

NARROW ESCAPE.

BY JAN FABRICIUS.

WHEN in 1910 we rented for a few months one of those roomy old-fashioned Surabaya houses in which it is delightful to live, we were entertained by two permanent non-paying guests.

One was a cannibal: a huge spider, a *laba-laba* as the Malays call it, or, in the dignified Javanese language, a *kemangga*. In labelling it a cannibal we have revealed the spider's sex. Nature decrees that the female shall devour the love-making male. During the rainy monsoon she had spun her web partly on top, partly at the side, of the telephone apparatus on the white-washed wall of the spacious back porch. Kassan, the *spèn* (head-boy), who knew more of Nature's ways than most white men will ever learn, had excited my children by informing them that in another four or five weeks, at the beginning of the dry season, she was sure to be visited by a male of her kind. So naturally she was called Juliet—waiting, on her 'balcony', for Romeo.

Our other inmate was a gecko, a *tokkèh* as the natives call this large-sized wall lizard on account of his reiterated cry: "Tock-èh . . . tock-èh . . . tock-èèèèèèèè!" From the lordly way in which he bossed his distant relatives, the smaller lizards (*tjitjaks*), who could only say "tsk-tsk-tsk" as they chased mosquitoes along the wall, we decided that he was a male. Of course Kassan could easily have enlightened us on that point, but in elucidating the matter he would probably have been rather explicit, so we practised discretion. As the telephone happened to be screwed on to two wooden battens, one at the top and one at the bottom, the gecko had

cunningly taken up his abode in the open space between wall and telephone: it allowed him a clear view of his hunting-ground, even though part of the spider's web encroached a little upon his field of vision.

We could never decide whether or not the noise made by the telephone was any bother to him. Every time the bell rang we thought he must find the volume of sound deafening. Yet he seemed to take no notice of it. He never once made any attempt to flee from the ordeal. Maybe he had become used to it, or else he knew instinctively that barking dogs don't bite. Doesn't the robin build her nest even under a railway sleeper over which trains are thundering day after day? Apparently our gecko restricted his attention solely to the live food he could snap up from the wall—as a rule during the evening, because his habits were mainly nocturnal. Whenever a mosquito came into view within a convenient distance he darted towards the unsuspecting insect, and that was invariably the end of the mosquito. Sometimes it happened that a swarm of flying ants would suddenly invade the lamp-lit porch, dropping their wings as they clumsily waddled along. That was a red-letter day for our gecko: game in every direction as far as the eye could see! Before the native servants had time to collect the creamy-coloured ants as delicacies for their own evening meal, the *tokkèh* had managed to snatch a few for himself. But the best treat of all was an occasional *kuwangwung*, a big beetle, who in his wild flight dashed headlong against the wall and clung stupefied. In a moment the lizard had pounced

and retreated into his den to gormandise on the rare dainty.

One evening we decided to test his power of discrimination. My ten-year-old son took my tobacco-jar, and, wetting a few threads of the fragrant weed, moulded them into a cud. When this was thrown at the wall the gecko hurried forward and grabbed the supposed 'beetle' in his big mouth. The result was disastrous. At once it became obvious that he felt queer. His eyes rolled pitiably, and after a few seconds he dropped to the floor, unconscious, the 'quid' still protruding from his jaws. Knowing no remedy we did not attempt to touch him. We could only hope that no serious harm had been done to our friend who had become a member of the family. Even more hard to bear than remorse was Kassan's richly deserved humiliating contempt for what we had done. Without a word he turned his back on the sacrilegists.

*"Kramat dahun wahru,
Anaq tokkèh didalam sumur . . ."*

("Holy as a leaf of the wahru plant
is the tokkèh. . .")

To our relief the invalid soon recovered. Dropping the vile 'prey' he hurried back to his hiding-place, perhaps to meditate upon the venomous nature of this unknown variety of beetle. Evidently he never realised our bad joke; for the rest of our stay in the house he was as friendly and trustful as before.

The relation between spider and gecko was that of neighbours following the golden rule of not overdoing the social side. On the whole they were not rivals. The spider restricted herself to anything flying into her web; the gecko took care to keep outside Juliet's fixed domain. So all went well between them until . . .

I remember the date, for it hap-

pened to be my little daughter's birthday. We had noticed for a few days past that Juliet was growing more lively than usual. From time to time she would agitate her web vehemently as if to say, "Life's fun!"

The gecko was not amused. On the contrary, he seemed to think the extraordinary activity in his neighbour's network a downright nuisance. Moreover, it deceived him. Again and again he stuck out his head expectantly, but finding nothing in the way of food he retreated with a distinct grumble. "Women's tricks, curse them."

