure that the monkey case has gone against us; I'm awfully sorry, and did my best in the matter, I assure you. The Judge counselled a compromise after hearing Plaintiff's case and Bond's reply, and I thought it safest to take the hint. Bond, as you see, handsomely declines any fee. I have thanked
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him on your behalf for his exertions and settled the bill, the amount whereof we can adjust with other matters. I confess I couldn't follow the Judge's train of thought, for the story didn't seem to me to tell well in the witness box.

"Yours truly,
"W. INNES."

"18th September, 18—.

"My DEAR INNES,

"As Swettenham's case was compromised at the suggestion of the Judge, I don't intend to make any charge against him for the little I did, so all he will have to pay will be \$22:95 costs and damages.

"Yours sincerely,
"I. S. BOND."

There must have been something peculiarly malignant about this *únka*; the slightest connection with him proved fatal to so many people. The Sultan who gave him is dead, and the Governor who never received him; the Chief Justice and the Attorney-General who took a friendly interest in him; the magistrate who had such an experience of all his kind; the Counsel who defended him; my friend who supported him; and—I had almost forgotten—the man who really saw what happened to him. It is almost like the tale of the House that Jack built—a glorified Eastern version.