

# SACRILEGE IN MALAYA



**PIERRE  
BOULLE**

Author of  
'The Bridge on  
the River Kwai'

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## SACRILEGE IN MALAYA

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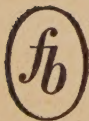
*Sacrilege*  
*in Malaya*

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PIERRE BOULLE

*Translated from the French by*

XAN FIELDING



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LE SACRILEGE MALAIS

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## *Sophia*

After handing over his shekels to the financier, the cobbler bent over his work again and burst into song—too loudly.

Once again the financier found himself suffering from early-morning insomnia. Unable to sleep, he fell to thinking. His thoughts centred on his neighbour's work.

"The cobbler mends old shoes and at the same time sings. There must be a close connection between this activity and this state of contentment. Why shouldn't I, too, take an interest in old shoes?"

The financier could not confine himself to the idea of mending shoes. He would also manufacture them—thousands, millions, billions of pairs. The whole world would come and buy shoes from him.

This prospect only aggravated his nervous tension. A horrible clatter, caused by the tramping of countless boot-soles, came up from the street outside and vied with the uncouth sounds made by the cobbler. He realised the full horror into which his habit of generalisation had almost plunged him. Sleep would then be out of the question. No, it was impossible. . . .

A pity. It was an attractive notion. Perhaps it could be pursued up to a point where its application might be acceptable? To attain the cobbler's peace of mind through the medium of shoes, but at the same time prevent them from disturbing his sleep? Noiseless soles? It only required some flexible material.

The idea flashed across his mind as he heaved his massive frame over for the umpteenth time and buried his head in the pillow in a desperate quest for peace and quiet. The financier leaped out of bed in one bound, snatched up his notebook and jotted something down on the "Ideas" page. This done, he was filled with a sense of inner calm

and lay down once more on his bed. The cobbler had stopped singing. The sound of tramping feet had dwindled into a harmonious murmur which was fraught with promise.

When he woke up later in the morning, the subject of shoes was forgotten. All that remained was the idea, pure and simple, represented on paper by the one word: "Rubber." The financier went into action.

His immediate inclination was to summon the cobbler and say to him:

"You sing, therefore you act. I *am* and I think. I've tried to stop you acting and singing. I've been wrong. From now on we're going to work together. You sing, therefore you act; you can work in wood just as well as in leather. We shall extract latex from the trees of the equatorial forests. I shall move you out there. You will tap the rubber trees. I shall give you the necessary tools. I shall plant more trees. I shall build you a house. I shall sell the rubber. All you need do is sing and tap the trees."

At this point the financier paused for further thought.

"No, it's impossible. I *am* and I think. I cannot plant. I cannot build. I'm even incapable of giving orders. I am utterly immaterial. The only way I can make myself felt is through my financial power. There will have to be intermediaries. Let's start from the beginning."

The beginning was the establishment of a nameless society consisting of some powerful and anonymous members. The most powerful of them all forced a Council which decided on the creation of a number of enterprises in various different countries, all situated in a narrow band on either side of the Equator. One of these countries was the British possession of Malaya.

The Council's imagination was fired by their branch in Malaya and the first meeting was devoted to finding a suitable name for it. The method followed on this particular occasion transcended common sense so far as to encroach upon the realm of poetry. Common sense would have sug-

gested deciding *first of all* on some title which indicated the functions of the organisation as precisely as possible, *afterwards* making sure that the name was easy to pronounce, and *finally* that it had an attractively original quality. The administrators went about it otherwise. They concentrated first of all on the forceful quality of the name, then waited to see *a posteriori* whether a significant title could be formed from the initials. The only concession made *a priori* to common sense was the compulsory introduction of the letter S, for "Society," as the first initial.

They started off by working individually, each of them, guided by chance and his own artistic sense, covering the block of paper in front of him with words beginning with S which were deemed likely to attract attention. Then they compared results at a collective conference. Among the few names set aside for consideration, S.A.P.H.O. struck them as being one of the most satisfactory in view of the intended effect. They adopted this combination as a firm base on which to work and tried out various formulas which would fit into this frame. After a number of tentative efforts a title emerged without too much difficulty: "Society for Agriculture and the Promotion of Horticulture Overseas."

But S.A.P.H.O. might offend the susceptibilities of the puritanical British in whose midst the enterprise was to be brought into being. They therefore proceeded by a system of permutations. S.O.P.H.A., which was inevitably the first to suggest itself, could not be taken seriously. They tried out various combinations of letters, and presently S.O.P.H.I.A. came to be put down on paper. Here, they felt, perfection had been attained. S.O.P.H.I.A. possessed every quality, including Greek elegance. As they had never for a moment doubted, the letters were easily made to stand for a name: "Society for the Overseas Promotion of Horticulture Industry and Agriculture." The title was unanimously approved.

Having thus taken the essential decision in a body, the

administrators went their several ways after delegating their powers to one of their number to settle the questions of detail.

Subsequently it became the custom to leave out the full stops between the initials. People wrote "La Sophia" or "Sophia Co.," according to whether the form of address was in French or in English. Then the article and the "Co." disappeared, and the enterprise came to be known only by its symbolic name: Sophia.

Sophia saw the light of day in the Malay Peninsula shortly before the First World War. Its youth was invigorated by a close contact with nature and by the variety of its separate components.

Among these, in the cobbler class, there was first of all Ramasamy, the Tamil tapper imported from India, a pariah in his own country, a wretched specimen of humanity, who knew he was wretched, solicited pity and worshipped horse-headed gods. Then there was the Chinaman, likewise imported, indispensable and of a philosophic turn of mind, who only asked for money in exchange for his labours. And finally there was the native Malay, who did not work and only asked to be left in peace but who nevertheless consented now and then to drive a luxury motor-car for Sophia.

More or less mid-way between the cobbler class and the financial tycoons there was the corps of intermediaries: the planters. They came from various countries in Europe, mainly France and England, drawn by the mysterious allure of a new enterprise in a country still covered in jungle. Each of them, in the early days, considered himself a king in his own realm, which was the plantation. He devoted himself to his task with all his might, according to his temperament, without a thought except to do his best.

For a long time its dependency on the natural elements and the diversity of its individual members gave Sophia the most attractive and original personality of all the enterprises whose name began with S. Then some of the mem-

bers of the Council in Paris began to feel disturbed by this somewhat exuberant activity and by the lack of co-ordination between the various departments. They decided it was time to replace empiricism and individual goodwill with the methods and systems of organisation of the modern world.

Under their impulse, little by little, the character of Sophia underwent a change. It began to wither. Before the ultimate success of this policy, it went through a period of transition in which its attractions could still be occasionally discerned. But all too often its youthful spirit of adventure was diverted from its original intention and torn asunder by a multitude of barbarous forces which were inevitably countered by extravagant reactions. The result was chaos, either pitiful or else intolerable.

This may perhaps account for the caricature-like quality of the individuals in whose subconscious the struggle was waged and for a certain manner of theirs which at times recalls the ravings of those poor unfortunates whom the gods send mad because they wish to destroy them.

PART ONE

*Bukit Gila*

I

On a stifling hot morning in December, 1936, Maille, a new recruit to Sophia, was met at the station of Kuala Getah, the capital of 'Telanggor, by Reynaud, the Company Secretary. Reynaud was wearing office workers' uniform: white trousers, long-sleeved shirt, collar and tie. His jacket, fresh from the laundry, was laid out carefully on the back seat of his car in case he should have occasion to use it. Maille had put on the less crumpled of the two white suits he had hurriedly bought in Marseilles before his departure. Reynaud did not hesitate but singled him out at once from the group of Europeans getting out of the sleeping-car coach.

"Mr. Maille, I presume?"

The young man acknowledged the greeting.

"I'm Reynaud, the Sophia Secretary. I've come to take you up to the Agency and introduce you to the Managing Director. Did you have a good trip?"

Maille heaved a sigh of relief and breathed freely for the first time in several days. The money question had cast a blight on the final stage of his voyage. The sight of the exotic coastline fringed with palm-trees, and the *d'Artagnan* of little islands covered in fantastic vegetation past which the *d'Artagnan* had sailed at sunrise, had been spoilt by financial worries. The very idea of approaching Malaya had been envenomed by the dreadful thought of the bar bill to be paid and the necessity of giving the steward a reasonable tip. That such a petty detail should be able to blind the eyes of a young man of twenty-three to an

experience as profound as the discovery of an unknown country struck him as being a disturbing anomaly; and while it infuriated him to recognise the fact, he still could not deny it.

It had worked out more or less all right in the end. On the boat the amount of the bill and the tip had not come to more than his capital. What he had left over, when changed into local currency, had yielded five Straits dollars, and his fare on the night train from Singapore to Kuala Getah had already been paid by the Company. He had even been booked in a first-class sleeper, whereas he had only been allotted a second-class ticket on the liner. The Personnel Manager in Paris had insisted on this point, putting the new recruit on guard against a possible error. The journey by sleeping-car was to be regarded as a compulsory obligation.

He had broken into his five dollars in Singapore and the financial bugbear had assailed him again on the train, in the shape of the taxi he would have to take on arrival. Reynaud's presence brought him immediate relief. Only then did he begin to show some interest in the motley crowd which the train had spilled out on to the platform.

The Agency was situated two miles outside Kuala Getah, in the middle of the Bangar Estate, the smallest of the fifteen Sophia plantations, which was unremarkable apart from the fact of its housing the brain-centre of the organisation. Reynaud first took Maille to his own bungalow, which afforded a view of some long wooden buildings with roofs arranged symmetrically round a vast empty space that marked the end of the road.

"That's the Agency," the Secretary explained. "We'll go down there later on, when you've had a rest and something to eat."

It was eight o'clock. An early-morning storm had cleared the air and a sparkling sun was now dissolving the last remnants of mist. On the veranda overlooking the

garden, a "boy" brought out the tea things together with a tray of fruit fresh from the frigidaire. Maille was confronted for the first time with a classical aspect of Sophia: a carefully mown lawn in a uniform shade of green pierced here and there by luminous patches—thickset clumps of bougainvillea hanging in bright red clusters and the long yellow flames of giant cannas. In an unbroken circle all the way round this lawn stood the rubber-trees of the plantation.

This sight impressed him very favourably. He still had in his mind's eye the picture of another organisation with a name that also begins with S, in which he had taken his first steps as an engineer, in France. It was a dismal, gloomy and inhuman picture, in a setting of factory chimneys and corrugated iron roofs, veiled in black dust and shrouded in bitter memories. Here, however, after treating him to chilled fruit, Sophia smiled on him with its flower-decked lawn and the sunlit mass of its myriad trees. And by the mouth of Reynaud, who had cast a brief indulgent glance at his turn-out, it invited him to have a bath and change his clothes.

Maille had his bath but had to put on the same suit, after smoothing it out repeatedly in a vain attempt to make it look crisp and clean.

His first interview with the Managing Director did nothing to destroy his favourable impression. Mr. Chaulette peered at him intently through his horn-rimmed spectacles and then said:

"One important point, Maille. We're in British territory here. Always bear that in mind. The personnel of Sophia represents the élite in Malaya and in all circumstances has to set an example of irreproachable appearance and conduct. I insist on this ab-so-lute-ly. Consider it as the first ess-ent-ial. In order to succeed out here you've got to maintain certain standards of dress and deportment which many Frenchmen, alas, do not seem to possess. . . ."



The eyes behind the thick lenses scrutinised the crumpled suit. Maille felt himself blushing.

“Another extremely important point. Interfering with the female coolies, the Tamil women, is absolutely forbidden. Don’t believe what you may have heard on that score . . . and needless to say, no nonsense with the planters’ wives either. You are young and unmarried,” Mr. Chaulette went on in a fatherly tone. “I know what that means. When you feel like having a fling, ask for twenty-four hours’ leave and come and spend them in Kuala Getah. You’ll soon find what the place has to offer.”

Such was the tenor of Mr. Chaulette’s initial recommendations. He expressed himself in even more direct terms, showing to what lengths he could carry good fellowship and human understanding. Maille blushed once more and promised to conform to the rules.

The Managing Director’s office was approached by a vast empty space leading on one side to the Commercial Department, under the direction of Bonardin, and on the other to the Secretariat, the administrative headquarters. Maille followed Reynaud into his domain.

In the Director’s office he had noticed nothing in detail except for Mr. Chaulette, and only one particular feature had struck him—the spaciousness. His first impression of the Secretariat was of a very long rectangular room with a row of desks in perfect alignment at which a dozen figures in white trousers, white shirt, collar and tie, sat banging away on typewriters. These were the clerks. They were mostly Chinese, with two or three Tamils whose dark skin set off the whiteness of their linen. Some grey metal filing cabinets drawn up along the main wall, one behind each clerk, echoed the alignment of the desks. At first glance the room seemed as big as the booking-office of a provincial railway-station. Between each desk there was an empty space of several yards. In front ran a gangway stretching the entire length of the building, likewise empty and unobstructed except for a central table covered with magazines

and flanked by two arm-chairs. A wicket gate gave access to Reynaud's private office. The two rooms were separated by a glass partition which enabled the Secretary to keep an eye on the whole of his staff.

"Sit down," said Reynaud. "I've ordered a taxi. It will be here in half an hour to take you to Kebun Kossong. That's the name of the plantation to which you've been posted. It's about fifty miles from here, but still in Telanggor. The director's a Belgian, Mr. Loeken. He has been notified of your arrival. . . . You must excuse me now, I've got a lot of work to do. Here, would you like to glance through these while you're waiting?"

He handed him several leaflets, then buried himself in his files. Maille peered round the room. The office was light and airy, well ventilated by a succession of windows looking out on to a lawn. A fan revolved slowly and silently in the ceiling overhead. Reynaud sat in a swivel chair behind a large glass-topped desk. Behind him stood a metal cupboard like the ones in the clerks' room, flanked by two smaller card-index cabinets. On the right-hand wall, and occupying most of its space, hung a board of varnished wood on which were pinned a number of circular labels in various colours linked together with white string. There the staff of Sophia stood symbolised, each member crystallised in his present function. The colour differed according to rank. A director or manager was represented by a red label; an assistant by a blue one; an assistant on probation, like Maille, by a yellow one. The white string indicated the hierarchical chain. The whole pattern formed a series of eighteen different groups, one for each of the fifteen plantations, and one for each of the three departments. Several spokes radiated outwards from each director to the assistants and the office clerks. Other networks, consisting of shorter links, connected the assistants to the intermediary field workers—the "conductors" who, with the clerks, made up the Asiatic per-

sonnel and were entitled to smaller grey labels. At the very top, Mr. Chaulette appeared in the form of a separate white circle. His own position in the hierarchical chain was left unindicated.

Directly opposite, on the left-hand wall, there was a board of the same size which reminded Maille of those wooden panels which are to be found in the lobby of some hotels, on which the keys of the rooms are kept. Small metal discs, likewise red, blue, yellow or grey, hung from brightly polished brass hooks screwed into the varnished wood.

Maille wasted no time in attempting to unearth the significance of this second symbol and tried instead to concentrate on the leaflets which the Secretary had given him. They were written in English. He had only a nodding acquaintance with that language and had some difficulty in deciphering the heading and then the opening sentences. These consisted of various injunctions drawn up for the benefit of the junior assistants. Modesty, he gathered, was strongly advised, especially when dealing with superiors. A little further down, the phrase "never interfere with the female coolies" held his attention and he realised that a further barrier, in the shape of a written interdiction, had been raised between himself and the Tamil women.

His attempts at translation were interrupted by the entry of the Managing Director on a routine inspection of the Agency. There was an uncompromising glint of authority behind the horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Look here, Reynaud, there's something about your office that simply won't do. Come and have a look. . . . You come too," he added to Maille who had respectfully risen to his feet, "and you can tell us what you think."

Mr. Chaulette, Maille subsequently discovered, always welcomed a second opinion. All three of them went into the clerks' room. The Managing Director halted half-way down and nodded towards the desk in front of him.

“Well, Reynaud? Well, Maille? You see what I mean? I never noticed it before, yet it sticks out like a sore thumb.”

Maille maintained a cautious silence. This particular desk, he noticed after a close examination, was not exactly similar to the others. It was a shade longer and the drawers were arranged somewhat differently. It was the desk used by Mr. Xuan, an Annamite, the sole representative of his race and the only member of the Asiatic personnel who spoke French. To this specialised knowledge, as well as to his natural talents and seniority, he owed the rank he held of Chief Clerk.

Reynaud tried to justify himself.

“It’s the Chief Clerk’s desk, sir. I thought it might be a little different from the others, in fact I even thought it should be.”

“That’s true,” Mr. Chaulette muttered pensively. “The Chief Clerk should have a different desk. . . . The Chief Clerk. . . .”

He communed with himself for some time, muttering under his breath, then came round with a sudden start.

“But in that case, Reynaud, if that’s the place for your Chief Clerk . . . Good morning, Xuan,” he broke off in reply to a bow from the Annamite who, as a specialist of many years’ standing, had the right to a certain degree of deference, “. . . but in that case, Reynaud, Xuan’s desk should be right in the middle. At the moment there are four desks to his right and five to his left! What sort of an arrangement is that? Don’t you find it offends the eye, Maille? Eh, Reynaud? And what about you, Xuan? Doesn’t it bother you to have to sit like that—all off balance as it were?”

“The organisation of the Secretariat,” said Reynaud, “provides for nine clerks under Xuan: hence this asymmetrical lay-out. But perhaps we could put an extra desk on this side and make the *tambi*<sup>1</sup> sit there?”

<sup>1</sup> Office-boy.

"The organisation . . ." Mr. Chaulette echoed, following a private train of thought, ". . . the organisation . . . the *tambi* . . . Yes, perhaps. That's not a bad idea. We can try it out. Let's see how it will look. Send for another desk."

Reynaud gave the necessary orders by telephone. Less than five minutes afterwards a "standard" desk was brought in by two *tambis*. Maille was filled with admiration for such promptitude and dispatch.

Then the rearrangement of the room began. But the problem involved further complications. In order to keep an equal space between each desk, every one of them had to be shifted. When this was done, it became clear that the filing cabinets behind them would likewise have to be moved. The whole staff set to work. Reynaud directed the operation as though he was completely familiar with such tasks. To make himself useful, Maille helped to lift some of the heavier furniture. Mr. Chaulette, who seemed delighted with all this activity, gave an occasional word of advice or encouragement. When order was eventually restored, he took a step back to consider the result and voiced his opinion out loud.

"That's better . . . much better. Don't you think so, Reynaud? Would you please tell them all to sit down in their places, the *tambi* included. . . . There now, unquestionably better. . . . Of course the *tambi* in khaki trousers won't do at all. . . ."

"We could give him some white ones and put a typewriter on his desk," suggested Reynaud, always eager to oblige.

"Yes, in fact that would be absolutely essential. . . . Yes, at a pinch. . . . What do you think, Maille?"

The young man, who had not been expecting on his very first morning to give advice to the powers that be, declared that the arrangement seemed very satisfactory.

"What a shame, though, Reynaud! . . . What a shame that it's absolutely out of the question!"

The Secretary, who for the last few minutes had appeared to be breathing more freely, looked startled. Mr. Xuan raised his head.

“Ab-so-lute-ly out of the question, Reynaud. Look at the windows. We hadn’t thought of that.”

With the new arrangement of the furniture, the cupboards were out of place in relation to the space between the windows.

“What a shame!” Mr. Chaulette continued, heaving a deep sigh. “We’ll have to find some other solution. Put everything back as it was before.”

The staff once more set to work. The original lay-out was restored. Armed with a tape measure, Mr. Xuan checked the distance between the desks and the windows—a move which found great favour in Mr. Chaulette’s eyes. When this was done, he observed:

“Let’s see now. There’s only room for ten desks, one between each pair of windows. That’s obvious. So what we need . . . what we need . . . there’s no way out of it, Reynaud, what we need is an extra window, which will mean lengthening the room by the necessary amount. That will give you a bit more space, which would do no harm. Everything to be said for it, in fact. That’s the solution. Have a word with the Technical Department about it. Tell Gladkoff to get down to work on it this morning.”

Having thus taken a decision and issued his orders, the Managing Director left the Secretariat and continued on his tour of inspection.

Maille’s taxi arrived. The young man was sorry to see it come, for he was beginning to feel passionately interested in the problem of the desks and would have liked to see the outcome of it. Reynaud went out to the car with him. After giving the chauffeur some instructions in Malay, he wished him good luck and advised him in solemn tones, but with an accompanying wink, to keep his hands off the Tamil women.

## 11

Sophia welcomed the new assistant to the Kebun Kossong plantation through the medium of Loeken's cordial smile and outstretched hand. The taxi had drawn up under the porch of a long wooden building with a red corrugated iron roof. A tall European in white shorts, shirt and stockings greeted Maille and showed him into the house which was divided into two parts: a big room for the clerks, and the smaller private office of the Manager.

"One important point, Maille," said Loeken, as he sat down. "Hands off the female coolies."

Maille could not help admiring the protective system that Sophia had erected round its female personnel and assured the Director of the purity of his intentions. Then, with extreme amiability, Loeken told him that if ever he felt in need of a change he should simply apply for one or two days' leave, which would not be refused, and go and spend them at Kuala Getah. Maille blushed once more and promised to follow this sound advice.

"I haven't got a bungalow for you yet," the Director went on. "To-night you can stay with me. I'm on my own at the moment. My wife's in Belgium and won't be back for another month or so. To-morrow you can move in with Dassier until they've repaired the old shack I've earmarked for you. Dassier is one of my two assistants, an old hand. The other one, Stout, is an Englishman. You'll be working under him to begin with. . . . You'll have to be pretty quick about learning English, Malay and Tamil. . . . Needless to say, you'll treat them both with due respect. Some youngsters think they know everything and give themselves airs; I hope you're not like that. Dassier's a very good chap, with years of experience behind him. He's got a charming wife . . . not so well acclimatised as

she might be perhaps, not exactly the ideal wife for this sort of place. But he himself is a first-rate planter. If you happen to hear any stories about him, don't pay any attention. It all happened right at the beginning of his career, and anyway it's none of your business. . . . To-morrow you must go and see the Chinese tailor. You'll need seven pairs of white shorts for a start. I make a point of my assistants' wearing white. Khaki looks so sloppy. Needless to say, you wear a clean pair every day. . . . Some white suits as well, for when you go out in the evening. To begin with you won't be going out very much. Another thing—you'll need a motor-cycle. You'll be lost here without one."

Maille felt assailed once more by financial worry, but his case could not be so uncommon. Loeken guessed what was on his mind.

"No need to bother about that. The plantation will give you an advance, which you can pay back in monthly instalments. If you're chucked out after the first month, we can still come to some arrangement. That's all, I think. Now I'll take you up to my place for lunch. You can rest all afternoon. This evening you'll be on your own. I've got to attend a planters' meeting. To-morrow I'll introduce you to Dassier and you'll start to learn the job. It's not always easy at the beginning."

Loeken showed Maille into the front of his Ford V8 and then settled into the driver's seat beside him. A Malay chauffeur in a white uniform and black velvet cap respectfully closed the door and got in behind them. As he drove off at high speed down the laterite road that crossed the plantation, Loeken added a few words of explanation:

"Kebun Kossong, one of the first of the Company's plantations. A million trees, eight thousand acres; and hilly country, as you can see. That creates quite a lot of difficulty with the tapping and maintenance."

The road skirted a succession of steep hills separated by deep ravines. Over the summit as well as down the sides



stretched the green blanket of the rubber-trees. Not a single patch of ground, apart from the narrow strip of red laterite, was left unexploited. Maille had never envisaged a plantation on such chaotic lines as these.

"All first-class trees. Grafts from the best leaders. The plantation is divided into four sectors. Dassier is in charge of Divisions One and Two; Stout, of Three and Four. In each division there's a village of Tamil coolies, with shops, a hospital, a school and an office—we mustn't forget the office, by God, the Agency never forgets it! You'll have to get up at four in the morning for the coolies' roll-call. On Sundays I allow my assistants to hog it . . . until six or seven. Some of the older managers are less tolerant than I am. . . . Oh, I almost forgot: a very important point. No familiarity with an Asiatic, whoever he may be. You must adopt a decent attitude with the clerks and the conductors, but always keep your distance. Never, in any circumstance, shake hands with them. Anyway no one ever shakes hands out here, it's a habit you'll have to get out of . . . and never allow an Asiatic to remain seated in your presence without your permission."

They had arrived. Loeken's bungalow, situated on rising ground, appeared to Maille as a black wooden barracks with a red corrugated iron roof—a feature which was evidently common to all the Sophia buildings. A lawn dotted with cannas and bougainvillea helped to make it look a little more cheerful.

"Don't look at my old shack. It doesn't do justice to the plantation. They're planning to build me a new modern bungalow on a much higher hill. You're an engineer, I gather? Then you'll be responsible for marking out the road. We turn our hand to every kind of task here, as you'll see."

Maille bent down to pick up his suitcases. Loeken stopped him abruptly.

"None of that here, by God! Boy!"

A Tamil in a sarong ran up and seized the luggage.

“You’d like to have a shower, I imagine . . . and also change your togs,” he added, after a hasty glance at the newcomer’s suit. “Haven’t you got any white shorts?”

Maille was forced to admit that he had not shorts of any colour and that his suitcases contained nothing but dirty clothes. So Loeken insisted on lending him some of his own, and gave the “boy” instructions to have his shirts washed and ironed in the course of the day. For the second time Maille doused himself in cold water and, before going into luncheon, donned the white uniform of the Sophia planters.

“You’ll have to learn to do without wine. We only drink water with our meals out here. Not a drop of alcohol before sundown, as the English say. They make up for it afterwards. Do you like whisky?”

Maille replied in the affirmative.

“So much the better. That will make you popular with the English. Last year we had a young recruit who couldn’t bear the stuff. A chap called Barthe. An engineer, like you. He has since been transferred to Pahang to have his character moulded. Oh, not only on account of the whisky—but that’s none of your business either. Still, don’t overdo it. You can’t last long in this country if you drink too much . . . or too little. Remember, never before sundown. On Sundays, of course, you can have a glass of beer with your curry.”

Slightly dazed by this avalanche of advice, Maille replied in monosyllables. The Tamil “boy” filled their glasses with iced water. Over his native shirt he had put on a white jacket, buttoned up to the neck and so stiffly starched that there was a crackling sound each time he moved.

“When you’ve settled into your own place,” said Loeken, “never allow your ‘boy’ to serve at table in his *bajuh*.<sup>1</sup> We don’t go in for siestas here . . . a bad habit,

<sup>1</sup> A sort of native shirt.

sheer self-indulgence . . . except on Sundays; after curry it's essential. Have you ever had a real Indian curry?"

"No."

"I hope you'll like it. Barthe, the chap I was telling you about, never got used to it. It was the same with him as whisky, and quite a lot of other things. He spent every afternoon reading and studying. An engineer! You're one as well, of course. Anyway, he spent his time working. So don't believe any of those stories you may have read; you youngsters all have the same illusions. Big game hunting. Games of polo. The beauties of the jungle and the charm of the natives. I've never been able to understand where Kipling got all that stuff."

He was a realist. Maille felt that perhaps their opposite outlooks marked the fundamental difference between Kipling and Loeken, but he made no comment. Moreover, in spite of his churlish tone and rough manners, the Manager of Kebun Kossong was anything but antipathetic. He left him immediately after lunch, after notifying him that he would not be back till late that evening and without forgetting to leave instructions with the "boy" to see that he had everything he wanted.

Maille went into the room that had been prepared for him, lay down on the bed and was soon fast asleep. He woke up late in the afternoon, drenched in sweat, and felt like having another shower. He ladled some water out of the large vat with a wooden-handled zinc scoop. Loeken had warned him that the bungalow lacked comfort, but this primitive process only increased his sense of well-being. He went out into the garden where a small table with a crisp white cloth was already laid. The "boy" had heard the sounds of splashing in the bathroom and had brought out the tea as soon as Maille emerged. He had put on his starched white jacket again and was doing his very best for the new-comer. He made several journeys between the pantry and the garden, bringing out some small sand-

wiches, buttered toast, biscuits and fruit. Then he disappeared without a sound. Maille became aware of yet another aspect of Sophia: the silence of the plantation round the bungalow at dusk.

It was such a strong impression that it eclipsed all the rest: the voyage out, his arrival at Singapore, being pursued under a blazing sky by all the rickshaws in the harbour when he started out on foot in a vain search for some modest café where he could sit down without making too big a hole in his capital, the outline of the coconut-trees glimpsed from his sleeper at each of the countless stops during the night, the strange sounds of alien tongues, the Agency, and even Mr. Chaulette himself.

The silence of the plantation created a more intense sensation. The sun had just gone down. Not a single bird celebrated the end of the day. Not a single rustle stirred the unvarying features of the artificial forest, which seemed depopulated. The jungle was too far away for the sound of its incipient activity to reach the bungalow. The pale-coloured trunks of the nearest rubber-trees formed a perfect oval at the foot of the terraced garden. The foliage, clearly outlined in the foreground, melted into the distance in a solid compact mass. This was the farthest horizon. The bungalow was not high enough to afford a view of the world beyond the boundaries of Sophia except at one point where a deep gap between two hills revealed a small luminous triangle standing out against the highest peaks of Malaya.

The last sign of life was the passage of the flying-foxes. These were giant bats, almost as big as vultures, which accomplished the same pilgrimage every evening. They would take wing far away, in the direction of the sea, fly over the plantation zone at dusk, then make off in search of food in the jungle. Their altitude varied according to the season and the wind, but they always materialised at the same hour with clockwork regularity. Within a few minutes the whole sky was dotted with them. On a calm

day, like this evening, they flew over fairly high—not too high, however, to prevent Maille, startled by the sight of this sudden invasion, from noticing the contractions of their membranes folding and unfolding in a series of rhythmic beats. Each black speck looked like a mechanical toy operated by an invisible spring. The flight passed overhead in a slow, steady procession.

## III

“The silence, you mean? Yes, I was also affected by it my first evening here. It was awful. But you get used to it, it’s not the worst by any means. . . . Do you know we’re going home on leave in a few months from now? Yes, after four years out here.”

Germaine Dassier spoke breathlessly, without allowing him to get a word in edgeways. From time to time a slight quaver in her voice betrayed some internal agitation or lack of balance. Maille remembered what Loeken had said about her: not exactly the ideal wife for this sort of place.

“I’m so pleased when there’s a Frenchman I can talk to. There are only four women in the district, and I’m the only Frenchwoman. I don’t see much of the others. Loeken’s an old bear who can’t think of anything except the plantation, and Jean is so overworked! When he comes home in the evening he’s so tired he sometimes falls asleep in a chair after his shower.”

There was something pathetic about the way she embarked upon these confidential details at their very first encounter. Maille, who felt sorry for her and at the same time embarrassed, did not know what to say.

He had moved in with the Dassiers during the day. His hosts had asked Stout and his wife to come in and have a drink before dinner. They were sitting in a corner of the living-room which occupied the ground floor of the bunga-

low. Dassier was deep in a conversation in English with Stout. Germaine had buttonholed Maille. Mrs. Stout sat by herself quietly smoking a cigarette. The room was lit by a big pressure lamp resting on a tall wooden stand.

For some time Jean Dassier had been casting anxious glances in his wife's direction. Sitting bolt upright in her armchair apart from the others, Mrs. Stout resigned herself with a smile to being overlooked and being kept out of a conversation in a foreign language. In any case she was not particularly interested in the story her husband was telling at the moment: about a Tamil from a neighbouring plantation whom he had caught in the act of conscripting some Tamils on one of his own divisions.

"I long to know what's going on in France these days. . . ."

"Sorry, Alice," said Dassier, deciding to intervene. "No one's looking after you. Germaine's so pleased to have someone to talk to about France that she's neglecting her duties. . . . *A stengah?*"<sup>1</sup>

Dassier did his best to keep up a general conversation in English, which was the recognised practice of Sophia in the presence of a single British representative. It was anything but easy. Maille only understood a few words, and from the awkward way Germaine tried to apologise it was clear that she was scarcely more adept.

"Cheers, Maille," said Stout, raising his glass. "Dassier tells me you're an engineer. Yet another expert who'll shortly be joining our famous Technical Department to teach us wretched planters how to draw a bucketful of latex daily from a single rubber-tree. . . . Go on, Jean, tell him."

Dassier translated this with a smile. Stout, a giant of a man with a good-natured air, had spoken without a trace of malice. Maille joined in the laughter, raised his glass in reply and mumbled a few unintelligible words. A few minutes later Dassier and Stout were once more talking

<sup>1</sup> Whisky and soda.

shop and comparing figures, while Alice Stout sat quietly sipping her drink. Germaine re-embarked on a further flow of confidences.

“I’ve been out here over three years, you see. Alice is a dear, but I never know what to say to her. She seems to like this sort of life; the endless afternoons all alone in the bungalow. She reads detective novels all day long. She finds it quite natural to have nothing to do, not even the housework or the cooking. Out here the ‘boy’ and the cook see to everything. You can’t even lend a hand yourself, it’s just not done. We hardly ever go into town, Jean is always too busy. Oh well, in a few months we’ll be back in France. You haven’t seen my son yet, have you? The amah is giving him his supper at the moment.”

He watched her as she refilled the glasses. Her looks had successfully withstood these last three years spent down on the Equator. The inevitable ransom claimed by the climate betrayed itself only in a few barely perceptible signs: a sprinkling of freckles on arms and neck: a slight thickening of the ankles which contrasted with the slenderness of her body; dark circles under her eyes which careless make-up did nothing to conceal; above all, her feverish manner of talking, her nervous glances and fluttering gestures, which she did her best to control but which were rendered all the more conspicuous by Mrs. Stout’s complete repose.

Maille remembered what Loeken had said about an incident early on in Dassier’s career. What nonsense had he managed to get up to? During the conversation he had had with him in the course of the day Dassier had dropped a few hints about starting off on the right foot and creating a good impression, not only on duty but on every other occasion, and had added that in a company like Sophia one false step at the beginning could lead to the gravest consequences.

These thoughts were interrupted by the Chinese amah, who came into the living-room leading a little boy of two or

three by the hand. Germaine kissed him and made him say good night to all the guests in turn.

“Philippe, you’re looking so pale to-night. Oh, how I’d like to see some colour in those cheeks! What do you think of him, Maille?”

She uttered these last words in a tone of entreaty. Maille lied and said he thought the child looked splendid. In point of fact he had instinctively shared her concern at the sight of the drained complexion and black-ringed eyes. She gave him a smile of gratitude.

“Darling, come over here and say how-do-you-do. . . . And do stop talking in Malay.”

The child let go of her hand and rushed crying into the arms of the amah, who gave a chuckle and comforted him by stroking his hair and talking to him in an unintelligible tongue. Then she led him away. Germaine Dassier went as white as a sheet.

The Stouts eventually left, and Maille and the Dassiers went in to dinner. An empty space between four pillars supporting the floor above served as the dining-room. The “boy” brought the heavy lamp-stand nearer, then filled their glasses with iced water and served the first course.

It was a gloomy meal. The silence of the plantation had invaded the bungalow. The continuous hissing of the lamp only made it more intense. Germaine kept glancing anxiously at her husband. Jean Dassier was anything but talkative. Maille, who was sitting opposite him, looked at him more closely. Unlike his wife, he seemed to have paid a fairly heavy toll. His dark eyes were sunk in a ravaged, deeply lined face which wore a perpetually worried expression.

He got up as soon as the meal was over.

“Good night, darling,” he said. “I’m tired. Good night, Maille. Roll call to-morrow morning at four o’clock. The ‘boy’ will wake you. But you can hear the trumpet from here in any case. In this country dawn is the best time of the day.”



He picked up the little lamp which the "boy" had just brought in and climbed the wooden staircase at the far end of the living-room. Each stair cracked under his weight, then the floorboards of the room overhead. A moment later Maille heard the bed creak as he slumped into it. The "boy" cleared the table, locked the doors and disappeared.

"It's the same every evening," Germaine Dassier observed.

He began talking about his voyage out, the incidents that had occurred on the way, and his arrival. She interrupted him.

"I remember, three years ago. Jean was waiting for me at Singapore. We were married in the Consulate. We had got engaged in France, during his leave which was to have lasted six months. We had planned to get married at home. I was thrilled to death at the idea of the voyage. But he was recalled at a moment's notice by an urgent summons from the Company and had to leave before me. There was nothing he could do about it. They wanted him out here. He took the first ship back, after only three months' leave. He tried to explain: the staff had been reduced to a bare minimum as a result of the rubber crisis, and there had been some unforeseen cases of illness. I followed him out a little later. It wasn't the same thing at all."

She spoke in jerky little sentences, at times almost as though she was short of breath. Suddenly she pulled herself together and smiled.

"You must forgive this outburst. I shouldn't have told you this. At the moment all I can think about is our departure and the journey home. That takes up all my time."

The conversation began to flag. He got up to say good night and held out his hand. She gave a look of surprise.

"That's the last time," she said with a smile. "No one shakes hands out here. You'll have to get used to it, like me."

Maille went into the spare bedroom. On the table the "boy" had placed a small lamp which gave only the

dimmiest light. The wooden shutters which served as a window had been removed, and the only thing that cut him off from the plantation was a thin wire screen with some house lizards scuttling across it.

He lay down, trying to shake off the depression caused by the evening's atmosphere and the emotions roused by the pathetic figure of Germaine Dassier. He told himself that he had not come out to Malaya to listen to a woman's tale of woe, and fell asleep thinking of the morning to come.

## I V

A piercing long-drawn blast on a trumpet shattered the unbroken silence. By the light of a match Maille saw that it was four o'clock in the morning.

He had had to make sure. This was the third time his sleep had been disturbed by the same noise. Dassier had forgotten to tell him that the Tamil responsible for waking the workmen was not content with blowing his trumpet only in the morning. Proud of his duty, and conscientious too, he also blew several resounding blasts in the course of the night to show that he was really there. No one was deceived by this, neither the coolies nor the inhabitants of the bungalows. Maille alone had been startled out of his sleep by these nocturnal rehearsals.

This time the summons was genuine. Maille lit the bedside lamp and hurriedly dressed. Dassier came downstairs; he had put on a pair of sandals so as not to make too much noise, and a dark coat over his white shirt. The "boy," still half asleep, brought in two cups of tea which they gulped down quickly without sitting down.

"It's time," said Dassier. "Come along, we'll take the car."

Maille inhaled the cool night air with delight. He was surprised to see the drawn features and sickly expression

on Dassier's face. Before getting into the car the latter gave a shuddering belch and stood stock still for a moment, as though to catch his breath. Maille asked him if he was feeling all right.

"It's nothing. Liver, probably."

In the artificial light the colours of the plantation looked even clearer and more brilliant than in the blinding glare of the noonday sun. At each bend in the road leading to the village in Division One, the pale beam of the headlights pierced a background of red ochre and swept across successive coats of chlorophyll of a green as pure as the green of ocean depths. Underneath, the smooth white trunks of the rubber-trees flashed past. Every now and then something glinted on the red laterite and a small shape materialised. The fern-owl would fly off at the last moment, brushing past the car.

On a Malayan plantation it is always cool in the early hours of the morning, for the trees then distil their moisture. Maille was suddenly assailed by that slight twinge of fever which is known only to those who have felt the nocturnal breath of equatorial vegetation on their skin, which newcomers sometimes mistake for the first symptoms of malaria, and which the old planters allay with a mouthful of neat whisky. Then his eyes started out of his head; for, as the car began skirting the native lines, a procession of ghosts materialised in the beam of the headlamps.

Real ghosts. Not a single ghostly feature was missing: neither the white shroud enveloping each one of them from head to toe, nor the two glowing coals in place of eyes which were the only visible features in the disembodied faces that melted into the darkness, nor the fantastic movements of their limbs.

Dassier drew up and switched off the lights. A sound of clanking chains could now be heard, and a reddish glow appeared. This was not a phosphorescent reflection but

only the smoky flames of firebrands held in invisible hands. The noise was caused simply by the clatter and clash of latex buckets. And the faces and hands could not be seen, merely because of the natural colour of the shadows. This was, in fact, nothing more than the gang of Tamil tappers hurrying across the *padang*<sup>1</sup> to celebrate the early-morning rites.

But a loud roar first heralded this pagan festival. Out on the *padang*, where more lights were now flickering in the darkness, the air was suddenly rent by an outburst of furious yells which rose and fell without a break. The din could be traced to a single source. It was the head *kangani*, or chief foreman, cursing the latecomers and berating them for their sinful sluggishness.

"He's spotted the car," Dassier explained.

The two white men got out and walked across. The head *kangani* prostrated himself before Dassier, the *dore*<sup>2</sup> of the division, beating his breast as though accusing himself of all the sins in the world. Then he took a deep breath and re-embarked on a further flow of invective.

"Good morning, sir," said Mr. Sivam.

Mr. Sivam was the Tamil conductor of the division. He belonged to a higher caste than the coolies. He spoke English. He was entitled to be called "Mr." and to wear European clothes. He was dressed in khaki slacks. He formed part of the Asiatic personnel and appeared as a grey label on the big wooden board in the Secretariat. He only gave an occasional yell. The head *kangani* saw to that.

The head *kangani* was a giant of a man. By the light of a hurricane lamp held up for him by a little boy of ten, with his arm outstretched in a menacing gesture towards the group of sluggards, his face distorted with rage, each feature betraying his wrath, the veins on his neck swelling

<sup>1</sup> Flat open space, used for games or celebrations, and particularly for the morning roll call.

<sup>2</sup> Master, lord.

with fury, he invoked all the gods—Hindu, Malayan, Chinese and even the God of the white man—to wreak their vengeance on his pestilential flock. He addressed the women as whores, the men as cuckolds, and the youngsters as degenerates. He spewed out appalling oaths and spat out ghastly threats.

“All this nonsense,” Dassier explained, “is because we’ve just appeared on the scene.”

The procession eventually reached the *padang* and the ghosts came to a halt in two parallel columns. They dropped their tools on the ground with a loud crash, which provoked a final volley of insults; then, with their sheets wrapped closely round them—for they were frightened of the early-morning damp—they waited for the ritual words.

Mr. Sivam glanced up at Dassier. Dassier gave the signal for the service to begin. The lad responsible for the lighting held the lamp aloft in the attitude of a choirboy. Finally the conductor took a notebook from his pocket and began reading out the names in a flat monotonous voice, stressing and drawing out the last syllable.

“Ramasamy-y-y. Sinnatamby-y-y. Munnisamy-y-y. Kuppusamy-y-y. . . .”

First on the list came the tapping gang. They were the ones who made such a din with the two latex buckets they carried dangling on the end of a pole. Slung round their shoulders was a bag containing their tools—the “standardised” tools of the Agency. The most important of these was the tapping implement, “the Sophia chisel,” which in the past had given rise to heated arguments among the planters, to learned studies on the part of the technicians and even to involved speculations in the realm of finance.

The tapping gang included a certain number of women. Mr. Sivam now embarked on their names.

“Munniamah-ah-ah. Kanniamah-ah-ah. Paliniay-ay-ay . . .”

From their group came an occasional stifled giggle.

Dassier, who was walking slowly up and down between the two columns with Maille behind him, would then stop in front of the miscreant and glare at her with eyes full of scorn. This was generally sufficient for order to be restored. Sometimes, however, a more serious quarrel would arise on account of a stolen bucket lid or an accidental dig in the ribs; and Munniamah, who had a highly developed sense of justice, would voice her indignation in guttural tones that echoed through the night.

Next came the various specialists who thronged the plantation every day; and then the children's gang, composed of boys and girls between the ages of ten and twelve, who were responsible for weeding the mountain paths. They were always the first to arrive for roll call. To pass the time, they amused themselves by setting fire to some dried-up twigs and waving these torches around in a series of fantastic patterns.

At the sound of his name each coolie replied with a grunt to denote the word "Present!" These were the quiet ones who answered placidly. There were also the grouzers, whose tone betrayed the grudge they felt at being torn from their slumbers. There were the humourists, who pretended not to have heard their name called out, for the innocent pleasure of having it repeated by the functionary—a jest that never failed to provoke a murmur of appreciation from the ranks and to unleash a fresh volley of curses from the *kangani*. There were absent-minded women, genuinely lost in their own thoughts or else absorbed in a whispered conversation, whose name had to be called out twice or even three times before they could be brought back to their senses. Munniamah would then reply in a rush of words which elicited an outburst of laughter, while she concealed her mock shame and feigned embarrassment behind the screen of her sari drawn across her eyes.

Right up to the end Dassier, who would not stand any nonsense in his presence, kept walking up and down be-

tween the two ranks, stopping only once or twice to tweak the ear of some clumsy youngster who had dropped his hoe.

The ceremony eventually came to an end. Mr. Sivam put the notebook back in his pocket. The head *kangani* then expended as much vocal energy in dispersing his flock as he had used in order to assemble it. The various gangs lined up behind their respective *kanganis* and moved off towards the areas assigned to them. It was still pitch dark. Another hour would elapse before it was light enough to start work, especially the tapping which was a tricky operation. Having arrived at the scene of their labours, Ramasamy and Munniamah squatted down on their haunches and waited for the sun to rise, in the meantime discussing the quality of yesterday's curry or the appearance of the new white assistant. Roll call could have been held an hour later, only then it would have lost its religious character and been reduced to the level of commonplace utility. It was a point that had not escaped Sophia's notice. This spiritual communion in the dark was intentionally endowed with all the sacred value of holy writ. Roll call had to take place at half-past four precisely. Having participated in the rites, the assistant could then go back to his bungalow and wait for the sun to rise. That was what Dassier and Maille did, while the head *kangani* directed a savage yell at any trickster trying to creep back to the lines instead of setting straight off for his task.

His infuriated cries rang in the white men's ears until they were drowned by the sound of the car. Dassier pressed the self-starter and drove a dozen yards or so, then stopped and switched off the engine.

"Listen," he said.

The shouting had already ceased and the plantation was once more engulfed in the silence of the Malayan night.

Having thus embarked on his apprenticeship as a planter, Maille began to develop a taste for the job.

The Personnel Manager in Paris had told him what to

expect. He would be required to work in the fields for an indefinite period of time. It was not even certain that his engineering qualifications would ever be put to use. The Personnel Manager had stressed this point in somewhat forceful terms, as though to destroy in advance any illusions the young man might entertain on the value of his degree. Maille had raised no objection. His short experience of industry in France had led him to attach a particular esteem to agricultural work and an open-air life.

He was initiated first of all into the mysteries of tapping. He learned there were a thousand different ways of tapping a tree, but the Company recognised only one—the full spiral. The principle consisted in making a winding incision right round the trunk. The latex oozed out along this gash in the rough shape of a capital S, Sophia's initial letter; and this factor, which Mr. Chalette regarded as a symbol full of significance, had been a powerful argument in favour of adopting this system to the exclusion of all others. It had been baptized the "Sophia Full Spiral."

Maille was starting out one morning to learn more about it when the affair of the Bukit Musang bungalow was set in motion at Kebun Kossong. Loeken summoned him and Dassier to his office, where he greeted them with a triumphant grin.

"It's all settled, Dassier. They're going to give me a new bungalow. Paris has passed the accounts. Chalette has just rung up and told me. He's got some grandiose scheme up his sleeve which he wants to put into effect at once. Harrisson, an English contractor, is going to build it. They're not employing the usual Chinese contractor this time. The sky's the limit. We three will be responsible for choosing the site and preparing it, and for carrying out the preliminary rough work. Chalette already has a number of designs in mind. He's coming down here next week. It's up to us to suggest a suitable position. He wants a spot right up in the hills which will overlook the



whole plantation—somewhere in Division One, for instance. That's your area, Dassier. Go and do a little prospecting up there. It will make a change from the usual routine. Take Maille along with you, he'll be able to supervise the work when it starts."

"Right, Loeken," Dassier replied. "In two or three days I hope I shall have found something to show you."

Since Mr. Chalette had suggested somewhere high up in the hills, it was straight towards the Bukit Musang<sup>1</sup> range that Dassier led the way on his motor-cycle, followed by Maille who had just bought himself a brand-new machine. They turned off the road on to a track that climbed steeply for a mile or two, then petered out into a narrow path that was still, however, practicable for motor-cycles and which finally came to an end on a flat peak which sloped gently away in all directions. This was the hill or plateau of Bukit Musang, which gave its name to the whole mountain range.

Maille, who had never been up as high as this since his arrival, was rewarded with a fresh view of the Malayan countryside. The jungle, of which he had seen no more than a few isolated sections during his initial rounds of the area, now appeared as the essential feature in the landscape. It covered a succession of mountains that rose higher and higher the farther back they stretched, which could be distinguished one from another only by the difference in their colour, and the last of which, extending right along the horizon, formed the great blue chain of Malaya. The foreground looked extremely close and the curling foliage of each tree could be seen quite clearly. The plantation itself appeared as an insignificant accessory.

Dazzled by the grandeur of this view, Maille was only just beginning to take in the details when Dassier, who had parked his motor-cycle and gone off to reconnoitre, came back towards him.

<sup>1</sup> Civet Cat Mountain.

"What do you think? Not a bad spot for a manager's bungalow, is it?"

Maille hastily switched his glance back to the plateau and without hesitation declared there was no point in looking any further. They seemed to have discovered the ideal site at the very first attempt.

This was as plain as the nose on his face, and Dassier agreed. Even an inexperienced beginner could not fail to be struck by all the advantages that nature had assembled at Bukit Musang. A garden could be built on the gentle slopes. It was an easy approach; the path and track merely had to be widened a bit to serve as a motor road. The dry invigorating air would be a welcome change after the sticky heat of the plain. Last, but not least, the view was splendid; and even Dassier, who was used to this landscape, honoured it with a glance.

There was only one point in the whole range that was slightly higher than Bukit Musang and therefore sheltered it from the prevailing wind: a steep sugar-loaf peak which rose a little way off on the opposite side of the saddle.

"Are you game for a bit of a climb?" Dassier suddenly asked. "What about going to have a squint from the top of Bukit Taggar? I've only been up there once before."

"Bukit Taggar?"

"Thunder Mountain. It's that peak over there. The view is even better than from here."

Dassier looked ten years younger. His face had lost that worried expression which Maille had always seen on it and which he could not understand since he himself found nothing but delight in the planter's life that he had been leading for the last few days.

They started off on the climb. It was hard going. There was no path. The soil was dotted with boulders, and giant ferns had invaded the open ground between the trees; for even at this height some rubber-trees had been planted.

"If an inspector ever took a stroll up here," Dassier muttered, "he'd have something to say about it."

— It was evident that the weeding gang and even the tappers regarded Bukit Taggar as a task beyond their powers. Dassier himself had admitted he had been up here no more than once. He stopped for a few minutes to catch his breath and jotted down a reminder to have this particular corner tidied up. Then they set off again and did not stop until they had reached the summit.

Up there Maille realised why the mountain came to be named Bukit Taggar. The stunted rubber-trees that had grown as best they could in between the rocks bore the mark of gigantic spirals all the way down their trunks—lightning. He remembered having once seen some telegraph posts that had been struck in a similar manner. Here the latex, oozing out of the wound and coagulating, encircled the tree in a dirty yellow coil like a monstrous deformation of the incision made each day by the Tamil tappers, the Sophia Full Spiral.

But seen from the summit of Bukit Taggar, the Malayan countryside revealed a vast extent of splendours seething with an infinity of colours and shadows. The jungle appeared as a whirling chaos, a bewildering mosaic of startling vegetation, in which the hues of various climates clashed in a fantastic pattern that resulted paradoxically in perfect harmony. On the hills in the foreground, which seemed within arm's reach, all the burnished gold and russet tints of the European autumn vied for light with the greens of giant bamboos, wild palms and banana-trees, encompassing here and there a vernal patch of pink or violet. A mist as white as snow shrouded the slope above a valley which had just been cooled by a local shower. A little farther off and higher up, the colours grew less vivid. Farther off still they merged into one another, blending with the shadows in the limpid atmosphere, until at last they were transformed, each by the miracle of its own particular metamorphosis, into the uniform blue of the mountain range. The plantation was invisible to the casual glance. The eye had to be directed downwards to a lower

level in order to perceive it nestling at the bottom of a chasm: a dingy patch of monotonous regularity, which struck the eye mainly on account of the red roofs of the nearest Tamil village and the incongruous rectilinear contours that marked its boundary.

In the other direction the view was less overwhelmingly spectacular but almost equally beautiful—a broad sheet of green stretching right down to the sea, its smoothness broken only by the minute hump of Kuala Telanggor: an ocean of rubber-trees, palms and mangroves, which gradually dissolved into the coastal mist.

“What do you say, Maille? If Chaulette wants somewhere really high up and with a splendid view, Bukit Taggar wouldn't do so badly!”

The young man realised that Dassier was joking. When there was a site like Bukit Musang close at hand, from where the view was just as lovely and indeed less overpowering for a permanent home, and which was easily accessible and sheltered from the prevailing wind, it would have been ludicrous to consider building a house on this sheer rock, lashed by storms and a favourite target for the bolts of Zeus, and on which, at first glance, there seemed to be space for no more than the foundations of a chimney.

This opinion was echoed by Loeken when Dassier took him up next morning to the summit of the range, and he decided to advise the Managing Director to build the new bungalow on the plateau of Bukit Musang.

Ramasamy ambled across towards the first of the hundred and fifty rubber-trees that made up his daily task. He moved slowly, with short strides, peering round in all directions in the hope that some unexpected sight might meet his eyes to relieve the monotony of his work.

This hope had often been fulfilled. Frequently, after a storm, he had espied the carapace of a big black scorpion scuttling through the grass. At other times a cobra might rear its dark head above the ground, showing its angry swollen neck. You could never tell what might happen in this particular section of Division One which bordered upon the jungle. Only a year ago Ramasamy had come across an eighteen-foot python drowsing in the mud at the bottom of a ditch. After capturing it alive with the help of all the other tappers who had forthwith answered his hue and cry, he had taken it to the director of the plantation who had given him a ten-dollar reward and had had to close his eyes to the abrupt decline in that day's crop. In his monthly report to the Agency he had subsequently attributed this to a violent early-morning storm which had had an adverse effect on that day's tapping.

On one occasion, walking barefoot so as to make no noise, Ramasamy had come upon a herd of wild boar at the top of a little hummock. It had given him infinite pleasure to see them rush off into the jungle, crushing all the plants on the way underfoot. Another day, a furry little bear cub had strayed across his path. Ramasamy had alerted the gang with a piercing shout. The coolies had encircled the intruder and tried to capture it. Sometimes even the footprint of a tiger could be seen in the soft earth, and Ramasamy would then peer round anxiously in all directions.

But these windfalls were few and far between. Worthwhile sights did not occur every day of the week, and more often than not Ramasamy was reduced to contemplating the months-old spoor of an elephant or following the evolutions of a black and white squirrel.

This morning even the squirrel had gone to ground among the damp leaves in the forest. Ramasamy went off to see if the elephant had come back or not and then decided with a deep sigh to embark on the work for which

Sophia had recruited him. The *kangani* of the gang came up and they started talking.

"This year's rice is not too bad."

"No," Ramasamy replied, "it isn't bad at all."

"You could almost say it's fairly good rice."

"Yes, it's certainly extremely good."

"But it does have a few black grains in it."

"Yes, you do come across a black grain now and then."

"Nevertheless, in spite of the black grains, it's very good rice."

Having exhausted this subject, Ramasamy relapsed into silence and devoted himself to his task.

He leaned over the tree and in a couple of movements removed the coil of yellowed latex that had coagulated all the way down the recently made spiral. He put this into his bag; then, holding his chisel waist-high with both hands and controlling it carefully with his splayed index-finger, in a series of rhythmic strokes he detached a thin strip of bark, following the spiral from top to bottom, moving round the tree as he bent lower and lower down. When this was done, he opened up a vertical ridge connecting the spiral to a small aluminium gutter fastened at an angle to the tree. From this gutter the liquid drained into a porcelain cup lined with varnish—the Sophia Standard Cup. The fresh incision immediately turned snowy white, and the latex began to ooze drop by drop into the cup. Ramasamy slung his bag over his bare shoulder and shambled over to the next tree. The *kangani* followed behind him.

"It was in that ditch I found the python sleeping," he said, stretching out his arm.

"They look for somewhere cool to sleep after they've had a meal."

"Yes, it's when they've just had a meal that you can catch them."

"Had that one just had a meal?"

"It had just had a meal and had curled up in that ditch."

Ramasamy bent down once more, picked up the cup which still contained a scrap of coagulated latex, wiped it clean, replaced it and put the scrap into his bag. All these odd bits and pieces would be taken to the workshops and be turned into second-class crêpe. He was about to embark on the tapping when the noise of a motor-cycle reached his ears. He stood rooted to the spot for a second or two, then bent over his work in a fever of activity. The *ḡangani* assumed a furious expression and started shouting at the top of his voice.

Since Dassier had gone into Kuala Getah to fetch the pay, Maille was undertaking his first tour of inspection alone. He was beginning to think he had lost his way in the labyrinth of paths, when a volley of curses in the offing informed him that he must be in the tapping area.

The *ḡangani* bustled over towards him, without interrupting his flow of invective. From far off he had mistaken Maille for Dassier. When he saw who it was he still did not abandon his display of activity, for which the young probationer secretly thanked him.

