

MALACCA GOLD

Wayne Stier

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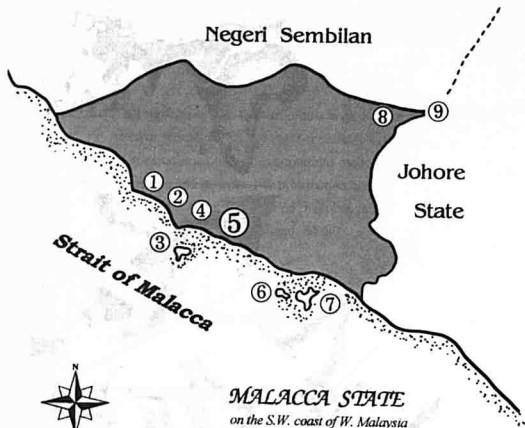
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Perpustakaan Negara
Malaysia





1. Kampong Kuala Lama Lama
2. Tanjong Kling
3. Upeh Island
4. Kelebang Beach
5. Malacca City
6. Serimbun Island
7. Besar Island
8. Asahan Rubber Plantation
Rumah Wiggins
9. Mt. Ophir (Gunung Ledang)



OLD MALACCA TOWN

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Bong Mansion
(former site of Portuguese
Stockade) | 8. First Church |
| 2. Lim Mansion | 9. Sultan's Palace |
| 3. House of Madame X | 10. St. Paul's Hill |
| 4. Temple of the Turquoise
Cloud | 11. Padang, playing field |
| 5. Li's shop | 12. Malacca Club |
| 6. Percival's office (former site
of bridge market) | 13. Bukit China and the
Rajah's Well |
| 7. Clock Tower | 14. Meng Seng Heng
Charitable Association |
| | 15. Majestic Hotel |
| | 16. City Park Dance Hall |

DEDICATION

**To the spirit of Malacca and to the people
who made manifest this spirit
with the smiles and their stories.**

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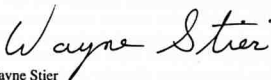
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PRIVATE PROLOGUE

A short time ago I received via e-mail from Edwin Prebble this manuscript about a beautiful, adventurous woman who says she found the gold reserves of King Solomon. Edwin has the air of an American aristocrat, the kind of guy who can honestly appear comfortable in a high collar, tie, and suit. He is graying with dignity at his temples and actually has been a model for distinguished gentlemen's apparel. Edwin was an occasional barmate of mine when we both worked in Tokyo. He was teaching at some prestigious Japanese university and editing manuscripts for a small publishing firm for the "shear" (Edwin's own pun) pleasure of it. He had vetted one of my manuscripts, always signing his copious notes "Ed, ed." I consider him rather picky about details, but he was always meticulously accurate in his information.

I found the story fascinating, so without making any judgment about its truth or fantasy, I present it to you, the reader, to decide for yourself. Enjoy!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wayne Stier". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'W' and a long, sweeping underline.

Wayne Stier

P.S. The manuscript included the following letter by way of introduction:

Komaba, Tokyo

Dear Wayne:

Was in the "Golf" of Thailand for my summer vacation and took a few days to doze off on the beach on a remote isle of idleness where I met this interesting woman...

Interesting? Gorgeous! Dazzling! A dreamer of dreams! A great teller of tales!

Before she appeared at my bungalow that evening, I had been recording some notes for a class that I plan to teach next fall. I had forgotten to switch off the tape recorder, and thus accidentally recorded part of her story till the end of that tape, then purposely continued recording the rest, with her approval. When I returned to Tokyo, I had the tapes transcribed by my secretary, Mrs. Yamamoto. I then edited the text, added some comments in italics about our actions during the time of the telling if an explanation was necessary, put in footnotes to give background information, expansions, and, of course, corrections, and noted sources at the back in the selected bibliography in case you want to look things up for yourself.

Her story certainly challenged some of my concepts about history. Yet, after considerable research, I was frankly amazed at the accuracy of some of her most outlandish assertions. Since you covered Malacca in your book, *Time Travel in the Malay Crescent*, I thought you might appreciate the tale as much as I did, especially since I noticed, on a couple of occasions, Cindy Anna (the storyteller) seemed to refer to passages in your book.

So with no further ado, I bid you adieu. I do.

Cheers,

Ed, ed.

South Thailand, Koh Sabai

Sunset. The red-gold sky was reflected on an ocean with a surface as smooth as glass. I was on the verandah of my bungalow, the last in a line. Nothing blocked my view of the ocean but a few curved trunks of coconut palms. Since I was lying in my hammock, my head at approximately a forty-five degree angle, the unlit cigarette in my mouth was consequently intersecting the horizon. Thus, when a lighter suddenly flared in front of me, I thought—for just a nano-second—that the sun had exploded. I was startled!

Cin: Need a light?¹ Said a cheerful voice. A golden plastic lighter was in the hand of a woman... long arms... blue eyes; lapis, wild, intense, like the eyes of a kid just getting off her first Ferris wheel ride or like someone who had just skied Mt. Fuji.

Mt. Fuji! Cleavage! Just below what looked like a piece of bark suspended on a string were firm upright breasts spilling over a bikini top. Short shorts, tight; long supple legs: a luscious, statuesque woman. Thirty-ish. Stunning! And, despite her considerable physical beauty over the entire curving length of her body from her toes to her long, blonde hair, my gaze was drawn like a magnet back to those powerful lapis eyes!

I was completely nonplused.

Ed: Hey! What the—? Oh! Grunts to that effect. Where did you come from?

Cin: Yeah, well... She let the silence hang like a fisherman, dangling the line.

Ed: I didn't hear you coming.

Cin: I tread lightly. A raucous laugh, anything but soft. Name's Cin.

Ed: Cin as in Cynthia, I take it, or are you the original Cin.

Cin: Cin as in "Cindy Anna from Montana."

¹ My secretary, Mrs. Yamamoto, decided to type what was said on the tape in audio-script form. For brevity, Edwin, my name, will be written 'Ed' and Cindy Anna's will be written 'Cin', both followed by a colon. My comments describing the scene have been written in italics as have foreign words in other parts of the text. Ed, ed.

Ed: Cindy Anna. Your last name wouldn't happen to be Jones, would it?
As in Cindy Anna Jones?

Cin: Would you believe me if I said yes?

Ed: No.

Cin: So, why should I answer a question like that? *There was a pause.*
And you are—

Ed: I'm Edwin, Ed Prebble. *At that moment I noticed that the sun was about to touch the horizon.* Look! You're just in time. There it goes.

Cin: There we go.

Ed: I meant the sun going down.

Cin: So did I, except that the sun isn't going down. We're on a spinning ball. Now, as we're watching the sun disappear, we are actually falling over backwards... Mind if I sit down?

Ed: Oh! I'm sorry.

Cin: No problem. *She came onto my verandah, snooped around for a minute, looked at what books I was reading and sat down on the cushioned white rattan chair beside my hammock, running her fingers through her loose angel-fine blonde hair and letting it fall back on her shoulders.*

Tooka! *The mating sound of a gecko lizard can be heard on the tape five times.*

Cin: Five times. *She had counted.* That's good luck. Do you believe in luck? *She looked toward my liquor cabinet.*

Ed: Oh. I'm sorry again. Would you like a drink or something? I'm being a horrible host.

Cin: Sure. I mean about the drink. And don't feel responsible for me. No one appointed you host. I'm the one who invited myself up here, remember? Now, as to that drink—does this *istana*, this palace of yours, happen to have what has become an exceedingly rare treat on an island such as this—a good old gin and tonic?

Ed: You're in luck. I am well stocked—as of today, as a matter of fact.

Cin: So, you believe in luck?

On the tape can be heard the clinking of bottles as drinks are being poured, the tinkle of a stir stick, palm fronds flapping in the breeze.

Ed: Your drink, Ms. Cindy Anna from Montana. *I remembered my cigarette in my hand and began fiddling for my lighter; she leaned over with hers and lit me up. Cleavage again! I'd been in Japan too long, my eyes were hungry for feminine curves!*

Her eyes catch mine, look deep into mine. I'm embarrassed at being caught a voyeur, but find myself spellbound in her eyes, floating in those lapis pools again.

Er, sorry. Do you want a cigarette?

Cin: *With a little laugh.* Would you quit apologizing? *She put her lighter on the table.* This guy I know, Presto—Capital P, Capital R—once told me that apologizing is a handy way to justify in advance what you plan on screwing up again.

Ed: Presto?

Cin: Presto Magnifico. The magician.

Ed: Oh! Of course... Never heard of him.

Cin: *Taking a sip, sighing,* Ah-h! Thanks for the drink, Mr. Ed. *Raising her glass in salute.* And here's to a great disappearing act by the master magician, the sun, *Matahari*, the Eye of the Sky, as they say in Malay. Now you see it, now you don't.

But to be totally honest with you, Mr. Edwin Prebble... Edwin? No! Can't deal with that. You're Ed. Or maybe, Win. I knew you to be at least one person on this beach likely to have a G and T available to offer me on the occasion of this sunset. I almost always develop a thirst for one at this time of day. By chance, I saw you buy the gin at the store in town today. And, since I had a vague idea where your bungalow was located, it's not entirely by chance that I ran into you just now at the exact moment when I wanted a G & T the most. Now, is that luck or not? Which is why I asked you about luck. Do you believe in miracles?

Ed: Pretty chancy.

Cin: No, seriously. What do you make of coincidence? Serendipity? Take now, for example. Here we are, you and I, in the middle of the Gulf of

Thailand, looking at this mostly liquid world spin the illusion that the sun has gone into the sea at this particular moment of this particular millennium. I mean, what would be the probability of this all happening while being witnessed by the two of us who just met? And yet, here we are side by side, our souls passing each other like planets, like comets in orbit.

You're from—? *I found out as we were speaking that she had a habit of switching subjects on me abruptly like this.*

Ed: From? Er—Tokyo. Boston. I, I—

Cin: *Laughing.* Yeah. I know how you feel. I'm from Montana, sort of, by way of everywhere else, it seems. Make it simple; I'm from my mother, but I was raised by my granny. But back to the bouncing ball, the thought I was following. What do you think are the chances of our meeting here on this beach? Here, today? Tonight? At this time when it's neither day nor night, when the spirits have their greatest might?

Considering all the other places you might have been, all the other choices you might have made, all those turns in the road, missed buses, spontaneous decisions....

Ed: I had most of my travel arrangements done by an excellent agent, a friend of mine in Yokohama, who told me about this place.

Cin: Exactly what I'm talking about. The random chance that you would have an agent who clues you into this obscure spot on the planet so that you can live out your fantasies about paradise and, meanwhile, here am I also, coming by an entirely different route. Is it merely by chance? When the odds against something happening are astronomical, the event becomes staggeringly momentous. "It's extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary," as my dear friend Planter Percival Wiggins would say, may he rest in peace—if he's dead, that is.

Ed: And what happened to dear old Planter What's-it Wiggins?

Cin: Old? Well, I guess he must have been if all he claimed to have done was true. I only wish I knew what happened to him. That's a long story. He was either poisoned in his pavilion by Mr. Pumpkin or died of a heart attack in his boudoir with Miss Peach, or perhaps he didn't die at all. I haven't a clue.

He drank too many cordials and was fairly naughty for a man his age, although what his age was I wouldn't have come close to guessing if I hadn't heard his stories. He was a lot like the town of Malacca where he lived, having reached a certain age of dignity, he seemed to have chosen to remain unchanged, a bastion against the onslaught of time. He looked like a man in his mid-fifties, yet I believe he was over seventy when he... *A frown of concern shadowed her face; I could see the subject was bothering her.*

Ed: I'm sorry. *Then, remembering she didn't like apologies, I continued.* Oh! Sorry. I mean, well, it must be okay to be sorry for someone who has died, isn't it?

Cin: Only if you know him. And it might help if you know for certain he's dead.

Ed: *Confused, I pulled out another cigarette although I still had one burning in the ashtray. Again she was ready with her lighter.* I'm sorry— Seems I have a habit of apologizing. Did you say whether you would like a cigarette?

Cin: I don't smoke. Gave the darn things up when I was riding on the tanker. Natural gas. Smoking somehow didn't seem like such a good idea at the time.

Ed: What were you doing on a tanker?

Cin: Ha! I thought I was getting myself out of trouble.

Ed: Why? Were you in trouble?

Cin: Listen. I don't really mind telling you my life story, I'd actually like to, but three things. One, you got time? This could take a while because there are really many stories that come together. Two, I won't be surprised if you don't believe what I tell you, so you don't even have to pretend. I lived through it all, and sometimes, to tell you the truth, I don't quite believe it really happened.

Ed: Okay, it's a deal. I got the time. I'll cancel all appointments for the evening—not that I had any, mind you. And I'll suspend my suspension of disbelief until otherwise required. What's number three?

Cin: Unlimited refills. *This she says while holding up her half-empty*

glass and smiling. I'll help myself.

Ed: Done. Let's have it. **THE LIFE STORY OF CINDY ANNA FROM MONTANA.**



Twilight in the tropics is followed quickly by darkness, a time when the insane violining of insects begins as if on cue. They chose this precise moment to tune up for their nightly concert, thus adding an aura of magic to the beginning of her tale.

Cin: Starting when?

Ed: You were trying to get yourself out of trouble.

Cin: That's what I mean. Starting when? Okay. Let's see if we can find a beginning. I guess it was when my ex-husband walks into the room and tells me he has fallen in love with another woman half his age, the idiot—both of them. He was having a cliché, by-the-book mid-life identity crisis and my wrinkles weren't helping his self-image, his self-imagination. He said he was sorry.

I lasted seven years with him—Mr. Right, the architect. Seven years! That's a long time. And they said it wouldn't last. Ha! Nobody told me that when you marry Mr. Right, you don't become Mrs. Right. You become Mrs. Always Wrong!

It was a damn soap opera. We split the estate. He got the house, the car and the cat. I got the cash.

Ed: And you parted amicably?

Cin: Humph! Hell, no! At first I was hurt. It took me a while to see the whole sickening episode as an opportunity instead of a tragedy. Up until that moment, I had been living the script I'd been handed, the one that said for me to be good little Cindy Anna, not like my mother, who'd got herself "preggers," as Granny would say, by a no-good drifter. Besides holding down a job teaching English lit. at the community college, I had been doing the "right" things, decorating the home, cooking the balanced meals,

cleaning the toilet, smiling at the same old jokes he'd tell at parties—things a good wife does. For what?

Amicably? Not quite. How could I respect a man who would trade me in on a newer model, his new trophy wife?

Amicably? Maybe by now, but it's more like benign indifference, but even that has taken time. I don't respect him, but I do thank him. In that one moment, I was transformed from a woman with wifely purpose to, well, I didn't really know what the... what I wanted to invent myself into. Granny described me at this time as having my back wheels on ice and my gas pedal to the floor. All I knew was that I didn't want any more soap operas in my life. So, I traded them in for high adventure. *She broke into that wide open laugh again, a laugh that would be at home on the rolling plains of Montana.*

I decided to try my luck, and I found out, all in all, my luck is pretty good... even if I did happen to lose a hundred tons of gold. *She burst out laughing.*

Ed: A—hundred—tons—of gold? And you lost it?

Cin: *Her laughter, pouring out, hits a quick crescendo; her private joke subsides, and she continues.* Do you think that disqualifies my luck? You're just being picky!

Ed: A hundred tons of gold? You said I didn't have to believe you. *Laughing.* Go on.

Cin: Yeah! Gold! King Solomon's gold! But now, I'm jumping way ahead in the story. Let's see, I was just getting a divorce and trying to decide what I should do with my little broken nest egg. I had my "fair" share of a lucrative, albeit failed marriage partnership. We were *dincs*: double income, no clue. I decided the kindest thing for me to do would be to take myself as far away from him as I could. So I flew to Europe and hung around here and there for a while.

It was in Munich that I ran across this crazy busker in the park. This guy would do almost anything to avoid holding down a real job. I knew him mostly as Presto, the Magnifico, but when I first saw him, he called himself Rosco, the Rasta fire-eater. This guy lived right on the line. At that time, he sported classic dreadlocks, a bedraggled beard and moustache, hair all over

his face. It added excitement to his sidewalk fire-eating act, he told me later. It sure did!

I think he must have taken a deep toke of hashish right before he began his act that day I first saw him, because as he stood there dramatically poised, gasoline ready to spit onto his ignited torch, the tickle in his throat caused him to burst into a fit of coughing, spraying gasoline all over his beard and dreads, and WHOOSH! He was glowing like a Christian at Nero's party.

Ed: Roasted Rasta.

Cin: Real impressive! At first we, the on-lookers, thought it was part of the act. "O-o-oh! Wow! Spectacular! Vunderbar!" The crowd was captivated; we were all applauding and cheering... until we got a whiff of burning hair! Ugh!

The pseudo-Jamaican fireball, meanwhile, was hopping around, slapping his flaming head and running for the park fountain. Splash! Sizzle! "A-ah!"

I saw him again about a week after he got out of the hospital, bald as a berry but back on the street busking with a new act. He had covered his face, freckles, and sores with white grease-paint and drawn tears on the cheeks of his harlequin face. He advertised himself now as FResco, Capital F, Capital R... the human statue.

"Guess it was the universe's way of telling me to move on," Rosco/FResco told me. "Don't need to let it get you down. You gotta take what comes. Find the attitude that best handles the situation." He always got philosophical when he was hurting.

FResco enjoyed his new line as a motionless mime; it suited his nature to be paid for doing as little as possible. "But it wasn't easy," he told me. "Takes a lot of concentration to stand still. I never realized how much we use speed to help keep our balance. I think that's why so many people are afraid to slow down—afraid of crashing. It takes guts to do nothing."

He was surprised at how much he could learn about a person from only their touch. Some were gentle, loving; others, cruel. Some came totally from their minds, some from their hearts, and others came from lower down; he could tell when they tried to grab his genitals.

"It's like you get absorbed right into their soul merely from their touch,

provided you aren't putting up defenses and pushing back. You ought to try it," he urged me.

So I did, and, you know, he's right. It took all my concentration just to keep my defenses down so my body wouldn't react reflexively when someone, say, pretended to punch me in the face. You get to know a lot about people. It's frightening.

One day, he handed me a new card; it reads, 'PResto THE MAGNIFICO.' Seems he had gotten into a game of snooker and won the gear for a magic act, including all the props and animals, with an old, worn-down VW van thrown in.

"Maybe," I suggested after checking out the van, "the guy wanted to lose it to you."

"Maybe," admitted PResto, "but the fact is, I still won. I've always wanted to be a magician." He wasn't your test-the-water type of guy. He dove in face first, mouth open, quenching his thirst at the same time. PResto's act would include working with highly poisonous spiders, venomous snakes, and lethal scorpions.

Ed: But why the name PResto?

Cin: I asked him. He said, "Saves money. Don't need to print new name cards. Just alter a few letters." (This also explained the name FResco, coming as it did, from Rosco. Rosco/FResco/PResto.)

"Okay," I told him, "a magician I can understand. But why work with poisonous snakes and rare African scorpions? Hell's bells!"

"If you want excitement," he explains, "sometimes you got to wait like a surfer for the big wave, and when it comes, you got to take it 'cause it's the best ride. Life without risk isn't worth diddly."

Then he asked me if I wanted to join his act. I could be the vampire lady that he saws in half. How could I resist an offer like that? The truth is the guy would make a terrific salesman if he ever wanted to go to work. Ha! Fat chance! I viewed his offer as a free ride in a van down to Spain. He was heading for El Puig, a beach resort town on the Costa Brava. I agreed to go along with him only after he convinced me that the sawing was all a mirage and that all the venomous vermin were safely locked away in firmly-closed and securely-latched drawers and cabinets in the van. He always drugged

them before a performance, he told me. I wasn't surprised.

"Incidentally," he asked me on the trip southward, "would you like to expand your routine for the show by becoming the snake-lady vamp? You'd look great in snakeskin." He challenged me to allow a doped-up cobra to slither all over my body, my bare shoulders and stomach and down my o-o-oh! Gives me goose bumps just thinking of it. I can't believe I did that! That guy, PResto, he could sell sand to sand fleas.

We parked the van near the beach where we camped out and performed on the pavement for the sunburned sybarites whenever there was a likely chance of a paying audience. One night, PResto and I were off on our separate ways—he with a Flamenco dancer he'd met at a cockroach-stomping contest, and I with a lifeguard who gave me a sensational massage and will, I'm sure, make a great toreador someday, especially if they ever need someone to fling the bull, but that's another story.

The next morning, my life changed. It seems some punks had broken into PResto's van. When they saw what was in the drawers, namely, the highly poisonous scorpions, they panicked, and three of those darlings, "deadly African scorpions, officer.... Yes, that's what I said, sir, escaped, sir. They probably got out onto the beach, officer, sir. They like sand.... Yes. Highly poisonous, sir."

Needless to say, the police, the hotel owners, the mayor, the shop owners—all were less than happy with this situation and, by extension, with PResto or me. I mean, I can see it their way. Tourism is their major source of income; busy season is just coming on. Things are beginning to look promising after a long period without much money coming in, then, into town drives Mr. PResto Magnifico and his Vampire Snake Lady, and now, they have to cordon off the beach, barring access to thousands of tourists. Paying tourists! On top of that, to be safe, the town council had to shell out big money to fly in some vials of rare scorpion poison anecdote...

Ed: Don't you mean antidote?

Cin: Oh yeah. I always get those two words mixed up. Once when a teacher asked me why I always had something to say, I told him my aim in life was to have an antidote for each situation. And he said, "I think you mean anecdote, but in your case antidote might be more appropriate." Again her ready laugh.

Anyway, they had to have the antidote sent up by some larcenous witch-doctor from the middle of the Sahara.

We all went on a very thorough and thoroughly careful search of the sand, and good news: we found two of the escaped scorpions. The bad news was that the third one was "Er—she's pregnant, sir....Potentially, thousands, sir....Any time now."

So when I saw a group of angry-looking townsmen that had formed after a hasty gathering down the way come charging up the beach toward where PResto and I were standing, I decided it was a good time to take PResto's advice and look at the situation from a different angle. I told him, "Sorry"—see what I mean about sorry?—and plunged into the surf, T-shirt, jeans, money belt and all, with PResto shouting after me: "Don't do this to me! I'll be waiting for you when you get out of the water! Traitor!" Then, at the last second, he turned, pointed at the feet of his attackers who were just about on top of him and shouted, "Look out for that scorpion!"



I swam far out, stretching myself to the limit, challenging myself to reach a distant buoy that was barely within my range and, for a while, making my life definitely worth diddly. There I hung, panting, wondering how the heck I was going to get back to shore, when a small sailboat eased by in the breeze. As a desperate joke, I put out my thumb as if to hitch a ride. To my surprise, the skipper managed to maneuver his craft over to pick me up.

Hans turned out to be a well-built blond from Holland, tattoos of dragons and anchors on his arms. A sturdy man. He was enjoying the last of his holiday before returning to his job in Lisbon as first mate on an old tanker, the Asian Princess, bound for Tokyo.

"Great idea," I told him sarcastically as we cruised the harbor. "Get a good look at the sea before you start your voyage aboard a ship. You're like a door-to-door postman who goes for a walk after work." He had a good chuckle at himself. He had to admit it: he loved the sea. And I liked him

immediately for this.

After a few drinks and an evening together, we decided, well, I guess he decided, with the help of my hinting and flirting, to invite me aboard as his guest on the passage east via the Suez and Singapore.

Oh, look at you, Ed. You're turning red. YES is the answer to the question you are too polite to ask. I slept with the man that first night, but only because there was only one bed in his hotel room—I couldn't very well go back to the van, could I?—and not before I had drugged him a little so that he fell asleep and was only dreaming.

Ed: You drugged him? What, with the stuff you used on the snake?

Cin: That might have worked, never thought of it, really. No, I used the stuff my doctor prescribed for me when I was going through the throes of post-parting depression, stuff called Rohypnol or something. It hasn't been approved in the U.S. yet, but that doesn't stop my personal country doc from handing out samples for special cases. He told me he gives it to some women living out on the lonely, rolling ranches of Montana to slip to their hubbies when they come home drunk and mean. The wife sprinkles a little of the stuff on the mashed potatoes, and she feeds him several helpings, serves him a few more beers, too. The more he drinks, the more effective the drug is. In the morning, he thinks he drank himself to sleep.

Next morning Hans sheepishly alluded to the night before, wanted to know what happened. I told him not to worry. Nothing had happened because I had slipped him a Mickey.

Ed: You told him?

Cin: Of course.

Ed: Why?

Cin: Because he asked me, rubbing his head like he had been kicked. I told him because I didn't want to start out our relationship under false assumptions, and also because it was the truth. And the truth is the one direction for which most people have no defenses built up, because it's the last place they expect anyone to be coming from.

He had been drinking, I explained, and I have a policy never to go to bed with a drinking man. My daddy was a drinking man.

Ed: Oh? Isn't that a double standard? You drink.

Cin: It's different. We women got home-court advantage. Besides, you got to consider that men lose their potency with alcohol. I told Hans, if he and I were ever going to get it on—and I made no promises—I would naturally want him at his best. I'm into quality.

He took it well and, I got to hand it to him, he didn't renege on his offer of the voyage. He was a good man, Hans. Had trouble with his wife. Separation. Maybe a divorce. I don't know. He didn't say. He was trying to get back his baby girl from her. Showed me photos. Ugly kid.

That man taught me all about the stars. Why bother, I asked him. He told me to think it through. If I wanted to know where I was in a city, I needed a map. If I wanted to know where I was on the planet, the stars were my map to the world. By observing familiar stars you can know how far north you are. Stars can tell you the time of year, and knowing that, the time of night.

He showed me the constellation of Leo. That's my sign. What's yours?

Ed: Mine? I'm Taurus.

Cin: Do you believe in that stuff?

Ed: No.

Cin: Neither did I. Now, I'm not so sure. Anyway, I'm proud to be a Leo, being born under that particular group of stars. They're beautiful, shaped like the outline of a lion with his head held high, exactly like an outline of the Sphinx. And after I stared at it awhile and added a few more stars, it would transform itself into a stallion, prancing across the deep sky, the gently rolling sky above and all around us as we lay beside each other on the deck, Hans and I.

It's the only way to do it. If you stand up, you get a kink in your neck, because watching stars takes time. It was wonderful learning about the stars up there on Monkey's Island, that's the top deck, way in the back of the tanker. It was wonderful learning the stars from Hans.

Another constellation I like is the curving "S" line connecting the stars of Scorpio, its tail coiled. Each night I saw it, I spent a silent moment wondering if they ever found the mother-to-be scorpion on the beach and how PResto was doing. Hans told me the Egyptians called the Scorpio constellation the three-headed snake in their astrology.

Hans also showed me the Beehive, a cloud of light in Cancer that disappears when you stare straight at it, but once you look back at the proud nose of Leo, the dim glow of a million distant stars reappears like magic at the outer edge of your vision.

Hans and I played games with the airplane lights overhead, betting which stars they would intersect in their course across the sky. At first, I would miss by whole constellations because I would forget that the sky is round as we look at it from our round earth. Strange. I wonder why?

Ed: Perhaps it's because the universe is actually round, all expanding outward from the initial Big Bang into the void.

Cin: Yeah! Wow! I can see it. Can you? Imagine riding out there on the farthest edge of the outermost star, past all galaxies and birthing nebulae, staring hard trying to see into the darkness. Where's my torch? What's out there?



I sailed with Hans and the rest of the crew on the Asian Princess across the Mediterranean. We anchored for a couple of weeks in Port Said. I took this opportunity to go to Cairo and visit the pyramids of Giza, and then went up the Nile to Luxor, Karnak, Aswan, and finally, all the way upriver south to the border, to Abu Simbel, the Temple of Dawn.² I flew because it was the only way to reach this old, old temple. But I couldn't stand being tended to like a sheep in a flock by the bored tour guide, "On your left you will notice the cartouche of Queen Necrophilia... Turn right and you will see..." So many facts, but I wasn't getting any feeling from the place, despite its antiquity. Though dwarfed by the awesome proportions of hewn stone, I was left numb.

So when the tour group was herded back into the bus, I told the guide to go on without me. "But it's five miles across burning desert to the airport," he warned me. I was stubborn; I would find a way. The guide threw his

2 Abu Simbel was built during the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II, 1304-1237 B.C.E. Ed, ed.

hands up in disgust and left.

Then I was alone among those ruins, except for some gawking Arabs in flowing galabias who sat beneath the only shade tree within two thousand miles. The doors to the temple interior were locked after the tour left, so I roamed outside among the ancient carved stone: four colossal figures of the mighty pharaoh, Ramses II, sitting in a row and flanking both sides of the entrance to the sacred chamber. One of the gigantic heads had broken off and was now lying on the ground at his feet.

Alone, I began to get a feel for the history of the temple. What an amazing feat of astronomy and engineering! I could picture the pomp and pageantry of the ceremony held at dawn on the longest day of each year so many millennia ago, when the first ray of the rising sun stabbed like a sword into the center of a certain sanctified rock deep in the cavern carved out of a limestone mountain. What Freud could do with that image! Whew!

I also began feeling the heat of the midday sun pounding down on the back of my neck. I decided to take refuge in the shade. While there, to pass the time, I began a letter to Granny, writing, "I am sitting here in the shade..."

For some reason I stopped at this point and looked around. I had an idea. I got up, moved five steps to another shade, sat down once more and continued my letter, "...the shade of the fallen head of Ramses II. A few seconds ago, I had been sitting in just an ordinary shadow, but by moving five steps, my words and my reality have suddenly taken on a larger significance: here in the shelter of this particular shade, I have somehow hooked into many millennia of history. I connect with a symbol of pride and absolute power. I see it all now in crumbled ruins, having been humbled by time, mighty power worn down into the sand by the storms of time. Shades of *Ozymandias*.³ I had become part of all this just by taking those five steps.

"I am reminded," I wrote on, "how easily life passes and, therefore, what a great and precious treasure is this moment. It dawned on me, there at the Temple of Dawn, that the journey I had just taken with those few steps was,

3 *Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), a poem expressing the futility of overweening ambition written during the English Romantic Period. Ed. ed.

in fact, a long one from merely an ordinary forgettable place in the shade to a moment charged with poignancy. It was a walk toward the poetic; I was romancing my life. Could I choose to make this kind of move often.? *She paused to drink her glass dry, and stood to get a refill.*

After I got back on the tanker...

Ed: Wait! How did you get back to the airport across the desert?

Cin: Oh! I walked. Actually, I had walked only about two miles when the military police picked me up and took me to their camp— lucky for me; I don't think I would have made it. They asked me questions, offered me water, played a few games of backgammon with me, shouting, "Finkished," meaning finished just before beating me game after game. Talk about police brutality!

And then, after checking their watches frequently, they gave me a ride to the airport just in time for my plane. I was lucky, I'd never have made it in time without them. I guess the security men were afraid that an attack by militant extremists on a woman traveling alone would cause an international incident.



Anyway, back on the tanker, we sliced a path through the waters of the Suez, down the Red Sea, with the wind steady at our back, and across the vast Indian Ocean, leaving a wake—a scar healing itself behind us. Occasionally, when he had been drinking, Hans would forget himself and have too many hands for his lady friend's comfort. I found a solution for these unwanted advances one night when I went to light a cigarette, and his eyes bulged with fear.

"Not exactly with fear," he insisted. "I'm just aware of what could happen on board this ship full of natural gas if the lighter was used in the wrong place, and, if you don't mind, I would prefer that it didn't happen."

So I knew from then on, all I had to do if he was becoming All-Hands Hans was to take the lighter out of my pocket, and he would grow pale. It was Pavlovian.

Ed: What if the tanker had exploded?

Cin: The effect would have been epic. Would've been a hell of a way to go—not with a whimper but with a major bang.⁴ When I told him I was ready, right then and there, for a ride on the back of the Brahman bull straight out of the red eye of God, Hans softened out of his cowboy mood. It helps sometimes to have come from Montana. You learn how to bluff.

Most of the time, though, Hans and I got along great. He set up a lounge chair back on Monkey's Island, that's the most private place you can be on a tanker, high above everyone else, perfect for nude sunbathing. I'd watch the clouds, the gulls following us or diving; I saw a pair of dolphins swimming alongside the ship for hours, and flying fish scattering from the prow of the boat far ahead, reminding me of chickens running from a tractor down a farm road.

When you're out in the middle of the ocean, no one could convince you the world is flat. You're on the top of a hill, every direction you cast your eyes is downward over a vast expanse of ever-changing color and texture, over the liquid skin of Mother Earth.

Monkey's Island is a good place to read, too, if you can stay awake. There is something about that constant jerr-jerr, jerr-jerr of the engine vibrating beneath you and the subtle rolling of the world back and forth, back and forth, that lulls you to sleep. I got burnt badly once, drifted off in the sun. Couldn't sit for days.

That was about my only problem. Life is simple on board ship. Just tie your clothes to a rope and throw it behind the—let's see, I had a way of remembering these terms. That's the stern because you're looking backwards into your wake and feeling nostalgic and sad and that's why you're stern. So you go Right to the port because there isn't any Left at starboard. Or do you go Right for the starboard because there isn't any port Left. I figured out a way to remember this, but now I can't remember my memory device.

Before I shipped on that tanker, I didn't know the brig from a bridge or the poop deck from the loo. I called my granny back in Montana before I

4 T.S. (Thomas Stearns) Eliot (1888-1965) *The Waste Land*, misquoted. It should read: "Not with a bang but with a whimper." Ed, ed.

got on board and told her of my travel plans. Granny is the one who took care of me when I was growing up, helped out like a parent. My dad had run off, and my mom died young. Granny pitched in and did what she could. Couldn't smooth out some of my edges, though, but she tried her best.

So here's this old lady on the phone with me, never seen the ocean in her life. She's silent for a few seconds after I tell her my plans for a voyage, hanging on the telephone line from halfway across the world while she's thinking, and then she says, "I don't know much about the sea, Cindy Anna; but if I were you, I wouldn't worry too much about the roof, but I'd take **real** good care of the floor."

Ed: She is a wise woman.

Cin: Was, and she was indeed wise. Anyway, that was the extent of my maritime training when I went off to sea.

Ed: And about the clothes on the rope?

Cin: Oh, yeah. After three hours dragging behind you, churning in the wake, they'd be clean... unless, of course, you run into a clump of oil left by some other tanker. You know, except for some moral qualms on a purely ecological basis, all selfish things considered, I wouldn't mind taking another trip on a tanker, a shorter trip perhaps, and I'd try to stay on board next time until we reached port. And I'd stay out of pirate waters.

Ed: Pirates? Are you joking? In this day and age? Pirates?

Cin: You better believe pirates, honest-to-Lucifer, walk-the-plank, scarf-on-head, knife-in-teeth pirates. The Strait of Malacca is swarming with them, a virulent breed of swashbuckling social parasites lurking around any one of thousands of little islands that dot that narrow waterway. They disguise themselves as fishermen, waiting for a chance to rob their selected prey, any one of the two thousand or so vessels that thread their way cautiously through that long narrow lane every day.⁵

⁵ To be perfectly accurate, the Strait of Malacca is 4.6 km. at its narrowest and only twenty meters deep at its shallowest. It is about 600 kilometers from the northwest entrance, marked by an imaginary line drawn from Aceh in northern Sumatra across to Phuket Island, to the southeast entrance, marked by Singapore. Malacca is situated near one of the narrowest points. Ed, ed.

The chances for a major catastrophe are immense, especially when these cowboy pirates board the ship, tie up everyone with ropes and, after taking what they can easily carry off, they escape over the sides, leaving the ship and its crew to their eventual doom.

They usually work on moonless nights. They spot some likely prey, drop their fishing-boat disguise and rev up their five high-powered outboard motors. Catching up with a lumbering ship with ease, they grapple aboard just like pirates of yore.

These guys are usually members of martial arts sects, disciplined like ninja. They prefer to attack tankers, especially natural gas tankers, because no one would dare to use a gun to defend himself—an explosion would send everyone to eternity. Few sailors are a match for these daring, reckless men, skilled in knife fighting.

One group in Indonesia is said to be a secret branch of a quasi-military unit called the Red Berets. For their graduation exam, they must whip their knife out of its sheath, throw it in the air, spin and kick it so that it lodges, thoinng-oinng-ing-ng! into a tree ten miles away. Okay, so that's an exaggeration. Maybe it's only one mile away! The point is, these dudes are very good with their knives.

Ed: So the tanker is defenseless?

Cin: Not exactly. There's always the water hoses, huge pythons of hoses with about a thousand pounds of pressure surging through them. It takes two strong men or three normal AB's, that's an able-bodied seaman, to handle a hose at full pressure. Once that stream hits a pirate, he's history. The force of a hose will wash a man overboard, and there is slim chance of anybody finding him and picking him up on a dark night.

"You go over, you're gone," Hans told me. Succinct.

We were nearing the southern end of the Strait of Malacca. It was late at night, which didn't mean anything to me one way or the other because I had spent the last two weeks sleeping day and/or night, mesmerized by the purr of the ship constantly pulsating through my whole being. I was at the stern, tying the legs of my blue jeans onto the rope, ready to do some midnight laundry, when I noticed a scarf-clad, bearded head pop up over the side of the ship where he shouldn't have been, and slipping under the

railings onto the deck.

Before I could holler, the ship's alarm starts screaming all hell's bells. Every man in the crew jumps up and runs to his assigned station.

I forgot what Hans told me I was to do in a situation like this. I just reacted by instinct. I jumped up and threw some karate kicks, foot jabs to the chin of the invader. Then I spun around in the air with a double kick to the abdomen. *She laughed at the serious look on my face.*

No, I didn't. Too many *kung fu* movies at the Lucky Theater in Malacca. That stuff can get to you after a while. The truth is I didn't go anywhere near the pirates. I'm not crazy! I ran in the other direction.

The crew worked quickly and efficiently, and, in a minute, the battle had been staged, waged, and won by the good guys. Most of the pirates had been blown overboard by the water hose. It's a rough game they play, one where it hurts bad to lose.

I went to join Hans and another AB, who was leaning against the railing, hose still in hand. We celebrated our victory by retelling each other what had just happened, casting ourselves in the lead role, of course. I relaxed, sitting astride the railing, a cowgirl on the fence.

I think Hans or the other guy was saying something Freudian about the hose when the alarm unexpectedly went off again. A pirate who had been hiding under some pipes not far away appeared, knife in hand, as if out of nowhere. The AB at the faucet wheel panicked and gave it a frantic spin, twisting on the water full blast.

Hans and the other mate, with quick reflexes, caught the hose before it got away from them, but not before it knocked me off-balance—teetering, frozen in a motionless moment, just out of reach of outstretched hands. When it became apparent I was going over, I tried desperately to grab for anything that would help and came away with my arm between the legs of my blue jeans. At the last second, I kicked myself clear from the side of the ship and began the longest fall into blackness I ever experienced, even in a bad dream—falling, falling, all the time trying to wake up and find out this is only a bad dream, when I hit the water. Umph! Then total blackness. I must have been knocked unconscious.

Fortunately, the legs of the jeans, both tied to a rope, had somehow slipped over my shoulder, the crotch forming a sling under my arms. I was being dragged along the surface in the very rough white water wake of the ship. The cold water splashing in my face brought me back to consciousness, coughing like a three-pack-a-day smoker.

The next thing I know, I'm being pulled out of the water by a strong arm, pulled on board a small fishing boat and laid down uncomfortably on top of some ropes.

"Aaa, lah!⁶ Aziz. Better we just throw it back in, huh? It's a Mat Salleh."⁷ In the soft light pouring from the boat cabin, my eyes slowly focused on a deep chocolate face with black, curly hair obviously cut by a malicious barber, a pendulous pelican nose resting on a mustache nest, and a bright, broad grin looking all the more like a piano keyboard because of the numerous dark spots where teeth were missing. A stainless steel cross hung at the neck of the stranger. His voice glided into falsetto from excitement. "I know you hurt, miss? But are you okay, lah?"

I groaned a "yes" meaning: "Yes. I hurt all over," which meant "Yes, I will probably live."

"I saw you splashing along there at the end of that rope," his hands flying in imitation, "and I figured you are either a very bad water skier or you need help." He pealed off a laugh, a vaudeville rim shot after a joke, rat-a-tat, cymbal crash. "I guess, either way, you needed help."

"Hello. I'm Alfonso Fernandes. And you are one lucky lady," he continued when he realized I hadn't yet recovered my speech. "I even saved your jeans for you." He held out my old jeans to show me, and I grabbed them out of his hands and hugged them, overjoyed at being reunited with them. I laughed, ecstatic to have survived along with my

6 "Lah" is a local expression used for emphasis or to show excitement or to soften an imperative verb. Ed, ed.

7 Mat Salleh is slang for "white man," said to be a derivation in the local pronunciation of the English phrase "Mad Sailor." Ed, ed.

adored jeans, happy to know there was some part of my past that still had not been washed away in the indifferent wake of time, and I burst out crying as I was laughing.

Alfonso left me, the look on his face saying that he thought I might appreciate some privacy while I made a fool out of myself with my hysteria. He said he was looking for a light. He had already started talking to me when he got back within earshot.

"... one lucky lady, lah! Good thing I just happened to be cruising in the area when I heard the siren of your tanker go off. I figure pirates, right off. That's all we need is a tanker to collide with something right off our coast. Aaa...lah!

"So, I think: this would be a good time for Alfonso Fernandes to follow, just in case they leave everyone on board tied up. Then, I see the hose spray and saw some bodies flying over and disappearing in the dark water, and then you come flying off the stern, trailing your dirty laundry, and go bouncing along the waves"—again his hands start fluttering like butterflies who'd had too much coffee—"putting up such a splash, we couldn't lose you. I don't believe it, but I seen it on my own eyes. Lucky!"

Then suddenly he looks me straight in the eye, "You got a light?"

Instinctively, I reached for the lighter in my pocket and only then remembered it was as soaked as I was. I handed it to him anyway as a joke. But this was no joke to Alfonso. This was the only light for a cigarette on board. He'd show me a way of getting it to work even when it was wet.

He ran the roller backwards along the seam of his jeans several times to dry the flint, flicked it but couldn't get any spark, ran it down the seam on the opposite leg, repeated the process. Still no spark. He tried again and again for about five minutes, laughed at his failure and admitted, "Got too much water in it. No can, lah. Finished already. Cannot, after when you drag it through the water for a half mile. What do you expect?" Again that rat-a-tat laugh.

"I'll keep that in mind next time I buy a lighter," I told him. "What about him?" I nodded to the handsome young Malay man at the wheel. He was a picture framed in the cabin window. His eyes were always busy, checking the course and the skies, but, often, seeming to dart just past me, away from me when I looked his way. His face had sharp features, his delicious bronze

skin ravishing, glistening with perspiration. His smile was halfway between the leer of a lecher and the gawk of a rube, not unfriendly, but uncomfortable, unconsciously communicating his vision of me undressed. His moustache was only the slightest shadow, as if he had just decided to start the new style since his first shave a few weeks ago. "Maybe he's got a light," I suggested.

"Aziz don't smoke, lah," explained Alfonso, fishing through his pockets again, looking for a light. Even though he didn't find one, he still pulled a cigarette out of a freshly-opened red packet. The cigarette had a red band around the filter; there was brown spots on the white paper as if someone had wrapped fish and chips in it before using it to roll the cigarette. Alfonso tapped one end of the cigarette on his heavy, imitation diver's watch with broken crystal and put it in his mouth.

He's silent for a moment, deep in thought. Then, abruptly, he stands up, grabs my wet lighter from the ledge beside him and goes to the back of the boat where he sets it on top of the warm motor. A quarter of an hour later, he comes back with a lit cigarette. Inhaling deeply, he sits down, leans back and smiles with deep satisfaction, the king of the world.

The smoke smelled heavy, more like incense than tobacco. He explained these were clove cigarettes, called *kretek* because they make little exploding sounds—"kretek-kretek"—when they burn. He offered me one, I accepted, and I haven't smoked a cigarette since.

Ed: Didn't you like it?

Cin: Made me dizzy. I hadn't smoked for so long and those things are strong. It felt like when I first started smoking, those teary-eyed sessions in the coffee lounge when I was in college and we women were just starting to prove that we could be as stupid as you men. I figured it was moronic to start the first time. I'd be hopeless if I started it up again.

Ed: Why do you carry a lighter around then?

Cin: It's my way of keeping the choice constant and personal. I quit because that's what I wanted to do and only as long as I want to. And it's my choice. It has nothing to do with anybody else. But it feels too dangerously proper for me, uncomfortably close to being politically correct for my own self-respect. So I light up other people's cigarettes. It's my way of saying "go ahead, you know the score, kill yourself; it's not my problem

if it isn't yours." I don't mind the smoke so much. I sure do love the smell of those clove cigarettes.

That night, I must have watched Alfonso smoke a pack of them, one after the other so as not to risk the ember dying and then be forced to rely again on my lighter. After perhaps his tenth link in that chain of fags, I'd had enough time to get some of my equilibrium back and began to snoop around. I noticed the stack of cigarette cartons beside me, all of them the same red with the name "Gudang Garam" and a picture of a warehouse on the carton. I looked around and saw several more similar sacks stored everywhere around the boat. Must have been hundreds of them.

"Planning on a long fishing trip or something?" I asked Alfonso.

He flashed me his piano keys. "Okay. It's like this. There are all these cigarettes here because why? Because lah... Can you keep a secret? I mean, I save your life, so can. True? Holy Mary Magdalene! Of course, true! Fact is, I like these cigarettes. I love them. To me, smoking one of these is same like drinking good brandy after a meal like they do in the cinema, or for me, like a cold Guinness Stout.

"Now, I don't make a lot of money working for the government in customs. I get by, lah. It pays for my bowl of rice, but I'm not getting rich. It's not like I am complaining, you see, because why? Because it's an okay job and pays for the few things I like to do to relax, you know, like shoot the bull with the other guys under the *ketepang* tree by the pier, maybe sing few songs, play the guitar, hang out, maybe go to the food stalls by the sea, eat some Devil Curry, have few beers, maybe buy a stout for home and have it wrapped in a brown paper bag so no one will tease me for being stingy.

"Cause why? Because say I'm sitting at a table and a friend comes along, and I'm drinking a Guinness. Of course, I got to invite him to sit down with me, so I offer him a beer. Now if I'm drinking stout, what do you think he is going to drink? Stout. True. So I got to buy him a stout, too, and, now, a stout cost, what, a third again as much as a regular beer. Then we drink another one. It will cost me ten dollars over that I got to pay extra just because I was seen drinking a stout at the stall. So instead I buy one, wrap it up and take it home and drink it while I smoke a few of these *kretek*. I earn enough to do that.

"But now the government wants to put a big tax on one of the few things I really love that I can afford—these here cigarettes. Just 'cause they are made in Indonesia. The government can maybe slap a tax on airplane seats, or golf clubs, or limousines. I don't mind. Can have all the tax you need on them, no complaint come from me. True, lah! The government needs money, too. But when they tax my cigarettes, they attack me personally lah.

"Why should I pay a whole ringgit⁸ more when, with just a short ride across the water, I can get the same package of cigarettes in Sumatra. Tell me why. Cannot! Of course, cannot, lah! 'Cause why? Because it isn't fair.

"Now and then, I team up with Aziz here, and we make a run over to Sumatra to pick up a new supply, lah. I get my kicks doing it when I'm off work. You maybe say I'm moonlighting from my job at customs on moonless nights," rat-a-tat, "as a smuggling pirate, like Error Flynt or what's-his-name in the cinema. But not for profit. I smoke them myself."

I didn't believe that last part. He sounded like a hunter who claims he kills only what he eats. You could tell, by the gleam in his eye, he was loving every minute of it, always on the lookout for patrol boats, pretending to be an outlaw on the run, a kid playing pirate. I'm surprised he didn't wear a patch over his eye.

"Course, I don't smoke them all," Alfonso confessed. "The rest, Aziz here takes to pay for his gas and boat and things."

I felt comfortable enough to tease him. "Gas must be expensive! Don't you think there isn't maybe a wee little bit of a contradiction between your job and your hobby here? Isn't a customs officer supposed to stop smuggling?"

Alfonso didn't see it that way. He felt as if he—and here he lowered his voice—he was doing some free off-duty undercover work for his department. The information he collected while doing his personal smuggling might well come in handy some day in apprehending real smugglers, he told me. He almost whispered when he told me how he was learning a whole bunch of things about how the hong operate. The hong, he

8 A ringgit is a Malaysian dollar written M\$ or MR. Approximately M\$2.50 equals US \$1.00. Ed, ed.

explained, were the criminal gangs that control smuggling, drugs and stuff. "But I can't talk about this right now." His eyes darted up to the cabin where Aziz stood behind the wheel, watching us, smiling.

Alfonso pointed out that if anybody else tries to smuggle in a load of clove cigarettes and he catches them, he doesn't think twice about arresting them. They are doing it only for money; he is doing it for the love of clove cigarettes and for the fun of it. It sounded almost heroic when he said it.

Suddenly, the wind picked up and the waves with them, then **CERRACK!** Lightning tearing through the sky like a rip in the seat of your pants! Lightning stabbing straight at a small island nearby! A few counts of blackness and then light exploded again, lancing the island once more. The storm came out of nowhere, brushing the ocean and us with a shower; it blew over in a matter of minutes—which I learned was typical of these storms called "Sumatrans". Lightning continued to flash, but the battle had already rolled off into the distance across the water.

Alfonso watched it go; he tilted his head diagonally to show disappointment, as if to say he thought he could have done that better. "Now, Mother Mary, I ask you," he said aloud toward the sky, "why doesn't that water fall over there on the land where we need it?" He pointed, giving directions to the deity. Then turning to me he said, "Sometimes you got to wonder about God's plans, lah. Why, if we got a drought, does he order it to rain on the ocean?" He threw his hands up in the air with the question and shook his head with disappointment.

When lightning struck once again on the nearby island, Alfonso observed, "Funny thing about the Pulau Upeh⁹, that island over there. Always seems to be getting hit by lightning. And it's hit more than any other island out here. Isn't very high, so that's not the why. Maybe 'cause it stands alone. Must be all that iron in the rocks out there that's drawing the lightning. Land's red like rust on that island.

"Aziz says his grandfather used to tell him it was because Upeh is protected by a spirit fish swimming around it. I asked him what that had to do with lightning, and he says he don't know. Maybe spirit fish give off

9 Pulau (Island) Upeh. Upeh is a type of tree whose hollow sprouts were used as natural water buckets. The island by that name is located just north of Malacca. Ed, ed.

lightning. He never seen one, lah. So how did he know if they didn't cause lightning?"

"Anyway, that island there is where we Portuguese went to fetch rock when we were building A' Famous.

"We Portuguese?" I asked. "A' Famous? Give that to me once again please, and slower."

"A' Famous, that's what the fortress in Malacca was called, A' Famosa,"¹⁰ Alfonso explained. "It was attacked, oh, how many times, by the Siamese, the Achehnese from north Sumatra, the Dutch a couple times, the Javanese also, you name it, they were practically standing in line to attack Malacca. Because why?

"Because it looked like the place would be a pushover. I mean, how can, lah? A bunch of low-life Portuguese, because mostly that's the kind of men Portugal sent out here back in the 1500s, low-life picked from jails, taverns, and gutters, men who were running from the Inquisition or an angry wife," rat-a-tat, "men more likely to be chasing skirts—or here in Malacca, sarongs—than an enemy away from the walls, lah."

10 A brief history of Malacca seems in order here. The port of Malacca was founded around the turn of the 13th century by a Malay nobleman named Parameswara. His offspring ruled as sultans, and Malacca grew into one of the world's wealthiest emporiums of silks, ceramic ware, and spices until the Portuguese attacked and conquered the town in 1511. The Portuguese promptly built a fort, A' Famosa, that withstood countless attacks, twenty-four to be exact, but finally succumbed to the Dutch after a brutal seven-month-long siege, capitulating at 10 AM, January 14, 1641. The once-thriving entrepot was left to languish, a Sleepy Hollow with little significance either political or economic.

The English took control between 1797 and 1818, an administrative move effected in order to protect the Dutch colonies from France during Napoleon's occupation of Holland. Although it was returned to the Netherlands, Malacca was subsequently traded for Bencoolen in Sumatra. The English took over the second time in 1826 and made it one of the Straits Settlements along with Singapore and Penang. At one time, a plan was considered to vacate Malacca entirely and move everyone to Penang. But with the rubber boom, the town survived. Malacca became the capital of a state of the same name in the nation of Malaysia whose independence was gained August 31, 1957, declared in a ceremony in the center of Malacca.

(Incidentally, Wayne, in your book *Time Travel in the Malay Crescent*, Meru Publishing, 1983, you misnamed the Portuguese fort Formosa instead of A' Famosa. Sorry about that. One that slipped by me.) Ed, ed.

"Fifteen feet thick they were, the walls that is, not the Portuguese." Rat-a-tat. "The walls of A' Famosa were made from the gravestones of former sultans and from rocks carved out of that island right over there, Pulau Upeh. We called it *Illeh de Pedre*, the Island of Stone." He pointed to the island which was receding in the distance behind us.

"Everybody worked in building A' Famosa. Everybody complained about the work, too, especially all the 'Sons-of-Somebody' who weren't used to working with their hands. All the time, the locals were taking potshots at us with blowguns. And those things were deadly.

"So you tell me. How can, lah? How can only six hundred men, at most. Sometimes only three hundred, two hundred. And they are all petered out from chasing after the local girls and often catching up with them, too. And then they get even more tired." Rat-a-tat.

"The enemy think: 'Hey, finished already, lah.' So they attack, but, somehow we Portuguese, lah, we hold on. Sure we die out from malaria or poison darts or starvation during some of the sieges where we had to eat dogs, rats, our shoes, no choice, some of the Portuguese go crazy with hunger, lah. But somehow we are saved by God's will over and over. How can, lah?"

He answered his own question, "For one thing, it is in our blood to be lovers. True! Look, when Albuquerque went back to the king, he had a letter from fourteen of the knights, the Sons-of-Somebody, and these guys are the leaders, right? They wrote to brag about how good they were, not only on the battlefield, but also in the bedroom. All of them were proud fathers, fourteen in less than a year. You see, lah. Lovers.

"Anyway, it looked as if Malacca would be easy pickings for anyone who wanted it. Probably only three hundred healthy Portuguese defenders plus, as the years went by, their kids and bastards. But the number never really grew, because why? Because most of them die young from malaria, jungle fever, the heat, that is, if they weren't shot already, lah, by poison darts, like I say before.

"So how can? How? Just a handful of Portuguese surviving so many attacks, and they last for a hundred thirty years before the Dutch take over and persecute us, and then the British come and prosecute us and, now? Now, we Portuguese are the only ones left with European blood. How can?

Where are the English now, lah? The Dutch? Where are they? Gone already. Only the Portuguese stay. Because why? Because actually, lah, we Portuguese didn't have enough money left for the ticket home." Rat-a-tat.

"So we just hung around here for the last, oh, about five hundred years, still speaking Kristang around the house. True, lah. It's not like the Portuguese speak now. It would be like for you to hear the English of Sir Francis Drake."



After we'd traveled for another several links in Alfonso's chain of cigarettes, each taking about fifteen minutes to finish, the boat tilted in a turn. Aziz increased speed to time our movement with a wave, the bottom scraped over a sandbar, and the motor slowed and started chugging into a smooth lagoon, a *kuala*, a narrow estuary.

I remember that moment as if it were this morning. The mouth of the small river was barely visible in the deep purple light of early dawn, the verdant growth all around just beginning to change from black silhouettes to a dark green. The engine idled as if tiptoeing by the houses of the waking village. Some of the women were already awake, cooking the meal for their men returning from fishing. They listened for their husband's boat coming over the sandbar; they would recognize the sound of the engine by its particular rhythm. I could see them cooking rice on dim mangrove-charcoal fires.

We glided into Kampong Kuala Lama Lama.¹¹ It was idyllic at that moment—classically Malay in its simple and innocent beauty, a picture of a rural past that had somehow survived untouched by the glass, steel and computer ages and remained in an eternal state of half-sleep. Our boat turned with the meandering small river as it swung around some spider-leg roots of mangrove trees; the view opened into a placid pond where other

¹¹ There is no village Kampong Kuala Lama Lama listed on the map of Malaysia. Perhaps it is too small. Kampong means a small village or hamlet. *Kuala* means a river mouth, usually a widened inlet just inside a coastal sandbar. *Lama Lama* is best translated as something happening after a long time. Ed, ed.

similar boats were moored. Aziz cut our engine, and we coasted gently, perfectly into an empty spot to moor in the mud along the shore.

Across the pond, at the far end where it narrowed into a lazy stream, a wooden bridge spanned and was reflected in the quiet water. A woman walked over the bridge, her head covered with a white scarf. The turnip-shaped dome of a mosque rose above the steep-sloping roofs of humble homes. Some men in white caps were beginning to drift toward the sound of the muezzin, enticed by his call to prayer.

Five times a day! Count them. *Satu. Dua. Tiga. Empat. Lima.* I stayed in the home of Aziz's family, very near the mosque. Every day from morning till night, five times I was reminded that Allah is Great. And great Allah is indeed because, while Alfonso was taking care of my passport and visa papers, I was provided with a place to heal my many bruises.

There were surprisingly few questions about those bruises. However, I was asked many other questions: Did I have children? Where was my husband? How long will I be in Malacca? To all of these I lied, of course. I gave them the answer they seemed desperate to hear: "Three children. My husband was working in Singapore. I just dropped in for a while to have a look see." To these earnest people, the truth would have been uncomfortable, especially to the women, mothers, wives and intended brides of the many young men who were forever hovering around me, leering, I believe actually salivating at times. I just didn't have the heart to tell them that I was single and had no idea what I was doing in Malacca.

The interior of the Malay house is buffed clean. These women are fanatics. "Take off your shoes—*Al la mak!*—before you come into the house, lah!" There is always water to be poured from the spout of a little silver *repousse* pitcher at the table to wash your hands before eating with your fingers from orange plastic plates. And you wash your hands after meals as well, and your mouth, and your forearm, too, if the main course has been one of those delicious Malay curries, and you're a rookie like I was. Yum! My appetite must have been a compliment to the cooks.

The houses were set on short stilts about six feet above the tidal slough, reminding me of little girls holding up their skirts while going through mud puddles. The houses had all settled in, leaning into the slope of the land, easing downward towards the lazy river. From the curving coconut palms

were strung fishnets hanging down to the ground and looking like silvery flying buttresses in the sunlight.

At sunset and into the night, we would sit on the porch floor, ignoring the stiff, home-crafted wooden chairs set out along the walls. With our view unimpaired by screens, we would enjoy the fireflies and the birds, the neighbors talking, and the silence. This is where I picked up much of their language. I found it surprisingly easy to learn, maybe because that was the only way I could express my opinion. Can you imagine me without a vocabulary? We got along well until my language got good enough to disagree on philosophies.

Their kindness, noble gentleness, and natural grace were humbling. I was a fish out of water; they made their home into an aquarium for me. Their religion was ever-present; every day felt like Sunday school, and I was never comfortable in Sunday school when I was a kid. Eventually, Granny had given up trying to make me go.

That village was so lovely, so picturesque! On the night of a full moon, for instance, that bridge would have been a perfect place for a romantic tryst between an eager young boy and a breathless girl. But no. There, in that village, they could never meet like that. The brave and the bad ones stole furtively away into the shadows or the boys paid for it under the red lights.

It was into this steaming sexual stew that Alfonso dumped me—Aziz and his three brothers, all of highly active gonad age. In their minds, since every Muslim girl was off-limits with severe repercussions if the line were crossed or even neared, any **Western** girl—whom it was rumored were willing to do it with strangers on the first night—provided a chance for free love. NOW!

Yet, I must give Alfonso credit; it was much better to be in the center of four handsome horny, young, and competitive brothers than to be the focus of attention for just one of them alone. Their jealousy of any advantage another brother might have with me made each of them act as my guard, even while their eyes were dripping with lust. I appreciated the protection; I had used up my supply of Rohypnol, which is not as effective without alcohol anyway, and we were totally without alcohol. It was what I dread heaven might be like.

When they weren't going to the mosque or going on irregular fishing trips, and especially at sunset, we would all sit on the worn linoleum floor of the verandah. The whole porch slanted on its stilts, so much so that once a glass of rose syrup, a sweet drink, was knocked over and the red liquid sped across the floor toward the front. On that porch our conversation would flow just as naturally, and turn as inexorably as liquid flows downhill, to sex—unless a mother or sister happened to be sitting with us, in which case, to the weather.

They were having a drought and it had gone on way too long, all agreed—mother was on the porch. They had prayed and prayed for rain. They had also taken little Rahim out back to pee on the red pepper, "Oh, so many times already, lah." They explained rather hesitantly from shyness because of the delicate nature of the subject. Slowly I came to understand that a prepubescent boy can make rain by peeing on a red pepper at noon; it was commonly-known folklore. However, it hadn't worked that day... again.

Someone suggested that the government, in order to bring rain, should hire a *bomoh*, a magus of the black arts, a man in communion with nature spirits that had haunted the area before Islam arrived. The suggestion was quickly pooh-pooed by the shawl-covered mother. "We no longer are concerned with those spirits. They are in league with the *shaitan*.¹² We are Muslims." I wasn't quite sure if she just happened to be looking at me as she said this, or if she was aiming.

The fact is that a deputy minister or something of the state of Malacca actually had gone out in secret to consult with a *bomoh* about the rain or maybe about a financial problem; nobody who is talking really knows why he went. He had some bad gambling debts. He dared not be caught, for his reputation as a modern Muslim would have been greatly compromised by consulting a jungle doctor.

He assured the *bomoh* that no one knew where he was that day, for the practice of the dark art is illegal. No one could possibly trace him, he guaranteed. When the *bomoh* was finally convinced that the minister was telling the truth, he and his wife killed him. Then they drove the minister's car to nearby Seremban and sold it there; otherwise, they might never have been caught.

¹² Satan, the devil. Ed, ed.

One day, after the sun had set, in the still, stifling air of early evening, a friend of the family pulls up on his motorcycle, sliding to a stop in the dust just across the bridge. He jumps off, crosses the wood-plank bridge in five thuds and runs up to us on the porch, panic breaking out as sweat on his face.

It seems that he had been driving home along an old country road, coming back from Asahan, not far from Gunung Ledang.¹³ He had taken a back road, twisting through a rubber tree plantation in the long shadows of late afternoon when the sun sends spears of light piercing through the trees. When he came to a curve where he needed to slow down, there appeared, as if out of nowhere, a beautiful woman with platinum hair, smiling. She was draped in a shimmering white cloth that hugged her curves. As he slowed down, intending to stop to see if she needed help, he noticed the shadows slice across her like the stripes of a tiger. Her smile revealed fangs. Her hair turned white.

His hair stood straight up on the back of his head. A hand seemed to grab his neck. He ran his bike off the road but managed, just in time, to regain his balance and speed away, throwing rocks as he spun out of there, hearing her laughter behind him.

Not long after, he came to another curve and slowed down. There was the same woman again, still laughing at him. He sped up again. At the next curve, he didn't slow down, ran off the road and wiped out. Luckily, there was little damage to his bike and only a tear in his jeans at the knee. He set his bike upright, got on and started it up.

When he got back on the road, he felt as if someone were riding pillion behind him, holding onto his waist and reaching ever lower. He felt the hand release him only after he had reached a village and had driven to the mosque. Everyone agreed he was lucky to be alive after such a close encounter with the Tiger Princess, Putri Ledang.

Aziz checked through the fringed curtains to make certain his mother would not be coming back soon. She was busy grinding betel nut at the neighbor's across the way. That would keep her occupied for a while. He turned down the wick of the lamp so that we sat in satiny darkness. In a

13 Gunung (Mountain) Ledang (Shining Brightly in the Sun) is also known as Mt. Ophir. Ed, ed.

lowered voice he spoke a mixture of Malay and English which I translate freely.



Aziz told of how the Malays are now Muslim, but before that they were perhaps Hindu, and probably some of his forefathers were nature worshippers. When the fierce goddess of the sea-wind threatened their fragile homes, his ancestor knew that she was testing his manhood. "Excuse me my words, but this is the truth," said Aziz. "A brave man of the house would go out to the verandah, raise up his sarong and expose his—his manhood to the storm." The goddess would either be frightened away or would blow the house down if she was disappointed.

The old spirits were both bawdy and bloody, but this was way back before Islam, before history, in the ancient days back in a time of mist and myth, when life was a raw, open struggle between good and evil, and sex was the ultimate communion. In this dark once-upon-a-time, high on the verdant plateau of Pasemah near the southern end of Sumatra, surrounded by dense jungle, was the mystical kingdom of Sopheir.¹⁴

In the background, a volcanic cone called the Iron Mountain¹⁵ rose high above the plateau, its peak usually shrouded in an ominous gray cloud. Beneath this mighty mountain lived a famed sorceress named Bittibitti¹⁶. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd had the ability to walk in and out of the nether world at will. She became friends with a lot of little devils, those

14 A variant of Ophir, the source of the Queen of Sheba's gold. Ophir is mentioned on several occasions in the Bible, for example: 1 King 10:11 N.E.B. Ophir, incidentally, is similar to the Persian word meaning "abundant." Ed, ed.

15 In the Pasemah Highlands of Sumatra can be found statues of, among other things, men wrestling snakes. These are the remnants of a long-forgotten civilization. Pasemah comes from the same root word as the Indonesian word *besi*, meaning "iron." See *Forgotten Kingdoms of Sumatra*, Schnitger, F.M. Ed, ed.

16 The name Bittibitti seems to come from an ancient Javanese myth. She is usually depicted as a deformed sorceress or a white tiger or crocodile. She is remembered in a court dance, depicted as a demonic witch with a deformed leg. Ed, ed.

foreboding spirits of the rain forest, and even became good buddies with Sulaiman¹⁷ himself, the king of the black jinn.

Like the Fairy Queen, she could summon these jinn at will. She also knew the secrets of plants—which ones would cure, which would kill, and which would make you feel funny for a while. She could interpret dreams, explain what they meant. With the flick of her hand, she could make a gecko sing; at her command, a swarm of hornets would descend and sting. She was great at parties, especially when she wore her high-priestess tiara, a silver crescent moon with the gold horn of a ram on each side.

Her husband was the blacksmith Janggati,¹⁸ a crippled dwarf with a vulgar sense of humor, but a mighty wizard as well. He could fuse metal with such magic passion that it seemed he had drawn lightning from the sky for his forge. He worked deep in a cave where no one could learn the secret of his dark art. He was remorselessly dedicated to a life focused on gaining **power**.

He spent many a full-moon night submerged up to his neck in the middle of the current at the confluence of two rivers in order to absorb ever more *prana*, more **power**. Janggati even abstained from sex for years on end, tempting himself constantly with rooms full of sexy *sakti* priestesses who were clad in gossamer gowns and always available for private “religious” consultation.

For years, he would resist, and then yield to the aching urge in his groin, but only after the hot metal of a magic knife that he had been forging all during that time was finally ready to be struck for the last time on the anvil before being thrust immediately into the heart of the bravest slave that could be found. Then he, Janggati, would thrust himself deep into his virginal wife, for Bittibitti was always a virgin. As I said, she was a great sorceress.

At one such orgiastic moment—at the union of mind, metal, motion, mortality and magic—was conceived a daughter they named Putri Ledang, Princess Shining-Brightly-in-the-Sun. She grew up into a golden beauty; everyone who glimpsed her passing lightly by would stop what they were

17 A variant of Solomon. Ed, ed.

18 In ancient Javanese history, this is the name of a famous *empu* or *kris* blade forger-magician who lived around 400 AD. Ed, ed.

doing to watch in adoration. She was divine! Years passed; she was coming of age and her first virginal orgasm was to occur in the culmination of the creation of the master blacksmith's ultimate weapon, the *kris*.

The *kris* had been in the making for seven years. Its creation had been kept top secret; Janggati allowed the red-hot metal to be struck just once every Friday when it was least likely to be heard by those who would be attending prayer at the mosque. In his furnace, he forged iron from seven sources, the sources for the ingredients carefully stated in the formula.

Some of the iron was to have been stolen from the palace of a rich man—the king who lived to the north was the obvious target. Some of the ore must come from the sea to the east. Some must be picked out by a blind man, some selected by someone who was deaf. A fifth source must be from the top of the active volcano, Iron Mountain. In order not to incur the wrath of the hot-tempered goddess of this mountain, those who were climbing to the top had to tell vulgar jokes so that the goddess, upon hearing them, would be too embarrassed to hang around in their company. For a while, the jokes around the local palm-wine stall became unusually tame since no one relished the thought of being selected to climb up close to the lava at the mountain top. But you can't keep a vulgar sense of humor under a zipper for very long, and soon Janggati was able to find someone to join him in his foul-mouthed, intentionally farting pilgrimage to steal some of the goddess's iron.

Another one of the sources was special. It had to have fallen out of the sky and been worshipped for eons by the black people who lived in the rain forest without clothes or television.

Ed: *Laughing*. Or G and T for that matter. Can I freshen your drink?

Cin: You bet.

Ed: What about the **seventh** source of iron? Where did it come from?

Cin: Beats me. No one remembers. This is a very old story.

The master Janggati fashioned the *kris* blade to have five undulating waves like a crawling snake. He pounded and folded the seven metals together and tempered them each time in the heart of a worthy slave—their strength, their whole life spirit being thus absorbed into this gruesome, awesome blade. He caused the metal to be streaked like a tiger's skin. On

its side, he fashioned the form of a *naga*, a dragon, the spirit of the underworld, of fertility. Here, I remember, Aziz looked at me pointedly to tell me the symbol was—"very phallic."

When the *kris* was finished, its magic could cause trees to fall when merely touched by the blade for a second; it would rattle in its scabbard when danger was approaching; and it could fly to kill all enemies who dared to get too near. It could be milked for sweet water. It could cure the common cold. It would give its owner the right to rule. And it looked good hanging above a fireplace in the den.

After seven long years, the blade was soon to be completed. On the final Friday, a day of the waning moon, Black-Master Janggati planned a fabulous feast deep down in his cave to which he invited all to come and partake, no matter what their status may be: "Scanty formal attire suggested. RSVP." He ordered palm wine to be lavishly poured for all, as much as each required, saying, "Eat, friends, and drink until you are drunk with love."¹⁹

Then, as the revelry rose to a high pitch, Janggati stood up again, one arm leaning on the table for balance. This time, he invited all who wished to join with the temple priestesses or B-Y-O (Bring-Your-Own) in order to celebrate physical communion in an ultimate love dance, but with a new step at the end if they wouldn't mind giving it a try.

Instead of yielding to the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am urge, he asked everybody to go to the very edge, but not over, controlling, staving off, saving their orgasm with all the power they could garner against the yearnings of the universe, waiting, waiting until their very core seemed to melt within, and then, at that moment when the *kris* would be struck for the final time upon the sacred anvil, everyone would release all, yielding all the power, giving it up, opening, flowing from them, through them and into the sanctified *kris*. "Now if you all would like to take your positions, as it were."

The king then escorted his queen, wearing her silver moon tiara with the ram's horns made of gold, to a front-row mat. At first, no one followed, not wanting to seem too eager, but after the first few couples stood up, the

¹⁹ This is a direct quote from Song of Songs 5:1, N.E.B., Ed, ed.

dance floor filled fast.

For added power, Janggati had arranged for his apprentice, who had assisted him throughout the making of the *kris*, to take his daughter, the Princess Ledang, in a hot, holy love-knot. This, by the way, delighted young Putri Ledang, for the apprentice's nickname was Dua which meant, according to the talk around the bathing pool, HIS was so long he could wrap it around his waist *dua*, or two times. Now, this part sounded to me like the repressed sexual humor of an adolescent trying to get attention, but Aziz swore it was part of the legend.²⁰

Everyone was arranged in pairs together on mats, the greater share of which held one man and one woman each, although there were a few rather creative combinations scattered here and there. The mats were arranged around and spiraling out from the center altar which was in fact an anvil beside the roaring flame. The holy orgy was in full thrust, everyone grunting to a pulsating chant. *Jerr-jerr. Jerr-jerr.*²¹

As the moment of climax approached, a beggar entered the cave unnoticed, probably because everyone was pretty darn busy doing their thing. He made his way steadily toward the very center of the shrine cave. At the moment of the coming, the beggar grabbed the hot lethal weapon—presumably, he carried a pot-holder—threw off his garb, proving himself to be a dashing young sultan-to-be with a good haircut, and proceeded to run amok.

Yelling "*Death to the friends of the devil in the name of Allah!*" he stabbed Janggati and Bittibitti. White lightning crashed into the cave. The *kris* blade flashed and stabbed hundreds, uniting their love throes with their death throes. There was blood, ankle deep on the floor, amid screams of panic.

The knife slashed again, wounding Dua fatally even as his seed flowed

20 This is only partially accurate. The myth specifically uses the name Sembilan for her partner meaning "nine." Ed, ed.

21 There remains in Malaya a dance named the Olek Mayang which some believe derives from pre-Muslim times. It was connected with the worship of Sakti in union with her spouse, Shiva. This could be a survival of tantric orgies where union with the divine is effected with a nude woman worshipped as a goddess who lived at the temple for that purpose. The Sakti rituals had five M's which translate as: wine, fish, meat, grain, and copulation. Ed, ed.

into Princess Ledang. The madman would have taken her in murderous rape had not her golden beauty blinded him.

She escaped, carrying the dying Dua—her lover and her husband—on her back, and she descended deeper into the cave, fleeing the crazed killer. She came to a river in the heart of the cavern, changed herself into a crocodile—she'd learned how by watching her mother do it—and swam downstream to the ocean, Dua still on her back. In the middle of the sea, she stopped to care for her dying lover.

His last request was fulfilled inside her. He died shortly thereafter, his body turning into a giant *kris*, its blade sinking into the sea, leaving only the hilt exposed above the surface.

A male child, conceived that day, was later delivered stillborn. Princess Ledang buried him at the opposite end of the bay, his iron gravestone-island, a smaller replica of his father's. It is said that, to this day, she often transforms herself into a spirit-fish and swims protectively around her child.

