

# The Jungle Graduate

by

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From his short story collection "The Breath of the Jungle"

THE moonlight fell upon Schreiber's bald head as he jerked his body out of the depths of the rough-hewn lounge chair. His eyes were turned to the blue-black smear of jungle, but his ears were absorbing the faint sounds that came from the interior of the bungalow. The path, like a whitewashed strip, reached fearfully toward the weird tree masses, and alongside it the coarse rirro grass stood up haughtily as if protesting against the man-made barrenness. The jungle resents a cleared space; it speaks of the presence of human beings.

"What is it?" I asked softly.

"Nothing," murmured the naturalist, but his grip on the unplanned pine limbs which formed the frame upon which the Dyak mat was stretched did not relax. He gave one the impression of a man sifting the noises of the night with his whole body.

Suddenly his head came sharply down between his shoulders, and the chair groaned a protest as he left it with a spring. A black line appeared upon the moon-whitened path, and the heavy German pounced upon it with the agility of a cat.

"It is that damn vermilion snake," he grunted, holding the wriggling thing up by the tail as he shuffled toward the door.

"This is the second time he has escaped."

When the chair had again received him with a long-drawn creaking sound, I put a question.

"Did you see him before he started across the path?" I asked.

"No," snapped Schreiber. "I just felt that things are not right. That is easy. When he escaped it caused a little silence and just a little change in the note of those that didn't keep altogether quiet. Listen, please, now."

From inside the darkened bungalow came a peculiar wasp-like buzzing that filtered unceasing into the mysterious night. The surrounding jungle appeared to be listening to it. At first it defied the attempts of the ear when it sought to analyze the medley, then the different noises asserted themselves slowly. It was the inarticulate cry of the German's prisoners. There was the soft moaning of the wakeful gibbon, the *pat pat* of the civet, the whimper of the black monkey, the snuffling of caged small things, and the rustle of snakes that crawled wearily around their boxes. The sounds seemed to bring to the place a peculiar aura that put the bungalow apart from the untrammled jungle that surrounded it on all sides.

"They are all right now," murmured the German, contentedly. "They are quiet, so."

"But how did they know that the vermilion snake had escaped?" I asked. "They're in the dark, and the snake made no noise."

The naturalist laughed, the pleasant laugh of the man to whom a question like mine brings the thrill of subtle flattery.

"How ? " he repeated. "My friend, the gibbon in there felt it in his blood, *ja*. He

whimper softly, oh, so softly, and the news ran along the cages. The dark makes no difference to the wild people. Every little bit of their bodies is an eye. Every little hair listens and tells them something. That is as it should be. I felt the change in their notes. I was dreaming of Jan Wyck's place in Amsterdam just then, and I wake up mighty quick. The black monkey stopped quiet, for the black monkey is wise, but the tune of the others changed to pianissimo very, very sudden. A snake is a fellow that can get in anywhere. Listen to them now. I did not tell them that he was back, but they know."

A feeling of nausea crept over me as the German spoke haltingly, groping for the words to express himself. To me the bungalow appeared as a leprous spot in the jungle of wild, waving tapang, pandanus, and sandalwood, laced together with riotous creepers. The whimpering, snuffling, and protesting rustling made me shiver, and I surprised myself by voicing my thoughts.

"It seems so infernally cruel," I stammered. "If you look at —"

The naturalist interrupted me with a quiet laugh, and I remained silent. The big meerscham was being puffed vigorously.

"It is not cruel," he said slowly. "Out there," he waved a hand at the blue-black smear of jungle that looked like a foundation upon which the pearly sky reared itself, "they are dining on each other. My prisoners are safe and have plenty. Did you not hear just now how it troubled them when the snake escaped? So! The black monkey has a little one and she was afraid. The jungle life is not a lengthy one for the weak. I was at Amsterdam five years ago—*Ach Gott!* it seems fifty years ago — and at Hagenbeck's I see a one-eared *mias* that I trapped years ago. She looked well. Would she be alive here? I do not know."

The irritating droning noise continued to pour out of the bungalow. It floated out into the night that appeared to be all ears in an effort to absorb it.

"No, captivity is not bad if they are treated right," continued the naturalist, "and can you tell me where they are not treated well?"