"Salaam, *dore*," he said, coming to a halt six paces away and beating his breast.

This was what he was meant to say and to do. Maille felt extremely pleased. Ramasamy had just that moment completed a fresh spiral, and the white coil was oozing in little drops into the cup.

"*Odi, po!*"<sup>1</sup> the *ḡangani* yelled.

The tapper, who still thought it was Dassier behind him, slung his bag over his shoulder, took a flying leap and galloped across to the next tree.

Maille was delighted. Everything was happening exactly as it should. The wild rush from tree to tree had set him wondering at first, until Dassier told him it had been ordained by the latest instructions from the Agency.

This was at a time when financiers all over the world were influenced by the ideas of Taylor and the results

<sup>1</sup> "Run, get a move on!"

achieved by American industrialists. They all dreamed of obtaining from their own staff that mathematical perfection of movement that does away with every redundant gesture and thus reduces the periods of unproductivity to a minimum. Sophia had begun to look into the question and, under Mr. Chaulette's auspices, the Technical Department had embarked on a scientific study of tapping based on a break-down of Ramasamy's movements and an analysis of the relative times.

This study would not be completed for several months, but one result had come to light at the outset—the time Ramasamy spent in moving from one tree to another was unproductive, and its duration was in inverse proportion to his speed. Hence the theory, propounded by Gladkoff, required that Ramasamy should *run* from tree to tree. Fascinated by the idea, Mr. Chaulette had given orders for this suggestion to be put into immediate effect.

Ramasamy did not complain. He was prepared to allow the white man some of his strange fancies on condition that these did not clash too violently with his own views on economy of movement. After the initial shock this new rule had caused him, he had soon calmed down and had learned to vary the speed of his run and the length of his stride according to the circumstances. The assistant in charge of the division was entitled to a good brisk canter. For the benefit of the director of the plantation, Ramasamy worked this up once a week into a full gallop. And on the rare occasions when Mr. Chaulette's presence was signalled by the local bush telegraph, Ramasamy girded up his loins and launched into a wild charge which filled the Managing Director with joy. He kept this up until the noise of their motor-cars announced that his masters had finished with him. Then, alone in the depths of the artificial forest, he compensated himself for this expenditure of energy with a rest commensurate to the effort entailed.

When Ramasamy saw that the intruder was only the new probationer, he changed from a canter into a trot—which



made Maille realise exactly where he stood in the tapper's eyes. The *ḱangani*, who was eager to make a good impression even on a newcomer, intensified his cries and managed to obtain a sort of doubling on the spot; which saved the assistant's face by at least an appearance of velocity, and also Ramasamy's by an actual ground speed that was sufficiently low.

The tapper completed his incision as he moved round the tree. Maille picked up a few shavings of bark. The average thickness was scarcely more than that of a cigarette paper. Had it been thicker, the tree would have been stripped to a dangerous degree within a few months. Maille took out a penknife and inserted the point into the fresh, slightly concave incision from which the white liquid was beginning to ooze. The blade went in barely a fraction of an inch and then came up against the hard cambium. The core of the tree was undamaged; it had simply been lightly grazed to obtain the best possible result. This coolie was certainly an expert. He stopped and looked at Maille, as though he was expecting a word of praise.

"*Seri*,"<sup>1</sup> said the young assistant, only too pleased with this opportunity to air one of the ten words of Tamil he had learnt that week.

With this encouragement, Ramasamy went on with his work. He would never have made a champion sprinter, but he was a good tapper all the same. Maille followed him for a moment or two, examined half a dozen trees, then left Ramasamy and went on to the next task, with the *ḱangani* leading to show him the way.

When Munniamah saw the young master approaching through the trees, she tried to cover her mahogany breast with a length of torn scarf which only partly concealed it; and, to be on the safe side, she hastily discarded the white flower which she had chosen to wear in her hair that morning. The *ḱangani* shouted "Whore!" at her by way

<sup>1</sup> "Good."

of encouragement. The girl was a novice. She trembled with beginner's nerves; and the presence of Maille, whose possible reactions were an unknown factor, filled her with terror. No power on earth could have rationalised *her* gestures. The chisel she wielded slipped and tore off a strip of bark as thick as her finger. Instead of dripping along the spiral, the latex overflowed and spread in several streams down the trunk. The *kangani* lent a hand to repair the damage, and Maille did the best he could with his ten words of Tamil to express his displeasure, while Munniamah bowed her head, covered with confusion and encumbered by her tools, by her bag which hampered her movements and by her breast that kept popping out of the piece of torn cloth. The *kangani* called her a clumsy sow and once again a whore, then treated Maille to a lengthy speech not a word of which he could understand.

Not knowing what to say, the young probationer continued on his rounds. He had inspected about a dozen tasks when the sound of a car echoed through the plantation. The noise grew louder, then stopped, and he heard someone calling out to him in English. It was Stout. The mere appearance of this giant induced an activity among the tappers, male and female alike, which Maille for all his efforts had been unable to obtain.

"Hello, Maille! How's the tapping in this wonderful division? Why don't you come along to my place some time to teach them how to tap a tree? Not to-day, though. I've just seen Loeken. He's in a proper flap and wants you to come over at once. I think he's counting on you to build his bungalow in a week. Chaulette came up this morning. He likes Bukit Musang and he approves of the site. He's got a plan up his sleeve too—a sort of Buckingham Palace, as far as I can make out, only bigger and better. Run along now. Loeken's waiting."

Maille mounted his motor-cycle and raced down to the

office, where he found Loeken deep in conversation with Dassier who had just got back from Kuala Getah.

"It's all settled, Dassier. Everyone's agreed on Bukit Musang. . . . Good morning, Maille, draw up a chair. . . . Chaulette dropped in this morning. We went up there together. He thinks the site is perfect. He let me have a quick look at several plans, but he hasn't yet made a definite choice. Apart from Harrisson, the architect-contractor, the whole staff down there at Kuala Getah have put their heads together—Gladkoff and the Technical Department included. Chaulette himself can't think of anything else. It will all be worked out in a day or two. Meanwhile we've got to make the road practicable for cars, cut down the undergrowth, level the ground and dig the foundations—yes, they've already drawn up the foundations plan. Chaulette left a copy with me here. We'll have to get a move on. I've told Chong-Seng, the contractor, to report here this afternoon. I'll take him up there. I think he'll be able to start work to-morrow. Maille, you're detailed to supervise the Chinese and keep them on their toes—those are Chaulette's orders. Everything's got to be ready a week from now."

In those days the planters' bungalows offered a wide variety of design. Sophia had been forced to use some of its past inheritance, including the old thatch-roofed wooden buildings on piles which the rubber pioneers had erected immediately after clearing the jungle, while they were still marking out the first roads. Every year, depending on the funds allotted by the world of finance, a number of these relics had been pulled down and replaced by modern concrete houses.

The three European bungalows at Kebun Kossong dated back to those early days. They had been originally modelled on Malayan dwellings, but in the course of time had undergone a complete transformation. Sophia had adapted them to the Company's taste, which was different

from native taste, being made up of the various æsthetic principles, English and French alike, that had successively been brought to bear.

The space between the supporting piles underneath the original building, which the Malay would have used for keeping chickens, had been transformed into a living-cum-dining room. Three inches of concrete had been laid on the bare ground, then walls had been erected to a height of two feet and prolonged up to the main floor by a metal grille held in place by wooden clamps. The room that resulted looked rather like a bird-cage, but it was at least well ventilated. In bad weather removable shutters were quickly fastened to the grille by the "boy." Inside, a coat of light-coloured paint on the walls and on the ceiling-joists gave the place an occidental touch. Outside, the wood was coated in a black protective oil which gave it a somewhat funereal appearance. The difference between it and the ordinary Malayan house was accentuated by its immediate surroundings. Coconut and durian trees, which attract mosquitoes, were taboo. Instead there was a green lawn dotted with yellow cannas and scarlet bougainvillæas—a landscape that had come to be regarded as more or less compulsory, so much so that its absence outside the home of a British planter would have led to his instant dismissal.

In Stout's house the thatch roof had been retained. In the Dassiers' its coolness and picturesque aspect had been sacrificed for the solidity of corrugated iron, which needed repainting at least twice a year and carefully radiated the slightest beam of sunshine. In the evening the house lizards hunted for insects in the roof and on the grille, then fought and mated, and finally the big ones devoured the small. Stout would watch them for hours as he sat in his arm-chair quietly sipping his three *stengahs* after sundown, while Mrs. Stout embarked on her third detective novel of the day. In the night Stout and his wife could hear the patient labours of the caterpillars, scorpions and centipedes that inhabited the thatch, or else the playful

frolics of the *musang*<sup>1</sup> which for some time had taken refuge in the roof. They did not mind this at all: the presence of the *musang* was a safeguard against rats.

The cement in the bathroom was cracked, water collected in the crevices, and the damp gave out a faint smell of mould. There was no bath-tub, only a large earthenware vat which the "boy" filled with fresh water every day. It was quite common to step on a toad or else a sybaritic cobra that had come in by way of the drainpipe in search of a resting place more original than a muddy ditch. Gladkoff, the head of the Technical Department, who had once been put up for the night by the Stouts after a prolonged celebration at the Sungei Ikan Club, had come face to face with a twelve-foot python. But on that occasion it was never known for certain whether the beast had been guided by instinct alone or had been given a helping hand. Some people claimed that his peculiar sense of humour had inspired Stout to put an Agency technician's nerves to the test.

When wind, storm or damp rot threatened to bring down one of these old houses, or simply when a plantation developed to the point of becoming one of Sophia's show-pieces and the old bungalow was in danger of disappearing altogether, the Agency at last decided to demolish it and erect, either in the same place or elsewhere in the neighbourhood, a more modern building.

This decision caused great excitement among the planters, for whom it recalled the original period of construction that had preceded the actual exploitation. Mr. Chalette took a particular interest in these building projects, and whenever one of them was in process of gestation the words "Empire builders" would buzz in his ears. His sleep would be disturbed by strange dreams in which he saw huge houses of a majestically futuristic design overtopping those belonging to every other rival company. Unfortunately, in spite of enthusiastic suggestions from the

<sup>1</sup> Civet cat.

planters, in spite of the efforts of the technicians who, under his impulse, laboured incessantly to bring out more and more prodigious plans, to perfect them, destroy them and begin them all over again, in spite of his own enthusiasm and countless rough sketches in blue and red pencil, in spite of drawing on the most up-to-date American magazines for ideas, the work of art had still not seen the light of day.

It was Art, with a capital A, that prompted Mr. Chaulette's brain-child—a vague urge to create something unique of its kind that would leave a lasting impression. And the long succession of setbacks that Sophia had experienced in this field was perhaps only yet another example of the limitations of collective labour organised along these lines. The handful of bungalows built according to the accepted plan were uncomfortable and ugly. Those whose conception had demanded the most communal brain work were the most hideous and the most inconvenient. Some had even been greeted with indulgent smiles instead of the expected admiration.

But Mr. Chaulette still dreamed of creating an original work. With Loeken's bungalow at Kebun Kossong, he felt this was his chance. Kebun Kossong was a plantation with a future. Its trees were young and of a noble strain; great things were expected of them once they reached maturity. In a few years' time they would be the pride of Sophia and of all Malaya. The Director's residence would have to be worthy of this future glory. After a great deal of opposition, the financiers had granted a considerable sum for this event which would be marked down in the annals of the Company.

Given the circumstances, Mr. Chaulette had first decided on a lofty site.

The opinion of the planters was divided on this score, and many a heated argument took place over the evening *stengahs*. Some of them voted for a spot in the plains, somewhere near a stream so that one would not feel com-

pletely cut off, and not too far from the Chinese shops where the cook could buy his stores. Others were in favour of the coolness of the hills and the early-morning view of the mountains of Malaya emerging from their blanket of cloud.

Mr. Chaulette had decided on a spot high up in the hills.

Between *a* spot high up in the hills and *the* highest spot in the whole plantation, there was as much difference as there is between the general and the particular, the vague and the definite, the inexact and the precise, as much difference as there is between the symptoms leading up to the Idea and the Idea itself—the idea proper, pure and unadulterated.

It took a week for his genius to reach this conclusion—the very week which followed his first visit and during which Chong-Seng's Chinese labourers, under the supervision of Dassier and Maille, cleared the summit of Bukit Musang, levelled the ground, dug the foundations and widened the track leading up to the site. These few days having elapsed, the brainwave occurred. And while Loeken was awaiting his arrival with impatience to show him the work that had been done, Mr. Chaulette simply picked up the telephone and asked to be put through to the Director of Kebun Kossong.

"I say, Loeken, we're all barking up the wrong tree. That Bukit Musang site of yours won't do at all. I've just had a much better idea. I can't think why no one thought of it before."

"But the foundations are all ready," Loeken stammered. "You said yourself . . ."

"I know, I know . . . but it's not as bad as all that. All you need do is fill in the holes again. Anyway I've thought it over and I assure you Bukit Musang's perfectly absurd. Why, half the view is blocked by the peak of Bukit Taggar. . . . What's that? . . . But of course, old boy, Bukit Taggar's the obvious place for your bungalow. The highest spot in the plantation. Just think, Loeken! Won't

you feel happier when you get back in the evening to see the whole of your domain spread out at your feet? See what I mean? The manager's bungalow must overlook the *whole* area. That's as plain as a pikestaff!"

"But the summit of Bukit Taggar finishes in a sharp point. . . ."

"Well, we'll just have to level it off a bit—whittle the sugar-loaf down to a flat cone, that's all. And as there won't be much space, we'll construct the bungalow on a vertical plane. . . . I've just been looking at some rather good designs. Listen, Loeken. Three floors, and a terrace on the roof—what do you think of that, eh? It will be the first three-storey building on any of the plantations . . . and you'll make up in height what you lose by slicing off the peak. There's everything to be said for it. There'll be a lift as well as a staircase, of course. . . . I'll come up and show you the whole thing next week. You'll be thrilled to death. Meanwhile here's what you have to do, Loeken. First of all, fill in all the holes you've made on Bukit Musang. That shouldn't take you very long. Then get down to work on the Bukit Taggar peak. Slice it off. Smooth it down so that construction can get under way as soon as the plans are ready. Gladkoff's working on them day and night. So is Harrisson. You haven't a moment to lose, so you'd better get moving at once. What's that? The road? Yes, of course, there'll have to be a road. In fact we'll need it immediately, for the contractor to get his trucks up there. Get down to work on the road right away. Try and have everything ready by the time I come down. See you then."



## VI

After tea Loeken decided to call on his young assistant, who had recently left the Dassiers and moved into a tumble-down little shack. He raised no objection at finding Maille in a sarong and *bajuh*. This was the accepted dress of the planters in the evening when they were not expecting a visit.

"I see you're adopting the habits of the country. You haven't got much room here, but you'll have my old bungalow as soon as the new one is ready. Anyway you couldn't go on staying with the Dassiers for ever."

After telling his "boy" to bring in two *stengahs*, Maille assured his chief that he had found no difficulty in adapting himself to the place.

"Oh, you've only seen the best side so far. The rest will come bit by bit, as you gradually move up the ladder. Look at me, for instance. I spend three-quarters of my time writing reports to the Agency, and the clerks sometimes have to stay up all night to type them out."

It was true. Maille, who now lived near the main office at the entrance to the plantation, had already noticed this nocturnal activity on two separate occasions. Dassier, when questioned about it, had spoken vaguely of monthly reports and financial estimates, which apprentice planters luckily did not have to worry about. Maille had not pursued the question.

This evening Loeken looked as though he needed someone to talk to. He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. He had a second whisky and then a third, over which he lingered as he went on talking.

". . . Then there are extra worries, like this Bukit Taggar business. It's always the same. Yet I ought to be used to it by now. You never know what hare-brained scheme

they're going to think up next. All the same, it's a fine company and they never let you down once you've proved your worth. You can't say fairer than that. In your case, incidentally, everything seems to be going quite smoothly. You've made a good impression. Dassier tells me he has no complaints. You've gone down well at the Club. Be careful how you behave, that's the main thing. Did Dassier ever tell you what happened to him when he started? No? Let's forget it, then. But remember, work alone won't see you through. It's necessary, of course. . . . But there's conduct too, and appearances. . . . They're like that out here, you can't change them. And you have to admit, they've achieved results. Sophia's got a first-class reputation, and that's something. You seem to be able to hold your drink, which is a point in your favour. Not like Dassier, when he first arrived. . . . Look, I may as well tell you the whole story. You're bound to hear it sooner or later, and it might be a lesson to you. Anyway it's not as bad as all that. Dassier . . ."

"Boy!" Maille shouted, noticing the empty glasses. "*Stengah!*"

It was the fourth whisky, the dose at which the brain receives a lucid stimulation that leads to confidences, but beyond which reactions cease to obey universal laws and tend, according to individual temperament, towards sentimentality, taciturn misanthropy or bitter recrimination. Loeken was lost in contemplation of a pair of lizards entangled on the ceiling in an intricate embrace. For a moment the silence of the bungalow paralysed host and guest alike. Then Loeken drew Maille's attention to the lizards.

"Funny position for mating, don't you think? Which reminds me . . . it's about time you put in for a twenty-four hours' leave to Kuala Getah. At your age it's bad to stay cloistered among the rubber-trees for too long. What was

I saying now? Ah yes, Dassier. . . . He came out here ten or eleven years ago. He must have been about the same age as you. I was then an assistant on the Sungei Ikan plantation. Law was the director. Uncle Law, they call him. You've seen him at the Club. He's still director of Sungei Ikan, but not for much longer, I hear. He's going to be moved to the Agency as Chalette's second-in-command. He knows his job better than any other planter in the Company, and he's also a thoroughly nice chap—no one can deny that—but he won't put up with any nonsense. Anyway . . . this chap Dassier arrives, and Law hands him over to me to show him the ropes. He made a good impression, just as you have. He worked hard. He took a lot of trouble.

“One day, after he had been at Sungei Ikan about a month, all the Europeans in the district—and there were only a dozen of us at the time—were invited to a feast given by a Malay headman. The main attraction, as usual, was a *ranggeng*. You know . . . no, but of course, you don't. I keep forgetting you're a babe in arms, you hold your whisky as well as an old planter. The *ranggeng* is a Malayan dance. There's a sort of platform, decorated with wreaths, with two or three women in sarongs—professional dancers usually, painted up to the eyes and as ugly as sin—otherwise, of course, they wouldn't be doing that job. They waggle their hips and wave their arms about to a weird sort of music—drums, and a kind of squeaky violin you can hear three miles away. It sets your teeth on edge, it's so shrill. You'll find some old hands whose mouths begin to water when they talk about a *ranggeng*. Personally, I've never been able to understand what they find so wonderful about it; in fact I can't bear it for a moment. It's like all that romantic nonsense about the jungle. . . .

“Well, these painted women were wiggling away, and one by one the male dancers joined them on the platform, twisting and turning around them but without ever touch-

ing them of course. The experts would exchange a few words with the girls, showing off to them and reciting sort of improvised verses—*pantoums*, they call them. The usual nonsense, in fact. You'll see it one day, it's just ridiculous. But where it becomes grotesque is when the planters in their turn get up on the platform, in collar and tie, and try to imitate the Malayan gestures. It's all part of the programme. Even the most bashful have to do their stuff, if only for a minute, otherwise the Malays would feel offended.

“That day the planters got up and danced as usual, one at a time as there wasn't much room on the platform. Then it was Dassier's turn. He had drunk quite a bit—rather more than a young probationer should, in fact. I don't mean this personally, you've obviously got the right head for it. Anyway, Dassier had drunk one or two *stengahs* too many. He was in quite a state, and what with the violin and everything . . . to cut a long story short, he showed a little too much enthusiasm for a young probationer. You're relatively lucky to have started off with me. There are still some planters of the old school in the Company, who really put you through it. Well, as I was saying, Dassier even started jabbering at the girl in broken Malay. All the natives were in fits, they thought it was a scream. I was sitting next to Uncle Law and stole a glance at him out of the corner of my eye. *He* wasn't laughing, I can tell you! Have you ever seen him when he's in a bad mood? It sent a shiver down my spine at the time. Since then he has mellowed a bit, unlike some whose names I won't mention. . . . The worst of it was, there were one or two planters there belonging to another company. They were having the time of their lives. They encouraged Dassier to make an exhibition of himself and kept clapping their hands, while he went on twirling around like a punchinello.

“I was in a muck sweat, but there was nothing I could do about it. I'd forgotten to tell him there are certain

eccentricities you simply can't afford until you've got at least ten years' service behind you. Meanwhile he was getting more and more out of hand. He did an imitation tummy-dance. I shuddered as I heard Uncle Law mutter, 'Disgraceful!' When an English planter mentions the word 'disgrace,' Maille, you can never be sure whether he'll run amok and charge into a crowd with a knife in his hand or else simply slit his own throat. On that score they're rather like the Malays, if you come to think of it.

"But there was worse to come—the final act. This brought the house down! The music stopped and there was our Dassier, puffing and panting in the middle of the stage. He stood for a moment in a grotesque ballet position, with one leg in the air, then gave a tremendous 'Yippee!' which unleashed a thunder of applause. Can you imagine it?

"Uncle Law didn't cut up rusty there and then. I'll say this for him—he avoided dressing Dassier down in public. He was outwardly calm as he moved off, but I could see he was seething with rage. He merely turned to me and said, 'Tell Dassier I'd like to see him in the office to-morrow morning.'

"So I told him, and warned him he was in for it. I was right. When they came face to face in the office—*Gottferdamn!* Dassier described the interview to me afterwards. He was still quaking and looked quite green. He didn't know if he was on his head or his heels. Luckily he hadn't understood every word Uncle Law had said, but even the little he did catch had been enough to make a new man of him—a man almost out of his mind with despair. Law had pitched into him for a good ten minutes and threatened him with ignominious dismissal. I was also summoned into the office. I was given a long lecture on how to handle my subordinates, and strict instructions to take a firmer line with Dassier in the future. In spite of this, I did what I could to cheer him up. He was in a terrible state, poor fellow. And the incident has left its

mark on him ever since. It's unbelievable. Who would have thought that an idiotic *ranggeng*? . . ."

Loeken emptied his glass. Maille was utterly bewildered. He quickly ordered another round of *stengahs*, then ventured to ask:

"And . . . that's all?"

"It's quite enough, don't you think? His whole career has been blighted by that business. How it all came out, I don't know. But then there are no secrets in this country. Perhaps someone who actually witnessed the exhibition started talking about it afterwards. Or maybe one of the clerks overheard the interview in the office and couldn't keep his mouth shut. One thing's certain—it wasn't Uncle Law. He was far too ashamed, having seen one of his fledglings behaving like a bloody fool. Besides, he felt that the authority he wielded was enough by itself. As far as he was concerned, once the riot act had been read the incident was closed. He and Dassier are now on the best of terms, and he likes him very much. But Sophia hasn't forgotten. In the Company's eyes Dassier is still the young hobbledehoy who lost his self-control at a party one evening in front of a lot of natives and strangers. You can't have complete and utter confidence in a man like that, don't you see? I know him better than most people here, but even I sometimes find myself wondering. . . . That insane urge to cut a dash and be cock of the roost! Sophia doesn't take kindly to individual excesses, remember that, Maille. As for the excesses of the Agency . . . but they're no concern of yours. You'll see. . . ."

"To get back to Dassier. . . . He has worked like a black for the last ten years. So as to bring him to heel, as soon as the Agency heard of the *ranggeng* incident, they posted him to Pahang, an absolute hell-hole, under the command of S. T. Moss. You don't know him? He's one of the old hands I was telling you about. He has made quite a name for himself. Any youngster whose manners

leave something to be desired generally finds his way to S. T. Moss. He's a first-rate planter, however. But compared to him, Law is an administering angel. . . . Dassier took it on the chin like a man. Since then there has been nothing but praise for his work. Three years ago they cut short his home leave, just as he was about to get married. He took the first boat back. Yet when it comes to promotion he's always overlooked. He's not even a chief assistant or superintendent, although quite a few of his generation who aren't a patch on him have already been made directors. I keep putting in favourable reports on him, that's the least I can do. Maybe you've seen . . . but of course you haven't seen anything yet, you wouldn't understand. But one day you'll learn to appreciate the splendid condition of his divisions, and in ten years' time perhaps you'll realise how much work has gone into them—that's to say if you haven't by then been transferred to the Technical Department or the Agency. But let's not talk about that. . . .

"Well, in spite of my reports, Chaulette's always a bit chary whenever his name is mentioned. He seems amazed that I've got no grounds for complaint. Don't you think that's rather bad luck on him? It's true, he has since committed another blunder. That wife of his, I mean. Oh, she's a nice girl all right—I'm not saying she isn't—but she's not the sort of wife for a planter. . . . Still, that's none of my business—or yours, for that matter. . . . Well, I must be off. It's late and you've got to be up at four."

"Won't you have another *stengah* before you go, sir?"

"No thanks . . . but I wouldn't mind a short one. Let's have a gin *payit*<sup>1</sup> for a change."

Loeken finished his drink in a couple of gulps, then rose heavily to his feet and shouted into the darkness:

"*Sycel!*"<sup>2</sup>

His Malay driver, who had fallen asleep on the running-

<sup>1</sup> Pink gin.

<sup>2</sup> Driver.

board, woke up with a start and opened the door for him. Loeken sank into the back of the car.

“Good night, Maille. You’ll remember that story about the *ranggeng*, won’t you? And don’t forget to apply for forty-eight hours’ leave next week.”

## VII

Following Loeken’s instructions, Maille scarcely set foot outside the Bukit Musang area, which was now the scene of fruitful activity on the part of Chong-Seng’s Chinese labourers. He went up there one morning with some cartridges of dynamite which the director had asked him to hand over to the contractor in order to blast away some rocks.

After Mr. Chaulette’s telephone call Loeken had cursed the Agency for a quarter of an hour on end and had vouchsafed the opinion that all the funds assigned for the construction of the bungalow were going to be wasted on road-building and embankment work. Then he had taken the necessary steps to carry out the new orders.

Dassier and Maille had once again been summoned. The two of them had accompanied the director, first to the plateau of Bukit Musang, then to the summit of Bukit Taggar, and at both these points there had been a heated argument in Malay between Loeken and the contractor Chong-Seng. Having completed the work on the first hill, Chong-Seng had naturally demanded payment in full for the original task, plus an indemnity for filling in the holes. He had been extremely reasonable, however, thanks to the promise of a tempting new contract. The real tussle had taken place on the summit of Bukit Taggar.

In ignorance of the final plan, they had had to make a rough estimate of the height to be whittled down so as to form a base large enough for a building site. They all



three embarked on a series of intricate calculations and determined on a height of fifteen to twenty feet. It was going to be an awkward job. Chong-Seng underlined all the difficulties entailed. The rocky soil—Loeken promised to provide him with dynamite. The inaccessibility of the site; the coolies would have to live on the spot; consequently they would have to begin by building themselves a shelter; and Chong-Seng would also have to supply their food—Loeken agreed to lend him one of the plantation trucks. And then where was he to find so many coolies who were prepared to spend several weeks out on this mountain top, especially when thunder threatened? Chong-Seng shook his head and screwed up his narrow eyes. How long was the *tuan* allowing for the work to be completed? What! A fortnight! Ten days! The *tuan* was joking! It was impossible! One month, perhaps, and even that was cutting it fine—Loeken replied that Chong-Seng's men were quick workers.

The Chinaman had thought it over, shaking his head as though in despair. He had then mentioned an exorbitant sum. Loeken had pretended not to take him seriously. The price of the contract had been contested in the midst of the darkening mountains. An agreement had finally been reached at sunset, just as the first flying-foxes were passing over the peak of Bukit Taggar. Loeken had had to consent to a considerable sacrifice, but Chong-Seng was going to start work first thing in the morning and had promised to complete the job within the time laid down. Furthermore, he would provide a second gang to tackle the road as soon as it had been marked out. The Chinaman had hurried off into the night to assemble his forces.

Maille had been detailed to reconnoitre a course for the road. In the few days available there was no question of building the three or four hundred yards that were needed to allow access to the peak; but Loeken had given strict instructions for the marking-out to be completed, the trees felled and the ground cleared within the specified time.

Maille and Dassier had hurled themselves into this work. With the help of two coolies, who carted their survey equipment through the trees, they had been over the ground between Bukit Musang and Bukit Taggar at least fifty times, for the best plan was to make use of the track that already existed as far as this first hill. They would have to avoid embankment work as much as possible and work round the rock face, yet at the same time keep the slope fairly regular and not too steep. The road would be an expensive job, but time was the main consideration. They could not avoid the rocks altogether. Dynamite would have to be used to shift them, not to mention a great deal of Chinese sweat. Tamils were not fit for this sort of work.

They had at last plotted the course which seemed the best and the most economical. Loeken had once more inspected the terrain. He had argued and bargained with Chong-Seng over and over again. In the end he had agreed to the estimates and had drawn up the second contract. A fresh gang had set to work a few hours afterwards.

With a final effort Maille dragged himself up to the top of Bukit Taggar, where he took note of the work that had been accomplished since the previous day. He was beginning to understand why Chinese labour was more expensive than that of any other race in Malaya. The peak had already changed shape and was now miraculously broader.

Stripped to the waist in the searing sun, their heads protected by large round hats, their blue cotton trousers rolled up to the knee, twenty coolies were tackling the hard rock face without an instant's pause. The picks only ceased their activity to allow the shovels to come into action. When they encountered a particularly stubborn rock they did not down their tools and brood over the problem, as Tamils would have done. Instead they urged each other on with hoarse grunts and spontaneously united their strength to shift it, five or six of them at a time, using their picks as levers. Then they trundled it along to

the edge of the precipice and, with a final effort, heaved it over, celebrating its fall with savage cheers. If the rock happened to graze their colleagues in the other gang who were working on the road below, they would also shriek with laughter. Once that was done, they would get down to work again, after taking a mouthful of tea from the urn which was kept to warm on a twig fire between two stones. The *kepala*<sup>1</sup> himself did his stint like the others and did not even knock off work to come up and greet Maille. He hardly ever needed to give an order. Everyone knew, or instinctively guessed, what he was expected to do.

The Chinese women at work on the foundations were all as busy as ants. In white smocks and trousers, their heads protected by a red scarf, with their bare hands they scraped up all the loose earth and pebbles. Each of them would fill two wicker baskets attached to a bamboo pole. When these were full, they would sling the pole across their shoulders and, staggering under the weight, go and scatter their load down the side of the mountain. At each stroke of the picks the apex of the pinnacle was gradually melting away. With each load scattered from the baskets the building site was growing imperceptibly wider. It already formed a roughly circular space over thirty feet in diameter which was more or less flat except for a few narrow pyramids that had been left standing on purpose to mark the original height. The coolies were going to blast these away at the last moment.

The work would be finished in time for Mr. Chaulette's visit. Everything was under control from that point of view. Maille declared himself satisfied with the results, but did not feel his presence there served any useful purpose. The Chinese took no notice of him. They were working for money. Chong-Seng had promised them a bonus if the job was completed in the specified time. It would be. It was a question of self-interest, also of personal pride, of saving face. The presence of the young white man did not

<sup>1</sup> Chinese foreman.

affect them at all. It was not Maille who handed out the dollars. When he turned up, there had been one or two mocking smiles and a few words exchanged in an undertone. Then the renewed activity of pick, shovel and basket had put an end to this brief display of contempt.

Maille stayed and watched them for five minutes, as a sop to his conscience, then made his way down to the second gang along the course of the future road.

On either side of the line marked out with whitewashed stakes which spiralled round the flank of Bukit Taggar, the rubber-trees had been felled by the Chinese, then, so as to save time, simply tossed aside and left for the Tamils of Division One to collect and cut up into logs. The clearing work would be finished by this evening. Four coolies were still hacking down what remained of the undergrowth on the Bukit Musang side. The rest of the team, following instructions issued by Dassier the day before, had started work all the way down the line on a rough embankment three feet wide, which would allow a motor-cycle to get to the summit on the day of the Managing Director's visit. This was a surprise for the benefit of Loeken, who had not asked so much of them. Maille joined the main body of the gang who were tackling a difficult section on either side of a huge outcrop of rock.

The contractor Chong-Seng sat crouched on his heels, watching his men without saying a word. Next to him was a coolie doing nothing. They both rose to their feet as Maille approached.

*"Tabeh, tuan. Ada oubat?"*<sup>1</sup>

Maille opened his haversack and took out a number of small brown cylinders. At the sight of the dynamite all the coolies downed tools and gathered round, excitedly murmuring under their breath:

*"Oubat! Oubat! Oubat!"*

The coolie who had been sitting with Chong-Seng felt the cartridges with a greedy, knowing air. He was the

<sup>1</sup> "Good morning, sir. Have you got the dynamite?"

demolition expert. He took the primer-cord and box of detonators that Maille had carefully pulled out of his pocket; then, under the supervision of the young man who never took his eyes off him, he began preparing the charges. Loeken had warned Maille over and over again. Each of the cartridges he issued had to be used there and then and not neatly put aside for fishing or any other weird and wonderful purpose.

The expert inserted the charges into the holes prepared the day before. The fuses, it seemed to Maille, allowed for a very small margin of safety. He tried to point this out, but the Chinaman merely replied with a knowing grin. Up above them, the Bukit Taggar gang had also stopped work. Grimacing faces, with broad-brimmed hats encircling them like haloes, showed up sharp against the clear blue sky. They all seemed to be in a state of wild excitement.

*"Oubat! Oubat! Oubat!"*

They were standing directly above the explosives and were in danger of being caught by the blast. This time Maille approached Chong-Seng himself, but the contractor likewise answered with a broad grin and told him not to worry. After all, the men were old enough to look after themselves.

Chong-Seng ordered the coolies on the road to stand back and motioned to the young assistant to take cover. The expert was left alone with his fuses. He set fire to a twist of paper containing a little gunpowder, which immediately began to spark, then leaped from one fuse to another, lighting them in quick succession so as to get the operation over all at once. There were six of them. By the time he reached the last one, the first was already burnt almost the whole way down. The explosion caught him unawares, before he could take cover. He ended up with a final bound, shrieking with wild laughter, in a hail of falling stones. This was all part of the fun. The coolies gave a display of savage joy at a task so skilfully and

speedily performed. They all gathered round to inspect the damage and marvel at the force of the *oubat*, nodding their heads, bending over the blocks of stone that had been blasted away, fondling them and blissfully inhaling the smoke still rising from them. Then they went back to their labours, and Maille rode off on his motor-cycle to let Dassier know how the job was progressing.

That night, about two o'clock in the morning, two muffled explosions were heard in the direction of the river. Next day a lot of big fishes with blood-stained gills were being sold at bargain prices in every Chinese bazaar in the district.

Then Mr. Chaulette turned up again at Kebun Kossong.

"You're a lucky chap, Loeken! We're going to build you an absolute palace. Look: a swimming-pool in the middle of the living-room! What do you think of that, eh? That was my idea. You can have a bathe every morning just by jumping out of bed!"

The black Buick belonging to the Agency, which drew glances of envy and admiration wherever it went, had pulled up under the porch of the main office. It was driven by Ahman, the faithful old Malay *syce*, whom the planters had nicknamed Seagrave in honour of his skill and accomplishment. As the chauffeur of the chief white master, Ahman had assumed the privilege of wearing a white cap, which strictly speaking was confined to Malays who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, instead of the traditional black velvet headgear.

In his excitement Mr. Chaulette had not waited for his chauffeur to open the car door. He had jumped out of the Buick, burst into Loeken's office and spread a large plan out on the table.

"Just think, Loeken, a swimming-pool! Lucky dog! You could have a sort of bar running all the way round it . . . with a floodlighting system. It will look marvellous. The provisional plan has been drawn up by Harrisson on

my suggestions. Look at this now—three floors! A terrace, where you could have a telescope installed, and a lift. Harrisson hadn't allowed for the swimming-pool, of course. That was a last-minute idea of mine. I put Gladkoff to work on it for two nights running. Naturally, the plan had to be modified a bit . . . because as it was the lift shaft ended up right in the pool! I've had everything made bigger too, it was much too skimpy before. Now, at last, it's beginning to take shape. We'll be able to start on it soon. I hope you've already finished the foundations. All that remains is to dig the hole for the pool."

He was a past master at communicating his faith and enthusiasm in a few well-chosen words, at presenting the most extravagant scheme in the world in such a way as to quash in advance all possible objections—these never appeared valid until much later. For the moment Loeken found nothing to say against the project.

There was already a long story behind it. Mr. Chaulette had begun by discreetly sounding the opinion of certain friends whose taste he respected. Some of them envisaged the building on a vertical plane, others as a horizontal construction. He had received a lot of excellent contradictory advice, which he had striven to combine into a systematic pattern in the course of lengthy discussions with his technicians and with the help of American specialist magazines. The design was still fairly nebulous, but one or two points were beginning to come to light: the building was to be immense in all three dimensions, presenting to the eye an endless vista of straight lines and possessing a vast empty space on the ground floor, probably surrounded by columns, with a prodigiously original "something or other" right in the middle. These rough ideas were passed on to Harrisson, with instructions to hammer them into concrete shape. On the basic plan that was finally drawn up by the architect, Mr. Chaulette had allowed his fantasy to swoop like an eagle on to its prey. He had got to work with his red and blue pencils, scoop-

ing out a swimming-pool here, spacing out the columns of a new temple there, shifting walls, transforming the kitchen into a bedroom and the bedroom into a bathroom, enclosing the lift in a monument of reinforced concrete to give the whole thing a futuristic touch, and above all widening, enlarging and extending. When he had finished, the Technical Department had tried to interpret this puzzle and reconcile it to the architect's original plan. Gladkoff had taken the opportunity to introduce a Slavic note, and in this way a fresh plan had been worked out which, in Mr. Chaulette's eyes, was more or less final but which Harrisson himself would probably have had some difficulty in recognising as his own.

"Let's go and see for ourselves, Loeken. That's always the best way. We'll thrash it all out up there . . . Ahman!"

Unaware of the difficulties, Mr. Chaulette was expecting to drive up to the summit of Bukit Taggar in the Agency Buick. Loeken had to bring him back to reality. Only that morning Dassier had come and triumphantly announced that he had managed to get to the top on a motor-cycle and that unless there was a storm they would be able to do likewise. He would have two machines standing by at the end of the Bukit Musang stretch, which was now accessible in a Ford. Loeken asked the Managing Director to accompany him in his Ford V8.

They found Dassier on the first hill. Mr. Chaulette had not said a word. Glancing at the track, he had merely nodded and declared that they had better get a move on. Then, with Dassier's help, he mounted a motor-cycle and followed the planters along the narrow path. It was only when he arrived at the summit of Bukit Taggar that he raised his voice in protest.

"Really, Loeken! But it's much too small! What do you think we're planning to build up here? A lighthouse? And all the time I've been enlarging your bungalow to make it more comfortable! You can't build a



proper house on the point of a needle, really! You'll have to work on it a little more, old boy! Slice away, flatten it out. . . . Careful, though, you don't want to lose too much height. I wonder if it wouldn't be best to have some earth carted up here by truck so as to broaden the site without cutting it down."

It was an utterly ludicrous suggestion since the plantation only had four trucks, all of which were more or less in constant use for transporting the latex. Mr. Chalette insisted, however, on pursuing the question to the bitter end. He made the two planters carry out a series of complicated calculations on the volume of earth displaced in relation to the load of the trucks. Convinced at last by the figures that his scheme was childish, he became pensive and mopped his brow. It was obvious that the swimming-pool alone, as he had conceived it, would take up all the existing space.

"How can we get over this problem?" he growled. "We'll have to cut still more away—there's no other solution. Look, perhaps I was envisaging a rather too grandiose building. I'm quite willing to reduce it slightly. The swimming-pool, for instance . . . come now, Loeken, you don't really need an Olympic Games pool. Fifteen feet by twelve, that should do you nicely. . . ."

He pulled a red pencil out of his pocket and started making marks on the plan.

"This is what we'll do. You cut away to a depth of ten or twelve feet, and I'll reduce the plan . . . like this, see? We'll just have to adapt the building to the possibilities of the site, that's all!"

He had once more shifted the walls, shortening the swimming-pool with a stroke of his pencil, and changed round the various rooms until the whole design was transformed into an unintelligible scrawl. In the corners he had tentatively scribbled a few suggestions and embryo ideas, followed by enormous question marks:

“ . . . Perhaps a fourth floor? . . . Swimming-pool in the basement, with the living-room above it? . . . Veranda cantilevered in mid-air? . . . ”

“ There now,” he finally concluded, with an air of relief. “ I’ll pass this on to the Technical Department and let them work out the details. Meanwhile for heaven’s sake get the foundations finished off, and the road . . . and the swimming-pool too. Start on the excavation as soon as you’ve got the site levelled to the required height. We’ll be able to see it all more clearly once the hole has been dug there in the middle. Fifteen feet by twelve, we said, didn’t we? Depth? I should think six feet would be enough . . . unless . . . unless we allow for a diving-board on the first floor. What do you say, Loeken? No? Well anyway, dig down six feet to start with. We’ll see afterwards. I’ll be back soon, and I’ll bring Gladkoff and Harrisson along as well. We’ll come to a final decision together. Everything must be ready by then—I’m counting on that, Loeken, you hear?”

They made their way down into the plains again. The black Buick, which the *syce* Ahman had lovingly polished during the visit, swept the Managing Director off in a cloud of rust-coloured dust.

#### VIII

Germaine Dassier opened her eyes and saw her husband getting ready for the morning roll call. He was trying to dress without making a noise. As usual, he had shaved and had a shower the previous evening, just before supper. In the morning he merely splashed some water over his face, after carefully shutting the bathroom door. Then he quietly donned his clean shirt and shorts which the “ boy ” had laid out on a chair. The flicker of the little lamp did not even disturb the house lizard asleep on the ceiling.

Germaine had been wakened by the rustle of starched clothing, and this initial noise always got on her nerves. She still remembered the ghastly impression she had had that first night in the bungalow, when she had seen him getting dressed like this in the semi-darkness and then creeping out of the room on tip-toe, as though he was leaving secretly and for good.

Dassier gave her a hasty kiss and went out. She heard the stairs creaking, recognised the faint sound of the back door being opened by the "boy," then the sound of the front door, and she envisaged Jean standing on the porch gulping down his cup of tea.

As usual, the noise of the car starting up made her jump, even though she was expecting it. The headlights went on, their beams filling the room with a faint gleam. The car came out of the porch, which served as a garage, and moved off along the road skirting the bungalow. When it reached a certain turning, a thin streak of bright light swept the room. Then the glimmer was extinguished and the noise receded into the distance. Silence fell once more on the bungalow. The "boy" went back to bed. She went on listening for a moment or two, anxiously wondering about her son who slept next door in the care of the amah. But there was not a sound. She was the only one who had never got used to this nocturnal departure. She fell into a deep sleep, from which she was awakened about an hour later by Jean's return and the dazzling beam of light which swept across the room for the second time in the opposite direction.

She slipped on a dressing-gown and went down to meet him on the doorstep. Dawn was breaking. Out in the garden the fern-owls were chasing the mosquitoes in a final swerving flight before going off to shelter from the daylight. She inhaled a breath of cool air. Dassier got out of the car and they went into the bungalow together. The "boy" brought in the tea: real tea—the early-morning cup was merely a mouthwash—and some fruit. They sat

down facing each other. Jean peeled a mango. She took a few sips of tea and tried to tell from his expression whether it was going to be an easy day or else, as frequently happened, one of those days when nothing would go right. This morning he seemed even more preoccupied than usual. He forced a smile to his lips.

"Sorry, darling; but it's the end of the month, with all the usual chores—the reports and statistics to send off. And on top of it all, Loeken is in a bloody mood because of his bungalow."

"Only three more months, Jean, and then we'll be off. We'll soon be back in France. Have you written to book our passages yet?"

"Yes, I'm waiting for the answer."

"I'm going to get the trunks out and start sorting out our things."

"But there's still three months to go! Oh well, if you want to. . . . If there's not too much work on, we'll go and spend a day at Kuala Getah some time . . . buy a few presents and things to take back home, and while we're about it, you'll also have to think about getting yourself some winter clothes."

She kissed him, pleased at having taken his mind off his work, and led him outside. They strolled up and down the damp garden and glanced across at the ridge of mountains just as it started turning to gold. This was the best moment of the day. Sometimes, like this morning, when Jean stayed with her a little longer than usual, she could vaguely discern, as though through a veil, certain charms in the Malayan countryside. These occasions were rare and never lasted very long. Just now Jean was concerned in a number of questions which he never discussed but which she happened to know. Law's transfer to the Agency was bound to cause a general reshuffle among the personnel, involving promotion for some of them. This time, perhaps, Jean would not be overlooked. He suddenly let go of her arm.

"I must be off, darling. I've got a lot of work to get through, and it's guest night at the Club this evening."

"If you'd rather stay at home, I'd just as soon not go."

"We've simply got to put in an appearance, darling. It'll be about the last guest night before Law leaves the district."

She hung her head. She knew that the guest nights at the Club were held from a sense of duty and that it was considered bad form to miss one.

She went out with him on to the porch. He slipped off the jacket he had worn for roll call and mounted his motor-cycle. She handed him his crash-helmet which was hanging up at the entrance to the living-room.

"Good-bye, darling."

She followed the white figure as it twisted and turned down the winding road until it disappeared round the last bend in the green jungle. She would see him again for a moment or two when he came back to gulp down a hasty breakfast; and again at two o'clock, at lunch-time. By then he would be utterly exhausted, his features so drawn with fatigue that she could hardly bear to look at him. After the meal he would allow himself a short siesta in an arm-chair, even though this was contrary to the virile habits of the Sophia planters, but nowadays he could not do without it. Then he would leave once more for the divisional office, where he would be kept hard at work until six or seven in the evening. When he finally came home he would shave and have a shower, drink a glass of whisky, have dinner and go to bed immediately afterwards . . . but not to-day. To-day was Thursday—guest night at the Club.

She went back into the bungalow. The Chinese amah was coming downstairs with little Philippe. Germaine had once tried to help her bath and dress the child, but seeing this annoyed her, she had not repeated the attempt. She was slightly overawed by the amah. Her son came and gave her a kiss, then the amah took him off for a walk

before the great heat set in. Germaine hardly ever went out with them. She could not understand the Malay jargon they used when chatting together. Besides, the light hurt her eyes and the sun gave her freckles which filled her with shame.

She generally went back to her bedroom, lay down again and dozed until the heat made the touch of the damp sheets unbearable. She would then drench herself in cold water and go downstairs into the living-room. There she stayed till the evening, with nothing to do, picking up a novel which she did not read, putting it down again to embark on some needlework which she gave up after a few stitches, or else trying to concentrate on a letter to her parents which she would tear up after half a dozen lines.

Sophia took a poor view of the unproductive class represented by the planters' wives. The Company was forced to tolerate them but had postponed their arrival in the country as long as possible. They had first appeared at the end of the log-cabin era. Sophia had grudgingly admitted them and had taken steps to limit this immigration. The authorities frowned on it and had in fact discouraged it by a clause in the contract whereby marriage was made to appear in the light of a special reward confined to those members who had given proof of their loyalty over a number of years. No junior was entitled to a better half. A few highly privileged members could apply for permission to marry after two years' service, but more often than not this was only granted after four complete years.

There were several reasons for this unfavourable attitude, which was cloaked for the most time in a guise of courtesy but which occasionally erupted into manifestations of open hostility. Women and children presented an additional obligation to the Company. Sophia was morally obliged to lodge the married couples a little more comfortably than the bachelors, to provide medical facilities for

the whole family and to pay for their passages when they went back to Europe on leave. That, however, was not the main reason. Sophia was not particularly mean. Mr. Chaulette, in fact, was frankly averse to this cheese-paring policy and made a point of saying so at every opportunity. The danger he feared was the formation of splinter groups within the framework of Sophia, of small cadres which, under the name of "families," would undermine the team spirit and disrupt the splendid sense of unity. A married planter might allow himself to divert some of his thoughts from the Company's service and devote them instead to his household—and therein lay a definite danger. But the problem was not so simple; for, by the same token, the marriage of a reliable employee rendered him all the more dependent on financial security, which for him was represented by Sophia. A head of a family would not be likely to hand in his resignation out of spite or in a fit of depression, as a number of bachelors had done.

Mr. Chaulette's attitude towards the wives was dictated, according to the circumstances, by either one or the other of these contradictory feelings. On official occasions he treated them with courtesy and solicitude. At New Years he sent toys to all the Sophia children. But if a conflict broke out between family sentiment and that reflection of Company sentiment which each member of the staff was supposed to represent, at the first signs of this conflict Mr. Chaulette showed no pity but stormed and raged until the wife in question was reduced to the position of a warrior's plaything and resigned herself for good to this position.

Many wives *had* thus resigned themselves. A few still tried to struggle. Others lost all hope and paid Sophia back in its own coin by adopting a permanent attitude of hostility.

On that particular day Germaine Dassier did her best to drown her ill-feeling in the anticipated joy of the voyage

to come. She decided to concentrate exclusively on the bliss of the impending home leave, told the "boy" to bring in the cabin trunks, and began making plans for the journey.

## I X

It was Thursday: guest night at the Club.

Apart from the exploitation of rubber, which was its normal activity, Sophia was also interested in palm-oil. The Sungei Ikan plantation, which was managed by Uncle Law, contained two divisions of palm-trees. This landscape, which was more typically exotic than a background of rubber-trees, had been chosen for the site of the Club: the meeting-place of all the Sophia planters in the district of Telanggor.

It was an old wooden bungalow that had been renovated. On the veranda looking out on to the tennis court, Mrs. Law was supervising the Chinese "boy" as he set out the bridge tables. By virtue of her husband's position she was regarded as the first lady in the district, though she herself was the last to press the point.

Germaine Dassier was with her. The two women were doing their best to keep up a conversation, which was difficult since they hardly understood one another at all. They were both relieved by the arrival of Maille. He had ridden over on his motor-cycle and was soaked to the skin, having come through a storm on the way.

"Oh Mr. Maille, you'll catch your death of cold," exclaimed Mrs. Law. "Ask the 'boy' to run you a hot bath before changing."

There was always an undercurrent of sympathy and understanding between the wives and the young probationers. In the first place, they both felt they had something in common since Sophia, which treated wives with



cool indifference, showed scarcely more consideration towards the new recruits who were on trial for a period of six months. Furthermore the probationers, who were not yet overwhelmed by official duties, had more time to spare for the wives, who were accordingly grateful.

"It's nothing," said Maille. "I'll just go in and change."

Mrs. Law was about to indulge in further maternal solicitude, but he slipped away and went into the gentlemen's changing-room to have a shower before donning his guest night uniform.

The sun was setting. On the tennis court the last game was coming to an end. Shortly afterwards the players came in and made straight for the changing-rooms. Mrs. Law went round making sure that everything was in order for the evening. On each bridge table the "boy" had placed two brand-new packs of cards and four scoring-pads with pencils. Drawn up round the tables were chairs with wooden arms pierced by a circular hole to hold a whisky glass; and to round everything off, between each pair of chairs stood a side-table for plates of sandwiches. Two big pressure lamps hung from the beams in the ceiling. Mrs. Law told the "boy" to light them and then, with a clear conscience, she joined the female tennis-players in the ladies' changing-room.

"Boy!" Uncle Law shouted in a tone of authority.

"*Tuan?*"

"*Tania tuan*,<sup>1</sup> boy!"

By which he meant that the boy should go round and ask everyone what they wanted to drink before they took off their sweat-stained clothes before going to have a shower.

The "boy" moved silently down the row of benches, stopping before each planter to take his order. There was a slight pause as he hesitated for a moment to see whether he should end up with Uncle Law, who had ordered the

<sup>1</sup> "Ask the *tuans*."

round, or with Maille who was the least important person present. A peremptory nod from the former settled the question. If the probationer was occasionally treated with little consideration during his period of apprenticeship, the rigorous disciplinary measures were at least mitigated by the spirit of good-fellowship that reigned at drink time. The young assistants then enjoyed almost equal rights with the veterans. The "boy" took Maille's order first and ended up with Uncle Law.

"Tuan?"

"Stengah, boy."

This almost superfluous formality was simply to confirm whether soda or plain water was wanted. After a few minutes the "boy" came in again carrying a tray laden with glasses which he offered to each of the planters in turn. He handed Uncle Law his book of Club chits and a pencil. The latter questioned him in Malay, then signed for the number of whiskies he had ordered.

"Cheers, Maille!" he said, glancing across at the young man and raising his glass to his lips.

Provided his susceptibilities were not offended by any outrageous behaviour on their part, Uncle Law was generally fairly affable with the newcomers, especially if they happened to be French. The first *stengah* went down in a couple of gulps while the players recovered their breath.

"Boy, *tania tuan!*"

This time it was Stout launching a fresh offensive. Another round was promptly brought in and, while they went on undressing at their leisure, the conversation turned inevitably to the old familiar topics.

". . . so I gave the *kangani* his marching orders. You won't believe this, I know, but just behind the weeding gang I found some tufts of *lallang*<sup>1</sup> over two feet high. . . ."

They talked of their tapping, their weeding, their trees, their coolies, their termites. They talked of the Agency and of the Agency routine. They talked about Sophia.

<sup>1</sup>A noxious weed.

A barrier had gradually been raised between Sophia and the outside world. Its odd status of belonging to a French firm established in a British possession had stamped each of its members with a certain characteristic mark which made him seem out of his element as soon as he was out of his own group. Rivalry between French and English, mutual curiosity as to respective reactions and methods, and a genuine sense of fraternity, had been born of this isolation from the very start, prompting the pioneers of Sophia to seek no other company but their own. Even in those early days the members in this particular district had fallen into the habit of meeting at regular intervals at Sungei Ikan, in the antediluvian bungalows which were reached by paths hacked out of the jungle. This sense of unity came about spontaneously. Mr. Chalette was delighted, for in terms of work it made itself felt by a greater output than that of any other company and he lost no opportunity to extol its virtues with an exaggerated eloquence which added nothing to its basic reality. He encouraged isolation from all outside influences, which to his way of thinking served to cement the spiritual cohesion of the team. The Sungei Ikan Club had been erected under his instructions as a material symbol of the collective spirit. It was a Sophia club, built on a Sophia plan, and limited to Sophia members. Planters from other companies were occasionally admitted, of course, and they were given a warm welcome; but these intrusions were few and far between. Strangers preferred to use the K.K. Club, which stood on neutral territory twenty miles away and was open to all the inhabitants of the district. Members of Sophia were hardly ever seen in the K.K. Club.

As in the old days, the conversation was mostly confined to shop. But ever since the estates had reached the stage of regular exploitation, the job had post its picturesque character of a desperate struggle against the natural elements, which used to provide an inexhaustible supply of stories. So, after harking back to memories of the past,

they were reduced to supplementing the monotony of the present by exaggerated flights of fancy, and in this way kept their passion for their work alive. If, for instance, a gust of wind blew down a few trees, they called it a cataclysm, and the appearance of a few tufts of *lallang* in the fields was referred to as a disaster.

The Agency with its various departments had also begun to occupy a large part of their thoughts. They spoke about it frequently, almost always in disparaging terms, but without any real ill-feeling. They openly scoffed at the latest discoveries of the Technical Department, even in the presence of Uncle Law who was shortly to be transferred to Headquarters. Though he was a hard task-master during working hours, in the evening Uncle Law had no objection to these jokes and at times was even known to display a rollicking sense of fun.

“Boy, *tania tuan!*”

They all had a shower. Then, while they donned the trousers and long-sleeved shirts that were worn on guest nights, they quickly told a last series of stories about the good old days in Sophia before going in to join the ladies whose presence would demand a greater variety of topics for conversation.

“You remember that chap who suddenly turned up, complete with wife and children? . . .”

This was one of the most famous of the local legends. Maille had heard the story two or three times already, and it was unlikely he would ever be allowed to forget it: about a new recruit who had arrived at Kuala Getah with a wife and two children, fondly imagining that by this bold stroke he would face Sophia with a *fait accompli* and infiltrate his family whose very existence he had hitherto kept carefully concealed. He had remained exactly five minutes in Mr. Chaulette's office, and twelve hours altogether at Kuala Getah, which happened to be the interval between the arrival of the Singapore train and its departure. There

were other almost equally famous stories: about the man who had not been able to bear the solitude and had therefore brought three Chinese girls back with him from the town, announcing his intention of installing all three in his bungalow; about the fellow who had been found dead-drunk a few days after his arrival; about another chap who, after being dismissed and ordered to leave the plantation, had barricaded himself in, got hold of a rifle and taken a pot shot at anyone who had dared to approach; about yet another newcomer who, after only a fortnight's service, had felt he was entitled to strike a coolie and who had consequently received such a drubbing from all the indignant Tamils that he had had to go to hospital for a few days before taking the next ship home; about the youngster who used to lock himself up in his bedroom every evening and write letters until the early hours of the morning.

Many other cases of this kind were recalled, of men who had come and gone, unable to adapt themselves to local conditions. Uncle Law concluded by observing that among the present generation of recruits there was a much lower proportion of eccentrics than before.

"Boy, *tania tuan!*"

Maille, who had just been checking the level of the glasses and was about to order the next round, was once again forestalled by Uncle Law. He did not dare object. His knowledge of the English language was not yet sufficiently sound; and besides, it would have been a breach of etiquette, for whoever called for the "boy" signed the *chit*. This avoided all argument and waste of time.