Alone now, with no home to return to, Princess Ledang climbed to the highest peak so that she could overlook the watery graves: one belonging to the man who had made her a wife, mother, and widow in one day and the other, the son of their bodies and their lust, and their love. The mountaintop where she chose to live had a misty crown like the Iron Mountain of her home in far away Sumatra; the diffused mauve light matched her melancholy. She nursed her hatred for the murderer in that gloom which grew into a loathing for all men, especially for those who would be sultan.

Since that day, the vengeful princess loves to lure lustful men up her hill in the late afternoon, enchanting them with her matchless beauty, blinding them to the dangers by her sensuality until, unable to control their lust, they throw themselves upon her. Yet at the moment of embrace she invariably transforms herself into a white tiger, wounded and in pain from the hatred she bore. The victim who had so foolishly wandered into her clutches is usually found with tiger bites on his neck, fear frozen on his death face.



Now onto the scene walks young Sultan Something-or-other Shah of Malacca. The sultan thought himself a real stud, "the gods' gift to beautiful women." When he heard of a rare young flower, he would send one of his trusted servants to pluck her from her home and bring her for him to fertilize. The guy was insatiable. He had more wives than he could name, and his concubines had to wear numbers. The sex maniac had a problem; he should have gone for professional help. Instead, he became a set-up, the perfect toy for Putri Ledang to play with.

Despite all the warnings given to the sultan by his older, wiser advisors, he set off up the mountain path with his trusted younger vassal, Hang Tuah, a giant of a man, in order to steal a glimpse of the fair princess of rare beauty. Stealthily, they positioned themselves in a tree near her bathing pool and spied down as her naked fair skin slithered into the pond and was caressed by the water.

Hang Tuah knew that he would be lost if he looked directly on those luscious, scintillating curves, so he diverted his eyes in the opposite direction, and watched her reflection in the blade of his *kris*.

The sultan was not so wise. He gazed upon her translucent flesh directly and was smitten by a hard lust that wouldn't go away. He returned, distended, to the palace in Malacca and tried to alleviate the problem—and, to give him his due, he had a fairly lively imagination in this area. He tried soaking his extended member in coconut milk, palm wine, lemon juice, Drambuie, but the vision of the princess remained firm, and he could not lessen his tumidity.

The sultan decided to send his trusted servant back up the hill to ask for her hand, so to speak. Hang Tuah met up with the princess again, face to face this time, and had a rather awkward conversation with her since he didn't dare look at her directly for reasons mentioned. In order not to appear rude while talking to her reflection in his *kris*, he pretended to be picking hairs out of his nose, a common and inoffensive custom of the land.

Putri Ledang laughed at the sultan's request and sent Hang back with a firm but indelicate rejection. The sultan was insulted; he was not one to take no for an answer, nor one to take a hint either, for that matter. He sent Hang back up the hill to ask the princess what the sultan could do to prove the earnestness of his proposal of matrimony.

So Putri, trying to get rid of the jerk, told Hang, "Tell the sultan, if he ever wishes the pleasure of my upper thighs, to bring me the hearts of a million mosquitoes." She figured he'd take the hint and bug off.

To her surprise, the sultan ordered everyone in town to bring to the palace as many mosquitoes as they could find for a reward in gold, thereby inadvertently but effectively eradicating malaria in Malacca for seven days.

This, it seems, was only the entrance exam. Says the princess after she looked at the loathsome jar full of tiny hearts, "Give me, now, a jar full of a thousand tears." She meant, "Cry me a river, buddy," but the sultan, to her chagrin, was so dense that he took her words literally and went about spanking the heck out of every brat he could find in town, using the cane for every little misdemeanor—for spraying hubcaps on ox carts or sticking chewing gum in public places. Still, he would have come up short of tears if he hadn't stubbed his toe the night before the jar was due. Lucky?

The sultan just wasn't getting the message. So next, the princess demanded that he build her a bridge, a bridge of gold so that she could ride a royal elephant from her home on the top of the mountain all the way to the middle of Malacca on her wedding day. The people of Malacca were ordered to give up all their newly-acquired gold from the mosquito bonanza. Women donated their necklaces and earrings; men parted with their gold false teeth and their Rolex watches:²² all the gold that could be found in the town was fed into the furnace to be melted down to make the girders of gold for a bridge that was meant to stretch across a twenty-five mile expanse.

The bridge was never completed. While construction was still in progress, the princess made her final demand: she asked for the life of the sultan's oldest son so that he could share with her the pain she had felt at the loss of her firstborn.

The sultan didn't have to think twice. His oldest son had started getting dangerous ideas about where he should be sitting in the palace dining hall; he had been eyeing the sultan's cushions.

When the deed was done and the son was dead, the princess turned to Hang in repulsion and told him that any man so cruel as to kill his firstborn

²² Along with hubcaps and chewing gum, this is another anachronism. Ed, ed.

would never know the pleasures of her bed, not to mention her upper thighs. The sultan lost a lot of credibility with that unsuccessful romance. And poor Hang, he tried so hard to do the right thing but failed in his duty to his master, the sultan. Dejected, he headed back up the hill, tossing away his *kris* into the Love Potion River.²³ Some say that because of his pure heart, he was able to live as an immortal with the seductress Putri Ledang. Some say that his body was discovered not far from a well with tiger bites on his neck. He is said to have been buried near that spot.

Ed: So?

Cin: So nobody knows where or if he was buried, or if he lives forever in eternal bliss with his seductive lady tigress.

Ed: A real man would die either way. What I meant was, so what has this story got to do with anything? It's just a legend.²⁴

Cin: So was the story of Troy at one time.

Ed: I thought you were going to tell me how your old friend died of poison, which you, I assume, did not administer. And didn't you mention something about finding and losing a hundred tons of gold?

Cin: Yeah, well, I'm getting to that if you wouldn't keep interrupting me. And please, don't say you're sorry. I'm only joking. The truth is that later on this story provided me with a clue to the existence of the gold, and it was Percival who helped me interpret it. So be patient; it all comes together later on, I promise.

Okay, back to the *kampung*. One night, Aziz finally caught me alone. I warded off some passionate puckers. I told him not to fool around with me; I wasn't safe for him—I was the manifestation of his most fearful sexual fantasy, his Putri Ledang. He interrupted me with his hand held up to my lips and didn't let me finish. He just smiled rakishly and said, "Slowly.

23 Sungei (River) Duyung. *Mata duyung* means "tears of loneliness" and, therefore, by extension in the highly poetic Malay language, a love potion. Ed, ed.

24 The story above seems to be a combination of ancient Javanese, Sumatran, and Malay mythologies. The story of the killing of the blacksmith, for instance, recalls a coastal Sumatran myth of the death of *Empu* (blacksmith) Gandring. One would be tempted to disregard it as a composite and, therefore, a fabrication except for the fact that myths often incorporate older stories into themselves. See, by way of example, the two distinct stories of creation in Genesis. Ed, ed.

Slowly, my princess. When the time is right, it will be beautiful. It is our *nasib*, our fate."

That, thank God, was the end of any romantic complications with him for the moment. As for the other brothers, I was more careful than to be caught alone again. Strange, I got to feeling, somehow, that I was the one at fault for being the source of temptation, especially from the way the hawk-eyed mother watched me.

After a couple of weeks in Kampong Kuala Lama Lama, I was treated almost as one of the family—another sister or a cousin. When it was time to leave, the women of the family cried and tugged at me, trying to get me to stay on, but I tore myself from the web of that happy home and was happy to move away and into town. There are hidden costs to that kind of "free" room and board, costs I wasn't willing to pay.

I wasn't ready to accept the roles that were expected of me because of my gender. I had been caught up in my own culture for too long before escaping to want to scurry into the safety net of another. In the end, I suspect the family, especially the mama under the shawl whose piercing eyes seemed to see inside my soul and find it wanting, must have been happy to have me out of there. The sexual tension in the air was so thick you could have scooped it with a spoon.



Alfonso had fixed it with the immigration guys, delaying them with a bribe until my passport situation could be taken care of. "Not exactly a bribe, lah. My boss calls it a chance to deal with big government on a personal level. You just got to grease the machine. The trick, lah, is to know where to put the grease. My boss, he's a pro at smearing on grease." Rat-a-tat.

"Anyway, your new passport will be coming as soon as you contact the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Incidentally, nobody on the ship you named, the *Asian Princess*, nobody remembered you, lah." Nice guy Hans turned out to be. Maybe he wasn't supposed to have had me on board in the first

place and was trying to cover his tracks.

Aziz and a few of the other verandah sitters all scraped together and loaned me a little cash to tide me over. After I got settled in at the hotel, I went to a goldsmith with one of Alfonso's sisters and sold my wedding ring. It was a symbolic moment of freedom for me and also an ironic moment of gratitude to my "ex" who had given the ring to me for other reasons entirely. Or, who knows? Maybe all it ever really meant was merely money in the bank.

I had continued wearing that gold ring as a talisman to ward off unwanted or inconvenient advances from the ever-prowling males. Ha! A lot of good a wedding ring does for that! Some men even seemed to be enticed by it, to conquer another man's wife must give them a special thrill... Hm! I wonder if it was the wedding ring I gave him that attracted my ex's present wife to him?

I was surprised that I couldn't get much for the gold band itself, although it was fairly heavy. The jeweler told me it was of low carat compared with the gold usually sold in Malacca. He showed me some pieces of jewelry from his case. It was like candy for the eyes: sparkling golden gold, so gold it had a reddish aura. Beside these, my ring looked anaemic.

But the diamond in the ring, bless Mr. Right's little heart, was worth enough for me to pay back everybody, even Alfonso for the bribe—my chance to personally interface with the local government hadn't been as inexpensive as I had hoped it would be. I had enough left over to keep me going until my passport situation straightened itself out, and I could then get some money wired to me. I went out and bought a new blouse, a sarong, some essentials, and a brand new gold-colored plastic lighter for luck.

More about the local gold in Malaysia. I met a young Indian man, a reporter named Vijay. He's skinny and he slouches on his stool when he leans over to sip his beer at the bar, and with his long legs curled under the stool, he forms a perfect "S" in silhouette. Vijay always wore a thick gold chain necklace and a couple of heavy gold rings. He told me that he often travels to India on his holidays and pays his way by carrying gold from Malaysia. They call it "Batu Pahat gold" in India. That's the name of a town just south of Malacca. Malaysian gold is worth much more in India

than other gold, he claimed. Easy to trade on the black market.

It was early morning when Alfonso arrived on his motorbike to pick me up from Kampong Kuala Lama Lama for my move to Malacca town. All the clothes I owned and the small bag to put them in had been hand-me-downs given to me by the family. Alfonso didn't mind the early morning, said he was awake anyway. Hadn't slept the night before. He had been out on another adventure, "fishing for cigarettes," rat-a-tat, when in a flash of lightning, he thought he saw a ship run aground on a sandbar maybe two miles off the coast. Must have been a stranger, he thought. Every fool local fisherman knew about that sandbar.

When he arrived at the site, the boat was gone. The way Alfonso figured it, the boat had lodged onto the bar in the dark. The pirate captain, frightened of being caught, figured he must be near land, so his part of the contract, that of smuggling illegal immigrant families to the promised jobs of Malaysia across the strait at night, was finished. He forced his human cargo overboard, telling them to walk the rest of the way to shore in the dark. It wasn't far, he promised them. So the passengers stepped into the water. Now lighter, the boat lifted off the bar and sped back to Indonesia. Then the tide rose.

Alfonso found five floating bodies of women and children who had drowned. "They are crazy for jobs, lah! Hungry for them. Some of them, they cut down a banana tree trunk and swim all the way across the strait on it. True. I seen it on my own eyes."

We wound our way into the heart of town on the motorbike. Alfonso said the early morning was the best time, with less traffic. Only a few years ago, he told me, Malaccans laughingly complained of their then only fifteen-minute-long "rush hour." He took me through flat land sectioned into rice paddies. We entered the thin but ever-expanding outer shell of construction, the new city growing fast. Ugly buildings! They look like stacked egg crates. As we meandered along the maze of lanes, going ever deeper into the old town, the shops beside the road grew squatter and older, their pastel-painted facade long since bleached in the tropical sun.

Alfonso aimed my first thrust into the old town at the very heart of Malacca—Red Plaza, with the heavy Dutch State House, Stadhuys, standing near the stately Dutch First Church, both painted cinnabar red.

The color is set on fire by the orange morning sun. Behind these buildings rises St. Paul's Hill, with the roofless ruins of a Portuguese Catholic church at the top.

As we started walking up the concrete stairs, Alfonso told me he was glad it was daylight; he didn't like to come here at night. He'd seen some strange lights on this hill when he passed it late at night while walking back to his home in the Portuguese Settlement.

I asked him if he believed in ghosts and he said he didn't, but he saw one once. It seems that way back in the early days of the Portuguese, a *conquistadore* and a nun were enamored of each other and this led them to do things that they couldn't talk about even in the confessional. A baby was born.

Bad timing. This was just as the Inquisition was heating up. Offenses such as theirs were not to go unpunished—unless, of course, someone had pull with the Church authorities. The pair didn't know anyone important enough to save them. They were condemned, chained to each other for eternity by the church, literally locked in each other's embrace and cemented alive inside a little room in the middle of the thick fort wall.

When the British were in Malacca the first time, they tore down the fort wall and found the two skeletons in their deathly embrace. Ever since then, there have been stories of a heavy-set black-bearded soldier and a woman in a long brown habit roaming the slopes of the hill, appearing to float, as their feet are always shrouded in mist. According to reports, she, the nun, can be quite nice, especially to children, but the soldier has a mean streak and likes to throw people against walls and to set dogs barking.

I asked Alfonso which one he saw and he admitted he hadn't really seen either one. "But I seen the dogs barking, lah."

We climbed to the top of the steep hill to the statue of Saint Francis Xavier. Now, here was a man with deep, black eyes and a ready, radiant face who leapt out of bed, smiling even before coffee after having slept an average of only three hours a night, whose stated ambition was to convert Asia to Christianity. To spread the word, he walked barefoot across a tropical island, through jungle and swamp, and sailed into the hostile harbors of Japan and China. He converted twenty thousand souls in his ten-year career, this "Heavenly Pilgrim," as he came to be known, and more

surprising perhaps, he managed to reform the Portuguese who had fallen into debauchery in Goa.

But try as he might, he could not stop the fornicating in Malacca. One Portuguese soldier, like I said, got a nun knocked up.

Ed: Bad habit, that.

Cin: You're right. And another man, one of Alfonso's ancestors, had something like twenty-four wives! And the priests were more interested in making money than in making converts to the glory of the Lord.

Xavier was incensed by the weak morals of the Malaccan governor who refused him the use of a ship so that he could continue on his mission, refused him because the ship could be better used to carry cloves back to Goa.

Ed: Better profits than prophets, I guess.

Cin: Well, you can imagine, Xavier was none too pleased. So when he left the port, after balancing on a rock by the shore at low tide, he took off his shoes before getting into a boat. While he pounded off the Malaccan mud that had dirtied the soles, he cursed the governor to a horrible death, did the smiling, saintly Francis Xavier.

He had only one follower with him when he died on a small island off the coast of China. He was buried in a shallow grave without coffin and covered with lime to speed up the decomposition of the body so that the jackals wouldn't desecrate his remains. When the new governor in Malacca heard of this, he ordered the remains of the holy man brought back to Malacca.

Ed: What happened to the old governor?

Cin: He had been taken back to Portugal in chains under charges of corruption and died of leprosy while in prison, as Xavier had ordained.

On the island, when they exhumed the body of Xavier, they found it had not decomposed at all. Apparently, the lime had interacted with that particular type of soil and caused the body to mummify. His cheeks were still pink.

Ed: So much for the miracle of uncorrupted flesh.

Cin: Yeah? What about the miracle of that particular chemical reaction

occurring? The youthful body was brought back to Malacca. Word spread of the miracle and, eventually, Francis Xavier was sainted and put on display. It was then that souvenir seekers started pulling off his fingers as holy relics. He had been buried in the church on top of St. Paul's Hill for about seventy-six years, buried in Malacca, the only place he ever really hated. Then he was moved to Goa.

From the top of the hill, Alfonso and I surveyed the land and sea below me. The leaves of trees were yellow in the extended drought. Alfonso outlined with his finger where the fort wall once stood before the English blew it up.²⁵ He showed me where the shoreline had been, now so far away after centuries of silting and decades of land reclamation. The rock Xavier had stood on is now in a shallow pit in the middle of a shaded park on reclaimed land.

In the distance, we could pick out an island, the one we passed in the storm on the night of my rescue, Upeh Island. He patted a red laterite rock in the church wall to show me the kind of rock they took from the island.

When I looked out at Upeh again, it was floating in the strait at the end of a rainbow. Alfonso suggested we go there to look for a pot of gold. The truth is, Alfonso would walk a mile for a cliché, but he somehow gets you to believe that he thinks he is being original.

"But how come we have a rainbow and still we get no rain?" he complained. "What kind of promise is that, lah?" Alfonso was having a dialogue with the deity as we entered the roofless church.

From the back of the ruins, rising behind the hill where we stood, we could see Mount Ledang, an equal-sided triangular-shaped mountain. Nearby we could see *Bukit China*, China Hill, a knoll full of circular Chinese graves.

Speaking of graves, inside the church was a whole quarryful of tombstones. One had a Portuguese ship carved on it. Most of them had family crests. But the interesting thing was that three or four were carved with a frieze of a skull and crossbones. I mentioned to Alfonso that it

25 In 1807, under orders of the British Resident of Malacca, Major Farquhar, the fort was destroyed rather than be returned to the Dutch. Only the Porta de Santiago, or St. James's Gate, remains of *A' Famosa*. This was due to the fortuitous and last-minute intervention of Sir Thomas Raffles. Ed, ed.

appears he wasn't the only Portuguese pirate, but he didn't think it was a joke. One of the graves was that of an early Bishop of Japan who died en route. He thinks the bishop wanted people who saw his grave to be reminded of death and, therefore, not to forget to give generously when it came to tithing time.

I found out later that the skull and crossbones was a symbol used by the Knights Templar and the Freemasons. At least that is the truth according to Planter Wiggins, who studied about this a lot. You ought to see his library.

But I'm jumping ahead again. It's hard to keep this story in order, 'cause why? Because...

You get into talking like this in Malacca, lah, cause why? Because that's the way they talk and then they draw out the "Becau-au-se" singing like this: "Becau-au-se, lah!"

Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, confused in Malacca on our first spin through the center of town. We crossed the bridge over the river where—and this is on all their tourist brochures—"Where it all began!" From the beginning, as long as man has memory in Malacca, it was the river that brought barter goods from the rain forest and here, at the river's mouth, natives, jaws agape with awe, reached out and touched the world. This puny little river opened up onto a broad bay full of ships from faraway places like Persia and China. Jumbo junks, five stories high, splashed their anchors here. Sleek, fleet fleets of outriggers with fifty oarsmen each²⁶ streaked into port from Oceania, skidding to a halt with a spray in front of the lumbering century-old teak barges from Pegu.

"Step right up, folks, for the big market! Whatever you like, we got it here in Malacca: cloves and mace and musk, damask, damascene and diamonds, rubies and pearls, mirrors and glass beads, tamarind, tin, satins, velvet, silk, skins, apes, slaves of several colors, ivory, ebony, rare plumage from birds of paradise, and birds' nests for soup, opium, aphrodisiacs, gold, and rice."

The river and the sea defined the contours of the town. Between them, streets, though crooked, evolved with their own logic. The center of town has been growing with the flow of the river for six or seven hundred years.

²⁶ Some *kora kora*, as the Portuguese called them, carried as many as 140 oarsmen and could cover 160 miles in a single day. Extremely swift. Ed, ed.

Alfonso took me along a narrow meandering lane between rows of old two-story stucco buildings. We crossed the river again before we came to the Majestic Hotel beside a hairpin bend in the lazy old river.

But that day, the river was frisky, barely able to stay within its banks. I was surprised that it was so clean.

"Or so high, come to think of it," said Alfonso, scratching his head. "It's not supposed to be high tide now."

Old man Leong, the grandfather of the family that owns and benignly neglects the Majestic Hotel, was standing in his white undershirt and striped pajama pants at the wrought-iron gate in front of the hotel's parking area. He was stroking the few, long strands of white hair growing from a mole at the side of his chin, stroking with a nail on his little finger as long as a grapefruit knife. He said that, in China, legend has it that the Yangtze River runs clean like this once every thousand years, and when it does, it brings a time of prosperity... But when the Malacca River runs clean, "I don't think so good luck, ah!"

His eyes glazed in thought for a moment, then he straightened up, slightly tottering in an old man's panic, turned and hobbled as fast as he could into the hotel, yelling something in Chinese that I found out later meant: "Fill up all buckets! Now! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Then call for a big tank to be delivered today. Hurry! Hurry! No water! Hurry!"

His reasoning went something like this: "No rain, yet clean river water. Clean water must have come from reservoir. If no rain, no more water in the reservoir, no water for us. Finished already, ah!"

He was right. In the middle of the drought, some factory foreman upriver fell asleep on his watch and accidentally allowed some highly toxic substance to leak into the river. Afraid of the ecological effects, and probably more so of having to pay for those effects, the plant manager went to his friend at the water department and convinced him—I wonder how?—to allow some precious water to wash the mistake out to sea. Unfortunately, they got to talking over some whiskey about the latest scandal of the *bomoh* murderer and forgot to put the plug back in. The reservoir for the city was drained.

The water shortage in the middle of a drought was like a mouth full of dry crackers. At times, the pipe in my shower only managed to clear its

throat when I turned on the tap, struggling with laryngitis to explain to me, "No water!" With luck, drips trickled out of the showerhead, making hair-washing a luxury. I found a beauty shop down the road that had their water shipped in. They took care of me; I could have clean hair, with a great head massage thrown in. Even so, clean hair felt somehow elitist to me at the time.

Major companies in the new industrial parks had to call in water tankers from all over Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, and had them waiting in long lines—hundreds of them—continuously feeding the unquenchable thirst of their machines. People formed lines too, at the public water outlets; at least they formed lines when they were being polite and fair. But people with hot, sweaty bodies are rarely polite or fair. Heated quarrels flared up about who should get to use the public water outlet first. Unkind remarks about the other's family and what they did during the Big War were hurled about. There was not enough water for everyone. Fights broke out.

Some people squabbled with their neighbors for flushing their toilet. Clothes could not be washed as often as before, and the price of perfume skyrocketed. Restaurants no longer served water unless requested; the sale of beer, never modest in Malacca, soared. As the water shortage continued, the lobby of the Majestic, with its Formica bar, became more and more populated, like a water hole in a desert oasis where even hostile species observe a tacit truce for the sake of survival.



The Majestic Hotel probably once was genuinely majestic. It was originally a home built for a large Chinese family, nuclear and extended, then distended to include aunts and second cousins, grandmothers one through five as well as ancient concubines, maids and the rickshaw puller all under one roof of palatial proportions. It seemed especially palatial to me, after having lived for weeks in a modest Malay home.

The building had aged. The stairway up to my room offered a loose banister for support, and each step had been sculptured by the buff of a

million soles. From the first decades of constant scrubbing by the bound servants of the family, the wood-grain on the floor of my room had been raised to a satiny finish. The fixtures in the bathroom were Victorian, like the long, chipped, porcelain bathtub with clawed legs. A historian on holiday who stayed here one night hesitated to turn on a faucet, thinking it should be preserved in a museum.

The rest of the colonial Majestic, too, was rusting and crumbling, barely maintained, partially remodeled and done poorly, but it was once the gathering spot for rubber planters and remains a haven today for the romantic-at-heart. Some visitors see the weedy parking lot outside filled with bougainvillea plants in clay pots set on top of rusted folding chairs and turn around disappointedly at the gate. Some enter the lobby, looking for Malacca's version of a Singapore Sling like they'd had at Raffles. They find only a beer bar cum reception desk, an almost-empty display case, and a surly, portly, bald Chinese man named Leong, the old man's grandson, I think. Leong will gladly serve a cold beer in an iced glass to a paying customer, but don't expect a smile until he gets to know you better, say in a decade or so.

The lobby is large, with four doors beneath arched transoms leading to rooms on each side. The doors were once painted yellow and trimmed with pale green. They have since been repainted brown and beige by age. The tile floor shows the eroding tread of time; it is a repetitive, tri-colored star design that must have been painfully vibrant when new and clean, neither of which applies now.

In the center of the lobby, beneath each one of five lethargically whirling ceiling fans are several clusters of low-to-the-floor bamboo furniture with cushions that sag under the weight of years. These surround glass-topped coffee tables. Here you will find a handful of intrepid tourists and a wide assortment of local characters sharing their bits of fact and fantasy about Malacca.

At about five in the afternoon, when the western rays stab into the hotel vestibule and the back of the long lobby disappears in the contrasting shadows, Leong wipes down the black Formica bartop and waits. Soon local men, rarely women, slither out of the intense sun and onto one of five bar stools for a cold glass of brew. And then the talk begins.

Man #1, putting down the Star he'd been browsing, comments, "Seen in the paper today the gov'ment is tying up some more of our taxes; they hired some American scientists up from Singapore to get rain to fill the reservoir back up."

"How's that work?" asks Man #2.

Man #1 explains, "They're using this orgone box invented by a fellow named Reich. They claim they have a machine that will draw energy from the cosmos, something like the Chinese *ch'i* power. Am I right, Leong?"

Leong said nothing. "Look at him." Man #1 nods his head sideways to indicate Leong. "He doesn't even change his expression.

"Leong! You're going to have to quit butting into our conversation like this!

"Well, anyway, the way I misunderstand it, with this box they can concentrate this energy on a cloud and press a few buttons, and the cloud moves right over the reservoir and dumps tons of water. The government claims there is no expense involved because of a guarantee, no payment unless it rains."

Man #2 is disgusted. "Of all the hair-brained... I'd be happy to offer them the same deal."

"You gotta make it believable. That's the trick. Sounds to me like we bought ourselves a high-tech *bomoh*, ah!"

Everyone at the bar agreed, "Ah!"

Some research by Vijay, the newspaper reporter, revealed that the high tech *bomoh* (witch doctor) came from a firm that only a few months before had been a fruit juice company. It had been based first in Hawaii, then suddenly moved to Singapore. There its entire working assets amounted to two Singapore dollars. Wilhelm Reich, the inventor of this magic orgone box that is considered a hoax by many in the scientific community, died in prison. He was the man best remembered for the slogan: "Make love, not war."

Vijay said he saw the apparatus and according to him it had "...this four-sided metal arm with a couple of cone things that revolved around, isn't it?" (He used that tag at the end of the sentence, indicating his Indian descent.) It's powered by a motor, plugged into an outlet on the roof of the

Ramada Hotel, presumably because that is the tallest building in town. There are a few upside-down plastic pails, and there's this other contraption with five more cones, one pointing at the sky. Some of the cones look like they have light bulbs in them; a couple have glass spheres.

"How does it work? Actually, I haven't a clue," said Vijay, raising his hands in bewilderment and letting his head bounce loosely sideways. "It looks like something a schoolboy would put together for a science project that was due the next day," Vijay explained, smiling with glee; he loves to find rank muck in the ranks of the high-ranking mucky-mucks.

From the beginning, there were lots of people who had their doubts about the high-tech *bomoh*. It seemed to them that some officials in the government were trying so hard to be up-to-date that they became easy marks for any con artist who used science and technology instead of the old smoke bombs and mirrors to fool the naive "natives."

So when the news broke about the discovery of the wreck of the *Flor de la Mar* by using a satellite to pinpoint the exact location, there were many skeptics.



Ed: Run that name by me again.

Cin: What? You don't know about the *Flor de la Mar*, the Flower of the Sea, the flagship of the Portuguese conqueror Alfonso d'Albuquerque that sank after leaving Malacca? Well, neither did I until I got there. I remember a conversation at the Majestic while sitting in one of the circles of cushioned chairs in the lobby. Some people claim that the ship was supposed to be loaded with the wealthiest treasure ever to be lost at sea. In its hold, besides the plundered gold of Malacca, was the throne of the defeated sultan, intricately carved, and gilded, and embedded with precious sapphires and moonstones. The ship also carried a golden ring with a large red ruby, a gift from the King of Siam to the potentate of Portugal, carried back to Malacca by the first ambassador to Siam, Duarte Fernandes. (More about this ancestor of Alfonso later.) Perhaps the sacred *kris* of Hang Tuah

was also part of the loot on board—though some insist it had been thrown into the River Duyung. Much of the history of Malacca is beset by this kind of controversy.

Also carried aboard the ship were six statues of bronze or gold—the accounts vary. I read up on this. There were these heavy cast-metal lions taken from the steps of the Sultan's palace—or was it his mausoleum?—intended to be used as ornaments on Alfonso d'Albuquerque's own sepulcher.

Albuquerque was heartbroken, his letters say, when he lost these statues along with his ship. He regretted their particular loss even more than the personal loss of 400,000 *crustado* and another 100,000 for his king, the total value of the booty estimated today at nine billion US dollars. But Albuquerque was fretting over those lions.

Ed: Those must have been some dandy lions.

Cin: Ouch! Ed! Your blooming puns!

Ed: You want an apology? *She ignored my question and continued.*

Cin: Alfonso Fernandes, my customs-agent-pirate friend, was a frequent patron of the Majestic lobby in the afternoon. That day he sat on the cushioned chair beside me. When he heard about all the treasure reported to be on board the wreck, he scoffed, "Unlikely story. They never got gold out of the Sultan's istana, that's the palace, lah! When Albuquerque's men rushed up the hill to the palace early the next morning, the day after we'd won the bridge," he said, taking personal pride in a victory his Portuguese ancestors had won five hundred years ago, "well, when our guys got up that hill, we didn't find any gold. Cannot, lah. Finished already!" His hands pivoted at the wrist, indicating a negative.

"Cause why?" he continued. "Because all our men saw was the arse end of the last of the sultan's twenty elephants disappearing into the jungle, that's why. They weren't loaded with trinkets and toiletries, you can be sure of that. They were loaded down with all the gold the sultan could pile on. Now, elephants can carry a lot of gold, lah!

"It's true, lah! The Portuguese knights were so peed off—sorry my words—that they set the palace on fire. But this got Albuquerque mad, because why?"

Vijay, turning around on his bar stool, answered. "Because he figured there might be something else worth taking, isn't it? And old man Albuquerque—he was about sixty-three then, ancient in that era when few reached fifty—he was not someone you would want angry at you. He was an ornery devil "determined to make himself famous by cruelty alone" as one of his contemporaries wrote about him. Once, someplace in India, after a rebellion had collapsed, a group of Indian rebels surrendered and were returned to the Portuguese under a guarantee from Governor Albuquerque that their lives would be spared. Each lost his right hand, an ear and his nose, cut off by command of Albuquerque. He was a man of his word; he had spared their lives."

Alfonso Fernandes puffed on his clove cigarette, pouting. "Don't say nothing bad about Albuquerque. He's a national hero of the Portuguesees and especially to this particular Portugoose. Never mind this fellow," he said to me and referring to Vijay. "So you see, lah, the sultan took all the gold. No more, lah. Finish already."

"Not true, ah! The victorious Portuguese soldiers were allowed to plunder the native godowns and vaults under the wealthy merchants' houses." Jimmy, a well-built Chinese man in a fine-tailored silk shirt had walked into the conversation as if he knew everyone there, and as if they were all waiting for his opinion.

"Only for three days though, and only until sundown. Then the plundering had to stop, lah." Alfonso was being defensive.

Jimmy was teasing. "Yeah! What restraint! What a humanitarian! Only three days from sunup to sundown to take whatever or whomever they wanted. Can you imagine the havoc? Like one of those game shows we see on TV where a housewife is given a shopping cart and five minutes to grab all the groceries she can." He laughed mockingly.

Oh! By the way, Jimmy Ng is a creep, but I didn't know it at the time. He's about my age, thinks he's God's gift to women, likes to take them on jungle excursions and... but that's another story. I'll get to that later.

Another guy who was sitting around with us that night had the habit of wiggling his legs as if he needed to go to the can. Dominique D'Abreu, like his good buddy Alfonso, was also a Portuguese from the Settlement, a cluster of houses about a mile south of town. Most of the people who live

there claim some Iberian ancestry. His mouth held precious few teeth, fewer even than Alfonso's. His skin was almost as light as mine with a tan; his mother is a *nonya*, a mixture of Chinese and Malay.²⁷ He calls himself a "Heinz 57" breed, a mixture of a little English stock, Dutch, and probably some *orang asli*, the aboriginal people of the Malay Peninsula. Alfonso hinted that there might also be an orangutan swinging around in Dominique's family tree.

Dominique said, with legs wiggling and hands rubbing together with excitement, "I can imagine that by evening most of the Portuguese soldiers got themselves quite a haul. Pockets so heavy," he chuckled, "their pants must have been falling down."

Jimmy agreed. "Every fighting man had at least as much as the king's share. So there was a lot of gold on the *Flor de la Mar*, even if it was just the personal loot carried off by the ordinary soldiers."

Vijay added, "Let's not forget about the gold that was offered to Albuquerque. A Javanese family living in Malacca was caught red-handed in the act of treason, isn't it? Albuquerque sentenced all the male members of the clan to be beheaded. Then the wife came and offered him a fantastic sum, something like a hundred tons of gold, if Albuquerque would change his mind."

"Albuquerque turned her down, lah," claimed Alfonso, defending his namesake. "He told the woman you can't buy justice from the Portuguese King with gold."

Vijay smirked. "A man of principles was Albuquerque. Not swayed even by a hundred tons of gold, isn't it?"

Jimmy suggested, "He probably had more gold than he could carry already, ah."

Dominique shook his head as well as his legs. "Still, it seems strange. The *Flor de la Mar* was an old ship already, lah, when he loaded her down with gold. They had worried about how seaworthy she was a long time before Captain Sequeira set sail on the first Portuguese voyage to

27 Young women from the Straits Chinese families were called *nonya*; the men were called *baba*. Ed, ed.

Malacca.²⁸ So why put the richest treasure ever known on board a ship that had been around the Cape a couple of times and was probably full of wormholes? It don't make no sense, lah! Those ships were none that good even under normal conditions. Albuquerque needed to do some fixing after sailing only from India to Sumatra. I don't see why they would risk so much on one old ship, lah!"

"Three ships," Vijay corrected. "Another junk was lost in the same storm, isn't it?"

Jimmy asked, "They find the location of both ships, ah?"

Alfonso said. "That's another thing that bothers me about this story. You don't need a satellite to find the location where the ship sank, lah. The location was never lost. The local priest, old Father de Silva, knows where it is, for San Pedro's sake. The map is in the library in Lisbon. He saw it there once.

"No, it was the treasure that was lost, not the location. Albuquerque knew exactly where his *Flor de la Mar* went down, lah. He went back to the same place, sent divers down, but it was too deep, lah! No can. Finish already." Again his hand pivoted to show a negative.

Dominique, legs fidgeting, sighed. "Even if they do find the place, it's under—oh how many—maybe fifty feet of mud by now, lah, pressed hard as rock under fifty feet of ocean water for five hundred years.²⁹ How can?"

Jimmy jumped in, taking his turn. "Can, ah! They got big salvage dredges now, like tin mines for the ocean floor. They could eat through an island in a week. That's why they're selling stock in this company. They need capital for the big equipment for underwater excavation."

A man at the bar beside Vijay turned on his stool. "Still, they won't find

28 Diogo Lopes de Sequeira landed in Malacca in 1509. Some of his men were subsequently taken prisoner.

Even before that, in 1506, there was a question whether or not the *Flor de la Mar* was "fit to sail" with an important cargo such as spices. Yet, in January of 1512, Albuquerque chose this same ship to carry the richest cargo in the world! Strange. See: *Document 1, Documents on the History of the Portuguese Patronage in the Far East* and annotated by De Sa Insulindia, Artur Basilio. Ed, ed.

29 To be more accurate, it is most likely under 37 meters of water and 15 meters of packed silt. Ed, ed.

nothing. A guy I know met an Australian frogman who had done underwater sabotage during World War II while working out of a mini-sub. He thinks that that Aussie found the *Flor de la Mar*. And right after the war, he came up here, staying on his private boat, all the while he was bringing up the booty with no one the wiser, and then he went back to Melbourne and bought a big house, where he lives today. No one can say where he got so rich. He probably got the gold."

Alfonso wasn't convinced. "He could have salvaged some other wreck, lah. Mother Mary! There must be hundreds of them sunk all over the place, lah, during those hundreds of years that they have been sailing and bashing into underwater rocks around Malacca. Like that guy, lah, who just found the wreck of the *Diana* full of Ming or Ching or Sing or whatever pottery. Sold it all at an auction for seventeen million. The guy who found it, his share would buy a nice house, for sure, lah!"

Alfonso got up and came sliding onto the cushion next to me on the sofa, bumping cheeks. He wanted a light. I checked. That was all the smiling keyboard seemed to want, sort of like a brother.

Vijay picked up his beer and came over to sit in the chair that Alfonso had just vacated. He cleared his throat with authority. "My sources—who often have had too much beer to know what they are talking about—tell me that American oil men worked underwater looking for oil—well, at least that's what they told the Indonesian government they were doing off North Sumatra. Under this pretext, they set off explosives and blew up the site. If they found anything, they aren't saying. But they left the place a mess where nobody but a very lucky person is going to find a single *crustola*."

"*Crustado*," corrected Dominique, legs still pumping.

Alfonso wanted to rescue the conversation from complete agreement. "But they still aren't going to find as much gold there as they will in the jungle."

Dominique was quick to disagree. "Some of the men on the sinking *Flor de la Mar* tied gold to their waist even while they were going down, in the hopes they could tread water long enough to get on board a hastily built raft."

Ed: That shows a certain amount of devotion to their gold.

Cin: It does that. You got to want that gold pretty bad to tie it around your waist before you dive into a stormy ocean. Gold makes people do strange things."

Vijay sneered, "Meanwhile, your hero, Albuquerque, is busy pulling a beautiful princess out of the water, a slave he was bringing home for his king, isn't it?"

Dominique interrupted, "She was only a child. I mean, it wasn't for what you're thinking, lah."

"Never mind that," Alfonso brushed him aside. "The point is that you would be more likely to find gold in the jungle where the sultan had it buried just before he died while on the run."

Vijay corrected. "He didn't die on the peninsula. They found his grave in Sumatra."

Alfonso argued. "That doesn't mean he didn't hide the treasure in the jungle here, lah. I knew a guy, a policeman, who was up in Asahan, in the foothills of Gunung Ledang once, patrolling through the jungle during the Emergency.³⁰ He came across a cluster of stones that seemed to be markers of a sort. He went back years later to search for them, but cannot find again, lah."

Jimmy laughed. "If it was buried in the jungle, most likely some Chinese man found it when he was clearing the land for a rubber plantation."

Vijay disagreed. "In that case, it would probably have been an Indian who found it since we usually did all the real work. We built this land with our sweat, our blood and our tears. The Indians were the "mules", the working slaves, the drudges who came in droves, isn't it. If it hadn't been for the Indians—"

"If it hadn't been for the Indians," Jimmy joked, "Malacca's Red Plaza would still be white."

"Why's that?" I asked. It was a standard joke in Malacca. Vijay, knowing what was coming, groaned and rolled his eyes.

"Betel nut," Alfonso started to explain, flashing his piano keys. Now his

30 The Communist terrorist insurrection between the years 1948 and 1960 was labelled simply, "the Emergency." Ed, ed.

legs were wiggling too. He was razzing Vijay. One thing about Malacca—the different races have had to live close to each other for so long that they've invented many ways of having friendly fun abusing each other.

Dominique continued the explanation. "Betel nut turns everything red when they spit out the saliva it causes, like, for instance, at the bottom of white walls. You see it still today every once in a while, the bottom of a wall splattered red with it, lah. Mostly, it's the Indians who do the spitting."

Alfonso took his turn now. "So some smart government man decides to paint the whole building, every one of them, red. Easier, lah, than to stop the Indians from chewing and splattering." Rat-a-tat.

Vijay, taking the jibes good-naturedly. "Carry on. Carry on, boys. But remember, if it hadn't been for the so-called Tamil 'mules,' the world would have had far less rubber."

Alfonso quipped. "Maybe if you had had a few more rubbers, the world could have had far less Indians." Rat-a-tat.

Vijay countered. "I'll ignore all advice on birth control coming from a Catholic who lives in a Settlement overfilled with Portuguese. Portuguese! How you people were ever given partial *bumi*³¹ status, I can't understand."

Alfonso responded, "Because we have been around so long, lah."

Jimmy complained. "What about the Straits Chinese? We've been around longer, ah. When Admiral Cheng Ho arrived, there were Chinese living here already, ah, and married to the local girls, and that's way back in the early 1400s."

Admiral Cheng Ho, I was to learn, was the Three-Jeweled Eunuch who arrived with a fleet of fifty ships. One day, so the story goes, he was walking along the beach with Parameswara, the founder and first maharajah of Malacca. Parameswara was bragging to old Cheng Ho that he had as many soldiers as there were fibers in a sago palm. Now, if you ever saw a sago trunk opened up, you'd know that Para was telling a tall one.

Cheng Ho just smiled and invited the other man on board his junk, a

31 *Bumi* as in *bumiputra* or sons of the soil. The Malaysian government, in order to re-establish an economic balance between the various ethnic groups, had given economic and political advantages to this group. Generally, those eligible for these benefits are people of Malay ancestry. Ed, ed.

fifteenth-century five-story-high luxury liner with buffet lunches in the ballroom and mahjong and shuffleboard on the afterdeck. Cheng Ho then took Parameswara into his private cabin and showed him a wall shimmering with gold. On closer inspection, Parameswara found the wall to be covered with tiny gold pins, each one, said Ho, representing a thousand of his emperor's soldiers. Parameswara gulped hard and decided then and there to sign a friendship treaty.

Vijay thought Jimmy was a historical revisionist. "If we wish to go back to the beginning, isn't it, to see who was here first, we should not forget the ancient Hindu kingdoms that dotted this coast."

Alfonso added. "And disappeared. No more, lah. Finish already! Gone. Gone with the wind, lah! But we Portuguese, we are still here. That's why we are *bumi*, lah."

"True, ah! You Portuguese never know when to go home," quipped Jimmy.

At that moment, a large egg-shaped Chinese man with a smooth fat face waddled by. He was chauffeur Chong On, I learned later. He was followed at a distance by an elegant Caucasian gentleman in a long-sleeved batik shirt cut straight at the bottom and untucked, yet looking dressy. The second man swung a cane in such a way as to make you wonder if he was about to do an old soft-shoe dance number. As he was passing and while putting on his hat, he saw me and stopped in mid-motion. He nodded "Good evening" all around and, with a graceful bow, took my hand in his, looking me directly in the eye as Vijay presented him to me as Planter Percival Wiggins.

In a deep and resonant baritone voice he said, "How extraordinarily pleased I am to meet you, a lily among these thorns, I must say..." His hair was white with golden overtones. His face wore a kindly smile beneath an aquiline nose.

He turned my hand over in his. "May I have the privilege of looking at your palm? A hobby of... Hm-m! Intelligent. Adventurous, I see. Extraordinary. You shall never want for money."

Then looking up at me, still holding my hand, "But you don't believe this sort of thing, do you? Personally, I have never given the palm reading much credence. I learned the 'Cheiro' technique for one specific reason

only: even as a very young man, I had become interested in the gentle ways of the opposite gender, and I noticed that a woman, no matter what her age or station, is almost always willing to put her hand in the hands of a palm reader. And once a man holds a lady's hand, he has made all the contact necessary to know what could flow between them if the fates allow. And in my years of experience, I have never known a lady to hold back...her hand from me. It's an innocent indulgence, I think. What?"

"Would you like a beer?" Dominique or Alfonso asked him. My eyes were still looking into Planter Wiggins' as he sat down in the chair brought for him and placed beside me. His eagle-like eyes were so full; it was as if they had lived many lives, and yet they were brimming with vitality.

"A beer?" answered Percival. "How extraordinarily kind of you," he smiled and tapped the table with his fingertips, "but I'm afraid I can't. Chong On—he's my rather stout driver whom you have just seen walk by," he added for my benefit, "will get impatient. Now he is waiting for me in our 'limousine.' That's our Morris Oxford, in case you are interested in vintage machinery. We don't care to use the word 'old' around Rumah Wiggins, our cottage home out on the Asahan plantation. Chong On can be very insistent, you see, especially if he hasn't eaten within the hour. He is one of those rarest of individuals who knew, almost from birth, what he was destined to do in his life. In his case it was clear: he was born to eat."

Later Percival told me more of Chong On's story. From very early on, it became apparent that one family could not possibly afford to feed his unappeasable appetite. He was raised on the plantation, eating breakfast at one home, lunch at another, and dinner at still another family's table, complimenting the cooks' efforts by the intensity with which he gobbled their food. The families alternated so that no one family would have the burden of the major meal two days in a row.

This was not enough for Chong On. He soon learned to cook for himself, starting by making in-between-meal banquets for himself. He became an excellent chef and was given employment at a major hotel in Singapore.

Ah, but then there was his tragic flaw. Chong On was just too good a cook. Upon broiling a steak, he could not resist the temptation of sampling a little slice; sometimes, admittedly, he got carried away and carved off half the steak for himself. Soon, the management understandably started hearing

complaints from patrons about the missing portions. One day after his sampling, the sirloin he ended up serving was the size of a miniature *fillet mignon*. That did him in. Chong On was relieved of his position as chef.

Ed: Everything was at steak for him.

Cin: Prime cut. But the manager was a kind soul. He let Chong On stay on as the bartender. Yet this was not to be for long. Chong On, denied access to food, was like a wild animal behind the bar. Drooling, he would glare at the waiters walking by with their platters full of his one true love: food.

It was too much for poor Chong On. He leapt over the bar—"extraordinary, really, for such a large man," commented Percival—"grabbed hold of a waiter and forced him into the cloak room, where Chong On held him off with a wine bottle while he ate the entire tray full of meals.

That was the end of Chong On in the city. He came back to the plantation where Percival gave him a job because he knew his father, "and he has proven to be totally loyal, if fed regularly.

"No doubt he is famished at this moment," said Percival, peering through the hotel's front door into the dark parking lot. He talks about his plans for dinner while he is eating his lunch. Right now, I am confident in saying that he is sitting in our limousine in the moonlight, passing the time dreaming of his love by pouring his whole heart onto paper, but not in poetic verse. Rather, right now he is composing an ideal menu.

"I would love to stay, but I really mustn't disappoint Chong On. However, there are a couple of points I wanted to make *en passant*, as it were. You see, Mr. Rangjit and I were sitting back there in the dark, shamelessly eavesdropping on your conversation.

"I do rather like this lobby. I must come back here more often. This is where, at one time, we held our Rotary meetings, you know? It was converted from a colonial Chinese mansion into a hotel the year I came to Malacca, 1954. I was here at the grand opening gala. Extraordinary! Judging from the style of the doors and transom, I should say this structure was built at approximately the same time as the Malacca Club, the former Malacca Club, that is. That would date this building at about 1912.

"So, then, as to those points I wish to mention: first, the story of Cheng Ho and his cabin wall full of golden pins is probably apocryphal, especially since Cheng Ho was not present on the first ambassadorial voyage from Ming China.³² Also, considering that lying at anchor in the harbor was the implied threat of fifty leviathan junks carrying over fifteen thousand fighting men, it is unlikely that the local river chieftain of a fledgling settlement, Parameswara, would need to be additionally impressed.

"My second point about gold and Malacca is a provocative one to ponder. Do not forget that this peninsula was once known as the fabled Golden Chersonese, rumored through the ages to be a fabulous source of gold. Remember, too, that the other name of our mountain, Gunung Ledang, is Mount Ophir, and it was to Ophir, a land belonging to the Queen of Sheba, that ships were sent by King Solomon to bring back that extraordinary gold, 'red gold' as the Old Testament describes it.

"So, having tempted you with those small grains of thought for you to mull over in your minds, I will have to beg your leave, good gentlemen," and then turning to me, "mademoiselle. I believe feeding time is drawing nigh for Chong On." He leaned forward on his cane to stand up, stopped, turned toward me and handed me a card that had appeared in his fingers seemingly out of nowhere.

"My dear, please accept my card and do call sometime soon so that we may get together, perhaps for tiffin? If you plan to stay here awhile, I would like to offer you the use of my library, if you desire. I will be looking forward to your call. Now, if you will excuse me, good evening."

With that, he planted his cane, raised himself up slowly, with dignity but no apparent difficulty, and walked out to the impatient Chong On who held the car door open and then closed it after he got in.

After considering another round, ordering it, and lighting up a few cigarettes, my new lighter getting a workout, the conversation warmed up anew. By now two sets of knees were bouncing like pistons as Jimmy had joined Dominique in fidgeting.

Vijay said, "If you're looking for gold, you might look right under the old Hong Kong Bank Building down at the foot of St. Paul's Hill. It was

³² The first Chinese ambassador to Malacca was Yin Ching in 1403 for Emperor Yong Lo. Ed, ed.

built on the former site of a cathedral, and cathedrals always had crypts and vaults that were great places for storing old saints or valuables."

"Now how you going to get a permit to dig under the bank? 'I'm only digging for lost treasure, Mr. Policeman.'" Alfonso laughed, rat-a-tat.

Dominique expanded, "If we're thinking of tunnels for storing treasure, some people say that the empty hole for the grave of Francis Xavier up there on St. Paul's, that hole is supposed to open somehow through a hidden passage in the wall to a stairway that goes all the way down to sea level, lah. It was dug in case an escape route was ever needed during a siege. Someone could have hidden gold there, I suppose."

Jimmy pointed his finger at Dominique. "Or there is always the two-mile-long tunnel the Dutch were supposed to have dug between St. John's Hill and St. Paul's, ah!"

Dominique returned the volley. "And don't forget about hiding it in a well, lah. The Dutch never found anything like the treasure they expected in mighty Malacca when they captured the town after the siege. They think that maybe some of the treasure was hidden at the bottom of some well. Never found anything though. Or maybe they did."

Vijay agreed. "There's one story I read about a Portuguese woman who had a vast amount of precious jewelry and tossed it all down a well before escaping into the woods, isn't it."

"Which well?" Alfonso asked, pretending to stand as if he were going to go and look for the treasure right then.

"If I knew, would I tell you?" Vijay answered, bobbing his head in the Indian fashion. "They came across a well when they were remodeling Stadhuys, and people got excited for a while, isn't it, but so far they found only an old clay pipe and some tin dishes."

Jimmy summarized the conversation, "Truth is, no matter where you go in Malacca, you might be sitting right on a spot where some treasure was hidden, ah."

"Everywhere we go," agreed Alfonso. "Could be, lah."

Dominique philosophized, his piston knees still pounding. "And probably someone's already found it, lah, and isn't saying."



The eighty-five-year-old Indian man who had nodded with a diagonal twist of his head when Planter Wiggins mentioned that they had been listening to our conversation and had since been sitting by himself in the shadows now cleared his throat. He had continued eavesdropping with great interest after Wiggins left him, and now wanted to attract our attention. He was promptly invited to join our group and was introduced as Arthur Rangjit, retired court recorder. He was bent over at the shoulders, as office workers often are, bent beneath the burden of all that bureaucratic bull.

Arthur amended the introduction. He had been an assistant court recorder, to be more accurate. "That's what I was for most of my forty years working for the government, I dare say. I was court recorder only the last few years."

He talked with the raspy voice and the occasional squeak that old men often develop. He had a straying memory that was as likely to latch on to a classical quotation or a Malay proverb as it was to continue his story.

"Yes. Yes. Thank you, friend. I WILL have a stout, if you please. My doctor orders me to lay off beer, so now I drink only stout," he said, purposely ignoring the fact that stout is also beer. "I've been having quite a time with my health lately. At my age, things start to break down." Someone handed him a glass and poured his beer which foamed high in the cold glass.

"Cheers! You know, I used to be able to drink from sunup to sundown. No ill effects. I still can... except now I can have only one." His body chuckled, but he made no sound as he laughed. You could tell by the way he leaned into his glass that the old man loved his brew, and he loved telling his story, too.

He savored a sip with his eyes closed. Then he began. "Now, what was it I was going to tell you? Something about gold and....Ah. Now, I remember. Your talk about wells and hiding places triggered my memory, what is left of it." He told us a rather tragic story of "this one Tamil Indian chap named Ahriman."



Arthur had known Ahriman from way back when Ahriman was still wearing short pants, a clean-cut boy frightened of his own shadow, just off the plantation. Arthur was working as a clerk in a government office, and the boy was riding his bicycle back and forth on the brick street outside his window.

"Back and forth. He must have ridden past ten times, probably more as I wasn't spending **all** my time looking out the window, after all. I was paid to work on the books," said Arthur pugnaciously.

Finally, the boy got up his nerve and came into the office. At first, Arthur couldn't hear him when he spoke. "I told him what my mother always said to me: 'If you are shy, your family goes hungry.' So he summoned up all the courage he could muster and asked me again, this time loud enough so that I could hear him."

It appeared that he wanted to apply for a scholarship so that he could go on to school at a higher level. His family didn't have the necessary funds to pay the school fee. "The tuition was quite steep, after all," said Arthur. "I believe it was the English administration's intentional policy, a way of discouraging education among the Indians and Chinese in their colonies. But they did offer a few scholarships, I'll grant them that."

"Well, I gave him the form, and he took it back to his teacher who helped him fill it out. He brought it back shortly and, to make this long part of the story perhaps slightly more condensed—for as the good Doctor Johnson said, 'Brevity is the soul of wit.'"

Arthur paused with his mouth open. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes! Ahriman was accepted. And, to his credit, he did well in school and was sent up to Junior Cambridge A. He was at the top of his class and stayed there; he had a good head, and he kept it down, his nose in the books, I mean. If anything, I think he was a bit too sincere about his studies, felt he had to be the best at everything he tried so that he would be accepted."

"By some miracle of God, I believe a missionary sponsored him—I don't even know if he ever converted from being Hindu. Anyway, Ahriman

found a way to study in England, at Oxford or one of those, you know. He played on the cricket team, married an English woman. They had a child who was, fortunately for the circumstances, quite light of complexion.

"Yet, as the old Malaccans are wont to say: 'When the curry is tasty, the rice is undercooked.' Or as that Scottish gentleman wrote, 'The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men....' something about it going all wrong."³³

"Never mind. So the chap comes home alone, divorced. I met him here at the Majestic one night, shortly after he returned. He was quite broken up about the divorce; you could tell by the way he drank his beer too greedily. He started drinking only after he got back from England, come to think of it.

"Ahriman was well into his cups when he asked me, 'What would my wife, a white professional woman, do here?' This was at the time when Malaysia was a very new country, and there were few positions available for a man of ideas, for a scholar. There were simply no positions open for foreign female academics. It would have been impossible for a woman, a European woman, to feel at home here, especially when she would be limited to a life inside her home after having been accustomed to being treated almost as an equal in her previous society.

"Ahriman went on and on about the reasons why his wife hadn't come back with him until finally I thought: 'Methinks he doth protest too much,' to quote the bard.³⁴

"He must have had some trouble with his English wife. Perhaps it had something to do with the color of his skin, but I was never told; it was never any of my business, so I never asked. Yet I am almost certain that the issue was one of race. However, as the village jurist once said to the judge when asked how he had come to his rather surprising decision: 'When the facts are obscure, sir, as they are in this case, then the reasons for my decision must also be somewhat obscure, lah.'" Arthur chuckled with his body, his shoulders shaking.

Ahriman took a job at the University in Kuala Lumpur. Arthur remembered that he married an Indian woman within a year of his return. She was more Indian than any local Malaysian Indian girl would have

33 "...gang aft agley." 'To a Mouse,' Robert Burns. Ed, ed.

34 *Hamlet*, 3. 2. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Ed, ed.

been.

"Saidi, her name was, as I recall. Ahriman had gone back to Madras from whence his ancestors hailed and looked around until he found a woman from the very core of his culture and untainted by Western values—a beautiful, dark lass from Madras.

"And, at the bat of an eyelid, they had produced offspring, a girl and then a boy. Then, in addition to the expenses of raising these children, they had a lot of other medical expenses, too. Ahriman had a heart problem; he'd had a scare, and spent some time in the hospital." Arthur began talking about his own time in the hospital until Vijay brought him back to the story.

One day, when the older child was five years old, Ahriman was returning home on his motorbike, coming home late from his teaching job. That's what he told his wife. Actually, he was inclined to stop for a couple of beers. Just as the sun was transforming itself into the brightest orb of gold late in the afternoon, Ahriman turned into his driveway to discover a man dressed in white, his head bound up in a turban. This Brahmin priest was in the process of cutting off the head of a cockerel and splattering the spurting blood all over the garage, on his tool chest, on the garbage can—everywhere a bloody mess! Meanwhile his wife, in a trance, was swaying and chanting some gibberish.

When his children saw Ahriman, they came running to him, crying in terror. The curious neighbors looked on. Ahriman was embarrassed and also angry.

He tried to calm his little girl down, gave up and handed her screaming to a neighbor. Then he grabbed his wife by her wrist and dragged her forcibly inside.

She was babbling hysterically, so he slapped her quite hard, harder than he intended to. Then he felt guilty, so he told her he was sorry. But this sudden change in his behavior totally confused his panicking wife. She honestly believed he had been possessed by the devil. And maybe so, he had been drinking.

He held her until she became quiet, held her not with tenderness but in order to protect himself from her pointed, angry-red fingernails. He asked her, "What the hell was all that mumbo-jumbo in the garage?" She told him, between gasping sobs, that she was having the place purified. It was

full of evil spirits; she could feel them. Maybe he couldn't see them or feel them anymore because he had spent too much time in England and lost the eye a Tamil naturally has for this sort of thing.

Again she worked herself into a frenzy and began chanting, chanting, crying out the name of the Hindu God Muruga³⁵ to help them, for her husband was most certainly possessed of an evil spirit.

"Our marriage is like crashing dishes," she told him. A demon had made him drink too much. Evil spirits. Muruga would help them be rid of the evil spirits.

"Damn your priest and his hocus-pocus for making my children cry," the husband shouted at his raving wife. "Damn your soul for your superstitious claptrap. Damn it all! Damn MURUGA!"

In her terror, she broke free of his grasp and slapped him, screaming, "You have cursed yourself and all of us!" He grabbed her again, flung her onto the bed and left for the *kedai kopi*, the local coffee shop, to drown his anger.

A few days after this argument, again at that hour which is neither day nor night, when light is so golden it seems red, Ahriman was riding his motorbike home when he came suddenly upon the scene of an accident, ran over some debris and was catapulted through the air—a human cannonball—towards a tree twenty feet away. With the tree looming ever nearer, he saw a vision of Kali, her pendulous breasts parted by her tongue which was extended between long, pointed fangs, with blood pouring out of her mouth.

He cried out to the god of his youth, "MURUGA!"

When he regained his senses, he found himself lying at the base of the tree. His watch had stopped, broken on impact, but somehow, he had

³⁵ Muruga, according to myth, had an inauspicious beginning as a god. His parents, Lord Siva and the Goddess Parvathi, challenged their two sons to go around the world. The faster of the two would be considered the truly loyal son. Muruga, the younger, ran down to the pier and set sail at once. His older brother, however, merely walked around his parents, saying, "You are my world." When Muruga returned, he found he had run the wrong race, and his sycophantic sibling had won; he retired to the hills where his shrines are now normally located. Ed, ed.

suffered only a few minor scratches. Even his motorbike was functional after he had straightened out the front mudguard with a few judicious kicks. He rode it home, shaken by the whole experience.

When he got home, he told his wife what had just happened to him, still shaking his head in disbelief at the clarity of the vision of Kali. That did it! His wife decided that she would carry the *kavadi*³⁶ at Thaipusam.³⁷

Thaipusam is held at the time of year when the full moon enters the cloud of light called the "Beehive" in the West; it is located in the middle of the constellation Cancer. The Tamil believe that when the light of the full moon flows into and becomes lined up with this magic bit of stellar luminosity, the power of Muruga will beam down from the heavens directly upon those who make sincere petition.

It is for this reason that men have developed a variety of demonstrations to prove their earnestness to the powerful god. After fasting for days and abstaining from carnal pleasures, the priest puts a participant into a trance in the temple, then sticks skewers through his ears, tongue, and nose.

Then the believer goes out into the street and picks up his burden, a *kavadi*, a float supported on long metal poles resting on needle sharp tips that pierce his flesh. It is festooned with peacock feathers surrounding a bronze statue of the elephant-headed deity Ganesh, with dangling costume jewelry sparkling under flashing lights. The lights are powered by heavy batteries trailing behind him in a wagon pulled by hooks tugging and stretching his skin. He pulls it, dancing barefoot on the pavement in the hot tropical sun in apparent bliss within his trance. If that doesn't get Muruga's attention, what will? You would think it would hurt, but it doesn't seem to bother him. That's some trance they go into!

In Kuala Lumpur, after having danced mile upon mile along the burning-hot asphalt, the procession ends at the foot of a long, steep stairway leading up to the Cave in the Rock and a sacred Hindu temple therein. The petitioners, those pulling the burdens, struggle up this last part of their journey. All the while they are urged on by the crowd of well-wishers

36 The *kavati* is a burden born by the faithful during Thaipusam in order to petition Muruga for help or thank him for blessings bestowed.

37 Thaipusam is a festival of penance and vow fulfillment celebrated by Tamil villagers in southern India, but today, most elaborately, in the Indian communities on the Malay peninsula. Ed, ed.

chanting, "Vel! **VEL! VEL!**" Power! **POWER! POWER!**

The seething crowd is made up of relatives who are bound by a tradition so powerful it cannot be violated. They **MUST** be present at this crucial moment to support their dear ones in their toil to attract the attention of Maruga. One simply **MUST** be present, there was no other choice.

And so it was that Ahriman was there to support his wife, although he did not wholeheartedly support what she was doing. As she carried her brass vase of coconut milk—for that was the most that women were allowed to bear—up the steep stairs, he struggled beside her. His children, too tired to walk after so many miles in the sun, were riding on his shoulders, his living kavati.

"**VEL! VEL! VEL!**" The crowd was chanting. Ahriman's heart was pounding. He thought of his children on his shoulders. They must not be hurt. He felt dizzy. A ringing in the ears. "**VEL! VEL! VEL!**" The children. His vision fading... He made it to the top step and set his children down. His knees gave out, and he collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

He was carried into the temple and laid on the floor beside his wife who had gone hysterical and actually impeded people from coming to her husband's aid. When the priest came to take his wife out of her trance, he saw Ahriman and, after studying the situation, asked the wife, "Why did you do this?"

"Do what?" she squirmed.

"Don't lie to me at this moment, daughter. You are in very grave danger. Tell me **WHY!**"

"Because," his wife whimpered. "Because I wanted to put our marriage back together. That is why I carry the *kavati*."

The priest examined her, fury rising crimson in his face. "**DAUGHTER! THE TRUTH!**" he yelled.

The wife took a deep breath, held it for a long moment, and then let it out with a wicked hiss. "Because I wanted to kill him! He has another woman!" Her body shook with gasping sobs, pouring tears of shame into her hands.

Ahriman divorced her soon after. As Arthur commented, "You can tie together broken thread, but broken charcoal is finished, already." The

tragedy and irony is that she was wrong; he didn't have another woman. He was spending more and more time at the *kedai kopi*, romancing more and more bottles of beer, trying to wash memory from his mind.



At this point, if I remember, old man Rangjit agreed to have another drink; and I think I will, too. *Cin got up and fixed another gin and tonic for herself and for me, meanwhile continuing her story.*³⁸

Soon after the divorce, Ahriman left his teaching position at the university and came back to live in Malacca in his aunt's back room. He would set up his typewriter at the front of a *kedai kopi* and write letters for people who couldn't read or write or fill out government forms. He prided himself on a particular love letter he wrote to a customer's boyfriend in Australia. Something about how he was her water buffalo and it was getting close to plowing time.

He earned enough money to keep beer on his table. As Arthur described him, quoting a Malay proverb as usual: "He was a chicken that scratches only enough worms for the morning."

Arthur used to treat him to lunch whenever he stopped in; he was getting so thin. He often forgot to eat. Then Arthur had some problems with his liver, "the doctor said I was lucky, but let's not go into that now." Arthur looked around in case anyone actually wanted to hear about his liver condition but there were no takers.

"Anyway, because of the medical bills, I was a little short of spending money, so I stopped offering him meals. One day, he approached me and asked me why I no longer invited him to lunch. I told him about my liver and the expenses involved in medications. He looked at me seriously, in mock anger, and said, 'So, I see. You are paying your medical bills at my expense, isn't it?'

38 That evening Cin was to go to the well, so to speak, on many occasions, as did I, but for the benefit of brevity I instructed Mrs. Yamamoto to leave out most further references to this in the text. Ed, ed.

"That boy was a clever scamp; he had a good mind. What a waste. He got himself in with a bad crowd, a bunch of no-account rascals by any decent standards, and they were to become his nightly companions. I met him on the rare occasion when I came to this oasis here at the Majestic, but frankly, I didn't care to talk to him while he was with that bunch."

Arthur told us that Ahriman continued to drink. As the alcohol progressed on its inevitable course, taking over his mind, he began to see things in the shadows, those dark and ominous demons who disappeared when he looked at them. Even if he turned to them as quick as lightning, they'd vanish, he'd tell Arthur, but he knew they were there, reptilian beings that oozed from the nightmares of his ancestral Dravidian dreams. Where once he dismissed all superstitions, he now carried several talismans against those demons in his soul, charms sold to him dearly by a village soothsayer whose mouth bled with betel nut. Ahriman, who once wanted to become an Englishman, now slit his finger and made blood oaths to snake gods in order to chase away the ghouls, especially those that imitated the sound of laughter, the haunting sound of his own child left behind in England, laughing.

"One night," said Arthur, sliding forward in his chair, "it seems that Ahriman and his drinking friend, another dark chap who I believe was often in trouble with the law—What was his name? It will come to me in a minute." He paused to tap his memory for a moment but failed to find the name.

"Never mind. The two of them decided to enjoy the fruit of the vine one night and purchased a bottle of what we call 'No-Tax' because it was so cheap the government didn't bother to tax it."

"The stuff is rocket fuel," said Jimmy, his legs now, also pumping excitedly.

"Yeah, lah!" Alfonso agreed. "You don't dare light a cigarette and belch at the same time." Rat-a-tat.

Dominique, legs wiggling, lit a cigarette. Arthur, legs wiggling, took a swig from his mug, burped, and continued.

"The two of them set off in a row boat and headed to one of the nearby islands named—Now, I can't recall the name of that either. Oh! It's a shame when the memory goes!

"Cheers!" He took another large draw from his glass. "Ah!" He sighed with pleasure. "When I was young I used to be able to drink from morning to midnight and I still can, but now I only—What? Did I tell you that one already? Never mind, then.

"Well, these two scamps went out to that island to see the moon through the bottom of that bottle of No-Tax. There they proceeded to get royally potted, when Siva—that was the other fellow's name. I knew I would remember him. Not a good chap, at all. I saw him in court on several occasions, once for stealing and another time for I.C.G.H."

Ed: I know what that is. That's an old Victorian expression put into initials for added discretion meaning "Intentionally Causing a Grievous Heart," a delicate euphemism for rape.

Cin: You're pretty smart. But you must know that already, so back to the story.

Arthur felt it showed the depth to which Ahriman had fallen for him to choose to hang around with a wastrel like Siva. Did I say "hang around?" What an unfortunate choice of words!

It was Siva's plan to go out to the island, but for him it was not just to find a quiet place to drink; he wanted to pick up a smuggled gun from its hiding spot because he had just sold it for cash to a local *hong*, one of the Chinese gangs in Malacca. He didn't want to be late in delivery. And to be caught with a gun was punishable by hanging, so he had another reason for getting it off his hands quickly. He never considered that he was putting Ahriman's life in jeopardy also.

Siva, knowing how superstitious Ahriman had become, decided to "push a pillow toward a drowsy man," as Arthur put it. This was made easier because Ahriman was really blitzed that evening, having been drinking since morning. Siva began telling Ahriman about the ghosts that haunted the area: succubi that lure men to their doom by giving them pleasure in their night dreams, ghosts who hold their decapitated heads in their hands, the clinking chains of prisoners who died screaming on the island, tortured by red ants on their honey-coated faces while their arms and legs were manacled to stakes in the ground "right on that rock where you are standing, Ahriman. Right there!" he pointed to the ground in front of Ahriman, who nervously changed locations, moving farther from the lantern.

Siva squatted in the middle of the walled-in enclosure of a Muslim grave. He tipped the grave marker, grasped and pulled out a metal box from its hiding place underneath. The Coleman lamp on the ground beside him painted fierce shadows on Siva's face. Evil lines drawn there from years of crime revealed the face of Satan himself to poor Ahriman's magnified imagination.

Ahriman, on the uphill side of the grave, went to answer nature's call, his back to Siva, his stream arching into the shadows. He staggered to keep his balance in his tipping world for he was very drunk, and often the ground seemed to dance wildly in front of him.

Siva, meanwhile, sensing Ahriman's vulnerability to suggestion, began weaving yet another story to stand Ahriman's hair on end, the tale of the three-headed snake that, it is said, lives on the island. He talked with exaggerated pauses and dramatic whispers.

He told Ahriman of a stone that glows in the dark, glows like the moon on a misty night. This *gileega* stone was a favorite plaything of the three-headed snake. The serpent loved to roll it back and forth from head to head to other head, using its forked tongues like hockey sticks. The stone was said to be full of magical powers that would give anyone who possessed it control over anyone he met.

If you could manage to grab that stone when the snake was momentarily mesmerized in mid-striking position, then you must run for your life. But since the stone glows in the dark, the snake will always find you, and you are dead unless—unless you take a knife and slit an opening deep into the thick part of your arm and quickly shove the stone into the wound and press the skin closed—all without making a sound despite the pain. Even your heart must be silent for the three-headed snake has six sharp ears and can hear even that. But if the snake does not see or hear you and passes you by in the night, then the power of the stone will be yours.

"But beware!" warned Siva. "Watch out for the flaming eyes of that devil in the disguise of the three-headed snake. Don't let its stare fall upon yours or you will be frozen like a rock unable to escape."

Meanwhile Ahriman, who had been sorely taxed by the No-Tax, began to see a faint light shining in the shadows in front of him. Probably it was the light of their lantern reflecting off some leaves made wet by his own

water; but to him, in his condition, they were the very eyes of the three-headed snake itself. He was momentarily frozen with fear. A breeze swept across the island and moved the branches. He saw the snake's mouths open, showing burning hell inside. Then it seemed to Ahriman that one of the snake's three heads reared up as if to strike. He began to consider that it wasn't such a good idea to be so far from the bright light of the lantern. He edged his way backwards from the snake which he, in his fuzzy drunkenness, was sure was poised to strike. He heard a snap, the cracking of wood. The ground seemed to move and then disappeared from beneath him.

Siva was busy inspecting his gun, checking to see how it had survived its burial, oiling it and loading it. Occasionally, to enjoy the effect his ghost story was having, he glanced up to see Ahriman's dirty white T-shirt in the lantern light. Then, chuckling, he would return his attention to his gun while continuing his story. "Yah, lah. Be careful that the devil snake will not get you."

Siva heard the snap, like wood breaking, a crash, then a splash. He looked up; no Ahriman. He'd been there a second ago. He was gone, vanished into thin air.

Remember that Siva had been drinking, too. His success in frightening Ahriman had come partially because he himself sort of believed the ghost stories he had been telling. Now he stopped in mid-story, his eyes growing wider as he listened. Nothing. He yelled for Ahriman. No answer. He yelled again. He heard only the sound of waves. He carried the lamp way out in front of him, using it less to light his path than as a shield against whatever evil must be lurking on this god-forsaken island where a man can disappear in the blink of an eye.

"Ahriman? Ahriman, are you there? Don't fool with me! Ahriman?" Siva called. There was no answer. He came to the spot where Ahriman had been standing moments before he disappeared and discovered a hole in the ground. He shone the light down the hole and saw nothing but water far below, and debris on the surface that must have been the decayed cover over an abandoned well. Not a trace of Ahriman.

He must be down there, thought Siva. He used his head scarf to tie the lantern to a vine and lowered it into the well for a better look. Still, no sign

of his drinking mate. He let it farther down so that the lantern bottom just touched the surface of the water. Ahriman had vanished!

Cowering in the presence of the unknown, Siva raised the light up to the top of the shaft and set it beside him where he squatted. He had to consider the situation. What evil had befallen Ahriman? More to the point, what evil was about to befall Siva himself? Ahriman was most certainly dead. If his body was somehow trapped underwater, it had already been there for many minutes by now. Ahriman couldn't still be alive, that is, if he fell in. And if he was not down in that abandoned well, he must have been taken away by some evil jinn.

"Ahriman? Don't joke with me!" Silence.

What was Siva going to do? If he reported this, he would have to explain why they were on the island at night. Having the gun made this a very unattractive proposition to him. They had been noticed when they left the village in their boat, but maybe if he were to come back alone in the dead of night, he might be able to sneak in. That was what he would do. Later, after he had the chance to get rid of the gun, he could always come back with somebody and get the body. But why bother?

There was a more immediate concern. If Ahriman were dead, would not his ghost be coming up from the well soon? After taking another look down the shaft, Siva decided it was time that he started on the long row back home.

He was stumbling down the hill toward the boat on the beach, losing the path in his haste, when he heard a deathly groan, a voice from the dead, he was certain.

"Who...Who's that?" asked Siva, not wanting an answer. It was the voice of the ghost of Ahriman, thought Siva. It sounded as if it came up from hell.

"Hel-elp!" The voice echoed.

"WA—Wa—where are you?" stammered Siva.

"I'm-m-m dow-ow-own he-e-ere," responded the voice.

"Well, I'm not surprised," said Siva, assuming in his stupor that "down here" must mean his companion was in hell. "Hell is where you belong. No use complaining now, Ahriman. The way you wasted your life. You get

what you deserve. So don't come around and haunt me with your hell. I told you—well, at least I told a lot of other people that you'd amount to nothing. You were worthless. So don't complain to me now that you get your karma."