Then, on the 3rd of April, HE arrived. Romeo. We noticed him as we rose from supper. Whence he materialised, by what means he had managed to discover this place, we had no idea. Had the power of speech been bestowed upon him he might have reminded us:—

*"By love, who first did prompt me to inquire;
He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes."*

Although he was less than half Juliet's size she seemed to find it worth her while to take a good look at him. Was he her type? Worthy of fathering her offspring? Yes, he would do. She came an inch or so forward. This initial advance producing no apparent effect on the little man, she started a series of coquetries to encourage him. She turned and squirmed as if to exhibit all views of her bulky brown body, which was no doubt lovely to him. Yet he still hesitated, keeping a respectful distance. Did instinct whisper that the fulfilling of his desire would cost him his life? If so, he must have been a Sybarite; for it soon became clear that to this miniature suitor a short spell of rapture out-balanced a life without love. Stripped for action, he entered the web. Slowly, carefully he semicircled round the bride-to-be. The vamp half turned,

her crafty eyes watching every movement of her bold knight, realising perhaps that he, more nimble than she, could still turn tail if he so chose. He didn't. Nearer and nearer he crept. Suddenly he pounced. "Neck or nothing!" Once more the divine union of two creatures manifested the mightiest power in the Universe. Marriage consummated, she took the undaunted lover in her claws with the morbid intention of devouring him at her leisure. Jealousy? Must no other woman ever cast eyes upon him? Or was it that Nature in its infinite wisdom had no longer use for the little fellow once he had fulfilled the sole purpose of his brief life? His number seemed up.

But Fate intervened.

At the very moment that the gluttonous female set to work to envelop the poor male in the treacherous threads of her body a crowd of flying ants, sudden as usual, entered the porch. One flew straight into the lower part of the web, from which it in vain tried to free itself. The spider, confronted by the problem of what to

do first—imprison her husband or secure the tempting ant—decided on the capture of what obviously she regarded as *une bonne bouche*. Abandoning her tiny spouse, who after all offered but meagre nourishment, she ran to the edge of her web and grabbed the white ant.

It was her downfall.

The advent of the rich new prey had not escaped the gecko's attention. So far he had always respected the spider's hunting rights within the boundary of her domain, but whether it was that he had not yet worked off the irritation of the last few days or that this time the temptation was too much for him, he poached. Quick as lightning he leapt forward and arrived on the scene just as the spider seized the unfortunate victim. Of course the gallant giant lizard meant no harm to the lady spider, but as he opened his huge mouth and caught the ant he couldn't avoid swallowing Juliet as well! Down they went with a single snap of his jaws.

Romeo?

Vanished! Best foot foremost.

SIR RICHARD STAYNER.

BY OLIVER WARNER.

WHILE the seaman of today must be awake to perils above and beneath the face of the waters as well as upon them, he is spared three evils known all too well to his forebears. The marine engine and the wireless telegraph have between them eased the threat of the storm; radar has simplified navigation unrecognisably even in fog; while the ill-health referred to again and again in the biographies of past generations is less heard of, since improvement in conditions of service and in the building of ships has been vast.

Many great men, Collingwood among them, have literally worn themselves out keeping open the sea-ways. Some of these men of endurance are long forgotten, among them Richard Stayner, who flourished in the days of Blake. He lived and died at sea, returning to Spithead for the last time in November 1662 in His Majesty's ship the *Mary*, after a voyage from Lisbon. That pleasing Garrison Church, which had seen the marriage of Charles II. and Catherine of Braganza in May of the same year, witnessed his final home-coming. His embalmed body, by his express wish, was to lie near that of his wife, who had died in the time of Old Noll.

The event was not much remarked by the world at large, yet within a day of the ship's arrival a man in London duly noted the fact, as was his way. "This morning," wrote Pepys, "we had news by letters that Sir Richard Stayner is dead, which we are sorry for, he being a very stout seaman." Pepys knew him of old, and himself attended the last obsequies of one whose whole life was spent on active service, generally afloat, often abroad, and never in great commands. He left neither a memorable portrait

behind him nor any sort of memorialist, and his name, therefore, is seldom recalled; but he was in fact, what Pepys's few words indicate, one of those quiet and resolute officers upon whom, then as since, England's safety has depended. He has, moreover, another claim to attention; for it so chanced that it was from spoils of his winning that some of the finest coins in the whole English series were minted. His name, indeed, links with Blake and Monk at sea, with Simon and Blondeau in the realm of numismatics, while he had the distinction (shared, oddly enough, with a regicide, Dick Ingoldsby) of being knighted both by Cromwell and by Charles the Second.

The historian rightly laments that too little detail is known of Blake's early life, though at last, after nearly three centuries, he has an honourable memorial in Westminster Abbey. With Stayner, as with so many of his sea contemporaries, the gaps are still wider: though once fairly launched as a commander of State's ships, his career is not hard to follow. He first appears towards middle life, when he had charge of the *Elizabeth*, a small vessel carrying two sakers—guns equivalent to six-pounders. The *Elizabeth* was fitted out "for surprising small pickaroons that lurk among the sands" of the Essex coast, and for convoy service in the North Sea. In August 1649 he had his first recorded success. He captured a small frigate, the *Robert*, one of a force under Prince Rupert. For this and other good work he was given twenty pounds, with a further five pounds for a gold medal. Henceforward he was a favoured man. Three years later he was in command of the *Mermaid*, fitting out at Chatham, and by January 1653 had exchanged to