

The Green Jade God

By JOHN BRIGGS

*Three enemies—one blind, one deaf, and one tongueless—
were forced into a strange comradeship*

AS OFTEN as I have lingered in the marketplace of Pnom Penh, the King's City by the yellow Mekong, I have always paused to watch the three old men who sit mending sandals, day after day. Now that I am informed of their history, I never cease to marvel at the strange fate which has inseparably bound them who once were foes.

Of the trio, one is continually mulling over rotten sandals with betel-stained fingers. I have watched his palsied and aimless hands, and have wondered whether they accomplish anything at all during the long periods that he sits there. Sometimes he mumbles inarticulate sounds in spells of forgetfulness. The patrons who come with their old sandals, or to buy new ones, never speak to him. Although he can hear them, they have learned that he can not answer. Once he held a high office with the king; but his years have netted him only wrinkles and uncertainty; so that he has even forgotten when men called him Ben Hammed, the Excellent. Now he is spoken of as "the Tongueless One." He is known to have once possessed skill in making new sandals; but even that has left him, and now he only putters with strips of palm fiber, or clumsily fashions patches from bits of dried sheepskin which he has purchased from traders coming down the river from the high mountains of Bhutan. And this is Ben Hammed, accursed. Sometimes he glares with hatred at the dancing girls who slither by with laughter and prattling tongues. Too late, he has learned that words are dangerous things. For Ben Hammed has no need of this knowledge. He can never speak.

At Ben Hammed's right hand sits Singh Dar. He is shrunken and yellowed. His gray beard is matted and gnarled. Like an image in wood he squats from dawn till dark, rarely lifting his chin from his sunken chest. Each morning, following his mates, he gropes to his mat—his mat which

has rotted with age. The sun rising behind the silvered palms never seems to warm his shivering body, nor does he behold its brilliance glinting from the myriad pagoda spires which thrust heavenward like dazzling lances of gold. He has forgotten the porcelain, the gilt and the jade emblazoning the temples about the square. He has quit seeking consolation in the gods. He spits betel-juice with contempt, as the prayer gong sounds from the mosque. He is known simply as "the Blind One;" for as ancient as are the old women shuffling by with their baskets of yams, nodding their shaven heads over breasts bone-dry, there is none of them who can remember him as Singh Dar, chancellor to the king of a bygone age. Once I saw this Singh Dar lift his face. I gazed with horror into the hollow sockets from which all vestige of eyes had been removed.

Small wonder that this strange trio has fascinated me, and that I never forget the picture of them sitting in the market square.

Ben Hammed's other companion—he that squats at his left hand, partly facing him and Singh Dar—was called Cham Ra. He is a little old dried-up knot of rags and bones. His moth-eaten turban seems to repose upon his shoulders; so nearly missing is his flat face which folds up from chin to nose when he works his betel-nut between toothless gums. Yet his small eyes, sunken in folds of wrinkles, are sharp and constantly darting glances here and there; for they must pick up a little of that which his ears miss. Cham Ra's world is soundless. Of the three, he suffers least. Being a philosopher, he is relieved not to carry the burden of listening to much that is not worth hearing.

An odd trinity of misfortunes. Enough to halt the curious, of whom there are few in Cambodia. Ben Hammed, the tongueless mute; Singh Dar, the blind one; and Cham Ra, the deaf. Yet that is not all.



"Ben Hammed turned the limp body of his enemy face upward."

At times, they argue, one with another. Ben Hammed, the tongueless, can not make his thoughts known to Singh Dar, the blind one; for although he can write and also can make expressive motions with his hands, Singh Dar is unable to see the writing or the signs. Cham Ra, the deaf one, can interpret Ben Hammed's gestures, and he can speak; so that he is able to tell Singh Dar what Ben Hammed would have him know. And yet, being deaf, he does not know what Singh Dar says in return. Ben Hammed, hearing the blind man speak, interprets his words to Cham Ra in signs. Likewise Cham Ra, the deaf, can speak to the blind man directly; but his reply must come through Ben Hammed, the tongueless, who can do nothing but gesture. And so on. Customers usually address Cham Ra, because his eyes are sharp. And Singh Dar, the blind, answers them because he can hear and speak; while Ben Hammed, the mute, having heard, conveys by signs to Cham Ra what is being said. An excellent arrangement perfected by long practise.

