

God of the Earth

Ho Thean Fook

2003

The Perak Academy

GOD OF THE EARTH

by Ho Thean Fook

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*Dedicated to
my granddaughters*

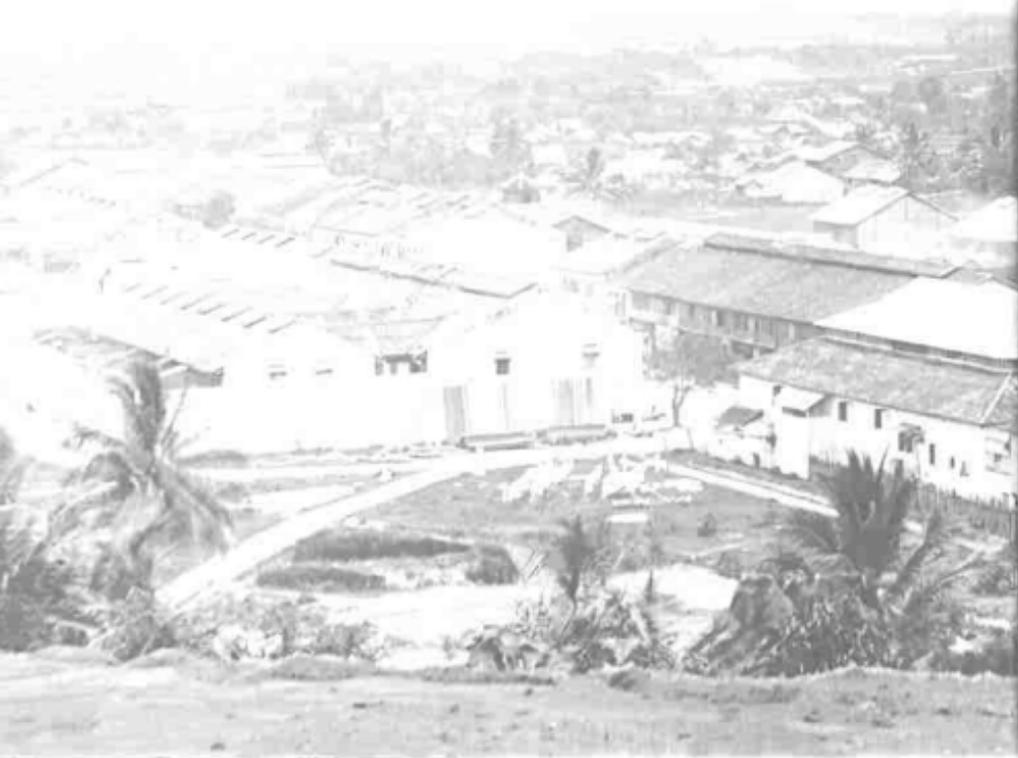
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Overview of Papan taken from the top of the Reservoir. Road on the left leads to Kong Mui village. Foreground buildings: first building on the left with the angkana tree in front is the vacant haunted house, large building in the centre is the Theatre, right of the Theatre is the Eastern Smelting Co. with its smoking chimney. The



isolated building on the right is the Government Dispensary where the author lived as a child with his family and grandparents. This is the house where his grandfather told him all these stories. (Circa 1905)

The Cover

The entrance to Papan showing Main Road with the Gunung Hijau range in the background. The white building on the left is the main market and the Theatre is at the end of Main Road facing the camera. There is a cast iron street light on the right. (Circa 1905)

Foreword



When I read Ho Thean Fook's book about his involvement with the guerilla movement against the Japanese Occupation, **Tainted Glory**, it brought back many memories. His descriptions of Papan and the other little towns outside Ipoh recalled for me my bicycle rides around the Kinta valley with my Anderson School friends and classmates before the invasion. During the Occupation, I rarely wandered far, but did manage to visit Menglembu, Papan and Pusing on a couple of occasions. The stories in **Tainted Glory** about the resistance against the Japanese, and the dangers that this brought to the district, make clear why we did not travel much during those years.

After 1945, I did have occasion to visit some of the same towns and noted the growth of population there, but our family left Ipoh for good after 1949. It was not until the year 2000, some fifty years later, before I visited Papan again. By then, it was a ghost town with only a handful of people still hanging on and living in the few houses left on the one remaining street. When I saw what remained of the famous Kathigasu clinic, the site of Sybil Kathigasu's courageous efforts on behalf of the anti-Japanese guerillas, I felt sadness for the community that had once made Papan one of the liveliest towns around Ipoh.

Why did this town not survive the growth and changes in the district? Although Kinta has not been favoured with the kind of prosperity that has overcome a city like Kuala Lumpur, it now has a large population, at least ten times the size in the 1930s. All around Ipoh are satellite towns

ving for economic development. Close by to Papan are several of these that show signs of keen commercial and industrial life. I was told that, because of the rich tin deposits underneath the town, speculators have been buying up what there is left of the town in the hope of mining those deposits. This was probably not the only cause of the town's demise, but it probably hastened its end, and drove the residents to buy new homes elsewhere.

My other reason for sadness in 2000 has now been remedied. I was afraid that Papan would disappear from the map and leave no trace, like so many mining ghost towns. Ho Thean Fook, however, made sure that this would not happen with his first book. He has now gone further with even more stories in this second volume, this time about his own family, notably those based on memories of what his grandfather recalled of events at the beginning of the 20th century. Here are stories of a quite different world, of pioneers who have come from afar, notably those from China, but also those from Sumatra, India and Britain and their relations with the local Malays. These stories remind us how much has changed, not only by describing the physical landscape of the Kinta valley at the time, but also by trying to recapture the mental and cultural landscape of the people who first decided to settle there. Incredible though the stories might seem today, the simple way Ho Thean Fook recalls what he had been told marks an authentic voice. It is a voice that should stir the memories of the old and leave arresting images in the minds of the young.

Professor Wang Gungwu

East Asian Institute

National University of Singapore

5th October, 2002

Preface



My grandfather migrated from China to Malaya in 1870 at the tender age of sixteen. He came, not because of civil wars, floods, drought, pestilence or turmoil which afflicted the country from time to time and sent waves of migrants to settle all over Southeast Asia, but to seek a better life. The stories he had heard from successful migrants who returned to visit his village fascinated him so much that he decided to come.

He registered with one of the collecting agents in China at the port of departure. He came to Malaya in a sailing junk which was typical of the mode of travelling in that period and which relied very much on the vagaries of the prevailing winds. The passengers lived no better than animals that were being transported by sea. The mortality rate on board was very high but my grandfather, having worked on his family sugar plantation since he was a boy, was physically fit and strong, and therefore able to survive the strenuous voyage. When he disembarked at Singapore he did not have to use the clandestine deals designed to exploit new arrivals from China encountered by most *sun haak* (new arrivals) as a clansman had been arranged to meet him.

I have tried to portray Malaya at the turn of the 19th century as my grandfather saw it. In what I have related I have, therefore, to give an account of the life and times of the period. Since this cannot be done without having persons to speak and act for me, I have resuscitated persons my grandfather had acquainted me with. We were then living in a large, solitary bungalow, formerly a Government clinic. We used to sit in a large open piece of airy, grassy lawn beside the building regularly after dinner.

It was the place where my grandmother's wake was held before the funeral as mentioned in my autobiography entitled **Tainted Glory** which is published by The University of Malaya.

I have introduced several incidents which occurred in different contexts. For instance, Chapters 9, 14, 19 and 20, entitled **A 'King' Is Dethroned, Kidnapped, Ordeal With A Devil, Journey In The Underworld** respectively, should be at the end of the book. Chapters 30 and 31, **Was It The Carnivorous Dragon?** and **God Killed The Monster**, should be before Chapter 6. Therefore, the story is not arranged chronologically and I have to make it cohesive and whole. I have also taken the liberty to dramatise some parts. For instance, there were no horse riders who came across the monster. It just came out of nowhere, swooped down from Kledang Hill and swallowed the six year old boy whose mother cried and prayed. In the end, the monster was killed by lightning. I have tried to convey the atmosphere and the immediacy of the monster and surroundings of the Chindits, the British guerillas who fought behind the Japanese lines in Burma and who encountered such a monster snake. They killed it by dropping bombs from the air. There were several accounts of this in the newspapers and magazines in England as well as the newspapers in Malaya shortly after the Liberation in 1945.

There was, indeed, a kidnapping in Papan in 1929 and the brave girl who led a party of men and boys to free her father is as described in Chapter 15, **To The Rescue**. She died in September 1999 at the ripe old age of 93!

When I was a child I had also lived in the house represented by the house of Cheong Siew Mei, one of the principal characters in this story. Living with us were two men, Chin Wui Fatt and Ho Low Kook – the first man was young and the other quite elderly. They were working in the *wooden dredge* in Kong Mui. They went to work early every morning by bicycle and joined the hordes of workers going in that direction. It was from them that I learnt about the place and the people living there.

The occasion when Cheong Mooi Kim encountered the devil was not fictitious. It really happened but to two boys, not one as related in the story. The first encounter happened to a boy, Ban Sue Chai, living in a liquor shop in the centre of Papan town. One dark night, while he was returning from Tampoi with two friends, he saw a ghost in the manner presented in the chapter, **Ordeal With A Devil**. He did not survive the ordeal but died of shock. The following chapter, **Journey In The Underworld**, was also neither imagined nor fictitious but real. It happened to a boy who was 19 years old then. His name was Kwan Mah Hoong and he lived in the second last house of New Town in a shop manufacturing darts for the shooting galleries in Papan and elsewhere. He 'died' for nineteen hours but recovered to tell us his story. His journey in the underworld was related to us again and again whenever we met him. He died about 50 years later at the age of 69 in Ipoh.

The story of the giant snake was related to me by no less than ten people who claimed to have seen the monster when blocks of the carcass were being ferried to Papan and then Batu Gajah. My mother saw it in Lahat when the convoy of bullock-carts was passing through the town en route to its final destination Batu Gajah where it was dumped into the Kinta River. She was thirteen years old then. Both my grandfather and grandmother also saw it. I have encountered several elderly people before and after World War Two who said they saw the carcass of the monster. Of all the people only my grandfather told me that the creature had legs. He said, "All snakes, when killed and roasted or burnt would exude legs..." as he had had occasion to eat roasted snakes when he was working in the *wild rat* mines in the jungles near Lahat.

I visited all the sites mentioned in this story as late as 1990 when Mah Kau, who was president of the Papan Tsen Lung Fui Kuon and the Papan Town committee, took me sightseeing. He took his automatic shotgun which held six buckshot cartridges and his huge Rottweiler dog with him. I also took my .22 rifle for protection. We went on foot from Kong Mui to

Kledang Hill. Mah Kau's house was situated not far from the foot of the hill but he has since moved and is now living in Ipoh.

We could not reach the site where the monster was struck by lightning because of the difficult terrain. We looked from afar and found that the stretch of barren earth had been reclaimed by nature and covered with trees and bushes. When I saw it in 1943, as a guerilla, the stretch was still barren because it was said that for 75 years nothing would grow on any piece of ground scorched by lightning. When I was a boy travelling by train to school I could see the barren stretch of brown earth. It was also visible to travellers by road then.

Foremost, I would like to thank Ong Su-ming for editing my book. Not only has she given considerable time and energy but has acted with patience and dedication towards this endeavour, for which I am extremely grateful. I would also like to thank Messrs Jeffrey Liew, Wong Yoong Sang, Law Siak Hong and Choo Koo Chai for their invaluable contributions of photographs for the production of this book. They are acknowledged wherever they appear.

Ho Thean Fook

Ipoh, Perak,
March, 2003

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Journey Into The Interior

KONG MUI¹, a village at the foot of Gunung Hijau, was at least a mile from Papan, and the footpath that led to it was hilly, with *lalang* and tall trees on either side.

On a fine morning in early September, a young man, tall and well-built, was climbing this path, leading a boy who could not have been more than nine years old. It was difficult to tell the latter's age, as most boys who came to Malaya² from China were thin and slight.

After an hour's steady climbing, the man asked, "Pak Foo, are you tired?"

"No, Uncle Yoong Fu," said the boy, shaking his head. "You forget I'm used to walking like this back home in China."

Half an hour later, they came to a farmhouse where they were greeted by the entire household, who came out to meet them. Yoong Fu had reached Kong Mui.

"Stop for a while, Yoong Fu," *Baat Sou*³ (Eighth Aunt) said. "You may not need a rest but the boy does, and a drink too."

Yoong Fu had been away from Kong Mui for nearly six months. Everyone knew he had gone to China to bring his nephew to Malaya and that he went through a collecting agent who recruited labourers to work in the tin-mines. The junk they sailed in was at sea for nearly three weeks. All that time they were given poor food and drinking water stored

1. *Kong Mui*: Hakka dialect, literally meaning "the tail-end of a district."

2. *Malaya*: Malaysia was constituted on 16th September 1963. Malaya is used to denote the period prior to 16th September 1963.

3. *Suk, Sou, Baak*: (The system used to romanise Cantonese is Yale.) Terms of respect, which also denote relationships. E.g. *Suk* is uncle, specifically younger brother of father. *Baak* is uncle, specifically older brother of father, or used to address an older man in general. *Sou* is aunt, specifically wife of older brother. Also used to address older women in general.

in dirty drums and old wooden tubs. Several people who could not stand the hardships died.

Their journey came to an end when they landed at Kota Baru, in the state of Perak. They then travelled by elephant to Batu Gajah. From there, they rode in a bullock-cart until they reached Papan.

Yoong Fu did not want to break journey but he thought of his nephew who might need a rest. As his uncle hesitated, Pak Foo made for the long bench outside the house where the family sat in the evening when they had finished work on the farm. Yoong Fu sat down beside his nephew. They were invited to go into the house but Yoong Fu preferred to rest outside as it was cooler.

Meanwhile, three boys and a girl, about Pak Foo's age, came out. They stood and stared at the strangers.

"How far away is our house from here?" Pak Foo turned to ask his uncle.

"We are almost there now," Yoong Fu told the boy cheerfully.

Just then a pretty girl of about sixteen came out of the farmhouse, bringing two cups of tea. She was the elder daughter of the family and was feeding the pigs when she heard the excited voices outside the house.

"Drink some tea," she said, looking first at Yoong Fu and then at the boy. "Excuse me, I am so untidy. I had no time to clean myself when you came."

"So this is your nephew?" asked *Baat Sou*. "He's your brother's son, isn't he?"

"Yes, this is Pak Foo," replied Yoong Fu. "I'm taking him to his parents. Six months ago, my brother asked me to go to Kaichoon Liang in China to bring him here. My brother not only paid my fare but the expenses as well. I agreed because it gave me a chance to visit our aged parents and also to look around a bit."

"What about your work?" the girl asked. "Aren't you working on a dredge?"

"He's not working on a dredge, Siew Lan," *Baat Sou* told her. "He's operating a tin-mine in a valley near Lahat."

Anxious to correct the impression that he was a miner and wealthy, Yoong Fu said, "It's not a mine. It's only a 'wild rat'."

"Mother," the girl asked, "what is a 'wild rat'?"

"It's a mine in the jungle," *Baat Sou* explained.

"It's against the law, isn't it, to work in such a mine?" enquired Cheong Tuck Choy, Siew Lan's father. "The authorities won't give you a licence even if you apply for it. Isn't that so, Yoong Fu?"

"Yes, that's so," Yoong Fu replied, "but I'm doing this only for the time being. I hope to work on a dredge one day. The wages are regular there and the work is secure although I may earn a bit more in what I am doing now."

Yoong Fu turned round to see where his nephew was. He saw that Pak Foo had already joined the three boys and their young sister in a game of hide and seek among the fruit trees.

He continued, "My nephew is quite bright for a boy of nine. If his parents won't use him on their farm I'll take him to my mine. There are always jobs to be done which are not suitable for a man."

"Taking a boy of nine to work with you?" *Baat Sou* asked.

"That doesn't seem right," added Tuck Choy. "If I were his father, I would rather have him in school."

Yoong Fu did not answer. Getting up, he moved to a vantage point. The farmstead was situated on high ground and had a commanding view overlooking the valley. Tuck Choy and his wife followed him to where he was standing.

"Tuck Choy *Baak³*," Yoong Fu said, "I did not expect to see the whole mine from here. In my brother's farm, the jungle blocks it from view."

"We were among the first to settle here so we could pick the best spot. Your brother and sister-in-law came only five years ago and had to settle further into the jungle."

Yoong Fu looked down into the valley that lay below. At the far end, near the jungle's edge, was the dredge. Smoke spouted from its tall chimney so that it looked like a steamship. In its wake was a large

expanse of white sand. As the dredge moved about in all directions, digging relentlessly, separating tin from earth, discharging waste, the expanse of white sand grew bigger and bigger day by day. After nearly ten years, the land the dredge had laid waste covered an area no less than thirty acres.

Houses were built on the land. First, houses were built for the people who were working on the dredge. These were the staff quarters which were occupied by the workers and their families. Then wooden houses were built for different businesses, such as sundry shops, coffee-shops and dhobies.

Papan Tin Dredging Company was one of the first few machine-driven mines started by the British in Malaya at the beginning of the twentieth century. After having successfully mined coal and other minerals in England, some enterprising British engineers turned their attention to Malaya to mine tin. They came to this valley in the foothills of Gunung Hijau and built a dredge. So successful were they that other European dredging companies were formed in different parts of the country, wherever electricity was available and where tin deposits were found, in places where the ground was not too hard or rocky.

In time, a 10-bed hospital was also built by the company. It became so popular that not only its workers and their families benefited from it, but the residents of Kong Mui often went there to seek treatment. Later on, a maternity ward and an infant welfare clinic were set up. An elderly, experienced Indian dresser or male nurse was put in charge and the company engaged a visiting doctor, a highly qualified European physician, to come around once a week to attend to seriously ill patients or any European staff who fell sick.

Dr Stuart McDougle, MBBS LRCP MRCP (Edinburgh), was based in the nearby town of Batu Gajah. He had a private clinic there and was retained by several European estates and a few dredging companies. He was the first person in Perak to ride a motor-cycle. Whenever he passed through Papan and came to Kong Mui, children would line up on both sides of the road to watch him go by. A curious crowd would gather

wherever the machine was parked. The noise it made and the blasts it sometimes gave, when the starter was kicked, attracted not only the children but also the adults in the village.

The European settlement in the valley of Gunung Hijau was not unlike an English village. It lay with rolling hills on one side and, on the other, wherever it had been mined and the earth laid waste by the dredge, the land was as bare as the English moors.

Kong Mui had come into existence because of dredging and it was owned and controlled by a London tin-mining company. It was almost like a village in China. There were no boundaries to separate the houses of the farmers. Together with the farmsteads which depended on the dredge for a living, Kong Mui had a population of not less than one thousand.

"Why is the dredge called a wooden dredge?" Yoong Fu asked *Baat Sou*. "Surely, it needs iron and steel to do the kind of work it is doing?"

"Because it uses wooden planks to cover its sides and also wood for its roof," explained *Baat Sou*, "and it works by steam, which is why you see smoke coming out of its chimney."

"How do you know so much about dredges?" asked Yoong Fu.

"I used to pan for tin-ore from the earth left behind by the dredge," *Baat Sou* told him. "I stopped working only after Siew Lan was born."

"We have to go now. Thank you for the tea," said Yoong Fu.

"Come back and see us soon," *Baat Sou* and Tuck Choy said as they walked back to the house where the children were still playing.

2

At His Parents' House

AT THE ENTRANCE to the farm of Pak Foo's parents was a shrine. It was made up of a small red stone with gold Chinese characters, *Daaht Dou Gung*⁴, which stood for *Datoh of the Jungle*, and was housed in a small concrete hut. Inside were a packet of joss-sticks, some red candles, a bundle of joss paper and a box of matches. They had been put there by Pak Foo's mother to be used by anybody who wished to pray to the *Datoh*.

Yoong Fu went to the shrine, took out six joss-sticks and lighted them. He gave three to his nephew and said, "Pak Foo, pay attention and look at what I'm doing."

The young man knelt down before the shrine. He moved the joss-sticks up and down several times and mumbled, "Honourable *Daaht Dou Gung*, Ho Pak Foo has come from Kaichoon Liang in Tsen Sang Province of China to live with his father, Ho Yoong Sin, and mother, Chew Choo Moy. Please protect him as you have been protecting us. He will also come and pray to you, and light joss-sticks at your shrine every festival."

He got up and placed the joss-sticks in the urn already full of the burnt ends of joss-sticks and candle sticks covered with wax. Pak Foo, who was observing his uncle closely, did the same. Yoong Fu then took two red candles, lighted them and gave them to his nephew.

"Take these and place them next to the joss-sticks," he said.

Yoong Fu then took a brown bundle of joss paper, untied it and set it alight. He twirled the burning joss paper three times over the deity and laid it beside the shrine. They then went into the compound and entered the house.

4. *Daaht Dou Gung (Datoh)* is a deity which the Chinese, working in the jungle at jobs like lumbering, cultivation or mining, pray to. It is believed that he is a Muslim. Therefore, offerings put at his altar can be chicken, tea and fruits, and must not include pork.

The mother was the first to see them. She gave a shout of joy and, clasping her son's shoulders with both hands, called loudly, "*Louh Gung! Louh Gung!* (Husband! Husband!) Come and see who's here!"

Ho Yoong Sin came out from the back of the house into the hall. As soon as he caught sight of his son, tears came to his eyes.

"I was worried for your safety," the father said, "especially when you were crossing the sea." Turning to Yoong Fu he asked, "Was the weather bad?"

"Yes, brother," said Yoong Fu. "Our junk was rocked about by big waves and strong winds."

Yoong Sin squatted in front of his son to look at him more closely. He said, "Never mind, son. The important thing is that you have arrived safe and sound. Heaven has delivered you to us. When your mother and I came, we too ran into bad weather. The wind blew hard and whistled and roared through the sails. Waves almost as high as our house smashed on the side of our sailing-ship, throwing us all over the place."

After Yoong Sin and Choo Moy had a good look at their son, the woman said, "I will cook some food. After such a long and difficult journey, you two must be very hungry."

In the excitement of their arrival and meeting his parents after such a long time, Pak Foo had forgotten everything else, but now he realized how hungry he was. After their meal, Yoong Fu washed the cups, bowls, plates, spoons and chopsticks, wiped them dry and placed them on a rack in the kitchen. He put the leftovers in a cupboard and then went into his room to take a nap while Pak Foo looked around him.

His parents' house and the other structures on the farm were made of wood and *attap* (woven palm-leaves).

The hall was the main part of the house. In it were a table, some stools and a long bench. On the table were a teapot and a bowl in which were four teacups immersed in water. Beside the hall, on the right, was a large room occupied by his parents. There were two more rooms on the left, the front room being occupied by Yoong Fu. In the back wall of the house was a door opening to the kitchen, which was built of hardened

mud and stones set near a wall of corrugated iron sheets. There were no other walls enclosing this structure. A large iron awning, fixed to the wall above the back door, extended over the stove and a cupboard, cooking utensils and firewood. A kettle, a pot and a frying pan were on top of the stove.

The bathroom beside a stream was a small *attap* hut, the entrance covered with a gunny sack. Since the hut extended a few feet into the stream, anyone who wanted to bathe had only to scoop up water with a coconut shell to pour over the body. The latrine, situated some distance away, was the smallest building on the farm. Its entrance was also covered by a sack cloth and inside was a hole dug into the ground. Each time after it was used, ash was sprinkled into the hole.

The pigs were kept in a large shed a few yards from the house near the chicken-run. Beside it was a hut where farm tools were kept. Both the pig-sty and chicken-run were fenced with barbed wire so that the animals would be protected from tigers and civet-cats.

The pigs were mainly fed trunks of banana trees which were scrapped, chopped into small pieces and mixed with ground paddy husk. They also ate leaves of sweet potatoes and young tapioca shoots. The pigs were usually kept inside the sty and not allowed to run about so that they would be fat when they were sold. Another reason was to prevent them from joining the wild boars which usually roamed near their farm.

Pig dung was washed down to the fishpond when the animals were bathed every morning. The fish fed on the droppings, grass cuttings and, sometimes, young tapioca shoots. As manure for the vegetables and fruit trees, the farmers used human waste, chicken droppings and leaves which were swept together and burnt. They sometimes also used compost made up of leaves and decaying matter, buried and allowed to rot. Pig dung was also used but it had to be dried in the sun and made into blocks convenient to be taken to where they were needed.

"What do you grow here, father?" the boy asked.

Yoong Sin was smoking a water-pipe, as he accompanied his son who was walking about the farm.

"All kinds of vegetables," he said and stopped walking.

He pulled out a short tube from the pipe and blew out the wet tobacco ashes. He replaced it, took out a pinch of red tobacco from a small pouch tied to his belt, filled the pipe again, lighted it and puffed until the water inside the pipe made a gurgling sound.

"We plant leafy vegetables like *baahk choi*, *choi sam*, and also spring onions, leeks, brinjals, lady's fingers, chillies, cucumber and long beans." Yoong Sin pointed to the edge of the jungle, "On the higher level, we plant tapioca and pineapple. These serve more as a boundary than anything else because the wild boars dig up the roots of the tapioca and eat them and the monkeys and squirrels often come to eat the pineapples. In the lower ground near the stream, where the soil is always moist and wet, we plant yam and *kangkong*. We also plant papaya, mango, rambutan and jackfruit trees which bring us extra income. When *A Suk* is free he sits in the hut and, when the pests come, he shoots them with a catapult. This job we want you to do now that you are here."

"Oh, good. I like to do that," Pak Foo said. "I'll also patrol the border with a catapult and shoot at the monkeys and squirrels to drive them away as we do to the birds in the paddy-fields in China." He paused and, after a while, continued, "Father, why don't you build scarecrows or other things attached to strings? These can be pulled from our rooms to raise the alarm. Such devices are very useful at night and can be worked without having to go out into the open when animals are about."

"I use fire-crackers to scare the pests away," his father said, "but then the wild pigs get used to the noise. I've to go outside and beat kerosene tins to frighten them. They've become so bold now that they come during the day."

Evening was coming on. A fairly strong wind had sprung up and was rustling the leaves of the fruit tree under which they were standing. A thin mist was moving towards them from the valley below, coming up faster as the wind became stronger. Pak Foo heard something drop to the ground not far from them.

"It's a mango." The father went to pick it up. He looked at the fruit and said, "It's ripe and not rotting. It must be delicious."

"Keep it for Pak Foo to eat," said the mother, who had joined them. "I don't think he has eaten a mango before. It doesn't grow in China."

"I can feel a storm building up," said Yoong Fu, as he came out of the house. He stood at the doorway of the kitchen. "It's going to rain soon."

When they went into the house, rain began to fall, dripping lightly on the roof at first and then becoming heavier. There were bright flashes of lightning and loud peals of thunder. The wind blew with such force that the house shook and the rafters of the roof creaked.

"Where shall I sleep, mother?" Pak Foo asked, looking around.

"We planned to put you and *A Suk* together in one bed," the mother said. "Since you want to have a room to yourself you can have the vacant room."

"But there's no bed there," the boy said.

"We can make one," Yoong Fu told him. He, too, would like to sleep alone and would not mind making a bed for his nephew.

Yoong Fu set to work. As it was already dark, he went into his room and took out his lamp, a wick floating in a bowl of oil, which he placed on a three-legged stool in one corner of the room. He found two old brooms and sawed the handles into four lengths. He nailed the lengths to two planks making two long benches. He placed the benches about four feet apart and nailed more planks across them in the shape of a bed. The planks had been taken from the pig-sty and were spares they kept for an emergency. The father now hung up a mosquito net while the mother brought a straw mat and spread it over the planks. The bed was ready to sleep on.

Pak Foo said, "We have forgotten one thing, mother. A pillow. I need one when I sleep."

"And a blanket too," the father added. "Although Malaya is a tropical country it is quite cold at night on a farm in the jungle."

Choo Moy brought a clay pillow shaped like a brick into the room and put it on the bed. It was three inches high, five inches broad and six inches long.

"You can go to bed now, son," the father said. "It should be comfortable."

"Yes," Pak Foo said. "Good night, father! Good night, mother! Good night, *A Suk!* Sleep well."

The temperature had by now dropped and it was cool and comfortable enough for Pak Foo to sleep soundly, for the boy had come from a country where the weather was cold all the time except in summer.





At Home With His Parents

PAK FOO was awakened by a loud explosion, followed by shouting and the din of a tin being beaten. Was his father at it again? Earlier in the night he had set off a cracker and thrown it into the edge of the jungle. Immediately after the cracker exploded he began to beat a tin and shout at the top of his voice.

"Poor father," thought Pak Foo. "During the day he has to work and at night he has to frighten wild boars away. Doesn't he sleep at all?"

He decided to put his plan to work as soon as possible. He would hang an empty kerosene or coconut oil tin up a tree near the boundary. Inside the tin would be a short stick or a small piece of rock, tied like a hammer, which would hit the side of the tin when the string was pulled. He planned to set up three alarms in the farm, each with a string leading into his room.

Pak Foo lay in bed. He was tired and all the muscles of his body were still aching from the rigours of the long voyage and the slow and tiresome journey to the farm. The light of the oil lamp was out. His mother must have blown it out after he had fallen asleep. On the floor beside his bed was a new pair of wooden clogs. In China, he went about barefoot. But he was given a pair of slippers made of hay, when he took the buffalo to graze after harvest or when he went to cut grass or sweet potato leaves to feed the animals.

He felt sleepy as he had eaten too much for dinner. He had a faint recollection of having eaten bowls of rice and chicken, gravy and fried vegetables. During the night he had wanted to urinate but did not like to go out in the dark. When he heard his father's footsteps coming back, he got up, opened the back door and went outside. As he walked

towards the latrine, beside which was the large jar for urinating in, he saw his father.

"Father, what are you doing outside the house at such an hour?" called Pak Foo, to let his father know that he, too, was outside.

It was not good for the older man to come face to face suddenly with him. Some people with weak hearts might faint and it was widely believed that people had fallen dead, due to meeting others unexpectedly in the dark. His father did not answer but stopped in his tracks.

Pak Foo said, "Father, will you please hang the lantern on some branches so that I can use it on my way back?"

"I'd better wait and keep you company," his father replied. "I'll wait till you've finished and accompany you back to the house. It's always better to come outside with a lantern because you can avoid stepping on snakes or centipedes lying across your path."

The jungle was full of noises. There was the monotonous call of the night jar, *tok, tok, tok, tok*, and the high-pitched cries of insects. Some monkeys, startled by the explosion of crackers and the banging of the tin, were still chattering excitedly. Bats were also flying about swooping down on insects. They sometimes came so near as to be quite scary.

All this Pak Foo was not familiar with and had to get used to.

"Thank you, father," the boy said.

When Pak Foo went back to bed, he could not sleep. As he turned about, he could see, through the window, the moon above the jagged outline of trees. His bed seemed to rock, as if he were still on the ship on a rough sea, as if he were riding on the swaying back of the elephant or travelling by bullock-cart to Papan.

He fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, the sun was already high in the sky. Pak Foo looked about him wondering where he was. When he heard his mother's wooden clogs, clacking on the hardened mud floor as she went about her daily chores, and his father talking to Yoong Fu, he knew he

was on land and in Malaya. He jumped out of bed and went out of the room, wishing everybody a good morning.

"Go and wash your face in the basin," his mother told him. "There's hot water in the kettle. Pour as much hot water into your basin as you like. Your towel is already there."

"Would you like to go to the mine with me?" Yoong Fu asked his nephew, when he had washed his face and brushed his teeth. "If you do, you'll have to change and eat your breakfast quickly because I am almost ready to start."

"Yes, *A Suk*," Pak Foo replied. He was very excited and rushed into his room to change. He did not have any rubber shoes and so took his mother's to put on as his father's did not fit him.

His father called after him, "Pak Foo, Pak Foo! I thought you're going to build your alarm system to-day. You promised to do it."

"Not today, father," the boy called out from his room. "Building such things takes time. I will do it tomorrow."

"All right, all right," the father said. "Don't give *A Suk* any trouble when you are with him."

There were a few things to be taken to the mine. He had to take along a *cangkul*, a cutting knife, two empty pails, their lunch in a basket and a bottle of water. When Pak Foo came out of the house, he saw his uncle waiting, sitting on the long bench under a tree. The latter got up and, pointing to the things on the ground, said, "Pak Foo, you carry the *cangkul* and lunch basket. I'll carry the rest."

Yoong Fu tied the handles of the two pails on to the carrying pole, squatted under it, stood up and lifted it on his shoulder. "Put the knife into one pail and the bottle of water into the other to balance it."

The boy did as he was told. He then carried the *cangkul* with the long handle slung across his shoulder. The basket was put in front using the metal spade turned upwards as a catch. In this way they went, down the slope, along the path by which Pak Foo and his uncle had come the day before.

It was like a spring morning in China. The sky was blue, the air clear and fragrant. The sun shone on the distant blue mountains, flooding the land with its cheerful light. The birds livened the atmosphere with their melodious songs. Everywhere were green plants and bushes with little red, yellow and purple flowers.

His uncle was familiar with all the plants in the area and had learned what they were good for because he wanted to own a Chinese medicine shop one day. He was also able to tell Pak Foo about the insects and animals living in the area. Butterflies of various colours flitted from one plant to another and the bees drifted from flower to flower busily collecting pollen.

Soon they reached *Baat Sou's* house. When they went into the compound, they saw Siew Mei, the younger daughter, playing catching stones with her sister in the shade of a large *angsana* tree.

The game began by throwing down a handful of pebbles within a circle drawn on the ground. The first player then picked up a pebble and, throwing it up, tried to pick up as many as possible from the ground and catch the falling pebble with the same hand. If the player failed to catch it, or if any pebble fell outside the circle, the game was lost. The loser was the one who collected the least number of stones. The penalty was carried out by the winner or winners flicking the knuckles of the loser, whose hand was spread out on the ground.

The three boys were in front of their house, squatting and gazing into a tub on the ground. They were agitating two crickets with a blade of grass to make them fight. Pak Foo knew this game well, for he had also played it before. In ancient China, young emperors and princes had been known to play this game.

The boys and both the girls had pig-tails. Yoong Fu said to his nephew, "You, too, must grow a pig-tail like them. In China, you are allowed to grow one only when you are older but here it is different. Even children have to have one. Choong Tet, the youngest boy, already has a pig-tail."

"How old were you when you had your pig-tail?" Pak Foo asked.

"When I was about your age," Yoong Fu said, "because I, too, came from China. I found that if I didn't have it, other boys would boycott me."

The children turned to look at them as they entered the compound. The girls immediately stopped playing and Siew Lan stood up. She smoothed her dress with her hand and tossed her pig-tail over her shoulder. She would always tidy herself when she saw Yoong Fu.

Choong Tet, the youngest boy of the Cheong family, rushed out to meet his friends. The other two boys stopped the match, took the crickets gently in their hands and put them back into separate cigarette tins with holes punched in the covers for ventilation.

"Yoong Fu *Suk*, Yoong Fu *Suk*," cried Choong Tet, "please let us go to your mine. We like to see how you work."

Yoong Fu did not reply immediately. Taking off his large brimmed straw hat, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt which was made of dull blue drill. His pants were also made of the same strong heavy cloth. The two open sides of his shirt were fastened by strings. For a belt, he used a piece of manila hemp as thick as a child's finger.

"I don't mind if your parents allow you," Yoong Fu said. "You get their permission first."

"I would like to go, too," Choong Sin, the second brother said.

"Me too," Siew Mei, the youngest girl said. "Don't leave me out."

Then the mother came out of the house. Before she could say a word, Siew Mei went to her and asked, "Mother, will you allow me to go with Yoong Fu *Suk* and Pak Foo to their mine?"

Before *Baat Sou* could answer, all the three boys gathered around her. They were looking anxiously at their mother when their father came out. "You boys may go," he said, "but not the girls."

"No, father," Siew Mei cried. "Where the boys go, I go too."

"Let her go, father," Siew Lan said. "Nothing will happen to her with this mob. Together, they can kill a tiger."

"Aren't you coming with us?" Yoong Fu said to Siew Lan.

"No, Yoong Fu *Go*⁵," she said. "I've work to do. This is the time of the festival."

"What festival?" Pak Foo asked.

"The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods," the mother said. "We don't eat meat during this week. Tomorrow is the final day. We have a holiday and will go to the temple in Kong Mui village to pray to the Nine Emperor Gods."

"I'd like to go there to pray," Pak Foo said. "Do I have to wait another year for the festival to come again?"

"But there are always other festivals when you can go and pray and give offerings to the gods in the temple," Tuck Choy said. "Your mother always goes to the temples to pray for prosperity."

Yoong Fu interrupted them, "If you want to go to the mine, we have to leave now."



5. *Go*: (Cantonese) older brother, often used to address an older male person, not necessarily related.

4

What Is A 'Wild Rat' Mine?