"Ge-et me-e ou-out of this we-e-ell!"

"Well? You're not in hell? You're in the well?"

Eventually, after many protestations, Ahriman was able to convince Siva that he was not dead, and would he please help him up out of the old well shaft. Siva did, and after the successful rescue, they drank the rest of the bottle to celebrate Ahriman's survival and rescue, and also his rebirth, for he had the strangest story to tell.

He had hit his head during the fall, blacked out, and when he came to, he found himself floating on the surface of the water in an ink-black and soundless place. He thought he was dead and waited for a while to see what would happen. Nothing happened.

His hand touched a wall, his feet found steps. He was making his way upward when he noticed a faint light glowing from behind and below him through the water, a dull indirect light just as he imagined the *gileega* stone would look.—That must have been when Siva had lowered the lantern down the well shaft. At the same time, ever so faintly, he heard his name being called, "Ahriman!"

Then the light became fainter. To Ahriman, it felt as if the last of his life was somehow being sucked out of him; eternal darkness would follow. He took a deep breath, plunged down toward the fading light and, when he surfaced again, he saw stars shining over the rim of the well above. He tried to yell but choked on the water he inadvertently swallowed.

After the rescue, the two of them continued drinking until the bottle was dry. All the while Siva was thinking his friend was a fool, lucky to have survived a fall into that abandoned well, probably some kind of cesspool for all he knew; meanwhile Ahriman believed that he had just had a spiritual experience.

The conversation started to take on an edge by the time the two had shoved off from the island and begun their awkward rowing back toward the coast several miles away. Ahriman was getting irritated by Siva's sneering ridicule.

"You fall into an old cesspool," chuckled Siva, "and come up thinking you died and were born again. *Adoi!* Ahriman! You are a big fool! For the smart man you once were, you are plenty stupid now. No, I go farther than that. You are worthless, my friend, like me.

"No! You are worth even less than that. Me, I didn't have any fancy-dancy advantages like you who went to university in England. I had to steal everything I got. None of it came easy. I must make the most of every little break I have made for myself. I wasn't given any, not like you. I made myself what I am out of nothing. I ain't much, and here we are in the same boat, foolish fellow." His mocking laughter washed over Ahriman like acid.

Ahriman listened in silence. As fire eats chaff beneath the surface, he smoldered with hidden wrath. The thought that his drunken friend—no, not a friend, just someone Ahriman had chosen to spend his time with—that Siva would think it natural for him to go to hell, this had been funny for only a brief moment. It soon began to irritate him and then festered. He became angrier with each pull on the oar.

"You belong in hell," continued Siva, not looking up from his rowing. If he had glanced at Ahriman's face at that moment, he probably would not have said another word. Instead, he kept on with his drunken babble.

"Take your pick of reasons. Your table is full of the rotten fruits of your life, Ahriman. For one thing, what you did to your wife. Or should I say wives? Three children you never see, who you never send money to, orphaned by their half-dead father. You wasted your career; you lost your home and your children. Your family, no, your families, where are they now?

"You'll go to hell just for the money you cheated out of your own friends. For the loans you stiffed, like from me, Ahriman. Oh, yes. I remember. You never pay me back."

Siva, at his best, was not one to tiptoe lightly upon a delicate subject. When inebriated, he was like an elephant stamping out a match. "You know what your problem is? You're weak. You are good for nothing. Not worth the rice you consume. You never were and never will be capable of doing anything worthwhile for the world you have stolen your life from.

"Do you want to know why I have never asked you about the money you owe me, Ahriman, not even once? Because I know that my money is gone.

Instead of getting angry, I just remember it, knowing that you, with all of your advantages, are still and always will be beneath me. That's what that money bought me. And deep down in that black heart of yours, you know that it's true despite all your airs. You are beneath me because, in spite of all the luck you had in your life compared to me, we are now sitting in this same boat, my completely worthless..."

At that moment Siva looked up, probably after noticing that Ahriman was no longer pulling on his oar; he looked up and found himself staring straight into the barrel of the gun in Ahriman's hand.

"I shot him in his third eye," Ahriman said at the trial. He described how the body fell back toward the prow of the boat, his head over the side. Ahriman grabbed Siva's legs and held him overboard, trolling in the moonlight, letting his blood drip into the water to attract the shark he had seen on the way out to the island. "You don't normally see sharks in the strait. I felt it was a sign of my good luck," Ahriman's face at the trial wore a demented smile.

"The shark would be my alibi. When the devil fish neared, I dumped Siva overboard. 'Rest in the belly of the shark, my false friend. I'll see you in hell.' That's how I said good-bye to him."

Ahriman felt a surge of power when the waters churned where his companion had disappeared, a sense of purpose which he hadn't had since he left with high hopes and expectations for England so many years before, so many lives ago. He knew now what he had been born again to do: to be the angel of death against all the evildoers like Siva. He had the gun now. He had the mind to make plans and the hatred. He knew who they were, those who deserved to be eliminated. No longer a coward, he wouldn't try to sneak back into the *kampong* without his friend. Better, he thought, to be all black than just splashed with ink.

When he arrived back at his village near Tanjong Kling, he raised such a hue and cry that people thought he had lost his best friend. And that, he let on, was just what had happened. He explained in dramatic detail—which even he began to believe—how his friend and he had been drinking No-Tax, and he will never do that again because, horrors, Siva had fallen out of the boat when a big wave caught him by surprise while he was passing water—he felt that was a clever little detail about Siva urinating. His

education hadn't been for nothing, after all, he laughed inwardly.

He told the fishing folk of the village that before he could pull Siva back into the boat, a giant white shark shot out of the water open-jawed and snapped the screaming Siva in two.

"There was nothing I could do. Nothing!" he sobbed convincingly.

Actually, without knowing it, "he had made his sarong into a noose," as Arthur put it. The elders believed every word that Ahriman told them. They quickly convened a village council meeting and, on the impulse of outrage that one of their own—even if it was a no-good like Siva—should die such a horrible death, they decided that very night to set off and hunt the devil shark.

Ahriman suggested that it might be better to wait until daylight. What were the chances of finding it in the dark ocean? But his words fell on deaf ears; everyone believed his judgment had been damaged by the experience of losing his best friend, not to mention impaired by all that No-Tax. Perhaps he was afraid of the shark. No, the villagers decided, this must be taken care of at once.

They set out to sea, every boat and able-bodied fisherman navigating under the light of a full moon on a crusade against the demon fish who ate one of their own flesh, to find it and bring it back in. To everyone's surprise, they did find that rogue shark, snared it in a net and dragged the huge carcass up onto the gray beach of Tanjong Kling early the following morning. When they cut open its stomach, they found the partially-digested skull of Siva. There was a bullet hole in his forehead.

Ahriman was tried, convicted, and hanged for his crime. He faced the grave gratefully, as one does a sheltered bench after a long walk on a cloudless day. His death seemed much less tragic than his life.

"I have always wondered," Arthur moralized, "what would have happened had the boy not been given that scholarship? Did he strive to go too far? Or not far enough? If education makes the man, did it, in his case, actually make him better or worse? Would he have been happier if he had stayed on the rubber plantation like his father, who worked hard and lived a short but honorable life as a tapper?

"And I have always wondered if Ahriman really did have an after-death

experience, hearing his name called as he finds himself in a dark room. Or, was it only Siva, his drinking buddy, who called his name? If it was, then down in a well on one of these islands off the coast of Malacca, there could be a hidden room of some sort with an underwater entrance. And if so, why would there be such a room except, I thought tonight as you were talking about hidden gold, wouldn't it be a perfect place to store treasure?

"But I am letting my imagination get the better of me. It was when you started talking about wells and places to hide things that that story came to mind. As has been said, 'The memory is the cabinet of the imagination.' I forget who said that."³⁹

You know, Ed, the next few weeks after hearing that story, I thought about it a lot and I took my own moral from it: giving up your dream is dangerous to the soul.

There is a pause in the tape and the sound of the gentle surf rumbling over the distant reef is heard.

Cin: And not having a dream is dangerous, too, perhaps even more dangerous. And that is where I was at that time in Malacca, with no direction, no dream, just waiting for my life to start up again with a new purpose.

I needed a purpose, a dream, a reason for being. I wanted to take those few steps toward romancing my life, but in which direction would I find it in Malacca? I had no idea. I only knew it had to be in Malacca.

Ed: As luck would have it?

Cin: Exactly. Look at it this way: what were the chances against my falling off that tanker at that very spot on the planet? Astronomical, right? I believe it was Teilhard de Chardin⁴⁰ who said that, "on the cosmic level, only the unlikely is probable." This may sound corny but I wanted to find the cosmic reason for my being in Malac— "

39 St. Basil. Ed, ed.

40 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a rebel Jesuit eschatological theologian (1881-1955). Ed, ed.



At this moment, having reached the end of the tape, the recorder automatically clicked off, surprising us both. I immediately realized what had happened but feared that she might be suspicious that it was an intentional invasion of her privacy. Although innocent of anything of the sort, I felt like a spy caught in the act. I sheepishly explained to her the truth: that I had been doing some work and, distracted by the sunset, had forgotten to switch off the recorder.

I told her I was enjoying her story very much and would like to continue recording, if she didn't mind. I could perhaps use portions of it for my English listening class at the university. She shrugged "no problem" and agreed to continue, so I put in a new cassette and pressed the record button.

Ed: All set. Please continue.

Cin: Where should I—What should I say?

Ed: Just start where you left off.

Cin: It's not the same now. I don't know who I'm talking to anymore. It's weird somehow, knowing that the tape recorder is on. It's as if I'm talking to the future instead of now. Time gets all confused.

Ed: *Trying to coach her.* You were talking about Malacca, what it's like.

Cin: Well, it's kind of like I just said "time gets confused." Now, there's a good description of Malacca. Confused. Time and races and cultures and languages mixing together. It's like pottery from China and china from Rotterdam were dropped on the ground and their shards intermingled.

Try a simple ride on a trishaw, you know, a pedicab, one of those three-wheeled taxis powered by the bulging calf muscles of small sun-baked men. In Malacca, some of these once-humble vehicles are now adorned with brass trimming and equipped with heavy batteries to provide power for a stereo with mega-speakers that can play a wide assortment of hard-driving music.

Ed: That kind of music I can do without. I detest heavy metal.

Cin: You have a choice of music, but they like to blast you out, they're so proud of their speakers. You ride beside the driver—he's on your right. He wades right into the middle of traffic among smoking motorbikes, vintage Mercedes, and buses belching thick blue clouds. So you're stopped at a traffic light by the Pizza Hut, and your human motor, an old man with graying hair under his pith helmet, wearing a thin shirt with rips and tears and some hand-mended repairs, momentarily morphs into a tour guide. He points at the Art Deco building opposite, the Meng Seng Heng, the Shining Star Charitable Association—heavy beat thumping on the stereo—smiles and says, "This is where Japanese torture us Chinese during the Big War."

Then the light changes, and you're being pedaled through the morning street lined with two-story shop-homes, each fronted by a shaded archway that has been raised several steps up from street level, for when it rains, it really pours. You read the signs, smiling at choice names like the Wye Sin Mortuary or Chop Fat Butcher.

You pass an elderly dark-skinned, white-haired woman in a batik sarong and plain tunic; gold pins instead of buttons line the front. Farther down the road, a Chinese matron in a prim, polyester flower-print pantsuit scurries along the five-foot way, eyes on her destination and nowhere else, certainly not on the young secretary ahead.

The younger woman is Chinese? Maybe a mixture. In Malacca, probably a mixture. The secretary stands at the curb with legs crossed, in high heels—and nylon stockings, for God's sake, in that climate!—and a short skirt, waiting for her ride to work, a side-saddle trip on a motorcycle to her desk in an air-conditioned office no doubt. If a flash of grape purple, Kool-Aid crimson, or other bold, bawdy, delectable or outrageous colors catches your eye...

Ed: How about thanks vermilion? Or Freudian guilt?

Cin: There you go. See a flash of these and chances are an Indian damsel is fluttering by wrapped in her diaphanous *sari*.

Continuing the trip in a trishaw down the street, along the archway you see a Malay Muslim woman, head covered in a white shawl and bent slightly downward, demure, her eyes on the tiled walkway. Her flowing, long-sleeved blouse is well-tailored to the curves of her body and matches the pattern of her ankle-length skirt. She passes in front of an Indian man

diapered in a dhoti. He is blessing his shop in the morning; the terra cotta bowl he carries is billowing clouds of heavy, aromatic frankincense.

Turn right at the intersection of five roads. The trishaw driver jumps off and pushes you up the incline to the center of the bridge. The spires of a cathedral, leaning toward each other in their age like an elderly couple on a park bench, are reflected in the surface of the river. Islands of hyacinth are floating upstream at high tide. A wooden fishing boat, one of the Malacca purple-painted fleet, with red paint on the prow for good luck, chugs downstream, the net-marker flags flying on deck like banners for a crusading army. On board, a half-naked Chinese man, wearing only an old pair of dress pants cut into shorts, sits at the rudder beside an urn of fresh water for his day's use. He steers around the last turn in the river before it meets the ocean.

On the far side of the bridge, the second one upriver from the mouth, you pass a Chinese shop owner stretching into his morning constitutional. Tai Ch'i exercises like a dancer in slow motion, while on the street nearby a younger Chinese businessman adjusts the starched cuffs of his "I've-got-expensive-air-conditioning" long-sleeved, white shirt, flashing his heavy gold cufflinks in the process, his gold chain in view when he leans over to remove a spot from his sparkling new Audi.

Corner left and continue till you hear the clanging rhythm of blacksmiths, a dying craft, a far cry from the days of master magicians like Jangati of the Putri Ledang myth.

Go down a street past a mosque built by a Chinese in the part of town named after Indians, Kampong Kling. A man wrapped in a polyester plaid sarong passes serenely by, his balding head covered by his Haji hat,⁴¹ looking like a hard-boiled egg in a crocheted cozy.

Within a couple of blocks in Malacca, you can find a Muslim mosque built by a Chinese, a Hindu shrine and the oldest Chinese temple in all of Southeast Asia,⁴² the Temple of the Turquoise Cloud, which contains what to me was a confusion of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian symbols and

⁴¹ Indicating that the wearer had gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the basic requirements made of all Muslims who can afford the journey. Ed, ed.

⁴² Probably referring to the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, the oldest functioning Chinese temple in Malaysia, founded in 1545 C.E. Ed, ed.

icons, an eclectic home for many faiths.

Near this temple is a shop where men chisel gravestones. The dead person's image has been photographically printed on the stone. Oh, and speaking of the dead, in another shop nearby, they make paper houses, cars, refrigerators, VCRs and CDs, PCs and whatnots: all destined to be burned at the funeral so that the fire carries their essences to the loved one in the hereafter so the deceased won't die of boredom, I guess. God, the dead are living better than I am. They even make paper mobile phones now.

Ed: Touch-tone to the twilight zone?

Cin: Yeah. Will there be plastic credit in heaven?

Ed: Wouldn't that be divine.

Cin: On Heeren ("Gentlemen's") Street, now named after Tun Sir Tan Cheng Lock, are rows of two-hundred-year-old Dutch houses with Chinese family names all ornately carved and gilded and hung above thick, black, lacquered front doors and barred windows.

Malacca has got personality. It doesn't make any sense, but it feeds the senses. The steaming tropical climate transforms the ancient walls into works of nature imitating art. You find a surface, for instance, that has an abstract pastiche of faded paint peeling into several layers of pastels, accented at eye level with parts of an old poster for Tiger Beer and a handbill from the recent past, its message already obscured. The wall tilts with age and bulges like sculpted canvas. There are mad mosaics of cracked stucco colored with mold and stains from rusted pipes. On the facade of Chinese homes, on corners, cornices, lintels and eaves, window and door frames, the slightest architectural excuse was used for applying riotous rococo decorations; they were completed at a time when people weren't timid about ornamentation. Stucco was fashioned geometrically, or as flowers, leaves and clouds. These intricate lines have been rounded and muted by countless coats of thick whitewash, splashed on over the centuries. In some of these nooks now grow sapling trees; other buildings have wild ferns hanging gracefully down from the eaves at the edge of the orange-and-black clay roof tiles.

At times, very early in the morning, you feel as if you have just walked into a photograph—not a movie—a photograph in which nothing moves or will ever move. It's so still.

Then out of nowhere a young boy comes up to you and says, "Welcome to Malacca," and smiles almost too broadly, a bright flashing smile like a toothpaste commercial. He is dressed in clean, pale green pants and matching long-sleeved shirt, a classy dark green sash at the waist, and topped with a black velvet pillbox hat. I know it's a school uniform, but to me he looks like a pageboy at a five-star hotel.

People in Malacca are often truly friendly. They flash genuine smiles, especially in the morning. They say "hello." They wave a greeting as you ride by in your trishaw. They stop to chat when they think they see an invitation in your eyes. They will give you the time of day and their life story with the slightest encouragement. I was right at home.

In Malacca, there was always time for a cup of tea at a *kedai kopi* where the sweetened milk is thick at the bottom and must be mined to the depth of sweetness you desire. It's placed before you, overflowing and half spilt onto the saucer. You lean your forearm on the cool, tea-stained soapstone tabletop and listen to the clanging medley of conversations in Chinese all around you, the waiter shouting a solo to the cook and doing his damndest to be heard above the *dim sum* din. You might suspect that you are the only one listening; all other parties seem to be talking at once.

They get real slow in Malacca, though, around four in the afternoon when the heat becomes oppressive. At that time of day, you see an old *towkay*, a rich Chinese man, in the back of his shop, lying on his cot, his sleeveless undershirt pulled up to his chest, exposing a beach-ball stomach which he proceeds to fan. He will not move to serve you; he waits for his wife to wait on you if she's around. If not, he ignores you.

Some shopkeepers may appear sullen, convinced that it takes more energy to smile than to let their face melt flat of all expression in that sauna air. Or perhaps they are practicing their mahjongg gambler's face for a session later that night.

There is a peculiar thing about many shopkeepers in Malacca. You go in and ask for, say, some stationery. "Don't have," they frown at you by way of apology. "Finish already, lah." And they'll pivot their hand at the wrist as if it were a puppet shaking its head, "no." Then you go back into the dim interior and browse among the thickly-laden shelves piled high with paper and plastic paraphernalia from China and Taiwan and, chances are, you will

find that they do, in fact, have the exact item you asked for. They are not doing this to be mean to you personally, and it isn't racially motivated. And they certainly do know their stock. Apparently, they feel it is not worth getting up in the sultry afternoon for so little reward. That's Malacca, too.

And then there are the smells of Malacca. You pass by a shop grinding freshly-roasted coffee. In another, they grind spices for Indian dishes, and fumes of cumin, cinnamon, caraway, fennel, and turmeric waft out onto the "five-foot" walkway, making the whole atmosphere smell of curry.

At night the scent of durian, with a half-life of ninety years, hangs thick and heavy in the still air. I can understand why the locals think it's an aphrodisiac. It smells like sex, if you get close up. And the way the cream clings around the egg-shaped seed, it's lewd. I'm surprised it isn't banned by every major religion.

Ed: That is an erotic description of a fruit!

Cin: Fruit is erotic when you think about it that way.

Ah-h, the fruits. I'm drooling just thinking of them. Oh, and the satay, the Indonesian peanut sauce dip for chicken grilled on a skewer. And then there's Malay *ikan bakar*, baked fish, or Indian food served on a banana leaf. And I'll go crazy if I keep talking about the food down there. You could eat your way across Malacca, but you would never be able to walk home.

Oh. I almost forgot, there's curry *diabu*⁴³, devil's curry, at the Portuguese Settlement.



When I was out at the Settlement one night sitting around at a table with Dominique and his "Auntie" Angelica, the stalls were at the oceanside, but they won't be for long. Land reclamation may have already taken the ocean away.

43 Diabu means "devil." This seems to be an example of *kristang* (spelled Cristao), a Portuguese dialect of the 16th century still spoken in parts of Malacca. Ed, ed.

"It's a shame to lose something we've taken for granted for so long," complained Dominique, referring to the sea splashing against the wall at high tide as he poured us all another beer. Angelica tapped her fingertips on the table and mumbled, "*Abligato*," which is thanks in her dialect.

Dominique, dressed in the unofficial Portuguese Settlement uniform, a casual pullover shirt with a collar, said, "I hear either the Dutch or the Koreans are going to get the contract for the land reclamation."

"Tsk. Better not be the Dutch," frowned Auntie, remembering her history. "They might try to reclaim everything," Angelica is slightly younger than her nephew Dominique and twice as wide. She says "hello" to a passerby by raising her eyebrows. Eyebrows are raised in response. Everybody knows her, but then, everybody knows everybody in the Settlement. They are only about a thousand strong.

I asked where Alfonso was, and Angelica jumped at the chance to take center stage. He and Dominique had "a little misunderstanding," she explained. That was the Settlement's way of describing any disagreement from a fist fight to a three-generation blood feud. "Yah, lah!" she sighs. "It's only a misunderstanding. Why do people fight so? The Portuguese are always fighting, from the beginning, from the days of Albuquerque even they were squabbling, lah! Most of his commanders weren't on speaking terms with each other, you know."

Auntie Angelica was right. I read up on it in the library. It seems that all the knights insisted on having their own name listed first on the stone Albuquerque was having chiseled to commemorate the Portuguese victory over the Sultan of Malacca. Albuquerque got so disgusted that he had the stone turned around and inscribed with the words: "the stone the builder rejected."⁴⁴

Auntie Angelica shook her head. "Life is too short, lah! And it is such a small misunderstanding they are having. Because why? Cause Alfonso, he wanted Dominique to help him carry water for the Sisters at the convent here, lah, because the pipes have no water now, you know, and Dominique said he cannot, lah. His back, lah. It hurts. Tsk."

Just then Alfonso, in his imitation Polo brand shirt, came to the table and sat as far away as possible from Dominique. Dominique's legs began

44 Psalms 118:22 N.E.B. Ed, ed.

wiggling. Alfonso's hands started waving in the air even before he spoke. "But it doesn't hurt the night before when he danced disco with Maria. No, lah! Then he is okay. But when it comes time to do a little work, he makes excuse. A fine friend. Humph! I have seen the way he acts."

Dominique claimed he had hurt his back at the disco but was too drunk to notice "until today, and sorry, lah, but a good guy ought to believe his friend. So you don't believe me. So how can you say friend, lah?" accuses Dominique.

"Don't talk friend to me," sneered Alfonso. "And where's that twenty I borrowed you?"

"I gave back, lah!" Dominique said defensively.

"D'Abreu, you never."

"Sure I did. I paid for beer last Friday, lah!"

"You bought both our beers with my money. And you call that paying me back? Ah, lah! You're a bloody bastard—!"

"Now. Now. Alfonso," tut-tutted Auntie Angelica, but Alfonso was in no mood to be tutted.

"You're a bloody bandit! That's what you are. A bandit!" Then looking up toward the road, Alfonso struck on an idea and his expression changed into a smile as he announced, "And this fellow coming down the lane here, Bernard, he's a killer. He kills shrimp."

An old man with a weathered face under a broad straw hat, and wearing tattered shorts and T-shirt, stopped on the road beside a plaster statue of Mother Mary. The poles, with his push net wound like gauze around them, were borne on his tired shoulders as if he were prepared to walk the path to Golgotha.

"How was fishing today, Bernard?" asked Alfonso.

"By the grace of our Lord, I have these to show you," he said with a humble smile, holding up his catch in a net.

"Good for you! Good for us! We'll take them all. Choose the best ones for the cook here, and I'll send the rest over to my house."

A ten-year-old boy was passing by on his bicycle. Alfonso called him over. "Hey boy! What's your name? You're a Fernandes, aren't you?" The

boy nodded. "Good for you, lah! Do you go to church?" The boy nodded again. "Good. Good. Do you know where I live?" The boy nodded once again. "Okay, lah. Take some of these shrimp over to my sisters."

After the shrimp had been separated, the boy was handed a plastic bag and made as if to leave. "Wait first, lah! Boy, come back here." Alfonso slipped something into the kid's hand. 'A Fernandes, is it? Here. Buy yourself a cola, lah." The boy's eyes lit up and he was off.

Alfonso turned back to the shrimp man. "Bernard. Dominique will pay you. Don't let him bargain you down too much, lah."

Dominique did pay, reluctantly, grumbling as he dug into his pocket for a few bills for the shrimp and for yet another round of beer. "You know what your problem is, Alfonso Fernandes. It's breeding. Bad blood. Low class. What can we expect of you? Your ancestor was a cook. On the other hand, the D'Abreu family are all Sons-of-Somebody; we are *fidalgo*. Antonio D'Abreu was a captain, the head of the expedition sent out to find the source of the spices in the Moluccas and—"

"Not just a captain lah, Dominique," interrupted Alfonso sarcastically. "He was a king, the pepper king. King of all the pepper in the soups he made because, your ancestor was the cook lah."

"You say this?" Dominique glared at Alfonso. "You, whose family name is as common as *kaka* in the bull pen?"

Alfonso stared back at him, as if he were savoring the offense before he answered, pointing a finger dripping with chili sauce threateningly at Dominique. "So? Okay! Now, you force me. It is time to bring out the truth. I will tell you to your shame and your family's how my ancestor outshone yours."



Alfonso drained the beer from his glass in preparation for his tale. "First," he admitted, "I must agree with you a little and say okay, it is true that my ancestor was not a Son-of-Somebody; he was a son of a nobody. He was no *kapitan* like the famous late, great, jut-jawed D'Abreu you talk

so much about.⁴⁵ As a matter of fact, my glorious forefather was only a humble tailor at the time he left Lisboa. But, BUT," Alfonso held up his hand to ward off any interruption, catching Dominique with his mouth open like his famous ancestor. "But if it wasn't for Duarte Fernandes, the Portuguese would never have... Let me tell you the story first, lah."

Alfonso had heard the tale from his grandmother, who said she heard it from her granddad, who claimed he heard it from his, and so on. The original ancestor who came to Malacca from Portugal was Duarte Fernandes.

Duarte's father was a tailor in Spain,⁴⁶ and, because in those days the slopes were greased against social climbers, his son became a tailor, too. The society of those days was split into clubs with the architects and the goldsmiths on top; the tailors were just a cuff above the cobbler who was on the bottom.

When Duarte was about twelve years old, at the turn of the sixteenth century, the Inquisition in Spain made it very uncomfortable for anyone suspected of being a Jew, especially one with a beating heart. Perhaps coincidentally, Duarte's family chose this time to migrate to Portugal.

When asked at the border to declare his occupation, the father said, "tailor." In those days almost all tailors were Jews, so suspiciously, the border guard asked them their religion. The family patriarch replied promptly, "We're Christians. Of course, we are Christians. Don't we look like Christians? Oy vey!"

Needless to say, the family remained under suspicion. They were stigmatized with the label "New Christians," which meant they couldn't get good jobs and had to ride in the front of the ox cart.

Ed: Why was that so bad?

45 When the Portuguese attacked Malacca, Antonio D'Abreu was placed in charge of the assault boat at the heart of the attack. During the battle, a bullet went through his jaw and severed his tongue. He refused to leave his command as long as he had life to fight. Nevertheless, without a tongue to express this valorous thought, no one could understand what he was saying. Another man was sent to take his place, a one Dinis Fernandes, interestingly enough. The wound left Antonio D'Abreu's jaw permanently askew. Ed, ed.

46 The trade of tailor was typically filled by the Jews in the Middle Ages, as were the guilds of goldsmith, blacksmith, armorer, and cobbler. Ed, ed.

Cin: I guess it depends on how you feel about riding close to the back end of an ox.

Duarte Fernandes' family had to be careful about every little thing they did. Those were the days when they burnt heretics for taking a bath on Saturday. Very suspicious, that. Why take a bath so often if you're not unclean? Better a little BO than to be hauled before the Inquisition for smelling peculiarly fragrant.

It was in this atmosphere, so to speak, that Duarte grew up, a likable kid, clean—except on Saturdays—handsome, clever, lanky, long nose, rakishly-dark eyes and curly, black hair with streams of red running through it like hot lava. He wasn't a fighter; he was a lover. He's the guy who first started the custom of singing to a lady from below her balcony,⁴⁷ Duarte Fernandes, the unsung singer.

It was his singing that got him started on his world travels. You see, one night he was serenading a hot-blooded Iberian lass named Rosaline. I remember the name because Rosaline is the girl Romeo was pining for when the play opens. I'm a Shakespeare nut, was in love with that play in particular when I was a girl. In fact, I noticed, later on in the telling, several other parallels to Romeo and Juliet. So I asked Alfonso about the possibility that his story might have been lifted from Shakespeare.

He said, "Don't know, lah. Could be. Never seen any of this fellow Shakespeare's stuff. When did he write?" I told him about the latter part of the 1500s. "So you see, lah," Alfonso replied, "this story of Duarte, it takes place maybe almost a hundred years before Shakespeare. So I ask you: who was first, lah? Who got the story from who?"

Duarte Fernandes was enamored of Rosaline, but she already had a man; she had been spoken for, and her father had made the deal, signed on the line, and sent his daughter as an unwilling bride to a very old but prosperous nobleman, the mayor of the town of Coimbra. Rosaline had other ideas, and on hearing Duarte sing a *fado*,⁴⁸ his heart quivering in his

47 This is not true. The Italian writer Boccaccio, for one, wrote about minstrels singing under balconies in Naples in the book, *Decameron*, published in 1353.

Ed, ed.

48 A *fado* is a type of mournful, sentimental Portuguese ballad. Ed, ed.

voice as he treasured the exquisite pain of having laid eyes upon her delicate beauty, a beauty that he knew he could never ever hope to come near, but could only be consumed by the burning vision of her... and on and on until she considered throwing one of her seven-inch-high cork-soled shoes at him to quiet him. But, on second thought, she decided that he was kind of cute in his way and not a bad singer either so, instead, she invited Duarte up for some biscuits in her boudoir.

Biscuits and tea, a little honey, if you please, a strum of a chord, a loosening of waist cords, two hearts in accord, someone knocking on the door, her newly-wed husband with a sword, the mayor of Coimbra, no less, a cuckold with a cutlass. Make haste!

In their hurried parting, Duarte threw her a kiss. Rosaline, in turn, tossed a potpourri to him—or, at least, that's what she thought the pouch was. She didn't have time to check its contents as the bolt on the door was giving way. Duarte displayed an amazing sense of balance along the gables of the clay-tiled rooftops as he made his escape from the angry husband.

And that is why he signed on to—"any ship, sir. Today, if possible, sir," he said, glancing over his shoulder. Thus did Duarte take his trade aboard a ship that was captained by Sir Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, and thus was he destined to save the day for the Portuguese in Malacca.



On the other side of the world from Portugal, twenty years before the *conquistadores* arrived in Asia, at the time when the Fernandes family was still taking baths on Saturdays, a princess arrived in Malacca from Java with all her servants, her many ladies-in-waiting, and a few of them who were actually busy doing something. From the boat by Kelebang Beach, where the crystal water of the strait lapped against the golden sand north of the village of Malacca, the princess was borne ashore upon an ivory palanquin. The long poles of gilded wood rested on the shining, bare shoulders of six copper-skinned slaves as they bounced their way to the palace of Utimuti Rajah, her husband-to-be as arranged by her father, the

Maharajah.⁴⁹

In the palanquin following, the slaves carried the *kris* of Susuhusunana (or something like that), which means the weapon belonging to the ruler whose vassals' heads were, by divine right, oleaginous stools willing to support his highness' feet.⁵⁰ The slaves of this second palanquin were considerably less tired when they arrived at the palace courtyard than the ones who had been shouldering the princess, dainty though she was.

The *kris* blade was marked with a damascene pattern in the form of a coconut frond, an effect caused by the repeated pounding of different types of molten iron together. The secret of this process has been lost and such knives cannot be duplicated today, despite all our modern technology. The closest imitations are made by pounding motorbike chains into blades.

Ed: Makes a person seriously consider the concept of devolution, doesn't it?

Cin: Yes. The study of history tends to do that.

On each side of the *kris* blade was an image of a serpent writhing up the wavy blade to the hilt, which was carved from fragrant sandalwood in the likeness of a misshapen gnome. (But then, can you have a shapen gnome?) The hilt had then been covered with gold, the eyes of the gnome gleaming with blood-red inlaid rubies.

The *kris* had been sent by the great god-king of the Majapahit Empire of Java, the uncle of Utimuti Rajah. Along with it, he sent a very special type of batik cloth whose print was sacred and reserved; on penalty of torturous death, this pattern was to be worn only by those who held the right to rule. If that weren't hint enough, the Maharajah had sent his lovely daughter to marry Utimuti Rajah, his distant nephew, so that the two houses would unite, and merge their powers granted by the gods; specifically so that they could join the wealth and military might of two powerful branches of the family to secure their holdings.

49 A title roughly equivalent to sovereign or overlord as opposed to Rajah which means nobility, a Lord or a Sir. Ed, ed.

50 This appears to be a possible reference to the royal house of Solo in Central Java, the Susuhanan. However, there is no historical proof of any family connection between the House of Susuhanan and either this Javanese woman or the Rajah Utimuti. Ed, ed.

The princess was the granddaughter of a sorceress. From the time she began to walk, she had learned the merits of various plants; she was an expert in the preparations of potions that kept the skin young and the breasts supple and upright; potions that would ease the course of love and other concoctions that would cause swift death. The fifteen-year-old princess was sent to Malacca to marry a man she had never seen, Utimuti Rajah, fifty-nine years old. After one year, she bore him a son, Pataico, the Knife, and three years later, a daughter, Anyi, Fire.⁵¹ Sixteen years after the birth of the daughter, the Portuguese arrived.

At that time in Malacca, the Prime Minister was called the Bendahara.⁵² He was the most powerful man in town, controlling even the Sultan, his nephew. Uncle Ben, to put it delicately, was corrupt.

How corrupt? For example, all the streets of Malacca followed the curves of the meandering river. Always did. So Uncle Ben had his nephew, the Sultan, prove his devotion to the faith by signing a decree that henceforth, all the streets of Malacca would be straight like those of Mecca—which neither man had ever seen.

Then the Bendahara went around from shop to shop, telling the owners that they would have to move to make room for road-straightening as decreed. However, it would be possible to see that the street in front of any given shop was basically straight—if one were given a good reason to see things straight, that is. Uncle Ben extorted a lot of money on that project and made many, many enemies. But nobody could do much about it because the Bendahara was most definitely NUMBER ONE.

Number two in town was this Javanese I mentioned earlier, Utimuti Rajah. Old Ut was an inside man, a spy. He had been sent to Malacca from

51 The correct spelling would probably be "Agni" but when my secretary, Mrs. Yamamoto, transcribed the tape, she came as close as she could in spelling to the sound she heard and now refuses to change it—as is usual. I left it unchanged as it makes the correct reading easier.

52 Agni is the Hindu god of fire, the messenger who carries the offering to the gods. Pataico seems to be a historical description rather than a name. *Pata* means warrior and *ico* may be a derivative of *acu* which means "someone threatening with a knife." Ed, ed.

53 To be more accurate, the *Bendahara* was the one in command of the local police force. Ed, ed.

Java by the Hindu Maharajah of the once mighty but now weak and corroded Majapahit Kingdom to gather information to help plan an attack on Malacca. An expedition would be sent from Java, and once Malacca was defeated, the glory of the Majapahit Empire would be re-established. Uti had been waiting for the promised armada for thirty years when his princess bride arrived. He married her and continued to wait for his ships to come.

The Maharajah had sent to Utimuti Rajah his daughter and the *kris* of power for logical reasons: Uti was the only Hindu remaining of any standing and wealth in all of the former Majapahit realm. He was the Javanese Hindu's last great hope.

Uti accepted the *kris* and the daughter. Then, a few years later when it was convenient to do so, he converted himself and his family to Islam, entering the close-knit brotherhood and business network of the Muslim community. Utimuti Rajah was a clever man, and could tell which way the wind was blowing and how to set his sail.

Ed: And probably when to have a sale.

Cin: Still, for all Uti's self-serving greed, he remained loyal to his original mission: he was committed to aiding Java in the takeover of Malacca. Only now, after his conversion, it would be a brother Muslim who would send a thousand ships to swamp the proud Malaccans and reassert Java's dominance.

So much for politics in sixteenth-century Malacca. How about the social life at that time? In those days, Malacca had a big generation gap problem. Quite a few of the town elders were like Uti: horny old devils. The Sultan, Uncle Ben, Uti: all of them were between seventy and eighty years old and had kids just coming into rutting age.

So here we are, say after watching a late night shadow puppet performance, or young women dancing with the sinuous, sensuous, slow grace of court dances, it was not uncommon for a boy to ask a girl if she needed someone to escort her home—the dark streets of Malacca not being safe late at night with the new arc lamps having yet to be installed.

Then the boy would lead her subtly down the darkest of all lanes beside the river until they reached the concealing branches of a banyan tree, and there he would stop, pretending to work a thorn out of his sandal, and

suggesting that she rest beside him awhile.

Then one thing would lead to another, and pretty soon he's leaning over her, sniffing the flower in her hair—for that was the custom rather than kissing—sniffing the aroma of her body, sniffing specific areas.

Anyway, rumor had it that Miriam, the Sultan's daughter, was sniffing around with a lot of different men. Fatimah, the beautiful daughter of Uncle Ben, the P.M., had already had a few near whiffs, and Anyi was using potent perfume, her coquettish, flashing eyes and pouting, molten lips to send the hounds around town howling. Malacca was in high hormone.⁵³



Into this atmosphere, as it were, came our hero, Duarte Fernandes, along with the other Portuguese when the five ships of the Diogo Lopes de Sequeira expedition parked in the harbor just off Pulau Upeh. Every trader in the port wanted to be the first to trade with these newcomers, but Uncle Ben, the port authority, put his foot down. He said no one was to trade with the strangers until he, the representative of the sultan, had had a chance to meet them and inspect their goods.

Utimuti Rajah was apparently not informed in time. He was the first to reach the galleons, the "carracks," as the Portuguese called their ships with iron-plated hulls. Actually, it was Uti's twenty-year-old son who arrived first, "all decked out," as Granny would say, in a new royal-blue silk shirt that shimmered in the sun. He stood ramrod-straight in the prow of his boat despite the waves, with his gold-handled *kris* tucked in his sash on the left side. His hair was tied in a scarf which had elaborate folds like the tail of a rooster. His short nose rested on a broad moustache. He was poised like a proud stallion, perhaps a Shetland, for he was quite short.

He had come to announce the imminent arrival of his father, the Rajah

53 Although the decadence of Malacca prior to the arrival of the Portuguese has been recorded, the facts may have been biased, for they were written a long time after the events by the conquerors, looking to justify their victory as the will of God. Ed, ed.

Utimuti. The Rajah arrived in a boat finely carved from wood in the form of a bird and painted in primary colors that changed from one feather to the next, a psychedelic swan. His upper garment, like his son's, was made of the finest silk. His scarf was tied on his head in a signature fashion. People here came to recognize someone in the distance by the way he folded his scarf, just as folks in small-town U.S.A. know who is coming down the road when they catch the color and make of their pickup truck.

Since yellow was the color reserved for the Malay Sultan, the Javanese Uti assiduously shunned that shade — except unavoidably when he flashed his teeth, choosing instead subtle browns and deep indigo applied in the repetitive patterns of sacred batik.

The Portuguese captain was dressed in his laughable leather boots, his balloon pants, cumbersome cloak, and ridiculous hat—for so the Portuguese must have appeared to these Javanese men. In a gesture of friendliness, the captain climbed down the rope ladder to Uti's boat rather than force the elderly man, now in his seventies, to climb up—there being some doubt whether that old coot could have even made it up the rope ladder.

The meeting didn't go well from the start. First, the Portuguese oaf didn't take off his boots. No one had ever worn shoes in Uti's bird boat before! Then, Uti learned that Diogo Lopes spoke none of the eighteen languages which he could speak fluently.

It also became painfully obvious rather quickly that Diogo Lopes was not a trained diplomat and knew nothing of the local customs. In greeting Uti, instead of taking his two hands in his own, gently, as one would take dew off the petals of a closed lotus blossom, and then touching his hands to his breast, gently, thus carrying the other man's essence to his heart, Diogo clutched Uti's right hand like a wrestler and began to shake it vigorously as if he were trying to rid their hands of red ants.

This oddly-dressed foreigner from afar also sat down without being invited, although the invitation was already on the tip of Uti's tongue. Worse, he sat with his feet pointing at Uti. The Rajah smiled with effort, barely exposing his yellowed teeth.

He politely asked about the purpose of the newcomers' visit. "To buy spices, is it? How serendipitous. How fortunate." Spices were Uti's

specialty. "If the Captain Major would like to sign an exclusive treaty...?"

Diogo Lopes cut him short, flatly refusing the offer. Instead, he demanded to see the Sultan first. The old man was not accustomed to having demands made upon him. He became furious. In the typical straightforward Javanese manner, Uti smiled courteously to his visitor while showing him the ladder, and left.

Later, the Bendahara came aboard Diogo's ship to offer welcome, handed out shopping coupons and a map of the town and helpfully explained the harbor fees. During the first few weeks, everything seemed to be going well for the Portuguese. The Sultan threw a banquet, and during speeches both host and guests said things about eternal friendship, pledging their honor toward those promises of peace that always seem to come before a major conflict. The Portuguese were allowed to use a warehouse inside a stockade next to the beach where they could unload and safely store their trading goods. There were parties every night. There were dancing women, Koran readings were postponed, and a good time was had by all.

Eight men, Duarte Fernandes among them, were sent to town to set up shop and stay there to guard the goods for trade. It was shore leave for the duration for these lucky eight. The marketplace was where the world gathered. There were Peguans from where Burma is now, Gujaratis from West India, Arabs, Persians, Chinese, Japanese, and many other races. Eighty-seven languages were spoken at the market, which made for some interesting conversations.

"Fish. How you say fish?" asks a stranger, holding one by the tail.

"Ugly bastard," mutters the fishmonger.

"Okay. I take three ugly bastards."

There were twenty stalls set up at the prime location right on the bridge at the mouth of the river. It was here one day that Duarte was strolling and browsing, his mandolin-like guitar slung across his back as usual, looking for items that he could buy and sell back in Lisboa for a big profit.⁵⁴ His

⁵⁴ There were ample opportunities for the shrewd businessman when, for example, a forty-five dollar investment in spices brought a profit of \$1800 in Europe. Ed, ed.

roaming eye stopped at the sight of Anyi, sexy, sixteen, and willful: a father's nightmare. She didn't walk; she prowled like a hungry tiger looking for her prey. She was quite used to being the center of lusty attention and quite adept, despite her youth, at sparking desire with a flash of her fiery eyes.

Anyi stopped at the stall where Duarte stood. She picked up the corner of a bolt of fabric, rubbed it between her fingers and asked the Indian—with white beard, white turban, long white shirt and pants, and a face as dark and wrinkled as a date—what was his price. He answered. She feigned shock. They began to haggle, of course.

The old Muslim was firm in his price. "Whatever money you lose in the cost, you will gain in the wear. I promise you."

Duarte, who knew fabric, for that was, after all, his trade since he could first lift his little needle, felt the fabric with his fingertips and shook his head, advising her not to buy. He motioned her to feel the quality of the material in his shirt, if she would—a little lower, if only she would.

Duarte and Anyi's eyes met and were welded for eternity in that moment, forged together in the furnace of painful yearning with an unspoken promise of love.

She liked this strange man, his clothes gathered, tucked and tufted into fascinating folds the likes of which she had never seen before. Great style! It was as if fashion and sculpting had been united into one craft. And besides, this stranger had an extremely long nose compared to many of the local guys, and everyone knew, or at least the girls who had whispered to her at dance class knew, if the man has a long nose, he would be long in other places as well. "Ah, lah!" she thought.

The result was that the old Indian Muslim lost that sale, and many more after that, because the Portuguese cloth—actually Irish cloth brought by the Portuguese—was better and cheaper. There was a wide-open market for good linen in Malacca, for the locals were walking around in stiff sarongs made of either pineapple or banana fibers. Until the Portuguese arrived, the Indians had enjoyed a monopoly in textiles. And that must have been the cause of some of the bad blood between the Portuguese and those people from India.

When Anyi's father, Utimuti Rajah, threw yet another banquet for the

Portuguese who had stayed ashore, Anyi spent the whole day before the evening event having her hair done for the night; it took that long because she couldn't sit still in her anticipation.

Imagine being one of those eight Portuguese men, the first Europeans in an exotic land so far from home, as they neared the stockade whose tree trunks were sunk deep in the sandy loam near the beach outside of town. Utimuti Rajah had a tiny kingdom of his own in the suburbs called Kampong Upch, north of the river. The Portuguese walked between two manned watchtowers that guarded the gates of this private village, and again between two more guards by the arch leading into the Rajah's wide courtyard, which was spacious enough to accommodate on each side several resting platforms each ten feet square set on stilts and shaded by palm thatch.

They passed in a procession between rows of bowing servants, ranging from venerable old men wearing matching patterns in their sarongs and identically-tied knots in their head-scarves, to women, tastefully topless, each with a silk *selendang* scarf draped over her shoulder. There was a strange assortment of bouncing jesters, acrobats, actors, an albino, and a dwarf who acted as their guide. These latter showed the prestige of the Rajah. You just weren't anyone unless you employed at least one dwarf.

Ed: I'm afraid mine has taken the night off.

Cin: I was wondering where the little fellow was. I'll just have to serve myself. *She does and freshens my drink, too.*

Well, inside that courtyard, night had been changed into day with countless lamps; it was an amazing display of opulence to have glass lanterns lighting even the courtyard. The group of eight Portuguese approached the main pavilion, a raised area with a polished stone floor and a broad roof supported by seven rows of columns, three deep, each column at least four paces from another one.

To the back and side were seated men in purple shirts, golden-brown batik sarongs tied neatly at the front, a knife handle exposed at the back and worn more as an ornament than a weapon. These men sat behind various gongs and drums. The orchestra of the gamelan struck a chord and spilled out music; it was as if cherries had fallen out of a bowl and onto a xylophone.

In the slight breeze of this enchanted evening, the Portuguese guests could smell the mixed aromas of the earth following a late afternoon rain, the overabundant fruit fermenting beneath the trees, the scented coconut oil burning in the lamps, and, especially, the food cooking in exotic spices: all heady smells, none of which the Portuguese had experienced before coming to Malacca. Flower fragrances floated through the air now and then like a school of little fish passing through.

The old Rajah sat in the center, on pillows that were noticeably thicker than the others', indicating either his exalted status or that he had piles. To his left knelt his surprisingly young and beautiful wife, the Raneel. To his right sat their twenty-year-old son, the Knife. He wore the family *kris* in his sash; he had been wearing a blade at his waist since he was three, but that was normal for young boys back then in Malacca.

The band played dinner music while delicious food was served around by noiseless, topless male and female servants. Although they were in abundance that evening, these two hundred servants were only a fraction of the ten thousand or so available at the Rajah's beck and call. The evening floated on a cloud of warmth and friendliness induced by the spices in the food, the intoxicating aromas, the mesmerizing music, and the attentiveness of the host who, admittedly, looked a lot better when he wasn't displaying his yellowish smile.

Suddenly a large school of flower fragrances swam onto the pavilion verandah and stayed. The door leading to an inner chamber swung open, and through it floated—for it did not seem as if they were moving under their own power—five nimble, nubile maidens in gossamer gowns with flowing trains, a long scarf draped over each one's shoulders and down her arms. In their wake lay a trail of flower petals. As they turned in unison, each one flipped her long scarf and a spray of pink petals floated in slow motion to the floor, echoing the graceful arc of her movement.

Anyi was in the center; she was the center of everyone's attention. Duarte was transfixed, forgetting to breathe, turning red with rising passion and the lack of oxygen. How long did the dance last? What is time when you fall into a moment without past or future, complete in and of itself? Did time stop? How was it possible for Duarte to hold his breath for the eternity of that exquisite moment?

He forgot about what's-her-name in Coimbra. He forgot about all the other beauties he would once have gladly given away his needle to know in the Biblical manner. He forgot to close his mouth and was beginning to drool when Rui de Araujo, his boss, nudged him a good one in the ribs and told him to quit gawking as if he had just gotten off the boat.

When the dance was over and the dancers had vanished, there was left an emptiness on the pavilion, except for a few flower-fragrances left swimming around in the air. Into this void leapt the Knife, dressed in loose pants and a black shirt tied at the waist with a checkered sash. Another similarly dressed warrior jumped into the performance area with him. They moved as a unit but not in unison; it was as if the motion of one became a catalyst for the other, and his action, in turn, spurred the first on to twists and feints, flexes and falls, always balancing the other's energy. A dance, a prayer, a warm-up exercise, a moving meditation, a warning to any future foe: it was all of these. It was a training ritual for the martial art of *silat*.

The other warrior was named Ali, the Bendahara's son-in-law who trained with the Knife at the local gym. The two were equally matched in skill, for what Ali lacked in swiftness, he made up for in superior size and strength. But this was more than a mock battle; it was a masked taunt to the foreign guests. And, of course, the two warriors were showing off their stuff to the ladies at the same time.

After they had finished, the Portuguese felt that it was a point of pride for them to participate too in the evening's entertainment. But what to do? At this moment, Duarte reached behind him for the trusty guitar that he was in the habit of carrying with him and gave it an absent-minded strum, which, to his surprise, caused everyone to become silent with expectation. The spotlight was now on him. In rising panic, he tried to find a song that would capture the majesty of the enchanted evening, or perhaps some plaintive melody from his Iberian homeland. But the only song he could think of was a party song, "*Jinkly Nona*." So, without thinking, he broke into this lively melody with an infectious rhythm:

Jinkly Nona, Jinkly Nona

Oh my Nona, ooooh!

Nona you're so beautiful

I'm so in love with you.

*Jinkly Nona, Jinkly Nona
Nona, my sweet miss
You're beautiful; you make a hole
Each time you squat and pis—"*

It was too late; the words had already escaped to the ears of his genteel host. As fortune would have it, the host couldn't understand a word of it; but the Rajah did notice the strange effect the song was having on the faces of his guests. They were suddenly turning a shade of red that came close to the color of cooked shrimp. Rui, the boss of the shore crew, with his red beard, looked almost molten with embarrassment. Duarte shrugged his shoulders as if to apologize. "What can I do?" Then he cast his eyes upward, tossed off a fast prayer to the heavens and bravely continued.

*Jinkly Nona, Jinkly Nona
How long can I wait?
To enter in, you must open,
Unlock your garden gate.*

By this time, a few of the Portuguese, caught up by the irresistible rhythm of the tune, had gotten up from their cushions and began dancing the *branyo*, a kind of *fandango*, or sixteenth-century *lambada*. Duarte sang the interlude:

*I play on my guitar
I tickle on the strings
Before we go too far
What song am I to sing?"*

In a short time, a few of the Rajah's female servants, then the cousins, and eventually the five goddess-like dancers themselves were out on the floor, grinding away in this sexually-teasing dance of approach and retreat, each time risking more risque movements: close, then away; closer yet, but never touching; moving back and forth, back and forth with the sensually-stimulating rhythm.

It caught on in a flash; it was a courtyard smash; it was the *branyo* bash. And to this day, the Malays dance the *joget*, an obvious copy of the dance that Duarte brought to Malacca that night so long ago as he sang:

Jinkly Nona, Jinkly Nona
Ripe papaya tree.
Oh, if I fell into the well,
Would you come along with me?
Oh if I fell into the well,
*Would you come along with me?*⁵⁵

Ed: How did you remember the words?

Cin: Easy. Me and Alfonso worked on the translation one afternoon while we lay around on the platform under the *ketepang* tree, a type of chestnut tree. So, in a way, those are my words, at least, my translation.

Anyway, the words were never translated for the Rajah or the Rancee. However, the red-faced embarrassment of the Portuguese, especially poor old Rui, the boss, was enough to cause the young people to suspect that the lyrics were absolutely scandalous and, therefore, essential to learn. Besides, the Rajah would definitely forbid them if he knew their meaning, so, of course, they couldn't resist.

Anyi, as usual, was the leader of this secret rebellion against Uti's ultimate rule. She chose Duarte as her teacher. In sessions—chaperoned, of course—they strove to learn the words for what their eyes already said so eloquently: "I love you. I want you. Where can we be alone?"

The Knife, her brother, joined them in the language sessions and soon picked up a few rudiments. He was mainly interested in military things and idly asked questions such as: How many men do you have on your five ships? Is that really metal plating on their hulls? Does it stop cannon-balls? Speaking of cannon-balls, how far do yours fly? Are they made of iron or stone? Do you carry much ammunition? How many cannons do you have? If, say, something were to happen to all five of your ships, hypothetically speaking of course, how long would it take for a rescue expedition to arrive?

These were not questions one should answer—after all, loose lips sink

55 To my surprise, these words match closely but not precisely with the song lyrics recorded for a doctoral thesis about the ethno-musicological aspects of the Portuguese community in Malacca, which strongly implies that the Malay *joget* dance is derived from the Portuguese branyo. No mention, however, was made of Duarte Fernandes as the person who first introduced the *branyo*. Ed, ed.

ships, but Duarte was not really a military man. He was engrossed in learning the language, thirstily drinking every word from Anyi's volcanic lips. As for Anyi, she kept wondering if it was true what they said about the nose.

The Knife invited Duarte to come along with him to the gym; actually, it was the open field next to the mosque where all the guys got together to work out and the girls came out to watch. There were some younger men in a circle, kicking a rattan ball around, keeping it from hitting the ground by using their head or a foot. The Knife was intent on more serious exercises, the *silat*.

When they arrived, the instructor was showing off an advanced technique he had learned from Sumatra. He threw his *kris* in the air, spun around and, as it was falling, he kicked it so that the blade flashed toward and stuck into a tree at the far side of the clearing. It takes ten years to learn that trick, he told his awed students (and plenty of bandages, he omitted telling them).



According to legend, *silat* began like this: A man kept beating his wife until, in her despair, she was driven to a ledge beside a pool beneath a thundering waterfall, intending to drown herself in the turmoil of the water. But as she sat on the ledge, her tears darkening the edge of rock in front of her, she noticed a delicate flower floating on the surface of the pool below. She watched it being inexorably drawn by the eddy current back toward the cascade where it would surely be crushed, crushed as she had been under the beatings of her husband. Although seemingly doomed to certain destruction, it was saved at the last moment by the finest drops of spray splashing it away from danger. Time and again, it would be drawn near the thundering falls only to be rescued at the last moment.

The woman's attention was then drawn to a large boulder in the ravine below. A tiger and an eagle were in mortal combat. Both were at their stillest just before attacking, then they would feint, fall, and roll in a mutual dance to the death. They used vastly different styles of fighting, yet seemed

evenly matched. She watched. She studied. She learned.

When her husband came looking for her and found her loitering by the waterfall, it was too much for him to take, especially after he had exhausted himself that very morning by beating her for being so lazy. He decided to thrash her another good one so she wouldn't forget.

But when he took a swing, she wasn't where his fist went. He swung again and again hit air. Suddenly, she was crawling up his torso, scratching ferociously at his eyes until he pleaded for mercy.

He was impressed, amazed at her new fighting skills, and he begged her to teach him. She did, and they lived happily ever after, after each one of their many great fights.



Anyway (coming back to the story), Ali was one of the Malay warriors who was part of Malacca's *silat* dojo or whatever they called this group; he, along with the Javanese named Knife, were two of the five top fighters in Malacca. Another one was a Muslim Indian named Xanbar, whose father sold cloth in the market, you know, the guy with the white beard and turban that Duarte had already made an enemy.

The fourth fighter was another Javanese, a greedy man named Kadir who came from a lower-class family but refused to submit to his fate. He had even had the gall to ask for Anyi's hand in marriage. Utimuti Rajah had something better planned for his daughter than to marry a money-grubbing, tin-picking dog sniffer like Kadir. The Rajah sincerely detested Kadir. Anyi agreed with her father about this. She'd rather be crocodile meat than marry him.

But she didn't care much for Patapra, the fifth in the group of *silat* masters, who was her father's selection as her husband. She had thrown a temper tantrum to stop the betrothal arrangements to this warrior prince from Java when she was fourteen years old and had been backed at that time by her mother, the Raneer, who felt Anyi was too young. Each passing year weakened that argument, for physically Anyi was already very much a

woman. The constant pressure for her to marry and her frenzied refusals made for some noisy door-slamming "misunderstandings" in Rajah's otherwise peaceful domain.

All five fighters had bought their ugly bracelets at the same jeweler. They were loosely woven twigs and leather braided around bones in such a way that made Duarte suspect that the jeweler had some sparrow in his genetic makeup. Beauty, they explained, was not the purpose of these bracelets; rather, they were charms, talismans. He who wore one could not be killed by a weapon made of iron, Duarte was told.

They had bought them from the Siamese merchant down on the bridge. Duarte went to visit the guy, to look over his goods—you never know—and, though he never bought a bracelet, he got to be friends with the vendor. He was even able to pick up a few words of Siamese. This proved to be useful, but also embarrassing later.

The situation for the Portuguese seemed all hunky-dory for about two months, but things aren't always what they seem. Xanbar's dad from the western coast of India had been talking to anyone who would listen about what the Portuguese had done to their Muslim brothers in Goa. They had cut off the noses and hands of local fishermen and sent these body parts to the governor as a present, something, they told him, to add to his curry. What kind of joke is that?

Ed: Not in good taste, I think.

Cin: "Portuguese are Christian dogs, infidels!" railed the cloth merchant from beneath his turban. "Their clothes are strange and, furthermore, they are ruining my business."

The Sultan and his admiral were in favor of setting up friendly trade ties with this new, potentially-profitable Portuguese market. The sultan was particularly pleased with the French perfume he'd been given as a present; it had improved the sniffing times with his consorts considerably.

The Bendahara liked the full-length mirror in a gold frame that had been presented to the Sultan and now, instead, graced his uncle's bedroom. He spent forty-five minutes getting dressed in front of his reflection after each of his seven daily baths. But he also knew how the Portuguese, pretending friendship in India, had built a fort, and now controlled the whole market. "Safer to pull the sprout out of the ground than to chop down a tree," he

decided, sagely.

Uti sat on the fence as usual, but when he learned that the mullahs had convinced the sultan it was Allah's will that the Portuguese should be slaughtered, Uti urged his son, the Knife, to volunteer to lead an attack on the captain-major's flagship. One of those iron-plated hulls would come in handy for Uti to have in a game of cannon-ball catch when he joined up with the soon-to-arrive fleet from Java in attacking and taking Malacca by force. If they ever arrived, thought Uti, drumming his finger on his opium pipe impatiently.

The council of advisors devised a plan for the Sultan. They would divide the small Portuguese force by guile, keeping the unsuspecting foreigners off-guard by smiling until their faces got sore, if need be. Then, one day, when he felt the time was ripe, the Bendahara told Rui, the chief officer of those on shore, that he had managed to secure a quantity of cloves that the Portuguese could purchase. But since tradition stipulated that the first ships to arrive in the harbor would be served first, the Bendahara would have to bend the harbor rules.

Uncle Ben was able to push the Portuguese ahead in line. The only thing was, they would have to send four dinghies in at once to speed up the process before the other traders had time to get angry. Of course this would further divide the Portuguese force from their ships.

Diogo Lopes sent thirty men to the warehouse to help the eight men already stationed there. Duarte was called to the warehouse from the Rajah's palace where he had been an honored guest and unwitting informer. They were to receive the large shipment of cloves early the next morning. It promised to be enough to make every single *conquistadore* aboard the ships a wealthy man many times over. And for the mere price of some Irish linen. Unbelievable! It was too good to be true!

Meanwhile, the Knife, Xanbar, Ali, Patapra and Kadir each led a couple of warriors in small boats and drifted out to the galleons in no discernible pattern, whistling innocently as they climbed aboard. The same goods that had been dear the day before now could be had for a few glass beads. The locals, previously astute hagglers, seemed to get the worst of every bargain that evening, selling items for as cheap as the stalls in the market. They brought palm wine which they shared liberally with their new Iberian

friends, themselves abstaining for religious reasons.

The Knife came aboard Captain-Major Diogo Lopes de Sequeira's vessel while the latter was playing chess. With unusual hospitality—perhaps it was because he was losing the game—the captain-major left his chessboard and went to greet his guests. The Knife politely insisted that the captain continue the game, asking questions about the moves of various pieces. All the time, his right hand was twitching on the hilt of his *kris*, ready to strike at a given signal.

Now we must flash to the scene in town that evening where the rabble had gathered, torches in hand, and began surging through the streets, picking up men along the way, picking up speed, converging from several directions on the Portuguese warehouse inside its frail wooden stockade.

A silhouette of a woman dashes from the shadows, her face concealed beneath her scarf. At the back gate of the Portuguese stockade, she cries in alarm at the top of her lungs, waking everyone inside the palisade: "DUARTE! DUARTE! DANGLE! DANGLE!" She meant to say "Danger!" but the language was still new to her.

Everyone looked at Duarte, who understood her meaning immediately because she always mixed up those words. He looked out and saw the torchlight of the angry crowd on the underside of the branches of tall trees as the mob moved steadily down the streets; torchlight was converging from many directions toward the warehouse, ever closer. He told Anyi to run to the nearby boats for help and get away from the godowns.⁵⁶

The support boats were unfortunately pulling away from shore already although the attackers had not yet arrived. Without hesitation, for she was a fine swimmer, she dived into the waves and swam to the nearest boat to convince those aboard to come to the rescue of her darling Duarte. Instead, the sailors decided to take the lady to their leader and save her lover later.

She practically ran up the rope ladder and onto the ship, where she ran into a *conquistadore* who was throwing his hands up in the air, an expression of futility, and swinging his leg over the railing to debark. That man was Fernao Magalhaes, known to history as Ferdinand Magellan, the first man erroneously given credit for sailing around the world.

⁵⁶ Godowns, from the Indian word *gadang*, are storehouses usually dug into the earth as an additional protection against fire. Ed, ed.

Ed: Erroneously?

Cin: Well, he never really made it, did he? Anyway, young Magalhaes and his men on another galleon had felt uncomfortable when they noticed that there were more Malays aboard their vessel than Portuguese. He had gone over to the flagship to warn Diogo Lopes of the potential danger and found the same situation there.

Diogo wasn't worried about the Malays. He had more important things to think about; specifically, the tide of the chess game was turning seriously against him. But to make Ferdie feel better, he sent someone aloft with the eyeglass to see if there was any trouble at the warehouse in town.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. At the moment when the warehouse went up in flames, a fleet of Javanese ships belonging to Utimuti Rajah suddenly appeared from behind the cape, rowing hard in attack to the sound of martial drums and blaring, bleating horns. At that same moment when Anyi set foot on the galleon deck, the Knife saw the flames shooting into the sky from the burning warehouse, took it to be the signal he'd been waiting for, and drew his *kris*. The watchman in the crow's nest also saw the fire and hollered, "Treachery, sir!" The Knife had his *kris* half-drawn from his sash. Anyi, blind with worry over the fate of her lover Duarte burst out with the only word of warning she could remember in the new language: "DANGLE!"

And, at that very moment, the captain-major, realizing he had been checkmated, threw the board onto the deck in anger and stood up. His sudden movement, combined with simultaneous warnings hollered from Anyi below and from the crow's nest above, froze the Knife in mid-action.

The captain, to his credit, quickly assessed the situation. He called for his arms, which his nervous, clever cabin boy had already made available, pivoted, and caught the Knife and his seven murderous buddies in the stern... of the ship, that is. If he had played chess with the same alacrity, he would not have lost the game. Yet it is also true that if he had played any better, he wouldn't have caught his assailants off guard.

The Javanese warriors could escape only by jumping overboard but all except the Knife were killed before they took the plunge. He tried to swim to freedom but was captured by a pursuing boat and brought back before the captain-major. His intended victim only a few minutes before had

become his judge and potential executioner. Sentencing was swift. The blade was raised to dispatch justice when Anyi ran forward and grabbed Diogo around the waist, begging for mercy.

"How," she pleaded, "could the captain wish to kill the man who was trying to save him?" Hadn't the captain noticed that the warriors from India were about to take over his ships? Her brother had been trying to protect Diogo Lopes, not to kill him. The captain wouldn't be alive now if she, his sister, hadn't warned him of his "eminent dangle."

She had meant "imminent danger," but the slip of the tongue proved fortuitous. Diogo burst out laughing, softening his heart so that he agreed to spare the life of the Knife. Besides, at that moment, the cabin boy was indicating that the captain-major might have more pressing matters to deal with, "like the very real possibility, sir, of losing your entire fleet, not to mention your thick, black-bearded head, sir."

By his astute and immediate actions, Diogo Lopes was able to salvage sixty percent of his fleet. Meanwhile, the palisade around the warehouse on the beach gave way to the pressures of the mob. The thirty-eight Portuguese defenders fell back to the brick-and-clay building. It was their last line of defense.

Inside, they bandaged their wounded as well as they could and prepared for the final assault. They could hear the cries from outside; people they knew were urging them to give up, calling them by name.

"HEY! ANTONIO!" one of the assailants shouted. Antonio stood up, "Yeah?" And "Whoo-oosh!" He was shot dead with a poisoned dart.

Then someone else outside yelled out, "HEY! JOE!" This time two of the beleaguered Portuguese *conquistadores* stood up. "Yeah?" they said in unison. And "Whoo-oosh-shoosh!" Two darts hit home.

One of the Portuguese thought he could turn the tables on the attackers. He called out, "HEY ABDUL," laughing at how he was about to trick his enemy.

Instead, he heard, "IS THAT YOU, FRANCISCO?" He stood up. "Yeah!" And "Whoo-oosh!" Another Iberian bit the dust.

Eighteen of them were cut down by these poisoned darts before it became apparent to boss Rui that sooner or later they were bound to get

around to calling out his name. Rui decided that surrender might not be a bad idea, especially since there was a fire raging out of control in the next room, and they were sitting on straw.

Twenty Portuguese were taken prisoner that night, herded down to the banks of the river, where they were placed in one of the sub-surface godowns. It was dank, dirty, dingy, and the room service was lousy.

To Anyi's disappointment, Captain Diogo decided to send her and her brother ashore, free to return home to their very wealthy father. She thought the two of them might at least have been used as hostages to exchange for a few of the Portuguese prisoners, for instance. "Oh, I don't know, maybe Duarte Fernandes. You never know when you're going to need a good tailor," she suggested to no avail.

Captain Major Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, representative of his majesty, the King of Portugal, sent a message to the Sultan and his Bendahara that as long as even one Portuguese *conquistadore* remained prisoner, Malacca would be visited with the full wrath of the king's vengeance. He was prepared to stay and blockade the harbor for years, if necessary, until he got what he demanded: compensation for lost cargo and the return of the captured ships in clean condition. (Well, did you ever see how rental vehicles are returned?) Oh, and he wanted his men freed. The sultan would rue the day he took Rui and the others as captives. It was only then that Diogo Lopes de Sequeira realized that he lacked the firepower with which to make his blockade effective. So he set fire to a few undefended seaside houses instead and set sail for Portugal, forsaking the captives. But before leaving, he ordered a man and a woman who had been captured during the night battle to each be shot through the head with an arrow. He sent their corpses ashore as a parting salvo, for his ammunition was almost totally depleted. Anyi decided, on second thought, that she was not quite so disappointed to have been set free.



Twenty Portuguese *conquistadores* had been abandoned. Imprisoned, they suffered horrible torture, you know, like when you put a glass of water

just out of reach of a thirsty man: this kind of torture. When the young local lasses, wrapped in their waist-hugging stiff pineapple fiber sarong tubes would come around to sell the prisoners food through the ground level windows, the Portuguese were racked with a different kind of hunger. The view through the bars, looking up those sarong tubes at shapely curves of comely girls was hard on them.

They learned that conversion to Islam was a way to freedom, and it was not long before the first of them took leave of the faith of his father and entered the open arms of Islam. Several followed. These men were freed immediately. But the Malays didn't make it easy to convert, there had to be a definite and irreversible commitment to the new faith. The converts had to submit themselves to circumcision: cutting away the foreskin around the entire tip of their male pride. Not familiar with circumcision and the spiritual benefits thereby derived, many of the potential converts were terrified and, therefore, remained steadfast in their faith.

There was a twelve-year-old cabin boy in the prison with them. Being the youngest among the men, some duties naturally fell upon his back. Nearness to this boy's innocence helped some men resist the temptresses. Others joined Rui in daily prayer sessions that usually broke up into rounds of blasphemies thrown through the bars at the teeth of their captors, often aiming not a few expletives at their absent captain-major whose military genius was responsible for getting them into this mess.

For four months they languished in prison. Then one day, the door was opened, and they were allowed out into the daylight, squinting like imitation Orientals, you know, like Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. They were given a house and new clothes; their old ones were burned—downwind. They were promised that some of the stolen Portuguese goods would be returned to them so that they could use it to start their own trading company. They allowed Rui to write a letter to Albuquerque, saying that everything was almost fine again, although they were still under house arrest, and the wine list left much to be desired. The Portuguese lined the pier, waving good-bye to the ship carrying that letter, watched the sails disappear beyond the point, and then they were sent back to their former prison.

Through the application of constant pressure, a few of the prisoners managed to be released. Rui had made friends with the wealthy Hindu

merchant, Ninu Chatu. He went to live with that family. At the urging of Anyi, who was constantly goading her brother and father to do something, Duarte was allowed out into the protective care of Utimuti Rajah. The other dozen shipmates who stuck to their faith were also stuck in prison.

For Duarte, life suddenly became sweet. The Knife, when he forgot about trying to prove that he wasn't short, was basically a pleasant fellow who was keen to learn how the Portuguese firearms worked. He even asked the young foreign tailor about his trade of making doublets, asking pointed questions about where the seams were. Exactly where did Duarte think would be the most vulnerable place where, say, a knife, hypothetically speaking of course, could strike a person who was dressed in the full battle gear of a *conquistadore*?

Anyi and Duarte continued to absorb each other's language. Because of his occupation, they naturally picked up tailoring words first, harmless words such as: thrust, softness, curve and angle, in, out, needle, seam, scissors, bobbin and such.

He wrote a song for her in her language about how much he loved her. This song caught on, made it to the Top Ten in 1510, and was taken along by one of the Portuguese prisoners who managed later to escape. That sailor shared the song with another sailor who was subsequently shipwrecked on the Seychelles. His grandson sang the song to a visiting seaman from Java, where it became a popular love ballad also. The melody made its way back to the Malay Peninsula and the words of an anthem of a Malay state were adapted to it, a melody which eventually became the national anthem, "*Negaraku*," when Malaysia gained its independence. This anthem was played for the first time to a Malaysian crowd on Merdeka Day, Independence Day, in a ceremony held, not in the nation's capital of Kuala Lumpur, but in Malacca. The song had gone full circle.⁵⁷

Of course, Duarte and Anyi were never left alone with each other; usually her older brother tagged along. The three of them, and an occasional servant maid whom the brother brought along for personal reasons, enjoyed each other's company, learning to dance the *branyo*, going

57 The story of this tune can be verified as far back as the Seychelles, but the assertion of a connection between this song to the one Duarte wrote to Anyi cannot be supported from existing evidence; but, indeed, it is not altogether impossible. Ed, ed.

on shopping sprees to the world emporium down by the river, taking holiday journeys to the country estate, the *dusun*, in the foothills of Gunung Ledang. Here they went armed with cumbersome archbusses and powerful crossbows to hunt black rhinos and striped tigers from elephant back. In the deeper jungle, they learned to use the blowgun, bagging broad-winged hornbills for their amber ivory brow with a single puff of forced breath. First rule: Don't inhale.

After a hard day in the jungle, they would linger by the limpid pool of a sylvan stream, lying in the slanting sunbeams of late afternoon that filtered through the canopy of leaves. This was one of Anyi's favorite places, and for good reason. The pool was in the center of a thick copse of trees, sealed from view by lush vegetation. In the eternal dim core of this grove, the floor was carpeted in thick moss. Occasionally, a marble rock would break the surface of the moss like the platform of some missing statue. The floor of the pond was a naturally polished slab of white marble.

Anyi so wished her brother would take the handmaiden and go into the bushes, leaving Duarte and her alone with each other on the moss. But her meddlesome brother had more questions about the archbusses and the doublets of mail and all.

Meanwhile, back at Malacca, politics was getting confusing. Uncle Ben decided it was time that he became sultan, the "Chosen Shadow of Allah." Therefore, it was apparent that the existing Sultan should fade away. The wealthy Rajah Utimuti found out about the plot and encouraged it by joining because he thought that the disruption it would cause would only work to his benefit when the Javanese fleet arrived—if it arrived.— Why were they taking so long? Uti even convinced the Gujarati trader and his son, Xanbar, to join the *coup d'etat*.

The Byzantine plot unfolded. In order to get the pro-Sultan navy away from the town for a while, arrangements were made for the Portuguese prisoners to escape. Uti volunteered to have one of his servants navigate one of his fleet of ships to transport the fugitives to safety in Sumatra.

On the appointed hour, Uncle Ben went to turn the key and let loose the captives. Both Duarte and Don Rui, incidentally, missed this chance to escape since they were absent from prison at the time. With Ben was Ali (his nephew who was also his son-in-law after he married Ben's daughter

Fatimah). Also present was Ali's father, the Bendahara's cousin (who was possibly also his nephew or perhaps an uncle)—family trees in the tropics often tended to twist upon themselves like jungle vines.

Ben told the Portuguese to hurry to the waiting boat, then shot a few of the stragglers in the back to make the story of the escape look more realistic. "Pity," he sighed.

He then sounded the alarm that sent the Malay admiral on a wild Portuguese chase. Thinking that everything was going pretty well his way, Uncle Ben rubbed his hands together and went trippingly up the path to the royal palace, leading his group of conspirators to kill the Sultan, his nephew.

But the Sultan's men were waiting for Ben in ambush, having been warned by Uti, who had switched sides again. Why? Because Uti had decided it would be better to rid Malacca of Uncle Ben than to do away with the doting old Sultan. So Uncle Ben found himself surrounded on the broad, ceramic-lined palace steps. Uti's son, the Knife, with his *kris* drawn, had eyes hungry for blood.