I didn't answer. Confronted with a request for reasons to back up my stammered protest, I found myself without any. Schreiber's captives were well fed. The baby monkey was guarded from the snake.

The big German smoked silently for several minutes, his eyes fixed on the jungle belt in front.

"The zoological people treat their animals better than society treats human beings," he said, gently. "And the naturalists? Well, they treat them well. I never knew one who did not."

He stopped for a moment, and then gave a little throaty gurgle. Memory had pushed forward something that displeased him.

"I made a mistake," he remarked, harshly. "I did know of one. The night is young, I will tell you of him. It happened a long while ago when I first came to the Samarahan River — Fogelberg and I came together. This man's name was Lesohn — Pierre Lesohn — and he was a naturalist of a kind. That is, his heart was not in his work. *Nein!* He was always thinking of other ways of making money and no man who calls himself a naturalist can do that. This business calls for everything—heart, soul, brain, all. That is why I said Lesohn was not a naturalist. The devil of discontent was gnawing at him, and in this work there should be no discontent. No, my friend. "

"One day I pulled down the river to Lesohn's place, and he pushed at me an illustrated paper from Paris. He laughed, too, very excitedly. He was nearly always

excited; the discontented people always are."

"'What do you think of that?' he said."

"I read the piece in the paper, and I looked at the picture that went with it. It was the picture of an orang-outang, and it had under it the brute's name. He had two names, just like you and me. There he was sitting at a desk smoking a cigar and making a bluff that he was writing a letter. It turned me sick. It was not good to me. I handed the paper back to Lesohn and I said nothing."

"'Well?' he snapped, 'I asked you what you thought of it.'"

"'Not much,' I said. 'It interests me not'"

"'You old fool!' he cried out. 'That monkey is earning two hundred pounds a week at the Royal Music Hall in Piccadilly. He is making a fortune for his trainer.'"

"'I do not care,' I said, 'I am not concerned one little bit.'"

"'Ho, ho!' he sneered. 'You want to work in this stinking jungle till you die, eh? I have other things in my mind, Schreiber.' I knew he had, but I didn't interrupt him just then. 'Yes,' he cried out, 'I do not want to be buried out here with the wahwahs singing the "Dead March" over my grave. I want to die in Paris. And I want to have some fun before I die, Schreiber. There is a little girl whose father keeps the Cafe des Primroses — *Mon Dieu!* Why did I come to this wilderness?'"

"'And how will that help you?' I asked, pointing to the paper that had the picture of the smart monkey in it."

"'How?' he screamed. 'How? Why, you old stupid, I, Pierre Lesohn, will train an orang-outang too.'"

"'It is not good to make a brute into a human,' I said. 'I would not try if I were you.'"

"Lesohn laughed himself nearly into convulsions when I said that. It was a great joke to him. He fell on the bed and laughed for ten minutes without undoing his face. He was a smart man, was Pierre Lesohn — too smart to come out of Paris. The smart men should always stay in the cities. The jungle is not for them. It agrees only with men who have made a proper assay of their faculties. Lesohn never had time to make an assay. He was too busy scheming."

Schreiber stopped and again leaned forward in the big chair. Something had gone astray in the buzzing noise from the prison house, and like a maestro he listened for the jarring note. Softly he rose from his seat and slipped into the interior darkness.

When he returned he relit his pipe slowly — the jungle life makes a man's movements composed and deliberate — then he settled himself back in the seat of his own manufacture.

"The little one of the black monkey is ill," he explained. "If it was in the jungle it would die. Here it will live, I think. But we will get back to Lesohn, the smart Frenchman who should have stayed in Paris. He pasted that picture of the man-ape over his cot, and he looked at it every day. It got between him and his sleep."

"'Two hundred pounds a week,' he would cry out. 'Think of that, you old, square-headed Dutchman. That is nearly five thousand francs! That is four thousand marks! Could we not train one too?'"

"'Not me,' I said. 'I like the orang-outang just as he is. He suits me like that. If he got so clever that he could smoke my cigars and read my letters I would not like him one bit. He would be out of the place that God gave him in the animal kingdom.'"

"I annoyed Lesohn by telling him that. I annoyed him very much. Three days afterward a Dyak trapped an orang-outang

that was just getting out of its babyhood, and the Frenchman bought it quick."

