SINGAPORE E CLASSICS

SCORPION ORCHID

LLOYD FERNANDO

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For Sebastian, Benedict,
Fernando and Caspian

Introduction by Robert Yeo

IT IS INSTRUCTIVE to read *Scorpion Orchid* together with Lloyd Fernando's essays collected in *Cultures in Conflict* (1986) and essays collected by his wife Marie, after his death, in *Lloyd Fernando: A Celebration of His Life* (2004). In both books, there are revealing passages that inform about his citizenship status, the novel's theme and characters. I am never convinced about D. H. Lawrence's advice to trust the tale and not the teller as I am sure a knowledge of what Fernando was doing with *Scorpion Orchid* will greatly enhance our reading of it. In the second book, Fernando wrote an essay *Engmalchin* and the opening paragraph is revealing:

> During my life in Singapore in the 1950s, I became aware of the many races in this country and the incompatibility of our colonial upbringing with the concept of a united society of multi-racial origins.[1]

Undoubtedly, this is the theme of *Scorpion Orchid*.

Fernando lived in Singapore in the 1950s and it was a very tumultous period politically. The Japanese Occupation of Singapore, 1942-45, alienated the local population from its brutal Asian rulers but it also saw disenchantment with colonial rule because of British surrender to the Japanese. When the colonisers returned after the war under the British Military Administration (BMA), there was resentment among the local population which had strong urges to be free of foreign domination. For freedom to be achieved, the multi-racial society of Singapore, comprising the indigenous Malays, the majority Chinese, Indians (children of migrants) and other peoples on the island, had to be united. But they were not and what divided them were race and politics.

The Maria Hertogh case of 1950 had aggravated race relations. Maria was a Dutch girl adopted by a Malay woman Cik Aminah. Years after her

adoption, the colonial administration allowed her biological parents to start legal proceedings to claim their natural daughter against opposition from Aminah, relatives and Muslim sympathisers. Tension, racial and religious, mounted, and when the courts ruled in favour of returning Maria to the Hertoghs, riots erupted. Muslims were pitched against Christians, Malays against white people; Eurasians, who were deemed white by enraged Muslims, were attacked.[2]

In 1949, Mao Tse Tung triumphed over the Kuomintang and China became Communist. Pro-Chinese fervour in the overseas territories in Southeast Asia took on a distinctly Chinese and Communist bent, inflaming opinion and inciting violence in places like Singapore, which had a significant Chinese majority.

Lloyd Fernando lived in this cauldron. In the 1950s, he heard of violence in Ceylon between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Ethnically Sinhalese himself, he made a commitment then. Years later, in 1998, in his essay *Engmalchin*, he wrote:

> Ethnically, I was ashamed and disgusted by the narrow-minded and selfish stand of the Sinhalese community and I choose Singapore's citizenship because it promised a united way of life, without prejudice or dominance by any sector of the society…[3]

In 1957, Malaya achieved independence and in 1959, Singapore became self-governing. In 1960, Fernando joined the English department of the University of Malaya and it may be around this time that he accepted Malayan citizenship. In his academic career, he thought much about conflicting cultures as reflected in many conference papers he delivered and essays he wrote. In 1986, he collected these in a book, published in Singapore, entitled significantly, *Cultures in Conflict*.

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In *Scorpion Orchid*, there are four young men—Santinathan, a Tamil, Guan Kheng, a Chinese, Sabran, a Malay, and a Eurasian, Peter D'Almeida.

> The four of them had been sixth formers together and were now undergraduates in the third year at the university. They had moved in a group as young men who are contemporaries and

enjoy company do, but the bond of their young manhood was wearing off and they were not fully aware of it yet.[4]

The company they keep include Sally, a Chinese prostitute, and the mysterious prophet Tok Said. When the novel opens, Santinathan is coping with the members of his family and his uncle's family who want to return to India; his uncle Rasu, aunt Nalini and their daughter Vasantha, prepare to leave but he Santi and his sister Neela choose to remain. This episode shows the ethnic pull on Indians (it could be Chinese) who, in a crunching time, prefer the homeland of their imagination to the land they grew up in. Later, Santi (as his friends address him) is dismissed from the university for insubordination.

Sabran comes from a poor family in Endau, Johore, which is the southmost state of Malaysia adjoining Singapore. He acts as an interpreter for activists demonstrating against a colonial employer, British Realty. In the course of the novel, he is picked up for questioning but is later released.

Guan Kheng has a relationship with Sally. Going out with her one day in his car, they run into riots in the city, he fails to protect Sally, and she is raped and badly bruised. The bond between them weakens. In hospital, Sally, who had left her husband in Malaya, wonders, "What was she fleeing?"[5] The crisis leads to a discovery she had repressed—that she could actually be Malay and her name is Salmah. Uncomfortably, at this time too, "Guan Kheng thought, for seeking to be firm, to reassert, in fact, rational pride of race."[6]

Peter, the Eurasian of Portuguese ancestry, is set upon and hurt because his assailants identify him as a white man. After the incident, he comes to this realisation about his attackers. "…At me…Not any of you. Me…I saw the point suddenly. I don't belong here. I don't really know anybody here and what's more with the British getting out, I don't want to. I'm getting out too." [7]

Sabran, realises that his unionist friend Huang, who acts as an interpreter for Prosperity Union against British Realty, has different aims in fighting the British. Sabran suspects that Huang has closed an eye to inordinate violence, including attacks on Eurasians. This, and the attacks on Peter and Sally, leaves him pretty disillusioned. "That was why he was going back to the Federation." [8]

Finally, there is the mystical figure of Tok Said. Many of the protagonists have met him and come up with different versions. One unalterable fact about him is that he has prophetic power and predicted the violence that engulfs Singapore, as depicted in the novel. Sally thinks he is a holy man and an Indian and has encountered him in Trengganu and various places in Pahang, the two Eastern states of Malaya. Sabran meets Tok Said and is repelled by his “long” and “blood-curdling” scream and does not think he was a holy man. The authorities think he is linked to the Communists as an inciter of violence. Throughout the novel, the reader is left wondering, who is Tok Said? What is his role in the troubles infesting Singapore? The persistent questions asked about him and the absence of answers lend a thriller element that adds to the tension in the novel.

Two more points are worth making about this novel. True to the thinking of many in his generation, Fernando saw the political-geographical entities of Peninsula Malaya and the island of Singapore as one: Malaya. This is the novel’s frame of reference. The four young men go to Singapore because the university is located in the island-state. Tok Said is a Malayan phenomenon, spotted in Ipoh (the capital of the northern Malayan state of Perak), Trengganu, a northeastern state and elsewhere in other states.

Finally, what can be said of excerpts from classical Malay, colonial English and one Japanese book that pepper the novel? Fernando’s explanation is, “I wanted a mythic meaning to be added on the persons and the several incidents in the novel, yet references to specific works could not rely on the knowledge of the reader. I therefore selected passages which illustrate the truism that there is nothing new under the sun.”[9] This is a credible explanation. It supports my feeling that these extracts, placed at strategic points in the novel, remind readers of the multi-racial origins of Malayan-Singaporean history, of early migration, the coming of the colonial powers beginning with the Portuguese in Malacca and followed by the Dutch and the British. Indirectly, they point to the divide-and-rule policy of the British which is one of the causes of racial division shown in the novel.

Lloyd Fernando continued, after publishing *Scorpion Orchid* in 1976, to be preoccupied with cultures in conflict in fiction and this was demonstrated in his second and last novel, *Green is the Colour*, published in 1993. It is about the racial riots of 13 May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, that lead to far-reaching political consequences in Malaysia. It is a must-read novel

for those interested in Fernando's take on racial problems that continue to be very relevant today in both Malaysia and Singapore.

Robert Yeo, 2011

NOTES:

1. Marie T. Fernando, *Lloyd Fernando: A Celebration of His Life*, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.
2. Joe Conceicao, *Singapore and The Many-Headed Monster A look at racial riots against a socio-historical ground*, Horizon Books, Singapore, 2007. See chapter, *The Maria Hertogh Riots*. See also *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse* by Dennis Bloodworth, Times Edition, 1986, Marshall Cavendish 2005, especially the chapters on the 1950s.
3. As in 1, above, p. 9.
4. Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2011, p. 17.
5. Ibid, p. 93.
6. Ibid, p. 85.
7. Ibid, p. 73.
8. Ibid, p. 120.
9. As in 1, above, p. 10.

SCORPION ORCHID

1

SHE STOOD A little to the corner, out of the way and watched Santinathan take a nail and carefully hammer it down. Her eyes followed the arcs of the hammerhead in the small taps as the nail was being confirmed in its place, then in the swings which first widened and then diminished, ending in a double tap when the nail was fully in. Half kneeling before the box, the singlet stuck to his back, he paused, the muscles on his back relaxing their tightness. In Vasantha's eyes he suddenly seemed ashen, old. Then he was up and he walked round the box, head cocked on one side. "That ought to hold it." His eyes moved carefully over the box.

Aunt Nalini came in and stopped. "What on earth is in that big box?"

It's a coffin, Vasantha said with her eyes.

"It's got all the things I won't need here," Santinathan said, going out.

Nalini looked at the box. "What are you doing in that corner? Go and get dressed. Now. Go."

"Why isn't Santi going to come with us?" Vasantha's sweaty face was expressionless, only the eyes questioned. But they seemed to say that no possible answer would be comprehensible.

Nalini put her hands to her head and shouted, "Oh stop asking questions and do as I say."

Santinathan came back. "Don't shout at her."

"If she persists in being so—"

Thrusting her lower lip in resentment, Vasantha said, "I'm not stupid. You're the one that's stupid."

"There! You see. Perpetually talking back." Nalini went up to her and caught her by the arm, speaking through clenched teeth. "Now you go and get dressed this minute or else I'll—"

"Stop it." He did not move; he spoke quickly. "Please be kinder to her."

“Kinder. You don’t have to put up with her the whole day as I do. Nor Neela. And where is Neela, can you tell me that? Going about with white men. She’s nothing but a—” He saw how she bit back the word prostitute. “And you. You show no respect to your elders. Is that what you learn at the university? You go to lectures in the morning and come back at night—if you do. It’s easy for you to say be kinder. Do you know what she did this morning?”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know.”

“That’s just like you. And you dare to tell me be kinder.”

“Santi!” The voice came from the verandah above their quarrelling.

He turned to Vasantha. “Go and get dressed.” It was his look. She stepped round the trunks lying in disorder on the floor, but knocked the picture frames which lay at the edge of the table. They fell with a triple clatter.

“Santi, the lorry.” His uncle’s voice came again.

Santinathan said, “Help me with this trunk.” Nalini helped to heave it on his back, and watched his torso go out. There was a thud and then a scraping sound as the box was arranged in place on the lorry. When he came back she said, “Is he drinking?” although she knew the answer. A lorry man had come in, and the two worked systematically and silently, except for an occasional grunt. From the verandah old Rasu, Santinathan’s uncle, watched them gradually denuding the house. The samsu was now fully in his system like a warm, thick vapour imprisoned in dark corridors, tilting his frame slightly this way and that. The last box thudded onto the lorry and he spoke to the slim dark figure as it went past him. Santinathan approached him, face and bare shoulders rashed with sweat.

“The money for your fees is with Mr. Desai. Each term when they are due, all you have to do is go and ask him—”

I know.

“There’s just enough for five terms. You can’t afford to fail—”

I know.

“—it’s only for one and a half years. Then you can come back and join us —”

Santinathan was thinking how the words slid out of his uncle’s mouth like slobs of refuse pouring out of a burst pipe. Burst, that’s what you are.

Bust. You're bust after paying for all your passages back, and my fees. You're bust because you're running away. "No!" he suddenly shouted.

"But we can't leave without Neela. Whatever she has done, we can't leave her here. After all, she's our own flesh and blood."

"I've been there once," Santinathan said, breathing hard in his effort to speak quietly, "and I'm not going again. She said she won't come no matter what you do. And that's that, as far as I'm concerned." He turned and walked in.

The bareness of the living room depressed him. Its lived-in untidiness had disappeared. Only the altar remained. Vasantha was on a chair carefully taking down the garlands that draped the picture of Vishnu and Lakshmi. The bronze figure of Nataraja already lay on the table face down. "Leave the picture for a moment. And the oil lamp," he said.

"Why?"

He tried another approach. "Santha, please get me my shoes from the bedroom."

She fumbled unnecessarily with the garlands for some seconds longer before she got down and went out.

Outside, the ordinary sounds of living seemed to recede. The room became oppressive as the heat surged in waves and pounded his ear drums. In the oil lamp the little flame flickered convulsively and was still. The walls of the room fell away and the earth was in darkness. His body burst and he was nothing, only the flame remained, a yellow arrested explosion retreating swiftly. He followed it eagerly, seeking to be one with it. Yearning grew intense within him and he strained powerfully to penetrate the folds, to see the voice, to touch the flame now diminished in size but roaring white as from a jet. The splintering of glass was muffled in the squat plop of oil as the lamp hit the floor, and he felt the numbness pass.

"Athan, what about Neela?" Aunt Nalini asked. "We can't leave her."

Old Rasu watched his stranger self scream, "She's not fit to come with us. I could have arranged such a good marriage for her. What would her father have said if he had known she would come to this. All the time—"

Vasantha watched the figure of her uncle sway in the way she had come to dread. The whites of her eyes stared out of the corner into which she had shrunk. Would he be like this on the ship? Santi had told her how exciting it was going to be with the deck rolling, and the sea breezes—

“Santi!” old Rasu shouted.

Almost immediately Santinathan’s voice, near at hand, said quietly, “Everything’s ready on the lorry. If we leave now, you’ll have just enough time to settle your things on board before the ship leaves.” He had put on a crumpled shirt to match his dirty white trousers. He had wiped the sweat from his face but it was still shiny.

“Santi, come here.”

“We’ve got to leave now. Ten minutes is all you have to—”

“Come here.”

Santinathan stepped forward eyeing his uncle’s mottled face coolly.

“Why doesn’t she come back? Doesn’t she realise we’re leaving? Who will take care of her?” He gripped his nephew’s shirt front, but the youth’s face, inches from his uncle’s, was expressionless. This is the last time you’ll do it, old man.

“There is a man, isn’t there? Who is he—who is he?” The nephew looked at the faces behind his uncle: Vasantha’s wide-eyed, uncomprehending; Aunt Nalini’s eyes lowered, hair awry, an irregular line across her forehead, like a long scar. “She’s a slut, she will spoil our blood. After all I’ve done for her, see what she’s done.” He released his hold on Santinathan’s shirt. “We must get her. You must go again.”

The youth looked at his uncle steadily.

“I’ll come with you.”

His gaze remained unblinking.

“We can’t—”

“I’ve told you. I’ve done everything I can. I’m not going to see her again.”

“But why? She’s your sister. You can’t be—”

“That’s why. Now if you don’t get ready this minute I’m going out, and you’ll have to find someone else to help with the boxes.”

Old Rasu sat down suddenly and looked at his nephew.

A lizard came down from the ceiling to where Vishnu used to be. He stopped and waited for a long time, motionless, as if not sure of his bearings.

The lorry with their baggage had left. The taxi remained. In the late evening they could look at last at the sun, a glistening ball of red glass. On the road little vehicles ran about, open-shirted figures promenaded, wholly

unaware of the group that was leaving them. Santinathan, gazing on the busy strangeness of the scene, wished for a moment that he too would be on the ship taking them all away. He turned and shouted, “Vasantha!”

“Goodbye, house,” Vasantha was saying on the door step. Though she heard his call, she turned her back on him and listened to the silent house which had witnessed the innumerable occasions on which, uncomprehending, they had scolded her. She went backwards down the steps slowly. “This is the last time I shall walk down the steps.” She touched the stone balustrade at the foot. “This is the last time I shall touch this—this—” she puzzled, “—this.” She returned and touched it again quickly.

The taxi crept through the evening crowd of anonymous creatures in the suburb. Rasu recognised a face here, a crony there. They had been the props of his existence. He felt no regret at leaving, indeed he was anxious to leave. Too many changes were taking place, there was too little order, too much unease, uncertainty. It was a good country in which to earn a livelihood for a while, that was all. His head slowly turned left and back as the car moved, staring at the felled long-stemmed trunks of coconut trees lying athwart one another. The little plantation, cool patch, point of rest in a strange country, had gone. Although he had been twenty-five years in the country, part of him had always been held in suspension. Now atrophied, it gave him no satisfaction going back after the long interim. They were held up on Serangoon Road by a procession.

“So many carrying kavadis,” Aunt Nalini said. “What is the matter? Thaipusam is over.”

Several bare-bodied figures came into view. They were dusted over with saffron powder and ash, their eyes were glazed as if a film of water had frosted over the corneas even in the process of washing them. A neat red dot stared out of the centre of the forehead of each like a third eye. Each carried a large aluminium frame shaped in a quarter circle from which numerous metal skewers plunged like wheel spokes, piercing the flesh of his shoulders, chest and back as if to converge upon his heart. The tongue of each was stitched once with a tiny skewer, and the mouth remained open.

Most of the penitents were in a trance. If there had been pain at first, they had now crossed its threshold and were in a dark chamber of numbness. They did not bleed. Other members of the procession, jostling round the

penitents, shouted and clapped rhythmically. Clap-clap, hai-hai! Clap-clap, hai-hai! The drummer whose rhythm they kept shook his head convulsively in time with the complex beat which he produced from either side of a rope-tautened drum, low-slung from his shoulders. Near him walked another, holding to his lips an oboe, out of the flare of which issued a piercing and prolonged variation on one note.

"What is wrong? Why are there so many?" Aunt Nalini asked again.

Something is going to happen, Rasu thought. It's the same in Bukit Mertajam and Ipoh. It's not safe to be here. It's better to be among our own people.

The policeman at the harbour gate waved them in. They drove past dark, deserted godowns and emerged on the wharf. Yellow electric bulbs lit up the dirty Japanese packet that lay alongside. At one end a crane was hauling up their goods. Up, up, up they swung, swiftly disappearing into the hold. From the middle sloped a rickety gangway that rocked alarmingly as they climbed aboard. The mats were rolled out on the deck, pillows arranged under the canvas awning that was to shelter them for the next five days. Aunt Nalini was pouring out some coffee from a flask, Vasantha was at the railing looking down at the little motor sampans that chugged about. Old Rasu sat staring at his nephew arranging their luggage in a neat row at the head of the wide bunk on which they would all lie, feet towards the railing, for five days.

"Write often."

The youth stared out at the winking lights at sea. The anticipation had vanished, and his stomach felt small and contracted within him. The men around the hold of the ship were rounding off their tasks. A crane hook swung up loose and heavy for the last time, a rope leaped up at it like a snake and drew it firmly to the base. The last oblong of the hatch was covered and thick canvas swished stiffly over it. A dark figure leaped on the rail like a monkey bellowing out orders. Voices shouted a confused reply above Santinathan's thoughts and his uncle's voice. "After all she's your sister. Why do you hate her so much? Remember the way she alone took care of you when you had pleurisy? You were such good friends." It struck him that his uncle was not drunk any more. And further, that he seemed to be waiting for a reply. From the wide bunk a few yards away Aunt Nalini,

flask in hand, stopped in mid-action and held him with her eyes. “Santi are you listening?”

“It’s time for me to get off.”

“I said are you listening.”

“It’s time to go.”

“I won’t let you go until you answer me.”

Shutting his eyes the youth nodded.

“And when you come back you’ll bring her too? You must. Understand?” His head jerked again.

“You’ll be careful? There may be trouble.” He forced his nephew to look at him. “You know what I mean? If it’s going to be bad, leave at once and come to us. You hear?”

Figures were suddenly moving about busily. The roll of the boat became more pronounced and somewhere a bell clanged. Arms held him, different pairs of lips pressed upon his face; hot and sweaty; cold; and fleeting.

On the wharf he looked up once at the ship against the black sky. Vasantha’s squat figure was against the railing. He waved, but could not see whether she waved back. Perhaps they were all against the railing looking down and waving. Perhaps they were thinking it’s useless waving in the dark. The yellow lights on the ship and on the wharf held together in a sickly pallor against the wide blackness. Then they parted. Inside him was a chill quite unlike the feeling he expected to have.

The city looked new and strange. Its dark alleyways snaked away with new mystery, its lights glinting like a thousand fragments into which a vast mirror had shattered. Creatures, maggot-like, crawled on the thoroughfares. Santinathan stumbled past them in fear. Strange eyes stared out of pallid faces. In the bus not a single face muscle twitched. He got off almost before it had stopped and strode back to the dark, empty house.

The door creaked open. He stood silently, listening. Light, filtering from the neighbouring house, gave him the barest illumination. Softly he entered the wide dining room that was now simply a shell. Tomorrow he would leave this and move into a rented cubicle. The lizard came scurrying down the wall to where the altar had been. The young man watched it coldly. He took off a shoe and edged along the wall towards it. The house echoed as he crashed the shoe against the wall.

“Nataraja’s gone, you bastard,” he said.

The lizard scuttled away.

• • •

They led in a man whose hands were bound together with cord. When he was brought facing the master, he was ordered to bow, but he remained standing. A man came forward and struck him ten or twenty times with a bamboo cane. Then he was asked, "Do you wish to join this society or not?" But the man remained silent. Then he was asked the same question again. The third or fourth time he was asked, he replied, "No." The master glanced up at the men carrying swords and they all brandished their weapons making as if to cut off the man's head. I expected him to be killed. But the master stopped them and questioned him again, and again he said, "No." Then the master ordered him to be thrown face on the ground, while two men flogged him on the back with bamboo canes until he shrieked in agony.

2

"THERE HE IS."

"Where?"

"Talking to Huang." Guan Kheng waved and shouted, "Hey, Sabran!" He turned to Peter and said, "Come on."

"No, let him finish. No point going into that crowd."

They stood to one side and watched the Chinese, Indians and Malays jostle out of the grounds, it seemed, unendingly. The lorries, neatly arranged in files, began to fill up. Banners of white cloth with slogans in English, Malay and Chinese crudely written in red and black ink began to unfurl and were held aloft on poles at each end. The men squatting in one lorry began to cheer and their applause was taken up by others. Singing broke out, ragged and out of key, but soon gained tempo. They might have been football partisans returning after a rousing game.

"Look at those banners," Peter said. " 'British Realty is sucking our blood', there, that one. If I were the governor I'd line them up and shoot the bloody lot of them."

"Sabran, too?"

"Sabran is a fool to get mixed up in this." Peter was angry that they could not have the good times they had had when they first entered the university. "Just wait and see when he starts looking for a job."

Sabran saw them at last and dodged through the lorries which were grinding out, to the accompaniment of bursting firecrackers. It was the eve of Chinese New Year. He wore a shirt with rolled up sleeves and crumpled trousers. He was trying to force himself to stop breathing hard. When Guan Kheng asked, "How did it go?" he said, "Fine. Fine."

Guan Kheng, impassive behind his rimless spectacles, asked, "What does that mean? Joint union or no joint union?"

Sabran blinked momentarily. “Of course we’re going to join. You should have seen the men. I was doubtful at first. First we introduced Thian the President of the Prosperity Union. Thian spoke in Mandarin. Huang translated into English. Then I translated that into Malay. Then Rassidi the President of the Co-operative Union spoke. I translated that into English. And Huang translated my translation into Mandarin. It was going so slow I was worried. Then Thian got up again and tried to speak in Malay. It was so funny the crowd laughed. I think that did it. After that it was all cheering.”

• • •

It was then that they found at the point of the headland a rock lying in the bushes. The rock was smooth, about six feet wide, square in shape, and its face was covered with a chiselled inscription. But although it had writing, this was illegible because of extensive scouring by water. Allah alone knows how many thousands of years old it may have been. After its discovery crowds of all races came to see it. The Indians declared that the writing was Hindu but they were unable to read it. The Chinese claimed that it was in Chinese characters. I went with a party of people, and also Mr. Raffles and Mr. Thomson, and we all looked at the rock. I noticed that in shape the lettering was rather like Arabic, but I could not read it because, owing to its great age, the relief was partly effaced.

Many learned men came and tried to read it. Some brought flour-paste which they pressed on the inscription and took a cast. Others rubbed lamp-black on it to make the lettering visible. But for all their ingenuity in trying to find out what language the letters represented, they reached no decision.

…Mr. Coleman was then an engineer in Singapore and it was he who broke up the stone; a great pity, and in my opinion a most improper thing to do, prompted perhaps by his own thoughtlessness and folly. He destroyed the rock because he did not realise its importance…As the Malays say, “If you cannot improve a thing at least do not destroy it.”

• • •

“I don’t know what there is to cheer about,” Peter said gloomily. “It means you are going to have a showdown with Realty. And that means trouble.”

“No. Just wait and see.”

“Let’s go and get a bite,” Guan Kheng said.

“Sure. I’m hungry.” Sabran looked around. “I thought you said Santi has come back from the Federation.”

“Yeah, he’s back. He’s somewhere here.”

“The bugger looks exhausted,” Peter said. “Hollow eyes, and thin like a stick. Must have screwed all the female rubber tappers from Johore to Perlis.”

They saw Santinathan sitting on a bench at a vendor’s stall outside the grounds, eating a plate of fried mee, Indian style. He looked up, his face streaming with perspiration. “Your meeting okay?” he asked Sabran.

“Yeah. The committees of the two unions are going to meet next week. They are going to plan joint action. You want to come?”

“What, me?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“You could translate for the Indian workers,” Sabran said. Santinathan kept his eyes on Sabran as he drained a glass of pink syrup. “You’re in for trouble if you don’t look out, my boy,” he said at last.

“That’s what I say,” Peter put in. “You don’t think the police are going to stand by and watch the country go to ruin, do you?”

