The Village in the Jungle

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THE NEW PHOENIX

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To V. W.

I've given you all the little, that I've to give ;
You've given me all, that for me is all there is ;
So now I just give back what you have given—
If there is anything to give in this.

THE VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE

CHAPTER I

THE village was called Beddagama, which means the village in the jungle. It lay in the low country or plains, midway between the sea and the great mountains which seem, far away to the north, to rise like a long wall straight up from the sea of trees. It was in, and of, the jungle; the air and smell of the jungle lay heavy upon it—the smell of hot air, of dust, and of dry and powdered leaves and sticks. Its beginning and its end was in the jungle, which stretched away from it on all sides unbroken, north and south and east and west, to the blue line of the hills and to the sea. The jungle surrounded it, overhung it, continually pressed in upon it. It stood at the door of the houses, always ready to press in upon the compounds and open spaces, to break through the mud huts, and to choke up the tracks and paths. It was only by yearly clearing with axe and katty that it could be kept out. It was a living wall about the

village, a wall which, if the axe were spared, would creep in and smother and blot out the village itself.

There are people who will tell you that they have no fear of the jungle, that they know it as well as the streets of Maha Nuwara or their own compounds. Such people are either liars and boasters, or they are fools, without understanding or feeling for things as they really are. I knew such a man once, a hunter and tracker of game, a little man with hunched-up shoulders and peering, cunning little eyes, and a small dark face all pinched and lined, for he spent his life crouching, slinking, and peering through the undergrowth and the trees. He was more silent than the leopard and more cunning than the jackal: he knew the tracks better than the doe who leads the herd. He would boast that he could see a buck down wind before it could scent him, and a leopard through the thick undergrowth before it could see him. 'Why should I fear the jungle?' he would say. 'I know it better than my own compound. A few trees and bushes and leaves, and some foolish beasts. There is nothing to fear there.' One day he took his axe in his hand, and the sandals of deer-hide to wear in thorny places, and he went out to search for the shed horns of deer, which he used to sell to traders from

the towns. He never returned to the village again, and months afterwards in thick jungle I found his bones scattered upon the ground, beneath some thorn-bushes, gnawed by the wild pig and the jackal, and crushed and broken by the trampling of elephants. And among his bones lay a bunch of peacock feathers that he had collected and tied together with a piece of creeper, and his betel-case, and the key of his house, and the tattered fragments of his red cloth. In the fork of one of the thorn-bushes hung his axe: the massive wooden handle had been snapped in two. I do not know how he died; but I know that he had boasted that there was no fear in the jungle, and in the end the jungle took him.

All jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Beddagama. If you climb one of the bare rocks that jut up out of it, you will see the jungle stretched out below you for mile upon mile on all sides. It looks like a great sea, over which the pitiless hot wind perpetually sends waves unbroken, except where the bare rocks, rising above it, show like dark smudges against the grey-green of the leaves. For ten months of the year the sun beats down and scorches it; and the hot wind in a whirl of dust tears over it, tossing the branches and

scattering the leaves. The trees are stunted and twisted by the drought, by the thin and sandy soil, by the dry wind. They are scabrous, thorny trees, with grey leaves whitened by the clouds of dust which the wind perpetually sweeps over them: their trunks are grey with hanging, stringy lichen. And there are enormous cactuses, evil-looking and obscene, with their great fleshy green slabs, which put out immense needle-like spines. More evil-looking still are the great leafless trees, which look like a tangle of gigantic spiders' legs — smooth, bright green, jointed together—from which, when they are broken, oozes out a milky, viscous fluid.

And between the trees are the bushes which often knit the whole jungle together into an impenetrable tangle of thorns. On the ground beneath the trees it is very still and very hot; for the sterile earth is covered with this thorny matted undergrowth, through which the wind cannot force its way. The sound of the great wind rushing over the tree-tops makes the silence below seem more heavy. The air is heavy with the heat beating up from the earth, and with the smell of dead leaves. All the bushes and trees seem to be perpetually dying for ten months of the year, the leaves withering, and the twigs and branches decaying and

dropping off, to be powdered over the ground among the coarse withered grass and the dead and blackened shrubs. And yet every year, when the rains come, the whole jungle bursts out again into green; and it forces its way forward into any open space, upon the tracks, into villages and compounds, striving to blot out everything in its path.