Eventually a move was made to go and join the ladies. The planters put their tennis clothes away in their bags and, glass in hand, wandered out on to the veranda. Behind them, the Chinese "boy" picked up the bags and went and put them in the cars outside.

After a few minutes of general conversation, there was a

choice of bridge or billiards. Mindful of the traditions of Sophia, Mrs. Law who presided over the bridge-players did her best to ensure that the French and English elements were suitably mixed, with the ladies alternating with the gentlemen, and with husbands separated from their wives—a feat that was not always easy to accomplish. The bids were punctuated by long silences, when nothing could be heard but the hissing of the lamps. Now and then, however, the sound of voices floated up from the billiard-room in the basement. Whenever this happened, the planters who had been inveigled to the bridge tables to help Mrs. Law with her seating arrangements would cast a glance full of regret in the direction of the room where the men were knocking the balls about, drinking their fill and carrying on a conversation on the old familiar topics.

Maille, Dassier, Uncle Law and one or two others made up the billiards group in the room downstairs, where the rounds of *stengahs* soon succeeded each other at an ever-increasing speed. After the eighth whisky the game began to lose a certain amount of precision, and Maille's ineptitude provoked roars of delight. As luck would have it, he found himself partnering Uncle Law who happened to be an expert.

"Maille," the old man solemnly declared, "you can hold your drink all right, but you'll never make a planter as long as you go on playing billiards like this. . . . Boy, *tania tuan!*"

The "boy" kept coming round with the tray almost without a pause. After several fruitless attempts, Maille had at last managed to sign for a round and now felt on top of the world. After a whole day spent in the open air climbing hills, he could stand any amount of drink. He found the atmosphere congenial and was amused by the planters' old stories. He went on drinking but kept a close check on himself in case he showed the slightest sign of intoxication. The other Frenchmen, however, were already beginning to admit defeat. For some time, in fact,

Dassier had secretly been ordering glasses of plain water.

"You certainly know how to drink, Maille!" Uncle Law observed in a tone of astonishment and admiration.

Every now and then, while his partner was sedately playing a tricky hand, one of the bridge-players would slip away to the billiard-room, gulp down a *stengah* and take part in the general merriment. At one point Stout put in a hasty appearance, during which he buttonholed Dassier.

"What's happening about Bukit Gila, Jean?" he asked. "Tell us a bit about Bukit Gila, won't you?"

"Bukit Gila?" Dassier echoed in surprise. Then he suddenly understood. "Oh that! I refuse to take any responsibility. Loeken's not here to-night. It's a pity, you could have heard quite a lot about it from him, I assure you! But you ought to ask Maille. He's been working on Bukit Gila ever since it all started."

"Bukit Gila?"

There was a burst of laughter, in which Uncle Law joined. After which he growled: "You and your bloody nicknames! This one will stick if you don't look out."

"I wasn't the one who thought of it," Stout protested. "It was the Malays themselves. I heard it used for the first time the other day, when the *syces* were talking together. I bet it has gone the rounds of the kampongs by now."

"Shut up!" Uncle Law exclaimed in mock anger. "You're a fine example to a young assistant!"

They left the Club about one o'clock in the morning, bidding each other good night without shaking hands.

Maille waited for the managers' Fords, with Malay *syces* at the wheel, to move off first, and then the Austins or Morrises, which the assistants drove themselves. Then he looked round for his bag which the "boy" had put down by the side of his motor-cycle and found that the lights were not working: which was scarcely surprising considering the treatment the machine had received on the rough mountain tracks. Luckily there was a full moon. With

his cheeks ablaze and with the fumes of alcohol rising to his head, he managed to steer a more or less straight course back to Kebun Kossong. A stretch of virgin jungle caused him a moment's anxiety. Its dark mass, which was thicker and taller than the artificial forest, blocked out almost all the light. He thought vaguely of the possibility of running into a python, a bear or a wild boar; but the alcohol had made him decidedly optimistic. This evening he was really conscious of being in Malaya.

"Bukit Gila?" he pondered. "I'll have to find out what it means."

After a long ride at low speed, interrupted by a not very serious fall, he at last reached his bungalow just outside the Tamil village. It was three o'clock, and already there were some faint lights flickering among the lines. At the sound of the motor-cycle, the coolie on night duty gave a blast on his trumpet just to be on the safe side. Maille realised there was only one more hour to go before reveille. Luckily his "boy" never failed to give him a good shake in the morning after a guest night at the Club.

Before going to bed, he consulted his Malay dictionary. Gila? Mad, demented . . . madness, raving. Bukit Gila—the Mad Mountain, the Mountain of Madmen, the Mountain of Madness, or even the Mountain in the throes of Madness . . .

The admirable lack of precision of the Malay language, which leaves a great deal to the imagination, allowed a number of different interpretations. But the meaning itself was clear. Maille smiled and fell asleep, lulled by the noise made by the Tamil women who were already up and about and busily pounding the curry spices in their stone mortars.



## x

Sophia certainly showed little consideration towards the new recruits. Even the older planters sometimes treated them as though they were less than the mud clinging to their boots, until they had finally signed the contract which made them proper members of the Company. Having been through the mill themselves, the senior managers favoured a Spartan education for their subordinates.

The corps of senior managers hated nothing so much as non-conformity in a new recruit. After hearing the Dassier story, Maille was now told about the case of Barthe. Barthe was an engineer who had recently graduated from a reputable school and had arrived in the district a year or so ago. From the very start he had tried to impress the corps of senior managers with his profound knowledge of rubber considered in terms of a hydrocarbonate belonging to the series  $(C^5H^8)_n$ . He had soon been transferred and sent packing to S. T. Moss, the terror of Padang, who forthwith put him through an intensive course in humility. Yet Sophia nowadays expected great things of science, and Mr. Chaulette was pinning his faith on the generation of technicians that had been recruited during the last few years. But science could be tolerated only if it showed proper restraint. Furthermore the corps of senior managers still wielded considerable power in the Company, and considering that Sophia was indebted to them for the creation of fifteen plantations, no one could say that their advice was not worth having.

Maille, for his part, had no complaint against the senior managers. Having realised that his temperament did not prompt him to break into an extravagant ballet and that his mind was not obsessed by the consideration of rubber in terms of a hydrocarbonate belonging to the series

(C<sup>5</sup>H<sup>8</sup>)<sub>n</sub>, the corps of senior managers felt that his character was sufficiently developed and therefore spared him many of the classic trials. Furthermore, since he was not yet familiar with the English language, during the first few months of his apprenticeship he maintained a cautious silence on guest nights at the Club, which further endeared him to the senior managers. Even in his work he did not come up against uncompromising discipline. Loeken displayed a grudging affection for him, while Dassier and Stout very quickly adopted him as one of their number.

Moreover, at his level, the countless intermediaries that separated him from the powers that be absorbed most of Sophia's demands and so left him free to appreciate various aspects of a planter's life in Malaya: the immensity and mysterious majesty of the equatorial jungle seen from the summit of Bukit Taggar; the strange smell of mould it gave out when it suddenly came into view round a bend in the mountain track, like an impenetrable wall marking the boundary of the civilised world; the motor-cycle rides over the hills; the downpours which within a few minutes turned dry river-beds into raging torrents, while the wind brought the rubber-trees toppling down across the roads; the brilliant sunshine which inevitably followed storm or gale; the blanket of mist which formed on some mornings half-way up the mountains; the dark mass of the artificial forest at night-time, with the fire-flies that made the darkness seem all the more intense; the musical whimpering of the monkeys at dawn; and even the silence of the bungalow in the evening, after the passage of the flying-foxes had given the signal to retire. All these attractions, which were perceptible only to a mind at peace, could still be enjoyed by those on the first rung of the ladder.

There had been one or two attempts against his individual liberty, which at first he had resented: like that official and confidential letter which Loeken had sent him after seeing him in the fields bareheaded, in which he had

forbidden him to move outside without a pith helmet between the hours of six in the morning and five in the afternoon. After the initial shock of humiliation Maille had thought the matter over. He had compared it to some of his past experiences in Europe and had come to the conclusion that it was not very serious. He had complied with the order.

And so, during his months of apprenticeship at Kebun Kossong, Maille felt that in Sophia he had really found the pearl of all organisations whose name begin with S, an organisation which imposed only a mild form of restraint that was amply compensated by countless material advantages and by the fascination of working as a team.

The Bukit Taggar bungalow took up more or less half his time. The remainder was devoted to the exploitation and maintenance of the plantation's capital. This capital (a million trees) was the object of ceaseless attention on the part of the Tamils organised into small groups. Ramasamy was not worth much as an individual worker. The active working unit was the gang.

The weeding gang proceeded on its periodic rounds, eyes focused on the ground, pulling up every species of noxious plant. On the other hand, the *corticium* or "pink disease" gang traversed the plantation from north to south, then from south to north, looking skywards in quest of branches showing signs of discoloration. The *fomes* or "touchwood" gang specialised in roots. Their attention was only aroused by suspect patches at the base of the trunks. The "patch canker" gang consisted of surgeons. When they came across a trunk affected by rot, the decaying wood was cut away with a scalpel; then the wound was sterilised and dressed with a protective unguent. The "fallen trees" gang dealt with trees blown down in a gale. There were sometimes violent storms at Kebun Kossong, which did not last very long but which caused

considerable damage among the delicate pedigree trees of the young plantation. After each tornado several hundreds of them were bound to be sacrificed; the gang would then cut them up into logs and take them along to the workshops to supply fuel for the boilers.

In addition to these gangs, emergency working groups were also formed at a moment's notice, either to repair a mountain track that had been swept away in a storm or to recover a truck that had got bogged down in the mud. The activity of the gang would then depend on whoever was in charge of the task. On certain occasions, and for a given length of time, the gang was capable of superhuman effort if they happened to like the man who was leading them. Maille had once seen twenty coolies under Stout's command drag a fully laden truck out of a muddy ditch and heave it back on to the road, each coolie exerting himself with savage cries to outdo his neighbour. Such a display of energy on the part of the Tamils never lasted very long, and the average output of the gang was rather on the low side.

Maille ended his tour of inspection that day with the weeding gang, which contained a large proportion of women. The *kangani* came forward, showed him a plant and asked him, by means of gestures, whether they should pull it up or not. The women paused in their work and anxiously waited for the young master's decision.

It was a tricky question. Weeding had become a complicated operation; for there were some plants that were harmful and others, on the contrary, that served a purpose and had to be preserved. The distinction was by no means clear in Ramasamy's mind, and planters themselves had been known to make mistakes; for the directives of the Technical Department modified their classification fairly regularly. The gang waited with bated breath. Maille examined the plant and could not connect it with any known description, but he felt he would lose face if he showed a moment's hesitation.

"*Vettu!*"<sup>1</sup> he ordered, with an air of supreme confidence.

The gang heaved a sigh of satisfaction and continued on its rounds, encouraged by the cries of the *kangani*.

"*Vettu! Vettu! Vettu!*"

That day the gang indiscriminately pulled up every species of suspect herb.

After that Maille clambered up the slope of Bukit Musang.

Once again the picks and shovels were in action on the summit of Bukit Taggar, which the Malays now referred to as "Gila." Once again the Chinese women had filled their wicker baskets and spread their contents over the flanks of the mountain. Once more the peak had been whittled down. Then a hole for the swimming-pool had been scooped out in the middle of the level space. Enthusiasm had not waned. This original task, which consisted of digging a crater on a deserted peak, really fascinated the Chinese and they set to work with a will. Besides, a further profitable contract had been negotiated by Chong-Seng, who had promised them a considerable bonus. Loeken grew more and more gloomy every day at the thought of the sum he was having to pay out before the building was even started; but Mr. Chaulette, who rang him up morning, noon and night to find out how the work was progressing, carefully avoided the subject of money whenever the question cropped up and swept aside every objection with his breathless enthusiasm.

The road had been widened and was now practicable for motor-cars, provided they had strong enough springs. The hole for the future swimming-pool had almost attained the specified dimensions. It had even collected a little water from the last storm, which had shaken the whole mountain. Maille felt that everything was under control and went back to his bungalow for lunch.

After the meal he made his way to the Division One

<sup>1</sup> "Cut it!"

office, where Dassier was already to be found. Work in the fields came to an end at two o'clock. The planter's afternoon was devoted to documents and Ramasamy's private affairs.

Seated at his desk, Dassier was checking the cards of various colours that were handed to him by Mr. Sivam standing obsequiously by his side. The cards indicated the progress of the gangs. Their number had recently been increased. There was one, in duplicate, for each gang. One copy was fixed to a board in the division office, the other was sent in to the main office to be recorded on the plantation board. Bringing them up to date and dealing with various other documents kept Mr. Sivam busy every afternoon. At the end of the month, when the final reports were due, he was obliged to devote several mornings to this work as well. Dassier was likewise chained to his desk; so Ramasamy particularly enjoyed those days during which there were no sudden intrusions to disturb his peace.

Maille settled down to work with Dassier and discovered that the actual progress of the weeding fell short of the progress recorded on the card. Mr. Sivam indulged in a discreet smile. Dassier made a gesture of irritation.

"I'm well aware of that," he said. "I gave the instructions to Sivam myself. There's a quota laid down by the Agency."

He agreed, however, that the deficiency was too considerable. After thinking it over for some time, he ordered Mr. Sivam to indicate part of it on the diagram and then feverishly tried to decide on a proportion that would be justifiable and yet not too inconsistent with the truth. After that he racked his brains to find a reasonable excuse to put forward. When this was done, he thought of the next inspection by a member of the Agency, then embarked on some intricate calculations, and finally showed Mr. Sivam the exact point to which the gang should be sent in a few days' time. Mr. Sivam jotted this down in his notebook.

Dassier looked utterly exhausted as a result of this exertion. He handed the thick stack of cards back to the conductor, who put them down on a small table littered with coloured pencils.

It was now about half-past four. The heat that came through the open window was accompanied by a sound of whispering. At regular intervals a black eye would cast a furtive glance inside, hastily withdrawing as soon as the *dore* made the slightest gesture. Every now and then, in a tone that had become monotonous in spite of its calculated gruffness, Dassier spat out a violent oath in Tamil. Then the coolies, who were waiting at the door until he saw fit to attend to them, bided their time in patience and fell silent for a few minutes longer.

"I hope they won't keep me too long," Dassier sighed. "I promised Germaine I'd be back early to help her with the packing. You know we're leaving quite soon. Our passages are already booked. . . . Well, let's start."

This was the moment when Ramasamy would come in and humbly inform his master of his marital problems or report some complaint against his neighbour. He lived in the belief that the fact of belonging to a big company like Sophia should also facilitate the conduct of his private affairs. Dassier made a sign to Mr. Sivam, who forthwith summoned the first plaintiff. Ramasamy hastened into the room, came to a halt three paces away from the table and embarked in a whining voice on the list of his misfortunes, while Dassier listened patiently, his elbows on his desk and his chin resting on his hands.

It was a commonplace case of family honour being jeopardised through Ramasamy's daughter, on whom a young suitor was bestowing rather too much attention. The witnesses listened at the door, as did the accused, together with his brothers, uncles, aunts and a number of others who had no family connection with him but who were always fascinated by events of this kind and by the young *dore's* method of dispensing justice.

They were in for a disappointment, however. Not even Maille, who was paying close attention to Ramasamy's complaints, was to know the outcome on this particular day; for the plaintiff was suddenly interrupted half-way through his story by the roar of a motor-cycle.

It was Loeken. His presence in the division was unexpected in the middle of the afternoon. He left his motor-cycle in the hands of a Tamil who had hurried up to help him and called out in a strange voice:

"Maille!"

The young man came out to meet him. He was about to inform him that the work on Bukit Taggar had just been completed, for he knew how much this question occupied the Director's thoughts, but Loeken would not let him get a word in edgeways.

"Have the hole filled in at once," he yelled. "It's got to be done in forty-eight hours. That's all I can allow you, understand? But I don't want any more truck with those Chinamen. You'll have to work it out with Dassier. Use all the Tamils in the division, if that's the only way. I can't go on ruining myself with extravagant contracts. All the funds for the bungalow will be used up! Dassier, you'll have to detach every gang in the place, if necessary, and put the deficiency down to the weeding section. Get a move on now. In forty-eight hours, remember!"

"Very good, sir," said Maille.

"Don't worry, Loeken, we'll see to it," said Dassier.

The Director of Kebun Kossong then dashed off as quickly as he had come, venting his bad temper by racing the engine of his motor-cycle. Maille paused for a moment, then burst into a paroxysm of laughter which lasted nearly a minute. In spite of his usual reserve Dassier followed suit, then gave instructions to Mr. Sivam for an emergency gang to be sent up to the top of Bukit Taggar first thing in the morning.

By means of a brief telephone call Mr. Chaulette had



announced his visit for the day after to-morrow. Just before hanging up he had informed Loeken of certain modifications that had to be made to the plan as a result of objections put forward by the contractor and on the advice of several different authorities. In particular, the project for a swimming-pool was definitely abandoned. Loeken had almost jumped out of his skin.

“What! But the hole’s already dug! You told me . . .”

“I told you? . . . Yes, perhaps I did say something about a pool—just like that, a mere suggestion. But you’ve been a bit hasty, Loeken, haven’t you? Come now, just between ourselves, a pool in the middle of a bungalow—don’t you find that a little incongruous, a little . . . snobbish, to say the least, what? You’d be a laughing-stock. No, on second thoughts, it’s out of the question. The hole’s dug, you say? Well, you’ll just have to fill it in again, that’s all. It’s not such a calamity. But another time do think twice before letting yourself in for such a lot of unnecessary expense . . . and you’ll get the job done by day after to-morrow, won’t you? I’ll be coming up with Harrisson and Gladkoff . . . maybe Law as well. He’s got some good ideas, that chap. I want to show them a proper site, not just a lot of holes dug in the rock. Have you got that? See you soon then, Loeken. I’m counting on you, remember. . . . And don’t worry about your bungalow. It will be absolutely splendid. I’ve got the plans with me now. Did you hear what I said, Loeken? Ab-so-lute-ly splendid!”

## X I

Ahman, the Malay *syce* with the white cap, drew up in the Agency Buick outside the main office of the plantation. Mr. Chalette got out of the car, accompanied by his staff officers: Gladkoff, the contractor Harrisson, and Uncle

Law who had been picked up on the way at Sungei Ikan.

The Managing Director came straight to the point.

“Now look, Loeken. This swimming-pool idea—it’s sheer madness. And what about the water, eh? I can’t understand how an old planter like you didn’t think of that in the first place. A swimming-pool is all very well, but it’s got to be filled. You’ll have enough trouble as it is, right up there on top of a mountain, to get sufficient water for your household needs.”

Loeken did not say a word. For the last month he had been thinking of hardly anything else but the water question, but Mr. Chaulette had swept aside all his objections—cisterns would be built, pumps would be installed, etc., etc. . . .

The little group squeezed into the Ford and drove up to the top of Bukit Taggar. Mr. Chaulette voiced his satisfaction at being able to go the whole way by car.

“But of course you’ll have to widen this road, Loeken. There’s nowhere near enough room at the corners. Still, we can drive up; that’s the main thing at the moment.”

The excavation for the swimming-pool had now been made good. The two Tamil gangs had completed the task in forty-eight hours. They had laboured almost as hard to fill in the hole as the Chinese had done to scoop it out. They had had to retrieve the earth scattered over the steep slopes all the way round the circumference, so as not to destroy the symmetry. The Tamils were not too keen on this form of acrobatics, and Dassier had had to intervene personally on several occasions. The summit was now more or less flat, and spacious enough to act as a site for quite a large building.

Mr. Chaulette spread out a fresh series of plans on the bonnet of the car and declared the conference open. Uncle Law, who had a practical turn of mind, once more brought up the question of water.

In the standard bungalows a regular supply was usually assured by the large number of storms. There is no com-

pletely dry season in Malaya, and even during the period when it rains least of all hardly a fortnight goes by without there being a downpour, streaming off the roof and channelled by a system of gutters, to replenish the big cistern installed near each building. On the rare occasions when it was necessary, latex tanks filled with water were brought up by truck. But the conception of the Bukit Taggar bungalow as a lofty building of several storeys limited the projection plane, so that the amount of rain water collected, Uncle Law maintained, would be clearly insufficient. They would have to provide a water supply all the way from the river and also install a pumping station, which would entail still further expense.

This naturally turned the attention of the whole group to the financial question. Mr. Chaulette, who had started off by dismissing it with supreme contempt, now began to show a little interest in it. Harrisson, as was only to be expected, had not been able to recognise his original plan. Taking into consideration the feverish activity on the part of the Technical Department, his own conceptions of architectural technique, the rough scrawls by means of which Mr. Chaulette had translated his ideas, and the sudden inspirations which he communicated to him by telephone every day, he had drawn up a new plan in which the Bukit Taggar bungalow was beginning to dissolve into a collective abstraction which would cost a great deal to put into concrete form. In an offhand way Mr. Chaulette asked how much.

Harrisson quoted a figure which was infinitely higher than the funds allotted for the job. Mr. Chaulette then declared point blank that he did not like the present idea of the bungalow anyway and that they would have to think of something else. Uncle Law agreed with him. As a planter of the old school, he could never have approved of a bungalow of several storeys equipped with a lift. Mr. Chaulette embarked on a long argument which underlined the weaknesses of the scheme. In a few minutes all of

them, under the influence of his eloquence, were forced to admit that a three-storey bungalow on a Malayan plantation was the sort of folly to be avoided.

“Just between ourselves, Loeken, can you imagine the living-room on the ground floor, the dining-room above that, and the bedrooms right at the top, eh? And what about the servants’ quarters? In the basement, I suppose? Can you see yourself yelling your head off in your bedroom each time you wanted the ‘boy’ to come up? And that lift now . . . a lift’s all very well, but how is it going to work? An electric motor? With a dynamo running all day? But, my dear fellow, the whole thing would fall to pieces in a week unless you had a mechanic permanently on hand. You hadn’t thought of that, eh? Once again you’ve been a bit hasty. No, Law is right: a hundred times right. You’ve got to be realistic about these things, you know—re-al-ist-ic! A simple storey bungalow, that’s the only possible solution in this country. And now that I come to think of it . . .”

Mr. Chaulette looked round in every direction and stood for a moment in silence, gazing at the golden mountains.

“Now that I come to think of it, I wonder if the site is really suitable. It’s a bit isolated, don’t you think, Law? What do you say, Loeken? Come now, there must be somewhere on your plantation that’s more easily accessible than this peak. Down by the river, for instance. You’d be nearer your office . . . and there’d be no difficulty about water. There’s a lot to be said for it, you know.”

But at these words Loeken broke into such a flood of lamentation that Uncle Law was moved to pity and backed him up, firmly advising the others to stick to Bukit Taggar since the hill had already been prepared as a site. The whole group having rallied to these words of wisdom, Mr. Chaulette fell in with the general concensus of opinion. At this stage in the proceedings the engineer Gladkoff put in his oar.

“The main thing,” he said, “is to adapt the building

to the terrain. Here, we have a more or less circular site. Now the circle affords a greater surface, in relation to the contours, than any other shape. . . .”

With this new idea that came to light high up above the valleys, Mr. Chalette recovered all his self-assurance and was once more carried away by his own enthusiasm.

“Pre-cise-ly!” he exclaimed. “As a matter of fact we’ve discussed that before, Gladkoff, but I’d never grasped it so clearly until now. Have you got that sketch you showed me the other day? Good. Now look. . . .”

A fresh plan was spread out on the bonnet of the Ford. Mr. Chalette embarked on the new scheme.

“There now! We’ve been wrong from the start because none of us thought of this idea that Gladkoff has just put forward, though it’s simple enough. . . . That’s a good point, Gladkoff, old man. . . . We’ve got to adapt the building to the terrain. Now the site in this case is in the shape of a circle. So obviously what we need is a circular bungalow. Don’t you see what a lucky coincidence that is? It so happens, as you’ve just heard, that the circle presents a greater useful surface than any other geometrical figure. . . . Come along now, you technicians, Gladkoff, Harrison, is that true or isn’t it?”

The technicians assured him that this was indeed a well-established fact. Mr. Chalette went on:

“So the circular shape gives us every advantage, and we’re mad not to have thought of it before. Let’s think now how we can exploit this advantage to the full. As I see it, the living-room should be right in the middle—a circular room, of course—with the bedrooms and bathrooms forming a ring right round it. Like that there’s no space wasted. In the middle of the living-room, so as to have a focal point, we could build some little fantasy or other, don’t you think? A small fountain, for instance, with green plants? What do you say to that, Harrison?”

The architect said he thought it would be possible, provided the circular outer edge could be replaced by a polygon

consisting of a fairly large number of sides, which would be easier to build. Mr. Chaulette reluctantly agreed to this compromise.

“So long as you promise to preserve the circular appearance, well and good! By the way, what do you envisage in the way of a roof, Gladkoff? What’s that? But you’re out of your mind, old boy, that would ruin the whole thing! What we want is a roof in the same sort of style. . . . Let’s see now—a roof in the shape of a cone, with the circle as its base. And no corrugated iron, do you hear? No tiles either. Just reinforced concrete. I want something streamlined, something solid. Isn’t that right, Harrisson?”

Harrisson said it was difficult, but feasible. Mr. Chaulette was satisfied.

“There now! Harrisson, you work out something along those lines. Gladkoff will produce his version too. Then we’ll compare results and pick out the best points in each.”

And having finished with the technicians, the Managing Director now turned to the planters.

“Of course, Loeken, you’ll have to enlarge the site a bit. . . . Slice a few feet more off the peak. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing else for it. Now that we’ve decided to build a single-storey bungalow, in spite of making proper use of the terrain we’ll still need more space. That’s obvious.”

Chong-Seng the contractor once more led his coolies up to the top of Bukit Taggar, which the native poets in the kampong immortalised every evening under the name of Gila in a series of ironical *pantoums*.

Chong-Seng did not say a word when Loeken told him that a further slice would have to be cut off the peak, which would bring the level down a little bit lower than the hole that had been originally dug by the Chinese and subsequently filled in by the Tamils. He merely nodded his head and smiled. Furthermore, he proved to be very reasonable. He agreed with Loeken that this task was not

as arduous as the initial operation and consented to a slight reduction on this part of the contract. He would make up for it on the rest.

At length, after further adventures that added nothing to the glory of Bukit Gila, a decision was taken by Mr. Chalette and the bungalow was completed in a few weeks by the contractor who was in a hurry to get it over.

Then, under the dazzling equatorial sky, overlooking the artificial forest and facing the russet jungle where the musical whimpers of the gibbons could be heard in the morning, overhanging the sheer cliff which was wreathed in a blanket of mist after every storm, and catching the last rays of the sun while the flying-foxes hovered round the strange unfamiliar heap, there emerged on the summit of Bukit Musang a geometric monstrosity of a hitherto unknown species which, to the Malay world, appeared from afar like a sort of Roman amphitheatre that a drunken god had crowned with an enormous Chinese hat.

It was as though a malevolent shower of rain had encouraged the growth of this shapeless cryptogram until it dwarfed every other feature in the landscape, so as to ensure that it would be seen in all its grotesque ugliness from every single point in the plantation.

The detail was in keeping with the general effect; the interior matched the outside. Art had paid the inevitable toll to the collective character of the building. All the ideas that had sprung from various sources in the course of gestation had pitilessly left certain embryonic marks, deformed and distorted traces of the original conception, concentrating in an absurd and contemptible simulacrum of symbols all the essence of the ridiculous contained in the initial inspiration, without displaying a single aspect of its true quality.

The scheme for a swimming-pool, which Mr. Chalette had cherished too deeply to abandon it altogether, was represented by a wretched little fountain from which a

sluggish jet emitted a few drops of water and which at night reflected the beams of a greenish light which gave a corpse-like complexion to everyone and everything within its range. The triumphal stele which was to have housed the lift-shaft and stand as a symbol of progress had been replaced by four pillars supporting the crushing weight of a fantastic reinforced-concrete cone which served as a roof. One of these had been hollowed out and concealed a narrow spiral staircase (pitiful vestige of the chimerical lift) which led, with glaring incongruity, past phantom floors up to an imaginary terrace. The thickness of these columns, out of all proportion to their height which had been reduced for technical reasons and also for the sake of economy, were an offence to the eye and precluded any rational arrangement of the furniture without even giving an illusion of grandeur.

The partition of the central living-room and the circular outside walls formed two perfectly concentric polygons, between which the bedrooms and bathrooms had been crammed as best they could. This enforced use of all available space had resulted in an alternation of acute and obtuse angles which made one dizzy and which called for a bewildering arrangement of the weirdest-looking furniture. Finally, on stepping outside, there was every chance of falling straight over the precipice, since every inch of level ground had been exploited. With murder in his heart, Loeken was obliged to surround the whole building with a balustrade which added still further to its outlandish appearance. Needless to say, a garden was out of the question; and after the first flashes of lightning had threatened to set fire to the building, the tip of the cone was prolonged by a lightning-conductor which lent a final touch of absurdity.

On meeting Stout one morning near the boundary of Division One, Maille pointed out to him that as a result of the successive cutting operations the summit of Bukit Taggar had been perceptibly reduced to the same level as



Bukit Musang, without, however, affording such a large flat surface. He was about to remark on this detail in his halting English when Stout silenced him with a frown.

"Don't try and be sarcastic," he said. "Wait till you've grown up a bit."

## X I I

Shortly before the bungalow was finished Maille came to the end of the first stage in his career. Loeken summoned him one morning to the main office. He was buried in a mass of circulars and seemed extremely busy.

"Ah, there you are! Sit down. I've got some good news for you. There's going to be a general reshuffle of the personnel. It happens at regular intervals. You'll soon get used to it. For you . . . no, wait, let's do things in the right order. First of all, I want you to sign this. . . but good God, man, look at the damn thing first before you sign it! It's your contract with Sophia. Your period of probation is over. You've been judged fit to become a full-time member of the Company. Does that make you happy? Good. Read it through now while I have a look at the mail. After that we'll get down to business."

Maille glanced through his contract. He already knew the gist of it by heart: salary of two hundred and fifty Straits dollars a month, plus an allowance for the "boy" and the motor-cycle; increases in pay at the Company's discretion; possible bonus at the end of the year, to be considered not as a due but a favour; undertaking to remain unmarried for at least two years, and special permission to be obtained from the Company before marrying during the two following years: six months' home leave every four years, passage paid, second-class for assistants, first for managers; possible termination of contract at one month's notice by either party, except in the case of grave

misdeemeanour on the part of the employee, in which case the Company reserved the right of instant dismissal, with no indemnity and guarantee of a passage home, etc. . . . Maille signed.

“Good,” Loeken observed, raising his eyes. “That’s one point settled. Now for the next. You’re being moved from Kebun Kossong. That’s what the Agency has decided. You’ll be leaving day after to-morrow, but you won’t be going far—only to Sungci Ikan. So we’ll still be seeing you at the Club, I hope. You’ve been appointed Assistant Engineer. From what I’ve gathered, your time will be divided between the plantation, where you’ll be in charge of the workshops, and Kuala Getah where you’ll be working with Gladkoff on research. I can’t tell you what that consists of—no one has ever known except Gladkoff himself, and I’m not even sure about that! Didn’t I always say that you’d end up as a technician? I’ll be sorry to lose you, for your own sake as well as mine. For your sake, because in six months you’ve only been able to pick up the vaguest notion of the job; and from my point of view, because you were really beginning to pull your weight. And Stout’s being moved as well; you could have taken his place, under the guidance of a senior man. . . . Oh well, you’ve been earmarked for the Technical Department, and that’s that. We’ll just have to make the best of it. To replace you, they’re sending me young Barthe—you know, the chap who never drinks whisky. It seems he has improved no end. But I’m not too keen about it all the same. An engineer . . . I’m not very fond of engineers, they always think they know better than anyone else. Don’t take this personally. You’ve kept yourself in your place, I’m bound to admit, and then you don’t turn your nose up at a drink. But Barthe . . . there’s a chap with a fine future ahead of him, I believe. The Agency thinks very highly of him now.”

“Stout is also being moved, sir?”

“Yes, it’s part of the great reshuffle, but that’s not the

end of it. It all comes from Law being appointed assistant to the Managing Director at Kuala Getah. Stout's being transferred to Sungei Ikan as temporary director, so you'll still be seeing something of him. I'm delighted about it, I may say. It's a good step up for him, and he deserves it . . . only what with Dassier leaving in a fortnight's time, I should have been left here alone with that fellow Barthe who hasn't got anywhere near enough experience. An impossible state of affairs. Needless to say, I protested . . . so they're going to leave me Dassier for the time being. He's going to be appointed Superintendent . . . and if anyone has earned promotion, he has."

"Dassier? But what about his home leave?"

"What do you expect me to do about it? It will be postponed a few months, that's all. It won't be the first time that has happened in the Company. He'll get over it. I'm expecting him here now to give him both bits of news at the same time. I'm not sure how his wife is going to take it, but I hope she won't be too unreasonable."

He looked hesitant, almost embarrassed, under Maille's steadfast gaze and embarked on a long explanation though the young man had not asked for it.

"It's a plantation of eight thousand acres, damn it all! I can't be expected to manage without a second assistant. The best I could do was to get him appointed Superintendent, and even that was quite a job. . . ."

He looked more and more uncomfortable, almost as though he was trying to apologise.

"I dare say there may have been some other solution . . . but no, it wouldn't have worked. There were two assistants due for home leave: Dassier and Hudson. You don't know Hudson, do you? He's up in the north, in Perak. Yes, he's a bachelor, I know; and perhaps it would have been more normal to postpone his departure instead of Dassier's. But if you took every consideration into account, you'd never see the end of it. It was pretty obvious Chauvette preferred keeping Dassier back—the old story of the

*ranggang*, as usual. Well, to cut a long story short, I didn't raise too many objections. It's not that Hudson isn't a good planter—he is—but he's not used to the district. He could never take the place of Dassier, who can do what he likes with the Tamils. Have you seen how much he gets out of them? You can't get away from that. In the interests of the plantation, it's much better this way."

Loeken slammed down the lid of the file containing the mail, called for a clerk, handed him the file, then rested his elbows on his desk.

"That's all I had to tell you, Maille. Run along now. Dassier will be here any minute. After all, a few months more or less won't make much difference. Look at me, for instance—my wife has just written to say her passage out has again been delayed. There's always something. . . . You can thank your lucky stars you're a bachelor. Off you go now and pack your kit. I'll let you have a truck for the move. To-morrow you can take it easy. Go into Kuala Getah if you feel like it. I'll put in a good word for you at the Agency."

Next day Maille decided, instead of going into Kuala Getah, to spend his day off exploring the banks of the river that flowed past the plantation and pottering about with a gun in his hand under trees that for once were not rubber-trees—a plan which Loeken had considered most peculiar.

He had wandered quite far afield, following a path along which the elephants had once blazed a trail. He had spent the previous evening with the Dassiers, and the painful impression this had caused was hard to shake off.

Germaine had scarcely spoken a word. Dassier had talked about his new rank and increased responsibilities. It was one step higher towards the position of Director. For him the joy of promotion had compensated for his disappointment. Loeken, who was also there, had clumsily tried to amuse her by dangling before her eyes the infinitely

greater pleasure she would feel in a few months' time; but she had not even listened to him. Soon afterwards the three men were deep in conversation about service matters. She had sat apart, isolated and silent.

Maille shrugged his shoulders and reminded himself that he was in Malaya and had the whole day free. He peered into the forest in the hope of coming across some game. But none appeared. By day nothing stirred in the jungle except the monkeys or an occasional flight of toucans whose wings beat the air with a sound like flapping sails.

There was a surprise in store for him, however.

He was approaching the river, after making a long detour, when he suddenly came upon a path that had recently been cut through the jungle and which still bore the marks of motor-car tyres. He tried to get his bearings. In one direction the path obviously led back to the road, in the other it disappeared among some giant trees which stood between him and the river. Intrigued, he started off down hill, and presently reached a slight rise in the ground overlooking the water yet concealed on all sides by thick vegetation. On this little hummock someone had built a bungalow.

A brand-new bungalow, with glistening brown varnish, standing out against the background of unrelieved green. It was a building of pleasant proportions, but larger than the ordinary Malayan house. The trees all round it had been carefully preserved, and their foliage served to alleviate the oven-like heat. The palm roof, so dear to Malays, acted as an additional screen. As he came closer, Maille noticed that the finest and most expensive local wood had been used for the framework, a wood as heavy and as hard as iron, which no termite would venture to attack.

It probably belonged to some Malay who wanted peace and quiet and cool fresh air. The roof was not in the shape of a crescent, however, and certain details suggested a discreet European taste: the zinc gutters, the cement storage

tank to catch the rain-water, a hand pump, and wire netting against the mosquitoes.

Scarcely able to believe his eyes, Maille described a wide arc round the building. A gentle slope stretching right down to the water's edge had been made into a garden, in which some classic bougainvilleas and inevitable cannas had recently been transplanted. The undergrowth had been cleared all round it, but a natural lawn of ferns and rhododendrons had been left. Maille saw two little Chinese children playing on the grass. A Chinese woman who was washing some clothes on the bank raised her head and peered at him intently.

Next to the garden, half hidden in the bushes, stood a wooden hut. From this shelter there now issued an ancient Ford. It drew up in front of him. The contractor Chong-Seng stepped out of it and greeted him with every mark of respect.

Business must have been flourishing these last few months. With his perpetual smile on his face, he invited the young man to have a glass of tea with him in this house which he had built for himself to celebrate his prosperity. Maille was about to accept, but he changed his mind and politely refused. He had suddenly remembered Loeken's advice: never indulge in familiarities with an Asiatic.

PART TWO

*Mr. Bedoux*

I

The Chairman of the Board rose to his feet and began pacing up and down the narrow room which served as his office. Then he paused, deep in thought, and listened for a moment to the clamour coming up from the Bourse. In spite of the heat he shut the window. The noise prevented him from giving his full attention to the important letter he had to write. To him every letter was important and of vital consequence, but none claimed so much care and concentration as those destined for the Managing Director of Sophia, the favourite branch of the society without a name. Each of these epistles contained an ingenious distillation of all the subtle essences which the powers that be employ to awaken the emotions and direct them into one particular channel.

The Chairman was second to none in the art of playing upon man's vanity, loyalty and competitive spirit; of interlarding praise with criticism, endowing the former with a quality that is usually reserved for something quite exceptional and couching the latter in a dry, occasionally sarcastic civility at which he was a past master. He expressed himself in a style that was concise and frequently incisive but which nevertheless did not scorn a certain literary elegance amounting almost to dandyism.

He had just come back from a tour of the Far East, and in his letter he gave some of the impressions he had gathered on the way. He read through his rough draft with the utmost care.

"Gentlemen . . ."

Although the letter was intended for Mr. Chaulette, who was directly responsible to the Board of Directors, the Chairman always addressed himself to a symbolic collective body.

“Gentlemen,

“We herewith send you, by surface mail, the detailed report on our last inspection. You will see that our general impression is by no means unfavourable. We would, however, draw your immediate attention to certain questions which have been somewhat neglected in the past but which are of prime importance to-day and to which, we trust, you will find a rapid solution.

“1. *Administration*. Every effort must be directed towards a rational organisation of the divisional offices. We are well aware that the assistant's main duty is the maintenance of the fields, but we do not feel that this duty should absolve him from devoting close and constant attention to his office and to routine documents. On the contrary, we are of the opinion that sound office work will facilitate field work considerably. We feel that this problem should be studied *at the highest level*, on a general scale, and that the solution should not be left to individual initiative or indeed, as in some cases, individual whim. We expect to see a marked improvement in the course of our next visit. We have in mind the progress that has been achieved in the organisation of the Agency and the main plantation offices.

“2. *Costs*. On the plantations of Indo-China the departments devoted to manufacture and packing are inferior to yours. You should be able to reduce the labour force in your workshops by condensing the internal organisation, which likewise seemed to us somewhat fluid.

“3. *Research*. You are well aware of the importance that we attach to this branch, particularly to the perfecting of processes for the manufacture of ‘improved’ types of rubber. The Board of Directors agreed to a considerable outlay for the purchase of up-to-date testing equipment.



You have informed us more than once that the machinery, which is somewhat fragile, has been installed less than a week after receipt, and we ourselves saw it in perfect working order. We have already transmitted our warmest congratulations on this diligence which, in our eyes, was inspired by your eagerness to embark on the research work. We hope to be notified in your next report of the initial results of your experiments.

“4. *Rationalisation of the Tapping.* We have been amazed by some of the results obtained in this field, in Indo-China, through close collaboration between planter and technician. We earnestly desire that the same effort be made in Malaya. The Board, in fact, considers this point to be of such importance that it has been decided to provide you for several months with a specialist in labour organisation. Mr. Bedoux, who represents the firm of ‘Ratio,’ will be arriving in Malaya shortly to undertake a complete study of the tapping process. We would request you to follow his work with the utmost attention, to bring its import and extent to the notice of every planter, and eventually to detach one of your junior engineers to act as his assistant so as to acquaint himself with his methods, benefit from his experience and continue his work after his departure.

“5. *Housing.* We have made no secret of the painful surprise we were caused by the new bungalow at Kebun Kossong, and we have already given you our verbal opinion in respect of that costly fantasy. We do not wish to refer to this subject again. Would you kindly let us have some *other* photographs of this building (ones that do not stress its outlandish appearance). . . .”

The Chairman of the Board corrected a word here and there, added a fresh paragraph, then, after giving the matter a great deal of thought, ended the letter on a note of encouragement.

“*Conclusion.* The points of criticism we have raised do not detract in any way from our general impression which

is, as we have said, very favourable. We have communicated this impression to the Board. In the report of the Shareholders' Meeting, which we herewith enclose, you will see that a motion was passed to congratulate every member of the Sophia staff on the work that has been achieved through their combined efforts despite the difficult conditions which you noted in your last report and which we fully appreciate."

## II

Mr. Bedoux, who was a technical engineer, a specialist in questions of labour organisation and a French member of the international firm of "Ratio," landed in the British possession of Malaya, a country where poets in sarongs immortalised the Universal Soul in the shade of the coconut-trees, with a view to rationalising the tapping of *hevea bresiliensis*, analysing the movements of Ramasamy the Tamil tapper, and co-ordinating these into a stylized and economic pattern.

Maille, whose time was now divided between the group of workshops at Sungei Ikan and the Technical Department of the Agency, was detailed to follow Mr. Bedoux's experiments and acquaint himself with his methods.

These were explained and described at great length in a bulky set of documents which Mr. Bedoux had dispatched in advance. They were based on the "Ratio" principle of chronometry and evaluation of human labour, a principle which had enraptured all the big industrialists of the New World and which had even eclipsed the theories of Taylor, making them seem grossly rudimentary in comparison.

According to the "Ratio" school, simple chronometry as practised hitherto should be regarded as an error or at least as an outdated imperfection. It was essential, but by no means sufficient in itself. The "Ratio" time-keeper,

however, while recording the partial "timings," simultaneously awarded the worker a so-called "coefficient of activity" for each of his movements, which he inscribed opposite the timings in a separate column. This coefficient, the precise and rapid evaluation of which required sustained attention and long experience on the part of the analyst, made it possible, by means of a simple mathematical formula, to convert the actual duration of each movement into a fictitious "ideal" duration independent of the particular circumstances governing the experiment.

This was how Mr. Bedoux explained the method to Gladkoff and Maille during the first tour of inspection which they carried out together on the Sungei Ikan plantation. Stout, who was acting as temporary director since Uncle Law's transfer to the Agency, had attached himself to this group of technicians.

Mr. Bedoux was a little man of forty or so, with spectacles perched on the tip of his nose and with the pale pink complexion of the town-dweller, whose incipient embonpoint was emphasised by a pair of shorts he had bought the day before in Kuala Getah. At the moment he seemed rather dismayed at the prospect of exercising his talents in a temperature of ninety-five in the shade and grappling with chocolate-coloured labourers, both male and female, the former wearing nothing but a loincloth, the latter a tattered sari which concealed only one breast at a time. Perhaps he was also tired after his journey, and slightly bewildered by the way Mr. Chaulette had welcomed him to Kuala Getah. The Managing Director had allowed him barely enough time to have a shower before bundling him into a motor-car and sending him off to Sungei Ikan.

Conscious of being observed by four white men, including the director of the plantation and a stranger with spectacles, Ramasamy set to work with a will and gave a demonstration of his talents. He shifted his bag, tensed his muscles and took a flying leap. Mr. Bedoux watched him closely.

“That,” said Gladkoff, who was only too pleased to show that Sophia was no novice in matters of rationalisation, “that is the result of our initial inquiry into the tapping process. The unproductive time is thereby reduced to a minimum.”

Mr. Bedoux smiled.

“I see,” he murmured. “Forgive me a moment, will you?”

He opened his brief-case and took out a small metal board to which were attached some sheets of paper divided into columns. A precision chronometer was fitted into the top left-hand corner. A circular hole big enough for a mans' thumb enabled the board to be held in comfort, rather like a palette, and was so placed that the ball of the thumb came directly over the stop-watch. Stout opened his mouth as though he was about to say something, but changed his mind and fell silent. Gladkoff and Maille observed the procedure intently.

Without taking his eyes off Ramasamy, Mr. Bedoux set the watch in motion, stopped it, then started it again; and after each operation he jotted down some figures in the columns. Ramasamy watched him out of the corner of his eye and began to look a little less anxious. He had already heard about the chronometer. The Technical Department had once carried out some similar experiments on the Bangar Estate and the news had quickly spread to all the other Sophia plantations. The energy he put into his third leap gave an indication of his relief.

“We must draw a close distinction,” said Mr. Bedoux, “between speed and haste, between activity and agitation. It's just as I thought. We all made the same mistake to start with. The effective activity of this . . . of this fellow here is appreciably decreased by these physical jerks of his. It's a great deal less than it should be. The basic error of all novices in the field of rationalisation. Speed should be attained by the co-ordination of every movement and not by an acceleration that takes no account of some of them.

Look, now he's had to slow down to catch his breath. . . ."

Confident that he had given a sufficient display of enthusiasm, Ramasamy was now almost dozing off, lost in some private daydream of his own as he moved at a snail's pace round the tree.

"*Ni, badoua, odi po!*" Stout suddenly barked out. Which, being interpreted, meant: "Get a move on, you stinking little pimp!"

Recognising the familiar words, Ramasamy took another flying leap into the air. The *kangani* of the gang, who was following the experiment at a respectful distance, was jerked back to reality and promptly elaborated on the spirit of these words at considerable length.

"That's enough for this fellow," said Mr. Bedoux. "Let's move on to another. At this initial stage I'd like to get as general an impression as possible, so as to be able to draw up a rational programme. As a matter of fact I think I know already what's needed."

They continued on their rounds, and Mr. Bedoux timed the movements of several other tappers. They reacted as would any other workman in the world when confronted with the analyst's little board. The older ones gave a shrug and went on working in the usual way. Others displayed an exaggerated zeal and poured with sweat. Many of them felt that no good could come of this inquisition and therefore dragged out every movement interminably. Mr. Bedoux went on smiling and nodding his head with a knowing air, and after each pause jotted down a fresh lot of figures. Stout, who was beginning to show signs of irritation, interrupted him several times. At one point, after one of the subjects had shown even greater reluctance than the others, he had intervened with a certain forcefulness, seizing the man by the shoulders and shaking him as hard as he could. Mr. Bedoux motioned him to stop.

"Let him be, let him be. That's exactly what I'm here for—to work out a technique which will enable you to avoid using brutal methods like that. They only have a

transitory effect and in the end result in a falling-off of work. The 'Ratio' method eliminates these perpetual reprimands, which only irritate the overseer and tire out the workman."

"But that chap is pulling your leg!" Stout protested.

Gladkoff translated this for the benefit of Mr. Bedoux who was ignorant of the finer shades of the English language.

"That doesn't matter at all, I assure you. I'm used to it. You're bound to come up against a certain amount of opposition to begin with. It's a question of patience. You've got to explain things carefully and make them understand that you're not trying to exploit them but, on the contrary, you're out to help them. They usually end up by thanking you for your pains. . . ."

At this point, having put his board back in his brief-case, Mr. Bedoux told them the story about Factory X in the north of France, where the workmen, after threatening to go on strike and even do him a bad turn, had submitted a petition two months later asking to have him permanently attached to the firm. They had realised that by practising his methods they expended far less effort and earned a great deal more. The employer, for his part, had recorded a thirty per cent. reduction on his cost price.

"I am well aware," Mr. Bedoux went on, "that tapping is a tricky process which gives rise to a number of hitherto unknown problems. What we've got to do is to study them closely one after the other. There is also the question of the labour force, which is certainly rather primitive; but that won't interfere with the final outcome. From what I've seen this morning, I think I can guarantee a reduction of twenty per cent. in your tapping costs."

"Twenty per cent?" exclaimed Stout, after Maille had translated the expert's opinion into English.

"Twenty per cent.," Maille repeated.

"Twenty per cent.," Mr. Bedoux confirmed.

"Maille," Stout exclaimed, speaking very quickly, "if

only a quarter of this chap's promises eventually come true, I swear to wander about myself with a chronometer and a board. . . . Meanwhile, just look at that fellow over there! *Ni, badoua, odi po!*"

Intrigued by the white men's conversation, for the last five minutes Ramasamy had been pretending to repair the broken support of a latex cup. He now gave such a jump that he knocked it over and the white liquid poured all over the ground. Mr. Bedoux gave a smile and looked at Stout with an air of triumph.

## III

A long table, made up of planks supported on trestles and covered with white cloths, had been laid out in the open at the Sungei Ikan Club. The sun was setting. The jagged shadows of the palm-trees stretched as far as the centre of the tennis court. The personnel of Sophia, in coats, collars and ties, fixed their eyes on the tall figure of S. T. Moss and waited attentively for the words he was about to pronounce in reply to Mr. Chaulette's farewell speech.

S. T. Moss was on his feet, his hands resting on the table, his body slightly inclined, his head lowered, as though he was thinking out what he was going to say. He remained in that position for some time. The Chinese "boy" stood at the foot of the staircase. Ahman the *syce* and the other Malay drivers squatting on their heels near the kitchen had stopped whispering together. S. T. Moss raised his head.

"We are a great company," S. T. Moss began in a strange voice . . .

S. T. Moss, the fiercest, the worst-tempered, the most awe-inspiring of the senior managers, was retiring. Or rather,

he had been asked to resign—and everyone present knew this—following a series of incidents in which the old bear's sense of independence had clashed with Sophia's and he had stubbornly and systematically refused to comply with the Agency's instructions in matters of organisation. Rumours of his latest rebellion had filtered through by devious ways to all the other plantations: he had sent the Managing Director a letter verging on insolence, in which he had made no attempt to conceal his personal opinion of what he called "this invasion of bureaucracy." Since the letter had not even been marked "Confidential," it had been opened by the clerks who had discussed it at considerable length. Mr. Chaulette had then made up his mind to put an end to the intolerable situation.

A big farewell party had been organised in his honour at the Sungei Ikan Club. All the members of Sophia were invited and almost all had come, not only those of the district but also those from the plantations farthest away, some of them moved by a vague feeling of friendship, others in order to fulfil Mr. Chaulette's wishes, but most of them, so Stout maintained, to make quite sure that this resignation was beyond all doubt final. S. T. Moss was not very popular. Those who had worked under him in the wild territory of Pahang, to which Sophia had exiled him a long time ago, came away with the memory of fierce disciplinary measures, withering humiliations and a systematic course of rough treatment.

Among the corps of senior managers, however, it was generally acknowledged that he knew the job better than anyone else. The members of Sophia, young and old alike, had subscribed to present him with a gold cigarette-box with their signatures engraved on the inside. To his wife, who was worn to a shadow after twenty years in Malaya, the ladies of the Company had given a fitted dressing-case. These gifts had been presented to them as they sat down to tea, then Mr. Chaulette had delivered his speech. For a quarter of an hour he had sung S. T. Moss's praises, relat-



ing how he had been one of the initial pioneers; how he had reclaimed the jungle; how, at a time when the most elementary comforts were unknown, he had lived isolated in the bush, eaten alive by mosquitoes and racked by malaria; how he had planted the first of the Company's rubber-trees and built the first inhabitable bungalows; and finally how his wife had aided and assisted him throughout his long career, during the whole course of this magnificent achievement which had earned them both Sophia's undying gratitude.

Since his arrival S. T. Moss had scarcely uttered a word. He had sat bolt upright beside his wife, who was no more talkative than her husband. He had accepted the presents without a word of thanks. He had listened to Mr. Chaulette's speech with a frozen expression which boded no good. The authorities were beginning to wonder if his non-conformist spirit might not prompt him to play a final trick on them by indulging in a public outburst. With S. T. Moss anything could be expected. Even his opening words were far from reassuring—"We are a great company." In the odd tone in which they were uttered, they sounded like the sarcastic expression of some deep resentment.

He paused for a moment, then seemed to be racked by some sudden internal upheaval. He faltered, looked away and burst into tears. Everyone then realised that ever since the party began he had been sick with emotion and sorrow. There was a barely audible sigh of relief from the corner where the authorities were sitting.

"We are a great company . . . Sophia is a great company," stammered S. T. Moss.

At one point it looked as though he would be incapable of saying anything else, and the audience froze in embarrassed silence.

All the various departments of Sophia were represented. Apart from the planters of Telanggor, Kedah, Perak,

Pahang and Johore, the Agency staff was also there in force—Reynaud, the Company Secretary, and Bonardin, head of the Commercial Department, personifying the administrative and financial activities; Gladkoff, the industrial side; and Desbat, a forestry expert, the agricultural field. All of them lowered their eyes, not daring to look at the end of the table where S. T. Moss was trying desperately to master his emotions. He managed, however, to pull himself together and to utter a few words in a fairly clear voice.

“What I’m trying to say is, Sophia is a magnificent company, and I am proud to have been one of its first members. . . .”

Maille instinctively peered round to study the reactions of some of the guests. The Stouts were as impassive as ever. Mrs. Law was wiping her eyes. Loeken looked disgruntled. Young Barthe had a preoccupied air. Mr. Chaulette’s face expressed nothing but relief.

Maille’s gaze fell on Germaine Dassier who was sitting opposite him. He had not seen her for over a month, since his departure from Kebun Kossong. She had had a bout of malaria which had aged her considerably, and he was struck by her look of gloomy resignation. Now, for the first time, her face came to life, but it was an ugly expression that did nothing to improve her appearance. Her hands fumbled nervously with her tea-cup. She never took her eyes off the speaker for an instant.

“I want our younger members in particular to realise . . . the work that has been accomplished by this company under Mr. Chaulette’s direction is a perfect example of what can be achieved by the team spirit. This result could only have been obtained by the sacrifices of many individual wishes. . . .”

“Hear! Hear!” exclaimed Uncle Law.

Uncle Law and S. T. Moss were contemporaries. In the past they had not always seen eye to eye. They had even

had a famous quarrel, which had lasted for years, over Ramasamy's footgear. Should the Tamil coolie be allowed to wear shoes while working in the fields? Uncle Law, who was anxious to have his labourers' feet in good condition, said he should. S. T. Moss, however, said he shouldn't and maintained that the wearing of shoes for a man in Ramasamy's position was an inexcusable sign of emancipation which amounted to sheer defiance. He supported his contention with numerous arguments based on his knowledge of the Hindu caste system. Uncle Law had finally won the day, and Sophia had authorised shoes for the coolies. But from the moment these were no longer forbidden Ramasamy had scorned to wear them, which had profoundly irritated Uncle Law. But to-day he bore no resentment.

"Hear! Hear!" Sophia echoed in an undertone.

Dassier, too, seemed to have aged and looked even more harassed than usual. Apart from the new responsibilities that came with his rank of Superintendent, he was worried to death by his wife's present disposition and his son's state of health. After their leave had been postponed, she had not spoken to him for over a week and was not able to face unpacking all over again. The departure of Stout and Maille had done nothing to improve the atmosphere at Kebun Kossong. Loeken grew more and more morose every day, and Barthe could hardly be described as sociable. Dassier had suggested that Germaine should leave with her son at once and he himself would follow later, but the thought of travelling alone had made her seem even more depressed than before. He had dropped the idea.

S. T. Moss wound up his speech by enjoining the junior planters to preserve the old team spirit, then he sat down amid a thunder of applause. Uncle Law came up and shook him by the hand without saying a word, then he signalled to the others and began singing: "For he's a . . ." All the members of Sophia, including his former

victims, thereupon joined in and declared that the old terror of Pahang was really a jolly good fellow.

The official reunion was over. Mr. Chalette had left with Bonardin. The Laws had driven back with the Mosses. The only members of the Agency still there were Gladkoff, Reynaud and Desbat. Gladkoff was to carry out one of his regular inspections of the group's workshops on the following morning; so Maille was going to put him up, the Stouts' spare room being permanently occupied now by Mr. Bedoux. Reynaud and Desbat were only too happy to make an evening of it out in the country. They were both bachelors and liked to spend as much time as possible with the planters, which made their crime of belonging to the corps of office-workers a little less unpardonable.

There was a moment's silence after the authorities had gone. A wild cock crowed somewhere near the Club. The last golden gleam faded from the palm-trees. The flying-foxes passed high overhead. The hour had come: Stout gave the signal.