“Don’t be crazy, man,” Guan Kheng said.

“I’m not crazy. Just look at all those rumours. Too many people are getting jittery.”

“You mean our unions must not join together because of the rumours.” Sabran looked steadily at Peter.

“No man, I don’t mean that. But if you have too many people excited all together with all kinds of rumours flying about, there’s sure to be trouble. Stands to reason.”

Guan Kheng said, “You better stop that kind of talk, Peter. Or you’ll get us all into trouble.”

Peter lowered his voice. “I have a cousin in the Police Force. He says they’re really worried about Tok Said. They think he is the cause of all the

wild talk that's going about. And until the talk stops, they're not keen about public meetings, rallies, marches and so on. That's all I'm trying to say."

The four of them had been sixth formers together and were now undergraduates in their third year at the university. They had moved in a group, as young men who are contemporaries and enjoy company do, but the bond of their young manhood was wearing off and they were not fully aware of it yet.

The car park outside the grounds was nearly deserted, the dusk had deepened and the vendors were preparing to leave.

"We're going to get something to eat," Guan Kheng said to Santinathan. A single cracker explosion out on the road punctuated his speech. From another part of the city the sound of the crackers was continuous, like distant gunfire.

Santinathan lit a cigarette and sucked deeply. No smoke appeared when he breathed out. "Who's paying? You? Okay I'll join you. This bugger's mee was not so good today."

"I have a message for you from Miss Turner," Peter said as they got into the car which Guan Kheng had hired for the evening. "Next Wednesday you must bring the five essays you missed during your Federation orgy, or else __"

Santinathan blew smoke out with a loud whizz this time. "That bitch needs to be bedded with a gorilla." As they drove through the streets he lowered his gaze from the unmoving black high up, down to the dirt-stained buildings below. A huge coloured wheel spun continuously against one wall and it seemed they drove on the rim of the wheel, moving in a vast circle while the coloured lights played on them like a kaleidoscope continually changing the colour of their faces, and the smoke from the exploding crackers smothered them so that they looked like refugees in flight.

The shutters were up in the street as they entered, but from several upper windows of the derelict houses there snaked long dark writhing lines whose ends, a few feet from the road, sparked and snapped continuously like snorting dragons. They did not speak. It seemed as if they were moving on a cloud of smoke. Guan Kheng drove slowly through the winding alley cluttered up with hawkers' barrows. Their journey seemed endless. It was as if they had got into a rut as deep as the dark houses that lined it, and could do nothing but follow its unknown course.

A paraffin lamp finally appeared at the end of the road where a dingy wall rose square in front of them, up into the blackness. Guan Kheng swung the car round until it nosed against a dustbin. The edge of the road streamed wet and bits of cast-off food glistened near the tables. A little boy moved forward as if in a trance and placed tiny saucers at the table where they sat. Behind them a lone Chinese violin scraped.

“Practically the only place you can get a meal anywhere tonight,” Guan Kheng said.

“I wonder if Sally will be here tonight,” Peter said.

“She’ll be here. She’s got no people in Singapore.”

“Santi, did you see the Thaipusam last week?” Guan Kheng asked. “In Tank Road.”

“No. Why?”

“So many fellows carrying the kavadi. You know how many? Over three hundred. Including Chinese. There was a real traffic jam I can tell you. I swear there was a fellow carrying one who looked like you.”

They laughed.

“Can you lend me ten dollars?” Santinathan’s face shone with perspiration. “For ten dollars I—I’ll carry a kavadi. Ten dollars. It’s cheap.”

“Ka—what’s that?” Peter mockingly hummed Santinathan’s up and down Tamil intonation.

“Do you know it was nearly the same for the fire-walking ceremony in Yio Chu Kang last year?” Guan Kheng continued. “Nearly two hundred and fifty people.”

Sabran said, “Same thing in Pulau Besar, off Malacca. Crowds visiting the keramat of the seven Muslim saints. They cross in boats, make offerings and pray.” He stopped. “Looks like a whole lot of people want to cleanse themselves.”

“Let’s begin with a bath for Santi,” Peter said. “He badly needs one.”

“I need ten dollars,” Santinathan said.

Sabran spoke to Peter. “Ay, you don’t know what is a kavadi?”

Guan Kheng was polishing his glasses. “I bet you a hundred you’ll never carry one.”

“Why should he know what a kavadi is? This is not his country,” said Santinathan. “He’s going back ‘home’—to England. Aren’t you, Peter?

Only with a name like his, I wonder whether they'll let him in. D'Almeida. Peter D'Almeida." He whizzed out smoke rapidly.

"And what about you. If you ever go back to India, they'll put you in the Andamans, that's certain."

"What about it, Santi? Hundred."

Sabran looked at Guan Kheng. "Do you think it's because of Tok Said?"

"Maybe."

"Well what are the police worried about if that's what he's making people do?"

"It's too unusual, man, that's what," Peter came in. "Usually there are about half a dozen—or at most a dozen for these ceremonies. Something funny is going on. It's like a scare. And the crowds—they're far bigger than in previous years."

"Well let everybody repent—if that's what Tok Said wants them to do. And the police had better be grateful."

There was a lull in the explosions. Now they sounded in single bangs behind which headless urchins lurked or darted.

"Ay, Santi look," Guan Kheng leaned suddenly to point, and the loose wooden table top tilted up at him and fell back. The others turned to look. A figure dressed in white trousers and white shirt was approaching. In the smell and dark of the alley it cut an incongruous figure.

"A freshie."

"Yeh. The one we ragged last week."

"Tell him to get lost," Santinathan said. "No, wait. Ask him to come here. If he can lend me ten dollars I'll let him go."

Guan Kheng got up and shouted, "Hey bastard, come here. Come here." The dim white shirt and trousers at the end of the street stopped moving. "Come here."

"What do you want ten dollars for? For Sally?"

Santinathan puffed three or four times at the cigarette end. It was so short he held it carefully between finger and thumb, his cheeks pouted and his eyes were almost fully closed in the effort to avoid the smoke from the stub. At last he threw it away. He said seriously, "You see it's like this. My father is dead. My mother is sick and bed-ridden. I am sole bread-winner of the family. We are four months in arrears of rent, and we have had nothing to eat but bread and water—"

“Balls to you,” D’Almeida said conversationally. The white shirt had reached them, a tie knotted in front of it. Above it was a face whose youthfulness shone even in the paraffin light. The voice was nervous. “Good evening.”

Santinathan lit another cigarette. D’Almeida’s face straightened as though into a rectangle. Through tight lips he said, “You haven’t learnt yet, have you. Down.”

“Good evening, reverend sires.”

“Down.”

The youth stood still.

“I said down.”

“You can’t do this to me outside.”

They laughed heartily. The urchins who had been exploding single crackers at a time stopped and approached, to enjoy the spectacle. D’Almeida caught hold of the tie and tugged three or four times. “Down,” he said kindly.

When the youth was spread-eagled on the wet road face down, Guan Kheng asked him, “What are you doing here?”

“I live in this street,” said the youth from the road surface.

They went through the routine, trying to think of new things to make the youth do, since the old things were not satisfying, nor even funny anymore. Or they said it was funny and didn’t laugh. They made the youth “pump” until he could support himself on his arms no longer, and lay heedless, panting, on the filth at the side of the road. Then he had to slither up to Santinathan who put his foot on him saying, “Stoop, villain, stoop?…er… what? Lie prostrate on the low disdainful earth, and be the footstool of great Tamburlaine, that I may rise and go for my—” He broke off and asked, “Where’s Sally?”

Then Guan Kheng asked him to go and urinate in the monsoon drain. The youth got up and stood by the drain but there was no sound, and was called back again. Guan Kheng pushed a glass of water at him. “Here drink this, it might help. No, wait. This will speed the action up a bit.” He poured half a bottle of black sauce into the water. The youth closed his eyes and drank it, then went back to the edge of the drain.

Santinathan wasn’t looking. The food had arrived and he began to eat. His eyes steady on the girl who had brought it. Her lips were smudged with

red and her long hair though combed looked dry like coconut fibre. She wore a sleeveless white blouse and a cheap-looking satin skirt with a glittering brooch at the waist. She moved among them as with old friends, before sitting next to Guan Kheng.

Santinathan said, “Ay, Sally. You don’t love me any more?”

“What for to love you? You got no money.”

They laughed.

“All right. Love Guan Kheng for his money. But love me for myself alone.” He put his hand on his heart.

Laughing, she said, “I love Peter for himself alone. But you—not even for money. I think you better pray to God to change your luck.”

“We want him to carry a kavadi. That will change his luck,” said Guan Kheng.

“I know what,” said Peter. “Let’s all subscribe and send him to Tok Said. Sally, you agree?”

The smile left Sally’s face. She fumbled with her brooch and looked away.

A brief silence caught them unawares. Peter broke it, saying heartily, “I love you too, Sally. But right now I want a beer, what about you chaps?”

Guan Kheng removed his arm lingeringly from her shoulders and she went away. “Why doesn’t she go home—at least for the New Year,” he said, staring after her.

“Now don’t start that,” Sabran said. “It’s like the first question a man asks a woman in bed. ‘What’s a nice girl like you doing in a job like this?’ ”

“But how many girls can you find like her?”

“Hundreds,” said Santinathan.

“You’re wrong.”

Peter said suddenly, “Did she get angry because I mentioned Tok Said just now?”

Guan Kheng waved a hand dismissively. “Ah come on man, don’t imagine things.”

Santinathan turned to the freshman. “Have you got ten dollars?”

The freshman was beginning to feel he had had enough. “Ye-es…but… you can’t—”

“Uh-huh. You want to use it yourself. Well, go and find your own whore. Go on, get out of here.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” D’Almeida got up sucking his teeth loudly, and called the freshman back. The figure returned disconsolately.

“Santi, you want to go?” Guan Kheng passed him a couple of notes. Santinathan got up and walked towards the staircase in the shadow.

Peter said, “Freshie. Bastard, I’m talking to you, man. Do a war dance round this table.”

The street was deserted now. Even the urchins had gone, and only the burst of a firecracker now and then broke the stillness. It was the eve of the New Year, the time of the gathering of the clans, the time when old injuries are forgiven, and new beginnings made, a time of sadness for the loss of the passing years, and of hope for the future, a time when deep in the consciousness was the realisation of the appalling flow of time and the strange disturbing changes that make newer universes stare into existence.

The dingy shutters of the worn three-storeyed shophouses that cramped the street on either side were up; hardly a pedestrian appeared. Against the leaden-blue glare of the street lamp at the end of the alley, the three friends sat around their table, lean silhouettes in a modernistic wayang kulit, while a fourth figure danced round them Red-Indian fashion.

“Higher,” shouted Guan Kheng, “Get those knees higher. Stop!” The youth stopped and stood awkwardly. “What, you haven’t seen cowboy films? You haven’t seen Red Indians dance ah?” He turned to the others, “What am I saying? He probably sees no other films. All right, come on, once again. And whoop louder.”

• • •

The majority of the female slaves were Balinese and Bugis. They were brought up by men of all races, Chinese, Indians, Malays, who took them to wife and whose numerous progeny are here to the present day. There were also Malay boats bringing slaves from Siak. A great number of them came from the hinterland of Siak, from Menangkabau and from Pekan Baharu. They were all being herded into Singapore, driven along the road and beaten with canes like goats being taken to market. That is how slaves were sold in those days both in Malacca and in Singapore, like a cattle market. I went back to the town and told Mr. Raffles all about what I had seen. He

replied, "That business will not last much longer for the English are going to put a stop to it. It is a wicked thing and many people have gone and made reports about it to Parliament in England demanding that the slave trade cease," and he added, "It is not only here that this sinful business goes on. To England too boatloads are brought from other countries, and thousands of the black men are turned into slaves. Then they are put up like goods for sale in all the countries of Europe. If we live to be old we may yet see all the slaves gain their freedom and become like ourselves."

3

IT WAS THE driest season the island had ever known. The heat which had accumulated during the long days still seemed to hover over the city, stifling its inhabitants. Usually they streamed on to the water front at night, sweating, wondering, in the gustatory atmosphere, moving in clusters or striking out alone.

On this night there was an uneasy stillness. Even the flow of the murky little creek that emptied itself into the harbour had slowed to an imperceptible pace, so that the odour of its refuse rose and lingered over the streets like an invisible pall.

When she was so close that he did not see her face, and he was staring into the damp corner of the room where the spittoon lay, the trembling of tiny muscles inside him seemed to cease and it was fine to feel the warm skin on her back. He moved the palms of his hands up and down, and then suddenly realised that she was still, not inert, not intent. She was looking at him.

He moved to one side and said, “Sally.” She did not move, and now even one foot away it was difficult to see her face for the dark. In another room a throat gratingly gathered up its phlegm and he waited for it, for the “thoo!” that would send another great gob into the foetid air. “Sally, will you answer me something?” He spoke at her black figure.

Her knee slid up from the mattress in a pyramid so that it caught a pallor from the dim light in the window. He held her, vice-like.

“Sally.”

“What?”

“I think you have actually seen Tok Said.”

At last she said, “Yes,” adding, after a pause, “and I know you have seen him too.”

There suddenly arose deafening sounds as if all the bricks of all the buildings in the city had come loose and were clattering separately but continuously to a ground that was far below, so that one heard not only the hard impact of one alien surface upon another but also the echo as it resounded through the waiting city. The result was a continuous roar which lasted several minutes, near and so intense that he gritted his teeth, his face contorting. It was the start of the new year. The gods were in their heaven and mortals were left to their own devices, if only for a short spell. He held his breath and waited for the noise to stop, but he had to breathe out gasping, for it did not. Soon his ears became attuned to the continuous roar, and he realised that she had wrenched her wrists away and now had both hands under her head and was staring up at the ceiling.

"When did you see him? Where?" he asked.

"Last year in—"

"Tell me."

She moved to him, pressing close, her arm round his neck, as if seeking to hide. "I don't want to talk about him. I can't remember anything." For a long time they lay silent, listening to the noise outside. "I had gone back to Tumpat to see my father who was ill. People told him about my life in Singapore. He was not angry. In fact I'm sure he knew before they told him. After all I was sending him money every month. Anyway, what was I to do? What is a woman who has run away from her husband to do? I cannot speak good English, I cannot get a job.

"He asked me to go and see a holy man in Temasek. Ask him what to do. Ask his advice. So I went to Trengganu. The holy man gave me something to drink, and a small packet for me to keep and said to me to go back to my husband. I spent five dollars just to hear only that! I came to my father and told him no, no, I'll never go back. Then he said go and see Tok Said. What's the use, I thought. I'm making enough money to keep us both alive, and no one will marry me now. But I could see my father was very ill, and to please him I set out again. Tok Said was a quiet holy man. He never asked for money, only a little bit of food. Sometimes he would take a few cents to give to the children in Kampung Rompin by the sea where he lived. So again I went down to Kuantan, then to Pekan, then to Kampung Nenasi. After I crossed the ferry there, I had to walk all the way—about twenty miles of hot sand to Rompin. At last I found him in his hut. Naturally I

expected to see a Malay man. But no. He was an old Indian man with a greying beard. He was barebodied. He wore only a sarong. He never looked in my face, just my hands. And he said—he said—”

He lay still and waited for her to collect herself.

“He said it doesn’t matter whether I go back to my husband or not. He kept saying there are too many men, there are too many men. I asked him what he meant. Then at last he looked at my face and his eyes opened wide and he said I made him see great trouble ahead. For whom, I asked. He simply said I would be forced to love those who come to me. I went back to Tumpat to tell my father what had happened but he had died and had been buried a few days previously. So I came straight back to Singapore.”

“How did you know he was Tok Said?”

“I was not sure then. I know now.”

“How?”

“Because it was only after my visit to him that he started telling everyone who came to see him of troubles in the future.”

“But you said he is Indian.”

“Yes.”

“Then what about his name?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

Santinathan turned away and said, “It’s confusing. I met Tok Said in Rompin, too. He’s Malay.”

She looked at him with interest. “Why did you go to see him?”

He was silent.

“Santi, why? Was it because of a girl?” She looked at him with love.

“Yes. She asked me to go and I went.”

“What did she want to know?”

“Whether there was any future for us. He said—”

“Yes?”

“He said I would die this year.”

Something inside him tightened again. It was like wires that had somehow got enmeshed and were being twisted remorselessly by a pair of pliers and he had to stop the heat in his brain. He thought of tractors gashing red hillsides and tree trunks lying athwart one another, their roots pointing like long-nailed witches’ fingers into the sun. The roar of the

motors filled the whole room so that his body shook and he could not hear himself weep.

She had gone into the lavatory and he heard the flush which groaned three or four times before it began to work. He sat loose and pointless, listening over the thin partition to the creak of the bed in the next cubicle. The cracker explosions had receded and were now echoing in distant parts of the city, muted but continuous. She had come back into the room and had begun dressing, not looking at him. He felt ashamed of his nakedness and moved to one corner to put on his clothes. He opened his mouth as if to speak and she stopped at the door. There was a clamour of voices downstairs and he thought he heard his name being called. Footsteps sounded in the corridor, then the door shook as a flat palm banged it several times. “Santi!” It was Sabran. “There’s trouble. Let’s go.”

She opened the door and stood unblinking. Sabran pulled him by the arm. “Come on man, hurry up.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Don’t know. A lot of fellows are standing and watching us. We got to go.”

Downstairs on the five-foot way which was over-hung by the upper storeys of the slum building, Sabran motioned to Santinathan to stop and they stepped behind a pillar. A number of men had appeared on the street, shirts hanging out unbuttoned, sleeves folded to three-quarter length. They slouched about insolently.

“What is it? Where’s Guan Kheng?”

“Quiet, Santi.” Sabran’s lips did not move. “He’s waiting for us round the corner with Peter. I don’t know what happened. While we were waiting, suddenly they came out. They all looked at us. They looked and looked. We thought it is Chinese New Year, that’s why they came out. But Guan Kheng was not sure. He thinks maybe it is a gang fight. Maybe that freshie that we ragged has got a gang. Guan Kheng told me to get you. He’s waiting with Peter in the car.”

“This is crazy, man.”

“Now Santi we have to walk. If we run they will come after us.” They stepped out, Sabran slightly in front. Even their walk revealed that they were strangers in the area. Sabran stepped stiffly, a slight film across his eyes, looking straight ahead. Santinathan walked with a slight swagger. A

murmur rose from the crowd. Several voices broke out and there was a laugh, loud and short, a “ha!” that was full of contempt. Sabran hunched his shoulders and felt again the curious depression that came upon him as he looked at the alien faces. A cracker sailed out in front of them like a tiny shooting star and he winced, but it failed to explode. The urchins followed, but the pair didn’t turn round. In the darkness in front of them a car started with a sudden roar and revved noisily two or three times. They broke into a run. Instantly they heard shouts and the pad of rushing feet.

“Come on!” Guan Kheng’s pallid face was barely visible in the black of the car. Two points of light glinted on his spectacles. They leapt in and their bodies were thrown back as the car shot forward and snaked through the winding alley, its headlights scouring the dark like a submarine monster.

4

THE MANGO WAS momentarily still as if it too was fascinated by the smooth professional flow of argument that issued from Miss Ethel Turner. From behind a look of intentness Santinathan turned to watch the spectacles dance on her nose.

"—What is important for us in connection with our present problem is that all derivative value rests on basic value. Whatever possesses derivative value must be related to something else of value, and ultimately to something of basic value. Judgements as to the existence of causal and other relations which hold between basic and derivative goods are admittedly confirmable. Most scientific work rests in part on such judgements. The crucial question for value theory is whether or not judgements of basic value can be confirmed. If they can be shown—"

He watched the woman, her mouth shaping and reshaping in complex relation to the movements of her head. He looked at the freckled knees pressed against each other below the table shutting out the light tightly. Then he inclined his head so that he was looking past the nose of the student on his left, and staring at the stump of a branch, some fifteen feet in the quadrangle, which had been cut off out of an obscure general desire to make the grounds presentable. Its leafy presence removed, there was now only a hard intervening glare that hurt his eyes but yet he stared boring through the foliage behind it until he saw the solitary mango that dangled unripely in a slight wind. He had found that by looking at it and pursuing inexorably its movements, now pendulum-wise, now circular, he could reduce the plaintiveness of Miss Ethel Turner's voice to a bare hum.

"Are you saying then, Miss Turner," it was Patricia Chen, her cheongsam further uncovering her thigh as she leaned forward earnestly, "are you saying that value judgements, like the descriptive judgements of science,

are subject to empirical testing?" She took her studies seriously, learnt the jargon pat, could reel off the deontological and teleological views of the universe and the respective objections to each, and was a devout Christian. Every Wednesday she organised a lunch time hymn session. So far she had failed to persuade Santinathan to attend even once. For the moment she had given up, for three weeks back when she had spoken of a "retreat" her group was planning, he had suggested instead that the two of them go on a retreat of their own.

Miss Turner looked approvingly at her questioner. "Well I'm not saying they are subject to empirical testing. And then again I'm not saying they're not." She broke off coldly. "Did you want to ask a question, Mr. Santinathan?" He had unaccountably let off his breath in a forced "hss hss hss". "You may not be so frivolous after you've seen the Dean." He averted his eyes from her gaze and looked at Miss Chen's thigh. She resumed. "What the discussion is about can be put in the form of a question: how can I confirm my belief that the pleasantness of my experience is basically good? Or: can I show that it is desirable for its own sake? My immediate evidence for this is—"

"A series of oohs and ahs."

Even Patricia Chen giggled. Miss Turner said, "Now that is quite enough, Mr. Santinathan." The mango started to move again, this time, pendulum fashion. "I was saying that my immediate evidence for this is that I find that I do desire it for its own sake. I catch myself desiring it. If you don't believe me you can use a lie detector—"

He suddenly wrote industriously in his note book, and then looked up at her with unfeigned satisfaction and interest. She was nonplussed.

"—suspect that I am deceiving myself, that somehow unconsciously I dislike the pleasantness of an experience, that my apparent desire for it is only some sort of a neurotic rationalisation of an underlying dislike for happiness, you will have to go to more pains to confirm my statement that I do desire my experience to be pleasant. You may have to consult a psychiatrist, or perhaps even have me psychoanalysed, to learn about my unconscious desires—"

Yup. But I haven't got the time, Ethel.

Patricia Chen hurried up to him at the end of the tutorial. "I do hope it will be all right with the Dean. When have you got to see him?"

“Turner said nine in the morning.”

“You know I tried to speak to her to ask her not to send to you. Oh why didn’t you do the essays?”

“You shouldn’t have. It’s not your business. She might have thought I put you up to it.”

“Of course not.” But she looked uncertain. They walked a few steps together, then she said, “What are you doing after lunch?” but didn’t wait for an answer. “Would you like to come and join us? We are having our regular get-together at one-thirty.”

Patricia was conscious of being a very understanding girl. Her father had come out of China as a penniless youth and had risen to make his fortune as a dealer in motor car spare parts. He now owned three rubber estates, had shares in several companies and sent his children to the best school. That it happened to be run by one of the Christian missions neither troubled nor interested him. Patricia however had early been attracted by the religious tenets which the school upheld and when she was in the sixth form awaiting admission into the University she had been baptised by the fluent young American pastor who was principal at the time. Her father raised no objection since it made little difference in the household. There were three large American cars in the garage, and it only meant that one of the cars was now frequently used by Patricia to attend church services and meetings, in addition to lectures at the University. She was still his dutiful daughter, was back home at the very latest by eight in the evening, and was conscientious in her studies. Religion became for Patricia an indispensable part of her life. But she was troubled by the lack of seriousness on the part of her contemporaries.

Santinathan looked at her beautiful eyes, the touch of lipstick and the slim figure that her cheongsam followed. On impulse, he said, “What time did you say? One-thirty?”

He looked so intently after her as she walked demurely away that he did not immediately hear the “Good morning, reverend sire” which a passing freshman greeted him with. Still absorbed he called the freshman back, handed him his files saying, “The Dead Sea Scrolls. Bear them carefully to the conference chambers,” and added, when he saw the freshman’s blank look, “the canteen, you fool.”

The canteen was crowded. At one table sat six young ladies, who stared modestly at each other, ate delicately and whispered discreetly to one another from time to time. At exactly one twenty-five they got up, paid for their meal, and walked demurely out. They were smartly, even fashionably groomed, immensely sophisticated in appearance, and extremely proper. Senior students, among them Guan Kheng and Santinathan began by taking the keenest interest in ragging them, but quickly tired. They watched as the girls left and then turned to the captive freshman Santinathan had brought in for amusement.

Guan Kheng fanned himself with a limp handkerchief, saying, “Ay, it’s bloody hot, man.” He looked at their captive and had an idea. “Be my punkah-wallah,” he said to the freshman who took the newspaper that was handed him and waved it half-heartedly. After a few minutes Guan Kheng said, “Have you had your breakfast?”

Pereira, the freshman, thought it wise not to answer. Guan Kheng lost interest but another senior, Seng Teck, took it up. “He said have you had your breakfast? Wave harder, man! Like the Nubian slaves.”

“He’s not a Nubian, look at his colour.”

“Ay, what colour are you?” Seng Teck turned to another freshman. “What colour is he?”

Through being ragged continually for a week or more, this one had some idea of the kind of thing to say. He grinned and said, “No colour at all.” They laughed.

“He’s got to have a colour. Otherwise he’s white. Ay! How can you be white. Are you white?”

Pereira’s lips were trembling, but he still said nothing. “No answer! He’s kopi susu.”

Guan Kheng turned to Santinathan and said quietly, “Sabran’s been pulled in for questioning.”

“What do you mean? You mean arrested?”

“I don’t know. They simply said questioning.”

“But what for?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s because of his union work.”