THEY CAME DOWN the slope to the bottom of a valley lying between two ranges of mountains. Behind them were the farms they had left behind and in front were grass-covered rolling hills.

The road which ran from Papan to the dredge wound through this valley. It was used by bullock-carts and carriages drawn by horses carrying the European ladies and their families, travelling to and from Kong Mui and Batu Gajah, the capital of the district of Kinta. The men usually rode horses and went along with the carriages. They seldom stopped at Papan except to water their horses.

The European families went to the church in Batu Gajah on Sunday or attended parties organised by other Europeans, who were either Government officers, rubber planters, estate managers or managers and engineers working in other dredging companies.

"This road was built by the Papan Dredging Company," Yoong Fu told his nephew. "It is used for transport now but when it was being built, it carried materials to the wooden dredge."

"Is this the path by which we came, *A Suk*?" asked Pak Foo.

"It certainly is," said Choong Chee, the eldest boy of the Cheong family. "There is no other way except over the mountains."

They crossed the road and climbed a footpath which led to a grass-covered hill. The *lalang* was tall and sharp at the edges which was why Yoong Fu had told everyone to wear long sleeved clothing.

"Move along carefully," Yoong Fu warned them. "The *lalang* can cut your skin and the wound is very itchy."

The path led from one hill to another until it reached Lahat which was four miles away. There was no sound of birds except in the valleys below where wild boars hid among clusters of palm-trees and clumps of

bushes in the heat of the day. The *lalang* was tall and yellow and was so thick the soil could not be seen. It held the rain that seeped into the ground and came out to join the stream in the valley below. The top of this hill was bare, as were the other hill-tops, where monkeys gathered after raiding the farms in the plains below. They did this often to check if any member of their group was missing or wounded.

When Yoong Fu and the children reached the top, they stopped to admire the view. To the north, the hills were also grass-covered and continued to the horizon until they became hazy. On their left, on the top of a solitary hillock, was a bungalow surrounded by cultivated trees and plants. Behind them was the road they had crossed. Over the years since the earth began, lightning had struck the tops of these hills, wind had swept across them, rain had fallen on them gently or with full force. Yet the hills were still there.

"Yoong Fu *Suk*, what is that beautiful bungalow?" Siew Mei pointed. "Does anyone live there?"

"An English engineer lives there," Yoong Fu said. "He's the chief engineer of the dredge and has a foreman and two mechanics working under him."

"Why does he live alone, all by himself?" asked Choong Sin, the second brother. "He can pick and choose to live in a house anywhere in Kong Mui if he wants."

"Englishmen are strange people," commented Choong Chee. "They like to live in far away and lonely places. Given a chance, I would live in Papan where there are three restaurants and two coffee-shops and a theatre to go to. There are also many people in the town. Here, there are more trees than human beings. You can't talk to trees and animals, can you?"

Nobody could explain the mentality of the Europeans to Choong Chee and his friends. All they knew was work and earn money, grow up and get married, have children and bring them up as their parents did. Pak Foo and his family came from China where the people faced great hardships and where there were floods, drought, famines, diseases and civil wars. Sometimes when it rained, it came down non-stop, ruining the

crops, and when there was a drought, the land became dry and parched and crops failed resulting in famine. Outbreaks of diseases also brought misery and much suffering to the people.

Yoong Fu and his party reached the top and went down the slope. They wound around the waist of the next hill and continued to struggle along until they reached a point where the path became so unclear that even Yoong Fu found it difficult to follow. He had not come this way for quite a long time and grass covered the path. In the distance they could see a mound of brown earth with a hut nearby.

"We are quite near the mine now," Yoong Fu said. "It's over there."

When they heard that, the children quickened their pace and soon reached the mine.

"Put everything in the hut and let us rest for a while," said Yoong Fu.

"Look at the structure before you," Yoong Fu sat down with the children around him. "That is a *palong*, a wooden sluice about two feet broad and six feet long. You can see it is suspended on three pairs of wooden beams, each pair with another beam slung across.⁶ The top end of this *palong* rests on the edge of a small platform built on the side of a hill. The *palong* slopes down to about one foot above the water hole where excess water is drained off. The water hole is about the size of a large round table."

"So this is a 'wild rat' mine, *A Suk*?" asked Pak Foo.

"Yes, it is," Yoong Fu said. "A 'wild rat' mine is actually a small mine which is worked without a licence. Here I wash and purify tin ore taken out from the ground."

Yoong Fu was glad that so many boys had come. The girl too could do her share, small though she might be. Perhaps she could do panning, called *dulang* washing, a job normally done by girls and women. His problem now was how to put to use the young farm-hands and divide the work among them.

6. It was also the practice to have the 'wild rat' mine *palong* lay on the ground with planks fixed on the two sides.

"Choong Chee," said Yoong Fu, as he got up. "Since you are the oldest and strongest, you will do the digging." Pointing to the side of the hill where the barren brown earth showed, he added, "You will dig there and fill the pails with earth."

Turning to the second brother, he said, "And you, Choong Sin, will carry the pails to the foot of the ladder where Pak Foo will be waiting. He will carry the pails, climb up the ladder and pour the earth into the *palong*. I will then open the water gate and let the water flow down the *palong*. The earth will settle and pile up, clogging the dividers called cataracts, the wooden pieces you can see built across the *palong* about six inches apart. I will then release more water and use the *cangkul* to drag on the earth and level it. The water flowing over it will wash the earth down to the pool, leaving behind the pebbles containing minerals, gravel and tin ore. We will pick up the pebbles and rocks, put them into pails and carry them to the hut for pounding. When they become dust, we carry it down to the pool for panning to separate the tin particles from rock dust."

"What about me?" asked Siew Mei eagerly. "The boys are given jobs, but not me. Yoong Fu *Suk*, please let me do something."

"I haven't forgotten you, Siew Mei," Yoong Fu said. "I have a special job for you. It was what your mother did when she was working in the dredge, panning for tin-ore at the bottom of the pool where the *palong* dumps its waste."

"Will there be any ore left?" Choong Chee asked.

"Besides the pounded rocks and stones which will be handed to Siew Mei, there will always be some ore washed over the cataracts," Yoong Fu said. "This happens in open cast mines as well as in dredges. That is why we find *dulang* washing all over the country."

"That leaves you, Choong Tet, without a job," Yoong Fu said, looking about him. "You had better be a messenger, carrying things needed by any section, and do what the others tell you."

"Why can't I be given a real job?" complained the boy. "Even Siew Mei is doing something useful."

"All right, all right," Yoong Fu said. "You may go up the *palong* with me to pick up the pebbles and rocks for pounding and take them to Siew Mei to pan. Since this won't keep you busy all the time, you will also carry messages for me to the others. Alright?"

"Yes, Yoong Fu *Suk*," replied Choong Tet quickly, quite proud of his new job.

Yoong Fu set the team to work. He first gave the order for digging earth to begin. There was no need to teach Choong Chee this as digging was a task almost every boy who grew up on a farm knew. Carrying heavy things about was another. Choong Sin carried the two pails of gravel with the pole slung on his shoulder and trod from the digging site to the foot of the low ladder. Although Siew Mei had heard a lot from her mother about panning, she had to be shown how before she was able to do it properly. Controlling the flow of water and dragging the *cangkul* on the gravel caught in the cataract to split it and make it flow with the water required some special skill. This Yoong Fu did himself because too much water released would result in the tin-ore being washed down to the pool and too little water would not wash even the sand and earth away.

Yoong Fu had to direct the whole operation running all over the place to make sure everyone was doing the work properly. At the same time, he had to do some work himself but the children loved what they were doing and carried out their tasks well. After sometime, work began to slow down in one sector and then in another until it stopped altogether. Yoong Fu knew they were tired.

"Let's take a rest," he said. "We'll have our lunch."

They went to the hut and Yoong Fu took out some dumplings.

"There's only one dumpling for each of you," Yoong Fu said, "because I didn't expect so many of you to come today. There's also one bottle of water and we have to share it among ourselves."

"Perhaps we can get some water from the stream," suggested Choong Chee. "The water beyond the lock gate should be clear and clean."

"Don't drink any unboiled water in the jungle," warned Pak Foo.

"Then boil it," Yoong Fu said. "I have a kettle somewhere in the hut."

Pak Foo found the kettle hanging on a beam of the hut. He took it down, filled it with water taken upstream. He also found a packet of tea-leaves, put some into the kettle and began to boil it.

"If the tea cannot satisfy hunger," Choong Sin said, trying to comfort everyone, "it will make us less hungry."

After their lunch and a short rest, they continued working for another hour. When they stopped, they had nearly one pail of tin ore, the most Yoong Fu had ever got in a day's work.

They made a pretty sight when they were on their way home. Yoong Fu, leading the group, wore a broad brimmed straw hat and light blue cotton clothes now soiled with mud. The boys' wet khaki clothes were also covered with mud and they also wore the broad brimmed straw hats they used when they did gardening. Siew Mei was dressed differently. Her blouse was not opened in the middle but at the side, with the loose cloth pulled over to the left and secured by cotton 'buttons'. Her hat was also broad brimmed but was made of several layers of thick cotton sewed together to make it hard. All round the edge of the hat was a cotton band, about two inches wide, which flapped about in the wind.

"Did you always work alone?" Choong Chee asked Yoong Fu.

"I had a man and his wife working for me at one time," Yoong Fu said, "but they left when I returned from my trip to China. I will have to work alone from now on, doing the work you all did, unless one of you would like to work for me."

"I'll come and work for you, Yoong Fu *Suk*," Choong Chee said, "if father allows me. I don't like to work on the farm all the time. I want to be independent and earn my own living."

"I shall be glad to have you working for me," said Yoong Fu. "Ask your parents first and see if they would allow you to."

"Yoong Fu *Suk*," Choong Sin said. "Why aren't we walking through the valley? It's easier than climbing hills."

"It certainly is," agreed Yoong Fu. "But there are several old mining holes along the route which are concealed by grass and undergrowth. So it is dangerous to travel along it because we might fall into the mining holes. You know, snakes are found in nearly all the holes. If the fall doesn't kill you, the snakes will. Cobras or pythons love to live in old abandoned mining holes."

"Were the holes dug to get tin-ore also?" Choong Sin asked. "How did they do it?"

"They did as what we were doing," Yoong Fu said. "For instance, they dug into the ground like digging a well and took the excavated earth to a stream to pan as Siew Mei did. They also pounded the rocks or stones with a *kaki lesong* the way people pound paddy in a kampong."

"I still don't understand how they did it," Choong Chee said. "When I was digging I moved to another spot when the hole on the hill slope became too deep. What did they do when the hole got deeper and deeper?"

"The digging went downwards until they came to a vein of tin-ore on the wall," Yoong Fu explained. "Then they dug sideways following the vein. As they went further inwards, they put up planks supported by beams overhead to keep the earth from falling down. The earth was carried away and hauled up to the surface the way people draw water from a well."

"Do you call such a method 'wild rat' mining also?" Pak Foo asked.

"Yes," Yoong Fu said. "This method was so widely used in Lahat in the old days that the ground on which the town stands is said to be riddled with underground tunnels. One part of the town is lower than the other due to the collapse of some underground mines. Since it is so dangerous to dig tin ore this way, the authorities have put a stop to it. That is why mining activities in any form have to be licensed."

Not only did Yoong Fu get more tin ore for the day, he was also returning home earlier.

5

Working In The Farm

THE NEXT MORNING, when Pak Foo came into the farm, his father had already spent an hour pulling up the weeds on the east side.

Now, the latter was carrying two large tins slung from a pole on his shoulder and going towards the edge of the jungle. He did not have to strain to go up the slope although the load was quite heavy. When he reached the creeper plants, he put down the watering cans in the lane separating two vegetable beds. Since bitter gourd, cucumber and long beans grow on creepers, long twigs were stuck into the ground, crossing each other, to let them climb.

Slipping the pole from his shoulders, his father lifted one can with both hands, tilted it and, pointing at the roots of the climbing plants, began to spray. He moved along the lane wetting as many of the stalks as possible until the can was empty. He went back to get the other can and began to spray the other beds. When this was finished, he went back to the stream to get more water and returned to water one row after another until he finished watering all the plants on the slope.

In about an hour he came to level ground. The work was not so difficult here. By tilting the spouts of both cans and walking between the beds, he managed to water the vegetables on both sides simultaneously.

When Ho Yoong Sin first started, he used smaller cans until he got used to it. He always did the difficult work on the slopes first when he was still fresh and worked his way to the level ground. He would do the less difficult work last.

Chew Choo Moy, Pak Foo's mother, was tying paper wrapping or cut-up old clothes on the young cucumbers and other gourds to prevent insects and wasps from attacking them. When this was finished, she swept the ashes, dry leaves, rotting wood, grass, twigs and chicken and

duck droppings into the rubbish pits behind the house. She then went to the shed near the pig-sty and, sitting on a young banana-tree trunk lying on the floor, scraped it and then chopped it into small pieces. She put these into a large tub and mixed them with rice bran to feed the pigs, fowls and ducks.

Farmers believed that bathing pigs after feeding them made them fat and heavy. Carrying two wooden buckets into the shack, she scooped up the water and threw it on the pigs. She continued until every animal had received a generous amount of water over its body. Using a mop tied to a long bamboo pole, she scrubbed them. She then went to the pool and pulled up the slide door to let the water and pig dung flow into the fish pond. The fishes rushed forward to feed on the dung. The green grass and young tapioca leaves she had put into the water earlier in the morning had already been eaten up by the fishes.

Pak Foo watched as both his father and mother worked. He began to think about what their lives had been before they left their home in China. They had been living in a large, old house left by his grandfather whom Pak Foo remembered as a very firm old man. After the grandfather died, the household became disorderly and quarrels often took place among the family members. His father, being the sixth son in a family of nine, was left without any authority and hardly any money. The family depended on a large piece of land where they planted paddy, vegetables and sugar cane. The rice and vegetables were for their own use, but the sugar cane was sold to a mill. The eldest son controlled the money. He often went to the city to gamble so there was very little left for his brothers and their families.

Suddenly Pak Foo realised he was sitting on the ground doing nothing and felt ashamed of himself. As he got up he asked, "Is there anything I can I do, mother?"

"You can do a lot," his mother said. "For instance, you can take the bedding, blankets and pillow covers in our room and in *A Suk's* room and put them out in the sun to air. I am dirty all over and can't do that myself."

Pak Foo did as he was told, taking everything out and hanging them on bamboo poles to air. After completing this, he did not know what else to do when his mother called out.

"Pak Foo," she said. "I am going back to the house to prepare lunch."

"Please do as you wish, mother," Pak Foo said. "I'll take over any work you haven't finished." He had become fonder of his mother since he came to Malaya and saw her again after such a long absence.

He could not help thinking of his mother again as she walked back to the house. The sun was shining on her, for it was late morning. Her face was dripping with sweat and covered with dirt as she moved away from the shade into the open. She wore a plain blue cotton coat and trousers and was very dark as she had been in the hot sun all day long for several years now. Otherwise, she looked the same as when he last saw her. She was not only soft spoken but talked only when spoken to, a habit which was forced upon her after having lived with a large family in China, in her own family as well as after she was married to his father.

His thoughts were interrupted by his father who passed near him. He stopped idling and went off to work. He went to the west side where the land was lying fallow. He loosened the earth and built long beds and dug narrow trenches in the middle of the beds. Into these trenches he spread out the dried leaves, grass, chicken and duck droppings taken from the dump. He also put dried pig dung into them and covered them with earth.

His father, after having taken a rest, was also building beds in another section of the farm. Instead of using dry manure, he dug up the waste from the latrine and buried it in the beds to make them fertile for planting vegetables such as cabbage, spinach, lettuce, brinjal, radish and yam. He then went to the large urine jar which the men used and emptied it into the watering cans. After mixing the urine with water, he sprayed it on the leafy vegetables and chilly plants.

Then Chew Choo Moy came out of the house carrying two large cups of *huhng dauh sa* (sweet red bean soup). She called out, "Take a rest

now and eat your lunch." She went back into the house and came out with a large plate containing *wu tauh gou* (yam rice pudding). After lunch they rested for a while. While Ho Yoong Sin sat on a stool to enjoy smoking his water pipe, Pak Foo felt that he had enough work for one day and decided to call it a day.

When Yoong Sin resumed work, his wife joined him. He put on a large, broad brimmed straw hat and his wife wore the triple layer broad brimmed cotton hat that Siew Mei wore when she went to work in Yoong Fu's 'wild rat mine'.

"Let us work in the nursery," Yoong Sin said. "The young plants are old enough to be transferred to the beds."

While the woman dug holes in a new bed, the man went into a shed and, gently digging up the young plants, planted them in the holes. He then covered the transplanted vegetables with earth. Next they took out coconut leaves and placed them on supports they had put up to prevent the young delicate vegetables from being damaged by the hot sun. When they had finished transplanting and spraying the beds with urine mixed with water, they watered the farm again. While he worked on the slope, his wife watered the level ground. They continued working until the sun was low in the horizon before they stopped.

After they bathed and ate their dinner, it was already night when they went to sleep.





The Nine Emperor Gods Festival

AS SOON AS Pak Foo awoke, he got up, pushed apart the opening of his mosquito net and hung the flaps on two hooks on either side of his bed. Through the small window he could see the faint glow of dawn.

Although he had not gone outside the house yet, he could feel in the air that it was going to rain. The ninth lunar month of the year was always wet as it was during this period when the Chinese all over Malaya invited the Nine Emperor Gods to descend from heaven to take part in their celebrations.

He untied the string fastening his hair which he had been trying to coax to hang down his back. He took a wooden comb from the table and tried to comb his hair into a queue but without success as it was not long enough. He had to be contented with tying it into a ponytail with a piece of red silk cord.

After he changed out of his nightclothes, he left his room. He washed his face and cleaned his teeth with a homemade brush and ashes from the kitchen stove. When he finished, he threw the basin of water out of the back door, happy that there was no shortage of water in Kong Mui or anywhere else in Malaya.

Yoong Fu had not yet got up. Pak Foo went to his room, knocked gently and called out, "A Suk, A Suk, it's time to get up. The Cheong brothers and family must be waiting for us."

There was a grunt from the room and he heard his uncle getting up. Yoong Fu came out of his room.

"What time is it? Where are the others?" he yawned.

"It's already 7 o'clock. Father and mother left half an hour ago. Either they are waiting at the Cheong house or are already at the temple."

Pak Foo went into his room to check himself in front of the mirror. He changed into a light blue gown and let down the short plait of his hair. He passed his hand over his shaven brow and his cheeks. He then went to the drawer to fetch the black cotton pouch and counted the money in it. There was a dark red one dollar note and six quarter cent bronze pieces. Yoong Fu had promised to pay for the day's outing for both the families, his family as well as Choong Chee's. They had helped in the mine and got so much tin that day that he would like to treat the children to breakfast at a teahouse.

Pak Foo had decided he would not treat Choong Chee as he was working, earning his own living. Since one red tortoise-shaped bun cost a quarter cent, he would spend four quarter coins for four buns. He would still have two coins left and would use them to buy four bananas. Although they grew their own bananas they would taste different if he bought them from a stall, especially the big ones called plantains which they were not allowed to eat at home. It was believed that plantains would make children sick. As for the dollar, he would not spend it as he wanted to keep it for a rainy day.

When he went out of his room, Yoong Fu was waiting and ready to leave. They locked the door by passing the short bar of the lock into the metal lath and loop and pressing it. The lock was made of brass and was oblong in shape and the key was shaped like the handle of a fork but curled at the tip. There was actually no need to lock the door because nobody would enter the house to steal, but monkeys, bears or other animals often went into houses to look for food when nobody was at home.

When they reached Cheong Tuck Choy's house they found the others ready, sitting on the long bench in front of the house.

"Where are your parents?" Yoong Fu asked. "Isn't Siew Lan coming?"

"Father is staying behind to look after the house," replied Choong Tet. "Mother and Siew Lan left early in the morning."

They walked into the cool dark dawn, going downhill. When they reached the junction they turned left, marching along a well-kept road. The sky was covered by thick dark clouds. Since it was the final day of the

festival, the ninth day, it was bound to rain. If it did not rain in the morning it would at least drizzle in the afternoon or evening, when the fire-walking ceremony was held.

The village consisted of two rows of wooden link houses with corrugated iron roofs. A paved road ran in the middle dividing the houses into two rows. Practically all the buildings were wooden single storey structures but a few were two storeys high, especially the shops which had prospered through the years.

"Where does this road lead to?" Pak Foo asked.

"To the wooden dredge," replied Choong Sin. "The Europeans not only built the road but have been taking care of it so that their horse-drawn carriages and horse riders can go to Batu Gajah or other places where their friends live."

There were a lot of people in the village of Kong Mui, mostly worshippers or visitors. The normal crowd had been increased by about five or six times. Many came from Papan, Pusing, Lahat and other towns nearby. Everybody was very happy and a carnival spirit hung in the air.

Kong Mui was an open village, without a boundary or fence. Apart from the two rows of houses in the village proper, other *attap* and plank buildings were put up without planning or arrangement. They were built wherever there was space, making it dangerous if a fire broke out.

All day long, passing to and fro, were water carriers, each with full buckets hanging at either end of a pole, and handcarts piled high with vegetables or all kinds of goods, pulled or pushed by hand. With the population having increased many times, the public stand pipe⁷ next to the market and the other, at the forefront of the village, became very busy places with people lining up for their turn from morning till night. Wheelbarrows, laden with tubs, could also be seen ferrying water to the food stalls and homes, the water splashing upon the stones, wetting the ground.

7. *Stand pipe*: In those days, there was no domestic piped water. Town people obtained their water supply either from the public stand pipes or from their own wells. Papan town had only three widely spaced public stand pipes on Main Road, outside houses number 27, 40 and 80.

Slices of watermelon and peeled pomelos were spread out for sale on the verandahs. Hawkers shouted out their wares as Pak Foo and his friends passed by. There were also many stalls selling boiled cockles, toasted cuttle fish pounded soft to be dipped into tasty hot sauce, and ice-water stalls with green, yellow or red syrup, looking very tempting. A popular stall was one which offered different kinds of roast pork and dark red sausages.

Yoong Fu did not stop at any of these stalls but led the children on. They passed a barbershop where the barber was shaving a farmer's forehead. His apprentice was pulling a cotton fan with his toe to make the air move around. The farmer had brought in his vegetables the night before so that he could sell them at dawn in the market and return to the field after his shave.

"Where are you taking us?" Pak Foo asked his uncle. "I thought we could stop at any of the stalls we passed and have our breakfast."

"Today, we are going to eat in a restaurant," announced Yoong Fu. "I'm taking you all to eat *dim sam*."

Firecrackers were going off noisily when they entered the business sector of the village. This was the second time the explosions were set off and the old town section smelled of gunpowder, food and wine. Many shops were still closed because the owners had stayed up late the night before doing business.

Yoong Fu stopped at a three-forked junction. He began to wipe the sweat on his forehead with a finger.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "We have walked about half a mile. Are you tired, Siew Mei?"

"A little," the girl said. She was dressed in a Chinese gown of light green and had a pigtail wound round her head. Her face was without makeup and she looked very pretty.

"I'm not tired, but I'm hungry," Pak Foo said.

"Here is a teahouse, Yoong Fu *Suk*," Choong Chee said, pointing at a red signboard saying 'Tuck Yuen Teahouse'.

When Yoong Fu looked up at the signboard hanging above the

verandah he frowned. He wiped his forehead again and began to look around but could see no sign of another restaurant. This was not the type of teahouse he was looking for. It looked too high-class and the food would be expensive. Walking slowly up the staircase, he began to think that he had to be careful with his money. When he reached the top of the stairs he changed his opinion. The dining-hall was spacious but modestly furnished. The manager greeted them and led them to a table near one of the windows.

Tuck Yuen Teahouse was truly a Chinese restaurant with customers sipping tea and talking noisily, and one or two men sitting with their feet up on the bench. A Sikh and an Indian man were also eating, using chopsticks and appeared to be very much at home. This was a place which the people living nearby liked to patronise especially on Sundays, to eat, sip tea and chat.

Yong Fu and his party ate sixteen dishes of *dim sam*, their favourite being *ha gau* (the bonnet-shaped small buns with shrimp fillings), *wuh gok* (the half-moon-shaped pouches filled with pork), chicken and bamboo shoots, braised duck feet and chicken, sweet and sour pork and steamed dumplings. Pak Foo and his friends ate to their hearts' content.

When they left the teahouse, they went along the back of the row of shophouses and came into the compound of the temple. Although it was still early, the crowd there was already big. Bunting, streamers and small coloured strips of papers were hung across the entrance. Large yellow flags filled with markings in red ink fluttered in different parts of the temple compound.

The smoke and the smell of incense was so strong that even people who were in the open felt choked. There was a large heap of ashes where the worshippers stuck the joss-sticks, having lighted them in the temple. Siew Mei saw her mother kneeling there and praying.

"Mother," she called out and went towards her, "where is Siew Lan Je Je⁸?"

Baat Sou remained silent and did not say anything until she had

8. *Je Je*: (Cantonese) Term used to address an older girl or sister.

finished her prayers and made her wish. Only after she had put her joss-sticks on top of the heap of ashes and got up from her kneeling position did she turn to look at Siew Mei.

"So," the mother said, "you have finally come. Where are the others? I don't suppose you came alone by yourself?" She held Siew Mei gently by the hand and made her sit beside her on a bench outside the temple.

To their right was the Chinese opera with gongs, drums and clarinet at full volume as a fighting scene was being enacted. The popular Cantonese opera, "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms", was being staged, a story of China in one of the most troubled times in its history. The performance would go on till the following morning as it was the final day of the festival.

To their left was the temple which was crowded with worshippers and devotees who could be identified by their white clothes. In the space beside and behind the building were eating stalls selling vegetarian food and red tortoise-shaped buns, flavoured buns with green bean paste filling, buns decorated with roses and Chinese calligraphy and others which looked more like cakes. In front of them, a heap of charcoal and ashes was being prepared for the fire-walking devotees.

Between the temple and the theatre was a large open space for people to stand and watch the opera. There were no seats and those who wished to sit brought their own stools or hired long benches at two quarter cent pieces an hour. This was the most crowded spot with spectators squeezing into every available space.

Baat Sou got up and took Siew Mei into the temple. "First pray to the Nine Emperor Gods. They won't be here after 6 o'clock when they are sent back to heaven."

"But what about the boys?" Siew Mei asked, as she turned to look for her male companions but they were nowhere to be seen. They had disappeared into the crowd.

"Don't worry about them," *Baat Sou* said. "Boys don't bother about praying but girls must be religious."

They arrived at a section in the temple where prayer offerings were on sale. *Baat Sou* bought a packet of joss-sticks, some red candles and a bundle of joss paper and gave them to Siew Mei. She then took Siew Mei to the middle section of the temple where, on a long table, were many large brass urns holding burning joss-sticks and candles. She removed the joss-sticks from their paper holder and lighted them from the burning candles.

"Now," the mother told the daughter, "hold this bundle of joss-sticks and kneel in front of the Nine Emperor Gods and pray to them. State your wish and ask them to grant you your wishes. After that, light the candles and place them outside. I will burn the joss paper and say some prayers for you."

"What should I ask for, mother?"

"Anything you wish."

Siew Mei did not know what to ask. She was still thinking about it and turned to her mother, "What did Siew Lan *Je Je* ask for?"

"She didn't tell me. Perhaps she asked to be married to a good and rich husband. I don't know. You can do the same if you wish. Most girls who come here to pray ask for that."

There were many worshipers but only five kneeling cushions on the floor. Siew Mei waited until one became available. She quickly went forward to occupy the cushion and knelt before the altar. As she prayed, she spoke aloud, "Nine Emperor Gods, please make my parents allow me to attend school. They are very old fashioned and don't like girls to go to school. That is why my sister Siew Lan cannot read and write although she is nearly seventeen years old now. Pak Foo will be starting school soon and I would like to go to school too. Help me, Nine Emperor Gods. Thank you!"

Siew Mei would have said more but it was so stuffy and hot at the altar that she wanted to go outside. When she got up and turned, she came face to face with her sister who smiled broadly at her. Siew Lan could not help but admire the courage of her younger sister. The prayers to the Nine Emperor Gods was a ploy used with great skill and at a

favourable time. Their mother also smiled and was happy with what her younger daughter said.

Siew Mei stuck three joss-sticks in each urn in front of the deities, went outside and planted the rest in the high mound of ashes which was already covered with burning joss-sticks. She lighted the candles and placed them in one of the brass urns while her mother lighted the joss paper, prayed to the deity outside the temple and pushed the burning bundle into the stone hut used for such a purpose.

The fire-walking ceremony had begun. Ten devotees, dressed in white robes, lined up at one end of the mound of burning cinders and took turns to walk across it. When they finished walking across the pit, not one had his feet or any part of his body burnt.

"They don't get their feet burnt because they have been on a strict vegetarian diet for nine days," commented a spectator. "They must also have no evil thoughts during this period."

"Did you notice," remarked another bystander, "it drizzled when the fire-walking ceremony was on although the weather has been fine since morning?"

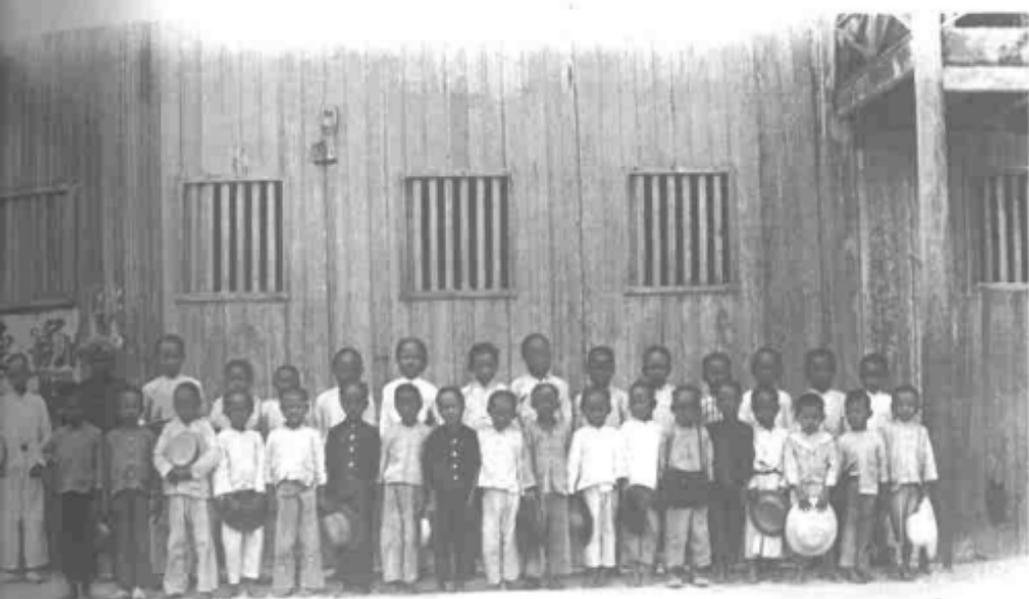
There was indeed a drizzle, wetting those who were in the open.

When evening came, all the priests, devotees and spectators gathered and walked in a procession through the village. They finally stopped at the bank of a river. The chief priest and the other priests said some prayers and, after setting them alight, placed floats containing paper images of the nine gods on the water.

It was, indeed, a beautiful sight to see the flaming floats being carried by the river flowing towards the sea. What a finale and a fitting way of sending the Nine Emperor Gods back to heaven!

7

They Attend School



School children in front of their school in Papan. (Circa 1905)

THEIR PARENTS took Pak Foo, Siew Mei and her brothers to enrol at the school, which was in a shophouse in Kong Mui. There was no name, no board with characters over the entrance. Even the smallest shop had at least a wooden board with Chinese characters above its entrance to show the kind of business it did. For instance, Sang Fatt, Seng Tuck, Swee Cheong or Ban Lee Cheong would suggest sundry business. Man On Tong, Ban Choon Tong would indicate traditional Chinese medicine shops while Wah Yik and Fook Soon were shops dealing in clothing, shoes, boots and stockings and so on.

Chinese schools did not have names then. They were known by the names of the teachers who owned them. The name of the teacher of the school they were going to study in was Tai Choong Koo and the school was, therefore, known as Tai Choong Koo School.

As students could start school any time they wished, Ho Yoong Sin and Cheong Tuck Choy took their children to enrol at the beginning of May. When the teacher arrived and sat behind a table before the class, the parents took their children in to see him. Tai Choong Koo was a short, middle-aged man of about thirty five, and stooped slightly when he walked. Peering over his spectacles, he asked, "How many of you are enrolling?"

"Four," Tuck Choy said. Pointing to his children, he added, "These two boys and the girl are mine. My good friend Ho Yoong Sin wishes to register his son too."

"Very good," Tai Choong Koo said, obviously pleased. Four students enrolling at the same time was very good business. He had never yet had four children registering at a time but had had four leaving at one time once when times were bad.

"Kwan Tai Lek," he called out to the boy sitting in the front row. "Bring your chair here. Also ask another boy to vacate his seat and bring it here for our visitors."

When the men were seated, Tai Choong Koo continued.

"The fee is fifty cents a month for each student," he said, "payable on the first of every month. Another fifty cents is collected in advance. When a student leaves he needn't pay the fee at the end of the month. The rental for one table and a bench is ten cents a month. Additional benches cost five cents each a month. If you wish, you can bring your own table or bench as some boys do."

Both men turned to look at the class and saw that the desks and benches were of different sizes and most were old and run-down.

Ho Yoong Sin turned to the teacher and said, "We don't live in the *sihng sih* (town) but in farms quite far from here. We need to rent desks and benches."

"So that's settled then," said Tai Choong Koo. "As for the inkwell,

ink slabs (for grinding into the inkwell to produce ink for the brushes) and writing brushes, you can buy them from the sundry shops. I sell books but if you wish you can also buy them outside."

Turning to look at one man and then the other, he asked, "Do any of the boys or girl know how to read? I have to test and grade them and recommend what books they should use."

"My two boys can read a little and also write some characters," Tuck Choy said, "but my daughter has to start from the beginning. She does not know how to read or write."

"Have the boys been to school before?" the teacher asked.

"No," Tuck Choy replied, "but I have been teaching them at night for some years now."

"What about your son?" Tai Choong Koo turned to ask Yoong Sin. "Can he read and write too?"

"No," Yoong Sin said. "He came from China about nine months ago and had never been to school there and I have not taught him anything since he came because I, myself, am illiterate."

"Then he and the girl will have to start with the reader called *Saam Jih Ging*.⁹"

He took out a small piece of paper from the drawer and, dipping the brush into an inkwell, with the tip still wet with black ink, wrote the name of the book.

"Go to Chop Yau Yuen, the sundry shop opposite the market. Ask for Hoong Suk and show him this slip and tell him you want this book. If you tell him that I sent you, he may sell it to you cheaper. Since your friend's daughter will use the same book, you might as well buy two at the same time."

Turning back to Tuck Choy, he said, "Now I want to test how advanced your two sons are. What are the names of the books you taught them to read?"

Tuck Choy then called Choong Sin and Choong Tet over.

9. *Saam Jih Ging*: Three Characters Classic which starts with the three characters, *Yahn Ji Cho*.

"Did you hear what Tai *Louh Si*¹⁰ said?"

"Yes, father," Choong Sin said, while Choong Tet nodded. They went to the teacher's table. Choong Sin was clutching the almanac and he placed it on the table.

"I can test only one of you at a time," Tai Choong Koo said, turning to look at the father of the two boys.

"Please do as you wish," Tuck Choy said. "Both have been taught from the same book. It is easier for me when I am teaching them."

"Yes," Tai Choong Koo said. "I will ask one boy to read the book and the other to recite what has been read. You know, in this school as well as in all other Chinese schools, a pupil is considered to know what he has been taught when he can both read and recite the lessons by heart."

"Everybody knows that learning by heart is the only method of study known to the Chinese," Yoong Sin agreed. "It is not only the method here but in China as well. There is talk that a new method of education has started in China but where I come from nothing is known about it."

"No textbooks for the modern method of education can be found in the book shops here," Tai Choong Koo said. "I managed to get hold of one of the so-called modern textbooks printed in Shanghai. What they have done is to take apart our literature and put in foreign ideas which can spoil our youths. It takes at least ten years for our youths to complete their education under such a system, whereas in our method, it takes only three to five years to be able to write letters or read and write business letters."

"All right boys," Tai *Louh Si* said. Pointing at Choong Sin, he said, "You read first while your brother listens. You stop when I tell you to stop. Then your brother will recite what you have read. You may begin."

"Ji yahn hau mihn bat ji sam..."

You may know a person's features,

But may not know what is in his heart.

10. *Louh Si*: (Cantonese) Term of respect to address a teacher. *Laoshi* (Mandarin, pinyin)

*"Yahn mouh chin yaht hou,
Fa moh baak yaht huhng..."*

A person cannot be well for a thousand days.
A flower cannot be red for a hundred days.