"Boy! *Tania tuan!*"

The *stengahs* were brought round. While Mr. Bedoux was telling the Frenchmen present the results he was hoping to obtain from the "Ratio" method, Maille was unmercifully ragged about his new duties as assistant timekeeper. Nor was Gladkoff spared a certain amount of banter. Then it was Loeken's turn. Tongue in cheek, the senior managers came up one after the other and congratulated him on his fine modern home, which annoyed him all the more since the Bukit Gila bungalow was still a constant source of anxiety. The Agency were now asking him for photographs of the building which could be sent back to Paris and handed round at the next Shareholders' Meeting. Loeken went on taking photographs every day, but none of them so far had met with Mr. Chalette's satisfaction.

Loeken gave vent to his resentment against the Agency

by criticising their latest whim to turn each division into a separate administrative department of its own.

“As long as the paper work was done at main office level, every director was chained to his desk. None of us had any time to pay proper attention to the plantation, but at least our assistants were still able to do their job. Now things have got completely out of hand. If they had their way, even Ramasamy would be made to produce statistics instead of latex.”

This was the burning question of the day, and was being discussed in almost every group. Inspired by the instructions from Paris, Mr. Chalette had launched into an orgy of organisation which was marked by a general increase in administrative duties. The planters anxiously surveyed the flow of red tape which now began to invade even the most subordinate posts. Powell, the assistant at Sungei Ikan, who was considered senior enough to join the managers' chorus of protest, complained about it in no uncertain terms.

“But without the facts and figures,” Gladkoff objected, “your plantations and divisions would not exist at all!”

The planters renewed their protests and were about to explain their point of view, but the ladies objected and the conversation took a different turn. Reynaud and Desbat told them the latest gossip from Kuala Getah. Young Barthe came up to Maille and asked him for further details of the “Ratio” method. Maille replied evasively.

Shortly afterwards most of the married couples went home. The men felt exhausted after wearing collars and ties since four o'clock in the afternoon, and their wives were worn out after helping with the arrangements for the party. Eventually there was no one left but the Dassiers, Maille, Gladkoff and the two bachelors from Kuala Getah. Maille suggested rounding off the evening in his bungalow which was not very far from the Club. Dassier hesitated. He had a long day ahead of him in the morning; but his wife seemed to welcome the idea and so

he finally accepted. They climbed into their cars and drove off.

At Maille's bungalow the party continued at the pace of those rare evenings when some special occasion or other dragged them out of the rigid framework of their daily routine, that's to say it quickly reached a degree of feverish over-excitement. The Tamil "boy" who had woken up at the sound of the cars and understood at once what it was all about, barely had time to slip into his white coat before starting on his rounds with the drinks tray.

Dassier, who was usually most abstemious, drank one *stengah* after another. Germaine matched the men drink for drink. She never stopped chattering for a moment and her eyes shone with fever. She laughed until the tears poured down her cheeks as she described the horrors of the Bukit Gila bungalow which she had seen for the first time a few days before, when Loeken invited them to dinner. Then she teased young Barthe on account of his pre-occupied air.

"There's a chap who'll make his way in the Company," Dassier bitterly observed. "He's already full of the Sophia spirit. His reports are the best I've ever read. And in addition to all that, he's got a natural sense of organisation."

"To hell with organisation!" Reynaud burst out. "You planters don't know the first thing about it. If you were in the Secretariat like me, Dassier, you'd soon see, I can tell you!"

"To hell with organisation by all means! Only we're *also* meant to produce a little rubber while we're about it!"

As the laughter died down, Maille wound up the battered old gramophone he had bought in one of the native shops. The cracked record he put on emitted a Chinese song in tones so shrill that even the "boy" could not restrain a smile. Desbat and Germaine Dassier launched

into a wild dance, while the others went on drinking their *stengahs*.

In the middle of this uproar Gladkoff tried to voice his opinion.

"Organisation is the only thing that counts," he said. "You yourselves only exist by virtue of the combination of your atoms. Sophia only exists through the perfect system that connects its various elements, iike latex through the subtle grouping of its molecules. It's all a question of scale."

But the laughter, the shouts and the gramophone drowned his words. He then entered whole-heartedly into the spirit of the party and embarked on a Russian dance to the Chinese music, which was loudly applauded. Ties had been discarded, collars unbuttoned, and sleeves rolled up some time ago. Maille's frigidaire was ransacked. A fresh bottle of whisky was opened. Dassier, in a state of great excitement, told the story of the *ranggeng* in all its juicy details. He worked himself up into a frenzy as he described the scene and volunteered, after a little encouragement, to re-enact it.

They gathered round in a circle, with Germaine in the middle to represent the dancing girl. She wound herself up in a sarong. Maille put the Chinese record on again. She started twisting and turning, waving her arms and rolling her eyes exactly like a professional dancing girl, flinging herself into the act with a gusto that no one would have believed of her. Her husband then faced her and launched into a series of extravagant high kicks.

"It was like this, you see, just like this! Everyone was clapping, just as you are now, and roaring with laughter. I lost my head completely and went on prancing about like an absolute clown. She was swaying all over the place at the same time, of course. We must have looked like a couple of marionettes. That's right, Germaine, like that . . . only quicker!"

She had drunk too much. She was unsteady on her feet. With her European dress on under the Malay sarong which came down to her ankles, she looked like some fantastic creature from another planet. Her rolling eyes, which were meant to look funny, had a pathetically grotesque air about them in the stark white light of the lamp. Dassier went on raving like a madman.

“Meanwhile I was doing high kicks, flinging myself all over the place, shouting at her in Malay, leaping about like a young goat. Everyone was in fits of laughter . . . except old Law, of course. But I couldn’t see a thing. Then the music stopped and I ended up like this—just like this, I tell you. Yes, Maille, in my day we younger chaps knew how to enjoy ourselves. Not like now. Can you imagine yourself behaving like this, Barthe, I wonder?”

He ended up with one leg in the air in a ridiculous pose. Germaine copied him, hanging on to a piece of furniture to prevent herself from falling. Then she burst into hysterical laughter.

“Yippee!” Desbat yelled. “You’re right, Dassier. Nowadays, with our wonderful organisation . . .”

Gladkoff, who had regained his composure, broke in.

“Organisation is the mainspring of a firm like ours. It’s the very soul of Sophia. You can’t have harmony, or even poetry, without a sense of unity as well.”

They promptly shut him up. It was quite usual for him to talk like this after one or two drinks, but he quickly came down to earth again and was not at all angry when they ragged him. He joined them in the ribald choruses which heralded the end of the party. Lying back on the sofa, Germaine Dassier listened to the monotonous string of obscenities with a blank expression on her face.

It was three o’clock in the morning. Reynaud and Desbat decided it was time for them to be getting back to Kuala Getah. They drank a final *stengah* and left. A trumpet blast sounded from the Tamil village. A worried look came over Dassier’s face as he, too, prepared to leave.



Gladkoff was sunk in an arm-chair, absorbed in his own thoughts.

While Dassier went upstairs to rinse his face in cold water, Maille went out with Germaine to their car which was parked some distance away from the porch. He realised she must be very drunk indeed. She instinctively clutched at him for support but seemed unaware of what she was doing. He almost had to carry her the last few steps. She showed no sign of life until he leaned forward to settle her in the seat. Then her arms tightened round his neck. He lost his balance as she pulled him down on top of her and hugged him in a close embrace. He drew himself up again as he heard the door of the bungalow bang, bewildered by the sobs he had felt racking her body and by the bitter tears he had seen coursing down her cheeks.

## I V

After tapping their trees, Ramasamy and Munniamah squatted down on their haunches and chatted together while the latex dripped into the cups at the rate of one drop a second. Towards eleven o'clock, when the cups were filled, they rose to their feet and went round their task in the opposite direction, emptying the precious contents into a bucket. When this was done, they slung their buckets on to a pole and made their way to the "station," the central point of the sector, where a big storage tank was erected under a corrugated iron shelter. Ramasamy and Munniamah were unlucky—their particular tasks were situated far from the station. They had to carry their load for almost a mile. So they stopped to rest several times on the way. They eventually arrived, and were abused by the *kangani*, manhandled by the head *kangani*, threatened by the conductor, and cursed by the assistant

who was waiting to go off to lunch. Under these various impulses they covered the last few yards at a run. They emptied their buckets into the tank, then, with the day's work over, ambled off in the direction of the village.

The latex was transferred from the tank to a truck fitted with cisterns and carted off to the workshops. Gladkoff and Maille, both with rather thick heads, were waiting with Stout for the morning's production. It was late in arriving. Stout remonstrated with the driver, who explained that he had been held up by Ramasamy.

"When Mr. Bedoux has rationalised the tapping," said Gladkoff, "there won't be any more of these delays."

"To hell with Mr. Bedoux," Stout grunted.

The truck drove up a ramp on to a reinforced concrete platform. Aluminium pipes were fixed on to the openings in the cisterns. The latex poured out through a succession of filters into an aluminium channel which ran almost the whole length of the first workshop building, and was then distributed among a number of rectangular coagulation tanks, also of aluminium, which were neatly laid out in two parallel rows both underneath and on either side of the central channel, like ribs round a giant breast-bone.

Under the watchful eye of Mr. Black, the workshops conductor, a *kangani* checked the level of the liquid in each of the vats and added a little acid. A coolie stirred the mixture with a sort of curved spade pierced with holes. Two others drew off the creamy froth which formed on the surface. Four more finally fixed into place the thin aluminium baffle-plates which divided the mixture into slices one inch thick. In twenty-four hours' time, when the latex had congealed, these plates would be removed. The separate slices, attached to each other end to end by the arrangement of the baffles, would then form a long unbroken ribbon which would be fed into the jaws of the rolling-mill.

The labour force of the workshops was made up of Tamils, most of them employees of long standing, who

prided themselves on belonging to a select body of experts. Permanent supervision was entrusted to the Tamil conductor, Mr. Black, who had held this position for twenty years and would not have let a grain of sand in the latex get past him. The organisation of the senior staff was fairly intricate: above old Black there was now Maille; and above Maille there was the director of the plantation working in conjunction with Gladkoff who, while holding no direct executive power, acted in a somewhat ill-defined role as adviser and inspector. Maille received his instructions from both of them. Most of the time their views were diametrically opposed, but a sort of compromise had been established. Gladkoff stood firm in the realm of theory. He had a horror of applied mechanics. He worked out various schemes in which every material body was reduced to the term of a perfect geometrical figure, and he delighted in evolving complicated combinations of hypothetical numbers *ad infinitum*. These calculations of his invariably made Stout fly off the handle, but he always ended up by forgiving him; for the Russian was an easy-going fellow and rarely bothered to find out if his advice had been taken or not. He never interfered with the practical side, which was Stout's personal prerogative.

Gladkoff muttered something about the large number of coolies milling around the vats and the high production costs. He suggested some other procedure. Stout sent him packing, half seriously half in jest, and retorted that this particular workshop produced the best rubber in the whole of Malaya. He led him out to the entrance where some coolies were busy packing the dry strips which had now assumed the appearance of translucent amber and gave out an appetising smell of baking. He picked one of these up, made it crack like a whip and stretched it out in front of him.

"Look. Top quality. Not a speck of black. Not a single flaw."

It was absolutely first-rate rubber and Mr. Black deserved

to be congratulated. He had earned himself a considerable reputation in the Company for the incomparable quality of his strips, and Gladkoff himself was reluctant to advise him on their production. The manufacture of these strips was not so much a matter of engineering science as a subtle culinary art. The latex was worked into a paste, rolled, pounded, flattened out like a pancake, and then baked in the oven. Its very smell recalled, at the outset of the operation, the faintly sour atmosphere of a dairy; and, at the end of it, the delicious scent of freshly baked loaves and ginger-bread. Mr. Black and his team of old-established specialists followed certain recipes which were not recorded in the technical instructions of Sophia—a lack of orthodoxy that was overlooked on account of the fine quality of the finished product.

Gladkoff was getting a little tired of watching so much physical activity and Stout made no attempt to detain him, being convinced that his inspection served no purpose whatsoever. The Russian cast a casual glance at the engines, gave the plummer-blocks a couple of taps, and declared that everything seemed to be in order.

“And now,” he said, “I should like to know how far Mr. Bedoux has progressed with his experiments.”

Thereupon Stout mumbled that he had some urgent work to do at the office and that he would leave the technicians to discuss these questions among themselves since they were not within his own sphere of action.

“There’s a special tapping operation organised for this afternoon,” said Maille. “Mr. Bedoux is going to be there to carry out further research.”

They piled into the little Ford that Maille had bought on credit now that his new duties necessitated constant trips to Kuala Getah and back, and set off in search of Mr. Bedoux.

They had some difficulty in finding him. Mr. Bedoux always worked in silence.

Maille, who knew more or less where he would be, left the car on the main road. They walked along a path for a few minutes, then caught sight of him below them at the bottom of a ravine, with his board held by his left hand against his chest, his thumb hovering above the stopwatch and a pencil in his right hand, completely absorbed in breaking down the movements of Ramasamy the Tamil tapper.

He had not heard them coming and they watched him for a few minutes before showing themselves. Mr. Bedoux was wearing a huge pith helmet. He was pouring with sweat since he was not used to clambering about the mountainside in an equatorial temperature. He was noticeably thinner than when he first arrived. His arms and calves had lost their lovely pink colour; the Malayan sun had turned them a raw red. On his blistered skin both mosquito and midge had left their mark. But Mr. Bedoux was gallantly persevering in his task.

It was not his fault that the couple composed of Ramasamy and himself against this background of rubber-trees and greenery, it was not his fault that this couple looked utterly outlandish and above all completely lacking in the activity which it was his mission to develop. During the present stage of objective analysis he was confining himself to the role of passive observer, so that his own activity was bound to depend on Ramasamy's. Now Ramasamy, faced with the silent contemplation of which he was the object, saw no particular reason for expending any undue energy. In fact he crawled about like a tortoise, going through an infinite variety of useless movements which cost him no effort at all, and drawing each one out as though it gave him real pleasure, rather like a film being run in slow motion.

During the tapping of a single tree, an operation which should take a minute at the most, Mr. Bedoux's chronometer jumped from seconds to minutes, and each minute was recorded by the jerk of a little hand on the watch face.

Mr. Bedoux did not say a word and jotted down some more figures.

Without being a planter, Gladkoff had some idea about tapping. He watched the Ramasamy-Bedoux combination with a far-away look in his eyes. Then, after a moment, he murmured: "Is it always like this?"

"Always."

Having at last completed the tapping of one tree, Ramasamy yawned and ambled over to the next. Mr. Bedoux almost had to mark time to avoid passing him on the way.

"*Ni, badoua, odi pol!*" Maille instinctively shouted, remembering his apprenticeship as a planter.

Ramasamy gave a flying leap into the air. Mr. Bedoux also gave a start and almost dropped his precious board.

"Good morning, Mr. Bedoux," Gladkoff called out, as he walked over towards him. "I hope we're not disturbing you. You know Mr. Chaulette's terrifically interested in your work. He keeps asking me every day how you're getting along."

"Not too bad, not too bad. . . . But I must ask you, Mr. Maille, not to break in like that. Now I'll have to start the whole series all over again—it's particularly interesting because of the number and variety of completely useless movements."

"I'm sorry. Maille thought you might need some help. . . . I must admit I . . ."

"Not at all, not at all. To-day I'm finishing the first part of the research, and for that—as I've already explained any amount of times—for that it's essential for me to observe the workman in his natural state, without any outside intervention. An interruption like this, Mr. Maille, completely falsifies my latest computations."

"I'm so sorry."

"Never mind . . . Anyway this first phase comes to an end to-day. I've got enough to work on already. The next stage will be devoted to analysing these figures, interpreting them, getting the essential results from them, and

working out a new technique based on the logical sequence of rational movements. I'm going to get down to it tonight, though I shan't stop carrying out certain observations on a number of points I want to study more thoroughly. I think I'll shortly be in a position to let you have a full report and to set two experimental groups to work. Then, and only then, I shall ask you to translate my instructions . . . to translate them with the utmost care and gentleness. It's no good using brute force. Excuse me a moment, will you?"

Mr. Bedoux clicked on his stop-watch and went off again after Ramasamy. Gladkoff and Maille followed close behind him.

"You can go on talking," he told them. "I'm so used to this work that it doesn't disturb me at all" (click on the stopwatch) ". . . You see how much time is lost in removing the strip of rubber as he moves round the tree?" (click) "Eighteen seconds! With both hands performing useless gestures and his legs crossing over one another. He could have arrived at the same result without moving an inch. . . . It doesn't bother me if you go on talking."

"Do you really think you'll increase the output, Mr. Bedoux?"

"Do I think? . . ." (click) ". . . There's another redundant gesture. . . . Do I think so? . . . But my dear sir, just look at that succession of pointless" (click) "movements! . . . As a matter of fact I'm now certain we'll make a saving of over twenty per cent. Look, do look!" (click) "That right hand of his doesn't know what to do with the chisel while it cleans out the cup, wasting long precious seconds . . ." (click) ". . . seven seconds to be exact, before putting it down on the ground. And there'll be several more wasted while he bends down, expending precious energy . . . to pick it up again" (click) ". . . Six seconds exactly! And now the chisel is covered in mud, and he's got to wipe it clean. Look at that bag hanging right down to his knees, slowing him up as he moves and

slipping round to the front, making him pause . . ." (click) ". . . to slip it back into place" (click) ". . . Five seconds! And the interruption in the rhythm! And the position of those feet! In a few weeks, my dear sir, you'll be able to watch my teams working according to the 'Ratio' system and then you can see for yourself. It's very simple. I think you may even accuse me of corrupting your workmen with bribes. There was one industrialist I knew who refused to believe that my results had been obtained simply by a rationalisation of movements, so far did they exceed his wildest hopes."

"It's quite clear," said Gladkoff, "that Ramasamy wastes a great deal of time."

After leaving Mr. Bedoux to continue with his experiments, they drove back to Maille's bungalow. Gladkoff had to return to Kuala Getah that evening.

"What do you think of the Bedoux experiment, Maille?" he asked.

As a matter of fact Maille did not view it with a kindly eye, for selfish reasons. He was the one who would have the job of developing the process of rationalisation after Mr. Bedoux's departure. Bedoux himself had insisted on this. Perfection could not be reached in a matter of months. All he undertook was to prove the value of his method by experimenting with a model team. After that the system would have to be put in hand on an industrial scale, which might take several years. Maille dreaded the thought of having to trail after Ramasamy with a stop-watch in his hand. Even if this work eventually led to a saving of millions of dollars, he did not see how he could ever conjure up any interest in it himself.

This question of personal interest on the part of the timekeeper had not been overlooked by the rationalisation experts. In fact, from the pamphlets Mr. Bedoux had brought with him, one could see it was uppermost in their minds. They set out to forestall every possible objection



with a lengthy introduction in which they endowed their system with a sort of artificial soul and even tried to give it a mystic and religious character. There were any amount of passages like the following :

“ Before embarking on any programme of movement analysis and measurements of time, it is essential to have FAITH. Without faith and enthusiasm, time-keeping will soon become tedious and monotonous and the whole enterprise will be devoid of that inner spark which alone leads to great achievements. Faith is the most important attribute for a time-keeper. Faith alone will inspire him with that bulldog endurance and tenacity that knows no defeat and comes up smiling to be knocked down over and over again. A timekeeper should approach each task as though his very life depended on it. . . .”

After reading this, Maille had begun to have his doubts. With all the good will in the world, he had not managed to work up the slightest enthusiasm; in fact he was appalled by the prospects the job had to offer. He answered Gladkoff evasively, without committing himself.

“ Let’s wait and see the results.”

When they reached Maille’s bungalow, Gladkoff stopped for a cup of tea before setting off again.

“ I’m one of those people who believe in principles,” he said. “ It remains to be seen whether the Bedoux technique is really worth while, that’s to say if it will ever work by instinct. If not we’ll have to carry out some other experiment. You’re right, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

In addition to the many ghosts that haunted the silence of the bungalow at night, for the unmarried men there was also carnal desire. In a faithful account of the various aspects of Sophia, carnal desire should not be passed over in silence; for in itself it was a factor that could not be overlooked.

Sophia was on its guard against carnal desire and the unpredictable consequences it sometimes had. Every unmarried assistant was advised to take an occasional day off in Kuala Getah. It was realised that no good could come of unreasonably prolonged abstinence. Its effect on work was marked by constant irritation and a succession of incoherent orders which put the Tamil labour force into a frenzy. In social relations it made itself felt in the form of a morbid longing for company as soon as the sun went down, which was a nuisance for married couples who wanted to go to bed early.

In Kuala Getah carnal desire could be satisfied in certain houses run by Japanese ladies, which the Sophia wives would never even mention except in an undertone and with embarrassed giggles. A little higher up the scale there were the taxi-girls from the dance halls. They were available in every range of colour: from the pale little Chinese with the slit skirt who had been imported from Shanghai, to Kanniamah, the tall slim-hipped Tamil, by way of Me-Hong, the plump little Siamese with a coffee-coloured complexion, and Nyah, the Malay with heavily powdered cheeks, who hid her face whenever she got into a car driven by one of her own race. With a little luck you might even come across Miss Betty Jones, the fair-skinned Eurasian, who stood aloof from her companions, took great care over her English pronunciation and made a point of appearing not to understand any Asiatic language.

In the bungalow itself, of course, there was always the Tamil cook's wife.

The cook's wife was sometimes allowed by her spouse, and on occasion actually encouraged by him, to alleviate his master's nervous irritation and bad humour by suggesting a simple material solution to the frenzied visions that disturbed his peace of mind at night.

As to the particular means proposed, the cook's wife had very little say in the matter. In the circumstances she dutifully accepted her role but played it without emotion.

Her body could bear comparison with many other bodies. It even had a special distinction of its own. The colour of her skin, for instance, provided a touch of the exotic; and the glossy sheen of her long hair, which she combed with her pointed nails, compensated for the pungent smell of the oil in which she soaked it. The slightly elongated oval of her face was by no means unattractive. The little gold studs she wore in her nostrils set her face in a permanent rictus which was not without charm. The blue mark of Siva on her forehead introduced a note of mystery, and her long Indian legs were slimmer and more shapely than those of the other races in Malay.

The cook's wife did not behave like a savage. Her husband had taught her manners. She was careful not to spit on the floor while in the master's bedroom. When she took off the length of cloth which served as her dress, she also removed the quid of betel that she had been chewing since dawn and which gave her teeth the same colour as her skin. —

But though the appearance of the cook's wife could give satisfaction to the most exacting amateur; though the various parts, the separate elements of her organism, were without a serious flaw; though even when viewed as a whole they were anything but offensive to the eye; the expressiveness of her body never exceeded the purely abstract significance of contour and colour—a limitation which detracted considerably from her willingness to

please, reducing it to a mere anxiety not to make a mistake. In her relations with white men she lacked that certain spark which carnal desire demands and appreciates above all else and which the counsels of her spouse the cook were powerless to engender, probably because its origin lies in spontaneity.

The cook's wife was impassive. The cook's wife could look like a dusky goddess, but her heart was cold as ice. The cook's wife never shed a tear, and any smile on her lips was disguised by the perpetual contraction of her pierced nostrils. The cook's wife radiated no more magic than Lee-Tho the Chinese, Me-Hong the Siamese or Nyah the Malay; and when she lay stretched out on the bed, the mark of Siva which she wore on her forehead just above the level of her eyebrows stared up at you in the heat of passion like a glassy-blue third eye, so cold and indifferent as to stifle the slightest sensual urge. Through lack of enthusiasm the cook's wife was incapable even of simulating pleasure. Carnal desire was dismayed by the sight of such utter indifference, and if it derived any satisfaction at all it was only by dint of its own feverish imagination which endowed the cook's wife with a symbolic aura of excitement; for actually it found nothing even remotely comparable in this example of automatism, except what it contributed itself—only that, and nothing else.

There were several other drawbacks to the cook's wife. She left a smell of coconut-oil on everything she touched, and the room stank of it for hours afterwards. Furthermore, once her husband was established in what he considered to be a higher social position by virtue of his wife's self-sacrifice, he exploited this honour by indulging in gross familiarities and neglecting his proper duties. Sophia, however, turned a blind eye on the cook's wife. She did not, properly speaking, form part of the native personnel.

Sophia was so convinced of the evil effects of unsatisfied

carnal desire that if, one evening, the prospect of an empty bungalow was more than its owner could bear, it even tolerated the temporary presence of a dancing girl imported from Kuala Getah; but only on condition that she was kept hidden away out of sight, and on the undertaking that this exceptional situation would not go on indefinitely. If it lasted more than a reasonable length of time, Sophia took steps to impress upon the young assistant that he had overstepped the mark. Each manager had his own particular method. Uncle Law had one which had achieved considerable renown. He would turn up at the bungalow at a time when the assistant was bound to be on duty in the fields, would pay the girl whatever she asked without haggling over the price and throw in a handsome present as well—after all, Sophia was a “great company”—and then he would send her back to the town in his own car driven by his own chauffeur. She never raised any objection. Nor did the assistant when he came back to find his bungalow empty. At the end of the month he was presented with an official bill for “sundry expenses,” which he promptly settled without a murmur.

One night Maille brought Me-Hong, the Siamese girl, back to his bungalow at Sungei Ikan. He had picked her up in Kuala Getah where he was often to be found now that his time was divided between the plantation and the Agency.

She had spent the first day in the garden picking flowers to stick in her hair. The day after that she had been overcome by the silence and the solitude of the bungalow. She got up at dawn, wound herself up in a sarong and curled up in an arm-chair with her feet tucked up under her. She did not move when Maille went out of the house. When he came back in the evening he found her sitting in the same place, motionless and unchanged, having not even shifted her position to enable the “boy” to shake out the cushions. After a very short time she had cleared out in a

fit of depression, unable to bear the atmosphere of the plantation a moment longer.

Maille had not tried to detain her. He had stayed on alone. That evening, on coming home after a visit to the Agency, he found the silence of the bungalow unbearable. He had not even the heart to put on some clean clothes and go and have a drink with the Stouts, realising in any case that he would derive no comfort from the sight of the placid Mrs. Stout or from the conversation of Mr. Bedoux who was staying with them. He decided to go out for a walk in the direction of the big Tamil village which lay on either side of the road near the workshops. It was an original, almost revolutionary idea. After tea-time the planters either stayed at home or else drove over to visit one of their colleagues.

This was the hour when Ramasamy was to be seen sitting under the trees on the edge of the *padang*, discussing the events of the day or the administration of the village. Between the concrete piles on which her house—the Sophia “Standard Coolie House”—was raised, Muniamah could be observed cooking the evening curry in a smoke-blackened cauldron, waving her arms wildly and shrieking at the top of her voice to drive away a goat or a cow attracted there by the smell of the spices. On the *padang* some half-naked children were playing with a ball, proud to be indulging in a European game. The strange spectacle of a white man on foot at this hour provided the Tamil world with a topic of conversation which was pursued until late into the night.

Just outside the village, seated in a wicker chair on the veranda of his bungalow—a Sophia “Standard Asiatic Bungalow”—Mr. Black was reading the latest Empire news in an English newspaper. When he caught sight of the assistant engineer, he goggled with surprise, jumped to his feet, greeted him with a respectful “Good evening, sir” and did not sit down again until he was well past the house.

Maille went on walking until he reached the river. There he came upon a group of Malay women who had ventured outside the kampong to have their evening bath. Following their usual custom, they had entered the water sheathed in a sarong knotted under their breasts, so as to wash their clothes and their body in a single operation. When they emerged from the river, with the flowered cloth clinging to their dark skin, he could not help admiring their inimitable way of squeezing their hair dry, then combing it with their wide-spread fingers and letting it hang loose on their bare shoulders. They moved off towards the kampong, which lay outside the limits of the plantation, hidden behind a curtain of scrub. They had scarcely even glanced at the foreigner.

He did not go farther on. After the women had left, he stood there for a long time looking at the river. A kingfisher, like those in France, described a series of darting glides along the bank. The sun went down. The waterfowl emitted their melancholy cries. The flying-foxes rose into the air in the direction of the sea and in a few minutes filled the entire sky. Maille started back for the bungalow.

As he walked along he was haunted by the image of Germaine Dassier. He pictured her as she had appeared to him at their first encounter, with anguished eyes, a pitiful figure of disappointed hope, oscillating endlessly between resignation and rebellion. After that he imagined her dressed like the women bathing, in a flowered sarong, swaying about and imitating the gestures of a Malayan dance. The picture then grew blurred. Her hair hung loose and enveloped her in a cascade of fine spray, a mist through which she appeared like a phantom. The spray thickened to form a continuous stream, in which she was submerged by the waves. The picture finally came into focus again. He felt the pressure of her clasped hands round his neck and the supplication of her lips.

Once again he crossed the Tamil village. Whispering voices in the shadows followed his footsteps. Squatting

round the cooking pots, Ramasamy and Munniamah commented with curiosity on his unusual and unexpected stroll. By the time he reached the bungalow, the fire-flies were already gleaming in the undergrowth on either side of the path. He performed the daily rites; had a shower, put on a sarong, sat down with a book under the lamp, and called the "boy" to bring him the first *stengah* of the evening.

He could not concentrate on the book. He tried to shake off the obsessive mental images by thinking of his new post in the Company. His thoughts took a pessimistic turn. He had to admit that he found Malaya less attractive ever since the round label bearing his name on the board of the Secretariat had been shifted to the Technical Staff section. He no longer had the sensation of living in the Far East. Some of the symptoms that had alarmed him during his early career in a European enterprise now began to reappear. On the plantation things were not so bad; he got on well with Stout. But the atmosphere of the Agency, where he spent at least one week every month, made him feel uneasy.

He drank another *stengah* and tried to track down the exact cause of his depression. Presently he thought he had found it. Two days before, he had presented Gladkoff with a ten-page report on a series of experiments which he had undertaken in the Technical Department laboratory on the manufacture of special types of rubber. The report had reappeared on his desk only that morning, delivered by an unknown hand. Attached to it was a slip of paper bearing the peremptory instruction: "Re-type in capital letters." It was not Gladkoff's handwriting, but Reynaud's. On being questioned about this, Reynaud had explained with a smile that every document went through the Secretariat for checking before being passed further on.

It was not such a disaster. He tried to reason with himself while he drank a third *stengah*, but he could not recover his peace of mind. Eventually he pulled himself together and found it was already nine o'clock. The



"boy" had laid the table and donned his white jacket some time ago and was now waiting at the entrance to his quarters for the master to call for dinner. When this was done, he shifted the wooden lamp-stand. He took the jug out of the frigidaire and filled a glass with iced water. He vanished for a moment, came in with a tray, stood by the table and finally announced that dinner was served. He performed these rites in the same order as always. Maille ate abstractedly, the ineffectual book lying open as usual beside his plate.

## VI

Mr. Bedoux wiped the sweat from his brow, which now bore the marks of the Malayan sun, and spoke to Ramasamy in an outlandish jargon.

"No! good. Not like that. Wipe cup with left hand. Now let go of chisel. No! I say. Look me."

Mr. Bedoux now had a gang of his own, an experimental gang which operated solely under his surveillance and by means of which he was to demonstrate the excellence of his principles to the planting world.

"No. I say. Blockhead! Put down cup with right hand . . . then hold chisel in position. . . . Oh, what a brute! He still doesn't understand! Look at him, Mr. Maille! I ask you, just look at him!"

Maille, for whom these sessions were a welcome diversion, did his best to hide the secret delight he derived from the spectacle of the Bedoux-Ramasamy combination cavorting through a rubber plantation. After displaying astonishing patience, Mr. Bedoux was now beginning to show signs of exasperation at Ramasamy's singular reluctance to allow himself to be rationalised.

"Look at him holding the chisel between his thumb and forefinger like a fountain-pen! That's not how I told him

to do it! If I've explained once, I've explained a hundred times!"

This was true. Mr. Bedoux had been unsparing in his explanations and his efforts.

Before starting the experiment, the "guinea-pig" gang had been mustered in front of the main office. There a Tamil conductor had translated the speech which the representative of the firm of "Ratio" had delivered. Stout had insisted on attending the meeting in person, to demonstrate the goodwill of the whole plantation staff.

The speech had opened with a few simple statements about rationalisation of labour in general. Maille, who first had to translate Mr. Bedoux's French into English for the benefit of the conductor-interpreter, noticed the latter hesitate for a moment before rendering the words "rationalisation" and "taylorisation" into Tamil. His embarrassment was short-lived. He found perfect equivalents in the expressions "*reshoonlishoon*" and "*teelrishoon*," with the stress on the last syllable according to the rule of Tamil phonetics. Ramasamy looked as though he understood and nodded his head with an air of approval.

Then Mr. Bedoux had embarked on the list of the useless gestures and movements which were to be avoided, not omitting to show what he meant by a personal demonstration. This first part had lasted quite a long time, during which Ramasamy squatted comfortably on his haunches with an expression of wide-eyed curiosity, the same expression that Maille had noticed on his face when an itinerant cinema had come to give a performance at Sungei Ikan. Each time Mr. Bedoux paused, Ramasamy made a gesture of encouragement.

Eventually Mr. Bedoux got down to the heart of the matter and began to explain his method, once again doing his best to make it clear by means of a personal demonstration. With untiring patience he showed how to give the chisel the optimum angle of thirty degrees with the

face at a tangent to the trunk of the tree, and how the sequence of gestures had to follow closely the sequence indicated, in which the right hand had its own particular field of activity and did not encroach on the functions of the left. Finally he showed how the movement of the feet round the tree should be co-ordinated with the manual gestures.

When he had finished, the coolies, who had given evidence of increasing interest and even of enthusiasm during this last performance, looked at each other and conversed in an undertone for a moment or two. Maille felt they were consulting each other to know whether they should break into applause and clap their hands. This proved to be correct. A furious glance from Stout and a few curses from the conductor put an end to this display just in time.

Mr. Bedoux had then asked the interpreter to make sure that everyone had understood. The air was immediately rent by vehement cries of affirmation.

“*Amah! Amah! Am'ange!*”<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Bedoux, who was nothing if not conscientious, had repeated his request. He had put himself at their disposal to go over all the tricky points once more. There had been a second whispered consultation, then the *kangani* intermediary had said that they would feel a little happier if Mr. Bedoux would be good enough to repeat the experimental demonstration so that no detail should escape them.

Delighted at seeing them evince such profound interest, Mr. Bedoux had once again illustrated his system. Then, while Stout appeared to be lost in a brown study, he had given a third performance for the benefit of two or three fellows with thicker skulls than the rest.

“In the whole of my career,” Mr. Bedoux had declared, “I have never seen workmen so well disposed as these. Really, the attention and understanding they have shown augur the most promising results.”

<sup>1</sup> “Yes! Yes! Yes, sir!”

“Well,” Stout had broken in abruptly, “I suppose that will be all for the moment. Now, Maille, would you please ask Mr. Bedoux if he would like me to add a few personal words of advice—for instance, to warn these chaps that they’ll have me to reckon with if they don’t comply with his instructions to the letter.”

“On no condition!” Mr. Bedoux had strongly protested. “On the contrary, I want this team to work henceforth under my direct surveillance and without any intervention from the plantation staff. Mr. Maille will accompany me as usual, but solely as an observer. Please understand. I’m not trying to belittle the planters’ methods, but this work is completely different and there must be no outside influence over the men until they get the hang of it. In fact what I’d like you to tell them is this: as from to-day they’ll be working under my orders, and the only reprimands they’ll get will come from me.”

Maille saw that Stout was profoundly disturbed.

“Do you mean to say he really wants you to tell the coolies that?”

Mr. Bedoux declared that this condition was essential to success.

“Well, go ahead then. But just a moment, Maille. Tell him from me that on no condition will this gang have the slightest contact with any other. They will be kept isolated in a corner of the plantation, in Block 5b, which is going to be cut down at the end of the year for re-planting. It’s in Powell’s division. I’ll give instructions for him to keep well out of the way.”

Mr. Bedoux had been delighted with these arrangements, and the experiment had been launched.

“It’s awful, Mr. Maille. Look at them, they’re waddling about like a lot of ducks!”

Block 5b was situated on the edge of the jungle. The monkeys invaded it frequently and chased each other from tree to tree in a series of fantastic leaps, and it was one of

the few remaining spots where you could still come across the tracks of a panther in the early morning. From the very first day some strange scenes had been enacted in this dark-green theatre, against the backcloth of the equatorial forest and with a cast consisting of lizards and red squirrels. Maille had observed the evolutions of the Bedoux-Ramasamy combination with an interest that was all the more profound since he had been forbidden to intervene. He had often wondered at the depths of absurdity to which a Tamil tapper's fantasy could descend when it came up against the speculative reasoning powers of the West. He felt there was no new extravagance in which Ramasamy could indulge in his grotesque distortion of the pure gesture advocated by Mr. Bedoux. And each time Ramasamy drew on his primitive brain for some more fantastic interpretation.

He had seen Ramasamy, the Tamil tapper, he had seen him tackle a tree in attitudes which defied the most twisted imagination: sideways, backwards, crouching, kneeling, on tip-toe like a ballet dancer, or else with both arms raised above his head as though he was being covered by a fire-arm. He had seen him try to keep his balance standing on one foot and at the same time try to wipe the cup clean with the nimble big toe of the other, while both hands, armed with the chisel, flayed the air like a murderous windmill. He had seen him tear off strips of rubber and wave them wildly round his head while launching into a sort of Indian war dance. He had seen him move round a tree and get his legs so entangled in the process that, thanks to his natural suppleness, he almost succeeded in plaiting them together; whereupon, unable to stand up any longer, he gave a delighted cry and tumbled over with a childish chuckle, looking round in all directions with a poignant expression of unrewarded virtue on his face. Mr. Bedoux gave vent to groans of despair. Ramasamy assumed a contrite air, raised his eyes to the sky, and asserted in his own language that he was

doing his very best. Then, by means of mime, he tried to show the "Ratio" representative that he had not quite grasped his method and that further instruction would be much appreciated.

Whereupon, with angelic patience, Mr. Bedoux once again put himself out and undertook to give this recalcitrant yet another demonstration. Ramasamy laid down his tools and squatted comfortably on his haunches. The *kangani* who, since working with the technical staff, had taken to wearing a European shirt over his sarong and had substituted his usual volley of oaths with a sweeter-sounding litany in which the words "*reshloonishoon*" and "*teelrishoon*" kept cropping up, the *kangani* gave a raucous yell as a signal for the other coolies in the gang to come and attend the lesson. They came in from all directions, racing through the rubber-trees, leaping over the undergrowth, giving evidence of superhuman activity in their haste to witness the performance. They gathered round in a circle, nodding their heads and watching Mr. Bedoux with an air of delighted approval. Puffing and sweating, Mr. Bedoux gallantly went through each of the pure gestures, the gestures devoid of all useless fantasy. His stumpy little arms, now heavily freckled by the fierce Malayan sun, described a series of straight lines indicating the shortest course between various given points. Needless to say, he merely went through the motions of tapping, drawing the chisel across the surface of the bark without cutting into it, and expending a considerable amount of energy in his efforts to move his feet in a coordinated manner.

The *kangani* asked them in Tamil if they had all understood; whereupon there was a new outburst of vehement affirmation.

"Yes, sir, yes! Like that, we quite understand!"

The gang then dispersed like a flight of sparrows and the *kangani* resumed his monologue punctuated with the words "*reshloonishoon*" and "*teelrishoon*." Mr. Bedoux

switched his chronometer on again. This time Ramasamy really had understood and could hardly wait to prove it. There he was, imitating Mr. Bedoux to the letter—drawing his chisel across the surface of the bark, taking great care not to cut into it. With a glance of triumph in Mr. Bedoux's direction, he gambolled across to the next tree like a young billy-goat and repeated the self-same gestures.

"But . . . look here!" Mr. Bedoux burst out. "You've got to tap the tree, damn it all! I just go through the motions, but you—you actually do it!"

And the better to make him understand, he seized a chisel and drove it fiercely into the tree with a gesture of incipient exasperation. And he made a deep gash in the bark. And from that moment on, Ramasamy set to with a will, making hideous gashes that would have pierced the heart of any planter, carving off great chunks as thick as a man's finger instead of the thin strip as delicate as the petal of a flower which he previously used to detach with loving care.

In the end, however, Ramasamy had grown weary of his own exhibitions. He had gently resumed his own individual method, based on the multiplication and prolongation of unproductive movements during which he gathered enough strength to carry on still further. He was more or less completely unaware of the presence of Mr. Bedoux just behind him. He fell into a deep stupor and scarcely ever came out of it: only when Mr. Bedoux in his anxiety and irritation brought him to his senses with a louder cry than usual. Then he would invent some fresh fantasy, like the novelty of holding the chisel in one hand alone, with three fingers, in the manner of a portrait painter.

"Mr. Maille, please help me," Mr. Bedoux pleaded with tears in his eyes. "Could you tell them that they shouldn't hold the tool like that? They really are rather dim-witted . . . And when they're not indulging in flights of fancy, they're so terribly slow. They just drag themselves along,

Mr. Maille. They almost fall asleep on their feet. Do you think they could be doing it on purpose?"

Maille did not answer this last question, but mustering all the knowledge of Tamil he possessed, he turned on Ramasamy and launched into a furious diatribe.

"*Ni, pandi ni, surruka odi pol!*" he finally concluded in a fierce voice.

Ramasamy seized his chisel in both hands and began to tap in the normal way.

"That's much better," Mr. Bedoux observed, keeping his eye on the chronometer. "The movements are still not perfectly co-ordinated, but there's a marked improvement. What on earth did you say to him?"

"I said, 'Get a move on, you cur, you swine, or you'll have me to reckon with!'"

"It's all very odd," Mr. Bedoux remarked.

## VII

Maille's next visit to the Agency was devoted to rounding off his thesis on special types of rubber.

The scheme for "special types of rubber" had been suggested by a member of the Board of Directors in Paris who had been disturbed to note from the reports that there had been no improvement in quality commensurate with the increase in output. Mr. Chaulette had seized on the idea and instructed the Technical Department to look into it. Maille, to whom Gladkoff had entrusted this task, had first of all asked for further information on the sort of specialisation envisaged. No further information was available. The only directive was the need to obtain a product superior to the ordinary sheets. The criterion of improvement had not been specified, since the industrialists of the New World and also those of the Old—the clients of Sophia—had never made known their conception of a *good* rubber.



Maille had been somewhat perplexed to begin with; then he had decided to take action. By incorporating several haphazard chemical ingredients into the latex, he had obtained a number of different products, some harder, others softer than the ordinary rubber. Then he had once again come to Gladkoff for advice. The latter had told him to draw up a report which would serve as a firm basis for discussion.

After sending his report back, Reynaud lent him a thick folder with a red cover entitled *General Instructions*, in which were recorded the Sophia regulations for the presentation of documents. Maille spent two days recasting his text. After a number of tentative efforts, he added a general conclusion in which he stressed the one positive fact that had been brought to light as a result of his experiments, to wit that he had obtained rubber that was hard and rubber that was soft. He submitted the revised version to Gladkoff. The latter pounced on the conclusion and exclaimed:

“That’s very good, Maille! Soft rubber, hard rubber. Your scheme seems perfect to me. Forge ahead with it . . . but wait, just a moment. This question of special products is extremely important. I’d better talk it over with Mr. Chaulette before we go any further.”

He picked up the telephone.

“What’s that?” said Mr. Chaulette. “Special types of rubber? So you’ve decided to do something about it at last! It’s of vital importance, Gladkoff. Our very future depends on it. . . . What’s that? Hard rubber and soft rubber? I say, that’s not at all bad! In fact I rather like the idea. What do you think? Yes, I see. Well, send the report down to the Commercial Department—it concerns them as well—and then let Law have it. After that we’ll put our heads together and see if we can come to some decision.”

Maille’s report came back from the Technical Depart-

ment, went through the Secretariat again for onward transmission, was marked by Mr. Xuan with a date-stamp recording its receipt and despatch, and finally found its way into Bonardin's office. The latter promptly burst into a flood of angry protest and complained that he wasn't allowed to work in peace for five minutes on end. Reynaud had to be called in to speak to him in the name of the Managing Director before he could be induced to give the document his attention. He glanced through it in fury, shrugged his shoulders with an air of weary disgust, pounced on the general conclusion, scribbled a few lines across the text and returned it to the Secretariat who sent it on to Maille. The latter had some difficulty in deciphering the following comments: "1. I see there's a conclusion, but no introduction. 2. The expression 'special types of rubber' is meaningless. Paris now uses the term 'improved types.' Do the report over again."

Maille fumed with indignation. Gladkoff declared that he himself was not qualified on questions of detail and sent him off to Reynaud for advice. The latter embarked on a violent diatribe against Bonardin and accused him of poking his nose into other people's business. Then he calmed down and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"You're not yet used to our methods, Maille. Bonardin is as prickly as a porcupine, but in this particular case he's right. You'd better start your report all over again. It's in your own interests. Between you and me, Chaulette is deeply intrigued by your idea of hard rubber and soft rubber. He told me so only this morning. For a beginner, you're not doing too badly."

Maille acquiesced. He revised his text and added an introduction, which followed the general conclusion more or less word for word but which also stressed at the outset his firm intention to concentrate on hard rubber and soft rubber.

The report was then submitted to Uncle Law. The latter made a point of reading every document addressed to

him. He gave this one a great deal of thought and was about to send for Maille to ask him for some additional explanations when Mr. Chaulette decided not to wait any longer before calling a conference of all the departmental heads. He sometimes took a passionate interest in the research of the Technical Department, particularly in a subject that concerned the Industrial Section. The manufacture of rubber was admirably conducive to that continual oscillation between concentration on the most insignificant detail and diffusion on such a general scale as to mask all the essential points, by means of which the administrative mind shows its superiority over the specialist mind and which, unaccountably, sometimes results in brilliant achievements.

Maille was not invited to attend the conference. It was a confidential meeting and the Managing Director distrusted the discretion of junior assistants. He was tormented by the suspicion that Malaya was crowded with spies employed by rival companies who spent money like water in the hope of penetrating the secret projects of Sophia.

The discussion gradually veered from the general to the particular. The "general" meant the "idea" of improvement. Mr. Chaulette summed it up in a neat little theory which he had come across in an American magazine and which he now repeated in the most forceful tone: "There is no such thing as marking time. If you don't advance, you lose ground." Bonardin, who was only too eager to assert himself, illustrated this by stating that the future held an unpleasant surprise for those who were content to stick in the same old groove. Gladkoff drew comparisons with the law of universal evolution. Uncle Law said nothing. Reynaud made notes for the minutes that would be read out at the next meeting.

The "particular" then followed without the slightest transition. This was the problem of "packing" for the special, or improved, types of rubber. A number of sug-

gestions were put forward, but opinions were divided, the only point of agreement being the extreme importance of this factor. It was finally decided that the Technical Department should undertake a series of experiments on this question.

“Tell Maille to look into it,” Mr. Chaulette said to Gladkoff. “He’s got some good ideas, that lad.”

Gladkoff made a note of this. Mr. Chaulette declared he felt confident that the discussion had served to elucidate a very obscure problem. He was about to declare the conference closed when Uncle Law asked what particular characteristics the new products were likely to possess. Gladkoff triumphantly exhibited the general conclusion of Maille’s report, and it was unanimously decided to pursue two parallel series of intensive experiments, on the one hand to render rubber hard, on the other to render it soft.

Maille had waited in his office for the conference to come to an end. Then, as it was getting late, he had gone back to Reynaud’s bungalow where he always stayed when visiting the Agency. From the veranda he could see the brightly lit office of the Managing Director and, occasionally, a silhouette outlined against the window. Towards nine o’clock the lights were extinguished. Shortly afterwards Reynaud came in. He hastened to let Maille know the results of the meeting and the instructions which he was going to receive. At the long face the assistant pulled, he burst into laughter.

“You’ll see a great deal worse than this if you’re ever transferred to the Agency for keeps. You mustn’t take it too much to heart. Do you know how I’ve been spending every morning for the last week—me, the Company Secretary of Sophia? Prowling round the bungalow on Bukit Gila, trying to find a suitable spot from which to take a photograph so as to diminish its more blatant deformities! The photographs Loeken took caused a howl of protest at Head Office, so Chaulette passed the job on to me. I’ve

had to go up there time and time again. The trouble is, the beastly thing is circular. All the shots look exactly alike. Eventually I had the bright idea of taking it from down below. From there the roof is completely masked. . . .”

Gladkoff and Desbat, who had been invited to dinner, interrupted this conversation. Gladkoff was married, but he often attended these bachelor parties. His wife was a Frenchwoman. She did not share either of the twin attractions that dictated her husband's existence: abstract speculation and heavy drinking. She therefore spent the best part of the year in a hill station and let him live as he saw fit. Reynaud suggested a jaunt into Kuala Getah. Just as they were going out, the telephone rang. They looked at each other in alarm. Mr. Chaulette sometimes sent for them at the most unearthly hours.

“Nothing serious,” said Reynaud. “It's about the Bukit Gila photographs. Mr. Chaulette now wants some shots taken from the air, so as to show nothing but the roof. That will mean a day out for us, Desbat.”

Desbat had a pilot's licence and jumped at any opportunity to take up one of the small aircraft belonging to the Kuala Getah Club. He said he would be delighted.

They drove off and spent the rest of the evening as they often did after a particularly long session in Mr. Chaulette's office—a visit to each of the night-clubs; countless rounds of whisky; and later on, in some Japanese dive, a Franco-Russian chorus supplemented by the voices of some gentleman-planters who happened to be about. They finished up at four in the morning in one of their bungalows. The cook began making an omelette as soon as he heard the car, while the “boy” donned his white coat and got out the soda-water. During the day they were harassed by Company affairs. At night they sought relief in alcohol. In the heart of Malaya they had recreated the European way of life.

## VIII

A few days later Maille was back again among his planter friends. When he entered the main office he found Stout deep in conversation with his assistant Powell. He seemed to be in the grip of a violent mental turmoil which manifested itself in angry gestures and a manner of inclining his powerful chest over the papers spread out in front of him, glaring meanwhile at the man opposite him as though calling him to witness some monstrous injustice.

"Back already, Maille? Here, take a pew. I've got something to ask you about your friend Mr. Bedoux. Hang on for a moment while I clear up this office furniture business with Powell."

He turned back to his assistant.

"Now look, Powell, I've had orders in writing. See? Here they are. The list has been added to *General Instructions*. You haven't come across *General Instructions* yet, have you, Maille? Never mind, you will! Have a look at those five fat volumes over there on the shelf. Confidential, for Managers only. . . . So I'm afraid, Powell, you'll have to put up with it. Read it out again. I can't bear to do it myself. . . ."

Powell read out loud:

"The furniture of the Division Office will consist of the following:

"1 desk and chair, Assistant, for the use of (figure 1).

"1 desk and plain chair, Conductor, for the use of (figure 2)."

"Never mind all that stuff about desks and chairs and cupboards!"

". . . 12 wooden wall frames, twelve inches by twelve inches and one inch thick. . . ."

"You can skip that part too," Stout growled. "Wonderful, isn't it? Go straight on to the final paragraph, Powell, and put me out of my misery. Read out the important note at the end."

"Important note," Powell calmly read out. "All the furniture will be made of *merbau* wood . . . which means," he concluded, "we'll have to replace all the stuff in here, though it's only a month old. We had it made in ordinary wood."

"Exactly. I rang up Chalette and tried to explain the position. He wouldn't take No for an answer. While wandering about in the North, he happened to see some furniture in *merbau* because there's any amount of that wood up there, and he found it admirable. Now he wants all the plantations down here to be similarly equipped within the next eight days! Well, we'll just have to do it, that's all."

"O.K." Powell murmured with a gloomy sigh.

"Right. Now then, Maille. There's something about your friend Bedoux in the last letter from the Agency. . . . But, of course, you were down there yourself. Didn't they say anything about it to you? No? They must have had other things on their mind. Chalette complains that he hasn't yet had a report on the results achieved to date . . . as though that had anything to do with me! What's the position? Not that I really care very much, but they seem to think I'm partly responsible just because the experiment's being held at Sungei Ikan."

"I'm going to see him this morning," Maille replied. "Ten days ago it didn't look as though there was any result at all."

"I've got a good mind to come along with you. I could do with a little fresh air after to-day's mail. It's still in Block 5b, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Let's go and have a look, then. Why don't you come

along as well, Powell? There can't be too many of us for this sort of work."

They took their motor-cycles and set off towards the north of the plantation. Stout drove slowly, sniffing at the air on either side of the road instead of looking straight in front of him, obeying the reflexes he had acquired at the time he was a junior assistant. Every now and then they exchanged a word or two, shouting to make themselves heard above the din of the engines.

"Good trees, those. Only seven years old, and already nearly a full cup every four days!"

They passed straight through the centre of Division Four, Powell's domain. Stout stopped for a moment on the road overlooking the village.

"Are they happy about the latest additions—the theatre, the day-nurseries, the temple?"

"Yes. Especially the temple. They want to hold a feast for the opening. And naturally they're hoping the plantation will contribute towards the expenses."

Stout leaned his motor-cycle against a tree.

"Let's go and have a look. It's not often I get a chance of an outing like this."

They walked past the school. A dozen little boys, between eight and ten years old, jumped to their feet and greeted them. For their lessons, they all wore shorts instead of their native sarong. The teacher gave a bow, holding one hand to his heart in the usual *kangani* manner. To Stout's questions he replied that everything was going very well. Stout told him to carry on as though he was not there. The boys sat down again on the floor. There were benches available, but they preferred to use these as desks. The teacher inscribed some weird characters on the blackboard, then turned round and pointed to them with his ruler. The boys started chanting the endless Tamil alphabet. Stout eventually moved off, leaving the boys all agog with curiosity.



They skirted the neat lines of native houses standing on high concrete piles. In the space underneath, which served as a kitchen, old men, invalids, and one or two women—all the “dependents” who were not out at work—sat patiently waiting for curry time. Stout stopped once or twice, tasted the rice, cracked a joke or two which unleashed an explosion of laughter, rebuked one old woman for not keeping her house clean, upbraided an old bachelor for keeping his cow in the kitchen, and withdrew among salaams on all sides.

“Well, they’re not so badly off,” he concluded, as they walked back towards their motor-cycles. “At least they’re fairly decently housed. Sophia doesn’t always make silly blunders, in spite of what you say.”

“I never said anything of the sort,” Powell retorted.

They reached the boundary of Block 5b, then stopped and listened. An aircraft was flying over the plantation at a low altitude, though they could not see it on account of the thick clouds.

“That must be Reynaud and Desbat,” said Maille. “They’re taking photographs of the bungalow.”

“They won’t see a thing unless it’s a good deal clearer up at Kebun Kossing,” Stout growled. “And if they don’t fly a little higher than that, they’ll find themselves below the bloody building.”

The hum of the engines died away. They went on listening. Not a sound disturbed the silence of the plantation save an occasional dry cackle from the rubber-trees.

“Let’s leave the bikes here,” said Stout. “I feel like stretching my legs a bit.”

Maille led them to the spot where the experimental team was supposed to be operating. Stout suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes fixed on a tree.

“What the devil is that? Powell, have I gone mad, or do you too see what I see?”

He was looking at what was once the immaculate

"Sophia Full Spiral" which Ramasamy, in a series of fantastic tappings, had transformed into a hideous sinusoid criss-crossed by sharp lines and dotted with other excrescences emanating from deep gashes.

"What the devil is that?" Stout repeated.

Maille felt a twinge of conscience. Even though he could not be held directly responsible, he fully expected the director of Sungei Ikan to call him to task for having allowed such sabotage to be committed without first warning him. But, after his initial stupefaction, Stout seemed to take it all in good part.

"It's lucky those trees are due to be cut down at the end of the year. There's no point in bothering about them any more. All the same . . . it's a good job I confined him to this old block. A very good job indeed. Here! What's that?"

"*Reshloonishoon . . . Ni badoua, odi po! . . . Teclri-shoon . . . Odi, odi po!*" a fierce voice suddenly yelled, breaking the silence.

Their presence had been signalled, and the *kangani* of the gang was mingling at random the newly-learnt expressions with his usual fund of invective. He came forward to see who it was just as Stout stopped in front of a tapper who was fumbling with his chisel in a desperate attempt to restore the orthodox form to his spiral. The *kangani* recognised Higher Authority and prepared to meet the storm. He swore at the tapper without coming any closer. There was an odd expression on Stout's face.

"Where is the *dore* with the chronometer?" he asked.

The *kangani* raised his arm and pointed in a certain direction. Stout told him he need not accompany them, which was clearly what he least wished to do. The three white men moved off in silence.

A strange-sounding voice reached their ears. They could make out an occasional word in Tamil, but pronounced in an extraordinary accent. They advanced in the direction of the din. A mass of vegetation tends to deaden sound. If a

noise is heard in the middle of the jungle, then its source is never far away. Stout, who was leading, reached the summit of a hillock and came upon the Bedoux-Ramasamy combination.

"What the devil? . . ." he began.

But he stopped short with a gasp, in the grip of an emotion which it was impossible to describe. Mr. Bedoux was actually trying to swear in Tamil.

"You son of a pig! You dirty pimp! You whoreson!" Mr. Bedoux was shouting.