“This is stupid. Let’s go and see him.”

“It’s no use. I tried that. You weren’t around so I went to the headquarters in Robinson Road with Peter. They refused point blank. He’s not the only

one who has been nabbed. There are others. Only junior officials, though."

"But he's been working for the Co-operative Union for more than two years now. Why are they acting only now? What's he done that's wrong?"

"You know the scare that's going round—said to be caused by Tok Said? In fact I'm beginning to believe it myself. Remember the other night when we had to drive off in a hurry? How did that happen? What was the cause? We ourselves were caught in a scare. Those people have known us for such a long time. They had no reason to want to attack us." He called out above the hubbub for another coffee. "I suppose by rounding up some of the junior men, they hope to warn the unions to go easy and stop the scare from becoming true. Something like that. I'm guessing."

"But I've helped Sabran type things and lick envelopes and correct the draft speeches of some of his leaders. Sometimes. Why haven't they arrested me? This is simply idiotic."

"I don't think it's only his union work. Someone told me they think he's seen Tok Said too, and therefore he's suspected of helping to spread the scare rumours."

"Sabran's seen Tok Said? I've seen him too."

Guan Kheng looked startled for a moment. Then he said, "Don't be a bloody fool, Santi. Keep your mouth shut, unless you want some damned student to inform on you. We'll wait a few days and see. I'm sure they'll let him go. This may be simply their way of telling him to watch his step."

They watched, without interest, the ragging of Pereira continue. He was held by his tie, pulled as if by a halter to a crouching position, his face alongside the table, while the seniors laughed. Santinathan got up and walked out unseeing, thinking of Patricia Chen's "get-together".

The lecture room was a contrast of monastic stillness when he approached the door. Thirty or forty students sat with heads bowed while one of them stood up and talked. Santinathan strained his ears but could not catch what was being said. On the lecture platform a white man in rimless glasses gazed at the ceiling serenely. Patricia Chen caught sight of him and approached.

"Come in," she said softly. He entered and sat in a corner, she beside him. The student had stopped speaking and there was a deathly silence. Then another got up. His face was shiny and clean, unmarked by furrows.

Santinathan thought of the nature reserve which had been cleared for the buildings they now occupied. Why hadn't the trees been left to grow? Another student had got up and was speaking.

Outside, there was trouble beginning in the city but these didn't seem to care. They were insulated, it seemed. What had been done to them? What had the Reverend Elmer Jones done to make them such dummies?

"You're wrong," Patricia said confidently, when he once put the question directly to her. "You'll find social awareness among us if you really look."

"With a string attached always," he replied. "For you it is not common charity you do to the poor and the illiterate. You're not satisfied until you own them, until you've put your mark upon them, put them in your pocket. In Reverend Elmer Jones' pocket, in fact."

"I'm in nobody's pocket. Nobody had forced me. I truly believe in what I'm doing."

"That's the last condition of the damned," he said lightly.

The pastor cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should now go on to read our text," he began benevolently, but stopped when he saw Santinathan standing.

"If you please I should like to speak."

Patricia looked both gratified and apprehensive. Reverend Jones looked doubtful but Santinathan did not wait for permission.

"I would like to tell you," Santinathan began, "of the extraordinary influx of grace which I experienced last night without which I should never be here speaking to you all today." An uncertain smile fleetingly touched Patricia's face. "As you all know I have led a very sinful life up to now. I cannot deny it. It is true. For a long time I was greatly troubled by my sinfulness but it was a vexing question just where and how I should begin to atone to the Lord. Would he accept my supplications knowing the evil life I had led? Would he find it in his heart to hear my prayer? I didn't know. All I knew was I couldn't afford not to hope. Still where was I to start? I spent many long hours thinking for many long, unrewarding days. I thought so much that it seemed as if all my being became concentrated in my brain. It was in this mood of concentration that I had my first flash of grace, a divine intuition, you might say. I realised that in fact all a man's vital energy is stored in the skull—which was why long after the other parts of me had gone numb as it were, I was conscious of being a living, thinking brain, a

glutinous cerebral mass. There could only be one explanation: the brain is the ultimate storehouse of a man's vital energy, and therefore this is where his seminal fluid is concentrated. Now the realisation of this was highly exciting. My friends. My friends—" He paused and surveyed his listeners, deliberately seeking to hold them by the eye but finding only one or two whose gaze wavered and dropped before he could lock with them.

Legs were crossed and uncrossed, there were a few slight coughs, and one or two chairs scraped. The whirr of the fan overhead seemed unnaturally loud. The direction of the Reverend Elmer Jones' gaze was towards the far corner of the ceiling, the expression on his face held in the fleeting second between the depiction of one attitude and another. He coughed and looked wise. "We are all very grateful to Mr.—er—"

"Santinathan."

"Mr. San—we are very grateful to the speaker for his remarks on this important subject, but—er—however much we may be interested—"

"You mean you won't listen to me?"

"Of course we will. That is the whole purpose of these Wednesday afternoon get-togethers." Reverend Elmer Jones paused and surveyed the students confidently. Several heads nodded vigorously in assent. He was quite sure he could still command the situation, and the smile of wise understanding on his face showed it. "But time is running short and—"

"And that's where he let them have it," Guan Kheng said afterwards, recounting the story of Santinathan's expulsion from the University.

"What did he say?" Sabran asked.

"He was really too much. He'd been reading some old book on Yoga. Actually something of what he said is true. Some of those yogis really tortured themselves for the pure life. But trust Santi to turn it into something obscene. Apparently he described one of the exercises at length. He didn't spare a single detail." Guan Kheng shook his head. "The bugger was really too much. He advised them all to try the exercise in pairs."

Sabran repressed a laugh.

"Just then the bell started ringing for the start of the afternoon lectures. That broke the spell. Until that moment he had them completely cowed. Now they rushed at him, upsetting chairs, flinging books, shouting at him. A deputation went straight to the Vice-Chancellor, and that was that."

Santinathan disappeared entirely from the university scene. A day later he received a brief letter from the Registrar asking him to be present the following day to answer “serious charges” made against him. He ignored this. After an interval a letter arrived in which the Vice-Chancellor officially informed him that in view of his grossly improper conduct which was detrimental to the good name of the University, it had been decided to expel him from the University. But by this time, Santinathan had left—“For India,” as he said to the lady of the house where he had a room, “to see my mother who is dangerously ill.” The lady merely nodded her head but did not believe a word.

5

NOW ONE DAY a toddy-tapper, who had gone sailing with his wife, came across a boy adrift in the sea, clinging to a plank. He rescued the boy and took him aboard his boat: and he perceived that though the boy was unconscious as the result of long exposure in the water without food or drink, life was not yet extinct: as says Baginda 'Ali (may God be pleased with him), "La maut illa bi'l-ajalu," that is to say, "Death only comes at the appointed hour." The toddy-tapper dropped rice-gruel water into the boy's mouth; and the boy opened his eyes and perceived that he was on board a boat. The toddy-tapper then took him home with him and cared for him.

After some days the boy recovered, and the toddy-tapper asked him, "Who are you and how came it that you were thus adrift on a plank?" And the boy answered, "I am the son of the Raja of Tanjong Pura, descended from Sang Maniaka who first came down from Bukit Gantang Mahu Meru. My name is Radin Perlangu and I have two brothers and a sister. One day my father, the Raja of Tanjong Pura, set out to an island for sport, and when we were well out to sea a storm broke and the waves rose, so that the craft in which my father was sailing became unmanageable and was wrecked. My father, the Raja of Tanjong Pura, and my mother had no time to get into a boat but took to the water and swam after another ship. I myself clung to a plank and was carried out to sea by the current and the waves. I was afloat for seven days and seven nights, without food or drink. In the nick of time I fell in with you who have treated me so kindly: but if you wish to be even kinder to me, take me to my parents in Tanjong Pura, that they may give you reward without measure." And the toddy-tapper replied, "Yes, but what means have I of taking you to Tanjong Pura? Stay here with me and let me adopt you as my son, for I have no child of my own and I like your

handsome young face." And Radin Perlangu said, "Very well then; whatever you wish, sir, I will do." And the toddy-tapper gave to the son of the Raja of Tanjong Pura the name of Kimas Jiwa, and great was the love of his wife and himself for the boy.

• • •

The butt of the huge wooden roller cupped in his hands behind him, Santinathan moved in jerking steps, eyes compulsively on the carpet of wood shavings. The flesh of his finger tips pressed into his nails and the butt began to slip. He balled his mind in concentration on the last few steps to the front of the keel that leaned obliquely at and over him and let the thing go as he staggered clear.

"Adei!" Arokiam's shout was piercing as he flung his end of the roller away and leapt away too. "Why did you do that?" He controlled his indignation when he saw his panting companion and said with a rough kind of patience, "We must do it together." The mandore gave a shout and an argument followed lasting many minutes. Its main import was that the new man being "educated" did not know what was required and was unused to heavy work. In the end Arokiam, his moustache drooping with sweat, beckoned him with both hands and a nodding head saying, "You carry with me next time."

Then the work chant of leader and crew began again and the tongkang inched down the slipway. Every little while a large meranti roller came free at the rear whereupon two figures promptly lifted it up and staggered with it to lay it once again in front of the keel. The new man had imagined the base of his abdomen tearing a little each time his turn came to lift a roller. He felt relieved Arokiam would be there to help him the next time. Now bent low beside him, he exerted himself no longer but merely moved with the roller as it helped shift the tongkang slowly forward. The chant was in his ears, rhythmic and melodious, and Arokiam smelling of body odour and uncooked rice heaved and sang with the rest. Then someone shouted a warning and everybody straightened expectantly. In a few seconds, to the accompaniment of rattling logs, the tongkang moved forward on its own down the last twenty yards of the slipway and splashed into the little bay,

scattering its props clear on either side. Cheers broke out from the watching crowd of shipyard workers. Arokiam and some others plunged in after it to retrieve the logs before they floated away.

“Why didn’t you swim out to get the logs,” he asked later, his body glistening with the slime and tar of the sea. It was not a reproof but a request for information. Arokiam wondered at this young man who seemed to have known better days, who could speak English but apparently did not have any job. The new man went to one of the supports of the huge zinc shed and picked up from the foot of it the metal can in which he brought the day’s food; he placed the can in a dirty handkerchief and tied the four corners of it in a knot on top of the can. Arokiam pulled a dark brown wad from his waist and put together the makings of a wad of betel. After he had got the white lime on the tip of a finger he looked at the other, and gesturing the betel nut at him, said, “Take it.” Then they sat down on the wood shavings clasping their knees with their arms and waited.

“Where is your father?” Arokiam asked. He only wanted to talk.

“Dead.”

“Your mother?”

“Dead.”

He did not ask about brothers and sisters lest he should get the same answer. “I was a rubber tapper in Labis before I came here,” he said, after a pause. “Twelve years I worked there. Then the estate was sold and I had no work for three months. We had no food. My wife grew tapioca in the Japanese time but it wasn’t enough and she was not strong. About two years ago I came to Singapore and got a job as gardener for a Chinese towkay. After some time he got a Chinese gardener, too, who acted as if he were the towkay’s manager. He was always ordering me to do this and that. I stood it for two months. Then I found this job.” Red spittle had accumulated while he spoke and he spat out a blotch on the wood shavings.

“Do you like this job?” the new man asked, and then felt as if he had asked something silly. “I mean—”

The other said simply, “Sometimes there is overtime.” The whistle went and the mandore came up busily saying, “Don’t get into the lorries yet. We have a meeting.”

“Where?”

“Outside the gates. Everyone must turn up.” And he was away spreading the word to the others.

“Yesterday one meeting, today another,” Arokiam grumbled. “But what do we get? Nothing. They fight among themselves and want us to support them.”

Santinathan pushed his way through the crowd of workers surrounding the speaker who was addressing them, standing on the roof of a lorry. He heard something about remaining united even though they were going to join the other union.

He walked without energy for he was still hungry. He stopped at a coffee stall and sat staring vacantly over the glass of coffee laced with ginger which was handed to him. A military vehicle rumbled past carrying British soldiers with rifles. Over the noises of the dusk, of bells and cars and shouts and speech in several languages, he heard the clash of gongs from a Chinese opera over the wireless, and from a shop nearby, on another wavelength, a plaintive Tamil song accompanied by a beat of drums.

The coffee did not stop the gnawing at his stomach or the general feeling of listlessness he had felt for so long now. He walked the narrow winding streets breathing in their fetid smells and climbed the dingy staircase leading to the back room he occupied. At the door he stopped, for it was ajar. His heart contracted for he had a premonition. He entered and closed the door behind him.

“Why don’t you go to Ellman? What have you come to me for?” he shouted.

Neela’s dark-haired figure moved a little as if adjusting its sitting position. Minutes passed. The ringing of an ice cream hawker’s bell came in from the street below.

“I suppose you’ve come to find out if they’ve gone.” He strode up to her, his breath coming in short gasps. He bent down and shook her violently by the shoulders. “Is that why you’ve come? Is it? And what do you care?”

Still she remained silent.

“Why did it have to be Ellman? Why? Anyone else I wouldn’t have cared. But him. Why? I could have told you about him. Full of the latest ideas from London, trying to make us gape at his accounts of the marvels of culture back ‘home’.” He strode to the window, half tripping over a frail chair in his path. “Do you know what? Half the things he talks about never

really interested him until he found, when he came here, that he could pose as an expert."

She still said nothing.

"Get out of here! Get out!"

He turned sharply and went to his camp bed with its disarranged sheets and yellowing pillow. His straight stiff figure looked as if it was carved out of wood as he stood thinking of his drunken Uncle Rasu and Vasantha and Aunt Nalini and their sweaty voyage towards an obscure distant village with no future. When he turned round, the figure near the rectangle of dark blue light was gone.

Stumping down the straight flight of concrete stairs he grabbed hold of her by the arm crying, "Neela!" He couldn't let her go like that. She struggled to get free but he held her. "No, no, don't go. I'm sorry. Have you got enough money? Come upstairs, I'll give you some."

She shook her head wildly, her long hair flying, moaning, "Let me go."

"No, Neela, come." He put his arm around her shoulders and half forced her back into the room.

At last she said in a dry voice,"They've gone, then."

"Yes. On the last day he wanted me to look for you again. He was drunk as usual."

"Poor Vasantha."

"Vasantha is lucky in many ways. She hardly knows what's happening."

She sat down wearily on the bed and thought, my God what is happening to us. Her shoulders began to shake in spasms. "I'm afraid, Santi. Please help me."

He told her again, but quietly this time, that Ellman was a phoney. "He has never understood what's going on here. Oh yes, he shows that he is very interested. I suppose he really believes it. But who does he know outside University students? You think he was ever really interested in you? He's simply trying to have a pleasant time pretending that this is a British university." He stopped. "Has he asked you to marry him? Neela, will you listen to me."

Reluctantly she raised her head.

"Has he asked you to marry him? Answer me."

I was a fool to come, she thought.

The partitions of the room began to vibrate. A convoy of trucks was moving in the street below.

He said again, “Does he want to marry you?” He kept his eyes on her unmoving figure, but not by the slightest movement did she betray herself. “There you are. I could have told you—”

But his voice was drowned in the roar of the passing trucks, and he went to the window, and leaning far out, shouted at the top of his voice, “Go and play your war games somewhere else you bastards, why don’t you get the hell out of here—why don’t you—” The noise like a giant electric drill shook their bones to the joints. It seemed as if even the street was rattling, as if the curious old shophouses that had stood from the time of the earliest British occupation were being jarred to their foundations. His voice was easily drowned.

Voices came from the adjoining rooms, doors were banged, there was much hawking and spitting, all of it sounding unnaturally loud in the silence that succeeded the passage of the trucks. Neela got up and made listlessly for the door.

“Wait.” But he had no money, and did not know what to say.

“It’s no use my staying. You only shout at me.”

“All right, all right. Just—just sit down. Here, have a cigarette.” He fumbled in his shirt pocket. “I haven’t got any. Have you?”

He lit the cigarette she handed him, and then hers, thinking how incongruous it was that she should smoke it so expertly. It didn’t go with her shabby saree, nor with their way of life. At least not the way they had lived it in India.

“Poor father,” he said. “I wonder what he had in mind when he brought us over to Singapore. And what did he get out of it? A Japanese bomb that blew off the side of his face. He thought he was doing us a favour; actually he came here simply to die. And now that he’s dead, the family’s gone back. There’s a kind of beautiful pointlessness about it. What a rotten deal for a man to have had. And what would he say if he saw us now.”

And she who was with child wondered too. She hoped he would not have been too harsh. Confused, perhaps, but not really angry. Like Santi.

They talked about their childhood days in the little village near Madurai. Their father as the village postmaster for the area was treated with a proper deference. His children were envied because they went to boarding school.

How their little house on the edge of the cocoa estate rang with their shouts and laughter when they came home for the holidays. They stole the cocoa fruit, they brought down the green mangoes with a catapult, they fished. But most of all they swam in the nearby mountain stream that descended a couple of hundred feet in four or five rapid stages. At the end of the third stage was a pool hollowed out of the rock, deep enough to dive into from the branches of the tree that overhung it. Neela had ecstatically quoted some lines from Wordsworth the first time they had come upon it, but everyone was far too busy splashing about to pay much attention. That was the time they first began to realise that something was wrong with Vasantha.

At first it seemed only ear-trouble. Neela had slapped Vasantha for talking back, and the following morning there was a discharge in Vasantha's right ear. She had to stay away from school a long time, and when at last she went back she seemed to have forgotten everything she had learnt. Their father tried hard to believe it was simply the result of missed lessons, but an unnamed fear clutched him. After all, Vasantha was a seven-months' child. The convent teachers rapped her knuckles and shook her by the shoulders in exasperation so that her head lolled violently, and Vasantha became more and more sullen, talking to no one because they never understood her, speaking for the most part aloud to herself. Sometimes she was troubled at the way her classmates laughed at her. A group of them would see her walking down the school corridor during the recess, and would go into a huddle throwing an occasional glance in her direction. Then there was a peal of laughter that made her stumble in embarrassment, and one called her saying, "Vasantha, how much is three times two?" and she went to them thinking they meant to be friendly and trying to think hard what the answer was. Then someone said, "I think it's eight. Yes, it's eight. That's right, isn't it, Santha?" and she looked hopelessly at the speaker and nodded her head, and there was another hoot of laughter that made her bite her underlip and thrust her chin out hard. She never cried, but she went and sat near Neela as she sat reading, saying grimly to herself, "I'm not stupid. You're the one that's stupid."

Neela looked up with irritation. "For goodness sake stop muttering to yourself. Go and find something to do."

"You said you were going to teach me the tables."

Her sister gritted her teeth. "Yes, but not now Santha. In the evening."

Vasantha did not see the impatience, or if she did, she did not mind, for Neela spent an hour of her own time each evening teaching her. “How much is three times two? You told me it was six, but you’re wrong. It’s eight.”

“Eight—why you stupid little—” There, the word was out again. Neela repentant, could not call it back again, taking Vasantha roughly by the hand, saying, “I’ll teach you in the evening, dear. Not now, I have some work to do.”

“When we go to Singapore I shall never see them again. That Kitty and Rani. And that Mother St. Agnes. They won’t come on the ship with us, will they Neela?”

“No, dear, they won’t. But we’re not going to Singapore for a long time yet. Not until Papa gets the money. Now be a good girl and let me finish this work.”

After Vasantha had been three years in Standard Two, the nuns asked her father to take her out of the convent. Vasantha found nothing strange in remaining at home while the others were away at school except that she missed the sound of human voices. Each morning her father mounted his bicycle and went off to his post office, leaving her largely to her own devices. Kandiah, their servant boy, free from supervision, sometimes made her help him with the household chores. One day, however, Vasantha broke three cups while washing the dishes, and Kandiah’s bullying was discovered.

He tried to brazen it out. “She’s a stupid girl. She knocked them off the shelf.”

Her father looked hard at Kandiah and seemed convinced. The servant boy watched in awe as his master walked wordlessly to the hibiscus which grew outside and came back with a stick from which he had plucked all the leaves. She was to be beaten, then. Well, what did it matter, she was only a —

The stick landed on Kandiah’s arm before he could defend himself, and several times on his back as he retreated. Then he was up against the wall, and like a creature at bay, he tried to dart past the old man, but was held.

“Show more respect, you piece of filth,” her father said.

The best event of the holidays was the imitation sports meet which Santi organised. Their track was a deserted stretch of the main road about two

miles from the village, where the padi fields began. Santi gave everyone a handicap and still could have won all the races, but he slowed down in the “quarter-mile” (which was no more than two hundred yards) and practically pushed Vasantha, who had the biggest handicap, past the finishing line. Neela usually won the girls’ high jump, and all agreed that throwing the stick (javelin) was Santi’s strong point. In the evening their father gave away the prizes. Vasantha got an old tennis ball, Santi an old clock he had set his heart upon (it did not work), Neela got the stub of a red pencil, and so on. How solemnly satisfying the ceremony was. It rounded off the holidays adding an extra poignancy to the impending return of the children to boarding school.

Neela got up listlessly. Most of the night noises had ceased. They had come to the point of the night when they could relinquish temporarily the search for their bearings, and obtain solace from the stability of a past world. Where had it gone, and why? Neela’s child shifted its position within her, casting about for a new orientation. In a corner of the room, among a confusion of clothes old and new, his face lined with dried sweat, Santinathan slept.

• • •

From the fatal hour in which they lost their revered father, it is not to be imagined what cares and troubles have been experienced by each individual of the children of Kei Damang; the consequence of having quitted their native land. The sons were separated and scattered over different countries, to which their fortunes happened to lead them. Some remained in the island of Percha (Sumatra), some went to the island of Balli, and some to those parts of Java that lie beyond the jurisdiction of the Dutch Company. These were their resting places. Like birds they directed their flight to wherever the trees of the forest presented them with edible fruit, and there they alighted.

6

SABRAN, IN A thick brown leather jacket, came the following Saturday and sat patiently while Santinathan combed his hair, peering into a tiny hand mirror which hung on a nail near the window. Far outside, the sun struck the dilapidated houses in the neighbourhood with its late evening heat; the room, in the shadow, remained dark and damp.

Screwing his face up at the mirror, Santinathan said, “I read in the papers you were out the next day.”

“Yeah. You might say, temporarily.”

“What do you mean?”

Sabran ignored the question. “What the hell have you gone and done to get expelled?”

Santinathan turned round and said, “Well you see, I have set my heart on an honorary B.A. If I get a B.A. the regular way I can’t get an honorary B.A. now, can I? Stands to reason. In twenty years’ time when I’m old and distinguished—”

“Stop fooling, Santi.”

“Okay. Let’s go and have a coffee.”

Sabran stood up and said, “Give me a cigarette.”

“I have some rokok daun. Look under that shirt on the table.”

Sabran smoked the tiny aromatic cigarette, watching him. “Sally wants to see you.”

“Sally?” He sat down on the camp bed to put his shoes on.

“She heard about you leaving the University. She wants to see you. Guan Kheng has a house in Pasir Panjang for tonight and tomorrow. Peter is also there. And Sally.”

“Do you know I didn’t pay her that night? We left in such a hurry.”

Sabran did not seem to hear. “The tide is high about now. You’ll have to hurry if you want a swim before it gets dark.”

They sat at a marble-topped table in the coffeeshop below, under pale blue neon lighting. “How come you have so much time? Don’t they need you any more for translation work?” Santinathan asked.

“It’s broken down.”

“Broken down? You mean the meeting to plan joint action against British Realty?”

“Well not really broken down. It’s suspended.”

“But for Christ’s sake, why?”

“I don’t know,” Sabran unzipped his jacket and fed himself teaspoons of coffee. “I really don’t know. I wasn’t there at the beginning, the police had me at the time. Something about representation in the negotiating team to meet Realty. Who should make up the team and why. Something like that. It seems there was a misunderstanding over the translation of the speeches. Because I had been there from the time when a merger of the unions was first discussed, it was thought I could help. I was released for fourteen days on the surety of the two presidents Thian and Rassidi. Those last five sessions were a waste of time, I knew it was useless the moment I came back. It had already gone wrong and there was nothing I could do. There was suspicion on both sides, you could see that, although they were doing their best not to show it. At last they thought it better to stop for a while. We’re going to meet again next month.”

“It’s not a complete breakdown, then.”

“I suppose not. But I tell you it’s no good stopping at a time like this. Anything can happen. Simply because nothing is happening. You know the confusion is there already. Now there’s a rumour spreading that British Realty does not want to see us united. That they have planted agents to cause trouble between the unions. So long as we remain disunited, they can remain on top. So they say. But that’s not all.”

“What are you going to do?”

“There’s nothing to do. On Tuesday I have to report back to the police. We are going to have a rally to demonstrate unity. I don’t know what’s going to come of that.”

Santinathan’s face was static as a mask. Sabran bought him a cigarette for five cents and watched the twin jets of smoke flowing from his nostrils.

“What will happen, Sabran?”

They looked at each other and knew they were thinking the same thing but would never express it. Ever since Santinathan had come to stay in his kampung near Endau, Sabran had come to a conviction that whatever Santinathan said or did could never separate them. They had found an indescribable way, not simply through language, of making their differing backgrounds respond to each other in mutual sympathy. It was like being attuned; words were no longer always necessary.