*"Saan jung yah yauh chin nihh syuh,
Sai seuhng naahn fuhng baak sei yahn."*

Although there may be thousand-year-old trees
in the jungle,
It is difficult to come across a hundred-year-old
man in this world.

"Stop," the teacher called out. "You, Choong Tet, recite what your brother has read."

The younger boy did an excellent job. He recited word for word what the second brother had read. Then they changed roles.

*"Dong cho duhk syu bat yuhng sam,
Bat ji syu noih yauh wohng gam."*

When a person starts to study, he does not
work hard enough,
Because he does not realise there is treasure in
books.

*"Jou ji syu noih wohng gam gwai
Bun yeh tim yauh joi yuhng sam."*

Had he understood earlier that there is treasure
in books,
He would have refilled the oil lamp and tried
even harder.¹¹

11. The couplets are from the text *Jang Gwong Yihh Mahn* (Essay/Discourse on the Increase of Virtue).

"Excellent," said Tai Choong Koo, when the two brothers had finished the tests. "They not only know what they have been taught but are also intelligent. Since they have not come to the end of the book yet, I want them to continue using the same book. You can't use the ancient Chinese almanac any more but real textbooks. Buy not one but two textbooks, one for each boy. It will be useful when they do revision.

"They will also need exercise books for writing. Both the girl and the boy who are going to start from the beginning will need exercise books too. Their exercise books are of a special kind. Instead of writing they will print characters. I will write out a list of what you should buy."

Getting up from his chair he led the two men to a room behind the hall which served as the classroom. Hanging on a wall was a painting of Confucius in a long flowing robe.

"This is a picture of *Hung Fu Ji*," Tai Choong Koo told the two farmers. "He was a great scholar and teacher who lived about 2500 years ago. All my students who wish to become hardworking and intelligent pray to him when they enrol. If you want your children to be good students, tell them to come here and kneel and pray to him."

Without any delay both men went out of the room and returned with their children. Tai Choong Koo went to light a bundle of joss-sticks taken from the altar. He gave three sticks to each boy and Siew Mei. He also gave three to each man.

"Boys and the girl, kneel before the Honourable *Hung Fu Ji*," he said, "and repeat after me."

"Oh, great ancient teacher," he mumbled, "I have joined this school and wish to study hard and become clever until I have learnt enough to go out into the world to earn my living." And, to make sure the new students would not give him any trouble, he added, "We not only wish to be good students but will obey our teacher at all times."

The three boys and girl repeated after him until he came to the end of the prayers.

When he finished he told the students to bow to the portrait and place the joss-sticks in the urn on the altar.

"Now you men may like to make a wish for your children," Tai Choong Koo said. "You needn't say your prayers aloud but tell him silently what is in your heart. The great *Louh Si* is already a holy man living with the fairies and gods in heaven."

When both the men had paid Tai *Louh Si* and bought what were recommended, they thought that educating children was expensive, especially Tuck Choy who had to pay for two boys and a girl.

"Why send a girl to school?" Ho Yoong Sin thought. "After all, when she grows up she will be married into another family. They will benefit from my daughter's education, not I."



The Pleasure Of Being In School

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Yoong Fu and Pak Foo came to Cheong Tuck Choy's house and the three brothers and sister left with them. Yoong Fu and Choong Chee took the road leading to the mine while the others followed the road to the school in Kong Mui.

Pak Foo had by now grown brown and healthy from outdoor life and the good food he was eating. He was never unhappy for he could always find something interesting to do. Most pleasant of all was the new found freedom, the liberation from boring farm work and the enjoyable walk in the great open, treading along the road to Kong Mui with Choong Sin, Choong Tet and Siew Mei. Going to school? Something he would never have thought possible a year ago. What good friends he had! And such great companions too!

They were quite early. The boys had not gone into the classroom but were outside, playing marbles, spinning tops. Some gathered in a circle to watch spiders fighting. The shiny blue-green spiders did not live in webs but in green leaves bound by the silk they passed out from their bodies. The boys spent many hours searching in the bushes for them, looking for old spiders which were about a centimetre across and dark in colour. Since only the male insects fought, they were much sought after and, when caught, were kept in matchboxes and fed certain types of ants, mosquitoes, flies and very young spiders.

When a fight was arranged between two spiders, they would approach each other slowly. Normally they moved from side to side in a threatening manner with front limbs stretched out and stomachs raised. On contact, each tried to grab its opponent and the action was so fast that the spider's front limbs trembled. A fight lasted about 10 seconds with the loser turning and fleeing, chased by the winner. Some very old,

dark and crazy spiders charged and attacked their opponents, often killing themselves or their enemies.

Siew Mei decided to go into the classroom. When she entered, she saw a girl about her age seated at her desk all by herself.

"Please come over here and sit with me," invited the girl, moving a little to the left to make room for Siew Mei.

"Sure," Siew Mei said and sat down. "Thank you. I thought I was the only girl here and I'm glad to have you as my friend."

"I was the only girl for nearly a year now," the girl confided. "When I saw you enrolling I was happy and hoped you would be my friend."

"It's a stupid custom of our people," Siew Mei said, "to send only boys and not girls to school, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," the girl said. She was a pretty girl with large, black eyes and a high nose. Her eyelashes were long and dark, too. "We are Christians and don't follow such an old fashioned custom. By the way, you haven't told me your name, yet."

"My name is Siew Mei," Siew Mei said, "and my surname is Cheong. What is yours?"

"Lee Kwei Fah," she said. "My Christian name is Elaine. I am a Christian and my parents and I go to the Catholic Church in Batu Gajah every Sunday."

Siew Mei did not know what being a Christian was but thought her name strange. She had never heard of anybody with such a clumsy name. So she remained silent.

"I know what you are thinking," Kwei Fah said. "Most people here do not even know what a church is, what Christianity is and what having a Christian name means. It is not so in Batu Gajah where we used to live. My father worked as a clerk with a dredging company there and when he got the job of chief clerk in the Papan Dredging Company, we moved here. My brother is still in Batu Gajah studying at the Government English school there. When I am older I too will join an English school and learn to read and write English."

Tai *Louh Si* came into the hall and sat on his chair. He looked at the two girls.

"Good morning, girls," he said.

"Good morning, *Louh Si*," chorused the girls.

"I wanted to seat you two together," Tai *Louh Si* said, "I can see that you have become friends, so you might as well sit together. After all, there's room on your bench for one more girl, don't you agree, Kwei Fah?"

"Yes, *Louh Si*," Elaine Lee said.

"Then, I'll ask Siew Mei's father to pay you for sharing your desk and bench with her."

"But, *Louh Si*," Elaine said, "I don't want to accept any money from her father. It's a pleasure to have Siew Mei sitting with me."

"You're very generous, Kwei Fah," Tai *Louh Si* said. "It's very kind of you."

Going to the cupboard behind him, he unlocked it, took out a bell and rang it. The boys trooped into the classroom. When they were properly seated, Tai *Louh Si* got up and started to walk round the class. He told the senior boys to take out their readers to revise the lessons they had been taught the previous day and the junior boys to take out their exercise books to write.

It was very noisy when everybody started to read aloud. After a while, the noise lessened when the students got tired of yelling out their lessons at the top of their voice. Those who were writing took out their exercise books, brushes, inkwells and ink slabs. They poured a little water from a bottle into their inkwells and began to grind the ink slabs until the ink was black enough. They dipped the brushes into the ink, pressed the tips on the edge of the inkwells if there was too much ink and began to write.

Since Pak Foo and Siew Mei were beginners, they were given characters written by *Louh Si* to be put under the transparent sheet of their exercise books. They then carefully copied the characters visible on the paper.

"Form your characters from left to right and from top to bottom," Tai *Louh Si* told them.

Siew Mei had Elaine Lee to help her whenever she came across anything she did not understand but Pak Foo was on his own. He was determined to work hard so that he would be as good as Siew Mei, if not better.

"You have to print the characters the way people draw pictures until you become used to it," Elaine Lee told Siew Mei. "Then you will do *tyut sau* writing, that is, writing free-hand without the backing sheet and on plain paper."

Tai *Louh Si* began to knock on his table with his cane.

"I have given you more than half an hour to do your revision," Tai *Louh Si* said. "Have you learnt by heart the lesson I taught you yesterday?"

There was no answer. Then Choong Sin and then Choong Tet raised their hands.

"I have memorised the lesson you taught yesterday," Choong Sin said.

"So have I," Choong Tet said.

"Come over here," Tai *Louh Si* said.

Tai *Louh Si* turned the pages of Choong Sin's book and then leafed through Choong Tet's. He knew where he had stopped because he always dabbed red ink on the sentences to show where commas should be. There were no commas, colons, semi-colons and other punctuation marks except full stops in the old classic readers.

He gave Choong Sin a passage and told him to read. When he finished, Tai *Louh Si* told him to recite it by heart. Choong Tet was made to read another passage and also recite it.

"Look here, class," said Tai *Louh Si* after the two brothers had finished. "These are new boys and they have done their work well. I want everyone of you to be like them."

Then he asked the other boys to come out to read and recite by heart. Some did well but some did not, especially Kwan Tai Lek. The

teacher scolded him and knocked him on his head when he failed to remember a word here and there.

Tai *Louh Si* then went into the next room where the altar of Confucius was and attended to two men and one woman. They were sick and had come to see him, for Tai *Louh Si* was not only a teacher but also a physician. After he had taken their pulse and diagnosed their condition he wrote the prescriptions and told them to buy the medicines from a Chinese medical shop.

There was a break of one hour. Nearly all the boys went home to take their lunch except Pak Foo and the Cheong brothers and sister who had brought their food in tiffin carriers. Elaine Lee also did not go home to eat but brought her food to school.

When school reopened at two o'clock it went on for another two hours. The boys and girls revised the morning's work, reading aloud and learning their lessons by heart. Eager students who wanted to learn more could go and ask the teacher to teach them new lessons, but they first had to show *Louh Si* that they had learnt the morning's lessons thoroughly. Some practised writing characters until they were sure they had them right.

When the bell rang at four o'clock, nearly every boy ran out of the building after pushing everything into their drawers and locking them. The girls were better behaved. They went off only when the room was almost empty.

"Aren't you leaving?" Siew Mei asked her friend after she had packed and locked up everything. "What are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for my mother to take me home," Elaine said. "She's late today."

Siew Mei bade her good day and was about to go out when Elaine took her by the hand.

"There's something I must warn you," she told Siew Mei. "It's about Kwan Tai Lek. He's a real bully. He was not happy that Tai *Louh Si* scolded and hit him. He blames your two brothers and might take it out on them."

"I hope he won't attack girls," Siew Mei said.

"I am not so sure," Elaine said. "A *sam sing* is like a mad dog and attacks everybody, unless he knows the person he's going to attack is strong and can beat him in a fight. That's why I ask my mother to come with me in the morning and take me home after school."

Outside the school there were no other children except her brothers and Pak Foo waiting for her. When Siew Mei did not see any sign of Kwan Tai Lek, she was relieved.



9

A 'King' Is Dethroned



Youths with pigtails showing off their leisure activities in front of a garden in Papan. The youths on the ground are playing Chinese chess and the youth on the right has wound his pigtail across his forehead.

(Circa 1905)

THE CHILDREN did not return home immediately after school but wandered about the village. They stopped to look at anything that interested them and gazed into shops and stalls which displayed toys, clothing, towels, blankets and other goods.

The paper construction shop attracted their attention most. All the things there, such as houses, carriages, animals and other objects, made to be burnt and offered to the dead, were made of paper. During the Moon Festival it was perhaps the most beautiful shop in the village.

Colourful lanterns of every shape and design were put up in front of the shop.

The children walked around until they came to the Temple of the Nine Emperor Gods. There was nobody about, unlike during festivals when it was crowded. They went into the compound and sat on the benches around a small grassy patch where some cows and a few goats were grazing. An Indian boy, who was looking after the animals, did not bother to look up.

The children saw a large coconut palm leaf on the ground and, near it, an old bicycle wheel rim. As Choong Tet went to check the wheel, Siew Mei sat on the palm leaf, holding the shaft. Choong Tet found a short stick and used it to roll the wheel round and round the field.

"It would be nice," said Siew Mei, "if somebody could pull me around."

"Do you really want that?" asked Pak Foo. "Then sit nearer the shaft and hold tight. Put your feet on the frond."

Siew Mei did as she was told and Pak Foo pulled her around while Choong Tet rolled the wheel rim from one end of the ground to the other. The children were so happy that nobody expected that trouble lay ahead.

From nowhere Kwan Tai Lek and his gang appeared. One boy, known as Kwan Ti Ti, stood in Pak Foo's way and another, Kwan Heng Loong, blocked Choong Tet. Standing next to Kwan Ti Ti was another boy who was called 'the Lieutenant' in school. Kwan Sie Lek and Kwan Heng Loong were Kwan Tai Lek's younger brothers. They were not students of Tai Choong Koo School but worked as apprentices, one in a teahouse and the other in a sundry shop. They were not paid wages but were provided with lodging and food.

Choong Tet stopped spinning the wheel and Pak Foo ceased pulling Siew Mei around. Immediately Siew Mei ran to where they had left their books and tiffin carriers. She picked up the stick she had brought and went back to Pak Foo and Choong Tet.

"Here, Pak Foo *Go Go*," she said, passing the stick to him.

Sie Lek walked over to the Indian cowherd and seized the stick from his hand.

Astonished, the cowherd stared at the children who had gathered for a showdown.

"Bring them over here," Tai Lek yelled.

"The King of Tai Choong Koo School has given an order," said Ti Ti, the younger brother. "His Majesty wants you all to go before him."

The three boys did not know what to do.

"Are we going to obey him without giving them a fight?" Pak Foo thought.

"He's not a king," retorted Siew Mei boldly. She was standing behind Pak Foo. "He's a dumb-bell who doesn't know his lessons. He was punished by our *Louh Si* today."

"Seize the girl and bring her over here," Tai Lek said. He was surprised at the courage of the girl. "Make her apologise and kneel before me."

Ti Ti took a step forward.

Pak Foo barred the way with his stick. "If you lay a hand on her, I will break your head with this stick."

The boy stopped. He dared not take another step forward.

They saw the 'Lieutenant', the bodyguard of Tai Lek, coming to help Ti Ti.

He took the stick from Ti Ti. "Coward," he said. "Watch me."

The 'Lieutenant' raised his stick above his head and brought it down on Pak Foo. He wanted to hit Pak Foo's shoulder. He just wanted to hurt him enough to scare him and the others. Pak Foo stepped aside, raised his stick with both hands to avert the blow on his body. The Lieutenant's stick struck his in a slanting position. Immediately on impact, he pressed his opponent's stick down to the ground and brought the tip of his stick up hitting his opponent's fingers. The 'Lieutenant' let go his stick and yelled in pain. Pak Foo stood where he was, still holding his stick.

As soon as the fight began, Choong Sin had gone forward and brought his stick on Heng Loong's head, sending him to the ground. Heng Loong cried out with both hands covering his head. He did not expect to be attacked as he was watching the stick fight with interest.

"Good! Good! Well done!" The shout came from the Indian cowherd. He clapped his hands loudly for it was not always he could see a fight in action.

Siew Mei was very happy. She clapped her hands, too. She was afraid at first but was delighted when she realised that Pak Foo had come to her defence. So, instead of the slave being brought before the ruler, Tai Lek went to meet Pak Foo. When he came face to face with Pak Foo, he said, "I didn't expect you to be good with the stick."

Tai Lek had taken part in many fights before and had a lot of experience in fighting with fists, but not with sticks. The way the boy from China had fought with a stick he knew his enemy knew *kungfu* – the Chinese martial art. It was widely known that, in the villages in China, everybody practised martial art because there were no amusements and no where to go to after work.

Tai Lek was taller, bigger built and a few years older than Pak Foo. The streetfighter knew that in stick fighting, skill and experience were more important than strength. It was not so in fist fights where strength was often more important. So in fighting with fists he might beat the boy from China but not with stick fighting.

"Hey," Tai Lek said, "you and I have something to settle."

"Really," Pak Foo replied, "we have no quarrel with you and we shouldn't fight at all."

"So you are afraid to meet me," Tai Lek said, haughtily. "I want you to apologise and crawl between my legs."

"I'll do no such thing," Pak Foo said, pounding his stick on the ground. "I prefer death to shame like that."

"All I wanted," the bully said, "was to tell you that both the wheel rim and coconut palm leaf belong to us. When you use our things without permission you should apologise, shouldn't you?"

"That isn't the reason he has come to give us trouble," said Siew Mei.

"If that's not the reason," asked Tai Lek, "what is, you bad girl?"

"You got jealous when my brothers were praised by *Louh Si* and you were punished," said Siew Mei.

"You talk a lot for a girl your age," said Tai Lek. "If I fight with your hero and win, I will claim you as a prize and make you my slave."

"I will never be your slave," Siew Mei answered, vehemently. "I prefer to kill myself than to be taken by an animal like you."

"We will see," he said. "In war, the winner has the right to carry off women to be their slaves. If I win this fight I will make you my slave whether you like it or not." Then, turning to Pak Foo, he continued, "Let us fight without any weapon. Let us fight with our bare hands."

Pak Foo did not say anything but threw away his stick. Tai Lek charged forward immediately, swinging his right fist at Pak Foo's head. He believed that whoever landed the first blow and hit his enemy had the advantage. But Pak Foo was alert. He raised his left hand to block the blow and threw his right fist towards his adversary's head and hit him hard.

Tai Lek felt the pain. Pretending to stoop down a little, he suddenly raised himself up to full height and swung his right foot at Pak Foo's waist. Pak Foo took one step backwards but, realizing that he could not avoid the kick altogether, turned his back offering the lower part of his body if contact came. At the same time he squatted down a little, placing both his fists down (like a man pushing down the handle of a bicycle pump with both hands) to protect his buttocks. When the foot reached him it hit Pak Foo's fists. Pak Foo then took two steps forward and drove his fist into Tai Lek's neck.

The pain made Tai Lek groggy, experienced though he was in fighting. He lost control of himself. He became careless and threw a blow at Pak Foo who warded it easily. Without letting go of his opponent's hand, he wound his fingers around Tai Lek's wrist and gave it a slight pull, pretending to tug. Tai Lek pulled his hand back with all his strength. Pak

Foo then let go of the hand and, advancing one step, gave his opponent a push on his chest. The latter stumbled backwards and swayed about but did not fall. Pak Foo rushed towards him and gave him another strong push. This time he managed to put his foot behind Tai Lek's heel as he pushed.

Down went the streetfighter. His head hit the ground. He tried to get up but could not. He was stunned. Pak Foo's gang clapped when they saw that their enemy was totally vanquished. Heng Loong and Sie Lek rushed to their brother's side.

"Come, brother," Heng Loong said as he lifted Tai Lek up. "Let's go."

"What are we going to do now?" Siew Mei asked. "Aren't we going home?"

So happy were the boys with their victory that they did not know what to do until the girl, the most sprightly of the lot, made them realise that they still had to go on a journey home.



10

Blue Mountains And Green Jungle



Youths enjoying themselves in a waterfall near Papan. (Circa 1905)

WHEREVER he went Pak Foo would call at the Cheong family home and wait for the three boys and Siew Mei. They would walk down the path, either turning left to Kong Mui village or going straight towards Yoong Fu's 'wild rat' mine.

This time, however, they were going in the opposite direction. The three boys and their sister went to Pak Foo's house. After he joined them they left the farmstead and went westwards, heading towards the interior of the jungle. They followed a fairly clear-cut track beside the stream, which flowed through their farms. Soon they were surrounded by

jungle on all sides. Tall trees grew on either side and their branches and leaves were overhead.

"Where are we going?" asked Pak Foo.

"To look for my uncle," replied Choong Chee. "We have not seen him for nearly three years now. He used to call at our house whenever he came out of the jungle to go to Papan."

"What does he do for a living," asked Pak Foo, "living deep inside the jungle?"

"He is a sort of trader," said Choong Chee. "He buys such things as rattan, rattan baskets, straw mats, maize, honey and sometimes, bananas and paddy, from the *Orang Asli* (aborigines) to sell to the people in Papan. He would put up with us for a night or two before returning to his home in the jungle."

"Isn't he the man they call Uncle *Luhng Yih* (Deaf) Chin?" Choong Tet asked. "It is said that after he sold his goods, his pockets would be so full of money that sometimes coins would fall out whenever he lay down to rest."

"Remember," Siew Mei cut in, "he used to give us money and buy us toys, biscuits and groundnuts whenever he came to our house after a successful business trip."

"Really!" exclaimed Pak Foo. "I wish I have an uncle like him."

"Whatever good he has done for the family," Choong Sin said, sadly, "I don't like him at all. He's actually not our real uncle but only claimed relationship with our family through mother's brother now living in Sungei Siput. I overheard father telling mother that *Luhng Yih Suk* had killed a man in a fight and is now hiding in the jungle. He is wanted by the police in Taiping where the fight took place."

There was silence after the second brother spoke. The excitement of the journey was beginning to wear off as they walked along. They stopped talking when the journey became more difficult. The air was humid, the atmosphere filled with the smell of dead vegetation. Despite the coolness in the half-light of the jungle through which sunlight seldom,

if ever, broke through, they were covered with sweat from head to foot, their clothes wet as if they had been caught in the rain.

The stream began to twist and turn and then, quite suddenly, it was in front of them, blocking their way with the path leading into it. A log was laid across the stream but it appeared slippery. So, instead of using it, they stepped into the cold, clear water and crossed over to the other side. When they walked on they found that the stream was now on their right and they were going up a slope until they came to a high point. They could hear water falling and soon saw a lovely waterfall cascading over the rocks, ending in a small pool at the bottom before flowing onwards.

Deep coloured birds were flying about among the trees. If their feathers were blue, they were very blue and if they were red, they were very red, unlike the lighter coloured birds in the valley. Although they were very beautiful to look at they could not sing. Instead they uttered coarse cries. They were not like the songbirds whose singing had always given cheer to the Malayan countryside. There were many insect noises, especially those made by the cicadas which were very annoying. Their cries were a long dull drawn-out buzz which drummed into the ears. They seemed to dislike people going into the jungle.

The children were heading upstream all the time and could feel the cool and pleasant breeze, brought about by the water flowing past them, blowing against their faces. Siew Mei slowed her pace to come alongside Pak Foo, who was trailing behind. He was thinking how different the vegetation was from China and could not help admiring the beauty of a tropical jungle. The leaves of the trees were so green, and so were the small trees and tall grass which covered the ground.

"Do you know why Choong Sin Go Go doesn't like *Luhng Yih Suk*?" she said softly to Pak Foo.

"No," he said as he turned towards her. "Why?"

"Because *Luhng Yih Suk* forced him to change from using his left hand to his right. One day, at the dining table, he knocked his head with his knuckles to make him use his right hand to hold the chopsticks. Choong

Sin cried and walked away. He refused to return to the table although father told him to. He even ran out of the house and missed the meal for the night."

"Oh, that's too bad," Pak Foo said.

"You know," Siew Mei continued. "The change has hurt Choong Sin in many ways. He used to have the best handwriting in the family but not any more. He's very forgetful too and he thinks this was brought about by *Luhng Yih Suk*."

They went over the top of the slope and came down to the foot of the hill. The trees in front of them opened up and then they were walking along fairly level ground. They came to a grassy plain where their view was not blocked for miles around. As it was a sunny day, they could see a range of blue mountains in the distance. How blue they were, Pak Foo thought. He could not help wondering why the mountains were blue and the jungle was green.

They saw bulbuls, the brown black-breasted jungle magpie and the tiny colourful bird which always cried "*tik, tik, tik*" whenever it hopped from one bush to another. Other birds were usually dull grey like the birds found in swamps. As they turned a corner, they saw a large water-hole filled with water-plants such as hyacinths and lilies. Choong Chee heard the familiar call of the waterfowl, "*wak, wak, wak*". He could not see the bird until the water-plants stirred and gave out a soft sound and a white-breasted waterhen started to fly away. There were butterflies of many colours flying about. The trees were low and had small trunks. The tall green grass was everywhere. It was unlike the yellow *lalang* grass which covered the hillocks of Yoong Fu's 'wild rat' mine and the area near it.

When they entered the jungle again they were once more surrounded by the half-light which made it hard for them to see. They walked unsteadily along and had to pick their way carefully. The grass on the ground was short and the trees close together.

"I have a feeling that we are near houses," said Choong Sin.

There were some monkeys among the trees. They were the grey, long-tailed kind, jumping from one branch to another. After they came

out of the thick vegetation, the jungle opened up a little and there, in front of them, was a large but not very tall tree with low hanging branches and spreading green leaves. They had surprised a group of monkeys which squealed wildly. Those on the ground scrambled up the trees and those in the branches sprang away in panic. One very large animal, sitting high up in the tree, jumped to another branch. It failed to catch it, slipped and fell to the ground with a loud, dull thud.

"It must be the leader which was keeping watch," said Choong Tet. "We must have surprised him. The wind wasn't blowing in their direction or else he would not have made such a mistake. Wild animals usually know we are about before we come near them."

"Come," said Pak Foo, who was last in the file. "Follow me." He rushed to the spot where he had heard the noise of the fall and started searching. He pushed his stick into the undergrowth and disturbed a large iguana which ran away, its route marked by the wild swaying of the grass.

"What are you looking for?" Choong Chee asked.

"I'm looking for the monkey which fell from the tree," he said. "From such a height and judging by the sound of the fall, the animal must be badly wounded and not able to run away."

"Are you telling us that you expect to have meat for our lunch?" Siew Mei asked.

"Don't be stupid," Choong Tet said. "You don't expect to find an injured animal lying on the ground. It would have run away by now or gone up the tree again."

"Monkeys are like cats," said Choong Sin, sitting down at the foot of the tree. "Falls might hurt them a little but won't kill them. Before they reach the ground they always turn their bodies around and use their paws to soften their falls. If you want to eat monkeys, you have to trap one and be quite skillful at it."

Suddenly the grass near Pak Foo began to sway violently. An animal, whatever it was, seemed to be in difficulty. Pak Foo went forward and saw the tail of the iguana moving from side to side as if the animal

was trying to free itself from whatever was holding it. He rushed towards it and put his foot down, pinning the iguana to the ground. It continued to struggle but to no avail. Pak Foo grabbed it and pulled. It held tight. What could be holding it? Putting the stick down, he again pulled at the iguana as hard as he could. This time it gave way and began to move.

"We have meat for lunch," he yelled and continued to pull and pull.

Then the thought struck him that an iguana could not be so long, for trailing behind it was something black and which looked like another reptile. Two different species joined into one? There were no such animals or reptiles in the world. No sooner had he shouted then the two came apart. One part was the dead four-feet-long grey iguana he was holding in his hands and behind it was another part. It was a black reptile! It began to raise its head until it came to the level of Pak Foo's eyes. Then it stopped, staring menacingly at the boy. It flattened its head and raised its body to attack!

It was a cobra, a king cobra, the most deadly snake in the world!

Something inside Pak Foo warned him not to move for, if he did, it would strike him. Its speed was as swift as lightning and its bite deadly. What was he to do? He had to do something. A cobra's stare made people or animals feel sleepy. It could also spit up to a distance of three feet and the spit was so poisonous that it could blind man or animal instantly! Even the tiger and the elephant were afraid of it because no animal could live more than half an hour after it was bitten by a king cobra.

"Swing the dead iguana over the cobra's head." Pak Foo heard Choong Tet's whisper.

Pak Foo could not do anything. He seemed to be paralysed.

"N-O-W!" Choong Tet roared out the order.

The moment Pak Foo swung the iguana towards the cobra, it took its gaze off him and sprang to seize its prey. At that instant, Choong Tet struck the snake's neck with his stick, breaking its backbone. As it lay thrashing about, Pak Foo sprang to get his stick lying on the ground and

returned to join Choong Tet to pound at the snake's head until it was reduced to a pulp. When they tied it to a stick they saw it was indeed a large king cobra, almost thirteen feet long. Instead of dragging it on the ground, which would ruin the meat, they carried it on their shoulders.

"Can we eat poisonous snakes?" asked Siew Mei.

"Yes. The more poisonous it is, the more delicious the flesh," Choong Chee told her.

As they moved on, the hard ground gave way to soft and moist earth. They trudged along in the mud, stopping often to pick off leeches which were sticking to their bodies and causing blood to flow from the wounds they opened. Siew Mei began to lose her cool at the sight of the slimy leeches. After the first attack she kept a sharp lookout for them. She could see them coming, moving quite swiftly on the leaves and the overhanging branches of the trees. When one again succeeded in fastening itself to her arm, she panicked. She ran on ahead of the others until Choong Chee caught hold of her and tried to calm her down.

"What has come over you?" shouted Choong Chee.

"I'm very scared of those slimy creatures," she cried out. "One of them has got on my arm."

"Let me look at it. You can always peel it off."

"I tried, but it won't come off," she began to cry. "It has buried its head under my skin."

Sure enough, when Choong Chee pulled at the leech, it would not come off but stuck to the skin. He then took out a cigarette, lighted it, gave it a good puff and applied the lighted end to the leech. Almost instantly, it cringed and then fell off.

"There might be others still sticking on other parts of my body," Siew Mei cried in dismay. "What shall I do?"

"You will have to go behind some trees, take off your clothes and pull them off your body," Choong Tet said. "You're a very brave girl. Don't let such a small creature scare you so badly."

Siew Mei began to look around for a place where she could take off her clothes and peel off the leeches. When she joined them again

Choong Tet gave her a bottle of *huhng yin* (red Chinese tobacco) soaked in water. He told her to rub it over her hands and feet and wherever the leeches might attack. He also placed her at the head of the file.

"You know," explained Choong Chee, "leeches always attack the people in the rear. When there is any movement they always go towards it. When they reach the place the first person would usually have passed them. They attach themselves to the persons who come after and so the last person or second last person usually gets the most leeches on his body."

The track widened and they saw a farm house.

"Good! We're here at last!" Choong Chee exclaimed happily.

It was a shabby hut surrounded by plots of wretched-looking vegetables. Finding the door open, they entered the hut.

There was nobody inside!

The furniture consisted of a table, three stools and a long bench, all made from old wooden boxes. The cooking area, in one corner, had only two pots – one for cooking and the other used as a frying pan. The cupboard was made from a soapbox fitted on four sticks driven into the ground with a door fixed to old hinges. The mud-floor was brown earth beaten with flat sticks and flattened by use. There was a room, the walls of which were made from milk-boxes whose letters making up the word 'Milkmaid' were mixed up. The planks of the walls were so badly joined that, besides keeping out the rain and sun, they had no other use. Anyone could see what was going on inside.

"Where's uncle?" Siew Mei asked aloud.

"Isn't anybody home?" Choong Tet also asked loudly.

Choong Chee called out, "Chin *Suk!* Chin *Suk!* Where are you?"

They waited, but still nobody answered. Since they were hungry after such a long and tiring journey, they went to the kitchen to prepare a meal for themselves. Taking down the cooking pot, they put in enough rice for five persons. They then cut up the snake and some salted fish to cook in the other pot. They used some oil from a bottle they found in the cupboard.

Then they heard footsteps on the path leading to the house. They went to the door to greet their uncle.

It was not their uncle, however, who appeared but a middle-aged woman. Beside her were two bundles of firewood which she had just lowered to the ground.

Both parties were surprised when they came face to face with each other.

The woman spoke first.

"Who are you?" she asked in a loud, angry voice.

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## 11

### *A Dragon Ascending To Heaven*

THE WOMAN who faced them was *Luhng Yih* Chin's wife.

"When I was near my house," the woman said, "I was surprised to see smoke coming out of the kitchen. I have only been gone about an hour to cut firewood. Who should I find when I return but you."

They explained to the woman why they had come and finally she agreed to take them to see her husband. They went past four or five *attap* houses. The people living here were Kwangsai, a clan of Chinese whose independent spirit was still strong. They preferred to live in the jungle, away from civilisation. Except for salt and matches which they had to buy, they grew everything else themselves. They extracted oil from the coconuts they grew. They planted sugar cane which they made into syrup and used for sugar. To grind sugar cane, they placed a machine in a shed which everybody could use.

The party walked along the side of a *lalang*-covered hillock with the woman leading the way. A rough trail led them through the tall, coarse grass into the thick jungle.

"When your uncle is working for Batin Laud," the woman said, "he seldom comes home but stays with the *Orang Asli* in their longhouse in the *ladang*."

"Who is Batin Laud?" asked Siew Mei.

"He's the headman of the Semai, an *Orang Asli* tribe living in our area," the woman replied. "Whenever he prepares new ground for planting he always asks your uncle to help them."

They came in sight of a range of limestone hills the tops of which were covered by small, low trees and the sides with moss, lichen and creepers. Beyond it, were majestic blue mountains, the peaks covered by thick mist.

"Oh," said Choong Chee, "is that why he doesn't come and stay in our house nowadays? Isn't he going to do business in Papan any more?"

"I don't think so," said the woman. "You see, he often goes to Bekor and Manong now. Bekor is a kampong where the Malays live and Manong where people of our clan live. They are simple people and your uncle finds it easier to do business with them."

After a while, she added, "Your uncle and I are of the Kwangsai clan. We first met in Manong, my hometown."

"Bekor is a kampong near the Perak River," Choong Chee told Pak Foo, "and Manong a village which lies further on. You have to cross a river by ferry to reach it."

"How can we get there?" Siew Mei asked.

"You can go there from our house," said the woman. "You must know the way or you can get lost in the jungle. I seldom go there unless it is with your uncle."

They came to the rest hut. The roof and sides were covered by *nipah* palm leaves. It was built on stilts and the floor was raised about six feet from the ground. Tools and other equipment were kept under the hut which was reached by a steep staircase.

Not finding her husband anywhere, the woman took the youngsters up the flight of stairs. *Luhng Yih* Chin was not in the hut nor was there anybody except an old man who had come to help out with some light tasks. Usually, in an *Orang Asli* longhouse, there would be some women and young children, but this was not their home, so only men were there.

"Where do you think they are?" the woman asked nobody in particular. She then put the question to the old man. He looked up, shook his head and returned to mending the floor.

The floor was made of split bamboo with both its edges kept in position and bound by slit rattan to keep the surface level and comfortable to lie on. There were no beds, tables or chairs. The people sat, ate and slept on the floor and passed the night there when it rained and when they could not return to their longhouse.

The woman went to the window, an opening in the wall, and looked out. Smoke was coming from a cluster of low trees nearby and she saw her husband sitting on a log with three *orang asli* men preparing a meal. She got down from the hut and led the boys and Siew Mei towards them. Although *Luhng Yih Chin* was surprised to see them, he invited them to sit on the ground in the shade of the trees. One *orang asli* was roasting tapioca, another cutting cucumber into small pieces and the third peeling the skins of roasted brinjal. The rice and monkey meat had already been cooked and were spread out on banana leaves.

"Come, let's start," *Luhng Yih Chin* told the newcomers. "There's no ceremony here. When we ask you to eat, you just eat. Whether you are hungry or not, you still eat."

He then gave each guest a piece of tapioca. Taking a piece himself, he peeled off its skin, and started to eat. He picked up a piece of meat and ate it with the tapioca. Every now and then he also ate the cucumber and roasted brinjal. He did not eat the rice, leaving it for the *orang asli*. The young guests followed suit.

"We would be happier," he told his wife, "if you had brought these kids here earlier. They could have helped to clear the jungle and chop down the trees and we would have finished the work earlier."

"Is the work completed now?" Choong Chee asked.

"Yes," *Luhng Yih Chin* said. "The tall grass and bushes were cut by the women and children and the trees felled by us. Since the weather has been hot for nearly two months, everything is dried up now. We'll burn everything before the rainy season."

Choong Chee looked up at the sky. Even the blue mountains in the distance were hidden by dark clouds. A storm had begun and rain would soon be upon them.

Beyond the edge of where they were was the clearing, where the undergrowth had been cleared and the trees felled. It was about twice the size of a football field. Cut grass was gathered into heaps. Twigs and trunks of trees were piled over tree stumps so that when they set fire to them, the stumps would be reduced to ashes and thus they would be

saved the trouble of digging out the roots or breaking them up by axe. When everything was turned to ashes, the soil would be fertilised and the land made suitable not only for the paddy they were going to plant but for other crops as well.

The open stretch of the jungle looked like a man whose body was bared before his head was going to be cut off.

From afar they saw the old man climbing down the stairs of the rest hut. He went under the hut and took a torch. When he came near the men, who had just finished eating, he muttered something in the Semai language.

"What did he say?" Siew Mei asked.

"He told us to get ready to set the clearing on fire," *Luhng Yih Chin* said.

"Why didn't he answer me when I asked him where you were?" the woman asked. "I thought he was dumb."

"He's not dumb," replied her husband. "He's deaf."

