

## Sindbad's Old Man of The Sea.

BY W. GEORGE MAXWELL.

It was in the fifth voyage of Sindbad the Sailor, after the shipwreck caused by the bereaved and vengeful roc, that he found himself upon an island where he met "an old man, "a comely person, who was clad from the waist downwards "with a covering made of the leaves of trees." The old man was sitting by the side of the stream sighing; and in answer to Sindbad's questions made signs, by dumb show, that he wished to be carried across the stream to some fruit trees on the further side. Sindbad, in pity, took him up on his shoulders, whereupon the old man twisted his legs "which were like the hide of a buffaloe in blackness and roughness" round Sindbad's neck. "I was frightened at him," "Sindbad's narrative continues "and desired to throw him down "from my shoulders; but he pressed upon my neck with his "feet, and squeezed my throat, so that the world became black "before my face, and I was unconscious of my existence, falling upon the ground in a fit like one dead. He then raised "his legs, and beat me upon my back and my shoulders and "I suffered violent pain; wherefore I rose with him. He still "kept his seat upon my shoulders, and I had become fatigued "with bearing him; and he made a sign to me that I should "go in among the trees, to the best of the fruits. When I "disobeyed him, he inflicted upon me, with his feet, blows "more violent than those of whips; and he ceased not to direct "me with his hands to every place to which he desired to go, "and to that place I went with him. If I loitered, or went "leisurely, he beat me; and I was as a captive to him. We "went into the midst of the island, among the trees, and he "descended not from my shoulders by night nor by day; when "he desired to sleep, he would wind his legs round my neck, "and sleep a little, and then he would arise and beat me,



“whereupon I would arise with him quickly, unable to disobey him, by reason of the severity of that which I suffered from him.”\* It will be remembered that eventually, after many days of beatings and ill treatment, Sindbad got rid of the old man by making him intoxicated with fermented grape juice, and then beating out his brains with a stone.

After his escape Sindbad wandered for some days upon the island until he met some merchants who, when they had heard his story, told him who it was that he encountered. “This man” they told him “who rode upon thy shoulders is called the Old Man of the Sea, and no one ever was beneath his limbs and escaped from him excepting thee.”

The whole of Sindbad’s personal narrative points to his adventure having been with an orang utan (*simia satyrus*): the difficulty, the only difficulty, but the whole difficulty, is the name ascribed to his persecutor by the people whom he met after his escape. Hole, in his commentary, suggested that the “Old Man” was an orang utan, but the qualifying words “of the Sea” so baffled him that he was prepared to consider them a mistake. “I would willingly suppose” he wrote, “the phrase ‘of the sea’ to be an addition of the translator, not countenanced by the original: or that it was applied to Es-Sindbad’s persecutor merely on account of his insular abode, or usual appearance by the sea side. If either of these conjectures be allowed we may pronounce him, without any hesitation to be an *orang outan*.” Hole then goes on to give his reasons for his opinion.

Lane agreed with Hole that the “Old Man” was an orang utan, and supported the theory that the words “of the sea” merely denoted the insular abode.

Burton scoffed at the idea: “the inevitable orang-utan” was his jeering comment. But his own suggestion does not seem worthy of much support. The story is, he says “a jocose exaggeration of a custom prevailing in parts of Asia and especially in the African interior where the tsetse fly prevents the breeding of burden-beasts . . . . In

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\* Lane’s translation.



“Central Africa the kinglet rides on a slave, and on ceremonious occasion mounts his Prime Minister.” The weakness of the connection of ideas is however apparent. The custom of one man being carried by another does not convey the impression of the unnatural, clinging, unshakeable, creature with which Sindbad was saddled. For an explanation of the expression “of the Sea” Burton had recourse to the classics. “The classicists,” he wrote “of course, find the Shaykh of the Sea in the Tritons and Nereus, and Bochart (Hiero ii 858, 880) notices the home aquaticus, Senex Judaeus and Senex Marinus.”