Sabran never forgot the strength of his early bitterness at realising how much there was to be done for his kampung. Everybody else seemed to be getting on fine, only they remained in a backwater. Decades of planting padi had given his father a hardy physique but, it seemed, little else. In his schooldays, Sabran would get up at four to go out to help his father in the rice fields, and then walk the three miles to the English school. By ten in the morning the hollowness in his stomach left him listless, his ears hummed, his eyes seemed to film over. Kindly Mr. Boey would sometimes give him ten cents which he promptly spent on mee siam and sherbath. When he won a scholarship to Raffles Institution, he went to live with his uncle who was a lorry driver in Singapore. It was exciting to go to school with classmates of different races and it was there he met Santinathan. When Santinathan came to stay in his kampung while they were awaiting admission to the University, Sabran told him of his work during the Japanese Occupation as a dockyard labourer by day and trishaw-rider by night. They were cycling with some half a dozen other kampung youths on a deserted moon-lit road across acres of padi to another village, some ten miles away, where a wedding was taking place. All wore sarongs, Santinathan borrowing his from Sabran. They had tried to teach Santinathan a song sung at harvest time, as they rode along. But not having a note in his head he produced sounds which sent his companions into fits of laughter. The singing that night as they cycled back at three in the morning, the shouts across the silent sawah that extended far on either side, the memory of these remained unaccountably vivid for Sabran in his university days. Somehow that innocent night was connected in Sabran’s mind with his realisation that his bitterness about the condition of the people in his kampung could only be part of a larger concern for all who lived in the country. And in some

peculiar way it was, all unknown to Santinathan, having him for a friend which crystallised it.

“What is going to happen, Sabran?” he said again.

“I don’t know.” He hung his arms straight and loose on either side of his chair. “Everyone is saying it’s because Tok Said has been predicting trouble, creating hysteria. You know for some time now whenever there has been a crisis, they’ve been saying it’s because of Tok Said.”

“I heard that maybe you’ve seen him. Have you?” Santinathan asked.

“Yah, I’ve seen him.”

“You never spoke about it.”

“I just didn’t know what to make of what I saw and what he said. I’m still trying to work it out.” Sabran replied.

“You mean you don’t know whether we are going to have trouble because he said we are going to have trouble? Or is it that we are going to have trouble because we don’t know how to live together—and that’s what he is predicting?”

Sabran stared at Santinathan for a while. “Yes. And more than that. Wait, I will tell you. At first I thought he was a communist or something. Some people are whispering he’s an agent planted by the communists to cause panic. Even the government is beginning to think that. Some even say maybe he doesn’t really exist, they have just made him up to help spread unrest. At this time—it was the last long vacation—Huang and I were working like mad translating documents, regulations, speeches, from Malay to Mandarin and back. We got to know each other quite well during that time. I think we could see how, quite often, many of the little misunderstandings between Thian and Rassidi and their committees arose out of mistaking little phrases in our translations. We ourselves got quite hot sometimes, working out meanings.

“One night after a really bad session of the joint committee I was ready to give up. I could see Huang was gloomy too. Everyone had tried his best and yet got nowhere. Maybe it was fate, we said to each other, or some hantu has got hold of us. And then Huang said, ‘Everyone is frightened, nervous. They are scared and they don’t know why. That’s why they were quarrelling about even little things today.’ I knew what was on his mind and I asked him point blank if he had ever seen Tok Said. He said nothing. He even seemed afraid.

“Everyone was talking about the scare which Tok Said is supposed to have caused but no one had seen him, no one knew who or what he was. The politicians were blaming him for everything, the government had put a ban on rumours, and more and more penitents were coming forward. Last vacation, when we had this crisis in the committee meetings and stopped for a break, I decided to look for him myself. First I went back to Endau. You remember last time you came to stay with me there was a lot of talk about him in the kampung. My uncle made inquiries for me and I got to see a bomoh about fifteen miles away. ‘Don’t look for him,’ he advised. I said why. ‘He’s gone mad. He used to help people before. He’s no more the same since that Chinese woman went to see him. She’s a bad woman. A prostitute. I think she seduced him.”

“Who was she?”

“I don’t know. I think he married her secretly. She’s in Singapore now.”

“I pressed him to tell me where he was, anyway. He grumbled a lot and said he needed time and the next day he said he thought he might be in Kampung Rompin.”

Santinathan flicked his cigarette butt and watched it sail in an arc before disappearing into the drain outside as he said, “Kampung Rompin. That’s where I saw him.”

“You saw him? You never told me.” He broke off. “The point is I found no one at Rompin. I found him in Ipoh. Maybe you saw another man.”

“Yah. Maybe,” Santinathan said nothing for a long time. He called for a fresh cup of coffee and drank it out of the saucer, spilling some onto his trousers because of his trembling hands. “You know how it is with country folk. They mix up all their stories into one.”

Sabran held Santinathan with his eyes. “But why were you looking for him?”

“In fact I don’t even know whether the man I saw was really Tok Said.” Santinathan tried to drink the remaining coffee from the cup, but his hand was shaking violently, and he put it down with a clatter. At last he said, “I was sitting near a woman selling kueh near the Rompin crossing. We talked a long time. I was hungry but I had no more money. She gave me a piece of dodol. When she was packing up to leave about nine in the evening she asked if I had a place to stay. When I said no, she said to follow her—”

Sabran waited. The trembling ceased but Santinathan did not continue. “Santi, why is everything so confusing? The bomoh in Endau said Tok Said might be in Rompin, so I went there first. But nobody had even heard of him. So I went to Pecan. Then to Tembeling. Then Gua Musang. Everywhere. Finally I came to Ipoh. And what do you think? There was a fire-walking ceremony at the Temple of the Third Prince. It was not a festival day and yet there was to be fire-walking. Fifty-five people were going to walk across burning coals in atonement for their sins. A famous medium had come and it was being done while he was there. The place was jam-packed when I went that night. You know the grounds outside the caves? You couldn’t move, there were so many people. As I pushed past, I tried asking who was the medium. Was it Tok Said? People looked at me as if I was stupid, and refused to answer. It seems this medium was very powerful. But he wouldn’t speak a word. People simply crowded up to him, paid obeisance, received a small packet or something to tie round their arm, and then had to move on.

“I was downcast. I would never get to see him this way. So I waited in the grounds for two days until everything was over and the crowds had gone at last. On the second night I went to the house in which he was staying—a few hundred yards from the grounds along a dark path. I lit some attap to light the way. I peered into his house which was in complete darkness, and was about to turn away when a voice said, ‘I know why you have come. I know you have waited two days. But I have seen the woman and now it is too late. Birth is bloody. Do not lose heart.’

“I asked him if he was predicting trouble. I said, ‘The people are afraid. Can you not give them peace?’

“ ‘The fear of God is good,’ he replied. ‘Let them atone and pray. They did not see me for what I am. Now I have grown old and still they do not know me.’

“ ‘That is why I have come,’ I said. ‘I want to know you.’ And I took a few steps forward towards the house but was stopped short by his scream, ‘You are not ready yet! I am a forerunner and now I am near dying.’ ”

Sabran looked out to the road as if intent on deciphering hidden meanings in the hoots of car horns. “And then—then—he went into a long scream, so long that with its echo it sounded as if not one, but thousands were in some mortal pain. For some reason I found myself crying. I

couldn’t stop it, my shoulders were shaking, I had no breath left, I found myself coughing and choking at the same time. Then in the scream I caught some words. I had to leave, I must leave, I wasn’t ready yet. You should have heard him. It was blood-curdling. I rushed back along the path, frightened to death. There was nobody about, and I sat on the roadside in the dark as cars flashed past from time to time. I did not move, I was trying to put together the few words I caught in the scream, to figure out what he meant. It was so puzzling. It’s still puzzling. I think he said before others like him come there will be pain.”

Santinathan flung his cigarette butt into the spittoon. “We’ve got enough holy men about.”

“That’s just it. I don’t think he’s a holy man.”

“Well, what is he then?”

“I don’t know,” Sabran said in a level voice with lips that smiled. “And this is what the police are trying to get out of me, but they’ll never believe it. If I tell them they’ll think I’m inventing stories.” He zipped up his jacket. “Let’s go.”

7

SANTINATHAN GRIPPED THE pillion seat tightly with his knees as Sabran swung his borrowed Norton Dominator in and out of the late evening traffic. They hurtled over Anderson Bridge and down Collyer Quay, past the glinting carbide lights of the hawkers' stalls at Clifford Pier, and on to Pasir Panjang Road. Neat suburban brick houses swished past them like whips. Overhead a mass of brown cloud obscured the last light of the sun. The air was dry and charged; it looked as if it wanted to rain but could not. Soon after Haw Par Villa Sabran swung into a lorong on the left, and they bumped over the rough surface till they reached the concrete embankment against which the sea lapped. Here they turned left again, riding easily on the sandy promenade lined with casuarina trees. At last they entered the grounds of a house with two stone eagles at each gate.

Leaving the engine running, Sabran put a foot down and looked around with a frown. "They must be swimming still." They rode out to the embankment in front of the house and peered out over the sea. "Do you see anybody?"

"No."

Re-entering the grounds, Sabran parked the Norton and unzipped his jacket. "I suppose they've gone for a walk. Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

They sat on wicker chairs in the open verandah wonderingly. Out at sea the kelongs ranged round them in a wide arc, their paraffin lights staring neutrally out of the deepening grey like some nearer stars, enclosing them. The slap-slap of water against the sea wall somehow merged with the silence that pressed more closely upon the house and its grounds. Santinathan had just begun a tuneless whistle when a voice behind them

said, “Sabran, Santi, come in quickly.” They got up and entered the central corridor of the house.

“I think you’d better bring your bike into the verandah,” Guan Kheng said. “No, don’t ask any questions now, just bring it in.” Sabran left them. “Come into this room, Santi.”

In the gloom Santinathan could make out a figure lying inert on the bed. Sally half-knelt by it, her arm resting protectively on the pillow. Striding forward, Santinathan said, “Peter, what’s happened?”

“He was beaten up.”

“Peter, are you all right?”

Peter turned and looked at him with wild eyes. His face was discoloured with bruises, part of his scalp was matted with dried blood, his underlip was swollen. Sally sponged his forehead with a wet handkerchief. “I’m getting out of this damn place,” he said, and turned his head away.

“Why haven’t you taken him to a doctor?”

“We can’t.”

“What do you mean can’t? You’ve got a car.”

“They’re still around, hiding in the lorong waiting for us.”

“Who are? Why, what’s he done?”

Guan Kheng looked at the night sky through the window and said, “I don’t know. I don’t understand anything. I don’t know why it happened.” Sabran came in and crouched beside Peter, looking at him silently. “We thought it better to wait till morning before trying to get out. You see there’s Sally as well.”

Guan Kheng sat on the floor and leaned against Peter’s bed. “I’m still trying to figure out what happened. We’ve never been here before. I don’t know anyone here. Sally doesn’t. Peter doesn’t. We’re complete strangers in the place. Why did they come for us?”

“They didn’t come for you,” Peter said bitterly. “They came for me. Me only. Don’t forget that.”

“You’re wrong. They came for all of us.”

“Oh what does it matter?” Sally burst out.

Guan Kheng resumed. “We must have got here about four. The sea was much higher then, and smooth and warm. We just kind of slipped in. Peter wanted to learn to ride Sabran’s motorcycle, so Sabran got out and coached him a few times. Sally was floating on a rubber mattress; I pulled her out to

someone’s boat lying a couple of hundred yards from the shore. From where we were, we could see Peter and Sabran, tiny figures, Peter wobbling on the motorcycle up and down the sandy stretch on the embankment. Then Sally thought of you, Santi. So when we came back Sabran said he’d go and see if he could bring you along, too. While he was away, Peter suggested some rojak, so we decided to take a walk down to the village. We felt so free, lounging along. I think Peter even said as much. Yet almost as soon as he said it I felt it was quite wrong.

“Then we turned into the lorong and we passed two men who looked at Sally, and a couple of women at the standpipe and some naked children chasing each other round it. Peter was telling Sally about Bahau where he and his family lived for most of the Japanese Occupation. It was dark in the lorong and we were glad to get out of it on to the main road. But then as we neared the village—you know the tall banyan trees on the left side of the road? You know how dark it is under it? Well there must have been about twenty figures standing there, watching us as we passed by. I’ve been in Chinatown and have had people stare at me as I walked past—that was nothing. I might get beaten up, but that would be because some petty mobster imagined I swaggered or something. Here, as these men looked at me—”

“—At me,” Peter burst in feverishly. “Not any of you. Me. Their look made me feel for the first time such a complete stranger—as if I was a creature made in the likeness of someone they did not know, whom they feared because he was so wholly foreign to them. I was an alien. Why? When we were eating that rojak—which by the way for the first time I didn’t enjoy—I saw the point suddenly. I don’t belong here. I don’t really know anybody here, and what’s more with the British getting out, I don’t want to. I’m getting out, too.”

“Don’t be a stupid bastard,” Santinathan said. “You belong here same as we do. Why, where would you go?”

“I mean you, too, Santi,” Peter said. “You’re a bloody foreigner. As for where I’m going, why to England, of course. They’re a bit more civilised there. I’ll get a job there, maybe as a teacher, marry and settle down and live to a ripe old age. You buggers can agitate and demonstrate and fight it out amongst yourselves.”

“Did you have an argument with somebody in the coffeeshop?” Sabran asked.

Peter turned his wild eyes to Sabran and looked at him for a long time. The room was quite dark now, but their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, and Sabran felt a tremor at the expression on Peter’s face which not even his bruises could disguise. “We simply ate our rojak, drank our coffee, paid the man and walked out. And then we saw them again, those same twenty figures, under the same tree, their gaze fixed on us—or on me, rather—as we approached. We were no sooner abreast of them than they charged. We were so surprised we turned round in astonishment. I think I had some desperate idea that if I said wait don’t you know me, they would stop. And then I thought I would stand and fight and I punched the nearest man. Sally and Guan Kheng were surrounded and I reached out for Sally and pulled her out. Guan Kheng had her by the other hand and suddenly they were free, and that was when I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that it was me they were after, and me alone. I shouted to Guan Kheng to run, and he pulled Sally after him and sprinted down the road towards the lorong. Then the men closed round and hit me.”

“I had to take Sally out of it,” Guan Kheng said. “They seemed to want to beat her up too. As soon as we got into the lorong—no more than ten yards away—where it was completely dark and we were stumbling over the stones, I told her to keep on running until she came to the house. She was rather upset and wouldn’t go so I told her to wait while I went back for Peter. I didn’t really know what I could do against so many. And I don’t really know what I did. Maybe the fact that I ran so fast back towards them startled them. Anyway for a moment they were confused, and I pushed through them, got hold of Peter and we started running back. They chased us but when we got into the lorong it was easy to dodge about until we reached the house.”

Sabran asked Guan Kheng who the men were.

“I told you we don’t know. We’ve never seen any of them before.”

“I mean who were they?”

Sally was crying, “I want to go from here.”

“It’s not safe to go out now. They may be still around.”

Santinathan said, “We saw no one when we came in.”

“It’s not safe to stay either,” Sally said hysterically. “They may try to enter the house and attack us. Please take me back.”

“But what the hell is this all about,” Santinathan said. “Who were these men? Were they gangsters or what? Guan Kheng, did you or Peter annoy anyone?”

“I tell you it was nothing like that.”

Sabran asked, “How bad is it, Peter?”

The night wore on; Peter stirred from time to time, mumbling. Sally fell asleep leaning against the bed.

In the morning, with the sunshine streaming into the house, they fled, Guan Kheng driving Peter and Sally in his car at great pace along the promenade and through the lorong on to the main road and towards the city. Sabran and Santinathan followed on the motorcycle, seeking but finding no sign of the attackers of the previous night. The roads were strangely deserted, and Sabran’s motorcycle hummed at sixty, glinting in the sunshine. Except for the houses and trees which whizzed past, and an occasional vehicle, Sabran felt they were motionless, floating on another dimension more simple and equable. They arrived in the city to find it in shambles.

Sabran weaved his motorcycle carefully between the splinters of glass which lay scattered along Collyer Quay. A crowd of people rushed past, hardly noticing them. There were shouts, sharp and expectant. He saw a bottle sail into the air and crash on the road ahead of the crowd. “Don’t go that way,” someone shouted at Sabran from the pavement. “There’s big trouble on High Street.” When they came to a car, its bonnet smashed in and its windscreen shattered, lying with its front wheels on the pavement near Anderson Bridge, Santinathan gripped Sabran’s shoulders and said, “Better stop here till we know what’s happening.”

“No, let’s go on.”

“You may lose your bike.”

They moved forward on first gear with the crowd which had thickened, and Santinathan asked a man striding alongside, “What’s happening?”

“Co-prosperity protest against the arrests. We are going to throw out all the Europeans.” He looked exultant as he waved a hand forward. “Come on, let’s go and hear the speeches.”

He shot ahead and was lost in the crowd.

“What about the Co-operative Union? I thought there was to be joint action.”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Sabran said over his shoulder. “If they’re not together on this—”

The road in front of the City Hall was packed with people. On the steps some figures stood facing the crowd which overflowed onto the padang. A rectangular area in front of them was cleared, and here three men, folded handkerchiefs tied round their foreheads, improvised a hopping dance to time from the crowd which clapped in unison. Sabran pushed his motorcycle into the grounds of the English club nearby. To the Sikh watchman who tried to stop him entering, he said shortly, “Besok boleh cakap.”

“What are you doing? Let’s get out of here,” Santinathan said.

“Santi, come with me, help me.”

“What can we do? There’s no stopping this mob.”

“We must try. Let’s speak to Huang. Huang can tell the leaders to call it off. It will get worse if we don’t try. And it won’t be Europeans only. Don’t you see? That’s why Peter was attacked. For today, he’s classed with the Europeans. And not only him—all the Eurasians, too. Some in my union don’t agree with the Co-prosperity leaders. They prefer to negotiate with Realty separately. If they get it into their heads to come out into the streets today—they may even have done so already—I don’t know what will happen.”

“That’s a mob out there. What good is it talking to them? You’ll never learn, Sabran, will you?”

They confronted each other, a momentary island in a seething crowd, trying to find the words which would keep their friendship intact. At last Sabran turned away saying curtly, “Peter was right. You’re a foreigner, too.”

Santinathan walked without any sense of direction, an emptiness in the pit of his stomach, his eyes glazed. He seemed unaware of the frenzy of the people around him, threading his way through the crowd which thinned out by the time he reached the junction of Beach Road and Bras Basah Road. A few yards from the junction, down Bras Basah Road, empty milk boxes and dustbins lay strewn in a kind of makeshift barricade. At either end of the barricade men stood, waiting for passing cars. “Here’s another white,” a man near Santinathan shouted, picking up one of a number of chairs taken

from the school nearby. He was barefoot, in crumpled trousers rolled up to three-quarter length, his shirt hung out unbuttoned. His hair was curled like Tony Curtis'. The car, a gleaming Vauxhall with a white driver, entered from Beach Road, its engine screaming on third gear, bearing down on the milk boxes. The man hurled his chair but missed; a brick from the other side hit the bodywork with a thud. The boxes scattered as the car shot through. "You pimp, you," the man with the Tony Curtis curls shouted at his companions across the road. "Why weren't you ready?" They rearranged the boxes and waited.

A boy on the other side said, "Look!" pointing to a group of people in an excited huddle. "They're striking someone."

The man with the Tony Curtis curls called out and someone from the group shouted back. "It's all right. It's only a Eurasian."

Someone came dashing up and pushed Santinathan off the can of kerosene on which he was sitting aloof from the proceedings. As he sprawled on the road, the sounds around him seemed to die out. He saw the can on which he had been sitting gripped between gleaming knuckles, fast receding. "Stand clear," a voice shouted, and the crowd round the prostrate Eurasian formed a large circle of silent watchers. Kerosene splashed, and the Eurasian struggled dazedly to one elbow as the men who kept his head and groin pinned down leaped clear. With a loud "whop" a large yellow flame gathered him in its embrace, shrouding him from the viewers. A pall of smoke rose overhead. Someone shouted, "They're burning him!" Santinathan heard feet pattering in many directions, saw the flame motionless now, raging steadily.

"Serve him right," Tony Curtis said. "He wanted to be a European."

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In the Singapore River estuary there were many large rocks, with little rivulets running between the fissures, moving like a snake that has been struck. Among these many rocks there was a sharp-pointed one shaped like the snout of a swordfish. The Sea Gypsies used to call it the Swordfish's Head and believed it to be the abode of spirits. To this rock they all made propitiatory offerings in their fear of it, placing bunting on it and treating it

with reverence. “If we do not pay our respects to it,” they said, “when we go in and out of the shallows it will send us to destruction.” Everyday they brought offerings and placed them on the rock. All along the shore there were hundreds of human skulls rolling about on the sand.

8

GUAN KHENG HAD his own suspicions about the cause of the attack on Peter the night before, but kept them to himself. He was not surprised when he reached Tanjong Pagar to find the shophouses shuttered and the streets littered with the debris of broken bottles and smashed fruit. Sally leaned forward. “What is happening? What shall we do?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you home safely.”

He turned into Cantonment Road driving under the shady trees, feeling strangely remote from the strife that was opening like a great wound in the city. Had it been foolish after all to have believed that we could make a go of it as one country, he wondered. In the University the ideal seemed alluringly close. He and Sabran and Santinathan and Peter seemed in microcosm a presage of a new society, a world of new people who would utterly confound the old European racialist ways of thinking. How did these hopes stand now? There had been an unconscious arrogance, he now realised, in their seeing themselves in the centre of great events. They had been enticed into an ambience which, after all, was local to another place, but only marginal here. Perhaps that was why it was so hard to discover what contribution one could make.

But where was the heart of things? Was it in the mindless violence which now plagued the streets? Surely not. But that it was in a violence of some kind, he was convinced. A soundless fury which confused birth and dying, and left growth to find a new relation to each. That was what they had to understand. That was the true blight of the colonial era. Its invisible presence created goblins which everywhere interfered with the discovery of originality.

Maybe that was the reason for the irrational scares on the island, the penitential throngs, and the confusion everywhere. Even the research team

set up three years ago by the Anthropology Society had been fooled. Their report, offered to the Government, was declined. The team had gone up to find out who Tok Said was, establish his identity, and clarify exactly what, if anything, he was predicting, and on what basis. Guan Kheng felt his skin prickle as he recalled the dry words of the mimeographed report of which he had been given a glimpse by a member of the team.

"We visited the three main places in which the man was reported to have been," it said. "Endau, Kampung Rompin and Ipoh, from where he is reputed to have made his predictions about future trouble. We found no hard evidence that he even exists. Indeed in each of these places we found only local bomohs or mediums, respected within their districts but not known at all beyond those bounds. We are convinced, as a result of exhaustive inquiries, that any person of alleged supranormal powers by the name of Tok Said does not exist.

"However, in the process of arriving at this conclusion, we discovered an interesting figure in Malacca who has been making certain predictions which may be of use to record. Our last stop was therefore Malacca where we sought a meeting with this figure, Señor Francisco Xavier Entalban, an aged Portuguese Eurasian. Eventually, Señor Entalban consented to speak to only one member of the team, with Brother Joseph Noronha as interpreter for the patois he spoke. We unanimously agreed that Mr. Lin Tze Tseng should represent us. Unfortunately Mr. Lin took ill immediately after the interview and we have no first-hand report. We gathered from Brother Noronha the gist of Señor Entalban's views. 'Our time will come,' he said. 'You are afraid to see this. The Europeans are afraid to see it too. They are leaving us because they have realised what they were in for. And we ourselves are panic-stricken because we see our fate, but refuse to admit it.' "

Guan Kheng never told anyone of his own secret visit to Malacca after he saw the report. It was an anti-climax. He found only listless Portuguese Eurasian boys charging ten cents a time to see a toothless hulk, purported to be Entalban, who could have been Malay or Chinese or Indian or Eurasian, staring vacantly across the waters of the Malacca Straits from his hut in the Portuguese Settlement. Guan Kheng heard later that Lin had been sent for observation in Woodbridge.

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And when the season of the year for the return voyage to Malaka was come, the Raja of China bade Ling Ho make ready ships to convey Ling, his daughter, to Malaka. Ling Ho did so, and when the ships were nearly ready, the Raja of China chose out five hundred youths of noble birth with a high officer in command, to escort his daughter Princess Hang Liu; and several hundred beautiful women-attendants accompanied her. And when the ships were ready, Tun Perpateh Puteh sought the Raja's leave to return to Malaka and the Raja's letter was borne in procession to the ship. Tun Perpateh then set sail for Malaka, which he reached after a voyage of some length. Word was brought to Sultan Mansur Shah that Tun Perpateh Puteh had arrived, bringing with him a daughter of the Raja of China, Sultan Mansur Shah was well pleased and gave orders to his chiefs and war-chiefs to welcome her. And when they had met the party, they brought the Princess into the palace with every mark of honour and distinction. And when she appeared, Sultan Mansur Shah was astonished by the beauty of Princess Hang Liu, daughter of the Raja of China, and he gave orders that she embrace the faith of Islam. When this had been done, Sultan Mansur Shah married the princess, daughter of the Raja of China and by her he had a son to whom he gave the name of Paduka Mimat. This Paduka Mimat had a son named Paduka Sri China, who in his turn had a son named Paduka Ahmat, father of Paduka Isap. And the five hundred sons of Chinese ministers were bidden to take up their abode at Bukit China: and the place goes by that name to this day. It was they who made the well at Bukit China, and it is their descendants who are called "the Chinese yeomen".

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In the face of this unprecedented confusion, who could blame him, Guan Kheng thought, for seeking to be firm, to reassert, in fact, rational pride of race. Guan Kheng thought incredulously of the time not long past when he found himself infected by a simpler idealism. He saw now that the aimless existence of their last year at University was a tacit acknowledgement that they were living in a kind of capsule. They had not known the patient,

unremitting power of the flood around them. Sabran, alone, it seemed, had had some inkling. Now the capsule was dissolving, Guan Kheng was glad that except for a very brief period he had never really given in. A still inward hesitation had persisted through all their good times together and now justified itself. Any poise he retained was due largely, he knew, to his Chinese education.