"So that was why he didn't answer auntie when she spoke to him," Choong Sin said. "I thought he was proud."

"The *orang asli* are humble and honest people," *Luhng Yih Chin* said. "They are never proud but kind to visitors who have not offended them."

Some of the men went to the storeroom to get torches. Others picked up sticks and tied dried grass at both ends to use as torches. The fire was started at different points and soon the whole area was burning. Bright, red flames rose high into the air and thick black smoke billowed. The air trapped in the bamboo exploded like firecrackers. The warm air carried the grey smoke to the hills nearby, making the air flow upwards and the fire grow bigger. It looked as if the whole jungle was on fire.

The sky began to darken as a storm was forming. Black clouds twisted and turned and lightning flashed. At first there was a drizzle but soon the rain fell like sheets of water thrown from a basin. They ran back to the rest hut and sat on the floor of the storeroom.

"It must be the evil *ruai* (spirit) we offended," the deaf *orang asli* cried out. "When the storm is over let us leave this place and look for another site."

"I had a bad dream last night," another *orang asli* said. "I dreamt that somebody had died and was buried in the *selai* (clearing)."

Day was like night now. What was happening? Was it nature's way of telling them that there was danger ahead? Suddenly a strong wind blew in their direction. When they heard it coming they huddled together and clutched each other tightly. Then they heard a sound like whistling behind them. Then it happened!

Their hut came apart and flew into the air, sucked by a gust of swirling wind, carrying everything with it. *Luhng Yih Chin* and the others would have been swept away had they not held tightly to each other. The torches, knives, pots and pans and other tools disappeared, drawn into the air. Without cover and with nothing to protect them, they looked up. They saw a column of wind spinning past them. The column was very long with the broad peak up in the clouds and the narrow base trailing just a few feet off the ground. Wherever it passed, it took everything with it. When it reached the edge of the clearing, it stopped for a short while, then moved to the opposite hill where it continued to spin, drawing the clouds near it until they broke apart.

Then, a most wonderful thing happened. The head of the column leaned back a little as if giving the earth a look. The sun cut into the column and shone through it, so that it was like the eye of a monster looking down at the jungle.

"This is the first time I'm seeing a dragon<sup>12</sup> going up to heaven," *Luhng Yih Chin* spoke. "If I have not seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it."

"I too have heard stories about this." His wife, who was silent all this while, began to speak. "In Manong from where I come, I've heard

12. It was a strong whirlwind they saw, not dragon. It was sometimes called *gwai fung* (devil's wind).

stories that a big monster roams the hills across the river. Fortunately, it is on the other side of the broad and deep Perak River."

"Is that on our side of the river?" asked Siew Mei.

"Even if it is," said Pak Foo, reassuringly, "it has gone to heaven and won't trouble people anymore."

"Only good dragons go to heaven," *Luhng Yih Chin* said. "They must eat only grass or vegetation and mustn't eat human beings or animals."

By now the column was slowly breaking apart and disappearing. They turned to look for the four *orang asli*, but they had disappeared.

"Where have they gone?" asked Choong Chee.

"They are very superstitious," said *Luhng Yih Chin*.

"If they don't come back," asked Choong Tet, "what's going to happen to the clearing? Do you think it's going to be wasted?"

"It won't be wasted," replied *Luhng Yih Chin*. "I'll take it up. Instead of planting hill paddy alone, I'll plant tapioca and vegetables which can be harvested in three months. Paddy takes six months to become full-grown."

"Won't it be too much work for you to handle alone?" his wife commented.

"I'll need help at the beginning," her husband said. "This is a bad burn. I'll come again to gather the logs and unburnt twigs or grass and burn them. The ground is wet now and it takes a few days for it to dry. It will be nice if some of my relatives and friends can give me some help."



# 12

## *A Hive Of Activity*



*Central Market on Main Road at the entrance to Papan town.  
(Circa 1905)*

PAK FOO and his family came to live in Papan when his farm and Siew Mei's were demolished. Their homes were torn down to make way for plantations. A Chinese *towkay* had already cleared large tracts of the jungle to plant rubber trees. From the jungles east of the Papan Tin Dredging Company to the Kledang Range in Menglembu, the land had been opened up, trees felled and the vegetation cut and burnt. When the plantation reached the farms of Pak Foo and Siew Mei, their families had to give up everything they had worked for and leave.

Papan was very different from Kong Mui. It was a hive of activity, something like a *sihng sih*, the meeting point of a district in China, surrounded by villages. Now that Pak Foo's excitement over his new surroundings was over he began to get to know the town better.

Every morning, in Papan, stalls were set up. Men and women carried their goods in baskets slung from the ends of a pole, or drew carts containing goods to the market, which was a large whitewashed wooden building two storeys high.

On the ground floor where the fish-stalls were located, were large baskets of fresh water fish, caught at night in the rivers and lakes or reared in ponds. There were tubs of large reddish *tohng saan yuh* (China fish), wriggling eels and dull grey crabs, tied to strings, jerking and crawling about the floor. At the grain stalls were sacks of white rice, *pulut* (glutinous) rice, brown and dark yellow wheat, soybeans, red beans, green peas, millet and sesame. At the meat stalls on the second storey were pork bones, different cuts of pork, beef and mutton hung on hooks. At the roast duck stalls hung golden roasted ducks and roasted pork. There were also coops containing live fowls and geese.

As for vegetables, every kind that Pak Foo knew and grew could be found there. There were red and white radishes, cabbages, cucumbers, bitter gourds, leafy vegetables, brinjals, celery, ginger and bean sprouts kept in tubs of water.

Almost everything that a person needed was found here.

Outside the market were men and women selling fried sweet potatoes, fruits, nuts, roasted meat balls, glutinous rice cakes, *haahm gou* (rice pudding), *wuh tauh gou* (yam pudding) and *jyu cheung fan* (rice noodles) which, when flavoured with chilly sauce, vinegar and soya sauce, was a favourite with those in a hurry. There were also stalls selling *baahk gwo juk* (rice porridge) and *mahk juk* (sweet oatmeal gruel), where men and women squatted or sat on stools to have a quick breakfast.

The sundry shops opposite the market and beside it did good business every morning. So did the coffee-shops around the market square. They were always crowded with men only because women seldom, if ever,

went there as they felt it was not good to be seen sitting and gossiping in a public place, even if it was to have a cup of coffee or tea.

At night there were few people in this section of the town. The crowd moved to the upper section, as the other end of the shophouses was called.

The opera house was in this area. It was built at the end of the town, in a large compound, and was made up of a stage looking down on rows and rows of seats. Only Cantonese operas were staged and, whenever famous actors or actresses performed, the theatre would be packed. The stories, the performances of the actors and actresses, were topics of conversation for weeks or even months.

Beside the theatre, on its right, was the Eastern Smelting Company which collected tin-ore produced by the 'wooden' dredge and the Chinese open cast mines in the area. Further down the road on the right was the Government dispensary which was built on the top of a high piece of land. The lawn was quite big and surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and the grass was always kept short making the compound tidy and pretty. Behind it was the gaol built on a small hill overlooking the town. It was a common sight to find one tall, strong Sikh policeman handling four or five Chinese prisoners. He tied them together by their pigtails and drove them on with only a stick.

A large football field was situated a short distance to the right of the dispensary. Whenever there was a football match, there was great excitement in the town. Since the dispensary overlooked the field, the Chinese dresser (male nurse) would place chairs on the edge of the compound for his friends and other guests to watch the match. His guests were usually the European prison warden, the medical officer of Batu Gajah Hospital, the Officer-in-Charge of the Papan Police District, the manager and engineer of Papan Tin Dredging Company and other wealthy and prominent residents.

There were only three rows of shop houses. The row opposite the dispensary was wooden and was known as the New Town because it was recently built. The street which led to it started from the bottom of the

wooden stairs of the dispensary. It passed through one end of the football field and the right side of the tennis court which was built for the Europeans and medical staff.

The other two rows, which ran side by side with the main road, was the Old Town. They were the oldest buildings in Perak as Papan was known to be the oldest town in the state and were mostly brick buildings. The first shophouse was the Anglo-Chinese Club whose members were Europeans and prominent Chinese residents. Every year the European community held a sports event for the public. The object was to foster friendship with the other communities which, apart from the Chinese, were the Malays, Indians and Sikhs.

From the second house onwards, about ten other houses were occupied by fairly well-known families. There was a break here, and the next house was separated by a road which led to the New Town, the gaol, the dispensary and the football field to join the main road. From the next building onwards until the market, the shop houses were occupied by people doing different kinds of work, some very rich and some fairly rich.

There was no one living in the first shophouse opposite the Anglo-Chinese Club because it was said to be haunted. The next house down the row, until it reached the break, also had a lane running at the back for the Sanitary Board labourers to carry away the buckets in the latrines and replace them with empty ones.

It was in the first lot of houses in this row that amusements were found. Located here were the houses with prostitutes and sing-song girls and the shooting gallery where the men and youths rented guns to shoot at targets. Girls in bright, coloured clothes could be seen in front of the houses or walking about on the verandah under dimly lighted red lanterns. Music and voices of women singing could also be heard.

Quite different were the houses in the next row, the Lower End as it was called, occupied by some of the wealthiest families of not only Papan but the Kinta District. These houses stretched to beyond the coffee-shops opposite the market until, after another break, they reached the

post office opposite of which was the police station. About ten yards further down, was the quarters of the Officer-in-Charge of the Police District.

Looming over the town, was Gunung Hijau, a range consisting of three blue hills. It was about a quarter of a mile from the gaol but, from afar, it looked as if it was just beside it. It appeared formidable as if it were a monster awakened from sleep and starting to move away. The peak in front was flat at the top like an angry cobra's head. Its three humps and two curves made it look even more frightening when dark rain clouds were near, blown by wind and moving over them. Everyone knew it would rain soon when they saw low, hanging clouds which failed to go over the range.

Kong Mui got its name from these hills as it lay at the tail end of Gunung Hijau.

A swamp lay on one side of the hillock where the prison was. Very few people dared to go into the water to catch prawns or set traps at night to catch fish because it was full of leeches, which attacked cows or people as soon as they stepped into the murky water. On the other side of this hillock was Tampoi. The people who lived there were mostly Chinese who worked in tin-mines or farms. Tampoi was a large piece of level ground stretching from the prison hillock to the foot of Gunung Hijau, at the forefront of the range.

The low hillock, on which the gaol was sited, was actually a continuation of the other hillocks in which Yoong Fu's 'wild rat' mine was situated. They were complementary, combining to form a balanced whole series of undulating hillocks which joined the Kledang range and beyond, coming to an end at Jelapang. Perched on the summit of a beautiful hillock beside the theatre was a reservoir. Running at the foot of this high land was a road which led to a quarry which produced some of the best granite rocks for road surfacing and, across this and adjoining it by a difficult pass through a col, was another beautiful hillock shaped like a dome.

Pak Foo's parents built their house at the foot of this yellow, dome-like hillock.



## *Principles Of The New Order*

SO MANY things were happening that Pak Foo was hardly able to cope. First of all, he did not have to do farm work or any other work at all as both his father and mother were now working in a tin mine in Tampoi. Their house, a neat wooden one with an *attap* roof, had not much land for planting. His mother grew some vegetables after work and these were not for sale but for their own use.

Their house stood by itself with some land around it. In between the shrub fence surrounding their home, fruit trees such as pomelo, jackfruit, *chiku* and rambutan had been planted. On the left, separated by a thick bamboo fence and tall *macang* trees, was the Istana Rajah Bilah, the mosque and some Malay houses.

On Friday, Malays of the same clan<sup>13</sup> from Siputeh, Pusing and other parts of Papan, came to the mosque to pray. Early every morning, the muezzin would first recite aloud verses from the Koran calling the people living there and nearby to prayers. Even the non-Muslims, who had become used to the voice of the muezzin, found it pleasant-sounding. The recitation of the Koran and the sound of the *kerantung* was like an alarm clock, telling them that it was time to get up and get ready to go to work.

During the fruit season, Pak Foo and a few other boys would sit under the *macang* trees to wait for the ripe fruits to drop. They would, of course, wait inside the compound of Pak Foo's house and not climb over the fence into Rajah Bilah's compound. Even if they did so, the Penghulu did not mind. He said the boys had to ask permission first before going into the compound, especially when it was very early in the morning. The

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13. Clan: The Mandailing clan, originated from Sumatra.

Malays of the kampong were very kind and they did not mind if the boys picked the fruits to eat but not to sell.

During the day, Pak Foo joined in almost all the activities. He flew kites when it was the season, spun tops, played marbles, caught fighting fish in swamps and kept them in glass bottles, placed close together. When the fish saw each other they would become angry and light up and glow with beautiful colours, trying to frighten each other. Sometimes he would put his fish into the bottle of his friend's and let the two fight. He also kept a magpie in a cage, catching grasshoppers and insects for the bird to eat. His bird was a very good singer and woke Pak Foo every morning with its singing.

At night he would go with his friends to the swamp behind the Government Dispensary to fish, catch prawns and small young frogs as bait for big fish. He would place a net tied to a bamboo pole in the swamp. To attract fish or prawns, he would fix a small lamp to the end of the pole and drop crumbs of leftover food in the water. He caught mostly small prawns which were enough to feed his magpie. Since there were many boys who went about catching crickets at night with torches he also joined them, but soon gave up this uninteresting hobby. All night activities between the dispensary and gaol were stopped for a while when a prisoner escaped one night and a curfew was imposed.

Nothing would stop Pak Foo and his friends from doing one thing or another during the day or night. For Pak Foo, it was only in Papan that he was able to go out of his home at all hours, whereas in Kong Mui, he had to stay indoors after sunset. So, on bright moonlit nights, he would be out with his friends. One favourite activity was to catch birds for frying or for cooking porridge. His method was to cut out a large piece of an old mosquito net. Together with his friends, he would go along the road up the reservoir and spread the net to cover the bushes. They would disturb the bushes or had someone beat the *belukar* with a stick until the birds flew out and were caught in the net. Most of the birds caught were bulbuls which were slightly larger than sparrows and would have more meat.

Another place the boys often visited was the large, dirty lake opposite the New Town. Surrounded by wooden shophouses on one side and the football field on the other, the lake was bordered by squatter *attap* houses on the remaining sides. So many people lived there, depending on the lake for a living as the Malays in a *kampong* would depend on a river, that they were known as the Lake Community. Pak Foo and his friends would go there to spear fish at night. They would plant a stick in the shallow water and attach a lamp to it. They would throw some food in the water and wait. When fish swam by and came near, they would spear them. They would take the fish from the barb and throw them to the shore where their baskets were.

They kept on going to the lake even when many people told them that there were many *seui gwai* (water spirits) in the lake, and that they were always pulling a human being into the water to drown him so that one of the water devils would be reborn as a human being in his place.

They learnt to swim in the yellow, muddy river, Sungai Johan, which flowed through the houses of the Lake Community. Since they had, by then, become clever at catching fish, they would put their hands to feel along the sides of the river bank. As soon as they felt something soft they would grip it. The fish caught here were mostly catfish which had sharp horns. They were sometimes pricked by the fish and when that happened, they would squeeze the wound and put the finger into the mouth to suck out the poison. Sometimes they caught snakes which they would throw back into the water or to the land. They seldom killed them. Snakes which lived in the water were usually not poisonous.

They also learnt to swim in the large, deep mining pool on the other side of the gaol in Tampoi known as the Lim Lee pool. At first they depended on the light *jelutong* logs to move about in the water but when they improved they would swim without inflated tubes or other kinds of floats.

They spent so much time outdoors that their bodies were so sunburnt that they were called 'blackies' by their friends.

Perhaps the greatest change in Pak Foo's life was brought by the school in Papan. It followed the modern method of education, using the graded textbooks which his former teacher in Kong Mui, *Tai Louh Si*, had condemned. Education in China had, for sometime now, been changed. The old textbooks were discouraged except as classics. Textbooks with simplified characters were used and grading of books and classes was introduced.

Students were divided into different classes, from Standard One to Standard Six. Each class was placed in the charge of a teacher who would use the same book for all the students. After one year they were made to sit for an examination. Those who passed were promoted to Standard Two and would use a more difficult book and given more difficult characters to write. Arithmetic, dictation, geography, hygiene and moral were introduced and so was English. The students would continue to study until Standard Six when they would sit for a Public Examination. Those who passed, and who could afford it, would go to Batu Gajah or Ipoh for the Junior Middle and then the Senior Middle, after which they could join the university.

The school was not owned by anybody. It was controlled by a public committee who also looked after the affairs of the town. Money came from the public, especially the wealthy, who regularly contributed to the fund. The school was called the Papan Hwa Chiao (Overseas) Chinese School and was situated in the New Town, occupying two old, dark and grim wooden buildings. The "water devil" lake was just in front of it and the football field a short distance to the right.

At about this time, Dr Sun Yat Sen had replaced the Manchu government in China and set up the Republic. One of the first things the Chinese people did was to get rid of the pigtail. Those who refused to do so would have it cut off by others. In the school, where the headmaster had come from Shanghai, cutting off the pigtail was carried out very eagerly by both men and boys.

In China, the keenness of the newfound freedom was great. The people there were like the people of Malaya when the country became

independent. They wanted to make the nation great. Dr Sun Yat Sen, founder of the Kuomintang party, introduced "The People's Three Principles", the new order for change. It came to Malaya through the new type schools. The headmaster stopped wearing his old fashioned clothes, which many of the wealthy, elderly people in Papan were wearing, and put on a white coat and a bow-tie when he came to school. He also taught the students to sing military songs.

After some time, cutting off pigtails became fashionable with the girls too. When Siew Mei first bobbed her hair, many of her friends were excited, especially Pak Foo who was in the same class as her. Choong Tet and Choong Sin were thrilled too by the changes that were happening.

Pak Foo took a long time to get used to town life. There was little work and much play in the public school. Classes were over by three and they did not go to school on Sunday and public holidays. He was taught to read and speak in Mandarin which was new to him and his friends from Kong Mui. In a few months he began to understand what the teacher said and was able to follow what he was taught. His teacher was a very pretty girl of sixteen, having just passed her Junior Middle in a girls' school in Ipoh. She was dressed in an exquisite white tunic and black skirt which came to slightly above the knees. Both Pak Foo and Siew Mei loved her as they had never loved anybody else before.

Every morning, Pak Foo used to walk to school in Kong Mui with Siew Mei and her two brothers, but in Papan, he went alone. It was true that *sihng sih* (city) life changed people and Pak Foo felt that his friendship with his friends had changed.

Something had awakened in him. He really loved going to school. It was not only the lessons he looked forward to but there were so many other children he could meet and become friendly with. And they were all so neatly dressed and many were living in lovely brick houses! There were also the girls. Some were so pretty that he wished they could be his friends the way Siew Mei was. He was never given the opportunity to look at pretty girls so closely before.

It was the custom in China that a girl should be quiet, hard-working and silent and, above all, have good manners. She was expected to prepare herself to be a good wife and daughter-in-law, not to answer back when scolded, to talk softly and sit properly with her legs close together. It was not expected that a boy be restricted from so many things. His role was to be active and assume the duties of the household. If he was the eldest son, he was to take over the responsibility of running the house when the father died. Above all, he was expected to be the husband of the girl he would marry and become the master of his household and carry on the tradition from generation to generation. But the girls in Papan were not so obedient after all. In school and on the streets he would find noisy, screaming girls. They did not shout any less loudly than the boys.

Everything was different in the town. The boys and girls were allowed to do many things Pak Foo was not allowed to do in Kong Mui or China. He was glad that he had come to live in Malaya!



# 14

## *Kidnapped!*

THEY WADED in the stream following its course towards its mouth. The water was clear, as are the waters of all streams or rivers before they are made dirty by human activity. It was shallow and the current gentle, but the banks were fairly wide apart, so that the people in Tampoi called it 'The River'. Vegetation came to the edge and in some parts grew trees, with branches and leaves hanging low over the water. Where there were sharp bends, the water was still and grass grew profusely. This broad stream was unlike most of the streams in Kong Mui where the banks were narrow and the currents swift, showing that they started from high ground and their courses were steep.

"The source of this river is a point where the water comes out from the ground," said Cheong Mooi Kim. "It is actually a meeting place of a few streams which have their beginnings in the rocks in a valley."

Cheong Mooi Kim was a boy about Choong Tet's age. He lived in Tampoi but went to the same school as Pak Foo, Siew Mei and her brothers. He and Choong Tet became friends when his (Mooi Kim's) father took him to visit Cheong Tuck Choy and *Baat Sou*. His father was not only working in Sin Chung Tet Tin Mine, the mine where Choong Tet's parents were working, but they had the same surname, Cheong, which, according to Chinese custom, made them virtually relatives.

They waded on for sometime until they came to a sharp turn in the river. There was a small pool of slow moving, almost still water with tall grass growing on both banks.

"Here's a spot," Mooi Kim said, "where there is likely to be more fish than any where else. Let's put up a blockade and draw out the water to catch the fish."

They climbed up the embankment to put away their picnic basket and started work at once. While Pak Foo began to arrange rocks across the opening at one end of the pool, Choong Sin and Choong Tet were doing the same at the other end. Mooi Kim cut vegetation and twigs and built a barricade around the rocks while Siew Mei dug sand and earth in the river to strengthen any weak spots. In a short while they completed building the dam.

Mooi Kim then took out an old oil tin. He tied four pieces of manila rope, two on each side, to the tin and gave each piece a tug to make sure they were firmly fastened. Mooi Kim and Choong Sin then went to either side of the dam, each holding to one pair of the ropes. They swung the tin about until they got into rhythm and Mooi Kim, being more experienced in using this method of drawing water, timed the swinging. At the count of three, they dipped the tin into the water and tugged at the ropes, each at his end, and pulled the tin, now filled with water, out of the pool. When the tin went over the dam, they pulled the rope at the bottom causing the tin to tilt and pour out the water. They did that until they were tired and changed hands.

When the water inside the pool became less and less, they saw fish splashing about as they came out from the holes in the bank. Siew Mei, together with the others, went to catch the wriggling fish and put them into baskets and nets. By the time the water in the pool was almost all drawn out, they had caught all the fish there. Some fish remained hiding in the holes and were prodded with sticks. Water was thrown into their hiding places until they were forced out and caught. Altogether, the children caught enough fish for three average families for two meals each.

While they were resting and eating their lunch, they heard voices. First came the rough voice of a man giving commands to a boy who was crying. They hurriedly climbed up the embankment overlooking the path, took away everything down to the river and hid them. After a while they saw four men escorting a middle-aged man and a boy. Both the man and the boy were blindfolded and had their hands tied behind their backs.

"If you don't stop crying," said the man, who was holding a *parang* and urging the boy on, "I'm going to cut off your tongue."

"Please tell your man not to frighten my son unnecessarily," the elderly man told the man who was holding him and guiding him along. "You're the leader, aren't you?" Then he slipped and fell to the ground, his right hand touching the ground as if to balance himself. Before he was helped up, he took a small plant and broke it and bent it in the direction which they were heading.

"Mangkali Sang," the leader of the gang called out, "stop scaring the boy. It's money we want, isn't it? If you kill them, what would we get in return?"

"I'm doing it to stop the boy from being too cheeky," Mangkali Sang said. "Boys from wealthy homes are always like that. He ought to be taught a lesson."

"Take off his blindfold," the ringleader said. "We're far enough from civilisation now and are safe." As he said this, he stopped to take off the cloth covering the man's face. The tall, dark Sikh did the same to the boy.

"Isn't the boy Chang Kon Fook?" Choong Tet asked as they climbed from the bank down to the river after the party had gone past. "The man is Chang Sin Sang. They live in the house next to Soon Woh and are Christians, aren't they?"

"Yes," replied Choong Sin. "They're father and son and live in the house called Toong Tuck. The family has just moved to Papan from Tronoh."

"So what, whoever they are?" asked Siew Mei. "They're not related to any of us and why should we bother about them?"

"Chang Sin Sang is very rich," Choong Sin said. "He has just bought over some rubber estates in Tampoi and goes around visiting them every day."

"He has just started to grow tobacco in the vacant lands around his estates since the price of cigarettes has gone up," Mooi Kim said.

"Chang Kon Fook is our classmate," Pak Foo said, looking at Siew Mei, "isn't he?"

"I can see you're all feeling sorry for them," Siew Mei said, "but what can we do? The leader of the gang has a gun and he has the looks of a very cruel man."

"But the gun is not a real one," Pak Foo said. "It's made up of a sawn pipe fixed to a wooden stock. The hammer is also crude. When pulled forward, it sets fire to the powder in the sawn pipe and sends the ball bearings, cut-out nail heads, and pebbles to whatever object it is aimed at. The trigger is a bent nail. It is doubtful the gun will work when the trigger is pulled, but guns like that have been used by robbers in China and they have wounded and even killed people."

They set about putting their fish into the basket and the two nets into two buckets filled with water. They made several openings in the dam for the water to flow back into the pool and let nature rebuild what they had upset.

When they climbed up the embankment, they came to the footpath. Instead of going in the direction the kidnappers took the captives, they went in the opposite direction, back to Tampoi and Papan. When they were near Mooi Kim's house they met a group of men led by a girl going in the opposite direction. When they came near them they recognised the girl. She was Chang Kung Thye, daughter of Chang Sin Sang, the man the robbers had kidnapped.

"What's happening here and where are you going?" Choong Sin asked the girl.

"Have you seen my father and brother?" asked Chang Kung Thye. "They were captured by a gang of robbers. I've brought these men here to help me rescue them."

Mooi Kim noticed that most of the men were from Tampoi and some lived in the rubber factory belonging to the father of the girl.

"Yes," Pak Foo said. "We saw them taking your father and brother into the jungle. They were blindfolded and had their hands tied but when the blindfolds were removed we recognised them."

When Chang Kung Thye heard this, she became very excited. She asked, "Do you know which way they went?"

Before Pak Foo could answer her, a man in the group said, "Please lead us to where they are. I know it's dangerous but please help my *towkay's* daughter."

"If you help us and lead us there," Kung Thye said, "we'll reward you if we locate my father and brother and succeed in releasing them."

"Please come with us and help us," another man pleaded. All the men surrounded the boys asking for their help.

Mooi Kim, seeing that most of the men lived in his area and knew him, agreed, "All right, all right." He then turned to his companions and told them, "I'm going with them. How many of you are going with me? Those who are willing, raise your hands."

All of them raised their hands, including Siew Mei. Chang Kung Thye and the men with her were very pleased as they were going to have more company for the mission.

"What are we going to do with the fish we have with us?" Choong Tet asked.

"Two of us will have to take them back," Mooi Kim said. "They'll have to make the sacrifice and not join in the rescue effort. The question is who?"

"Let Siew Mei and Choong Tet take the fish back," Choong Sin said. "Siew Mei is a girl and my brother is too young for such a dangerous task."

"Oh, no," protested Siew Mei. "Where you boys go, I go." After a while she added, "Isn't Chang Kung Thye a girl? Well, if she can take the risk why can't I? Surely, she's not better trained than I in travelling in the jungle?"

"Chang Kung Thye's father has been kidnapped by the robbers," Choong Sin said. "She has to go along even at the risk of her life. How can you compare yourself with her?"

"But I'm as big as Pak Foo or Mooi Kim," Choong Tet said. "When they can go, why can't I?"

"Pak Foo knows kungfu," Choong Sin said. "Don't you know that given a stick, he can beat many people?"

"I would let you go in my place if you know the place as well as I do," Mooi Kim said, trying to console Choong Tet. "These people need me."

After more discussion and arguments, a man in the rescue team stepped forward and said, "Let's not waste any more time. The decision stays. We don't want to be burdened with almost a child and another girl on our mission. You know, there will be dangerous fights and shooting." He was holding a gun in his hand.

Obviously, the man was the leader of the team and spoke with authority. He lived in Tampoi near Mooi Kim's house and was known as Yap Ghee Hong. Mooi Kim and the people of Tampoi called him Ghee Hong Go.

Siew Mei and Choong Tet were dejected when they heard this. However, they had to accept the decision whether they liked it or not. As they were leaving, Mooi Kim told them to go to his house and leave the fish in a jar beside the house until they returned home and decide what to do with the catch.



# 15

## *To The Rescue*

MOOI KIM led the search party and followed the path the kidnappers and the captives had taken. As it was the dry season, the ground was firm and hard and would not set down foot marks clearly. So there were scarcely any tracks and, if there were, they were faint and blurred. Once in a while, they found signs of heavy boot marks and bent vegetation. These distinct signs were found at great distances apart but when they appeared more than once Mooi Kim realized that they were made by Chang Sin Sang to guide the rescue party.

"How come your father and brother were kidnapped?" Pak Foo asked Chang Kung Thye beside him.

"You see," the girl said, "we bought the estates only about a year ago. My father is a very ambitious man and he had bought not only the estates in Papan but also those stretching from Tampoi to near Pusing."

"I'm sure if he had bought only property in Tampoi," said Mooi Kim, "nothing like this would have happened. I know the people in our area well. They'll never do anything to harm your father because he has not only given them work but has been treating them well, better than their former employers."

There was silence. Nobody said anything.

"I want you to tell us how it happened," Mooi Kim continued. "Start from the beginning. Tell us how many came, what they did and why you were not taken with your father and brother and so on."

"As usual," the girl began, "at about eight o'clock in the morning, my father, my brother and I started from our house to go to the estate. Our coachman drove us there and put us down at the factory where my father and brother immediately set out to go around the estate. It is also a form of exercise for my father to walk around a bit in the morning. So

they set out almost immediately after getting down from the gharry (horse-drawn cart) without me.

After I had visited the toilet in the factory, changed into working clothes and put on my boots, I took the gun and walked as fast I could to join them. When I almost caught up with them I saw what happened. One robber was tying my father's hands while another had the gun pointed at him. The other two men were holding my brother to prevent him from running away. Our coachman was already tied to a tree. I waited until the kidnapers left with my father and brother. The first thing I did was to free our coachman and find out what happened. He told me everything."

"Why didn't your father take the gun with him when he left you?" Pak Foo asked. "Don't you think it would be better for them to go with a gun?"

"He knew that," said Kung Thye. "He thought it would be better for me to be armed than them. You know, my father is a very tough man and was leading a robust and spirited life when he was in China."

"I have the gun now," Yap Ghee Hong, the village chief of Tampoi, said. "I can handle it better than a girl."

"Do you always visit the toilet and change your clothes when you reach the factory?" Pak Foo asked.

"Yes," the girl said. "You know, girls are not like boys. We don't like to be seen in town in shabby clothes like the kind we wear when we go around the estates."

"Since that has already become a habit with you," concluded Choong Sin, "the kidnapers knew that your father, brother and coachman always go unarmed when they start to go on their rounds. That's why they chose this time to attack and kidnap them."

"Towkay Chang was a bandit himself," one of the men in the group whispered softly into Pak Foo's ear. "In fact, he was the chief of a band of robbers and wouldn't have left China if the authorities hadn't tried to arrest him."

Before they passed the point where they went down to the river to fish, Mooi Kim saw the clear boot marks and spotted the broken plant where Chang Sin Sang fell to make these clues.

"Remember these signs?" Mooi Kim asked Pak Foo.

"Yes," Pak Foo replied. "Isn't it the place where Kung Thye's father fell? I'm sure he pretended to fall and break the plant to point it in the direction he was being taken."

"What a clever boy you are," remarked Choong Sin. "You're not only able to pick up the clues left by Kung Thye's father but also know how ingenious her father was. He made clear signs for us to follow."

"He sure has," the coachman said. "The fact that he has become rich in such a short time proves that my boss is very talented."

"All this is of no use now," Chang Kung Thye cried in despair. "His life is in great danger. I don't know if we can get him out of this alive."

"Please don't be so down hearted," Pak Foo said, trying to cheer her up. "Can't you see you have a very good team in us? If there's anybody who can save your father we are the people. I've been in difficulties worse than this before and I've always got out of them."

They went eastwards in the direction of Pusing, a neighbouring town. They followed a path which seemed to be on the edge of rubber estates. On their right were the rubber trees and on their left were many squatter houses which lay far apart, separated by secondary growth, tall grass and bushes. The estates were like a ribbon winding round the foothills of Gunung Hijau. They were formerly owned by many people called small-holders, but after they were sold to Chang Sin Sang, the bush fences separating them had been cut, making them into a continuous whole until they came to somewhere near Pusing.

There were faint trails leading from the edge of the estate towards the squatter houses. Some were still being used by tappers who were engaged by their new employer.

"Does your father own all the estates here?" Pak Foo asked Kung Thye.

"No, not yet," said Kung Thye. "We own the estates stretching from Tampoi to somewhere near Pusing. Those stretching from there to Siputeh belong to small-holders who live in the villages near their property."

First they passed a rubber estate on their right. The trees were not more than five feet high and were recently planted and the land appeared to be newly cleared. At this time rubber was in great demand and everywhere rubber trees were being planted.

They then came to an abandoned tin mine with a broken down sluice and the longhouse already crumbling. There was a small pool nearby where there were signs that the workers had dug for tin and had abandoned the project due to the low tin price. The area was deserted and there was no sign of recent activity.

Still the pursuers found no sign of the captives or kidnapers. Occasionally, they came across telltale marks of boot scratches, broken twigs or twisted blades of grass, until even these ceased to show. As the path continued, the group kept on following it until it took a sharp turn and dipped in the direction of Pusing.

The boys spread out to look for a lead until Choong Sin spotted some foot prints veering off from the trail leading up to an incline. They followed them and came to an orchard. At the edge of the mango trees and cleverly hidden from view, was a fairly large hut, recently built. It was in the secondary jungle with lots of bushes, low trees and wild plants for cover.

Could this be the hideout they were looking for? They were not sure. They had to get nearer to take a look. They dared not go in by a direct approach, but went round the shack through the small, low trees and thick undergrowth.

After studying it closely, they realised that the hut was not recently built but was quite old and could still be used as temporary living quarters. Only the front part of the ground overlooking the guava trees was recently cleared. The bushes and vegetation on both sides of the shack had also been cut. Some parts of the ground had been dug showing the brown earth. This was done to give the occupants of the hut a clearer view of

the orchard so that they could see anyone approaching it in front or at the sides. But nothing was done at the back as they might have planned it as a means of escape. Through this they could run into the jungle and disappear when there was danger.

The shack had its back part set on to a steep sloping land and was built on stilts, like the *orang asli* rest hut they saw near Bekor. The sleeping platform was also made of split trunks of wild palm trees about the size of betel-nut trees. Its roof and sides were covered by leaves of the wild palm trees, but since they were not as durable as *attap* leaves, parts of the roof were already rotting and had been patched with *lalang* to prevent leaking when it rained.

The party was in a dilemma. While they waited they saw Mangkali Sang leaving the hideout. He was carrying a wicker basket in his hand and appeared as if he was going to the market. He did not go in the direction of Papan but Pusing where he could not possibly have aroused suspicion.

How many people were still in the shack? Where was the sentry posted? Now that one had left were there three or less men there? Should they attack now? But they did not want to take the risk yet by attacking but wait till they knew how strong the kidnappers were and how many men they had. They were trying to work out a plan of action.

Then they saw the man with the gun coming out of the hut and going to the latrine. The opportunity had come! They decided to attack even though they were not sure how many men were in the hideout.

Yap Ghee Hong stood up. He pointed to Pak Foo, Choong Sin, Mooi Kim and two other men indicating by hand signals to go with him to the latrine. He motioned to the rest of the men to surround the hut. Since silence was very important in such an exercise everything was carried out without uttering a word. So the men and the boys as well as Kung Thye were deployed as planned.

Pak Foo waited near the latrine with Ghee Hong, who was pointing the gun at the entrance. They would set the roof of the latrine on fire. When the gangster chief rushed out, they would either clobber his head

with a stick or strike his feet and capture the culprit alive. It would be unwise to shoot and kill him, wouldn't it?

Ghee Hong agreed by nodding his head. So they crept as quietly as they could towards the latrine where the gangster leader was still inside. Pak Foo put the nail hanging beside the entrance back to the latch and fastened the door thus preventing it from being opened inside. Then Mooi Kim struck a match and set fire to the top of the structure. When the blaze began to consume the *attap*, the leader of the kidnapers became aware of the situation. First he tried to open the door and found he could not. He tried to escape through the roof but found it blazing away fiercely. When he again tried the door and found he could not open it, he shook it vigorously and yelled at the top of his voice, "What the hell is going on here? Open the door!"

First one man came out to find out what was the cause of the commotion. He was struck in the shin and brought down to the ground. When the other man rushed out to investigate, he received a knock on the head and back when two men set upon him with their sticks and put him down also. They pinned the two scoundrels down and tied them the way they had tied their captives.