"' It is just the size I want,' he said to Fogelberg and me. ' I want to train it as quick as I can. Ho, ho! you two fools, just wait. There is a little girl whose father keeps the Cafe des Primroses—wait, Dutchman, and see things. Professor Pierre Lesohn and his wonderful trained orang-outang! Five thousand francs a week! Is it not good ?' "

"But Fogelberg and I said nothing. We knew the status of the orang-outang in the animal kingdom, and we were content to leave him on his proper plane. Mother Nature fixes the grades, and she knows that the orang is not the fellow that shall send notes to his sweetheart or puff cigars when he is sitting in tight boots that squeeze his toes that have been made for swinging him through the palm trees. From the ant-eating manis with his horn armor, right up to Pierre Lesohn, Mother Nature has settled things very properly and very quietly."

"Lesohn was not the man for the wilderness. No, my friend. He was all bubble, all nerves, and he wanted to feed on excitement ten times a day. And there is no excitement here. Not a bit. People in the cities think that there is, but they are mistaken. This is a cradle where you get a rest if you sit quiet. Do you understand? The Frenchman could not sit quiet. His imagination made him a millionaire after he had that orang-outang two days. It did so. It bought him a house at Passy, and a carriage and pair, and the smiles of the ballet-girls at the Grand Casino. Some men are like that. They make their imaginations into gas-wagons and ride to the devil. And Lesohn was taking something that didn't improve things. He kept a square bottle under his cot, and he toasted the monkey and the good times that he was going to

have in Paris—toasted them much too often for my liking."

"That monkey learned things mighty fast. He was a great mimic, a very great mimic. Every time Fogelberg and I pulled down to Lesohn's place, the Frenchman trotted the damn hairy brute out to do things for our approval. Fogelberg didn't like it I didn't like it. *Nein!* We told Lesohn and he laughed and made fun of us."

"'Oh, you two old Dutchmen!' he cried out. 'Oh, you two old monkey-snarers! You wait! Professor Pierre Lesohn and his trained orang-outang at five thousand francs a week! Five thousand francs! Think of it! In the Cafe des Primroses I will think sometimes of you two fools on the stinking mud banks of the Samarahan.'"

"He was going mad thinking of the good times he would have on the boulevards. He drank— *Gott in Himmel!* how he drank. He saw himself strutting in Europe with the monkey bringing in the money. He was mad, all right. And I think that orang-outang began to think that he was mad. He would sit alongside Lesohn and puzzle his old head to know what the Frenchman was so excited about. The brute didn't know of the dreams of Monsieur Pierre Lesohn. No, my friend. He didn't know that the Frenchman was going to make a pedestal of his wisdom upon which he could climb and kiss his fingers to the Milky Way. Oh, no! He was only an orang-outang and he didn't know that people would pay four thousand marks a week to see him stick his blue nose into a stein and puff at a cigarette. *Ach!* it sickens me."

"Then one day the monkey got sulky and would not do a single thing. I think Lesohn was drunk that day. He must have been. The brute was sulky and the Frenchman was drunk. Pierre told me of it afterward. The *mias* knocked over the specimen cases

and went cranky. Lesohn went cranky, too. He saw the boulevards and the house at Passy and the ballet-girls and the Cafe des Primroses floating away on the monkey's tantrums, and he got sick. He got very sick. He swigged away at the flat bottle till he went nearly mad, and then he done something."

The bluey depths of the jungle appeared to pulsate as Schreiber halted in his story to listen again to the sounds that came from within. There was witchery in the soft night. It touched one with mysterious fingers. It watched outside the lonely bungalow, wondering, inquisitive, wide-eyed.

"He must have been mad," continued the German, "mad or very drunk. The Samarahan flowed right by Lesohn's bungalow, and the Samarahan was alive at that place. Dirty, ugly, scaly-backed crocodiles slept in the mud there all day long. Ugh! I hate crocodiles. They turn me sick. The Frenchman he was mad, though—mad with drink and mad because he thought the orang-outang was turning stupid."

"Well?" I gasped, "what happened?" The night was listening to the story. The buzzing noise from the prisoners died down to the faintest murmur.