Ali drew his *kris* to defend his uncle/father-in-law, but the Bendahara had a lawyer's brain. He held out his hand and calmly indicated to Ali to put away the weapon. This was no small request. Once a *kris* is drawn, it must taste blood; Ali had to first cut himself on the arm before returning the weapon to its slumber in the scabbard.

Meanwhile, the Bendahara began pleading his case. If the sultan wishes him killed, he would willingly submit to the Sultan's will, for he had always been loyal to the wishes of the Shadow of Allah. If the Sultan thought he had been disloyal and wished for Ben's death, he, loving Uncle Ben, would prove this to be wrong by his martyrdom which he would gladly suffer rather than fight the forces of his liege, the Sultan. He won his point but lost his life.

The Knife already had his *kris* in hand. Rather than cut himself on the arm as Ali had done to satisfy the blood thirst of his drawn *kris*—for, in truth, he was a little squeamish at the sight of his own blood—the Knife killed Uncle Ben on the spot. Ali's father, brothers and cousins were all slaughtered in the ensuing fray. It was only politic. Once the killing started, a family was best eliminated, every man of them, rather than let vengeance

haunt the land. It was the only way to insure peace.

However, Ali managed to escape. He and Xanbar, perhaps protected by their magic anti-iron bracelets, fought their way to the path and managed to escape into the darkness. Months went by, and finally word came that the Portuguese had arrived in Sumatra, and so had Xanbar.⁵⁸ Not a word, however, was heard of the whereabouts of Ali.

During these times of turmoil, Duarte was enjoying life at the Utimuti Rajah's palaces, either in the suburbs north of Malacca or at the orchard estate in the foothills of Gunung Ledang about thirty miles from the harbor. He teamed up with a dwarf drummer and an albino gong player and jammed some brand new *branyo* songs. The dwarf was one of those long-hairs who dreamed of being a teen idol. He called himself Captain Universe.

Duarte always found Anyi chaperoned by her brother, who was, admittedly, a little neurotic. If not her brother, then one of several of the domestics was always at her side. Over the weeks, the months, the year that Duarte lived with the Uti family, the group of young people spent many evenings listening to Captain Universe, the house astrologer, babble about the stars and planets flying through the cosmos, his words keeping time with the patter of his drums. One day he predicted, because of a particularly fortuitous conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, that he was soon destined to go on a long ocean journey.

It was a time of frolic. There was a jungle to explore from a safe height on elephant back, a town to ride through astride proud Arabian horses while wearing Malacca's newest fashions designed by Duarte, or to race along the beach in front of Uti's estate on these elegant steeds. In the evenings, there was always music along with the savory meals, an acrobat to turn a trick, new words for Duarte to master.

There were also cooking lessons, for Duarte had become an expert in the use of a new spice so powerful that only a few ground seeds would be

⁵⁸ When Governor Albuquerque was on his way from Sumatra to Malacca, he came across the warrior Xanbar. In the ensuing battle, Xanbar, also known as Nahodabeguea, proved himself every inch a warrior, surviving countless wounds and refusing to give up. He was at last subdued. When they took the bracelet off his wrist, his wounds gushed blood, and he died instantly. Albuquerque, henceforth, wore that bracelet. *Portugal Documents No. 4*, Castanheda. Ed, ed.

added to a dish to make it burn. Duarte had begun carrying the pouch with him all this time, the pouch, if you remember, that Rosaline had tossed to him instead of a potpourri from the balcony back in Coimbra when he was making his escape.

She had mistakenly grabbed a pouch that her husband, the mayor of Coimbra, had received in the mail the day before, sent by a cousin who lived at the royal court in Spain. In the cloth bag were flat red seeds from the recently discovered "Indies" brought back by a fellow named Colom, called Cristobal in the Spanish court. (We call him Columbus.) These seeds burned the tongue like fire; they were hotter than the strongest black peppers known, able to reduce tall giants to nose-running snivelers. They were seeds of the red, the yellow and, that devil of them all, the orange chili.

On the long voyage from Lisboa to India, when the food had begun to be not only boring but inedible, Duarte decided to mix in some of the chili with his curry sauce—

At this point D'Abreu interrupted the story, saying, "I told you he was a cook."

Alfonso held up his hand like a traffic cop. "Now wait, D'Abreu! That don't make him no cook. Everybody aboard ship had to pull time in the galley. There were no cooks, cause why? Cause everybody was a cook, that's why. But not everybody was a cook like Duarte, who was no cook. He was a chef, the greatest of chefs. He put together a curry so spicy that the sailors all said it was from the devil. It's where we get our Curry *Diabu*. True! True, lah! How else?"

Anyway, by the time Duarte got to Malacca, he had developed a taste for extremely spicy food. He liked the local cuisine, but found it a little flat. Soon he was seen seasoning his dishes with the ground-up seeds. Before long, the spice caught on with the local lasses, and that's how the chili came to be used in Asian food. "True!" affirmed Alfonso. "So you see, my ancestor is the one that brought these chilis," he chuckled, holding up a chili prawn for effect.



One day, while Duarte and the others were staying at the country estate out by the orchards in the shadow of Gunung Ledang, the Knife said he had to leave. It was full moon, he explained, a time when the power of his *kris* could be increased by a solemn ceremony at the grave of a great Muslim warrior-saint of long ago, a *keramat* grave. If he left that morning, he would be able to be there by nightfall.

Despite her brother's absence, Anyi decided not to cancel the picnic at her favorite spot, the mountain pool with the marble floor. She packed the lunch herself for three, for there would be a chaperon, of course.

At the picnic, the servant girl took one bite of her rice ball, gave a silly smile and fainted. Anyi explained that the food had been drugged with *datura*—of the deadly nightshade family of plants. She assured Duarte that it was entirely safe if used as prescribed. She had gotten the formula from her mother who was great at cooking up medicines and poisons and potions and stuff.

"She'll be awake in a few hours," Anyi told Duarte, with an unmistakably suggestive smile, "and then she'll be so terrified when I tell her what we did while she was sleeping on the job, she wouldn't dare utter a word."

Evening fell like a curtain, then the night was bathed in the light of the full moon. In the center of a circle of gleaming white stones, on a carpet of moss, the two of them delved deeper into each other's... language. Duarte taught her positions of the tongue that were new to her, and she practiced until she got him. It was a very torrid language lesson. In the heat of it, they pledged their eternal love, trippingly on each other's tongue.



As the moon shone down on Duarte's white bare behind, that same moon—in the sky, that is—was busy turning the damascene on the blade of the Knife's mystical family *kris* into silver flames. He knelt inside the walled enclosure surrounding the grave of the great warrior of old. Nearby was a well about four feet across with the water surface about twenty-five feet below which was rumored to have been dug by this same legendary hero with his fingernails in one night, much to the chagrin of his manicurist, no doubt. In the well, so it was told, was the soul of a three-headed serpent, a mythical snake—or maybe it was a crocodile: these things tended to get mixed together in mythology.

The Knife had drawn his sacred *kris* from its scabbard with dread, knowing it must taste blood before the night was through. He wished he didn't have to do this ceremony alone; he would have much preferred to shed someone else's blood.

His blade had drunk the blood of others twice while in his hand. First Zainal, the brother of the Sultan, was stabbed in his sleep at the Sultan's implied request. The second kill was the haughty Bendahara. He remembered the old man lying in front of the main stairway to the palace, impeccably dressed in presumptuous royal yellow with a splash of red growing larger around the hole in his breast. Tonight, it would be the Knife's own blood that the blade would taste.

The air on this full-moon night smelled of vanilla from the myrrh resin burnt as incense, burnt to attract the primordial spirits of darkness to recharge the blade with otherworldly powers. Thus, the Knife would become an Invincible, if everything was done correctly.

He raised his *kris* above his head, pointed it into the center of the full moon, and began to chant:

*Oh holy Penglima
Come rest here, sir
Come here, lord, my master.*

Here he added a lot of gratuitous compliments to his nibs, the holy commander—so many, in fact, that anyone but the vainest of spirits would suspect it to be blatant flattery, after which he beseeched:

*Descend and enter the abode,
prepared and waiting.
Cluck cluck soul cluck cluck.*

The Knife never really liked this last part of the ceremony, but that's the way it was taught; that's the way it must be done.

He repeated this chant in sonorous tones, came close to putting himself to sleep, his eyes rolling up into his head. Beads of perspiration formed from profound concentration, giving his skin a silver aura in the lunar light. All the while, he was rubbing the blade from haft to tip, from tip to haft to tip and back, rubbing it with the oozing entrails and gray brain matter, rubbing the slime of a king cobra just killed.

The spirits couldn't be fooled with any old butchered snake. No way! It had to be fresh cobra. But the Knife was willing to put up with these inconveniences for the sake of invincibility.

While he was thus occupied, three shadows approached through the trees, stealthily, ever closer to the grave. At a silent signal, they split up so as to attack their intended victim simultaneously from different directions.

A twig snapped. The Knife was on his feet, looking straight into the chest of big Boaz, Ali's servant. The Knife threatened with his *kris* and Boaz, in reflex, backed up, right into a nest of cobras. He was bitten, and fell groaning to the ground.

The other two assailants came out of the shadows at the same moment. The sand was loose beneath his feet, so the Knife fell to the ground, crouching like a tiger, a special technique useful for this type of terrain. He then sprang over the wall of the grave. Ali stabbed, missed the Knife, but his *kris* struck home in the other assailant's shoulder, fatally wounding him.

Now it was a battle between the Knife and Ali, with two groaning, dying spectators, a battle they had practiced countless times on the *silat* field at sunset by the mosque. This time, however, they were in deadly earnest. First, as was the custom, they insulted each other. Ali lied and said he'd had a great time sniffing up the Knife's sister, and the Knife responded by describing a cute mole on the backside of Ali's wife, Fatimah, something he shouldn't have known about, and, well, they had a big "misunderstanding." After these words had been uttered, there was no way to convince the two boys to talk it over.

They faced off, standing sideways to each other to reduce the size of the target. A few feints tested the other's reactions; the will to do battle grew within them like heartburn. At first they fought evenly matched: Ali's strength and size was balanced by the quickness of the Knife; but slowly, the contest started going Ali's way.

"What's the matter, Shorty?" taunted Ali. "Can't reach?" As intended, this made the Knife, always self-conscious about his size, even angrier.

Ali faded to the right, doing a shuffle, throwing jab after jab, toying with his opponent. The Knife lunged, and in his anger, missed, losing control of his *kris*. This was Ali's chance for the kill. He moved in. The Knife dived for his *kris*, grabbed it and rolled. Ali was on top of him. The Knife, on his back, put his foot in Ali's groin, the other foot catching Ali's hips and lifting. Meanwhile, with all his remaining energy, the Knife thrust the blade of his *kris* upward between Ali's ribs.

Ali flew over him in slow motion; the *kris*, stuck in deep and tight, was wrenched from the Knife's hand and was falling away with Ali down, down into the well and gone, gone beneath the silver surface of the water.

The *kris*! The sacred *kris*! The *kris* that gave his family the right to power! The family heirloom! If his dad ever found out he had lost... The thought was too horrible to consider. He'd have to go down and get it.

However, the Knife didn't relish the idea of going down into an unknown well which was rumored to be home of the three-headed serpent spirit, and especially not when the body of a person he had just killed floated there. Furthermore, he hadn't brought his nose plugs, and his sinuses would kill him tomorrow if he dived underwater without them. Better come back in the daytime, or better yet, let his sister dive for the *kris*. She was a better swimmer.

Even if he did get the *kris* back, he would probably have to go through the whole invincibility ceremony all over again, including the snake guts! Yuck! And yet, come to think of it, he **had** just survived miraculously against heavy odds, and he didn't have to cut himself, for his *kris* could drink its fill of Ali's blood until he got back with his sister to fetch it. So, although depressed about losing the *kris* in the well, he was also quite pleased at the possibility that he might already have become invincible. It was with these mixed emotions that he returned to the country estate to find his sister.



Back at the pool near the orchard estate, Anyi and Duarte wake up in each other's arms (barely able to tell where one of their bodies stops and the other begins). Then Duarte opens one eye and it is—"Wake up! Is that the moon you see? Can't see. Looks like the sun to me!"—way past curfew time. "Her dad is gonna be mad!"

First, after they got dressed, they had to rouse their drugged chaperon. "Maybe I used a little too much," Anyi fussed. After vigorous shaking, slapping and a bucket of water in the face, the maid finally came to... partially at least. The after-effects of the sleeping potion caused her to break into uncontrollable fits of laughter for no obvious reason.

So the three of them are trying to sneak in the back gate of the country palace at dawn, with Duarte and Anyi holding their hands over the handmaiden's mouth to stifle her giggles, when they bump into the Knife coming in from his full-moon adventure with a heavy scowl.

One can imagine the toothy smile and the over-enthusiastic "Good morning, brother!" from Anyi.

"Snick, titter," from the maid.

Said Duarte, awkwardly, "Well, well. I see you like to get up early, too. Yes, sir! Nothing like the good old morning air to start your day early, I always say. Think I'll be off for a little jog. Nice meeting you—er—by chance this morning, Anyi, and you, too, Knife. *Adios amigos*," and disappeared down the road, his pace a little too fast to be considered a jog.

"Chortle. Twitter."

The Knife is serious. He needs Anyi's help. He's in big trouble. And if she will do this one favor for him, he will pretend he didn't see what he just saw.

"Snort. Twitter."

He told her what had happened at the grave, how he had killed three men in one night, more than doubling his previous tally.

"Giggle."

He told her how he had almost died in the last attack by Ali.

"Cackle."

He told her that if she didn't get rid of that servant girl right now he was going to wring her neck. So Anyi took the servant down the hall, told her to stay put, and came back to her brother.

He whispered the awful secret: that he had lost the *kris* in the well!

In the poignant stillness of that moment could be heard faintly in the distance: "Giggle."

The opportunity to sneak off to the island didn't present itself for several months. The Knife took her to the remote grave and the well beside it. She submerged once and found the body. She descended again and found the *kris*. Then surfacing and taking all the air she could into her lungs, she dived for the *kris* and wrested it from the dead man's body. But, when it unexpectedly slid free, she found herself thrown back by her own energy into darkness, not hitting rock where the well wall should have been. When she came up to the surface, *kris* in hand, the light was faint as if someone had dimmed the sun.

She could see a vague glow coming from beneath the water, the reflection of the sun shining down the well shaft, for it was midday. She gulped more air, dived back in the direction she had come, and surfaced again with sunlight arching down the side of the well once more.

Her brother couldn't believe her lung capacity. He would have sworn she had been underwater for over ten minutes. But he soon forgot about this when she returned the *kris* to him. She had saved his life.

Anyi never told him about the secret room she had discovered. The next day she returned to the well, alone. She carried charcoal, hot embers that she wrapped in leaves, and some kindling; she stuffed both bundles inside a gourd with a stopper. Then she climbed down a rope ladder that she'd borrowed from one of her father's warehouses, down along the well wall, then into the water, feeling for the opening in the wall below the surface. She found it, followed the wall contours and, as before, came up in the darkened room. Here she found a regularly cut series of steps in the sloping floor, steps carved in the rock leading out of the water to a dry surface.

She found a smooth spot on the floor and opened her package of leaves

carefully. She added the kindling to the charcoal ember to produce a blaze, and in a short time had a flame large enough for her to see by. She couldn't believe her eyes!

Red, yellow, and orange raced to her eyes in a dead heat! She blinked at the unexpected brightness! GOLD! A floor smooth with gold, the walls dripping with gold! It was as if an incredible heat had taken the precious metal and made melted cheese of it. A ROOM FULL OF GOLD!

"A room full of gold," she repeated to her disbelieving mother later. The Ranee was not in a receptive mood. She knew her daughter had been out unaccountably late one full-moon night a few months back with that foreign boy and hadn't had her monthly since and, therefore, Anyi would naturally want to get the Ranee's attention focused on something else. The mother had good reason to be skeptical.

Her daughter continued. "I swear I'm telling the truth, Mother. It's abundant, abounding, it's a lot! It cannot be counted, like water can't be counted! There is enough gold in that cave to—to lay a floor on this entire pavilion a foot deep, maybe much more. It is gold that is so gold it is almost red!"

When Anyi told her the whole story about her brother's losing the kris, a frown sailed across the Ranee's forehead and shipwrecked between her eyebrows. "A kris lost must stay lost. The kris has mystical power, power that must not be toyed with. When the kris no longer belongs to you, to hold on to it is to court disaster. No good can come of this..."

"But I suppose," she sighed with resignation, "with that much gold, we'll learn to get by. It could be worse," she philosophized.

The two of them decided that this would be their little secret. "Tell no one of this, child, for, if what you say is true and not a real tall one, for which I'll have your hide, young lady, then the mere knowledge of it means the risk of death. The secret, even half out, will bring us torture and tragedy."

Despite her own warnings to her daughter, the Ranee instantly began developing plans for using the gold. She would first have drapes done up for the front room. Surely, after that she would still have enough money left to buy that army her husband, Utimuti, had wanted so badly for a long time. With this new power, he would not need the help of the fleet from

Java to take Malacca; he could easily make himself sultan. And when her husband died—which could be any time now considering his age—her son, the Knife, was old enough to reign under her wing, if she could settle him down a bit. With the money to buy ships, guns and men, she and her son could take Sumatra, Java, then all the islands, and regain the glory of the Majapahit. The Ranee wrung her hands in hungry anticipation. Today, Malacca; tomorrow, the world!

Anyi had another secret which she didn't tell her mother, but she suspected that her mother knew anyway. Anyi had missed her last two appointments with the moon. She was "preggers."

Meeting the couple in the early morning when they were obviously sneaking into the palace had made the Knife watchful of his sister and the foreign houseguest. He had noticed how Duarte and Anyi lobbed loving looks at each other over his head; he decided they could not be trusted alone for even a minute. He also started paging through a catalog for chastity belts. It was like trying to close the barn door after the horses got out.

Ed: Another one of your granny's expressions?

Cin: You betcha.

There was no chance for Anyi to tell Duarte about the room of gold. She was, however, able to communicate behind her brother's back, using some rather crude but universal hand gestures to get the message across that she was going to have Duarte's baby.

Meanwhile, Uti, under the guidance of the Ranee, decided to make his move, using his daughter as an important piece in his master chess game of life. She was to marry the warrior prince, a distant nephew of the Rajah; he would hear no arguments to the contrary. He would put his foot down. Rice and water only until Anyi did as he commanded.

To his utter surprise, she agreed to the marriage immediately. She had no choice if she wished her child and her lover to live. The marriage was hastily arranged, the nuptials to be completed while the sarong still fit. In a painful irony for the lovers, Duarte was asked to sing at her wedding the now-famous love song he had written to Anyi, his eyes glistening in the lantern light as he sang.



A few months later, there was another wedding; one of the Sultan's daughters was betrothed to the prince of Pahang; it was to be a major merger in Malay family politics. For the wedding, the Malacca Sultan built a huge, gilded, covered platform-on-wheels—thirty wheels, each as tall as a man. The exterior of the platform was festooned in bunting, the interior lavishly cushioned. The columns were decorated with carvings and inlaid with semi-precious gems and wreathed in golden garlands at the cornices. On the large platform, a gamelan orchestra entertained the in-laws-to-be while they proceeded along the main street of the town sitting in comfort on their cushions, peacock feathers fanning them. The bandstand on wheels was pulled along by eleven caparisoned elephants.⁵⁹

They were on the homestretch of the parade, coming past the mosque at the foot of the hill at the top of which the palace stood with swooping, multi-leveled roofs. It had stained-glass windows, and ceramic tile decorated the broad front stairway. On that day especially, the palace offered the additional promise of a sumptuous wedding banquet. Just as the procession turned the corner, they were jarred by a thunderous roar as if the heavens had opened up. The Portuguese were back; nineteen black carracks had appeared in the harbor and had suddenly started shooting cannons, blowing trumpets, and raising a ruckus like a throng of college kids on spring break. The procession and wedding ceremony had been preempted.

Without waiting for approval from the Sultan, the jailer set the six remaining captives—including Rui and Duarte—free, and hurried them out to the flagship of Governor Albuquerque, the *Flor de la Mar*. Rui brought with him a message of support from the Hindu, Ninu Chatu. He also brought a sketch of the military installations in the town, most of which proved to be incorrect.

From the Rajah Utimuti, Duarte brought to Albuquerque a request for safe passage for the Rajah, his family, and servants so that they could return to their native land of Java, should hostilities break out. Albuquerque was

⁵⁹ Actually, there were only eight elephants. Ed, ed.

glad to hear that so many potential enemies were willing to hang out the white flag before the battle. He approved the request.

The messenger who had been sent by Uti to receive Albuquerque's reply to their request for safe passage also carried a secret message from Anyi to Duarte stating that she was now "a well without a bucket." Duarte sent back to her a verse about how he thirsted; for once he had drunk from the Rajah's well, he must return for more, which is getting very close to just coming out and saying it, especially since they were relying on a third party to carry the message orally. (It was like they were having verbal sex.)

Was the messenger an idiot or what? "Duh? I wonder what they mean, all that talk about wells and buckets?"

After receiving the prisoners, Governor Albuquerque made additional demands: a protected fort for Portuguese traders, payment for his fleet's former and present expedition, and he probably would have thrown in a request for a million mosquito hearts if he had thought of it. He was not making his requests so that an agreement could be easily reached.

After talks broke down, the Portuguese decided to storm the city. The first attack took place at dawn after everyone on board the ships had been bugled out of bed at 2 AM for their morning ablutions, a pre-battle breakfast of high-carb pancakes, and a prayer meeting. Confessions took longer than expected because the priest asked several of the men to repeat some really juicy parts.

Then they went to town! Now the Portuguese of that day had a unique battle strategy. As the boats neared the beach with trumpets bellowing, the best and bravest of those Sons-of-Somebody *conquistadores* would jump out, sword raised high so that they wouldn't rust in the surf, and cry, "To James! And at them!" For some reason, to them those were real rousing words, like shouting "Powder River!" in Montana. Then they would charge straight at the enemy.

If the strategy worked, the enemy, formed in a line of defense, would see the fearless ferocity of the attackers, cower, break rank, and run in panic. If, however, the strategy didn't work, which was often, the fastest *conquistadore*, way out in front, would find himself in deep doo-doo. He would be running ever nearer to a wall of ready defenders, his chances for survival diminishing exponentially with each step he took until, despite the

chivalric frenzy that he had worked himself into, he would realize that the better part of valor was to turn around and haul his tail out of there or kiss this life good-bye.

Now, remember, he has just finished a hundred-yard sprint in full battle dress—boots, metal shinguards, a mail doublet over his quilted one, a helmet as heavy as his neck could balance, and a two-handed iron sword. He didn't have a lot of energy left for a retreat. First, the helmet would go, then the doublet; a trail of armor would mark the path of his flight until, finally, he'd fling his sword at his attackers as his last futile martial act. As often as not, the bravest and the best, the flower of Portuguese knighthood, would be cut down from behind.

There was another problem with the Iberian battlefield tactics. As soon as they got near any object worth plundering, the knights often lost concentration; they would forget their military objectives, drop their weapons, and run off with the loot or a lady, often losing their lives and the battle in the process.

General Albuquerque was aware of these tendencies, so he formed a detailed battle plan to guarantee success. Team "A," standing for Alfonso—for he would, of course, be at the vanguard—would go left, land on the right bank, and then bank right to what was left of the bridge. That left team "B," under Bosco, to go right and land on the left bank, and then bank left to the bridge. Right? They would meet on the bridge and then, and then... er, then they would decide what to do next. "Clear?"

Everybody agreed it was a great plan. Governor Albuquerque was not the kind of commander to be crossed.⁶⁰

Rui told Albuquerque that once they controlled the bridge, refreshments could be brought to the men from the ships. No need for everyone to carry along his own lunch while fighting. Let Rui cater this battle.

Knowing Rui's knowledge of Malacca and his capacity for good judgment, when Duarte heard of the decision to let him cater, he decided to pack himself a snack just to be on the safe side. He had this idea he wanted

⁶⁰ This may have been a minor tactical error on the part of Albuquerque. He took the larger number of men and attacked the side of the river where he knew there were sympathizers, while he sent a smaller unit of his men to fight against the crack troops defending the mosque on the opposite bank. Ed, ed.

to try out, anyway. He took a loaf of bread, cut it in half horizontally and stuffed it full of cheese, tomatoes, onion, some assorted cold cuts, mayonnaise, and some lettuce: a kind of submarine sandwich—although neither the submarine nor the sandwich had at that time been invented. While he was in the middle of his creation, Duarte had to answer the call of nature. A few of his shipmates took this opportunity to stuff into the sandwich a whole mess of Duarte's ground-up red peppers, just for the fun of it. They couldn't wait to see Duarte's eyes bulge when he took his first bite.

During the attack, Duarte, being the humble man he was, tried to stay in the rear. He was one of the last to get off the landing boat. Let the others get first chance at the enemy and honor, he thought generously. He would save himself until they needed help.

Unfortunately for him, they needed help almost at once, and soon he was clanging steel and fighting for his life as his team pushed forward. The might of arrogance rather than their superior fighting power helped the Portuguese overwhelm the humbler Asian defenders.

The defenders were shoved back away from the river, pushed past the mosque, "and they ran through the brier and they ran through the bramble and they ran through the bushes where a rabbit wouldn't go..." and by that time it was already past noon: time for lunch and siesta.

Meanwhile, five⁶¹ elephants appeared in front of the palace on the hill with long swords attached to their tusks slashing the air, flashing like lightning in the sunlight. On each elephant's back stood a turret from which twenty warriors shot arrows and poisonous darts.

"Hey, Manuel!" *Whoo-oosh!*

These lumbering, unstoppable fortresses began plodding toward the resting Portuguese. Duarte didn't hear the elephants coming. He must have dozed off, exhausted by all that unexpected fighting he had done. Also, he hadn't slept well the night before, worrying about Anyi, and then he had to get up early for Mass. So, when he woke up from his siesta, he was still groggy and facing the wrong direction. Then, when he drowsily took a bite into his sandwich...

61 Three. Ed, ed.

CHILI! Real fiery ones! You know—the kind that you bite into and the fumes burn your cheeks, singe your nostrils, and turn your eyes into artesian wells, and you would pay anything for the chance to drown! Duarte turned his head and sprayed the contents out of his mouth, as chance would have it, right into the swinging trunk of an attack elephant coming around the corner.

Now the elephant's trunk is an extremely sensitive organ. Spears? The elephant had been trained to ignore them with a sneer. The blare of trumpets? How trivial. The blast of cannons? Didn't even raise an eyebrow. But this old war veteran had never experienced anything like this: his nose was a volcano in a tube!

He frantically reached up to the howdah and grabbed his mahout, his lifelong companion day and night since the days of their youth, wrapped his burning trunk around the poor man, threw him to the ground, and did the pancake stomp!

The elephant ran amok! He panicked the other pachyderms and, when war elephants go berserk, they tend to draw people's attention. All eyes were turned, therefore, in their direction. So when Duarte, blindly seeking water, darted across the open battlefield and straight at the startled enemy's line of defense, his face red, his eyes crazed, his agony misinterpreted by everyone as a war cry more blood-curdling than had ever been heard, his awesome magical weapons totally invisible to all, the Sultan's men scattered like chickens at fox-feeding time, all except for one little man from the interior of the Sumatran rain forest, who took aim with his blowgun. "Hey, Duarte!" *Whoo-oosh!*

Duarte fell unconscious, landing in the lap of the giggling housemaid who had been sitting at a nearby stall eating durian while watching the battle.⁶²

Duarte's was a rare injury in the annals of military history: shot in the butt behind enemy lines. Most of the Portuguese who were killed during the battle had died from the wounds these poisoned darts inflicted—a slow, oozing ulcer that would not heal. A few desperate victims tried to cauterize their injury by burning bacon fat in it. This rarely worked. The Malays

⁶² War in those days was often observed by picnicking spectators so this point may not be as far-fetched as it appears. Ed, ed.

knew of the leaf of a plant that would act as an anecdote—

Ed: Antidote?

Cin: Right. Did it again. It was chewed, made into a poultice, and applied directly to the wound. But this must be applied soon after the injury is incurred.

The dart was quickly dislodged from Duarte's derriere, and he was carried on a palanquin, prone, to the palace of Utimuti Rajah and the waiting arms of Anyi, four months pregnant, one month a wife.

Duarte missed the rest of the action that day. The Portuguese won the bridge. Not bad considering that the odds were nineteen to one against them.⁶³ However, their present position had its problems. One: there weren't enough uninjured men remaining—who weren't out looting, that is—to hold off the enemy and build up the defenses. Two: there was no food. Rui had been wrong about the practicality of catering. He had forgotten to consider the tide. And three: at high tide that evening, the Sultan could set a few boats on fire and float them down under the bridge, and there would be charcoal-roasted Portuguese by morning. After talking it over with some of the keener tacticians on the bridge, the Portuguese decided to declare victory, and then give up the territory they had won and make an orderly retreat to the galleons.

The Governor volunteered to be one of the first to go "in order to set an example," he explained later to some who felt that his retreat had been too hasty. And thus the Portuguese left the bridge, but not before burning the platform on thirty wheels that had been hastily abandoned at the beginning of the attack; the bunting, the cushions, and the musical instruments all went up in flames. This angered the Sultan of Pahang. "Some wedding this turned out to be!" he humphed. He went home in a snit, taking his troops with him. The wedding was canceled.

63 Estimates of the defender's strength have varied from 20,000 to as many as 100,000 armed men. A large number of soldiers happened to be on hand because the Sultan was preparing to go on an expedition to punish rebels in northern Sumatra. Albuquerque picked the worst time possible to arrive, and, therefore, the Portuguese conquest was all the more miraculous. Ed, ed.



And so it was; the Portuguese withdrew, and, for the second time, Duarte was abandoned in Malacca. But he was in the home of friends. The giggling maid had brought Duarte straight to Anyi, who nursed the wound in his behind—"I'm just glad it wasn't a snake-bite."—with the special poultice prepared by her mother and mixed generously with her tears.

"Look what has happened to me," she wailed. "Before I met you, Duarte, I had a knock-out figure. Everybody turned their eyes to watch me pass, and now, look at me. I am beginning to look like a water buffalo!"

He tried to tell her it wasn't true, that she did not look like a water buffalo, but she was in no mood to listen. "Don't try to make me feel good," she sobbed.

"I was three months pregnant so I had to marry that dork of a cousin, the warrior prince with walleyes and bad breath. Fortunately, he was not interested in sex, or at least not with women, that is, so that we haven't done it yet which, unfortunately, makes for a big problem because now I am starting to show, and my husband is starting to get suspicious, and now with all the bombing you Portuguese are doing to the town, I can't even go shopping at the market for a new sarong," she sobbed.

The injured Duarte, from his prone position, did what he could to soothe her. The maid in the next room giggled. Duarte was surprised and a little concerned; he thought the effect of the drug she had been given would have worn off by now.

Before Anyi became calm enough to tell her lover about the gold she had found, her father called for Duarte and sent him back to Alfonso's ship with a message to the Governor. It seems that Albuquerque had noticed a short Javanese warrior fighting in the front ranks, and someone had told him that it was the son of Utimuti Rajah, the same man who had asked for a safe passage for himself and his family.

Uti wanted to send his apologies for his son's impetuosity. He had gotten a little rambunctious when the fighting started, as young men will, he added in his avuncular way. It had been the boy's first real battle, and he

was sure no harm was meant to the Portuguese cause.

So Duarte was sent—standing, for his wound was still too recent—back to the *Flor de la Mar*. This time Albuquerque didn't greet Duarte with the hearty hug that he had bestowed on all the returning prisoners before. Instead, Albuquerque scowled, ordered Duarte to follow him to his private cabin and, controlling his fury, cordially suggested that Duarte sit down.

Duarte, who was in no position to refuse but also could not possibly sit because of his wound, refused the invitation as politely as he could; but offense was still taken, and the interview continued awkwardly with both men standing.

Albuquerque had reason to be suspicious. Here was this man, a "New Christian,"⁶⁴ no less, who had been living with Muslims for a year and had been granted a special release from prison similar to those who had converted. Then, on the first opportunity after being rescued, he had gone back to be with his former captors once again.

Albuquerque was not unaware of the romantic involvement as well; the messenger who had carried their poorly-coded words of love had kept no secrets from his commander or the rest of the fleet. Quite a few ribald jokes about wells and buckets were circulating among the crews of all the ships in the fleet at anchor in the harbor.

Duarte offered to show the Governor his wound as proof of his valor. He could also prove he hadn't converted. Both these offers were quickly refused. Duarte asked the Governor if anyone had explained that he had been the one who had turned the tide of battle by turning the Sultan's elephant back with a spray of chili pepper in its trunk. Otherwise, surely, the beasts would have crushed the valiant but undermanned Portuguese.

Albuquerque, who was touchy about any criticism of his unsuccessful military operation, took this to be a thinly veiled reproach of his battle strategy. He got defensive. He told Duarte that he doubted his story. He said that two other soldiers—men that Duarte knew, incidentally, men who shared mess time in the galley with Duarte—these two brave soldiers had already taken credit for repelling the elephants. They had told the captain that they used their spears, a much more conventional weapon than red

64 "New Christians" were suspected to have converted more for social and political reasons than because of faith. Ed, ed.

pepper, don't you think? Now who was Albuquerque to believe?

One thing was certain to the keen eyes of the military leader, Duarte Fernandes was not going to be of much use in the upcoming battle, not with his present wound. But since he spoke some Malay, and had even picked up a few words of Siamese in the market, the governor reluctantly decided to name him the first Portuguese ambassador to the Court of Siam. He ordered Duarte Fernandes to sail on a Chinese junk that was on its way home and arrange for his own return-trip ticket.

"Alone, sir? Don't you think there ought to be somebody else along in case something happens? I feel that on an important mission such as this representing the king, sir, I ought to have some protection—for the sake of the king, sir."

Albuquerque scowled and then, surprisingly, agreed. "All right, then. Here you go." He gave Duarte a sword, a lance, and some armor, and then sent him on his way to Siam. So Duarte was not around when the Portuguese conquered and looted Malacca on the second attack, nor was he present when Anyi gave birth to their baby girl, whom she named Lela.



The Chinese on the ship were from the Szechuan province of China. Duarte shared some of his red chili pepper with them, and shortly after that journey, Szechuan-style cooking took a sharp turn toward the pungent.

On their voyage, they passed through the Strait of Singapore, turned left and hugged the sandy shoreline up the east side of the peninsula. The cruise in the South China Sea took about a month. You know, Ed, they must have passed this island we're on right now, right east of here.

Ed: What year was that?

Cin: In 1511, sometime in August.

Anyway, at the mouth of a broad river, they waited through the night for high tide before crossing the sandbar, then their three-hundred-ton craft had plenty of clearance to make its way slowly up the Chao Phraya River that

the Siamese call "the Mother of Water." It was sixty miles from the ocean to the hub of the nation, the capital named after a mythical City of Bliss, Ayuthia. Many arms of the Mother of Water surrounded and extended from this splendid island-city.

Imagine being the first European rounding that last bend in the river before reaching the city at daybreak, seeing the spires appear one after another from behind the flame trees and the plumeria. People were bathing from the steps of their riverside houses and brushing their teeth with sticks of wood. A line of saffron-clad monks, carrying bowls, strolled beside the gardenia bushes along the shore. Water hyacinth floated beside the boat.

Then, in the distance, Duarte caught sight of the golden flash of oars as the royal barge approached around the bend. The gilded head of a giant bird at its prow turned, both sides became visible, one hundred and forty men in crimson uniforms dipped their oars in unison like a centipede with its legs tied together.

Word had sped ahead of Duarte Fernandes, word of the arrival of a strangely-dressed stranger with a strange nose and a strange accent. The barge had been sent to receive him if he would be so kind as to come aboard.

Duarte did. They invited him up onto a raised platform, the greater height to give him honor, and if he would, please remove those boots and be comfortable. Duarte hadn't removed his boots for a while, so when he struggled to take them off, there was a strange smell.

He climbed onto the platform to take his place on the cushion offered. His hosts brought their hands up in front of their faces as if in prayer by way of greeting in the Thai fashion, but, overcome as they were by a reflexive protective reaction against the unfamiliar foot effluvia, their fingers plugged their nasal passages as well.

Duarte decided to return the greeting, imitating what he considered the exotic fashion of Siamese greeting. Graciously, he held his palms together with his fingers pressing at the sides of his nose and said, "hello," in their language, admittedly in a rather nasal tone.

He lay down and leaned back on his triangular-shaped cushion. Now this was riding in style, he thought. Below him was the crimson-dressed crew, the long bird boat was on cruise control. He had only to enjoy the view.

Some spires needled up toward the pink pin-cushion clouds, others stood out clearly against the azure morning sky. Roofs seemed to be stacked on top of roofs as if displayed for a clearance sale. It seemed as if where one roof would have sufficed, four would be better, and eight even better. Where a corner was needed, why not jog a few times more so that one corner has five edges, and why, then, not ten, and again, until some buildings ended up being essentially round and thrusting excitedly into the sky.

They turned into a canal and passed beneath a series of bridges. Duarte thought this must surely be similar to the Venice he had heard so much about. Up close, the temples and palaces displayed even more elaborate works of art: beneath the orange and green tiled roofs nearly every surface was covered with shining ceramic mosaics or images of, say, multi-headed snakes about to strike but instead forming a shelter for a meditating Buddha, or sculpted birds whose wingspan held up a roof, or rows of ugly demons who carried the burden of an entire building on their shoulders. Everything was rendered in curves and swirls; a straight line would have felt no more welcome there than a mouse at a sorority party.

The barge docked, and Duarte was escorted to a kneeling elephant. He was motioned to climb on and sit in the carved-ivory howdah. The giant beast wore a cloak of crimson velvet fringed in gold and dangling pearls. A golden breast ornament studded with diamonds and rubies clasped the cloak in front, and a heavy gold chain was used as a girth. The polished ivory tusks were banded with bangles and inlaid with precious gems.

With servants and musicians leading the way, the elephant carried Duarte, swaying beneath his cooling canopy of peacock feathers, passing through throngs of people, all of them holding flowers up to their noses as he went by.

When they reached the palace, there was a foot bath waiting for him. Then he was escorted into the audience hall of the king: "Oh, wonderful of wonderful, majestic, sublime, first born of the world, navel of canal network, hub of the roads, source of light, bringer of water, one who makes the teeth-brushing stick taste sweet in the morning, the giver of rainbows, bestower of moon glow, dispenser of justice and vending machine of rice...." it took over an hour just to recite all his titles.

Duarte noticed, when he entered the audience hall, that everyone was lying on their bellies, eyes down as if they were looking for a lost contact lens, for it was the custom of the land never to look upon their king. So, when the curtains parted, no one but Duarte saw, high on the gilt platform in the center of the vast audience hall, His Majesty, the King of Siam, sitting on his throne with one leg naked to the shin, the other tucked beneath him and an elbow resting on his knee. He wore a pagoda on his head with more tiers than a Hollywood wedding cake, each slightly smaller than the one below and ending in a purple crystal at the pinnacle pointing heavenward—like some sort of extraterrestrial transmitter/receiver. It sparkled with gold and rubies, as did his wide bejeweled collar, epaulets, cuffs, belts, and sashes that drew an "X" across his chest.

He kept his head erect—of course, to keep that pagoda balanced on it. His face was without a smile, without a frown, just a blank expression whose meaning was colored by the subject's love or fear of him.

The king was told of the stranger's presence. This was the moment Duarte had been waiting for. He stepped forward, but unfamiliar with being barefoot with clean feet, he slipped on the smooth, marble floor and ended up on hands and knees. A smile flickered across the face of His Highness.

Duarte had practiced the words he had learned from the Siamese talisman trader in Malacca for this moment. Raising himself up on one knee, he announced his message, which was basically, "Hi. We're the new guys on the block. We won't hit you if you don't hit us." That said, Duarte complimented the king on his beautiful houses and gardens, and, having been told by the Chinese on the voyage to Ayuthia how much the Siamese loved their elephants, he decided to throw in an ad lib phrase about how he especially enjoyed the ride.

The language of Siam is a tonal language, in which the meaning can change drastically by the way in which a word is spoken. What Duarte really said was, "And I especially liked the elephant dung." Then, in an attempt to be polite in the Siamese fashion, he pressed his palms together and plugged his nose, compounding the misunderstanding.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the hall, eyes darting back and forth in bewilderment and indecision. Surely, this was not what one should say to their monarch. Then a wise man crawled forward to save the day. He

suggested that the Siamese ruler, being philosophical by nature, should interpret the strange man's message symbolically. Without doubt, unless the strange man is blind, he must have seen us all recoil from his strangeness. "Look at the way we all smile at him in our nervousness." Everyone, trying nervously not to smile, grinned.

"Perhaps the stranger is trying to remind us subtly that, although there may be a bad smell as when an elephant has, shall we say, just recently passed, this is the precise spot where the grass will soon grow greenest. In like manner, we should not underestimate the worth of his message merely because of the smell of his feet."

The Siamese were amazed at the subtle deftness of this strange ambassador. The king's chief minister then asked if there were any gifts as were customarily brought by people when they went to visit someone else's home. Gifts? Duarte had to think fast. He remembered the sword, the lance, and the set of armor, so he quickly called for them and handed them over, saying that he realized they were poor in value, but it's the thought that counts, right? The Portuguese were only humble fighting men, and these weapons represented "er... an offer to fight for the King of Siam, should the need arise and everything works out, you know..." His voice trailed off into an inaudible mumble.

Then he quickly changed the subject. He looked around the room and admired the high ceilings. "Makes it nice and cool in here," he said, perspiring. "It makes the palace in Malacca look like a chicken coop... And Wow! Would you look at this nice gold tea cup here. That's real gold, isn't it?"

The tea cup was given to him. Duarte praised several more things he saw that were of a size he could carry, and these, too, were given to him as presents. The king's generosity knew no limits, but Duarte didn't want to push his luck. As it was, he entered the chamber assigned to him with his arms heavily laden with booty.

The next day, while being honored with a tour of the royal stables for white elephants, he happened to comment on a cute gray baby elephant, and it took him quite a while to explain that, no, he couldn't accept the animal; he really didn't have room in his travel luggage to pack a pachyderm. He was presented, instead, with a lacquered basket filled with

some dung from a white elephant, which he couldn't refuse.



Meanwhile, back in Malacca, the battle had been waged and won by the Portuguese. The palace had been burned, the warehouses and secret vaults under the homes had been plundered, the army of the Sultan was in hasty retreat in the rain forest, and Utimuti Rajah was again riding the fence.

Anyi's discovery of the gold had, through the suggestions made by the wily Rane, altered the Uti family strategy. Perhaps a review of Uti's policy will reveal his tendencies. He is the Javanese who has been waiting for fifty years to help an armada from Java attack the Sultan of Malacca. He was given the daughter of a Hindu king and then had converted from Hinduism to Islam. He befriended the Portuguese before trying to steal one of their galleons and murder everyone on board. Then he befriended a Portuguese prisoner while encouraging Uncle Ben (the Bendahara) to let the other prisoners go, meanwhile informing the Sultan of Uncle Ben's plans, and then, with the help of his son, the Knife, killed Uncle Ben. Uti had asked the Portuguese for safe passage to leave, after which time his son was seen fighting for the Sultan in, not one, but both battles.

After the second battle, Uti again apologized for his son, pointing out that, in this case, the punishment had come with the crime, that his son had been sorely wounded and would surely have died if the Rane had not been an expert in the medicinal herbs of the rain forest. As it was, the boy was still in critical condition. The Knife had fought fearlessly, probably overestimating his invincibility, and was lucky to have escaped with his life.

To show his loyalty to Albuquerque, Utimuti Rajah donated a thousand slaves to help the Portuguese build their fortress (hoping to finish it before he planned to take it over). With such a fortress, one could hold the town even with only three hundred fighters manning its walls. He who ruled that fort would rule Malacca, and he who held Malacca would control the spice trade coming through the narrow strait. With gold to buy the very best soldiers and the strong, new fort they were building, Utimuti could easily become the new sultan of Malacca.

Actually, it wasn't Uti who wove all these grandiose schemes. He was an old man, very much under the influence of the opium that his Ranees supplied steadily. She had increased his daily allowance ever since she learned from Anyi about the room of gold. He was much easier to control that way. And when he should die, and that moment couldn't be far away, she intended to rule through her son, the Knife, a reckless boy, but not impossible for her to manage; she could always resort to her drug cabinet.

For her schemes to work, she first needed the fort completed in order to defend herself against the Malay Sultan who was lurking in the jungle near Malacca, looking for a chance to counterattack and win back what was left of his town from the Portuguese. The Ranees also wanted the fort finished before her husband's allies, the Muslim Javanese, arrived with their fleet. She wanted to be in complete control by then.

To keep the refugee Sultan cooling his heels in the hills, she had her husband and family swear their loyalty to him in a letter, promising to tell the sultan as soon as there was a good opportunity to attack. At the same time, she pleaded that the sultan delay his counterattack as long as possible because the longer he waited, the fewer the enemy he would have to fight against, since almost daily a Portuguese soldier was dying of malaria. This the Ranees knew from having her servants count the Portuguese graves, an act the Portuguese felt was rather less than polite.

Meanwhile, the Ranees let word leak out to Albuquerque of the location of the Sultan's jungle camp. Hundreds of Uti's servants were sent along with a large armed expedition to rid the surroundings of this threat. They found the camp empty when they arrived, fires still burning, the tea still hot. They found colorful tents and seven elephants caparisoned in fringes and frills, decorated for use by court ladies, the ornate gold and ebony chairs still strapped on their backs—the elephants' backs, that is. It seemed as if they had interrupted a ladies' afternoon picnic rather than surprised a military encampment.

It so happened that the letter that the Ranees had Uti send to the Malay Sultan, the one pledging undying support and signed by every male in the Utimuti family, had been intercepted and wound up in the hands of Albuquerque. One can almost see that snide worm, Kadir, Anyi's erstwhile, rejected suitor, sneering in the wings as he twists his moustache. He had intercepted the letter and given it to Albuquerque in revenge for his loss of

face at Uti's refusal of his proposal of marriage.

Albuquerque had the whole Javanese house of Utimuti arrested, every male member. A solicitor was appointed for their defense, but Uti, feeling particularly lucid and inspired by the five pipes of opium he had smoked that morning, made the same mistake as the Bendahara and insisted that he be allowed to plead his own case.

"Did the court not agree that it was the first duty of a subject to be loyal to his ruler?" he began. "If, in my case, loyalty were to be extended beyond the time when the ruler was actually in his palace, this can only be construed as proof beyond the shadow of a doubt of the sincerity of this humble subject's loyalty.

"Had I, a Rajah, been any less trustworthy, I would have been all the more disloyal." The opium was taking hold.

"On the other hand," he continued to confuse the tribunal of jurors, "having proven myself loyal to the former ruler in the extreme, have I not already thereby also proven my tendency to be trustworthy? Wasn't this the kind of men Albuquerque needed, people of proven loyalty? Of course it was.

"It was true," he admitted, "that I offered succor to the fallen monarch in his fight against the Portuguese, although I always felt the sultan to be in the wrong. Yet, what kind of man can help but forgive the sins of his betters?"

Then his logic dissolved entirely. "Is it not also true what the prophet said, 'to regret in time is to gain?' And isn't it also true that 'a sin that is hidden is already two thirds forgiven?'"

"Let's say we forget the whole thing ever happened. I'll even bring the price of rice down for you. What do you say? Bear in mind that horse-mangoes may have an ugly rind, yet they are sweet inside. And remember, too, that Allah will not subtract the time spent fishing from the days of one's life."

Uti had slipped into a common Malay rhetorical pattern, much like a filibuster, using a text made up entirely of aphorisms. "Rather be gobbled by a crocodile than nibbled on by the little fish all the while." He had to be forcibly removed from the dock. "The tongue is boneless and therefore it's

flexib—" and gagged.

The three Javanese were sentenced to die by decapitation on the twenty-seventh day of December, the punishment delayed so that the beheadings wouldn't mar the celebration of the birth of the Lord, who came to bring hope to the world.

On Christmas Day, 1511, we see the Ranee being frisked, then climbing the steep wooden stairs to Albuquerque's office on the third floor of the not-quite-finished tower keep. The door had yet to be hung on its hinges; it now leaned against the wall beside the open frame. The room smelled of wet stucco and fresh-hewn timber. Behind a heavy desk stood the governor, his back to the door, gazing down at the construction work on the fort below.

Rust-red laterite stones, shipped over by barge from the Island of Rock, were being used to cap a section of the fifteen-foot-thick walls, covering from view the gray granite base made from slabs taken from the mausoleums of Malacca's former sultans. Albuquerque allowed himself a chuckle of satisfaction over those gravestones and the six metal lions he had stolen so that some day he could use them to adorn his own mausoleum. Life was good.

He turned to the woman who had asked for this interview, acknowledging her presence with an arrogant twitch of his eyebrow but saying nothing. Instead, he poured himself a cordial mixed with the grains of paradise.⁶⁵ He did not offer her a drink, she being a Muslim and the wife of a convicted rebel; rather, he drank it down rudely, in front of her, with an audible gulp.

Albuquerque showed her the face of a fierce man of sixty-three, a permanent frown knifing between his implacable brows, his long, white beard tied into a stubborn knot at his waist. He had made a vow never to cut his beard until he had cut the Moors off at Ormuz, and the Governor wasn't one to break a vow of vengeance, no matter how long it grew. "What do you want?"

⁶⁵ Also called guinea grains, of the ginger family, it was used to strengthen cordials. It also began to be prescribed in veterinary medicine between 1490 and 1500 C.E. Ed, ed.

The woman had come to plead for the lives of her husband, son, and son-in-law. She was prepared to offer everything she possessed in exchange for their lives and for the guarantee of safe passage home to Java. This time, she promised, they would leave quickly.

"Grant me this," she said, "and I will make you the wealthiest of all men," she leaned forward, tempting him. "I see the question in your eyes; they tell me what is on your mind. And well you may ask how much that might be. It is far more than your ship can carry. What say you to a hundred tons of gold? As I said before, grant me my request and it is yours and, if you wish, yours alone. You will be the richest man that the world has ever known. A hundred tons of gold, two hundred thousand pounds!"

Unfortunately, there was no one present to record exactly what was said at this meeting, nothing left to history other than those few references to it quilled later by Albuquerque himself in a letter to the king and another to his son. Actually there are several other accounts given by Albuquerque, but on each occasion the amount of gold varied considerably, making his testimony suspect. And he was the only witness.

According to Albuquerque's account, he laughed in the Ranees's face. He told her that even if he believed her, which he didn't, it would not change his mind. No amount of gold could sway the justice of his king. Rebel against His Majesty, and you must die; that was the law. His decision was final and irrevocable.

Should we believe Albuquerque? There is no way to tell for sure. His ships were already overburdened with loot taken from Malacca. Even if he had learned of the location of the hidden room of gold, he had good reason to keep it a secret.

After Albuquerque left Malacca, he showed no sign of hurrying back. He spoke of a grandiose plan he wished to accomplish before he died, the mad scheme of a man who had unlimited wealth, that of digging a canal from the Upper Nile to the Red Sea in order to parch the throats of every heathen infidel in Cairo. Other than that, however, he seems to have had more modest ambitions: razing cities, maim and slaughter, your standard mayhem. All he wished for personally from the booty he took were those six lion statues for his grave, the ones he lost at sea in the wreck of the *Flor de la Mar*. Alfonso d'Albuquerque, former valet of the King of Portugal,

conqueror of half the world, died on his way back to Malacca, leaving only a bastard with his name. History does not record if, upon his return, he intended to search for the hidden gold.

History does record his decision to execute for treason three Javanese leaders of the powerful Utimuti family. On the same day that Anyi had gone into labor with Duarte's child, the Rajah Utimuti, Patapra, the Warrior Prince, and Pataico, the Knife—Anyi's father, husband, and brother—were taken up onto the scaffold, their bracelets were removed, and, before the assembled townspeople, their sentence was read. "For crimes against the Portuguese crown these men are sentenced to die. Be warned!"

The Warrior Prince was rigid with dignity, or perhaps it was fear. The Knife was bitter, knowing that if he had only performed just one more full moon invincibility ceremony, he would have gotten it right. He had been so close the last time.

Old Uti was smiling, giggling really, and shaking his head in amusement. He'd had a few extra pipes that morning and couldn't help but notice that the universe was made up entirely of single-celled elephants. He was laughing at his own stupidity for never having noticed this before.

They were beheaded. The three heads were impaled on stakes and displayed in the public square for all to see; the bodies were rowed out to sea at night, tied to rocks and sunk so that the fragmented Muslim soul could never make it into paradise and would be cursed to roam the earth forever in search of its head.

Ed: It just doesn't pay to lose your head.

Cin: Yeah. And the poor head is singing, "I ain't got no body."

Anyway, Anyi's husband never heard the news that he was the proud new "father" of a baby girl. He died a virgin, of sorts. The *kris*, once worn by the son, was returned to his mother, the Ranees. The Rajah's ruby ring had disappeared.

The widowed Ranees vowed revenge. That was an expensive ring, and besides, her plans had been set back drastically. She took the *kris* home. That very night, she began preparing a hellbroth over a scorching fire, concocting, by using all her considerable sorceress' art and fortified with her hatred, a poison without an anec—without a cure. To the sap of the evil

ipoh tree, used as the death agent in poisoned darts, she added the colorless crystalline helleborine, stirred in an unhealthy dash of deadly *datura*, poured in assorted known carcinogens and topped off the evil brew with a pinch of the lethal granules she'd bought from a one-eyed Persian trader.

She bathed the tip of the *kris* in the foul-smelling sludge, chanting incantations accompanied with appropriate flashes of lightning, a rock concert in hell. Then, with extreme care, she grasped the *kris* and slid it into its scabbard. She called for Kadir and handed the weapon to him with a grave warning about the poisoned point.

Dark Kadir, the worm-turned-serpent, was the strong man that the Ranee needed to fulfill her plans to rule, now that her husband and son were dead. Kadir was the obvious choice for another reason; he was completely controllable because she knew his weakness: greed. She had many a golden carrot for this donkey. It was he that she would use to massacre the Portuguese.

Kadir insisted on having a firmer hold on the Rajah's estate than a mere *kris*, no matter how much symbolic power it might possess. He suggested, as he had years before, that he marry the Ranee's now-widowed daughter Anyi and become one of the family. He knew she had just had a child, but he was sure she would get her figure back.

The wedding took place hastily one evening. Since the bride had to nurse her newborn, the groom decided to celebrate by frolicking with the maids prior to the nuptial services. The whole ceremony was a travesty of tradition; it was held with unseemly haste too soon after the former husband's demise. To top it off, the bride chose for her sarong, a pattern named "Pining for a Lover," which some of the older women thought was not in the best taste for a bride.



It was at this time that Duarte arrived back in Malacca after his wonderful holiday in Siam. He had some catching up to do. His good friend Fernao Magalhaes filled him in on what had happened in his absence. First,

the good news: Anyi, his girlfriend—everybody in the fleet knew about the lovers by now—had given birth to Duarte's baby. It was a girl. Both mother and daughter were doing fine.

Good news or bad news depending on your point of view, I suppose: Anyi's father, brother, and husband were dead. Their heads were impaled on spears down at the town plaza. Admission free. "Oh, and incidentally, Duarte, Anyi has remarried."

"But I was only gone a few months!" Duarte complained.

Duarte had trouble adjusting to the new Malacca, which was slowly becoming a Portuguese village. It was not the town it used to be. After the thrill of his illicit love affair with Anyi, when he'd offered his whole soul to the licking fires of passionate love only to lose her to another man because of cruel politics, and then to another man after that; and after the considerable stimulation he had received while at the Siamese court, to come back to Malacca and be here all alone without the old gang around was a let-down.

Early one evening, Duarte was moping beside the spring near the base of Bukit China, a place where he and Anyi—and, of course, the chaperon—had often come riding on their Arabian horses to refresh themselves with the tasty water. He was idly strumming his guitar, singing *fado* after sad *fado*.

"I have often walked down this street before, but the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before," he crooned, plaintively. He was seriously melancholic. Truth is, he was hoping to meet Anyi "not really by chance." He was also hoping she would not be chaperoned.

Anyi did, in fact, come by. She'd been looking all over town for him. And to his joy, she was alone; she had been much less chaperoned since she'd given birth to her baby.

The baby! She had almost forgotten. She had called the baby Lela and hoped he didn't mind. "The father, ahem, was off in Siam when the baby was born, after all, having himself a good time, I suppose. I mean, it wasn't like there was a lot of help around here, you know."

He put his arm around her to console her, for she had broken down sobbing. How cruel was their fate! She had missed him so much. He had

missed her, too. Duarte sighed; he was so much in love. Sure, there had been others, but this one, Anyi, kindled in him a desire to possess and be possessed, to offer to burn for eternity for a moment in her arms.

It was a dangerous emotion to have. He pulled back, picked up his guitar but couldn't think of an appropriate song.

"We could go away somewhere," she said. "Just you and I... oh, and the kid," she added. "There's a place for us. Somewhere, a space for us."

He still couldn't think of a song. So he said, "I love you. I've always loved you. I will for eternity."

"Look, Duarte. I got some gold. A lot. We could take some of it and set up a new life. Start a tailor's shop. Live simply. Just you, me, the kid, maybe a few hundred slaves..."

They fell into each other's arms and sniffed. They hugged. They came up for air. She told him the story of how the Knife had lost the family *kris* down a well near a *keramat* grave and how she had gone down for it and discovered a room full of gold. But the Freudian symbolism of the well was too much for them, and they fell into each other's arms once more, heavily sniffing. Before she could finish the story, down the path thundered Kadir, Anyi's present husband.

For Duarte, the situation had an unsettling familiarity about it. "Not again!" he moaned. Was he doomed all his life to be chased by angry husbands? Anyi, meanwhile, was wishing she had tied up her horse farther from the road.

Kadir was hungry for a fight. He hadn't killed a Portuguese in weeks, and he'd vowed to kill them all before the year was out. Feeling as if he'd fallen behind in his quota, he was anxious to get rid of this little runt who was sitting suspiciously close, well, actually, suspiciously under his wife. The poisoned kris was drawn before he entered the clearing, its deadly blade thirsty for blood.

Kadir, as you may remember, was one of the top five *silat* warriors in Malacca. He was, by far, the biggest and the meanest of them all. In the other corner was the contender, the diminutive Duarte, who would have had a reach advantage only if it had been a duel of noses. Duarte scrambles backward over the roots of a towering tree as giant Kadir looms, snarling,

fire spewing from his nostrils, ever closer. A sudden movement; Duarte flinches. Kadir sneers. Another feint; Duarte nearly faints.

Kadir thrusts. Twang! He cuts the cat-gut strings of the guitar that Duarte had brought up as a shield. But the impact makes Duarte fall backward. He looks up, the blade is raised over him, beginning to descend.

Anyi runs, reaching to grab her husband's arm; the blade swings and slashes Anyi's wrist.

"ANYI!" Kadir cries as he turns toward his wife, the horror of what he has done scalding his face. Then the guitar comes crashing down onto his temple, splitting, splintering down on the left ear of KO'd Kadir.⁶⁶

Duarte catches Anyi as she falls and eases her onto the grass. She smiles up at him, a kiss on her lips, a whiff in her nose, "I'll wait for you" in her eyes. She closes her eyes and dies in his arms. So lovely even in death. "I'll wait for you."

With tears in his eyes, he picked up the cursed Rajah's family *kris*, put it back in its scabbard, and slipped it into his belt. Then he lifted Anyi's delicate, lifeless body and carried it to her white stallion. With difficulty, he managed to mount her Arabian steed while holding her in his arms. He clung to his sad burden for miles and miles along the rainforest trail, slowly, taking one last ride with her on his lap as they had done once before; the horse on free rein took them back to her family's country palace.

The Ranee was there; she had fled to the country estate when Albuquerque ordered the Rajah's beach house burnt to the sand. She must have had a premonition for she stood at the edge of the pavilion, waiting.

Duarte carried Anyi's body in front of him through the high gate, straight across the courtyard to where her mother was standing, motionless and alone. He laid Anyi down lovingly on the verandah at her mother's feet, saying good-bye for the last time with a whiff. He withdrew the *kris* from his belt and laid it on top of her. Then he looked up; his eyes met the Ranee's, and each reflected the other's hatred, anguish, numbness, despair. No word was spoken.

⁶⁶ Kadir was eventually executed for his treachery against the Portuguese. Ed, ed.

Duarte left the Ranee and wandered off alone deeper into the rain forest until, as if drawn by some force, he found himself once again at the spot where, on that full moon night—it seemed so long ago but had been less than a year—he and Anyi... but the sweet memory of it was too painful. He wiped the tears from his eyes but more followed.

It was all so confusing. It was true that the only woman he had ever really loved with all his heart and soul had been taken from him. It was also true that in the heat of passion, he had vowed to be with her for eternity, and he had meant it from the very core of his being, and he still meant it. But this was where the problem came in. Since eternity was a long time, was there really any hurry to start? Was he honor-bound to commit suicide so that they would be together *now*, when, after all, they would have forever together? Wasn't that being a bit greedy?

While he was trying to make up his mind, but leaning strongly toward the no-suicide side of the debate, he heard a faint muffled noise coming from a nearby copse of trees.

"Giggle." The maid from the Rajah's palace was hiding behind a tree trunk, watching him. She had run away when the Rajah's beach home had been razed by Albuquerque. Now she came to Duarte's side. His heart, opened by his sadness, yielded willingly to the massage of her nurturing touches.

Duarte found consolation from his misery beyond his wildest expectations. For no sooner had the two of them spent themselves in ecstasy than another young woman appeared. And then another. And another, until it became necessary for them to draw straws. There is no record of how many damsels in distress Duarte rescued on that and subsequent days, but when he died, he had twenty-four wives and had fathered seventy-two children. Some suggest that these women were from the Malay sultan's court, stranded when their picnic had been so rudely attacked, and certain it is that one of his wives was named Mariam and another Fatimah, but no definite conclusions can be drawn from this, for they were common names in Malacca. Some of the others of his wives were certainly runaway slaves, such as the maid with the bubbling personality. He came to enjoy her giggles. He made it clear to every one of them that in the afterlife, he'd belong only to Anyi, so they should enjoy him while they could.



"Duarte made an honest women out of every one of them, too, lah" claimed the storyteller, Alfonso, "by lying to the priest." Rat-a-tat. The priest, he said, was happy for the extra income, for every wedding and every birth meant more fees for his services, and Duarte was helping him to stack up his pile in a hurry so he could go back a rich man to his little village in Portugal.

Duarte set up shop as a tailor in Malacca town but nothing ever came of it. Business wasn't very prosperous. What does one expect where sarongs are the standard of fashion? And he wasn't often open. He kept closing up shop and wandering off into the rain forest. He had the strange habit of falling into wells. Neighbors were not fond of finding him swimming in their source of drinking water with or without his boots on.

It was while he was off on one of these wilderness treks that he contracted malaria and died at the ripe age of sixty-nine, never finding the gold that Anyi had told him about.

Duarte Fernandes was indirectly responsible for another momentous historical event, according to Alfonso. Along with the women Duarte found in the rain forest was his buddy, the long-haired dwarf drummer from his old *branyo* band, Captain Universe. He was an okay guy to have around for a while, but he was a little far-out-in-orbit to be comfortable living with for long.

Ed: I guess with twenty-four wives, who needs a dwarf?

Cin: Exactly. So, when Duarte remembered that his friend Fernao dreamed of sailing around the whole world, Duarte donated the dwarf to the expedition. With his knowledge of the stars and the language of the Spice Islands where he had been born, the dwarf would prove invaluable to his friend, an explorer who, as I mentioned, came to be known in history books as Ferdinand Magellan.

Captain Universe sailed with Magellan back to Portugal, then went with him to the Spanish Court where they sold the idea of getting to the Far East by going southwest. They sailed together again to South America and

beyond. When Magellan was killed in a battle near Cebu in the Philippines, the dwarf stayed on with the ship, returned to his home island and was féted as a hero—the first man to sail all the way around the world: *Penglima Awang*, Captain Universe!⁶⁷

And then he left again on a ship full of cloves and was one of the eighteen men of the expedition to return to Spain, all of whom became fabulously rich. He converted to Catholicism, married the sister of a novelist, and had to house and feed the lazy do-nothing for years.

The Raneé took her granddaughter Lela and the *kris* with her back to Java, to the old Hindu kingdom of her childhood in the fertile central rice plains. As a parting shot, she sent some brownies to Albuquerque, but his men stole the package so that, although her brownies didn't hit the mark directly, they caused a great deal of discomfort for everyone on board during the Portuguese return voyage to India. They thought it was the water.

Of course, the Raneé never forgot where the gold was, nor did she give up trying to get it. A few years later, the armada from Java made up of one-hundred-and-fifty vessels, the fleet for which Utimuti Rajah had waited so long, finally arrived at Malacca; they were soundly defeated by the iron-hulled black ships of the Portuguese.

"So you see," concluded Alfonso, "if it hadn't been for Duarte Fernandes, the Portuguese would have all been killed the first time they came, for it was the warning of his lover, Anyi, that saved them. Then they would all have been trampled by elephants when following Albuquerque's attack plan, but it was Duarte Fernandes' chili in the trunk that turned the tide. And after the Portuguese settled here, he did more than any other man to help populate the place with us Eurasians, did more than twelve men combined. And remember, if not for Duarte Fernandes, there would be no *branyo* or *joget* music in Malaysia, nor would we have our beautiful national anthem, lah, his love song to Anyi."

67 Also known as Malacca Henry, the name Penglima could be variously interpreted as "commander" or "admiral" and Awang as "universe" or "heavens" or "space" or "cloud." He was, indeed, the first man recorded to have sailed around the world, but there are no data to connect him with a drumming dwarf at the court of Utimuti Rajah other than the fact that he was in Malacca at the same time Magellan was there, that is, during both the Sequeira and Albuquerque expeditions. Ed, ed.

"And the food, where would we be without the chili pepper? What would Indonesian food be, or Thai and Szechuan food be without hot peppers? Thank Duarte, lah, or we would not be eating such good shrimp now.

"What did your D'Abreu ever do?" Rat-a-tat. This he said, licking his fingers and reaching for another chili shrimp.

"As for the gold, the hundred tons of gold, for all we know it is still in that cave at the bottom of a well somewhere near a *keramat* grave not far from Malacca."



Ed: So that's the hundred tons of gold you were talking about, right? And this is how you got started on your treasure hunt?

Cin: Are you kidding? There wasn't any hunt, not until later, and not really then, either. It was all just sort of "pretend" until I found it. Seriously, Ed, I didn't really believe Alfonso's story when I heard it. Did you? Do you? I didn't find out until later that at least part of it was true—after I spent some time reading about the Portuguese invasion in the library I found out—

Ed: You went to the library?

Cin: Libraries, actually. Both the city public one and Planter Wiggins' esoteric private collection. What else can you do for free in the steamy dream of an afternoon when even the iguana are looking for a shadow to slither into? Nothing wants to move. It seems that even the sun stops and stares an evil eye down on you. The drought only amplified the ennui.

Sometimes, waiting around for something to happen is the hardest thing to do. In Malacca, the stillness of the air seems to be matched by a stillness of time. Nothing changed. The old Chinese man with his calligraphy-brush beard slept in the same chair, in the same position as the last time I saw him that morning. (Or was it last week?) I checked to see if any cobwebs had attached themselves to his long fingernail.

The drought and water shortage, of course, was the topic of conversation at the Majestic bar-lounge at sunset. A guy comes in, orders a glass of beer and a glass of water. Leong frowns behind the counter but serves him. "Why is?" he asks with a glare. "Before you never drink water, ah. Not once. For ten year you come this place, no water, ah. So why is, in middle of this drought, you ask for water now?"

"Because why?" the guy answers. "Because you got to ask for it now. Nobody gives it to you for free anymore unless you ask. Well, that made me think it must be worth something. Then I got to considering what I was missing when it was always available. Made me thirsty for a glass of water. I know, it's crazy."

Another guy at the bar says, "Heard say that the high tech bomoh the government hired has split town, leaving all his fancy equipment. Tried to skip out without paying his bill. The hotel manager caught him at the taxi stand, and now his bill is all paid up at the hotel, no hard feelings, and there was a healthy tip besides. Brought a few friends from the *kongsi* with him, I hear."

Ed: Kongsi?

Cin: Wait. I'm coming to that. Then the other guy sitting on a stool there in the bar at the Majestic says he read in the newspaper that some *bomoh* group in the interior wrote a letter to the state government offering their services with the same "no rain, no payin'" plan. They say they can burn some magic bark and get the clouds to listen to them.

Another article in the same paper showed the "serious" manner in which the government was addressing the situation. At the state assembly meeting, the opposition minister stood up and accused the government of causing the death of eleven people because the water pipes went dry.

The government man, taking the accusation personally, warned that "he who bites into a chili better like it hot," meaning that he was willing to burn back if the squeeze were put on him, and the results would not be pleasant. The opposition responded by challenging the honorable government representative to a chili-eating contest.

The government guy quipped that he had heard of people who felt like dying when their pipes had dried up, but he knew of no one who had **actually** died from the lack of tap water. The opposition respectfully asked

the government spokesman if his pipe personally had dried up.

No motion resulted from the discussion, for when the time came for a vote to be taken, it was discovered that most of the members had already gone home and there was no quorum.

Leong was wiping the black Formica bar counter and emptying ashtrays. Someone asked him how the Chinese make rain. He considered the question momentarily. "Easy. You get two dragon playing with this magic pearl, rolling it to each other. When the pearl rolls, you get thunder. Thunder, you get rain. Easy. Ah."

"Eat beans you get thunder."

"But no rain, ah."

"Drink beer, you get rain and thunder."

Jimmy Ng, the Chinese man I had met a few days earlier at the hotel entered the lobby, a shadow appearing out of the scorching afternoon rays. He took a stool and signaled Leong with an upraised finger for a beer. The conversation drifted. "Hear about the guy who come round to Tan Kit's goldsmith shop? A *Mat Salleh*, had a strange accent. Says he has some gold bars smuggled out of Russia when the Soviet Union was dissolving. Pure gold bars. Wanted to sell cheap, needed the cash. Flashed a sample to Tan Kit at the counter and was taken to the back room straight off. Old man Tan called the guard in to be safe. They cut the bar up right there and then, and checked it carefully. It tested out at almost twenty-four carat, 99.7% pure gold. And since it was stolen from a government that no longer existed, there was no victim; no one looking for it. It could be had at a very cheap price as long as it was kept a secret."

"Good, ah!" says another man.

"Not so good, lah! Only that first bar was pure gold. The rest of them all had lead inside. By the time that was discovered, the *Mat Salleh*,—surprise, surprise—he long gone."

"So what? Tan Kit, he go to police?"

"How can, lah. Buying smuggled gold, ah?"

"Ah."

"You better believe old man Tan didn't just forget about all that money,"

Jimmy sneered skeptically. "He'll be taking his troubles to the *kongsi*."

I asked Jimmy what a *kongsi* was. Jimmy answered. "You know, the company. Ever heard of the *hong*? The *hooy*? The *Triads*?" I hadn't heard of any of these. "Okay," Jimmy continued. "How about the Chinese secret societies, mafia-like gangs? The folks that bring you a variety of services: drug smuggling, protection rackets, prostitution, gambling, extortion, exterminations, and other profitable enterprises?"

"Look through your newspaper here," he continued. "You'll find them. They do their advertising for free, often on the front page." He scanned the paper for a moment until his eyes lit on a particular column which he showed me.

"Here, this piece about a businessman shot three times by a gunman behind his house. He's recovering in the hospital. Lucky to be alive. That's the second time this same man has been shot at. Police suspect attempted murder. Those police guys, they are pretty sharp, ah." Jimmy snorted at his sarcasm.

"You can almost be sure, if there's a gun involved then it's probably the work of the *hong*." He scanned the paper again until he came to another item of interest. "Here's another one. Six gunmen dressed entirely in black, like *ninja*, they walk into a coffee shop in a small town near here and waste this guy with a volley from their hand guns. Even being caught with a gun means death by hanging here in Malaysia, so to display six at once, that's pure bravado. That's got to be the *hong*, or rather one of the *hong*, there are many groups today, but they all come from one source, really."

"The *hong*, they reserve their worst punishment for those who reveal any of the secrets of their society: the punishment is called 'Death by a Thousand Swords.' They make delicate cuts into various muscles, rubbing salt into the wounds to make the pain all the more excruciating; it is torture by an artist, designed over centuries by some of the world's premier sadists who desired to prolong the agonies of death."

"Yuck! I don't think I like these people," I told Jimmy.

He told me that the secrets of the *hong* must never be revealed, so extreme measures were taken to insure silence. The initiate is warned when he is brought into the gang what will happen to those who betray the vow of secrecy. He is reminded again and again at every initiation thereafter

over the years as he climbs up the ladder from foot-soldier to Tiger General and on up from Silver Sandal to White Fan, and maybe, but not likely, to the very top to become the Red Bamboo, the hidden power behind all the power, an identity kept so secret, few would ever suspect that some of the most respectable elders of the Malaccan community are hidden leaders of the underground. It has always been this way, since before the days of Dutch rule.

"At the initiation," Jimmy told me, warming to his subject, "each member will prick his middle finger and let it drip into a common cup, and then they stir it up and everyone drinks some of this blood with an oath of eternal unity. They are taught secret signs to identify their brother and his rank in public, how to hold their tea cup, how to position their chopsticks. In these ways they communicate to other members; they indicate which *hong* they belong to and their rank in the society."

"Do they get a little plastic decoder ring, too?" I asked him. "It sounds kind of Boy Scout-ish to me."

"There is nothing Boy Scout about it," Jimmy insisted. "They are deadly serious and brutal, if necessary. Suppose you are shaking hands with someone and you feel this little scratch on your palm." He demonstrated on my hand; it felt creepy, like I was being violated somehow. "That means," pointing his finger at me like a gun, "I know you, but you don't know me. And that means I have a higher rank than you, say, I am a Tiger General and you are only a red soldier. And that means be careful how you treat me. You don't have to worry though. *Mat Salleh* hardly ever have a run-in with the *hong*."