He did not feel smug in this realisation. It was rather more like relief that he partially knew where he was and what he stood for in the face of the peculiar mixture of dissolution and growth taking place. He was Chinese. How could he contradict that? This did not mean that he was against people of other races. It simply meant that he was a person of a certain racial origin. It meant he had been brought up in a certain way of life, with habits, attitudes and beliefs which though largely undefinable, had shaped his personality. A way of life did not exist only in the present. It issued from an admixture of past customs and ideals, which only one without a sense of history would fail to recognise. Of course, no way of life remained static. The ways of the Chinese overseas would no doubt change, according to the country they were in, were in fact changing. But some people seemed to expect them to jettison everything, and that, too, in a flash of time. For the moment, Guan Kheng felt, he had jettisoned enough, and he must look to conserving, however inadequately in his own life, the stabilising sense of his own past.

He looked sideways at the drawn face of his companion. She was afraid; her usually smooth complexioned face was now sallow. A tiny muscle at the corner of her eyes twitched now and then. She had somehow lost her Chinese-ness. He caught himself wondering when he lay with her many times whether she was in fact Chinese. They spoke Cantonese in public, Malay in bed. Her Malay was better than her Cantonese. Its fluency frightened him. He knew no other Chinese who spoke it so well. It made him feel left on a shoal amidst a swift flowing river. She had lived in Tumpat until she was sixteen. He knew there was a husband somewhere, but she rarely mentioned him. He could not understand the attraction she had for him. After he had met her, he saw the other girls less and less. She was good to make love to in a way they never were. He always came away from her with a kind of content he did not wish to think about for fear of losing it. She even took him without money. She pressed her softness to

him, her mobile hips filled him with passion. There were few who gave love as she did. He had been startled by the thought that he would like to marry her. Of course that was not possible. But he could not face the prospect of marriage to anyone else without love like that.

Would Patricia who was so chic and outwardly so sophisticated love him like that if they married? They would make a harmonious pair before their friends. That was so very important. It would be a match that his father would approve. Her father would undoubtedly make her some form of large gift, perhaps a house, perhaps some money as well. There would be the added advantage that he, Guan Kheng, would then be able to meet members of a fairly influential group of merchants in the city. It would not be true to say that he was marrying her for her money, but he did not doubt, on a practical and realistic level, that money in some form or other would indeed be forthcoming if they did marry. He thought with a kind of contempt of her religious zeal. He had no objection to her religion itself. He too subscribed vaguely to a belief in some kind of deity, and thought Christianity in itself a fairly harmless addition to the numerous systems of religious belief. Guan Kheng thought now, if they married, he would have to try to melt the unadventurousness that lay deep in her nature. Anyway, if he failed, there was always Sally. Maybe he could find her a flat and see her now and then.

At the Outram Road junction the traffic lights had gone out of order, and a single policeman was doing his best to order the traffic converging on him from four sides. Two cars drove past him contrary to his directions, and he paused from his duties to stop them and remonstrate with the drivers. The horns of other cars meanwhile began to sound simultaneously. “I think I’ll try to go through Tiong Bahru.”

Guan Kheng drove insolently past the gesticulating policeman, missing by inches a van that cut across his path. Halfway up Clemenceau Avenue a group of people standing on the island at Orchard Road Circus looked expectantly at his car as it approached. He swung away from them, taking the road up Fort Canning Hill.

“Guan Kheng.”

It was Peter. He had forgotten he had Peter in the back seat. He could not account for the slight irritation he felt at realising that it was Peter who had to be got home safely. Peter had only himself to blame for believing his salvation lay with the Europeans. Who could he stand with now that they

would soon be going? Guan Kheng suddenly felt ashamed when he caught himself wishing to be rid of Peter.

Peter was saying, “I think you’d better drop me here. You’ll be able to get home more safely that way.” He spoke as though to a complete stranger. The years they had spent as contemporaries in school and University appeared suddenly to be too paltry an excuse for their continuing friendship. Those years belonged to people they did not know, who would never comprehend the suddenness with which they now found themselves apart.

Although Guan Kheng slowed the car down as Peter spoke, he found himself saying, “How will you get home? Where will you go? Do you know anyone who will put you up?”

Peter said with unseeing eyes, “I’ll be all right. It’s not far. We moved to my grandmother’s house in Waterloo Street after she died last year. I think it may be better for me to walk there. Besides I think I’ve brought you enough trouble already.” He forced a smile as he got off.

“Do you think he’ll be safe,” Sally said.

The change of gears punctuating his words, Guan Kheng said, “He should be all right.” Most of the shophouses on Queen Street were also shuttered. An urchin ran towards them shouting, “Don’t go that way, they’re killing somebody.” At Jalan Besar a car had begun to burn. Two men flung some paraffin on it and stood back as the flames spread swiftly wide and up. The moment he turned into Rochore Road, Guan Kheng knew he had done the wrong thing.

“No, no. Turn back,” Sally cried out. But the street was too congested for them to do anything but move forward at walking pace. A man in front turned round and rapped hard with a bicycle chain on the bonnet of his car. “Do you want to run me down? Take your car somewhere else, you pig.” Others kicked the car on the sides; a stone thudded on the boot and rolled into the rear seat.

“We can’t go on. What shall we do?”

Guan Kheng tried to edge the car to the side of the road. He turned to Sally and said, “Get out and stay under that five-foot way. I’ll try to park the car somewhere safe and come and join you.”

“No I don’t want to go alone.”

“It’s only for a few minutes. You’ll be all right.”

“No, don’t leave me.”

“You’ll be all right, don’t worry. I only want to turn the car into that lane —” They did not hear the sound of the windshield splintering, they merely saw jagged lines irradiate the glass with a brilliant suddenness. Blood trickled from a cut in Sally’s cheek. Guan Kheng pulled her out and pushed his way through to the five-foot way. Bottles, stones and rubbish began to rain on the car. Someone shouted, “Get it out of the way,” and it began to tilt amidst the hoarse sounds of confused voices.

They ran with the crowd, stumbling over the debris, Guan Kheng with the sick consciousness that he, too, like Peter, was in reality a stranger who had never understood the people among whom he had been born, or the land in which he had spent the whole of his life. But who understands himself or his true place in this country? Guan Kheng thought. Did these people, who jostled on all sides, their faces set in lines of vacant hate, understand themselves? The truth is that no one does. We are all strangers to one another.

A hand clutched at the collar of his shirt and pulled. He elbowed the man aside, pulling Sally into a faster run, knowing now that they were running not with the crowd but from it. On Victoria Street they succeeded in mingling with a fresh group of people. Guan Kheng pulled Sally into a lane on the left, and they ran down it for some yards, swerving without any conscious decision into a narrow half-cemented alley constituted by the space between the back walls of two rows of grit-stained shophouses. Pieces of broken beer bottles embedded in the plaster gave the top of each wall a serrated edge which glinted bawdily in the noonday sun.

“It’s a blind alley. We can’t go on.” Guan Kheng banged on the wooden back door of one of the houses. “It’s no use.”

Sally, drawing her breath in short gasps, her eyes wide and unseeing, turned round to walk back the way they came.

Guan Kheng gripped her by the arm. “Not that way again. Don’t you see? They’re after us, too.” She sat on the steps of the back entrance of one of the houses, and, slumped against the door like one not in full possession of her faculties.

Guan Kheng looked impatiently at her and then took a few steps towards the blind end of the alley. The sun’s rays caught his white shirt with a brilliance which dazzled Sally’s eyes.

She awoke to a feeling of cramp in one leg and sat petrified as the muscle bunched viciously when she tried to move. Guan Kheng had disappeared. Over the grinning tops of the walls, came the sounds of voices, exuberant as in distant revelry. She stretched her legs slowly out, stopping halfway in terror when she caught sight of a dark figure standing at the blind end of the alley watching her, teeth flashing white in a sardonic smile. She raised herself, sliding up against the doorpost, eyes wide open in fascination. The figure took a step forward, and then withdrew, swaying in a gale of silent laughter at the involuntary spasm which shook her. The teeth flashed and vanished in arcs across the sudden gloom of the afternoon. He means to harm me, she thought wildly. The teeth had stopped moving, and she peered hard as if to fathom their intent. The gloom had consumed the figure's concreteness, leaving only an indistinct outline. She ran unseeing, the figure padding behind her. She banged on several closed doors. No one answered, but she was conscious of unseen eyes peering at her through cracks. She whimpered as the figure lunged at her, and wondered what appeal she could make to him in extremity. But though her lips moved rapidly, no sound issued, for she saw there were now four figures, laughing hugely. It was at that moment that the fear inexplicably left her, and she found herself asking what it was that she fled from.

The sun had gone down and brown clouds, massed overhead, gave the atmosphere a sickly hue, depriving objects of their colour. It seemed that the thick, pallid air had absorbed all the concrete objects around her, and was now pressing upon her like some protoplasmic mass. She sensed the pressure as clammy layers of velvet upon her skin. The layers seemed to move with a kind of obscene rhythm, sliding up and down on the sweat of her bare arms, of her tanned neck, caressing her thighs as if they were bare of her tight jeans. The teeth moved at and from her with fierce speed, and gusts of hot wind blew wet on her smarting cheeks. She felt again the unease of first penetration, a small wonder that the point at which she had arrived was that for which she had for so long schooled herself.

That she asked the question at all surprised her. What was she fleeing? The question seemed more important than any answer that could be given to it. It seemed to take the ground away from under her feet, spinning her slowly in a simulation of weightlessness. She had been fleeing from something or someone, and now she realised for the first time she had

moved not an inch. That alone was incredible, as she told Sabran later, crying dry eyed. “Was all my life come to nothing after all? What would I have said to my old father in Tumpat? How could I have told him so that he would understand? He did not want me to leave Tumpat in the first place. Yet he knew I had to go, and he let me go at last. He didn’t want to know about my life since I left, because it meant that he got the money I sent him every month. Even I don’t know. To know what I have been running away from I have to begin all over again. Tok Said had told me I would be forced to love all who came to me, but was this what he meant. Why must I only give, why should not they love me in return. Why do they take, hurting. Why can’t they take with love. Why do they find that so difficult. I have taken whoever came to me, so often without money. I have given love so freely. I thought I had the patience to wait even until I die to find someone who would love me. Now I feel foolish even to expect that. Is this to be my whole life? Is this what Tok Said meant I must accept? That stupid old man, why did I ever seek him, I can’t get him out of my mind. I don’t know what my life means any more. I only know I have offered myself to those who won’t give love. There are too many who won’t. It might have been different if I had remained in Tumpat. Yet what could I have done after I ran away from my husband? All I could think of now was I didn’t want to begin again. It’s so hard, hard. Guan Kheng loves me, I know. But he doesn’t want to marry me. He’s so practical about everything, he’s so right. If only we can be together without people interfering, I know it would be all right. By this time I was not running any more, or even walking. I simply lay still —in my mind, you understand, in my mind!”

9

WHEN THE RIOTS began Ellman remained in his flat eating out of tins. The columns of smoke smudging the sky beyond the trees seemed like a shroud round the heart of the city, and he turned away from the balcony, eyes smarting, defeated. To the spacious rooms supplied by the University he had added a thick pile carpet, a large Chinese lantern, a misty scroll landscape, and a hi-fi set. His maid swept and cleaned for him, washed and ironed his clothes, and waited on him at table over meals which approximated, except for a slight tinge of garlic and a hint of suspicious sauces, to English cooking. He enjoyed the Chinese food which was served up now and then, and occasionally, a curry. With numerous bars in the city in which to quench his thirst and forget his loneliness, he drank more than was good for him and was rapidly falling into the mould, he told himself sardonically, of the old time whiskey-drinking colonial. It was not true, of course. Ellman belonged to a younger generation of Englishmen who came to Malaya and Singapore rather more as individuals than as cadets of empire. But tradition and upbringing were not easy to escape wholly. He was at first fascinated by, and later appalled at the contrast between the orderly society he had left in England and the squalor and total absence of coherence in the country he had come to.

"It's not a single society, really," Ethel Turner, who had come round to look the newcomer over, said cheerfully. "Thank God the British are here. The Malays are in their kampungs, the Chinese own all the business, and the Indians are in the rubber estates. And the Eurasians—not half-castes, Roger, or mulattoes, unless you want to lose friends and influence people—the Eurasians sit in their cricket club and imitate us, rather poorly, actually. You see, they have nothing in common. If we left tomorrow, there'd be such a lovely bit of mayhem that we'd have to come back to keep the peace. No,

I’m afraid we have to grin and bear it—the white man’s burden, I mean,” she added lightly.

“They seem to live on friendly terms with each other,” Ellman said cautiously.

“Only on the surface. Have you heard Chinese talking when no Malays are present? Or loud-mouthed Indians when no Chinese are there? You will. My students talk, on occasion. Makes your blood run cold to hear them. What are you doing this evening? Come round to my place and have a meal. You’re lucky to inherit Ah Hong from poor Maitland who I’m afraid went to pieces and had to be sent back. Ah Hong’s a gem, but even she can’t produce a meal without pots and pans. Shall we say seven?”

After she had gone Ellman cursed himself for accepting the invitation. She might be good for a lay, of course, she wasn’t at all bad-looking, but he wanted his options open. Also he did not want to be drawn too early into an ambit which might mark him off as belonging to one particular camp or another. He really did want to make up his own mind about the novel society he found himself in. As the months passed he heard Ethel Turner’s sentiments expressed over and over again with variations, and realised at last, with some wonder, that he too secretly subscribed to them—with some qualifications, of course. At the end of his second year he gave up trying to understand the country, and settled for looking at his surroundings as a satisfying alternative to the queues and the rationing he had left behind. He was pleased with the letters he wrote to friends at home who, he knew, would envy him his life in the tropics. He thought he did his ironic descriptions of the people he met rather well.

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After a while there came a ship of the Franks from Goa trading to Malaka: and the Franks perceived how prosperous and well-populated the port was. The people of Malaka for their part came crowding to see what the Franks looked like; and they were all astonished and said, “These are white Bengalis!” Around each Frank there would be a crowd of Malays, some of them twisting his beard, some of them fingering his head, some taking off his hat, some grasping his hand. And the commander of the ship

landed and presented himself before Bendahara Sri Maharaja, who adopted him as his son and gave him robes of honour, as befitted his rank, while the commander for his part presented Bendahara Sri Maharaja with a gold chain.

And when the season came round for the return journey the commander went back to Goa, where he described to the Viceroy the greatness of the city of Malaka, the prosperity of the port and the number of the inhabitants. The Viceroy at that time was one Alfonso d'Albuquerque. When he realised the greatness of Malaka, the Viceroy was seized with desire to possess it, and he ordered a fleet to be made ready consisting of seven carracks, ten long galleys and thirteen foists. When the fleet was ready, he ordered it to attack Malaka. On arrival at Malaka the ships forthwith opened fire with their cannon. And the people of Malaka were bewildered and filled with fear at the sound of the cannon, and they said, "What sound is this like thunder?" And when presently the cannon balls began to arrive and struck the people of Malaka, so that some had their heads shot away, some their arms and some their legs, the people of Malaka were more and more astonished to see what manner of thing this artillery was, and they said, "What may be this round weapon that yet is sharp enough to kill us?"

• • •

His students delighted him. They crowded round him because he was one of the few Englishmen to make himself accessible in an unstuffy way. They spoke better English than he had expected. They told him with charming rudeness what was wrong with the British administration; he made a half-hearted attempt to resist being lumped together with it, but realised it was no use and entered into some wordy arguments with Guan Kheng, Sabran and Santinathan about the roads and the railways the British had built, and the international language Malaya was extremely lucky to have. Sabran looked at him steadily, drinking coffee with a teaspoon, saying between sips, "Do you know what the population of Malaya is?"

"I don't know."

"Only a small fraction of them speak English. And from that how many of us come to university?"

“You talk about how much good you’ve done for us,” Guan Kheng came in. “Do you know how much money you’re sending—‘home,’ as you call it?”

“Not half as much as the Chinese,” Ellman said flippantly. He got bored very quickly with political discussions. These were personable, intelligent young men who would have done well in any university at home, he was sure of that. But they seemed to have some kind of chip on the shoulder which they could not get rid of, and a fatal knack of paying more attention to politics than their studies. He supposed they would all get lower two degrees or worse. It was only many months later that he realised that he wasn’t seeing as much of them as of the girls. Sabran he didn’t really meet again after the session over beer in a bar in Beach Road. Sabran had become an official of a trade union, he was not surprised to hear. Guan Kheng came a few times more, sitting expressionless, saying little. The girls eagerly questioned Ellman about T. S. Eliot and Sartre (he had not read any Sartre till he came to Malaya and delighted them by dismissing him airily as obscurantist) and giggled at his first tentative off-colour jokes. He was amazed and then flattered at the rapidity with which they broke their reserve. As a group they were saucy, screeching sometimes like little children. He found it pleasant to be with them after the paid responses of the women in Lian Aik Street. They beguiled him with their chatter, and with the quaint Malayanisms which frequently slipped into their speech when their reserve was gone. Patricia Chen’s regal bearing and striking intelligence attracted him first. He still could not help chuckling at the transparent honesty—which only he, it seemed, had been unable to see—with which she brought him to a religious meeting. Him. To a religious meeting. She was going to spend a day by the sea in a house in Bedok, she said charmingly, and would he care to come? After that he could not speak two straight sentences to her without breaking into a smile at the way he had been had by this perfectly ingenuous creature. Still, it was on that day in Bedok that he met Neela, Santinathan’s sister. Halfway through the meeting inside the house, she came out and walked with him across the scorching beach till they were ankle-deep in the water.

“How’s it you’re not in the University?” he asked, plunging into the water which quivered in a grid of sunlight. He turned round, floating on his back, looking at her.

“Look out, there’s a jellyfish,” she cried out, in mock horror, and he flailed about involuntarily while she shook with laughter. Her eyes danced, and her hair which was gathered together at the back in a bun came loose and strands of hair came over her forehead. She pushed them back but they returned as she continued laughing. There was an abandon in her manner which he found a provocative contrast to the staid-looking saree wound round her, now clinging wet to her legs.

“Come in! It’s fine!” he said, wondering at the same time what she would do with all those clothes if she did. She seemed to catch herself in the nick of time, and then turned round and ran with a wet flap of her saree into the shade of the casuarinas trees lining the beach, leaning against the trunk of one, watching him with her dancing eyes.

“We’re going back to India,” she said, answering his question at last, when he came up out of the water and lounged down beside her on the sand. “I mean our whole family.”

“When?”

“At the end of this year.”

“Is that why you’re not in the University? But what about your brother?”

“That’s different. He’s a man.”

He could not follow. They looked at the glare over the sea, crinkling their eyes. The tide, waveless and glistening, heaved like melting jelly. “So you’re going to get married and raise children,” he teased, but she had turned to look at a grizzled fisherman walking along the beach towards them, stopping frequently to pinch something out of the sand and put it in the basket slung over his shoulder. “Why are you going?”

“My uncle feels we don’t belong here. He’s lived and worked here for more than twenty-five years, and now he feels it’s time to go back. Ever since the Japanese Occupation he has been planning to take us back. Now he has the money, we’re going.”

“I suppose he wants to marry you off.” This was something he could not grasp. He knew a couple of girls who seemed to have quite a modern outlook, and then they meekly went and married someone chosen for them by their parents.

“I don’t want to go back,” she said, as she got up and walked back into the house.

She came to the student evenings in his flat after that, sitting in an armchair just out of the circle of lights, listening to voices analysing the symbolism of the horses which threaten Ursula Brangwen in *The Rainbow*, and to her brother trying to persuade Patricia to play strip poker. Trying to catch a glimpse of her behind the bobbing heads, Ellman discovered with some surprise that he was no longer interested in the point he was making to his neighbour about a current proposal to produce *Macbeth* in Malay costume. Looking back on this evening many months afterwards, he saw it as the end of something, but he could not say what. A mild alarm, certainly, at the imminent loss of detachment in regard to the place. He had enjoyed being here, he thought, because if he stopped enjoying himself, he could always go. He knew now that he had fallen into the old trap of believing that he would be able to discern that arcane moment when it arrived. In truth he enjoyed being in the country even when he ceased to be interested in those around him. True, he was interested in Neela, but he was interested in her alone, the others had simply become again part of the setting. He was crestfallen when he realised that the sense of being different, of being white, which had patiently dogged him during his stay had finally caught up with him. He was nagged with puzzling whether his involvement with Neela may have been partly due to an effort to counter this, or the cause of it.

From his slumped position in his armchair he opened his eyes and saw Ethel Turner on the settee reading a copy of the *Spectator*. Her maroon shirt blouse sagged over her chest in a way that suggested she was not using her usual artificial supports. Her glasses glinted from time to time under the standing lamp as she read. Outside over the balcony, the sky had darkened, as if someone had suddenly painted it over with a dark blue ink wash.

“How long have you been here?” he said straightening up. He reached for the half-empty glass of beer at his elbow, but it felt warm, and there was a fly in it.

“I don’t know. Three-quarters of an hour, perhaps. Ah Hong let me in.” The tautness of her features had vanished temporarily; she looked almost homely. “You’ve been sleeping since two.”

“There’s absolutely nothing to do—with all this fun and games going on in town,” he said as she handed him a drink.

“It’s spread to villages too. Latest count is fifteen killed, over three hundred injured. I don’t think they know why they are demonstrating any

more—or against whom. The two unions are fighting each other, and both are fighting the police."

"Are they going to bring in the troops?" As soon as the question was out, he realised he had declared his stand. He was in Ethel Turner's camp. He had tried to persuade himself that he was different from her, and that he had more in common with the country of which his students were not so much a part as, so comically, unfitted jigsaw pieces. If they did not quite fall into place—and with the violence with which he felt the air was laden, he did not see how they could—if they did not quite fall into place, if they did not quite fall into place…Ethel, who had been sitting on the arm of his chair, was rubbing his cheek with the back of her palm. He looked up at her and put his arm round her waist. She felt loose, ungirt, and in fact as she slid into his lap, he found that she wore nothing beneath her blouse and skirt. He felt vaguely irritated that his life in the country was distinctly in jeopardy. These people didn't seem to be able to manage their own affairs. He kissed her hard and she responded more with firmness than passion, asking inanely, as she always did, "Do you love me?" Do you love me. Unreasonable to think that a philosophy lecturer could not be silly. In the bedroom she came at him with a vigour which excited him. Something in his surroundings had attracted him, almost persuaded him that he could not return any more to England. Hidden in the discordance, shrouded by layers of voices, flesh, and trees, was a vapour which had drawn him on, now vanishing in the fires of the city. Or had it been a mirage of the senses which now burned, burned, and left him brittle so that he could no longer touch but must hurt in order to know where he was and who he spoke to? He had thought there were only two races in the world, white and black. The white must understand the black, and then there would be peace in the world. Fear, like a tiny nerve, pinched a muscle below his ribs, and he pressed Ethel, terrified at the effrontery of his thinking, muttering with her, "I love you, I love you." The Malays he did not understand or hardly ever met. For the Indians he felt a mild contempt because they cringed, or else, if they were educated, talked too much. Although he knew many more Chinese than others he found in their manners a hint of adamantine crudeness that went deep. How then were all these people to live together, because he feared, because…Because. Because.

The ceiling fan clanked doggedly at full speed but did not cool them. He slid off her, sweating profusely, and wiped himself and her with the sheet. She lay silent, her head turned away from him. Something in her posture prompted him to say, “I’m sorry.” As if she had not heard him she said through lips that scarcely moved, “Get me a cigarette, will you,” and she took long pulls at it, still resolutely turned away from him. They lay apart, not touching, and the old cramp returned rapidly to his muscles. He said again, “Look Ethel, I’m sorry, I—”

“What’s the matter with you? What’s got into you?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s that Indian bitch, isn’t it?”

“Don’t call her that.”

“Come off it, Roger, don’t play the protective white man with me. I’ve been here twelve years in training colleges and in the University, and I’ve seen all the kinds of acts you men put on when you’re out East.”

“I’m only trying to say she’s not at all what you think.”

“Well, let me tell you something. If you don’t look out, this Eastern flower of yours will peel off her saree in record time if she gets half a minute with you alone—”

“She already has.”

“—and the next thing you know, you’ll have to marry her, or leave in a —” She stubbed her cigarette many times into the ashtray lying between them on the bed, when his words registered. He watched her angular shoulders as she put on her blouse, and her bare buttocks when she picked up her skirt, abandoned on the floor near the door, and pulled it on.

“Ethel, for Christ’s sake, don’t go.” He said it so quietly that she turned round and gave him a swift look.

“You can have your bloody women, but you don’t have to boast about them to me.”

“Don’t go. Please.”

“Are you trying to make excuses for just now? ‘I’m sorry I gave you a bad time, but you see I’ve had this long line of native women I’ve been stud to, but I promise you, as soon as I—’” She stopped suddenly as a cicak’s sounds like a swift series of light hammer taps echoed round the faded yellow distempered walls. She came and sat on his side of the bed. She lit a cigarette and put it in his mouth, and then lit one for herself.