They rushed into the shack but could not find Chang Sin Sang nor his son on the ground floor. They ran up the short flight of stairs and found them lying on the platform. They were bound and gagged. When the rescuers cut the strings binding their hands and feet and pulled away their gags, they heard a gun going off with a loud bang. As they came down the ladder, they saw the gangster chief running out of the burning latrine, his face badly burnt. He was still clutching the gun which was not only made useless by the fire but could only shoot once unless reloaded – he had used it to blast the latch off the door to escape. Choong Sin and Mooi Kim, who were waiting for him to come out, were no longer afraid of him now. They pounced on him and brought him to the ground and tied him like the other two gangsters. After that they helped to smother the flames burning his clothes. All this time, Ghee Hong was standing guard with his gun pointed at the gangster leader.

"What are we going to do with these people?" Pak Foo asked when the three gangsters were brought together.

"Hand them over to the police," said Kung Thye. "Perhaps we might get a reward from the authorities."

"I'm not keen on the reward," said Mooi Kim. "What I want to see is that these crooks are put in jail so that they won't be able to rob and kidnap people any more."

"That's very noble of you," said Kung Thye. "It's better to see people who do wrong punished and good people are protected from harm."

"You are all very brave," Chang Sin Sang said, after he had recovered from the ordeal he had gone through. Casting his eyes about the men and boys who had rescued him, he added, "I admire you for what you have done, especially the boys. I'll see how I can repay you."

"Come," said Ghee Hong, "let us go and hand these rascals to the police."

"What about Mangkali Sang?" asked Kon Fook. "He's not among them and is still free." The boy, remembering the rough handling the robber had given him, was keen that he, too, should be punished.

"The police will know what to do after we hand these men to them and make a report," said Ghee Hong. "They'll either send a posse here to catch him when he returns or search the opium dens in Pusing where he goes to smoke opium."



# 16

## *Windfall For Everybody*



*Main Road of Papan with the Gunung Hijau range in the background. The house in the centre with the side balcony is Siew Mei's house. The smoke behind the shop houses is from the Eastern Smelting Company. (Circa 1905)*

AFTER SCHOOL was dismissed, Siew Mei and her brothers invited Pak Foo and Mooi Kim to their house for dinner.

"Today is the fifth day of the fifth lunar month," said Choong Sin, "and we're celebrating it and inviting you two over to our house for dinner."

"We've made *jung*, too," said Siew Mei.

"Every Chinese festival is celebrated for a special reason," added Mooi Kim. "Why is *jung* associated with this festival?"

"According to Chinese legend," began Pak Foo, "*Wat Yuhn*, a minister of the Chu Kingdom, committed suicide in 278 B.C. by jumping into the river when he fell out of favour with the king. *Jung* or rice dumplings are made to honour and remember him."

"Why are the dumplings we make and eat for the occasion not made and eaten during other festivals?" Siew Mei wanted to know.

"The people of the village where *Wat Yuhn* lived," Pak Foo continued, "felt so sad over his death that they made dumplings to throw into the river for his spirit to eat. Since they were afraid the dumplings might break up in the water and be eaten by fish, they wrapped them in bamboo leaves and tied them firmly with strings. As time went on this custom spread to other villages and it is being carried out to this day."

"Our teacher told us," Siew Mei added, "the people in China celebrate the festival with a dragon boat race. Is it true?"

"It's true," Pak Foo nodded. "They hold a boat race every year in my village, Kaichoon Liang, to celebrate the occasion."

"Why," exclaimed Mooi Kim, "they're going to hold one in Papan today. I heard they're going to hold it in the Lim Lee Lake in Tampoi."

"If that is so," Choong Tet asked, "why aren't we going to see it? If none of you want to go I'll go alone."

"Mother said no one can leave until the dumplings are eaten," Siew Mei said, firmly. "She has also prepared a meal for all of us."

Siew Mei's house was like the other shop houses. It was linked to other houses on the left but had a stony road on the right. It was the only house which had a covered balcony running along its whole length giving the occupants a view of what was going on along the side road. They could even buy vegetables and do petty marketing here by lowering baskets and telling the street hawker what they wanted, whereas the other housewives had to do that through their windows, verandahs or open terraces.

The Cheong family's fortune had changed for the better since the children took part in freeing Chang Sin Sang from the kidnap. Cheong Tuck Choy, Siew Mei's father, was given the job of going round the estates and was in charge of the tappers, which was formerly done by Chang Sin Sang himself. Ho Yoong Sin, Pak Foo's father, looked after two open cast tin mines and his mother, Chew Choo Moy, was given contracts of *dulang* washing of discarded earth from the *palongs* in the mines.

Choong Chee had opened a bicycle shop on the ground floor of their house. Since the two-wheeled vehicle was introduced into Papan, he not only sold bicycles but did repairs and rented them out at 5 cents for half an hour. Cheong Tuck Choy also knew that in time to come many people would use the bicycle for travelling. So he opened a shop for his son. Ever since the 'wild rat' mine stopped operating, Choong Chee had not been working.

When they went into Siew Mei's house they were served two kinds of dumplings. One contained pork, mushrooms and pepper and the other was tasteless and was eaten after dipping the cut up pieces into thick, sweet syrup. Both were made from glutinous rice and wrapped in large dried bamboo leaves and bound with strands peeled from cut banana tree trunks.

After the feast it was still early and they had to find something to do to while away the time.

"Aren't we going to watch the dragon boat race?" Choong Tet again asked.

"It starts at five o'clock," Mooi Kim answered. "It's only two o'clock now."

"What are we going to do until then?" Choong Tet asked.

"Well, you can go sightseeing on bicycles," Choong Chee suggested, seizing on the opportunity to do some business. "It costs only five cents rental for half an hour for each machine."

"*Daaih Go* (eldest brother) is greedy and thinks only of business," Siew Mei protested. "I'm not going to pay you money when I use your machine."

"Well, it isn't a bad idea at all," said Choong Sin. "After all, there are so many places we can go to by bicycle."

"Yes," agreed Choong Tet, "but how are we going to raise so much money to pay for the rental of the machines?"

"Never mind the payment," Choong Chee told them. "I was only joking. What I really want is for you guys to go around on my bicycles to make this kind of transport popular. It's still new here."

The first place they went to was Chang Sin Sang's house. These days they rarely went anywhere without his son, Kon Fook. When they arrived at the front door of his house they rang their bicycle bells until the boy came out. When told where they were going he asked, "How can I join you? I don't have a bicycle."

"You don't need to have a bicycle," replied Choong Sin. "Just sit on the carrier at the back of my machine."

When they were on their bicycles, Kon Fook said, "I was about to go to your place when you came. Father told me to invite you all to a dinner at the club tonight. He has told the cook to prepare a special table for us."

"What club?" Siew Mei asked.

"Our clan club," Kon Fook said. "Since your fathers have been admitted as members they will be introduced to the other members. They have to sign some forms and take part in some swearing in ceremony and other things."

They started the journey in front of a large house owned by Yap See, a wealthy tin miner and owner of many rubber estates. As they pedalled on, the row of houses on their right came into view. After Tuck Kwai's house was a tin smith shop followed by a blacksmith's, a tailor's and two rubber dealers' shops. Next came the coffee-shops and sundry shops which were situated near the market. Then there was a broad, well-kept lane leading to the Istana Raja Bilah, the royal tomb and mosque. Across the lane was a cloth merchant, who also sold toys, kitchen utensils, penknives and other novelties.



*Yap See Mansion at the entrance to Papan (photo by Jeffrey Liew)*

The market and other businesses around it on the left side were not doing any business at all at this time of the day. The first shop across the stony road was a sundry shop. There was an ice-water stall with a banana stall beside it. It had already opened for business. It was very popular with the footballers who, when they had nothing to do, would idle and chitchat with each other and sit on the long bench set beside the ice-water stall. They cycled past a few more shop houses until they came to a shop with two wooden plaques strung across the shop, one beside the other. The characters on the left sign board bore the characters 'Man Choon Thong' and the other, 'Papan Tsen Lung Fui Kuon'. On the ground floor was a Chinese medicine shop with a wall of drawers behind the proprietor and a long counter in front of him. The attendant also did watch-repairing as a side line.

This shop was looked after by Yoong Fu, who was put there when Pak Foo's father bought it after the building was taken over by the club. Yoong Fu had gone to Menglembu to work as an assistant in a medicine shop after his 'wild rat' mine closed down and he therefore had some

experience. The next shophouse was the famous tea-house, Nam Heng, and then there was a liquor shop. Further on, the shophouses were mostly residential until the barber shop, followed by a licensed opium dealer shop. Still further on was the Yee Lok Club where, every night, the members played musical instruments and sing-song girls were engaged to perform. Accompanied by the banging of gongs and the beating of drums, these activities went on until the early hours of the morning, especially when the following day was a Sunday or a public holiday. On the ground floor of this building was another famous tea house, after which were other residential houses opposite of which was Siew Mei's house.

After passing this, the children swept past the Anglo-Chinese Club and the theatre. When they arrived at the foot of the hillock where the reservoir was, they got down to push their bicycles. They turned right, going along the road leading to the quarry. They parked their machines at the foot of the hillock and looked up the slope leading to the reservoir.

"Isn't it too steep to walk up?" Choong Sin asked. "There's another way up which isn't so steep."

"Where is it?" Kon Fook asked.

"Just behind the reservoir on the other side of this hillock," Choong

*The road on the left leads to the reservoir (photo by Jeffrey Liew)*



Sin said. "We can go there, park our bicycles and walk up the slope. It's only a short distance from here."

They climbed back on their bicycles and pedaled along the road leading to Kong Mui. It was quite steep. When Choong Sin had difficulty pedaling with the extra weight behind him, Kon Fook got down and helped to push the machine. When they reached the top, Kon Fook climbed back and sat on the carrier as they cycled down the slope until they reached the bottom. There was a small concrete hut on the left side of the road. They got down and parked their bicycles beside the hut.

This hut housed a kind of locking machine used for stopping water from flowing up the reservoir when it was full by turning a large iron steering wheel.

"At one time this was quite a famous spot," Choong Sin told them, pointing at the tiny concrete structure. "Workers who walked past this hut to go to Kong Mui always tried to keep well away from it. They say it was haunted."

"How so?" Mooi Kim asked.

"One dark night, some workers saw a woman dressed in a long white robe squatting beside the hut, weeping," related Choong Sin. "A kind-hearted woman walked up to her and asked her what the matter was and, when the weeping woman turned, the inquirer was shocked to see the face was covered with blood."

"Wasn't it mother who told you this?" Siew Mei interrupted. "I've heard her telling the story to our neighbours."

"And that is why she resigned her job in the house of the manager of the dredging company," Choong Tet continued. "She said she was scared whenever she passed this place although she was always accompanied by many women and some men going to Kong Mui to work."

"I also heard," added Pak Foo, "that a man, who was returning to Kong Mui after the opera, lighted a cigarette and offered it to a woman and when he turned, he also saw her face was covered with blood."

"Hasn't the ghost been exorcised, driven out by prayers?" Kon Fook asked.

"It was, many years ago," said Choong Sin, "but the pole planted by a Siamese priest to imprison the ghost was pulled away by an Indian labourer who was building this concrete hut. As soon as the rod was pulled up the labourer was struck dead as if by lightning."

They plodded up the slope until they came to a barbed wire fence. They helped each other get into the compound by stepping on one barbed wire and lifting the other. After they entered the compound through the gap they came to the concrete wall of the reservoir. The water in the pool was so clear that they could see the bottom which was about six feet deep. The surrounding scenery was one of the most beautiful Pak Foo had ever seen. All round were yellow grassy hillocks and below them they could see the whole of Papan and beyond. The railway track was dimly visible, stretching out before them and soon a train rushed by with its engine belching smoke. They could hear children's voices and laughter when the wind blew in their direction.

After they returned to the concrete hut they went to get their bicycles. They started to return the way they came. Since the route from here to Papan was mostly downwards, it was a most exhilarating ride all the way till the foot of the reservoir. They got down to push their machines up the incline following the road to the quarry. The metalled road, used by bullock-carts to transport stones for road making, was well kept and a pleasure to use.

The slope was gradual and going upwards all the time. On their left was the hillock where the reservoir was and adjoining it was another stretch of highland scrubs and low trees leading to the interior. On their right the land sloped downwards and there was a small holding rubber estate with short stunted rubber trees owned by Mohamed Ali, an Indian Muslim married to a Malay woman. His son Manjit, nicknamed Panjang, looked after their family affairs, neglected the estate.

When they came to the first bend of the road, Choong Sin stopped and panted heavily. "I need a rest," he said. "I feel tired."

Kon Fook got down from behind the bicycle. "It's better that I ride and carry you from here onwards. You've done enough for me already."

"But you're not strong enough," said Choong Tet.

"What?" cried Kon Fook, surprised. "Don't you know that I'm in our school soccer team which beat the Pusing Yik Chee school team by twelve goals to nil? When we scored the tenth goal, Mr Chin Khiam Yoon, our headmaster, told us not to score any more goals but I continued scoring when the chances were too tempting to pass over."

"We're not interested in football," Mooi Kim told him, "and we don't go to watch the matches."

After Choong Sin got on the carrier, Kon Fook continued to boast.

"Do you know," he said, "we have the best football team in the district? The Papan Sports Union has beaten all the other teams including that of Batu Gajah and Kampar. The only team we couldn't beat was the Ipoh Perak Chinese Recreation Club as they have several State players."

When that did not draw any response from anybody, Kon Fook continued, "I've been coming here to train with the Papan Soccer players when they come in the early morning to trot up this road. You know, I play centre forward for the Papan Hwa Chiao Chinese School soccer team and I am their top scorer."

At Pak Foo's request they stopped for another rest. On their right, the land opened up to reveal that they had come to quite a high point for they saw a large area of reddish laterite soil, stretching from the foot of the hillock where they were standing to a distance of about two hundred yards.

"That's where my house is," Pak Foo pointed to the land hidden behind the trees. "You can't see it from here, but I know it's there. I often walk on a bridle path behind my house till I reach the foot of the hillock shaped like a dome. Sometimes, I walk up to the summit and it's so beautiful up there especially when you are alone, with only your thoughts for company."

They continued cycling for about two hundred yards until they reached the quarry. Nobody was working there as it was an Indian festival holiday. The hill behind the hut, which had an iron roof and thick concrete walls and some machinery, was bare due to the blasting by dynamite.

Between the foot of the hill and the hut and machinery were loose pieces of rocks of various sizes.

"Through the valley over there," Pak Foo pointed to the depression, "is a pass leading to the dome-like hillock which I told you about. The whole place is linked with those hillocks of *A Suk's* former 'wild rat' mine."

"Let's go and visit these hillocks one day," Kon Fook suggested. "I believe they lead to Lahat too, don't they?"

"We can't go there by bicycle," Siew Mei reminded them.

"We can if we use horses," Kon Fook countered and looked doubtfully at their girl companion. "If we don't have enough animals I can borrow one or two from my neighbour Mr Khew Chin Sen."

"Great!" Siew Mei exclaimed, happily. "I've always wondered what it is like beyond Yoong Fu *Suk's* mine. We can visit Lahat and beyond and come out at Menglembu which isn't far from Lahat."

Siew Mei seemed to have forgotten that the boys had doubts as to whether she should be included in their expedition. So they just smiled at her and kept quiet.

# 17

## *The Dragon Boat Race*



*The Lim Lee Lake with Gunung Hijau in the background.  
Behind the barren earth on the right was the prison site.  
(Photo by Jeffrey Liew.)*

THE LIM LEE LAKE was the largest mining pool in the Kinta District. It was formerly two pools which were joined into one. Lim Lee Seong first started mining there and the land was so rich in tin that it made him rich. When the mine was worked out and he applied for the land next to it, he was turned down.

When Khew Chin Sen applied to the Government, his application was approved. When the land was worked out, another pool was left behind. The Europeans removed the dividing wall and joined the two pools making it one, suitable for families to spend the week-ends, swimming and boating.

When Lim Lee Seong abandoned the place, his cook was the last person to leave. He could not carry away all the livestock. So he opened the pens to free some chickens and two pigs, a sow and a boar, which went into the jungle. The wild boars that were caught in that area later had traces of fat when animals in other areas had only lean meat. The wild fowls trapped were also bigger than those found elsewhere.

There was a stream flowing from the edge of the jungle into the lake. A floodgate built at the other end enabled excess water to flow out as a stream, providing drinking water for four or five families living near the area.

It was already four o'clock when Pak Foo, Siew Mei and her two brothers, Mooi Kim and Kon Fook arrived and joined the crowd standing beside the pool. Another group of spectators lined the higher ground overlooking the pool. These were the prison staff, the European Prison Superintendent and his family. Behind them were some prison guards. Nobody, except the prison staff, was allowed to be there.

"We've been to the jungle beyond the lake to have our picnic," Siew Mei said, speaking to Kon Fook.

"Did you carry cooked food there or did you do your own cooking?" Kon Fook asked.

"It's more fun when we cook there," Pak Foo said. "We take only rice and try to get everything else in the jungle."

"We trap wild fowls and birds or shoot them with catapults to make curry," added Choong Tet.

"The fish we catch is also delicious when we make *assam* curry," said Choong Sin. "It tastes especially good after a swim."

"It sounds wonderful," said Kon Fook. "How do you trap wild fowls and birds? I know how you shoot birds with catapults as I have done it around my house."

"It's quite easy," Siew Mei said. "To trap wild fowls, all you have to do is to make loops with strings tied to bent sticks. Sprinkle the ground with paddy or rice and spread the loop around them. When the

fowl steps into the loop it will step on a small stick which activates a spring, catching it by its leg."

"As for birds," Pak Foo said, "we paint tiny sticks or the stalks of coconut palm leaf with sticky gum. We plant these in the likely places where birds would perch. There's a cherry tree where there are plenty of fruits for the birds to eat and so we always have enough bird meat to make porridge or for frying."

"How did this boat race come about?" Kon Fook wanted to know. "This is something new in Papan, isn't it?"

"It was proposed at the Anglo-Chinese Club," a spectator said. "When a Chinese member there mentioned the dragon boat race, the manager of the Papan Dredging Company became interested. He discussed it with other European staff in his office and it was suggested they join the race which is now opened to all communities."

"How could they scramble up so many boats at such short notice?" Mooi Kim asked. "To be fair, they'll have to have boats of the same size, length and weight."

"You are right," the man agreed. "In the wooden dredge where I work, two barges are used to ferry workers to and from work. They have pointed fronts and flat sterns and are of the same length and size. These were taken to the lake for a tryout and found suitable. Carpenters made two other similar barges and oars suitable for the race."

The sun had now gone down behind the trees casting a reddish glow over the otherwise green water of the lake over which Gunung Hijau loomed. The earth on which they were standing and the bare earth on the slope going up towards the prison was also purplish red in colour.

"I'm sure the good weather will last until the boat race is over," another spectator said. "The blood-red sun and the red clouds are always a sign of good weather."

At the far end of the lake near the jungle, the officials began to come out into the open. They were in the boat-house built on stilts in the lake. It belonged to the English engineer of the dredge who lived in the lone house atop the hillock in Kong Mui. He had organised a team of

the employees of the dredge and called it the Papan Tin Dredging Company Team. The engineer, Edward Mitchell, was a member of the Cambridge University boat race team and was assisted by Dr McDougle, the visiting doctor, who had experience in boat racing in Scotland. This team had been practising in the lake for nearly a month now and was expected to win the race.

Since only four boats were available, there were four teams altogether, each made up of a crew of six and a hauler (the man who calls out instructions to time the pull), with their boats already lined up at the edge of the jungle. The Chinese community in Papan had formed a scratch team to join the race but they were not expected to achieve anything apart from taking part just for the fun of it. The other team, formed by the timber merchants and lumbering labourers, were expected to win a prize because all their members were accustomed to sawing logs, using their muscles to pull and push saws the way people do in rowing. The crew of this team were huge fellows with bulky chests and big muscular arms. They had been secretly training early every morning for three days in the 'water spirit' pool in front of the Hwa Chiao (Overseas) Chinese school. The fourth team was composed of the best and strongest footballers of the Papan Sports Union. They thought that practising rowing was not important as they trained for football most of the time, especially when the league matches were on. They only did a tryout with the men and the boat two or three times in the Lim Lee Lake.

While the Papan Tin Dredging Company boat had the red, white and blue naval flag planted at its stern, the others carried banners with the picture of a dragon flying at the back of their boats.

Officials at the landing of the boat-house began to wave red flags and gather along the shore. When everything was ready, the race started. The English O.C.P.D.<sup>14</sup> fired a shot into the air. Officials and spectators ran along the side of the lake, urging the crews on. Dr McDougle, the helmsman of the Papan Tin Dredging Company Team, started shouting at

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14. O.C.P.D.: Officer in Charge of Police District

his crew as soon as their boat started to pull away from the starting line. "Heave!... ho!... heave!... ho!..." The other three teams of Chinese participants used drums to time the pulls of their men. Each time there was a bang on the large drum the men in the boat would start to pull at their oars.

The explosion of crackers, the drum beats, the shouts and cheers of the spectators were intensified by the echoes thrown back by the hills around.

A few minutes into the race, it became clear who the winners would be. The Papan Tin Dredging Company Team began to forge ahead of the others, closely followed by the timbermen team. After a while they drew further away from the other two boats. As expected the Papan Tin Dredging Company Team won the race and the timbermen team came in second. The Papan Sports Union football team, although very confident of themselves, were third and the last was the Papan Chinese team who could hardly make the finishing line.

The prizes were to be given the next day in the Anglo-Chinese Club and the organisers declared that the race had ended and that the first Dragon Boat Race in Papan was a resounding success.





## Ritual Dinner At The Club

IT WAS already seven o'clock in the evening in Papan and the Tsen Lung Fui Kuon<sup>15</sup> was ablaze with light.

The Sanitary Board labourer, who was in charge of lighting the street lamps, had already gone round the town and done his job. He was also responsible for putting them out at dawn. It was a simple job. The difficult part was to carry a short ladder which he leaned on the lamp posts to enable him to climb up either to light the kerosene lamps or put them out.

There were lights at all the strategic points of the town. From the front of the Anglo-Chinese Club to the market there were lights until just past the police station. There was no light on the street in front of Siew Mei's house but, across the street, there was a lamp post lighting up the five-foot-way and the street.

Wherever there was business, the place was well lit. The theatre, tea houses, coffee-shops and the cloth and garment shop were lighted up with pressure lamps. The market was not lighted at all as it was used only during the day. The other places which were kept in semi-darkness were the disreputable houses whose patrons did not wish to be seen and recognised. Everywhere else the shops or houses were brightly lit up.

At the back of the clan association, a staircase led to a large room converted from two smaller ones. The *sinseh*<sup>16</sup> had set up his clinic there. There were a few stools and a long bench outside for patients to sit while waiting for their turn to see the *sinseh*, Lim Kong Fei, a slight, spectacled, middle-aged man. After a patient had been examined and diagnosed, the *sinseh* would write down the prescription. The patient

15. Tsen Lung Fui Kuon: Hakka Association.

16. *Sinseh*: physician. A transliteration from Hokkien, an accepted Malaysian term to mean physician.

would go downstairs to the hall and give it to Yoong Fu who would get the medicines ready for him.

When Pak Foo and his friends arrived at the clan association, the former took a seat near the clerk who was writing down the names of those paying him 50 cents each for the dinner.

"You and your friends don't have to pay," the clerk said.

Yoong Fu had closed his shop and was helping out wherever he could.

"How's Siew Lan?" he asked as soon as he sat at the table. "I haven't seen her for quite a while. I hope she's well."

"She'll be coming," Pak Foo said. "She asked Siew Mei to wait for her so that they can come together. Why didn't you go and fetch her? You can carry her on your bicycle. She can sit across the bar in front instead of on the carrier at the back."

"Why," Choong Tet said, "Yoong Fu *Suk* doesn't seem to bother about anyone else except *Daaih Je*<sup>17</sup>."

"He must be in love with her," Choong Chee spoke, teasingly. "The feeling must be mutual as I have often heard other people teasing her about Yoong Fu *Suk*."

"I won't be surprised if Yoong Fu has already sent a matchmaker to ask for Siew Lan's hand," some one seated outside the five-foot-way said. The romance between Yoong Fu and Siew Lan was already known by many people in Papan.

The people kept on coming, giving their names to Yoong Fu and paying him. When Siew Mei and her sister arrived, Yoong Fu stood up to receive them, offering each a seat. When Siew Lan paid him, Yoong Fu took money for only one. He explained, "Siew Mei doesn't have to pay. She and her friends are guests of President Chang Sin Sang tonight."

There was a stir when Chang Sin Sang and his wife arrived in a carriage drawn by two horses. As soon as they stepped down, the fire crackers were set alight and began to explode for nearly fifteen minutes, covering the entrance with a carpet of red paper. When it stopped, one

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17. *Daaih Je*: Elder sister.

man began beating the big drum, another clashed cymbals and two blew the Chinese trumpet-like musical instruments while the president and his wife were escorted into the premises.

While Chang *Tai Tai*<sup>18</sup> was taken by Yoong Fu into the physician's room and seated with the other ladies, the president was led to the head of the long table in the hall upstairs. The sixteen committee members were seated at the two sides of the long table with the President, Chang Sin Sang at the head. Beside him were the Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer. The clerk occupied the first seat on the right.

Along the wall on both sides were chairs made of dark Chinese hardwood with backrests and armrests. These were all occupied and extra chairs had to be brought in for people who had come to watch the proceedings. The paintings on the wall were scenery done in water colour. There were two maps – one was of Malaya and the other was of China. They were both old and fading, having no glass frames to protect them.

After about ten minutes, the Honorary Secretary stood up and called the meeting to order. He began, "Dear members of our clan, this is an extraordinary general meeting of the Association. It has been specially called by our President to honour five remarkable children. Four boys and one girl and some men freed him and his son from a gang who kidnapped them. I will now call upon the Honourable Mr Chang Sin Sang, the President, to address you."

Siew Mei, the four boys and the men had already been brought into the hall and seated on extra chairs placed near the President.

"Ladies and gentleman," Chang Sin Sang started, inclining his head towards Siew Mei, the four boys and the men. "This meeting and dinner was called at my request. Since I am the President of this association, those of you who have come tonight have given me face. I can see that the attendance this evening is larger than usual."

Inviting the children to stand near him, Chang Sin Sang placed one hand on Siew Mei's shoulder and the other hand on Pak Foo's and

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18. *Tai Tai*: Madam.

described in detail how brave they were and the part they played in saving him and his son during the abduction.

He said that fighting ability was necessary for every member of the clan in the early days. He recalled how they fought and the battles they won in Kamunting, Taiping, where their leader, who managed to subdue all the gangs and brought peace to the area, was appointed *Kapitan China* by the British administration, and given the opium monopoly, licence to operate gambling dens, control of brothels and other privileges.

"What's very interesting," he continued, "is that, along with the title, the *Kapitan China* was given a walking stick. If he was offended, he could hit a person with it without fear of prosecution."

"I now want to point out the advantages of being a member of a clan organisation. In the early days, collecting agents were employed in China to recruit labourers for Southeast Asia. Sometimes men were tricked or kidnapped, shipped under terrible conditions and sold to employers as slaves. But most of us joined the *maaih jyu jai*<sup>19</sup> system which was a voluntary method. When the new-comers got off a ship they were made to sign an agreement to work for their employer at about \$7.00 a month for a number of years, paying nearly all their wages back to their employers until the 'loan' was repaid in full. Meanwhile, the workers were left with an allowance enough to buy 'cool drinks', medicines, clothing and other essentials. Their living conditions were no better than those of a slave in the sugar plantations in America in the old days.

"In 1873, the British administration passed the Chinese Coolie Immigration Act and, in 1877, set up the Chinese Protectorate Department, which gave some protection to the immigrants.

"Not all of us have parents, brother or sister waiting for us when we arrived in Malaya. The *san haak*<sup>20</sup> as the immigrants are called, always faced difficulties in a foreign country. That is why we formed the clan associations which not only gave protection, advice and other forms of assistance to our clansmen, but also provided them a place where they

19. *maaih jyu jai*: Literally, selling piglets.

20. *San Haak*: Newly arrived immigrant. (*Sinkeh* in Hokkien)

could gather and meet other clansmen to talk about things in common and discuss problems and so on.

"When some of our clansmen arrived in Kota Baru and came to Batu Gajah, where we were then living, they did not know what to do. My father gave them board and lodging until they found jobs and were able to be on their own feet. I still have several rooms in my house which, at one time or another, were occupied by the *san haak* but since our clan association was set up, I am no longer worried by such problems.

"When my son and I were saved from the kidnappers I asked about their fathers and found that only Cheong Tuck Choy, Siew Mei's father, was a club member. Although our clansman, Pak Foo's father was not a member of our club and Cheong Mooi Kim's father was not of our clan, I called them to my house and, with the approval of the Tsen Lung Fui Kuon committee, had them admitted to our clan and association."

Looking in their direction, Chang Sin Sang said, "Will my three Honourable brethren please stand up and introduce yourselves?"

Then Cheong Tuck Choy, Ho Yoong Sin and Mooi Kim's father were asked to repeat after Yoong Fu, reading the oaths from a book, and made to pledge that they would follow the rules of the club. After this they signed their names in the membership register and with that the meeting ended.

Dinner started at about nine o'clock. In the hall where the meeting was held, the table, joined by some hinges, was separated into three sections. Each section became a table which could accommodate ten diners. All in all, there were close to fifteen tables, which was very good attendance, considering the small size of the town of Papan.

Throughout the dinner, the three-man-band which had welcomed the President and his wife, played soft, soothing music. It was supported by some musicians from Yee Lok Club and two sing-song girls who sang beautifully.

The dinner ended at around midnight and some people, like Mooi Kim and his parents, had to go home in the dark.



# 19

## *Ordeal With A Devil*

WHEN THE DINNER at the clan association was over, Pak Foo and his parents walked home with Siew Mei's family and Mooi Kim and his parents. Shops and homes were shut. Except for the street lamps which were spaced at about fifty feet apart, only beams of light came from holes in the walls of some houses, cutting through the darkness.

After walking a short distance, Pak Foo and his parents bade the others good night, walked through the lane of the shophouses and passed into the darkness.

When the rest of the group reached Siew Mei's house, they found the main door partly opened. The dim light from a kerosene lamp showed through the doorway and they could see Choong Chee seated on a stool.

As the two families bade each other good night, *Baat Sou* said, "Liew Moy, why don't you and your husband and son spend the night with us? It's very dark to walk home."

"It might rain soon," Cheong Tuck Choy added. "Seong Woon, you should have an umbrella. Choong Chee can get one for you."

"Thank you very much," Mooi Kim said. "I don't think we need it. Our house is not very far from here."

"But," Seong Woon said, "we can do with a lantern if you don't mind. It'll help us see where we're going."

Choong Chee went into the house and came out with a lighted lantern.

Mooi Kim and his parents walked along the side-street beside Siew Mei's house, passed the New Town where the school was and came to the football field which they had to cross. They were now in a large and wide open space.

They stopped for a short while in front of a shallow and narrow grassy ditch which they had to cross before cutting across the field. They realised how dark the night was. There was no moon and the stars were hidden by dark clouds. Even the glow, which normally made things visible for travellers in the dark, was not there. The three humps and the two curves of Gunung Hijau were hidden by mist. Now and then, flashes of lightning lit up the sky making the travellers uneasy.

Tampoi, a settlement of about a dozen *attap* houses, was situated at the foot of the first and largest of the three hills of Gunung Hijau. After they crossed the ditch and came to the open field, a gust of wind swept past them and blew out the light of the lantern, plunging them into darkness. First Mooi Kim, and then his father, tried to re-light the lantern. Each time they struck a match the strong wind blew it out.

They were afraid that something bad was about to happen and everybody remained silent as they walked on. They cut through the field and were soon walking along the sandy road towards Tampoi. On their left was an *assam* tree with a wide spread of thick leaves. Under it was a small, low concrete building which was formerly used as a stable by officials and coachmen when they stopped there to rest their horses before walking up the slope to the gaol. This building was no longer used after a beggar committed suicide there. One morning when Mooi Kim was on his way to school, he was horrified to see the dead man strung up on a branch of the tree with both his legs stretched straight down and his tongue hanging out.

After they crossed a wooden bridge, a drizzle started and they could feel tiny raindrops falling on their faces and hear them hitting gently on the zinc roof of the deserted coach house. Then they heard a booming noise coming from Gunung Hijau in front and raindrops became bigger, beating on them and the zinc roof more rapidly. They knew it was a storm coming in their direction.

Without hesitation Mooi Kim turned round and made for the old stable, followed closely by his parents. When they reached the shack

they entered it, sending rats and other vermin running all over the place. They brushed away cobwebs from their faces and their bodies.

There was only one door left at the entrance. The other had been torn off by the beggars who often went into the building to take shelter.

"Strike a match," Cheong Seong Woon said.

Mooi Kim struck a match to look around him. He could see that the remaining door was already on its last legs, hanging on only one rusty hinge and broken down in several places. There were several holes in the roof with the rain dripping along the walls and water seeping to the floor.

"Light the lantern," Liew Moy said, after the match went out. "It will help us to see better.

By then the storm was already upon them. It swept past and went towards the field, the dispensary, the New Town, heading for the other side of the town.

The lantern was lighted giving cheer to Mooi Kim and his parents who felt they had entered the deserted building uninvited. Holding the lantern high, Mooi Kim began to look around. He saw some cockroaches and a cricket, alarmed by the light, run for cover and hide under the thick layer of dust and garbage.

He then went back to where Cheong Seong Woon was standing and said, "Father, please hold the lantern for a while. I want to go outside to ease myself."

"But it's raining heavily," Liew Moy protested.

"You can do it inside the building," suggested Seong Woon. "You can see that the place is already fouled by human beings and animals."

Mooi Kim went towards the back door opening to the small living quarters. They were also in a derelict condition and the roof had caved in. The verandah leading to it had also decayed giving Mooi Kim no choice but to ease himself inside the building beside the broken-down door. When he finished, he felt strange and agitated and shivered as a gust of cold wind swept past him and into the building, putting out the lantern. He then became aware of a movement, of something raising itself up, and it was not more than two feet from him!

It was in the form of a human being! His hair was disorderly, flowing down to his shoulders and his face so sunken that only the eyes were visible! His clothes were dirty and in a pitiable condition, worse than a beggar's! Although it was pitch dark he could see it almost as clearly as in daytime! He looked familiar, almost like someone he had seen before, somebody like the beggar he saw hanging from a branch of the *assam* tree... why, yes... it was... the beggar who had committed suicide... it was he, his ghost... moving towards him!

Without a word to his father or mother, he rushed out of the building, sweeping past them and out into the rain.

"What's the matter?" Seong Woon called after him as he, too, rushed out followed closely by his wife.

"I've to get out of the building, father," Mooi Kim yelled. "Don't ask me why. I'll tell you when we reach home."

Seong Woon and Liew Moy soon caught up with Mooi Kim. When they reached him, Mooi Kim could not stop moving about. Sometimes he was in front of them, sometimes beside them and sometimes behind them.

"What's the matter with you?" his father asked. His mother went up to him and caught him by the arm and jerked him, hoping to awaken him from the daze he appeared to have fallen into, but to no avail. When she released her hold on him, he again kept moving around them constantly until they reached their house.

Once inside the house his father felt his way about and managed to find a box of matches to light the kerosene lamp on the table. He took it to his son who had already gone into his room and locked the door.

"Open the door, son," Seong Woon called. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm changing my clothes," Mooi Kim said. "I'm wet through."

When the boy opened the door his father went inside. He shone the light on Mooi Kim's face and saw how pale it was. He put his hand to his forehead and said, "It's quite hot and you're running a temperature. Do you feel sick?"

"Yes, father," Mooi Kim said. "I think I need a rest. I want to go to bed and lie down for a while."

"Not before you answer some questions," said the mother who had come into the room. "You behaved as if you had seen a ghost, moving around us all the time on our way back."

"Yes, mother, I did see a ghost," Mooi Kim said sorrowfully as he got up from the chair and moved towards the bed. Before he could lie down his father put his hands on his shoulders.

"Tell us exactly what happened," he said.

"Well," Mooi Kim began, "after I urinated beside the back door, I felt a gust of cold wind brushing past me and entering the building. It blew out the lantern. I felt a chill and was scared stiff, for rising in front of me was the ghost of the man I saw on my way to school, hanging from a branch of the *assam* tree beside the abandoned building. I recognised him, father. It was him all right."

Mooi Kim paused, looked about him, frightened and breaking out into cold sweat. He began to wipe his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Yes," encouraged Seong Woon, "go on."

"He was coming nearer towards me," Mooi Kim continued, "although he was not more than two feet from me! It was as if he was trying to enter my body! That evil look, that horrible appearance, with his tongue hanging out, terrified me, frightens me even now."

"Liew Moy," the father called out, "brew a cup of *seui gam chah* (herbal tea for influenza) immediately for Mooi Kim."