AS DISCREET as were my inquiries about these three ancient relics, I was looked upon as an unbeliever who might indulge in improper sentiment concerning the curse of the Green Jade God. Thus my skepticism was feared by "the Old Ones" who were supposed to know. To them I was always referred by the lesser in age and wisdom. Until I came upon Lakie Zang, the retired Malay pirate, who had no use for Cambodian gods, my search for the truth was futile. Lakie, the grinning old imp, toothless and hairless, saw visions in rice wine and the long pipe. He dreamed dreams of the past; whether real or fancied, you may judge.

When I had heard his tale, I smiled. Perhaps he thought that I doubted it; for he told me how I might reach the ancient shrine that stands in the jungle, near the river—the shrine of the god, Amu Tau. Even he, pirate and unbeliever, had never found courage to molest the gold ornaments, nor to pluck out the ruby eyes of the green jade god. I, who had scoffed at its power, found it and left it untouched. It squats in the jungle, unguarded still.

Paddling north along the Mekong, from Phnom Penh, I discovered the entrance to the shrine, as

Lakie had described it. There is a place at the east bank of the yellow, sluggish stream where the lianas, curtaining down from the banyans and arica palms, can be brushed aside. Thence a worn trail winds through the jungle. It is bordered by flamboyant tree trunks and steaming foliage. Overhead it is canopied by matted lianas to which strange creepers cling and form the nesting-places of brilliant birds that flash in and out among the blue shades and broken sunbeams like fluttering petals of bloom. Yet these birds are not silent, as are the mottled serpents that glide and wriggle and hang from the creepers. With raucous clamor, they screech and cackle defiance at the foraging black-faced apes and at every creature that happens to disturb their primordial solitude.

At the end of the trail, rising from the center of a small clearing, is the pagoda of a single, pinnacled roof. Beneath it squats, on its carved pedestal of stone, the green jade image. Grotesque and motionless, it stares out of ruby eyes that flame lambent in the dim light. Insensate, cold, it looks out of the ages that have been, into the ages yet to come.

The earth surrounding and upon which the pagoda stands is flagged with square blocks of gray sandstone. The stone is greatly worn in places. It has been kept polished by the bare feet, the hands and the bodies of the worshippers who still prostrate themselves before the image of Amu Tau—avenger of personal wrongs.

With a cold chill creeping upon me as I gazed at that obscene, life-like creature of jade, I could no longer believe that Lakie's tale had been spun from a fabric of dreams. As in a spell, it came over me; the scene, the actors in that grim drama of years ago. It was Ben Hammed who first appeared, coming along the jungle trail with the alert tread of a preying beast. A young man, his body divested of all raiment save a loin clout. The dismal drip of congealing vapor splashed on his oiled shoulders. It was evening; for the thickening gloom enhanced the gleam of a strangely designed knife thrust in his clout. It was a kris, ground down to a delicate, needle-pointed sliver of steel.

At the edge of the clearing, Ben Hammed paused, elevated his arms to heaven, then lowered them, five times. The sun's last murky ray lit the four golden tips of the pagoda's pinnacled roof. After performing his devotional exercise to all the

gods of heaven and earth, Ben Hammed slithered across the stone flags upon his belly. He arose and prostrated himself seven times in the shadowy interior of the pagoda, while twin points of red flare glinted upon him from the eyes of the green jade god. From his loin clout, he removed a leather flask of pig's blood and five red-tipped sticks of incense. He poured the blood into the brass bowl held between the claws of the jade god. The incense he lighted at the pedestal's base. As the fumes wreathed up around the distorted image, Ben Hammed threw himself down upon the stone blocks. His voice intoned a supplicating chant.

"O, Amu Tau, god avenger of the seven times seven cursed descendants of Brahm—Amu Tau, powerful above all earthly beings, I implore the deliverance of mine enemy, Singh Dar, into my hands. I am disgraced unjustly, O Amu Tau, because of this man who has sought to elevate himself into my place. His eyes were ever spying upon me, until in a moment of indiscretion, to which all flesh is heir, his envious eyes beheld me. Now I have come to poverty, O Amu Tau, compassionate of man's wrongs. I beseech thee, O mighty Amu Tau, that thou deliver Singh Dar into my hands, that I may pluck out his offending eyes in my just revenge; that he may spend his suffering days hereafter harmless to repeat the wrong upon others. May his punishment, O Amu Tau, be by mine own hands, for it is my karma, and no other man's."