"You seem to know an awful lot about them," I commented.

"I'm a *kung fu* movie freak," Jimmy answered. "Can't get enough of them. I see every one of them that comes to the Lucky Theater at least five times."

"What does that have to do with the *hong*?" I asked.

"Just about everything," Jimmy said, obviously surprised by my ignorance. "All of the *hong* trace their origins to the same Buddhist monastery, the Shao Lin Temple in China, the same place where *kung fu* began."



Jimmy told me that, in order to understand the evolution of the *hong*, one must go way back in time to the beginning of Chinese civilization and sweep swiftly over three millennia of horrible disasters that annihilated millions upon millions of people. There were plagues, for instance, carried by proud soldiers on their triumphant return to the Celestial Capital after conquering and plundering "uncivilized" lands, plagues that killed one out of every three. One out of every three men, one out of every three women!

Floods poured down watery destruction and with it disease spread across the vast wetlands, and with cruel irony, these floods were often followed by skin-parching, tongue-sticking droughts and bone-exposing starvation. There were countless righteous and senseless wars with savage, ravaging armies, leaving the scattered survivors cowering in fear in caves.

The common man was poor and helpless; he sold his labor for a bowl of thin gruel made from broken grains of rice and was required to sleep in a hut in the field so that the rapacious landlord would get returned to him the benefit and profit from his serf's manure. Bandits would sweep down from the hills and take whatever could be carried off. Unscrupulous landlords would come to the serfs' hovels and take or borrow wives and daughters. Armed conscription squads would come to the village and take the healthiest young men as fodder for the front lines. And throughout this morass of pain, sadness, turmoil, irony, senseless suffering, cruelty, insanity, inanity, greed, need, lust and dust—through all of this comes a message of profound hope that somehow humanity can survive **anything** because we already have.

The Chinese survived by sticking close together. They lived in cramped spaces so that their hovels would use up the least amount of arable land and so that the walls of their village-fortress would be shorter and, therefore, easier to defend. They lived close together in small rooms with only the minimal papered walls between families. For hundreds of years, in China, five neighboring families were punished for a crime committed by a member of any one of them. Complicity was assumed; it was impossible to claim ignorance.

Ed: You would certainly keep an eye on your neighbors.

Cin: That's the idea.

If things are going right in the land, if enough rain falls on the crops but never on picnics, it meant that Heaven was pleased with the way the emperor of China ruled from his celestial throne. Because the job of appearing righteous and moral and godly was so time-consuming, the emperor had little opportunity for the actual mundane matters of running his vast kingdom.

To do this, there was a special class of educated civil servants, the mandarins. Although the system provided an alternative to nepotism, the mandarins often became very wealthy once they were in office by receiving "birthday presents" from those who were seeking favors. Nice work if you could get it, and you could get it if you passed the big national exam, the universal gateway to position and fortune.

Anyone could take the exam, anyone who had passed a series of preliminaries. But to do so, an aspirant must have had the free time during his youth to have memorized the classics, especially *The Confucian Analects* and also the forty-eight thousand Chinese characters in several different scripts. It was a grueling examination, and often the parents were forced to do a little personal communication, shaking hands inside the examiner's sleeve, as it were, and leaving a little red packet of money there so that sonny-boy could be allowed through the golden gates.

Those who failed the exam often got angry because it was blatantly biased toward the offspring of the wealthy.

Ed: No wonder they were testy.

Cin: The most ambitious among these flunk-outs had a nasty habit of becoming self-styled generals, leading peasant revolts and, at times, even founding a new dynasty.

Once upon a time, way back there just after someone had invented the second chopstick, Heaven, which had been pleased with the way the old emperor had handled things, became annoyed when his son took over; things began to go downhill fast. At the palace, there was an unending need for comely concubines, for intricately woven negligees, and expandable silk dildos for the ladies-in-waiting, for elixirs of virility and immortality:

these things don't come cheap.

As ever with big government, raising taxes was the answer. The government taxed the peasants sorely. The drought came, and rice became scarce. The government responded by adding taxes to pay for welfare, and thus the mandarins, those civil sycophants at the emperor's court, were able to fare quite well on the revenues thus gathered.

The peasants, sick of having the same old bowl of dust for lunch, rose up in revolt. They swept up the hill to the landlord's house and overwhelmed him and his family. They painted their eyebrows with his blood, although some of them preferred the landlady's rouge. Soon everybody who was part of the revolution started painting their eyebrows and joining in the march through the valley. They overran a garrison town, threw open the rice storage houses, and everyone ate a good meal for the first time in a decade. Soon everybody who was anybody was sporting crimson brows.

The emperor sent an army against the rebel peasants. The general, realizing he was vastly outnumbered, came up with a stratagem: he had his men paint their eyebrows red too, and gave them a secret signal by which they could recognize friend from foe. This so confused the rebels that they were easily routed. This was the peasant movement's first lesson: secrets can be used as a weapon.



Now we flash ahead a millennium or so. Since the time of the Red Eyebrows, several dynasties had come and gone under the opportunity offered by the Mandate of Heaven that charged an emperor with the duty to rule wisely and take care of his people. As long as he did this, Heaven would look with favor upon him. If he did not, Heaven might turn its favor upon a challenger. Once in power, he or one of his progeny might become arrogant and corrupt, encouraging another challenger to overthrow him. Thus, the mandate moved on, as mandates will.

The brother of an emperor decided that Heaven had chosen him: he attacked the palace at Nanking and torched the celestial residence. The

emperor faced the situation like the Son of Heaven he was supposed to be and committed suicide in the flaming palace.

In the ashes were found the scorched bones of the emperor and those of his crispy cup bearer, but no trace of the ten-year-old crown prince. The worried uncle told them to look again, this time using combs instead of rakes. Search as they would through the burnt rubble, they could find no remains of the boy.

Ed: No bones about it, eh?

Cin: None. Meanwhile, a group of robed mandarins had become concerned that the Mandate of Heaven should have proven once again to be so fickle, slipping so easily from nephew to uncle. These men, the pillars of the court, formed a secret society. They met in a place no one would suspect, a place where steady traffic was easily explained: at the moneylender's shop.

When it became apparent to all the members of that secret society that the time was ripe to take action to save the endangered kingdom, they withdrew to a mountain monastery for meditation and martial arts training. The first thing they did when they set up their new home was to cut down all the trees along the slopes leading to their bastion so that no one could approach unnoticed. Then they began digging a series of secret tunnels, allowing for escape if ever their stronghold threatened to be overwhelmed.

Ed: They seem a rather insecure group of worldly monks.

Cin: They were obviously expecting some trouble.

With all that digging and sleeping on thin monk's mats in the cold, moist mountain air, many of the brothers woke up in the early morning with some pretty stiff limbs. As they were all cracking and stretching these kinks out one morning, the abbot sat and watched. Before entering the monkhood, he had been an efficiency expert in a firecracker factory; he tended to reduce movements to the most effective minimum and put them into a sequence for maximum benefit.

Within a few weeks, he had devised a moving meditation, a balanced stretch. In fact, the balance and the calmness that came with this sequence were found to have martial application. Thus was developed the beginning of *Ta'i Ch'i Chuan*, the basis of most Oriental martial arts. These mountain

monks became so good at the routine that they could perform it blindfolded; in fact, they practiced it that way.



Meanwhile, back at the palace, the new emperor was finding out how slippery a heavenly mandate can be. Within the kingdom there were about seven or eight peasant revolts going on at once, depending on how one counted one's revolts. His lazy generals were taking their own sweet time in squelching these annoying pimples on the political complexion of his kingdom.

Then the emperor received word that Mad Dog and his Barbarian Horde had bribed the squadron leader manning the Great Wall to "forget" and leave a gate open. Now Mad Dog had poured into China and gobbled up all armies thrown in his path like so much meat.

The emperor called his generals forward, all of them having received top marks in the national examination. There was Ting, Tang, Mullah Walla Eunuch, Bing, and Bang. The emperor turned to Ting, who preferred to defer to Tang. Tang demurred. He was sure he couldn't take all the good wars; besides, there was his mahjongg tournament coming up. Bing had a dentist's appointment. And so on. It seemed that no one actually wanted the job.

So the emperor, in his wisdom, departed from ordinary court procedure and sent out an imperial invitation: anyone who wished to have the honor of leading an army was welcome to this war against Mad Dog and his Canine Barbarians. Anyone could apply for the position, be he landlord, sorcerer, merchant... anybody!

The proclamation was nailed up at every public place in the vast kingdom. It so happened that a monk from the Shao Lin Monastery was down at the market, shopping for food—vegetables, one presumes—when he noticed the parchment tacked to a post. Assuming no one else was interested, he tore it off its nail, folded it into his gray monk's robe, and brought it back to the monastery along with the cabbage, onions, and

bamboo shoots.

At a general meeting after vegetable stew, all one hundred twenty-eight men, plus the leader's wife and his sister, their bodies all toned to perfection from their daily exercises, sat around digesting the proclamation and drinking cordials. Someone, perhaps too much into his drink, suggested, since they were all in such good shape and had been practicing for these last seven years, and the tunnels were almost finished, "What the heck, why don't we just go and take on the Horde?"

They all had a hearty laugh, drank some more, laughed some more, took a vote and, well, they packed their bags the next day and followed the yellow brick road to the palace of the emperor.

"You intend to go against Mad Dog's horde with just one-hundred twenty-eight men?" asked the incredulous emperor.

"And two women," answered the abbot.

"Certainly, my friend. Of course, you are welcome to go and fight this war for me," said the emperor, smirking behind his fan. "You have my blessing."

And so the one hundred twenty-eight monks in their hooded gray robes, plus the two women in something slightly more fetching, marched off to the hill country to meet Mad Dog's army. They reached the gates of the frontier fortress in the evening. After having the emperor's seal shown to him, the commanding general gladly opened the gates, thinking relief had finally arrived, and just in the nick of time. He was surprised and disappointed to find such a small force march into his fort.

"That's all? That's it? Where's the rest of you?"

"I'm all here," answered the abbot. "Where's all of you?"

"I mean the rest of the soldiers."

"This is it."

"You? A bunch of bald-headed monks?" He laughed derisively from deep down in his gut. "Do you know what we call the 'bald-headed monk' in the barracks? That's our dong, our Willie."

"Do you know what we call the male organ in the Buddhist monastery?" rebutted the abbot. "The dust handle."⁶⁸

Ed: Ouch! That abbot dude didn't monk around.

Cin: After this brief exchange of introductory pleasantries, they retired to the banquet hall where they stood up and recited the required toasts and drank to each other's illustrious ancestors, after which they sipped and supped to repletion. The abbot amazed the general by his astute military questions about the terrain.

The next morning, the hundred thirty set off for battle. The abbot chose eight of the fleetest of foot and positioned them next to black pots set into crevices at the convergence of a "Y" in the canyon. The rest he stationed in the narrower of the two ravines, near gray clay pots. When Mad Dog and his Horde came rampaging down the mountain pass, the fleet-foot eight lit the wicks on top of the black pots and ran like the wind.

The heavens sent down a shower of rocks and dust that, as planned, persuaded Mad Dog to make a detour down the narrower pass. When his thousand-horse cavalry had extended itself two abreast through the confining ravine, bombs exploded, darts whistled, and mines burst beneath the horse's hooves, and the sun was darkened by blue-gray smoke billowing out from hundreds of smoke pots. The gray-hooded monks, invisible in the smoke and trained in fighting blindfolded, wreaked havoc upon the enemy riders who, in their panic, turned upon anything that moved in the haze, slaughtering each other. When the smoke cleared, only the hooded warriors remained alive.

When the warrior-monks returned to the celestial throne, the emperor gratefully offered them positions in his court, but they humbly declined the offer, saying they wanted only to go back and live in peace and meditation. The emperor yielded to their simple request, but insisted on giving the abbot a ring with an equilateral triangle insignia carved in jade. This ring gave the holder the power of the emperor in absentia, the power over the life and death of his subjects. It is from this triangle on the ring that, some say, the *Triads* got their symbol.

68 In the Buddhist philosophy, man is no more than dust that can be controlled by manipulation of his sexual drives. Ed, ed.



After the monks returned to their monastery stronghold, the emperor's advisors cautiously suggested to him that perhaps it hadn't been divinely inspired of His Cloudiness to have allowed those monks to practice their military skills so freely inside the country so far away from the supervision of the court, especially since their skills had proven superior to any army belonging to His Airiness. "It might be expedient for His Eminence to extirpate this imminent peril," they cautiously advised.

"No," declared the emperor, "I'll get rid of the dangerous pests instead."

But how was this to be done? A plan was devised. In gratitude for saving the kingdom, one year after the date of their victory, a caravan of wagons carrying huge vats of wine would be sent to the Shao Lin monks. They would not refuse that. Of course, this wine would be made from the finest grapes. And, of course, it would also be subtly drugged, the effect of which would be to slow the *kung fu* monks down to the speed of snails on holiday. The caravan would be accompanied by a whole battalion of soldiers to show greater honor to the heroic monks.

Meanwhile, back at the monastery, there was a little problem with number seven in martial skill rank, a guy named Fuk Yee.⁶⁹ It seems he had made some lewd and unwanted advances, insulting to the chaste wife of the abbot. Then the fool had made the mistake of repeating the same come-on to the abbot's sister. On top of it all, he got to showing off with the chains during the blindfold drill and accidentally broke the sacred "Ten Thousand Year Precious Lamp" that was presented to the brotherhood by the potentate of Persia.

As punishment for these indiscretions, his bald head was branded with the Chinese character for a lecherous clumsy monk, who has been kicked out of the monastery, and then he was indecorously shown a fast route down the slopes.

Fuk Yee, living up to his name, bore a grudge; such a man is dangerous.

⁶⁹ There was a real person by that name with aliases of Ma Yee Fuk and also Ma Ning Yee. Ed, ed.

He met the emperor's army and showed the commander a map of the secret tunnels, which he had hidden under his frock. "If you let even one of the super-warriors escape," he told the commander, "your life won't be worth a chopstick at a termite convention. Lucky for you, I'm in the mood for revenge. For a small fortune, this map is yours." Sold.

On the day of the attack, all the hidden cave mouths were filled with bundles of dry twigs, leaves, and old newspapers to be ignited on signal. Then the wine caravan began to roll, creaking its way up the winding mountain road to the monastery, accompanied by the high honor guard. The procession was allowed into the monastery courtyard, into the banquet hall.

The wine casks were opened at once for a little sampler to help the abbot write the poem of gratitude to send back with the honor guard to the Celestial Throne for his intoxicating thoughtfulness. "Intoxicating thoughtfulness," repeated the abbot in his mind, already working on his verse. But when the abbot brought his cup to his lips, his delicate nostrils, educated in the subtleties of the bouquet of many different wines, noticed that this wine gave off a faint aroma of something akin to rabbit raisins. The wine was slightly off.

The abbot called for his rhinoceros horn—what home would be without one?—and poured the vile liquid into it. The horn began to smoke and fume, a sure sign of poison.

The abbot looked up to see that the soldiers had all drawn their weapons and were bent on wreaking havoc on the unarmed monks. These swords at first proved to be no problem for the monks with their superior *tai ch'i* skills. However, many of the brothers had unfortunately already dipped into the vino vats; and as the battle wore on the effects could be seen. Their *kung fu* was stunning in slow motion, perfect in form, but completely ineffectual against real-time slashing blades. Smoke was pouring through the air vents as the underground escape routes had all been set on fire.

Only eighteen monks managed to fight their way into the innermost temple. They shoved the heavy doors shut and bolted them. There, before the giant image of a smiling Buddha, they knelt in prayer. The doors began to bulge beneath the heavy wooden bolt from the ramrod crashing against them on the other side, but the bolt held.

The monks prayed harder, sweating in earnestness. They reminded the

deity that they had spent a lot of time with him lately and thought he must feel like part of the brotherhood by now and, by the way, would he mind finding a way to secure the longevity of these particular eighteen humble monks?

The building they were in was set ablaze, smoke pouring up through the floorboards and air vents. The silk drapery caught fire, flames licked upward and singed the rope that held the golden cloth that draped across the giant breast of the Buddha. The rope broke and the fabric fell, covering the eighteen who were all bowed devotedly in prayer. They were overcome by smoke fumes.

The roof collapsed, and rain soaked the cloth, protecting them from the flames. The eighteen monks came to some time later, surprised to be alive. When things cooled down a little, one of them knocked a hole in the wall—for the building had caved in, blocking all other exits—and they crawled their way down the hill to freedom.

On the very gateway to safety, they ran across the defrocked Fuk Yee with a small detachment of soldiers lurking at the mouth of a main escape tunnel. The monks' anger got the better of them. Although they managed to dispatch the traitor from this world, they did so at great cost to their own number; only five of them survived the assault.

Later, these Fab Five teamed up with an outlaw and a giant to make up the original Magnificent Seven. They went on to form the core of a rebellion, membership in the inner core an extremely guarded secret.

One day, a boy of fourteen arrived with an older man, a servant with a high voice, at the enlistment office for the

New Improved Peasant Revolt

Coming Soon

Keep This One a Secret

as the billboard outside their office read.

The boy wrote down his occupation on the application form as crown prince of the family Hung.⁷⁰ You remember, Ed, I told you about the palace at Nanking burning. Well, the eunuch in charge of the crown prince had

70 From this family name, Hung, some secret societies took on the name Hong. The dynasty under the Hung family was called Ming, 1368-1644 C.E. Ed, ed.

whisked the boy away and escaped. They had spent the last several years hiding in a Buddhist monastery. They now wanted to join up.

Ed: I would imagine they found the present situation revolting.

Cin: The boy was just what the rebellion needed, a worthy symbol to rally around and rebel for. Justice demanded that he get the Ming throne that was rightfully his from his usurper great-uncle.

With the crown prince as their standard bearer, the movement gained strength, ballooning in size. It appeared nothing could stop it; its members vastly outnumbered any army the emperor could send against it. But with a stunning lack of communication, the revolt was able to snatch defeat out of the hands of certain victory. The emperor's finest were able to overrun the various scattered revolutionary clusters one at a time because they failed to coordinate their attacks. Lesson number two: don't be too secret.

The Crown Prince Hung again evaded the clutches of his uncle, fleeing the battlefield and his defeated army, escaping to the coast with his trusted eunuch. The older man was to pose as a tea merchant and the crown prince, the rightful heir to the Celestial Throne, his servant.

The eunuch went through internal turmoil the first time the boy poured his tea for him in public. By his sworn duty, it should have been he who served the boy, but he could not, to save their lives. He didn't even dare to say, "Thank you." But he could use the secret-society hand signal, indicating "I rank lower than you." He tapped the table with his fingertips to show his humility. To this day, this is one of the best known of all the secret signals, used commonly in Malacca as a subtle way of showing gratitude.

No one knows where the Crown Prince Hung and the eunuch sailed to. Jimmy claimed it was to Malacca. A few years after the prince's second disappearance, a fleet of fifty great ships arrived in Malacca from Peking. Aboard was Admiral Cheng Ho along with a supporting cast of thousands. When he landed, he was accompanied by a bodyguard of dark-skinned archers, spearmen, and swordsmen with weapons drawn. Others followed, banging gongs and throwing firecrackers into the crowd if they followed too closely.

Cheng Ho went straight to Parameswara and—

Ed: Para who?

Cin: I told you about him before. He was the Malay founder of Malacca. Anyway, Cheng Ho asked if he had seen any Hung on the run, anybody hanging around who answered to the name "Crown Prince?"

"Nobody had arrived here that age from China but the servant of the new tea merchant," answered the Malaccan ruler, "and they happen to be out of town at the moment. They left rather abruptly, too, come to think of it." Cheng Ho left soon after that; he later returned to China without ever finding the boy. It's not known whether his mission had been to bring the boy back to rule China or, more likely, that the boy was to become politically corrected, i.e., erased.

It can't be established for certain that the crown prince actually got to Malacca. But Jimmy is convinced he did. On Bukit China—that means "China Hill"—there is an old grave, one among thousands. This grave has no name, but the date is still partially visible. "It's a Ming grave. It could have been the crown prince, ah!" concluded Jimmy.



Near the end of Jimmy's story, Planter Wiggins, Percival, had come into the hotel lobby, got himself a cold beer and a chilled glass and joined us, motioning that he didn't wish to interrupt. Occasionally, he would interject with what I have come to think of as his own private word, "Extraordinary." I couldn't quite tell if he was impressed by what he was hearing or was finding some point extremely difficult to believe.

After Jimmy finished, Percival explained that Chong On, his driver, had gone out for a snack, it being between tiffin and high tea. He reasoned that this should give him a few minutes to relax with us.

Just then Jimmy saw a large German woman come out of her room and sit at another cluster of chairs. He excused himself, explaining that he was arranging a tour into the interior for her and needed to make preparations. When Jimmy was out of hearing distance, Planter Wiggins, for that's how I knew him then, leaned forward and suggested in a subdued voice that

perhaps Jimmy wasn't entirely accurate in his tale.

He said, "History records that the boy, the Crown Prince Hung, was discovered as an old bald-headed monk at a monastery, and he was allowed to live out his harmless life in peace. He had not taken part in any rebellion. That boy in Jimmy's story was an impostor.

"Yet," said Percival, "it is quite possibly true that part of Cheng Ho's expedition had been sent out to find out if there had been any word of the missing boy who could so upset that meandering Mandate of Heaven, the boy who had been heir apparent to the Celestial Throne. It is all but certain that at least some of the people who had escaped from the many earlier rebellions, from that particular rebellion, and from countless ones to follow fled to Malacca.

"I found it interesting" continued Percival, "that Jimmy should have imagined them to be refugee tea merchants. In this instance, that would have proven to be an excellent disguise for them at that time in history. Tea was just then making its way into Southeast Asia, at the precise time—and perhaps because—people of this area were converting to Islam. Although many did not actually quit drinking alcoholic beverages altogether, tea quickly became the acceptable drink, especially when the in-laws were visiting.

"A side-effect of this phenomenon, incidentally, was that the people's health and life span were greatly increased because until tea was introduced, there was no need to boil water, and bacteria thrived in their drinking water," Percival told me.

The Chinese, Percival explained, came to Malacca in large numbers, cramped together unmercifully on ships as one would transport pigs. They were desperate men, usually refugees from some war, famine, or disaster. Many came without wives; they often were lone survivors. To fill the Chinese need to belong to a family in this diaspora, they started local lodges of secret societies.

These societies were so strong that the Dutch conquerors in the mid-1600s decided the Chinese were quite capable of governing themselves and appointed the leader of the most powerful *hong* to be the official head of all Chinese, the *Kapitan* China. In this way, they gave sanction to what already existed. The English, in turn, continued the practice.

"One should be skeptical," cautioned Percival, "about how much of this 'history' of Jimmy's has to do with the nefarious activities of the present criminal organizations who, I believe, have no right to claim such lofty traditions."

"But what about the Ming grave that Jimmy mentioned?" I asked.

Planter Percival smiled. "That Ming grave could be for anyone who died during the Ming period, which lasted almost three hundred years until the mid-1600s. There is no name on the stone. I have seen the one of which he spoke; it has no indication of being the grave of royalty. To me it seems highly unlikely that it is.

"However, if you are interested in listening to speculation on the subject of gravestones, I would like to draw your attention to the top of St. Paul's Hill. Have you made the climb?" I told him I had.

"Then you have noticed, perhaps, the gravestones carved with the skull and crossbones inside the roofless sacristy?"

"Yeah. Who were they, pirates?" I guessed.

"No. Well, not exactly. Actually one of them was the Bishop of Japan who died on his return journey. The sign of the skull and crossbones was also previously used as a symbol for the Knights Templar and also for a Master Mason."

"But what were they doing in Malacca?" I asked.

"Ah! What indeed?" said Percival with raised eyebrows and a conspiratorial smile. "My speculations on this particular subject, one of my favorite, would take far too long for the time I have available at present. To my regret, I shall be called forth shortly by my hungry chauffeur, just finished with his snack. He knows that the tasks of driving me home and cooking our dinner lie between the present moment and the eating of his next meal, and he will not want to be detoured from this duty. He's an extraordinary cook, really.

"Thus, with the brief time I have remaining, allow me to hasten on to two purposes of my mission, first, to reprimand you gently, young lady, for not availing yourself of my first invitation. I meant for you to call and was quite disappointed that you didn't." He smiled at me.

"And second, I have come to ask if you would be so gracious as to

accept an invitation to my office tomorrow. Actually it is now more my library, now that I have very little actual work to do but have plenty of time to read for my own curiosity and to make conjectures about a vast range of subjects.

"Shall we say tomorrow at about three o'clock, then?" He asked. I agreed. "I shall send Chong On around to pick you up."

Just then, Jimmy came back with an invitation for me to join him and the German woman on an excursion the following day into the interior, to Lake Bera. When I told him of my appointment with Planter Percival, they were willing to postpone their trip for a day so that I could do both. Besides, this would give Jimmy extra time to scout up more members for the expedition and reduce the cost per head.

"Extraordinary," smiled Percival. "Then it is settled. You will visit me tomorrow. And I shall tell you more about the gold mines, since you will be traveling on some of the same waterways that the ancients journeyed perhaps three thousand years ago, the ancients under the powerful matriarchal ruler of the Indian Sea, Her Majesty Queen Bilqis, known to us as the Queen of Sheba."

His voice had begun to get dreamy before he caught himself. "But I mustn't get started now. I really should go, or my chauffeur will become impatient. Tomorrow, then. Ta-ta."



The next day, I was picked up by Chong On. I noticed that, even though he got out to hold the door open, the old Morris Oxford tilted in a permanent list to the right from having been so long beneath the driver's ponderous weight. I rode alone in the back seat because an early-model air-conditioner took up most of the leg space intended for the front-seat passenger.

We arrived at the downtown, riverside Dindings Rubber Building, the name raised in stucco above the entrance. Stately columns graced the facade of the structure. Its foundation, I was told, was resting on that part of

the riverbank where once an old drawbridge had its foundation during Dutch times.

Planter Percival's office-library was on the upper floor. He was waiting in the front doorway, extending open arms in welcome when I stepped out of the car. He escorted me up a stairway lined with framed copies of old lithographs of Malacca from the early 1800s, reprints of ancient mariners' maps, reproductions of portraits of famous people in Malacca's past: Albuquerque—yes, his beard tied in a knot; the gaunt, sagging-eyed old Indian, Ninu Chatu, beneath a giant turban; Sir Thomas Raffles in ruffles; and a mandarin in blue brocade robes. Cheng Ho?

At the top of the stairway, the gallery spilled into a large, open room with a warped hardwood floor. Shelves lined most of the walls, row upon row of expensive leather-bound books. Two globes, one of the earth and one celestial, each suspended on its axis on dark mahogany stands, flanked the open double-doors leading to a balcony. At the far end of the room stood a very large wooden desk and another smaller one with a covered typewriter, presumably for a clerk. The cover appeared dusty, as if it hadn't been removed for a while.

A coffee table with a tribal design—Sulawesi Island, Bugis, I was told later—was surrounded by a circle of heavy, overstuffed chairs and a sofa, all covered with dark brown leather that was cracking at the edges of the arms beneath dainty antimacassar. The room smelled musty, as if someone who resided there had once smoked a pipe and the aroma had taken up permanent residence.

Percival pointed out hooks on the ceiling from where the *punka* once hung. Even after they put in the ceiling fan, he told me, they occasionally had an old Indian man come in and pull a rope to move the cloth that moved the air to cool the room "more in the imagination than in actual fact," Percival informed me. He came in when we had electrical outages, or sometimes in the afternoons when he needed some money for tea or, more likely, I suspect, for a pipe of *chandu*." That's opium.

I was offered my choice of tea or coffee, and Chong On was sent out to a nearby *kedai kopi* to fetch it while I was urged to browse through Percival's books.

Ed: I doubt if you needed much urging.

Cin: No. I see a library and I start salivating. You, too?

Ed: I am an addict. But please, your story.

Cin: Later, we stood on the terrace, tea cup and saucer in hand, overlooking the olive-gray river two stories below. Percival sighed. "When I first arrived here in Malacca in 1954, the water was so clean that I could see fish swimming in the river from up here on this balcony. We actually swam in the river then, despite the danger of the occasional crocodile which strayed into town from the rain forest via the river. I would not advise anyone to go swimming now, including the crocodiles.

"I can recall the day I arrived as if it were yesterday," he continued after sipping his tea. "I stood at the prow of the launch, hanging onto my hat in the breeze created by our movement, steadying myself with my umbrella, eager to jump to the quay. I remember, once having set foot on shore, looking up in a silent salute to the top of St. Paul's Hill, romanticizing about all the history it had witnessed. You see, I have always had a passion for history, which was one of the reasons I chose this assignment in Malacca, a place replete with a glorious past.

"Which reminds me of the ploy I used to lure you here to my library, our discussion of the day before: the extraordinary occurrence of several skull and crossbones carved on the gravestones on St. Paul's. But where to begin?... I suppose at the beginning.

"I have always been fascinated by legends. Perhaps it is in my name. You see, Percival was the knight who went in search of the Holy Grail.⁷¹ I have always been enchanted by the stories of King Arthur's court when knighthood was in full flower. I read of Robin Hood and of brave King Richard the Lion-Hearted. It was through this story and, of course, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* that I first learned of the Knights Templar, the Knights of the Temple of Solomon. Have you heard of them?" he asked.

Vaguely, I told him.

"That's quite understandable," said Percival. "They were a most

71 Parzival, by Wolfram von Eschenbach and also *Perlesvaus*, anonymous, but believed to have been written by a Knight of the Templar. The name is associated with Sir Galahad and also the Freemason phrase 'Son of the Widow' which, in turn, refers to the builder of the Temple, either Hiram of Tyre or King Solomon himself. Ed, ed.

mysterious organization. Extraordinary, really. I shall be telling more about them later.

"When I was about ten, I happened to read the book *King's Solomon's Mines*. In the enthusiasm of youth, I vowed to do as Heinrich Schliemann had done. He, as a child, had been read the 'fairy tale' of *The Iliad* by Homer and believed it to be real. He refused to grow out of this folly. When he became an adult, he went off to find the fabled city of Troy. To almost everyone's astonishment, he succeeded, thus proving that what had been believed to be myth was historical fact. I dreamed of doing the same and finding the fabulous mines of King Solomon.

"How disappointed I was to discover that, unlike the city of Troy, those mines I dreamed of finding existed only in the fertile imagination of Sir H. Rider Haggard—who was, incidentally, a Freemason. He wrote the story because everyone was raving about Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Sir Haggard read this book and was not impressed; he claimed he could write a better book about lost treasure and sat down to pen his classic. He was quite proud of his piece of fiction.

Nonetheless, the die had been cast. At Oxford, I immersed myself in the history and languages of the ancient Middle East, in the lore of Egypt, the battles of Babylon, and myths from Mesopotamia to Macedonia. I was always in search of mysteries.

"After graduation in 1946, thirteen months after World War II had ended, I was sent to Damascus by Her Majesty as a commissioned officer. It was there that I came across the first clue to an extraordinary puzzle that I have been trying to solve for almost a half century.

"In Damascus, I became friends with an American fellow, a Mr. Jack Sanders, who happened to be a not-so-secret operative for the OSS—I believe that was just about the time they changed the initials to the CIA. He had been approached on a back street by a shifty-looking Egyptian with a beard dyed bright red. In the classic style of a blackmarketeer, the Egyptian, his eyes darting furtively about to make sure he was unseen—and thus drawing much attention to his product, I'm sure—opened the folds in his galabia and revealed to the American agent a crumbling scroll. He wanted money; he wished to sell it.

"Sanders told the man he would pay for it only after he had verified its

authenticity. After negotiating, the Egyptian agreed to leave the scroll with him so that an expert could analyze it in exchange for a twenty-percent deposit.

"I was there when Sanders brought the ancient scroll back to his office at the American Legation. It was decided that they should photograph it to have a copy, in case the original document was somehow destroyed. They planned to use the OSS camera, but the office light proved to be too dim.

"Someone suggested—Thank God, it was not I—that we should take the scroll up onto the roof and photograph it there in the sunlight. This we did, spreading it out carefully on paper on the flat rooftop to keep it from being soiled, unrolling it delicately, for although the papyrus was of high quality, it was quite brittle in its antiquity. I think we had taken perhaps twenty frames when a gust of wind swept unexpectedly down from the mountains of Lebanon and picked up whole sections of the scroll, shattering them into fragments and scattering them like snow dusting over the roofs of Damascus. I cringe to think of it. We lost over half of the papyrus in this manner!

"The photos were developed and taken, along with the remaining portions of the parchment, to an expert, who said that it was probably a copy of the Book of *Daniel*. That would have made it similar in age to the Dead Sea Scrolls, which had not yet been discovered at that time. Our scroll, in other words, was quite old.

"A second expert examined the scroll for quite a long time, looked up, and asked, 'Did you pay that first fellow, your so-called expert?'

"He told us that the scroll had nothing to do with Daniel. Rather, it was a copy of an even more ancient work hitherto known only because it had been referred to in another obscure ancient text as *The Book of the Seals*, but, at that moment, there had been no extant copy, the only other known copy having been burned by order of a Pope, who claimed it to be a demonic work.

"The text was attributed to the wise man, King Solomon himself.⁷² From the small fragments rescued from the winds of Lebanon, our second expert deduced that the scroll contained a list of treasures belonging to the Temple

72 Solomon reigned from 966 to 926 B.C.E. Ed, ed.

of Jerusalem—which he, by the way, translated the ‘Foundation of Jerusalem.’ How frightfully odd, I thought at the time.

“Another phrase struck me as extraordinary: he said the scroll mentions something about ‘greatest of the’... and then there was a missing segment approximately the size of one or two words and then the partial word, probably ‘treasure’ and then there was another missing section followed by the phrase, ‘golden grain in the hand of the Virgin.’

“Now what could that have meant? I wondered. I searched history for a clue. Solomon lived about nine hundred fifty years before the birth of Christ. The scroll obviously was not referring to the Virgin Madonna unless as prophecy. If it referred to any holy figure, it could only have been Astarte, the Goddess of Fertility. She was worshipped throughout the Fertile Crescent at the time when the wandering Israelites arrived in Canaan and took over the land. She was often represented carrying a sheaf of grain.

“The Goddess cult was a difficult one for the Israelite priests to stamp out, primarily because it enjoyed such an advantage in the form that the worship rituals took. It seems that the physical union of Astarte and her consort, Baal, was reenacted by the entire congregation upon altars set up on mountain tops. Communal copulation was often connected with fertility rites, which is quite understandable, almost commonsensical if one thinks about it. There were, frankly, orgies upon those altars.”

Ed: Puts a completely new spin on the idea of approaching the altar on bended knees, doesn't it?

Cin: It does. And Solomon himself was known to have flexed his knees quite a few times on the hilltop altars of Astarte; for this grievous sin he was condemned by Yahweh, speaking through one of his unwashed prophets.

But what could one expect of poor Solomon? He was, after all, a half-breed with some very strong blood ties to the old-time religion of his mother, Bathsheba. ‘Bath,’ by the way, means ‘house of,’ that means she was a woman of the House of Sheba, a matriarchy.

“Solomon built three royal cities and gave each one of the Goddess’ names.⁷³ He built temples for many of his wives who were followers of the

73 Beth-horon, Baalath and Tamar, 1 Kings 9:18 N.E.B. Ed, ed.

'Virgin' cult. It seemed to me quite extraordinary, however, that this great treasure of the Temple mentioned in the scroll—if one is to believe the second translator—this treasure of Solomon's was hidden in some temple other than the one dedicated to Yahweh in Jerusalem, hidden instead, in a temple dedicated to Astarte, the Virgin Goddess of Fertility. How frightfully odd, don't you think? The King of the Israelites hiding the Temple treasure in the hall of worship of a rival goddess!

"That is where matters lay for quite some time; the trail to the treasure disappeared like a river beneath the desert sand. The crafty Egyptian red-beard vanished; he never returned for the money or the scroll, probably satisfied with what he had already safely received, for most likely the papyrus had been stolen and he felt his life was in danger. There was a great deal of that sort of cloak-and-dagger activity around the time of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, authentic antiquities and fakes were showing up in the most unexpected places. The photos we had taken of our scroll, the negatives, and the remaining portions of the scroll were placed safely inside a box in a locked drawer somewhere in the American Legation, but since then have disappeared. Perhaps they were thrown out when the old desk went to the junk heap."⁷⁴ Percival cringed with pain at the loss.



"Years passed. I was on a business trip for Dindings Rubber to the Solomon Islands when an entirely new possible interpretation occurred to me for those extraordinary words in the scroll, the '*golden grain in the hand of the Virgin.*'"

"We were lying on the sand, my new young acquaintance and I, her head resting on my arm, gazing at the stars above which I was naming for her. The star Spica was directly overhead. I remembered remarking on how extraordinary this was to me. Previously, whenever I had gazed at the sky

74 One can find this story recounted in the book, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, Baigent and Leigh, 1991. However, one can find no reference to the second translator nor his interpretation from *The Book of Seals*. Ed, ed.

in Hampshire and even in the Holy Land, Spica always appeared a good distance farther south. It is ten degrees south, I believe.

"Spica means spike, as in a spike of grain, or an ear of corn. I recollected that Spica was a star in the constellation Virgo and that night it suddenly occurred to me that Virgo was, of course, the Virgin. It was one of those facts that one knows but is not always conscious of.

"Now, I shall be discreet and not tell you why I happened to make that particular association of ideas on that particular beach on that particularly extraordinary night with her. Suffice it to say, it put an entirely new direction to my quest for the treasure of Solomon, the greatest treasure of them all. I had come upon my '*...grain in the hand of the Virgin,*' as it were.

"The possibility intrigued me. If the star Spica was, in fact, a clue, Solomon was most likely indicating that the gold was located in a land directly beneath that star. It would have been a most logical way for him to give reference to a location, especially if it were in a distant land. A star can be used to indicate how far north or south a place is located. In this case, it would also have been a perfect way to hide the information by making it obvious, by putting it into a code that would easily be misunderstood as referring to a very popular religious cult, **unless** one possessed the key."

Ed: Like the hiding of the purloined letter among all the other letters.

Cin: Pretty slick, huh? And Solomon certainly knew the names of the stars. The star Spica of the Virgin has been known as such since time immemorial. The Old Testament even mentions it, calling it the "Vintager."⁷⁵ Back then, its appearance in the heavens would mark the end of winter, the harbinger of spring, hence when the full moon was in Virgo, it was time to plant the grain she carries, hence fertility and a time to join in universal fertilization by rutting at hilltop altars. It was a very popular spring festival. It would have been a stroke of genius if Solomon, who was, after all, known for his wisdom, had hidden a treasure at the latitude beneath that star and then declared its location plainly so that no one would suspect.

⁷⁵ Who makes Taurus...set hard on the rising of the Vintager?" Amos 5:9. "Vintager" means someone who helps in the harvest. Ed, ed.

Ed: It makes my head spin.

Cin: The question came to Percival's mind as to why the Spaniards, who discovered those islands, had named them the Solomon Islands. The captain⁷⁶ was not named Solomon, nor was the Spanish king, nor anyone of importance on board the ship. Why that name, then?

Percival suggested that we hypothetically assume that the reason for the name was that the captain believed he had found the location of Solomon's gold, the land of Ophir as mentioned in the Old Testament. "If that was his assumption, I'm afraid he was badly mistaken," he told me. "The Solomon Islands certainly have no such resources, nor did they ever. There was nothing in the land that would have inspired any thoughts of King Solomon's Mines.

"If, in fact, they had come looking for treasure, how had they come to be looking for it there at that particular location? Had there been another copy of The Book of Seals? Had someone else held the key? Had they been led to those islands by Spica, *'the golden grain in the hand of the Virgin?'*" Percival wondered.



Percival continued. "My story now jumps a few years to 1954, several years after I had resigned from the military to protest against the duplicitous way the British government had handled the situation in Trans-Jordan, as a portion of the Middle East was then called, but that is another story. Anyway, after dabbling here and there in London and on the Continent, I came to Malacca to manage the rubber plantation up near Asahan in the foothills of Mt. Ophir.

"That was two years after my predecessor, the former estate manager, had been murdered by the CTs, as the communist terrorists were called during those exciting and awful times which we referred to simply as 'the Emergency'. I spent a large portion of time dallying around Malacca town,

76 Captain Alvaro de Mendana discovered and named the Solomon Islands in 1568. Ed, ed.

often at the sparkling new Majestic lobby bar. Can you imagine that? It was new then, the bar. Other planters and I would drink *stengah* or take time for a Tiger, or sip on our delicious afternoon 'ver-gins.' That is a concoction of vermouth and gin, and, of course, mixed with the tonic bitters to protect us from the dreaded malaria fever which has been the... the end..." he hesitated, took in a deep breath and continued, "of so many fine people here in the tropics."

He was silent; his eyes followed a bird in flight to the trees on the hill across the river. Then Percival turned back to me, smiled an apology for drifting away and continued. "We—using the royal we—would alternate between the Majestic lobby bar and the 'Gent's Club,' now called the Malacca Club. It was formerly a bastion of white males, now it is a museum. What else but a museum in Malacca? I dare say. The whole town is turning into a theme park.

"At night, we would walk from the hotel to beside where the Lucky Cinema now stands, entering through the arches leading to the City Park.

"Ah! City Park! It had columns with palm frond capitals that always reminded me of rather unripe artichokes. The band was in a small alcove facing the entrance. We would buy these little pink tickets from the 'mummy,' the madame at the door, three tickets for a dollar.

"Each ticket represented an opportunity to dance with a choice of young ladies in flouncy, tulle party dresses, taxi-dance partners provided by the establishment for the entertainment of paying customers. They would sit opposite the long bar all in a row over on the right side of the hall with little tables between them. We would choose a partner and place a pink ticket discreetly under her handbag which generally rested on the table beside her or was held defensively on her lap.

"She would get up, generally without a word or a smile, and go to take her position on the dance floor. The dances did not last as long as they do now. A few turns around the floor and the music would end; and she would go back to her chair, her handbag on her lap once more.

"Anything more than that brief piece of music, such as the exclusive dance privilege with one particular partner for half an hour or perhaps some afterhours assignation, had to be arranged with *mummy*. She supervised from behind her desk at the front door and would, for a fee, make

arrangements for the rest of the evening, but only if the girl was willing; some were, but not all.

"Most of these girls were already mothers, the fathers having somehow managed to disappear. Desperation drove them to dance at City Park. Desperation drove us patrons, too, for normally the local girls were well-guarded inside their cultural cocoons and not available to us *Mat Salleh* except on the most formal of terms.

"I mention this because I found my long-time companion beneath one of those handbags. She had laughing eyes, an oval face that belonged in the moonlight, and grace like a bird in flight. Soon after our first dance, she moved in with me, for it was lonely on the plantation. We were blessed with no children, so I never saw the need to actually marry Kori in a ceremony. She lived as my wife for twenty-three years before she died of malaria.

"I miss her sorely." He smiled sadly. "Kori was a Bugis, a race of people whose home is in Sulawesi, formerly called Celebes Island, part of Indonesia today. She told me she was a Bugis princess and, from the nobility of her bearing, it must have been true. According to the legends of her people, she could trace her lineage back through thousands of years to a great matriarch, Empress Bilqis.

"I found this interesting because Bilqis, as I believe I already told you, is the name tradition has given to the Queen of Sheba, the one who visited Solomon. I was curious as to how her name should appear so far from where Sheba's home is believed to have been, which was located, some believe, at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

"My research uncovered some startling facts. Extraordinary, really. It seems there existed in ancient times a culture that spread all the way from Zimbabwe in Africa to Zamboanga in the Philippines. Any place with a name that begins with *Zam* or *Sam*, meaning river gold, was part of a vast maritime empire known in the Old Testament as both the Sabaeen Empire and as Sheba. The name Sabah in North Borneo is derived from the same root. The powerful queen of it all was the Queen of Sheba named Bilqis during Solomon's day."

"How come I never heard of this kingdom if it was so big?" I asked Percival.

“History is written by the victors,” Percival explained, “and one must remember, if the ‘proper’ bias had been missing, so would have been the court historian’s head. And, of course, Western history had a Western bias. Few people ever learn any Asian history; far fewer, Southeast Asian history.”

Percival discussed another problem the historian confronts: a group of people is often given different names in different places during different periods by different people. Thus, for instance, when the Philistines who were believed to have come from Crete, migrated to the coast of Palestine, they became known as Tyrians, whom the Greeks called Phoenicians, meaning basically the “Purple People.” This is because of their skill at dying cloth a deep tyrian purple. Later, they set up colonies along the north coast of Africa and became known as Libyans, the pharaoh’s sailors during the times of the Ptolemies⁷⁷ and spread southward through the Red Sea to become known there as Sabaeans.

Ed: Is this true?

Cin: Sure is. Check it out for yourself. They disappeared from history when the Romans defeated Carthage,⁷⁸ for they, the Carthaginians, too, were the same people. There are those who would trace the migration of these people to Central America, and that would explain the great upsurge in construction that occurred there shortly after the fall of Carthage. Others sailed east, and some say we can trace them to Java, Hawaii, and beyond.

The Roman victory over seafaring Carthage cost the world untold secrets about open-ocean navigation.⁷⁹ In effect, the Mediterranean became a large Roman lake, for few dared to sail far from the sight of land or between the Pillars of Hercules. Asking what lay beyond the world of the mighty Romans was like asking what is at the end of the universe.

77 The Ptolemaic Pharaohs ruled Egypt from 304 B.C.E., a line founded by a Greek general and half-brother of Alexander the Great. This last dynasty of Egyptian pharaohs ended in 30 B.C.E with Cleopatra and her striking asp, shortly after the defeat of Mark Antony. Actually, it was Cleopatra VII. Ed, ed.

78 At the battle of Zama, Scipio Africanus Major defeated Hannibal in 202 B.C.E. Ed, ed.

79 Strabo concurs. The Romans could not match, in either shipbuilding or seamanship, the Phoenicians who were “superior to all peoples of all times.” Strabo 16:2:23. Ed, ed.

Since then, the once-vast Sabaean Empire has been covered by the sands of time, erased until recently from the Western mind; it was rarely known and then only as one of the many lost kingdoms mentioned in the Old Testament.

Though the empire disappeared, the people lived on. Eventually, some migrated and settled in Southeast Asia. Most of them were pushed high into the hills by the subsequent migrations of a darker race that settled along the coast. We find traces of these people in the Batak of Sumatra, the Dyaks of Borneo, and peoples on the island of Sulawesi, to name a few.

"If, in the end," Percival speculated, "nothing more should come of my search, I have at least been pleased to learn that I have loved a woman who was of the lineage of the Queen of Sheba."

Percival said that another clue in his quest for King Solomon's treasure came to light about the time he was in the Middle East, although the world was not to hear of its contents for almost ten years. In 1947, a Bedouin boy was climbing up a barren landscape, with only an occasional parched shrub providing him with a tenuous handhold in those hopeless hills above the Dead Sea. He espied a cave high up on the surface of a precipitous slope, climbed up to it, entered, and discovered some jars filled with ancient crumbling scrolls. One of the texts, presumably the most important, had been painstakingly pounded in relief on copper.

When this Copper Scroll was finally, carefully cut open and deciphered, it was found to contain a list of sixty-four sites where the gold from the Temple of Jerusalem had been buried. None of the place names or the geographical landmarks have been identified, nor has anyone been recorded to have found even one of these caches.

The Copper Scroll from the Dead Sea described how, in their wisdom, the elders in Jerusalem saw fit to hide the Temple gold. It seems a reasonable conjecture that King Solomon, with his infinite wisdom and with far greater wealth to be concerned about than later kings, would have been at least equally as cautious, if not even more so.

Percival asked me to consider that wise King Solomon, supplied with the country's best tutors, would have had a good command of his local history. He would have visited the sites of countless battles that had been fought on that blood-soaked soil, both during his lifetime and in centuries before.

Hyksos, Hittites, Canaanites, Philistines, Israelites, Jebusites, Babylonians, Egyptians, Syrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Turks, terrorists, and tourists: no matter what time period in history one cared to gaze upon, it's the same: DEVASTATION!

Obviously, the Fertile Crescent was not a great spot to store your goodies. This fact certainly would have occurred to a very wise man like Solomon, if he were a truly wise man.

Ed: What do you mean "if"?

Cin: Well, all we know is that the Old Testament and the Koran tell us he was wise. Yet we can't point to anything he actually did that makes us want to say, "This is a really smart man!"

What makes him so wise? He lost a good share of the kingdom that his father had willed to him from his deathbed. That doesn't sound very astute. He married seven hundred wives. Does this suggest wisdom to you?

We do know Solomon was a smooth con artist. For his fleet of ships to be built, he ordered some cedar trees delivered to the southern coast from the hills of Lebanon in exchange for six cities he sold to Hiram of Tyre. After delivery, he first claimed that the trees were a wedding present—thank you very much—and not a purchase at all, and that he didn't owe Hiram of Tyre a red shekel. But Hiram insisted on getting the deeds to the cities as promised.

It turned out to be the first desert-development scam in recorded history. After having made final payment on the property, Hiram went to see what he had bought. He was shocked! He wrote a letter back to Solomon stating, "You call those cities? What kind of cities are they? I call it desert!"⁸⁰

A crafty businessman was Solomon, clever, most certainly energetic—he would have had to be, considering the size of his harem. But what did he do that was so wise? We learn from the Old Testament that kings came from all around to ask him questions and listen attentively to his answers. He is called a magician. Why? On what was his reputation based?

We are handed a rather weak press release from Solomon's palace PR department. You know the story: Two women, hookers they were, both

⁸⁰ He called the cities "Land of Cabul" meaning sterile. 1 Kings 9:12-14 N.E.B. Incidentally, it was not six, but rather twenty cities. Ed, ed.

have just had babies and are sleeping in the same room. One of them gets drunk, rolls over in the night in her sleep, and smothers her baby. So she gets up and makes a switch while the other mother sleeps. When the other mother wakes up, she discovers the baby in her arms is dead.

She wails and cannot be consoled until she notices it is not her child but, rather, the other woman's. They quarrel over this living child, the contested kid bawling all the while, causing such a ruckus that the question of who is the rightful mother is brought before King Solomon—this being prior to DNA testing.

King Solomon, in all his wisdom, commands: "Fetch me my sword," and it is brought to him so that he can cut the kid in two so that each woman could have her half. You've got to be joking!

The real mother falls to her knees, pleading that the king spare the child. Let the other woman have it. A-ha! The king thus knows who is the real mother.

I wonder what that other woman was saying during this time. What gave her away? "Sure, king. That sounds fair to me. Cut the kid in half. Half a kid is better than none." I find that hard to believe. Therefore, perhaps Percival was right. Perhaps Solomon's reputation for wisdom is based on something else, something he would rather have kept secret.

But, assuming he was a wise man, he would certainly have hidden his gold safely, probably in several locations. The author of the Copper Scroll mentions sixty-four such sites. "We can only speculate," Percival told me, "as to how many were the number of treasures written on the 'Damascus Scroll.' That number has disappeared with the wind; no one can say. Yet, we do know that Solomon was the author, and tradition is very strong in attributing the number 'seventy-two' to him."

Percival motioned me to follow him from the balcony into his room. He went over to his desk, opened a drawer, got out what appeared to be a thick deck of cards, and brought them over to me. Have you ever heard of the Keys of Solomon?⁸¹

Ed: They are used in some forms of cabalistic divination, if I recall

81 Also called the *Goetia* or *The Lesser Keys of Solomon* and associated with black magic; it should be kept distinct from *The Testament of Solomon*. Ed, ed.

correctly.

Cin: Yeah, I believe so. No one seems to know what their true meaning is. However, they are said to have been the keys to the magic of King Solomon, giving him the ability to command spirits—angels or demons, depending on how you look at them, to do his bidding.

Percival flipped through the seventy-two cards. At the top of every card was the symbol for one of five metals and one of the twelve signs of the zodiac. At the bottom was the card's attribute and also the name of the guardian spirit. The circle in the center was filled with a design, each unique. Many of the cards had splayed crosses on them like those you see on a pirate's treasure map.

"I recommend that we proceed with caution here," advised Percival. "We are treading dangerously close to demonic esoterica, and tenuous, at best, are the assumptions drawn from such speculations. Suffice it to say that if there had, in fact, been seventy-two caches, then these seventy-two Keys of Solomon are quite conceivably the maps to the various treasure troves. This is not an original conjecture on my part. Recently, Umberto Eco in his *Foucault's Pendulum*, suggested the same idea, albeit with his usual tongue in cheek.

Percival surmised that, if these Keys of Solomon are indeed maps, the one representing "golden grain in the hand of the Virgin" would be the card bearing the symbols for both gold and Virgo. He stopped when he came to the card with those symbols, card number 32.⁸² It bore the title

82 In some accounts the card number is number 37. Ed, ed.

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"Skill." "A very Masonic label, don't you think?" interjected Percival.

"But, as I said before, this way lies madness," Percival repeated his warning. "People have been incinerated at the stake and, more recently, incarcerated in mental institutions because of speculations with a far less, shall we say, liquid base than the arcane cabala. Let us, therefore, move to more solid ground."



Percival went over to a bookcase and walked his fingers along a shelf filled with thin volumes, talking as he did so. "In the seventies, after Kori passed on, I was left with so much time on my hands that I indulged myself in this diversion of mine and subscribed to archaeological journals and quasi-scientific newsletters of all kinds."

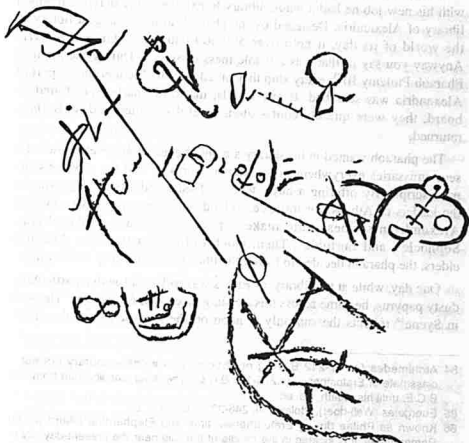
From the shelf he pulled a thin white magazine-size journal entitled simply, "*Occasional Publications*." It fell open to the particular page he wished to show me. "Here. Come and take a look."⁸³ He steered me over to the sofa and sat down beside me.

There was a rendition of a drawing found on a cave wall in Irian Jaya, on the west end of New Guinea. The markings had been written in charcoal and, over the years, have been covered, drop by drop, with a protective sheet of translucent crystalline sediment. "Somewhat reminiscent of the 'Hall of the Dead' in Sir Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, don't you think?—But then, how often does something written as fiction turn out to be fact?" commented Percival. The message seems to have been purposely written on that particular wall so that it would be preserved.

Ed: It reminds me of that plaque and recording of President Jimmy Carter's voice that the U.S. sent into outer space on the astronomical chance that some intelligent life might find and decipher it.

Cin: Yes, there is a similarity: both are messages to the future. The message on the cave wall was written by a man called Commander Rata, sailing under orders from Pharaoh Ptolemy III. An eclipse is described, which dates it precisely at November 19, 232 BC. Commander Rata states that the voyage came about because of the curiosity of a Tunisian Greek

83 A copy of the Picasso-like New Guinea cave writing found in 1937 by an expedition sponsored by the Frobenius Institut, Goethe University, Frankfurt A.M. is reprinted here with their permission, Ed, ed.



named Eratosthenes. (Eratosthenes. Wow! What a name! Say it three times real fast with marbles in your mouth, you could lose a few teeth!)

I'll call him Eratos. He was an Olympic pentathlon champion back when those events were still held in the nude. He was also a poet of renown in the Hellenistic world and the astronomer who invented Leap Year. He was friends with Euclid with whom he used to trade geometry homework before class. He was appointed in the prime of his young adult life to the prestigious position of librarian of Alexandria.⁸⁴

"Eratos was in heaven! He loved worn scrolls, the older the better; and with his new job he had a whole library to explore—the massive marbled library of Alexandria. Designed by the pharaoh to be the largest library in the world of its day, it held over 500,000 papyruses. Or is it papyri? Anyway you say it, that was a whole mess of scrolls. During the reign of Pharaoh Ptolemy III⁸⁵, every ship that sailed into the Mediterranean port of Alexandria was searched. If any scrolls, maps, or charts were found on board, they were quickly confiscated, carefully copied and, only then, returned.

The pharaoh wanted in his library a copy of every book ever written. He sent emissaries everywhere in the known world to find the most obscure manuscripts. By offering a huge deposit of gold and silver, he persuaded the leaders of Athens, for instance, to lend him some originals so that the Alexandrian scribes could make copies of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Then, much to the dismay of the Athenian elders, the pharaoh decided to forfeit the library fine and keep the scrolls.

One day, while at the library, as Eratos was rolling through a particularly dusty papyrus, he came across this startling piece of information: "The well in Syene⁸⁶ reflects the sun only at noon on the longest day of the year."

84 Archimedes (c.287-212 B.C.E.) not Euclid, was a contemporary but not a classmate of Eratosthenes (c.275-195 B.C.E). The latter was librarian from 235 B.C.E. until his death. Ed, ed.

85 Euergetes (Well-doer), Ptolemy III, 246-221 B.C.E. Ed, ed.

86 Known as Philae during Eratosthenes' time and Elephantine Island during Roman times, it is located in the middle of the Nile near the present-day city of Luxor. The temple on the island dedicated to the Goddess Anath, from whom we get the word "anathema," was considered the source of the Nile's fertility. Ed, ed.

From this single obscure fact, this man, this genius, was able to deduce the shape of the planet and calculate its circumference.

Here's how he did it. He planted a pole in his backyard and measured the stick and the angle of the shadow on the longest day of the year: The sun was at a seven degree angle. Since he had a shadow, and yet, at another place, namely Syene, there would be none if the scroll were correct, he deduced that the world must be round. Ta-da! Of course, anybody who had watched the sail of a ship sink into the horizon would have come up with the same idea. It was his calculation that showed his genius.

He sent his slave south, upriver to Syene just before the first cataract, so that he could witness this phenomenon on the year's longest day. Imagine the slave that noon in June, peering over the edge of the well at a carefully chosen spot, the arch of the sun inching almost imperceptibly at first but picking up speed on its way down the pink granite on the west wall of the well.⁸⁷ He notices a halo of light growing ever brighter behind the silhouetted reflection of his head. Then, the sunlight hits the water, his face glows in reflection, and he is momentarily blinded by the light. Thus do the gods appear on the temple walls of Egypt, wearing the sun upon their heads.

After this noon event, the slave was told to hurry back to Alexandria without dawdling, counting every footstep he took along the way. So this poor servant, whose name is not recorded to history, went running and counting, and concentrating, red-faced, puffing the long, hot way back to Eratos.

"Forty-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-eight *stadia*,⁸⁸" panted the servant. "Forty-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine..." and he dropped dead from exhaustion at the gate of his master. Fortunately for science, Eratos was there to hear the dying words of his slave.

He quickly scribbled the figure in the dust. Then he multiplied it by fifty—since seven degrees is about one fiftieth of a circle—and, allowing for wind and slope, he came up with the circumference of the earth within four thousand miles of being correct, which was, I'm sure, a small

87 There is a pink granite containing quartz, feldspar, and hornblende named after the location: Syenite. Ed, ed.

88 *Stadia* is the plural of stadion, equal to approximately 607 feet. Ed, ed.

consolation to the widow of the dead slave.

Ed: Not bad without a calculator.

Cin: Really!

To prove his idea, Eratos wanted to have an expedition sent around the world. However, theories alone are not enough to launch ships. So, in order to convince the pharaoh that an expedition should be sent, crafty Eratos turned to another scroll he had been keeping for just such an occasion. He knew the pharaoh, named Well-Doer, was anxious to find a new source of metal for the quantities of gold coins he'd ordered to have minted.—Commanding that the coins be minted before such a source had actually been found hadn't been such a wise move on the pharaoh's part.

The librarian's opportunity came about through an incident involving Queen Bernice.⁸⁹ She and the pharaoh had come to the library one night on the occasion of a celebration honoring the completion of a monumental project: the naming and cataloging of the stars. Most of the star names and constellations as we know them today were announced officially that night in the library garden while refreshment was served. It was a formal toga⁹⁰ affair.

While at the library, the royal couple took a stroll through the museum. The Queen noticed something missing. It seems that Queen Bernice⁹¹ had donated her hair for an exhibit in honor of her husband's recent military victory. This was considered a generous gesture in a land where the more hair one had, the more power it symbolized. Because of this, royalty was forced to shave their heads so that they could better balance their humongous false hairdos.

Ed: Is that where we get the term "big wigs?"

Cin: Possibly. I never thought of that.

Anyway, the hair was missing, and the queen demanded to know where it was. Eratos had to think fast. He couldn't very well tell the truth, that he had ordered the hair taken out of his museum and disposed of to make room for the Pipes of Pan, a massive bronze pipe organ he was in the

89 Correction: Berenice of Cyrene, or, more accurately, Queen Berenice II. Ed, ed.

90 Togas were worn by Romans, not Greeks. Ed, ed.

91 Op. cit. Ed, ed.

process of enlarging. So he pointed at the heavens and lied; he pointed at a fine spray of small stars which he had planned to call the "Beard" but, considering the situation, on the spur of the moment, changed the name to "Bernice's Hair."⁹²

"Your hair is up there, Your Highness," he smiled.

Neither Queen B nor Ptolemy Well-Doer was much impressed with this little switcheroo of his. In order to avert their wrath by diverting their attention, Eratos pulled out his other scroll, the one he had been hiding up his sleeve. What it said, we do not know, but it can be inferred from the message written on the cave wall in New Guinea. It said that the goals of the mission were twofold: one, "to circumnavigate the globe"—and from evidence found in Chile mentioned in the same journal in which the wall drawing was reproduced, it seems that they made it to South America, claiming land for the pharaoh as far north as San Francisco before turning back. Their other mission: "to find the extent of the mines."

"What mines?" I asked Percival.

"What mines? Indeed!" he replied.

We can assume that the mines were of enough importance to warrant the expense of a large fleet of ships, each sixty paces long and manned by several hundred oarsmen. We can also assume that these mines were believed to have been located at a considerable distance east of Egypt for them to have been looking for them in New Guinea, of all places. We can also infer from the message that, for some reason, knowledge of the location of the mines had been lost.

Ed, the mines could have been the fabulous gold mines that had belonged to the Egyptian pharaohs in the faraway land of Punt, which, by the way, was also referred to as Pan. Some scholars have suggested, because of the similarity in sound, that Pan was actually Pahang, an area of the peninsula where I was going the following day.

Ed: Hold on. I thought that Punt was in Africa.

Cin: At first, probably so. But later, as the ships began to roam farther

92 *Coma Berenices*. Callimachus, the Cyrenean poet, composed a piece about the incident, a Roman poet translated it and claimed it as his own, and Alexander Pope did the same with the title in English, *The Rape of the Lock*, a long history of classic plagiarism. Ed, ed.

across the sea, the name Punt or Pan came to mean some part of greater India, somewhere to the east. Distant travel by sea was quite possible. Ashoka the Great, King of the Subcontinent, was in correspondence with the pharaoh. An ambassador from India lived among the Egyptians at court. There was ample contact between the two centers of civilization in 200 BC, so why couldn't there have been ships sailing the Indian Ocean as far back as 1500 BC?

Ed: Come on. The ships of that time didn't even have keels.

Cin: Neither did the Polynesian canoes, and yet they have been able to sail all over the Pacific for thousands of years.⁹³

Now remember that these gold mines were a monopoly of the pharaohs. I am sure, therefore, every pharaoh-to-be would have been taught by temple priests the location of the source of Egyptian gold. Moses was trained to become a pharaoh. During the Exodus from the land of Ramses, knowledge of the locations of the gold mines left Egypt with the Children of Israel.



Percival gave me a quick sweep over the history of the "Chosen People" to help familiarize me with important events. After the Exodus, the Israelites wandered through the wilderness for forty years, living on manna and water which came gushing from a rock that Moses struck with his staff.

They crossed the Jordan River. Joshua blew down the walls of Jericho.

93 For proof of the sailing capabilities of the ancient world, see Carter's translation of Quiring's *Die Goldinsel Des Isador Von Sevilla, Aegypter Der 20 Dynastie Als Entdecker und Kulturbringer in Ostasien*. He mentions Egyptian vessels sixty-seven meters long and capable of speeds up to fifteen knots and distances of ninety miles a day. He also notes persistent legends of a Golden Island to the east. Sahure (2494-2345 B.C.E.), Tutmose I (1525-1512 B.C.E.) and Ramses II (1304-1237 B.C.E.) all sent voyages to this mysterious land of Pan. At the end of the Rameside Pharaohs in 1085 B.C.E., about the time of Solomon, Egypt lost all her Asiatic dependencies. Ed, ed.

Later David crawled up a drainpipe⁹⁴ and took Jebusalem by surprise, changing only one letter in the name of that plateau-top town to Jerusalem.

Ed: Maybe he didn't want to waste the old name cards like your friend PResto, the magician fellow.

Cin: It's true. All you would have to do is white out a couple of parts in the "b" and you have an "r". I wonder how hard it was to do that in the Hebrew alphabet.

Anyway, years later, King David thrust southward, captured the source of iron in the Sinai and also gained a port on the Gulf of Aqaba leading into the Red Sea. Hiram of Tyre made contact soon thereafter, probably for the purpose of trade.

Solomon was commissioned to build the temple by his father, King David. Among the many details in the plan for the temple was the construction of strongrooms. It was one of the first items to be mentioned, indicating its importance,

Check it out in the Old Testament. If you read the description of the design in the book of Chronicles with a different bias, it appears to be the building plan for a bank. Think of the Holy of Holies in the innermost part of the temple, with its extremely limited access, and compare that to the vault of a bank, for instance.

David had good reason to desire security. Before he died, he donated thirty-five tons of his own gold plus a thousand tons of state gold to be kept in the temple.⁹⁵

I asked Percival if he didn't think those figures were exaggerated. "Not necessarily," he answered. "Of course, the chroniclers were no more above inflating their claims than the advertisers of today. Yet, in those ancient times, the measure of things was often colossal. Think of a walk in the

94 2 Samuel 5:8 N.E.B.

King David Ben Jesse was born in Bethlehem, Judea at 1 AM Oct. 28, 1062 B.C.E. According to at least one professional astrologer, the Mogen David, the superimposed double-triangle Star of David is the plot of his horoscope. He died in 966 B.C.E. Ed, ed.

95 David gave 3,000 talents of his private stock of gold from Ophir and 100,000 talents of public funds. One talent is equivalent to approximately 47 pounds. Ed, ed.

Temple of Karnak with those columns rising fifty feet above you to palm-frond capitals. What extraordinary dimensions!" I thought, instead, of my moment in the shadow of the immense fallen head of Ramses II at the Temple of Dawn.

Percival continued. "And again, consider the balance involved in weighing the offerings at the Temple of Amon at Luxor—the giant scale itself weighed over four hundred pounds in pure gold.

"Besides," pouted Percival, as if I might tarnish his game of pretend, "we must assume that the figures are not exaggerations, or the search would not be as much fun. And after all, young lady, we are taking much of our information from an unimpeachable source, namely the Old Testament." Planter Percival gave me a very mischievous smile.

He poured me another cup of tea, then one for himself, before continuing his history. He said that when King David was quite old, a sensuous young dark-eyed woman named Abishag was sent to lie beside him. After failing to have his loins stimulated, David yielded the throne to his son Solomon and died suspiciously soon thereafter.

Solomon married a daughter of the Pharaoh Sheshonk I—and six hundred ninety-nine other brides—and he received what he wished to consider a wedding present, mentioned before, from his neighbor Hiram, king of the Phoenician city of Tyre, namely the cedar for the temple and a extra few thousand logs to build a fleet of ships at the southern port. Solomon wasted no time collecting the logs. He sent twenty thousand men to cut down the trees and another twenty thousand to haul the logs overland to his harbor on the Gulf of Aqaba.⁹⁶

Hiram also gave technical assistance, loaning skilled navigators for the voyages. To where? To Ophir, of course, to the land of gold! On their return, they picked up ivory and apes.

Ed: Sounds like Africa to me.

Cin: Many people agree with you. Sir Haggard, for instance, set the hidden mines of King Solomon in the heart of the Dark Continent. But Percival warned me not to be too hasty about this assumption. The site of Ophir has never been found, and you can be sure that people have been

96 Correction: Solomon raised a forced levy of 30,000 men to help cut the timber, plus 70,000 haulers and 3,300 supervisors. 1 Kings 5:13-16 N.E.B. Ed, ed.

searching in Africa for twenty-five centuries.

Percival studied the trade routes of Solomon's day to see if they offered a clue. He learned that merchant sailing ships of that time could not sail northward against the fierce breezes which blow constantly southward in the Red Sea, so although they could sail southward from Aqaba, they had to return via a different route.

During that period in history, the political turmoil in the Persian Gulf had effectively closed that route into the Fertile Crescent.—Some things never change.—Transporting goods overland was all but impossible; the camel was only then being domesticated, and no other beast of burden was practical for hauling merchandise across the vast desert terrain.

The Old Testament says that the journey to Ophir took three years. Three years is a long time. Even in the sailing vessels of those days, with good winds and correct charts, three years would have been ample time to sail around the entire world!

This next point particularly intrigued Percival. In the Old Testament it is written that they left Aqaba on a three-year journey and returned to Tarshish!⁹⁷ Tarshish has been identified as Tarsus, located in the Mediterranean. That means, if we can assume what the Old Testament said is true, King Solomon's ships either circumnavigated the globe or sailed around Africa!

Now let's consider which way they went. If they sailed eastward from Aqaba, they would have had to cross not only two great oceans but they would also have had to navigate west to east through the treacherous Strait of Magellan, which is extremely difficult, before they reached Tarshish. But if, instead, they sailed westward, they would be taking an easier, safer, and shorter route around the tip of Africa to Tarshish. It's logical to assume they took the latter route.⁹⁸ And, if sailing around Africa were possible during the time of King Solomon, then certainly sailing further to the

97 "The king had a fleet of ships plying to Tarshish." 2 Chronicles 9:21 N.E.B. and also "...to build ships for trade with Tarshish; these were built in Ezion-geber," 2 Chronicles 20:36 N.E.B. The latter was the port on the Gulf of Aqaba at the northernmost tip of the Red Sea. Ed, ed.

98 In fact, such a journey by Phoenician sailors was recorded as having taken place under Pharaoh Necho in 600 B.C.E., only three hundred years after the time of King Solomon. Ed, ed.

islands of Southeast Asia was well within the capabilities of the Phoenician navigators that Solomon had at his disposal.

So, according to Percival's speculations, they would spend one year going to the source of the gold—which he feels certain was in Southeast Asia, and specifically Malacca. There they would pick up the cargo and wait for the monsoon winds to change and take them westward. Another year of sailing would bring them to Africa, where they would again wait for favorable winds, and take on board apes and other African products. They would have had room for such cargo since no one would have risked filling a hold completely full of precious gold, in case of shipwreck. The final year would take them up the west coast of Africa, through the Strait of Gibraltar and across the Mediterranean to Tarshish.

It was soon after King Solomon's first successful journey to Ophir and back that the powerful Queen of Sheba decided to take a trip to Jerusalem to see this rising monarch. Let's set the scene.



Accompanied by a very large retinue and a caravan of camels laden with spices, gold in great quantity, and precious stones, the dusky Queen of Sheba, smelling of myrrh and musk, comes wobbling on the hump of her ungainly camel, wearing a silver moon tiara with golden ram horns at each side.⁹⁹ She had rings on her fingers, bells on her ankles, and a large blue star sapphire sparkling from her navel.

Ed: She had no navel reserve, then.

Cin: None in the least.

Jaws dropped, mouths stood agape when she arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, but nobody noticed her navel. They were all flabbergasted by the sight of the spitting, green-tongued, humped back camel she was riding. They had never seen a tamed one before, and it was an absolutely repulsive sight to behold. It couldn't possibly be comfortable to sit up there! And the

⁹⁹ Interestingly, the ruler of Palembang passed on his title to both the Malacca and Perak Sultans, both of whom were proclaimed "*Lord of Two Horns*." Ed, ed.

smell!

No one that day would have guessed that the camel would one day revolutionize travel in the Middle East, would make Mecca into a mecca, would tie China to the West via the long ribbon of the Silk Road and would, in the late twentieth century, become a potent symbol of American masculinity. But that was many years later.

Anyway, from atop her camel, the swaying Queen of Sheba got her royal eye-fel as she entered the city. There was the strange sight of everyone with their mouths flopped open. Besides that, the fashion of the day in downtown Jerusalem was hair dyed passionate purple.

Ed: We had punk way back in BC?

Cin: There's nothing new under the sun.

When Sheba arrived at King Solomon's palace, she was escorted into his presence down a long colonnade. She noticed all the gold adorning the walls, trimming the doors and windows, garnishing the ceiling beams and the hanging lamps. Gold had been pounded into the shields and armor for the royal guards, the king's "Heroes," as they preferred to be called, and they looked stunning, literally blinding in the sunlight.

The heavy cedar double doors swung open; the queen cleared her throat, getting ready to break into her rendition of, "Well, Hello, Solly! Is that you, Sol..." when she was struck dumb by what she beheld. There in the center of a large hexagonal room sat King Solomon, high atop his throne with his legs resting casually on a golden footstool and his long, blond, wavy hair cascading down to his shoulders. His youthful, energetic eyes appraised her up and down.¹⁰⁰

His throne was made of ivory accented with gold; the arms were supported on the backs of golden lions, their mouths open ferociously in mid-growl. Six broad steps encased in gold, each one flanked on both sides by additional red-gold lions, descended to the base and the floor of water.

¹⁰⁰ Although at first I thought this description was in error, since Solomon was a Semite and they do not have blond hair, further research indicates that tradition bears this out. It is probable, therefore, that the lighter hair color and complexion came from his mother Bathsheba, from the house of Sheba, which would imply they were of light skin and not dusky as was mentioned earlier. Ed, ed.

The entire island dais was surrounded by water.

