

OUHA, KING OF THE APES

I. Ouha Will Interest You...

*Harry Smith Lauwer¹ to Dr. Abraham Goldry in Philadelphia
Borneo, Riddle-Temple, via Ambang*

My dear friend,

When I left Philadelphia on your specific orders, it was, for me, a question of life or death. Neurasthenia, arrived at its extreme point, would inevitably have driven me to suicide. While making an immense fortune by means of enormous overwork I had conceived such a disgust for humankind that we searched together for a country that civilization, or at least what we call by that name, had not yet penetrated, and one in which the great scenery of nature would offer my mind a new interest—in brief, an encouragement to live.

I yielded to your reasoning, my dear doctor, and left with my daughter Mabel, your goddaughter, for Borneo, the largest island in the Indo-Malaysian archipelago. The description of that island, two-thirds Dutch and English in the northern part, had not deceived me. On the coasts and in the towns proximal to the China Sea, and Java Sea and the Celebes Sea, rice and tobacco are grown, but the rest of Borneo is nothing but an immense forest of mangroves, coconut-palms, sago-palms, areca-palms, gum-trees, resin-trees and gigantic bamboos: a forest ideal for me, as a misanthrope, delightfully populated by orangutans, rhinoceroses and elephants.

As I tap the keyboard of my typewriter to write this epistle, I have a true contentment in my soul and at my fingertips. It's a salvation that you have wrought; you may consider it as one of the best of your medical career. Since we left—which is to say, in the last five and a half months, many changes have occurred. First of all, in spite of Major Bennett's very cordial hospitality, in need of more solitude, I found that of which I dreamed a few hundred miles away from him.

In the course of an excursion into the interior of Borneo, buried in the heart of the virgin forest, we discovered the ruins of a temple whose antiquity is lost in the night of time. The idea immediately struck me of restoring it and taking up residence there.

That whim, which cost me ten million dollars, saved me, because I have been occupied with that project for four months. I brought engineers and workers from India—the only ones capable of understanding the restoration—and had furniture, carpets and tapestries sent from Imbuk. Our friend Bennett has shown himself, on this occasion, the most devoted of friends. Bennett, my daughter, her governess and twenty carefully-chosen servants, who seem pleased with us, are sufficient for me. All that is lacking here, my dear doctor, is you—so I hope that you will soon find the opportunity to come and join us.

Mabel, in particular, needs you. She is generous enough not to be bored by me, but she is now 17 years-old and I am anticipating in terror the moment when she will require another companion. On that subject, please send us news of that Archibald Wilson, who began a flirtation with your goddaughter six months ago. He is, I believe, a friend of yours, and an appropriate suitor in all respects.

Here, my dear fellow, nature is splendid. Around Riddle-Temple I have cleared and ploughed up a few acres of land, but all around that is the forest, the virgin forest in all its virginity, wild and luxuriant.

From here we can hear monkeys chattering and tigers howling. To prevent accidents, I've encircled my temple with a strong fence, but beyond it is primitive life in all its beauty. Every so often, Mabel, myself and a few servants—good hunters—set off into the forest, and we have brought back some superb tiger skins and elephant tusks.

¹ The author subsequently abandons the "Lauwer" and is content to allow this character to be merely "Harry Smith."

As for the orangutans, we have not yet made their acquaintance. Thus far, we have only encountered numerous varieties of monkeys. As one of the most ardent observers of our simian brethren, you could carry out studies here, for the forest is swarming with them. We already have ten of those forest-dwellers living inside the fence, who do not seem to regret the wilderness overmuch and are amusing companions for us. Moreover, you would find species of tropical vegetation that must be absolutely unknown in Europe.

Well, my dear doctor, that ought to tempt you: flowers, plants, monkeys and your friends.

Harry Smith Lauwer

Mabel Smith Lauwer to Abraham Goldry

Dear and beloved Godfather,

I have snatched the pen from Papa's hand in order to be the first to tell you our great news. We have captured an orangutan! A large, fine specimen; it seems that no one had ever seen one so big. He is taller than Papa, and you know that Papa is fairly tall—five foot nine. Personally, I think the orangutan is considerably more advanced than his fellows; he almost always walks upright and his arms only hang down to his knees. At the same time, his face has a Napoleonic expression and he sometimes moves his lips in a fashion that resembles a smile.

As you can imagine, we didn't take possession of the fellow without difficulty. It was a little native woman, of whom Papa recently made me a gift, who served as bait. I'd like to tell you that strange story, but it would take too long, and I'd rather wait until you're here. The main thing is the capture of the hairy giant.

Come to admire and study him, Godfather.

In your last letter you told us that my suitor, Archibald Wilson, was still inconsolable; tell him that he has a successor and that I have embarked on an original flirtation with a great lord who answers to the name of Ouha. My friend Ouha can pronounce that word quite clearly, and we have understood that in my ape's family (should I say ape?—he seems to me to be superior to many humans) Ouha must be his name, for he always answers to that appellation when one speaks to him, or pricks up his ears when anyone talks about him.

We have already had him for a month, and Papa is thinking of taking off his chains, for he seems totally inoffensive and does everything one wants him to do with extreme skill.

We're expecting you, my dear Godfather. Ouha will interest you. Come soon! Ouha! Ouha!

I love you dearly.