His voice droning on, Ben Hammed lifted himself to his knees and began kowtowing himself repeatedly to earth. The shadows of the jungle deepened. The chatter and screech of day life was hushed, until in the distance could be heard the occasional cry of a night-prowling beast.

PRESENTLY another dark human form broke from the secret trail into the clearing. It reached the rim of the stone square and prostrated itself, as Ben Hammed had done. This second supplicant was Singh Dar, appearing as if in direct answer to Ben Hammed's prayers. But the nebulous glow cast by the burning sticks of incense was not sufficient for him to recognize the worshipper who had preceded him.

Singh Dar also had a wrong to avenge. He in turn delivered his blood-sacrifice and lit his offering of incense. He prostrated himself, and his

plaint bore a close resemblance to Ben Hammed's, except that he named a certain Cham Ra as the man who had wronged him. And Cham Ra's offense had been that of eavesdropping. Of Amu Tau, he sought the power to destroy his enemy's ears.

Meanwhile Ben Hammed, whose eyes were accustomed to the dim light, recognized the enemy whom he sought and knew that the god had favored him. Yet he continued his devotional mumbling. Covertly he watched, alert and waiting. At Singh Dar's waist, also, he caught the glitter of bright steel.

Now Ben Hammed's muscles tautened more and more with each of his genuflections. As Singh Dar prostrated himself in prayer, he leaped from all fours like a leopard, landing astride his victim's neck with a stunning impact. Before the prostrated figure could squirm, Ben Hammed had delivered the cunning blow to the cords of the neck, inducing unconsciousness. Singh Dar flattened beneath him without a sound. Immediately Ben Hammed turned the limp body of his enemy face upward. With two deft movements of his kris, he gouged out Singh Dar's eyes completely.

Yet even in the moment when he had completed his revenge, and while his victim's body convulsed instinctively, a third nearly nude figure had entered the pagoda of the green jade god. Blinking to see through the obscurity, and aided by the dull red glow of the incense sticks, the third supplicant beheld the two writhing human shapes.

The god had answered the second worshipper's prayer a trifle too late; for this latest seeker was indeed Cham Ra, whose eavesdropping ears Singh Dar had wished to destroy. Singh Dar had lost forever the power to see his enemy. And yet Cham Ra had also arrived in quest of vengeance. In the uppermost of the two writhing figures he recognized Ben Hammed—Ben Hammed, whose prattling tongue had done him injury. Exultantly he observed his enemy in a defenseless position. His wish was already granted, even before he invoked the green jade god.

He sprang at the back of Ben Hammed, who, still flushed in his revenge, was taken wholly by surprise. Yet being in an exalted state of activity, Ben Hammed's defense became ferocious.

As the two struggled, Singh Dar, blinded, returned to consciousness. In an agony of pain and wonder, he cried out on the god, Amu Tau, to avenge him for this new wrong.

Hearing him, the third man answered him, gasping that he could revenge himself by helping him conquer Ben Hammed, to whom his blindness was due.

In the voice that answered him, Singh Dar recognized Cham Ra, the enemy for whose inducement into his hands he had just been imploring the god. But now, crazed by his more recent injury, he groped his way feeling for the wrestling pair, that he might get his hands upon their common foe. His fingers clawed at a contorting, oiled back.

"Whose body do I touch?" he cried.

"Not mine—Ben Hammed's!" panted Cham Ra.

Singh Dar's fumbling claws sought Ben Hammed's neck, and bit into it, choking their prey down until he sank limp on the stone flags.

"Ah-ha!" gasped the third man. "Do thou hold him thus while I take my vengeance upon him. Ill his fate that he just now gave thee cause to render me this worthy assistance. It is his lying tongue that hath injured me——"

Thus speaking, Cham Ra drew his knife, and running his hand into his victim's mouth, he entered the blade and severed the tongue at its base.

"Release him," he directed the blind man. "Our revenge is complete."

Taking his victim's tongue, he placed it in the brass bowl of the green jade god, and he poured his pig's blood over it, as an offering of victory. Then he lighted his incense and prepared to make his devotions of thanksgiving.