“She’s pregnant and I don’t know what to do.” After the first puff the cigarette hung loosely between his fingers, its upward trail of smoke swinging to rapid spirals which dissipated under the fan. “It’s all happened so unexpectedly. She came whenever the other students came, but she never said much. She’d laugh and talk when they all did, but on her own she wasn’t ever again like on the first day I met her in Bedok. It became an obsession with me to see her again like that. Because I’d seen her like that once, I felt I could draw her out again. Some combination of circumstances had been just right that day on the beach to make her wonderfully natural—beautiful. It was as if I had seen her naked for an instant. I wanted to catch her again like that. I thought—” He broke off and said with lips that smiled, “You’re right about the flower of the East, you see. I kept telling myself I was a fool, but the more often I saw Neela, the more of a fixation it became with me to see her as I had seen her. I took her for a drive one evening up to Changi. She talked and laughed, and for a moment I thought it was going to be all right. But she wouldn’t let me touch her. It took me weeks to realise what it was. For her, sex was the great promise after marriage, she wasn’t being prim about it; that was the way she was brought up. She was soon going to India, therefore obviously we were not going to be married, therefore obviously no sex.” In suppressing a laugh, he breathed out through his nostrils in short, involuntary jerks. “Do you know it was hours after I made this discovery that I realised that it was no more and no less than everything about middle-class attitudes back home which I detested, and which I’d come out to avoid? Mysterious East and a different way of life, my eye. Here I was making out as if I’d discovered something new. Yet I couldn’t get it out of me that somehow it was different. The details were different, the details made it different. What jinx in the place had confused me in this way? I told you I was obsessed, you see.

“Well I decided I’d had enough about understanding the East, and all that jazz. Next time she came out, I would put a straight proposition to her, and if she said no, that was that. But she seemed to have made a decision, too. She found excuses not to come. She had a lot of marking to do, she said—you know she’s a school teacher—she was behind with her lesson preparation, she said, she was travelling upcountry with friends, and so on and so on. Well I got the message, and I was so fed up by this time that I let it go.”

He was awakened to a vague sense of betrayal, of confiding secrets to one who did not really care. He brought her a beer from the refrigerator and when she said, “Go on,” he knew he had been right to stop. He went to the balcony and looked beyond the trees at the sky unnaturally pink. Somewhere among those palls of smoke were Sabran, Guan Kheng, Santinathan and Neela, they on that side, he on this, and he knew he would never have—he thought with some wonder—the simple inclination to go through the fire to them to learn their secrets. “Don’t feel you have to do anything,” Neela said, when she told him she was pregnant. She didn’t need money, she didn’t want to go to a London clinic. “I didn’t want to go to India. Why should I go to London?”

“Does your uncle know?”

“Everyone does. I had no further trouble about being forced to go to India. They left cursing me.”

Had she wanted him to offer to marry her? He did finally suggest that, but she said somewhat at a tangent that she was going to Pahang. Ellman’s cheeks itched slightly until he realised it was the hot night air drying their wetness. Ethel put the radio on and they learned that the bren-carriers had rolled out, and that armed British troops, convoyed in lorries, were setting up barbed wire road blocks in different parts of the city. After Ethel left he found himself wishing he could leave everything and go—anywhere, so long as it was out of this place. Ah Hong would sweep his house next morning as usual, wash his clothes and sit patiently in the kitchen until he came down for breakfast. Not one to be flurried, she was capable of waiting until one before trying to find out if Tuan wanted “half-by ek” or “confrey”.

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After he had had breakfast at his house Colonel Farquhar went down accompanied by thousands of people to the water’s edge. They all saluted him and he said goodbye to each one in turn. It was two hours later that he got on board the ship’s boat, and there were tears in his eyes as he raised his hat and called goodbye four or five times to all the people who had come with him to the shore. The hundreds of boats already mentioned followed behind his boat to the mingled strains of music. He was much

moved at this demonstration and saw with bowed head. The boats fired their guns and let off crackers, and there was much singing, beating of gongs and playing of violins, each race after its own fashion, the Chinese after theirs, the Malays after theirs and the Indians after theirs. The uproar on the water was deafening. At last the ship was reached. Colonel Farquhar embarked and the boats gathered round. Those accompanying him came on board to say goodbye and he received each of them in turn with kind words to gladden their hearts, and with all manner of friendly counsel. He treated them as a father his own children, until tears came to their eyes and to his also. At last they took their leave and returned to their boats. Then all the vessels left for the shore. After they had departed Colonel Farquhar came to the ship's side and raised his hat, waving goodbye to them four or five times. The people waved back in acknowledgement, shouting, "Goodbye, sir. May you have favourable winds. You can return to your homeland and meet your parents and all your relations. May your life be spared so that you may return here and become our ruler again."

10

HERE NOW IS a story of the Raja of Haru, whose name was Sultan Husain. He was a remarkably handsome, well-built man; and such was his strength and valour that he would declare, "Put me on my elephant Desening, with Tambang behind me and Pikang marching at the elephant's side, then if I fought Java, the whole of Java would be no match for me: if I fought China, the whole of China would be no match for me: if I fought the Franks on the mainland, they would be no match for me!" When Sultan Husain came to hear of the beauty of Raja Puteh, he conceived a great desire for her: and on the strength of the reports he had received of her beauty and of the great affection Sultan Mahmud Shah had for her, he proposed to go to Bentan and seek her hand. But his mother was opposed to this design and said, "Go not, Sultan, to Hujong Tanah, for the Raja is our enemy." But Sultan Husain replied, "Even if I risk death at his hands, I am determined to go and present myself before the great Raja at Hujong Tanah!" and despite his mother's efforts to dissuade him he insisted on going.

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I'm burning no don't touch me burning I can't come back now I'm not afraid I can't what tin do you hold I know it's not no kerosene please burning no don't let me burn Peter let me burn not bamboo please she said nothing Zaleha you said hair your hair burning yet yes burning not bamboo not please tell the two who said

I followed you through the long grass in the dark night slitting my skin open to hear the sound of crickets you balancing on your head the tray of

kueh snapping the twigs under your feet until we came to the clump of nangka and pisang and mangoes so cool and the stream rolling quietly nearby the kerosene lamp swung merrily when you lit it and your hair shone while you fried the fish which we ate while Shaja whimpered in her sleep and I never thought of the two who said

you gave me your pillow and all night I heard the wind passing through the trees and the water which flowed without ceasing when you slept with Shaja I felt for the first time the long pain lessen next morning when you came back from the stream after your bath your sarong tucked high and on your strong bare shoulders a pail full of washed clothes afterwards you showed me the grave where your husband was buried and I took Shaja to pluck the rambutan fruit while you prepared the cakes to take to Rompin there was no pain now I never thought there would be

after you had gone I bathed in the stream and thought I must go today but when you came back that night I did not know how hard it was to leave thinking of the Japanese rifle shot that killed your husband two days before they lost I have loved other women your hands I know your hands told me they did not want to hear when we made love there were two in the still evening they watched from far islands the red sun on the bank where we hid from the boy leading home his buffalo I have waited with dread for them to come and you know I love you when they came and said

you wept to see me take Shaja to pick the fruit to think again what could make love strong since I became afraid of the night winds the crickets the leaves the stream and bamboo which entwine love and hate I was sad to see your anger and begged you to let me sit a while longer on the bank when you said the Datuk would pray to the spirits for us if I asked him on the seventh day I left you sold no cakes but packed them for the old man that warm afternoon I saw in your eyes you knew but I did not know I would not why did you send me if you knew I was afraid of the two who said

I walked on the burning sands and on the third day sat in the burning shade for I was hungry three Sakais shared their food with me and pointed to the hut where the old man has lived for twenty years while the sea crept inland the earth giving way to erosion and storms sparing his hut now lying on silver sand a quarter mile from the shore princes have visited him to seek favours blessings and holy water on Tuesdays there were three when I found him for it was not Tuesday and he knew before I told him of the two

who said he tied a talisman round the wrist of a child and blessed a mother whose daughter was ill praying for the success of the sergeant’s son returning half of what he received in rice fruits and money giving most of the rest to the children who came to see the Datuk he said nothing to me when I said I had nothing but the cakes you gave me leading me to the raised wooden platform on which he sleeps with a smoky lamp and a few pots and pans I saw the lines the salt wind made on his face while he poured the fresh water on my head and said I was going to die this year die because I refused to live by the cool bank under the cool trees fearing two from the far islands who said

they left Peter bruised in anger at not finding me and I waited in Bras Basah watching them burn me thinking I would rather die by fire than bamboo my heart is sick because they sent you my love when I came back to the fire the water the leaves and the bamboo and I ran through a forest of night noises they pursuing without rest I am tired now fearing death by burning too which only Sally’s love will save us from why have they not found me yet they are watching I know they will come in daylight I know and I will go with them and be at peace with the two who said

11

SABRAN LISTENED TO the shouting with a chill in his heart. He did not recognise the man on the steps shouting at the crowd in Mandarin through a loud-hailer. The man shook his fist often as he spoke, seeming to trigger off shouts of acclamation each time he did so. Where had the marshals come from? They wore red armbands, moving about keeping the crowd from surging up the steps. Sabran pushed himself into the mass of bodies sweating in the sun, thinking, as he found himself lifted off his feet for a couple of steps this way and that, how the warmth of human bodies crammed against each other, challenged momentarily the feelings of pessimism he had experienced for some time now. A hope which he refused to name had sustained the carefree years he had spent since school days with Peter, Guan Kheng and Santinathan, but he had seen it die out in Peter's wild eyes and on his muttering, blood-stained lips last night. The surprise was how swiftly his own childhood memories flowed back, suggesting by the ease with which they repossessed him that there had been a synthetic quality in that hope. That was what had taken him aback, made him lose impetus. Why then was he not doing as Santinathan? Why was he plunging into this senseless melee? He remembered the warm eddies of air that radiated from dry country lanes, and the quiet wood-brown houses with their dry-leaved roofs. He saw again the ringed trunk that rakishly angled the shore from where he had watched the ships, maggot-like, labour across the horizon. He stared at the silent hills, lemon-green against the rain-dark skies, and scanned acres of yellow sawah which changed their colour from morning sunrise to light star-filled blue. And most of all he remembered his father's unavailing struggle to redeem the ten acres of rice land in Jeniang mortgaged to a trader from Penang to help pay for his, Sabran's education. He had obstinately sought a connection between such memories and the

alien swirl of life in the city. Now he was witnessing the dispersal of the last traces of that hope, the bloody evacuation of matter that had failed to grow into life.

Straining over the heads of the crowd, he caught sight at last of the only face he recognised, standing to one side on the steps, and he squirmed for the last time to the edge of the chasm, knowing that he would not try to cross it any more. Not now. Not for the time being.

“It’s no use,” Huang said, not looking at him. He was agitated.

“This is not a joint rally, my union is not here. What has happened?” He gripped Huang’s arm, and then let go, knowing there was no real need to ask.

“It’s not safe for you to be here. Go while you can. Wait. I’ll come with you.”

They went down a lane alongside the Adelphi Hotel and crossed a deserted vacant lot on which several hawkers’ barrows, selling sugar cane juice, rojak, fresh-cut fruit and coffee, lay abandoned. The smell of refuse hung in the air. Crossing High Street, they stood twice behind pillars of the covered way fronting the unending line of shophouses, as small groups of men shouting with exhilaration marched up the middle of South Bridge Road. Except for an occasional car which drove past at high speed, there was no traffic. Buses and cars lay parked askew on both sides of the road.

The doors of the Prosperity Union premises, a shophouse on Havelock Road, were locked. Huang rattled the doors several times without result.

“There is really nothing to do,” Sabran said. Why he had accompanied Huang here, he could not say. Had it been because he dared to think that they could in some way between them stop the evil that had sprung up? To the north, grey smoke spread out against the sky thinly like a vast cobweb. Inside him was a silent screaming, like Tok Said’s, which gave him no peace.

“Better go home and wait,” Huang said. But his house was in Tanjong Katong, Sabran’s in Geylang. From the cars which lay abandoned on the roadside, they picked one which had its keys and drove up Tank Road. A motorcycle lay on its side, the oil from its engine making a pool on the road as if it had bled. The doors of the houses were all shut.

“There’s trouble in Kallang. Geylang also. We’ll never get through.”

They left the car and climbed up King George V Park. Neither led, neither followed. From the relative shade of the tall trees on the hill they watched thin spirals of smoke rising up in the city. They saw tiny figures grouping and scattering, it seemed without purpose, peering through the afternoon heat which almost visibly quivered in front of their eyes. Sabran realised for the first time that he did not really know Huang. They had only met in the course of their interpreting duties, Huang for the Prosperity Union, Sabran for the Co-operative. Huang had been a student in a Chinese school until his father had transferred him to one of the free English schools run by the government. His English had not been good enough for him to enter the University. He became a teacher in a Chinese secondary school in Tanjong Katong Road and later an official in the Geylang branch of the Chinese teachers' union. When the amalgamated Prosperity Union was formed he became its chief translator and interpreter. He and Sabran met when their two unions sought to institute joint action against British Realty. But already the unions were finding that an opponent in common only hid the uncomfortable truth that after decades of living together they remained strangers still.

"There was a meeting in Middle Road. Thian tried to calm the members but—" Huang broke off.

"But why was there a meeting? It was agreed there would be no meeting. Why did he call a meeting? We didn't know anything about it. He should know it is dangerous."

Huang's face was expressionless as he returned Sabran's challenging look. "This morning I got a telephone call asking me to go to Middle Road. When I got there people were making speeches, and then they began moving to the padang."

Sabran realised that nothing that Huang was saying clarified anything. There had been a lot of emotional talk about driving out the British if they didn't release the detainees. A jeep which happened to pass by was stopped by people on the fringe, a scuffle took place, and some British Air Force people in the jeep were beaten up. Was that the flashpoint? It was difficult to say. British people were stopped and assaulted in different parts of the town, how or why Huang did not know. Some policemen were also manhandled. By twelve-thirty, members of the other Union were on the

streets on their own. He heard that some people had died. Eurasians were also being attacked.

“Why didn’t Thian and Rassidi meet to stop things from going too far?”

“It was not the time.”

“Not the time?” We are breaking up, Sabran wanted to say, how can it be not the time. Then he acknowledged dully to himself that, truly, it wasn’t the time, and that was what it was all about. The two unions were fighting for two different causes on the same ground. It sounded crazy. That was why he was going back to the Federation.

A school of swifts darted by in formation, the fleeting swish of their wings whispering a secret message he did not catch. They wheeled sharply in perfect unison, heading towards the city in an undulating wave that grew fainter to the sight. Suddenly they veered upward and were lost in the darkening air. Against the lights of the harbour, the city appeared like a giant hulk, its buildings, faintly defined, thrusting blindly upward and vanishing in the gloom.

Sabran sat immobilised in the dark, feeling his body absorbed by nameless forces, his mind unable to comprehend itself. A light glared at him unwinking and he strove to outstare it. Something was struggling to take shape but the forms overlapped each other as in a bad focus. The far-off sound of wailing pierced him. It was like a high-pitched hum that made his eyes wet; and his shoulders began to twitch uncontrollably. There was nothing left to do in the city. He had laboured for nothing. Even if this madness finally came under control, where were his friends? The bitterness of their loss shook him repeatedly. They were gone, gone, how would they ever come back? The days of laughter, of sharing, of blunt comradeship—had they ever been? They had, they had, Tok Said, he cried. We loved each other like brothers. The hum increased in intensity, touching his spine so that he became numb.

Like children.

No. All right—Yes! Like children.

You thought of yourselves only.

No, it’s not true. We believed.

You played at believing. See, where are they now?

Sabran screamed what can they do, what do you expect them to do, but he knew they had come apart because they had not really believed.

Huang stood silhouetted some yards away staring, it seemed, in Sabran's direction. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just cold," Sabran replied. "What time is it?"

"About eleven-thirty. I think it will be all right if we leave here in about an hour's time and try to get home. It's so dark we won't be seen. We'll have to walk all the way. A car is useless. There's sure to be road blocks."

Sabran decided to head for Guan Kheng's house in Cairnhill Circle first. From where he was, it was only a slight detour on the way towards Geylang. If Guan Kheng was in, it would mean that he, Peter and Sally had got home safely.

Huang was reluctant to make any detour at all. "We haven't got much time," he said. "We must get to Geylang before dawn. Otherwise we'll be in trouble."

After some hesitation they agreed to part, their hands meeting uncertainly in a handshake which ended forever their eighteen-month association as translators for their respective unions. Sabran watched Huang's dark figure move silently up the hill and disappear down the other side. Then he too struck out, diagonally left, slowly at first, then more swiftly as the numbness left his legs.

The green-leaved branches of the old angsana trees in Cairnhill Circle flung a pall of coolness over the quiet row of terrace houses. Guan Kheng's house, at the end of the row, had a little grass plot on the side with a couple of frangipani trees, from one of which a merbuk gurgled unconcerned. This was Sabran's second morning in Guan Kheng's house. There was a dull pain in his heart when he went over what Guan Kheng told him. He could not bring himself to look at Guan Kheng's eyes from a fear of finding a truth there like a toad among the leaves.

The news on the radio was that the disturbances had subsided after the British troops had been brought in. The curfew was being relaxed for three hours in the morning.

The two friends returned, faces streaming with perspiration, just before the curfew was reimposed, and stood their bicycles on the grass verge in front of the terrace houses.

"She could have gone somewhere else, I tell you," Guan Kheng said.

"Where? Back to Kelantan?" Sabran could not keep the edge out of his voice.

“She has friends—she must have some. She could be staying with one of them.”

“Sally had no friends. You know that. Only customers.”

“We have done our best. We have gone to Lian Aik Street, and they have said she hasn’t been there for days. What else can we do? I mean I like her a lot, but what else is there to do?”

You shouldn’t have left her. Sabran could not help thinking, why did you leave her?

She had been, in some strange way, the pole around which they had been magnetised all unawares. She had taken their jests, their faithless embraces, their petty cruelties with infinite patience—with love, thought Sabran, marvelling that he was seeing only now that she had been far stronger than all of them—Guan Kheng, Peter, Santi and himself. Was it because she was lost that they were now lost?

“We treated her badly.”

“Come on man, she liked being with us more than with her other customers,” Guan Kheng said.

“That’s not what I mean.” What *did* he mean by this conventional remorse, welling up in him only because she was, possibly, dead?

Guan Kheng was talking on the telephone. He was listening more than talking, his spectacles tilting slightly as he nodded. His lips moved, forming protean shapes, launching sounds that were familiar but meaningless to Sabran. Sabran felt, as always, layers of air immobilise him at such moments, filling him with a desperate sense of his own strangeness.

Guan Kheng put the telephone down and said quietly in English, “The police have been to Middle Road and Havelock Road. Lim, Kwan, Junid, Govinda, a few others—all taken in. Files, papers, books. They have locked the premises and placed guards.”

“I suppose they’ll be wanting me, too, now that everything has collapsed.” It really was time to go. He was not giving up. The things he had believed in needed longer nurture. That was all. Meanwhile it was true he had lost stamina. He wanted a context he could take for granted, not one where nearly every gesture had to be thought out. He wanted to see his father and mother to give them some return for the education they had given him. They had worked the mortgaged sawah patiently, depriving themselves of simple comforts to keep him in University.

“What do they want you for, Sabran? Didn’t they find out enough when they picked you up last time?”

“They were asking me about Tok Said. I was released only to act as translator for the meeting between Thian and Rassidi. Now all that’s over.”

“You had fourteen days, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I have a few days left.”

“You’d better not count on that.”

“I know, that’s why I want to find out quickly what’s happened to Sally.”

Guan Kheng reluctantly agreed to Sabran’s suggestion that they go to the Tan Tock Seng Hospital and the General Hospital and go through the wards to find out whether Sally might be among the casualties admitted for treatment.

12

FROM THE DIARY of Inspector Adnan Hamid, officer-in-charge, R. Patrol from 11pm to 5am on—

Case of grievous assault, the battery and rape of a Chinese female, aged about 26 years, no fixed abode, no known relatives.

I was at the mortuary in the G. H. Outram Road helping relatives to identify bodies of those who died in the disturbances on Saturday and Sunday morning. The work was slow as there were so many bodies and they had to be laid on the floor, arranged one next to the other and it was difficult to step from one to the other as there was little space between. The next room had also to be converted to a temporary mortuary. The smell from both rooms was strong as a few bodies were beginning to get bad, and there was no help to have them buried. The duty orderlies were not to be found except one named Samy; his home was far away so he could not return. He and I could not do much, there being so many bodies, and the smell so strong. For each relative we had to go over them all each time so that the dead father or mother or brother or sister could be identified. In many cases, we had to wait a long time, the relative was not sure when the dead person's face was totally unrecognisable owing to injuries. After every ten minutes we had to rush out to be under the trees to escape the smell.

At 3.45am R Patrol arrived and said its Inspector had to go to Beach Road Police Station to be in charge as the O.C. was summoned to a meeting at H.Q. I was to take over R Patrol and go to the Rochore Canal area where there was a reported case of grievous assault and one person lay unconscious. Leaving a constable to work with Samy, we proceeded via Clemenceau Avenue, since the South Bridge Road route was completely blocked by burnt out cars at the junction with High Street. The street lights were broken or out, there were a few loiterers, but they ran away when they

saw us coming. I was glad to be away from the smell of the dead bodies. I was hungry but I could not eat. In Tank Road someone threw a rock at our car but the wire mesh was only dented. We did not stop. It was more difficult to move from Orchard Road up Victoria Street. Many shops had been looted, and goods were thrown all over the road. Besides this there was much shattered glass and we were afraid of getting a puncture. Soon after Arab Street we turned left and then right into a back lane. Some backdoors of the shophouses were half open and faces peered at us. At the end of the lane were four or five people bending over an inert body. They ran away when they saw us coming but we caught one, a male Indian aged 56, named Arokiam whom we took in for questioning. I went up to the figure lying prostrate and found her to be barely conscious. Her face was bruised and swollen, she was almost completely naked. A few of her torn clothes covered her a little. She tried to speak but could not. There was no point to telephone for an ambulance as the service had broken down much earlier in the day. With the help of my two constables, I carried her into the car. Before taking her to hospital I picked up certain articles from the scene as possible evidence but it will be difficult to say which, if any, will have a bearing on the case.

In the Emergency room of the hospital we had to wait for two hours before she could be admitted. On the advice of the M.O. in charge, I put it down as grievous assault and battery and rape by persons unknown. The M.O. said apparently she had been doused in water and revived every time she fainted. A copy of his initial medical report is attached. Report of a more detailed examination will follow. From my observation in the presence of the doctor I noted the following injuries: 3 front teeth lost, face swollen, left eye closed, nose bleeding, two ribs suspected fracture, severe bite marks on upper chest, slight stab wound in right arm, lower abdomen and groin bruised and bleeding.

Put this bugger in the lock-up.

Adei! Poda! What’s he done?

Rape with assault and battery.

Master, why—what you are doing?

Shut up. God, he smells. Here, get me something to drink.

No coffee. The shop’s closed. There’s a little bit of ice in that jug.

O.C. back yet?

He’s on his way. The troops are out.

I know. Thank God. It’s so bloody pointless, man! The streets, have you seen them? And the bodies?

What are you doing?

Writing a report on him, what else?

Ah, you can forget it. You’d better get the P.C.’s together. They’re restless. Two of them hurt. The rest worried about their families.

Let me just finish the patrol report.

Master, I—

Shut up. Just answer my questions. What is your name?

Arokiam.

Where do you live?

I have no home. Sometimes I sleep on the five-foot way. Please master I did not—No, please, don’t hit me—

Now. If you confess everything at once, maybe the judge will be kind to you and give you a light sentence.

Master, I did not do anything. I simply—

Here, I’ve got a confession all written in Tamil by the clerk. Can you read?

What for? Just listen to me. I will tell you what happened.

I know what happened. Just sign here. Get up man! Don’t kiss my feet, I’ll hammer you.

Master, master, I tell you—

P.C.! Throw him back in the lockup.

I could not keep the suspect, Arokiam, in custody without preferring a formal charge against him. No identification parade was possible as the victim was still in hospital. I let him go. Anyway, I began to doubt if he was really involved—except as a witness.

I did not go back to the case for some days owing to pressure of work in the Station, and we were short-staffed. Also there were so many cases that H.Q. ordered a temporary suspension of all investigations. Except those serious ones for which suspects were in custody, witnesses were available, and the chances of conviction very high, we were to concentrate on restoring order by means of frequent patrols, and setting up of road blocks. There were also some raids to be conducted in known “bad-hat” areas. A few of these raids were successful but in most cases we were defeated by

bicycle bells. The bells would ring as soon as we entered a lane, and other bells would take it up as we drove. This warning system, though simple, enabled many suspects to escape.

I had almost forgotten about the case when I received a telephone call from the Hospital about the fifth day saying that the victim was going to be discharged. The Sister asked if we wanted to see her before she was allowed to go. The O.C. cleared my request to take up the case again but he said that at the end of two days he would review progress.

Her name is Sally Yu alias Salmah binte Yub. That shook me. I thought she was Chinese.

"She is," replied the Sister. "You can tell from her face."

I couldn't any more.

"She will be discharged as soon as I get the doctor's signature. If you ask her now she will say it is Sally. When you hear her speak in her sleep she will say it is Salmah. She can speak Malay very well, you know. She is a waitress. I suppose she changed her name and her language according to her customers. You know—that kind of woman. It's good for business. I tell you she's Chinese, lah—cannot be rojak, her Cantonese so good, you know."

"Can I speak with her?"

"Can, why not? But before you go I must tell you something. I think she's a little bit crazy. All the time when she sleeps she talks about Tok Said. Made the other patients frightened, too. Does this mean she's a Communist? How can it be? She doesn't look that kind of person. I think she was delirious only. Come this side, I want to tell you something." She moved to a corner of the hospital corridor and beckoned with her head. "Some things she said—so shameful to speak about." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "But even so I cannot help feeling sorry for her."

I said urgently, "What did she say?"