"Well," repeated the naturalist, "Pierre Lesohn taught that orang-outang a lesson in obedience. He tied the animal to the trunk of a tree near the mud banks — yes, near the stinking, slimy mud banks that smell like assafoetida and then he, Pierre, laid himself down on the veranda of his bungalow with his Winchester rifle in his lap.

"The orang-outang whimpered, and Lesohn laughed. He told me of this afterward. The orang whimpered again and again. Then he cried out with fear. A bit of the mud started to move, and the big *mias* was afraid, very much afraid. You know the

cold eye of the crocodile? It is the icicle eye. It is the eye of the monte sharp. No animal has such a cold eye. The shark? *Nein!* The shark has a fighting eye. The crocodile doesn't fight. He waits till all the cards are his way. He is a devil. That tied-up pet of Lesohn's attracted the dirty brute in the mud, and the orang-outang had been fool enough to tell him by that whimper that he was helpless. See?"

"The crocodile watched him for one hour — for two hours — for three hours. He thought it might be a trap. Lesohn watched, too. He was teaching the monkey what mighty smart fellows come out of Paris."

"The crocodile knocked the mud off his back to get a better view, and the orang screamed put to Pierre to save him. He screamed mighty hard. He chattered of the things he would learn if Lesohn came to his aid quick, but Lesohn smiled to himself and sat quiet."

"The crocodile dug himself out of the mud and looked at the *mias*, and the *mias* shivered in every bit of his body. Lesohn told me all about it afterward. He said the monkey cursed him when the crocodile flicked the water out of his eye and moved a little farther up the bank. That icicle eye had the orang-outang fascinated. He lost his nerve. He shrieked and he prayed in monkey gibberish, and that gave the crocodile plenty heart. *Ach* yes! He thought that he held four aces in the little game with the orang, and he thinks it good to take a chance. He made a big rush at the tree, but Pierre was waiting for that rush. He threw the rifle forward quick, the bullet took the brute in the eye, and he flopped back into the stinking mud with a grunt of disgust."

"You see what Lesohn was? He was a madman. Next day when Fogelberg and I

went down there he told us all about it, and he laughed a lot. The orang-outang was so mighty afraid that Lesohn would repeat the stunt that he was hopping round doing everything that he could. *Gott!* he was much afraid, was that monkey. I bet he dreamed of nights of that icicle eye of that crocodile. Every time Lesohn looked at him he shivered as if he was going to take a fit, and he whimpered like a baby. That crocodile had watched him for three hours. See?

"' Look at him!' screamed the Frenchman. 'No more sulks from him! I tamed him! Here!' he yelled to the orang, 'bring me my bottle!'"

"Didn't that monkey rush to get it? You bet he did. He went as if it was a matter of life and death to him, and I suppose it was, to his thinking. And Lesohn shrieked with laughter till you could hear him at Brunei. He reckoned that the cold eye of a crocodile was the very best thing in the world to bring a monkey to his senses."

"' I will take him over to Singapore next week,' said Lesohn, 'and from there I will get a boat to Colombo, and then ship by the Messageries Maritime to Paris. Five thousand francs a week, Dutchman! You will read of me. *Mon Dieu!* Yes! You will read of Pierre Lesohn — Professor Pierre Lesohn and his trained orang-outang."

Schreiber halted in his recital. A wind came out of the China Sea, charged down upon the jungle and slashed the fronds of the big palms like a regiment of cuirassiers thundering through space. It died away suddenly, leaving an atmosphere of weird expectancy that put one's nerves on a tension. The night seemed to listen for something that it knew was coming.

"Go on!" I cried, excitedly. "Tell me! Tell me what happened!"

"Four days after that night," said Schreiber, quietly, "I pulled down the Samarahan. When I came in front of Lesohn's bungalow I called out to him, but I got no answer. 'He is in the forest,' I said to myself; 'I will go up to the hut and get a drink.' It was a mighty hot day, and the Samarahan is not a summer resort. *Nein!* It is not."

"Did you ever feel that a silence can be too much a silence? Sometimes in the jungle I feel a hush that is not nice. It was here tonight when the vermilion snake escaped. Often in the forest it chokes the whistle of the cicada and it seems to stop the little blades of grass from waving. *Jah!* It is strange. Whenever I feel that silence I am careful. I am not afraid, but I know that other things that can feel in a way that I cannot feel are much afraid."