"He must take it hot, so don't let him go off to sleep yet," Liew Moy said, as she started to go to the kitchen.

"I know that," Seong Woon said. Turning to his son he continued, "Why did you move around us all the time when we were on our way back? You didn't stop even when your mother got hold of you and shook you."

He rubbed a strong smelling balm on Mooi Kim's forehead and made him inhale a pungent oil as he continued to ply him with questions.

"He was approaching me all the time," Mooi Kim said. "As I told you, it was as if he was trying to enter me. He appeared to be unreal, like

water and able to pass through solid things. He went through the wall when he came at me. Why, couldn't you or mother see him at all?"

"No," Seong Woon said. "Luckily we couldn't. After you take the medicine you better go to sleep. Cover your body and your head so that you sweat enough and, when you wake up in the morning, you should be well and able to go to school. I'll go to the temple tomorrow to ask for advice from the Goddess of Mercy to find out what happened to you."



## *Journey In The Underworld*

MOOI KIM felt very strange. He had never felt like this before. He appeared to be leaving himself behind, coming out of his body and moving away from it. When he looked back he saw himself lying on the bed, stiff and still, without life.

He was light-hearted and cheerful and was no longer firm and strong anymore. He felt he could float in the air and go anywhere he wished.

Then, suddenly, he felt he was being drawn away from his other self on the bed. His steps, if he had any steps to take at all, were light as he moved away to – he did not know where.

The world around him was also very different, the atmosphere, the surroundings, the scenery. There was no air, as far as he knew, and there was no weight to carry. Why, his former life and body were burdens. The body was a dead weight and he had to carry it wherever he went. Formerly, he had to make an effort to walk, to do anything. Now he felt he had no such problem. If he wished to be at any place, he could be there without any effort at all. But right now he could not understand why he was being taken on a journey he had no wish to go.

He was going through a world where there was neither light nor darkness but where it was dusk, as before nightfall. He saw many people but most of them were dressed like the figures in the charts displayed by priests who performed funeral rites or the effigies displayed before the annual processions held during the Hungry Ghosts Festival. He met many people who he knew had died and saw stalls displaying all kinds of food. Purchases were paid with money like that used in Chinese operas. Gold ingots were used instead of coins and they resembled the padlocks used

by the villagers. The currency notes were like those burnt to ancestors at the graves.

"Don't eat food from the street stalls," a voice behind him said. "Buy only from stalls which are carried about."

It was an elderly man who spoke. He had a flowing white beard which he was constantly stroking. He wore a yellow gown and, in his right hand, was a flywhisk which he used like a fan.

"Who are you?" Mooi Kim asked. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"You have, indeed, seen me before," the old man said kindly. "You have seen me in the opera, in pictures in temples as I'm worshipped as a deity and have been set up in front of many homes. I'm known as *Tou Deih Gung* (God of the Earth). I've come to give you protection and accompany you on your visit in this world."

"Why am I in this strange land surrounded by so many unusual things? Am I already dead?"

"No, you are not. That is why I've to go along with you wherever you go. You may run into difficulties and meet people who might harm you."

"Why can't I eat things sold in stalls but buy only food from stalls carried about by hawkers?"

"Because only the dead buy from such stalls whereas you aren't dead. If you eat anything at the stationary stalls not meant for living people, it might delay your return to the earthly world where I'm going to lead you."

"But I'm not hungry. Even if I am and wish to buy anything I don't have the money. I don't have even the money we normally use because I was forced out of my body to come here. Why am I here?"

"Because you urinated on the spirit of the man who hung himself from the *assam* tree. He entered your body and succeeded in forcing your spirit out, trying to make you die so that he can be reborn."

"So, I'm the spirit and not the body of myself? Am I right?"

*Tou Deih Gung* nodded but did not speak.

"If I'm already dead," cried Mooi Kim, "I haven't said farewell to my parents and the many friends I've left behind. I still want to do many things I've always wanted to do but haven't done yet."

"Do you want to go and see for yourself whether you're dead or alive? There's a way of finding out here."

"Oh, yes, I want to very much since you say I'm still alive."

"Follow me then."

They went on until they reached a river spanned by an arched bridge. They mounted the bridge, climbed up the arch and peered into the water.

"This is the *Wohng Hoh* (Yellow River) which is crossed by all people who have died. There's a saying in the earthly world that until one has crossed the Yellow River and looked into the water at one's image, one is not convinced that one is dead. So look at yourself in the water and tell me what you see."

Mooi Kim looked into the water and saw his reflection exactly as in a mirror. "Why, it's me all right. What's so unusual about it?"

"If you can see yourself exactly as in a mirror, then you're still alive and not dead. Those who are already dead don't see any flesh on their faces in the reflection. They see only bones like the face of the ghost you saw in the deserted house. You're not fated to die yet."

Then he heard a very faint voice, a woman's voice calling, "Mooi Kim, Mooi Kim, come back." It was not his mother's voice, he was sure, but another woman's voice speaking the Tung On dialect, a dialect he hardly used but could understand. It was from so far away that it did not seem real. Perhaps it was his imagination or his hearing was playing tricks on him. He was convinced that anything could happen in such a strange place and ignored the voice.

"I'm going to take you to a place to see somebody you should meet," *Tou Deih Gung* said. "Come down from the bridge. Don't cross it because if you do it will be difficult for me to bring you back. Remember, this is a river of no return."

Even if Mooi Kim wanted to go over to the other side, he couldn't because there was an irresistible pull, a kind of force which drew him towards the God of the Earth.

They went in another direction.

"Where are you taking me?" Mooi Kim asked.

"I'm going to take you to see the Registrar," *Tou Deih Gung* said, "to report that you've been wrongly taken to the spiritual world before your time and get his permission to send you back to where you belong."

As they journeyed on they came across some of the characters Mooi Kim remembered seeing in pictures or in folklore books borrowed from some street stalls. There was the demigod of Hades, wearing a tall peaked hat and holding a fan in one hand, the deity with a cow's head and another with the head of a horse. He also saw more people who he knew had died.

"You told me that all the dead people are on the other side of the river," Mooi Kim was puzzled. "How is it that all these spirits of the dead are on this side of river?"

"Today is the Hungry Ghosts Festival," *Tou Deih Gung* explained. "These spirits have come over to this side because they wish to go back to your world to visit friends, relatives and homes they had left. Twice a year, the gates of Hades are opened to allow the spirits of the departed to return and visit the mundane world. This month is the seventh lunar month. The other period is the third month of the lunar year when ghosts are allowed to roam the world of the living for about one week."

They entered a hall where many spirits of the departed were waiting. But *Tou Deih Gung* did not have to wait, for, as soon as he took Mooi Kim in, the Registrar bade them to go forward. He appeared to know why Mooi Kim was brought to see him and went to a large shelf in the library and took out the register where the names of the dead or those who were about to die were entered. After searching through the file for a while he said, "His name is not in The Book."

"So his time is not due yet?" asked *Tou Deih Gung*.

"No," the Registrar said. Then turning to *Tou Deih Gung*, he continued. "It's strange why the living want to keep on living and don't want to die. They don't realise that in life there is much suffering. They endure hardships, fall sick, feel angry or sad and disappointed when things don't come their way, and their women have to bear great pain giving birth. No, the boy is not dead yet because he has not suffered enough. The yoke of life around his neck has not been fully used yet, like the yokes human beings put around their bullocks. The animals have to suffer until they become weak and old, and then they are slaughtered and their flesh eaten by the people to whom the bullocks had given service. How ungrateful such creatures called humans can be!"

Mooi Kim listened to the words of the Registrar but he did not know whether to agree or disagree with him. He just dismissed the lecture although he knew that much of what he said was true.

"Can he let me know what I was and had been doing in my previous life?" Mooi Kim asked God of the Earth. "I'm told they keep such records, don't they?"

"Even if he does," *Tou Deih Gung* replied, "you haven't got the time. Someone has been calling your name, calling you to go back."

As they left the building they saw several prisoners in chains with cangues around their necks, their heads showing above. Then *Tou Deih Gung* got ready to leave Mooi Kim.

"Who are these people?" Mooi Kim asked. "What have they done?"

"They did wrong when they were alive," *Tou Deih Gung* said. "They were tried by a court of justice here and sentenced to be punished."

Mooi Kim wanted to ask more when he heard his name called again. This time he could even hear people crying from far away.

"We're near the place from where you came," *Tou Deih Gung* said. "It's time for me to wish you goodbye and good luck."

"Why are you bidding me farewell? Are we parting so soon..." As soon as Mooi Kim said this, *Tou Deih Gung* waved the flywhisk over his head. Almost at once Mooi Kim felt he was swept off his feet and was

being driven through space. When he entered a long dark tunnel he could see light at the end of it. He heard his name called again, more distinctly this time, and people crying. Then he came to the end of the tunnel and plunged downwards. He could see his house now but not his body, his other half!

"Where is it?" he asked himself. He could not see it, but he was still being pulled towards a destination, but he did not know where.

When he entered the house and came into the hall he saw a coffin with the lid beside it. He caught a glimpse of people kneeling beside the coffin before he was pulled into his other part and entered it.

The blast of worldly noise began to assail him. There were people crying, the sound of clashing cymbals, the chanting of the funeral priest and, above all, the familiar wailing voice of a woman, "Mooi Kim, Mooi Kim, *koi lor, koi lor*" in the Tung On dialect which meant, "Mooi Kim, Mooi Kim, come back, come back."

He opened his eyes slowly and became aware of the bright light of a pressure lamp flooding the hall, blinding him. He felt hemmed in. On either side was a low partition and around him were the folded paper money for the dead!

Slowly he pushed himself up in the narrow confines, brushed aside the underworld currency spread about him and sat up. He peered over the side and looked straight into the eyes of Choong Sin who, hearing a noise coming from the coffin, was looking inside to find out what had caused it.

Choong Sin gripped the shoulder of his brother, Choong Tet, who was seated on a mat beside the coffin lighting incense papers before dropping them into a brass urn, and whispered, "Look! He's moving!" When Choong Tet saw Mooi Kim's puzzled face staring at the people gathered around him, he yelled at the top of his voice, "It's a ghost! It's a ghost!" and got up and ran out of the house.

"He's moving! He's getting up!" exclaimed Choong Sin. "Run! Run!"

He, too, dashed out of the house and nearly collided with the woman who had been calling Mooi Kim's spirit to return to the body. She was coming into the house to get something to drink as she had been calling and uttering words, which only she knew what they were, for nearly an hour.





# 21

## *Sights Before Hungry Ghosts Festival Procession*



*Papan folk in front of temporary shed built for the Hungry Ghost Festival. The curious onlookers are a mixture of all the races living peacefully and close together in Papan. In spite of the dirt floor, most of the people are bare-footed. (Circa 1905)*

"YOU SHOULD have taken my advice," *Baat Sou* said, "and nothing would have happened to your son that night."

"They could have, at least, taken some umbrellas with them,"

Cheong Tuck Choy added, addressing his wife. "If Mooi Kim had carried an umbrella, he would have been spared getting wet in the storm and would not catch pneumonia and pass out." He then put the question to Seong Woon, "How long was he unconscious?"

"For close to nineteen hours," Seong Woon said. "My son was not only unconscious, he had practically died. Mooi Kim's eyes were closed, his body unable to move. Had his breathing also stopped and his body become cold we would have nailed the lid on his coffin and then, if he should wake up as he did three nights ago, he would have died for lack of air."

"Tell us what you did when you found your son had passed out that afternoon?" *Baat Sou* asked.

"We went to the temple to pray," Seong Woon said. "We asked the temple-keeper to go into a trance so that he would let us know what was the trouble with my son. He told us exactly what Mooi Kim had already told us the night before he went to sleep."

Seong Woon paused to take a sip of tea. They were in the upstairs hall of the shophouse belonging to Cheong Tuck Choy and *Baat Sou*. The children were in another room at the back of the building which had a separate staircase leading to it. They were on the balcony where they often spend their leisure hours looking at what went on along the road below.

Seong Woon went on, "The medium advised us to take a few remedial steps. The first was to engage a professional 'caller' who would call for Mooi Kim's spirit to return to his body. The second was to hire a priest to go into the deserted building where my son had urinated on the spirit, ask for forgiveness and pacify him by offering him underworld money, a paper house, food, and so on. The third was to paste the portraits of *Gwan Dai* and *Jeung Fei*, the two guardian deities of households, on the doors of the house and install the God of the Earth outside. The fourth was for Mooi Kim to wear a charm blessed by the priest.

"The temple-keeper pointed out that the last two steps were to be taken only after Mooi Kim had woken up and become conscious again,

otherwise his spirit would be prevented from entering the house and returning to his body.

"We sent a priest to the haunted building to do the ceremonies and asked the 'caller' *Daaih Jek Hoh* (big size Hoh), a Tung On lady, to perform the 'spirit calling' rite. She performed the ritual at the wooden bridge which was a junction, with one road leading to the gaol house and the other to Tampoi.

"When Mooi Kim did not wake up after ten hours we gave up hope that he would be alive and called the priest to make all preparations for a funeral. When Yoong Fu and Lim Kong Fei, the *sinseh*, dropped by, they advised us not to seal the coffin until Mooi Kim's body had become cold and stiff. It was fortunate they came and we followed their advice, otherwise..."

"I am not interested in events that didn't happen," *Baat Sou* interrupted. She was fascinated. "What I want to know is what happened when Mooi Kim got out of the coffin."

"What would you expect?" Liew Moy asked. "You and your husband were not there when Mooi Kim woke up but your children were. It was Choong Sin who heard Mooi Kim's movements in the coffin and brought Choong Tet's attention to it. When they both saw my son slowly climbing out of the coffin, they yelled and ran out of our house. All the others who were at the wake also ran away. Both the priest and *Daaih Jek Hoh* also took flight, but the latter could not run far because she was knocked down and was struggling to get up when Mooi Kim crawled to her and told her that he was a human being and not a ghost. She believed him and became convinced of the efficacy of her methods, that is, to be able to bring the dead back to life! Instead of being scared like the others she was delighted. When Mooi Kim told her how hungry he was she took him to the kitchen to look for food."

She paused to catch her breath.

"Go on," Cheong Tuck Choy implored, "please go on. I want to hear all about what happened."

"Yes," *Baat Sou* also begged for more information. "Please don't stop; please continue."

"Do you know what he ate?" Seong Woon said. "When he saw the pail of water in which we had washed our cups, plates, spoons and chopsticks - it was oily and dirty but Mooi Kim pulled it from *Daaih Jek Hoh's* hand and drank from the pail. He didn't stop until he had drunk nearly half the water in the pail!"

"Aiyah!" *Baat Sou* exclaimed. "He must have been starving. He was without food and drink for nineteen hours! You may say the water was not clean but it sure had some nourishments in it."

At that moment Siew Mei and Choong Tet came into the hall.

"Don't you two ever get tired of listening to the story?" Siew Mei asked. "We've told you the same thing over and over again."

"Chang Sin Sang, Chang *Taai Taai* and Chang Kon Fook have come," Choong Tet said. "Aren't you going to accompany them around town and look at the preparations for the procession?"

"We're going," Siew Mei said. "It's more fun if we all go together."

They left Choong Chee to look after the shophouse. It was not open for business because nobody would hire or buy bicycles when the procession was about to start. Except for tea houses, coffee-shops and sundry shops which were doing business for an hour or two a day, all other businesses were closed for the week of the carnival. There were simply too many people about. The crowd was so big and the road so thickly packed that people were forced into the five-foot-way.

"We can easily get lost in this crowd," Chang Sin Sang said. "If we're not living in Papan we wouldn't have come."

"I'm glad you've come. The Hungry Ghosts Festival procession takes place only once in three years," Cheong Tuck Choy said. "I want to show the others the *Sei Daaih Gam Gong*, the four malevolent-looking guardians of the Underworld you donated and also ask Mooi Kim if he can identify any of the effigies he saw during his tour of the Underworld."

They moved along the five foot way until they came to the Anglo-Chinese Club. Beside it, a large temporary shed had been erected which

housed paper work of all kinds. There were also *papier mâché* effigies of the Underworld. On such an occasion, the two paper construction shops in Papan and the one in Kong Mui were kept very busy and working overtime to meet orders of the town officials and the wealthy and prominent citizens. Slogans, letters and writings of all kinds done on paper of various colours were pasted all over the place. Strips of paper announcing the names of donors and amount of contributions were put up on the public notice board, where normally news and announcements of important events happening in town were displayed.

Sweets, sugared foods of many kinds and wax figures were sold at the stalls. Bunting was strung overhead and many-coloured flags and lanterns were hung aloft giving the town a carnival atmosphere. Lighted joss-sticks, red candles and the burning of incense papers, produced a thick smoke which hung in the air and spread over the area.

In the vacant house opposite the Anglo-Chinese Club were the four guardians of the entrance to the Underworld. They were almost as tall as the ceiling and huge with shoulders at least five or six feet wide. Their eyes were big, jutting out and glaring fiercely down at the crowd. In their right hands they each held a weapon which they used to fight with and prevent disorderly elements from entering the domain of *Yin Loh Wohng*, the Emperor of the Underworld.

The wooden partitions of the rooms of the whole floor upstairs had been demolished to provide more space for the exhibition. Here Mooi Kim recognised some of the characters he saw in his sojourn in the Underworld. He recognized the Registrar, the half-man-half-animal with a head of a cow and a body of a man and another with a head of a horse and a body of a man. The demigod of Hades and the deity of divinity were also exhibited.

Other paper constructions were also displayed in this building which was spick and span, having been swept clean of dust and rubbish and the floor and walls mopped by hired hands. The two rooms downstairs at the back portion of the building were occupied by the priests.

"Our generous Mr Chang has sponsored performances for three days and three nights at the theatre," Ho Young Sin said. "It costs about \$150 a performance, including the evening show, which means \$450 altogether."

"No," Seong Woon said. "Mr Chang paid \$500 altogether according to the strip I saw on the wall of the Anglo-Chinese Club opposite here. What the extra \$50 was for, I don't know."

"Well," Chang Sin Sang explained, "it is like this. The owner of the theatre told me that if I pay \$50 more he would put a low cotton partition around the seats to reserve twelve seats specifically for our use. If any of you feel like going to see the opera you can go and occupy the seats in this section. You can mention my name and occupy the seats. In fact, the whole show has been opened to the public free of charge for three days, starting two days ago."



## *The Procession*

PAPAN was a fairyland during the procession. At night every building, whether business house or private household, was brightly lit up and had at least one pressure lamp hanging in the hall or outside in the verandah. Bright lanterns of many colours and streamers were strung across the main road. Even the shabby wooden shophouses in New Town had been spruced up and were lighted to make them look gay and give this sector of the town the same carnival atmosphere.

At the theatre, Pak Foo, Siew Mei and her three brothers, Mooi Kim and Kon Fook occupied the seats reserved for the Chang Sin Sang's family members, in the first class section. Around the twelve seats was a low curtain making entrance possible only by a small wooden door which was opened by an attendant.

The theatre was a two-storey wooden building. On the ground floor, on the right, were the living quarters of the proprietor and his family. Just outside this was the hall with row after row of seats. About one quarter of them was reserved for ladies and the rest for men. The hall was at least ninety feet long and fifty feet wide. The stage at the end of it consisted of a raised platform about as high as an average man's shoulder so that whatever was performed on stage was at the eye level of the seated audience.

In the front portion of the second storey, where the upstairs floor should be in an ordinary shophouse, were four small rooms built on a platform which extended outwards over the heads of the third class seats. The second and first class seats were, therefore, opened up to the roof. The audience occupying these seats had a feeling of spaciousness which was lacking in the third class. There was no real second floor but a

staircase near the entrance led to the four rooms where low ranking actors, actresses and stage hands were put up.

The parents of the children were not at the theatre but stayed at home. They preferred to watch the procession because stage performances could be seen every day while the Hungry Ghosts Festival procession was held only once in three years.

The theatre was staging the famous play called "Justice Pao's Trial of Kok Wu", the infamous and evil Minister who had become so powerful that only the Emperor was strong enough to check his misdeeds. It happened that the Minister's sister was the favourite wife of the Emperor! Justice Pao, a famous and the most upright judge in Chinese folklore, risked his life by arresting Kok Wu and putting him on trial. Everybody knew that the Minister had caused the deaths of many innocent men, women and children, but he was so clever that he did not leave any evidence which could be brought against him.

Kok Wu was fed with drugged food when he was in prison. When he awoke he thought he was already dead and his spirit was in hell. He was in the make-believe world of Hades where everything was faked to look like the underworld. People were made up and dressed to look like those he had killed. They came forward, one by one, to prove how they were murdered, to give the circumstances and reasons why Kok Wu killed them, in a court where the judge of Hades was presiding, and where malevolent-looking guards, council members and ghosts were seen. The accused became so confused and was convinced that he was in an alien world. He felt guilty and repentant and admitted the crimes he had committed.

Then the lights were put on and Kok Wu realised he had been tricked. When everybody unmasked himself or herself, he saw that the judge was none other than Justice Pao himself and behind him were some of the most powerful and highest ranking judges and lawmakers of the kingdom.

At this moment there were explosions of fire crackers outside. The audience, which had packed the theatre to capacity, began to ease

out of their seats and leave the theatre. Even the people occupying Chang Sin Sang's reserved seats were leaving as they too wanted to be in the procession.

When the children were outside, they saw the strings of firecrackers hanging on the *angsana* tree in front of the vacant house blazing away while the priests, wearing caps and gowns now, were reciting prayers, chanting and beating their cymbals, standing behind a long table on which were plates of oranges, roast pigs and other sacrificial offerings for the dead. Under the shed, beside the Anglo-Chinese Club, a couple of men were beating two big drums. Two troupes of lion dancers were performing, one in front of each large table on which were also food and other offerings for the dead.

"This is the signal to start the procession," Choong Chee said, as he looked in the direction of his shophouse where their parents were. How were they going to get back there? The crowd had become so big and dense with people clustering vantage points where the procession would pass.

Kon Fook said, "I wish we can get through the crowd to a position where we can watch the parade."

"I've an idea," Choong Chee said. "There's a saying that if you can't beat them join them. Let's go to where they employ people to carry posters, lanterns, effigies or do some work. I'm sure there'll be work of some kind where our services are required."

"I know the place," Mooi Kim said. "Very few people, apart from beggars, would go to look for jobs in the vacant house."

Without further coaxing they set off. The four *Sei Daaih Gam Gong* had already been loaded on two carriages. The boys went to the clerk to register for work. Chang Kon Fook and Choong Chee were given the job of handling the traffic. Choong Sin, Choong Tet, Pak Foo, Mooi Kim were appointed to move the first vehicle on which the huge paper figures of the guardians of Hades were placed while loafers, beggars and the unemployed were assigned to move the second carriage. Siew Mei got

a job as a lantern carrier to accompany the carriage of the Goddess of Mercy.

The priests chanted some prayers at the altar and performed some rites. The procession, which was nearly five hundred yards long, stretching as far as the wooden bridge beyond the football field, started to move after the chanting finished. The Hungry Ghosts Festival Procession had begun!

Choong Chee and Kon Fook waved their flags as they moved forward, clearing the way for the procession to move along. The crowd gave way and moved aside for the parade to go through, but after they had passed the crowd closed back again.

The pavements were already packed with children sitting on the kerb and older boys on wooden grocery crates, others standing behind them, five or six deep, craning their necks to look over the heads of those in front. The elderly men and women, who had installed themselves on comfortable chairs along the verandahs of their shophouses, had returned to their shophouses, to sit or stand at the windows on the second floor, from where they could get a better view.

Two uniformed Sikh policemen, provided by the Prison authorities, went by on horses to clear the way. Not only were they very efficient in what they were assigned to do but their presence stood for law and order. To make sure the crowd would keep the way open all the time the two policemen went forward and backward constantly, one on either side of the road.

The first place the procession stopped was at the Yee Lok Club. On a table in front were a roast pig, cooked chicken, sweetmeats, burning red candles, flowers in pots wound with red ribbons, slips of red paper greetings in gold characters and other decorations and offerings for the underworld. The two lion dancing troupes, one on either side, leapt forwards and backwards, timing their movements with the drum beats. They paid their respects to the president, Khew Chin Sen, who was standing behind the table to accept on behalf of the club amidst explosions of

firecrackers, wild shouts of approval and loud hand clapping. Then the saffron-robed priests came forward to recite prayers and beat their cymbals. After an attendant of the club burnt incense papers, underworld currency and set alight the paper effigies, the procession moved on.

People turned to look at the north end of the town towards which the procession was heading. There were carriages carrying paper effigies, *papier mâché* figures and characters and symbols of the underworld. This was followed by sedan chairs bearing important men dressed in official Manchu uniform, gaudily dressed corps of youths, gaily dressed children carrying lanterns of many colours. Next came two brass bands. The first was from the Papan *Hwa Chiao* (Overseas) Chinese School and the second from Papan *Baat Ji Jam* (Eight Needles) the old medium school. Then came the illuminated floats carrying the famous *Baat Sin* or Eight Immortals (the eight human beings who performed humane work to help suffering humanity and who became immortals and were raised to the status of fairies). In the rear was the float carrying the popular *Gwun Yam* or Goddess of Mercy, flanked by gorgeously dressed maidens carrying lanterns. They smiled and waved at the applauding spectators as the young girl dressed as the Goddess of Mercy tossed flowers at them.

When they passed the clan association of Tsen Lung Fui Kuon, the procession stopped to pay their respects. Yoong Fu, Lim Kong Fei, the *sinsei*, Siew Lan and others waved at Siew Mei as she walked proudly along, accompanying the float carrying the Goddess of Mercy.

The procession's last stop was the mansion of Yap See, a wealthy miner. On the table were the food and other offerings and beside it were two servants serving bowls of tea to anyone who was thirsty.

Yap See and his family lined the balcony facing the road to acknowledge the two troupes of lion dancers. After the priests had chanted and performed the customary rites, a servant came forward to present a *huhng baau*<sup>21</sup> (red packet containing money) to each priest and members of the two lion dance groups who gave extra performances to the family.

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21. *Huhng baau*: (Cantonese) *Ang Pow* in Hokkien.

The huge paper effigies of the four guardians of the gates of Hades were burnt beside the temple, behind which was the cemetery where the procession ended.

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## *A Tiger On The Rampage*

GOSSIP played an important part in the lives of the people of Papan. Topics concerning fights, quarrels between families, so and so getting married, were often discussed in the homes, tea-houses, coffee-shops, the market and at the stand pipes. All these, however, paled in excitement compared with what was currently being discussed.

For there was talk that a tiger had come out of the jungle and was prowling in the vicinity of Papan. The animal was said to be a full grown female tiger and had been seen by people who went into the jungle to gather firewood or by those who depended on the jungle for a living such as the woodcutters, charcoal makers or vegetable farmers near the jungle. As everybody used either charcoal or firewood to cook with, many men and women, and even children, went into the jungle to get fuel.

The daily lives of many were thus affected when there was such fear and people dared not go into the jungle. Not only were the people living in the country-side and near the jungle afraid to go out at night, but even the residents of Papan would not leave their homes after sundown. So night-life practically came to a stop and many businesses were affected.

The first news of the tiger came from Edward Mitchell's isolated hilltop bungalow. Late one evening, shortly after the engineer of the Papan Tin Dredging Company returned home from work, he heard his wife, a pretty Eurasian lady, yelling in the kitchen. When Mitchell rushed into the kitchen he saw the face of a tiger at one of the windows. Fortunately, the window had bars and was covered by netting. The animal could not get into the bungalow even if it wanted to.

The immediate thought that came to the Englishman's mind was to drive the tiger away. A relative of Mrs Mitchell, who was Siamese and

reputed to be a very powerful maker of *jampi* (magic spell), splashed the window with water. The tiger's face vanished immediately.

After the initial shock, Mitchell went into his bedroom and took out his gun. He went out of the house to look about the compound but found no sign of the tiger. He went to the window and saw pug marks of the animal, indicating that it had stood on its hind legs and had placed its fore-feet on the window sill to stare into the house. He followed the foot prints until they came to the barbed wire fence where there was a breach through which the tiger had entered. He dared not go further and enter the jungle because it was already dark.

Early the next morning, accompanied by his dog, he continued where he left off. He found that the tracks led to a hill covered not with *lalang* but small trees. He followed them until he came to a valley where the bush was very dense. Both sides of the valley had been cleared of brush and undergrowth and were cultivated, the top of the hill planted with tapioca. At the foot of the valley was a hut where an elderly Chinese man lived. He stayed there to keep away the monkeys and prevent them from destroying the young plants and wild boars uprooting the older plants and eating the tapioca. At this point Mitchell's dog stopped and growled. When Mitchell ordered it to go on, it began to whimper and tremble. The Englishman knew that his quarry was in the thick undergrowth and he did not think it was safe to go into it.

"What do you want?" asked the old man, who had come out of the hut.

"There's a tiger hiding in the undergrowth over there," said Mitchell, pointing to the thick bush. "I'll come back tomorrow with more men to flush it out."

"What will you do with it?" asked the old man.

"Kill it, of course," Mitchell said. "I can't let it roam all over the place. It might kill livestock and even human beings."

"I don't think it harms human beings," the farmer said. "It has been living near here for several years and has never been known to attack any human being."

"Then how come it came to my house last night and frightened my wife?"

"Two women firewood gatherers took her two cubs yesterday while it was away hunting for food. I tried to stop them and told them to return the cubs to the lair. They wouldn't listen but told me they could sell them for a lot of money."

"How do you know the tigress won't harm or kill human beings?"

"I know it won't harm human beings because it is a divine tigress. I've run into it several times and all it did was look at me and go away without harming me."

The tigress was next heard of appearing in different parts of the town. News came that it had been sighted in the lake area one night, on the verge of the jungle in Tampoi the following night and behind Pak Foo's house at the foot of the dome-like hillock the third night. Then came news of it being seen near the town. It was lurking around the reservoir and quarry and finally seen descending into Panjang's estate and the road to the quarry. It went into the farm and attacked and killed a cow. As it could not carry the body away it ate what it could and left behind a large part of the carcass.

When the Indian Muslim family reported the matter to the police all the authorities could do was to post two policemen to keep watch for the tigress in case it came back the following night to feed on the leftovers. They kept watch for two nights but the tigress did not turn up and when the carcass began to rot and was attacked by flies, the vigil was called off.

There was consternation when the authorities left the situation like that. The people sent a delegation to ask Mitchell to help, but the Englishman's reply was not encouraging. He said he would not kill an animal which was seeking revenge for what had been done to it. He suggested to the people sent to see him to look for the two women and ask them to return the two cubs to the tigress.

What were the people to do? They offered a reward of \$30 to anyone who would kill the tigress. So the obligation fell on the few people who had guns.

Two hunters, Yip Kon Nam and Yap Mui Tow, came forward to offer their services, but they requested that they be stationed together and act together. So, when scouts reported that the tigress was leaving Kong Mui, the two hunters thought it was wise to keep watch on the animal from the arch built across the road to Kong Mui.

These two men were known to be unreliable. Yip Kon Nam, was a part-time coachman who would be called upon to drive a horse-drawn carriage when the wealthy people of Papan required it. Mui Tow was working off and on in dredges and foundries in Batu Gajah, and at other odd jobs. He was known to be out of work more often than working. At the time when he was engaged to capture the tigress, he had just started a rickshaw repairing shop in town. He worked when he liked and this attitude affected his business because people could not trust him for he was seldom able to return on time machines sent to him for repairs.

So the task of getting rid of the threat of the tiger rested on these two unreliable men. What they did to clear the town of the danger was interesting.

When dusk came they walked along the road to Kong Mui, climbed up to a flimsy platform built on the arch across the road. It was about fifteen feet high and the two hunters were afraid that they would be within the reach of the tigress if it were wounded. Since they were receiving a daily allowance of \$1 a day they did not bother whether they killed the animal or not. All they did was bring several bottles of Chinese tea, an ample supply of ground-nuts and tit-bits to eat while on watch.

On the third night, they saw the tigress accompanied by a male tiger as they passed under the arch. The two animals went to Yip Kon Nam's house and attacked his dog. While one tiger went under his carriage, the other pounced on the dog, killing it with one bite on its neck. There was so much noise that it woke up the whole neighbourhood. The frightened people took kerosene tins, pots and pans and banged them as

hard as they could until the two animals left carrying their prey. Instead of going back to the jungle, the tigers settled near the arch to enjoy their meal. When dawn came, Yip Kon Nam's neighbours reported the incident to the public as the two hunters returned to their homes to sleep. They heard what happened but kept silent.

When questioned further, Yap Mui Tow replied jokingly, "I fell asleep but our friend saw the animals when they came out. They ate his dog just below where he was posted."

"He saw them also," Yip Kon Nam said. "He hissed and signaled to me not to shoot because there were two animals, not just one."

"But weren't the animals on your side and nearer to you when they were eating your dog?" Yap Mui Tow argued, trying to defend himself.

"Don't try to cover up your fear," Yip Kon Nam retorted. "The animals were also within the range of your gun, weren't they?"

While the two continued to argue with each other whenever they met, the tigress, now joined by a male partner, continued to prowl around the town.

The people were at a loss, not knowing what to do. They held a meeting and decided that they look for the two women who had taken the tigress's cubs and tell them to return the newborn animals to the lair from where they took them.

"What if they refuse?" someone asked.

"Let us give them some money," suggested Chang Sin Sang.

"No," Khew Chin Sen said. "If they don't give in, let us stop everyone coming to Papan from Pusing. Each time when we turn back anyone from Pusing we tell him or her the reason. This way they will let the two women know and they'll do what we want them to do."

"Are the two women from Pusing?" Cheong Tuck Choy asked.

"They certainly are," Seong Woon said. "That's why they don't care what's happening here."

"Then let us stop them at three points," Khew Chin Sen said. "In the jungle at Tampoi, the railway track at the iron bridge and the junction where the road leads into Papan."

The punishment placed on the people from Pusing remained until the cubs were returned to their lair. The problem however was that they might not be accepted by the tigress. There was the belief that when a young wild animal had been held by human hands it bore the strange human smell which wild animals did not like. Fortunately, there was no such difficulty because, after the cubs were returned, all became peaceful again as both the tigress and her partner never gave any more trouble to the people of Papan.



## Yoong Fu Sends Matchmaker

"THE WOMAN with the big fan has come again," said Siew Mei. "What's she doing here?"

"The one with the small bound feet?" Choong Tet asked. "Why, she's the famous matchmaker of Papan."

"I wonder why she has come," Siew Mei said. "Perhaps she wants to arrange a girl for Choong Chee *Daaih Go* (Elder Brother) to marry."

"Perhaps she came for a social call," Choong Tet suggested. "You know, in a small town like Papan where everybody knows everybody else you can expect her to know mother, especially when she has three grown-up sons and two marriageable daughters."

*Sai Hoh*, younger sister of *Daaih Jek Hoh*, the caller of spirits who brought Mooi Kim back to life, could arrange for anybody to get married. She was a professional matchmaker and, as long as there was a boy or girl willing to marry, she would arrange it, no matter what the differences in age were or whether the boy or girl was suitable for each other or not.

"You're right, Choong Tet," said Choong Sin when he came and joined them. "*Sai Hoh* was sent by Yoong Fu *Suk* to see mother."

"Why?" asked Siew Mei and Choong Tet at almost the same time.

"What else except with a proposal?" said Choong Sin and stopped. He wanted to keep both his brother and sister in suspense.

"Well?" Siew Mei asked.

"Come on!" interjected Choong Tet. "Tell us if you know something we don't."

"I certainly do," Choong Sin said. "You see, I was in my room when I overheard the matchmaker and mother discussing Siew Lan. The go-between asked mother whether Siew Lan was willing to marry Yoong Fu *Suk*."

"What happened?" Siew Mei asked. "What did Siew Lan Je Je (Sister) say?"

"She would surely agree," replied Choong Tet. "Don't you notice how they behave whenever they meet each other?"

"You're right," Choong Sin said. "When mother asked Siew Lan to come out to meet Sai Hoh and asked whether she was willing to marry Yoong Fu Suk, she said yes."

"Why is the matchmaker here again today?" asked Siew Mei.

"Mother had given Siew Lan Je Je's date of birth and time she was born," Choong Sin said, "so that the matchmaker can see if they match Yoong Fu Suk's particulars. They will consult a fortune-teller to confirm that."

"What happens when the fortune-teller's reply is negative?" Siew Mei asked.

"Then the deal's off," Choong Sin said. "There won't be a marriage and the matchmaker will get only a small part of what she would get had the match been successfully made. She gets only \$1.50 cents."

"This custom is ridiculous," Choong Tet protested. "The fate of two people should not depend so much on the whims and fancies of the fortune-teller."

"I can't agree with you more," said Siew Mei adamantly. "I'll certainly not allow anybody to interfere with my life if I marry."

"The person they consult not only knows fortune-telling," Choong Sin said. "He also knows physiognomy, the art of judging a person's character from the features of his face or by studying his palm."