WHILE Cham Ra was busied thus, Ben Hammed, the tongueless, bestirred himself groaningly. And Singh Dar, blinded, remembered that he had not yet been avenged of his foe whom he had come hither seeking revenge upon; so he controlled his tortures and whispered into the ear of Ben Hammed, the tongueless man.

"The man who has just taken revenge upon you is Cham Ra, whose eavesdropping ears have wronged me. Now that he has injured you, Amu Tau has granted you sufficient cause to aid me in

my purpose. Ben Hammed, let us together overpower Cham Ra, our common foe. Canst thou see him?"

But Ben Hammed could not answer the blind man, being tongueless. And he could not even respond in signs, for Singh Dar could not see him. Still he was only too willing to perform a service for this one who had so recently been his enemy, and though agonized by pain, he waited prone and apparently still unconscious until he saw Cham Ra prostrating himself before the squat figure of Amu Tau.

Then in a terrible throe of agony and ferocity he bounded to his feet and pounced upon the last worshipper. Forgetting his inability to speak, and trying to call the blind man to his aid, he made inarticulate sounds in his throat, which nevertheless served to attract the other to the place where they struggled. And his grip, rigidified by his awful torment, was so remorseless that he held Cham Ra almost motionless while the blind man groped about for his victim's ears and entered the needle point of his knife in the drum of each, piercing it till the blood flowed out; while now the many burning incense sticks set up a wraith-like glow against the gathering darkness, and the jade god's ruby eyes flamed in their green sockets like two uncovered sparks of hate.

Ben Hammed and Singh Dar then released Cham Ra, and each of the three had had his prayer answered and his revenge on the other. Ben Hammed had collected the eyes of Singh Dar; which had given Singh Dar sufficient cause to aid Cham Ra in removing the tongue of Ben Hammed. This had given Ben Hammed reason enough to help Singh Dar, his former enemy, in piercing the eardrums of Cham Ra. Now they all were suffering alike and each bethought himself to leave the place and to seek what comfort he could in whatever he might have left of a home.

But as though sensing that the others were about to depart, leaving him with no means of finding his way, the blind man cried out to Cham Ra, on whom he had just revenged himself, to aid him in the direction of his steps.

But Cham Ra could not hear him, now, and he turned to the tongueless man.

"I see that Singh Dar speaks to me," he said, "but I can not hear him. I beg of you to make known to me what it is that he says."

Then Ben Hammed, because he could not speak—nor could Cham Ra have heard him, even had he been able to speak—indicated by pointing to Singh Dar's eyeless sockets, and then to the black opening of the jungle path, that the blind man had sought his aid in directing his sightless steps.

Cham Ra then became angry, and turning to the blind man, asked: "Why should I help one who has just robbed me of my hearing?"

And Singh Dar responded: "Did I not aid you in removing the tongue of your enemy, Ben Hammed? In return for the help I gave you, I now seek your assistance."

Querulously Cham Ra besought Ben Hammed to signify the meaning of Singh Dar's words.

By gestures, the speechless man then interpreted to the deaf man the significance of the blind man's speech. By pointing to his own tongueless mouth, to Singh Dar's sightless sockets, and to Cham Ra's deaf ears, he demonstrated that, since each had been obliged to participate in the other's revenge, now each was obliged to rely on the other for aid.

"Yes, that is so," agreed the deaf man, speaking so that he might interpret in words to the blind man what the tongueless man had conveyed to him in gestures; "each of us in seeking his revenge has suffered the revenge of the other, and now we are each one dependent upon the other. We have none of us to blame. It was granted thus by Amu Tau. It is the god's fault! He himself has taken his revenge, for granting us all our desires. He has bound us to remain together, hereafter; since it seems that none of us can get along without the others."

Thus philosophically spoke Cham Ra, twin streams of blood trickling from his ears, as he observed the gory faces of his companions.

And so the three of them together made their painful way out of the jungle, and getting all into one sampan they floated down the river to Pnom Penh, where until this day they have busied themselves in the marketplace making sandals, each dependent on the other.

Meanwhile in the jungle the green jade god squats on its pedestal of carved stone; serene, unaltered, immobile, gazing out of red eyes, unblinkingly, into the far reaches of ages yet to be.