"Here, I say!" Powell burst out in amazement, as he in turn reached the top of the slope.

Mr. Bedoux's anger verged on madness. His little eyes were red with rage. Every now and then he introduced a few words in his own language.

"Pig! Pig! Pig! Pig!" he shouted.

Nor did he confine himself to swearing. In a fury of disappointment he hurled himself on Ramasamy and gave vent to a curious display which consisted of pounding him in the chest with wild flaying movements of his stumpy little arms and which was no doubt intended to represent a revengeful corrective measure. Then, sick with anger and exasperation, on the verge of hysteria, he stamped his foot and clumsily tried to raise his leg to the level of Ramasamy's backside in the wild hope of landing a well-deserved kick on his bottom. But at each attempt he lost his balance and almost fell over. So, following the Tamil example, he unleashed a fresh flood of invective.

"You scum! You stinking cur! I've shown you a hundred times! Take this! And this! And this! You whoreson! You son of a pig! You dirty pimp! You won't get away with this, I can tell you!"

To this Ramasamy replied with a gentle untroubled glance in which there was even a hint of amusement. Yet he did not like being hit and would only stand it from the more senior planters. With his primitive mind, he probably did not realise that this eccentric exhibition was really

meant to be a corrective measure. He may have also, perhaps, felt a certain gratitude towards Mr. Bedoux for the easy time he had enjoyed these last few weeks. On the other hand, he may have been tormented by some vague remorse.

Stout drew closer.

“Good morning, Mr. Bedoux,” he said in his calm, even voice. “Are you having any trouble with this fellow?”

Sensing that his easy time was drawing to an end, Ramasamy rushed over to a tree and started tapping for dear life. Mr. Bedoux made a vain attempt to recover his composure.

“The wretches!” he burred. “The brutes! They’re trying to . . . I . . . You must forgive me, I don’t usually . . . I don’t usually lose my temper with workmen. But it’s too much, it’s really too much!”

Stout remained completely unperturbed.

“You really mustn’t take on so, Mr. Bedoux. These things are bound to happen. Do tell him to calm down, Maille.”

But Mr. Bedoux couldn’t calm down.

“They’re savages—absolute savages, I tell you! I’ll kill them! I’ve never seen such . . . Oh dear!”

Mr. Bedoux burst into tears. Tears of rage. Ramasamy had quite quietly reduced him to a state bordering on madness. He mumbled something incomprehensible, apologised to Maille, and rushed away as fast as he could on his stumpy little legs—away from Ramasamy, away from the rubber-trees, away from the planters.

“Where’s he off to now, I wonder?” said Stout.

Mr. Bedoux’s flight had been followed by a heavy silence.

“He said he was sorry, but he would see you later,” Maille explained. “He’s not feeling very well. I think he’s gone back to your bungalow to lie down.”

Stout allowed a moment or two to elapse before expressing his concern.

"Come and see how he is this evening, Maille, and ask him if there's anything we can do for him. We can't make ourselves understood properly, Alice and I."

"Certainly, I'll come," said Maille.

There was another long silence.

"It can't be very pleasant," Powell sententiously observed, "to be in a country where you don't know the customs or the language."

Stout nodded his head and lengthened his stride.

"Did you hear him?" Powell went on in awestruck tone. "He's learnt Tamil. 'Pig . . . Pimp . . . Whoreson.' That's not so bad in such a short time!"

Stout drew in his chin and made no reply.

"I wonder who taught him to swear like that."

"I gave him a few lessons," Maille admitted. "I thought it might come in useful."

Stout turned round, gazed intently at his assistant engineer, then went on walking.

"Did you see how red in the face he was, Absolutely out of his mind. On the verge of collapse. A real nervous breakdown. I'm not sure he'll get over it so quickly. It could be quite serious."

Stout did not say a word.

"I must say, he takes his work seriously. Did you see the way he moved his legs? In a few weeks, Stout, you might offer him a job as an assistant!"

Stout remained as placid as ever.

"You know, Maille," Powell went on, "I owe you an apology. I've ragged you often enough about all this stop-watch nonsense. But at heart I've always felt there's something to be said for the rationalisation business. The tricky part is putting it into practice."

They came back to where they had left their motorcycles. Stout at last decided to open his mouth.

"Didn't you say, Powell, that the coolies wanted to hold a feast for the opening of the new temple?"

"Yes, Stout."

"And they naturally want the plantation to contribute towards the expense?"

"Yes, Stout."

"A big feast, eh?"

"Yes, a big one."

Stout seized his assistant by the shoulder and shook him, as though what he had to say was of such importance that words alone would not suffice.

"Well, tell them they can have as big a bloody feast as they like, Powell! You understand? The biggest bloody feast that's ever been held at Sungei Ikan! Give them two hundred dollars towards it. You can put it down on the office furniture account. A feast, by God! It's a long time since they've had one. And we've got to think of their morale now and then, haven't we? We must all go to this feast, I assure you. We'll go and see the god Krishnan wreathed in flowers, and we'll be garlanded ourselves like fatted calves. You must come along too, Maille, you'll see what fun it is . . . and we'll also ask your friend Mr. Bedoux."

## I X

Six months had gone by since the reshuffle of the staff which had kept Dassier back on duty. He was soon to be replaced by an assistant returning from Europe and would then be going on leave himself. Germaine had waited till the last moment to do her packing. She hardly dared think about the journey. She had not asked Jean if he had done anything about getting a good cabin and had barely listened when he told her the name of the boat.

This morning, however, as her husband was leaving the

house after bolting his breakfast as usual, she realised there were only a few days left and she was suddenly dazzled by the prospect. They would be off in a couple of weeks. Six months in France seemed an entire lifetime. She could now sit back and relax. There was no more need to worry. Their departure had been postponed once; it was hardly likely to happen a second time. In a couple of weeks! She sat down at her dressing-table, which she rarely did, for she hated this piece of furniture which Sophia ordained for the bungalows of married assistants. She made up her face with the utmost care and sat looking at her reflection in the glass for a long time. She had still kept her figure. The slight swelling in her ankles would disappear after two or three weeks in France and a short course of massage. The climate had not withered her complexion. She was still extremely attractive when she bothered to make up properly, like to-day. Jean had been terribly distant and preoccupied these last few months. The damned firm never let him have a moment's peace. But he loved her, she was sure of that. Their trip to France would put everything right again.

She peered into the looking-glass to try to get rid of a slight tightening of her facial muscles which gave her a rather unhealthy appearance: a vague sort of rictus due to the dazzling glare. So these trees did not even provide adequate shade? That would also disappear once she was back in France. Meanwhile she would have to keep an eye on it. . . .

Yesterday he had talked about the voyage. Nothing could prevent their departure now . . . except for some serious accident, which was highly unlikely. Who could imagine an accident happening during these next two weeks?

Through the rubber-trees came the sound of an engine. She looked at her watch. She sat quite still and listened intently. A motor-cycle was coming up the winding road towards the bungalow. She recognised the familiar din.

It was Jean. So early! This was most unusual. To-day, in fact, he had said he would definitely not be back before half-past two. He was driving fast. Something quite extraordinary must have happened. Something serious perhaps. She suddenly went numb with anxiety and found herself whispering under her breath: "A serious accident. . . . A serious accident. . . ."

"Darling, I came back to tell you at once. We don't know for certain yet, but it looks as though there's been a serious accident. Reynaud and Desbat flew over from Kuala Getah this morning to take some photographs . . . They haven't returned. I just heard on the telephone. There was low cloud all morning. The noise of an aircraft was heard over Sungei Ikan. Nothing at Kebun Kossong. They only had enough fuel for four hours. They should have got back by twelve. We've all been told to stand by, and search parties are being sent out. Don't expect me back for lunch, or for dinner. I'll try to come myself or I'll send word to you as soon as there's any news."

He was off again in a flash. She stood on the stairs, clutching the banisters. A serious accident! Reynaud and Desbat, two close friends! This would entail emergency measures. Their posts at the Agency were considered too important to remain unoccupied. Desbat, head of the Agricultural Section. Jean was likewise a forestry expert. He had once been posted for a short time to the Technical Department. There were hardly any other planters with his experience and qualifications. Oh God! Surely they wouldn't ask him to . . . ?

But she was sure they would. She could already hear Mr. Chalette saying in that brisk voice of his: "Exceptional circumstances demand exceptional measures." And Jean would not be able to refuse. His future depended on it. He would acquiesce as he always had done. Especially at a time like this when everyone was expected to pull his weight. The team spirit. . . . It was awful to entertain



such thoughts at this particular moment, but if only they had been able to go on leave when they should have gone, six months ago!

She lay back on the sofa, oblivious of the comings and goings of the "boy" as he laid the table, incapable of diverting her thoughts from the fixed idea on which the unruly elements of her anxiety were centred. The Chinese amah gave little Philippe his midday meal, then took him up to his bedroom for his siesta. She did not even raise her eyes. The "boy," who kept glancing at her through the kitchen door, made a loud clatter with the plates and glasses, then finally lost heart and gave up the idea of serving luncheon. He disappeared into his retreat a few yards from the bungalow and regaled the cook with some choice comments on the event of the day.

At three o'clock she was once again startled by the sound of an approaching motor. It was one of the Malay chauffeurs, sent by Jean. He had a message for her. She made no attempt to go out and meet him. The "boy" brought the note in on a tray. She already knew what it contained. She read it almost without interest.

"There's very little hope. It seems the plane struck a mountain in the jungle. Loeken is setting out with a search party of planters. I can't leave the office. I'll be back late to-night or to-morrow morning."

It was useless to struggle. She would never dare protest. Sophia would take the necessary measures. She could imagine Chaulette bent over the personnel list, surrounded by his staff, examining possible names and deciding on Jean's. He would be anxious to take immediate action so as to prove to all and sundry, including himself, that Sophia was able to deal with any stroke of fate. To fill Desbat's post, Jean was the only man. She herself went over all the other names in her mind. She realised that none of them was suitable. Their voyage would be postponed once more. For six months, for a year—perhaps even longer.

At half-past six the "boy" reappeared and put the big

lamp on its pedestal. A little later he again laid the table and waited in silence for orders which never came. The Chinese amah brought her son in before putting him to bed. She kissed him absently, then resumed her endless series of speculations which always resulted in the same hopeless answer.

The alarm had been given towards the end of the morning by the Kuala Getah Club. Even before the authorities had embarked on an official inquiry, all the members of the Company had abandoned their normal duties to lend a hand with the rescue work.

The move had had the force and speed of an automatic reflex. Spontaneously, as soon as they heard the news, planters, technicians and office workers alike had applied themselves to the task of searching for the missing aircraft. Without a single order being issued every means in their power was put into action. Bonardin and Gladkoff were flown out from Kuala Getah in one of the Club aircraft to explore the neighbouring jungle. Mr. Chaulette offered a considerable reward to any native who could provide any information. The planters mobilised all the resources of their domains.

The aircraft, which had been sighted over Sungei Ikan, had failed to reach Bukit Kossong. It was in the area embracing these two plantations that the search would have to be concentrated. Information emanating from every inhabited spot in the district soon began to trickle into the main office of Kebun Kossong. It arrived by various means: telephone, messengers, coolie gossip, rumours that had spread by degrees and somehow reached the ears of the Tamil clerks in the office, who thereupon respectfully reported them to Loeken.

In less than two hours it transpired from the assembled evidence that the aircraft had lost its way in the clouds and was last seen heading in the direction of the mountains.

For some time all trace of it was lost, then the headman of an outlying Malayan kampong about ten miles east of the plantation sent in a messenger to report that an explosion had been heard during the morning up in the hills. While the envoy was being interrogated in the hope of obtaining further details, the plane in which Gladkoff was travelling flew over the office several times and dropped a note attached to a strip of cloth. Gladkoff had apparently found traces of the accident. The information which he had hastily scribbled down confirmed the report sent in by the Malay headman.

Loeken mustered all his trucks, and the planters set off for the kampong with several teams of Tamils. The track leading to it was not practicable for heavy vehicles. They did not reach it until late in the afternoon, after managing to get across several landslides thanks to the united effort of the motors, the Tamils who were infected with the white men's impatience and dragged the trucks by brute force over the difficult stretches, and the planters who urged them on with cries of encouragement. Mr. Chalette had stayed behind in the main office with Dassier to deal with any further information coming in.

As soon as they arrived they set out on foot to climb the mountain, each team following a different route, guided by a Malay from the kampong and under the command of a planter. There was very little hope of the search meeting with success that night. The summit would not be reached until after dark. In spite of the electric torches and fire-brands with which they were equipped, the chances of finding the remains of an aircraft in this dense tangle were infinitesimal.

By a stroke of luck, however, Loeken stumbled on the scene of the accident before darkness fell completely. The aircraft had struck the side of the mountain, ploughing its way through the undergrowth and catching part of one wing in the fork of a giant tree. It was this gleaming white

surface, still visible in the dusk, that had caught the attention of a Malay guide. He called out to Loeken and the rest of the group.

The shattered remains of the fuselage and pieces of engine lay scattered round a couple of figures carbonised beyond all recognition. While the Tamils muttered together under their breath without daring to approach, Loeken felt on the verge of collapse. He sat leaning against a tree for several minutes before he could summon up enough strength to issue his orders and give the agreed signal for the other groups to join him.

Germaine Dassier was dragged out of her torpor by a screech of brakes. A car had just drawn up under the porch. It was three o'clock in the morning. At midnight the "boy" had refilled the oil lamp and had then dossed down in the kitchen, on the bare cement floor. She had not moved from the sofa for several hours, feeling incapable of making the slightest effort. Loeken and Dassier came into the bungalow. They both looked extremely glum and barely glanced in her direction. They were carrying on a conversation they had evidently started in the car. Loeken's tone was domineering and offensive.

"... There's no question of your leaving for at least a week. Chalette can wait. You'd better get down to work on the hand-over first thing to-morrow. I shan't let you go till that's done. Do you realise your successor will have to be responsible for four whole divisions?"

"Don't bother. I'll make all the necessary arrangements."

Germaine had sat down again, shifting her gaze from the one to the other. Dassier gave her the news as briefly as possible.

"Just as we feared, darling. Both dead, burnt to a cinder."

He opened a cupboard concealed in one of the pillars and poured out a couple of whiskies. Loeken drank his

down in one gulp, then reverted to the subject which was uppermost in his mind.

"The Agency can damn well wait. That's the least they can do after depriving me of my entire staff. Before you leave I want you to complete the arrangements for the divisional offices. The new chap won't know a thing about them. You can tell that to Barthe as well, from me. He's not going to leave either, until everything's been settled."

He had never before spoken so brusquely or with such deep emotion. He was clinging desperately to these service matters and exaggerating their importance, as though they were his only refuge after a day of absolute pandemonium.

"Darling," Dassier eventually explained, "I've been transferred to the Agency in place of Desbat."

A guard had been posted on the mountain. Stout had stayed behind to keep watch until sunrise. Loeken and the other planters had returned to Kebun Kossong in the dark.

Mr. Chaulette's sorrow was sincere. As sincere and profound as that of all the others who for the last twelve hours had taxed their energies to the utmost limit and now felt appallingly depressed. None of them could bear the tension a moment longer. They gratefully welcomed Mr. Chaulette's sudden decision to call, there and then, in the Kebun Kossong office, an emergency meeting of the plantation directors to discuss the measures to be taken after this twofold loss.

The managers had assembled round a lamp. The others had returned to their plantations. Dassier had stayed behind to wait for the results of the conference, while two clerks who had been summoned at a moment's notice typed out the notes and the succession of plans emerging from the discussion. It had been a long, stormy meeting, Mr. Chaulette having considered every suggestion that was submitted before giving his own opinion. Loeken,

who had unsuccessfully attempted to put over his own particular point of view, was now giving vent to his spleen.

"They're also depriving me of Barthe, just as he was beginning to get the feel of the place. I'm going to be left with one solitary assistant whom I don't know and who hasn't even arrived yet."

Germaine was still watching them without saying a word. Jean came and sat down beside her.

"You see, darling, someone has absolutely got to fill Desbat's post at the Agency. It's an extremely important job, on account of all the experiments that are going on. Chalette asked me to do this as a special favour. At a time like this one can't think of oneself. I couldn't say No. He's making a special point of recruiting fresh personnel from France. In a few months' time, without fail, we'll be able to go on leave."

"Yes," Loeken observed bitterly. "The Agency can't get along without a full staff. That's why they're taking Barthe away from me as well. He's to replace Maille who'll be succeeding Reynaud as Company Secretary."

Loeken eventually left, after repeating his instructions. Dassier decided to look in at the roll call to make sure that everyone had settled down again after the excitement caused by the accident. He would doss down himself when he got back and have a few hours' sleep. He insisted that Germaine should go to bed at once and went up with her to the bedroom.

"I couldn't have done anything else, darling. You do understand, don't you? We'll be living quite close to Kuala Getah now. It'll be a change. You'll feel less lonely than out here. And then remember, this means promotion for me. Desbat had been earmarked as a future director."

## PART THREE

### *The Agency*

#### I

Mr. Chaulette drew himself up and made his swivel chair creak as he jerked it first to the right and then to the left. Ever since he had sat down at his desk, he had felt restless and kept changing his position. He was having great difficulty over what he was writing. He had already started a dozen rough drafts, then crumpled them up one after the other and thrown them into the waste-paper basket. It was the introduction to the Managing Director's annual report: his own personal report, in fact.

“. . . The port of Singapore, the crossroads of the Far East . . .”

The rest of the sentence would not come. To give his brain a rest, he opened a folder and took out half a dozen sheets of typescript which represented the general conclusion of the said report. This year he was particularly pleased with it. The final paragraph, above all, had made him glow with pleasure as he wrote it. Yet it was by no means first-hand. It could be found almost word for word in his previous report, though not in the same place. His master-stroke had been to insert it at the very end, like an unexpected bolt from the blue. He glanced through it again for the hundredth time with every appearance of delight.

“After a particularly difficult and trying period, following the orientation of all our energies towards an improvement in technique, and during which a tragic accident deprived the Company of two of its ablest members, we must record our gratitude to the entire staff for giving evidence

of a steadfastness and devotion beyond all praise. We have demanded a considerable effort from every one of them."

After poring over this passage for some time, he was astonished and enchanted by the sudden discovery that it could be further improved. He did not hesitate for a moment. With a red pencil he indicated a new paragraph after the word "praise," thereby isolating the final sentence. "We have demanded a considerable effort from every one of them," which now seemed ten times more forceful. He put the sheets down on a corner of his desk and embarked once more on the introduction.

He crossed out everything he had written so far and began all over again.

"The port of Singapore, the turn-table of the Far East . . ."

Since the rest of the sentence still failed to suggest itself, he left a blank space and went on to the next.

"The fortification of the naval base of Singapore, for which the Government of the Straits has allotted an astronomical sum . . ."

He remained lost in thought for some time. On further consideration the expression "astronomical sum" seemed ready-made and vulgar, apart from being slightly exaggerated too. There was nothing the Chairman of the Board appreciated more than elegance and purity of style. Yet an epithet that compelled attention was clearly needed. He jotted down "substantial funds" on a piece of rough paper. This looked vague and imprecise. In the end he decided on "handsome."

"The naval base of Singapore, for the fortification of which the Government of the Straits has allotted a handsome sum over the last three years, has now been rendered literally formidable and impregnable, constituting a sure guarantee for the future of British Malaya and affording our enterprise the complete security which is essential . . ."

This introduction, over which Mr. Chaulette took so much



trouble every year, was intended to be not only irreproachable in form but also rich in general observations transcending the narrow realm of the plantations and appropriately designed to uphold the reputation for broadness of outlook which its author had acquired with the Administrative Council.

The main body of the report was composed entirely by his colleagues at the Agency. The organisation of Sophia now enabled the Managing Director to rely on his subordinates for everything directly concerned with questions of routine or with material, technical and financial results. That's to say that by this time, the beginning of 1939, it had reached an advanced stage of development.

After drafting their own reports, the departmental heads would each contribute their stone to the recapitulative edifice erected by their chief. Gladkoff would give a picture of the industrial technique, the workshops, the new constructions, the improvements on those already in existence, and the projects for future development. Bonardin would deal with the results of the sales, comment on the variations in the price of rubber and summarise the financial position. Dassier, the new head of the Agricultural Section, discussed selection and future output. Maille, who had succeeded Reynaud in the Secretariat, had submitted his contribution in the form of a paper touching upon questions of administration, general organisation, internal and external relations, statistics, documentation and control.

Each of the departmental heads, in fact, disserted in different, more condensed and more attractive terms on the very same subjects dealt with in the Managing Director's own report. Since the basic information for this had been assembled by the clerks, it was actually the subordinate intermediaries who furnished the raw material. The senior intermediaries merely modified the "expression"—which was yet another sign of advanced development.

Maille, in addition to his other duties, was entrusted with the task of correlating the separate subjects and combining

them into an attractive whole, the Managing Director refusing to peruse his report until it was absolutely complete and properly typed out. Then only did he deign to look at it and go over each page with his red pencil, inserting inverted commas and brackets, changing the position of phrases and words, alternating paragraphs, modifying the punctuation, until the text, with its passages in italics, its capital letters, its various additions and corrections and a thousand other details of presentation, produced a satisfactory impression.

But Mr. Chalette made himself personally responsible for drafting the introduction and the general conclusion, having not yet found a colleague sufficiently sound to be entrusted with this task.

“The naval base of Singapore, for the fortification of which the Government of the Straits has allotted a handsome sum over the last three years, has now been rendered literally formidable and impregnable, constituting a sure guarantee for the future of British Malaya and affording our enterprise the complete security which is essential . . .”

He was beginning to feel quite pleased with the sentence. Inspired by a short article in a Singapore newspaper and composed after several unsuccessful attempts, it seemed to round off to perfection the picture he was trying to give of the position, first of Malaya in relation to the world, secondly of the rubber industry in Malaya, and thirdly of Sophia in the rubber industry. The comment on the naval base of Singapore was a brainwave. In the first place it buoyed up the financial pundits who needed to be constantly reassured. Secondly, it brought to the attention of those members of the Council, who were not yet fully convinced of it, the fact that the Managing Director of Sophia was not one of those petty-minded little souls who confine themselves to their own little sphere of activity without considering the broader issues or giving a thought for the future.

He underlined the word "handsome," which pleased him a little bit more every time he said it out loud. "Formidable" sounded somewhat over-emphatic, but the adverb "literally" served to tone down this particular aspect of it. To be on the safe side, however, he put the adjective between inverted commas, thereby absolving himself, in his view, of all responsibility for what might be considered an exaggeration. "Impregnable" was a mistake that had escaped his notice. He changed this to "invincible" and finally to "invulnerable," which he likewise put between inverted commas with a smile of satisfaction. He found nothing more to correct for the time being. He picked up the telephone and summoned the Secretary.

"Maille, would you please have this typed out for me. Double spacing, it's only a rough draft."

Maille went off with the sheet of paper and read it through before passing it on to Mr. Xuan, the Chief Clerk and a specialist in typing French texts. He could not help smiling when he noticed Mr. Chaulette had spelt "Singapore" in the English way and had re-written it extremely clearly (whereas everything else was hastily scribbled down) so that the Chief Clerk should make no mistake about it. By this touch of exoticism the text would be endowed with an additional attraction.

## I I

Maille was now installed in the office which he had admired so much on the day of his arrival in Malaya. He sat facing the big glass partition. Behind him stretched the vast clerks' room, with Mr. Xuan in the middle. Above him revolved the long-bladed fan, slowly and noiselessly. On his right was the wall chart on which the staff of Sophia was represented by a variety of different-coloured labels. Behind this stood the grey filing cabinet in which

all the confidential documents were kept, flanked by the two smaller cupboards of the same colour reserved for *strictly* confidential papers. The cabinet contained a copy of the five big volumes devoted to *General Instructions*: a compilation of Sophia's basic regulations which amounted to a sort of Company code.

The instructions were printed on loose leaves, of a different colour for each separate volume and held together by spring clips inside a thick red cardboard cover. The numbering of the pages was worked out on a complicated system involving Roman figures, capital letters, Arabic figures, Roman figures in lower case italics, and dashes. It had now become necessary to make use of the Greek alphabet as well. Mr. Chalette had asked Maille to look into the matter.

There were five volumes, each as thick as a big dictionary and as broad as an atlas.

The first was entitled *Administration*. It dealt with Sophia: the essential elements of Sophia, the definitions of Sophia, the functions of Sophia, the general methods of Sophia. It also defined the duties of the European members of Sophia.

The second was headed *Organisation*. It specified the chain of command linking together the various elements of Sophia and gave a detailed list of all documents issued and dispatched by Sophia. It was a very long list. Each document was dealt with separately, and a diagram accompanied by an explanatory text described how and when it should be drafted. If the document happened to be by various hands, which was more often the case than not, a synoptic table indicated how it should be tackled by each of the parties concerned.

The third and fourth volumes formed, to all intents and purposes, a single volume since they were both devoted to the same subject: *Technique*. These contained a summary of Sophia's exploitation methods and included a long chapter on Mr. Bedoux's system.

The fifth and final volume illustrated the Company's "standard" models. For each document mentioned in the second volume, for instance, it gave the exact specifications of the form required, down to the numbering and sub-heading of each paragraph. For each building, machine or tool described in Volumes III and IV, it contained a corresponding diagram accompanied by a detailed index. The title of this volume had been changed several times. At the moment it was called *Standardisation*.

Each of the red covers bore the words "Strictly Confidential." Each of the department heads and each plantation manager kept a copy of these *General Instructions* in his office. They were responsible for guarding the secrets they contained and undertook not to let them fall, under any condition, into the hands of their assistants. They were allowed to confide no more than the bare bones of the contents to the subordinates in their command. Any public disclosure of them was severely sanctioned and could even lead to instant dismissal. Maille had recently received a sharp rebuke, and a letter which itself was confidential, for keeping his own set of *General Instructions* in the central cabinet used for confidential documents and not in one of the two side cupboards reserved for *strictly* confidential ones, which was the proper place for them.

Maille's duties as Company Secretary were enumerated and described at great length in these volumes. On being posted to the Agency a few months before, he had read the passages concerning him over and over again and had felt absolutely overwhelmed.

One of his most important duties was to "control" the flow of documents within the organisation so that it followed the rhythm and time-table laid down in the rules.

When issuing this edict, Mr. Chaulette had thought of everything. It was ordained, for instance, that the rough draft of the annual report of each plantation should reach the Secretariat on the morning of January 15th. The Sec-

retariat sent it on at once to the Technical Department (Industrial Section) whose offices were situated on a hill overlooking the administrative buildings, and the document arrived there in the course of the morning. Gladkoff kept it for forty-eight hours, to embellish it with his comments. Then, on the morning of the 18th, he returned it to the Secretariat who dispatched it forthwith to the Technical Department (Agricultural Section) where it remained to be perused by the forestry expert until the 20th. After that it was forwarded to the Commercial Department, Bonardin's domain, whence it returned on the 24th. After a brief visit to Uncle Law's office it finally reappeared on Maille's desk and this time stayed there three whole days for verification from the administrative point of view. On February 1st, if all went well, Maille submitted the draft together with the various comments to Mr. Chaulette who then dictated his instructions in the form of an executive note, after which the folders were returned to the plantations for the composition of the final text. Eight days later the fair copies were sent back to the Secretariat and the same procedure was followed, within the same time limits, for a final examination by the various departments.

Mr. Chaulette had catered for everything. It had not escaped him that such a rigid schedule itself required to be controlled—which was where the Secretariat, as the instrument of transmission, naturally came into its own. Since documents of this kind were legion for each plantation and for each department, and since this quantity had to be multiplied by eighteen for the entire Company, the control demanded in its turn a number of charts and a complicated system of symbols. This mechanical hack-work exasperated Maille beyond endurance. In fact he had more or less given up dealing with it himself and had delegated the task to Mr. Xuan, who handled it with the infinite patience of the Orient and the punctiliousness of the Annamite race. He was, however, ultimately responsible for it; and Mr. Chaulette sometimes had a sudden whim to

ask him point blank where such and such a document might be, a question to which Maille could never find an immediate answer and which invariably necessitated a laborious search through Mr. Xuan's files.

It was then discovered that the report in question was not where it should have been, whereupon Mr. Chalette would accuse Maille of allowing the organisation of Sophia to disintegrate. On being summoned, Mr. Xuan would fall back on a certain paragraph of *General Instructions*. This paragraph stipulated that in the event of any delay in transmission the Secretariat should send out a reminder slip printed on pink paper to the department or plantation at fault. Mr. Xuan would calmly refer to one of his massive record files. The reminder on pink paper had been dispatched on the required date. Maille had signed it, but of course he had forgotten all about it since at least a dozen of these were sent out every day. Mr. Chalette would then want to know the outcome of this dispatch. After consulting another file, Mr. Xuan would announce that so far there had been no outcome. Mr. Chalette would get more and more impatient and inquire what subsequent steps had been taken. Mr. Xuan would quote another paragraph of *General Instructions*, which stated that if the delay continued more than five days after the dispatch of the first, pink reminder, the Secretariat should then send a second, blue one. He would go and get a third file and triumphantly exhibit the copy of the blue reminder, likewise signed by Maille and likewise forgotten by him. Mr. Chalette would calm down a little and pursue the inquiry less heatedly. Mr. Xuan would point out that three days after the dispatch of the blue reminder, a white one had been sent out in accordance with the rules laid down. This one had been signed by the Managing Director himself, but, like Maille, Mr. Chalette had forgotten it. After consulting a fourth and last file, Mr. Xuan was able to tell him exactly where the report was to be found. The delay had not been caught up, but everything had been done

according to the regulations. Mr. Chaulette would recover his composure but reproach the Secretary for not keeping all these details in his head. Mr. Xuan was never once caught out. In the days of Reynaud he had even succeeded in getting Mr. Chaulette to sign a white reminder slip addressed to himself, the Managing Director, for a report that had been hanging about in one of the drawers of his desk—for the head of Sophia was reluctant to submit, like everyone else, to the rules he had himself prescribed.

After the control of the circulation, supervision of the presentation was one of the Secretary's most important duties. He had to verify that all the documents that passed through his hands were drafted according to the "standard" models which filled Volume V of *General Instructions*.

This task had become sheer torture to him. He was by nature incapable of applying himself to a text, an illustration or a diagram unless he had first fathomed its meaning. It was on the sense that he concentrated first of all, by instinct as well as inclination. After three months of genuine effort he had not yet been able to grasp the idea, which to Mr. Chaulette was second nature, that the examination of a piece of writing began by studying the countless details of its outward appearance: the number and length of the paragraphs, the width of the margin, the presence of an introduction and a general conclusion, the presence of a particular conclusion at the end of each chapter, the graduation in the size of the main headings and of the sub-headings, those that required capital letters, those that did not, those that had to be underlined, those that were specifically not underlined, and many other features ordained in *General Instructions*. For all his efforts Maille let himself be carried away by the sense of the text and overlooked faults in the presentation which made Mr. Chaulette feel physically sick and which, in his



case, actually prevented him from fathoming the meaning.

Maille's duties also included the drafting of the Managing Director's correspondence. This was more or less confined to the exchange of letters between him and the Paris head office. Mr. Chaulette was not in postal communication with the plantations except on very rare occasions. There again the Secretary was not supposed to try to fathom the meaning. Bonardin, Gladkoff, Dassier and Uncle Law provided the fundamentals. He was merely required to assemble this material, then present it in an attractive form for the approval and signature of the Managing Director.

On mail days the Agency was always imbued with a special atmosphere of its own.

Mr. Chaulette would turn up rather late at the office, for he was in the habit of working at night. Maille would wait for his arrival with impatience and remind him that the letters had to be posted by half-past seven in the evening so as to catch the night train for Singapore.

"Damn it all," Mr. Chaulette would remark in a tone of high good humour, "we mustn't miss the train now, must we? Well, is the mail all ready?"

"It's all ready, sir."

Maille would place the folder containing the letters under his nose. They were all typed out on official Sophia paper, accompanied by countless copies addressed to the various departments concerned and stamped at the bottom of the page with the words "Managing Director." Nothing else was needed now but his signature. Faithful to the line of conduct he had adopted once and for all, Mr. Chaulette would not consent to look at his correspondence until it was in every way complete.

There would then begin a ceremony with which Maille was basically acquainted but into which Mr. Chaulette always introduced some new departure.

Without reading a single word, he would scan the first

sheet of paper with a disinterested and slightly pained expression.

"Don't you think," he would say, "that it would be better to have all our letters typed out with double spacing? Like this, you see?"

The red pencil would start moving over the paper, indicating the space required.

"And the margin a little wider. Like that, for instance. And begin a little lower down . . . there!"

With a horizontal line and an upright, he marked out the two co-ordinates forming the rectangular frame in which the text was to be inserted.

"Another thing. This paper's far too thin, even for air-mail. It makes a bad impression. And the Sophia heading doesn't stand out at all. You want much bigger letters . . . like this."

He was now rummaging through the pile of letters, scribbling all over each sheet with his red pencil.

"Have another stamp made with the letters wider apart. . . . Look, here's the whole folder. Try to find some other paper and have everything re-typed."

Maille timidly attempted a flanking attack.

"The mail has got to be posted this evening, sir. Perhaps you could just glance through it before we start on the fair copies. It would save a little time."

"Come now, Maille. We've got the whole day before us. It's only just eleven. Have it all typed out again and bring it in to me immediately after lunch. What's the trouble? The paper? Oh well, for this once we'd better stick to the same."

Maille acknowledged defeat and acquiesced. With the folder under his arm, he went back to the Secretariat and told Mr. Xuan in detail what the chief wanted him to do.

The curtain went up on the second act towards four o'clock, when Mr. Chaulette came back to the office. Maille dashed into the room. Mr. Chaulette was already

firmly ensconced in his swivel chair, safely entrenched behind his massive desk.

"Yes, Maille? What is it?" he asked in an indifferent tone, barely raising his head.

"The mail, sir! The Paris mail!"

"What? Ah yes, the mail. . . . Oh dear! I did so want to finish off this job first. Couldn't you wait a bit? Till this evening, for instance?"

"Yes, but it's got to be posted in Kuala Getah by seven o'clock, sir."

"Hang it all! We'll only just be in time. Let's have it, then. . . . Ah, that looks much better! These wider margins are a great improvement."

Maille hoped for the best. He had insidiously placed an insignificant little note of a few lines—a simple acknowledgment of receipt—on top of the pile of letters. Slowly, almost regretfully, with countless hesitations, Mr. Chaulette let his pen hover over it and began to append his signature . . . only to be possessed once more by the demon of perfectionism. He threw down his pen as though it was a piece of red-hot iron and reached for his pencil. In a fatherly tone of disapproval he said:

"You must consider other people's feelings, Maille. Look at this. You've written, '. . . and we thank you for . . .' That's a bit lukewarm, don't you think? Can't you put it some other way? For instance, 'and we are all the more grateful to you for . . .' Alter that for me, will you. They'll like it much better."

To avoid all possible mistake, he took up his red pencil again and scribbled all over the signature which he had just granted in a moment of weakness.

This second act was devoted to the finer points of courtesy. In the third, which began about six o'clock, Mr. Chaulette dealt with the columns of figures to be enclosed with the letters. His critical faculty fastened upon their position in relation to the two-dimensional space com-

prised by the page. At this juncture Maille felt it his duty to observe that if the mail had to be re-typed it would miss the evening train and, in consequence, the morning plane.

“Good heavens!” Mr. Chaulette cried. “But it’s got to get off to-morrow, whatever happens! You say the collection’s at seven o’clock? You’d better ring up and make sure. They can make it a little later if we ask them, surely?”

The Tamil postmaster, who was beginning to get used to these strange requests, invariably made the same reply. The mail would still have a chance of arriving on time if it was delivered at the back door of the post office by half-past seven.

This was not good enough for Mr. Chaulette.

“Are you sure that’s the absolute limit? Ask him if a quarter to eight wouldn’t do just as well.”

The postmaster replied that the train left at eight o’clock and he needed time to get the bags down to the station.

“What if we take the bags down to the station ourselves?” Mr. Chaulette anxiously inquired.

The Tamil postmaster explained for the umpteenth time that if the railway officials were prepared to take delivery of the mail bags, then it should be all right if they got to the station by five to eight, but he could not vouch for this.

“You see!” Mr. Chaulette exclaimed triumphantly. “Never lose hope! We’ve got all the time in the world. Hurry up and get all this re-typed. It’s such a mess, no one could make head or tail of it now.”

Maille rushed back to the Secretariat and explained to Mr. Xuan that each column of figures should be a separate enclosure and not inserted into the text. In consequence everything had to be done all over again.

A pure waste of time, as it turned out. For at half-past seven Mr. Chaulette decided that the output figures would have to be given in kilogrammes per hectare as well as in pounds per acre. Consequently everything had to be re-

vised once more. The time factor no longer bothered him. He had found a solution.

"Tell Ahman to stand by with the Buick," he said. "You can catch the train up. It stops at every station."

Slumped in the back seat of the Buick, Maille raced through the night in pursuit of the Singapore train. The *syce* Ahman was used to these hell-for-leather drives and fully justified his nickname of Seagrave. He tore through the crowded outskirts of Kuala Getah like a whirlwind, without deigning to slow down for the jay-walking natives who would jump out of the way at the last moment cursing loudly. On the open road he put his foot down and gobbled up mile after mile of silent darkness. Ahman almost always caught up with the train, more often than not at Serambam which was sixty miles from Kuala Getah, sometimes a little farther on. On one occasion the delay had been too long. The *syce* Ahman had driven all night, while Maille slumbered in the back seat like a boxer who has just been through an unequal fight. They had arrived at Singapore in the early hours of the morning, just in time to deliver the mail before the aircraft took off.

## III

Sophia remained almost completely unaffected by the disturbances of the outside world. Under Mr. Chaulette's leadership, the brains of the organisation toiled night and day to keep the machinery working at full pitch and to strengthen its internal morale. The threat of war had made the Managing Director even more conscious of the necessity to disassociate Sophia from the human factor.

He had therefore made known his views in a circular. "Our organisation must now assume a character of sim-

plicity and automatism which would enable it, in the event of any grave occurrence such as the outbreak of war, to carry on with a skeleton staff." This phrase said a good deal for its author's conception of simplicity and for the importance he attached to organisation as an intrinsic value divorced from the field of application.

In almost every department of Sophia the character of automatism was now fairly noticeable and it could be truthfully said that a certain degree of general simplicity had begun to emerge from the complexity of detail, or at least an appearance of simplicity relative to a particular scale of vision.

The offices, for instance, were all equipped strictly in accordance with the model laid down in *General Instructions*. Those in Kebun Kossong were exactly the same as those in Sungei Ikan, those on the Bangar Estate, those in Perak, those in Kedah in the north and those in Johore in the south. The same desk in *merbau* wood for the assistant. The same chair. The same metal cupboard. The same filing system and the same form of index for the same documents. In the course of the frequent transfers of personnel a planter of Sophia could walk into any of these offices and feel immediately at home. He knew that the first chart, on the left as he went in, showed the first-class roads of the division represented by continuous red lines; that the second showed the second-class roads represented by continuous blue lines; that the third showed the tracks represented by dotted green lines; and that the fourth showed the footpaths in grey. The control exercised by the visitors from the Agency was thereby also considerably facilitated. Some planters managed to derive some sort of satisfaction from this, but most of them deplored it.

The monster of organisation put out ramified tentacles which extended even as far as the fields. The *kanganis* were now issued with pencils of a specified colour to jot down their figures in the columns of note books printed specially for them in Tamil. Mr. Bedoux had recovered

from his fit of depression and had appealed directly to Mr. Chaulette for assistance and collaboration from the planters. Mr. Chaulette, who for some time had suspected the plantation staffs of harbouring reactionary sentiments, had sent out a circular to all the directors requesting them, in fairly strong terms, to put their influence and experience at the technician's disposal and holding them personally responsible for the results obtained by him. The directors had sworn like troopers, but had complied: Fresh experimental gangs, formed by Mr. Bedoux who was now assisted by young Barthe, had been placed under the direct surveillance of the regular staff. Their average output had quickly caught up with that of the other gangs, which had enabled Mr. Bedoux to prove by diagram that it had actually exceeded it and to take his leave of Malaya with the honours of war and the planters' blessings. His method had been christened the "Sophia Standard Tapping System" and was straightaway incorporated in *General Instructions*. A compromise had been reached between theory and practice: Ramasamy went through the same movements as before, only now he carried out his task in a series of fits and starts which gave the illusion of speed.

The Dassiers were installed in Desbat's old bungalow on the Bangar Estate, while Maille had moved into Reynaud's. Their transfer to the Agency had coincided with the death of their child.

He was carried off by an illness which the doctors had been unable to diagnose and against which he had had no resistance. Following so closely on the emotion caused by the tragic aeroplane accident, the event had passed almost unnoticed among the rest of Sophia. This second loss plainly had none of the significance of the first. Maille had called on Germaine Dassier and was surprised not to find her as grief-stricken as he had feared. She had always been used to living apart from her son. Her resolute attitude was attributed to a strength of character that had

hitherto lain concealed, and her stock had gone up several points with the directors of the Company.

Jean Dassier had been heartbroken for some time. Then he had pulled himself together, seeking relief in the increased work which his new responsibilities imposed. He had found it. Mr. Chalette had congratulated him warmly, both on the task he had accomplished at Kebun Kossong and for the energy he showed in his present post. He had added that his duties were actually those of a director even though he had not *yet* been given the rank. His emphasis on the word "yet" sounded promising. They had come to a friendly agreement whereby Dassier should carry on until the middle of 1939, when a junior would be available to replace him. This meant he would have been five and a half years in the field instead of four, but to make up for this he would be granted eight months' home leave instead of six.

## I V

"A confidential letter for you, Dassier. I thought I'd better bring it along myself."

Maille already knew the contents of the letter. Dassier looked gloomy. Confidential letters usually boded no good. He tore open the envelope and read:

"We have much pleasure in informing you that you have been granted the rank of Director with effect from . . ."

Dassier was overwhelmed.

"Well I never! That's good news if ever there was!"

He could not think of anything else to say. Feeling tired, he had left the Agency at half-past five whereas he usually stayed on working till eight or nine o'clock. Maille had looked for him everywhere in the Technical Department and had then decided to go up to his bungalow. Mr.



Chaulette had made his decision on the advice of Uncle Law who recognised the fine job Dassier had done.

“Germaine! Do sit down, Maille. Germaine, quick! Look! I’ve been made a director! A *stengah*, Maille? We must celebrate this.”

“Darling, I’m so happy for you.”

Maille noticed what an effort she had to make to show a little enthusiasm.

“It’s marvellous, Jean. I . . . I congratulate you.”

Dassier was deeply moved.

“You’ve got no idea what this means to me, Maille. After we’ve waited so long! Sophia really is a fine company—a ‘great company,’ as Moss said. He was right. You’ll realise that one day. You’re still young. Life may not seem worth living at times, but it all turns out all right in the end. Once you’ve proved your worth, Sophia never lets you down. Here’s to your health. And to yours, darling!”

There was a sour expression on Germaine’s face. Jean’s delight was perfectly natural, but Maille felt irritated and uncomfortable.

“Let’s drink to Chaulette as well. You can say what you like, but he’s a chief in a million. We’ll make a night of it this evening. We’ll go into town for dinner and look in at the Club on the way. You’ll come with us, Maille, won’t you?”

“Yes, do come with us, Maille,” Germaine echoed.

They went off in Dassier’s car. Germaine kept peering through the window at the fan-like movement of the rubber-trees waving in the breeze. Maille observed her face in profile and could not help noticing how drawn and pale she looked. They drove through Kuala Getah. The streets were teeming with natives. There was not a single European in the crowd that overflowed the pavements, though one or two could be seen from time to time sitting with a preoccupied air in the back of a big American car driven by a *syce* in a white uniform and black velvet cap.

At the Club they sat down at a table by the swimming-pool. There were not many people about. The water looked less and less inviting as the colour slowly faded from the sky. The lights went on outside on the terrace. Midges and mosquitoes began swarming round the incandescent globes. Chinese "boys" armed with sprays moved from group to group squirting clouds of insecticide under the tables to protect the ladies' bare legs.

They picked up their bags and went inside to change. As they passed through the bar, Uncle Law, who was sitting with a group of people at a table, rose to his feet and went up to Dassier.

"Congratulations, Mister Manager! Pity I'm not free this evening. We'll make up for it some other night, eh? Hello, Maille! It's been a long time since you sent me a blue or pink slip. . . ."

Uncle Law had much the same attitude towards the organisation of Sophia as he had towards the customs, traditions and laws of his country, that's to say he joked about it unmercifully while regarding it as a necessary discipline. He was the sort of man who always tried to justify any decision he made. Maille thought very highly of him ever since he had listened to him, for over an hour, expatiating with great persistence on all the interesting elements that were to be found in the work of the Secretariat, as though he feared these might not be self-evident. He was the only one in the Agency who had troubled to look into the question.

Germaine Dassier disappeared into the ladies' changing-room, while they went into the gentlemen's.

Maille felt like a fish out of water; and Dassier, although he had been in the country several years, seemed likewise out of his normal element. The Sophia staff was always regarded with a certain uneasy curiosity. Those eccentrics who worked till seven or eight in the evening, sometimes even later, who never played golf and hardly ever played tennis except, on rare occasions, among them-

selves! They stood aloof from the other bathers who sat together drinking whisky as they slowly dressed, hastily put on their bathing-trunks and went out to the swimming-pool.

Germaine was already in the water and called out to them. They were about to dive in when their attention was drawn to a "boy" bearing a slate on the end of a pole from table to table. As he passed close by them, they were able to decipher the words inscribed on it in chalk.

"Mr. Dassier. Telephone."

They had both notified Kassim, the Sophia telephone operator, where they could be contacted during the evening should the occasion arise. This was the usual practice at the Agency. Mr. Chaulette made a point of it. In the first place, he had an obsession that something serious might happen at any moment; and secondly, he often wanted to notify one of his colleagues immediately of some idea that had suddenly crossed his mind.

Germaine had swum up towards them and had also read the message as she clung to the edge of the pool.

"Jean, don't go!"

"I'll have to, darling. Law must have seen my name chalked up. What would he say? The very day I've been made a director too!"

He disappeared into the depths of the bar. Maille dived into the pool and swam up to Germaine. After some time Dassier came back. He had hurriedly got dressed again.

"I've got to go off at once," he said to Germaine, almost brusquely, as though to cut short any possible objection. "I'm terribly sorry, abandoning you like this. But why don't you two stay on? I'll leave you the car, Maille. I can get a taxi. You'll have to have dinner without me."

"But Jean, Maille was supposed to be our guest."

"You'll sign for everything in my name, Maille, of course. Where are you thinking of going?"

Maille suggested Ah-Kee's, the Chinese restaurant. She agreed languidly.

"If by any chance I can get away, I'll join you there. But it's not very likely. Chaulette wants to reorganise the Technical Department, he's discussing it with Gladkoff at the moment. You know what that means."

He made for the exit. Uncle Law, who had been watching them for some time, saw him go outside.

"He won't be back," she complained. "I'm sure of that. He'll come home again at two in the morning with a dreadful headache—unless, of course, he's kept up all night."

This eventuality was, in fact, perfectly possible. When Chaulette got his teeth into something that interested him he did not let go very easily. Maille felt he should have known it all along. The only evenings he could hope to spend without the threat of a telephone call were when the Managing Director went off to his rest house, a bungalow about forty miles from Kuala Getah, which he had furnished with an outlandish mixture of modernistic sofas, Malayan carpets, Chinese atrocities and a handful of sumptuously bound books which held pride of place on a little desk. These included the works of Rimbaud, Shelley's poems and a few other volumes which he had never read.

"Oh well, it can't be helped about Jean!" Germaine Dassier abruptly exclaimed. "But you're not going to leave me in the lurch as well, are you?"

They had the pool to themselves. It was the hour for *stengahs*, not for bathing. They swam side by side. The lights of the bar cast a glittering oval in the middle of the pool, the edges of which were plunged in darkness. Arriving at the deep end, where the diving-boards masked even the faint luminosity of the sky, she stopped and caught hold of the cement support, then suddenly flung herself into his arms, seeking consolation in his hungry lips.

They were sitting in wicker arm-chairs, facing the brilliant ellipse. The "boy" brought them out their drinks.

"You must forgive me," she said. "Above all, don't take me seriously. Sometimes I feel I can't stand it any longer and then I lose my head."

After that moment of madness in the pool she had pushed him away and swum off at full speed.

"Sophia! All Jean minds are Chaulette's sudden whims. All he cares about is making a good impression. I don't count for anything in his eyes. It's been like that for a long time now."

She spoke in a stifled voice, drained of all expression. They sat unnoticed in the midst of the other drinkers who were discussing their usual topics of conversation. At Uncle Law's table, round followed round in quick succession. By turning his head slightly, Maille could see the clear-cut profile of the old planter with his lips faintly pursed in the ghost of a whistle—a favourite attitude of his. Every now and then he would glance across at them and raise his glass in a mock toast.

"I've come to the end of my tether. . . . But let's not talk about it. Jean suggested I should leave for France without him. I didn't want to. I didn't dare. He doesn't realise. If I left him now I wouldn't want to see him again, ever . . . I wouldn't ever want to come back."

The cloakroom "boy" had started carrying people's bags out to their cars. The telephone rang in the depths of the bar. The Chinese secretary answered it, then there was a moment's silence. Presently another "boy" came out with the message slate.

Maille saw his own name inscribed on it in capital letters. No one knew him at the Club, except Uncle Law. He did not move. The "boy" went straight past him without his making the slightest gesture.

"Let's leave at once," he said. "There's no telephone at Ah-Kee's. We'll be left in peace. At least I hope Jean won't tell them we're there."

She made as if to protest, but he quickly signed the

chits and led her over towards the exit. Uncle Law was looking the other way.

They did not go directly to Ah-Kee's, the Chinese restaurant where the native food was modified to suit European palates. He suggested going first for a drive through the streets. She was feeling rather guilty.

"You mustn't put yourself out because of me. I'm used to it! We'd better go back. At least you ought to telephone and see."

"I'm not going back this evening. That's definite."

They drove through Kuala Getah again. He realised he had never appreciated how colourful the crowds were until to-night. He was happy to see that she, too, was taking an interest in her surroundings.

The pedestrians seethed in a solid mass down the narrow arcades bordering the illuminated shops on either side of the street. In places they overflowed into the street itself, and the rickshaw coolies had to shout at them to draw aside. They were mainly Chinese. This was the well-to-do commercial quarter. Most of the men were dressed in European clothes: white trousers and starched shirts. Some of them even wore a coat and tie. The women were mostly in pale-coloured pyjamas; only a few of them in traditional Chinese dress with split skirt and high collar. A few Tamil beggars stood out like sore thumbs among all this elegance and cleanliness. There were hardly any Malays. Maille opened the windscreen of the car. A gust of warm air blew in, glueing Germaine's damp hair to her temples. She drew a deep breath. The hard expression on her face had almost completely disappeared.

"It's great fun driving through these crowds, Maille. When you come to think of it, we don't know a thing about them. We live cheek by jowl with them for years on end without getting to know them any better than Europeans who have never been out here. They at least read

books about the Far East, but not us. . . . I'd like to drive in a rickshaw through this mob."

"So would I, this evening. But I'm afraid we'll never be able to allow ourselves that pleasure. There's a limit to one's instincts of revolt and flights of fancy!"

She smiled. It was true. This was all part of the rigid code of behaviour that kept the gentlemen of this country chained to their sense of respectability. In this far-flung equatorial outpost three-quarters covered in virgin jungle, where savages still built their little huts in the trees, a European was a slave to his motor-car. At the very most he could go for a short stroll in the evening. To drive in a rickshaw would have been regarded as a serious breach of etiquette.

"If you feel like it, let's get out and walk for a bit."

She accepted with childish enthusiasm, as though he had offered her some rare treat. Maille parked the car near Ah-Kee's restaurant and they set off together down the arcades. Germaine stopped in front of every shop and took a childish delight in losing herself in the crowd.

"I can't thank you enough for this. I'm absolutely loving it. I've never been down here at night. . . ."

He was amazed that such a commonplace amusement could bring about such an astounding change. Her appearance had altered completely. There was a new light in her eyes. She took Maille's arm with a happy laugh and they plunged into the crowd. They felt like two children out on the spree as they made their way back towards the Chinese restaurant, walking arm in arm.

By their car stood the black Agency Buick, overshadowing every other vehicle with its massive bulk and gleaming coachwork.

Maille let go of Germaine's arm. Squatting on his heels by the door of the restaurant, Ahman the Malay *syce* with the white cap was mounting guard, closely scrutinising every customer going inside.

He had seen them. He came up and touched his cap.

"*Tabeh; mem, Tabeh, tuan,*"<sup>1</sup> he said, as he handed Maille a note.

It was a sheet of paper without an envelope, folded in four. Maille recognised the handwriting at a glance.

"Can you come back at once? I'm in the middle of transforming the whole organisation of the Agency, with Gladkoff and Dassier. I need you for certain administrative questions."

Germaine looked at him in silence. Her mouth contracted. It was only too easy to guess the contents of the message. Maille folded the sheet of paper into four again, taking care not to crumple it, handed it back to Ahman and spoke to him in Malay.

"I'm not going to Ah-Kee's this evening. Tell the *tuan* that you didn't see me."

Germaine's face lit up for a second, but she protested.

"You can't do that. I won't allow you to. . . ."

"It's no use," he said to her brusquely. "You can't do a thing about it. It's already decided."

He smiled as he saw an expression of gratitude come into her eyes that was out of all proportion to the importance of his gesture.

"But back there at the Club, Law must have seen . . . If Chaulette hears about it, he'll be furious. You can't trust this chauffeur. He's bound to say he saw us."

"I'm not so sure. Anyway we'll see."

The *syce* Ahman looked extremely ill at ease. He nodded his head with an awkward air.

"You're sure you understand?" Maille asked him. "I'm not going to Ah-Kee's. . . . That's quite true, we'll go and dine somewhere else. You stay here a little longer, then you go off and have some dinner yourself. Here's two dollars for you. After that you go back to the *tuan*. Tell him that you waited here for half an hour and that you never saw me at all."

Old Ahman still looked undecided, though his kindly

<sup>1</sup> "Good evening, madam. Good evening, sir."



old face was now creased into a smile and his eyes sparkled with mischief. He looked Maille straight in the eye, then gazed intently at Germaine and finally made up his mind.

"Very well, *tuan*. I haven't seen you."

He saluted and, to prove that he had understood, went back at once and resumed his post by the door. Maille led Germaine off towards the car.

"We'll go and dine in a proper Chinese restaurant, where the Chinese themselves go and eat. You sit on a bench, and it's out in the open, but at least the food's good. Do you like the idea?"

"Do I like it! But I'm really worried about you. If the *syce* lets the cat out of the bag, Chaulette will never forgive you. I'd be heartbroken. . . ."

The tone of her voice so belied her words that he burst out laughing. She followed his example.

"Let's hope the *syce* keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't look a bad sort."

"He's a Malay. He must be opposed to tyranny."

As they walked off he drew her attention to old Ahman who was calmly and conscientiously peering at every European in sight. She could not restrain a fresh surge of hilarity.

They sat down in the garden of the restaurant, surrounded by Chinese busily pecking at countless small plates. Trying to eat with chopsticks made her laugh like a child. She stopped suddenly and a gleam of gratitude came into her eyes again.

"I'll never forget what you've done for me this evening."

"I didn't do it for you only, it was also for myself. Do you think the sort of life we lead is any more bearable for us men than it is for you?"

She looked at him curiously, as though she had never asked herself that question.

"Collective work, with all the artificiality, constraint

and degradation for the individual that its inevitable organisation entails! That mystique which Chaulette exalts like the high priest of some new religion—each one of us a link in the chain—and which little by little kills any significance the job might ever have had, through sheer humbug! There's infinitely less interest in our profession these days than in that of a provincial grocer—for him, at least, current market prices are a matter of personal concern. But our only worry is whether Sophia is pleased with us or not. The only fault we can commit is to fall into disgrace. I'm beginning to develop a real hatred for the team spirit. . . .”

“Maille, you're an anarchist!”

“Look at the state we've reached in this land of liberty and equatorial forest. We've come to the point where we regard an evening like this as a heaven-sent blessing. A blessing just to go for a swim, take a stroll down the street, and have dinner in the open air! All we ever learn here are the ins and outs of our precious organisation. We don't know a thing about the Malay world that exists beyond our artificial trees; we can't even speak the language, apart from the two or three hundred words we pick up during the first few months. Collective work requires us to look inwards on ourselves at every moment. Whether we're in Europe, Malaya or anywhere else, it doesn't make the slightest difference. . . . I promise you one thing: if I ever leave Sophia I swear I'll never belong to any team again, not even a sports team. Even in that field they're beginning to talk about the collective spirit. I swear I'll never sit down to a dinner at which there are more than four guests!”

She burst out laughing without restraint.

“Just as I thought, you *are* an anarchist. I am too, I believe. . . . But I won't hear a word against this evening. It's not so bad after all.”

“You're right. To hell with Sophia! We've had enough trouble breaking free for a few hours. Anyway I'm being

unjust and I know it. There are times when the collective effort does seem worth-while . . . in the beginning. The trouble is, it always deteriorates."