"She said—when she was sleeping she said—I cannot remember the exact words you know—she said 'Tok Said, you said to me that I must love all who come to me. How could you say that to me? Me? You mean what I'm doing is not love because they give me a little money? It's love. Maybe I never see most of them again, but when they're with me, I give them a little love. Even the rough ones I give them a little love. They are all so lonely. They only act tough. They are frightened, all of them, as if they are

running away from something and want to rest. Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, I give them rest, I know they are confused, they talk bad of one another sometimes—sometimes even they get very angry. But when they are with me they become calm, they don't argue, they don't talk. Why shouldn't this be called love, too?

" 'Tok, I thought that was all, why didn't you tell me it was not all? Haven't I done enough? I have given my whole life—isn't that enough? You could have told me even a little bit what was coming. That's what is so hard, hard. What I have been through now—I think you want me to say that is love, too. No, no, please, I cannot, I cannot—' I tell you, Inspector, it was the same every night. She would go over the same thing every night and she would weep and scream without stopping and wake up the other patients. Then when I gave her something to take, she became quiet until next morning."

"I think she is still upset," I ventured.

"That's what!" she said. "I think maybe she's simply mixed everything up—Tok Said and all the others she has met. But all this 'love, love' stuff—I didn't know what to do. Some of the other patients were laughing and they mock at her, and some nurses—young things lah, you know. Then you know what? The patients said they didn't want her in their ward. She's a bad woman, they said, so shameless talking about bad things—as if she liked bad things done to her. What should I do? At last I moved her to a corner near my table. Now she's quiet. The doctor says she can go. Be an outpatient. Make room for other people. So many we have on the waiting list. Waiting list!"

She was lying on her bed, propped up against some pillows. She had changed into a flowered dress that was too big for her. Her upper lip was still slightly swollen, and the bruise marks on her face now looked blue beneath her pale skin. Her neck was tightly bandaged, and it seemed under her dress, her shoulders and upper chest, too. Her left arm was in a sling.

"I am glad to see you. How are you?" I began. She looked at me without curiosity and I added, "I brought you here. I understand you will be discharged today. I have to ask you a few questions. Hope you don't mind."

We spoke in Malay, hers was much better than mine. I thought she might be Kelantan Malay, her skin was fair, but I could not be sure. "Which is your born name?" She said it didn't matter, Sally or Salmah, it was the

same. She had lost her identity card, she couldn't remember any details. She never saw her birth certificate, her father would know about that. She wouldn't give me her father's name and address. She did not answer when I asked where she would go now. I asked again. No use. What was the point of carrying on if she did not want her assailants arrested? How many were involved, three, four, five? For how long? Could she recognise any of them if she saw them again? What race were they? Or many races? Could she remember anything about any one of them? Anything. I could be of help if she remembered.

She had been looking straight ahead with unseeing eyes as if she heard nothing I said. Now she whispered, "An Indian man. With a moustache." Arokiam, I thought. But I wasn't prepared for what she said next. "Can you thank him for me?"

Thank him.

"He tried to help but they kicked him and beat him. And I remember—afterwards—he—covered—me."

Nothing else. I could get nothing else out of her.

The Sister was doing the rounds of the wards with the Duty Doctor, and I had to wait until she returned. "Well, has she told you what you want to know? You must catch them, Inspector. They're animals, that's what. How can they be so bad. People like that must get the rotan, even a hundred strokes, I don't care. And put in jail how long also I don't care. Poor thing. I feel sorry for her. What is her life going to be? Do you want me to be a witness when the case comes up?"

"There's no case yet. She doesn't want to help."

"There were some people who came to see her. You know so many people have been coming looking for missing relatives." She called one of the young nurses sitting at the reception desk to her. Two visitors had come, one Chinese and one Malay. Like everyone else they had been allowed to go round the wards to see if their friends or relatives were among the injured. They waited at Salmah's bed for two hours till she awoke. The Chinese was tall, he wore thick glasses, he was always taking off his glasses to wipe them. The nurse didn't hear what they said to each other when she awoke. It was like they were quarrelling. He moved his hands up and down as he spoke, he looked as if he were trying hard to make her listen to what he said. Her face was mostly averted as he spoke, except now and then

when she turned to say something to him. She seemed to be getting more and more upset, then her shoulders shook. The nurse then decided to go to her on pretence of taking her temperature. She was crying. The Chinese stood up and looked at the wall, the bedside table, the floor. He said, “Goodbye, Sally,” and left. No, she didn’t get his name. He looked young, he spoke in an educated way, that was all she noticed.

“And what about the Malay,” I asked.

“Oh, he didn’t talk much. He just sat there listening. Even after his friend went he didn’t say anything. He just sat by her. I had to attend to other patients. When I came back to my desk he was speaking softly, I couldn’t hear, I think he spoke in Malay.”

No name there either. I had to get back to the station. I left a P.C. on duty with instructions to see where she went. The rape case was no use, but maybe she could lead us to evidence about Tok Said. Some days later I put the remaining evidence together. She worked at a coffeeshop and bar in Lian Aik Street. A hotel was above the coffeeshop. She was popular with some University students and went out with them sometimes. She was what you might call available for special customers, no race distinctions. She had no relations in Singapore, she came from the Federation. The coffeeshop owner said Kota Bharu, someone else said Ipoh. After leaving hospital she went back to the coffeeshop to pick up her things. Then she took a bus to Johore.

Hey, Adnan, you’re really hooked on this case, man.

Not to say that.

Then why are you going to so much trouble for a prostitute. So many cases we’ve abandoned for lack of evidence, you are still carrying on. The girl doesn’t want you to prosecute, what can you do?

Yes, I know. But she’s not the usual kind of girl. I still don’t know if she’s Chinese or Malay.

Ah what does it matter, man, nobody cares. She’s got the right spirit—a real multi-racial girl. Anyway you’ve got no arrests as yet. Maybe it was a multi-racial rape. That’s why you can’t track the culprits down. Formerly it was always one group, no mixing. You could tell the pattern from that. That could give you a hunch—you know, race habits. Now how to tell?

I don’t know if that’s the reason I was so interested. I mean because I couldn’t tell how the races were involved in the rape. Anyway the O.C.

ordered me to put the case aside as there had been no progress. The whole file was sent to the Robinson Road H.Q. and I was put back in charge of the Missing Persons section. Fortunately, by now this duty was easier. The mortuary had been cleared of the unidentified bodies picked up from the streets. Now I simply sat in the Station taking down particulars and asking people to come back in a month’s time. Most never did.

13

SABRAN PUSHED OUT the group of students scanning the notice board in the corridor outside the library, and stepped on the shoe of one trying to edge his way in. “Sorry,” he said, looking at the face a few inches from his own. “Eh—Pereira. How are you?” It was the first year student who had been ragged many months earlier. Pereira looked quietly confident now, his black-rimmed glasses enhancing his studious air. He had won a second year University scholarship to read Geography. The first and second year results had been out for some time. Students loitered about in expectation of the results of the final year. Pereira said, “I’m fine,” adding with a smile, “Hey, congratulations, man. You’ve got two-A.”

“How do you know?”

“I heard some fellows talking.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“How about Guan Kheng? Peter?”

“Also two-A—I mean Guan Kheng. Peter is two-B, I think.”

So. That was that. The students’ grapevine in such matters was invariably correct.

The corridor was lined with a series of semi-circular concrete arches on both sides, and students were sitting on the low parapet walls on either side. Sabran went through some banter with old cronies, feeling no elation. He patiently parried some remarks about his “fieldwork”, a reference to his union activities and two-week detention after the disturbances, which, it was playfully claimed, had given him an advantage.

“You did your field work. Then you had two clear weeks to write it up,” Seng Teck said. “How can, man? Not fair to us, lah.”

“Never mind about that,” Sabran replied. “I bet you’ll get a job before me. Want to bet or not?”

Someone spoke up. “He already has one. He’s going to England. Trainee officer for BOAC.”

Sabran felt bemused by the speed with which time had flown and wrought changes in all of them. Who would have thought of Seng Teck, one of the chief raggers of years past, as a serious, well-dressed airline executive. He couldn’t have conceived a year ago that Santi, Guan Kheng and Peter would be missing from the crowd round the notice board discussing the examination results. He had heard that Santi, after his illness, had gone to work as a school teacher for rubber estate children in Labis. Santi was capable of that, but there really was no knowing what he would do. Sabran bitterly repented the harsh words he had uttered to him as they separated on that explosive morning.

“Poor bugger, Santi,” somebody said. “I’m sure he could have got first class without even trying. Do you remember him in sixth form? Always reading. He would read a thick book like that in one day, you know. Have you heard him quoting—“

He didn’t see much of Guan Kheng after their visit to the hospital when Sally—Salmah—had shown a dismissive weariness towards them both. They had sat silently by her bedside for the whole two hours before she awoke, not looking at each other at all, each struggling to absorb the information which the nurse gave them about what had happened to Salmah. It was as if the hospital with its wailing in the corridors was no more, the disturbances were no more, even Salmah herself was no more, and only the dark mystery of what happened to her and to them oppressed their flesh. They saw that she had given meaning to their vacuous days, but that in response they had only cruelly ignored it.

Sabran felt a pang when, after she awoke, she looked at them without interest, answering their questions briefly. She had a thick wad of plaster above her left eye. Her cheek was swollen and bluish-tinged. Her hair was matted although apparently an attempt had been made to comb it. She lisped slightly as she spoke, showing the gaps in her front teeth. Guan Kheng and Sabran winced at her slight agitation in discovering the new impediment in her speech. Guan Kheng hesitantly tried to explain how he

came to leave her. But she closed her eyes and shook her head each time he began.

“Sally, will you listen to me,” Guan Kheng said. His eyes were glistening.

“There’s nothing to listen,” she replied quietly, keeping her head averted.

“I wasn’t trying to save myself only. I was looking for a way to save us both.”

“Then why didn’t you come back?” she spoke with a slur through her still swollen lips.

“I know it’s no use saying I’m sorry. I knew I made a terrible mistake as soon as I got out of the alley. Some men saw me and started to chase me. I ran, I do not know how or where. There were other groups too—” He broke off, looking helplessly at her. Then he began again, fresh words stumbling out in a futile stream and dispersing into the air. He spoke of the terrifying loneliness he had felt in a crowd gone berserk. He had tried to say, “Don’t you know me? We are not strangers to each other, we have lived together for so long,” but his throat caught, and he turned about running madly, sensing dreadful implacability with every step he took, finding refuge at last in the grounds of the big-domed mosque into which a white-capped man with a sweaty face beckoned him hastily.

Finding Salmah unmoved, he switched in desperation to Malay reiterating his explanations, his remorse, and at last his love.

At that, Salmah’s shoulders shook convulsively in silent weeping and she turned, distraught, to him and said, also in Malay, “It’s all right, Guan Kheng. Never mind. Please go now.”

“Ay, do you know what that fellow Lim got?”

“Who?”

“That fellow Lim, man. Keng Huat.”

“What?”

“Lower two. Always in the library hoping for a first. Must have cracked up during the exams.”

After Guan Kheng had gone, Sabran felt a new sense of intimacy with Salmah. The confirmation by the nurse that her other name was a Malay name explained much about her which he had not been able to place formerly, believing her to be Chinese. Now he felt protective towards her,

calling her in his mind “adik”, burning with resentment over what she had undergone.

She talked readily, though haltingly, about her married life in Tumpat, but she said her kampung was not there but in Kedah. Sabran uttered a few sentences in the Kedah dialect and brought, he thought, a faint smile to her swollen lips. But she was tired and her speech became confusing to follow after a while. Finally, he was not sure whether her family came from Kedah, or Pahang, or Malacca. “When you are better, I’ll take you back,” he said, by way of lame reassurance.

She frowned and said no.

He felt vaguely unsure whether she was refusing to go back, or refusing to let him accompany her. He let it go, and said merely that he would come again the next day. Again the frown and the shake of the head. He fell silent, embarrassed by his clumsiness and by his lapses into clichés, and at last got up to go. There was time enough to make arrangements later. He could not catch what she was saying, and said, “What?”

“I said I don’t want you to come again.”

“What are you going to do now, Sabran?”

“If only he hadn’t been detained. With his upper two, he could have got a plum job.”

“Are you going to do research, Sabran?”

“I think he will be good for research.”

“What if the government doesn’t allow the University to employ him?”

“You don’t mean they can order the University not to take him?”

“Don’t be a fool, man. There are always ways and means.”

He was confused, and all the hospital noises returned again dinning his ears, coughing, crying, sharp orders and replies, the scrape of beds, chairs, loud voices of expostulation and dismay. Trembling, he said, “Why, Salmah —”

She stared at him with an effort, her eyes unnaturally bright. “I’m not asking you to look after me. You’ve never done so before. Why should you begin now.”

“It’s not that. I just—”

“There’s no need. See, they’re taking care of me very well here.”

She was plainly agitated. He tried to say in as comforting a tone as he could manage, “I’ll come again in a few days.”

“Don’t,” she said, sharply. “What gives you the right? You act as if you own me. You don’t. I’m everybody’s, remember? All along you have just been one of my customers. And for you, I have just been a woman to while away time with. Or one whose morals you need not worry about. Do you think you’re different from the others? You’re no different from them. You think because we speak Malay together better than all of them you alone are responsible for my life.” Her speech left her panting.

“I only want to help you to get away from this place, Salmah.”

“It’s too late.”

“You mean you don’t want to go back home.”

“I mean—I have been—in the city so long, I see how my life in Tumpat really was—I see my father as he really was—my husband—everybody.”

“I think you should go back for a while.”

“I will—in my own way—not with you.” She subsided, looking broodingly at the patient in the bed opposite. After a few minutes she burst out, “All your talk of taking me home. What you really—want me to do is stay inside the house because—I’ve been a bad woman—cook and sweep—put up with the gossip about my life—put up with old men’s ogling stares. Is there anything else? I’ve known you all along—after the first time—you watched while the others used me—played with me—like a rag doll, passing me from one to the other—If you didn’t like—what they were doing why didn’t you leave them? I wondered about this for a long time—And then I knew that you simply wanted to take me out of their hands to put your own chains on me.”

Too stung to reply, he left. When he came again the next evening she was gone. The Sister could not help him. “She’s not really well enough to go. Luckily the X-ray shows no rib fractures. Just badly bruised that’s all. When she asked to go we let her. We are so short of beds and there are many other serious cases,” she said. From her old place in Lian Aik Street Sabran learnt that she had come to pick up one or two things and then had gone. Had she said anything at all? Nothing. Where was she going? Did she say she was going to Tumpat? The old cook in Lian Aik Street didn’t remember whether she had mentioned Tumpat. He thought she was going to the Federation anyway.

“Have you heard that Nancy Teo has run off with Kumara?”

“You don’t say.”

“I mean not really run off, man. The parents on both sides opposed them, so they just went off and got married on their own. They’ve become teachers in a school in Kuala Trengganu.”

“That Kumara. He certainly worked quietly. Never says much when you talk to him. I thought he wasn’t interested in girls.”

Even though many months had passed since then, Salmah’s rebuff to Sabran sank deeply and was the only thing which neither receded from his consciousness nor lost its power to surprise. It remained something to ponder over in the days of his detention by the police soon after Salmah left hospital. He did not know what to make of someone he had taken for granted for so long, who suddenly showed a new spirit. She was an obstinate blur to the vision and he chafed at the sense of his inadequacy. He now found it imperative to get his examinations out of the way quickly. He yearned to go back to his village near Endau. Many old thoughts had to be shed, hopes re-examined.

Patricia Chen timidly placed a hand on his arm and said, “Sabran, can I speak to you for a moment?” Wonderingly, he left the students he had been talking to and followed her aside. He had only met her in Santinathan’s company a few times, and had hardly ever spoken to her since the latter had been expelled.

“Congratulations, I hear you’ve got a two-A,” she said.

“It’s only talk.”

“Oh but I’m sure you’ll get it. You’re so mature.” She herself was rumoured to have got a Lower Second but she showed genuine pleasure at his result. “I would like to speak to you about a personal matter. I would like to ask for your help.”

“What is it? What can I do?”

“I don’t want to talk here. It’s a private matter. Can we meet somewhere outside?”

“Okay. Where?” He was touched by her appealing manner and her un-self-conscious friendliness.

They agreed to meet in a confectionery standing at the junction of Victoria Street and Bras Basah Road.

She made a polite inquiry about his detention after the disturbances, adding, “You know we haven’t met since then.”

Sabran was embarrassed. He had got a lot of attention in the newspapers because he was a University student, more attention, some thought, than some of the others arrested. He had merely reported back to the detective headquarters in Robinson Road as he had undertaken to do, and he had been promptly lumped together with the officials of both unions who had been picked up.

“We know about your translation work,” the Detective Superintendent-in-charge said. He was a burly British officer with a brush moustache and a kindly manner. “That’s okay. What’s not okay is all that stuff about Tok Said. You don’t really believe all that do you?”

“I’m only saying I did see him.”

“How could you be sure? You said it was in the dark. You only had his voice to go by. Anyway it does no good blabbing about it to everyone. See what it’s done this time.” He looked up from his desk with an avuncular smile. “I could have you charged with spreading rumours, you know.”

Two weeks later he was released, having eaten better and kept more regular hours than he had done for a long time.

14

CAREFULLY REMOVING THE skewer he ate his nasi lemak with relish and called for a cup of coffee.

He flung the dark green coconut leaf into the spittoon and gulped the thick drink sweetened with condensed milk, leaning over the table as he did so, his eyes on the morning traffic on the road outside. The bustle of the coffeeshop receded in his consciousness. On the five-foot way a man stopped abruptly in his stride to blow his nose, pinching it with thumb and forefinger. A bus dragged past, its engine whirring loud, trailing black fumes. He crossed the crowded road, dodging between honking cars, trishaws which swerved suddenly, and matrons in sarung kebayas with market baskets. Clinging to a shiny metal bar in the tightly packed bus he handed his fare to a conductor who sucked in through his gold-lined teeth at intervals. The passengers fell forward in a mass as the bus stopped at intervals, and jerked backwards as it started again.

He got off at Bras Basah Road, walking briskly in the sun under a clear blue sky, marvelling how hate could have vanished so completely. The foulness had been stopped from polluting the air, the stone had been put back in place, but who knew when it would be moved again to start Tok Said screaming again as if he were being tortured by fiends. Entering the Red House cake shop in Victoria Street he found Patricia already there.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “It’s about Peter.” It appeared they were “in love”. “After he was hurt in the riots I saw a lot of him and—well—that’s how it came about.” She looked at him self-consciously. He started to think of something suitable to say, when she broke in, “He wants to emigrate—to Australia—and I don’t.”

“You mean you would rather go somewhere else.”

“I mean I don’t want to emigrate.”

“I don’t really know—”

“Sabran, speak to him. Please speak to him. He’s so stubborn about it. Oh I know I can’t blame him for feeling as he does after what he went through but—tell him please not to leave. Tell him to stay.” She seemed to have absolute faith that he could make Peter change his mind.

Sabran thought of that night in Pasir Panjang when Peter lay embittered, declaring through swollen lips that he was going to leave. How could Patricia know what had snapped? How could he? They had all been together in such carefree times. That was the trouble. They could be so care-free only because others had done their thinking for them. This last year they had all begun to think for the first time and, ironically, the very first fruits of that thinking had been to set them apart very subtly from one another. Their recent meetings had no more the easy comradeship of the old days. There was a forced jollity, a half-revealed kind of irrelevance in what they did, that had frightened each of them in different ways. He had volunteered to help in the trade union in response to this intimation, and his decision to return to Endau stemmed from the same feeling. He guessed that Santinathan’s wild behaviour sprang from similar reasons. Guan Kheng had simply become more distant. And after what had happened to Salmah he felt he could not see Guan Kheng again on the old terms. Were these the reasons why they had come apart? Why—how—had they broken up? Was it because they were now finding at last their real selves? What were their real selves? Who were they? The frenzy which had convulsed them brief months ago answered these questions in racial terms, but that was too paltry a conclusion after the glimpse the four had had in their own lives together of an affinity more inclusive than race. That vision had somehow quickly dispersed like mist with the coming of bright day. Even before Peter was attacked he had been thinking of leaving, The attack only confirmed his resolution.

Patricia was looking at him expectantly, her eyes frankly pleading. There was a stillness between them which shut off the noise of Bill Haley’s Comets blaring on the coffeeshop radio. So she had no thought of leaving. It seemed the thought had never even occurred to her. This devout Christian, this beautiful daughter of a Chinese millionaire, and he, and thousands of others, were on common ground there at least. That was a

beginning, but how much was there to unlearn, how much to learn, before they could see their way?

"I am glad I am going to see Peter," he said. "But I cannot advise him about his life. He must do what he wants to do."

Patricia put a slim hand on the marble table top. "Do you know what they want, before Peter can be allowed to emigrate?"

"What?"

"They want him to produce a police report certifying that he has committed no crimes."

Sabran laughed. "Many countries want something like that—or how would they escape getting riff-raff? Has he done so?"

"He went to the Beach Road Police Station to get it. They asked him to provide a detailed account of his life from birth. Peter wrote pages and pages. When he handed them over they asked him, not for his signature only, not even for his thumb print. They wanted prints of both palms."

"Palms?"

She nodded.

The noise from Bill Haley's Comets now filled the entire room. He drank his tea thinking of what Malaya had asked of its first immigrants. Then or now it was the same—fellow feeling, intelligence and hard work. It appeared even this was not enough to ensure happiness. Aloud he said, "I suppose each country is entitled to try out its own form of insurance for social stability."

"Peter thinks he'll have more in common with them than with us, can you believe it?" She was incredulous. "All his life he's been here. Does that mean nothing to him? Can one incident make him suddenly feel he will get on better with foreigners than with us—?"

Sabran's mind wandered as he watched her speak earnestly. He didn't think he heard her right.

"—I said he's not even put off when they ask him to prove he's at least fifty-one percent white."

"Have they asked him that?"

"Yes."

"And you mean he has agreed to do that?" Sabran took a deep breath.

She was saying, "—he has written to his relatives. There's an uncle in Malacca, and two cousins in Kuching. To ask them about their parentage.

He has to make up a family tree for them to calculate what fraction of him is white.” Her eyes were reddening; she bent down to fumble in her handbag.

Turning into shady Waterloo Street, he smiled uncertainly at two Eurasian girls twirling a skipping rope while their friends took turns to hop into its arc as the children chanted,

> Keep the kettle boiling
> If you don’t you’re out

Stopping as one on “Keep the—” or “Keep the kettle boi—” when a companion tripped on the rope. One girl with lean brown features and sensitive eyes smiled back at him without stopping her chant, her hips swaying without conscious volition in response to the arm which spun the rope. Their rhythmic recitation created a melodious hum in his ears as he reached the faded yellow row of terrace houses. Where were the fiends on this day? Working obscurely on Peter, no doubt, even as they worked on him, Sabran. With a feeling of hollowness inside him he realised that Peter’s wanting to go somewhere else, and his own recurrent desire to concentrate solely on the well-being of his own kampung were symptoms of the same problem. He loved the orchid whose stems flower, curving free away from the supporting posts, but feared the scorpion which lurked among the roots hidden in the rich soil. He and Peter had never been so distant as on that night when, Peter incoherent, himself utterly dumbfounded, they looked at each other with alien eyes. What was there to throw grapnel on, when even lifelong understanding dissolved under a mysterious fury that sprang with suddenness and disappeared as unpredictably? The sun, the children, Patricia, the busy traffic, friends, everything that flowed, moved, or even stood still, fell under unnameable menace.

Peter’s mother showed him in, chatting with him cheerfully in Malay. She was not going to go with Peter, she might later, she said. “But I don’t know. I don’t like to travel such a long distance at my age. I’m so afraid of going by aeroplane. And then, to get used to a new place, it will be so difficult. And the food. Where to get the ingredients to make curry and sambal belacan and everything. If Peter’s father had been alive, maybe it

might have been different. But he's dead and buried. In Alor Gajah, did you know? His grandfather's buried there, too. That's his picture over there. And who will look after their graves? I go up every year, you know, and I pay the man to take out the weeds and plant flowers. Wait, I will bring you something to drink."

Sabran looked at the daguerreotype photograph of the old planter, Peter's grandfather, hanging on the wall. The oval sepia-tinted image in the flowing moustache belonged to a vanished world, and yet was also a part of what they had all become. If only he knew how.

Peter said, "Hullo, Sabran, apa macham? I wrote you two letters and you never replied. Where were you, man?"

"I know. I only got them last week. I went back to my kampung after the exams, my father was not well. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Still running around filling up forms. Have you got a job yet?"

"Nothing fixed. I'm a temporary teacher." Sabran felt the old informality trying to reassert itself but foiled by something tentative in both of them. "When are you going?"

"Next month, I hope," Peter said. "I've got my passage booked and paid for. Just waiting for the green light."

"When will that come?"

"I don't know. They're so slow. They wanted my family history and I've sent off that."

Sabran waited for him to elaborate but Peter had turned away awkwardly and, looking out of the window, changed the subject. "Where's Santi? The bugger seems to have disappeared."

"I heard he's gone to Labis."

"Labis?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I haven't seen him since that first day of the riots. I went to see him in his room a couple of weeks ago but there was no one there. Someone in the next cubicle said the landlord had moved his stuff out because he hadn't appeared."

"His sister Neela came to see me, looking for him," Peter said. "She was in a real state, what with her expecting and so on. You know about her and Ellman, don't you? Did you know he took ill after the riots?"

"Santi?"

“Yeah. Delirious. Some days later he’d just gone. I think he had some kind of nervous breakdown. Or shock. Something like that.”

Sabran said, “Maybe we should look for him.”

“Ah, don’t worry, man. You know him. If he is in Labis, he’ll next be in Kuantan, Dungun—just about anywhere. The bugger’s crazy.” Peter made a movement in disgust. “We’re all crazy. That’s why I’m going.”

Sabran came in swiftly, “What about Patricia?”