King Solomon raised his index finger and wiggled it, a gesture of invitation for her to approach him. She hesitated; she couldn't swim, and besides, she hadn't brought along her bathing suit. Was this some sort of wet-toga party or what? This wasn't exactly protocol for a meeting between heads of state. Peeved, she lifted up her skirt, showing her legs to the king. Solomon enjoyed the moment.

The king got up, descended the glimmering staircase and, to her astonishment, walked across the water, fish swimming beneath his dry feet. With a snap of his finger, a carpet of red gold was rolled out over the water. King Solomon escorted the queen, her hand in his, to the island throne. He clapped his hands and another throne appeared for the queen. And there the two of them sat upon their respective thrones, conferring with each other about the world and other affairs.

King Solomon taught her how the water trick was done; the floor was made of glass, you see, set over a very large aquarium. It was one of Solomon's better ideas for interior decorating.¹⁰¹ Queen Bilqis of Sheba liked the idea so much that she later had glass installed in her own palace, the Palace of the Moon, after first having it dyed ruby red with a special technique using gold, a technique Solomon taught her. The red glass covered a flowing stream that wound through the palace like a vein of blood. The effect was quite stunning, but some felt it was not in the best of taste, especially in the dining room when roast beef was being served.¹⁰²

The Old Testament says that the Queen of Sheba "came to test Solomon with **hard** questions."

Ed: Perhaps something like, "Is that a lance in your toga, or are you just happy to see me?"

101 There is a less ribald version of their meeting and a description of the glass floor in the Koran: S. XXVII:44. Ed, ed.

102 At the ruins of the Temple of the Moon near Marib, also known as Zaba or Saba, in present-day Yemen, evidence of such a glass-covered stream has been found where fish once swam. The stream flowed through the entire courtyard after entering the palace via an aqueduct and splashing over a fifteen-foot waterfall.

There is no evidence of any red glass, however. Although it is true that the creation of red glass does require gold, it is questionable whether it was within the technological capabilities of that era. Ed, ed.

Cin: We aren't told. We are informed that the queen told Solomon everything that was on her mind, and she was, in turn, given all she desired. That sounds very cozy, doesn't it? Not purely Platonic. It suggests that there was a whole lot of Biblical knowing going on. There was some gossip about their having a child together named Menelik, who never amounted to much. People will talk.

As did the two of them. They talked about gold shipments, about interior designing and architecture. Solomon was especially proud of his new building, the latest of many he had ordered constructed. The interior was both expensive and erotic. Phallic palm tree pillars had been festooned with suggestive clusters of sensual pomegranates. Two great bronze pillars stood erect in the middle of the floor with an arched ceiling designed like an opening flower directly above each one. Get the picture? The building seemed to have been designed as a pleasure palace for a foreign woman that Solomon was wooing.

He built his city with forced labor, conquered peoples such as the rock-carving Jebusites who, in effect, became slaves to Israel after David conquered Jerusalem. After the queen's visit, when the construction of the main building was near completion, the people, fed up with the lack of overtime benefits, rebelled against King Solomon. They had been forced to work long hours to hurriedly construct the large stone structure. Those heavy boulders hadn't been easy to move into place, and now Solomon wanted to add a front porch!

The angry mob stood at the base of the building, brandishing their fists at King Solomon, who strode along the edge of the roof, holding up his hands for quiet. "People! People! My Fellow Jerusalemites." That didn't sound right. "Jerusalites? Jerusalemeans?" He gave up. "My fellow Chosen People. Hear my words! Lend me your ears." When this had no effect on the crowd, he shouted, "Shut up!" and waited until they were silent before he continued.

"Why do you riot? Do you believe those false rumors about this splendid edifice? You should be very proud of yourselves, you really did a fine job, and I think you should give yourselves a very, very big hand!" He was stalling for time.

"Some say that this wonderful building is to be a palace for Billy, I

mean, for Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba. Nay! Ridiculous! I say unto you, I am not a crook! Would your good King Sol do that to you? Of course, I would not.

"This palace is, well, first of all, let me make this perfectly clear: it is not a palace. It will be, on the contrary, this building will be a very important erection...That is to say, it is a.... it's the..." and here he snaps his fingers, trying to come up with an idea fast... Bingo. He gets one. "It's the House of God! That's it! Yes! This will be the House of God, a temple! Yes!

"Oh, and by the way," he added, "donations are being accepted." A hat was passed around, and consequently most of the crowd quickly dispersed. And so it came to pass that the building became the temple. Solomon was indeed a very clever man.

Everyone with resources in Israel put their gold into the temple storerooms or, should we say, vaults. Sounds suspiciously like a bank, doesn't it? But should we be surprised? Who were the people sitting outside the temple when Jesus got so angry? Money changers, right?

We know that most of the wealthy people of Jerusalem and the surrounding area invested their savings in the temple. We know that business was good under King Solomon, or rather, it was good for Solomon. Every year he received six hundred sixty-six talents of gold, that's sixteen tons of gold, from the Queen of Sheba plus precious gems, flawless rubies, emeralds, and star sapphires. In Solomon's day, as the Old Testament says, gold was common, and no one even bothered to count the silver.

It would seem natural that Solomon should take some precautions to protect this vast wealth of his. He was only partially successful; four years after his death, his father-in-law, the pharaoh, raided the temple and took all the gold—or **thought** he had.

Through the following years, armies continued to swoop down and vacuum up any gold available. Yet, according to the Copper Scroll, they still had at least thirty-five tons of it to hide in 70 AD, after the Roman legions under Titus finally destroyed the temple and carried off the plunder to Rome. Nothing was left of the temple, not one stone upon another.

Ed: It seems almost as if the Romans had been looking for something.

Cin: Sure does.

As for the knowledge of the way to Ophir, Jehosophat and someone else tried to make this voyage some years after Solomon died, but the effort was futile.¹⁰³ The fleet floundered and the route was forgotten.

The map of the sea route to Ophir, land of gold aplenty, and the location of the mines there had been placed secretly beneath King Solomon's throne. Perhaps it was this scroll that was discovered in the library of Alexandria by the erudite Eratosthenes seven centuries after King Solomon died.¹⁰⁴ The subsequent defeat of the last Ptolemy, and then, the burning of the library by the religious pyromaniac, Emperor Theo-lots-o'-phus¹⁰⁵, helped to obscure the route to those elusive gold mines. The secret lay forgotten for over a thousand years.



Knowledge of these elusive mines seems to have come to light again during the First Crusade.¹⁰⁶ This is where the Knights Templar come into the picture. We center in on the small province of Champagne, France, near the medieval city of Troyes, and look through the wavy window glass into the dark cloister of an abbey renowned for its study of the cabala and the secrets hidden within them—not all of them being of a spiritual nature.

In one corner of a room, a cluster of men, experts all in arcane literature, huddle from the cold in their rough-cotton hooded robes, bent over a candle-lit parchment, puzzling over an extremely rare copy of an ancient

¹⁰³ Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, and Ahaziah, King of Israel, about 140 years after Solomon. The Bible states that they wanted to build ships to go to "Tarshish", not Ophir. 2 Chronicles 20:36 N.E.B. Ed, ed.

¹⁰⁴ In 194 B.C.E., Apollonius took over the post of librarian in Alexandria after Eratosthenes, who was beginning to go blind, had locked himself in the library and committed suicide by starvation rather than face a life where he could not read. Apollonius, incidentally, wrote a poem about argonauts and an expedition in search of gold. Ed, ed.

¹⁰⁵ Theodosius commanded that all books containing anything pagan be destroyed in 391 C.E. The Christian writings which then remained in the library were destroyed by the equally fanatical Islamic Arab armies in 646 C.E. Ed, ed.

¹⁰⁶ The First Crusade was begun in 1095 C.E. Ed, ed.

Hebrew text. An old man, with wizened face shadowed deeply in the flickering yellow light, points a shaky, gnarled finger at a particular series of symbols. The brothers gaze, then gradually one and then another realizes the importance of the discovery—if it is true.

Ed: What was it?

Cin: We don't know, but it was important enough that one of the brothers, Hugues de Payen, volunteers to go and verify it. He leaves soon thereafter for the recently-conquered and now Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem. When he returns from the Holy Land, a council of the wealthy and powerful of the area, including his uncle St. Benedict, is hurriedly convened. Then de Payen sets off again for Jerusalem in the company of eight other "monk-knights."

According to tradition, they rode into Jerusalem and went straight to the palace of the king. They told him that they wanted to start a holy order of militant knights whose purpose would be to protect the faithful on their pilgrimages to the Holy Land. So far, they had nine men. These nine men were going to patrol all the highways and byways leading to the Holy Land?

The king hid his smirk in his sleeve and graciously offered them a place to stay in his palace. They thanked him for his generosity. They would love to stay at his palace; in fact, they would like to reside in a specific wing—if the king would be so kind?—the wing that had been built on the land where the temple had once stood.

After they let him in on the secret, whatever it was, the nine monk-knights took up residence. They kept their horses below ground in what came to be called King Solomon's stables. These knights were known to make a lot of noise at night and always seemed to have rubble to be carted away in the morning. Since they lived where the temple had once been, they became known as the Knights of the temple, or the Knights Templar.

Before the temple, the site had been the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite; it was a large, flat, unplatable plateau of solid rock. Over the centuries this rock plateau had been excavated, honeycombed with rooms, enough to have housed hundreds of horses if, for some reason, one should ever need to stable horses there under the temple.

The Jebusites who populated the plateau before the Israelites came were

experts in rock carving, as witnessed by the technical wonder of the drainage pipe, the one David came crawling up through during his surprise attack. It was an astonishing feat of engineering for its day—"although militarily, it left much to be desired," commented Percival. The ancient Jebusites had carved solid rock with two crews working, one from above and one from below the plateau and meeting in the middle. "One of your American authors, a Mr. James A. Michener, wrote a fictionalized account of this in his book, *The Source*," Percival told me.

"During the time I was in Trans-Jordan, before the British government botched it so badly, it was rumored that the Palestinian radicals hid their guns in those labyrinthine storerooms that are now beneath the Al Aqsa Mosque. I was not, therefore, allowed to go down there to look around as I would have liked. What could have been hidden there during the time of King Solomon? No one knows. There is plenty of room for speculation," Percival added with a meaningful gaze.

But back to the Templar. Immediately upon their taking up residence in the palace, money began to seep into the Templar's coffers. Yet no new members were allowed to join the fledgling order for almost a decade. When they finally opened up recruitment, applications came pouring in. So that he could become a Templar, a master willingly became a subordinate to his former vassal who was one of the charter members of the order. That's curious. Why?

Ed: Talk about downward mobility.

Cin: The pope invested the Knights Templar with his approval at the Council of Troyes, freeing the order forever from paying tithes or taxes and granting it the right to collect its own tithes. Why? The Templar were answerable to no one but the pope, making them in effect, a multinational power that could not be checked by any bishop or monarch or even the pope's own army. As Percival put it, "How frightfully extraordinary!"

Wealth continued to flood into the Templar's many storerooms located all over Europe. Although individual members had taken the vow of personal poverty, the order was required to accept all donations from all sources, be they Christian monarch, Jewish rabbi, half-crazed Saracen, or hash-crazed Assassin. Yet the Templar Charter expressly forbade them from giving up any property or wealth to anyone. Within a few decades of

their inception, the Knights Templar had become the wealthiest institution in Europe, collecting a hundred million dollars annually in rent alone.

The Templar established banks, the first in Europe. One wonders where the idea for such an institution came from. King Solomon perhaps? It was the Templar who invented the banker's check. A Crusader could take his gold to the preceptory of the Templar, say, London, and when he got to the Holy Land, he could withdraw some of it from the Templar vaults there by using a series of secret codes to identify the account: the world's first pin numbers.

Queens and kings, bishops and knights, pawned their castles to the Templar to pay the bills for last night's parties. When signing the Magna Carta, King John of England had a Grand Master Knight Templar standing over him to officiate and make sure that he spelled his name right.

The Knights Templar gained a reputation as mystics. They were said to possess the secrets of sacred geometry and applied magical coded formulas to create those gravity-defying Gothic cathedrals. They were adept in astronomy/astrology, for in those days the two fields were considered one. They were rumored to be able to create miracles of alchemy with the use of a rare philosopher's stone which they kept secure in their possession. They could cure the sick with herbs and incantations. They may, for example, have discovered the secrets of antibiotics in mold cultures and used them against infection in their renowned hospitals.

They became the guardians of the Holy Shroud of Turin, taking the image of the folded shroud as their symbol: the skull and crossbones. By simply removing the skull, one gets the immediately-recognizable splayed cross, their emblem.

Percival told me an interesting side note about the Shroud: it was, at one time, considered a sacred relic, with the actual imprint of the crucified Christ formed as he was laid in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. But recent carbon analysis has dated the cloth itself from about 1200 AD, although the accuracy of that particular use of carbon dating has been called into question.

Recently, other scientists were able to reproduce an image on cloth that is quite similar to that of the Shroud through a process requiring long exposure to light directed through a large crystal lens. If this is actually

how the Shroud of Turin was made, it is a primitive photographic technique from the thirteenth century, five hundred years before photography is believed to have been invented! A miracle indeed.

Anyway, the Knights Templar were rumored to have learned the dark art of forging Damascus steel, so much stronger than their own weapons. It had been kept a closely-guarded secret for centuries: different types of iron were heated and pounded together until the metals blended into a single weapon, then the blade was tempered to gain extra hardness and strength; while still red-hot, it was immersed in the blood of a living heart.¹⁰⁷

Ed: Perhaps that explains why we have the word *black* in *blacksmith*. It was considered black magic.

Cin: Yup. And perhaps it was this same technique that somehow came from the Middle East to Southeast Asia at the dawn of their history. Percival showed me some photos he had of the blades. If you study the two types of steel side by side, the characteristic wavy lines on the blade of Damascus steel look very similar to the patterns on the old *kris* of Sumatra.

But back to those fabulous knights of the Splayed Cross. Quite naturally, because of their almost limitless wealth and power, the Knights Templar became feared and envied by kings, especially by Philip le Bel of France who was, incidentally, pawned up to his pompadour to the Templar.

Ed: About when was this?

Cin: At about the turn of the fourteenth century.

Once, during a particularly savage bread riot, the king was forced to take refuge in a "temple," where he witnessed—turning olive with envy—the insouciance with which these "poor" monk-knights displayed their wealth—living in luxury in those spacious, comfortable halls, playing poker, and swearing like, well, like Knights Templar, for they were also famous for their foul mouths. The king asked to be allowed to become a member of the club but was refused. There was no way to do that tactfully, and the king's resentment stuck in his throat like a whale bone.

In October 1307, on Friday the thirteenth, a day called unlucky ever

¹⁰⁷ The tempering of the metal results from the presence of organic nitrogen. Water in which animal skins had been immersed functions just as well and has a far less wearing effect upon the slave population. Ed, ed.

since, the Knights Templar of France were arrested. They were tortured and some confessed to heinous crimes: that of spitting on the Cross, kissing each other on the butt, things like that. Then they recanted, then recanted the recantation, and finally wanted to recant once more but were told "you can't." The Grand Master Jacque de Morlay was roasted at the stake in front of Notre Dame, swearing hot vengeance on the French monarchy as the tongues of flame licked his face.

When about five hundred years later King Louis XVI was guillotined during the French Revolution,¹⁰⁸ an unidentified man jumped up onto the guillotine platform, dipped his hands in the spurting royal blood, and sprinkled it over the crowd, shouting, "**Jacques de Morlay, thou art avenged!**" Some people can carry a grudge for centuries.

King Philip the Beautiful, who had become fanatically anti-Templar during the few years he had remaining before he was poisoned, convinced the pope¹⁰⁹—before he too was poisoned—to withdraw the Knights Templar charter, and the Order was no more. Yet none of the vast stores of gold they were reported to have possessed was ever found. None of their fleet of eighteen ships was ever seen again.

The dissolution of the Order was incomplete in other ways, too. In Spain and Portugal, they merely changed the name from the Knights Templar to the Knights of Christ. Interestingly, the Grand Master of this new order was the brother of the Portuguese king, who is known in history as Prince Henry the Navigator.

Shortly after a Portuguese victory in northern Africa against the Moors, Prince Henry began sending out ship after ship on voyages of discovery, as if driven by some mad impulse—or perhaps the Navigator Prince had come across some hitherto unknown documents sent to him from recently-captured Morocco.

"It is extraordinary!" Percival shook his head, confounded. "Although at one time, Prince Henry of Navarre was among the richest of all men in Europe, he died a virtual pauper. Why did he send costly expeditions, one after another, south along the coast of Africa? Out of curiosity? For the

108 Louis XVI was beheaded in 1789 C.E. which, to be accurate, was 475 years after de Morlay's execution in 1314 C.E. Ed, ed.

109 Pope Clement V (1305-1314 C.E.). Ed, ed.

chance of obtaining spices? Would he have willingly bankrupted his Order in a quest for pepper and Christian converts? Perhaps I am overly skeptical, but I think not," Percival declared. "I believe that it was something much more substantial that motivated him: a very large cache of gold!"

Percival had a point, you know, Ed. You don't hear much about the lust for pepper, but for gold, men have done some very strange things.

The pope granted these Knights of Christ—most of whom held the aliases of an excommunicated Knights Templar—the right to appoint all the administrators for all lands they discovered.¹¹⁰ What power! In the absence of the pope, the Grand Master was to be the most powerful person alive in all lands explored. Why?

The played cross of the Knights Templar billowed from the masts of all the Iberian ships of discovery. The daughter of the Order's Grand Master became the wife of Christopher Columbus who sailed for Spain, and thus the Templar cross was flying on the first sail to be seen by the natives of the New World. Vasco Da Gama was a Master of the Order and brought the played cross to India. Sequeira and Albuquerque, too, flew this cross when they sailed to Malacca.

"Considering all this," Percival mused, "it is not surprising to find the skull and crossbones motif on some of the graves up on St. Paul's Hill. Even some English gravestones bear the sign, for the Freemasons, claiming a rather spurious connection to the Knights Templar, took the symbol as their own. Most of those eager men such as Sir Thomas Raffles who were sent out as factors by the British East India Company were Masons. Finally, the Jesuits also claimed the symbol of the Knights Templar, which would explain why the tombstone of the Bishop of Japan would display the skull and crossbones emblem.

"Important questions remain: if it had been gold which motivated the Navigator Prince to embark on his quest, what gold could he have been seeking? Could it have been the same gold that sent the Spanish to sail around the world? As I have suggested before, we may have been given a clue to the answer in the very naming of the Solomon Islands.

¹¹⁰ In papal bulls *Dum diversas* (1452 C.E.), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455 C.E.) and *Inter caetera* (1456 C.E.), Pope Calixtus gave complete jurisdiction both secular and ecclesiastical to the Order of Christ. Ed, ed.

"And for what mines was the Ptolemaic naval expedition searching when their Captain Rata scratched that charcoal message on the cave walls in New Guinea two thousand years ago? Could they, too, have been somehow connected with King Solomon?

"An idea came to me one day as I was pondering these questions: that it may, indeed, have been the same gold that drew both the Spaniards and Ptolemaic-Egyptians on their quests. I had forgotten to consider something which would explain why those two expeditions could have looked in two different locations for the same treasure but during vastly different time periods, and why both of them were wrong. I had forgotten about the precession of the equinox!

"What's that? I asked.

To answer, Percival escorted me over to his star globe by the balcony doors. He placed the tip of his pen on a point just next to the North Pole. "As you may know, Polaris, the North Star, is no longer located due north. It is close enough for most casual observations, but one could not, for instance, use it to aim rockets. For a short time many centuries ago, however, Polaris was truly our Pole Star. The change in position has come about because the earth wobbles on its axis, somewhat like a top that has begun to lose its power. (Now, there is a chilling thought!)

"Our North Pole describes a large circle that takes a 25,000-year journey to complete."¹¹¹ He moved his finger about forty-five degrees south along the globe and rested it in the constellation Libra. In the year 15,000, the star Vega, way over here, will be close to due north.

"Now when the North Pole changes location, it stands to reason that the latitude of the other stars must change as well, a fact that people might easily forget—as I myself had—or perhaps it was not known at the time of the expeditions in question. When the Spanish arrived in the Solomon Islands and when the Greek-Egyptian navy arrived in Irian Jaya, they may have been using the very same star as their guide."

Percival had drawn a circle on his star globe which marked due north during the entire "wobble" of our planet. He showed me two dots along the arc: one for the point in the sky that was **North Pole 200 BC**, and the other

111 The time the North Pole will take to inscribe a completed circle can be rounded off to 25,770 earth years. Ed, ed.

for **North Pole 1000 BC**. Using a piece of string and stretching it from Polaris to Spica, he marked the length of the string. Then he placed one end on the **North Pole of 200 BC** and held the string so that it passed through Spica.

"Voila!" he exclaimed triumphantly, uninhibited in his glee like a boy at play, as if he were discovering it for the first time. "Do you see? In 200 BC, the star Spica would have been farther north, actually directly overhead if viewed from about three degrees south, which is approximately where that cave in New Guinea is located, the one with the wall writing. With the wobble, Spica has since moved until it is now directly over one of the Solomon Islands. It was overhead at a slightly different part of those islands when they were discovered in the 1500s."

Then taking the string and stretching it from the other point labeled "**North Pole 1000 BC**," Percival demonstrated how Spica would have been even farther north then. "The land beneath Spica, our precious '*golden grain in the hand of the Virgin*' at the time when King Solomon ruled, would have been right here," he pointed to the globe at the latitude of Malacca.

Next, Percival tried to imagine how Solomon handled the problem of longitude, for without it, the star would provide a very broad clue referring to anywhere on the planet located approximately two degrees north.¹¹² In order to measure how far east or west one is traveling, one must have a means of telling time accurately, and in Solomon's day there were no clocks, so that finding the correct longitude was probably not then possible.

Solomon's alternative? He could have chosen a geographic marker and described the topography of the location. Yet large trees die, mountains crumble, rivers change course, jungles become swamps, and swamps become desert. The more prominent the geographical feature he chose, the more likely it was to last. The choice was important. You wouldn't want to forget where you hid the cookie jar!

Percival motioned me to go to the other globe which had been printed sometime in the fifties, before Malaysia had become an independent nation. "Now," he said, his hand resting gently on my shoulder, "look at the geographical features of the Solomon Islands, the western end of New

112 Two degrees thirteen minutes north, Ed, ed.

Guinea, and the Strait of Malacca. What do they all have in common?"

It took me a while to see it. They all slant from northwest to southeast at about the same angle. Perhaps the Spanish captain and the Greco-Egyptian naval commander possessed this additional key, a description of the configuration of the land that led them to the respective locations on their unsuccessful quests.

"Speaking of keys," Percival went back to the coffee table and picked up card 32, "although I had promised myself to avoid this avenue of inquiry, I couldn't resist the temptation of returning to this card once more. Considering this new information about the land, I wondered, would there be any additional clue to be gleaned from this Key of Solomon? I was idly toying with an idea and found that if you take the arrow on the card which points to the edge of the circle and place it so that this point is at the top, at due north, it turns the two center bars shaped like the Roman numeral 'II' so that they form a channel running in that same northwest to southeast direction."

He studied the card again for a while and said, more to himself than to me, "This cross must mark the spot. It simply must!" He looked up at me, smiling sheepishly as if I had caught him playing. "But, of course, this is assuming that this is really a map to hidden treasure.

"Now I grant that I may be reading way too much into all this." He took one last look before putting the card back down on the coffee table.

"So let us again try to confine ourselves to the facts as we know them." Here are a few things he mentioned: ships have been sailing the Indian Ocean since ancient times. Note the dispersion of related languages from Madagascar to, some say, as far as Easter Island. Note the ancient written scripts of Libya and compare the similarities to other writing found among the Maori of New Zealand, the Batak of Sumatra, and the Bugis of Sulawesi.¹¹³ Note the resemblances these hilltop cultures have to one another and to ancient Egypt, things such as irrigation, metalwork, cotton cloth, and the use of the zero.

113 In the southern region of Sulawesi was found an alphabet derived from a Tunisian—that is to say Libyan—script. In 1815, in an attempt to preserve these rare and ancient documents, Sir Thomas Raffles collected these manuscripts called *lontars* and shipped them back to England. Tragically, they were destroyed in a fire on board the ship. Ed, ed.

Percival asked me to weigh another item: English mining engineers have found traces of old mines in the hills of Sumatra near the Pasemah Highland. Egyptian contact with these mines ended around 1000 BC, just before the time of Solomon's reign. The Pasemah Highland was the site of the mountain formerly called Mt. Ophir.

Gunung Ledang in Malaysia was also called Mt. Ophir. I checked on this, thinking it might have been named by some wishful-thinking Victorian, but Percival is right: the name Ophir for the mountain near Malacca predates not only the arrival of the British but also of Islam in the region. It comes from the Sumatran mountain.

"It is interesting to reexamine in this light the story of Princess Ledang," suggested Percival. "Her flight from her home in Sumatra to the Malayan Peninsula may very well be the mythological memory of the time the name of the mountain was transferred. I speculate this to have happened when the gold mines became nonproductive in Sumatra while rich deposits of gold were being discovered across the Strait of Malacca."

Percival suggested that we reconsider Putri Ledang's strange request for a bridge of gold. If you remember, she wished it to be built from Gunung Ledang, Mt. Ophir, all the way to Malacca. If you consider that a bridge is a span built between and resting on secure piers, and that the vaults of banks are also their foundation, their footing, then a bridge of gold is a fair metaphor for one of the services a bank renders, namely, the ability to transfer gold across distances by using as the bridge's piers, as it were, the gold in the vaults of the two banks."

Ed: Whoa! That's a bit of a stretch.

Cin: Depends on how you think about it. Consider it as a verb. Doesn't your ATM card help you "bridge" the distances, so to speak, financially, by sending money from one place to another?

Here's another item to ponder: there are literally thousands of holes, apparent mine shafts found in the hills along the rivers in the interior of the Malayan Peninsula. Who dug them? No Asian of ancient times—no Chinese, no Javanese, no Indian—was willing to go down and dig in tunneled mines because of their belief in subterranean spirits. They were willing to dig only tracer or open-pit mines. This rules them out as the miners of these deep holes. However, we do find deep cave mining

techniques from a very early era in ancient Egypt and elsewhere throughout the Near East. Some peoples, such as the Jebusites on the plateau where the temple stood, were particularly skilled at carving through rock. The Jebusites, remember, were enslaved by King Solomon.

Now consider this: the gold ore of the Malayan Peninsula is of a high purity and casts a distinctive reddish glow. Malaysian gold sold for three percent more than Australian gold during the gold rush. There is nowhere else in all of Africa or India with gold ore as pure. Bear in mind that the Old Testament specifically mentions the red gold of Ophir as different from, and of higher value than, ordinary gold.

Percival had one last point. "If King Solomon gave us a clue to this gold—which I personally believe he did, because it is so much fun to believe so—in what form would we find it? I believe we are looking not for a mine at all so much as for a place where mined gold was safely stored, vaulted, hidden away in the same way as the treasures mentioned in the Copper Scroll and in my 'Damascus Scroll.'"

Ed: But in Malacca, of all places? Why would Solomon hide it so far from Jerusalem?

Cin: Percival explained that. Consider this: I already stated the obvious, that the Fertile Crescent was never a good place to start a bank, not safe for the storage of large amounts of gold. Almost any place in the world, it seems, would have appeared better for keeping at least some of the treasure safe. If you intended to **hide**, rather than guard the treasure, the more remote the location, the better it would be. And to reduce the risk of shipwreck, the closer the storage vault was to the source, the safer it would be.

Now at the time of King Solomon, there were hardly any natives around Malacca; the Malay race had only begun to filter into the area. The few wandering aboriginal people nearby could have easily been kept away from any particular place with tales of mystical three-headed serpents.

Imagine the peninsula as it was back in Solomon's day, carpeted and canopied by jungle. Rivers like green tunnels beneath the overhanging trees provided the most convenient veins of transportation to the small trading and mining stations in the interior.

A perfect place to hide treasure would probably have been near the

mouth of some river, downstream from those mines. Malacca would have been an excellent location for this purpose with its broad, sweeping bay, rare along the west coast of the peninsula which is usually overgrown with mangrove. It would have provided a safe anchorage to protect ocean vessels from storms, with a river leading into the mines in the interior, where only a mile portage was required between this river system and the one where the gold mines were located.

Ed: But what good would it do Solomon to have such a large cache of gold so far away from Jerusalem?

Cin: That's the genius of the plan. Remember that the Knights Templar became bankers shortly after their visit to the vaults beneath what was formerly the temple in Jerusalem? Perhaps they found some treasure there. Perhaps they came across hidden documents belonging to Solomon containing some concepts about wealth, more specifically about gold, concepts that showed them how gold held the power to purchase without being spent, a concept that would aid the Templar in becoming Europe's first bankers, namely the gold reserve.

Ed: Are you saying that King Solomon was the world's first banker?

Cin: If not the first, then one of the all time greats, for sure.

So you see, nearness to Jerusalem would have provided little advantage. It would be easy enough for Solomon to send to the land of Ophir a number of the trusted underlings of each investor, say, from the courts of the pharaoh, King Hiram of Tyre, and the Queen of Sheba. These emissaries could then be led blindfolded to the treasure room, then the blinds could be removed, and they would be allowed to behold the intoxicating splendor of all that gold stored in the secret vault. They would be allowed to run their fingers through it, to count it, analyze it in detail until they were satisfied as to the amount. "Take your time, but no samples."

Then King Solomon's ships could return these same emissaries across the sea to their powerful masters so that they might report what they saw, assuring their highnesses that the wealth was secure in the vault somewhere in a faraway land. These servants would then have to be killed by King Solomon's men for added security. Repeated witness could be made as required to assure that the gold remained where it was said to be—provided those rulers had a good supply of trusted and expendable servants, that is.

Percival thinks that the card labeled "Skill" indicates the location of the world's first gold reserve, the precursor to the "Old Lady of Threadneedle Street," that's the Bank of England, or to the vaults of the American Fort Knox.

He told me, "It would be difficult to estimate what such a vault might contain. Quite likely, it is an extremely large amount of gold when one considers the sums of which the Old Testament speaks. Remember, for instance, the 666 talents of gold Solomon received every year from the Queen of Sheba?"

Ed: Curious. Six six six is the number of the beast, the number of the devil.

Cin: The treasure is surrounded by all sorts of demonic images, as if someone were trying to frighten the superstitious away. Card 32, I noticed, was protected by Asmoday; his name was printed at the bottom. Asmoday, alias Asmodeus, is the king of all the demons. That's pretty heavy-duty protection!

Percival concluded with a sigh that it must be a **colossal** cache of gold! "Absolutely extraordinary in size! And I think I would willingly forfeit every single ounce of it just to **know** that I had found King Solomon's *'golden grain in the hand of the Virgin.'*"



Looking out the window, Percival noticed that the sky had changed color. "I see I have all but talked the sun to sleep. It seems to be about time for dinner. Would you be so kind as to join me for some absolutely delightful seafood? There is this little Chinese restaurant a few streets from here that has never failed me. I would like to have the honor of sending you off properly on your excursion tomorrow, your journey into the ancient gold fields of King Solomon, and perhaps of the pharaohs as well.

"Do keep an eye out for any extraordinary scratches on a rock surface; it may be an inscription. Look at every rounded hill as if it may be a man-made mound over the hidden cache, any rounded stone as if it were a bead.

Perhaps you will find another glass bead like the one that was found to the south, in the state of Johore, dating back to as early as 900 BC and definitely made in Phoenicia.¹¹⁴ No matter what you find on your excursion, I am sure it will prove interesting.

"I have already sent Chong On home with orders to come and collect me from the restaurant I spoke of. So you will either join me, to my extraordinary delight, or I shall be forced to dine alone, always an unpleasant proposition."

I was enjoying my time with this fascinating man and felt relaxed enough to tease him. "You could always wait and eat with Chong On."

"Perish the thought. I'd rather fast. He is an extremely efficient eating machine; it is not an enjoyable sight to watch. Besides, I found it was never a good idea to eat with the help. Not for the reasons you might imagine. I felt it made them uncomfortable to have me around. It was so much more convenient for them if they could plan their mischief while I was not present. My spies would inform me later if it was important. The laborers, especially the Chinese, always seemed to handle their own affairs for themselves much better than we British ever could..

"Take, for instance, when gambling became problematic in the Straits Settlements, causing many families to fall into destitution, many a woman forced into prostitution, bloody feuds, and murders. The British authorities rightly decided to ban gambling altogether with the threat of dire punishment for all violators. Many years passed before it was discovered that during the fifteen days of celebration every New Year, the Chinese temples effectively became casinos right under the noses of the British authorities, who mistook the games for a form of exotic religious ritual. This went on for years, mind you!

"Now I will talk your head off, if you allow me. Please don't, for I am famished. Shall we be off to find our seafood?"

114 Not far from Malacca, glass beads were discovered whose special shape and color are exactly like those produced on the Phoenician coast circa 500 B.C.E., certainly no earlier than 700 B.C.E. However, no other beads of this kind have been found in the area. We must remember that one swallow does not a summer make. They may have been, for instance, heirlooms carried there many centuries after they were crafted in the Middle East. Ed, ed.

He offered me his arm, the perfect gentleman, picked up his cane, gave it a randy swing, and escorted me down the stairs and then along the narrow, dimly-lit streets. The darkness snuggled comfortably into the niches of the crumbling walls. Malacca's inner city is as quiet at night as it is noisy by day. A silent trishaw glided by, the empty seat an invitation that we refused.

We came to an intersection, on one corner of which there appeared to be steaming vats of a Chinese laundry overflowing into the street. On closer inspection, I realized those were large pots for cooking rice and stewing pork; this was the restaurant.

A narrow pathway led among the pots and sweating cooks of the roadside kitchen to a door. Percival opened it and allowed me to go in first. We entered a cold air-conditioned room, freezing in contrast to the outside. The plywood-panelled walls were decorated with several Chinese calendars displaying black-haired seductresses in red negligees selling black Irish beer under a red label. A family group, including a grandmother and several fat squirmy kids, was eating at a large round table, chopsticks flying like plane propellers. On the other side of the room, a group of seven men was drinking beer and snacking, the two tables they had brought together were filled with empty bottles.

We found a cozy table for two. Percival sang a few words in what apparently was good Chinese, Cantonese he told me later. He was fluent in many of the languages and dialects spoken around Malacca.¹¹⁵ Our imitation-ivory chopsticks appeared with hot water to pour over them to sterilize them one last time before we ate.

The meal was a pleasure. How do any Chinese stay thin? Percival was the perfect host, asking questions without prying, listening with interest, getting to know me, sharing his vast knowledge of Malacca with me. He again offered me unlimited use of his library, if I promised to stay and read the books there.

One thing marred the otherwise perfect evening. While we were enjoying our after-dinner jasmine tea, the group of men finished their gathering and began to leave. The owner went to thank them for coming, holding the bill in his hand, smiling fawningly. A few words were spoken,

115 The number of languages and dialects spoken in Malacca is estimated from between fifteen up to as many as thirty. Ed, Ed.

short words and sharp, barked out by one of the men who was leaving. He scowled, picked up his glass as if he was going to drink, but instead, pointed with his other hand at the four parallel fingers holding the glass. Then he put the glass back down on the table, flashed a cocky smile, turned without expecting a reply, and left. The proprietor sighed and let his head droop in resignation. His wife's eyes swept over the table, counting the empty beer bottles in a quick appraisal of how much money they had just lost.

Putting his hand over his mouth and speaking in a low voice, Percival explained that this had been a party gratuitously "donated" under extreme prejudice by the Chinese restaurant proprietor so that there would be no damage to the premises. This group was one of the local gangs known internationally as the "14-K" but locally as the "Four Holes."

"We are not in any danger, I don't think, being *Mat Salleh*. They usually keep this sort of thing among themselves and don't involve us," Percival said as he smoothed his napkin back on the table. "They have no idea that I understand the Hokkien dialect. But then again, perhaps they do. They seem to know almost everything. Very clever these Chinese secret societies. One doesn't want to underestimate them."



The next morning, in the lobby of the Majestic, I ordered coffee and received a thick sludge. It was made from coffee beans mixed, I believe, with corn before being roasted and ground to a powder with salt added, then steeped in hot water, strained into a cup through a cloth filter, then diluted to khaki color with beige milk via a can to the cup, then carried, half spilled onto the saucer, on a tray to my glass-topped coffee table by sullen Leong, who does not like mornings. You can't buy ambience like that.

Edelgard, the hefty German woman who was going on the trip to the interior, wore an outfit that looked like army fatigues—which became her. She joined me and ordered a large breakfast, as one would expect a woman of her girth to do. When she took her first sip of the coffee, she said, one

eyebrow arched in anguish,"Zis, I like not so much. I have tasted ersatz coffee better." She sighed philosophically, as if to say, "Life is hard. Vat do you expect?"

Jimmy came in with a young Japanese man. I noticed Leong's shoulders stiffen when he saw the Japanese enter. He actually turned his back on him; it wasn't like Leong to be **that** unfriendly.

The Japanese was named Shigeru. "Call me Shig," he said in breezy English, yet managing somehow to sound as if he had a mouthful of marshmallows. Shig was "into making documentary videos." Because he loved to fish, his current project was to film the various freshwater fishing methods of Southeast Asia.

We were, thus, a party of four, just enough to fill a shared taxi, an old Mercedes that galloped along the blacktop lanes and twisted through plantations. We passed long rows of evenly-spaced rubber trees with the bark on the trunks marked by diagonal slashes, then rows of primordial oil palms with scaly trunks like the legs of giant Jurassic reptiles.

We rode to Temerloh, a mid-peninsular town located on the Pahang River. It's a postcard-quiet little town with a picturesque onion-domed mosque on top of a hill that overlooks a broad turn in the reddish-brown jungle river. Here we found the headquarters of the JOA, the *Jabatan Orang Asli*, the Department of Aboriginal Peoples. Edelgard, it turned out, was a doctor, Ph.D, who specialized in insects. Her work was also her hobby, and she used her university name card to wrangle special permission for her and her three "assistants" to visit Lake Bera, an area otherwise restricted in order to protect the simple folks from too much outside influence.

I shared a hotel room that night with Edelgard, who complained repeatedly about the fan wobbling above—"Zis I like not so much!"—until she fell asleep. Her snores were Wagnerian; *The Ride of the Valkyries* was my lullaby that night.

The next day, we followed the winding road south to Bahau that narrowed to capillary lanes passing through more plantations. We then came to a barren section where the rain forest had recently been clear-cut, and the trees of a new plantation had not yet been planted. The earth, where the logs had been dragged, bled red from the iron in the soil. We passed a

logger trimming limbs from a tree as wide as he was tall. I heard the "whoosh" of powerful wings and saw a large hornbill fly toward the trees that marked the edge of the rain forest. How could anyone kill such a beautiful bird only to turn its amber-colored ivory horn into containers for snuff?

We followed the flight of the bird into the forest. The sound of the chain saw was soon muffled by trees. A woman washing clothes in a roadside pond stopped to watch us pass. A preteen boy, long knife at his waist, stared at us aliens as our Mercedes taxi bounced through crater-sized potholes. You didn't just pass over these holes; rather, the car descended into them and then scaled the other side.

About a mile from our lakeside destination, the driver gave up. He got out, straightened the Mercedes hood ornament that had jiggled askew, and stubbornly refused to go any farther. We paid him after renegotiations, and he headed back to the town, leaving us to walk the red gravel road the rest of the way. Dr. Insect, for so Edelgard had by then been nicknamed, was quick to assess the situation. "Zis I like not so much!"

The fact that she was a doctor expanded into an excursion joke among us. Shig soon became Dr. Fish; I, because of my newly-developed penchant for watching the night sky, became known as Dr. Star. And Jimmy became our Dr. Jungle.

Dr. Jungle Jimmy found a place for us to sleep that night on a floor in one of the village houses beside the lake, and he hired some boats and a guide to cross the lake the following day. Our guide's name was Nujen, a dark gentleman of the rain forest with the innocent eyes of a Rousseau native and tight, curly hair. His long knife was sheathed in two blocks of carved wood that were laced together with strips of leather. It hung at the waist of his polyester swimming shorts.

Nujen showed me his dugout canoe with the prow plowed into the muddy shore. He and his friend had carved it out of a single tree trunk. "Not so difficult," he told me. "Take two men only ten days."

He said that his younger brother went off to take a job; he is cutting down trees so that he can buy things from the Chinese store. He has a motorbike he hasn't paid for yet but needs to keep running in order to go to work with the tree-cutting men. He has to work many days to pay for the

bike and the gas he needs to go to work. No sense.

Nujen doesn't want such things; he figured that the more you get, the more problems you will also get. "We say, the larger the pot, the more rice stick to the side," he told me. He preferred to go fishing or hunting.

"Those problems come with progress," I said flippantly.

"Progress? What is? I think it is same like when we catch iguana," he said. "We have special way for hunting iguana. First, our dogs smell one and chase him up the tree. Then, we go to the tree and walk around and around it till the iguana, he watching us from above, he get dizzy and fall down. When he hit the ground, he feel more dizzy. Then fast, we grab it by the neck, but careful. He has teeth sharp like knife. Then quick, we grab the tail end and swing it at his head.

"The iguana, he see the tail come attack and he bite. Can't help it, because he's afraid. He bite hard. When his tail feel pain, the head get more afraid, and he bite more harder. He won't let go. You can wear that iguana around your neck all the way home. It won't never let go!

"Some people, they just same like that iguana, biting their own tail and feeling the pain, so afraid to let go that they, for sure, going to end up in some stew."

Nujen led us to the village bathing spot nearby, an area cleared of reeds and with a rare sandy bottom. With a gaggle of children wearing rubberband bracelets as our audience, we went for a late afternoon bath and swim. To my surprise, the Japanese, Dr. Fish, decided to forgo immersion, preferring instead to bathe with a washcloth while standing in his swimming trunks on the shore, and using barely enough water to rinse off the soap he applied.

Ed: You'd expect a Japanese to be the first one in the bath.

Cin: He didn't want to contact any tropical amoeba that he feared lurked in the water. Perhaps the red color put him off; it looked like tea. My skin was orange beneath the surface of the lake. Dr. Fish wouldn't chance the water, even though Dr. Insect assured him that it was perfectly safe.

I waded out into the lake up to my waist beside Dr. Insect and then floated on my back, my eyes closed to the sun, my body so warmed by the water that I thought there might be a hot spring feeding from the lake

bottom. It was so soothing. I could feel the bumps and jars of the road seeping out of my joints.

"Magic!" I sighed.

"Yah," agreed Dr. Insect, standing beside me. "But, no. I would not say such a word as 'magic.' I zink always zere must be a reason for somezhing. But I must agree mit you if you say zis is clean water. *Und*," she added quickly, not accustomed to having any student interrupting her lecture, I am sure, "*Und* zis I say for a reason. Come."

She pointed at a group of small flowers, growing from feathery fronds just below the water's surface. "Zis plant is a flesh eater. Of course, yah, it does not eat you or me, only tiny microbes zat are in the *vasser*, *ach*, I mean water. But if a plant is forced to eat flesh, zis means zere is very little other food, yah. So, ze water must have few pollutants." She smiled from the pure pleasure of her logic.

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, tired of the biology lesson already, tired from lack of sleep the night before because of her snoring, tired from a foreshortened taxi ride, and the hike here. I just wanted to lie back, float, and dream.

"I cannot do zis," complained Dr. Insect, again standing over me, looking down at me. "I do not float. I sink."

"Is problem," quipped Dr. Fish, still on the shore. "You *sink* too much." His Japanese accent rendered the words perfectly ambiguous. Dr. Insect laughed along with me, but not quite as long.

The next morning we waded into the muddy shallows, climbed into Nujen's boat and another one which Jimmy controlled and, using poles, we began wending our way along the shallow path through reeds growing thickly like hairs of a giant's crewcut.

Lake Bera is actually a shallow and very wide spot in a river; it is caused by the reverse flow set up by a natural bottleneck leading into the Pahang River. In some parts, where the water fingers around islands and far into valleys, the lake stretches five miles across. During the wet season, it expands, extending twenty miles from north to south.

The main channel flowed lazily through an archway of overhanging trees, leading, in turn, into a labyrinth of landless screwpine islands.

Although Nujen had been across the lake countless times recently, he often made the wrong turn. Time and again we were enticed down promising but dead-end lanes that narrowed into spike-needed gauntlets, the thorn-tipped leaves of the screwpine ripping our clothes and lacerating our skin from both sides. Flies buzzed all around us. Dr. Insect was in rapture.

The day grew steamy hot on the swampy lake, but Nujen seemed unaffected. I wrapped my head in a towel for protection from the brutal equatorial sun. When we came to open water, the silver surface mirrored a second sun. Then clouds gathered, and we glided on the reflected whiteness until we came to a hut standing high above the water, making use of three live trees and a pole for stilts. To get out of the midday heat, we climbed up a rickety ladder made of sticks tied together with vines.

When I entered the hut, the woven bamboo floor creaked under my crouched steps. Through the slats I could see our boat, a dizzying fifteen feet below. I suggested that Edelgard sit near the ladder so she could catch a glimpse of insects, and in that way managed to keep the stress of her weight off the flimsy bamboo floor.

We were offered betel nut to chew by the woman of the house, tobacco rolled in dried *nipa* leaves, and a tasteless yam mush to be eaten with... monkey meat? I decided I was on a fast. Dr. Insect tried it and found it greasy. "Zis I..." she arched an eyebrow as if in pain, but politely left the sentence unfinished.

A very young grandfather—he couldn't have been over forty—returned home while we were there. He and Nujen squatted together and began to sing their dialogue in rhythmic rhyming lyrics that they made up on the spur of the moment—"Hey laddee laddee la," to which the other would respond, "Hey laddee laddee lo." It was an old form of entertainment common throughout the Malay Peninsula; it's called a *pantun*,¹¹⁶ making conversation into a game and a song.

As they were singing-playing-talking, a strong wind picked up suddenly,

116 The *pantun* is said to have been influenced by the Portuguese through a type of competitive singing called *mata kantiga*. No one knows when the aborigines adopted it, possibly during the time when many of the Portuguese fled from the Dutch into the rain forest and mixed with the indigenous rural population. Ed, ed.

sending the hut swaying on its stilts. Nujen and our host were spooked; they literally changed their tune. The man hurriedly got out some "skin" as he called the bark "from a sacred spirit tree," I was told. He carved off a chip and burned it over a dish, all the while chanting, along with Nujen, chanting over and over a plea for the angry wind to stop. The violent way we were being jostled in that house in the treetop gave me a new understanding of why there was superstition about wind spirits. The two aborigines continued to chant until the wind stopped, which it did as suddenly as it had started.

Then it was time for us to climb back down that stick ladder to inspect our friend's fish, today's catch. We found it floating in the water in the bottom of his dugout canoe. This inspired Nujen to try his luck.

Dr. Fish, in the other boat with Jungle Jimmy, got his camera aimed and rolling. Nujen steered the boat straight into the reeds, swished the water with his fishing pole and made clucking sounds with his tongue to call the fish. He caught plenty for our evening meal. The fish were practically jumping into the boat.

While Nujen and Jimmy were busy setting up camp and would not tolerate any help from me, I decided to cool off with a short swim. But as sunset neared, Nujen worriedly wanted me to get out of the water. I ignored him and continued to soak, but he insisted and wouldn't leave me alone.

Later that evening, while Nujen was grilling the fish, he turned to me and gently pinched the skin on my arm. "Magic skin," he told me.

I'd heard it before, a maddening inferiority complex some natives have to those with lighter skin. Where did it come from? I wondered. Was it a colonial legacy? "No. Not magic skin," I corrected him. "My skin is the same as your skin, only a different color."

"No! Not same. Magic skin," he insisted.

"Actually," I argued, "your skin is better than mine in this sun. Mine burns faster."

"Your skin, magic skin. If I swim like you do today, the lake monster eat me." I hadn't even thought of the crocodiles!

Dr. Fish, remarking on the abundance of fish on the grill, said condescendingly, "He is lucky fishing man. His fishing method is more for

his mind than for attracting fishes, I sink."

Nujen, however, was convinced he had called the fish to him. He claimed he could also call deer and proceeded to make a "deer-caller" from a hollow reed. When he finished and blew on it, it bleated, and this set the previously quiet frogs croaking a chorus of noisy mating calls.

"Maybe you made a frog caller by mistake," ridiculed Jimmy.

"*Yah gooi!*" we heard Dr. Insect exclaim from the nearby brush. "*Das is vunderbar!* It is a male!" She appeared, carrying a praying mantis on a twig. She told us it was about to become an adult; it was having its last molting. She pointed out tiny red mites that were crawling from the old skin that would soon be discarded onto their matured host. "How do zey know ven to do zis?"

She then pointed at the side of the body where pinhead bumps, the same size as the mites, were appearing. "In about an hour, it has vings."

As promised, the wings grew before our eyes "like a flower blooming under time-lapse camera," commented Dr. Fish. The wings grew to the length of my index finger.

Dinner was ready. Jimmy volunteered to dish out the food. Dr. Fish was busy cleaning his camera lens and just as Jungle Jimmy was handing me my bowl of noodle soup, Shig looked up from his lens and mistook the serving for his. Something in Jimmy's hesitation and his eyes darting away from me caught my attention, but I brushed it off as paranoia, perhaps brought on by being a female among strangers in an unknown environment. Jimmy, for his part, did little to dispel my strange feeling; he didn't look me straight in the eye for the rest of the evening or the rest of the trip, for that matter. Something besides supper was fishy. When Shig (Dr. Fish) passed out shortly after the meal, my suspicions were intensified. We had to carry him, feet dragging, to his sleeping bag. Jimmy acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Later on when I got back to Malacca, I heard rumors that Jungle Jimmy sometimes takes women out on excursions, laces their food with opium, and rapes them while they are incapable of resistance. I believe it because of another incident that happened to me later with Jimmy, the creep. More on that later.



Dr. Insect wanted to know some of the local customs, her way of getting the most out of this visit to what was for her a living zoo. "Do men of your village witness childbirth, or are only women present?" Nujen told us that men sometimes helped; sometimes they get sick in sympathy for their wife's condition. He told us proudly how he himself bound his wife's abdomen during her labor.

"It pinch her, I sink," snickered Dr. Fish, untactfully, then he went back to slurping his noodles bringing his bowl up close to his mouth.

Nujen was defensive. He said he and most of the people of his village were modern people, not like some of the other villages. In his village, they no longer put the woman over a fire at birthing so that the smoke would hide the mother and child from evil spirits at this vulnerable time.

We asked Nujen if he knew any stories about his people coming to the lake. Nujen, in a hushed voice, told us to wait, and was silent. When all trace of day was gone from the sky, he spoke again, but, even then, only in a soft voice.



A long time ago, long before Nujen's father's father, there was no lake. Those who lived here were not black people with curly hair but short men with lighter skin. At that time, it was said, a three-headed snake lived here, too. Nujen believed that this snake still lurks in the lake and surfaces around sunset. So that, you see, explained why he was so nervous about my swimming at that time. It wasn't crocodiles, it was a three-headed serpent.

One day, Nujen told us, while an old woman and her grandson were out collecting herbs to cook with, a barking dog led them to a certain tree beneath which lay a fatty mound of wild pig flesh. The two returned to the village and reported their discovery to the headman. Soon everyone had gathered around the mystery meat. Someone suggested a Bar-B-Q and,

before long, the meat was twisting on a spit. Everyone ate a portion of it; everyone, that is, except the grandmother and her grandson, who ate nothing, figuring it wasn't their meat.

Then a three-headed snake came slithering out of the grass and onto the scene. Before everyone's eyes, it changed itself into an old woman who walked with a cane. When the old woman noticed that her fatty meat had disappeared and saw the remains of the Bar-B-Q party strewn about, she was furious.

Ed: You might say she had some bones to pick with the villagers.

Cin: Ed!

Anyway, angrily, she stuck her cane in the mud and challenged anyone to pull it out. Only he who succeeded had the right to eat her precious pork. The rest must die. Everyone tried; no one was able to budge the cane. The mysterious old crone then effortlessly pulled the cane out of the ground and walked away, cackling maliciously.

Immediately water sprang up from the hole left in the ground by the cane, red water as if mixed with blood. The water gushed out so quickly that people were caught by it and drowned. Others scattered in panic, but the water rose fast, chasing them in every direction. That is why the lake has so many fingers, explained Nujen. Only one person managed to escape: the grandmother. She found safety on the top of Gunung Ledang. There she stayed the night, then wandered away and never came back.

"No one lived here from then on until my people came to the shore of this lake," concluded Nujen.

"Vat happened to ze grandson?" asked Edelgard.

"He drowned."

"But zis is not fair," she complained. "He eat not ze meat."

"He drowned anyway," shrugged Nujen. "I don't know why."



The next morning, we were awakened by a blood-curdling cry. We all came running to where Dr. Insect was sitting with her cache of insects in their little cages. I thought she had been bitten by a poisonous bug.

"No. Ants! Ants are my enemy!" she groaned pitifully. "Ants ate my entire mantis. All of him is gone. Zis is vy you never find dead insects in a jungle. Never!" Dr. Insect's face was a mask of anguish.

However, she was able to overcome her disappointment in time to join us for a breakfast of fried fish. She ate heartily. Dr. Fish, however, picked at the food on his plate. He was feeling okay, but as he explained, "I like to catching fishes. I don't like to eating fishes."

Nujen took us to an old aboriginal graveyard half hidden beneath the debris on the rainforest floor. One grave had been opened. It had been dug four feet down and then laterally to create a cave for the corpse—strange for people who are afraid of subterranean spirits, I thought.

"Take what you want. Nobody will stop you," Nujen said, pointing at a ceramic saucer, maybe fifty years old, that was resting on top of the grave. Personally, he would take nothing, not because he thought grave-robbing was wrong. "Ghosts," he explained, without the slightest doubt in his mind of their existence.

For Dr. Insect, Nujen tore apart a piece of termite-shredded wood to show her some beetle larvae the size of his thumb. "Good for eating," he offered. None of us were hungry.

He also found and trapped a scorpion to the delight of the doctor. However, when she was getting back into the canoe, she slipped and fell, and the scorpion escaped inside the boat. Everyone aboard watched attentively, legs over the side, ready for a quick escape, as she cautiously maneuvered the deadly stinger back into its plastic bag.

"Ach! It is because I must always be so careful with zese dangerous sings, zat is vy I have all zese accidents," she explained with an embarrassed smile.

That night she regained her composure and gave an impromptu seminar about one of the oldest fish in the world. It was around when the dinosaurs became extinct, about sixty-five to seventy million years ago. We know this because fossil remains of this fish have been found in the same rock strata

as the dinosaurs.

She told us that we also know it is so old because of its distribution. There are only five related species in the world; all of them are freshwater fish and always have been. Two are in the Amazon, one species each in the Congo, Africa, another in New Guinea, and the last in Taiwan. This last species is also found in Malaysia.

Ed: Since it's a freshwater fish, it must have been around during the time when all these lands were connected.

Cin: Exactly.

Ed: That's an old fish all right. What's it look like?

Cin: A little prehistoric, to be truthful. The fish is a predator and eats even small birds. It has a mouth near the top because it feeds near the surface.¹¹⁷

"It is *arowana* fish," interjected Nujen when he heard the description. "They sell for good money. My friend caught two very big ones. He sell them for fourteen thousand *ringgit*. Sometimes restaurant man serve *kelasa* fish to people who just order fish, not say what kind fish. They get big surprise how much is bill. Pay big, big money! But most time, Chinese like keeping *kelasa* fish alive in glass boxes in their house for good luck."

Shortly after dinner that night, Dr. Fish pulled out his sex-and-violence comic book and went off to his sleeping bag with it. He could be heard occasionally sucking on his teeth as he huddled under his mosquito net with his flashlight. He crashed so early, with so little comment, that I began to wonder whether he was drugged again or was he always like that even without having anything added to his noodles? If it hadn't been for those nervous eyes of Jimmy's, I would have suspected nothing.

Jungle Jimmy and Dr. Insect went for a moonlight row that night. That left Nujen and me... and the mosquitoes. I must have gotten nicked a dozen times before the incense coils did their work.

Night on Lake Bera: frogs singing in chorus with the crickets. The air smelled of wet mushroom. The black water mirrored the gems of heaven and fireflies danced beneath the stars. The planet Venus was being chased by a canoe-shaped moon, while the Milky Way slithered across the

117 It's probably *scleropages formosus*. Ed, ed.

blackness like a ghostly snake. What a perfect night to watch the sky!

I pointed out the constellation Scorpio. Nujen recognized it at once, except his people called it the three-headed snake. I remember Hans on the tanker telling me that ancient Egyptian astrologers had also called it that. Was this a clue that Percival told me to look for?

Nujen pointed at a satellite that glided across the deep sky, thinking it was a falling star. I told him it was no star, and neither was it a meteor. It was manmade, a satellite.

"Man can live up there?" Nujen asked, astounded.

I told him about the space shuttle, about the men landing on the moon. He had heard something about that. So it was true. Then perhaps, since my people had been up there, I might know: where does the sun go at night?

I was condescending to this primitive, like one would talk to a child. I told him that it didn't go anywhere, that we are on a spinning ball. (Since then, I have come to realize that deep down, we are all still primitives. We still believe in our hearts, as did Nujen, that the sun comes up and goes down.)

"You mean, sun not walk across sky?" Nujen asked me; he was stupefied. Then, after considering the idea for a moment, he asked, "So, if true, where do stars go when sun shines?"

That question was a lot more difficult. "They're still up there," I answered, "and on all sides, or rather, in all directions from the ball we're on," I was imparting my wisdom to him like King Solomon. "You just can't see them because the sun is too bright," I explained. Nujen smiled as if he'd understood.

"Nujen," I said, trying to put him on more familiar ground, "would you let me hear that chant again, the one you and your friend sang to the wind this afternoon when you burnt the magic tree skin?"

Nujen shook his head in confusion. "No can chant now."

"Why not?" I asked, thinking he was being shy. "Come on," I urged him.

Nujen shook his head and pivoted his hand. "No can now. No wind now," he explained. There was no wind spirit, so how could he ask the spirit to leave?

"Come on," I urged him. "You don't need spirits to explain what's happening, Nujen."

"Then where wind come from?" he asked.

"Well, now. Let me think for a moment." I had gotten myself into deep water, but I gave it the junior-high-school-science-class try. "Okay. Here's how I understand it. You see, the sun heats the ground, and the ground heats the air that is next to it, and hot air rises in the same way as the smoke from our flame here. And then the cold air rushes in to fill the empty spaces," I finished, triumphantly.

The whites of Nujen's eyes widened with excitement. "Yah! The spirits push wind so it rush into empty place."

"Not necessarily **spirits**," I told him.

"So why wind go into empty place?"

"It just does."

"Because spirits push it," he insisted.

"No! Nujen, where did you ever see a wind spirit?"

"Cannot see!" he answered. "Same like stars when sun shine!"

Do you get what had happened? This "primitive," using something akin to Socratic argument, had shown me that my "scientific" facts were also based on beliefs. And if I were to be allowed my beliefs, should he not be allowed his spirits, his magic?

And if he could have his magic, could I not also have mine?



On the way back to "civilization"—somehow that word had become ironic to me after the last few days of living life in sylvan simplicity—it rained like I had never known rain before. Jimmy had asked Nujen's brother to have a taxi sent to the village to pick us up; and we rode in it down the country lane, the tarmac twisting through the trees. We went by a sign bearing a skull and crossbones at a sharp curve in the road with the

word **AWAS**, meaning danger.

We went around a turn in the road to find the sky darkened. Ahead, there was a sharp line across the road, and the tarmac beyond turned into black lacquer. The next moment a wall of white water was upon us. The Mercedes' hood ornament was barely visible. The roar of the rain on the roof was deafening; the air inside the taxi seemed to be compressed and smelled slightly sour. Day turn to dusk in a second, then lightning!

I rubbed the piece of magic bark that Nujen had given me as a going-away present. He told me to use it if I ever needed help dealing with spirits. Never know when a piece of sacred bark might come in handy, so I drilled a hole through it and wore it as a necklace on a string. I didn't really believe it would work, but I toyed with my new magic talisman, rubbing it with my thumb and asking the rain to stop.

The driver pressed his foot on the brake pedal, pulling over to the side of the road just as the storm stopped, as suddenly as if a malevolent spirit had been exorcised. Had the bark caused magic to happen? I decided it was only a coincidence.

In the first town we came to, Jungle Jimmy and Edelgard decided to leave us and travel north together. Dr. Fish and I rode back to Malacca together. He didn't say a word. It is amazing to realize how one could have spent several days as close to someone in space and experience as I had been with this Japanese man, Shig, Dr. Fish, and yet have communicated so little. And yet, at other times, when I meet someone like with you, Ed, I feel as if we have known each other for ages, and words and thoughts come easily, comfortably.

Ed: Yeah, I feel that way, too. I know you better than, well, I actually lived for some years with a Japanese person, and I feel I know you better already.

But back to your story. You had just stopped the rain.

Cin: Oh, God! Could it be true? Rain, just what everyone had been praying for and having their little boys pee on red peppers for—and when it finally came, I stopped it? In the middle of a drought, I stopped the rain? That magic can be pretty tricky stuff. Gotta be careful.



During the few days I had been gone, it hadn't rained in Malacca, not a drop. It hadn't rained for over forty days! Back at the Majestic lobby, the steady customers were drooped over the bar, melting like timepieces in a Salvador Dali painting.

Leong seemed reluctant to move when I asked for my key. I told him to stay where he was; I'd get it myself. There was a message from Planter Wiggins impaled on the nail where my key was hanging, inviting me to call him at my earliest convenience upon my return. I put it in my pocket for later.

To my relief, the outer lobby was filled with large plastic water tanks, which meant I could take a bath and soak the jungle out of my pores. I mentioned to Leong how good it was going to feel.

"Take shower, instead, only short one, ah!" he suggested, looking concerned. He must have just checked over the bill for the trucked-in water.

When I returned to the lobby an hour later, Vijay was there with a determined expression on his face and his fingers tight around his glass of beer. He had a tale to tell.

He had been tracking down the story of the *Flor de la Mar* and the sunken treasure of Malacca. He found out some juicy facts: first, the company that claimed to have discovered the site of the gold via satellite had previously been an Australian mining firm, Dry Land mining, whose stock price was low and falling, and whose prospects were extremely unpromising. One day an Italian named Sylvio came and told the company directors about his discovery of the sunken ship by using data from the French satellite Spot Number One which overflies the zone. Sylvio was given shares of stock in the company, which were admittedly all but worthless, in exchange for his information about the location of the sunken ship. It made sense. The stocks would only be worth something if his information was worth something.

Then Sylvio went around quietly to some government officials in the surrounding countries and, because he was strapped for liquid assets, he

gave them a special insider's deal on his personal shares of stock, a chance for them to amass vast sums of money once the wreck was salvaged. Important people started buying the stock. Word somehow leaked out. The price per share skyrocketed. Sylvio secretly let go of the last of his personal shares to his "special friends" in Malacca, then disappeared.

Since some very important people high up in the government had invested heavily and lost in the scam, they didn't want this story to get out. The net result of this for Vijay was that no article about the lost treasure of the *Flor de la Mar* would rate column space on any page in the newspaper for quite some time.

Vijay had found out that the local priest, Father de Silva, knew where the ship had gone down from Portuguese documents he'd studied at the University of Portugal in Coimbra. Incidentally, Sylvio had visited the Father about a month before the scam had been hatched. They talked about where the ship had sunk. The Father had recently received a warning over the phone from a source that will remain secret that it would be healthier for him if he kept this information to himself from now on.

Vijay had been told by his harried-looking editor to forget this sunken treasure story and move on to the more pressing matters such as *lepak*. This explained Vijay's look of frustration. *Lepak* means loitering, lazy idleness, hanging out. *Lepak* is laid back, laid way back. He showed me the headlines in the day's newspaper: "Cabinet to Get Report on Loafing in Rural Areas." An editorial called for strong measures to be applied for the stamping out of dreaded *lepak*: "Idleness is the devil's coffee shop." The government is concerned that so many of today's youth are wasting their time hanging out over soft drinks at the *kedai kopi*. It insists that this problem be dealt with immediately.

"Never mind the drought. Forget the treasure of the *Flor de la Mar*. We must eradicate *lepak* from our youth!" Vijay raised his glass sarcastically as if taking a pledge, quaffed his beer, set it down hard on the counter, and stood up, a little tipsy. He paid his bill, slapping the money on the counter.

"Well, off to the office for those deadlines. Tomorrow's follow-up story about the proposed solution to insidious *lepak*, namely, more summer camps in the jungle for the kids. Good luck. They seem to be forgetting that *lepak* is a way of life in Malacca and has been for centuries." Vijay turned

and walked carefully out of the hotel, unsure of his equilibrium.

I rang Percival on the phone. He asked how my trip to the interior had been and chatted about that for a while. He arranged to come and pick me up the following morning. "As a protest, in direct defiance of recent government directives, I have planned a day of unremitting *lepak*," he told me. He would knock off work in the morning. "Shall we say around ten?... Oh, no bother at all. It is merely a matter of clearing an empty desk."



The next day, Chong On chauffeured the "Wiggin's limousine" to the Sam Po Temple dedicated to Admiral Cheng Ho at the foot of Bukit China (China Hill). The Chinese have a custom of deifying historical personages, who thus become something like superstars, Hall-of-Famers in the hall of the ancestor tablets.

"The honored court official Cheng Ho," as Percival put it, "was without progeny for he was without the means to make them. You see, eunuchs, the Chinese word for whom meant "far from the Ways of Man," had come into a great deal of power in the court at Peking precisely because they had no way of creating a competing dynasty. They tended to concentrate more on the present because they left no descendants. But over time, the eunuchs, as a group, grew too powerful."

I said, "And then they got cut off, right?"

"Yes," answered Percival, trying to suppress a smile. "Precisely, but not necessarily in that order."

Old Cheng Ho was a great old soul capable of epic deeds, such as taking a giraffe back from Africa to the Peking Zoo and kidnapping a king from the island of Ceylon and taking him in chains to be the toy of the emperor. And let us not forget, he also brought the sailors' game of mahjongg back with him, thereby revolutionizing China and assuring himself a place in history.

Percival, ever the elegant gentleman, again offered me his arm and escorted me into the temple. "I find it interesting," he said, "that in this

basically Taoist temple with, of course, the requisite scattering of Buddhist images," he swept his hand across the room as if opening a curtain, "the main deity is a man who was a Muslim. Yes, Cheng Ho was a Muslim. The Chinese really are extraordinarily adaptive, or should I say absorbent? I once heard someone compare the Chinese to tofu in regard to this adaptive tendency because tofu takes on the flavor of the food with which it is cooked. One has only to think at how extraordinarily English the 'King's Chinese' were to become."

Outside the temple is a small square enclosure that was built by the Dutch to protect the precious Perigi Rajah, the well of the Rajah after it was once poisoned during a siege. There are gun ports in the white stucco walls. It is said that whoever drinks this water will surely return to Malacca. But honestly, the well looked so polluted, I doubt that the imbibor would be able to leave his hotel room, much less, Malacca, for quite a while after drinking it.

For years, barrels of water had been carried from this well on ox-drawn carts to the homes of the wealthy Chinese for cooking and making tea. The tap water that was piped in starting around the turn of the century was not considered as potable as this water that had been filtered through the graves of roughly twelve hundred ancestors interred on the hill above the well.

"This well is very old," Percival informed me. "According to tradition, Cheng Ho himself came to this spot and stuck his cane into the ground. When he pulled it out, up fountained the water."

I repeated the similar story Nujen had told me about the old woman and the cane and the origin of Lake Bera. "Extraordinary," Percival exclaimed. "I wonder if there is any relation?" And after a pause he said, "I am also reminded of the story of Moses who struck the rock with his staff to bring forth water in the wilderness."

When we came away from the well, I looked for the car but it had disappeared. Percival explained its absence. "Chong On has graciously volunteered to keep an eye on the car rather than join us in the pleasure of our climb up the hill. Such an extraordinary sense of duty that young man has. And he has taken it upon himself to drive to a shady location, which just happens to be near that little food stall which serves excellent fried noodles. He will be content to wait there, I am sure."

We started ascending the concrete steps, flanked by iron railings up the gentle slope of China Hill. Planter Percival, in his white summer suit and straw hat, marked our progress with the tapping of his cane. "Back in the twenties—this is even before my time, my dear—the 'Malacca cane' was quite the fashion, especially for the dandies at Westminster who used to impress young ladies by twirling them thusly."

He gave his cane a Chaplinesque spin. "They called it the 'cloud cane,' I imagine because the speed makes it appear somewhat translucent and cloud-like.

"The Malacca cane," he continued, "also came to be known in the Straits Settlement as the 'Penang lawyer,' which, I believe, speaks volumes about the state of British justice during the early years of the Raj."

Occasionally, during our ascent, Percival would stop to point out a grave here, a landmark there. I suspected that he paused in order to rest as much as to fulfill his assumed duties as host and guide, but his color was good, his breath stayed even, and his cane kept swinging. I myself was glad for the pauses, for I had been feeling rather weak since my return from the lake.

Percival said, "On this and the adjoining hills rests one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside the Middle Kingdom, if not the largest. The entire hill was purchased by a leading member of the Chinese community, likely the leader of the most powerful secret society in Malacca at that time if what Jimmy mentioned the other day in the hotel lobby were true. The land was donated as a cemetery in perpetuity."

Percival told me that, a few years back, a consortium of greedy land developers tried to take this hill away from the Chinese. They claimed that since the graves were not even visible in the long grass that grew wild on the hill, no one would care if they were all moved and the site was used for industry. "Industry! Imagine!" Percival was indignant. "Extraordinary!"

The temples in the city put out the word; the Chinese community turned up, cleaned the hill, and tidied up all the graves. They built the stairs with railings, a jogging trail, and benches for sunset strollers so that the public could use the area. Meanwhile, they put up such a hue and cry that the hill remains a cemetery, and the plan for an industrial park has been scuttled, or rather relocated.

Recently a document was released stating officially and categorically that there are no *keramat*, no ancient graves of Muslim holy men in the entire state of Malacca. Never mind the ones that were found just south of town in Alai where the industrial complex is now being built. By official declaration, these cannot possibly be *keramat* and therefore can be moved. Never mind those ancient graves found out on the plantation where Percival had his bungalow, although the neighbors in the nearby *kampung* claim that those graves date back to the time when the land belonged to a rich man from Java.

Ed: The tomb of Utimuti Rajah?

Cin: Could be but, if it is, it would contain only his head.

"No *keramat*, indeed!" huffed Percival. "How extraordinary that particular ruling was, especially when one considers that those were graves of Muslim men where people went to pray, even Chinese. On a couple of islands just off the coast here, Pulau Besar and, I believe, on one of the smaller islands, either Serimbun or Upeh, a small Chinese temple has been built near the grave of a Muslim saint. Again, we witness the adaptive nature of these Chinese. Absolutely extraordinary!"

We arrived at the crest of the hill where we paused to survey the slopes dotted with Chinese graves: "Don't you think their form similar to the Greek letter 'omega'?" observed Percival. "I've always thought it an extraordinarily appropriate coincidence that a grave which represents the end of life should appear in the form of the letter that stands at the terminus of an alphabet."

Nearby, we stopped at a particular grave, the final resting place of one Lucky Lim, I was told. Here we sat on one of the terra cotta benches that formed the legs of this large omega-shaped tomb. It was said that these benches were built so that those who came here to clean Lucky Lim's grave could sit with him for a while and share the view of his fortune.

Facing west, the tomb site surveyed a broad panorama. In the distance a necklace of ships was strung along in the silver strait beyond the sunburnt clay rooftops of two-storied shophouses. A pair of high-rise hotels needled into the skyline. Between them we could see Upeh Island.

Percival told me that some of his Chinese acquaintances at the Malacca Club claimed that this grave is particularly propitious for gamblers. They

say that it is lined up in a fortuitous manner with the triangular-shaped Mt. Ophir in the distance.

Percival said, "How similar indeed is this mountain we see to the outline of Mt. Dempo in the Pasenah Highlands of Sumatra. This alone is enough to convince me that Mt. Dempo was the original Mt. Ophir before the name moved here.

"But let us return our attention to this particular grave," suggested Percival. "It seems that the location of this gravesite in relation to that mountain can inspire a gambler whose mind is open to those hidden forces and aid him in the choosing of a lottery ticket number, the *ekor*, meaning the 'tail,' as they call the lottery number for reasons I haven't been able to ascertain. If rumors are to be believed from my superstitious Chinese informants, the *ekor* obtained at this gravesite have been extraordinarily successful."

Percival related how Lucky Lim had invited all to come sit with him and survey his wealth, though little is left of it now. At one time, in the thirties, much of the land he would have seen when looking down from this spot would have been his own. He was a very wealthy man who, some say, made at least part of his fortune from gambling, for which he was famous. He was noted for the equanimity with which he either won or lost large sums of money. Though the stakes were high, he never seemed to flinch. Lucky has become somewhat of a local saint for Chinese punters; his gravesite has become a minor shrine.

"I believe Lucky Lim paid an extraordinary amount for this particular plot; no other would satisfy him. Perhaps that's why it is so auspicious, because of its propitious *feng shui*, Chinese geomancy. So, my dear, close your eyes." Percival suggested, also closing his own. He really had a youthful face for a man his age despite the puffs of white eyebrows; he had so few wrinkles that I had the feeling he could live forever. "Close your eyes," he repeated, "and think of your *ekor*, your tail. I shall do the same, and then we shall go buy our winning lottery tickets."

It turned out that neither of us had been inspired by Lucky's grave; its magic wasn't working, at least not on that day, not as far as the lottery was concerned. Percival suggested that perhaps it had been his fault for wearing white, the Chinese color associated with death.

As we made our way down the hill, Percival corrected what he had said earlier. "I wasn't being quite fair when I defined *feng shui* as Chinese geomancy. It should be called the art of being in the right place at the right time, putting oneself in harmony with all the invisible forces, with the *ch'i*."

Ed: The *ch'i*? I hear everybody talking about it now. What exactly is it?