If you walk all day through the jungle along its tangled tracks, you will probably see no living thing. It is so silent and still there that you might well believe that nothing lives in it. You might perhaps in the early morning hear the trumpeting and squealing of a herd of elephants, or the frightened bark of the spotted deer, or the deeper bark of the sambur, or the blaring call of the peacock. But as the day wore on, and the heat settled down upon the trees, you would hear no sound but the rush of the wind overhead, and the grating of dry branches against one another. Yet the shadows are full of living things, moving very silently, themselves like shadows, between the trees, slinking under the bushes and peering through the leaves.

For the rule of the jungle is first fear, and then hunger and thirst. There is fear everywhere: in the silence and in the shrill calls and the wild cries, in the stir of the leaves and

the grating of branches, in the gloom, in the startled, slinking, peering beasts. And behind the fear is always the hunger and the thirst, and behind the hunger and the thirst fear again. The herd of deer must come down to drink at the water-hole. They come down driven by their thirst, very silently through the deep shadows of the trees to the water lying white under the moon. They glide like shadows out of the shadows, into the moonlight, hesitating, tiptoeing, throwing up their heads to stare again into the darkness, leaping back only to be goaded on again by their thirst, ears twitching to catch a sound, and nostrils quivering to catch a scent of danger. And when the black muzzles go down into the water, it is only for a moment; and then with a rush the herd scatters back again terror-stricken into the darkness. And behind the herd comes the leopard, slinking through the undergrowth. Whom has he to fear? Yet there is fear in his eyes and in his slinking feet, fear in his pricked ears and in the bound with which he vanishes into the shadows at the least suspicious sound.

In the time of the rains the jungle might seem to be a pleasant place. The trees are green, and the grass stands high in the open spaces. Water lies in pools everywhere;

there is no need to go stealthily by night to drink at rivers or water-holes. The deer and the pig roam away, growing fat on the grass and the young leaves and the roots; the elephant travels far from the river bank. The time of plenty lasts, however, but a little while. The wind from the north-east drops, the rain fails; for a month a great stillness lies over the jungle; the sun looks down from a cloudless sky; the burning air is untempered by a breath of wind. It is spring in the jungle, a short and fiery spring, when in a day the trees burst out into great masses of yellow or white flowers, which in a day wither and die away.

The pools and small water-holes begin to dry up under the great heat; the earth becomes caked and hard. Then the wind begins to blow from the south-west, fitfully at first, but growing steadier and stronger every day. A little rain falls, the last before the long drought sets in. The hot, dry wind sweeps over the trees. The grass and the shrubs die down; the leaves on the small trees shrivel up, and grow black and fall. The grey earth crumbles into dust, and splits beneath the sun. The little streams run dry; the great rivers shrink, until only a thin stream of water trickles slowly along in the middle of their immense beds of yellow sand. The water-holes are dry; only

here and there in the very deepest of them, on the rocks, a little muddy water still remains.

Then the real nature of the jungle shows itself. Over great tracts there is no water for the animals to drink. Only the elephants remember the great rivers, which lie far away, and whose banks they left when the rains came; as soon as the south-west wind begins to blow, they make for the rivers again. But the deer and the pig have forgotten the rivers. In the water-holes the water has sunk too low for them to reach it on the slippery rocks; for days and nights they wander round and round the holes, stretching down their heads to the water, which they cannot touch. Many die of thirst and weakness around the water-holes. From time to time one, in his efforts to reach the water, slips, and falls into the muddy pool, and in the evening the leopard finds him an easy prey. The great herds of deer roam away, tortured by thirst, through the parched jungle. They smell the scent of water in the great wind that blows in from the sea. Day after day they wander away from the rivers into the wind, south towards the sea, stopping from time to time to raise their heads and snuff in the scent of water, which draws them on. Again many die of thirst and weakness on the way; and the jackals follow the herds, and

pull down in the open the fawns that their mothers are too weak to protect. And the herds wander on until at last they stand upon the barren, waterless shore of the sea.

Such is the jungle which lay about the village of Beddagama. The village consisted of ten scattered houses, mean huts made of mud plastered upon rough jungle sticks. Only one of the huts had a roof of tiles, that of the village headman Babehami; the others were covered with a thatch of cadjans, the dried leaves of the cocoanut-palm. Below the huts to the east of the village lay the tank, a large shallow depression in the jungle. Where the depression was deepest the villagers had raised a long narrow bund or mound of earth, so that when the rain fell the tank served as a large pond in which to store the water. Below the bund lay the stretch of rice-fields, about thirty acres, which the villagers cultivated, if the tank filled with water, by cutting a hole in the bund, through which the water from the tank ran into the fields. The jungle rose high and dense around the fields and the tank; it stretched away unbroken, covering all the country except the fields, the tank, and the little piece of ground upon which the houses and compounds stood.