They were separated from the street by a wooden trellis through which they could see the crowds pouring through the entrance of the Padang Bitang, the big amusement park of Kuala Getah. At the neighbouring tables courting couples sat demurely pecking at their food. When they first arrived, after their bathe and the drive in the car, it had not seemed particularly hot, but after the highly spiced sauces they were reminded of the climate and beads of sweat began to appear on their brow. The "boy" brought them some steaming napkins and they dabbed their faces with them, which produced a salutary sensation of coolness. He watched her as she repaired her damaged make-up.

"It's too late to go to the cinema. What would you like to do? The Majestic? The Eastern?"

The approved places of entertainment for Europeans were strictly limited: the terrace of the Majestic Hotel, the Eastern night club.

"I can't very well go to a night club. You understand . . . only three months after the loss of our boy."

"I'm sorry."

"Maille . . . it's dreadful, what I'm going to tell you. You'll think the worst of me. But do you know . . . do you know, I hardly felt any sorrow at all. I saw so little of him!"

He could think of nothing to say in reply to this, and neither of them spoke again for some time.

"So what'll it be? The Majestic?"

"What I'd really like . . . you'll think me completely mad, but have you ever been inside the Padang Bitang?"

"Only once. It's not up to much, but if you feel like it . . . anyway we're not likely to run into anyone we know there."

"Please, let's go. I'd like to walk a little more again."

They entered the park and ambled slowly past the vari-

ous stalls: the rifle ranges, the Malay shops which sold statuettes carved out of wood, the pin-tables and the tombola stands which created the same sort of atmosphere as a street fair in a populous quarter of Paris. What fascinated them most, her just as much as him, were the crowds: the groups of little Chinese girls in pink or blue pyjamas, the demure-looking couples who walked side by side holding hands, or the few Malay women in flowered sarongs, with round heavily-painted faces.

They stopped in front of the Chinese theatre, where the music, punctuated by a rattle of drums, periodically drowned every other sound in the park. A little farther on, in the less noisy Malay theatre, a group of actors in sarongs were giving a performance of the famous native play *Hamlet Rajah of Denmark*, which always caused so much amusement among Western tourists, as though the Malay version was any worse than many others. They tried to follow the thread of the dialogue but only managed to catch an occasional word here and there.

Germaine wanted to see everything. She even tried to get a close view of the boxing show where, in the middle of a wildly vociferous crowd, two tiny figures were waving their fists in the air like children who did not know how to fight.

“So this is what they mean by romantic nights under a tropic moon!”

“You be quiet! At heart you’re just as fascinated as I am.”

After walking about for over an hour, he persuaded her to look into the dance hall in the middle of the park, which was patronised exclusively by natives. They drank a few *stengahs* and enjoyed themselves enormously as they watched the couples gliding round the floor.

Sitting bolt upright in their chairs in the front row, in imitation of the “correct” behaviour in force in the establishments reserved for Europeans, the taxi-girls quietly waited for the men to come up and ask them for a dance. A few of them, however, mingled with the customers at the

bar—which would never have been allowed at the Eastern. They were mostly Chinese, dressed in skirts with the usual slit up the side but slightly higher than at the Eastern. They had the gestures and smiles of children and contrived to introduce a sort of pawky grace into the steps of the Lambeth Walk. At the end of each dance their partners would escort them politely back to their chairs and furtively slip into their hands one of the tickets from a sheaf they had bought at the cash-desk by the entrance. Those with more consideration would slip it straight under their bag which they had left on the table beside their chair. A Chinese in spectacles, sitting at a table by the orchestra, would then jot some figures down in a notebook. Germaine wondered what on earth he could be writing.

“He’s the secretary of the place. He makes a note of the number of dances each girl has in the course of the evening. If he finds her average isn’t high enough, after a few days she is dismissed.”

“No!”

“Certainly. Didn’t I tell you we’re living in an organised world? Don’t forget that Chinese civilisation is just as highly developed as our own. In the same way the Secretary of Sophia . . .”

“Hush! Not another word about Sophia.”

After following the evolutions of every couple, she regretfully gave the signal to leave and they started back for the Bangar Estate. For a long time they drove along in unbroken silence. Then, as they were crossing the strip of jungle just outside the confines of Sophia, she spoke without looking at him.

“You’ll never know how grateful I am to you.”

They were now driving through the middle of the Company trees. The Dassier bungalow was in darkness. The “boy” had gone to bed. Above them, on the highest hill in the plantation, they could see Mr. Chaulette’s brightly lit residence. They noticed some figures in the living-room.

"They're still at it," said Maille. "The whole staff in conference. Jean won't get back until two or three in the morning."

"It can't be helped. I shan't wait up for him."

They felt vaguely depressed by the darkness and silence of the plantation after the noise and bustle of the Padang Bitang. He drew closer to her. She edged away. The black depths of the undergrowth were enlivened by tiny ephemeral pin-points of light, perceptible for the bare fraction of a second. He sat beside her, awkward and undecided.

"You'd better go off at once."

She raised her lips to his, then disappeared into the bungalow. Maille drove away immediately.

v

Mr. Chaulette swung round in his swivel chair and picked up the telephone. This gesture reminded him of an advertisement he had seen in an American magazine for a new internal system of telecommunication with loudspeakers, which operated at the mere turn of a switch and eliminated the use of a receiver. The device also enabled several people in different offices to hold a regular conference without even moving from their chairs. He made a mental note to have one of these machines installed in the Agency. But for the time being he had something else on his mind.

"Put me through to Mr. Maille," he said.

There was a few seconds' pause. He cursed this waste of precious time during which he was forced to wait, with his ear glued to the receiver, in a ridiculous attitude worthy of some antediluvian age.

"Good morning, Maille. Would you come in for a moment, please."

The young man prepared to meet the storm. The *syce* Ahman had probably spilled the beans. It was nine o'clock.

Something serious must be up for Mr. Chalette to be in so early after spending most of the night in conference.

He went out of his office, through the clerks' room and the vast empty antechamber, and pushed open the swing door. Before him stretched a second vast area of space. At the far end, firmly ensconced behind his desk in his usual attitude, sat the Managing Director. Mr. Chalette called out to him as soon as he was inside.

"Here, I say, Maille. The tiger's head—we've always placed it right in the centre. Yes, the tiger's head on the cover of the *Bulletin*. Don't you think it would look better in one of the corners?"

And he threw himself back in his chair the better to scrutinise his colleague through his horn-rimmed glasses.

The young secretary was disconcerted by this unexpected opening. Tormented by a vague feeling of remorse, he had not slept more than a couple of hours, trying to think of suitable answers to the questions that would be put to him about the reorganisation of the Agency. He had not been prepared for the tiger's head. Ahman had not let him down, and the chief's thoughts had taken a completely different turn.

He was now thinking about the Company's house journal, *The Sophia Bulletin*, a quarterly publication which was brought out by the Secretariat, based on contributions submitted by members of the staff. Each issue consisted of sixty copies which were run off on the duplicating machine and bound in grey cardboard covers adorned with a black and white drawing representing a tiger's head.

"The tiger's head?" Maille stammered. "In one of the corners? Yes, perhaps. If you like, I'll have some covers for the next issue printed like that. This one's now finished and bound. You passed it yesterday, sir, and it's got to be sent out to-day."

"Yes, but I still feel the tiger's head will look much better in one of the corners," Mr. Chalette went on. "To me that's as clear as daylight. You think so too, don't you?"

I feel the current issue ought to be improved in this way. Come now, Maille, it wouldn't be such a big job, would it? You know how keen I am about the appearance of the *Bulletin*."

When he wanted to have his own way, Mr. Chaulette would not hesitate to abandon his tone of authority for an almost girlish coyness. Maille, who had expected a dressing down when he first came in, was completely non-plussed by this affable approach.

"We'll have to undo all sixty copies one by one," he muttered, "then reprint all the covers and bind them up again. Apart from that, quite a lot of pages will probably be spoilt in the process, and they'll have to be re-done."

"Good!" Mr. Chaulette exclaimed in a tone of profound relief. "You see, it's not as complicated as all that, and I'm sure the result will be worth it. Now all that remains is to decide exactly where we're going to place the tiger's head. Get Bonardin for me, will you? He may have some suggestion to make."

Maille picked up the telephone and asked for the head of the Commercial Section. A few inarticulate grunts could be heard on the other end of the line.

Bonardin's external manifestations were limited to three forms of self-expression which corresponded to three essential aspects of his character. Bonardin was sentimental, timid and nervously unstable. As a sentimentalist, admiration was as necessary to his existence as breathing; in Sophia and Mr. Chaulette he had been lucky enough to find a couple of objects that adequately fulfilled this spiritual need of his. As a timid man, he lived in perpetual terror of displeasing Mr. Chaulette and Sophia and was forced to make a huge effort to overcome or at least conceal this haunting fear. As a victim of nervous instability, he reacted against this idolisation and fear by a constant display of bad temper and an instinctive aversion to anything and everything apart from Sophia and Mr. Chaulette.



Mr. Chaulette was well aware of this and did not hesitate to use, and even exploit, these sentiments for his own ends. It was a real object lesson to witness a conversation between Bonardin and the Managing Director, to see the desperate efforts which the former made to maintain the self-assurance he had built up in advance, and the pleasure which the latter took in slowly breaking down this attitude with a few disconcerting observations uttered in an icy tone of voice. It usually needed no more than two or three minutes for the initial display of defiance, which on occasion verged on the brink of polite contradiction, to be shamefully reduced to servile submission, while the ingenious remarks that had been so carefully thought out gave way to sycophantic agreement.

Bonardin took it out on everyone else, especially the junior assistants, for the nightmare in which the object of his worship made him live. Recognising Maille's voice on the telephone, he immediately assumed that disgruntled, exasperated and exasperating voice for which he was renowned throughout the Company. He was about to hang up, as he usually did, when Maille managed to slip in a word to the effect that Mr. Chaulette wanted to see him at once.

A few minutes later he knocked on the door unnecessarily loudly and with an extravagant gesture that betrayed the superhuman effort he was making to assume an appearance of self-assurance. He burst into the room like a whirlwind, waving his arms about in the air, taking enormous strides, displacing a huge volume of air, leaning forward with his head slightly inclined, in his role of the busy tycoon who has just been interrupted in the middle of some extremely important deal. Mr. Chaulette raised his eyes and seemed to weigh him up in silence.

No sooner was he inside than Bonardin tried to assert himself by switching the conversation on to a subject which he knew to be to the Managing Director's liking, an

attempt which was hardly ever crowned with success and which, Maille felt, had little chance of succeeding this time.

"I spent most of yesterday checking the monthly accounts of the plantations," he said. "No two of them present them in the same way. I've drafted a circular on the subject . . . if you'd like to have a look at it, sir."

He thrust a paper under his chief's nose. But Mr. Chaulette was not to be caught unawares by a sudden attack. He muttered, "Yes, yes . . ." then forestalled all further interruption with a sweeping gesture of his arm.

"Now look, Bonardin. It's about the *Bulletin*. We'd like to hear what you have to say. We feel it's not very original to have this tiger's head right in the centre of the cover. As the emblem of Sophia, it might look better in some other position. What do you think?"

To Mr. Chaulette it was self-evident that the tiger's head was the emblem of Sophia. Bonardin would have given several years of his life to be able to make some pithy remark on this question. He knew there was nothing the Managing Director liked more than a well-turned piece of criticism—constructive criticism, as he called it—which he could then systematically pull to pieces until his original idea appeared to be the only sound solution. Bonardin knew this, but he was no more prepared for the tiger's head than Maille had been. The tiger's head brought him up short. Feeling incapable of putting forward a considered opinion, Bonardin resorted to his usual base toadying but also made a half-hearted attempt to draw a red herring across the trail—a ruse which he did his best to camouflage under a tone of authority.

"There can be no question," he imperiously asserted, "there can be no question of doing away with the tiger's head. The tiger's head *must* appear on the cover of the *Bulletin*. It's not only an emblem, it's a tradition."

And he cast a furious glance at Maille, as much as to say that such a sacrilegious suggestion could only have

been made by a young probationer who was probably an anarchist to boot!

"The tiger's head is the very symbol of the Company. . . ."

But this new stratagem met with no more success than the first. Mr. Chaulette was far too pertinacious to let the conversation fly off at a tangent. Besides, if certain words like "emblem" and "symbol" went to his head when pronounced by him, he found them over-emphatic, out of place and even ridiculous, on Bonardin's lips. Firmly, with a hint of irritation in his voice, he brought him back to the original subject under discussion.

"Now, now, Bonardin. There's no question of doing away with the tiger's head. No one suggested that for a moment. We only thought—I thought, to be exact—that the appearance of the *Bulletin* would be considerably improved if this emblem, as you rightly call it, were placed in one of the corners. That's why I sent for you, and it's only on this point that I'd like to have your opinion."

"I ab-so-lute-ly agree," Bonardin hastened to declare, hammering out the words as Mr. Chaulette sometimes did.

Realising there was nothing else he could do, he had decided to capitulate. He now did his best to cloak his defeat and get out of the difficult situation he was in by laying it on thick.

"I ab-so-lute-ly agree. In one of the corners, that's where it ought to be. Why on earth didn't we notice it before? The centre must be left clear. That will make it far more modern—far more striking, that is. I shouldn't hesitate for a moment."

But this was not quite enough for Mr. Chaulette, who was a difficult man to please. He had decided to exploit the subject of the tiger's head to the full. The tiger's head was the "incidental detail" which had been carefully selected and isolated from every essential. No chief worthy of the name will renounce the incidental detail when fortune favours him with one so splendidly lacking in

genuine significance. Bonardin's hasty capitulation disturbed his plans. He sat for a moment in silence, in a mood of indecision, his vast frame tensed as though preparing for a fresh attack. Eventually he raised his head, glared at Bonardin who looked extremely uncomfortable, and in an icy tone let fly the question:

"In which corner?"

This blunted the edge of Maille's optimism. For a moment he had almost hoped that the tiger's head was finished and done with. He made a last attempt to save the situation and unhesitatingly declared:

"In the top left-hand corner."

"In the top left-hand corner?" Mr. Chaulette slowly repeated, as though to grasp the full significance of this suggestion. "In the top left-hand corner. . . . Hmm! Yes. After all, why not? That doesn't seem a bad idea. What do you think, Bonardin?"

Being unable to think of any valid objection, Bonardin agreed with a condescending air that it didn't seem a bad idea at all. Then, eager to subscribe to the general discussion with some contribution of his own, he added:

"Yes, certainly, in the top left-hand corner. So as to leave the rest of the cover completely clear."

Maille could willingly have strangled him. He had detected the bloomer even before Bonardin had finished speaking. Mr. Chaulette was not slow to bear down on this faulty reasoning—like a bull on a red rag, but with a somewhat more ponderous majesty. He allowed a few moments to elapse and then observed:

"But in point of fact, Bonardin . . . in point of fact, if we put it in the *bottom* left-hand corner, or even in either of the *right*-hand corners, the rest of the cover would be left *equally* clear. I don't quite see what you're getting at, Bonardin. Could you please explain how the fact of putting the tiger's head in the top left-hand corner would leave a larger area of clear space than if it was put in any other corner?"

Bonardin's blunders sometimes aroused a dormant sense of coherence in Mr. Chaulette. It was difficult to find an answer to this logic. Utterly worsted, Bonardin blurted out some incomprehensible explanation which threw no further light on the matter.

"But there *must* be some solution," the Managing Director broke in, with a faint note of irritation in his voice. "We can't very well scrap the present issue and spend five hundred dollars to have it reprinted without knowing exactly what we're after. Maille, you'd better ring up Law and ask him what he thinks. And get hold of Gladkoff as well. Those Slavs often have some bright ideas!"

Maille had difficulty in making himself understood in English on the telephone, and the subject required a detailed explanation.

"Ask him to come down here," Mr. Chaulette broke in, pensively contemplating the tiger's head.

Realising the business was important, Uncle Law said he would be there in a minute. The same reply came from Gladkoff, who loved being interrupted in the middle of his work.

"Tell him to bring Dassier with him," Mr. Chaulette called out.

Five minutes later the Agency staff was assembled in full strength in the Managing Director's office.

"Now look, Law," Mr. Chaulette began. "This is the point. . . ."

And he embarked in English on the question of the tiger's head. Law had a reputation for sound common sense and Maille pinned his last hopes on the wisdom of his judgment. But Mr. Chaulette presented the subject close to his heart with such artistry and forcefulness that Law, whose fundamental characteristic was professional conscientiousness, felt it his duty to examine the problem from every angle. So did Gladkoff and Dassier. From

that moment they were lost. Mr. Chalette had them under his thumb. They all applied their minds to the tiger's head. They started off by discussing in the abstract every possible position for it—the centre, the top, the bottom, the left-hand side, the right-hand side. Then Gladkoff declared that for this type of research nothing in the world could give such good results as the experimental method—an unexpected suggestion on his part, to which Law lent his full support. So Maille went off and fetched a pile of *Bulletin* covers as well as several pairs of scissors, and they all began cutting out tiger's heads and placing them in various positions, standing back every now and then to judge the effect. They were about to come to a final agreement on the top left-hand corner when Gladkoff had a sudden brainwave and suggested placing the tiger's head at an angle. This gave new life to the discussion which had begun to flag. Uncle Law objected violently to such a proposal, which offended all his conservative British instincts, and weighed in with a fierce argument against the oblique position. Mr. Chalette sided with him.

“And besides,” he added, “we mustn't forget that this tiger's head is the symbol of Sophia. I ask you, Gladkoff, what would it look like if this symbol was all askew?”

The discussion was thus resumed on a higher plane, and they reconsidered all the possible positions “in the light of” this symbolic significance.

It transpired that the top left-hand corner was again voted the best, even from this point of view. Thereupon Mr. Chalette raised the point as to whether the tiger's head should be exactly in the corner or whether a narrow margin of grey cardboard should be left round the edge; and they all tried to think of a solution which would find favour with their chief—all, that is, except Uncle Law, who really, truly, and in all conscience, tried to work out the ideal position. Then, when the margin was agreed upon, they went on to discuss how wide it should be. The Frenchmen put forward their suggestions in millimetres,

and Uncle Law required them to translate these suggestions into eighths of an inch.

After this the question of the position and size of the title, *Sophia Bulletin*, suggested itself quite naturally as a subject of further discussion.

Mr. Chaulette felt that the present lettering was too small and not sufficiently bold. Since he had decided to have new covers made, it was logical to seize this opportunity of correcting this fault. This led to a long conversation on the telephone with the printers at Kuala Getah. The facilities at their disposal did not satisfy the Managing Director, who wanted to know about the possibilities of photographic plates. Eventually, towards two o'clock in the afternoon, Maille was dispatched into town, in the Agency Buick driven by the *syce* Ahman in order to save time, with the rather vague directive to inquire into the various possibilities on the spot and to order a sample copy of each. These would have to be ready first thing in the morning so that a decision might be taken by lunch-time, the model chosen and the covers printed in the course of the afternoon, and the *Bulletin* re-bound and sent out in the evening.

Maille hurried off, on an empty stomach. On occasions like this Mr. Chaulette never thought of food. As a matter of fact he could spend the entire day discussing questions of this sort, without a moment's pause or change of atmosphere.

As Maille was getting into the Buick, Uncle Law, who was on his way back to his office, murmured in an off-hand manner:

"Enjoy yourself yesterday evening, Maille?"

Which filled him at once with confusion and gratitude. The *syce* Ahman, who understood a few words of English, did not even turn his head.

Early next morning Mr. Chaulette sent for him.

"What about the *Bulletin*?" he asked impatiently. "It's

got to be sent out some day, you know! When will it be ready?"

Maille reminded him about the covers. At the moment every clerk in the Secretariat had been mobilised to re-type the stencils of the pages that had been spoilt, as expected, in the unbinding process.

"Good! What about those new covers? How far have you got with them?"

"Here they are!" the young man exclaimed triumphantly.

He spread out several sample copies which had just been delivered by the printers, with the tiger's head placed in the top left-hand corner surrounded by margins of various widths and with the title printed in lettering of various sizes. He had spent the previous evening offering large tips to the Chinese artisans of Kuala Getah so that the work might be completed during the night.

Mr. Chaulette accorded them a cursory glance.

"Yes . . . yes, not bad at all. Not very striking, though, do you find? Ah well! We can't expect perfection. Let's see now, which of them would you choose?"

"This one," Maille said with determination, pointing at random.

"I agree," Mr. Chaulette replied indifferently.

He was clearly no longer interested in the question. Other thoughts now occupied his mind. All of a sudden he burst out:

"We've got to have this loudspeaker telecommunication system installed in the Agency, Maille. It's absolutely essential. Ring up the agents and make an appointment. We'll discuss it on the spot. Is Law still there?"

"He's leaving for his tour of inspection this morning, sir."

"Tell him to put it off. He'll be needed here. His advice is always useful."

"Please, sir," Maille tentatively asked, "can I have this



cover run off? It could be ready by this evening. The printers promised."

"Yes, yes, of course, go ahead. Let's get this *Bulletin* business settled once and for all."

Maille went back to the Secretariat.

By eleven o'clock in the evening, urged on by Mr. Chaulette who, Maille was forced to admit, never failed to get results, Sophia had accomplished a miracle in the field of action. Every clerk in the Agency had been kept back in the office, by a subtle mixture of promises, entreaties and threats, to re-type the stencils of the *Bulletin*. The sixty copies had been run off on the duplicating machine. The new covers had been delivered and the binding was more or less finished. Maille thought to himself that in half an hour he would be able to go to bed and dream of Germaine Dassier's eyes. At that very moment the telephone rang.

He had a very definite presentiment of catastrophe, and his heart was in his mouth as he picked up the receiver.

"Is that you, Maille?" the voice inquired. "Can you drop in here for a minute? I managed to persuade the tele-communications agent to stay to dinner. He's got some extremely interesting ideas. I'd like you to come and take a few notes. Is that clear? I'll expect you right away. Get in touch with Law and tell him to come along as well. . . . Oh by the way, about that *Bulletin* of yours, I've been thinking. . . . Well, you know, there's really no point in changing the position of the tiger's head. It doesn't look so bad in the centre. We mustn't rush these things. We'll thrash it out later. . . . After all, it's much more in evidence like that . . . a symbol . . . I'll think it over again. All clear? See you in a moment, then."

Mr. Chaulette rang off at once, for this business of the tiger's head was really beginning to get on his nerves.

## VI

When Uncle Law, who was nothing if not methodical, found on consulting his agenda that he was due to leave for his tour of the plantations the following morning, he took various preliminary steps.

He began by ringing up the Secretariat to make certain that the note on his agenda corresponded to the "standard" date shown on the wall panel. When he was reassured on this point, he gave precise directions as to his future movements, indicating exactly where he could be contacted each evening if the occasion should arise. This task accomplished, he rang up his own bungalow, notified Mrs. Law and gave instructions for the "boy" to pack his suitcase. Finally he assembled all the documents concerned with his inspection and planned his tour in detail.

He liked working according to schedule, without being interrupted. So when Mr. Chaulette disturbed his routine at the very last moment he willingly acquiesced, of course, but not without a touch of irritation and also a twinge of conscience in respect of the plantation managers to whom his quarterly inspection was quite an important event.

This time his programme had been modified again. Sitting in the back of the Morris, with his *syce* at the wheel, on his way to Sungei Ikan, he was worried by a succession of different subjects: first of all the international situation which was deteriorating daily and seemed to be heading straight for war; then the thought that his "boy" might have miscounted the number of shorts and shirts to be put in his suitcase as a result of the orders and counter-orders he had been given; and finally—this was perhaps his greatest concern—he had personally telephoned Stout to explain why he was late (he always liked to give his reasons for everything he did) and had not been at all pleased by

the tone in which the director of Sungei Ikan had replied that "he was entirely at his disposal."

These vexations, however, had little effect on his naturally optimistic temperament as he cheerfully wondered if the directors of the Company would ever set a good example by complying with the regulations which they themselves had laid down. He admired Chaulette sincerely but was baffled by some of his methods, which he attributed to a typically Continental excess of imagination. Of course the telecommunication system was important (for the last thirty-six hours he had studied every aspect of it, while Chaulette worked himself up into a fever of excitement) but all the same, the plantations came first. Stout's voice on the telephone had been extremely disagreeable.

As the Morris drew up outside the main office, the director of Sungei Ikan appeared in the doorway. Uncle Law got out of the car, only too delighted to be back among the rubber-trees bright and early in the morning.

"Hello, Stout. Sorry I couldn't come on the day we'd arranged."

"It doesn't matter. I'm at your disposal," Stout replied in an icy tone of voice, repeating what he had said on the telephone.

Uncle Law had to make an effort to maintain his composure. He liked this attitude less and less. He changed the subject as quickly as possible.

"I left Kuala Getah very early this morning. Did you listen to the news?"

"It doesn't sound too good. England and France are guaranteeing the independence of Poland. Hitler won't step down."

Uncle Law mumbled something under his breath, then got down to the object of his visit in the jovial mood that always came over him as soon as he was away from the Agency.

"Well, how's the old plantation going?"

"I suppose you'll want to start off by inspecting the

office," Stout replied indifferently. "All the documents are ready for you."

The desk was covered in a pile of books and files on which the clerks had been working for several days. Uncle Law frowned and assumed that icy attitude which used to make his assistants shake in their shoes.

"My idea," he said, "was to start off by visiting the fields, as I always do. It was to devote the whole morning to the plantation itself that I left Kuala Getah so early."

"Just as you like," said Stout without a trace of emotion.

They left the office and got into the ancient Ford which was earmarked for the use of visitors. Uncle Law was feeling more and more angry. He was well acquainted with Stout, who had been his assistant for a long time. Outside the service, in spite of the difference in their ages, they were good friends. What an idea, to want to shut him up in the office immediately on arrival! And that coldly polite attitude which was utterly unlike him. Uncle Law felt outraged. He went on in his sternest tone:

"I'd be delighted to check your books this afternoon. This morning I want to have a look at the tapping, the maintenance gangs and the roads. It was for this specific purpose that I left Kuala Getah at the crack of dawn."

"Just as you like," Stout repeated. "I hope the plantation is *also* in good condition."

"And I hope it is, *first and foremost!*" Uncle Law exclaimed, unable to contain himself any longer.

Stout looked even more surly, then all of a sudden something crossed his mind and his whole expression changed.

"Good heavens, Law! I've only just thought of it—you can't have had breakfast yet if you left so early. Let's go up to my bungalow at once."

Uncle Law calmed down and he too assumed a different tone.

"When I was a plantation manager," he observed sententiously, "I would never have dreamt of meeting a visitor without having something to offer him!"

"Breakfast's waiting. I told Alice to have it ready, just in case. You must forgive me—with these new methods of ours, I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"Now look here, Stout," Uncle Law exclaimed with a passionate indignation which had nothing in common with his recent biting attitude. "Listen to me. Our methods . . ."

Then he suddenly broke off, realising no doubt that what he had to say would take far too long to explain.

"We'll talk about it later," he concluded. "In the meantime let's go and have some breakfast."

In the evening the Stouts took Law along to the Club, for it happened to be the weekly guest night. He was in a pensive mood. Even after a shower and a change he felt none of the satisfaction and sense of well-being that he usually enjoyed at this hour.

He lent a languid ear to the news broadcast on an old battery wireless-set that Barthe had put in. The news was bad. War seemed inevitable, but that was not what was worrying him. The unpleasant sensation he had had on meeting Stout this morning had reappeared in the course of the day.

The plantation was in good shape, certainly. And yet there was something wrong: a sort of sadness in the air, an atmosphere of heavy melancholy which affected everyone—the European personnel, the clerks and even Ramasamy. The methods laid down were being closely followed. Heavens, how closely! All the same it was hardly up to him, Uncle Law, to rebel against the orders in force. It was not laziness exactly. On the contrary, even when caught unawares, Ramasamy was actually "working." Uncle Law had been absolutely dumbfounded. All the tappers had adopted uniformly jerky gestures and the *kangani*, on noticing the visitors, had given no more than a pale imitation of his usual robust vocabulary.

As for the assistants! Powell, though relatively senior

and one of those who had planted a number of trees with his own hands—he had come across Powell supervising the tapping tasks, accompanied by an assistant carrying an extraordinary gadget which enabled him to check the perfect form of the spiral and the depth of the incisions. Uncle Law had been so flabbergasted that he had almost lost his temper. He remembered just in time that the instrument had been laid down in *General Instructions*.

Without admitting it even to himself, Uncle Law had expected that on his arrival Powell, like Stout, might feel obliged to adopt an impersonal attitude in his presence. He had been relieved to see how, on the contrary, he had abandoned his methodical measures and had suddenly turned human enough to upbraid a Munniamah who had put down her tools to wash her feet in a ditch. At the rumpus caused by Powell, the *kangani* of the team had hurried forward. As though suddenly roused from a deep sleep, he had launched into a series of blood-curdling yells. She had pretended that she had been bitten by a snake and that cold water was the only cure. This had created an atmosphere of the sort of minor drama that once upon a time used to be enacted every day. On a sudden impulse Stout himself had joined in the argument until, convicted of malingering, she had reluctantly gone back to work. Uncle Law could have hugged her for it!

He was particularly worried about the younger men. They did not even behave like planters. That fellow Layton, for instance—what a strange way he had of prowling round his division, hardly ever stopping to talk to the coolies, never letting a swearword pass his lips, and wearing a perpetually bleak expression! As for Barthe, who had tried to show him his latest timings! He, on the contrary, seemed to take an intense interest in his work. There was even a smug little air about him that exasperated Uncle Law. Yet there was no fault to be found with his methods either. . . . All the same it should be possible, without infringing the rules of Sophia, to introduce a cheerful

element into the work. A plantation had to live, damn it all!

The atmosphere of the Club had confirmed his suspicion that there was something definitely wrong in the air. The first round of *stengahs* had been drunk in complete silence. Everyone seemed ill at ease in his presence, with the possible exception of Stout, who looked at him as though he was some strange animal. No one had suggested a game of billiards. There was only one table arranged for bridge. Everyone gathered round the wireless, as though listening to the news was their sole purpose in life.

The B.B.C. announced the latest developments. The situation was extremely serious. Other thoughts, no less gloomy, flashed through Uncle Law's mind. What effect would the war have on the Asiatic world? It was depressing to think that Sophia, after toiling so hard to reach this stage . . . for, after all, there was no denying the progress achieved during these last few years. Perhaps it had gone a little too far, but the organisation could not be criticised in itself so long as it did not make them all lose their sense of proportion. . . . What would become of Malaya in the event of a war? Even supposing Japan kept out of it? A wholesale reduction in the European personnel. A shortage of materials, petrol and rice. A movement towards emancipation on the part of the clerks and the coolies.

Powell came up and gave a summary of the news. He was in a state of great excitement.

"It can break out any day now," he said. "Perhaps in a few hours. It's inevitable, I tell you. Well, you chaps, it won't be long before we're off."

"Before you're off!" Uncle Law exclaimed.

Lavton joined in the conversation.

"Of course. We'll all be called up. I'm already packed and ready to leave."

"So am I," said a young French assistant, whom Loeken had at last acquired for Kebun Kossong.

Uncle Law was appalled. The younger men had a

feverish glint in their eyes. Powell, who was no longer a fledgling, and even Stout, now showed the enthusiasm that he had vainly looked for in their work. There was no doubt about it—it was a gleam of joy that sparkled in their eyes at the prospect of leaving. Uncle Law was assailed by a dreadful thought against which he had struggled all day. Was it possible that they were now fed up with their job? Almost hated it? They did not want to go and play at soldiers. It wasn't that. The youngest ones perhaps . . . but Stout, Powell? Come, come now! He felt quite sure of their sound common sense and mental stability. It was the prospect of leaving Sophia that enthralled them. Barthe was the only one who did not take part in the general excitement. He remained calm and aloof as usual. But the others, good heavens! You would have thought they were quite prepared to abandon everything, now, on the spot, without a moment's concern for what would happen to their plantations. Uncle Law was quite overcome.

“Rubber is an essential commodity in time of war,” he murmured. “The whole personnel can't be mobilised all at once.”

They did not listen to him. In their imagination they were already far beyond the confines of Sophia. The youngsters drank and joked together boisterously, all their high spirits recovered. Loeken made a remark which shocked him to the core.

“The younger ones will probably leave. But you and I, Law, we haven't an earthly chance. God knows what sort of conditions we'll have to work in!”

He would have liked to reply to this by giving him a piece of his mind, but he could not think what to say. Stout, who never took his eyes off him for a moment, suggested a game of bridge.

They played in silence. Uncle Law was absorbed in his own thoughts and made one mistake after another. . . . It was vitally important that he should report to Chaulette



and explain the situation. . . . He had come to this decision when the telephone, which had recently been installed in the Club, rang behind the bar. It was nearly midnight. The "boy" answered in Malay, then turned towards them.

"*Tuan Law*," he said. "The Agency."

As he got up, Uncle Law felt a twinge of irritation. Damn it all. . . . If there was any more talk of tigers' heads or loudspeakers, he would jolly well. . . . He was horrified to gauge the depths of his own exasperation as he thought about the others. But as he held the receiver to his ear, his face gradually changed expression and the two symmetrical furrows on either side of his mouth grew more pronounced.

"I've got to get back straightaway," he said. "Chaulette's been taken suddenly ill."

Stout and Loeken asked for further details.

"It was Maille who rang up. He did not tell me much, but it sounds as if it might be fairly serious."

Maille was sitting that evening in his office against the background of the metal filing cabinet flanked by the two card-index cupboards. It was eleven o'clock. The clerks were busy typing out the new forms suggested by Bonardin for the monthly accounts, which had to be sent out next day.

He felt worn out. Every morning now, when he got up, he had the same symptom of nausea that he had once noticed in Dassier and which evoked bitter memories of the industrial enterprise with a name beginning in S. Doctors usually attribute these complaints to a sluggish liver caused by over-indulgence in tobacco and alcohol, which is clearly false. A sound liver can withstand the worst excesses without suffering any damage. Grocers and rag-merchants are never affected by this painful early-morning indisposition, and yet they indulge in tobacco and alcohol as much as anyone else.

He felt incapable of working. It had been a particularly

arduous day. With a sort of sadism, Mr. Chaulette had fastened on the usual subjects. Maille sometimes felt a positively Machiavellian satisfaction in analysing his character and trying to foresee his reactions in a given set of circumstances. For a long time he had suspected that the Managing Director's enthusiasm for certain childish questions was sheer pretence and had been assumed simply for the purpose of encouraging his subordinates not to overlook the smallest detail. He was now convinced of the contrary. Mr. Chaulette was genuinely enthralled by these subjects. The evidence, which he found inexplicable, of this passion for unreality provided Maille with endless food for thought.

On the other side of the glass partition, the clerks patiently applied themselves to their task. It was the sort of tricky work they often had to contend with: figures, headings and paragraphs, then long spaces stretching as far as the rows of vertical columns drawn down each page in advance. Maille had noticed their strained expression when they were engaged on this operation. Mr. Xuan was busy checking the sheets for typing errors. Maille fell to thinking about Mr. Xuan. He had been in the Company as long as Mr. Chaulette. During certain periods of feverish activity he was often kept back at the office late at night for weeks on end. He was not paid overtime. The salary of the Asiatic personnel was anything but sumptuous. They could have earned about the same amount in another company that was less exacting, yet resignations were few and far between. Sophia was a "great company."

It was midnight. Maille was roused from his reflections by the telephone. It was Bonardin ringing up from Mr. Chaulette's office. Maille did not understand straightaway what he was trying to say. Each time there was anything even remotely connected with the Managing Director, the head of the Commercial Department would assume a confidential tone and speak in a mystifying jargon which was

even more exasperating than his normal surly grunts. He gathered more or less that Mr. Chaulette was not feeling well and wanted someone to ring up Uncle Law and ask him to come back. He was about to do this—reluctantly, because he felt sure there was some other hare-brained scheme afoot—when Gladkoff came in and gave him further details.

Mr. Chaulette had suddenly collapsed in the middle of a discussion on his favourite subjects. Gladkoff was still shaking with the emotion they had all felt. The doctor had diagnosed a heart complaint provoked by malaria in conjunction with general debility caused by overwork.

## VII

The outbreak of war threw the planters of Malaya into a state of nervous excitement caused by the distant vision of the events in Europe, the feverish anticipation of a change in their own existence and an excessive consumption of whisky intended to allay that impatience. The Tamil coolies, the Chinese "boys" and the Malay *syces* submitted to the effects of this tension with bad grace as they anxiously watched it develop, commenting under their breath on this unwelcome manifestation of Western instability.

In the cloistered world of Sophia feelings ran even higher by virtue of its very isolation. In one fell swoop a hitherto unimaginable contact had been established with the long-forgotten outside world. A mischievous spirit was now at work among the youngsters, leading to unpredictable reactions and causing a great deal of anxiety to Uncle Law who had been appointed Acting Managing Director since Mr. Chaulette's unfortunate accident and evacuation to France.

Just, a young Englishman of twenty-four, was the first to raise the standard of revolt. One morning, a fortnight after war had been declared, he turned up at the Agency clad in a crumpled shirt and shorts and covered in mud from head to foot. He had arrived from one of the plantations in the north, which he had left without asking his director's permission. He had ridden a hundred and fifty miles during the night, on his motor-cycle, to notify the Managing Director that he was going to sign on in the R.A.F. whether the Company liked it or not. At such a brazen display of insubordination, coupled with such extravagant behaviour, Uncle Law had seriously considered dismissing him on the spot. He did nothing of the kind, however. He simply tried to persuade him, as he had persuaded several others, to wait for further orders. Just agreed to wait a month longer. He announced this rather as though he was delivering an ultimatum, and Uncle Law had to be satisfied with this undertaking. All the same, once it had been dragged out of him, he ordered the young man to leave at once and go straight back where he came from without stopping to rest on the way. Just acquiesced and set off on the return journey.

As a result of this outburst Uncle Law had felt extremely perturbed. His instructions from Paris were explicit. Under no condition was a member of the Company to be allowed to join up voluntarily. The question of conscripting the staff was being thrashed out at a high level, and until this had been settled the Managing Director was not to countenance anyone abandoning his post. And here was this hot-head Just demanding to be released! Uncle Law could not remember when he had last given so much thought to a subject. He had kept quiet until the evening, incapable of working. He had gone back to his bungalow earlier than usual that day. He had had a shower and changed, asked for a *stengah*, drunk two more almost without drawing breath, and had then slumped into an arm-chair feeling morose and taciturn. It was not

until shortly after dinner that he broke his long silence. He had jumped to his feet, dealt the table such a sharp blow with his fist that Mrs. Law had started up in alarm, and had then declared in a tone of passionate conviction, as though this was the triumphant conclusion to his intense internal deliberation: "Mary, you can always do something with a decent chap, even though he behaves like a fool every now and then!"

Their longing to leave, and their increasing anxiety that they might be overlooked in this outlying sector unaffected by the war, were scarcely surprising after all. The planters of Malaya belonged to that small minority who had happened one day not only to dream of adventure but also to take a decision to make that dream come true. Otherwise they would not have become planters in Malaya.

Sophia had not come up to their expectations. Sophia took them in at the age of twenty-five and flung them out again in the prime of life, after transforming the higher energy contained in their youthful dreams into chimerical abstractions. During their service they learned to sublimate their own mind to that of the organisation and to devote their thoughts to the series of mechanical duties which Sophia had substituted for genuine work. This was successful only so long as the rhythm remained unbroken by external events.

The Malayan world saw them disembark, with a suitcase in their hand, in their European clothes, their eyes wide in expectation of some unlikely Eldorado. The Malayan world saw them, in their early days, toil along the steep paths, clamber up the hills, come to a stop at the limit of the plantation and halt in awe, for no apparent reason, before the ramparts of the jungle. On occasion the Malayan world saw them peer furtively into the damp undergrowth at the foot of the giant trees, as though it was a forbidden garden, and inhale the alien scent of humus. This would last a few months, during which their experi-

ence of the Malayan world extended no further. At the end of their first year they bought a motor-car, for which Sophia let them have an advance. Then they gradually paid off the debt. They became economical. They began to think about their eventual retirement. They achieved promotion and applied their minds to symbolic figures and abstract shapes. The crowning point of their career consisted of sitting at a director's desk and spending most of their time in the office. They retired before they were fifty, after Sophia had extolled their loyalty to the Company in the course of an official reunion. Younger men took their place and the cycle continued. There seemed to be no internal reason why it should not go on for ever. Their individual will was too quickly blunted to break the cycle, and even if they had felt an urge to do so they would have suppressed it for sentimental reasons. The war had put an end to this state of things. For many of them it appeared, though they would not admit it, as a heaven-sent opportunity to achieve their freedom without a twinge of conscience, since leaving was implicitly a patriotic duty to which even Sophia would be forced to acquiesce.

But Sophia, in Europe, was on the watch. With the help of Mr. Chaulette, whom the voyage back to France had partially restored to health, and who had a natural predilection for the game of important connections and influential contacts, the President of the Board buttonholed various Cabinet ministers. Sophia was a "great company." Now was the moment for them to prove the force of that collective spirit—the "credit" they had gradually built up for themselves. There was no lack of valid reasons for keeping the planters at their posts: their meagre numbers, the possibility of disturbances among the native personnel, the importance of rubber as a raw material. Sophia succeeded in having its point of view accepted by the governments of France and Great Britain.

At the Secretariat, where he sat kicking his heels in the hope of a speedy release, Maille received a note one day from the Consul General at Singapore announcing that all French members of the Company could be temporarily kept at their posts as a special measure. All that was required of them was to sign the enclosed slip. This assured them that their call-up would be deferred in so far as events allowed.

Maille read the letter, thought it over, then got up from his desk and walked along to Uncle Law's office.

## VIII

In the lobby of Raffles Hotel in Singapore there was now a sprinkling of khaki uniforms among the usual white jackets. This was not the only innovation. Sitting under a fan which made the green plants beneath it quiver, Maille had the sensation of a profound change in the atmosphere itself. The breath of war had not improved anyone in this country. When he sat down, none of the Chinese "boys" came forward to take his order. Half a dozen of them stood leaning against the balustrade in a negligent attitude, observing the clients with an expression of contempt in their eyes. When Maille called out to one of them, he looked the other way and brazenly pretended he had not heard. Maille fumed with rage for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. What was the good of losing one's temper?

None of this mattered any longer. He was leaving. Would he ever come back to Malava again? This eventuality seemed remote and unreal. He felt he had broken with Sophia for good, and to the exhilaration of this liberty was added the joy of having won it himself by suddenly recovering his sense of independence.

He had refused to yield. But it had been a close thing. When he had notified Uncle Law of his decision to apply for an immediate release, the old man had kept quite calm. He had merely repeated his arguments and added a few others. True courage lay not in going off on a questionable adventure but in sticking to a post which was bound to become increasingly difficult in the event of any local disturbance. Maille felt he was right. For him, more perhaps than for any of the others, this departure had been dictated by selfish aspirations, by an individual instinct in which a sense of patriotic duty was involved only by reason of the circumstances. He had hesitated. Then he had pulled himself together, announced that he had made up his mind, and tendered his resignation.

Uncle Law had gazed at him intently, pursing his mouth in that ghost of a whistle by which he usually expressed his astonishment. He had asked him to think it over for twenty-four hours and had fixed an appointment for the next day. Maille had turned up with his resignation in writing. Uncle Law had not let him get a word in edgewise.

“So you want to leave us, Maille? You’ve really made up your mind, have you? Well, get going then. And while you’re about it, you can tear up that piece of paper. People don’t resign from Sophia, do you hear? It’s up to me to give you the sack or not. I’ll see about that later. For the time being you’re still regarded as a member of the staff . . . on leave for the duration of the war, that’s all. But don’t go around broadcasting the fact! Do you think any of us likes staying on here? You can say that the military authorities have demanded your services as an engineering expert.”

Maille at last managed to order himself a *stengah*, which he drank to the health of Uncle Law.

He had been staying at Raffles for the last few days and had to wait another week before embarking for Indo-China



where he was to report for duty. He did not know a soul in Singapore. After his months at the Agency he was enjoying his present solitude in an unknown town.

"Good morning," said a voice behind him.

He turned round and saw Germaine Dassier.

There was nothing odd about that. Dassier had openly declared his intention of sending her back to France as soon as possible. He himself was detained for an indefinite period. It was better for her to leave before all passenger shipping was reduced to a minimum.

As soon as she sat down beside him in the midst of all these strangers, he realised their attitude towards each other had changed. At Kuala Getah she came under the heading of Sophia wives, a woman married to a Sophia planter. Between them there existed all the ties, all the obstacles, all the scruples of the collective enterprise. Meetings between them were forbidden by the unreasonable twinges of an artificial conscience which would have made their love appear as a form of treachery against the organisation or even as a sort of incest.

To-day they dared not look each other in the eye. She no longer regarded him simply as a friend to whom she could lay bare her heart.

"My departure was arranged all of a sudden. A free berth at the last moment, in a boat which was supposed to be leaving to-morrow. Now, they tell me, it doesn't leave Singapore till next week. I came up on the night train, so I've been sleeping all day. Jean didn't come with me, of course."

"I'm leaving next week as well, but for Indo-China. . . . I don't know whether I'll ever come back to Malaya."

"I'm absolutely certain I never shall."

She fell silent for a moment, then embarked on a long explanation, choosing her words carefully.

"We've had a row, Jean and I . . . a rather serious row. It was bound to happen some time. I asked him to come with me, on leave to Australia, anyway for a few weeks.

They couldn't have refused him that. He told me he had no right to abandon the Company at this particular moment. I'm leaving and I shan't come back. I told him so."

With a surly, glowering air, the "boys" first drew the curtains before putting on the lights. An A.R.P. practice was being held and a blackout had been ordered. After a few minutes the air stirred by the fans felt stale and heavy.

"It's good training for the voyage," she observed sadly. "It seems all the port-holes are kept closed."

"Listen," he said on a sudden impulse. "I've got nothing to do here for the next week. Nor have you. Have you let Jean know that your ship has been delayed?"

"I told you, I've said good-bye to him for ever. I've left him. I shan't ever see him again, don't you understand?"

She repeated these words with great insistence. It must have been an extremely serious row they had had.

"Then there's nothing to keep you in Singapore, in the middle of all this mob. Do you know Pasir Rahsia?"

"We went through it five years ago, when we first arrived, but we didn't stop. I've never been back there since."

"It's less than a hundred miles from here. I've still got my car. There can't be anyone there just now. There are bungalows for hire. It's not the prettiest part of Malaya, but there's the sea and no one there would know who we are. Why don't we go and stay there till it's time to leave?"

As they drove past the palace of the Sultans of Johore, its white bulk glittering under the stars, they felt purified of the last vestiges of Sophia. From Johore-Bahru they had taken the coast road, the worst and the longest, rarely used by Europeans and dotted with the settlements of Malays who had come up from the south.

After several miles they were brought to a stop by a river which they had to cross on a raft. But they were in no hurry; nothing needed to be done any more. With the car

safely embarked on the shaky contraption of beams and planks roughly bound together, while the boatmen strained on their long poles as the raft moved forward, Maille and Germaine listened to the cry of the water-fowl and enjoyed the sensation of being gradually swallowed up in the shadows of the unknown bank that lay ahead.

They reached Pasir Rahsia in the middle of the night and took a bungalow outside the village, some distance away from the nearest habitation. This hide-out was surrounded on three sides by a solid wall of palms punctuated here and there by the stem of a coconut-tree. The veranda looked out on to the sea, the warm gentle sea of Malaya impregnated by the rivers and the streams with the damp scent of the jungle and the diabolical smell of the durians—perfumes that mingled on the beach at night with the barely perceptible ripples reflecting the faint glow of the moon.

They plunged into the depths of this strange phosphorescent glitter and eagerly inhaled its fragrance, as though trying to make up in a minute for the countless days they had been deprived of their senses, as though this evening some secret will had assembled for their benefit the essence of all the attractions to which for so long they had been blind and deaf and which only some vague longing had made them dimly suspect. After their bathe they stretched out in front of the veranda, on the wet sand which was cooler than the water. She had wrapped a sarong round her, like a native woman, without even bothering to dry herself. He lay a few feet away observing the contours of her body thrown into relief by the damp cloth.

She called out to him, pronouncing his name in a strange voice, in which his ear, which he thought had become insensible after the dreadfully long silence, seemed to detect fresh grounds for hope.

In the morning Malaya came to life, sparkling with hitherto unknown colours. They delighted in this for a week.

They would get up at dawn, when the sand began to

stand out clearly against the surrounding darkness. By way of breakfast they would bite into the saffron-yellow flesh of a mango or else into the white pulp of a mangostine, its purple skin still permeated with the cool breath of night. They would go for a walk along the beach. This was the hour when the Malay fishermen came and cast their nets. The sand stretched as far as the horizon; the nets were tiny; the fishermen were few and far between. Each had at his disposal a limitless area, which he covered at his leisure, taking slow short strides. Every now and then they would stop behind one of them for the sole pleasure of watching him. The Malay would amble along the edge of the surf, his eyes fixed on the water, on the look-out for the slightest movement indicating a shoal of fish. When he noticed signs of one he would enter the water with the utmost care, sometimes standing stock still for several minutes on end, then let his casting-net fan out in a rapid sweeping motion. When he drew it in empty, as frequently happened, he showed not the slightest trace of emotion but slung the net neatly over his shoulder and went to try his luck again a little farther on. If he met with success he would put his catch, which was generally pretty meagre, into a bag attached to his belt. They saw one fisherman, on his first cast, bring in a fairly big fish. Whereupon he wrung his net out carefully, came out of the sea, passed a string through the fish's gills and set off for his village. On being questioned by Maille, he answered with a smile: "Finish, *tuan*. Enough for to-day!"

They plunged into the shade of the palm-groves, walking at random, and came across a series of kampongs scattered among the trees and concealed with native cunning in these green depths far from the road. Old Malays in sarongs, their bare chests burnt black by the sun, waited in front of their huts for time to go by as they listened to the song of the birds and scanned the sky for hidden portents. They drank milk straight from the coconut which

the master of the house never failed to offer and which the children went to gather before their eyes from the swaying summit of the tufted fronds.

In the evening they made their way back to the coast. The sun gilded the tops of the coconut-trees and deepened the glow of the red varnish protecting the carved timbers of the bungalow. They waited till darkness fell, then gleefully stripped off their clothes. They wallowed in the phosphorescent warmth of the sea, running their fingers through its myriad milky reflections. They swam far out, heedless of the sharks and jelly-fish, until the ocean breeze wafted new scents to their nostrils, and a colder water, reminding them of other, more distant seats, brought miraculous relief to their aching limbs. They stayed in for a long time without touching bottom. Malaya was no longer visible apart from one or two bright dots on the coast and the pale nimbus round their own house which served as a guiding-light for their return.

The cargo-vessel taking Maille to Indo-China steamed past the chain of islets marking Singapore harbour and headed towards the east. Maille peered through the mist to catch a last glimpse of Malaya. The void of this last year had never before impressed itself so forcibly upon him. The last few days alone had some semblance of reality.

Germaine had left for France the day before. She was going to write to Jean and confirm her wish for a definite separation. Maille, who was hoping to be sent back to France in the near future, would join her as soon as possible. After the war they would start life all over again, outside the realm of Sophia if necessary. At all events it now seemed quite clear that even in the Company they would be able to lead a normal life together. The power of Sophia appeared far less crushing when viewed from outside. The only thing was not to take it too seriously. Imagination probably played a large part in that sensation of constant restraint. Malaya now appeared to him as

bright and colourful as when he had left France three years earlier. This last vision blotted out all the rest.

The ship was swallowed up in the equatorial night. The vision began to fade before his eyes. Soon there was nothing left but a pale nimbus barely perceptible in the depths of the shadows, on which he felt compelled to fix his gaze until it was finally extinguished. This last vestige of the Malayan world vanished out of sight as soon as the vessel ran into the first squalls from the open sea.

## PART FOUR

### *The Trunk*

#### I

"It's a disgrace, that's what I say!" Uncle Law exclaimed, as he angrily switched off the wireless.

It was January 7th, 1942. The Japanese had landed up in the north two months earlier and started on their triumphant march through Malaya. Yesterday, for the first time, the sound of gun-fire had been heard at Kuala Getah. Law and Stout were the last two representatives of Sophia in Telanggor, and they were listening in together to an account of the disasters which had overwhelmed the Empire. To-day a military commentator had spoken in the vaguest terms of a possible line of resistance slightly to the north of Johore Bahru, that's to say more than a hundred miles south of Kuala Getah. Toward the end of the afternoon a cloud of thick yellow smoke spread across the sky, reminding the old planters of the burning-down of the jungle that had preceded the planting of the first rubber-trees. It was not the jungle on fire, however; it was the rubber in the warehouses—thousands and thousands of bales of rubber which the military authorities had ordered to be destroyed. Uncle Law had been notified that the Japanese would probably enter the town within the next forty-eight hours.

"What do you plan to do?" Stout asked him.

"We'll leave to-morrow morning. I paid off the Agency clerks to-day. I've arranged to meet them at eight o'clock for the final arrangements. What about the Bangar Estate, Stout, have you cleared everything up out there?"

Stout had been in charge of the Bangar Estate since evacuating Sungei Ikan.

"It's all done. I closed the accounts to-day. Everyone's paid off. I've brought you in the books. I locked up the offices and the bungalow and I've packed my bags. If you don't mind, I'll stay here to-night. I'm not too keen on going back there."

"By all means," Uncle Law agreed. "Let's have a look at your books, and then we can close the trunk."

When it became obvious that the situation was getting out of hand that he himself would probably have to withdraw one day towards the south, Uncle Law had gone into Kuala Getah and bought himself a tin trunk.

He had searched for several days before finding one that was big enough and strong enough for his purpose. When he eventually discovered it he had haggled for a long time over the price, as he always did when the interests of the Company were at stake. He had finally consented to pay the sum that was being asked provided the shop undertook to reinforce the hinges and equip the trunk with two stout padlocks. Then he had spent two whole nights going through the Sophia documents and piling the most important ones into the trunk.

*General Instructions*, the statistical reports of the Agency, and a copy of each issue of the *Sophia Bulletin* were the first to be packed. Then the highly confidential correspondence and every report that had a bearing on the personnel. This took up a great deal of room and was extremely heavy. Space had to be found for the plantation books as well. It was going to be a tight squeeze. Uncle Law hesitated in an agony of indecision. He could not take everything away with him. The administrative bulk of Sophia occupied several rooms. He would have to choose. He had reluctantly made up his mind to leave behind everything that was not of immediate importance and to fill the trunk with what he considered to be the essentials.

When this task was completed he had had the monu-



ment, which required six men to shift it, loaded on to a truck together with a drum of petrol and a suitcase containing a few personal belongings. He had had the vehicle parked in the garage of his bungalow, next to a heap of sand and a fire extinguisher which he had personally checked to make sure that it worked properly. He had given the *syce* Ahman instructions to run the engine a few minutes every day and to keep an eye on the tyre pressures. Then he had waited to see what would happen, demanding the usual punctuality from the clerks and turning up at the office himself on the dot, with his tie impeccably knotted, his shoes carefully cleaned and the ghost of a whistle on his lips.

Followed by Stout, who was carrying the Bangar Estate books under his arm, he walked through the garden, opened the garage, glanced round to see that everything was in order, and heaved himself up on to the back of the truck, spurning the helping hand that Stout held out to him. With an effort he lifted the lid of the trunk, cursing the local craftsmanship which fell far short of British standards, and took the documents from Stout who watched him with an affectionate smile as he arranged them carefully on top of the others. Then he lowered the lid, fixed on the padlocks, and jumped down.

“Well, that’s that,” he said. “We’ll push off from here at half-past eight to-morrow morning and call in at the Agency on the way.”

He appeared to be working something out in his head.

“It shouldn’t take more than ten minutes. That won’t hold us up very long. There’s not much more we can tell them anyway.”

He was sitting in the swivel chair once occupied by Mr. Chaulette. The Asiatic personnel was assembled in his office, on the other side of the desk. All the Agency clerks were there, and also a number of others from the aban-

doned plantations who had withdrawn to Kuala Getah at the same time as the Europeans. They had been wandering about the town, completely lost at finding themselves suddenly without work or guidance. The Agency clerks had passed on the news: the Managing Director was going to say good-bye this morning. They had turned up because they had nothing better to do, out of curiosity for any out of the ordinary event, anxious to be given advice or consolation and perhaps even some instructions on the subject of their future line of conduct.

"Gentlemen . . ." Uncle Law began.

He was the only European present. He had asked Stout to wait outside in the truck. When all the Asiatics had come in, he rose to his feet. He had made a final check to see that the drawers of his desk were empty. Then he had put on his hat with the same gesture as when he was leaving on one of his tours of inspection.

"Gentlemen . . ." he said.

There was nothing very odd about this form of address. The clerks and the conductors were entitled to it when they were assembled together, particularly for an official meeting such as the opening of an Asiatic Club or Asiatic Sports Ground, in the course of the speech delivered by whichever European was presiding over the ceremony.