Cin: The *ch'i*? *There is a pause on the tape.* It's that mysterious force in the universe that causes water to ripple, and mountains to fold, that puts the spin in planets and makes stars explode and then reform within our bodies.

Ed: Wow!

Cin: Yeah! Wow! Maybe some would call it luck.

Ed: I'm not superstitious—knock on wood, tap, tap.

Cin: That's exactly the question, isn't it? How do we tap into this mysterious power of the universe? That is the question *feng shui* tries to answer.



I mention *feng shui* because the subject came up again a few weeks later and eventually led me to the gold... well, maybe.

Meanwhile, day followed day in Malacca like the footsteps on a treadmill; a few weeks trudged by, sliding their feet. I spent many afternoons reading in the public library or paging through Percival's stacks of esoterica while sunk into one of his heavy leather chairs. I was always comfortable there; he was a gracious host.

The only time when the sun wasn't burning down like a hammer was in the evening and early morning, so that's when I'd explore the narrow old streets of Malacca. One morning, I stepped into an antique shop on Jonkers Street. This one wasn't one of the typical junk shops that are found on this street; it was more like a curio shop. The woman clerk, maybe in her late fifties—the proprietress named Lil, I found out later—was busy dusting the

knickknacks displayed on the glass shelves.

"How's business?" I asked.

"Business is **always** good, ah. It's no business that is the problem, ah! Have a look around." She continued dusting.

I picked up a little crocodile made of metal and tried to figure out what it was for. "Money," Lil told me. "In the old days, they used to make money out of tin in the shape of crocodiles, cockerels, and elephants. These are probably not really antiques. Could be that they used an old mold. Maybe, ah!" she laughed.

"They are getting so good at making antiques these days. Some of the furniture is almost as good as the real thing. And at least you know what you are getting when you buy a fake. When you buy antique, you never know. You may be buying termite food. Almost all of the real antiques for sale here in Malacca now don't come from here." Lil told me that most of the local Chinese and Victorian antiques had to be sold to pay the money the Japanese demanded during the war.¹¹⁸

On another shelf, I noticed a pair of small brocade shoes and asked Lil if they were meant for a child or a doll. They weren't for either, she informed me. These tiny shoes, both of which fit in the palm of one hand, were designed for adult feet, for Golden Lotus feet, the smallest and, therefore, considered the most beautiful of bound feet.

The woman who could wear these shoes would be instilled with pride in being a woman of nobility, wealthy by birth and thereby guaranteed a profitable marriage; females of the servant classes were forbidden the privilege of having bound feet. She would also feel the pain—until pain became the norm—everytime she had to make her long way across even a small room. And when it was about to rain, the pain might become so unbearable that she stayed in bed crying.

Lil said she could remember tears in old Tai Tai's eyes when the weather changed. "Tai Tai?" She saw the question in my eyes and

118 This refers to the Hong Lap Kim, a 'gift' that the Japanese extorted from the Straits Chinese during World War II to compensate the emperor for the pain caused him by the loss of Japanese soldiers' lives because of the money donated to "The China Defense and Anti-Japanese Funds." Ed, ed.

answered, "That's sort of like a grandmother but more. Oh! Her feet would have loved this drought!"

A *tai tai*, I learned later, is the wife or widow of the oldest son, the family matriarch responsible for all the children and their children's children and all household allowances.

Ed: All the allowances? That's a lot of power.

Cin: It is the strongest position inside a Straits Chinese *Baba* family, a complicated extended family in which there are seven hundred titles for the different positions to describe the various relationships in the family.

Ed: Seven hundred? I can't even keep track of my cousins!

Cin: A Chinese *Baba* family was a lot like a small town.

Anyway, back to the shoes. The pair of shoes I was looking at in the shop were brand new, but authentic antiques nonetheless, made by a man down the street, the last shoemaker in Malaysia, maybe the last man alive who can make these shoes from specially embroidered silk. The custom of binding feet was stopped in 1911. There are only five women still living who need his services. He had made the pair of shoes I held in my hand, but they were never picked up. The customer had died and had no use for them; she already had her red burial shoes.

Ed: Red?

Cin: Lil told me that the old women usually wished to be buried in red shoes; they wore them on every birthday when they were old until they died. So, if you actually see shoes like these in a shop, shoes that aren't new, they must have been stolen from a grave.

Lil shook her head. "I don't think that is a good idea. Me? I don't believe in ghosts, but why take a chance? If something is buried with someone, it should be with that person for eternity, ah. Actually, I wouldn't buy anything used. It might have spirits hanging onto it. Why take chances, right?" Then she added, "Maybe not so good I run an antique store, ah?"

"I tell you true, you know. They steal from graves! Ah!" Lowering her voice conspiratorially, she told me she once saw her old Tai Tai's lotus foot shoes for sale in another shop.

"Oh, yes, I would recognize them, certainly. I knew almost every stitch

in them, for the old woman wasn't shy about showing off her fine needlework. She had made them herself."

Lil explained that each year, at the New Year, Tai Tai would first call all her grandchildren to her room to hand out little red envelopes with money inside, and then, later, all her "dry" grandchildren, those living in the house but not directly related to her. Lil said she was included in this second group.

"Come in, come. Come. Don't step on the threshold." Tai Tai would invite them, always with that warning, for she had no desire to have careless children bringing her bad luck on her birthday. In her room, she would have her clothes set out for display—the ones from China, the ones she had worn when she had arrived in Malacca by steamboat in 1870. Resting her feet on a cushioned stool, she would display the brocade work in her little silk shoes, insisting that we take notice of the minute stitches at the seams, all the while smiling with unabashed pride. They were perfect!

Lil said, "After she checked us for clean hands, we were allowed to feel the fine fabric, the slippery silk and the braille-like relief of the brocade embroidery. She would explain the meaning of the calligraphy on the shoes she planned to be buried in: Long Life."

Ed: It isn't what you'd expect to be on burial shoes.

Cin: That's probably why Lil remembered this detail. She couldn't read Chinese herself. She told me that the Tai Tai's room was full of symbolic meanings. Everything meant something more than what it was. A fish, for instance, wasn't just a fish; it was a pictorial wish for abundance because in her Chinese dialect the two words sound the same.¹¹⁹ A boy holding a fish wasn't meant to bring to mind nostalgic Tom Sawyer images; it was meant as a wish for an abundance of scholarly sons. "It was always sons," Lil informed me. "Only sons were important."

Everything in Tai Tai's room was Chinese. The other rooms in the family house had some pieces of Victorian furniture, even the ancestral tablets were lit by carbon arc lamps held up by fat brass cupids. Tai Tai had complained about having them there, but she lost that battle, one of the few she ever lost.

119 The sound is *yu*. Ed, ed.

Lil remembered being in her room, tracing her fingers along the curlicues carved in black wood furniture, imagining she was being twirled around on the dance floor, something that the Tai Tai didn't approve of in the least. Once, when Grandfather Bong Tian Beng went to Singapore on a business trip and took along Tai Tai, they were invited to a ball at the home of a wealthy Chinese business associate. Some English people had also been invited, and for reasons Tai Tai had not understood, English customs were to be followed for that evening. Tai Tai was shocked at what she saw: men and women holding each other as if they were in the bedroom and moving around the dance floor together.

"Vulgar!" said Tai Tai. "The same as the barbarians' language." Then she would imitate what she heard. "*Please to eat. EAT!* It sounds like spitting. What kind of word is EAT to describe the pleasure of good food. *Ang Mo!*"¹²⁰ she exclaimed, pursing her lips with disgust.

Lil reminisced how, as a child in Tai Tai's room, her mind would wander into a dreamland as she stared at the marble backs of the chairs. "I would imagine I saw a crooked path through mountains covered with trees and wisps of clouds and even waterfalls. I always wondered how Nature knew how to put the picture in the marble. Or had *man* learned how to cut the marble so that there would be a mountain scene? How?"

There had been one framed picture in particular, a delicate paper-cut matted and framed, that Lil remembered: it showed a boy riding a tiger. It had something to do with filial piety, referring to a story about a son who jumped on the back of a tiger in order to distract it from his father. The result was that the kid died while dad lived.

Ed: Good son.

Cin: Yeah. Anyway, in the face of that angrily snapping tiger, Lil always imagined that she saw the likeness of Tai Tai herself with her high cheekbones. "You see, by then we knew that she really *was* a tiger."



120 An often derogatory Hokkien term for white foreigners, meaning literally "red hair." Ed, ed.

Tai Tai was born in Hokkien China in the Year of the Tiger, but her family lied about this when they broached the subject of matrimony to the go-between, First Uncle Bong. He had been sent from Malacca to China to establish trading potentials with distant relatives who had remained in the homeland. While in China, he was also to find a suitable bride for his nephew, Bong Tian Beng.

First Uncle's Chinese was poor; his reading, even worse. He could recognize so few characters, in fact, that it was easy to fool him about the year of her birth. This little deception was absolutely necessary, otherwise he probably would not have taken their daughter. Who would marry her knowing that she was a "Tiger Lady?"¹²¹

Lil explained that Tai Tai wasn't her name but her title after she became a widow and head of the family. "I never knew her to be called anything else. I never thought of her as having been young once. I thought she had been old forever. That's the way things seem when you are young. Ah!"

Tai Tai was born into a family of landed gentry in the 1850s during the turmoil of the Taiping Rebellion. Being the first-born of her generation, she was quite a disappointment, well, an embarrassment, really, for her father. "A girl! What do I care about a girl-child? They are only trouble!" were her father's words when he heard of her birth. Moreover, a girl who had the audacity to be born in the Year of the Tiger was destined to rule over everybody who lived in the same house as she. What man would marry such a woman?

So they lied. You see, at that time when First Uncle went to China on his trade mission from Malacca with obvious money behind him, her family was in no position to risk losing such an opportunity. The rebellion had set them back a great deal. Otherwise, it is unlikely that they would have allowed even a daughter to go so far away from the Middle Kingdom to somewhere in the South Seas. The Manchus had only recently allowed female emigration and the reputation of those who went was enough to—

121 The Tiger represents one of the twelve Chinese astrological years. People born in that year are said to be self-assured, courageous, though a bit reckless and rash; they make good leaders. However, they resist the authority of others, and therefore were considered undesirable as wives. Ed, ed.

Ed: To turn a mandarin orange?

Cin: *Laughing and groaning.* That was bad, Ed!

Anyway, when the second child, a son, was born, she was all but forgotten except as a helper to her little-emperor brother. When he studied his lessons so that he, too, could pass the national exams as had his father and grandfather before him, she was there to be sure he had hot tea. She took it upon herself to see that he was diligent in his studies, insisting that he repeat them all correctly as he would have to do with his real instructor, with his back to her, a common teaching method called "backing the classics". She would secretly follow along in his books. It is doubtful that he would have passed the exams, which he eventually did, had she not been there to urge and prod him. In this way, although a woman of her class rarely received an education, by teaching herself, she became proficient in the classics, in reading, writing, and in calculating.

It was through the national exams that one gained access to power, and in exercising this power, gained wealth. As wealth gathered in the hands, the arms, in the encircling ring of a prosperous family, the poor became inexorably poorer. It had been the national tests that had given her family their pedigree; it was also to become the cause of their near-collapse.

A man named Hung—

Ed: Is this the same Hung we met before when you talked about the secret societies?

Cin: No. Not the first Hung; that was the Crown Prince Hung. Call this one Hung Two, a man of lower birth but high charisma.

While Tai Tai was still a child, Hung Two failed the exam. He was not one to take things lightly. From his studies at a Baptist mission school, he had come to the conclusion that it was his divine duty to bring equality to humanity, to build a Heavenly Kingdom on earth, a combination Sino-Christian-Marxist-monarchy.

Hung Two picked up a following and they swept across southern China in a successful revolution against the Manchu, setting fire to the homes of the landed gentry and setting up a throne in Nanking to rule over his Kingdom of Heavenly Peace. This rebellion, started by an examination flunky, was quelled after many years of struggle at the cost of two million

lives.¹²²

The Manchus had been in power for two hundred years but were still considered foreign overlords by the Chinese populace. As conquerors, they levied taxes to cover their lavish living expenses, and each generation pampered in power became progressively more extravagant, corrupt, and less competent than the one before. By the time of the Taiping Rebellion, Manchu soldiers had taken to carrying their fans and opium pipes into battle. They were famous for swift and frequent retreats. It fell upon the mandarins, the academics, to defend the Celestial Throne.

Thus it was that the Tai Tai's father and uncles were all away from the family estate, functioning as generals, when a local revolt, a flying ember from one of five that were in progress at that time in China, burst into flame nearby. One night, the members of the household watched as a mile-long procession of torches wound its way up the hill toward their walled compound. The angry mob broke through the outer gates and threw open the rice bins, taking their own rebate on their heavy taxes. Then they turned their attention to the front door of the mansion and revenge.

The fifteen-year-old Tai Tai took charge. She was always active, even hyperactive. How excruciating it must have been for a spirit like hers to be hobbled on those pitifully painful little folded feet! Slowed down physically though she was, she was all the quicker mentally in reaching conclusions, making decisions, and while ordering others to do what she deemed necessary. She had good judgment and was rarely wrong, never wrong, if you were to ask her.

She ordered the panicking servants to carry all the furniture and stack it against the front door. Other servants were commanded to bring boiling water to her on the upper-floor balcony. When she got the scalding water, she leaned over the porcelain balustrade and poured it on the rebels who were ramming the door below. Even when she ran out of water, she brandished the pan threateningly as if it were full and held the attackers at bay with her bluff.

Ed: Gutsy girl!

122 The Taiping Rebellion (1849-1860). Nanking fell after a two-year siege. The inhabitants refused to surrender and perished in a mass suicide, every man, woman, and child. Ed, ed.

Cin: Very! Then someone in the house set off firecrackers and tossed them into the mob, which fled in panic.

Later, her arms were treated for burns from the scalding hot water. "I saw the scars; she showed us," Lil told me.

"Of course, this incident wasn't mentioned to First Uncle when the subject of matrimony was brought up. Rather, she was praised for her pickles. "The truth was," said Lil, "she could make great pickles. She would tell us that, too. Humility did not come naturally to Tai Tai."

She came via steamboat, first class, of course. She never mentioned noticing that down in the bowels of that same ship there were men cramped together like pigs going to market, eating only pickled vegetables while she picked at her pork in her private cabin, waited on hand and bound foot by her handmaiden.



The Bong family will long remember the day of her arrival in Malacca in the spring of 1870. Her departure date from Canton and the expected arrival in Malacca had been wired ahead, and the family had ample time to prepare for their new daughter-in-law-to-be. As the boat docked, the usual firecrackers were exploded to frighten away any evil spirits that might have been on board. The stately black Bong carriage was waiting for her at the debarkation pavilion at the edge of the long jetty. She frowned from beneath her red wedding veil when she saw the carriage.

"Red! Red is the proper color of a conveyance for a Chinese bride," she told the greeting committee, her indignation hardly veiled beneath a gossamer of patience. Despite being dressed in layers of heavy brocade in the heat of the day, she was willing to wait until they could find the right colored sedan. They explained that the wedding was planned for a few days after her journey so that she could rest.

She was outraged. She refused to sleep in the home of a stranger, and should they not blush with shame to even suggest that she might spend even a single night in the house of a man not yet her husband? What kind

of family was she marrying into?

What kind of family were the Bongs? They were an old Chinese family—well, at least partly Chinese. In Malacca, these mixed-race Chinese are called the Straits Chinese or simply *Baba*. Generations ago, a Bong had come to the peninsula to work as a coolie with only a mat for a bed and an umbrella for shelter. By living on cheap rice and making one boiled egg provide the protein for five days, he managed to scrape together enough savings to start a pole-and-basket peddling business, carrying his wares bouncing on his shoulder from *kampong* to small *kampong* until he had enough money saved up to build a shop selling sundries. The shop prospered and grew and prospered more.

He married a local Malay girl, and they had children who married and set up new businesses. Subsequent generations started a restaurant here, a lodging house there, a pawn shop, a steamship company. The family also became money-lenders. From this came foreclosures and take-overs of several gambier and pepper plantations and inefficient tin mines that had been used as collateral. In other words, the Bongs became one of the wealthier families living on Heeren Street, otherwise known as "Millionaires' Row."

The Tai Tai, however, considered them rude country bumpkins, inferior to the sophisticated society to which she was accustomed. The members of the Bong welcoming party explained that what she was requesting was impossible to fulfill. Weddings in Malacca must be started in the morning, the time for the very important hair-cutting ceremony. It was too late for a wedding to begin on that day.

She saw their point, smiled, and said softly that she did not want to be a bother. She could easily return to her cabin and spend one more night aboard the steamship, and she did. At considerable expense to the Bongs, the steamship delayed its departure until the following morning when a carriage arrived at the dock for her. The carriage was lavishly decorated in red.

Fortunately, Tai Tai had learned about the bamboo undergarment to keep the perspiration away from her elegant embroidered gowns, or they would not have survived that first afternoon in the sun. Every year at New Year's, she showed her grandchildren that they had indeed survived, and

that she had as well.

The only other thing she ever mentioned about the wedding was the part of the ceremony where she was required to sit on the *gantang*,¹²³ the rice scoop, a round bowl the size of a hollow melon that had been specially painted red for the occasion. Lil said, "For the man to sit is no problem. The bowl is placed upside down for him to rest on. But for the woman, she must sit on that bowl that has been turned right side up to represent the vessel ready to be filled with seed. Most brides just squat. That's easy if you have big feet, but try that with lotus feet, like Tai Tai's. She had never been so uncomfortable in her life... And to make matters worse, she had needed to pass water."

On the morning after the twelfth and final day of the wedding, she rose with the earliest-rising servant girl. Before the rest of the family awoke, she had completely reorganized the kitchen for efficiency, in her view. And once everyone learned the system, they agreed that things were a lot handier than before she arrived.

And everything was cleaner, as well. She ordered all surfaces scrubbed to a mirrored polish or to its original color, while she minced her way around to inspect every nook and cranny. She opened a door and found that it led to a back porch overlooking the ocean. She lifted a trapdoor and looked down. It was low tide, and a small rowboat was resting at an awkward angle on the mud below.

She closed the trapdoor, locked it, and went back into the kitchen. She spotted a small room off in a corner and the smell from it grew stronger as she approached it. Curious, she looked inside. The jars for the night-soil were filled; that would have to be taken care of. She told one of the servant girls to be sure that this was done today.

Armed with her feather duster, she hobbled as she marched the servants from room to room through the whole long, narrow house. The houses on Heeren Street had been built by the Dutch. Because property taxes were based on the amount of street frontage, the entire structures were built only eight paces wide, but extended room after room and through two squared, roofless, inner courtyards, a total of one hundred twenty feet to the back, where the houses on the Bong side of Heeren Street then overlooked the

123 This is part of the hairdo ceremony on the first day of the wedding. Ed, ed.

ocean. A second floor provided enough rooms to house an entire extended three-generation Chinese family.

She started her cleaning attack from the kitchen and servants' quarters in the back, moving forward to the room of the ancestors' tablets where, after cleaning and polishing the bronze incense burner and setting the tablets straight, she lit some incense to her newly acquired ancestors, as was required.

Then she continued forward, her feather duster slashing across the blackwood chairs and tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl, stabbing through the wrought-iron spiral staircase and the mahogany screens carved with intricate dust-catching designs. She found that it had been exquisitely gilded and was appalled by its present condition. She commanded the servants to wash it. By this time on this whirlwind, first-morning tour, the new bride had already assumed the rank of General of the Household Staff.

The men with the honey wagon arrived. Theirs was a large task that day since they hadn't made their regular visit during the twelve-day wedding in the house. The reason became obvious when they took the first load out. To do this, they had to scoop the night-soil from the large jars in the room into a bucket hung from a pole between two coolies, who carried this from the room in the back through the entire length of the house; this was their only access to the street. For hours after they left, the rooms reeked of human waste.

The new bride was shocked when she learned that the Bong household not only didn't receive any cash for the fertilizer the men had taken, but that they actually paid these men to carry away what her family in China called "brown gold." Her family had made a great deal of money from their public latrine monopoly that sold manure back to the tenant farmers. Here in Malacca, the men took the contents of the night jars and just threw it away carelessly. Such a waste, she thought, of perfectly good night-soil. What could she think of her in-laws when they didn't know the first thing about recycling?

She shook her head and, despite the pain in her feet, returned to her assault. When she got to the front room where visitors were entertained, she glanced at a picture hanging on the wall in a golden frame, and gasped. "They receive guests with this in the front room? What? Is this a bordello?"

The painting was one of those dry-brush, black-ink nature scenes of a diminutive man walking across a bridge at the bottom of a valley between two large, misty, narrow and precipitous mountains. It looked like your typical Taoist faraway scene that contrasts the grandeur of nature to the insignificance of man. Tai Tai had the picture removed at once.

It wasn't until years later when one of the sons who had been sent away to study in Hong Kong found out what all the fuss was about: The painting was Chinese erotica.

Ed: Really? That would take some pretty good imagination.

Cin: Never underestimate the dirty mind.

Anyway, the union with her husband Mr. Bong Tian Beng was fruitful. Four children followed one another at sensible intervals over the next seven years, three sons and a daughter. It was surprising that he never officially took a concubine to provide him with even more sons, as was common among the *towkay*, the rich Chinese merchants of that day. One suspects the Tai Tai had a part in her husband's decision not to maintain a concubine, despite his lack of commitment to monogamy.

There are some stories about Bong Tian Beng's tendency to play around with other women, but that's what rich Chinese men in Malacca did. It was expected. Once he and a few friends were having a party with some fun girls at his upstairs office—which, is where Percival now has his office. Tai Tai got wind of it. She called her rickshaw man and told him to take her to Mr. Bong's office building immediately; she would not hear any argument. Once there, she padlocked the iron gate at the foot of the stairs, tossed the key into the river, and returned home. The revelers were forced to spend the night locked inside. In the early morning, her sheepish husband hailed a passing coolie through the iron grate and told him to go fetch a locksmith. Word spread fast; that all-night party was the talk of the Chinese community for a while.

Another time, her husband came home late from a night on the town, probably with some rented woman. The Tai Tai had directed that the front door be locked and bolted from the inside. All the servants received strict orders from the "general" to sleep well that night and not to answer the door. Her husband knocked on the door; no response. The husband shouted, demanding Tai Tai's attention.

The front door of these homes is located under a five-foot archway with a portion of the master bedroom overhanging it. There usually is a four-inch-square hole in the floor which can be opened to see who is calling from below.

"You have my attention," she called down to him through the open hole, and then, as he looked up at her, she emptied the contents of the night chamber on him from above.

Lil had finished dusting the shelves in her store, but she hung on to her feather duster as if it were a baton. She told me that her father was born in 1891, sired by Bong Tian Beng as the result of a back-chamber dalliance between him and the *moi chai*, the little sister, a sort of domestic slave whose services had been purchased from a poor peasant family in China when she was a child.

The *moi chai* was quickly married off to the rickshaw puller and allowed to stay on and raise the child in one of the back rooms, near the toilet room. Tai Tai, to her credit, never made the slightest change in the way she treated that girl, Lil's grandmother; though she was never friendly, she wasn't excessively critical or demanding. To Tai Tai, the girl was merely a servant who was to be told to do what needed to be done.

One day, on a whim, Tai Tai told the rickshaw puller to take the long way, the road beside the river, to go to the Temple of the Turquoise Cloud. When she reached the bridge, she gasped. In a panic, she told the puller to turn around immediately and "run me back to the house at once. Hurry!"

She sprang out of the rickshaw, and even with bound feet, stormed in through the front door, calling everyone in the family to a meeting that very morning to consider the crisis.

"There is a cockerel on top of Christ Church!" she exclaimed to the assembled family members. Many a bemused eye met around the table. What could this woman from China be talking about? It was true. There was the image of a cock, part of a weather vane, affixed to the top of the bell tower of the church. But why was she so excited? No one in the family could imagine. So she told them.

Look at the street where they live, she explained. It squirms back and forth like a worm. But it is not a worm. They all agreed; it was not a worm.

"It's a centipede," she proclaimed. "Look. On both sides of Heeren Street we have all these long, narrow houses, one next to the other like the legs of a centipede. And that's good."

They all agreed it was good, like they were pampering an invalid. Finally one of the kids asked, "Why?"

"It's good because according to Chinese tradition a centipede eats up good fortune, bringing wealth to the families who live here on this street," she explained with an impatient smile. "But cockerels eat centipedes, don't you see? The English put the cockerel where it is on purpose, facing this street! They are deliberately trying to eat up all our money! We must do something!"

They all tried to calm her down, promising that something would certainly be done. They would bring it up at the next temple meeting. And there they thought the matter would rest, until a few days later when they came home and saw that she had acted on her own after seeking the advice of a priest from the local Taoist temple, a doctor of *feng shui* with five-inch-long fingernails to prove that he worked only with his mind and his spiritual powers.

She had installed a huge aquarium in the front room stocked with a large fish, its mouth at the top of its head, "so it can eat up good luck for this house," she explained. She had also hung there a red clock, and in the room with the ancestors' tablets, she had two round mirrors hung facing each other in such a way that the family could look at their reflection into infinity. It had something to do with long life.

The mirror reminded Tai Tai of an old Chinese story she had heard as a child, and after the mirror-hanging ceremony, she told it to the assembled family. A peasant woman in a very rural part of China wanted her husband to bring her a comb for her hair when next he went to market in town. He didn't know what a comb looked like so she told him to get something that looked like a crescent moon, pointing at the moon above so that her slow-witted husband could remember.

Many days later, the peasant man reached the market. He knew he was supposed to buy something for his wife but could remember only that it looked something like the moon and had something to do with her hair. He went to a shopkeeper and asked for his help. Since it was by then full

moon, the shopkeeper suggested that his wife must have been asking for a mirror. So the peasant bought one.

When he returned home, he was carrying the mirror strapped to his back above his pack. To surprise her with the gift, he tiptoed up behind her while she was sweeping and, turning his back to his wife, he cleared his throat to get her attention.

She turned around. Unfortunately for him, she had never seen a mirror before; she thought he was carrying another woman. She hit him.

"I ask for a comb and you bring home a concubine! Not into my house!" she screeched, beating her poor husband repeatedly with the broom. "And such an ugly hag at that!"

Perhaps one could trace Bong Tian Beng and Tai Tai's marital problems from that moment when she noticed the uncomfortable way her husband laughed at that story about a concubine. "But all of that is best forgotten," sighed Lil. "Grandfather Bong Tian Beng died unexpectedly while quite young of cholera during the epidemic of 1891. Tai Tai implied many times that she thought too much sex had weakened him and lowered his resistance. She may have been right; my father was conceived just a few months before Bong Tian Beng's death.

"But then," Lil added, "Chinese also say that women with high cheekbones consume their husband's energy so that they die young. Tai Tai had this feature, so who are you going to believe, ah?"

Bong Tian Beng's mother, the previous *tai tai*, died in the epidemic as well, presumably from causes other than excessive sex. The epidemic of 1891 took a tremendous toll. The wife of First Uncle also died, and then First Uncle himself, thus making Tai Tai, though still quite young, the official family *tai tai*. She took control at once as if she had been born for the role, which she definitely believed she had.



Over the years, Tai Tai had been teaching the *moi chai* and the other servant girls how to cook Chinese food, including the fine art of making perfect pickles to accompany the small bowl of rice at the end of a feast.

She insisted on using chopsticks and could not be cajoled into adopting the barbarian habit of eating with her hands as the rest of the family often did. "If the gods wanted us to eat with our fingers, they wouldn't have given us fingernails," she quipped one night when she noticed the dirty orange cuticles around the table at the end of a curry meal. Hers, of course, were always immaculate.

She was not averse to learning from her Malay kitchen helpers and even from her lazy sisters-in-law, whenever they could be cajoled into the kitchen. She learned the tangy effect of fermented shrimp paste but never developed a taste for it herself. The chilies were a bit too spicy for her palate, but she became accustomed to them after a while.

What particularly impressed her were the crackers made in Malacca from tapioca and dried shrimp. When a wafer of the dried flour is dropped into hot oil, it swells up into a crisp, airy cracker five times its original size. The sound it makes when one bites into one is the same as its name. "*Keropok*." They are mostly air, and that was what interested Tai Tai the most.

She sent one of her sons to various restaurants to offer to provide them with either prepared or uncooked *keropok* at a discount price if they bought a supply regularly and only from her family. Then, she set her reluctant female in-laws to work, transforming tapioca brought in from the family plantation into the *keropok* wafers ready for cooking. She particularly liked selling the cooked ones: getting money in exchange for air! For her, that's what business was about.

Tai Tai soon began making all the family's business decisions. It was about this time, in 1896 or so, that Rubber Ridley visited Malacca. Rubber Ridley had a small, round head and a black, drooping walrus moustache. He was in charge of the Botanical Gardens in Singapore at a time when it was experimenting with crops from different parts of the British Empire. He had received a few exotic tree seedlings from Brazil via the Kew Gardens in England. It seemed that some use had been found for the gummy sap of the tree in making surgical tubing. There was hope that some

other clever scientists could come up with still other uses that would increase demand for the rubber sap. Ridley thought that the tree, having come from the tropics, would do well in the soil and climate of the Malayan Peninsula.

It was a gamble, and the market for the product was uncertain. A Chinese man¹²⁴ took the chance and planted the free seedlings on his worn-out gambier/pepper plantations, but the rest of the landowners hesitated. It took many years for the trees to mature. They decided to see how the crop fared first and what kind of money could be made from it. The Bong family, however, joined the rubber gamble early.

One day, while on her daily trip to the market and then around the town, checking regularly on the various family concerns, Tai Tai saw a man-powered two-wheeled vehicle. "It's a bicycle, mother," explained her son, the one who could read English better than he could read Chinese, she was ashamed to say, the result of her sending him away to school in England. But at least the family now had someone who could tell her about all these newfangled contraptions.

"But why are the tires so fat? Why make tires that big for a vehicle that only one person rides on."

Her son explained to her that it was not solid rubber, that inside was only air. A guy in Ireland named Dunlop had invented a way to make what he called a pneumatic tire so that one actually rides on a bubble of air. She was impressed; someone else had found a way to sell air.

"But what happens when it hits a sharp rock and it cuts the rubber?" she asked. Her son answered that the tire goes flat and must be repaired or replaced. She was silent.

That night after the evening meal, she called her three sons together and asked, "How are the pepper/gambier plantations doing?" The question was rhetorical. Everyone knew the answer. Every year the land was getting more and more depleted by those nutrient-robbing crops, both growing on the same land. Every year the yield was less.

"Plant the land in rubber, all of it. And the tapioca plantations as well.

124 Tan Chay Yan was the first to plant rubber on forty acres of plantation land near Malacca in 1896. Ed, ed.

Save only enough tapioca to supply the present and future needs of our *keropok* business. Next, foreclose on all loans and credit overdue on land now being cleared where we can plant more rubber. Then plant it all.

"And finally, buy more land. Buy it from the Sumatrans, the Minangkabau women. No. Wait! I should go there myself to negotiate for the land. We are committing the family fortune to rubber." She assumed consensus, and no one had the courage to voice a different opinion or even ask questions.

As it turned out, she gambled correctly. When her trees were at top yield, she was able to sell her rubber at the highest price ever, six hundred dollars a *pikul*.

Ed: What's a *pikul*?

Cin: I don't know. I asked Alfonso the first time I heard the word. He told me a *pikul* was a hundred *kati*. I asked him what a *kati* was. He told me it was a measure they use to weigh things. I told him that I understood that, I wanted to know how heavy a *kati* was. He answered brightly, "Easy, lah! That's sixteen tiles."

Ed: So how much does a tile weigh?

Cin: Alfonso didn't know in pounds. He said a tile weighs a tile.¹²⁵

Whatever a *pikul* is, she got top money for her rubber crop. Then, to everyone's surprise, around 1920, she sold all the Bong family plantations, every one of them that had mature rubber trees on the land. A British concern, Dindings Rubber Company, bought them. People thought Tai Tai had gone crazy!

They knew for sure that she had cracked when she turned right around and used the money from the sale of productive land to buy tracts of raw jungle, having to hire Javanese workers to clear the land, then plant more rubber. She continued buying land and planting rubber even after the bottom fell out of the rubber market that same year. By the time those new trees, her second crop, had matured and were at peak yield, the rubber market had bounced back up again, and she again made a huge profit on her investment.

125 A *pikul* or "load carried on a man's shoulder equals 133 $\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. 1 *kati* equals 1 $\frac{1}{3}$ lbs. Ed, ed.

Her esteem in the business community grew as her decisions proved time and again to be correct. "Good judgment," she was wont to say, "comes from experience. And experience comes from bad judgment." Then she would slyly add, "Fortunately, for a while, I had my husband to observe."

She decided the *feng shui* of the family house would be improved if she were to buy the mansions on both sides of the original Bong Mansion and combine the three units into one so that all her family could stay in the many wings.

Ed: And under **her** wing, I bet.

Cin: Practically smothered.

Then she had the whole interior remodeled according to her specific, if eccentric, design; the work was done under her close supervision. The end result was that she had created a virtual labyrinth of rooms reminiscent of the country palace where she'd spent her youth, including several hidden passageways so that she could move invisibly throughout the house.



Tai Tai directed the course of the lives around her, bending them to her will. Once, when her first son returned from school in Hong Kong where he had been "backing the classics", that is to say receiving a proper Chinese education, he was wearing white trousers. She scoffed. "They teach you no sense in your studies. What good are white pants? They only stay clean from midday till noon."

When her second son came back changed after studying in England (in order to become one member of the family who could mingle easily with the British colonial government and understand their ways), Tai Tai was horrified. First and most obvious was that he had cut off his queue; his beautiful long, black braid that had escaped the blade since birth. It was gone! He had taken pomade and slicked down his short hair and parted it in the middle like... like a ridiculous imitation of a British dandy.

Ed: Or perhaps a good imitation of a ridiculous dandy. *I wiggled my*

eyebrows like Groucho Marx and flicked the ashes off my cigarette. Cin rolled her eyes.

Cin: Worse still for Tai Tai: the boy had "eaten Christianity" and said he would not worship at the tablets of his ancestors during his planned coming-home celebration. She suggested strongly that he shut himself up in a back room at the far end of one of the new wings in the mansion until he could again see the way of wisdom—the Chinese way; her way. She said that he should abandon the disgusting habits of the barbarians. She gave the boy a little plaque painted with an edifying phrase from Confucius' *Book of Rites* for him to contemplate:

THE SUPERIOR MAN IS, ABOVE ALL,
CONCERNED THAT OTHERS
WILL NOT FIND HIM LACKING
IN THE RIGHT FORMS OF EXPRESSION.

The boy was not seen in public for five months. When he finally again appeared, it was at the Temple of the Turquoise Cloud; he was burning incense at the tablets of his ancestors. It was only then that the Bong family held his welcome-home party. He wore his English suit and a bowler hat, but with a short queue dangling behind.

Her brouhaha about her son's queue proved to be unnecessary, for within seven years, with the revolution of Sun Yat Sen,¹²⁶ the mandarins who had supported and aided the hated Manchu lost prestige and power. Long hair and bound feet became embarrassing reminders of the Manchu past.



Once Tai Tai's favorite son, number three, brought home a singsong girl from a Singapore nightclub and insisted that she would become his bride no matter what Tai Tai might say or do. "Our love is more powerful than money," he told his mother, actually holding the girl's hand right in front of her. Tai Tai merely smiled and invited her potential daughter-in-law to her

126 The success of the Revolution ended 267 years of the Manchu Dynasty, 1644-1911. Ed, ed.

room for tea and a chat. She complimented the girl on her looks, her choice of clothes, so very chic and so very modern though not so very Chinese, and her hair style, those curls! How remarkable! Slowly, always smiling, she sliced the young girl apart, hiding her claws behind false flattery and innuendo.

Finally, she got to the point: her son would not be allowed to marry anyone but Tai Tai's choice. Although Tai Tai was convinced that the singsong girl was probably a lovely person deep down and probably had not had much choice in her selection of occupation, the girl was what she was and plainly did not fit into the family plan.

If the ill-advised marriage were to take place, make no mistake about it, her son would lose his inheritance; he wouldn't be allowed to take even a tin spoon with him. Could they live on what the girl earned at the club? Wouldn't marriage somewhat decrease her earning power? Was she willing to support him until he looked for a job? It wouldn't be with any of the Bong concerns.

"Did you think you would be marrying into our family fortune? If so, young lady, you are dreaming," she said. There was no chance that any family money would be coming their way. However, if the girl would discreetly leave, disappear for a while, say a year of traveling, there would be a tidy sum of money available to her at pre-selected locations along the way, with a bonus on her wedding day if she should get married before Tai Tai's son did.

When the girl left that same day without notice, Tai Tai comforted her brokenhearted son, sharing his sorrow like a cat weeping over the mouse it has just eaten.



There was a time when everyone, including Tai Tai, thought she was dying. She called her sons to her room to stand around her bed for a family conference. Before she passed on, she wanted to have a talk with them about her funeral arrangements.

She told them what she wished to be wearing when she was buried: of course, her little red hand-stitched Golden Lotus shoes. She mentioned the five brocade robes she wished to wear when sleeping in her coffin. She reminded them to make sure that all the pockets were sewn up so that she wouldn't be tempted to take the family wealth with her. There was nervous laughter around her, for they could never be sure if Tai Tai was joking or serious, even on her deathbed. She was dead serious.

She decided the time was right to tell them the story about a fat, old woman who was a miser. On her deathbed, she, too, called her three sons into her room. The old woman was perspiring profusely for it was a hot, midsummer afternoon, and she was indeed obese. She asked Son Number One to come to her side and asked him if any preparations had been made for her funeral. He said they planned the most elaborate procession possible with a long-poled palanquin hearse and sixty-four pallbearers. The palanquin would be made of sandalwood embedded with precious gems and trimmed with gold. It would later be burned at the gravesite so that she would have elegant transportation in the hereafter.

The obese old woman was enraged, and burst into a coughing jag. "Spending my hard-earned money on a dead woman!" She banished Son Number One to the far side of the room. "Is this really my son?" she muttered.

Son Number Two was called to her side. Thinking fast, he suggested a more modest affair, tasteful rather than lavish. Perhaps six pallbearers would be sufficient, and if not, because of the old woman's remarkably, er, ample figure, a few servants could be dressed up to look like friends or relatives and help carry the coffin. The hearse could be rented, and the coffin could be rented for the procession as well and then returned; a simple pine box would do in the grave, for dirt would soon cover it. They would hire no professionals; the family would do all their own mourning. Although this would put them under a bit of a strain, they would manage. They would have a simple gathering at the mansion for a few days so that people could say their farewells.

"I suppose you will have mixed drinks and a buffet with caviar and smoked salmon," the old woman interrupted, sweating irritably. She was not impressed with his suggestions. "Are you planning on inviting hungry students over as well? A few days of mourning! People would come.

Students for sure would sit around. You would have to feed them, you know, and spend my money doing so, not to mention the days everyone would take off from work. Wastrel!" She scowled. Sweat poured from her scarlet face from the exertion of venting her irritation.

Son Number Three was then called to her side. He figured out the way the old gal was thinking and decided to try a new tack. He looked at her huge form thoughtfully and from several angles, as if making an appraisal.

"You must be very uncomfortable," he said with concern. "You have been carrying a lot of fat around with you, honorable mother," he said melodramatically. "But that is okay. It looks good on you. It shows you are wealthy. Never mind the expense of feeding you all these years." He paused dramatically before continuing.

"Yet if you would consider passing away in the morning rather than at night, we could be spared the expense of those wasted meals on your last day. Money doesn't come to us so easy that we can afford to throw it away, as you have always taught us."

He sighed again. "We shall feel your loss. If only there were some way we could get some money back on the cost of all that food you have eaten already, which makes you so uncomfortable now."

The son pretended to ponder the problem for a moment. "I have it! After you pass on, we will melt you down slowly. I bet we could render a couple of large jars full of your oil. We could then put them on our rickshaw decorated with paper to look like a hearse and hope it doesn't rain. We'll have the rickshaw man pull it down the street. That will leave the hands of us sorrowful offspring free to take care of the rest of your remains. During your funeral procession, we can have one person call out your name and another tell potential customers that your fat, which they have admired for so long, is now available for sale. I believe we could make a handsome profit."

The other sons choked at the audacity of Son Number Three's macabre joke. But instead of getting angry, the old woman motioned him to come closer and whispered to him, "Better take the procession on the northeast road going out of town. The people on the road south will ask for credit."

Tai Tai smiled wanly at her family from her sick-bed. "In Malacca, I believe you would do better on Heeren Street than on Jonkers, although I

fear I have little fat for you to sell," she added humbly. Her message was simple to anyone who knew her. She was telling her family not to waste money on her funeral.

The Bong family, although they had been rich before Tai Tai, owed their immense wealth to this woman. They argued with her that the expense would be their way of showing their love and respect for her one last time for all that she had done for the family. Nothing she said could dissuade them from having anything but the finest funeral for her.

She was disgusted with them, angry at this blatant disregard for her wishes. She decided that if that was what they planned to do, she couldn't, in good conscience, die now. So she got out of bed, went down to the kitchen and made pickles, apparently fully recovered from her illness. As far as anyone could remember, that was the last time anyone ever noticed her being sick, although she religiously took two little pills daily made from ants and antlers which a second cousin in China sent regularly to her.



In the late 1930s, the fortunes of the family soared with the price of rubber as many nations stockpiled in preparation for the coming war. Like most families in the local Chinese community, the Bongs donated a large portion of their windfall to the war cause through the Chinese Solidarity-and-Righteous-Anti-Japanese-Expansionism funds.

When war spread to Southeast Asia, Tai Tai, at the risk to her own life and her family, decided to stay in Malacca, although she could easily have had one of the exceedingly rare tickets on the last Bong family steamships to leave. Malacca was her home. This house was **her** home. She was not about to give away everything she had worked for. She was not about to run from trouble. Her bound feet were not made for running away. She would find a way to survive. Because of her refusal to leave, her eldest granddaughter, Mei Li, insisted on staying with her.

A couple of her grandsons who were old enough chose to join the local volunteer militia and, after a few days of training with brooms, were sent

off to help defend Singapore, where they were introduced to their guns for the first time on the front line.

When the Japanese bicycle squads rolled, unopposed, into Malacca town, they went directly to the homes of those known to have contributed large sums of money to the Chinese war effort against the Japanese. They had a list. These prominent Chinese men of the community were promptly taken out and decapitated; their heads were stuck on stakes and displayed in the Red Plaza, left out to turn black in the tropic sun as a warning to everyone.

One of those impaled heads belonged to Tai Tai's eldest son. With macabre irony, considering how her family had humored the Tai Tai about her *feng shui*, his head was positioned in such a way that it seemed to look straight up at the cockerel on the weather vane on the bell tower of Christ Church.

The taste of blood created a thirst for more. Soon Japanese soldiers were in a frenzy, searching through the houses of the wealthy, seizing and exterminating entire families at a time, labeling even the women and children as "enemies of the emperor." They broke into the Bong mansion to find it had been remodeled into a maze of countless rooms, all empty except for a very old, retired rickshaw puller sleeping in one of the servants' room in the back. He was taken away and executed. Tai Tai's remodeling had foiled the soldiers with its ingenious system of false doors, doors hidden behind cabinets, escape routes behind mirrors, and bookcases that were actually ladders to trapdoors made invisible by the ornamental design of the ceiling.

The Japanese major was not to be denied; he was out for the whole Bong bloodline. He was out to avenge a slight he had received personally from the old Tai Tai that he would not forget. He sent a private, maybe seventeen years old, up the back staircase to search the second floor. The young soldier heard a muffled baby cry and, following the sound, he found a secret door behind a cabinet and entered a small room.

Said Lil, the shop clerk, "My mother was lying in bed, holding her baby, my little brother, still bloody from birth. The sight stopped the Japanese boy soldier short. Perhaps in his mind he saw his own mother holding him at birth. They can be very sensitive about those kinds of things. For

whatever reason, the young soldier quietly backed out of the room and, evidently, didn't report finding anyone. The rest of the household had been hiding in the next room."

After those first few days of violence, the official Japanese administration moved into Malacca, and this policy of exterminating whole families was no longer followed.



Lil told me that there are only three photos of Tai Tai, none before she took on that title. At first, she refused to hear any talk about reproducing her likeness either with a camera or by a portrait artist. "Where I come from"—she would begin, as she so often began her explanations. In China, a person didn't have his or her image recorded except after death, and then only so that it could be used for the funeral. The portrait artist would have a stock of canvasses, each showing a body dressed in layers of robes and sitting in such a stiff posture that the dead person's body size would be made irrelevant; the style and color of the clothing depended on one's station in life, the style of the ceremonial dress did not vary much over the years.

Ed: Like graduation gowns.

Cin: Yeah, like that.

When a person died, the painter hurried over to the open coffin with the appropriate canvas and filled in the blank space with a face before they closed the lid. No one in Tai Tai's part of China was in a hurry to see his or her likeness in a portrait.

The first picture of her is at the wedding of her eldest grandson Tian Lye to his first cousin, her granddaughter, Mei Li. That would be in 1921. She sits in the center of the photo, very much the matriarch of two generations. Defiance can be read in her out-thrust jaw, braving the camera and grimly trying, as Confucian wisdom decreed, not to show her teeth so the animal nature of her, a woman, would not be visible.

The second portrait shows her on her eightieth birthday around the time

she thought she was going to die. This time, she is posing confidently for the camera in her oversized death robes with the stylized Chinese characters for longevity embroidered in circles all over the robe like bubbles. With the hat she wears, she looks at first glance incongruously like Merlin the Magician. Of course, she is wearing her tiny red silk shoes. They show up extremely dark in the black-and-white photo. Tai Tai was all dressed up, but death was one party she was in no hurry to attend.

The third picture of her is a head and shoulder portrait, color-toned by hand, that was taken in a studio on the occasion of her eighty-fifth birthday. She is dressed in a high-collared black silk blouse, her gray hair pulled back tight and perfectly cemented in place. Her determined face is taut, not a trace of a wrinkle or a smile. Her gaze is steady at the camera as if she were mesmerizing her prey.

The truth is that she was furious. There was a point, Lil was told, when the photo session for this portrait was almost cancelled when Tai Tai realized that the photographer was a Japanese. Because of what was happening in China and Manchuria at that time, she insulted him to his face calling him a monkey. He was never to forget the incident.

This portrait of an unconquerable old woman with small feet, who lived far from her home in a male-dominated world, hangs over the family altar, indomitable. No other ancestor shares that honor; her picture hangs alone, looking down over all the tablets. She would have liked that, the Tiger Woman, Tai Tai.

She died at the age of ninety-nine, one hundred if you counted in the Chinese manner, which she most certainly would have. She was taking her usual afternoon nap in a bamboo lounge chair in the room with all the ancestors' tablets. It was dark and quiet there and relatively cool because of its nearness to one of the inner courtyards. On the street outside, a truck loaded with the rubble being cleaned up after the war rumbled down Heeren Street, shaking the whole foundation of the two-hundred-year-old building.

The pair of heavy mirrors reflecting into infinity still hung on the walls facing each other even after all the decades that had passed since Tai Tai's remodeling job. One of the bolts holding up one of the mirrors had already been loosened by a recent torrential downpour that seeped into the wall.

The vibration of the truck jarred it free from its grip in the wall, and the heavy mirror crashed down on her and crushed her to death instantly. It was as if the ancestors in infinity, impatient for her arrival and knowing that the Tai Tai would never readily resign from life on her own, had reached out and snatched her away in her sleep.



Ed: What a lady! Mom from hell! But what does she have to do with the gold?

Cin: Maybe nothing directly. But she had a lot to do with someone who I believe actually found the gold, although I can't prove it, and who actually led me to the gold, although I can only speculate that he meant the clue to be interpreted as I did. Perhaps he wasn't even giving me a clue at all. A false assumption doesn't necessarily have to lead you in the wrong direction. Do you see?

Ed: No. But go on with your story.

Cin: Okay.

Once again, when I returned to the Majestic after my long talk with Lil, there was a note from Percival hanging on the nail with my room key asking me to call him at my earliest convenience. I did, and he invited me out that afternoon to his bungalow for a meal cooked by Chong On on the plantation in Asahan; that is an area located about thirty miles from Malacca in the foothills of Mt. Ophir.

"Chong On has only one vice," Percival told me over the phone, "and he is very good at it. He likes food. No, he loves good food as Romeo loved Juliet, and I don't think I exaggerate. He is, therefore, by necessity, an excellent chef, as I believe I have already told you. If I ask him to cook for, say, five people, the two of us should manage to get a little of the banquet onto our plates. On second thought, I had better tell him to prepare for seven, you and I should be sure to get an ample amount of it. I cannot tell you what we will be having; I am leaving the choice up to Chong On. It *will* be delicious, whatever the menu; I promise you.

"Oh! And don't concern yourself about the return trip. I have already arranged for Chong On to convey you to the Majestic when you wish to go. He won't mind since there is an all-night stall behind the hotel where he can have a late snack. And if it happens to get **very** late, I have already spoken to Leong so that the hotel watchman will be around to open the gate for you upon your return."

I took a much-needed shower under pig-squealing pipes that grudgingly yielded dribbles of water, then put on some clean clothes, a summer dress I'd just bought at a boutique—a flower patterned batik, very tropical. By late afternoon, Percival and I were in the back seat of the Wiggins' "limo" on our way to his bungalow on the plantation.

I said, across the space that separated me from Percival who sat next to the opposite window, "It's so spacious in here. It's as if we were sitting on a sofa in your living room having our tea and crumpets. What is a crumpet, by the way?"

"Oh, dear! Have you never had a crumpet? They are delicious little morsels soaked in butter for which no description would do justice. We must have them for tiffin sometime. I shall get Chong On to make some.

"But I must caution you against mentioning food when Chong On is driving. He tends to speed up." This Percival said with a playful twinkle in his eye. I could see Chong On glance at the rear-view mirror. This, apparently, was a long-standing joke between them. Chong On smiled shyly.

The Morris we rode in had a tendency to lurch forward and then lose power so that we were constantly being rocked back and forth as if in a gallop. "That's another reason I love this vehicle. It always seems to be trying so hard," smiled Percival.

I told Percival about my conversation with Lil in the curio shop and asked if he had ever heard—"Of the *Tai Tai*, Mrs. Bong? I most certainly have. First of all, she is connected in a way with our destination; my little bungalow is located on what once was her family's land."

According to Percival, the Bong family loaned money to a man who came into one of their retail shops in town; he wanted to open up some new land for cultivation. This was common practice among the Chinese just off the boat who wanted to get started on their own. If the borrower looked like

a good worker, or if the land he wanted to buy showed promise, the Bong family would grant the newcomer the loan. If the coolie who cleared the land couldn't repay his loan, the Bong family took over the land and planted it in rubber.

"They made an extraordinary amount in a very short time, I understand," mentioned Percival. "In the millions. And then she sold the land to our Dindings group, just prior to the time the bottom dropped out of the rubber market. That fiasco led to a complete reorganization in the Dindings Board of Directors.

"The *Tai Tai*, Mrs. Bong, was a shrewd woman. She didn't lose many contests. But I heard that once she lost to a man with no education, who could neither read nor write, but who possessed a native brilliance and an extraordinary amount of luck. In fact, we sat at his grave the other day when we rested on top of Bukit China: Lucky Lim. For a while before the war, the Chinese community in Malacca could have been defined as a social battlefield between these two titans of wealth and will power, *Tai Tai* Bong and Lucky Lim, a battle waged with strained amenities, feigned smiles, and insincere bows."

Ed: Sounds like a company board meeting in downtown Tokyo.

Cin: Percival thought it sounded very English. He told me that he had heard many episodes of Lucky Lim's adventurous life from Lucky's one-time concubine, "while I was negotiating with her about some detail, shall we say?" Percival said delicately. "The woman whom I shall refer to as Madame X, for the sake of her privacy, was at one time the *mummy* I mentioned to you, the person in charge of the taxi dancers at City Park."



According to Madame X, Lucky Lim was born in the heart of China with neither of those names. His given name was Loh Kee or something and, because of the similarity in sound and the aptness of it, his nickname became Lucky. No one knows what his surname was; perhaps he never knew either. So I'll refer to him as Lucky only until we get to where he

acquires Lim as his surname.

At the age of fifteen, he watched as his little sister was sold to a woman who told his parents that she was a broker for a rich family in *Nanyang*¹²⁷ who wanted to adopt a domestic servant, a *moi chai*. His parents, desperate for enough food to feed far too many mouths, saw the selling of a daughter as the solution to two problems: more money for food and one less mouth to feed. Lucky found out only later that most girls sold in such a way were forced to work in brothels.

Then his other baby sister died of starvation; his mother died in childbirth. A fire took the family home and opium took his father. Fortunately, Lucky was high up on a hill which overlooked the plains, searching for a scrap of firewood on a slope where a forest once had grown, when below him he saw one of China's countless warlord-armies¹²⁸ vacuum their way across the valley, drafting every able-bodied man into their ranks. When Lucky came down the hill that day, his five older brothers were all gone. He was alone and lucky to be alive.

It so happened that an old couple in the neighborhood went to their landlady and asked for some relief on their rice taxes. Their son, they explained, had been taken from them by the warlord, and now they had no one to help them with the harvest, and they were too old to do it all themselves. The landlady generously loaned them some money to hire a helper to bring in the harvest so that they could pay their taxes and then repay the loan—with interest. Lucky was there at the right time to get the job.

After finishing the harvest and looking at the unexpected sum of money he had earned, Lucky sat down to figure out how long it would take him to make enough money to buy the land he worked as a tenant farmer. He was good with figures, had a natural aptitude for things like that. Within a few days, using his fingers and toes and those of all the kids in the neighborhood, he had calculated the answer: it would take him only one hundred fifty years to be a free man, providing he didn't have any living expenses during that time.

127 The Chinese name for Southeast Asia means, literally, the South Seas. Ed, ed.

128 There were an estimated fifteen hundred warlords in China between 1916 and 1937. Ed, ed.

He decided that he was just as free now. He owned no land, true, but he was lucky: he owed no one money. He had neither family nor possessions to keep him where he was, and the money in his palm was enough to get him a toehold and an arm around a rope to cling to the side of a barge carrying cargo and three hundred peasant passengers huddled together in the rain as they were tugged and poled down the Yangtze to the great harbor of Hong Kong.¹²⁹

He arrived there with only a single copper coin left in his pocket. Lucky wandered down to the pier, looking for adventure or whatever—he didn't really know what—when he noticed some white devils, tourists, standing at the railing of a luxury steamship, tossing coins into the harbor for Chinese boys to dive after. It was winter and the water was cold; the boys were reluctant to jump in.

A fat man in a double-breasted suit, a pink pig with a round bald head, exposed after his hat blew off into the harbor, held up a large gold coin so that everyone could get a good look. "Let's see if this will get you boys to hop to. Chop! chop!" he shouted, laughing.

The coin caught Lucky's eye. That was what he was looking for! Without a moment's thought, Lucky hurled himself head first off the pier, aiming at the point where the coin arched into the water. He snatched the gold coin about a fathom beneath the surface. It was only then that Lucky learned to swim.

Ed: A very determined man!

Cin: And focused!

Lucky hadn't hung around the wharf long before he learned a few things: one was that there was job opportunity. If he signed up for work on a rubber plantation somewhere in *Nanyang*, he would receive passage by steamboat, an amount of credit at the company store, and a guarantee of employment in a garden setting for as long as he lived, if he desired. He could find himself on a ship to the tropics tomorrow.

He also learned that if he didn't sign up, he still might find himself with the same contract on the same boat tomorrow morning, but with a headache

¹²⁹ Shanghai is the great harbor city at the mouth of the Yangtze, not Hong Kong. Ed, ed.

and a fuzzy memory of the night before. Lucky signed up to become a coolie—that is, he put his fingerprint on a piece of paper, for he could no more write his name than he could fly.

A man of about forty, who looked twice that age because he had given his youth to the rubber plantation, hung around the dock. From him, Lucky learned the truth. "I went to Malacca to work on a plantation for three dollars a month, good money. And the work? Clearing jungle. Insect bites, malaria, ulcers, infected sores, exhaustion, broken arms from fallen trees, mind broken, too, from monotony, loneliness, and boredom. I promised myself to work there for three years only to pay my debt and get back home where conditions had been horrible but tolerable. But after the sun went down and work was through for the day, there was no family to be with on the plantation. Opium was cheap and easy to get. There was gambling and ready credit at the company store.

"I was on that plantation for twenty-three years. I have nothing to show for it, only a story to tell." Lucky slipped a copper coin into the old man's sleeve.

With the gold coin that Lucky had snatched from the water, he bought an old mahjongg set at a pawn shop. That was another thing he had learned by just hanging around the wharf. He had watched and got to know the game.

Just before he got on board the steamship bound for the South Seas, he bought five salted, boiled eggs with what was left of the copper coins in his pocket. He boarded the ship, was assigned a number, and sent to a lower deck and his designated area on the floor, an area about eighteen inches wide and six feet long. Luckily, he owned little. The guy next to him had several bags full of things and almost nowhere to sleep. Lucky loaned him some of his space.

After a week of pickled vegetables served twice daily from slop pails, Lucky brought out one of his salted eggs. He made as much noise cracking it as he could. Then, so that all eyes around him could watch, he took just a pinch of that egg, placed it onto his tongue, savored it, and swallowed with such relish that everyone nearby began to salivate. Then he wrapped up the precious egg and put it away carefully, saving the rest for other meals. All the while, Lucky wore such a look of contentment that by the time he had finished his snack everyone wanted an egg.

He used the profit from the sale of his eggs to finance his mahjongg game. Before long he had lost the mahjongg tiles and everything else he had but for the coarse clothes he wore.

He was penniless again and back to eating pickled cabbage with everyone else, but at least he kept his health. The young man next to him, the one with all the bags, became sick about a week out of Hong Kong and got steadily worse as they steamed southward. Eventually, he succumbed to the heat in that cramped, hellish hold. One morning, he didn't respond when Lucky brought him some tea. Lucky tried to wake him up but couldn't.

Lucky had again become a man of possession; he inherited his neighbor's packages that had migrated over to his area. In this way he came to own a white jacket and shining, cobalt blue silk trousers. Until that moment, the only type of cloth he had ever felt next to his skin had been common nankeen.

He also came into possession of an umbrella with which to protect himself from the tropic rain and, more importantly, from the sun. With these possessions, Lucky developed a plan.

When the steamship arrived in Malacca and was still in the process of docking, accompanied by the usual cacophony of cymbals, gongs, and firecrackers, Lucky put his plan into action. He shimmied up a pipe that he had marked out on the starboard side during the voyage, a package tied to his back. He climbed to the upper deck, to first class. Here he changed into his new clothes. He walked off the boat, undetected beneath his umbrella, hailing a good friend he pretended to see in the crowd. There, he disappeared.

The overseer that day found the shipment of coolies to be one less than the bill of lading indicated and marked down the discrepancy as a suicide at sea. They had his signed fingerprint. If he hadn't died by drowning, and they found him, he would be tried and forced to pay a heavy penalty for attempting to break his contract.

"Personally," confided Percival, "I think he was peppering the story of his life liberally with the spice of imagined events. One thing that makes this story suspect is that the 'pig' ships, as the ships bringing coolies from China were called, were abolished around 1914, yet Lucky claims to have

arrived around 1919. Of course, it could have been an illegal vessel."

Another reason Percival gave to question this version of Lucky's arrival is that large steamships were unable to dock in Malacca even then because of the silting at the river mouth, and a smaller boat was needed to transport the passengers from ship to shore. Yet it is a tribute to the memory of Lucky and his mercurial rise in the community that fantastic legends continue to surround his lowly beginnings in Malacca.

One of these legends is the story of the thirty-five boats. Supposedly, Lucky was wandering around town, looking for something to come his way, when he came across a crowd of people. He squirmed to the front where he could see what was going on. It was the *Tai Jin*, Mr. Big of the Chinese community, sitting in open court. Although Mr. Big was allowed little real power by the British authorities, he could handle minor disputes such as granting permission for a couple to separate and remarry if both parties agreed to the separation. They often agreed angrily and theatrically, pointing out the spots on their spouse's bedsheet of life, which was one of the main reasons why the *Tai Jin*'s court always drew a big crowd.

A case was just then being presented to Mr. Big. It seems a man had sired many children, boys and girls. Some of his boys had died, so his only remaining heirs were sons Number Two, Three, and Nine—for only the boys were considered worthy of receiving any inheritance. In his will, he bequeathed his fleet of thirty-six boats to these sons. The estate was to be divided in the following manner: Son Number Two was to receive half of all the boats, Son Number Three, a third, and Son Number Nine, a ninth.

His very orderly plans were confounded when his fleet was diminished by one when the ship he was sailing sank in a storm, and he drowned. The division of the remaining thirty-five boats was made the more difficult because the three surviving sons stubbornly refused to compromise and give up even a small portion of their inheritance for the sake of resolving the problem.

The *Tai Jin* was stumped. How was he to divide the thirty-five boats fairly without cutting up a couple of the boats into worthless piles of lumber in the process? A boat cut in pieces would not be a boat at all.

Lucky sidled up behind the judge and whispered in the *Tai Jin*'s ear. "Lend me one of your boats, and I will solve your problem in a few

minutes. I promise to give the boat back to you when I finish."

The *Tai Jin* agreed at once, for this would take the crowd's eyes off him for a while and provide the people with the entertainment they came to see, watching this fool take on the impossible problem. He loaned him the boat without hesitation.

Lucky turned to Son Number Two. "You are to receive half of the thirty-five boats. That would be seventeen-and-a-half. Correct? Now that we have thirty-six boats you can have eighteen of them. Are you satisfied with that?" He was.

For the next heir, Son Number Three, he also increased the inheritance from eleven-and-a-fraction to twelve. He also was satisfied. The same was true for Son Number Nine, for instead of three-and-a-fraction, he was given four boats. All three sons were happy to have received more than their actual inheritance. He asked them to say so before the court.

Lucky added up the three portions of the estate—eighteen plus twelve plus four—and came up with the sum of thirty-four. Lucky then returned the borrowed boat to the *Tai Jin*, as promised. He kept the remaining boat for himself and thus began his new career as a fisherman.



At least, this was the story Lucky himself loved to tell about his arrival in Malacca. He was fond of little mental puzzles like this. Once, after he had become a wealthy man, he offered to give a prize to anyone who could tell him how to take twelve soldiers and put them in six rows of four men each. It was a key of sorts to his wealth, he added enigmatically.

Another story, widely accepted as a more factual account of his first days in Malacca, says that he was met at the boat like every other newcomer by a certain group of young men with bulging muscles and heavy brass rings. They asked him if he would like to come over to the *kongsi* association hall for some tea, and perhaps he could be persuaded to join their secret club.

He joined. He went out to the jungle meeting, pierced his middle finger, dripped blood into a silver cup, mingled it with the blood of the others, drank his portion of the mixture, and watched as a cock lost its head as an example of what would happen to him if he were to ever let his buddies down.

He learned the hand signals. In exchange for this, he was offered a high-interest loan to pay off the cost of his passage. He was also given some suggestions as to which plantations were hiring and for what kind of job. The options weren't very promising.

With his future looking grim, Lucky was walking dejectedly across a bridge near the market when he noticed a man at the rudder of a boat on the river. The man was gaunt; his sallow, yellowed skin stuck to his bones like parchment. His head hung with fatigue. He wore only tattered shorts. He had caught Lucky's eyes because he was rocking back and forth, groaning. Suddenly, he stopped. His head jerked up, his milky eyes rolled up into their sockets, and he slumped down on the deck, inert.

Lucky jumped off the bridge into the river, came up beside the boat, swung himself over the gunwale, and grabbed the rudder, managing to avoid a multiple collision. For this he was awarded the dead man's job at the rudder.



Whereas he prevented an accident on that occasion, he nearly caused one on another. It was the festival of the Chinese New Year, a better time than most for poor fishermen since the Chinese love to celebrate with abundance; and, since the word **fish** sounds the same as **abundance**, they tended to eat fish abundantly. Even when the festival was all but over, the demand made it profitable to go out to sea, and a poor fisherman could not afford to pass up the opportunity to earn another half-penny.

Every year on Chap Goh Meh, the last day of the fifteen-day-long Chinese New Year's celebration, the streets of Malacca were bustling with activity: women carried stacks of new clothes, one piece of apparel for each

member of the family, to be blessed by the priest in the temple. Firecrackers exploded, gongs clanged "*kieng-bieng-chiang*" and a lion with a mane of gleaming foil bobbed its head and grimaced above the legs of five men as they pranced from door to door of their paying patrons and danced to frighten away bad demons for the coming year. The ground behind them was red with the shells of exploded firecrackers.

The fifteenth night was a special one for a young *nonya* (half Chinese, half Malay) girl. The *nonya* received no formal schooling; exposure to the public was considered too damaging to her delicate nature. There were quite a number of elders who questioned whether educating women was not a barbarian custom and, at best, a waste of money.

Only occasionally was she allowed to play outside, and then only along the narrow five-foot way. Even then she was under the strictest supervision lest she attract the attention of some unwanted eyes.

The *nonya* were not allowed to go anywhere unchaperoned, and the stern *amah* chaperons kept all hopefuls at bay. The young girl kept her face hidden behind a veil when she did go out, for instance, to visit the temple, and then she was usually carried inside a *redi*, a screened palanquin box, or later, a closed rickshaw.

The fifteenth night of the Chinese New Year was the *nonya's* one chance to be seen, and she took full advantage of it, dressing in jewels that would not have been allowed in China except if worn by the empress herself. She wore an elegant sarong trimmed with gossamer cut-work embroidery along the edges, and a matching blouse, long and fitted to emphasize her delicate curves. Instead of buttons, the blouse was adorned with diamond clasps set in gold that were linked together by a chain of the same gleaming metal.

Constellations, whole galaxies of gems sparkled at her slightest movement as light reflected from rings, brooches, necklaces, earrings, and her shimmering clothing. Her carefully-arranged coiffure was bejeweled with accessories of tortoise shell and mother-of-pearl; she wore a crown and three lacquered hairpins as thick as your finger holding her hair up. The hairpins looked like rudders from the back.

Most essential of all was the *bimpo*, the silk handkerchief-like pouch which hung from her hand, attached to a ring on her finger by a golden tether. What message could not be conveyed by a *bimpo*? It could float like

a butterfly, drawing the eye to a half-hidden smile. A corner could be held in the mouth, showing both childlike innocence and intoxicating suggestion. Or it could be drawn sensually through the fingers of the other hand, innocently mimicking the act of love. No man stood a chance against an artfully manipulated *bimpo*.

On that one night of the year beneath a full moon, the *nonya* would parade through the streets of town in their families' horse-drawn carriages, millions of dollars worth of gems riding on them. By custom, each young lady would make her way down to the bridge carrying a little fruit, something like a grape in size and grapefruit in taste called a "dragon's eye."

When she reached the middle of the bridge, she would close her eyes, inhale the night air deeply, and dream of the face of the man she wished to marry while whispering the words,

*Throw the eyes of a dragon,
Catch a good husband.*

She would then toss the fruit into the river to make her dream come true.

On this particular night, the dragon's eye that the *nonya* from the Bong family, Mei Li, tossed off the bridge was caught instead by Lucky, whose boat chanced to be emerging from under the bridge at that very moment. He looked up and saw fifteen-year-old Mei Li, her face in all its radiant purity reflecting the enchanted blue-white light of the full moon.

If Lucky had been an educated man familiar with the Chinese classics, he could have rhapsodized along with the great minds of all time about how her raven-wing hair floated like a cloud around her egg-shaped face, a moon face the color of creamy asparagus. He would have been able to see her eyebrows as the delicate moths that they metaphorically were alighted above her apricot-pit eyes. He could have so aptly compared her small mouth to that of a fish, her teeth to watermelon seeds, her nose to the stalk of an onion, her ears to tree fungi, her slender young body with just the slightest hint of hips to the curving trunk of a willow tree.¹³⁰

But alas! He was unlearned in the love-inspired poetic utterances of those paragons of yore. He could only stare, breath forgotten, thinking,

¹³⁰ Surprisingly, I found all of these comparisons to actually have been taken from classic Chinese poetry. Ed, ed.

"Hot damn! She's beautiful!"

Mei Li opened her eyes and, looking down, saw him staring at her while holding her dragon's eye in his hand. She had missed the river.

He kept gazing at her. She'd never been seen by any man outside her home before, and his eyes would not leave her. She felt as if she had been caught naked, and the feeling disturbed, yet vaguely excited her.

He held up the "dragon's eye" with a smile. "I'm the one you're dreaming of," she could hear the silent message of his mind through his eyes, and then, in imitation of her, he closed his eyes as if he, too, were making a wish. "I want to marry you," she could read his lips.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw her glowing face disappear behind a flutter of silk as her hand flew over her heart and her hanky followed in an arc. It was then that he almost rammed a boat coming upriver toward him. Luckily, the other boat swerved and the angry fisherman on it called Lucky's attention back to what he should have been doing.

One thing for certain, nobody called out anybody's name. The boatmen in Malacca think it's bad luck; they think that a ghost might hear the name and know how to find a victim. These fishermen are a superstitious lot. For example, they won't ever turn a fish over on the plate, eating it all from one side for fear of causing their boat to capsize.

But back to Lucky. It remains a mystery how Lucky, a farthingless fisherman one day, became one of the wealthiest men in Malacca the next day, and at a time when rubber was selling for less than shrimp paste, when only the astute escaped bankruptcy.

Some people say, quoting a local proverb, that Lucky laid himself down on a bed already made, meaning that when he married the Lim sisters—

Ed: Sisters?

Cin: Yes. Wait, I'll get to that. Some say he married into the Lim family's wealth. Others scoff. What wealth? The Lims were an old family in town, that was true; but they did not become what one would call prosperous until **after** Lucky became one of the family. They certainly hadn't lived on Heeren Street, "Millionaire's Row" before Lucky became part of the family. Besides, this was long after he'd bought the expensive

gifts to propose to Mei Li and was rejected by Tai Tai.

Way before he met the Lims, there were rumors that Lucky was involved in some nefarious trafficking, perhaps in opium. This is a possibility. Although he was never known to use opium, his boats would have given him the means of smuggling high-grade Yunnan mud, as it was known, using any of the tiny offshore islands as a base. It is true that he quickly became a high-ranking official in the local secret society, and that a branch of that society was heavily into selling drugs among other criminal activities. But the society was also active in supporting orphanages and old people's benefit programs and, later, in providing relief for the war victims of Japanese aggression in China. Membership hardly constituted proof of criminal activity.

Although a leader stood to benefit greatly from the drug smuggling, the climb up to that position was very expensive. Every promotion up the ladder from common soldier to Silver Sandal and on to the prestigious position of Red Bamboo, always needed to be paid for, rung by increasingly expensive rung. It would have taken a great deal of money or power of some kind to rise in the mercurial fashion of Lucky.

How someone made his money and how much he had were major topics of interest in Malacca, especially among the Chinese in the business community, so it is all the more amazing that nobody **really** knows how Lucky's huge fortune began. Some say that he got rich gambling, that soon after he first saw Mei Li, he began to frequent the gambling dens, clicking mahjongg tiles regularly with the best but usually ending up the worse for it.

If this is how he got rich, he must have won big, and he must have continued to do so to have amassed his vast fortune. Yet, as far as anyone could remember, Lucky seemed to have been misnamed when it came to playing mahjongg. When people who could recall such things were asked, no one could bring to mind any occasion when Lucky had actually won big, except once.

There was a Chinese miser, Sam Fat So, who lived in Penang and made his millions by supplying rice, opium, and guns to the feuding tin miners in the interior. He was so tight, water wouldn't drip from his fist, much less money. He kept all his money in gold bars, slept on them having had them

chained to him every night, padlocked to his wrists.

He had one major weakness: he loved to gamble. But he was an extremely bad loser, parting with his money as if he were severing off a part of his body. After one very painful loss, he vowed to give up gambling. He wound a rubber band around his little finger to remind himself lest he be enticed.

Then he moved to Malacca where he soon heard about a rich man, Lucky, and his reputation for losing at mahjonn. The temptation was too much for the miser. So a game was arranged, and limits were graciously foregone. When the opium smoke had cleared, Lucky had a large part of Sam's fortune. The miser cut off the last joint of his little finger as a permanent reminder to himself in case of future temptations and then moved on to Singapore.

From that game, Lucky gained a reputation as a gambler, but it had not made his fortune. That game with Sam Fat So had occurred long after his rise in station, family, and wealth.

When asked directly by a child—for although many were curious, who but an innocent child or a mad barbarian would be so rude as to ask such a question—how it was that he came to be so wealthy, his smile would stretch even wider than usual. "Well," he would say, "I'm Lucky. I sort of fell into it."



Although no one discovered how he amassed his original fortune, everyone knew how he spent his money. His first purchase was an engagement ring, lavish with red gold which he himself supplied and garnished with a spray of flawless rubies. Some called it gaudy; others, ostentatious. Everyone in the Chinese community agreed that it was enviably expensive. He had the band engraved with the Chinese characters for her name, "*Mei Li*," beautiful woman. Word got around. Everyone knew it was intended for the Bong girl.

He also bought some fine lady's sarongs, a set of gold buttons for a

blouse, jade droplet earrings, the finest tea from China, an assortment of porcelain, herbs, fruits, and cosmetics, and a year's supply of rhinoceros horn. He had these boxed, festively wrapped, and tied with ribbons.

For himself, he had a new suit tailor-made, fitting his still-trim, young physique, a white linen suit to impress her family that he was a member of the leisure class now and no longer had to worry about getting his clothes dirty. With his new cork hat, he looked like an Englishman from a distance.

Ed: Which isn't necessarily a bad place, mind you, from which to look at an Englishman.

Cin: Finally, he purchased a complete set of betel-nut paraphernalia: the cutters, the crushers, the silver serving box with separate sections for the nut, the leaf, and the white lime. The mixing of these items was symbolic of the union of families. He knew that, without the betel nut, no agreement of the kind he sought would be possible.