The villagers all belonged to the goiya caste, which is the caste of cultivators. If you had

asked them what their occupation was, they would have replied 'the cultivation of rice'; but in reality they only cultivated rice about once in ten years. Rice requires water in plenty; it must stand in water for weeks before it grows ripe for the reaping. It could only be cultivated if the village tank filled with water, and much rain had to fall before the tank filled. If the rains from the north-east in November were good, and the people could borrow seed, then the rice-fields in January and February were green, and the year brought the village health and strength; for rice gives strength as does no other food. But this happened very rarely. Usually the village lived entirely by cultivating chenas. In August every man took a katty and went out into the jungle and cut down the undergrowth, over an acre or two. Then he returned home. In September he went out again and set fire to the dead undergrowth, and at night the jungle would be lit up by points of fire scattered around the village for miles; for so sterile is the earth, that a chena, burnt and sown for one year, will yield no crop again for ten years. Thus the villagers must each year find fresh jungle to burn. In October the land is cleared of ash and rubbish, and when the rains fall in November the ground is sown broadcast with millet or kurakkan or

maize, with pumpkins, chillies, and a few vegetables. In February the grain is reaped, and on it the village must live until the next February. No man will ever do any other work, nor will he leave the village in search of work. But even in a good year the grain from the chenas was scarcely sufficient for the villagers. And just as in the jungle fear and hunger for ever crouch, slink, and peer with every beast, so hunger and the fear of hunger always lay upon the village. It was only for a few months each year after the crop was reaped that the villagers knew the daily comfort of a full belly. And the grain sown in chenas is an evil food, heating the blood, and bringing fever and the foulest of all diseases, parangi. There were few in the village without the filthy sores of parangi, their legs eaten out to the bone with the yellow, sweating ulcers, upon which the flies settle in swarms. The naked children, soon after their birth, crawled about with immense pale yellow bellies, swollen with fever, their faces puffed with dropsy, their arms and legs thin, twisted little sticks.

The spirit of the jungle is in the village, and in the people who live in it. They are simple, sullen, silent men. In their faces you can see plainly the fear and hardship of their lives. They are very near to the animals which live

in the jungle around them. They look at you with the melancholy and patient stupidity of the buffalo in their eyes, or the cunning of the jackal. And there is in them the blind anger of the jungle, the ferocity of the leopard, and the sudden fury of the bear.

In Beddagama there lived a man called Silindu, with his wife Dingihami. They formed one of the ten families which made up the village, and all the families were connected more or less closely by marriage. Silindu was a cousin of the wife of Babehami, the headman, who lived in the adjoining compound. Babehami had been made a headman because he was the only man in the village who could write his name. He was a very small man, and was known as Punchi Arachchi[1] (the little Arachchi). Years ago, when a young man, he had gone on a pilgrimage to the vihare[2] at Medamahanuwara. He had fallen ill there, and had stayed for a month or two in the priest's pansala. The priest had taught him his letters, and he had learnt enough to be able to write his own name.

Silindu was a cultivator like the other villagers. The village called him 'tikak pissu' (slightly mad). Even in working in the chena he was the laziest man in the village. His

[1] The lowest rank of headman, the headman over a village.
[2] A Buddhist temple containing an image of Buddha.

real occupation was hunting; that is to say he shot deer and pig, with a long muzzle-loading gas-pipe gun, whenever he could creep up to one in the thick jungle; or, lying by the side of a water-hole at night, shoot down some beast who had come there to drink. Why this silent little man, with the pinched-up face of a grey monkey and the long, silent, sliding step, should be thought slightly mad, was not immediately apparent. He seemed only at first sight a little more taciturn and inert than the other villagers. But the village had its reasons. Silindu slept with his eyes open like some animals, and very often he would moan, whine, and twitch in his sleep like a dog; he slept as lightly as a deer, and would start up from the heaviest sleep in an instant fully awake. When not in the jungle he squatted all day long in the shadow of his hut, staring before him, and no one could tell whether he was asleep or awake. Often you would have to shout at him and touch him before he would attend to what you had to say. But the strangest thing about him was this, that although he knew the jungle better than any man in the whole district, and although he was always wandering through it, his fear of it was great. He never attempted to explain or to deny this fear. When other hunters laughed at him about it, all he would say was, 'I am