When Uncle Law uttered the word "Gentlemen," he did so with the air of a sovereign conferring a knighthood on one of his subjects. To-day there was no noticeable change in his manner. The tone was perhaps a trifle more solemn, but it was still imperious. The two deep lines on either side of his mouth were only just a little more pronounced than usual.

They waited for his speech with anxiety and impatience, moved by a variety of emotions. Relegated by their origin to the subordinate positions of typist, assistant-accountant or overseer, without ever being able to aspire, no matter how great their worth, to the "standing" of a responsible assistant, they had long ago lost the habit of taking deci-

sions. The present situation was beyond them. They waited, hoping for advice, encouragement, orders or injunctions. They were still not very sure of their own position in the conflict now raging and did not know what to fear or hope from future developments. The white men, in whose shadow they walked, whose activity had dictated their very way of life, were about to disappear. They had been hard task-masters. Not that they ill-treated them—far from it. In their relations with them they abided by a certain code of strict behaviour whose laws they had themselves established. When any European addressed them, it was always “Mr. Xuan” or “Mr. Black” or “Mr. Sivam” or sometimes, like to-day, “Gentlemen.” They had simply relegated them, one and all, to a level half-way between their own caste and that of the coolies. To-day the white men were being held up to ridicule. Their army was being hacked to pieces by fellow-Asiatics. The Japanese radio, in a special daily broadcast in English, kept telling them that their day of liberation was at hand. On the whole they did not feel too confident about this. They had grown accustomed to their present masters and were apprehensive of anyone new. Some of them, however, were in two minds about it and listened in regularly to these fraternal announcements. What instructions was the Managing Director going to give?

“Gentlemen . . .”

Uncle Law had never treated them with familiarity. He held strong views on the subject of authority and was convinced of the superiority of the European race. Many of them, however, had appreciated the way he always explained, sometimes at great length, the meaning and the purpose of the orders he gave them. Such was his nature that he was incapable of addressing any human being, however lowly his position, without trying to give him the reason for his own conviction.

“Gentlemen,” said Uncle Law. “Circumstances of which you are well aware have necessitated my departure.

Before leaving I should like to thank you for the service you have rendered to the Company. As to your future conduct, I have only one suggestion to make. . . .”

He had worked out and polished every phrase of his speech on the basis of the main idea he wished to express. There was not a single aspect of the present situation that had escaped him. There was not a single feeling of theirs of which he was not aware. He had started to prepare a lengthy explanation, but had gradually boiled it down to what he considered to be the essentials. Mr. Xuan never took his eyes off him. Kassim, the Malay telephone operator, stood unobtrusively by the door, translating his master's words phrase by phrase for the benefit of the *syce* Ahman who had likewise come in and was standing by his side.

“Only one suggestion, gentlemen. I would advise you to act on every occasion as your conscience dictates.”

Then he picked up his brief-case, put it under his arm, and walked out of the huge office looking straight in front of him. On the doorstep he called “*Syce!*” in the same tone of voice that he always used. Old Ahman, who had come out before him, opened the door of the truck with as much flourish as if it had been the sumptuous Buick that had now been requisitioned by the military authorities. Uncle Law sat down next to Stout, with his brief-case on his knees. Ahman closed the door behind him, went round to the other side of the truck, climbed inside and took the wheel. He was to drive the last two refugees to Singapore.

Uncle Law said nothing and kept his eyes on the road.

“Everything go off all right?” Stout asked him in a disgruntled voice.

“I think so,” Uncle Law replied. “I hope I haven't forgotten anything.”

## II

“Why the devil didn’t he get out yesterday?” Dassier asked Stout. “There’s not a hope now. The troops have evacuated Johore Bahru and fallen back on to the island. In the present state of disorganisation Singapore can’t hold out more than a few days.”

“I realise that,” said Stout, “and so does he.”

“Well, then? You had a chance yesterday, you told me. Why did you stay on?”

“Why? I’ll tell you, Dassier. Why he didn’t get away? Because of that trunk, that’s all—that damn’ tin trunk which weighs as much as a steam engine and takes up almost as much room! The precious, irreplaceable Sophia documents! Now do you understand? They can’t be allowed to fall into the hands of the Japanese—it might provide them with some vital information! Think of our organisation, Dassier! As for destroying them, heaven forbid! He won’t leave without his trunk, I can assure you . . . only at this stage in the proceedings you won’t find a skipper who’ll saddle himself with that sort of luggage.”

Over a million civilians and eighty-four thousand service personnel were now bottled up in Singapore, with surrender as the only prospect apart from a few individual escapes by some makeshift means or other. Two days earlier, while wandering along the docks, Stout had run into Dassier who was now in the local militia and had just withdrawn all the way from the Siamese border. His unit, composed of Malay and Chinese volunteers commanded by a handful of Europeans, had melted away to nothing on the march. The natives, almost to a man, had deserted and scattered among the various kampongs. He and a dozen Englishmen had eventually turned up in

Singapore, without equipment, arms or ammunition. The unit had been disbanded. Dassier, like every other volunteer, had been released from all his obligations and was now looking for a ship in which to escape. There were still a few vessels in the harbour in spite of the air raids: vessels of every size and type—tramp-steamers, junks, sampans. There were even two or three destroyers plying to and fro between Sumatra and the peninsula, taking off a human cargo on each trip. The thing was to find yourself a good spot on the quay and jump into the launch at the right moment.

“I’d like to have a go at it to-night,” said Dassier. “I’ve heard about a Dutch tramp-steamer which might take on a few passengers.”

“It’s the only sensible thing to do. In a few days’ time it will probably be too late.”

Since every hotel was crammed full, they had all three moved into a native house whose inhabitants had fled. They heard a noise in the room in which Uncle Law had retired an hour ago to rest.

“Try and make him see reason and come with me,” Dassier urged.

“You try. I’ve done my best, but I’m not going to leave without him.”

Uncle Law emerged from the dark little room which served as his retreat. He had shaved and put on his last clean shirt. Stout and Dassier explained the position to him.

“Good,” he said. “Now listen. All that remains for you to do, both of you, is to jump into the first vessel you can find—a junk, a dinghy, whatever it may be. Is that clear?”

“The same applies to you.”

“There’s no possible comparison. I’m incapable of rendering any useful service in this war. There’s no reason for me to leave here unless I manage to get these documents out. You’re in a different position, Dassier. So are you,

Stout. I've been thinking about it a great deal these last two days."

It was true. He had racked his brains all night as he lay stretched out on a wooden bunk, devoured by mosquitoes, and he had arrived at a conclusion which to him seemed irrefutable.

"You're not the only one who wants to safeguard those precious documents," said Stout, staring at the ceiling. "I'd like to help as well."

"Now look here! This is hardly the time to behave like silly children. . . ."

"I quite agree!" Stout stormed, almost frothing at the mouth. "This is certainly not the time to behave like silly children!"

"You jolly well shut up! In the present circumstances it strikes me there are two essential elements to be saved. First of all, the men. The staff, do you understand? From Sophia's point of view they're irreplaceable. Secondly, what remains of our work. For that I hold myself responsible, and nobody else."

"But damn it all!" Stout burst out. "How can you hope to do that? Don't you know that anyone who manages to leave can't even take a spare shirt with him? The Navy will have to send a battleship to deal with your bloody luggage."

"That's my business. The Japs haven't reached the docks yet. Is that clear, Stout?"

Stout did not have the heart to continue the struggle.

"All right," he muttered sulkily. "Since it's your idea, we'll leave without you. Dassier is going to try to get away to-night. I'll wait another twenty-four hours. If we haven't found anything by then, I promise to do what you say."

"That's all right, then," said Uncle Law, looking extremely relieved.

"But on one condition. Now it's your turn to listen. On one condition only, otherwise I shan't leave."

“Well, what is it?”

“In the name of our old friendship, by the God whom we both worship, tell me, while we’re still both together on this earth, tell me, I beseech you, did you really discover it just as it is or did you have it specially made?”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Uncle Law inquired, wrinkling his brow.

“That trunk of yours! That bloody trunk! Tell me how any decent Chinese or Indian merchant could ever have kept such a monstrosity in his shop! And if you really did find it like that, tell me how long you had to search before you came across it. Dassier and I have had a bet on the subject.”

Uncle Law looked annoyed for a moment, then a grin spread over his face. It was the first time he had smiled for several days. Stout got out a bottle of whisky, their last one, which he had put aside for a special occasion. They drank a final *stengah* to the health of Sophia and wished each other good luck.

That night Stout accompanied Dassier down to the docks. Uncle Law had given him permission to take the truck, after endless admonishments on the subject of the precious load in the back. Dassier had a stroke of luck. He jumped into a launch just as it was leaving the quay, without knowing exactly where it was going. Stout barely had time to shake hands with him.

At that moment there was a distant hum of aircraft. Bombs began falling in the direction of the naval base. Searchlights swept the sky; the anti-aircraft batteries went into action; the equatorial night was streaked with vivid flashes. The crowd waiting on the quay in the hope of being eventually taken off scattered and ran for cover towards the big reinforced concrete warehouses which still afforded the best protection.

Stout paused for a moment. The aircraft were coming



closer. They were probably going to raid the harbour. Soon they were directly overhead. He made for the shelter. A bomb burst a hundred yards or so away. In a few seconds a fierce fire was raging along the quay. A group of cars went up in flames; they must have been abandoned by people who had managed to get away. Stout suddenly noticed the truck. It was quite close to the blaze, which was spreading rapidly. In the back he could make out the fantastic shadow cast by the tin trunk.

Stout thought of Uncle Law and his heart missed a beat. He changed direction and started running towards the truck. It was next to a big Ford which was already in flames and throwing out a shower of sparks. He jumped into the driving seat and started up the engine. After making a full turn over the sea, the aircraft were now coming back towards the coast to release a second stick of bombs.

Stout just had time to get the truck clear and park it some distance away alongside a thick concrete wall. Finding no better shelter for himself, he decided to stay there too. He switched off the engine, then climbed into the back to make sure the precious load was undamaged. He felt relieved of a great burden when he found it still intact. A bomb burst on the other side of the street and a shower of metal poured down upon the wall. Stout lifted a hand to his chest and collapsed.

The air-raids increased in intensity during the last days of Singapore. The sky and the ground beneath it belonged to the Asiatics. On February 8th, the leading enemy formations landed on the island. Once again the authorities gave orders for the rubber stores to be destroyed. A thick brown smoke enveloped the town.

The naval base in the north of the island was captured in a few hours. Churchill made it known that he would shortly have an extremely serious piece of news to an-

nounce. Uncle Law realised that total surrender was now only a matter of time and once again uttered the word "Disgrace."

A few days earlier, when Stout had failed to come back, he had gone out to search for him and had found his body sprawled across the trunk. It had been a terrible blow. His attachment to Stout had grown much closer as a result of the trials they had been through together in the course of the last few weeks. He stood there for several minutes feeling utterly crushed and unable to control his emotions. He had a great deal of trouble to get him buried decently, for all the services were completely disorganised. When it was over, he had taken the wheel of the truck himself and had gone off to look for some means of transport for himself and his tin trunk.

He had driven in vain up and down the docks and along the neighbouring beaches, ploughing his way through the panic-stricken crowds of natives and Europeans, men and women, civilians and soldiers without weapons, who made a rush towards the sea each time a boat was signalled and then battled to get into the launches as soon as they came alongside. In this desperate confusion there was no chance at all of getting his trunk on board.

That morning he decided to make a fresh attempt, probably the last he would be able to make. It was February 14th. The rattle of machine-guns could already be heard in the outskirts and there was a rumour that negotiations for the surrender were now under way. Uncle Law left his retreat and drove through Singapore at the wheel of his truck in the direction of the docks.

The harbour was ominously empty. Not a vessel in sight. Not a funnel, not a sail, not a sampan. The docks were now less cluttered than before. Part of the crowd had withdrawn into the back of the town, having resigned themselves to surrender. Japanese aircraft were patrolling over the sea. Far out on the horizon, in the islets dotted along the bay, the big petrol depots were ablaze. Black

smoke was rising skywards and mingling with the heavy cloud which had been drifting over the town ever since the rubber had been set on fire. Uncle Law suddenly made a most astounding discovery, which for a few seconds took his mind off the wretched situation he was in.

The air was cool—here in Singapore! A European springtime temperature had miraculously developed, only one degree off the Equator! The thick ceiling of smoke was screening the island from the torrid rays of the sun which were its normal lot, and had thereby transformed the climate. How had he failed to notice it before? In spite of the physical exertion to which he was being subjected, in spite of his state of excitement, he was dry from head to foot. The sensation was so unusual that for a moment he was lost in wonder. But he had more important things on his mind than these unusual phenomena occasioned by the war. After casting a final glance over the harbour, he started off again. He drove at random in a westerly direction, following the coastal road.

It was some distance from the quayside, a long way beyond the docks, in a little bay that was sometimes used by the local fishing vessels, that he came upon the last opportunity available.

A Royal Navy pinnace was lying a few cables off shore. It had put in there to evacuate a group of V.I.P.s. A number of people in the know had got wind of this rendezvous and had assembled at the pre-arranged spot. The boat was not very heavily loaded and the captain had agreed to take them all off. Two launches were being used to ferry them across. The passengers piled on board and gradually invaded every cabin, passageway and area of deck space. The operation was almost completed—luckily, for there was very little room left. One of the launches stopped alongside the ship and was hoisted on board. The other returned on its final trip.

Uncle Law had drawn up on the jetty, not far from

some Tamil coolies who were squatting on their haunches disconsolately watching the scene. He called out to them in their own language and ordered them to unload his trunk.

They looked up in surprise and peered at him closely. He repeated the order in his usual commanding tone. The Tamils heaved themselves up on to the truck, got hold of the trunk and lowered it to the ground.

The launch came alongside. The remaining passengers got in. There was a naval officer in charge of the operation. He called out to Law, who had not budged an inch.

"Hey, you! Get a move on. This is our last trip."

Uncle Law pointed to the trunk and shouted something in reply.

"What's that?" the naval officer yelled, unable to believe his ears.

"Just a second," Uncle Law calmly repeated. "I've got to get my luggage on board."

"What!" the naval officer yelled once more, almost choking, his eyes popping out of his head. "What's that you said?"

Uncle Law quietly informed him that he could not leave without his trunk. The passengers in the launch began to scream at him as well.

"Never, never, never in my life have I come across anything like this!" the officer yelled, now shaking in every limb.

He was a young midshipman with a pink, boyish complexion. For his first spell of duty in the Far East, he had witnessed any amount of strange scenes. In the last three weeks he had crowded in enough experiences to last him a lifetime. He had battled with panic-stricken crowds who threatened to sink his launch. He had pointed his pistol at deserters trying to force their way on board. On one occasion he had even been machine-gunned by a group of soldiers who had been driven back and had lost their heads at the thought of being left behind. He was no longer a

novice. Yet he was bowled over by the present situation. It left him so breathless that he could barely give his helmsman the signal to pull out.

The sailors were Javanese. Uncle Law spoke to them in Malay, enjoining them, in a tone that admitted of no denial, to bring the launch alongside the stairs and hold it firmly there while he brought his trunk on board.

The Javanese obeyed without a murmur. The Tamil coolies, who were beginning to take an interest in the operation, now assembled round the heavy memorial and, urging each other on with shrill cries as they might have done to drag free a truck that had been bogged down, deposited it in the bow of the boat which promptly developed a dangerous list. The midshipman went scarlet in the face. He opened his mouth, but not a word came out. The passengers also fell silent and looked hard at Law. He had remained completely unruffled while directing the manœuvre and now gave orders for the trunk to be shifted farther amidships. Then he distributed his remaining dollars among the coolies, who thanked him with clasped hands and obsequious bows.

When the captain of the pinnace saw the launch come alongside with such a strange cargo, he too went red in the face and began upbraiding the young midshipman. A lively argument ensued. In the end the junior officer declared, almost insolently, that he had done all he could and that in his opinion no one but the highest authority on board would be able to bring this raving lunatic to his senses. The captain came down from the bridge and ordered the Javanese sailors to heave the trunk into the sea.

Uncle Law gave him a nasty look. He sat down on his trunk and solemnly assured him that if the order was carried out, not only would the captain be responsible for his, Law's, death—for he was prepared to go down with his luggage—but that the most dire consequences would ensue. Thrown off his guard by this speech, the captain

hesitated for a moment. Whereupon Uncle Law ordered the Javanese to unload his trunk. This they did with the utmost care and placed it on board the larger vessel. The captain climbed back on to the bridge. The pinnace headed for the open sea.

Uncle Law had his trunk safely stowed away on deck. He had at once spotted the ideal place for it, between a windlass and a hatchway, where it was bound to obstruct the crew and get in the way of the passengers, but where it could be firmly wedged in without any danger of falling overboard. Then he sat down on the lid and stayed there.

Miraculously the pinnace escaped being bombed by the Japanese and subsequently reached Sumatra. Uncle Law had his trunk put on shore.

He next applied himself to finding further means of transport. His idea was to make for Batavia and then, as soon as possible, Australia. Now that the British army had been defeated after a short three-month campaign, the Dutch, he felt, would not be able to hold out in the islands for more than a few weeks.

He achieved his ends and ultimately reached Perth in a tramp-steamer which had picked him up on a little island near Java, without anyone on earth being able to explain how he came to be there or, above all, how he had managed not to become separated from his trunk in the course of his countless transshipments. During that time, in this corner of the Pacific where a grim tragedy was being unfolded and where astonishing adventures had taken place on the sea and in the skies, Uncle Law had acquired a particular notoriety. He had become the terror, the constant nightmare, of the Allied navies and merchant marines cruising in the Sunda Archipelago, as well as of the little individual craft plying a more profitable trade. Whenever they met each other ashore between one perilous voyage and the next, ship's officers and masters of junks alike, whether English, Dutch, Chinese, Phillipino or Javanese,

would remember that gaunt figure with rage in their hearts and would clench their fists, swearing in fifteen different languages that they would chuck him and his luggage overboard if ever fate threw them together again. But when Uncle Law turned up with his trunk and assumed that truculent attitude of his, he never failed to have the last word.

As soon as he reached Perth he took a room in an hotel, had his trunk sent up, opened it, and began to go through the documents and draft his report on the evacuation of the plantations. A few days later his wife, who had been in Australia several months, came and joined him.

In 1944, after the liberation of France, having at last received news from Paris, he decided to return to England and re-establish contact with Head Office. He took ship with his trunk and Mrs. Law. At a time when people squeezed in eight or ten to a cabin on the former transatlantic liners, he again succeeded in not being separated from his trunk. He would not hear of its being stowed away in the hold. He and his trunk travelled the seven seas together, and together they eventually landed up in the room of a London hotel. There Mr. Chaulette found him. Uncle Law had unpacked the documents. He handed in his report and embarked on a detailed account of all that had happened since the outbreak of the war, giving his reasons for every decision he had taken.

## PART FIVE

### *Full Circle*

#### I

The aircraft was heading for Kuala Getah, losing height rapidly. By pressing his forehead against the porthole, Dassier could see in the distance the geometrical shape of the Agency standing out against the early-morning mist.

The British had recaptured Malaya a month earlier. Each week aircraft were flying in, bringing back former colonials who were anxious to measure the extent of the war damage, full of projects for putting their enterprise on its feet again, and eager to get back to work as soon as possible. Civilian flights were controlled by the military authorities who were now administering the country and who kept the numbers down to a minimum so as not to admit any useless mouths to feed. Every European, in fact, lived on Army rations. In Paris and in London Sophia had used its influence and had obtained permission for the speedy admittance of quite a large contingent of the personnel. Several of them had already arrived, including Uncle Law.

Dassier was rejoining Sophia. Since his escape from Singapore his mind had never, except for a few brief spells, stopped turning towards the exploitation of rubber-trees. After an eventful cruise on different boats of various types, he had fetched up in India. From there he had managed to make his way to England, where he joined up in a French unit and was posted to a training centre. After a few weeks he had been compulsorily demobilised and transferred as a rubber expert to the Cameroons plantations, the only important source of natural resin that still



remained in Allied hands. He had stayed there throughout the war, trying to initiate the Africans into the methods of the Far East and instinctively creating round him a little of the Sophia atmosphere.

On his return to France in 1945, he had seen Germaine who was living in the country. She had repeated her request for a separation. Maille, who had just been demobilised, was then in Paris looking for a new job. She was to join him shortly. Dassier had not raised any objection. He had merely asked her to think it over again. He had felt completely lost, not being able to decide if his depression was due to being abandoned in this way or whether it was because he found himself for the first time in years at a loose end, with no regular work or professional cares but only a vague indefinite aim to enjoy a little peace and quiet.

He was not to enjoy it for long. Shortly after the sudden Japanese capitulation he had received an urgent letter from Mr. Chaulette.

The administrators of Sophia were anxious to send as large a team as possible back to Malaya straightaway. They had come up against some difficulties. The English members of the staff, who had almost all joined up in local formations, had mostly been taken prisoner at Singapore. For over three years they had been treated like beasts of burden. Sophia, however, had been relatively spared the blows of fate. Only two members of the Company had left their bones out there. As Mr. Chaulette observed to the Board, that constituted only about four per cent. losses. But the survivors were in a pitiful state and it was impossible to send them back until they had had a rest of several months.

Mr. Chaulette pointed out to Dassier that those, like him, who had had the good fortune to lead a more or less normal life throughout the war, could not renounce their obligations and their undertaking to put the plantations back on their feet. Dassier had replied that he was ready to

leave at once and had flown out from London a fortnight later. Leaving under these conditions, he had realised that any attempt to redeem his marriage was doomed to failure. He had not seen Germaine again. He had written to her, agreeing to a divorce and wishing her the best of luck.

As he waited for the station-wagon which was now used for ferrying passengers between Kuala Getah airport and the town, an idea flashed through Dassier's mind which he thought extravagant but which he decided all the same to act upon: to telephone the Agency.

He asked a Tamil clerk who was arranging some files on his desk. The telephone? The telephone was working. The gentleman could use it if he wished. Dassier remembered Sophia's old number. He gave it, telling himself once more that this was pure folly. How on earth, after the war, the occupation and the subsequent looting, could one expect a telephone number to survive?

"You're through, sir."

Dassier paused as he picked up the receiver. The voice that answered him awakened old memories; he recognised it in an instant.

"Sophia Company here."

"Good morning, Kassim," Dassier said with a catch in his throat.

The Malay telephone operator bid him a warm welcome. A few seconds later Bonardin was on the other end of the line—a Bonardin who appeared to have dropped his proverbially surly attitude.

"Where are you, Dassier?"

Dassier told him.

"Stay where you are. I'll send Ahman along with the Agency car."

The Agency car! Ahman! Kassim! Sophia seemed to have arisen out of the past intact.

There had been a few changes, however. Dassier realised this when he saw Ahman drive up at the wheel of an

ancient Baby Austin, which no Sophia assistant would have formerly dared to exhibit in the streets of Kuala Getah. The *syce* still wore a fine white cap, though his uniform was threadbare.

“*Tabeh, tuan.*”

He seemed delighted to see him again. Dassier instinctively shook hands with him, then somehow piled in with all his luggage. As they drove along he broke into conversation.

“Ahman’s driving a beautiful car these days!”

The old chauffeur laughed and explained in the pidgin Malay he used for the benefit of the white men :

“Very difficult now, *tuan*. Japanese bad men. Everything destroyed. Everything stolen.”

Despite his manifest contempt for his new car, Ahman drove the Baby Austin with all his old virtuosity. After a series of dangerous acrobatics he succeeded in overtaking a convoy of three Army lorries, and when he was past the last one his strained features relaxed into a broad grin. They drove through the town and headed straight for the Bangar Estate. On arriving at the Agency, which had apparently suffered no damage, the *syce* swept round majestically and drew up outside the main porch. Dassier dashed into the Managing Director’s office where Uncle Law was waiting for him.

Uncle Law had been congratulated by the powers that be for having saved the documents of Sophia and had been promoted to the rank of Managing Director. Mr. Chaulette had been elevated to a loftier position on the Board. He was quite at home there. Throughout his career he had borne the stamp of the Board of Directors as others bear the mark of misfortune or of vice.

When he sent Uncle Law back to Malaya, Mr. Chaulette had allowed him considerable freedom of action. A certain instinctive tact prompted him to keep himself in the background for the time being, secretly elaborating on the projects he had patiently worked out during the war,

The instructions received by Uncle Law boiled down to having a look round on the spot and acting in the best interests of Sophia.

Faithful to his principles, as soon as he had welcomed Dassier back, Uncle Law gave him an outline of the situation as he saw it and then told him, as he had told all the others, what was expected of him.

During the preliminary stages of the occupation the organisation had given evidence of an activity which might have lent credence to its possessing a certain internal capacity for survival. After the initial shock, though shorn of its brain and deprived of its directing cells, it had fallen into a rhythm little different from its usual rhythm by virtue of an inertia whose merits Uncle Law did not hesitate to attribute to the deep impact left by the Europeans. In the fields, after the first flush of emotion occasioned by the change of masters, Ramasamy had got down to work again. The latex had dripped into the cups. The workshops had carried on with their periodical transformation. In the plantation offices the clerks had made out the monthly accounts on the forms prescribed by Sophia. These documents had been checked and collated by the Agency clerks. A Japanese Executive Board had been created, and Mr. Gopal, formerly the Chief Clerk of the Finance Department, was appointed Managing Director. Mr. Gopal spent his time writing stern confidential letters to the Asiatic plantation directors who did not comply with regulations, while Mr. Xuan, who had been promoted Company Secretary, signed the blue and pink "reminder" slips himself.

But this had not lasted very long. The rhythm soon began to slow down as the initial energy gradually exhausted itself. Bit by bit the organisation had lapsed, in the same way and at the same time as the comportment and manners of the new directors. The first step on the down-

hill path had been the renouncing of ties and long sleeves. Then the rot set in. Mr. Gopal had got tired of striving after perfection and keeping the various elements up to the mark. Mr. Xuan had begun to feel appalled at the thought of sending out reminders which never seemed to lead to anything. Some documents had been curtailed, others completely neglected. The presentation of the letters had become more slipshod. The new directors had fallen into the habit of turning up late at the office. Their subordinates had followed their example. The maintenance of moral and physical standards with an eventual aim in view demands the sort of patience that Orientals lack.

There is no doubt at all that the strictest formality was indispensable to the life of Sophia. The imperfections of the symbolic system were soon reflected in the daily routine. The personnel in the fields being no longer occupied at every instant with administrative paper-work and demands for reports that often had no real significance, common sense dictated that more time and care should be devoted to the practical side of the job. But once again common sense had failed. It had come to light that the organisation was unable to function without some accessory factor behind it. From the moment their minds were no longer absorbed and exasperated by preoccupations not directly concerned with their labours, the new planters had abandoned themselves to idleness. The lethargy had gradually spread and had finally infected Ramasamy. The number of trees tapped had decreased day by day. The output had dropped. From the point of view of *results*, European influence had proved its worth by its very absurdity.

A spark of life had flickered on, however, right up to the Japanese capitulation. Then the flame had promptly been snuffed out. The defeated occupants had ceased to call for the production of rubber. Whereupon all the Chinese in Malaya, who for ages had been waiting for this moment, had invaded the workshops, the office buildings and the

bungalows and had ransacked them from top to bottom, carrying off everything that could be torn down or wrenched off and easily removed. They had loaded their loot on to trucks that had suddenly made a miraculous re-appearance, on to carts, rickshaws and bicycles, and within a few days all these valuables had disappeared into various secret store-rooms. Work had come to a complete standstill. The Tamil coolies, after the Chinese had finished, had purloined the few remaining planks in order to repair their lines which were beginning to fall to pieces from lack of maintenance. Then the Malayan world had sat back and calmly waited for the return of the white man.

Uncle Law gave Dassier an outline of the situation, emphasising the points which he considered essential.

“The European staff? At the moment there are six of us, for the Agency and all fifteen plantations, at a time when there should be twice as many as before. . . .

“The plantations? They’re in a bad state, but it could be worse. At least the trees are still there. . . .

“Labour? We’ve got hold of quite a lot of the former Tamil population. The problem is to find enough rice for them; unfortunately that’s not too easy. We’re going to run into difficulties with the Chinese, but for the moment they’re busy selling us back at an exorbitant price all the stuff they looted from us.

“The Asiatic personnel? We’re going to have a lot of trouble there, I can tell you. Some of them have come up with a cock-and-bull story about how they saved the Company by offering their services during the Japanese occupation. . . . It’s true that a fair number of them kept some sort of organisation going for quite a long time. They tried to copy our methods. Here, have a look at the annual report drawn up by Mr. Gopal, the Managing Director, for the first year of his reign.”

Dassier glanced through the document and smiled as he read the introduction and came across the following phrase:

“The stronghold of Syonan,<sup>1</sup> the turn-table of the Sphere of Co-Prosperity of South-East Asia, now modernised and rendered invincible, constitutes the best security for the future of this Company. . . .”

He turned straightaway to the general conclusion, which ended with this passage:

“Working under difficult conditions, our personnel has given still more evidence of its steadfastness and loyalty, for which we must record our gratitude. We have demanded a considerable effort from every one of them.”

“Well, what do you say to that?” Uncle Law observed. “They’ve been well trained, haven’t they?”

“What have you got in mind for me?”

“Don’t think you’re going to stay there in the Agency. You’ll take over the management of Kebun Besar. Palm-oil, that’s right. It’s now a higher priority than rubber. The whole world is crying out for palm-oil. Maille is already there, seeing to the workshops. It’s got to get under way as soon as possible.”

“Maille? But I thought . . .”

“Yes, he arrived a few days ago. The only one I’m keeping at the Agency is Bonardin. Meanwhile I move around, here, there and everywhere, in the Agency car—I hope you liked it, by the way! You’ll leave for Kebun Besar as soon as possible: to-morrow, if that’s all right with you. . . .”

Uncle Law bent forward to drive the point home.

“We’ve got to start production rightaway, do you understand, Dassier? That’s our one and only aim at the moment. There’s no point in getting worked up about it, but there are any amount of difficulties which will have to be solved one by one. And it’s necessary for all of us, Dassier, for the morale of the coolies as well as for our own. I was in Kebun Besar the other day when I took Maille up there. It gave me the most horrible feeling. A plantation that’s not in production smells of death, Dassier

<sup>1</sup> The Japanese name for Singapore.

—of death, I tell you. Don't forget to take along a camp bed and a mosquito net. The bungalows have been stripped of everything. Get in touch with Maille as soon as you arrive."

## I I

In the gutted bungalow of Kebun Besar, the palm-oil plantation, Maille, who had just come back from Singapore where he had been to buy certain necessities, thought to himself that he really must write to Germaine. He had left her without news ever since his arrival, apart from a line or two dashed off in great haste. Still dusty from the journey, he sat down on one of the packing-cases which constituted the only furniture.

"... I spent no more than a day at Kuala Getah. The town hasn't changed very much. And Uncle Law is the same as ever. I didn't have a chance to talk to him about our plans. Jean hasn't told anyone either. (Jean has just arrived. He's here with me, as the director of Kebun Besar. We're actually sharing a bungalow.) I think it's best to wait for a bit before broaching the subject. In any case no women will be allowed out here for several months. We'll just have to be patient, darling; it will work out all right in the end. Life here would be quite impossible for you at the moment. There's no furniture left, and we live on Army rations. I'm away quite a lot as I have to go and buy various things in Singapore. The workshops were ransacked from top to bottom. There was nothing left, not even a screw-driver or spanner. . . ."

He paused in exasperation. Couldn't he find something else to write about instead of these trivial routine details? Didn't he have anything else to tell her apart from these practical difficulties, which could not be of the slightest interest to her? He forced himself to think about his love



for her in the hope that this would act as a source of inspiration.

For him the war had been punctuated by a great many moves and a number of extraordinary adventures, first in Indo-China and then in India and China itself, with the British forces in which he had managed to join up after the armistice in 1940. On his return to France after the liberation, he had gone straight back to Germaine Dassier. She had not changed. The memory of those last days in Malaya was still as vivid to her as they were to him. During the fortnight they had lived together they had made plans for the future. Then he had gone off to Paris to look for a job.

He had not found anything suitable. He was subsequently forced to admit that he had not tried hard enough. He knew that he was still on the strength of Sophia. The years of war were beginning to blot out the memory of the Agency. And not only that—renewed contact with Europe served to remind him of his previous experience in industry. Other companies, other societies offered him employment in a circle just as jealously guarded as Sophia's own little world, a circle organised on the same formal lines and in which the work was reduced to ritual observances that seemed to him equally devoid of all real meaning. Apart from that, the material aspect was far more grim. He knew this circle only too well and shuddered at the very thought of it. Viewed in retrospect, Sophia seemed tolerable in comparison. Besides, with Uncle Law out there, the atmosphere would be quite different.

Germaine was not as optimistic as he was, but she let herself be talked into it. He had decided to get in touch with Head Office in Paris. He was one of the first to be sent back to Malaya by Mr. Chaulette. Maille kept telling himself that it would have been mad to have done otherwise. The salaries he had been offered in France were all hopelessly low. Now that there was Germaine to think of,

he felt an even greater need for material security. Sophia provided that security. In four or five years' time he would probably be made a manager. In fifteen years he would be able to retire with some savings and the pension which Sophia bestowed on everyone who rendered loyal service. Germaine would come out and join him as soon as possible. Jean's presence in the Company might make the situation a little tricky at first. Maille dreaded the idea of announcing the news to Uncle Law. But, after all, it was a personal matter.

He had to finish this letter, however. He was horrified to find that it was almost a strain. Since rejoining the Company his work had occupied him to such a point that he could hardly take his mind off it. He had always sworn not to let his existence be swayed by questions which, when all was said and done, were relatively unimportant. The Kebun Besar workshops had to be put in running order as soon as possible? So what! He knew perfectly well that a delay of one or two months would do nothing to alter the situation. . . . He made an effort and tried to tell her how much he loved her. The words still would not come. A long time went by. As darkness fell, he realised he would only just have time to unpack all the stuff he had brought back from Singapore and to prepare the surprise he had planned before Dassier came back from the fields. He put off the letter till later, called for the "boy" and got down to work.

Dassier got home late that evening after a trying day spent in dealing with the Tamils who complained of the shortage of rice and the lack of suitable tools and who did no work at all without grousing. It was already dark when he reached the slope leading up to the bungalow. Through a clearing in the palm-trees he noticed a bright glow at the top of the hill. He was surprised, for ever since their

return their evenings had been spent in the melancholy half-light of hurricane lamps.

Maille greeted him at the entrance. The living-room was illuminated by two pressure lamps hanging from the ceiling. The light they cast reached out into the middle of the garden, where two massive bougainvilleas had successfully resisted the encroachment of the wild plants. Dassier was dazzled. The brilliance of these new lamps seemed to mark the beginning of a new era. The gentle hissing noise re-created the atmosphere of the old days. Some wicker chairs had been placed round a low table, with a mat underneath it. Maille had had a shower and changed his clothes. Even the "boy" had made an effort. He had picked some bougainvillea flowers and arranged them with some ferns in an old tin, then placed the whole lot on the table. The bungalow really looked quite cheerful.

"My word!" Dassier exclaimed. "You're doing us proud, aren't you?"

"I've got another surprise for you. Boy! *Stengah!*"

"What!"

"Yes, it's perfectly true. Twenty dollars a bottle. I thought we might stand ourselves this little treat."

Whisky had become a rarity, which contributed to the melancholy atmosphere of the bungalows.

"And I've ordered some proper beds. A bit expensive, I'm afraid . . . And a frigidaire."

"Well done. All the bills will be passed. Law gave me *carte blanche* for the bungalow . . . What about the workshops?"

"I've got all we need to start off with."

"Well, cheers! I shan't be a minute, I'm just going to have a shower."

Dassier went off to his room, preceded by the "boy" triumphantly bearing one of the new lamps. He came back a moment later, dressed in the evening uniform of sarong and Malayan *bajuh*. Maille had waited for him,

sunk in the depths of his arm-chair. They poured themselves out a second whisky and silently savoured the inner glow of the alcohol. A house lizard scuttled across the window-sill uttering its two-note cry.

"They're attracted by the light," said Dassier. "It's the first I've seen since we've been back. . . . What news from Singapore?"

With the Chinese mechanics in the workshops, Maille was encountering the same difficulties as Dassier with the Tamil labourers. Their methods were almost identical. The Chinese did not flaunt their misery. They hardly ever complained of an empty stomach. They wanted money, that was all. They found their salary insufficient and went on strike on the slightest pretext. They did not have far to seek. The material bought at exorbitant prices in Singapore was often miserably shoddy stuff; the spanners were either too big or too small; the cement, which was sold as pre-war Portland, was mixed with sand; the electrodes for the soldering gang melted like wax in less than no time. As soon as he had put one of these defects right, Chang the overseer would smile, nod his head and fold his arms for the rest of the day. Maille would take the Army truck and set off for Singapore again. It was exasperating, but there was nothing else to be done. For the last few days, however, he had managed to get better results from the Chinese.

Maille refilled their glasses himself rather than disturb the "boy" who was busy laying the table with the new dinner service.

"In Singapore," he said, "you won't find a single Chinese merchant who's not in a position to provide a full range of motors, dynamos, machine-tools and all the spare parts you could wish for. You can buy cars, trucks, motorcycles, furniture, wireless-sets and cameras. Yesterday I was offered a grand piano and a complete set of the works of Kipling: the name of the original owner had simply been scratched out. All the factory equipment in Malaya

is there. Not to mention, of course, the imitations manufactured by the Chinese."

"This whisky isn't imitation anyway. Cheers!"

They had knocked off a quarter of the bottle. It was nine o'clock. The "boy" was waiting in the kitchen. In the ordinary course of events they had dinner much earlier and went to bed immediately afterwards. To-day they felt there was no need to hurry. They both sank into a delightful state of torpor. The alcohol, the light, the hissing of the lamps, lent a new significance to the silence. A wild cock, deceived by the unaccustomed brightness, crowed in the darkness quite close to the bungalow.

"What we want is a shot-gun, Maille," said Dassier. "Those jungle cocks are running wild all over the plantation. Each time I go out I run into dozens of them."

A swarm of flying ants, likewise attracted by the light, invaded the bungalow. After a few seconds their bodies lay in a charred heap under the lamp. They shifted the table and drew away from the carnage.

"I also got some wire netting for the windows," said Maille. "I'll put it up to-morrow."

Several house lizards scuttled out of the shadows and began feeding on the dead ants. They watched them in silence. They had exhausted more or less every topic of conversation. The unaccustomed background to this evening broke their usual chain of activity and prompted them to more profound reflections. All of a sudden Maille remarked:

"It wasn't intentional, you know. Neither of us meant to . . ."

"I don't hold it against you. We couldn't have gone on living like that. She couldn't stand it. She told me so even before she went away. I had no illusions about it. I could see she was suffering. It was just as painful for me, I assure you. Every day I said to myself, I must make an effort so as not to lose her completely. It wasn't possible, not with Sophia. I thought of resigning and trying my hand else-

where. I didn't dare, precisely because of her. Have you heard from her lately? When is she coming out?"

"She's very well. She hopes you're not angry with her. I told her we were sharing a bungalow here. I think she'll be able to come out in a month or two."

"Have you spoken to anyone else about it? To Law?"

"Not yet. I'm going to wait a little longer."

"You'll have to face it some day."

They sat for a long time lost in their own thoughts. Dassier drained his glass.

"Ready to eat?" he asked.

"I'm ready."

"Boy!"

The "boy" put one of the lamps on the table. The invasion of ants had ceased. They moved across and sat down in front of proper plates laid on a white table-cloth, which was Maille's latest acquisition.

"Things are looking up," said Dassier. "Uncle Law is coming to see us in a fortnight's time . . . I thought that by then we might perhaps . . ."

Maille, who was thinking of Germaine, gave a start. He could not bear the idea of letting Uncle Law and the Sophia staff know about his liaison with her.

"We might perhaps . . . what?"

"Well, perhaps it would just be possible to begin harvesting . . . Oh! on a small scale . . . A few hundred acres. . . . The workshop will have to be got going, of course. Partially anyway—say one unit. I know it's difficult, but what do you think?"

Maille looked at him and thought it over.

"It's just possible," he eventually replied. "In fact if the Chinese go on working as they've done these last few days, I can guarantee it."

## III

Sophia was slowly coming back to life. Rather like someone who has been half-drowned and has all the appearance of being dead, but whose heart, under the influence of patiently repeated impulsions, begins to beat again, feebly at first but with increasing strength, its rhythm synchronising with the rhythm of the enforced pulsations—so did a faint breath of life animate the organs of Sophia, growing stronger and more regular day by day.

Uncle Law, to whom this rebirth represented the crowning point of his career, saw the moment coming when he would be able to write and tell Mr. Chaulette that work was back to normal in all the essential fields of activity. He divided his time more or less equally between the Agency and the plantations. Bonardin took over from him when he was away from Kuala Getah—a Bonardin who seemed to have got rid of his nervous instability.

On the plantations Uncle Law followed a line of conduct that he had mapped out after mature consideration. He would set off in the Baby Austin, for which he had now developed a sort of affection and which he refused to change for a more comfortable vehicle until everything else had been restored. He was driven by the *syce* Ahman. Sometimes he would take the wheel himself, and they vied with each other as to which could achieve a greater appearance of dignity. He would arrive in the evening so as to be able to spend the night on the plantation and start off on his inspection first thing in the morning. Once and for all he had ordained that there should be no modification in the daily routine. His first contact with the planters was made with a glass of whisky in his hand. After that he listened to the reports. He would then hold forth, without drawing breath, and give his views on matters of work, to

which his long experience as a planter and the circumstances attending these last war years lent, without his knowing it, the subtlety and forcefulness of a philosophical system. He would declare:

“You must avoid all unnecessary worry and never let it influence your work. You must take events and setbacks as they come, without ever letting them affect your even temper, and patiently get down to the root of every difficulty until you have solved it. You must never let it develop into an obsession or let it disturb your sleep. It's better to produce a little less rubber this year, but to do so on a sound basis.”

At dawn next day, after spending the night on a camp bed that had been prepared for him, Uncle Law would accompany the planters on their rounds. He would inspect the various gangs, see what progress had been made since his last visit, comment on the arrangements made, sometimes—though only rarely—utter a word of praise, and criticise when he felt it was absolutely necessary. In the evening, when he had seen everything for himself, he would get into his car and drive back to Kuala Getah in the knowledge that he had acted for the best. And this policy no doubt had something to be said for it.

When he arrived on the appointed day at Kebun Besar, Dassier triumphantly told him the news which he had hitherto kept secret. The first harvesting had taken place that very day. At dawn to-morrow the workshops would be under way and the cycle would be resumed. This was a happy event for Uncle Law. Exploitation had already started up again on several of the rubber plantations. Palm-oil marked a new step forward.

But Uncle Law was uneasy. If it was impossible for a serious accident to occur in a latex workshop, the same could not be said for an oil manufactory like the one at Kebun Besar, with its huge boilers, automatic cleavers, hydraulic presses and other delicate machinery. He knew this only too well. He was interested in machines and



knew every inch of the workshop, having seen it put together piece by piece. He asked Maille a thousand questions, putting him through a regular interrogation, demanding particulars of the smallest details. Convinced at last by his replies that there was every chance of success, he gave his sanction for the work to get under way on the following day.

Mr. Chang, the Chinese overseer, flashed his torch at Maille to see who it was.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Chang. All set to go?”

“All set. The furnaces have been lit, but we haven’t got the pressure up yet.”

Round the giant boilers lined up in a neat row under their brick cowls, the darkness was pierced by a number of flickering lights. Only two of them were in working order and were going to be put into use. A large pile of wood had been dumped just outside the building, and the stokers were busy feeding in the logs passed down to them by a team of coolies drawn up in a long line.

Maille climbed up an iron ladder on to the platform of the boiler-house. The needles on the gauges under the hurricane lamps were not yet moving. All the Chinese mechanics were there, checking the cocks and piping, ready to lend a hand in the event of any mishap. Mr. Chang moved from one to another with an air of expectancy.

The first familiar sound which came to Maille’s ears was a dull roar. The fire was rising. The flames cast a brighter light on the platform through the gap in the spring doors.

The roar grew more pronounced. On a signal from Maille Mr. Chang lowered the intake-levers and reduced the fuel consumption. It was best not to hurry things. Sudden overheating could lead to dangerous dilations in the furnace vaults. This was the tricky stage. Maille was on tenterhooks. He ordered the combustion rate to be decreased still further. Mr. Chang smiled and carried out his

instructions. The roar died down to a low murmur. As the masonry slowly began to heat up, Maille came down from the platform and walked round the building.

It was three o'clock in the morning and although it was still pitch dark an unusual activity reigned outside. Squatting on their heels in the shadows, all the Tamil workshop coolies were already assembled, draped in their lengths of white cloth. They had not been ordered to report until much later, after roll call. It would take several hours for the two Lancashires to work up enough steam. Until then no one was needed except the mechanics and the stokers. A *ḱangani* rose to his feet and saluted.

"What is it?" Maille asked.

"Nothing. We just came to have a look."

As he flashed the beam of his torch along the group, he recognised several coolies who did not even belong to the workshops. He likewise saw two truck drivers. From all of them he received the same reply:

"We came to have a look."

A little farther off, some children had lit a small bonfire and were playfully waving burning twigs about in the darkness. This reminded Maille of the ceremonies of the nocturnal roll call in the old days. He switched off his torch. In the lines some distance away he could see a blaze of lights. The whole village seemed to be up and about. He could hear the resounding thumps made by the women pounding spices for the morning curry. This was also a new departure. Since the war they had fallen into slovenly habits of which their husbands bitterly complained.

Maille went into the main building of the workshop. He swept his torch at random in all directions, over the presses, the hydraulic pumps and all the way up to the ceiling over the huge crushers that would eventually reduce the fruit to a dark-brown paste. Then he realised how pointless this inspection was. All the machines were frozen in silent immobility. Movement alone would reveal any defect. As Uncle Law had said, he would have to solve

each difficulty as and when it arose. For the time being the only important question was getting the boilers under pressure. Maille came back to the boiler-room, passing through the machine-room where a mechanic was checking the lubrication. The steam-engine which was to start operating this morning had been carefully oiled and all the little pipes were glistening.

Maille felt a sudden surge of anger. Mr. Chang had taken it on himself to increase the intake. The roar now sounded like distant thunder. The entire process of the workshop depended on the resistance of the furnace vaults. Mr. Chang favoured him with another smile and informed him that the masonry had been progressively heated up by a small fire that had been kept going for several hours.

"The stokers have been up all night," he said. "They've taken it in turns to keep the flame steady."

Maille looked at the stokers. Up to now they had been conspicuous for their lack of enthusiasm and their surly attitude. On one occasion he had almost been obliged to give them their marching orders, when they refused to climb inside the boilers to clean them out.

The fire was now intense. The heat could be felt outside. The black skins of the Tamils began to shine with sweat. All of a sudden, after the roar of the furnaces, a second sign of life could be noticed. Everyone in the boiler-room was looking out for it. Everyone knew it was bound to happen sooner or later. Yet when they saw it with their own eyes, it came almost as a shock and they leant forward anxiously to make sure it was not an illusion.

They were quickly reassured. There was no doubt about it. The needle of one of the gauges had just moved—the gauge belonging to the first boiler. The second one was not too slow to follow. Mr. Chang shouted something in Chinese and the mechanics exchanged a few words. The stokers wiped their faces with the back of their hands, then swung open the counterbalanced doors and levelled out the gleaming ashes with long metal rakes. The coolies

engaged in transporting the logs, who had stopped for the time being, now resumed their work, murmuring to each other under their breath. The murmur spread in some mysterious manner and came back in the form of an echo through the front of the building. All the Tamils outside knew what had happened. The pressure was rising. The news reached the native lines and provided a topic of conversation for the invalids, the women and the old men.

Two hours more went by before normal pressure was attained, rising slowly degree by degree. During that time there were more and more signs of life. Perched on the boiler cowls, Mr. Chang and his Chinese kept a watchful eye on these symptoms and carefully tended the machinery as though it was a body awaking after a long, long sleep.

Sizzling bubbles, instantly evaporated, only to reproduce themselves all over again, now began to appear at the oval joints of the man-holes and stop-cocks. The bolts were tightened up with extreme care. A little steam began to escape through the flanges of the water-level indicators. This was inevitable and not at all serious. The leak eventually stopped altogether.

As soon as the pressure was high enough the fuel pumps were tested. After one or two initial shudders the rods of the little pistons slowly but surely slid forward. It was the first movement visible to the naked eye. Another murmur rose from the Tamil world. The monsters would not die of thirst. They would receive the necessary water ration at regular intervals.

Getting down on to his knees and stretching out his hand, Mr. Chang turned on a number of brass taps. The water-level indicators were washed clean by a jet of steam. Through the glass, now rendered transparent once again, it was possible to follow the oscillations of the liquid.

The needles on the gauges moved more slowly than the hands of a clock. Maille went down into the basement and inspected the vaults. They seemed to be holding out. He

was not worried about the steel frames of the boilers. The carcass of the old Lancashires could withstand worse catastrophes than war. There was a noticeable change in the atmosphere, which was now permeated with jets of steam and with a thousand different sizzling, roaring and whistling sounds emitted by the two metal bodies standing side by side. Mr. Chang gave a signal. One of the mechanics opened the release cock for a few seconds and they were all deafened by the shrill hiss of the fluid as it gushed up above the roof.

The pressure was still rising. The normal level had almost been reached. Maille went outside once more. Dawn was breaking. The coolies were still huddled against the wall. Two of the huge corrugated iron chimneys were emitting clouds of smoke. Each minute the cloud was getting less dark and less opaque. The combustion was improving. The energy stored up in each log of wood and transformed into fluid was about to expend itself in useful work. Maille went back into the boiler-room and gave orders for the main steam-cock to be opened.

Mr. Chang insisted on doing this himself. First of all, however, he gave three tugs on a piece of string hanging from the ceiling. The siren emitted three short hoots. Before the last one had died away, the coolies outside were on their feet. They made their way towards the various parts of the workshop where they were required.

Mr. Chang turned the wheel of the principal cock a fraction of an inch, then paused and listened. The steam hissed through the pipes with a noise like a whirlpool, which contributed to the symphony of the workshop's rebirth. Some thin white filaments appeared at each joint in the piping system. The Chinese overseer waited a second or two and moved the wheel another fraction of an inch; then, leaping from one boiler to the other, he rushed along the full length of the conduit which had now come to life,

jumped to the ground at the end of the building and followed the pipe down to the machine-room. Maille was close on his heels.

Down there a little steam was likewise escaping from the joints which were still cold. There was a faint vibration which extended all the way down to the intake cock. Dassier and Uncle Law had just arrived and now stood motionless in front of the long cylinder. They had both heard Maille going out in the middle of the night and had thought of going with him. Then they had decided not to, for fear of being in the way during the preliminary preparations.

"How's it going?" asked Uncle Law.

"As well as can be expected, so far. The furnace vaults have held out anyway. We're going to turn her over now."

Mr. Chang yelled out an order to a boiler-room mechanic, who promptly turned the boiler cocks wide open. There was a fresh gust which swept right along the machine, again making a noise like a whirlpool. With the help of a crow-bar the mechanics gave a turn to the huge cast-iron fly-wheel. The piston rose and fell once in the cylinder, both surfaces of which had been progressively heated by little pipes of steam grafted into the main artery. They waited a second or two, then the fly-wheel was turned by hand once more to bring the lever down into the starting position. Mr. Chang cast a final glance at the greasers and checked the oil level. Then he turned to Maille.

"All ready to go, sir?"

Maille nodded in assent. The overseer seized the handle on the wheel of the intake cock in both hands, tensed every muscle, then gave a sudden heave. All at once the massive bulk of cast-iron was set in motion. A long shuddering sigh could be heard, followed by a second, then another and another, with shorter and shorter intervals in between. The mechanics gathered round the machine, listening closely to each of its palpitations, adjusting the oil circula-

tion, checking the two big bearings of the crankshaft. Everything seemed to be in order. Mr. Chang opened the intake to its full extent. The shuddering sighs quickened, while the initial asthmatic rhythm developed into a series of regular pulsations. The two spheres on the regulator started oscillating imperceptibly. The machine settled down to its working speed. It was allowed to run half an hour without re-fuelling, while everyone round it probed and prodded, recorded temperatures, listened to the pulsations and checked any abnormal vibration.

In the meantime the steam pipes had been opened for the automatic cleavers, which already contained the fruit that had been gathered the day before, and for all the accessory machines. The fluid was now circulating throughout the network of veins with the gentle sound of a brook flowing over a bed of sand. Maille, who had just gone to have a look round the pressing-room, came back to the steam-engine again. All the coolies were at action stations.

“Put her into gear,” he said.

One of the Chinese mechanics manœuvred the double couplings. The main shaft started turning.

It ran the whole length of the building and commanded every moving part. Followed by Uncle Law and Dassier, Maille went back to the pressing-room, where they were immediately deafened by the din which they had not heard since the old days. The whole unit was in motion. The mechanics had thrown all the machines into gear in order to test them. The result was a wild cacophony, once again familiar to their ears, in which they could clearly distinguish the clanking of the elevator chains, the scrape of the big crusher pinions and the rattle of the strippers.

“Everything seems to be under control,” Uncle Law observed.

The cycle of the transformation began. The automatic cleavers were opened. The smoking cages poured the charred bunches into the elevator shaft and the clusters

tumbled into the strippers. Uncle Law insisted on witnessing the entire process of this initial batch. He followed the fruit through each of its various stages and was not content until the clean oil, with its familiar scent of frangipani, was finally pumped into the big tanks. These had been newly painted in a bright orange colour, with the name SOPHIA superimposed in bold white letters.

Maille had stayed on with Uncle Law. The operation had lasted all morning. Dassier had left them some time before to attend to the work in the fields. As they came out of the workshops, they heard the sound of an engine approaching through the palm-trees. A locomotive presently appeared on the Decauville railway, manfully pulling six wagons piled high with fruit. It was the first crop of the day. The locomotive hauled its load up to the top of the approach ramp. The coolies tilted the wagons. The clusters fell into the cages, which were then pushed into the automatic cleavers.

## I V

When Mr. Chalette received the telegram saying that production had been resumed on all fifteen plantations, he rushed into the office of the Chairman of the Board to tell him the news and added:

“Old Law has got things moving. I knew we could rely on him. He’s done a really good job. I think the Board should send him a message of congratulation.”

“An excellent suggestion,” said the Chairman.

“But I think the time has now come for the executive office to adopt a broader outlook and reinforce Law, anyway for the time being, with a higher authority.”

“I’d already thought of that,” said the Chairman.

“It’s obvious. At the stage we’ve now reached, it’s essential to restore the organisation as quickly as possible.



Up to now we've allowed Law a free hand. The only directive we've given him is to produce oil and rubber. He went off with that idea firmly established in his mind and has necessarily had to neglect the administrative side. I don't blame him, but he mustn't confine himself to that line for too long. I know him extremely well. He has the defects of his qualities, and a pronounced tendency to see nothing but the immediate issue."

At this point Mr. Chalette enlarged on a number of ideas which had impressed themselves on his mind during the last few years. Then he went on:

"I'm bound to say I was a bit worried by Law's last report. At the moment there are eighteen Europeans on the plantations and only two at the Agency—himself and Bonardin. Furthermore he's out and about a large part of the time—which is obviously useful, I grant you—only when he's away in Kedah or Johore, there's no one left to attend to the general policy. I think it's absolutely essential for me to go and spend a few months out there just to give him a hand."

The Chairman of the Board gave his immediate consent. The powers that be maintain a certain degree of composure when confronted with material damage, but the idea of organisation being jeopardised fills them with concern.

Three weeks later Mr. Chalette landed at Singapore, passed like a whirlwind through Kebun Besar which Uncle Law wanted to show him, pronounced deep satisfaction at seeing the black smoke rising into the sky, then drove straight to Kuala Getah and shut himself up in the Agency.

He had arrived with three ideas which had come to him during the war.

The first, the idea of "mechanisation," had struck him at the time of the German army's initial successes. It was strengthened in the course of the Allied victories in the Western Desert and was firmly established in his mind,

together with a host of poetic images, after the American landing, in consequence of the rapturous accounts of the miracles performed by "bulldozers," "ditchers" and giant "scrapers" which, in the space of a few hours, could transform a mountain into an aerodrome.

The idea of "research" had also been floating through his thoughts for some time, but in a rather indeterminate form. It took proper shape one day under the name of "pure research." It had needed the thunderbolt of Hiroshima to bring it to light, to render palpable its infinite possibilities, and self-evident the relation between abstract speculation and the most prodigious realisation. The equation  $E=mc^2$  had engraved itself on his memory, to illustrate his next article in the *Bulletin* or a future address to the Sophia staff.

The idea of a "technical committee" had somehow arisen out of the mental chaos occasioned by the revelation of Russian power. He had said to himself: Russian industry is more highly developed than was supposed. Now, it is organised under a system of soviets. Therefore there must be something to be said for that system. There again, he had immediately adapted the idea to the question of rubber production and had voiced his thoughts in the term "technical committees." Moreover, it did not escape him that in borrowing a method from a people held under suspicion by the whole financial world, he was adding still further to his reputation for bold originality.