"What would you do under the circumstances?" Choong Tet asked Siew Mei. "You expect him to propose to you and you say yes to him? It's not always your hero, Pak Foo, who'll come riding on a white horse to propose to you. It could be someone else."

"Let's not talk about this any more," Siew Mei said, to avoid further discussions.

Choong Sin said, "The matchmaker is getting ready to leave."

The result of the discussion was known soon enough. Pak Foo's parents, Ho Yoong Sin and Chew Choo Moy, represented Yoong Fu's parents who were in China. They came to Siew Lan's house bearing gift baskets of chickens, sweet cakes and a red packet containing money. If Siew Lan's mother accepted the gifts and the *huhng baau*, Yoong Fu and Siew Lan would be engaged. After consulting a fortune-teller and the Goddess of Mercy in the temple, a suitable date was selected and the wedding announced. Invitation cards were sent out to relatives and friends.

On the eve of the marriage everybody in Siew Lan's house was kept very busy. The shophouse was whitewashed, inside and outside. The shop front was decorated with bunting, lanterns and flowers. Even the wooden plaque in front of the shop bearing the characters, "Cheong Yee Foh Bicycle Dealers", had a red cloth mounted on it and draped down the sides. Attached on top of this were the emblems of marriage, one at each end of the red cloth. These were in the shape of flowers made of red cloth decorated with gold threads stuck on pins.

The shop, which was closed for business on the important day, was also magnificently decorated. Everything was done in red and anything not red in colour was pasted over with red paper. The female guests, friends of Siew Lan's mother and Siew Lan's friends, Kon Fook's three sisters and Mooi Kim's two sisters, were lavishly dressed for the occasion. They crowded into the bridal chamber, surrounding the bride who was being attended to by the go-between *Sai Hoh*, putting the finishing touches to her hair and dress and giving all kinds of advice. Siew Lan had not put on the ceremonial dress yet, because it was made of thick material and would make her feel hot and sweaty. The costume was like the gown of the Empress Dowager as worn in the opera. On the day of her wedding a girl was dressed like an empress and made to feel like one. It was the greatest occasion in a girl's life.

Then it was time and the din of music reached the house. Everybody became excited and the sound stirred Siew Lan. Yoong Fu had arrived in a carriage drawn by two horses lent by Chang Sin Sang's family. He alighted from the carriage attended by Chang Kon Fook as best man.

Both were splendidly dressed. The groom was dressed in a deep blue coat and matching pants and a red necktie while the best man had put on a deep grey suit and a blue bow-tie.

As they stepped into the house, Choong Sin took their hats and put them on the hanger on the wall. Yoong Fu, accompanied by his close friends, sat in the hall where a tea-party was held in the bridegroom's honour. A six-man band played while the groom and his friends ate *nyonya kuih*, fruit cakes, biscuits, cracked ground-nuts, split open red lotus seeds to munch the meat inside and drank tea.

After about twenty minutes, the matchmaker appeared in the hall and told Yoong Fu that the bride was ready.

"Come upstairs with me," Sai Hoh said. "Come and take the bride away with you and make her your wife."

Yoong Fu followed Sai Hoh who was walking with a swagger as her small feet, which had just been released from binding, could hardly bear her weight. She was fanning herself to show her authority on this occasion. When the bridegroom and his party reached Siew Lan's bedroom, they found the door locked.

"Please knock on the door and tell them to open it," the matchmaker told Yoong Fu.

"Please open the door," Yoong Fu spoke in a voice hardly louder than a whisper.

The girls inside laughed and giggled. Then one of them asked, "Why?"

"I've come to claim the bride and take her home to be my wife," the groom said, as instructed by the matchmaker.

"Will you look after her properly, treat her well and obey her?" the girls within asked.

The matchmaker told Yoong Fu to say yes, but Kon Fook told Yoong Fu not to. "You lower the dignity of men," he said. "Don't agree."

Again the voices from within asked, "Well, aren't you going to agree? If you do we'll deliver Siew Lan into your hands. Yes or No?"

Still there was no answer.

"Yoong Fu *Go*" Siew Mei's voice came from within, "please agree. It's only the custom. Say yes."

Then Pak Foo spoke, "If you don't open the door we'll break it down. You know my uncle and your sister love each other very much. Why are you doing this to him?"

There were low whisperings inside. After that came Choong Tet's voice, "Pak Foo *Go Go*, they want to come to a settlement. They say that if Yoong Fu *Suk* doesn't want to agree to those things, I'll come out to arrange for a compromise. Okay?"

When both parties agreed Choong Tet squeezed out through a slightly opened door. "Don't you betray us," a girl's voice was heard warning Choong Tet. There was a click following the boy's exit and the door was locked again.

"Now what?" asked Kon Fook and Pak Foo.

"They say they want a red packet of at least \$10 for me to make up for losing a sister while you're going to gain a wife."

"But Yoong Fu *Suk* has already paid your parents a big red packet for marrying their daughter," Kon Fook said. "If you want a red packet you should ask them for it, not us."

"Then we won't give you the key to open the door," a girl's voice rang out.

"It's only the custom," the matchmaker said. "If you give them a red packet it shows Yoong Fu's gratitude to Siew Lan's relatives. If you won't pay, let me pay them then."

"No, no," the girls protested. "We want payment only from the bridegroom."

Yoong Fu took out an *huhng baau* gave it to Choong Tet. After this Choong Tet was re-admitted into the room. He was asked to open the red packet and when they found there was, indeed, a \$10 note in it, they gave the key to the youngest brother to hand over to the bridegroom.

The boys opened the door and Yoong Fu and his retinue entered the room.





# 25

## *The Marriage Ceremony*



*Family photograph taken in a club in Papan. (Circa 1905)*

WHEN SIEW LAN and Yoong Fu joined the tea-party in the hall, they took the seats at the small table facing two other long tables placed parallel to each other. The boys sat at the table on the left, on Yoong Fu's side and the girls on the right where Siew Lan was.

Siew Lan's father gave a speech, welcoming the guests, relatives and friends. After about twenty minutes the matchmaker told Yoong Fu and Siew Lan to go back to the hall upstairs. There was a small crowd waiting for them, mostly relatives of the bride.

Two chairs were placed next to each other, and beside them was a small table on which were a teapot, several teacups and a metal tray. The matchmaker poured some tea into two teacups and placed them on the tray. She then said, "*Louh Yeh, Naaih Naaih*, (Sir, Madam) please come and take your tea." As she said this she invited Cheong Tuck Choy to take the chair on the left and *Baat Sou* to take the other. When they were seated she asked the bride and groom to go and stand in front of the bride's parents.

"Kneel down before Siew Lan's parents, both of you," she told them. When they did so, *Sai Hoh* took a cup of tea and gave it to Yoong Fu. She added, "Serve the tea to *Louh Yeh*, and do so with both hands."

Tuck Choy took the cup with both hands and drank the tea. He then took out of his pocket a red packet containing \$10 and gave it to the bridegroom and another red packet containing \$1 note and a 10 cent coin and gave it to the matchmaker. When Siew Lan served her father with tea she was also given a red packet and the matchmaker another red packet. *Baat Sou* was served in the same way. Then it was the turn of Siew Lan's relatives who were older than her. This time, however, the ritual was carried out with the groom and bride standing because they needed to kneel only to the parents.

When this was finished they went downstairs and rejoined the tea-party.

*Sai Hoh* told Yoong Fu and his bride that it was time to go to the Yap See Mansion for a ceremony. They stood up and were shown the way out by the Master of Ceremony amidst the blaring music of *dehk daah*<sup>22</sup>, clarinet, and a large gong played by the musicians who were seated outside the shop on the five-foot-way, around a table laid out specially for them.

Parked in front of the house beside the main road was a magnificent horse-drawn carriage. The motorcar taxi and about half a dozen rickshaws were parked along the side road. Yoong Fu, Siew Lan, the matchmaker,

22. *dehk daah*: a Malaysian colloquialism or coinage to describe the noisy Chinese bands at traditional weddings and funerals.

Kon Fook and Siew Mei were directed to get into the carriage, the musicians went into the open hooded taxi while relatives of the groom and bride went into the rickshaws. The taxi went first followed by the bridal carriage and then the rickshaws. Those who could not find transport went on foot.

When the procession arrived at the Yap See Mansion, a long string of firecrackers was set off. When the explosions came to an end, the bride and groom got down from the carriage and the orchestra struck up. Siew Lan and Yoong Fu entered the mansion and were directed to the cloakroom. After the bride and groom had changed into their wedding costumes, which were like the imperial ceremonial gowns, they went into the hall and were placed at the head of a long table. A seat in the middle, between the bridal couple, was reserved for Chang Sin Sang, who came shortly after everybody had taken their seats.

Chang Sin Sang stood up to address the assembly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "It is, indeed, an honour to be asked to address this assembly. It gives me great pleasure to speak on such an auspicious occasion when two young people are going to be joined together in marriage. Many of you have taken off from work and given up valuable time to be here today.

"I like to say how lucky the couple is. They had the chance to see each other at a meeting arranged by a matchmaker. If they were meant for each other, one look is enough to seal their destiny. It has been said that marriages are arranged in heaven. Yoong Fu, the groom, and Cheong Siew Lan, the bride, knew each other in Kong Mui and had the opportunity to talk and meet each other before this ceremony. Custom lays down that they hold this ceremony, invite relatives, friends to be here to witness the signing of a union making the marriage lawful and I will put my signature as witness to make it so.

"In our time we were not so fortunate. Boys and girls were not allowed to meet or see each other until after they were married. The choice of life partner was always arranged by the parents whose decision

was final. The separation of sexes was so strict that a boy was not allowed to meet a girl, not to mention talk to each other.

"However, it cannot be said that marriages in the past were not as successful as modern marriages. If you look around you, you'll find that not one old married couple in Papan has divorced yet. Even blind marriages arranged by parents can be successful because it is known that love grows after marriage.

"I've been unnecessarily long winded, talking of things which people nowadays are not interested in. I will now proceed with the ceremony.

"Do you wish to be married to Siew Lan?" Chang Sin Sang asked.

"Yes, I do," Yoong Fu said.

Turning to Siew Lan, Chang Sin Sang asked the same question and she answered in the affirmative. An attendant placed the certificates before the bridal couple for them to sign. After Chang Sin Sang put his signature as witness, the bond of marriage became legal. Kon Fook, the bestman, and Siew Mei, the bridesmaid, also signed as witnesses. The couple were then asked to exchange the bunch of flowers they were holding. At that moment the orchestra started to play and flooded the hall with music.

"I now pronounce Ho Yoong Fu and Cheong Siew Lan man and wife."

The ceremony was over and everybody went home. Yoong Fu and Siew Lan now returned to Yoong Fu's shop. The room facing the hall on the ground floor, which was formerly the groom's bedroom, was turned into the bridal chamber.

They were supposed to repeat the same tea serving ceremony in Yoong Fu's shop, but since his parents were not in Malaya and it was not proper for Ho Yoong Sin and Chew Choo Moy to act as his parents on such an occasion, they left this ceremony out.

When night came they returned to the Yap See Mansion where a dinner was held. Although it was the custom to hold the bridegroom's dinner at one place and the bride's dinner at another, they found it more

convenient that both the dinners were held at the same venue.

Yoong Fu's dinner was held on the left of the mansion and so his guests entered by the left door while Siew Lan's guests used the right entrance. Since both families had friends who knew Yoong Fu and Siew Lan, they had to attend both dinners – husbands went to Yoong Fu's dinner and wives to Siew Lan's.

It was a grand dinner, one of the biggest ever held in Papan. The cooks, who usually helped during festivals, celebrations or anniversary dinners at the Tsen Lung Fui Kuon, were engaged and, together with the Chang Sin Sang's cook and other helpers, served a sumptuous feast. There were altogether six courses and the guests enjoyed themselves, especially Pak Foo, Mooi Kim and the Cheong family members who had never tasted anything so delicious before.

In Papan, guests sometimes took no less than three children with them to attend dinners, although a red packet of only one dollar and ten cents was given. Chang Sin Sang, knowing the custom well, always contributed generously to ensure that everyone was well fed and the occasion a success. He also loved to have wedding ceremonies held in his house, especially if it was the marriage of the male who would be adding another member to the family. This, he believed, was a good omen. It stood for increased wealth and would work upon the *fung seui* (geomancy) and bring good fortune.





## Visiting The Mine In Broken Gully

"WHERE'S this famous Tung Yow Kongsi?" Peter Lee asked. "It's supposed to be one of the largest open cast mines<sup>23</sup> in the district, producing the highest amount of ore."

"It's in *Daaih Bin Gwong* (Broken Gully)," Pak Foo said, "between the gaol and the road to Kong Mui."

"It's true that it is the largest open cast mine and produces the most ore in the country," Choong Sin said. "The fact that the Governor of Singapore and High Commissioner of Malaya visited it is proof of its reputation. It's the only mine not owned by an European to have the honour of being visited by such a dignitary."

"I heard quite a lot about it in Batu Gajah," said Peter. "My geography teacher mentioned it in class. I've visited a dredge but have never been to an open cast mine."

"That's not a problem," remarked Pak Foo. "My father looks after the mine and Chang Kon Fook is the son of the proprietor. If we call up the gang we can get the trip set up in no time."

"Is your father there today?" Choong Sin asked.

"Yes, he is," Pak Foo said.

"I've left my sister at Siew Mei's place," said Peter. As he untied his horse and mounted it, he continued, "It's a nuisance to have a sister tagging along. She insisted on coming when she learnt I was coming to Papan. She wanted to see Siew Mei, her former classmate in Kong Mui."

"But we can take her along," Choong Sin said. "When Siew Mei learns where we're going she's sure to come along."

23. *Open cast mine*: The Chinese introduced and developed the open cast tin mine (*lambong*) in Malaya. A large pit was dug in the ground, the tin-bearing soil (*karang*) was carried to the surface in baskets and was then washed in a rudimentary *palong* to separate the ore from the earth. Flooding was a major problem before the introduction of the steam engine and pumps.

"Take her along?" repeated Peter doubtfully.

"Why not?" asked Pak Foo. "Siew Mei has been with us on most of our outings. She's conducted herself as well as any of us."

"But my sister's different," the brother said. "She's not tough like Siew Mei."

"We'll meet at my house then," Choong Sin told Peter as he left with Pak Foo to arrange the trip.

They went on four horses and rode two to a horse. Kon Fook brought three animals while the fourth one belonged to Peter Lee. At about ten o'clock in the morning they set off. After passing the theatre on their right and the Eastern Smelting Company on their left they followed a path which took them to an area where most of the families of the Sanitary Board labourers and their families lived. Other Indian families also settled in the area beyond the coolie lines. In front of these houses grew mainly papaya trees bearing big, sweet and juicy fruits, which were left to rot or drop off to be eaten by black birds. The soil here was very fertile as the ground had been used for burying rubbish and night soil brought in by the conservancy coolies. The Indian families reared cattle and goats and dung was scattered all over the place.

They could see the reservoir on their right, with the road winding around the foot of the hillock, going towards the quarry. About a hundred yards further along the road to Kong Mui was the arch where the two infamous hunters had perched to keep watch for the tigress.

After crossing a wooden bridge spanning the muddy Sungai Johan they came to the houses of two Chinese farmers. The house on their right was a rambutan orchard with the ripe, red fruits weighing down the branches. The one on the left had about six or seven mango trees, which were a happy sight when the fruits ripened. Flying foxes were a nuisance to the two families because they were kept awake when the fruits were in season. They had to shout to chase away the flying foxes or bang tins or shoot with catapults when they heard big bats coming to attack their fruits.

From here onwards the ground began to rise until they came upon open land. A thin mist began to surround them.

"Isn't it strange that there's mist so late in the morning?" commented Siew Mei riding behind Choong Sin.

"It can't be mist," Elaine Lee said. "It must be haze which is different from mist. The jungles beyond the dredge have been burning for two days now, spewing smoke into the atmosphere."

Peter Lee said, "Mr Mitchell, our engineer, told us that the tiny particles and dust in the smoke are mixed up with the mist and cannot be driven off by sunlight. Only heavy rain or strong winds will clear it."

The soil here was red and the landscape looked different from any Pak Foo had seen before. The hills on their left were low and were also red with scanty stunted trees, low bushes and lichens. In places where the earth was bare, moss and mildew could be seen, as if spread by human hands, to prevent the soil from eroding.

Flying among the bushes and overhead was a species of a multi-coloured bird (bee-eaters). It was as beautiful as the kingfisher, but smaller and slimmer, with slender and long beaks for digging tunnels.

"We call them 'tunneling birds'," Mooi Kim said. "When I was a child I used to come here with friends to catch them. We set fire to a bundle of old clothes and put them near the entrance of the tunnel and blew smoke into it. The birds would run out of the other side of the tunnel. We put a small net there and caught them when they came out."

"But wild birds cannot be tamed, can they?" asked Choong Tet.

"No," Mooi Kim said. "They prefer to starve and die than to be caught and live. When we learned this, we set them free and did not trap them any more. Even the young ones would die when caged."

They soon came in sight of the 'Broken Gully' mine. With its red earth spilling over a wide area and covering the ground, the mine was like a large bowl broken at one end. When the Tong Yow Kongsí started, it was only working on the spill over soil. When they found it rich in tin deposits, they started mining the whole area. It was this mine which made Chang Sin Sang rich and famous.

They went to a longhouse called a mining *kongsi*. It was covered with zinc on the top and the walls were made of planks. The rooms and partitions inside and the office were also made of planks. Ho Yoong Sin, Pak Foo's father, came out to meet them.

"I was expecting you," he said as he stepped out of the porch to welcome them.

There was no proper stable at the *kongsi* as almost all the labourers, who did not stay in the *kongsi*, came by bicycle or on foot. They tied up their horses under a *cempedak* tree and a boy rushed out to fill some troughs with feed and water.

Yoong Sin led the party to the edge of the mining pit, which was as large as two football fields.

"Look down into the bottom of the pit," Yoong Sin told Kon Fook. "It's at least one hundred feet deep."

"How many people are there working in this mine?" Peter Lee asked.

"At least fifty," Kon Fook said, "including those doing clerical work and other odd jobs."

Men and women were digging at the wall of the pit. They used *cangkuls* and wore broad-brimmed straw hats to ward off the heat or rain. The earth was put into rectangular woven cane baskets which they carried, one hanging at each end of a pole, to the bottom of the pit and emptied into a small pool.

Beside the pool was a large clumsy looking machine which pumped the mixture of water, sand and tin ore out of the mining pit and into the top of a long sloping sluice-box (*palong*) where the flow was controlled, so that tin ore would fall to the bottom and be held behind the cataracts, while the lighter waste materials were washed away.

Sluicing and slicing the earth in the *palong* was done by several men and women. Water was controlled by a young man they nicknamed the 'mining engineer'. When more water was required in the *palong*, the gong would be struck three times and when the volume was to be reduced, it would be struck once. All the so-called 'mining engineer' had to do was



*Sluicing, slicing and hosing the earth in the palong.  
This is a process called "chingkow" – cleaning the palong for tin-ore.  
(photo by Wong Yoong Sang)*

to tug at a string, which he could do even while lying down. It was such an easy job that nobody would do the work unless he had no alternative. It was nicknamed the 'king's profession' in the mine.

*Dulang* washing at the bottom of the pit, where the waste gravel collected, was a contract job normally given out to relatives of important people or close friends and relatives of the proprietor of the mine. For hard-working people, such contracts were rewarding and could bring in a lot of money.

A railway line linked the *kongsi* house to the rim of the pit. It was used to transport heavy materials in the mine. Waste sand, gravel, stones and rocks were carried by the trolleys to be dumped far away from



*The hut in the background houses a gravel pump which transports the waste material at the bottom of the palong to a dump site.  
(photo by Wong Yoong Sang)*

the pit. Instead of being pulled by a steam engine as in mining companies, men or women were used. If the weight was too much for two pushers to handle, more men or women would be sent to help them pull the trolleys.

## “Where Do We Go From Here?”

AFTER A MEAL of rice porridge they were taken on a sightseeing tour around the mine by Pak Foo's father.

There were about a dozen beds inside the *kongsi*, dormitory style, with mosquito-nets covering all the beds. There were no mattresses and the labourers had to sleep on hard wooden planks covered by straw mats or gunny sacks. Pillows were mostly clay or wooden blocks as used by the people in the village. Clogs were worn and placed at the foot of all the beds so that the men did not get into bed with dirty feet. The sweeper, an elderly woman, did not like the labourers who dirtied the floor with ashes and stubs of hand-rolled cigarettes or blew out ashes from their water pipes as this gave her extra work.

Those who came from outstation or had their homes too far from the mine would stay in the *kongsi*, but most had families and returned home after work.

“Where do we go from here?” Kon Fook asked as he untied his horse.

They were preparing to leave the mine and had come to collect their horses. The *cempedak* tree gave shade from the noonday sun which would otherwise be blazing.

“I'd like to take the hill path to Kong Mui,” Siew Mei said. “When we were living there, I had always wondered what it was like to return home by this route.”

“Let's explore the area a bit,” Kon Fook proposed. “Since we've come so far and have horses let's go over the hills to Kong Mui. I would like to take a look at the place where we used to live, Peter.”

“And then home?” added Choong Sin quickly.

"What's the hurry, brother?" Choong Tet asked. "I know you don't like to visit places as we do."

"I would like you to take a look at the dredge," Peter Lee suggested, "and then pay a visit to Yoong Fu Suk's old 'wild rat' mine."

Mounting their horses they directed the animals towards the hills. They followed the track used by firewood gatherers and went up a slope until they reached the top of a hillock. They could see Gunung Hijau on their left with its tail end sloping down until it was lost in view, hidden by the *alang* hillocks.

"That's where our house was," said Choong Sin, pointing to the tail end of Gunung Hijau, "wasn't it, Choong Tet?"

"Yes," Choong Tet said, "and beside our house was a path leading to *Luhng Yih Suk's* house in the jungle."

"And it passed beside my house, too," Pak Foo said. "I'm wondering if my house and farm are still there."

"We shall know when we get there," Siew Mei said. "Your house as well as ours."

They paused and took a rest under a lofty *jelutong* tree near the crest of the hillock. The wind was quite strong here. They could almost see it coming towards them as the long, tall *alang* bent and bowed, following the direction of the breeze. The soft, white fluff on the tips of the tall grass covered the area like a huge blanket, which rippled as if a troupe was performing a dragon dance under it. They heard the leaves above them rustling and felt the pleasant, refreshing breeze caressing their faces and ruffling their hair.

When they reached the top of the next hillock, they saw a hut in the valley below and went down towards it. When they arrived they found an old man of about sixty years of age. He had chosen to live alone there because he was fed up with civilised society. He had taken part in the gang fights in Kamunting, Taiping, and had come here to live out the rest of his life alone to do penance for the engagements in which he had taken part and the people he had killed.

The hermit appeared as if he were dumb and on his last legs. He was neither glad nor unhappy on seeing the party and spoke only when spoken to. The hut was still strong because it was solidly built with good materials. It was bare except the kitchen, where there were a sack of sweet potatoes, some tapioca and a small flour bag containing rice, some bottles of oil, sauce and a few red chillies plucked from the plants outside. Behind the shack was a fish pond overgrown with weeds and grass. It had been built by blocking a stream in the valley with a weir constructed at the other end of the stream. There were few fish in the pool as, not only were they not fed regularly, but snakes and monitor lizards always went into the water at night and ate the fish.

Going along the shoulder of the hillock they came to the next valley. It was occupied by a man of quite a different character. He had short hair and was ruggedly built, and appeared to be a strong-minded fellow, quite unlike the recluse they had left behind. The children did not want to stop but when he came out from his hut he waved at them inviting them to come into his house. They worked their way down and stopped before his hut.

"It's not often we have people passing through here," he said. "Come, come inside and have a drink before you go on your journey."

The hut was not a solid structure like the recluse's two storied hut, but a small single storied country farmhouse. The hall was cluttered with *cangkuls*, a sickle, axes and other tools, and piled high with heaps of tapioca. There was scarcely room to accommodate more than two people much less the group. So they stood outside after getting down from their horses. When the visitors did not enter his hut the man brought out tea which he filled into bottles and told them to drink – he did not have enough cups for his guests.

"Where are you all going?" the farmer asked. "It's been quite a long time since anybody has gone through here," he said again.

"We're going to Kong Mui," Siew Mei said. "We want to go out of here by the hill road. Isn't there a way out? We used to live in the farms beyond this hillock."

"There used to be two farmhouses over this hillock," the farmer said, "but they have been pulled down and the whole area cleared of trees and *belukar*. The cut vegetation has been dried in the hot sun and is going to be burnt."

"Burning it in this dry weather?" Peter Lee asked. "The jungle beyond the dredge is now aflame on account of open burning. If it is burnt it will set the jungle alight from here to Lahat."

"It'll spread over here, too," the farmer said. "It's going to destroy my plants and farmstead. That's why I've invited you here to find out if anybody can put a stop to this burning."

"We'll try," Peter Lee said, "but who's in charge?"

"There's a hut somewhere on the other side of this hillock," he said. "If you get in touch with those people living there, they might be able to tell you something."

After taking their drinks and thanking their host they climbed up the slope and left. Skirting a tapioca plantation they saw many uprooted plants with the roots eaten by wild animals. Monkeys could be seen climbing on the top of the delicate plants, swaying, playing joyfully and jumping about, breaking the slender stalks. They also came across wildfowl running to take cover and flushed doves which flew into the air and dived into the tall *lalang* grass ahead.

"Be careful," Choong Sin warned. "Make sure that the horses put their fore feet on solid ground because there might be holes dug to trap animals."

"Wild boar meat is a source of food for the farmers," Choong Tet said.

"They also set traps for monkeys," Mooi Kim added. "Animals who fall into such traps usually have one leg caught by a piece of string and swung into the air."

When they came to the top of the next hill they saw, stretching before them, a long and broad span of barren land with all the trees, undergrowth and grass removed.

"It's like what the second farmer told us," Pak Foo said.

"What are we going to do?" Siew Mei asked. "We must try to stop the burning. The weather is so dry everything will catch fire easily."

"Are we near where you once lived?" asked Kon Fook, when he thought he saw something familiar. He was speaking to Choong Tet riding behind him.

"It can't be," the latter said. "We must be somewhere near where we climbed the embankment and saw you hurried along by Mangkali Sang." He raised his voice to speak to Mooi Kim, riding behind Pak Foo.

Mooi Kim, however, could not recognise any familiar landmark as he had not been there as often as the others.

"I'm not sure," he admitted.

"But I am," Pak Foo said. "Look at the stream to our right. Doesn't it look familiar? It's where we caught our fish."

"You are all wrong!" Siew Mei exclaimed. "This trail leads to *Luhng Yih Suk's* house in the jungle. The one where we encountered the kidnappers is in Tampoi where Mooi Kim lives and it leads to Yik Chee School in Pusing."

"She's right!" Choong Sin muttered. "It takes a girl to point out our mistake. Where do you think we are?"

"We must be near where we killed the king cobra," Siew Mei said. "But the tree where the monkey fell to the ground is no longer there."

"Isn't this the place where we battled with the leeches," Choong Tet teased his sister, "where a girl ran amok and had to run into the bushes to pick off the slimy..."

Siew Mei cried out, "Can't you keep your mouth shut. It wasn't funny."

There was a pause after the girl reprimanded Choong Tet.

"Let's go along the edge of the clearing," Kon Fook suggested. "The stumps of small trees or bushes would hurt our horses' hoofs."

As he said this he swung his horse to the left. The other three riders followed him. They saw that the trees and thick vegetation of the tail end of Gunung Hijau had been cleared, exposing the soil.

"Why do they clear the land in Gunung Hijau," Peter Lee asked, "but leave the *lalang* covered land on our left alone?"

"They want land for growing rubber trees," Mooi Kim said. "You can't grow rubber in areas where no trees, but only *lalang*, flourish."

"Why does *lalang* grow in some areas and not in others?" asked Elaine.

Peter Lee answered, "The soil is rocky and the topsoil is so thin that only the hardy *lalang* grows. Not even grass grows in such infertile soil."

When they came to the end of the clearing they worked their way towards the edge of the trees and came to the path which led to the interior of the jungle. They crossed the stream which used to supply water to Pak Foo's and Siew Mei's farms and homesteads. The sun was low in the western sky when they reached the hut but nobody was there.

"What are we going to do now?" Choong Sin asked. "We promised the farmer we would tell the workers not to do any open burning when we meet them."

"What can we do?" Kon Fook asked. "Even if they were here they might not take any heed of us."

"What can anybody do under the circumstances?" Peter Lee asked. "All we can do now is to find a place where we can spend the night and have our dinner."

## *A Visit To The Wooden Dredge*

"YOU'RE LATE," said Pak Foo, as soon as Peter Lee's head showed above the landing on the second floor of the Tuck Yuen teahouse. "We've been waiting here for sometime now."

"We didn't expect you to be here so early," Elaine Lee said, following her brother.

"You forget," Peter Lee said, "I had to get permission for the visit. Mr Mitchell, the engineer, has given us permission to visit the dredge. He has also chosen a man to guide us around and explain how the dredge works."

After both the brother and sister finished their breakfast, Kon Fook paid the bill. As they mounted their horses and set off, they became aware of the thick haze and cloudy sky.

"I hope it's not going to rain," remarked Pak Foo as he looked up at the dark clouds in the sky.

"But it has been like this for quite a while now," Elaine Lee said. "The haze is due to the big forest fires which are raging through the jungles beyond the dredge. There has also been a long dry spell with no rain to drive away the haze and dampen the fire."

"Mr Mitchell told me," Peter Lee said, "the haze is due to the dust particles of the forest fire getting mixed up with the mist. Mists usually scatter when the sun comes up, but it has no effect on haze."

They passed the manager's building and offices of the dredging company which covered roughly half an acre of land. The first building was quite big and two storeys high where the manager, accountant and engineer were. The clerks, store-keeper, time-keeper were in another building. There was a shift engineer who was placed with the Asian staff because, although he was a European, he did not have even a primary

education and was always drunk after work. He was a garbage collector in London and used curses and foul language unnecessarily. His friends were mostly illiterate dockyard workers from whom he had picked up the East End accent. Fortunately, none of the people working under him could understand what he said. He was the only English staff who had to go on night duty like the other Asian staff but he was given full control of the dredge when the engineer was not around.

They reached the single-storied staff quarters which were put up on land laid waste by dredging. It was quite hot inside these quarters despite the efforts to plant trees and grass to make the surroundings cooler. The barren looking buildings were even painted green to give a cool and cheerful effect.

The storehouse was situated on this barren land some distance from the living quarters as some of the materials stored there could catch fire easily. The building was painted white and covered with corrugated zinc sheets from the ground to the roof.

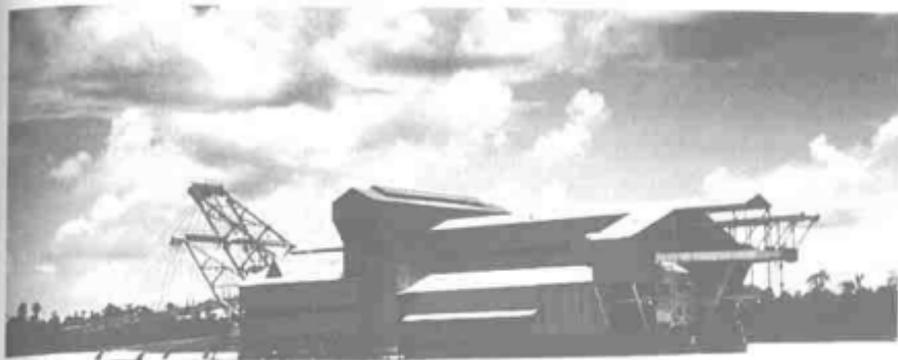
They rode until they arrived at a large wooden shed by the lake. Two trees provided shade for stable service for the horses. They tied their animals up and walked to the shed where only two people were waiting for the boats to ferry them to the dredge.

"At this hour there is no queue," Peter Lee said, "as most of the people who go to work in the dredge have already been ferried over."

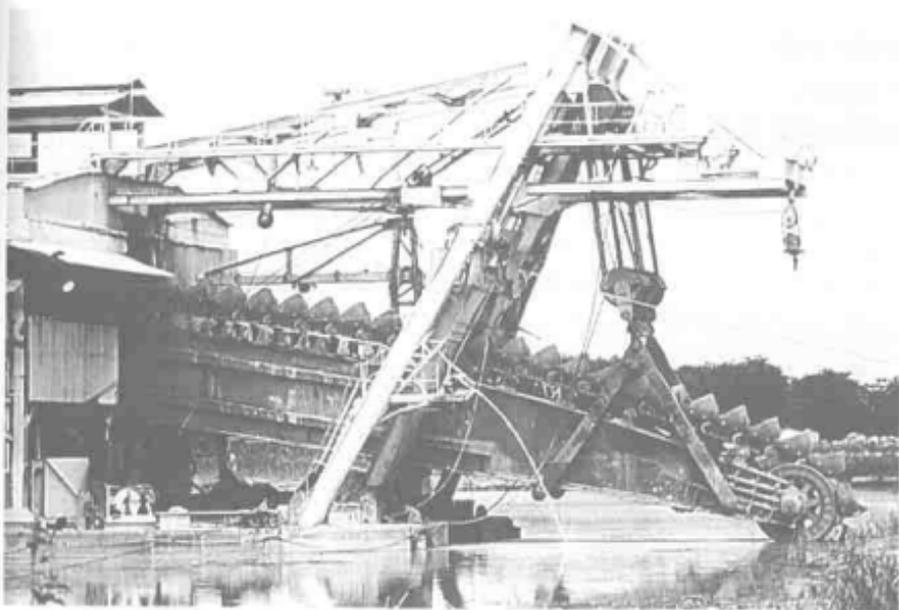
Woon Yew Siew, one of the two winchmen of the dredge, was waiting for them. A winchman is like the pilot of a ship. They all went into the large boat and were ferried across the water to the dredge. When the boat docked beside the dredge, they climbed up a steep iron staircase.

They were met by Thomas Farrow, the other shift engineer who was on day duty. He was a pleasant looking man who greeted the visitors with a smile. They were led to the second storey of the dredge after climbing another iron staircase and guided to the forefront of the 'ship', as the dredge was sometimes called.

"Can you see the large steel buckets hanging out in front of the ship?" said Yew Siew, pointing to the gearing hanging in front of them



*This is a dredge where the workers have to be ferried to by boat.  
(photo by Choo Koo Chai)*



*The long beam carries steel buckets which dig up gravel from the ground.  
They are like buckets carried by labourers in an open-cast mine.  
(photo by Choo Koo Chai)*

over a long steel beam, which was like the crane of a construction tractor. "They are hung on the long movable arm in order to lift or move them. These buckets are used to dig up earth. They are connected by steel chains, one after the other, so that when one bucket is filled, it goes up and is turned upwards to prevent the gravel from spilling while the bucket following it does the digging and goes up in turn, followed by the next bucket and so on."

"I can see the purpose of these buckets digging up earth," Peter Lee told Yew Siew. "They are like the buckets in an open cast mine where the men dig up gravel to put into rattan baskets and carried on poles to the pool at the bottom of the pit and dumped into a pool."

"Right," Yew Siew said, "you can pick up things very quickly. I suppose you would like to know how we transfer the earth to be 'cleaned' as they do in a *palong*."

The children nodded.

"Good," Yew Siew said. "I'm coming to that. When the buckets come down, they carry the excavated earth and deposit it on a large revolving screen. Inside this screen water guns are used to break up the earth. The water and broken up earth drop through the holes into an iron *palong* with iron blocks. The water washes away the gravel in the *palong* leaving the ore behind."



*This is a revolving screen where stones and rocks are separated from the gravel.  
(photo by Choo Koo Chai)*

"Then the *dulang* washer," Pak Foo said, "and the coolie in an open cast mine and the dredge all work in the same way. Each digs the earth and puts it into a container, each washes it with water to remove the dirt, sand and mud. What's not washed away and remains at the bottom is tin."

"The same principles apply in the 'wild rat' mine too," Choong Tet exclaimed. "Some people dig up earth on the slope of a hill and carry it to the man at the bottom of the *palong*. The earth is then carried up and stacked on the *palong*. Then water from the catchment is released to wash away the earth. The earth on the *palong* is then levelled to enable the water to flow over it."

"In the Tong Yow Kongsu," Pak Foo said, "we've no less than half a dozen men to do the leveling job during 'washing days' which take place at least once a week."

Pak Foo and his friends were led to other parts of the dredge. They stopped at the winchman's post and saw Yew Siew's assistant standing at work and also at the furnace where another man was throwing chopped up logs into the fire.

"Unlike the other dredges in Batu Gajah, Malim Nawar and other places," Yew Siew said, "which work by electricity, ours works by steam. Although electricity is now supplied to several parts of Kinta we are still using steam to operate the dredge."