"It was that kind of a silence that I feel when I was going up the path to Lesohn's bungalow. It was like ice upon my spine. It came around me and touched me like ten thousand cold hands. I am not imaginative, no, but in the jungle one gets a skin that feels and sees and hears. And my skin was working overtime just then. It was telling my brain something that my brain could not understand."

"I walked on my toes through the mangrove bushes at the top of that path. I know not why, but I did. I was near to making a discovery. I knew that. I stopped and peeped through the branches and I saw something. *Gott!* Yes! I saw something that made me reach out for the news that my skin was trying to tell me. I knew, and I did not know. Do you understand? I chased that thing all around in my brain and I was getting closer to it each minute. The things I thought of made it come closer, and my lips got dry. I thought of what Lesohn had done to that orang, how he had tied him to the tree and frightened him into a fit with

the cold stare of that scaly-backed crocodile, and while I thought of that I watched the veranda of the bungalow. I seemed to see that monkey tied to the tree and that icicle eye looking at him from the mud, and then — why, I knew! It came on me like a flash. I felt as if I was hit with a sandbag."

"For three minutes I could not move, then I staggered toward the veranda. Do you know what was there? *That big ugly brute of a mias was fumbling with the Frenchman's rifle, and he was crying like a human.*"

"'Where is Lesohn?' I cried out. 'Where is he?' And then I laughed like a madman at my own question. My skin, that was all eyes and ears, had told me where Lesohn was. *Jah!* It was so."

"The big *mias* sprang up on his feet and he looked at me just as if he understood every word I said. My legs were as weak as two blades of grass. I had not seen the thing done. *Ach!* It was strange. I thought I had dreamed about it, but then I knew I hadn't. It was the silence, and the crying *mias*, and something inside me which told me it is not good to teach a brute too much. 'Where is he?' I cried out again. 'Show me where he is?'"

"The orang wiped the tears from his ugly blue nose and touched me with his big, hairy arm, and then he started to shamble toward the mud banks where the Frenchman had tied him to give him that little lesson in obedience."

"I was sick then. That atmosphere turned me all upside down. I knew what had happened. Yes, I knew. My mind had pieced things together like the pieces of a picture puzzle. I knew what Lesohn had done to the brute, I knew the imitative ways of the *mias*, and I knew that Pierre was often drunk — very often drunk. And then there

was the knowledge which my skin had strained out of the silence. A cold sweat ran from me as I followed the orang, and I clutched the rifle tight as I got near the mud bank and looked around for something to confirm the horror that my soul had sensed. And the proof was there. It was a coat sleeve tied to the tree where the Frenchman had tied the *mias* a week before, and the sleeve wasn't empty. *Nein!* The cords had been tied around the wrist of Pierre Lesohn, and the cords were very strong. They had stood the strain of the pull, and — and it was there as a proof of what had happened."

"It was all so plain to me. Lesohn must have been drunk, see? Well, while he was drunk it had come into the ugly head of that brute to let Pierre get a thrill from the icicle eyes of the scaly-backed devils in the mud. He had tied Lesohn to the tree, and then he got the rifle and copied the Frenchman by sitting on the veranda to watch for the first one of those things that would find out that Pierre was helpless. It was plain — oh, so plain to me. But the Frenchman, in educating that orang, had forgotten to teach him how to load a rifle. It was unfortunate, was it not? The rifle was empty, and when the dirty brutes came out of the mud, the *mias* could do nothing. *Gott!* no! He just fumbled with the breech and cried like a human being till I came along, and then it was too late."

"What did you do then?" I cried, as the German's heavy bass tones were pursued and throttled by the palpitating silence.

"I did nothing," said Schreiber, quietly. "Lesohn had told me what he had done to that brute. Fate — Nemesis — call it what you will — has funny ways. I looked at the orang-outang, and he backed away from me, crying. And he looked back a dozen times, still crying, till the jungle swallowed

him up. Somewhere out there" – the German waved a hand at the dark forest that was watching and listening – "there is an orang-outang with tragedy on his mind."