Transcending these three ideas and taking pride of place in the programme he had set himself for his few months' stay in Malaya, the prospect of reorganisation kept a perpetual hold on his mind. In this field he felt he had, by himself, created something new. After devoting a great deal of thought to the many attempts made in the past, he had come to the conclusion that somewhere in the world there must exist an abstract system of organisation, stripped of all material contingencies, an absolutely perfect, absolutely universal system which could be applied *a priori* and

automatically to no matter what community of people—to Sophia as a whole and at the same time to the various sections, both present and future, within the organisation itself. This idea had been interpreted in diagrammatic form on a big piece of tracing-paper. These labours had been kept strictly secret. He would not divulge them even to his most trusted colleagues until he felt the moment was ripe. In the meantime he joyfully anticipated their future surprise and astonished admiration.

For the time being it was urgent to settle a few preliminary formalities.

“Now look, Law,” he said, after listening with indifference to a report on the state of the plantations. “Gladkoff has just arrived. The Technical Department ought to be able to get under way again. The Commercial Department? There’s Bonardin. He’ll do for that. Ah! I knew there was something important we still haven’t got. We need a Secretary, Law!”

“I’d thought of that, but we’re not yet up to strength and everyone who can be spared is needed out on the plantations.”

They went over the nominal roll together.

“I don’t see how it can be done,” Uncle Law complained. “Maille used to have the job, but I can’t afford to let him go from Kebun Besar.”

“No, of course not. And anyway Maille . . . I don’t think he’s really got a proper sense of administration. How do you feel about Barthe? He impressed me very favourably before the war.”

“But Barthe’s also an engineer! We can’t have enough of them. At the moment he’s acting as Loeken’s assistant for all the workshops in Telanggor.”

“An engineer, eh? Then he must have a taste for up-to-date methods. He’s just the man we want. An experienced old fox like Loeken ought to be able to manage somehow. I can’t see anyone else who’ll fill the bill. No, Law, we’ll have to transfer Barthe to the Secretariat. Just give Loeken

a ring, will you? . . . The line hasn't been re-connected to Sungei Ikan? What about telegrams? Yes? Good. Send him a wire, then. Tell him we want Barthe to be here to-morrow morning, if possible . . . anyway some time during the day. Good. That's one thing settled. We're beginning to see a little more clearly. Now, Law, we've absolutely got to have a forestry expert for the Agricultural Section of the Technical Department. There, we've got no choice. There's only Dassier."

"But Dassier's managing Kebun Besar—the most important plantation of all at the moment!"

"This is what you'll have to do, Law," said Chaulette, beginning to scribble all over the nominal roll with his red pencil. "Transfer Powell from Kebun Tinggi to Kebun Besar. Put a senior assistant in as provisional manager for Kebun Tinggi, and we get Dassier to come back here, eh? Let's send him a telegram straightaway. We must get moving."

The Agency staff being thus reinforced, Mr. Chaulette called them together in the Managing Director's office. When he held all his colleagues within range of his horn-rimmed spectacles, he said:

"We're going to form a committee—a committee of technicians to study our technical problems."

"A good idea," Dassier observed.

"An excellent idea," Gladkoff echoed.

"It's exactly what we need," exclaimed Bonardin, who started striding up and down the room waving his arms about.

Young Barthe, who was still too junior to vouchsafe an opinion before being asked for it, kept silent but nodded his head with an air of approval.

"We've already got a Technical Department," Uncle Law protested.

"Yes, but that's an Agency unit, responsible for planning and for helping the plantations with advice. The job

of the technical committee will be to discuss questions of general policy prior to the plans being put into effect. It will meet at regular intervals and bring together not only the Agency engineers but those on the plantations as well, which should lead to a useful exchange of ideas."

The initial principle was simple and the intention was laudable; but before it could be put into effect a place had to be found for it in the complex of mechanisms which formed the internal structure of the organisation.

"I foresee one difficulty," Mr. Chaulette went on.

His colleagues listened more closely.

"I'm worried the plantation managers might accuse us of attaching too much importance to the technical side and not enough to exploitation. What do you think, Law?"

"That could happen, I must say."

"Has anyone any ideas for avoiding this problem?"

To this question, which was addressed to the group in general, young Barthe made so bold as to reply:

"Perhaps," he said, "a committee of planters could also be created, to which all the managers would belong."

"That's an excellent suggestion, Barthe," Mr. Chaulette said with an air of approval. "Unfortunately, if these two bodies function independently of one another, they're bound to come to contradictory conclusions."

"Couldn't they first thrash things out separately and then both meet and take their decisions together?" Dassier ventured.

"Ye-e-s . . . but I'm not too keen on that. It's a rather lame solution. There's one point you haven't thought of. Whom are we going to include in the technical committee?"

"The technicians," said Uncle Law.

The others all replied in similar vein—all except Bonardin who, sensing certain as yet unformulated reservations in the Inspector General's voice, thought he would show how clever he was by saying in a tone full of innuendo:

"The technicians? Yes . . . That does present a certain amount of difficulty."

"What sort of difficulty, Bonardin?" Mr. Chaulette asked in a gentle voice.

The head of the Commercial Department stammered something incomprehensible, then lowered his eyes with an air of abjection. Since the return of his former idol he had resumed his former manner. Mr. Chaulette did not deign to follow up his victory but went on:

"Now this is the difficulty . . . In the first place, incidentally, not one of you has thought that the committee will have to be split into two, the industrialists and the agricultural experts. But that's a mere detail. The important point is that the corps of technicians will include a large number of junior assistants. We can't expect them to argue on equal terms with the managers. So this is what we'll do. Would you please make a note of this, Barthe. We'll create a committee of technicians, split into two sub-committees of course. At the same time we'll form a committee of planters which will consist mainly of assistants, with only a few managers. These will be two consultative bodies. They will discuss whatever concerns them separately and make the necessary recommendations. Then, above them both, we'll create a third committee, this one composed exclusively of managers. . . . How does that strike you, Law, eh? I think it should work pretty well. Two parallel consultative bodies, and above them an executive body. . . . Have you got that down, Barthe? They would all meet at the Agency on the same day, twice a month."

"But then on those days," Uncle Law broke in with a worried frown, "if all the managers, engineers, assistants and agricultural experts have been called in here, there won't be anyone left on the plantations."

"There'll be no one left on the plantations, I agree," Mr. Chaulette conceded. "It will do them good to get out of their routine rut and exchange a few ideas."

The principle of the committees being settled, their composition then transformed the Agency for several weeks into a bustling hive of activity which recalled the finest days before the war. After that the problem of chairmanship cropped up. All were agreed on one point: it would be impossible to include engineers in the discussions unless the meeting were given a slant beyond and above mere technicalities. Mr. Chaulette expected great things from the technical side, but only when it was properly organised, and its organisation could only be achieved through external administration.

After several opinions had been put forward it was finally agreed that Mr. Chaulette should take over the chairmanship of the industrial sub-committee, and Law that of the agricultural sub-committee. On further consideration, they were about to decide on the creation of a vice-presidency for each of these sub-sections (a position which could only be filled by Law for the industrialists and by Chaulette for the agriculturists) when young Barthe, who was intensely interested in these questions of administration, quietly remarked that since both bodies were to meet simultaneously, in two different rooms, it would be physically impossible to carry out this arrangement. Mr. Chaulette felt extremely vexed; he had been enthralled by the harmony of this solution. He consoled himself, however, by recording it, together with the vice-chairmanships, on his representative diagram. The circles symbolising these positions would be drawn with a dotted line, as was laid down in *Sophia General Instructions* whenever a post, which was considered theoretically indispensable to the organisation, was not in fact occupied for want of sufficient personnel.

The composition having been marked down on the diagram, they went on to study the question of statutes. Committees could not be conceived without statutes. Barthe used up a whole sheaf of paper on the succession of rough drafts for the opening paragraphs, which he

handed in for typing one after another to one of the Secretariat clerks. The final version read as follows:

“A. A SOPHIA COMMITTEE OF TECHNICIANS is to be formed within the existing framework of the Company.

“B. This COMMITTEE will consist of two Branches: the INDUSTRIAL BRANCH and the AGRICULTURAL BRANCH.

“C. COMPOSITION (see attached diagram)

“1. *Industrial Branch*

- (a) President: the Inspector General
- (b) Vice-President: the Managing Director
- (c) Councillor: the Head of the Commercial Department
- (d) Members: the Engineers of the Company

“2. *Agricultural Branch*

- (a) President: the Managing Director
- (b) Vice-President: the Inspector General
- (c) Councillor: the Head of the Commercial Department
- (d) Members: the Agriculturalists of the Company

“D. INTENTIONS . . .”

After casting a final glance over the text and checking the capital letters, Mr. Chaulette heaved a sigh of relief, wiped his forehead and exclaimed:

“It’s beginning to take shape. We’ve cleared the decks a bit. We’re getting somewhere now, aren’t we, Law?”

“Certainly,” Uncle Law solemnly agreed. “We’re getting somewhere now all right.”



But the real difficulties began to arise with paragraph D, the intentions.

“What we’ve got to do,” said Mr. Chaulette, “is to find some formula to define these intentions in concise terms, which will also appeal to the imagination. What do you suggest, Barthe?”

After thinking it over, Barthe ventured:

“The Committee proposes to study and discuss all aspects of industrial and agricultural technique that have a bearing on the development of the Company, and to establish a plan of action consistent with the latest scientific advances.”

“Not bad,” Mr. Chaulette admitted. “A little bit vague, however. In fact it really won’t do at all. But have it typed out in double spacing and we’ll see what we can make of it.”

The Secretariat clerk brought in the first typewritten draft a few minutes later. Mr. Chaulette took charge of the operations himself and began scratching out and making insertions between the lines, pausing every now and then to ask one of his colleagues for his opinion. The second draft read as follows:

## “D. INTENTIONS

“1. To study and discuss all matters relative to industrial and agricultural technique which are, or might be, of interest to the Company.

“2. To submit suggestions to the Managers’ Committee for the establishment of a constructive programme with a view to the progressive modernisation and development of our existing plant.”

“What do you think of that?” Mr. Chaulette asked, with his pencil poised in mid-air.

“It’s an improvement,” Gladkoff conceded, “a great improvement. And yet . . .”

“I know what you’re going to say. Not pithy enough, not specific enough, not sufficiently precise. We’ll have to divide the paragraphs up a bit, like this . . . there!”

After a further succession of rough drafts, paragraph D eventually read:

#### “D. INTENTIONS

“1. *To inquire into* all matters relative to industrial and agricultural technique which might be worth further consideration

(a) from the point of view of development.

(b) from the point of view of improvement.

“2. *To make a close study* of each of these matters and apply to each a *constructive criticism*.

“3. *To discuss them collectively* at the monthly meetings mentioned in paragraph D.

“4. *To draw up a report* embodying the results of this study and these discussions, which will be submitted by the Head of the Technical Department to the Managers’ Committee, so as to enable the latter:

(a) to vote in favour of, or against, any measure proposed.

(b) to provide the Executive Department with definite recommendations on Company policy with respect to technical matters.”

“There now! As you see, Law,” Mr. Chaulette observed, “the Management still has the last word when it comes to making decisions. It’s a question of principle. Would you have this re-typed please, Barthe?”

The drafting of the statutes proceeded and the list finally

took up fifteen sheets of paper. Mr. Chaulette heaved a sigh of relief and triumphantly exclaimed:

"Well, that's that! All that remains is to summon all the members to the initial meeting."

"We've also got to think about drafting a programme for that meeting."

"Good heavens! It almost slipped my mind! You take the chair now, Gladkoff. You know my views on the question of mechanisation and pure research."

Gladkoff embarked on a speech in which he set out to demonstrate that machines for shifting earth were the latest elements in an evolutionary series.

"I'm sorry, Gladkoff," Uncle Law artlessly broke in, "but I don't see why you want to shift any earth . . ."

But this remark was itself cut short by an interruption from Mr. Chaulette.

"All right, Gladkoff," he said with a smile, "but we're here to obtain concrete results, don't forget. We want to have something to show for it. It's not quite the moment to lose ourselves in abstract considerations, see what I mean?"

## v

Maille and Gladkoff stood watching the evolutions of the three bulldozers which had recently been assigned to the Kebun Besar plantation. Gladkoff had come up from Kuala Getah on one of his routine inspections, which had now been resumed at regular intervals.

One of the machines was operating quite close to them. The driver, a diminutive Chinese, was being almost bucked out of his seat but, realising he was under observation, he took a firm grip on the controls and began to give a demonstration of his skill. He was hampered for the

moment by a mass of rock which must have weighed several tons and which was firmly rooted in the ground by an agglomeration of earth and stones. It seemed impossible to launch a frontal attack against such an obstacle. The Chinaman tried to, however. He brought the "shovel" down to the level of the ground, steadied it in front of the rock and, with one foot on the gear pedal and one hand on the accelerator lever, bore down on it at low speed. As soon as the steel edge came into contact with the stone, he gave the engine all it had got. The mass of rock stood firm. For a few seconds the machine gave the impression of a live animal tensing its muscles to the utmost of its strength. The two articulated arms of the shovel seemed to contract, while the body of the tractor strained against the obstacle. The levers gave a shuddering groan. The caterpillar tracks toiled manfully, but soon began to slow down and finally came to a slithering stop in a shower of sand and gravel. The engine started racing. The Chinaman let in the clutch and simultaneously, with a practised gesture, reduced speed. Maille noticed his forehead was streaming with sweat and his face contorted as though with some superhuman effort. He realised then that he himself had instinctively clenched his teeth at the moment of the impact and that his jaw muscles were still aching painfully.

In the days of Sophia's carefree youth the story of the Mark D8 bulldozers would have provided a topic for any amount of discussions over the evening *stengahs*. But Sophia, alas, was now past the age of idle banter and no longer smiled.

After creating the mystique of the bulldozer in the course of private conversations and devoting several meetings to the organisation of technical matters which had culminated in an actual programme of work, Mr. Chaulctte had thumped both fists on his glass-topped desk and declared: "Now let's take action on it!" Bonardin, the specialist in

wholesale purchasing, had been entrusted with the immediate task of equipping the Company with a considerable quantity of internal combustion machines, provided these were of a decent size, every other particular regarding them being left unspecified.

Bonardin had a stroke of luck. In the Phillipines the American army was trying to get rid of a batch of ten Mark D8 bulldozers which had been used for building landing-strips and were now out of commission. As soon as he heard about this, Bonardin, in the enthusiasm which his chief had inspired, and the latter being away that day as well as Uncle Law, took it upon himself to send a telegram asking for four of the ten to be retained. No sooner was this done than he regretted it (the price was rather high) and the anxiety that he might have exceeded his responsibilities plunged him into further despair. It was in fear and trembling that he approached Mr. Chaulette next day to render an account of his stewardship. The Inspector General gave him a severe dressing down.

“But good heavens, Bonardin, you can't be left on your own for five minutes! You must be out of your mind . . . What we want is the whole batch! A heaven-sent opportunity like this, and you almost let it slip through your fingers! Yes, of course, all ten of them, I tell you.”

Gladkoff, on being consulted for the sake of formality, declared that the D8 might have been specifically designed for the use of Sophia. In spite of a mild objection from Uncle Law, a second telegram was sent off. A few hours later young Barthe was flown out to Manila to take delivery of the goods and bring them back to Malaya by the quickest possible means. In view of the size of the order, the American army provided every transport facility and in less than a fortnight the ten machines were unloaded in Singapore.

The question of their distribution among the various Sophia domains was discussed at a high level. It was solved according to the possibilities of maintenance and technical

supervision on each plantation. Kebun Besar, which had a repairs workshop with a permanent engineer attached, was allotted three. One morning Powell, the new manager since Dassier's transfer back to the Agency, had been advised that three bulldozers were being dispatched to him by special freight-car. The Agency's note was accompanied by American leaflets and detailed instructions as to the colour they were to be painted as soon as they arrived.

Powell had passed all this on to Maille, telling him to do as he saw fit. Maille had set out in search of drivers who knew how to handle these machines—a relatively easy quest. Quite a lot of Chinese in Singapore had been taught how to use them since the end of the war. About a dozen applied for the job. Maille engaged three who looked reasonably capable. On making their first appearance on the Kebun Besar plantation, the bulldozers were greeted with enthusiastic cries and immediately painted according to the Agency instructions. The question of how to make the best use of them was brought up for discussion.

It was not an easy problem to solve. Powell had noticed at once that where the bulldozers had passed a couple of times, the roads which they had taken so much trouble to repair had been hacked to bits by the caterpillar tracks. He had flown into a violent temper, because one of the purposes for which these latest acquisitions were intended was to build, not to destroy, communications. Besides, there were any amount of wooden bridges on the plantation; and none of these was strong enough to take a heavy weight. The first mastodon that ventured on to one of these structures went over the side and landed up in an irrigation ditch, which was fortunately not too deep, without the driver even being dislodged from his seat. This at least afforded an opportunity for putting the traction power of the two others to proper use in an attempt to drag it clear. They acquitted themselves of this task honourably, after toiling away for a whole day during which Powell cursed them up hill and down dale.

But that was by no means the main difficulty. The machines could always be driven through the palm-trees and not on the roads themselves; and by working out a cunning system of itineraries, they could be moved to any point on the plantation without doing any damage. The tricky business was finding them a "target" on which to work. Maille devoted a great deal of thought to this question, which eventually became an absolute obsession, second only in importance to the question of the organisation which had now been restored to its former splendour.

After careful deliberation he dispatched them first of all to a spot that had been vaguely earmarked for the creation, in the distant future, of a new Tamil village. It was an area with a number of folds in the ground and planted with a few stunted palms. Powell had agreed to the plan and the bulldozers had set to work. In less than two hours the ground had been cleared, tilled and its surface levelled with as much precision as could be expected from these heavy machines. It was a splendid job. Their performance had not been exaggerated. The three Chinese who drove them did not have the same dash and determination as the American doughboys who, with a stick of chewing-gum between their teeth and a peaked cap drawn over their eyes, made them perform miracles; but they got a considerable amount of work out of them just the same. Maille, who thought he was going to have a few days' respite, saw them arrive back at the workshops office. They saluted and asked for another job.

He sent them off to the big *padang* near the workshops, with instructions to clear the ground of all the bits of scrap-iron that had collected there during the Japanese occupation. No sooner was the order given than the *padang* was completely cleared and the three Chinese were after him again with a fresh demand for work.

Maille glanced through the leaflets that the Agency had sent. From them he learned that in view of the capital outlay and maintenance costs, bulldozers were not an

economic proposition unless they were used continuously for at least ten hours a day. Then he turned to the illustrations showing them engaged on road construction. They were not suitable for the finishing touches or the upkeep of the surface but could be employed on the preliminary heavy work. The network of roads at Kebun Besar was now complete. No new thoroughfare had been envisaged. Maille decided to build one all the same. After spending a long time trying to work out a project which could at a pinch be justified, taking great care to combine plausible utility with as many irregularities in the ground as possible, he launched his motorised fleet across the plantation. Two days later the Chinese, who had finished the road without too much effort, came back to announce its completion and asked for permission to start on something else.

Maille's imagination was again put to the test. Once more he consulted the American leaflets. From them he discovered that the D8 was specially recommended for felling trees. There were photographs to show exactly how to go about this task. Needless to say, it was not very rational to fell the palm-trees at Kebun Besar. But Maille, who was beginning to lose his nerve, had one or two uprooted which, being stricken with disease, could with a stretch of the imagination be judged incurable. Again, according to the American pamphlets, these bulldozers were particularly suitable for hauling trunks behind them with the help of a steel cable. Maille had the corpses of the palm-trees towed to the furthest corner of the plantation. This kept the Chinese busy for two or three days. At the same time, in the course of this work, the monsters accidentally got caught up in other trees, inflicting mortal wounds on them. These too then had to be shifted, and the ground cleared of their remains. Enthralled by the simplicity of this scheme, the Chinese developed the series of genuine accidents into a systematic programme, so much so that it seemed that a well-nigh inexhaustible source of



opportunities for putting them to use had at last been found—until Powell caught them at it one morning, almost choked with rage and put an abrupt end to their destructive career. They did not seem to mind in the least and merely came back to Maille with a broad grin on their faces and asked him to find them something to do.

The situation was becoming intolerable. Something had to be done about it. Maille was shaken as though by a palsy each time the figures of the three Chinese appeared on the horizon. It was too much to hope that one of the bulldozers would fall into an irrigation ditch every day in order to provide a "target" for the other two. Nor was it possible to rely with any degree of certainty on the trucks getting stuck in the pot-holes made by the caterpillar tracks in the low-lying water-logged sections of the roads. This happened fairly frequently but not regularly enough. At last, spurred by sheer necessity, Maille found a convenient solution. There was a vast empty space on the Kebun Besar concession, where the jungle had once been cleared but which had never been subsequently planted because of the rocky soil. This ground included two moderately big hills with a deep ravine between them. It was now covered in dense undergrowth and populated exclusively by wild cocks. Maille turned up at Powell's office one morning and asked for permission to fill in the ravine with the soil collected from the two hills. Before Powell could think of any objection, he pointed out the advantages of his project: it was an extensive operation and was bound to last several months during which the bulldozers would be employed at full efficiency. The machines would remain in that area and would therefore be nowhere near any bridge or road. Finally, it was the only really uneven part of the plantation and therefore provided an ideal outlet for their monstrous capacity for shifting earth. Powell looked Maille straight in the eye, then abruptly gave his consent.

The bulldozers had begun by tackling the summit of the higher of the two hills, scooping out a slice of earth each time they passed and then dumping it down the slope. During the first few hours the level of the ground had been visibly reduced. Maille began to tremble again. But as the peak was gradually whittled down into a plateau, the progress became less noticeable. He was soon reassured. His estimate of several months had proved correct.

Maille had a little difficulty in explaining to Gladkoff the chain of ideas that had led him to embark on this particular task. In the end he had told the truth. Gladkoff had not appeared in the least put out.

"That's how it always it," he said. "The 'underlying idea' or whatever you like to call it is an absolute myth. All ventures are meaningless, to start with. Creation is only achieved through a combination of chances."

Then he had stood quite still and watched—fascinated, for the first time in his life perhaps, by the sight of a machine at work.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed.

The mastodon had now resumed its mining operations on a broad longitudinal front. The shovel was being held a few inches above the ground by means of the hydraulic system which the little Chinaman controlled with a single lever. Every movement depended on this one manipulation. When the blade sank in too deep, the resistance was intensified; the machine then shuddered, the engine raced, the joints ground together, the articulations contracted. This state of strain and tension was instantly transmitted to the nervous cells of the driver who instinctively adjusted the lever by a fraction of an inch. The blade was immediately raised, the width of the slice was reduced, the resistance was diminished; the machine breathed normally and once again resumed its stealthy advance. When, however, the shovel was at too high a level, the thin

coating of earth did not offer sufficient resistance. Conscious of the monster flexing its muscles to give a leap forward, the Chinaman would then lower the blade with a movement of his fingers and bring it back into position before the massive bulk even had time to obey the impulses from the engine.

“Just look at that!” Gladkoff repeated. “The combination of driver and machine must equal, in compact form, the mental and physical energy of at least five hundred men . . . five hundred Chinese coolies, with a foreman for every gang. . . . You can’t deny the power of organisation now, can you? In this case you’ve got a total of . . . let’s say the average Chinaman weighs ten stone . . . a total of thirty tons of atoms. The bulldozer and the driver between them work out at less than fifteen tons. Merely by combining those atoms in a different manner, you get a far better result, for half the weight, and with infinitely less encumbrance.”

Maille barely succeeded in suppressing the exasperation he felt. He had become more and more irritable since the administrative machine had been set in motion again. Gladkoff was talking quite seriously. He had spent the war as a prisoner in the hands of the Japanese but had happily escaped the horrors of the Siamese railway and been held in Singapore in almost complete idleness. For three years he had sustained himself on his pet fantasies and had ended up by being enslaved to them. He could not help noticing Maille’s attitude and shrugged his shoulders.

“You Frenchmen will never pursue an argument to its logical conclusion!” he said.

There was not much in the way of a reply to this. Maille was relieved to see Powell’s car approaching.

The Manager of Kebun Besar drew up by the edge of the palm-trees and sat for a moment watching the three machines. Then he shook his head impatiently, got out of

the car and walked across to the two engineers. Maille thought there was a close resemblance between him and Stout. He had the same ungainly gait walking, with his back held erect but his head thrown forward. He had a naturally cheerful disposition, but he too could become morose. After triumphantly withstanding three years of slavery, he had been demoralised by his sudden transfer from Kebun Tinggi, a plantation which he had come to look upon as his own domain, to Kebun Besar and its palm-trees. The turmoil had started all over again; twice a week the mail brought in an avalanche of fresh instructions and, considering the precarious conditions under which they were still working, reading these was absolute torture. He had a sheaf of papers with him now and handed one of them to Maille.

“Here, a letter for you from Europe. And there’s also an urgent telegram from the Agency which concerns us all. . . . Heavens above, Gladkoff, perhaps you’ll be able to tell us what it’s all about! Here we are, summoned to Kuala Getah for the day after to-morrow—the whole lot of us: myself, Maille and my assistant who’s only just this minute arrived! No explanation, of course. We’ve got to be there at eight in the morning. That means leaving to-morrow and spending the night there. Do they imagine the plantation carries on by itself?”

Gladkoff smiled. He never got angry.

“Don’t lose your temper. It’s for a meeting. Chaulette asked me not to mention it, but if you promise to keep it under your hat. . . .”

Mr. Chaulette had retained his mania for secrecy and drama. He wanted to gather everyone round him in an atmosphere of mystery, without revealing his plans, in the hope of witnessing their astonished admiration. Maille moved a few yards off to read his letter, having recognised Germaine’s hand-writing.

He had a quick look through it. It did not give much news but he fancied he detected a certain hesitation, a

certain reluctance, which annoyed him all the more because his own letters to her likewise contained, despite all his efforts, the same sort of inhibition and constraint. The divorce would probably be granted within the next few days. She hoped she would see him again soon, but she sounded rather worried. In a strange passage, which he read through again, she asked him if he had given enough thought to the matter.

## VI

The committees had held their first meeting. The industrial Branch was assembled in the Managing Director's office.

It was now midday. The sun beat down on the corrugated iron roofs of the Agency. Mr. Chaulette had switched off the fan because the draught kept blowing the papers about. Everyone's face was shining with sweat. Under the porch at the entrance the *syce* Ahman sat patiently waiting on the running-board of the brand-new Buick that had recently been bought. The cannas and bougainvilleas sparkled on the lawn. On Barthe's orders, the Javanese gardener had stopped the automatic mowing-machine because the noise was disturbing the conference. He was now crouching by the window listening intently to the meaningless words in a language which he could not understand.

Mr. Chaulette was disappointed. After all the trouble he had taken he had vaguely expected a display of collective emotion and a flood of fresh ideas. He began to show signs of pained surprise at the absence of enthusiasm in the eyes of his colleagues.

As a matter of fact the attitude of the three plantation engineers gave no indication that they were even remotely aware of the importance of the matters submitted for their

consideration. Buried for months on end in a world of rusty iron, broken stop-cocks, dismantled engines and workmen who kept pestering them for rice and dollars, submerged by an avalanche of reminders, instructions and order-sheets which had rained down on their shoulders for weeks, they were not really equal to the situation. Being summoned to a special meeting by an urgent message couched in the most mysterious terms had only added to their confusion. Nor had a perusal of the statutes served to enlighten them in any way.

Old Cloud, a recent recruit to Sophia, was a born mechanic and had done marvels on the Telanggor Estates, repairing engines that had been condemned to the scrap-heap and cursing the workmen in every language under the sun. Mr. Chaulette's speech, followed by Gladkoff's explanations, had had the same effect on him as a thick fog and his mind had found nothing on which to fasten. At the beginning he had made a real effort to concentrate, but had soon given this up. As he said himself that evening on his return to the plantation, the words slipped off his brain "like water off a duck's back."

Maille had been prepared for something of this sort, but the reality surpassed even his wildest expectations. From the very start of the meeting he had been unable to divert his thoughts from the years to come, and the speeches had produced the impression of an aggravating buzz, like the hum of an engine that was always in his ears. He felt the only interest he could take in these discussions was to measure the extent of their futility.

Nor was Mr. Chaulette entirely satisfied with Bonardin or even with Gladkoff. The former, by signs of approval that were not only too frequent but also beside the point, failed utterly to give an illusion of genuine enthusiasm. The latter floundered about in abstract generalisations. He, Chaulette, wanted to appear as a man of action and immediate results. He himself was convinced that he was

such a man. Did he not voice his contempt for routine and bureaucracy at all hours of the day? He therefore kept interrupting Gladkoff in order to interpret certain points in the sense of his own particular realism. On one occasion he stopped him short in the middle of a sentence about the principles of research, to cite the concrete example of Hiroshima, draw everyone's attention to the equation  $E=mc^2$ , and outline a plan for the formation of a "Department of Pure Research" within the framework of Sophia.

Barthe was the only one whose attitude gave no grounds for complaint. The young man was as calm and attentive as ever, showing he had his head screwed on the right way; and the few remarks he did make indicated the passionate interest he was taking in this exchange of views. Since his transfer to the Secretariat he had gained more self-confidence. In private conversation Mr. Chaulette had made it known that he felt Barthe had a sense of authority and organisation.

And so the discussion veered on to the subject of pure research. Mr. Chaulette, who had in mind his original plan for the ideal organisation that he had developed during the war, asked each member in turn to put forward his suggestion on the points that had just been mentioned. Once again he felt deeply offended at the sight of so many gloomy faces without a glimmer of enthusiasm in their eyes. It was young Barthe who saved the situation by asking in his usual modest but decided manner for permission to speak.

"Go ahead, Barthe," said Mr. Chaulette in an encouraging tone of voice. "We'd like to hear what you've got to say."

The young man rose to his feet in the subsequent silence that reigned. Maille looked at him with curiosity, then switched his gaze to the window.

"Gentlemen," Barthe began in a clear voice, "it so

happens that during the war I had occasion to study the questions of organisation which are our main preoccupation to-day . . .”

This was true. During the war, after escaping from Singapore, he had been transferred from military duties to a civilian appointment in which he had indeed had occasion to study various methods of organisation.

Maille glanced back towards the speaker. The man of action in Mr. Chaulette did not fully approve of this preamble.

“Quite so, my dear chap, quite so. Now what do you suggest?”

Barthe went on without losing his grip. Maille, who had never looked at him closely before, now noticed he had thin lips and precise little gestures.

“Well, it seems to me—this is only a suggestion, mind you—that the organisation should not be projected on a system of plantations, divisions, departments or offices; on the contrary, it should be based *a priori* on a specific group. . . .”

At this point Mr. Chaulette emitted a stifled exclamation. He had recognised the ghost of his own ideas.

“It strikes me it would be possible, and extremely useful too, to create a ‘standard’ system of organisation, an ideal type free from any particular characteristic, which could be applied at one and the same time to our enterprise as a whole and to all the subsidiary groups within the Company, both present and future.”

Mr. Chaulette had recovered from his initial astonishment and was now the victim of a strange inner conflict. He was vexed and annoyed at having been forestalled in advancing this notion which he had looked upon as his own exclusive brain-child. On the other hand he was pleasantly surprised to discover at last, and in the Company too, a man of his own calibre. The latter feeling eventually prevailed and it was with a hint of deference in his voice that he interrupted the young man.



“Barthe, my dear chap, not only do I agree with every word you say, but . . . how shall I put it? . . . we seem to have arrived at one and the same conclusion. I was just about to put forward the very same proposal, and here in this brief-case I’ve got a complete plan. . . . But perhaps you’ve already worked out a project ‘of your own?’”

“Yes, I’ve got it here,” young Barthe calmly replied.

Each of them spread out on the desk a large sheet of tracing-paper covered with circles of every size and colour linked together by dashes, arrows and dotted lines. Mr. Chaulette had risen to his feet, in a fever of excitement such as he had not known since the good old days before the war. Barthe looked as though he was equally inflamed. The same passion took possession of them both as they ran their fingers and pencils over the variegated symbols.

“Fancy that now!” Mr. Chaulette exclaimed. “Our diagrams are almost identical. Barthe, my dear fellow, you’re a genius! We’ll pick out the best points in each.”

Old Cloud, who was not yet familiar with the methods of Sophia, contemplated this scene as though he could not believe his eyes. Maille once again heard a buzzing in his ears, above which he could distinguish no more than a word here and there.

“These are the essentials. All we need is to apply them automatically, from the executive plane down to the gangs in the field. . . . At each intermediary level, a management, a supervisory body, a controlling element, a secretariat, a financial department, a technical department, a planning department, and a department of pure research . . . you’ve even thought of that, I see! . . . and, of course, an executive body. The main thing will be to train everyone to think according to these particular divisions of human activity. Gentlemen, you now see how a general discussion on a fairly large scale automatically dictates each individual case. All that remains is to apply this formula to the realm of pure research which is our main concern at the moment, and what emerges is this new body, com-

plete with all its branches, forming part of a perfect organisation . . . with its management, its various departments, its pure research and its executive body . . . er . . . I say, Barthe, there seems to be something wrong there! Wouldn't the executive body be, by definition, a research body? But in that case it would be confused with the subdivision for pure research within the same department . . . unless, of course . . . yes, yes, of course, I can guess what you're going to say—and once again you're quite right. This subdivision would be concerned with 'researching into research' and wouldn't in any way encroach on the *execution* of research. The two bodies are essential to each other. Like that it's perfect . . . Yes, Maille, what have you got to say?"

"May I suggest," Maille ventured, "that on the programme of this department for 'researching into research' the first item should be the task of perfecting this plan of organisation. Then the circle would be complete."

For the last minute or two Maille had been showing signs of agitation, which had prompted Mr. Chaulette's question. He had felt an overwhelming urge to interrupt this monologue. He had replied in a solemn tone, looking the Inspector General straight in the eye.

A short silence ensued during which the eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles peered at him intently, as though to plumb his innermost thoughts. Bonardin froze in his chair with his mouth wide open. Barthe looked deeply shocked. Old Cloud glanced across at him with curiosity, and for the first time since the meeting started his face expressed a little interest. Maille was completely unruffled. Whatever happened, he would have had the satisfaction of putting an end to this madness.

Nothing catastrophic occurred. After a moment's silent contemplation Mr. Chaulette went on in that uncertain tone of voice which Maille knew only too well. That hesitant manner, as though he was calling on some inner

understanding as well as on the actual sense of his words, made Maille pause yet again before deciding whether his grotesque, outrageous attitude was due to the anguish of an oversensitive, oversusceptible mind constantly tortured by the demon of perfection or merely to some wretched intellectual anæmia. For several years this doubt had clouded Maille's existence. Mr. Chaulette replied:

"Perfecting the plan of organisation? . . . Yes, I see . . . Yes, indeed, you've got something there. . . . Make a note of it, will you, Barthe."

## VII

". . . I've had many qualms of conscience before writing to you, but I'm certain my decision is the only wise one, for yourself as well as for me. I can't come out and join you! It's impossible, and you know it is. We both know it. You haven't even dared mention the idea to the others out there. We're both guilty of mutual deception. I can see from each of your letters that you've had misgivings about my arrival. I feel the atmosphere of the Company must have become intolerable to you, as it already was (you remember) before the war, to both of us. And you tell me it's even worse these days!

"I don't want to go through that agony again, to feel you growing away from me and gradually come to read in your eyes, as I often read in Jean's when he was younger, your reproach at being forced into perpetual servitude. I know that, because of me, you consider yourself morally obliged to remain in your job. . . ."

Maille had found the letter waiting for him on his return from Kuala Getah. He accused himself for not feeling broken-hearted, as he had thought he would be . . . for he

had anticipated getting this message. He had known for a long time that their marriage was impossible. Plagued by a multitude of contradictory feelings, his mind could not reach the state of equilibrium that was necessary for despair. Paradoxically, his bitterness was mitigated by a delightful sense of intoxication that reminded him of his first experience of alcohol: the same light-hearted sensation he had felt at the start of his first voyage to Malaya and also at the beginning of the war.

She was right. Not for a second did he even consider sending her a telegram or a letter of protest. She had plumbed his deepest thoughts and divined what he had not dared admit to himself. He realised that now. He visualised their marriage as the last link in a chain.

Had he undergone such a profound change during these last few months? One cannot live with impunity in a closed world, in which every form of activity leads to a labyrinth of inverted commas and capital letters; after one's initial energy has been fruitlessly expended on "Gila" mountains, snarling tigers' heads and pointless earth displacements. With the best will in the world, a man cannot be expected to remain true to himself indefinitely when confronted with such a painful and demoralising spectacle of incoherence and lack of purpose. He either disappears, swamped by the organisation, or else there comes a day when he inevitably thinks, "Either I must be mad, or they are. In either case the most important thing is to get out of this hole." The urge to escape then becomes an obsession and stifles every other feeling.

Maille realised he had reached this stage and he imagined it applied to Germaine too. In fact they probably both had perfectly normal temperaments. She had once admitted to him that she adored music but could not bring herself to go to a concert. In the same way, he had never been able to stomach any writer whose books he had been forced to study at school. It was anomalies of this sort that showed they both belonged to the race of egoists.

The structure of Sophia was such that any discussion on the subject was a hollow mockery, and any complaint ridiculous. There was no form of logic, no moral concept, that could decide between the value of the Company and the worth of the individual. Cursing the servitude caused by the former or allowing the egoism of the latter to wilt were only superficial reactions dictated by the circumstance of two different points of view.

From the human point of view the acquisition of the Kebun Besar bulldozers was absurd, but a landing-strip would one day come into being as a result of this extravagance. If a collective spirit gradually emerged from blind gropings, chance combinations and actual results, that spirit was no longer that of a man but of a strange synthetic creature with whom he no longer had anything in common. Rendered useless, it was utterly divorced from him—just as it was already divorced, perhaps, from other groups of primary atoms. This was the most optimistic outlook, but it brought him no comfort. It was also possible that after the period of results, which corresponded almost always to the earliest days of the organisation, the chance combinations were powerless to specify the form in which this spirit should be incarnated. In that case imitation ideas would start churning round in an endless circle, sketching a grotesque caricature of the collective spirit, which went straight from the embryonic stage to senility without ever coming to genuine maturity, until its material cells eventually disintegrated.

To him the result was of little importance. An irresistible urge now drove him to detach himself from Sophia. Since Germaine's decision, no motive of security or stability was strong enough to hold him back. Yet when the moment came to break the ties, certain scruples arose. There had been times when group action had not had this artificial character and had not made itself felt by means of constraint. The word "desertion" rang unpleasantly

in his ears. The synthetic creature was reluctant to let him go. It already had sufficient cohesion and personality to express itself; and he himself, who denied it all reality, could not stifle its voice completely. This voice resorted to unfair arguments. It appealed to fatalism and higher motives. It painted a dazzling picture of the things to be created in the unknown future. Then, still more insidious and redoubtable than before, it exalted the grandeur of self-sacrifice. It declared:

“It is useless and illogical to whine and bemoan your degradation and gradual disappearance. Before cursing your fate, ask yourself if you really deserve to exist. The loss you fear is nothing more than the transitory expression of a principle which is now trying to assume another, vaster and more complicated, shape. When this principle is established in its new form, everything will be redeemed—everything except you, who will no longer be there to witness it and who have no more actual importance than an atom. You will achieve nothing by rebelling against the organisation. By the organisation you will perish, but without it you would never have been born. Better resign yourself, therefore, and give the illusion of being master of your fate by lending your annihilation the outward aspect of a voluntary sacrifice. . . . And look how well regulated the world is! How nature has catered for everything! How everything conspires towards the fulfilment of the law! This inevitable sacrifice of yourself, the very idea of which revolts you to-day, will in time to come not only strike you as right and proper but you will even burn to accomplish it. You and your ilk will vie with each other as to who will be the first to achieve it within the framework of a collective abstraction. You will never escape it. It is the strongest motive for every action. Do you think it is merely by chance that it assumes the form of such an irresistible temptation or that such prestige is attached to those who readily consent to it? Those haloes exist only

because the natural law is always at the back of one's mind."

Maille would probably have hesitated a great deal longer. He had lost the habit of making personal decisions. It had needed this commonplace incident to spur him into action. He was sitting in his office, with the letter in front of him, when Powell came in. He wanted to check the output of the workshop. The figures had not yet been entered on the wall chart which occupied the entire space between two windows. Powell casually drew his attention to this. Then he asked to see the books in which the relevant information was recorded day by day. Maille handed them over and said:

"This is the last time I'll be giving you these figures, Powell."

"What's that?" Powell exclaimed in alarm.

"I'm sending in my letter of resignation to-day. I've finished with Sophia."

The aircraft cleared the row of coconut-trees on the edge of the aerodrome and then flew over Singapore before settling on its course with the rising sun behind it.

It was all over. His letter of resignation had been couched in fairly strong terms so as to avoid all possible discussion. Uncle Law had sent for him and said:

"So you want to leave us, Maille, is that the idea? You've said you do anyway, so that settles the question. You're old enough to know what you're doing and quite capable of looking after yourself. From the Company's point of view I can't say I welcome this hasty decision. I'd like to add, though, that as a man—you see the distinction, I trust?—as a man, apart from the Company aspect of the question, you'll have left a very good impression behind you."

The aircraft flew over the big plantations of Telanggor, then Port Nigel where Sophia had considerable interests: a

rubber depot and twelve huge storage tanks in which the palm-oil was kept before being pumped along the pipe-line down to the docks. The freshly painted tanks attracted the attention of several of the passengers, and Maille listened to the flattering comments they evoked. The man sitting next to him, a banker from Singapore, leaned across to look out of the port-hole. The aircraft happened to be flying directly above the rubber depot which displayed on its roof the name SOPHIA in white letters more than a yard high. The banker gave a whistle of admiration. Maille, unaccountably, felt a surge of pride. Sophia, seen from afar, had its attraction. Sophia was a "great company!" When this final twinge of emotion subsided, he relapsed into his own gloomy thoughts.

Rangoon. The aircraft touched down for a short stop, then took off once more. Not far from the aerodrome, surrounded on all sides and as far as the eye could see by a checkboard of paddy-fields, the Burma Road began—the road which was once the pride of Chang-kai-shek's generals at Kunming. They never tired of recounting the saga of its construction. In less than two years nearly two thousand miles of track had been carved through the mountains, across virgin country, to provide a thoroughfare for the British and American military traffic. Five million coolies, they would tell you, had been engaged on the task. One million had died, struck down by the climate, malaria, cholera and famine. These figures were almost certainly exaggerated, but even so the losses had been appalling. No longer serving any purpose, the Burma Road was now deserted.

The flat wilderness of paddy-fields. After a few hours in the air, Malaya and its jungles already belonged to the dim past. The isolation of the aircraft was conducive to deep concentration. Deliberating over his future, Maille felt that from now on it would be impossible for him to "work" in the sense in which this word was regarded by enterprises with names beginning in S. He was under no illusion.



They were all alike. The only difference between them was their basic *raison d'être*. Sophia was by no means the worst. He knew that perfectly well. If he had not managed to settle down in Sophia there was little hope of his ever adapting himself to any other organisation.

Calcutta: the first overnight stop. A dark mist, floating dust on the breath of three million people. At dawn the aircraft flew over the Ganges where some pilgrims were already engaged in the communal activity of purging their souls.

The memory of Sophia had been haunting Maille ever since his departure. He could not stop thinking about those experiments which, though rooted in reality, gradually drifted towards the elaboration of a complicated system of codification and finally culminated in the exclusive task, which was either devilishly clever or else completely mad, of analysing and improving on that system. He realised that his own mind had not come out of this unscathed and that it had been affected more than he cared to admit. On several occasions, towards the end of his spell of duty, he had found himself dreaming about the mechanics of this evolution, taking a presumably healthy interest in trying to derive from it some universal truth.

Karachi. A new world divorced from the Far East, on which shone the less diffuse rays of the Arabian sun. Pakistan, only recently emancipated. The first steps on the road to liberty had been the establishment of a Customs system and administration more despotic than in any other country in the world. An official in a brand-new uniform handed each of the passengers a sheaf of forms containing an endless list of indiscreet questions and regulations. "It is forbidden to leave the airport during a stop. . . ." Surely there must be some solution apart from Sophia? Manual labour, perhaps, was one of the least obnoxious. Ramasamy was probably better off than anyone else.

Flying by night, with all the lights out. Flying by day, over the desert. The desert came to an abrupt end at the

clear-cut edge of the palm-trees. Before coming down at Cairo, the aircraft circled the town and banked steeply to enable the passengers to admire the pyramids. Maille looked at them with indifference. All he could now see in any object was whatever bearing it had on his own obsession. He thought of the number of lives sacrificed to this further absurd combination of elements. Ramasamy was better off than those above him, but he too ended up by being devoured.

Cairo. An overnight stop in a luxury hotel. Dinner in a dining-room with heavily gilded pillars.

After dinner Maille went up to his room, opened his suitcase and took out some sheets of paper on which, during those evenings when his nerves had been on edge, he had jotted down his views on Sophia, Mr. Chaulette and his own work. This had given him a sense of relief.

He spread the sheets out on the table, sorted them out, numbered them and re-read certain passages which brought a smile to his lips. It all seemed so futile and incomplete. How many gaps there were. And, above all, how many contradictions! There must be many other aspects of Sophia that could be explained and brought to light. He seized a pencil, crossed out several sentences and started scribbling in between the lines.

As he embarked on this task, he felt a twinge of conscience. Wasn't this, too, the development of an instinct he had acquired through Sophia? Was he not unconsciously applying the administrative system which consisted of juggling about with symbols and piecing them together until they produced some sort of meaning? Had he, too, been infected to the point of spurning action and shunning reality? After direct contact with the material world, after dealing with technical matters and organisation, was self-expression a means of achieving an aim through following a natural course, or was it a way of foundering for good by putting the finishing touches to a series of degradations?

He thought this over for a long time and finally came to the conclusion that this possible lapse involved no one else but himself. The initiative he had taken in resigning had given him a taste for deciding his own fate. Maille leaned over the hotel table and started "working" in his own manner.

## VIII

The financier carefully studied the figures indicating the fluctuations in the market. The symbolic representation portended a crisis. The interval of calm that Malaya had enjoyed after the war had come to an end. In the Chinese world, after the diversion of the black market and the hope of quick returns, the general masses who had not been so favoured by fortune had broken out into open hostility against the white man. The spirit of revolt, which had stirred up Indo-China and Java, was slowly spreading to the peninsula of Singapore. In all those countries a series of outrages had revealed a new force at work. The British foresaw a period of disturbances and latent hostility, perhaps even open war.

The financier was not unduly upset. He felt that the Europeans were still sufficiently strong to avert a catastrophe. Even if the worst came to the worst, the plantations would probably last for an indefinite period, during which the trees would still be tapped and the rubber sold. Mr. Chalette, whose opinion was not to be despised, had just come back and intended going out there again at frequent intervals until he had found a suitable successor for Uncle Law who was shortly due to retire. The planters would carry on with their job to the bitter end. He was sure of that, and he undertook to put the Company on such a footing of technical and administrative perfection that the rebels would be powerless against it.

The financier sent for the Chairman of the Board. They had a long confidential talk, at the end of which they decided to let events and Mr. Chauléte take their own course. They knew the guardian of Sophia extremely well. They had chosen him because of his defects as well as his qualities. They felt that the atmosphere he created round him was on the whole beneficial to the Company, and up to now the results had justified this opinion.

Satisfied with his decision, the financier pursued his train of thought. One had to be prepared, all the same, for every eventuality. There were still some countries where the spirit of free enterprise was allowed to exist in peace. If Malaya were eventually abandoned, it was to one of these that Sophia's stock of good will and experience would have to be transferred. The principle was the same and the methods had been improved. The financier divulged this project to the administrator who began methodically exploring, on the map, all the territories situated in a narrow band on either side of the Equator.

In his office Dassier was drafting the annual report of the Agricultural Department. A feverish activity reigned night and day in the Agency. The clerks were busy totting up figures while the departmental heads kept referring to Volume Two of *General Instructions*. Dassier himself had consulted this volume so often that he knew its contents almost by heart. He wrote mechanically and the sentences came of their own accord in the required order, which saved him a great deal of mental strain.

Confident that he had almost come to the end of his task, he sat back for a few minutes and considered his personal situation. He felt it was considerably improved. He was now well established at the Agency and everything led him to expect that he would not be shifted. There were certain advantages to this. As far as the work was concerned, it was a question of habit. The pace had been a bit

strenuous at first but he had soon acquired the necessary experience and adaptability. When all was said and done, it was a first-rate company. He had resigned himself to the loss of Germaine and never thought of her except on very rare occasions—for instance, when he got home in the evening a little earlier than usual.

Uncle Law was having tea in the garden with his wife. His days in Malaya were numbered. He had served his time and would shortly be retiring. The question of his successor was being thrashed out at the highest level. Mr. Chaulette was in favour of a younger man conversant with modern methods and he had kept a close eye on Barthe's activities. Uncle Law was planning to give the successful candidate, whoever it might be, some man-to-man advice on the personal initiative that was sometimes required in certain exceptional circumstances.

Mrs. Law went into the bungalow. He decided to go for a stroll round the garden. His thoughts took a gloomy turn that evening. He was not at all pleased with the news from the plantations, and he had to admit that the general morale left much to be desired. The awkward attitude and indifference that had worried him before the war was now apparent to a most alarming degree. Maille had resigned from the Company without anyone being able to explain what had prompted him. Another young assistant, he heard, was about to do the same at the first opportunity.

There were other symptoms that he found still more disturbing, for they betrayed a real change of spirit among the European personnel. Jealousies and animosities had arisen in the very midst of the planters' world. All his life Uncle Law had heard them inveighing with various degrees of acrimony against the tyranny of the Agency; but the sense of comradeship among them, no matter what their nationality, had always been preserved intact and had, in his eyes, an almost sacred quality. Now there were

signs of internal faction. The traditional team spirit was rapidly fading away.

Uncle Law pondered sadly on the reasons for this disintegration, but he dared not trace the subject right back to its source. He refused to admit that in this respect, too, Sophia had taken a turn for the worse. Mr. Chaulette had not been content with merely regulating their activities. He had also considered it one of his duties, as their leader, to maintain to the highest degree that team spirit to which so much value was attached. And to exalt this moral force, he had redoubled the number of meetings and official reunions. He had made speeches to remind them how valuable this spirit was and how carefully it should be cultivated. He had taken the managers aside and impressed upon them that they must be on the alert every hour of the day to prevent this precious treasure from foundering. He had confirmed this in writing. He had called together the junior assistants and had spoken to them in a similar vein but in more familiar terms. He had tried to inculcate into the senior men the duty of educating their subordinates, and into the subordinates a compulsory admiration for the achievements of their superiors. In each issue of the *Bulletin* he had had the word TEAM SPIRIT printed in capital letters. Indefatigably, and with his usual fervour, he had preached the classic, the grim, the sacrilegious gospel of form for form's sake.

Like all preachers, he had succeeded in convincing himself. He had gone back to France in the firm belief that the spiritual bonds within the Company had never before been so strong, whereas in actual fact they were already beginning to break, incapable of surviving such an attitude. . . . On this point Uncle Law could not come to any definite conclusion. He happened to be the privileged exception who had been allowed to practise the rites and at the same time worship the gods. He could not help deploring the new outlook.

"*Tabeh, tuan.*"

The *syce* Ahman respectfully approached him. He was holding in both hands one of those exotic flowers that grow within a few degrees of the Equator. Pure white at sunrise when they begin to open, their colour gradually alters with the changing light as the day wears on: pink at noon, they turn to purple as the sun goes down. In the night they wither and die. The *syce* Ahman raised it delicately to the level of his face and lovingly contemplated the fine petals from which the rich ruby tints were already beginning to drain.

"I didn't see it this morning," he said with regret. "I'll go and take it in to the *mem*."

He kicked off his sandals and disappeared inside the bungalow. Uncle Law decided to stay in the open air a little longer and try to get rid of his depression before going in to have a shower. At the far end of the garden he came to a stop, at a point which overlooked the Agency buildings. Through an open window he could see Barthe hunched over his desk. He thought about his own departure and felt quite distressed. He did not like the sensation at all.

The sun disappeared behind some thick clouds. On the other side of a slight rise in the ground he could see the Tamil lines of the Bangar Estate. He noticed a crowd of coolies drawn up in a circle on the *padang*. In the middle stood a figure in European clothes who seemed to be making a speech. Another of the "leaders," no doubt. Since the emancipation of his native country, Ramasamy had likewise created associations and syndicates which redoubled the number of offices, circulars and instructions. The mass of Ramasamys was aflame with the fever of organisation. They begged for organisation as they had once begged for alms. They dreamed of it night and day. They strove with all their might, not to break the ties with Sophia, but to establish new, stronger and more numerous bonds.

"Oh, to hell with it!" Uncle Law muttered. "I've done my best. All that remains now is to make a graceful exit."

He went into the bungalow. Behind him, as so often happens on the Equator, a bright ray of sunlight all of a sudden pierced the thick curtain of cloud. The slumbering landscape was immediately awakened by a flashing gleam of light. For a moment the bougainvilleas in the garden seemed to blaze. This lasted no more than a few seconds, then darkness fell. As though they were waiting for this signal, the flying-foxes blotted out the purple sky above Telanggor. There were many more of them than usual. They flew over the plantation, which was now engulfed in silence, just as the *syce* Ahman came out into the garden again. The irregular outline of each black speck was visible to the naked eye. The flight passed slowly overhead with a smooth sweeping movement made up of countless infinitesimal thrusts.

The *syce* Ahman raised his wrinkled face towards them and stood there lost in contemplation. The white men no longer paid any attention to this sight. The Chinese watched it greedily, thinking only of the quantity of food that was escaping out of range above their heads. The Malays looked upon this mass migration as a sign from heaven and anxiously questioned their wise men on its mysterious significance.

Young Barthe sat hunched over his desk, unaware that night had fallen. Wishing to assess the exact extent of his capabilities, Mr. Chalette had asked Uncle Law to entrust him with one of the most important tasks: the drafting of the essential passages in the Managing Director's annual report. The young man felt he had acquitted himself well. He had given a rough outline of Malaya's position in the world since the end of the war and had made a number of suggestions for future development, showing a breadth of vision which, he hoped, would be favourably accepted.



For the last minute or two he had been stuck. What he needed in order to round off his general conclusion was one of those concise, expressive phrases to which Mr. Chalette attached so much value—an unexpected, original observation which would leave the authorities in a state of surprised admiration.

He had already made several rough drafts but none of them seemed entirely satisfactory. For a long time he sat glued to his chair, tensed and hunched, then he rose to his feet and started pacing up and down the office. His attitude closely resembled that of Mr. Chalette when the latter was similarly lost in thought. Inspiration suddenly came to him as the fire-flies started to gleam in the undergrowth of the Bangar Estate.

He sat down again and wrote without a pause.

“The restoration of the plantations could not have been effected so rapidly without the loyal co-operation of our personnel . . .”

Mr. Xuan, who had been typing out the first draft of the introduction, came into the office with the finished sheets. Barthe stopped him with a gesture of urgency, so anxious was he not to lose his train of thought.

“Working in extremely difficult conditions, the staff has given evidence of a steadfastness and devotion to duty for which we must record our gratitude . . .”

All this was simply leading up to a final phrase. All this was merely to serve as a background to the ultimate observation, the very sound of which had been music to his ears from the moment he first thought of it, and the shortened form of which struck him as being such a master-stroke of artistry that it almost brought tears to his eyes. By means of a miraculous combination of words it symbolised, in view of the effect intended, the glory of the task well done, the splendours of discipline, the undisputed authority and slightly lofty attitude of the leader and at the same time his sympathetic humanity. All this

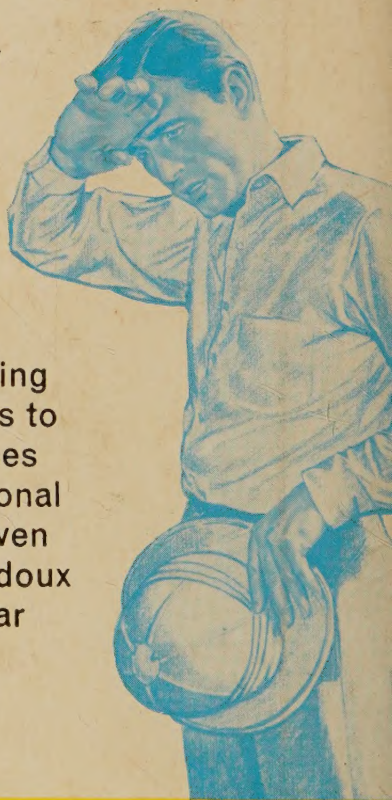
was mere verbiage. All this was simply for the sake of form. He quickly delivered himself of the phrase by putting it down in black and white with a sigh of satisfaction.

“We have demanded a considerable effort from all of them.”

THE END



This is the story of a famous Malayan rubber company, proud of its traditions and of the way it handles its Tamil employees. Although the Company is successful the Directors are keen to introduce the latest ideas. Bedoux is sent to Malaya to introduce new methods and reduce the period of unproductivity. In some excruciatingly funny scenes he is seen trying to train natives to slit rubber-trees in a more rational way. Finally even the gentle Bedoux learns to swear in Tamil.



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*fontana books*

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