"Why hasn't the dredge been changed to use electricity?" Kon Fook asked. "Surely, this would make the operation easier and cleaner."

"First of all," Yew Siew said, "it costs a lot to convert it from steam power to electric power - it would cost less to bring in a new dredge. Secondly, there's no electric supply in Papan yet."

After a pause, the winchman added, "You can see that we've practically worked out all the marshy areas here and the agreement we signed with the owner of the land will be expiring soon."

"Do you mean to say," Kon Fook asked, "the company is not applying to renew the lease? Is the mine going to close down soon?"

"I'm afraid so," Yew Siew said. "If the dredge winds up, I worry about the people of Kong Mui. Nearly the whole population here depends on the dredge for a living. As for myself, I can always go elsewhere like Batu Gajah or Malim Nawar to look for another job."

They then got on the barge to be ferried back. After going ashore they mounted their horses and rode on. They came to a bungalow-like building, surrounded by a low barbed wire fence buffered by bushes and shrubs, and paused.

"I'll be here for a short while," Peter Lee said as he dismounted. "There's no need for any of you to get down from your horse."

Turning to his sister still seated on the horse he said, "You stay here with them while I go inside to get the provisions."

As soon as Peter Lee reached the gate of his residence, a huge, dark brown dog came forward to greet him, howling and barking.

"Inside!" Peter Lee commanded. "Go into the house!"

The dog went back into the house. A maid came to the gate and unlocked it.

"What a huge dog," remarked Pak Foo. "What do you call it? What breed is it? I've never seen one like it before."

"It's called *Wohng Choih*<sup>24</sup> and it's a German Shepherd Dog," Elaine Lee said. "It's normally bred as a guard dog."

"Judging by its looks," Choong Sin said, "it must be a good fighting breed. It is as big as a small brown bear and looks fierce."

"Oh yes," Elaine Lee said. "It proved its worth when it was only six months old. One day, when our maid opened our gate, it slipped out and ran to the market place where there was a pack of dogs. The leader, the best fighting dog in Kong Mui, attacked *Wohng Choih*. There was a brief but decisive fight. *Wohng Choih* seized its opponent by the neck and almost killed it when the maid managed to chain it and drag it away"

Then the German Shepherd began to bark and howl as Peter Lee appeared.

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24. *Wohng Choih*: Literally, Yellow Fortune.

"Why is your dog growling like that now?" Pak Foo asked as Peter Lee went to his horse. Elaine Lee got down to allow her brother to mount first before she got on the animal again behind him.

"He saw me taking my gun," Peter said. "Whenever I come here for a visit I always take him for a walk in the jungle and also take my gun with me. I've trained him to pick up any game I shoot and bring it back to me."

"Your gun is an air-rifle, isn't it?" Kon Fook asked. "What happens should you meet a dangerous animal like a tiger?"

"There are no tigers in our area," Peter Lee said. "Tigers usually don't harm human beings unless provoked."

"There's some truth in what you say," Pak Foo agreed. "There's a saying in Chinese that a tiger has seven points of fear of a human being whereas a human being has only three points of fear of the tiger. If at all a tiger kills and eats a human being it is said that the person is destined to die that way."

All of a sudden *Wohng Choih* wrenched free from the maid's grasp as she was closing the gate. It pushed itself through the gate and rushed out, knocking down the girl. It came to Peter's horse wagging its tail and barking happily. While Peter's horse remained quite steady, the other horses whinnied and reared up. They became very excited.

"Why not take him along with us?" Kon Fook suggested. "He won't give us any trouble but might even be a help in where we're going."

"Yes," Pak Foo said. "A strong animal like that can be useful on our journey."

"Okay, then," agreed Peter Lee. "Let me ride at the back so that it won't disturb the other horses."

"No," Mooi Kim said, "I suggest you take the lead because *Wohng Choih* can spot mining tunnels more easily. A dog has instincts we human beings don't have."

"Are we going by way of the valley and not over the hillocks?" Pak Foo asked.

"Why not?" Choong Sin asked. "We're better equipped now, aren't we?"

Everything was quiet as the party proceeded, led by Peter with *Wohng Choih* tagging alongside them. But when they began to go into the jungle, the dog became very active. It stayed at the junction where the road turned into the path leading to the 'wild rat' mine and behaved like a leader in a procession directing traffic. Inside the jungle they went in single file. *Wohng Choih* ran into the undergrowth beside the path and emerged way ahead of Peter Lee. It then looked over the surroundings, and when it was satisfied that everything was all right, it turned around and searched the bushes on the other side coming out at the back. It went around the party in circles to make sure that there was no danger anywhere. It continued in this manner until they finally stopped at Yoong Fu's old mine.

They could not see any sign of the mine from a distance because not only were all traces of the mine no longer there, even the path leading to it was now overgrown. When they went near the site they found that the side of the hill where they used to dig was covered by undergrowth. The *palong* and its pillars had been knocked down by firewood gatherers and carried away for fuel. Monkeys had destroyed whatever the wood gatherers could not remove. Everything was covered by vegetation. The ground which had seen so much human activity before had been reclaimed by nature.



## *There Was No Way Back*

THEY HEADED back towards the road. The journey was uneventful and they travelled at a slow, relaxed pace as if giving their horses some exercise. What would they do when they reached the road? Go to Kong Mui or Papan?

The wind continued to pick up and lashed the tops of the *lalang*, bending them almost to the ground. It hurried across the path picking up dust and tossing it over the grass and leaves of the trees. It also brought a heavy smell of burning. Pak Foo looked in the direction they were going, but could hardly see through the dust and smoke.

"How far did you say the fire is from the dredge?" Pak Foo asked.

"Three or four miles," Peter Lee said.

"What happens," Pak Foo asked, "if the workmen set fire to the grounds where our farms and homesteads were? It's so near the road that the fire can set the *lalang* and bushes alight. Our way back would be blocked."

"Then we won't return the way we came," Kon Fook said. "We can go to Lahat."

"What happens when we get there?" Siew Mei asked.

"We'll have to take the highway," said Kon Fook. "We have our horses and won't have to trudge on foot, however far or difficult the return journey might be."

Kon Fook sat back on his saddle and prodded his horse, urging it go up to the top of the hillock so that he could have a better view of the surroundings. The others followed him.

"If the wind is strong at the fire front," he said, "little can be done to stop the fire from spreading."

"The only way to check it from spreading to the dredge or the

settlement is to dig a fire lane," said Choong Sin, "and the lane has to be a big one."

"They were trying to control the flames and prevent it from leaping across from tree to tree," Peter Lee said, "to divert it from going to the dredge or village. They were using pumps to drench places which had caught fire. Even in private homes people were using hand-operated pumps which can throw fairly powerful jets of water."

Siew Mei hoped the people there would have access to plenty of water and there were also enough people to dig a fire lane or operate the pumps.

When they reached the top of the hillock they were horrified to see flames less than a hundred yards away in front of them. The sight was frightening. As they watched, the wind carried some sparks to a patch of *lalang* not far from where they were and set it on fire. Everybody became frightened as the force of the wind increased. It fanned the ignited spot spreading the fire. They knew that the approach road would soon be engulfed by flames and there would be no exit in that direction.

"Scared?" Siew Mei asked Mooi Kim.

"Yes," he admitted. "I am. Aren't you?"

"The question is not whether you're scared or not," Pak Foo interpolated. "It's whether we want to get out of here at all. If we do we'd better leave before the flames spread to cut off all routes of escape."

"You're right," Choong Tet cried. "Let's get out of here before it's too late."

Kon Fook hung back a little longer. He studied the terrain around them and looked at the spot where the sparks had landed and saw the flames had already spread covering a wide area. He pulled the reins of his horse to turn it in the opposite direction and make it go down the slope back to the faint path leading to Lahat. Since most of the horses belonged to him and he was the most experienced rider in the group, the others followed what he did.

Kon Fook was calm and cool under the circumstances on account of his upbringing. Whenever he was faced with a problem there were the

servants, his mother and finally his father to support him, whether to offer advice, help or with financial backing. He knew the horses could rush them out of danger and take them over the hills and cover distances which a man on foot could not.

He turned around to look. The others were behind him. They moved on for some time and then Kon Fook began to slow down. They came to a small, narrow bridge which spanned a stream with grass growing on both sides. His horse wanted to move over to the grass verge to nibble the succulent grass, but Kon Fook would not let him. He tugged at the reins and guided him towards the water and gently spurred it.

They crossed the stream without getting their feet wet as the water was quite shallow. About two hundred yards to their left, the fire had almost come to the end of the tree-line and it looked as if it would be a matter of minutes before it would work its way down to the grass. And then everything would be over. Fire in the *lalang* could spread almost as fast as a galloping horse!

As they proceeded Kon Fook paused to study the fire which had by now spread to the grass behind them in a mass of flames. He looked at the scanty underbrush ahead and knew that if they did not leave the area soon they would be cut off.

"The fire on our left has spread," Kon Fook said. "It appears to be coming towards us."

"It's not only coming in our direction," Mooi Kim agreed, "it's spreading over a wide swathe and would cut across our trail if the wind blows to our right."

Pak Foo did not say anything but dug the spur into his horse and, overtaking two other animals, came alongside Kon Fook.

"Don't you think," he said, "we should leave the valley and go along the shoulder of the hills? We don't know how bad the situation is further on."

Kon Fook took heed of the suggestion and spurred his horse to make it go up the next hillock. When he reached the summit he saw the way was still clear.

"There's no sign the fire has spread ahead," Kon Fook said. "It's only bad behind us. If the situation becomes worse, we can always trot to the right and come to the road somewhere near Lahat. The terrain in that direction might not be good but that would be our only salvation if everything else becomes hopeless."

He could see the fire was already working its way along the side of the road behind them. From the direction the wind was blowing he figured it would jump across the path they had left. So he led the group to wade through the *lalang*, working along the shoulder of the hill on to high ground.

For the first time since they left Yoong Fu's derelict mine they saw some signs of human habitation ahead. Perched on a piece of high ground on the left of the path were some domelike constructions. They were earthwork kilns with smoke coming out at the top. Behind it were the trees which covered a wide area – it was on the side of the fire. Although there was no sign of any fire here the smell of smoke was strong and the possibility of it reaching them was great.

"What are those constructions?" Kon Fook asked.

"They are charcoal<sup>25</sup> kilns," Choong Sin said. "See the stacks of chopped up logs piled high near them. They are burned inside the kilns until they become coal. The fire is then extinguished and the coal left to cool down before they are taken out."

They worked their way towards the kilns. A man came out from the trees into the open and stood there for a while. He went back into the forest reserve and when he returned, he was followed by two more men.

As they came up on the road the first man pointed towards Kong Mui. The others stopped for a moment to look down the path from where the party came.

"Did you come from there?" he asked.

"Yes," Kon Fook said. "Why are you all still here? Don't you know

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26. *Charcoal*: Charcoal is manufactured by baking wood slowly in a kiln at a moderate temperature while depriving it of oxygen.

that the jungle beyond the dredge is burning and some people had set fire to the tail end of Gunung Hijau where the trees, bushes and undergrowth were cut and dried? The fire behind your place is almost here. And so are the flames behind us. The fire practically chased us all the way here."

"We know that something's burning," another man said, "but we couldn't see the flames, only smoke."

"Aren't you leaving?" Pak Foo asked. "If you are you'd better get ready and start now."

"We're staying," the first man said. "We've to look after our property and our tools. There's a large lake nearby and we've taken whatever we can to keep there. If the whole place is engulfed by fire we'll climb on to the barge and push it to the middle of the lake."

"Why don't you come with us?" asked Siew Mei. "Property you can buy again but human lives cannot be replaced. Surely you must have families somewhere in Lahat or Menglembu where we are going."

"Thank you for your concern and kind suggestion," the third man said. "We're bachelors and nobody will worry about us if we die."

"I forgot to tell you that you've already passed Lahat," the first man said. "You'll have to get out at Menglembu, I'm afraid."

"What's wrong with Menglembu?" Choong Sin asked.

"Well," the second man said and hesitated.

"Shall I tell them?" he asked his companions, turning to look at one and then the other.

"Go ahead and tell them," the third man said. "Since they're going that way, it's better they know and be prepared should anything crop up."

"Well," said the first man, "there's a rumour that a monster snake is in the jungle towards where you're heading. It's so huge that people say its body at its largest part is bigger than a bicycle wheel and it is as long as a block of shophouses."

"It's not a snake," the second man said excitedly. "It's a serpent."

Then the story of the two dragons related by the wife of *Luhng Yih Suk* came to Pak Foo's mind, one harmless and the other vicious. The benign one they saw in the rest hut had gone up to heaven. This was

pointed out to them by *Luhng Yih Suk* and his wife related that the other ferocious one was known to roam the jungles on the other side of the broad Perak River, on the side opposite Manong!

"It's not a snake or serpent," Pak Foo exclaimed, alighting from his horse. "It must be a dragon, a savage dragon."

Kon Fook and the others remained on their mounts.

"How do you know so much about the dragon?" Kon Fook asked.

Choong Sin broke in and related the story they heard from *Luhng Yih Suk* and his wife.

"This confirms what we heard," one of the men said. "We heard that this creature roams the jungle in the Kledang Hill region, eating all animals, big or small, and has been known to eat human beings. The jungle there appears to be strangely quiet with not even birds or insects making noise. One or two people who went there disappeared and had not been heard of again."

"What are we going to do?" Siew Mei asked. She directed the question to Kon Fook whom everybody assumed to be the leader of the expedition.

They were, indeed, in a difficult situation. Their way back was cut off by fire. Escape to their right was also almost impossible because of the difficult terrain for both horses and men. Their only avenue of escape was to go forward and now even this route had become dangerous. Go with the three men and stay in the lake and wait until the fire was over and then return home? They had provisions to last them only for one good meal. They could not depend on the three men for food under the circumstances, could they?

If they were to settle on the last choice what would the people at home think? They would think they had perished in the fire. And the tumult they would create would not be confined to Papan alone but would include Tampoi where Mooi Kim's family was and Kong Mui from where Peter Lee and his sister came.



## *Was It The Carnivorous Dragon?*

THEY WERE in the middle of nowhere and had come to a region of high land – they had left the smoke and fire behind. It was already afternoon but the sun could not be seen because of the haze which had become thicker. The big dog, so energetic at the start of the journey, was tired, following them meekly and breathing heavily with its tongue hanging out.

When they entered the belt of trees the atmosphere became even more gloomy. The mist, instead of floating about, hugged the ground from which it appeared to have seeped out. Nobody talked. There was a sense of foreboding.

A drizzle had started and raindrops were lightly drumming the roof of the tree-tops. Everybody felt uneasy. Kon Fook, who was leading the party, turned back to look at what his companions were doing but he could not see beyond Pak Foo and his riding partner Mooi Kim behind him.

Peter Lee, who was in the rear and riding with his sister, stared in front of him. He could not see anything. Nonetheless, he pulled the air-rifle out of its canvas cover attached to the right of the saddle and pushed it back. He also touched the pellet pouch tied to his belt. This made him feel a little more confident as if they would give them protection in the event of an emergency.

Then they heard Siew Mei's voice, "Can you see us here?"

"Yes, I can," Elaine Lee said.

"Everything's fine?"

"We're okay."

The drizzle had become heavier and raindrops passed through the foliage, falling onto their heads and shoulders.

"What time is it?" asked Choong Sin, riding in third position with his sister.

"It's already two o'clock," replied Pak Foo who was riding with Mooi Kim in second position. He had pulled out his Roskoff watch to check the time.

"I wonder why they did not pull up and stop for lunch," Choong Sin said.

"They might be having a problem," Siew Mei said. "I'm sure everybody's hungry by now."

"They have to find a suitable place first," Mooi Kim said. "We've to cook or at least heat up our lunch before we can eat it."

"Maybe Kon Fook hasn't stopped because of the rain," said Choong Sin. "He has to look for shelter before we can stop and cook."

There was silence.

"What was that?" asked Siew Mei, breaking the silence. There was alarm in her voice.

"What?" her partner, Choong Sin, asked.

They heard *Wohng Choih's* bark which started as an angry growl. The barking continued and stopped every now and then. It was about forty feet to their left and was coming towards them.

Then they heard a slithering sound ahead of them. It was from a tree trunk which had become alive and seemed to be gliding away towards their left!

"Get out of here," shouted Kon Fook in a shrill voice as he spurred his horse down the slope in the direction of Menglembu.

"Run! Scatter! It's him, the dragon!"

Choong Sin was at that time sleepy and was yawning. He turned to look at the dark forms of the trees on the left side and was startled by a sudden thump as the ground shook. He stared with his bleary eyes just in time to catch a glimpse of a dark shape as it angled its head, moving swiftly towards them, following *Wohng Choih* which was howling and barking as it ran. The German Shepherd was heading towards the rear leading the monster to Peter Lee and Elaine.

"What's the matter with you?" Siew Mei cried out loudly. "Get out of here. Quick! Quick!"

"My God!" Peter Lee exclaimed.

"What is it?" Choong Sin asked.

He also swung his steed and followed the others who were heading towards the town. The dog, as it ran towards them, was constantly turning back and barking at the monster which was chasing it. The monster was huge, almost as big as the sampan which commuted workers to the dredge in Kong Mui and nearly as long as a block of shophouses!

"Did you see it?" Kon Fook asked his companion, as they galloped and reached the plain.

"No," Choong Tet said. "I missed it. What was it?"

"It was a dragon or some kind of pre-historic monster!"

Choong Tet felt disappointed he had missed seeing the monster or whatever it was. There was a flash of lightning which lit up the place, followed by a loud crash of thunder. The rain was coming down hard now, shaking the leaves as it seeped through the foliage and fell to the ground. It seemed to make everything come alive.

The lightning flashed again. In the brief brightness Peter Lee saw the huge head of the monster bearing down towards them as the dog ran in their direction. It was greyish in colour, its skin mottled and wrinkled like that of a full-grown crocodile. It matched with the surroundings so well that none of the boys or girls was able to see it when it was lying on the jungle floor. Some parts of its skin were covered with mildew, having been exposed to the elements for so long.

It roared as it slithered.

Kon Fook, with Choong Tet behind him, had already reached safety in the vicinity of the town. He stopped and turned to look. They could go to the police station to make a report and get help, but what could the policemen do? The monster was so huge that he doubted bullets would kill it. As a matter of fact, would the police or anybody else be brave enough to face such a huge creature? So they waited but did not get down from their horses.

Pak Foo with Mooi Kim, the second in the group, decided to go into a building to seek shelter. But this had to be of concrete and solidly built. They spotted a derelict Chinese cave temple and went into it. It was built into the rocks and had a concrete solid wall covering the large cave mouth.

Choong Sin, riding with Siew Mei, also decided to get into the building. So he steered their horse towards the gate of the barbed wired fence, squeezed through it but when they tried to get the horse through the doorway of the temple, they found it was too low.

"Get down from your horse!" Pak Foo yelled. "You and Siew Mei come in first and then the horse."

So they dismounted, allowing Siew Mei to enter first, followed by Choong Sin leading the animal by the reins.

When the four were safely inside with their horses, they looked out of the window. They saw Peter Lee and his sister galloping along followed by *Wohng Choih*. As they swept past an *attap* house, Elaine Lee turned to look and saw, looming behind them, the biggest reptile she had ever seen. It was writhing and gliding along the ground smashing down the bushes and crushing small trees in its path.

Two small boys were bathing near a well beside their *attap* house. One was about six and the other about nine. When they heard the commotion they looked up and saw, to their horror, what was happening. The older boy quickly ran into the house. The younger boy was so frightened by what he saw that he was unable to run away. The monster spotted him, swept towards him and swallowed him in one gulp!

During the respite when the monster was swallowing the boy, Peter Lee spotted the concrete structure and went towards it, but *Wohng Choih* did not follow them. It stopped to bark at the monster. After completing its meal, the monster turned towards the dog again and charged at it. *Wohng Choih* then ran and headed towards the derelict temple. Easing through the wooden gate of the barbed wire fence, it went through the narrow door and came and rested beside Peter Lee and his sister, its tongue hanging out and breathing heavily.

When the dreadful predator reached the fence it paused momentarily. It swung its head about looking for an entrance and spotted the wooden gate. Knowing that this was too small, it arched its head over the fence and started to glide over the fence. However tough the body of a monster was, its underside was always soft. So, as its belly rubbed against the barbed wire, it cut it. Feeling the pain it roared. So terrifying was the cry that it seemed not to belong to this world. It rolled over to its back and, putting its full weight to it, crushed the fence.

Elaine Lee felt so scared that her knees began to tremble. She was frightened. She cursed and felt she should not have come. She knew what the monster's attack was like. She saw how it swallowed the boy! How would one feel to be swallowed alive and go into the stomach of the monster? It must be dark inside and being surrounded by all the digestive juices and intestinal gases, was no joke!

They heard the sound of the opening in the wall cracking and crushed concrete was tumbling down. They watched and, as lightning flashed again, they saw the silhouette of the monster framed against the entrance, swaying its head about and pushing itself through the opening, breaking down more concrete and making the opening bigger. Then when it became large enough the monster pushed its head deeper into the interior and looked inside, its beady eyes moving in their sockets and the two-pronged tongue flashing and probing. They could feel its breath and see saliva dropping to the floor. It seemed to be puzzled by what it saw.

Cocking its head, the monster looked at all the people and animals inside. It seemed to take more interest in the human beings, because, perhaps human flesh was tastier than animal flesh – it has been said that man-eating tigers prefer human beings to animals once it had eaten human beings. It looked at the boys and girls huddled in one corner of the cave, roving its eyes from one to the other until they rested on Elaine and glared at her intensely.

"I can't be his first choice, can I?" Elaine mumbled softly to herself. "God, please don't let him eat me!"

"Stay where you are," Pak Foo told the frightened group when he heard Elaine mumbling. "Don't make any noise and don't move."

Suddenly the monster withdrew its head and the pack of horses inside took the chance to escape. The animals whinnied, pranced and then screamed, running out of the opening from which the monster had withdrawn its head. Siew Mei and the boys also rushed out following the animals. At that point, Elaine Lee fainted and slumped to the ground. The brother could not follow the exodus, however much he wanted to.

Those who were outside found that the monster was occupying almost the entire space between the temple and the fence now trampled down with the predator squatting on it. There was little space through which they could run. Nevertheless, the horses plunged through the narrow gap and disappeared into the jungle. The monster swung its head round and went after them. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the children went through the breach and escaped.

Peter Lee, however, had to remain with his sister. He was carrying Elaine in his arms when the monster returned. It poked its head through the breach in the wall and looked inside. When it saw Peter Lee and his sister it gave another roar. Peter Lee was so frightened that his knees knocked together. He realized he was all alone with his sister. He had his air-rifle with him. He had remembered to remove it when he alighted from his horse or else he would be deprived of even this weapon, ineffective though it was.

He pulled the lever and cocked the rifle, took out a pellet from his pouch and pushed it into the loading plug housing. Thus, having loaded his gun, he waited.

He realized he was alone, but when he saw *Wohng Choih* beside him it gave him some measure of comfort. Though a German Shepherd was enormous it was nothing compared with the monster. Why didn't it run away like the horses and the others? Perhaps it realized its master and mistress were in danger and was living up to its name as 'man's best friend', preparing to stay with them when they were in great danger - a faithful dog was prepared to die to defend somebody it loved.

He laid Elaine down in front of the opening where he had expected the monster to show its head and climbed up on a flat rock and sat down.

*Wohng Choih* was beside him. It was keeping quiet and did not bark for the first time since they entered the jungle.

Then they heard the monster crashing and pulling the concrete with its head. There were jolting impact when slabs of cement dropped on the floor as the monster's head crashed through the enlarged opening. There was another surge of falling concrete around him and then the big head of the monster showed. When it saw Elaine Lee lying on the floor, it pushed forward toward her with its jaws open and Peter Lee felt the hot breath of the predator, the saliva falling out of its mouth near him.

There was another flash of lightning. Then Peter Lee put up the barrel of his rifle near the throat of the creature and pulled the trigger. Immediately, blood came out. At that instant *Wohng Choih* sprang up and sunk its teeth on its throat. It hung on to it with its front feet claws clamped on the underside with all its might with its vice-like grip. There was a thunderous roar as the monster withdrew its head. It was shaking its head vigorously but could not shake the dog off from its throat. It was also feeling the pain caused by the pellet of the gun.

Peter Lee did not want to waste time watching what was going to happen to his dog or the monster. Gathering up his sister from the floor, he rushed out of the building. It was slow enough to run on foot without a burden but, with his sister in his arms, how far could he run before the monster recovered from the shock and came after him? After running what seemed like ages, he was totally exhausted. There was still no sign of the monster although he could still hear its roars and thrashing, devastating the surrounding jungle.

Then he saw Pak Foo holding his horse by the reins, bringing the animal to him. He was alone on the horse. What a welcome relief it was. He and his sister were going to be saved after all!



*God Killed The Monster*

*Typical family photograph taken in a studio in Papan. The child is wearing a coat with cotton buttons. (Circa 1905)*

PAK FOO was combing his hair after changing his clothes, preparing to visit some friends, when he heard voices outside his house. Looking out of the window, he saw many people walking towards the town. There were men and women, young and old, and children, all talking excitedly as they walked along. Wondering what they were so excited about he came out of his house. When he asked one of his neighbours he was told that the Kledang Hill monster had been killed.

"Don't you know?" an old woman asked. "It is being transported to Papan for the O.C.P.D. to see."

"The convoy of bullock-carts, carrying the cut up parts of the monster, is being brought to the police-station," said another old woman.

A girl's voice called, "Pak Foo, Pak Foo. Are you in?" Then Pak Foo heard the loud and familiar bark of a dog. It was *Wohng Choih's* bark all right. He was very pleased the animal had escaped and was safe. Pak Foo saw his gang coming up the slope. Then *Wohng Choih* ran forward, began whining and, as if bowing in front of Pak Foo, stretched out its two front legs and lowered its head between them.

"God has killed the wicked monster," cried Choong Tet. "The mother of the child the monster had swallowed prayed and prayed to the God of the Earth, beseeching him to summon the Thunder God to kill it."

"She fasted and took only one meal a day, consisting of vegetables and no meat," added Kon Fook. "She continued praying in front of her house on the spot her son was swallowed until her prayers were answered."

"How did it happen?" asked Pak Foo, as he patted *Wohng Choih*.

"On the seventh day," Siew Mei said, "the Thunder God appeared amidst great flashes of lightning and loud claps of thunder. It struck the monster when it was moving across a stretch of high barren ground and killed it. It came rolling down to the foot of Kledang Hill. The people had to transport the carcass here for the English police inspector to see and then carry it to Batu Gajah for the District Officer to examine."

As they left the house and went towards the police station, Pak Foo asked, "How did *Wohng Choih* come back? I thought he was killed and eaten up."

"Fortunately not," Elaine Lee said. Her brother was not with them as he had already returned to Batu Gajah. "He came back one morning, after an absence of six days and six nights. He was howling at our gate and when our maid came out she was astonished to see *Wohng Choih*. He was thin and haggard but otherwise well. He must have escaped from the monster when he was swung off from its neck."

When they arrived at the police station a crowd had already

assembled on the road outside. The convoy of bullock carts arrived about an hour later. It consisted of thirteen bullock carts, each carrying a sawn portion of the monster. The carts stretched from the temple to the market. The flesh was white like that of a large cut up fish sold in the market. The average diameter of each portion was about that of a bicycle wheel and fitted snugly into the cart which was about five feet long. The monster was about seventy feet long from the tip of its nose to the end of its tail – about the length of a block of five houses in Papan!

After the officials of the District Office in Batu Gajah examined it, the portions were dumped into the Kinta River which was then much deeper and wider than it is now. There were people rowing sampans, carrying goods and passengers to and from as far away as Telok Anson (now known as Teluk Intan) situated at the mouth of the great Perak River.

What was it? Was it a carnivorous dragon or a pre-historic monster? Nobody in Papan knew what kind of creature it was nor was there a designation of it in the official record.



## *About The Author* *Ho Thean Fook*



Ho Thean Fook started his working life as an English teacher in Khai Meng Chinese School, Sungkai in 1940 after passing the Senior Cambridge Local Examination in 1938 in the Anderson School, Ipoh. In the following year he worked as a teacher in the Primary and Standard One Classes in the Kinta School of Commerce until war broke out in Malaya.

During the Occupation he was embroiled in underground activities ending in his having to go into the jungle to join the guerillas on 7th August 1943 where he remained until the Japanese surrendered in 15th August 1945.

After Liberation, he joined the Government Service during the British Military Administration, working at first in The Kinta Sanitary Board and later with The Trade & Industry Department in Perak Secretariat. He left and joined The Hongkong & Banking Corporation, Ipoh on 19th June 1948 where he worked until he retired on 30th November 1976.

His extra-curricular activities included —

**Union:** In the early part of 1947 bank employees were members of The Perak Clerical Union. When its President, C.H. Yin, changed it to The Perak Clerical & Administrative Union to enlarge its scope of representation, a drive was made to bring more bank workers into its fold. P.C. Gomez and Ho Thean Fook were elected to spearhead the drive to bring in more bank employees to become members. Since most states already had their clerical unions they formed The Malayan Federation Clerical & Administrative Staff Union (Banking Section) to enable them to embrace

all the states of the Malay Peninsula. P.C. Gomez was elected President and Ho Thean Fook Secretary-General to represent the Banking Section, the forerunner of what is to-day The National Union of Bank Employees. They were the first representatives of the Bank Union in the executive council of the Malayan Trade Union Congress of which, later on, P.C. Gomez became President.

In 1950, the first Collective Agreement between Bank Employees and Bank Employers was signed. On the Union side C.H. Yin signed as President of M.F.C.A.U. and P.C. Gomez and Ho Thean Fook signed on behalf of the Banking Section.

When P.C. Gomez died in 1964 the National Union of Bank Employees of Ipoh was thrown into disorder. The then principle executive council members were Misses Ooi Cheng Bee (Vice-Chairman) and Choe Soh Leng (Vice-Chairman). Wong Yeap Phooi (Secretary) and Saw Soon Keat (Treasurer) summoned Ho Thean Fook to the Union and urged him to take over the helm. Subsequently, he stood for election and was voted Chairman of the State Branch (1964-1974).

He represented Perak State in the Executive Council of the MFCU (BANKING SECTION) which by then had become The National Union of Bank Employees. Subsequently, he was in practically all the executive committees formed in the Federal Capital.

**Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corporation:** Ho became Chairman of the Inter-Relations-Committee of Hongkong Bank when it was inaugurated and held the post until he retired. He was in charge of the Hongkong Bank Malayan Branches Badminton Tournament for several years and had also led the Ipoh team in many matches held in Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Malacca, Johore Bahru and Singapore.

He was Chairman of the Wayfoong Cup Commercial Houses Badminton, Kinta (1968-1974).

**Literary and Editing Work:** Ho was voted by students and readers of Southeast Asia as "best writer" in 1958 in the Malayan Student Magazine. He edited The Malayan Directory in 1955 and The Malayan Merdeka Directory in 1956 and several other commercial journals and contributed articles to

various magazines. In 1964 he wrote his first book, "Around Malaya", the proceeds of which were donated to the late P.C. Gomez Fund. Ho became a freelance journalist contributing articles to the local newspapers until recently.

**Social Activities:** From 1960 to 1968 Ho was the Secretary of the Ipoh Chinwoo Athletic Association and remained in the Executive Committee until he retired in 1972. He is a life member of the Association.

In 1963 he was Secretary of the Perak Tsen Lung Association Youth Section and in 1964 he became the Assistant Secretary of the Association until he retired in 1971. He is also a life member of the Association.



# Acknowledgements



When Dato K.K. Lim, of the Perak Academy Board of Governors, asked me to read the manuscript of *God of the Earth*, it was like a touchdown of sorts, an acknowledgement of something both rare and quite ordinary.

Because Ho Thean Fook has done something many of us talk about but never get down to actually doing. And I have such a tremendous respect for him for doing just that.

Also because Papan, for me, is very special.

Since 1976, when I discovered the town for myself, I have been visiting it regularly with friends and visitors, foreign and local. I have also been taking my English class students there, getting them to read aloud as I drove along the old road described by Sybil Kathigasu in *No Dram of Mercy*.

I am very privileged to have worked on the manuscript, and I have attempted to preserve as much as possible the integrity of the eye of the author.

In doing this, I was happily and immensely supported by :

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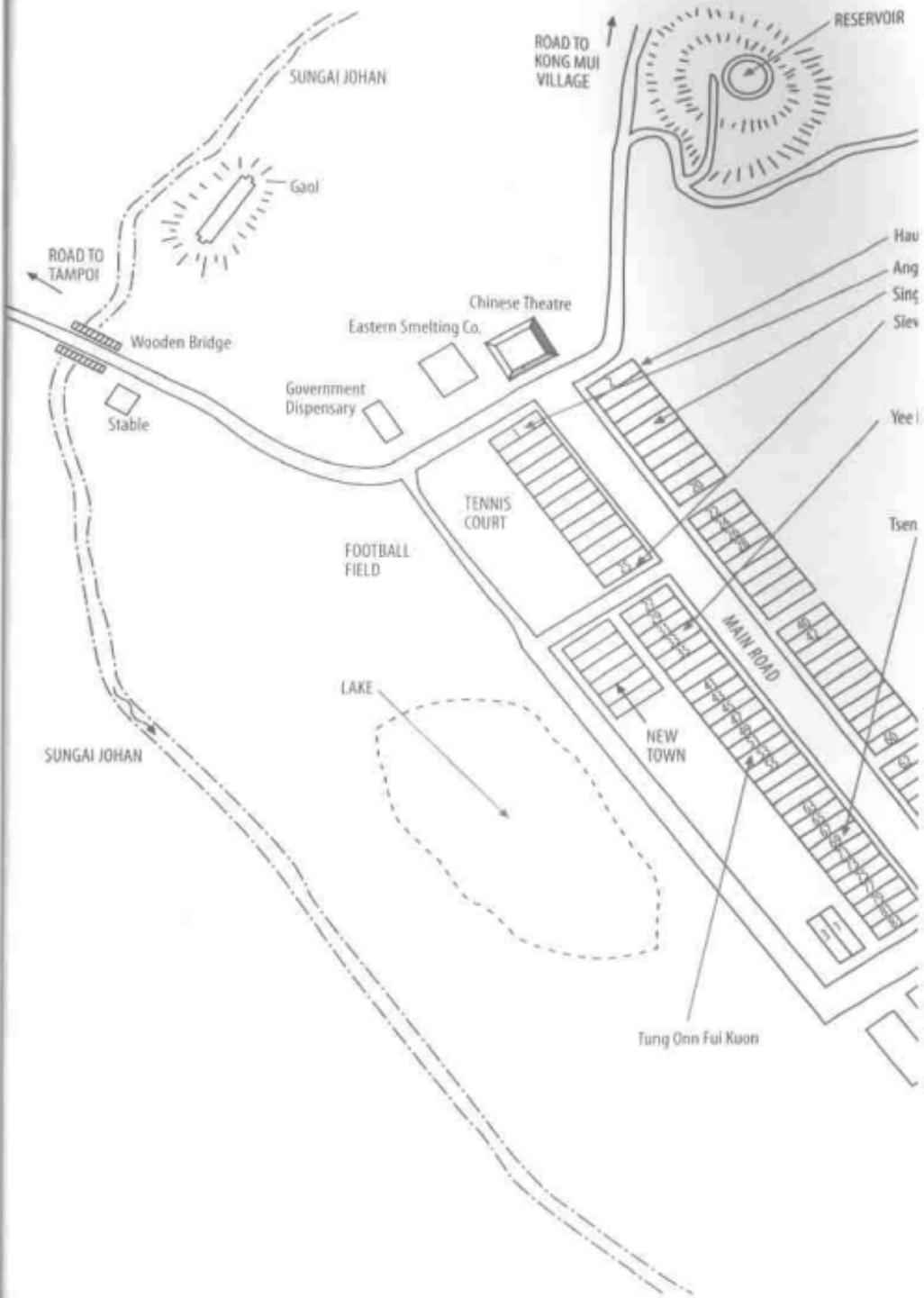
and my daughter, Chan Yuen-Li, *who was often on that old road  
with me.*

**Ong Su-ming**

*March 2003*

# PAPAN TOWN — 1900

(MAP DRAWN BY CHONG FONG LOON AND HO THEAN FOOK)





TE  
RY:

Club  
House  
se

uon

n

Pak Foo's House



Raja Bilah's House



Rumah Besar (1896)



Mandailing Mosque



Market

MANDAILING KAMPONG

Yap See Mansion



Chinese Temple

Muslim  
Burial  
Ground

Chinese  
Burial  
Ground

Post Office

Wooden  
Police  
Station

ROAD TO IPOH