He threw a quick glance at Sabran, saying with forced off-handedness, “She’ll come later. I have some friends in Perth. They’re going to help me look for a job. When I’m properly settled she’ll join me and we’ll get married.”

Though he tried hard to remain silent he heard himself say, “Don’t go, Peter. Stay with us. It’s not only you who went through the trouble. We all did, don’t forget that.”

“What’s the use, man, what’s the use? I mean it, we’re all literally going crazy. And it’s not only the riots. Those we’ll have again and again and again. And for no bloody reason.”

“There’s always a reason. And we’ve always got to look for the reason.”

“You look. No, Sabran. I’ve been over all this by myself hundreds of times. You think I haven’t? You think I’m going because I was beaten up? You’re wrong. Just look at the way all of you were going on about Tok Said.”

“If you had seen him you would stay,” Sabran said.

“Maybe. But which one? The one you saw? Or Santi saw? Or Sally? Or Guan Kheng’s friend? Who? Just tell me that.” Peter changed his tone of voice and said, “Look, man. I have a cousin who’s a Police Inspector. He’s seen the complete investigation file. It’s all a lot of rumours started by the people in the jungle. I’m not denying you saw some man screaming his head off in some temple. But how do you know he was Tok Said. People told you, right? It’s the same with all the other people who saw him anywhere in Malaya. It’s a psychological campaign. You know how we all are—always going to mediums and bomohs and holy men. Well that’s what it is. They’ve joined them all up and made them into one man. And we believe them. I told you we are crazy.”

“You should have tried to see him, Peter.”

“No point. Tok Said is the work of the Communists, and you’re a bloody fool.” He stopped and said, “I’m sorry, Sabran, it’s no use.”

They walked in the Botanic Gardens arguing about language. “No one is being asked to become Malay,” Sabran said. “All that is necessary is that we all speak the language.”

“Why? Can you tell me why?”

Sabran shrugged. “Just look at where you’re living, man. We—”

“I shan’t be living here much longer. That lets me out,” Peter said drily.

“Do you know why you’re going? Is it because you’re afraid of those who can’t speak English?”

“This is a simple question of emigration. People do it all the time.”

“Who are you kidding, Peter? Surely not even yourself.” In the distilled quiet of the jungle path, shrouded by the leaves, Sabran was surprised to hear himself speak excitedly. “We all belong to a colonial generation. Long after the whites go, we will do their work for them, see with only their eyes. And when we find we can’t do that—because those who don’t see with our eyes are becoming stronger—you’ve found this out—we will go. As you are doing.”

“I tell you this has nothing to do with language.”

“Ask yourself then what are you afraid of? You are afraid of something, aren’t you? Have you ever asked yourself why? You were born here. You have lived here all your life. Yet you prefer to go and live among people you don’t know. Why?”

They speak the same language, Peter thought, realising wearily that Sabran had made his point. What were the reasons, where were the words, to express his disenchantment? There was disenchantment, that he admitted. He was going in anger, disliking the life, disliking change. The very air blew against raw nerves. He heard himself say, “You say we belong to a colonial generation. You think the colonial process is now over. Well you’re wrong. It’s beginning all over again.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was born in Malacca speaking Portuguese. That’s because the Portuguese colonised us so many hundred years ago. The Dutch didn’t stay long enough, or I suppose it’s a toss up otherwise I would be speaking Dutch instead now. Anyway the result was no one outside Malacca understood the Portuguese I spoke. Then because the British had ousted the

Dutch, I learnt English and forgot my Portuguese. It was like taking out the parts and organs of my body and replacing them with others. Then the Japs came and we were told forget English, learn Japanese. So once more I began taking out parts and putting in new ones—unlearning my language and learning another. Now it seems I must unlearn it once more and learn Malay." He said, passionately, "What I want to say, Sabran, is this. I've gone through the process so many times, I can't any more. Say I'm a colonial creature because I speak English. I'm tired, tired, I can't learn any more. It may not have got into my bones, but it's gone deep enough for it to hurt to try to remove it. You want to unlace all my nerves and tie them up in a different set of knots. How many times?" His voice had risen. "How many times? Can you tell me that? The process is simply repeating itself, why can't it stop?"

Stung, Sabran said, "Even if you want to say that, what you mean is you'd rather the orang putih does it for you than us. And to qualify for that you're even ready to search around to see if you're more than fifty percent white."

Peter darted a quick look at him, flushing. They walked round the little lake, each struggling to be silent, to stop their quarrel. On the rolling lawn above the lake a Malay family, mother, father, and two little girls, strolled. Nearby two girls, Indian and Chinese, laughed and chatted, darting saucy eyes in their direction. A little white boy shouted, "Daddy, look, there's a squirrel." They came out at the gate still without a word, walking apart.

Sabran said, "Peter, I'm sorry."

"No, man. Why?" Peter said. They parted at the bus stop, Peter saying he was going to look up a friend in Holland Road. Sabran, swaying in the bus as it went down Orchard Road, knew Peter wanted to be alone. When he came to think about it, so in his way did Guan Kheng. Guan Kheng wanted to be alone. Santi, too. And so, sadly, did he himself.

15

IN THE LAST decade of the eighteenth century, the Eastern Queen, sent by the Royal Society on a voyage of exploration in the Pacific, running short of water on its return, anchored off a cluster of huts near Tumpat. The master of the Eastern Queen, Martin Smith, found the people hospitable. "We landed a boat with four, Keppel, Mundy, Wallace and Brooke, and myself making five," he wrote in his log for that memorable day, "taking with us ten casks for water. Brooke had charge of the muskets with orders that they should be hidden unless an occasion arose when we would need to use them. To our surprise," he added, though why he should have been surprised he did not say, "we were allowed to land without interference, although almost the entire village of five hundred persons (excluding the chief—whom they call, as far as I can gather, the Penghulu—and his retinue) followed us all the way to and from the spring about a thousand yards inland where we got our water."

He went on to describe the people. "The natives are generally of pleasing aspect, being neither black as the people of south India are, nor yellow like the Chinamen of Shanghai. Their complexion is copper-coloured, and they do not have crinkly but straight hair. Their noses are flat as the Negroes." He wrote that nearly all the women wore ornaments of silver, and almost every home had a greater or lesser amount of it. "The Penghulu's was especially richly decorated," he reported, "but no amount of persuasion could make him or any of his people part with their ornaments. We offered them our whole remaining stock of beads—which was still considerable—but they refused. Even the mirrors failed to excite any enthusiasm. I believe there is a place some miles inland where they get the ore, and I intend to send Wallace and Brooke to examine this place before we leave."

Captain Smith's log ends at that point. Whether there were subsequent entries is a matter for conjecture. Several pages after this entry have been torn, and the remaining pages are blank. The log disappeared for nearly eighty years until it was discovered among some old Arabic books in a kampung hut in Kuala Krai by Reginald Missall, the young bank clerk, local repertory actor, and author of the well-known Missallania, who made a close study of it and then presented it to the Smith Museum where it now lies. The writing is much faded, and the paper, through careless handling, is on the point of crumbling.

Two or three stories had achieved almost the status of legends in the kampung where the log was discovered. The noted British Protector, Thomas Lang, in setting the most current story down, refuted it in essentials. According to this kampung story, after some men from a European ship collected water, three of them landed again at night carrying guns and forced the Penghulu and three villagers to show them the way to the mine some distance inland. After surveying the place they took the captured men aboard their ship as hostages, threatening to kill them if the entire village did not surrender its silverware by sunset the following day. The people of the kampung sent word secretly to their ablest warrior, Hang Mahmud, who had been exiled following a quarrel with his chief. Hang Mahmud returning, organised a rescue party consisting of himself and two others. Silently overpowering the guards, they freed the captured Penghulu and his men, and were away from the ship before the alarm could be given. In the morning the Eastern Queen trained its guns on the village while Captain Smith again demanded the silver. The villages refusing, the ship opened fire. After the fifth shot some flimsy huts were ablaze, Hang Mahmud was among those fatally wounded, and the remnants surrendered, Captain Smith then annexed the territory to the British Crown, and he and his men were its first white rulers. A few remained behind, eventually marrying local women.

Thomas Lang's version of this episode is based on accounts given by relatives of Captain Smith and his men. According to Lang, the white men asked for guides, not to direct them to the mine, but to help them gather specimens of flora and fauna in the district, particularly the unique orchids, Vanda Hookeriana and Vanda Teres. But in deep jungle the guides set upon the party and one white man was killed. Smith and the rest escaped back to

their ship. The following day, training their guns on the village, they demanded reparation within twenty-four hours.

That night the Penghulu and a party of three came on board and asked for aid against Hang Mahmud who, he said, had deposed him as chief of the village and opposed reparation. Smith obliged by firing three salvoes, and the village surrendered. Hang Mahmud was killed in the attack. At the Penghulu's invitation, Smith, on behalf of His Majesty, agreed to remain as protector and adviser to the Penghulu.

One of the main difficulties of Lang's story, which local historians point out, concerns the log. Why, they ask, after lying so long intact were the pages torn? They hint that Missall might have known more about this than he cared to admit.

• • •

Ellman shook with silent laughter. "What is this bogus history? What's it got to do with what really happened in Kelantan? It's a complete fabrication."

"Take it for a figure. It's no better than all our stories of Tok Said, Entalban, the Chinese medium, the Indian astrologer. Your kind of legends started the rot everywhere."

Ellman smiled mockingly. "You mean if we had never come you would still be living in your kampung huts."

"I mean you've been here all along for the money," Santinathan said.

Ellman said, "We brought law and order. You may underestimate these things but—"

"Law and order! For what?"

"It's no use going to the past—or blaming the past—to try to explain what we are today," Guan Kheng said. "We'll face up to our problems in our own way."

"You have too little in common. The moment we go you'll fight and kill each other until one community gets the upper hand—or the Communists walk in." Ellman spoke of the countries of Europe, of their common history, their common classical heritage, their music, their art and their poetry intertwining.

Sabran sat listening.

• • •

When the Sultan and Temenggong arrived Mr. Crawfurd received them. He paid due respect to the Sultan and offered them chairs. After they had been seated a moment the Sultan said, "At present we are severely pressed for lack of money. Why is it that for the last three months you have not paid us our allowances?" Mr. Crawfurd at once replied, "Your Highness and the Temenggong will fully appreciate the circumstances in which I am placed. I can do nothing at all without authority. I have received instructions from the Governor-General of India authorising me to ask that full control of the Settlement of Singapore be transferred to the East India Company, so that there is no longer a divided control. For difficulty is caused by the fact that Your Highness controls one part and the East India Company the other. This is His Excellency's proposal to Your Highness and if Your Highness is agreeable to such an arrangement the Company will make Your Highness a monthly allowance of $1,300, and to the Temenggong $700 a month. Furthermore the Company will make an immediate grant of $30,000 to Your Highness and $15,000 to the Temenggong. If Your Highness wishes to move to another country the Company will give $30,000 in addition. The agreement shall be that the allowance is payable during your lifetime only and Your Highness's heirs will not receive it."

When the Sultan and the Temenggong heard Mr. Crawfurd's words, they looked at each other for a few moments in silence. Then the Sultan said, "Very well. We will think over this matter tonight, and we can give you our answer tomorrow." Mr. Crawfurd replied, "Certainly, Your Highness." He saw the Sultan out to his carriage. Then the Sultan returned home to Kampung Gelam and the Temenggong to Telok Belanga. They both gave the most careful thought to the matter that night, and the next day a member of the Sultan's staff came to Mr. Crawfurd and said, "The Sultan and the Temenggong agree to your proposal of yesterday." Mr. Crawfurd was pleased to hear this; because he had secured everything he wanted and because his reputation would be enhanced in the eyes of the Company owing to his good services. He quickly wrote out drafts of the treaty on thin

parchment which looked like paper. Then he said to the Sultan's representative, "Give my compliments to His Highness and say that if he can arrange to come here at ten o'clock tomorrow we can settle the matter." Then the man returned to convey Mr. Crawfurd's words to the Sultan.

At ten o'clock the next morning, the Sultan and the Temenggong came up the hill in a carriage. On arrival they were greeted by Mr. Crawfurd and invited into his house where they sat down. After they had been seated for a few moments Mr. Crawfurd said, "Is it true that Your Highness is ready to accede to the wishes of the Governor-General?" The Sultan said, "It is true." Then Mr. Crawfurd asked the Temenggong who also gave his assent. After that Mr. Crawfurd took the two pieces of parchment out of the writing box saying, "This is a copy of the agreement for Your Highness and this one for the Temenggong…"

The next day the Sultan's representative Enche Abu Puteh came to receive the money. When Mr. Crawfurd had calculated the total debt which the Sultan owed to Mr. Raffles there still remained due to the Sultan a sum of $20,000. From this were to be deducted sundry amounts which he owed to the East India Company. The whole of the balance was handed over to Enche Abu Puteh. The money was presented to the Sultan, and only when he saw the amount did he realise and regret his mistake in surrendering the Settlement of Singapore…

About five days after the agreement had been concluded Mr. Crawfurd ordered gongs to be sounded all round Singapore and in Kampung Gelam and a proclamation read: "Be it known to all men in this Settlement that full judicial and legislative control throughout Singapore has passed to the East India Company, and that neither Sultan Shah nor the Temenggong retains any power. The Sultan can make no order except on the authority of a magistrate." When the Sultan heard what the town criers were saying he realised at last that he was in the position of a man bound hand and foot. As the Malays say, "To repent in time is gain, to repent too late is of no avail."

• • •

Japanese Poster on a tree:

• • •

At first General Yamashita stood with his hands behind his back. His pot belly protruded a bit but he looked dignified.

Gradually the sound of the police band became louder. It sounded grand: the tune was correct and the timing superb. They were singing Aikoku Koshin Kyoku—Look at the Dawn over the Eastern Seas.

Impressed, General Yamashita moved to the front of the balcony to get a better look at the children. Then we could see them, row after row of them. They stopped in front of the main steps of the building, flags in their hands.

I looked at the General. There were tears in his eyes. Then the children sang the Japanese national anthem. There was silence for a moment, then they shouted, "Banzai!" three times. Every Japanese, including myself, felt very happy. The General turned to me and whispered, "Just like Japanese children, aren't they?" He saluted the children several times.

General Yamashita made no attempt to hide his emotion—tears ran down the face of this man they called the Tiger of Malaya. Most of those children who stood so correctly that day on the Padang and sang so well must now be over forty years old. How many of them, I wonder, remember that occasion?

As soon as the children marched off, General Yamashita and his group moved to the Adelphi Hotel, almost next door. I had to get there before him, for I was director of that affair as well. The General was to meet hundreds of Singaporeans there. While we waited for the general to arrive, a Hungarian orchestra practised some Japanese music. When Yamashita walked in they began to play Aikoku Koshin Kyoku. He saluted the people as he walked to the platform at the end of the room and they bowed to him. They clapped politely.

"Today," Yamashita told them, "we celebrate the Emperor's birthday with you. You have just become our new subjects. It is my great pleasure to be with you on this auspicious day. I want the people of Malaya and Sumatra to carry on with their affairs, for they are now our new subject people."

• • •

Do you want to join this society or not?

Christ, what a beating.

Those were the only words he uttered aloud when he was brought back to his cell about eleven-thirty that night.

Christ, what a beating.

The YMCA building in Stamford Road, headquarters of the Japanese Kempeitai, continued to echo with the shrieks of the others, but everything was getting fainter to his hearing. He tried to focus his thoughts on the house in Tembeling Road where his eleven-year-old nephew, Peter D'Almeida, would have waited for him for their Thursday night walk on the seafront along Marine Parade.

Do you want to join this society or not?

The slaps he could take, even the thrashing with the sticks. But not the iron bars. He felt things breaking to pieces inside him. After half an hour he lay on the floor and could not get back to the kneeling position they wanted. They left him alone and went and stood by the window, smoking and talking with one another. Then one strode towards him, and stuffed a rubber hose down his throat and opened the tap to which it was attached. Do you want to join this society or not?

He did not think he could take in so much water, the flow never seemed to stop. When they started stomping on his bloated belly he felt as if he was drowning, but the unconsciousness he prayed for did not come. Lieutenant-Colonel Sumida Haruzo, the Kempeitai commandant, watched him with an expressionless face as Nozawa swung the wet, knotted rope raising the welts on his face and back. He learned all their names quickly, associating each with the degree of violence they wielded on him. Monai, Sakomoto, Makizono, Tereda, Tsuito, Gunasena, Morita, Kataona, Hardman, Sugimoto Heikichi, Manap, Kashihara, Toh Swee Hoon, Kazuo. It was so cold now. He had lain in a pool of water unable to move, the sticks, the rope, the iron bars scattered around him. A face bent over him and he thought, my God how much more, but it was only Siew the young guard peering at him in terror, and he forced a slight smile saying, Christ, what a beating.

He was dead the next morning, Siew said, in exactly the same position as I left him the previous night.

Do you want to join this society or not?

• • •

When they reached Bedok, Guan Kheng swung the car into a track running off the main road, and away from the sea. The car bumped in and out of potholes in the laterite road, climbing the hill for about a mile before it came to a stop near two blackened pillars about six feet high. Guan Kheng drove between them and stopped at the entrance to the temple, a simple pink-walled brick structure with slightly curving roof lines. As soon as the engine had died and the headlights had been switched off, the sound of crickets rose in the night, busy and continuous, and the yellow light of a kerosene lamp inside the temple frailly asserted itself. The air was still, hanging thick, warm and heavy. From around the little clearing, dark massed branches of the rubber trees converged overhead like the petals of an imperceptibly closing flower, which quietly entombs the life that feeds unwittingly within. Only a small dark blue pool of sky remained to hint at the universe outside.

Hobbling on a stick and carrying several joss sticks, an old black-garbed woman emerged. Guan Kheng spoke a word and she replied. Turning round she re-entered the temple and they followed, not so much her figure for they could hardly see her in the dark, as her trail of incense. Sabran watched as Guan Kheng, kneeling before black and gold gods, rattled slivers of bamboo in an open cylindrical tin. Guan Kheng picked one of the slivers at last and handed it to the woman who, after peering at it closely, fished out a little paper packet from a desk drawer and handed it to him. He put it in his pocket and got up.

“The bodies of some five hundred Chinese shot by the Japanese during the war lie buried in this spot,” he told Sabran. “More than two thousand Chinese had been rounded up in the Katong-Bedok area when the Japanese first entered Singapore. They were herded together on a playing field in Telok Kurau and kept there for three days. Then five hundred of them, picked at random, were driven in lorries to this spot where they were made

to dig their own graves before being shot. My father was one of the few survivors. When the Japs started firing he was hit in the shoulder and he fell down and pretended to be dead. Other bodies fell on top of him. It was dusk and he was able to crawl away into the belukar without being noticed. We come here every year with many others to pay homage."

"This place gives me the creeps," Santinathan said. "Let's get out of here. I don't want to remember how we said 'Master, Master' and cringed before the runts. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was a load of bullshit."

• • •

POLITICAL DETAINEE RETURNS TO CHINA

Tan Seng Lock, under detention for three and a half years under the Security Regulations, was escorted by police on board the S.S. Ling Kuo bound for Canton. Tan, a former undergraduate of the University of Malaya, was arrested in 1949 for sedition. He was assistant treasurer of the Machine-Workers' Union whose strike lasting thirty-seven days, punctuated by clashes between strikers and police, was eventually declared illegal. Tan was among the leaders arrested at the time. The Government, yielding to pressure from his friends, eventually offered to release him on condition he took no further part in political activity; alternatively he could return to China, his fare paid by the Government. Tan chose to go back to China. A crowd of relatives and friends was at gate No. 9 to see him off. Tan refused to be interviewed by reporters, only saying, "This country has no future."

• • •

I changed my mind about going to Australia and came to England instead. I don't mind telling you, Sabran, that about ten days after I got here I put my head down on a table and cried. I am not ashamed to say it now, two years later, when I am in a comfortable flat in Harlow, Essex, and receiving good pay as a schoolmaster. The Head is very understanding. I am

in the local “B” football team which plays inter-district matches once a week. There is nothing more I could want. It was tough getting to this point.

Funny thing I don’t really know why I cried. I stayed a few days with the Johnsons who had emigrated here a long time ago until I found a pokey little place in which to live. And from there I started my job hunt. Oh, there are plenty of jobs about for conductors, waiters, cleaners, packers, sweepers, but there was nothing that came within a mile of what I wanted. I wrote to Patricia and told her not to come just yet as things were bad. I answered ads, I attended interviews, and then finally after one bad one, I just came back and broke down. I know it was not simply because I hadn’t got the job. It was more like some total effect of little gestures, manners, words, postures, in the people here which made me feel slightly freakish—I can’t explain it.

Anyway, then the Johnsons told me about a man in business on his own who needed clerical help. I was game, I needed money quickly. He worked me morning and night and Sundays too. I stuck it for two months. He was the meanest fellow I have ever met in my life. Then I was a bus conductor, railway booking clerk, and part-time teacher. Finally, the Head of the school where I taught liked my work and got me on the regular staff.

I have been at this school for a year now and everything is as well as can be. But it was when I decided to write to Patricia to ask her to come that I realised I did not really want her to come, because I didn’t really want to remain here. I know it looks as if I can’t make up my mind, but there you are. The people on the whole are nice. There is a lot of prejudice and ignorance of course, but it is when they mix these with kindness, that I simply want to blow my top. There was this woman serving coffee in a coffeehouse, watching me as I came up the queue with a look that’s very common here and directed at foreigners, mostly non-whites. It makes you feel like an insect. Well, when it came to my turn she said, with a friendly smile, “Are you half-caste?” My nerves had been raw for many weeks and I flared. “What if I am.” Her reply floored me. “It’s nothing, love. I’m married to one.”

Well, Sabran, I shall be starting on my travels again. This time back home. I love Malaya. I love Singapore. I didn’t know how much until I came here. I’ve started saving up now for my return passage.

• • •

So Hang Mahmud said to his wife who was named Dang Merdu Wati, "Wife, let us go to Bentan where we can find a livelihood more easily. Consider also the country is big. Let us, all three of us, move there." Dang Merdu Wati replied, "Husband, what you say is indeed true." Now that night when Hang Mahmud went to sleep he dreamed that the moon fell from the sky and its full beams shone on the head of his son, Hang Tuah. Hang Mahmud awoke, startled out of his sleep. He got up, seized his child, and embraced and kissed him all over his body. When day came he related everything that happened in the dream to his wife and child…

"It is clear that you should take good care of this child of ours. Don't let him wander too far, because he is rather naughty. I would like him to be educated but there is no teacher here. Moreover he has not yet learned courteous speech. And now let us set out for Bentan as soon as we have gathered together our belongings." Then Hang Mahmud fitted out his perahu and shifted to Bentan where he built a house for himself and his family near the kampung of the Datok Bendahara. And he set up a food shop there.

• • •

When we had sailed upriver for about an hour and a half, we came to Kampung China. I saw that there were several hundred Malays and Chinese waiting on the shore with spears and weapons. The three of us landed. They asked us, "Where is this boat from?" We answered, "This boat is from Singapore. We bring letters and are on our way to Kelantan." Then came Tengku Siak and Tengku Tanjong with hundreds of others asking for news from Singapore, and the price of merchandise. I told them what they wanted to know, and then I asked, "Where is the Datok Bendahara?" They answered, "The Datok Bendahara and the Kapitan China have gone upriver to Jelai, the place where they are digging for silver." "That's a fortnight's journey upriver," I said. And they said, "All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles.

Acknowledgements

Permission to include the following literary extracts in this novel has been renewed for this edition. Some of the extracts have been adapted slightly.

page 14 *Hikayat Abdullah*, page 186
page 26 *Hikayat Abdullah*, page 147
page 46 *Hikayat Abdullah*, pages 162 to 163
page 59 *Sejarah Melayu*, pages 63 to 64
page 80 *Memoirs of a Malayan Family*, page 82
page 84 *Hikayat Abdullah*, page 130
page 97 *Sejarah Melayu*, pages 81 to 82
page 110 *Sejarah Melayu*, pages 151 to 152
page 111 *Hikayat Abdullah*, page 174
page 158 *Sejarah Melayu*, page 179
page 162 *Hikayat Abdullah*, pages 193 to 195
page 165 *Syonan—My Story*, pages 42 to 43
page 172 *Pelayaran Abdullah*, pages 29 to 30

The passages starting on pages 12 and 166 were suggested by an article on the Japanese War Crimes Trial by Pakir Singh in *New Nation*, 17 December 1974, page 12. The passage starting on page 173 was translated by the author from *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Bab II.

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3. *Sejarah Melayu*, translated by C. C. Brown (Oxford University Press, 1970). First published in 1953 as Volume 25, Parts 2 and 3 of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.
4. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Malay Literature Series, No. 3). Extract translated by Lloyd Fernando.
5. *Pelayaran Abdullah* (Malay Literature Series, No. 2). The translated extract appears in M. B. Lewis, *Teach Yourself Malay* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1947).
6. Mamoru Shinozaki, *Syonan—My Story* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1975).

LLOYD FERNANDO was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1926, and migrated to Singapore with his family in 1938. After obtaining his PhD in Literature in English from Leeds University, he served as Head of the English Department at the University of Malaya from 1967 to 1978, then took an early retirement at 52 to study Law in London. Fernando was admitted as Advocate and Solicitor of the High Court of Malaya in 1980, at the age of 54.

Fernando is best known in the literary world for his novel *Scorpion Orchid*. His other novel, *Green is the Colour*, also explores the issues of identity and cultures in a multi-ethnic society. For his contribution to the University of Malaya, he was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus in 2005. Fernando passed away in 2008, leaving behind his wife, Marie, two daughters and four grandchildren.

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