Fables and Folk-Tales

from an Eastern Forest.
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Collected and Translated by

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To

my Friend and Fellow-worker

RICHARD JAMES WILKINSON.
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N.B. The Tail-pieces represent respectively Small Lizards, the Tiger, Mouse-deer, Otter, Tortoise, Monitor Lizard, Wild Bull, Monkey, and Elephant.
INTRODUCTION.

The Tales contained in this little volume were taken down from the lips of the Malay peasantry, in the twilight of their own tropical jungle, during the progress of the Cambridge Expedition of 1899 through the remoter States of the Malay Peninsula. The tales themselves, as will be obvious to the reader, are the merest gleanings from an extensive harvest-field, and make no pretensions whatever to any completeness or finality. For the most part, indeed, the book is an experiment, the object of which is to ascertain to what extent the native “Soothers-of-care” (as the village story-teller is designated by his Malayan audience) may tell his tale in words of his own choosing, without alienating the interest of the Western reader.

To save the translation from becoming too slavishly literal and (consequently) unreadable, the natural luxuriance of Oriental phraseology has been
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kept within limits, but otherwise the originals have been closely adhered to, and the fine art of embellishment has been disregarded. If something has been lost through an occasional want of conformity with Western ideas, it is hoped that much will also be gained in point and quaintness through the more faithful preservation of the original expressions.

The hero of these tales is a small chevrotain which is to be found in almost every part of the jungles of Malaya. It is commonly called the Malayan Mouse-deer; but in spite of its name it belongs rather to the antelope tribe, the heel-bone (os calcis) of its hinder leg projecting in a fashion which I believe is never seen in the true deer. Its eye-teeth, too, are curiously long and projecting, and its hoofs are cloven to an extent which in so small a creature is really remarkable. At the same time it is a most beautiful little animal, with big dark pleading eyes and all the grace and elegance of a gazelle. It is a favourite character in Malayan folk-tales, in which it is credited with such inexhaustible powers of resource and mother-wit that it is often given the name of "Ment’ri B’lukar," the "Vizier of the Underwood" (or "Brush"). No difficulties are too great for it to overcome; no
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perils can daunt it; even the savage lords of Forest-glade and River-pool suffer contumelious defeat when ‘Friend’ Mouse-deer is their adversary. In fact, the place occupied by the Mouse-deer in Malayan Folk-lore is exactly analogous to the place occupied by Reynard the Fox in the folk-tales of Europe, and by Brer Rabbit in the immortal cycle of tales which take their name from ‘Uncle Remus.’

Here, however, it is perhaps worth noting that although the Mouse-deer as a master of ‘slimness’ is given the preeminent place among all the beasts of the field, its mantle is sometimes temporarily permitted to fall upon the shoulders of other and quite different members of the animal creation. Hence we find in the 14th story, that the King-crow is worsted by a Water-snail, and I may add that in a Javanese fable of the same type (for which compare our own ‘Hare-and-Tortoise’ Fable) the Mouse-deer itself plays the part of the deceived, instead of that of the deceiver.

But the subject of the mutual relations of the Beasts in Malayan Fable is one which has yet to be worked ‘out, and which lies unfortunately far beyond the bounds of the present disquisition.

The other animals here introduced to the reader,

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for the most part resemble their Indian relatives and require little or no further description from the writer, with the possible exception of the “Wild Bull” which is the *Bos gaurus* or “Gaur” of India; rather than *Bos sondaicus* which is said to have been once or twice reported from the same region.

In making the illustrations which appear in this book, the artist has taken infinite pains for which I should like to take this occasion to thank him; he has certainly made the best of such somewhat scanty material as was available. With a few occasional exceptions, no serious attempt has been made to analyse the stories here given, or to trace their sources. It was felt that to do so would be only to break a butterfly upon a wheel; and the writer prefers that this little book should be to others what it is to him, a delightful memorial of a most fascinating country and people.

W. S.

1 In addition however to a few references given in the notes, I may perhaps mention, for the benefit of local readers, the Malay versions of the “Hikayat P’landok Jinaka” ed. H. C. Klinkert (Leyden, 1885), and the “Sha’ir P’landok” (both of which are lithographed).