Mabel

II. The Enigmatic Ruins of a Buddhist Temple in Borneo

Major William Bennett was resident in Borneo in a concession granted as recompense for valiant conduct. Having taken successive engagements since he was old enough to be a soldier, first with the East India Company and then with the Dutch, he had become an associate of Colonel Werspick, justly known as the hero of Borneo, and had campaigned with him.

Pirates known as “head-hunters”—because they took the heads of their enemies as trophies—made frequent landings in Java and the small islands subject to Dutch rule. In one of their recent expeditions, several Europeans who had fallen into their hands had been tortured atrociously. That action demanded vengeance. Colonel Werspick set off with two hundred European soldiers and four hundred coolies. The enemy, taking refuge in the heart of the island, protected by impenetrable woods and an insurmountable torrent, believed themselves to be sheltered from all danger.

For twenty-four days and twenty-four nights, the little column cleared a passage with hatchets through the virgin forest, with very little food, sustaining themselves with quinine, and without building a fire. Maintaining the most profound silence, they arrived at the pirates’ camp and fell upon the unexpectedly. After a thirteen-hour battle, in spite of their numerical superiority, the twelve hundred pirates were utterly defeated.

After that, Major Bennett had bamboo rafts constructed, and embarked on the torrent with his small army and four hundred prisoners. In twenty-four hours they made the journey that had taken them twenty-four terrible days before, but the rafts, carried through rocks, rapids and cataracts covered the hundred leagues of the journey and all reached the sea, where they were picked up by the Dutch fleet.

It was in recompense for that exploit that Major William Bennett obtained a large concession some twenty miles from Imbuk. The location was a trifle hazardous, but the major had no fear of peril. Partly by virtue of his energy and partly by virtue of his spirit of justice and perfect honesty, he was able to overcome the fear of the natives and win their esteem. Soon, following his example, a few Europeans came to take up residence in the vicinity, and a sizeable colony was established on that island promontory. It was soon very prosperous.

The major married Meg Sulten, the sister of an Irish colonist, Patrick Sulten—his neighbor, forty miles away from White House, Bennett’s home. From the viewpoint of administration and the direction of the plantation, his wife was a veritable pearl, but her character was exceedingly intractable. Always discontented with her husband and everything else, she never stopped grumbling, so she was feared by all the servants, her children—she gave the major two daughters and four sons—and the major himself, who gave in to all her caprices resignedly, for the sake of peace.

As much to get away from his wife as to distract his guest, William Bennett organized long excursions into the surroundings. In the course of one of these trips, he took Harry Smith Lauwer and his daughter—an astonishing masterpiece as a model of American maidenhood—to the ruins of the temple of Issager-Bong. Situated about four hundred miles from Imbuk, in the heart of the virgin forest, the ruins were one of the rare marvels of Oriental architecture.

Who had built the temple? To what worship was it devoted? No one knows. But the grandiose harmony of the sculptures and the minute detail in the majesty of the style testified to a surprising civilization many centuries in the past. Thousands of years had undoubtedly passed over that prodigious baobab of granite and multicolored marble, but such as the quality of the materials employed that they had resisted the action of time. Many of the floors and walls had been cracked by the pressure of an exuberant vegetation, but the stones had been loosened without breaking.

How could the presence of such a monument be explained in the heart of an island whose wild appearance and uncultivated land seemed to indicate a condition close to primitive savagery? The volcanic nature of the Malaysian archipelago suggested the possibility that in some very distant epoch, the region had been subject to an upheaval. Once no doubt, all the islands had formed a single vast

continent. Was it united to India?² The Malaysian people, however, are not very similar to the Indian people; they seem rather to be a variety of the Indo-Chinese.

In any case, such as it appeared to the excursionists, the temple was a marvel. Its three terraces, formed as a pyramid truncated at the summit, were supported by alternating columns of marble and porphyry. The shafts, fluted in spiral fashion, were terminated by curiously-sculpted capitals, all dissimilar. Porticos overloaded with delicate ornamentation, like lacework of stone and sunlight, gave entry into immense halls whose mosaic tiling, reminiscent in its richness of that of St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, was still in good condition. In some places, to be sure, the vegetation had invaded open galleries, but it was easy to see that restoration would not be difficult.

From the corner of his eye Major William Bennett followed the mounting enthusiasm in Harry Smith's face, which virtually transfigured the blasé and world-weary billionaire.

"What a pity," he said to Mabel, "that such a blossoming of magnificence remains buried in the forest."

"It would be an even greater pity," Mabel replied, "if the Vandals of Europe got their hands on it, to ornament their museums with its choice pieces. I remember the painful impression I had on seeing the fragments of the Parthenon in the British Museum. What would have been admirable, as a whole, beneath the pure sky of Greece, was paltry in its effect, thus mutilated, in a hall that was darkened that day by the London fog."

"It would require a billionaire of considerable artistry to carry out the repair and maintenance of this monumental masterpiece."

"Me!" cried Harry Smith.

"You couldn't find a nobler employment for your fortune. That, my dear fellow, is an idea worthy of an American like you. Furthermore, you will find, in the activity and distraction of that enterprise, a powerful distraction from your neurasthenia."

² The idea that there was once an advanced civilization in a hypothetical continent that connected the islands of the "East Indies" together prior to a prehistoric cataclysm, is commonplace in French adventure fiction, dating back at least as far as the works of Joseph Méry in the 1830s.