But he has made no attempt to show any connection of ideas between the Man-riding Man and the Water-Man. The five arguments which Hole adduces in favour of the orang utan theory may be briefly enumerated as follows:—

1. The old man never speaks, but expresses his wishes by signs.
2. He apparently lives solely on fruit.
3. Though his face is like that of a human being, the hide of his legs is like that of an animal.
4. The “pressing,” the “squeezing” the “winding” of the legs.—[Any one who has kept a pet orang utan, wah-wah (*Hylobates lar*) or siamang (*H. syndactylus*) as a pet knows the almost wild despair with which it clings to its master, as if it would suffer itself to be torn to pieces rather than be removed.]
5. The well known partiality of apes and monkeys to intoxicants, and the extreme quickness with which they become intoxicated.

A sixth point, which was probably unknown to Hole, but to which considerable weight may be attached is that stories similar to Sindbad's story are told to his day of the orang utan by the Dyaks. Hugh Clifford's “Story of Chaling, the Dyak” is very like the adventure of Sindbad. Chaling, it will be remembered, was carried off by a female orang utan to its platform on a forest tree, and for many days was unable to effect his escape.



The principal objection to the orang utan theory is that *Simia satyrus* is red, and not black. But in explanation of this I would suggest that there has been some confusion between *Simia satyrus*, which is red, and *hylobates lar* which is black. \*At the risk being considered fanciful, I am even prepared to suggest that the white beard, with which some some old versions of the Arabian Story and the modern illustrator to Lane's translation have adorned the "Old Man" are an embellishment of the white ruff of *Hylobates lar*. A minor objection is the fact that grapes do not grow in the countries where the orang utan is found. Toddy, however, and other similar intoxicants are well known; and it is not improbable that the words "grape juice" were inserted by some copyist.

Let us take it that Sindbad's persecutor was an orang utan. How do we get from orang utan to "Man of the Sea"? Simply, I think; through the Malay. "Man of the Sea" (orang laut) is a mistake for "Man of the Forest" (orang utan).

It is well known that orang utan has two meanings: it is the name for the ape, and is also the generic name for the aborigines. They are known as orang utan; orang bukit, (men of the hills); or, in the case of the tribes driven inland, orang dalam (men of the interior), or orang darat (men of the land); whilst in contradistinction to the latter, the tribes driven to the coast are known as orang laut (men of the sea).

Thus the Sakei are divided into Sakei laut and Sakei darat, in the same way that Dyaks are divided into Sea-Dyaks and Land-Dyaks.

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\* In the account of Sindbad's adventure in his third voyage, in the Island of Apes, Lane's translation describes the apes as being "covered with hair like *black* felt," while in the Calcutta edition and Langlès' edition they are described as "*red* downy creatures." I suggest that the mariner who described the animals as red was thinking of the orang utan, and that the other who described them as black was thinking of the wah-wah. A similar confusion seems to have been made in the case of the "*Old Man*."



It is easily therefore to make a mistake between a "man of the sea" and a "man of the forest," for both are of the same stock; and it is equally easy to make a mistake between the aboriginal and the ape, for both are known by the same name. And this is the mistake that I think has been made. The position may be briefly put thus:—what the merchant said to Sindbad was "you've met an orang utan:" what Sindbad has recorded is "you've met orang laut."

If this is conceded, it would appear that Borneo is the island of the adventure with the "Old Man," (Lane suggested Sumatra, where the orang utan is also found) and that Sindbad's tale and Hugh Clifford's tale are but slightly different versions of the story (founded perhaps on fact) which is told by the Dyaks regarding the gigantic ape that, to this day, is the most typical inhabitant of their forests.

*Postscript.* I have, since this note was set up in type, come across a mistake which is exactly similar but even more extraordinary. On page 175 of Volume II. of "Asiatick Researches" will be found a curious confusion between the Thibetan Yak and the manatel or dugong. Two more dissimilar animals could hardly be imagined; but one is the "Mountain-Cow" and the other is the "Sea-Cow;" and "Mountain-Cow" and "Sea-Cow" have been confused in exactly the same way that "Forest-Man" and "Sea-Man" have (I suggest) been confused.

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