Then, with gift boxes in hand, he made his way to Heeren Street. Flanking the heavy lacquered doors along the five-foot way hung two lanterns: the right one bore characters written in bold brush strokes with red ink declaring the name of the illustrious family who lived there; the left one displayed a painting of the family trade. Lucky was guided by the painting, for he could not read a single character. He stopped at a house with a horse and carriage which would indicate that a family of merchants was within. This, he had learned, was where Mei Li lived.

He knocked at the front door. A middle-aged servant lady, probably the former *moi chai*, answered the door, and after much insistence on his part, liberally lubricated by the coins he pressed upon her, she allowed him into the visitors' chamber, the front room. He announced that he wished to see the head of the house and was asked to wait.

Compared to the glare outside, the interior was dark, and it took his eyes a few moments to adjust. The room was severe in its arrangement. Chairs were stationed in a row against both walls, facing each other across the room like soldiers glaring at each other across hostile territory. The window shutters were closed, blocking out the harsh rays that were assaulting the outside. There were seven bars on each window; he counted them in his nervousness.

Directly opposite the main door was a broad archway leading into the

family portion of the house; the screen set there to keep evil spirits from going any farther into the house effectively blocked off his curious view. Complex tangles of leaves and vines were carved on the screens on either side of the arch. He could feel eyes on him from behind one of those screens; Mei Li was there, watching.

A muffled voice was heard, distorted by the large size and emptiness of the next room, then taps of a cane on the black granite floor, and an elderly lady, somewhere in her sixties, appeared from behind the screen. She walked carefully, or rather, minced precisely, confidently. Slow though she was, she created the feeling of a powerful wind sweeping into his presence.

"This is highly irregular. We don't generally entertain *sinkeh*..." She spat out the last word so that it would have its full impact. *Sinkeh* meant guest, but in the Malacca of that day, the word also carried a slur to any Chinese, suggesting he was just off the boat. "...without appointment, that is," she added graciously as was required by Confucian etiquette.

"Mrs. Bong. I have come to ask for the hand of your granddaughter Mei Li in matrimony—"

"Marriage?" She interrupted, astonished at his audacity. "My dear man. Hornbills fly with hornbills, sparrows with sparrows."

"That's for the birds," argued Lucky, not intending the pun. Undaunted, well, in reality quite daunted but stubbornly, Lucky continued, "I come to ask Mei Li to be my—"

"We do have conventions to follow here in Malacca, or perhaps you are too new to know. Traditions wrap us in our life, young man, as the coffin does in death. Traditions are our bond with our ancestors, with the wisdom of the ages, with history, with forever.

"In situations such as yours, for instance, a go-between is usually employed to make a proposal of matrimony. You see, then, if there is a refusal, it is made the more gentle by coming through a third party. There are always good reasons to follow tradition, young man."

He shook his head. "A go-between. Nine out of ten are swindlers, and the other one isn't at home," he argued, repeating a current Chinese proverb.

She retorted with a proverb of her own. "As without clouds in the sky it

cannot rain, so no match can be made without a go-between."

"A go-between would only get in the middle." Lucky parried back, again getting tangled in his words. "It would be unnecessary in this case, a waste of time and money. She would only bring me your gentle refusal. She could never plead my case as well as I." The Tai Tai looked decidedly unconvinced.

"Please listen. This is the twentieth century, madame. Conventions change with the times, even for us Chinese. We Chinese no longer wear an oppressor's Manchu pig-tail, do we? Nor do our women any longer suffer the senseless torture of bound feet."

Too late he remembered her feet! He wished he hadn't said that, but he had. He plodded on, weakly. "Look. I am not for changing everything. I still follow some of the traditions. I offer you betel nut on a silver tray just as a go-between would... but, I, I don't suppose you chew, do you? And... and some gifts—sarongs, plates, deer antler... for the honor of talking with your vintaged—er—venerable person."

Was he getting anywhere with this old woman? The Tai Tai surveyed the gifts, giving Lucky confidence to go on. "And Mrs. Bong, just as any matchmaker would, I come to you with the proper poetic phrase of proposal."

He cleared his throat; he had apparently memorized this part of his speech. "Mrs. Bong, I could not help noticing that there is a flower in your garden, a flower of great beauty and intoxicating fragrance. Madame, I wish to be given the honor of being the one to pluck that flower."

Ed: And she says keep your blossom plucking hands off, right?

Cin: The Tai Tai squeezed out a smile. "That flower of which you are speaking is an exotic bloom, rare indeed. She is a flower we have nurtured in this house these past fifteen years and all in preparation for one special blossoming."

"I offer your granddaughter this ring as a token of—" he fumbled open the ring box, displaying its value temptingly beneath her nose and so close that her eyes crossed to look at it, "as a pledge of my love for her."

Graciously ignoring his interruption, she continued. "The occasion of which I am speaking is her promised marriage to her first uncle's eldest

son. The two of them were betrothed while both were still in their mothers' wombs. I myself brought the two women, both my daughters-in-law, together for tea and a discussion on the subject of their children's future, should one give birth to a boy and the other to a girl."

"Give me a chance," he pleaded. "I have money, more than you think I have. More than you could ever imagine. Tons and tons of gold." She looked at him with apprehension, as if he had gone crazy with this barbarian-like display of emotion and exaggeration.

The thought of Mei Li behind the screen compelled him to continue. "Look at these gifts. Could a poor man offer you these?"

"Possibly. I know that you gamble. Word reaches us of your sudden display of wealth, young man. Now let us imagine a scenario. A poor man wins a large sum at a secret mahjongg game. He hopes to increase his winnings by investing them in a bribe to pay, for instance, a public official for an important appointment or contract. He buys an expensive gift that he really cannot afford and gives it to the official who grants him his desire."

"I swear I love Mei Li."

"Love? Love is the dew on the tip of a blade of grass," she snorted. "How long does it last in the morning?"

He tried again. "I could give you gifts like these every day of the year if you would only promise to delay any wedding for Mei Li until I have time to prove my wealth and my worth to you. Then let her choose. She loves me. I know what her decision would be."

"Who are you?" the Tai Tai frowned. "It isn't only money we look for in our choice of a son-in-law. We must consider the good of the entire Bong family. The clan is more important than the desires of its members. Why should I do anything for the likes of you, someone who does not have the same clan name, someone who probably does not even remember his father?" This last statement was a vicious stab at the young Chinese suitor.

"Now I have no more time to waste on a *sinkeh*. Take your baubles, young man; we have no need of them. And I want you to make no attempt to meet my granddaughter. For everyone's sake, do not try. You stand no chance of success. I assure you that the entire family and all resources necessary will back me in my decision. You have my final word on the

subject.

"Long life and prosperity," she added by way of a courteous farewell, but without conviction.

With that, she clapped her hands, and the servant woman scurried into the room. A glance toward the door was the command. The former *moi chai* opened it and molten sunlight poured in. Lucky walked blindly into the street.

He wandered dejectedly down to the ocean near the mouth of the river and sat despondent watching the tide roll away. He had lost Mei Li. The old hag was not about to change her mind. Him and his big mouth: that crack about bound feet! He could have kicked himself. Still, she deserved it. She did have bound feet and a bound mind, too, he thought.

As he had often done in the last couple of days since he bought it, he took the gold ring from his pocket and looked at the inscription etched on the inside of the band, "*Mei Li*." Those were the only Chinese characters he had ever learned to read; but now he couldn't see them, as tears formed and blurred his vision. Angry at himself for allowing sadness to paint itself upon his face, he flung the costly ring as far as he could into the Strait of Malacca.

That didn't make him feel better. He sulked. He brooded. The longer he thought about what had happened, the angrier he got. Finally controlling the tears, his anger crystallized and, like a polished lens, focused onto the *tai tai*, Mrs. Bong.

He would show her! He would get a name for himself, and he would make that name into the wealthiest, and therefore, the most respected Chinese family in all of Malacca. Before he was through, he wanted that old lady's face to turn blue with envy and regret that he was not her granddaughter's husband.



He got his name Lim through marriage. This happened shortly after the wedding of Mei Li to her first cousin. A certain *Nonya* lady named Lim

Kim Neo or, in English, Lady Kim Lim, had died suddenly and before she had been blessed with a husband. The Lims were an old Malacca Chinese family, *Baba* Chinese, who maintained much of the Chinese religion and customs. They believed, for instance, that keeping the spirits of a departed one happy was important to the well-being of the living. A daughter who died unwed was said to make for an unhappy ghost and was not pleasant to host.

The Lims were looking for a suitor who would be willing to spend a few days in connubial spirituality—nothing physical, mind you—with the deceased Lady Kim so that her ghost would be less likely to become a nuisance. For this, they were willing to pay the groom a sum of money, but it hadn't been enough to attract anyone—until now. Lucky applied for the position. He was particularly suited to be her husband since he was from the same clan, or so he said, although no one had ever heard him call himself Lim before.

Hasty preparations were made for the wedding feast. The mother ran out and stopped a hawker carrying noodles and a coal stove in baskets hung from a pole that was balanced on his shoulders. From another hawker who happened by, she bought some sticky tapioca cakes. The priest was brought to the house from the nearby temple; and in an intimate home-altar ceremony, Lucky was wed to Lady Kim or, rather, to a photograph of her. While looking at his bride's picture, Lucky felt thankful that the Lady Kim was already enjoying the banquet in the heavenly halls of her ancestors and not sitting beside him today as his bride, slurping long-life noodles through her buck teeth.

After he had become simultaneously a Lim, a husband, and a widower, Lucky was not prepared for yet another change in fortune that day. He was informed that he was now eligible, nay, as a member of the family, he was **duty-bound**, to marry Lady Kim's younger spinster sister, Lady Dim, in her mid thirties.

This unexpected offer caught him completely by surprise. He couldn't think of a net of words that would trap his thoughts that were swimming in so many directions at once. He considered claiming to be unworthy of licking the family's feet, but perhaps this was not the right thing to say so shortly after he had married into the family. Seeing no other choice, he accepted the proposition enthusiastically. "I—I am overwhelmed by the...

by the honor," he told his new in-laws.

The bride then appeared, already dressed for the ceremony. Her shoes were decorated with delicate beads in a floral design. Her large feet provided ample room for a life-size hibiscus in beadwork on each shoe. Her brocade wedding dress was as elegant as it was voluminous. The Lims had outdone themselves, Lucky thought. Such extravagance! His poor bride must be suffering in this heat beneath so many layers of clothing.

But, at the end of the abbreviated ceremony, when her veil had been lifted and he set eyes on his bride for the first time, he learned the truth: extra layers of clothing were not the cause of the bride's volume; Lady Dim could have filled out a tent. "Oh, boy!" he said when he got his voice back. "More to love!"

It was soon after this second marriage that the fortunes of the Lim family changed. The family started a coffee shop, a laundry, a bus company, an ice factory and cold storage, a pineapple shipping business, and a gold shop. Every new business in town seemed to be backed by the Lims, and this at a time when others were closing their shops, when, at night, the five-foot way all over town was crowded with sleeping squatters desperate for a job and thankful for shelter from the rain. Where did Lucky Lim's money come from? No one knew.

He bought the house on Heeren Street directly across the road from the Bong's home. People said he had been taken to the cleaners, had paid way too much, far more than the going rate for that house.

Mei Li, if you remember, had married her first cousin, Tian Lye. They resided in one of three front rooms of the expanded mansion, the room, it so happened, that was directly opposite Lucky's master bedroom. The new Mrs. Dim Lim, Lucky's wife, slept in another room. Three sons and a daughter were the results of his infrequent visits to that room.

It was shortly after the Lims took up residence across the street that the feud between Tai Tai and Lucky broke out into the open. The day after Lucky moved in, a mirror appeared in front of the Bong archway, an eight-sided mirror with magic hexagrams intended to reflect bad luck, thus preventing it from flowing into the front door.

The implication to the new neighbor was obvious. So that same afternoon, a similar mirror, slightly larger, appeared above the Lim lintel.

The next day, Tai Tai retaliated with two large mirrors. Lucky saw hers and raised two mirrors facing hers and then raised one more for good measure. Tai Tai bought a bigger mirror. Lim bought one, too, and then he bought the mirror factory, as well, and gave every worker a paid holiday.

Tai Tai sent to Shanghai for heavy artillery, two huge mirrors blessed by a master Taoist doctor of the wind and the water. Before these mirrors arrived, however, the local constabulary put a stop to the battle. They forced both families to remove the mirrors, claiming they were a traffic hazard. They were reflecting so much lantern light at night that the carriage horses were getting spooked every time they passed what had become known as the Hall of Mirrors on Heeren Street. Only one small mirror each was allowed to stay. When the Tai Tai took down her mirrors, she defiantly hung a flute as a protection against evil.

Incidentally, when Tai Tai's large mirrors finally arrived from Shanghai, she had them hung in the ancestors' hall to replace the ones she had put there so many years before. It was one of those mirrors that eventually fell on her and killed her years later.

Ed: There's something to reflect upon.

Cin: Isn't it?

When Lucky remodelled the mansion, he chose a color combination of cream, chocolate, and strawberry, with a dash of Japanese tea. The staid gray tones of the interior walls were trimmed in vibrant turquoise and pink. The front room was painted mauve with green doors and a ceiling of vivid blue.

Ed: I can't imagine any color combination that would be more jarring to me!

Cin: Me, neither. I'd love to have the money to do that to a house some day, experiment on the wild frontiers of interior decorating.

He spared no expense. He hired the best high craftsmen who lived only for the pencil-sized pellets of Yunnan mud they received in the morning and the evening, men who spent their health and vision meticulously carving opium dreams out of hard wood into three-dimensional scenes of tigers facing off in the forest beneath flowering trees and birds in flight with flowing plumage. Beneath their skillful knives were born vines

twisting in precisely mirrored curlicues or geometric mazes framing broad, arched doorways. The archway leading to the room of the ancestors' tablets was framed in ivory and had etched glass on both sides. The balustrade of the staircase was intricately carved teak and painted in many pastel shades; it would not have been out of place at the Palace of Versailles. Electric candles lit the crystal chandeliers in the first three front rooms.

He had marble laid on the floor and part way up the walls. In the squared area of an interior courtyard, he created a large chess board with black and white marble imported from Italy. On the wall of this courtyard open to the sky, he channeled the rainwater from the roof to flow through a pipe and spill out of the mouth of a carp and into a lotus pond. On a mother-of-pearl inlaid blackwood cabinet shipped from China stood glazed German beer mugs, a miniature brass Big Ben clock and assorted bric-a-brac from the Ming Dynasty. On the wall hung a portrait of a young Queen Victoria surrounded by her adoring family.

It was eccentric, eclectic, expensive, and chaotic. Almost everyone in the Chinese community coveted the extravagance. Tai Tai Bong found it atrocious, done in there-goes-the-neighborhood bad taste. She was convinced that everything Lucky Lim did was intended to irritate her personally. This was especially true after she learned of his, or, rather, the Lim family's donation to the Temple of the Turquoise Cloud fund: it had exceeded just slightly that of the Bong family. The Bongs had always been **first**, ever since her husband had died and she became the *tai tai*. She was not comfortable in any other position than Number One.

When her neighbor, Lucky, bought that flashy convertible-top motorcar, gray with lacquer-black fenders and a sphinx at the point of the hood,¹³¹ then honked its horn right outside her door, reminding her of the mating call of a weak drake in the wetlands on her family's property back in China, she knew he was doing this to irritate her. Must he make so much noise?

Her complaint reached his ears, and Lucky sent an expensive sandalwood fan from China by way of apology. The fan had twenty folds. This made the Tai Tai even more furious; it was such an obvious slight. Everyone but an oaf or a white devil knew that a woman's fan has at least thirty folds!

131 Obviously, an Armstrong Siddeley. Ed, ed.

Then, one day, appearing unnoticed in her granddaughter's bedroom, she caught a glimpse of Mei Li looking out the window. And through an upper-story window across the street, Tai Tai caught a glimpse of that Lim fellow standing in the shadows. He blinked his eyes. She couldn't be sure from where she was standing, but she thought she saw her granddaughter blink her eyes in response. It was a kind of code, Tai Tai was certain. She didn't like it and wasted no time taking care of it.

She charged across the street on her tiny feet, pounded on the Lim front door, and was invited into the visitors' room by a servant. The colors in that room made her even more agitated. She demanded to see Mr. Lim at once.

She heard his voice from behind the screen, inviting her into the inner chamber—highly irregular. When she entered, she found him holding a book open in his hands. He looked up from his book and said, "Ah, Madame Bong, welcome. How pleasant for you to come over."

"My granddaughter is a married woman," Tai Tai blurted out, going straight to the point. "You are a married man. I would appreciate it if you would follow the rules of propriety with regards to her, even if you do not wish to do so in other matters of your own concern. In particular, I wish for you to refrain from making insinuating eye gestures toward my granddaughter or from receiving any either. I am embarrassed for the both of you."

"I have nothing more to say." She turned and began to make her way steadily, determinedly, out of the room. She stopped at the doorway and turned for a parting shot. "Incidentally, you are holding your book upside down."

She turned to leave but stopped once more. "Furthermore, anyone but an uneducated fool like yourself, Mr. Lim, would know the difference between a fan for a man and one for a woman. A woman's fan, for your information, has more folds." She left.

Lucky sighed with relief. Why was it that when someone had nothing more to say, you never heard the end of it? She was right about one thing, though. Lucky had been completely in the dark about the fan. He hadn't known the difference and would have underestimated the importance a Chinese of her class would put in the number of folds in a fan; but when he found out, he couldn't help smiling. He probably would have sent her the

same fan had he known the difference.

The Tai Tai had been correct in her assessment of the man: many of the things Lucky did were intended to irritate her. Whenever he could, he would start up a business that competed head-on with one of the Bong concerns. Take his new cracker factory, for instance, that mass-produced rice crackers and thus undercut her labor-intensive and therefore, more expensive *keropok*. Further, by combining the delivery of his crackers with the ice from his cold storage, he was able to bring down distribution costs and undercut her price even more. Her share of the Malacca cracker market dwindled to insignificance.

As Lucky's wealth grew, his power increased. He used it to contravene the Tai Tai's wishes—expressed through her oldest son—at the temple and *kongsi* meetings, subtly asserting his control over every element of the community.

When he learned of the Tai Tai's battle with her husband over his concubines, he thought of another place he could press her buttons. Lucky had always been in the habit of visiting brothels, especially when there was a rumor that a new girl had arrived. According to Percival's informant, Madame X, Lucky had a reputation as a strange customer even before she met him, preferring to wait a long time in the lobby, sitting beside the altar to the red-eyed god—for brothels, too, had need of their deity.

Even after Lucky chose a girl—and it was always and only the new girl who had just arrived—and followed her to a room, he never asked for sex. Instead, he would ask her age and if she knew who her family was? Questions like that. Many a country girl from China had been kidnapped or sold by starving parents and sold again into such a life. It was as if Lucky was looking for someone in particular in the brothel. In fact, he told Madame X years later, after she had been his token concubine for a while, that she reminded him somehow of the little sister he had lost.

Madame X was invited to move from the brothel into a house on Jonkers Street—the street parallel to Heeren—a house bought by Lucky. It was not as ornate as his, but it was large, well-furnished, and conveniently abutting his mansion. He could slip out the back door of his house and into the back door of her house in one easy motion.

Madame X thought the reason Lucky had her stay there was mostly for

show. At that time in Malacca, if any man of Lucky's status did not keep a second woman, his sexual preferences were discussed behind his back. You might say he needed a concubine for respectability's sake. She was half his age, but the discrepancy was not particularly unusual where concubines were concerned.

Privately, he treated her like a sister, not a wife, and like a friend, never a sex partner. He hired a tutor to teach her to read, and would spend hours with her as she read to him books of Chinese philosophy and mail order catalogues. He himself never learned to read. He took her traveling with him—to Singapore on shopping sprees and to the ballrooms of Shanghai where they danced the Charleston beside Henry Pu Yi, China's last emperor. Through the Crash of '29 and into the drab Depression years, the two of them continued to tour the world on luxury cruise ships, visiting sites in Europe such as the Acropolis, the Eiffel Tower, and the Louvre.



It was on their way back from France that they met the Japanese tennis star Teruo Tanaka and his pretty young bride Kiko.

Ed: Kiko? Doesn't sound like a Japanese name to me. Maybe Kiku or Akiko?

Cin: Don't know. That was what she was called in Malacca.

Anyway, they were all on the same ship, but Lucky had never really talked to the taciturn Tanaka, who brooded in his deck chair and, then, later on during the voyage, in his room. The year was 1937, and Tanaka had gone to France with high hopes of showing the world, through his tennis talent, yet another reason why the Japanese should be considered at least equal to Europeans. Defeated in the first round in straight sets, humiliated, he left the clay court with only love, not having won even one point in the match game.

Ed: Ouch! Annihilated.

Cin: Yup!

Now on his return trip, as he approached his homeland, he became

increasingly aware that his defeat was not the politically correct thing to do at that moment in history. Japan was flexing her muscles; there was no room for a weakling.

Then, three-quarters of the way south through the Strait of Malacca, world class tennis star Teruo Tanaka took a dive off the ship and into oblivion, yelling in the middle of a storm either "Banzai!" or "Mama!" No one could hear him above the thunder.

But they had heard Kiko. She had seen him jump and screamed. She couldn't stop screaming. In her hysteria, she, too, would have jumped if Lucky Lim hadn't run and grabbed her. The doctor gave her a sedative and insisted that the ship make an unscheduled stop in Malacca so that she could be taken ashore to the nearest hospital for a rest. This saved Lucky an unwanted trip to Singapore and back, since large ships no longer made regular stops at the harbor that had long since silted up.

Kiko was taken to the hospital. Here she met Warren Gilbert, Percival's predecessor at the rubber plantation. He was laid up with malaria and completely disgusted with himself for his weakness in succumbing to illness. He had been reluctant to admit that he had been feeling light-headed and then shivering in the heat, and had waited far too long to come in from the rain forest for treatment. It had become necessary for his "boys" to haul him out from the campsite in the interior—where he was surveying the jungle before clearing it to plant more rubber trees. He had been carried for hours on a makeshift bamboo stretcher, delirious with fever.

The doctor ordered Warren to rest and recuperate, though it was difficult for him to remain still for long. He felt uncomfortable in hospital clothing, and had, just that afternoon, sneaked out to play in a rugby match.

Kiko had been sitting in the shade out on the veranda and had seen him stealing in through the garden entrance and back to his room. Half an hour later, he came out on the veranda once more, wearing khaki pants and a T-shirt, with a towel draped over his shoulder and hair wet from a shower. He lit his pipe, puffed on it impatiently, and paced back and forth for a minute or more, until an Indian man arrived and handed him a bottle in a bag. He gave the man some money and waited for the change.

Warren then disappeared down the hall and returned with a pail of ice,

some bottles of tonic, and two glasses. He popped the cap of a bottle of a tonic by pressing it with his thumb against the bowl of his pipe.

"What are you in for?" he asked her, acknowledging for the first time that he had seen her in the shadows. Perhaps he had known she was there all the time.

"Beg pardon?" Kiko answered timidly.

"The hospital. What's wrong with you?" She told him what had happened, bursting into tears when she came to the part about her husband's suicide. Warren was attentive but did not express any sympathy. He put one hand in the pocket of his khaki shorts and pulled out some matches to relight his pipe.

"You mean to tell me there is nothing wrong with you except for something in your head? Me, I'm embarrassed to have let a bloody—beg your pardon—a little malaria bacteria put me down on my back! All that is keeping you down is a thought." His words shocked her out of her growing hysteria. His eyes never left her.

Then, changing the subject abruptly, "I suppose every man who meets you tells you that you have beautiful features. Not that those tears are doing anything for you, mind you. You would look a lot better with a smile." She bravely managed a thin smile.

"There, that's more like it." He paused to take a puff. "You know what I think? I think you're really crying because you feel guilty for not loving your husband enough when he was alive."

The truth of these words stunned her! But how could she have been expected to love him? The marriage, not quite a year old, had been arranged between her noble family and a Japanese industrial leader. Her husband was handsome, intelligent, rich, and gentle—as long as his very precise standards were followed. She had been trying to please Tanaka-san, her husband Teruo, trying so hard that there had been no time to get to love him.

Before she could answer, Warren changed the subject again. "Come on. Let's pretend that neither one of us is sick. Come over here, and I'll teach you how to make a gin and tonic. First, go easy on the tonic..."

Before the end of the month, Kiko had moved in with Warren out on the

plantation. He taught her how to drive his car so that she could go shopping for fresh food at the market in Malacca; she had become responsible for his house, his kitchen, and his bed. He was her security, as solid as a rock, a strong man who wouldn't kill himself, who would rather kill others than allow them to threaten him or anything that was his. And she was his.

He worked hard on the plantation. He had a well-earned reputation as a severe but fair, consistent boss. He was an expert engineer, surveying the land in the foothills of Gunung Ledang near Asahan and channeling the water to where it would do the most good and the least damage. He had even created for himself a private golf course with water hazards.

When they came to town, Kiko would often be seen sitting on the slope of St. Paul's Hill, watching from a distance while Warren played cricket on the *padang*, the new field made from silt dredged from the mouth of the river. The town's other Japanese, Zemba, was often on the field. He had learned to play cricket when he studied in England.

Zemba was a professional photographer who often on weekends when his studio was closed got on his English bicycle—the Japanese ones rusted too fast for him, he told everyone, laughing nervously—and rode it into the countryside to take nature photos or shots of bridges and roads. On the cricket field, he was known for his extraordinary googly.

Percival guessed that if I didn't know what a crumpet was, I wouldn't know a googly either. A googly, he explained, is a ball that is "bowled on the pitch" with a spin; it is thrown in such a way that it bounces at an unexpected angle.

Warren took perverse pleasure in batting a "century" against Zemba—which I learned means a hundred runs in a single innings, not inning as in baseball, "innings," Percival insisted. For Warren, winning the game seemed to be his patriotic duty, proving the superiority of his race and their right to rule over others. In a way, it was similar to the way he expressed his masculinity to Kiko so often in their bedroom.



That was at the beginning of 1937, not a comfortable time to be a Japanese in Malacca, especially in the Chinese business section, where the conversation now always included news of the latest Japanese atrocities in China. The mood turned especially ugly when news reached Malacca a day after the incident on the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking, the day that the violence of World War II began.

Ed: I thought World War II started when Hitler attacked Poland.

Cin: Check the records.¹³²

Kiko had driven into town and parked her car at an angle to the curb in order to run into a store and get some cooking oil and sesame seed for Warren's evening meal. While she was in the store, people began to gather around the nearby Chinese newspaper office where a man who could read, a street-side storyteller with his box for donations in front of him, was recounting what had happened to the majority who could not read: the aggressor Japanese Army had bared the fangs of war; shots had been fired, killing Chinese soldiers in the very heart of the homeland, on the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking.

The news of war caused a shock wave through the crowd. Business came to a standstill. A hawker set down his pole and baskets and went to join the angry crowd that was gathering around the man reading the newspaper, leaving his load on the ground right at the spot where he had stood when he first heard the news, behind the back wheels of Warren's car.

When Kiko came out of the shop, she noticed the mob, felt its ugly mood, and decided to move on as fast as possible. She could feel the venom in some of their stares; she had seen those stares before, but never so many as now, and never so intensely.

In her haste, she backed over the vendor's baskets. His only means of livelihood lay crushed beneath a machine driven by a Japanese. The symbolism was as unmistakable as it was explosive. The mob turned on Kiko and would have hurt her had Lucky Lim not appeared at that moment and whisked her out of the car and into the safety of one of his offices nearby, locking the doors behind him. He then calmly offered her tea,

¹³² I checked the records; she is right. Since the Marco Polo Bridge incident on July 7, 1937 predates any attack made by Hitler, this date could very well be considered the start of World War II hostilities. Ed, ed.

suggesting she wait where she was until Mr. Gilbert could be notified to come to escort her safely home.

While this whole drama was taking place on the street, Zemba, the Japanese photographer, was snapping pictures of the leaders in the crowd. His camera was set up on a tripod in the shadows and pointing out of a second-story window above his studio. He was observed by no one.

Lucky had risked a great deal to come to Kiko's rescue, especially after the humiliation he had suffered at the Tai Tai's hands less than a month earlier.

After King Edward VIII of England had abdicated in order to marry a divorcee, King George VI¹³³ was crowned to take his place. In the coronation festivities celebrated by "the King's Chinese," as the Straits Chinese of Malacca liked to call themselves then, Lucky suffered a severe loss of face before the entire Chinese community and angered the British administration as well; and this was all because of a successful scheme of the Tai Tai, Mrs. Bong.

For years, she had been looking for a way to get back at Lucky Lim for all the irritation he had caused her. After seeing him hold his book upside down, an idea began to develop. She was certain now of what she had always suspected: that Mr. Lucky Lim was illiterate. This was not unusual in Malacca, but it seemed odd that a man of his standing in the community should not be able to read. What was even more useful for her purpose, he was apparently embarrassed about his illiteracy. He had tried to keep the fact a secret, resorting to devices such as insisting that all contracts be read aloud so that both parties would agree and there would be no fine print to complain about later. Then he would fumble in his pocket for glasses that he always seemed to have forgotten. He used his carved jade chop, a stamped signature, to sign agreements.

Tai Tai's plan was carefully thought out to expose Lucky to extreme difficulties because of his illiteracy. At the temple meeting, she had her eldest son, a member of the main temple committee along with Lucky, suggest that the Chinese community, especially the long-established *Baba*

133 King Edward VIII (1894-1972) abdicated on December 11, 1936.

King George VI (1895-1952) was crowned on May 12, 1937. Ed, ed.

families, show their solidarity behind the newly-crowned king. They would do this, if everyone agreed, by the ancient Chinese tradition of hanging up slogan banners. There were to be two banners from each family, brushed in their finest calligraphy: one expressing the majesty of the British monarchy and the other one referring to nature.

At the meeting, everyone but Lucky was eager to have a try at versifying. Tai Tai's son noticed Lucky's reticence, so he maneuvered over to him for a private conversation. His expression of concern opened Lucky's heart who then revealed his embarrassing secret. No problem, said Mr. Bong. He would write the banners for Lucky. He was a master of many styles of calligraphy, so no one would be able to compare his banners with Lucky's and find them written by the same hand. Only the two of them need know their secret.

And so it came to be. On the day that Malacca celebrated the crowning of a new English king on the other side of the planet, the local Chinese built congratulatory arches over the road by the bridge in the heart of town. Here all the families on Heeren Street proudly displayed their loyalty banners. The beautiful Chinese characters on Lucky Lim's first banner read:

*The British Raj
Shines down upon the planet
Like a heavenly body.*

The second banner extended the metaphor:

*The waning moon
is at its apex
before the rising sun.*

Ed: O-oh! That Tai Tai was insidious!

Cin: You got it! As she intended, the message, which he could not read, was signed with Lucky's chop, which everyone in town would recognize. The banners were quite clear; to the Asian mind at that time, Lucky Lim had come out blatantly declaring that the mighty British Raj didn't stand a chance against the power of the Japanese Rising Sun.

This angered the whole Chinese community against Lucky for coming out in favor of the hated Japanese. The aggressive Japanese Army had by

then, already taken a huge slice out of the northern homeland and set up its own puppet state.¹³⁴ The Japanese were the hated enemy of everyone with Chinese blood at home or abroad.

Several weeks later, when the messages on the banners were translated to the British authorities by one of Tai Tai's sons and the symbolic meaning of Lucky Lim's verses painstakingly explained until the implication was finally understood, they, too, were outraged at the affront.

Thus it was that when the call went out later for donations to help the Chinese war effort, the Anti-Japanese-Expansionism-Backing-Association, Lucky was maneuvered into a position where he had no choice but to be very, very generous, more so after his display of sympathy towards that Japanese woman the day the war began. To the Chinese, Lucky seemed to be a traitor. How did he know she wasn't a spy? Her very presence was a danger to the whole Chinese community.



The war in China continued for five years before it spread to Malaysia. Then on December 8, 1941, a few hours before Pearl Harbor was bombed, Japanese forces landed on the east coast of the Malayan Peninsula. The British responded by sending two heavy battleships against the attackers without air support, "an unconscionable military blunder," commented Percival. The Japanese sent out planes with bombs and torpedoes, and within the hour the *HMS Repulse* was de-pulsed and the spelling was changed on the *HMS Prince of Whales*. In other words, they both were sunk.

The local militia, hastily organized only a month before to protect the British territory, not to guard Malacca, was sent to Singapore to bolster the defense of that \$63 million harbor. The Japanese swept down the peninsula on their bicycles along British-built roads that snaked through rubber plantations. They were guided by some very fine maps and photo prints of

¹³⁴ In 1932, Japan took over Manchuria, changed its name to Manchukuo, a satellite government under a titular sovereign, the last Manchu emperor. Ed, ed.

strategic bridges which had been sent to them by the Emperor's spies who had been networking the area for a decade.

When the invaders' tires went flat, they commandeered any other bicycle available, preferring an expensive, sturdy English Raleigh to the rusted-out products of their own country. When no other bicycles were available, they rode on the rims.

At one point, a group of defenders, admittedly under-armed and unsupported, with morale no higher than the shins of a centipede, heard the oncoming rattle of metal on gravel and assumed it was a division of tanks just over the hill. They fled in panic. It was only bicycles without tires.

Ed: And tireless attackers.

Cin: Yes. The Japanese arrived so swiftly that few of the citizens of Malacca were able to flee. There were several reasons for this. First, the Malacca people needed to get permission to leave from reluctant British authorities; and second, they had to search for an ever-scarce ticket on a ship. Lucky, being the owner of one of the two steamship companies plying the local waters, could have gotten tickets to leave, of course. But when he heard that the Tai Tai Bong had refused to leave Malacca, and that her granddaughter Mei Li would stay on with her, he decided to stay too.

Lucky gave up his place on the ship to a surprised and thankful business associate who was desperate to leave. No wealthy Chinese who stayed would escape execution, it was believed; Lucky was facing his own death when he gave up that ticket. He told Son Number Two to take care of his mother and sister on their trip to safety in India. (Son Number One had joined the militia in Singapore; Lucky's youngest son was hiding out on a rubber plantation and refused to leave with his mother.)

Lucky's family boarded the last ship to leave Malacca; it was a day of panic as people fought for this last chance to escape. As the launch edged away from the pier, tears of despair were shed by those left behind, tears of guilt by those on board knowing their place on board had forced others to stay and face torture and death.

After a half-day at sea north of Malacca, just past sunset, this passenger ship sailing under a flag of truce was sunk by a Japanese sub, losing all on board.

The British took resolute action. They sank their own dredges to make their harbors worthless; they bombed bridges behind them and tore up tracks; they destroyed everything that might delay the Japanese juggernaut. Little, however, delayed them and nothing stopped the advancing army.

The government of Malacca sprang into action. The godowns (the warehouses) were opened and the goods were distributed so that they would not fall into enemy hands. To avoid Hong Kong's fate when the conquering Japanese soldiers got drunk on pillaged liquor and went on a crazed rampage of rape and destruction, the Malaccans poured a whole warehouseful of whiskey into the river. The work of smashing the bottles was so strenuous that the laborers involved had to be carried away on stretchers, laughing. Prewar hysteria, no doubt. These workers were replaced by sober Indian Muslims.

Troops were sent everywhere to make sure that anything and everything that might aid the enemy was made unavailable to them. They were thorough in their task; even the contents of goldsmiths' shops were made "safe" from the Japanese. Finally, the officials sent out reassuring words to calm the alarmed populace. "Everything is being done to alleviate your difficulties. A committee is being set up...."

Then these same British officials gathered their immediate local-born staff members for a hastily-arranged luncheon at the office. Here they slipped each of the underlings some severance pay and, with a jolly pat on the back, a stiff upper lip, and a "bloody sticky wicket, what?" sent them home early for the day, suggesting that they take a long holiday from work. These representatives of the British government then quietly slipped out the back door, checked to be sure it was locked, whistled their way to a waiting transport, hopped in, and toddled off. Malacca was without a government.

This was two days before the Japanese arrived. During this time, everyone became a law unto himself; looting was rampant. Strangely, Lucky, though purportedly very high up in one of the secret societies, was victimized by a series of raids on several different businesses he owned. Worse, his vacant mansion on the shores of Kelebang just north of town was ransacked, its furnishings taken; everything, including the bathroom sink, had been ripped out. His safe had been pried out from its niche, torched open, and its contents removed, the thieves leaving the empty vault lying like a carcass on the front lawn of the mansion. Lucky's name had

become ironic.

Out on the rubber plantation, Warren Gilbert had delayed his departure to the very last minute until he completed what he considered to be his patriotic duty. He had been busy preparing for the change in administration by destroying the most useful water channels on his plantation, sabotaging his machines, and burning the rubber sheds.

He delayed so long that he had put his life in extreme danger. Kiko, as a Japanese, had little to fear, but Warren had to escape or face death. She drove him to Lucky Lim's home on Heeren Street while he hid beneath a blanket on the floor of the back seat. Soldiers entered his plantation home from the garden as their car sped down the driveway.

Kiko and Warren arrived at Lucky's door as troops were appearing at the outskirts of Malacca. Kiko pleaded with her Chinese benefactor to come to her aid once again and let Warren take one of his fishing boats. He had only one boat remaining, but this being a life or death situation, yes, Warren could have it.

The planter seldom thanked anyone of a different race and found it embarrassing to do so now; so he left it unsaid. He made his way to the boat at the river mouth and sailed to a nearby island. He waited there till night fell to cover his perilous journey southward to Singapore. From there he was evacuated to Australia.

When the Japanese vanguard reached Malacca, photographer Zemba was there with his camera to capture the proud moment on film. He then disappeared into his back room, reappearing a few minutes later in the full-dress uniform of a major in the emperor's Imperial Army, complete with a ceremonial sword hanging at his left side.

Ed: His *katana*. Those are beautiful swords.

Cin: That's right. Major Zemba took charge of the situation. Those who had been most vocal in their condemnation of the Japanese invasion of China and those who had been most generous in giving money to aid the enemy of the Japanese emperor were sought out immediately. One of these Chinese community leaders was, of course, the son of Tai Tai Bong, the one whose calligraphy had been so much admired, the one who had helped Tai Tai perpetrate that little joke on Lucky with the banners. Even the executioner commented on the beauty of Bong's brushwork only moments

before the fatal stroke severed his head from his body. His head and those of several others of the Chinese community were impaled on stakes and set up around the clock tower near the bridge.

Next they went after the families of these men, killing them wholesale in a frenzy of revenge for the death of their brothers on the Chinese front. Tai Tai and the women and children in her household managed to avoid detection during this initial search. Across the street, the Japanese found Lucky alone in his house, looking out from his bedroom window, blinking his eyes.

In the house behind Lucky's, the one facing Jonkers Street, they found only the young concubine, our Madame X, who now felt that it was a good idea to pick up a little Japanese. She agreed to move in with Major Zemba in his commandeered mansion. She had always thought Zemba was kind of cute, she told him. Why hadn't he ever come over and visited her before? Maybe he could think of something to do during a private photo session?

Ed: And see what developed?

Cin: You got the picture.

All the leading members of the Chinese community were brought into the *kempetei* headquarters, the Bright Star Charitable Association Building, Meng Seng Heng or something. When soldiers took Lucky there, the thick wooden doors were closed. The soldiers pounded on the the heavy brass lion's-head knocker and the doors opened. His fate appeared sealed as he stepped across that threshold. He was ushered through a large hall with huge pillars it would take two men to put their arms around; this he knew because two men were at that moment strained and chained to each other's wrists around one of the columns. Lucky was kicked up the broad staircase at the back and into a special room for questioning.

"Please to cooperate," said his Japanese interrogator. "Where is your hidden gold? We want to be your friend." If answers didn't come readily in this room, the prisoner was taken to another where a hose was inserted into his anus and water was pumped in. Then an ex-sumo wrestler was brought in for trampoline practice on the "befriended" person's stomach.

Ed: With friends like these who needs an enema?

Cin: Lucky found himself in a squeeze, all right.

"Wait," Lucky pleaded. How, he asked them, could the Japanese think of him as a leader of a secret society with hidden gold when everyone knew that his businesses and even his beach home had been looted of everything? Would he have ordered his own home to be robbed?

His captors thought he might have done just that in order to throw off suspicion. What about all those large donations he had made to the Chinese cause? They had a record of his many contributions.

Lucky claimed that he had always thought his money went to support hospitals—civilian hospitals—and to buy dolls for children in orphanages run by Japanese nuns. Never had he imagined his money would be used to buy arms to help fight against the Japanese. He didn't know much about these things; he was not a fighting man. He preferred a good game of mahjongg. They weren't, by any chance, interested in a quick game? They weren't.

The truth is that he wouldn't have convinced his own mother of his innocence. He was marked down for a full-body enema until he spilled some information about where he had hidden his gold, and then they might be merciful and kill him.

His wrists were tied up with thin metal wire, and he was hung from the rafters. He felt his pants being ripped off and an uncomfortable sensation as if he were having his prostrate checked by a robot with elephantitis.

Ed: You mean elephantiasis.

Cin: Whatever. It didn't feel good. This was followed by increasing stomach cramps as the water entered from behind, then a feeling of nausea... he fainted.

When he came to, he was back in his house, sitting propped up in his bathroom. Kiko had heard about his arrest and interrogation at the Bright Star Charitable Association Building and had rushed into town from the plantation. Using Zemba's own photographs, she pleaded that this man, Lucky Lim, had saved her life during an anti-Japanese demonstration over the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and was no enemy.

That particular photo was ambiguous. For all anyone could tell, he was accosting Kiko, not helping her. The picture alone would not have proven Lucky worthy of a continued head-body connection had Zemba not taken

another photo on the day when the Malacca "King's Chinese" celebrated the coronation of King George VI. The banner of the Lim house, written by Lucky himself, for so the name chop clearly declared, proclaimed in very obvious oriental innuendos that the Rising Sun would soon shine brighter than the Raj. On the strength of this irrefutable evidence, Lucky was freed.



Meanwhile, Singapore, with its big guns pointing out to sea, was captured from behind by land, a classic "hit-'em-where-they-ain't" maneuver. The Malacca Volunteers, a ragtag militia that had hardly had a chance even to handle guns before being shipped to Singapore, were captured, herded onto trucks, driven out to an open field, lined up before a firing squad, and executed to a man, or so they thought. Chong survived.

"Chong?" I asked Percival, as my eyes darted to Chong On in the rear-view mirror.

"Yes," he answered, "Chong, was our driver Chong On's father. After the war, he was foreman on the plantation when Warren got killed. He ran the place by himself for a while. He then continued to work with me until he passed on. Good man! I don't know what I would have done without him. .

On that fateful day back in early 1942, Chong fell to the ground as his friend was hit by a bullet and cried out; Chong was not sure if it was he or his friend screaming; he fainted at the first sight of blood. When he regained consciousness, it was sunset; he saw a macabre view through the bloody limbs of his brothers. He fainted again.

When he awoke the next time, it was night. Under cover of darkness, he struggled out of the tangled limbs now all stiffened in death; for a while he thought he would not be able to break their hold but, finally, he was able to crawl his way to freedom, exhausted.

He made his way back from Singapore to Malacca in a week, hitching rides on bullock carts or walking. He carried with him the news of the deaths of Captain Bong, of the Bong chauffeur, the store clerk Lil's father,

and of Lucky Lim's Son Number One. He delivered the message to each family. Then he hid out for a month on a plantation, but finally decided to take the risk of giving himself up.

Kiko, who knew him on the plantation, again went to *kempetei* headquarters and pleaded his case. She claimed—and knowing Planter Warren, it was probably true—that Chong had been forced to join the volunteers or he would have lost his job for being disloyal. Surely, as Japanese soldiers, they could understand his situation. They did understand. Many of them, too, had been forced by the pressures of society to join the military. As a result of Kiko's pleading, Chong, too, was released.

General Yamashita, the overall commander of Japan's southward thrust, called a meeting of those leading Chinese men who had survived the initial massacre from all over the captured lands, from Penang, from the tin mines of Perak, from Malacca: all were to come to Singapore. These men were gathered in his office in the sweltering afternoon heat, standing close together, all vying for the back row. Yamashita entered the room after they had waited an hour-and-a-half. Only then did he allow the ceiling fan to be turned on.

He was followed by a young soldier who carried a package wrapped in fine, white linen. He set the package down on the table and neatly unfolded each corner until he exposed the round head of a Chinese rubber plantation manager. The man had come late to the meeting, Yamashita explained.

It was to be a little getting-to-know-you meeting, the general told the quaking businessmen. There were a few details—misunderstandings, perhaps, that had to be dealt with. First, the Chinese of Southeast Asia had been especially generous to the enemy with their donations to China. Was the general to consider this an act of friendship?

The leaders were quick to confess to him that they had made a mistake for which they were mighty sorry and, to prove their sincerity, they would be happy to donate an equal sum to the Japanese cause.

"Donate!" exploded Yamashita. "You cannot **donate** anything! The Japanese army owns your house, your businesses, your wealth, your women, your flesh, sweat, blood, and bowels! You all deserve to die! But since we of Nippon are a little short of cash right now, perhaps we can work out a deal." That wasn't exactly what he said, but I think I caught the gist of it.

The deal was a "voluntary" fund of fifty million dollars. Malacca's share, to be paid within the year, would be over five million. Lucky, whose loyalty was still suspect, was appointed to head the committee for assessing the amount each family in Malacca should pay. He was in an unenviable position, and those he assessed heavily could only take solace in the fact that Lucky Lim had been hardest on himself.

Families hadn't stored enough gold to pay the extraordinary sums being exacted. The family jewels, all the elaborate ornaments once adorning the young *nonya*, all the pocket watches with gold fobs, the jade chops: these were brought in cloth bags and poured out onto the Japanese commander's desk in order to make partial payment of the family's portion of the "gift." Loans on rubber plantations were taken out from the Yokohama Bank to make up the balance and the money was poured into the bottomless debt. Mother-of-pearl-inlaid furniture and fine clothing, jade carvings and hornbill-ivory snuff bottles—all were sold to meet the impossible quotas. Many families, especially those that had been wealthy before the war, were bankrupt by war's end.

Lucky's was among these unfortunate families. He had to sell his gold shops, his plantations, and his second home on Jonkers Street, which had become vacant anyway after his concubine had moved out of there and in with the Japanese Major Zemba. Lucky appeared to have lost everything. His wife, a son, and his daughter had drowned, and his eldest son had died in the massacre in Singapore. Only a third son was left. His name was Lim Li Hock, and, in another way, Lucky was to lose this child too.

Although the boy had been only fifteen when the war broke out, he had matured far beyond his years from an experience he'd had on the plantation one morning. He had successfully hidden there with a friend when the first wave of Japanese came through. Later, they were taking their bicycles along a trail through the rubber trees when they were surprised by another group of soldiers who came from an unexpected direction.

By luck, his friend was chosen first, taken behind some trees, and bayoneted. He screamed in pain until, after repeated stabbing, he died. Then it was Li Hock's turn. When the bayonet pierced his skin, he pretended to be fatally wounded and fell to the ground, refusing to react when they repeatedly kicked his apparently lifeless body until it rolled down the hill and over an embankment.

There he lay until the soldiers went away. Wounded and painfully bruised, he crawled out of the gully where he had landed. Dragging himself for the rest of that day and the next, he finally found a hut a few miles from where his friend's lifeless body lay. Here he was fed and nursed through his delirium by an old Indian couple. They used some herbs from the jungle that sped his recovery. He had lost an eye.

He stayed with them until he was able to walk again. He was no longer a boy. Now his seething hatred had forged the steel determination of a man; he was resolved to get revenge.

It is easy to understand how this son and Lucky would not see eye to eye politically. Lucky was now penniless, having only the empty shell of his mansion left to him. Yet he was philosophical. He told his son to be patient. He was sure the war would end with the return of the British. Then the family wealth would be regained, Lucky assured him. Wasn't his name Lucky? (He was optimistic.) But for the moment, he advised his son to go slowly. "If you don't want to be eaten, just don't look like food."

His son sneered in disgust. "Okay, Dad. Don't look like food, but do you have to look like chicken droppings?"

No matter how much Lucky tried to convince his son to wait, impatient Li Hock, Son Number Three, would have none of the old man's cowardice, as he called it. He would go into the jungle and join the guerrillas fighting against the Japanese. He would kill as many of them as he could and those who helped the Japanese, too, before he himself was killed or his country was freed of its hated oppressors. And when that day came, he would deal with the British in turn.

So Lucky was alone. With no businesses left and no money to buy even his food, he had to go to work, and the only work he knew was fishing. He had given his last boat away to allow Warren Gilbert to escape. With no boat, he had no choice but to sit with a fishing pole out on the edge of the warehouse pier.

Whatever he caught, he would take by pole and basket to sell door to door; in that way he would have a better chance of finding a customer and being paid in something besides the increasingly worthless Japanese

banana money.¹³⁵

One day, near the end of the war, Lucky happened to be walking by the Bong family home with fresh fish for sale when Mei Li stepped out of the front door on her way to do an errand. For a moment she didn't recognize Lucky, for he had aged, lost a lot of weight, and was dressed in tattered clothes. But when he blinked at her, she remembered that first moment when she saw him from the bridge. Her heart jumped. She fluttered a blink back at him.

Tai Tai appeared silently behind her and said curtly, "We have no money for fish today." She was treating him as if he were a fishmonger and enjoying being able to do so.

Lucky responded graciously, "Then for this house, today, I will give you the fish." (He made a show of generosity which he could ill afford.) "If you have the money tomorrow, then tomorrow the fish will be more expensive." With this, he handed the fish to Mei Li.

"Mei Li, take it to the kitchen. Come!" Tai Tai's arm flew around her granddaughter like the guiding wing of a mother hen, and the two disappeared. The door swung shut. Tai Tai wasn't about to say "thank you" to a fishmonger, especially not to this particular man. But the fish did look delicious. It had been a long time since they had eaten fish.

They took it immediately to the kitchen to clean it. When they cut it open, they found something metallic, gleaming inside: it was a ring, a ring of reddish gold with a cluster of flawless rubies. Inscribed on the inside of the band were the Chinese characters meaning beautiful woman, "*Mei Li*."

Out on the street, Lucky had almost disappeared around the corner with his baskets of fish bouncing on his shoulders when Mei Li caught up to him, running in quick, short steps as if she were trying to catch an elusive bird, as if she were trying not to scare him away. When he turned to see who it was, she stopped. Holding her hands together in front at her waist and looking straight into his eyes, she blinked. He blinked. She blinked. He...

¹³⁵ The Japanese money had a banana tree printed on it, thus the name. They continued to print it throughout the war; the last payment was made to occupation government employees in Malacca in this currency, with bills still wet from the printer. No one knows how much of the worthless money was printed in all, but estimates are about \$4,000,000,000 in stated value. Ed, ed.

"My grandmother was mistaken about the money," she said. "Yes, it is true we have no bananas for fish today, but if you'll accept this—" Looking both ways to make sure it was safe, she handed him a contraband English note. He took it from her hurriedly so she would not be exposed long to danger, for it was death to traffic in British currency. When he took the note, he noticed that on her finger she wore the ring he had purchased for her a quarter of a century before.



The war ended suddenly soon afterwards. News of the atomic bomb reached Malacca as an incredible rumor, and a few days later the surrender was announced to the Japanese people by the emperor himself, his no longer sacred voice heard for the first time over the radio. "We must endure the unendurable," he told his people. "Surrender."

In his dim room above his photo studio, not in his commandeered mansion, Major Zemba knelt on a floor cushion. He was dressed in his uniform, every button polished to a shine. Those buttons around the stomach had been opened and his abdomen was exposed.

He picked up his long, ceremonial *samurai* sword and held it horizontally out in front of him. Then he slowly unsheathed it without a quiver in his muscles. It had been his grandfather's sword, an exceedingly fine piece of workmanship.

Ed: *Seppuku!* He commits *harakiri*?

Cin: Yes.

He carefully wrapped a white cloth around the blade near his hand and brought the point toward his bared abdomen. His last thought before he plunged the blade in was, "Grandfather would be proud of me."

The Japanese were now a lame-duck administration; they felt like sitting ducks. The local populace interpreted some of the punishment that had been meted out by the Japanese during the war as a show of arrogance, brutality, and barbaric torture, rather than as "administrative necessities." The Communists especially, who had operated actively during the war from

their hide-out in the hills, now became increasingly more daring and effective in their assaults against the Japanese. It was as if they knew every move the Japanese planned to make. The most recent killings were performed like executions, and almost all of the deaths had been preceded by torture. The jumpy Japanese felt that they would need to keep a tighter control over these people or they might all be added to the list of the dead. Fortunately for the Japanese, they still held most of the guns.

During the war, leadership in the Chinese community had changed hands. Former leaders, like Lucky, those who had survived the bloody purges of the first days of the war, had been forced to pay a large portion of the "donation," if you remember. Furthermore, they had to be very careful in their actions, for they were always under the watchful eye of the *kempetei*. As this group lost their wealth and power, a new group replaced them.

Many of these newly-rich made huge profits on the black market and, now that the war was ending, they wanted to make sure they could enjoy their gains. They remembered that the properties of even the once-wealthy Lucky Lim had been looted the last time Malacca was without a government, between the time when the British departed and the Japanese arrived. They would not want this to be repeated at their expense.

So, eight of these *nouveau riches* businessmen decided to meet secretly at the Hokkien Association Hall on Jonkers Street with the intention of easing the transition from Japanese back to British rule, making sure that **they** were well-positioned for the changeover. When Lucky Lim walked by with his fish cart, one of the men hailed him, inviting him in. He had forgotten to buy something for his family's evening meal. Would Lucky be kind enough to deliver his best fish to his wife? How many bananas did Lucky want?

He was handing Lucky the money when they heard someone outside shouting through a megaphone in Japanese. They all froze with fear! For the past four years, whenever they heard Japanese shouted through a megaphone, it had always meant bad news: a slap here, a kick there, a slash here, and a head there. The nine Chinese men, including Lucky, were ordered out of the *kongsi* hall. They found themselves surrounded by Japanese soldiers, guns aimed at them and ready to fire.

The men were each bound with ropes around their wrists, arms behind their backs, and taken that night to the port south of town. They were then herded onto a boat and taken toward a small island just offshore from Malacca. On the way there, Lucky and the guy facing the opposite direction on the same bench found that they were able to untie each other's bonds. They used old secret brotherhood hand signals to communicate with each other. Then, at a given sign, they both dived into the water.

Guns flared into the darkness behind them. Lucky didn't know what happened to the other guy; if he hadn't been shot, he probably got caught in the current and drowned.¹³⁶

Lucky was more fortunate. He had made friends with the water years ago on that cold morning when he plunged into the harbor for the gold coin. Then, as a fisherman, he had spent more time than he cared to remember in the ocean when his boat had overturned in a storm. He knew how to conserve his energy; the important question was: how long could he tread water?

Talk about Lucky! Just before the Japanese surrender, a British task force, an armada with more ships than the Normandy invasion, left Ceylon and was on its way to land at Morib, about sixty miles north of Malacca. To aid the invasion force, an X-Craft, a three-man minisub, was sent out at night with two missions. One was to raise havoc in the small Japanese naval base just south of Malacca, where the sawmill is located now, so that the Japanese defenders could expect no aid to arrive by sea. The other mission was to transport a liaison officer on a secret mission from Force 136 Headquarters to a safe landing on the peninsula.¹³⁷ When the war ended abruptly, the invasion went on as planned; and the sub, already sent out on its mission, couldn't be recalled.

As happened frequently with these mini-subs, they developed problems with navigation. Thus, on the night of Lucky's escape, they were forced to surface under cover of darkness "to ascertain our location," said the sub's

136 The other man was never seen again. The other seven men who remained on the boat were taken to the island of Serimbun, where they were forced to drink poison before their bodies were thrown into a well. Ed, ed.

137 Force 136 was an English commando unit begun during the war to aid and coordinate guerrilla activities being carried out mostly by Chinese on the Malayan Peninsula. Ed, ed.

commander.

"To find out where the bloody hell we are!" bellowed the commando officer aboard.

As fortune would have it, the sub surfaced about fifteen yards from where Lucky was treading water and getting tired. He heard that bellow and recognized it—it was Warren Gilbert! Lucky Lim was rescued! Although there was no room inside for a passenger, he was invited to hang on to the outside. Lucky told them the war had ended; but all aboard felt compelled to go on with their mission nonetheless. Lucky suggested that Warren and he be taken to Upeh Island which he knew well from his early days.

Ed: Upeh! That's where it is!

Cin: Where what is?

Ed: The gold! It's hidden on that island, right?

Cin: Right! I thought I told you that before.

Anyway, Lucky volunteered to ride on the sub to help with navigation. He would swim and take his chances if they had to dive to avoid detection.

He knew of a small Chinese temple on the island that they could use as shelter. From the island, Warren could swim to Kelebang Beach north of town and make what contacts he needed in order to find his way to the guerrilla camp. While he was at it, maybe he could send a boat back to pick up Lucky, who would hide out on the island until help arrived.

The sub left the two men at Upeh and, after making some adjustment to the steering mechanism, went to fulfill the other part of its mission—to neutralize the small Japanese naval base. The sub was never seen again. Crew vanished.

Warren was able to swim the mile and a half to shore that night despite high waves. The man was a born athlete. From there, he made his way to the plantation. There he made contact with Chong and told him to make arrangements to fetch and hide Lucky. Then, despite the presence of soldiers all around, he spent the night with Kiko in the main plantation building, reunited at last.

The next day, on his way into the jungle, he caught sight of two Japanese

soldiers using his golf course. He killed them both with a nine iron.

Ed: I would have had to use a wood. *Cin groaned.*

Cin: He then continued on with his mission which was to contact one of the more elusive and effective guerrilla resistance groups who were fighting from their jungle lair near Malacca in the foothills of Gunung Ledang. He wanted to help coordinate their sabotage strikes and, now with the war over, to arrange for them to give up their arms. He eventually located their jungle hide-out, a one-hundred-commando-strong group of A.J.A., the Anti-Japanese Army, as they were called.

Here he met the youthful, one-eyed commander, Lim Li Hock. This meeting did not go well. The large European man towered over the wiry Chinese. Warren Gilbert made demands on the Chinese commander as if he were one of his coolies back on the plantation. Li Hock took offense. He mentioned a certain part of Warren's anatomy where he could shove his orders and protect them permanently from the sunlight. Bad blood began that day between the two men.

Meanwhile, Chong was left with a problem; he needed a place to hide the fugitive, Lucky Lim, until the Japanese left and the British took control once more, and there was no way of knowing how long that would be. The last place anyone would look for him would be in the home of his well-known rival, Tai Tai Bong.

He feared, and correctly so, that the Tai Tai wouldn't like the idea, so Chong decided to approach the granddaughter first. After all, her son and Lucky's had died together in the Singapore massacre, the one that Chong had been so lucky to survive.

Chong approached Mei Li with his request, and she readily agreed to help. In fact, she took care of one of the most troublesome details. She had a boat under the trapdoor at the back of the house.

That night, at high tide, the boat quietly left its mooring beneath the Bong house and made its way to Upeh Island. The boat was rowed by a single dark shadow. It returned several hours later with the shadows of two men aboard.

Mei Li hid Lucky in the Bong mansion, safe from detection for a week, a deception aided by the maze of the Tai Tai's design. He may have remained

there undiscovered indefinitely had not Eagle-Eye Tai Tai noticed first the trapdoor on the floor of the back porch was not locked, and then, that there was an extra pair of chopsticks in the dish drain. When she learned the truth, that her granddaughter was harboring **that** man in her house, she pretended she had noticed nothing. She never, however, spoke to her granddaughter again.

Lucky and Mei Li, both widowed by the war, were married in a civil ceremony. After twenty-five years their shadow romance, expressed over a distance by the secret blinking of their eyes, blossomed into full view.

Tai Tai Bong did not attend the wedding ceremony nor the dinner. When told about the marriage, she shrugged. "What do I care about a girl child? They are only trouble," echoing her father's words at her birth.

Miraculously, mysteriously, Lucky recovered his fortune soon after the war. He must have hidden it successfully from the Japanese, for the newlyweds soon departed on a world-cruise honeymoon. Surely, they saw none of the Bong fortune, what remained of it.

After an eight-month-long honeymoon, while returning to Malacca, the propeller BOAC airplane on which they were flying went down in the Alps. Mei Li and Lucky died in each other's arms.

Mei Li's grandmother lived another six years. She also seemed to have successfully hidden away a vast portion of the Bong estate, for their wealth also returned, but never to its previous splendor. There was a large funeral for the grande dame. Percival said he witnessed the procession shortly after he arrived in Malacca. It was extravagant. She would have been disgusted at the expense. She would have loved the honor shown her.

When the British took back control after the war, all Japanese military and civilians were rounded up and put into a camp to await repatriation. Despite her protest, Kiko was detained in this camp. She had no family to go home to. She wanted only to wait for her hero, Warren Gilbert, to return from Australia, where he had gone to be demobilized as soon as the war had ended.

When Chong returned to the plantation and found Miss Kiko missing, he drove right back to town to pick up Lucky and, together, they went to the detention camp in Bahau, near Lake Bera, to plead for her release.

They were successful, but Kiko didn't seem destined for happiness. She was at the plantation home when, about six months later, Warren returned, his new Australian bride at his side.

Kiko was heartbroken. She jumped into the well and drowned.

Do you believe in karma? Perhaps we long to see some meaning in events, especially in the way someone dies. Warren Gilbert had loved being a warrior. He had been born for the role. When, after the Japanese surrendered, the Communist rebels refused to accept British terms and give back their weapons, he personally volunteered to seek out the "bandit nests" and destroy them. He was quite successful until he was killed by a knife at his throat during a counter-ambush on the camp commanded by One-Eyed Li. Some say it was Lucky's son himself who pulled that knife across Warren's throat.

Years went by, the Emergency dragged on and reached a sort of stalemate. Eventually, negotiations were made so that Lim Li Hock could leave his futile rebellion with amnesty and would be allowed to disappear for a while, during which time he attended Oxford in England. After he graduated—with honors for, like his father, he was extremely quick with numbers—he returned to Malacca.

Percival changed the tone of his voice, signaling that he was coming to the end of his story. "Li Hock moved to Singapore in the sixties, after having married an old friend of mine, Madame X, who, if you remember, had been his father's concubine in name only. In truth, she had been the son's lover ever since the day he first discovered where the back door of the Lim house led. It was young love, first love, and forever.

"When the war had come, these two desperate lovers decided to use whatever weapons were available to them against the hated enemy. During the war, she was the Mata Hari of Malacca, sleeping with Major Zamba and secretly sending messages to her lover in the jungle, giving invaluable information that would help Li Hock on his next commando raid.

"Like his father, but without Lucky's golden touch, the son, Lim Li Hock, became wealthy, building up his business contacts through the use of the family name and an astute mind for business. He liked movies, for instance, and so he started up the highly-successful chain of Lucky Theaters throughout Malaysia and Singapore. However, as far as the actual

estate of Lucky Lim is concerned, it has been tied up in legal red tape and is unlikely to be untangled for another fifty years.¹³⁸ When asked why he didn't want to will his money to his lone surviving son, Lucky merely shrugged his shoulders and answered that his wealth should go to the person who cleans his grave. It's typical of the Chinese to worry so much about having a clean grave."



Once you have driven through one rubber plantation, you have driven through them all. Enthralled by Percival's story, I hardly noticed the scenery go by but for the flickering background of green light filtered through the trees as if we were looking at the world from the inside of an enormous emerald. A number of times, as we went around a sharp bend in the road, Chong On had to brake quickly to avoid hitting a water buffalo, looking like a fat, old aunt as she waddled across the blacktop on her way to greener pastures. We passed several little villages populated with the sprawling families of Indian tappers, their shrines covered with a cornucopia of deities painted in comic-strip colors. Bright-eyed children watched as our vehicle went by and waved when they recognized Percival, who waved back, smiling.

Suddenly, we arrived at a clearing, a manicured lawn, a small golf course, and a stately house overlooking an elbow in the river below. It had been Percival's home before he retired from actively managing the rubber estate. "Over there in the rough is where Warren Gilbert is said to have avenged himself on those soldiers who dared to use his private plantation golf course," Percival pointed with his eyes.

Putting my hand over my heart, I suggested a moment of silence for those poor Japanese who paid the ultimate green fee. Percival cast his eyes heavenward.

138 This is not unusual in Malacca among the rich Chinese. In order to keep the family estate together, a man by the name of Tan was able to tie up his inheritance for eighty-two years by willing the estate to the last surviving grandson. Ed, ed.

Just before entering the broad, circular drive that led up to the main house and a group of corrugated metal workshops beyond, the car swung right and down a tarred road that descended in a long spiral along a broad curved slope, down to a smaller house hidden in a copse of trees. These trees were not rubber; it was neither garden nor jungle but both, a place where man and nature seem to have agreed to live together in harmony.

Okay, it sounds kind of corny, but I don't usually look at a house in a natural setting and feel that it belongs there. But Percival's home belonged to its surrounding. Built in the classic style of Malaccan homes, it stood on stilts against the hillside. Its deep red clapboard siding was weathering to dark brown beneath swooping, stepped roofs, sharply-peaked at the gables, sloping less near the eaves. A broad stairway of nine steps widened at the base like arms opening in welcome.

Percival, pointing the way with one hand and bowing, said, "Welcome to *Rumah Wiggins*. *Rumah* is the Malay word for humble home. I toyed with the idea of calling it *istana* which means palace, but I felt that approaches *lese majesty*. Yet I do believe the tiles adorning the risers of my stairway would have been the envy of even the sultans themselves." He smiled. The tiles on the vertical portion of each step displayed flowers or peacocks with feathers spreading in an array of glazed colors.

Chong On disappeared into a small adjacent building, the detached kitchen. We went to sit in a pavilion in the back beside a natural pond. Here and there, white boulders broke the mossy surface suggesting to my imagination the scattered foundation of an ancient temple. The pond reflected the triangular-shaped mountain, blue with distance, creating the form of a diamond, standing on a point.

Percival noticed where I was looking and joined me, putting a hand on my shoulder for a moment. He motioned with his chin toward the pond. "That goldfish approaching us now is my Princess Putri Ledang." A large golden carp swam toward us, mouth open. Percival tossed some crumbs of bread he had been carrying in a handkerchief in his pocket. Beneath the swimming princess, I could see the bottom of the pond; it was smooth white marble.

"With my princess here before my eyes and, of course, having just recalled the story of Lucky Lim and the ring in the fish, I am reminded of

yet another legend," said Percival, casting more bread on the surface, "a legend involving King Solomon. As you know, Solomon was not the oldest of King David's sons. There were at least seven who came before him. When father David died, therefore, it was not Solomon's age that entitled him to the throne."

According to Percival, Solomon's older brother Adonijah had the backing of the military and some of the priests. Solomon had the backing of his household guards—David's famous Heroes—a few country priests and, most importantly, his mother, who had extracted a promise from King David years ago that her son, Solomon, would be king, and she intended to see that the promise was kept in spite of the fact that David had other sons by other wives.

Solomon's mother was Bathsheba, remember, which means she was born of the House of Sheba; most likely royalty herself. So Solomon was not even a pure-blooded Israelite. Nor was he the most powerful. How was he able to get the Heroes' allegiance?

According to legend, he caught a fish and pulled a ring of gold out of its mouth. That ring proved Solomon to be God's chosen one, the next King of Israel, and so the Heroes followed him.

With this ring he is said to have been able to control the King of the Demons, Asmoday (or Asmodeus), and through him he could also command seventy-one other dark princes to do his bidding. Years later, when he lost the ring while swimming in the Jordan, he is said to have lost his power to rule as well.

"As is my predilection," continued Percival, "I looked at this legend in the light of my quest for the treasures of Solomon. The gold ring, to me, represents the gold itself. Coming from the mouth of the fish seems to indicate that it comes from the water, indicating probably that the land of gold can be reached by sea. Don't you agree that knowledge of a cache with a vast sum of gold would be sufficient to justify a leap over others in the order of succession, so that Solomon could become king?" I nodded in agreement.

"And, if this interpretation is correct, I wonder where Solomon got that information about the location of the gold? My suspicion is that it came from his mother, Bathsheba. The Old Testament, more specifically, the

Song of Songs, describes her as the person who actually placed the crown on Solomon's head."¹³⁹

Percival and I drank our gin and tonics and watched the sun disappear behind the hills. Chong On had lit incense to surround us in fragrance and keep the mosquitoes away.

Dinner was a masterpiece: the seven, maybe nine, courses— who really keeps count when the food is so good?—with varied textures and seasonings combining like musical phrases in a symphony, a deliciously-orchestrated feast. Yum! I remember one dish in particular called *otak otak*, fish wrapped in a banana leaf, then simmered in coconut milk. Mmmmm! Percival offered me another helping.

"Enough!" I cried, smiling, content. "I couldn't eat anything more."

"You will forego our *chendol* for dessert then? It is an ice-cold sweet local concoction made of green rice flour cut into long slender skeins, sprinkled with oodles of caramel-flavored palm sugar called *gula melaka*, and then smothered in sinfully creamy coconut milk."

I yielded. As we were polishing off our dessert Percival said, "Chong On has outdone himself tonight, wouldn't you say? Extraordinary! For this, I can forgive him his vice. But then, we can almost always forgive a vice we share."

When the sky had turned to lavender in the twilight and stars appeared above the canopy of trees, Percival offered me his arm and escorted me into the main house. He poured out some brandy, handed me a glass, and pointed me to an overstuffed chair. Percival went through his library of old LPs and selected a collection of romantic favorites from the Big Band era: *Moonlight Serenade*, *The Way You Look Tonight*, *Deep Purple*, *Time Waits For No One*... And as the music played, Percival continued to talk, glass in hand, often swirling his brandy and inhaling the aroma, rarely sipping.

"Bathsheba has always been a most intriguing character to me. She first appears in the story fully unclothed, taking her bath in the privacy of her rooftop within easy view of the palace roof where David just happened to be strolling, having risen from his couch after tossing and turning with insomnia. How often had she taken such a bath before David saw her? How

139 Song of Songs 3:11 N.E.B. Ed, ed.

often had David walked the palace roof? Why didn't she dim the lights if she wanted privacy? Why couldn't David sleep?

"No doubt you are familiar with the story. David called her to him that night. Her husband was out of the city, gone off to fight in a war of David's design. The king wished to possess her that very night. Could she refuse him? In those days, one supposes, the king's word was law and his wish was her command."

Ed: He sure laid down the law on her.

Cin: True. King David laid down the law, and Bathsheba lay with him. And as soon as the result of this affair became evident a month later, she sent word to David, informing him that she might be in a family way, and, incidentally, she hadn't seen her husband for a couple of months.

King David ordered one of his officers to send her Hittite husband home from the front as a messenger and, after remembering to ask a few questions about the conditions on the battlefield, David encouraged the lad to go home for the night, relax, and spend time with his lovely bride. But the young man was the gung-ho type. How could he sleep with his wife when David and Israel were fighting in a war, and his friends slept in discomfort in their tents? Absolutely not! Instead, he curled up in the palace courtyard with the guards and servants.

When David learned of this, he was upset. He tried again. He had the Hittite husband stay in town another night. They drank a few together; David kept the other man's cup full. The king then brought in the topless dancing girls, strippers to titillate the lad and, when he judged the time was right, sent the young, horny husband home to his wife. Unfortunately for David, the lad had quaffed five flagons too many and was too intoxicated to make it all the way home; he chose, instead, to sleep the night on the street before heading back to the front early the next morning. The result: Bathsheba's pregnancy became a growing concern for her and David.

Finally, David couldn't contain himself; he wanted Bathsheba to be his wife. Why? What did she do? Here is a man who already had many wives, hundreds of concubines, and his pick of all the most comely virgins in his kingdom, and he had to have *her*! What did she say or do? Why **this** woman, the Hittite's wife?

Anyway, David sent orders to his general that the Hittite was to go into

battle at a position most likely to be attacked; and when the enemy came, the troops were to fall back so that the unfortunate husband would face them alone. And so it came to pass. The Hittite was dispatched.

David married the widow and a male child was born to them. God visited King David through one of his unwashed prophets who told him that the penalty for this heinous double sin of adultery and murder was the death of their first-born.

Ed: Seems to me he got off rather easy. Here's a man who has killed another man in order to take the wife whom he has already knocked up. That is at least two major strikes against the Ten Commandments, and God just taps him on the wrist. You sin, the son has to go. It's not fair.

Cin: Fair? What is fair?

Anyway, the prediction came true. The son died. To console the mother, David promised that their next male child would become king after David died. That is an "extraordinary"—now I'm using Percival's word!—promise to be made by someone who already had several mature male offspring, each one hankering to hunker down on his throne and make it his own. How could she have gotten him to promise so much? Either she was a beauty beyond comparison, or a sorceress, or Bathsheba had connections. Perhaps it was her connection with Sheba that caused her son Solomon (years later, of course) to so graciously host the Queen of Sheba when she arrived in Jerusalem. Quite possibly the Queen of Sheba and Solomon's mother were related.

"Isn't it interesting," Percival commented, "that in a secret order such as the Freemasons, they refer to Solomon not as the son of mighty King David, but as the 'Son of the Widow,' the widow Bathsheba."

The conversation lapsed into silence for a while and we listened to nature's orchestra. Then the phonograph clicked on a new record and the song Stardust began to play.

"Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely night dreaming..." Percival sang along with the first line before fading into his own thoughts. He had a beautiful singing voice.

"When I lived on this plantation up at the big house with Kori, my Bugis princess," Percival reminisced, "we had no TV, of course, and the radio

reception in these hills was very poor, a lot of static. This old record player was all we had to entertain ourselves, along with our books and each other. It was enough. I have gotten to love the sound of the scratches on these records and would miss them if I were to hear these songs without them."

He twirled the brandy in his glass for a moment, then, as if talking to the air, he asked. "Must nostalgia be maudlin?" And to me, "The root of the word nostalgia means 'returning home,' you know."

He put his brandy down and moved over to stand in front of my chair. "Would you like to dance?" He looked down at me, his hand held out ready for mine, and bowed like a courtier. I fell into the act as if it were a scene from a period piece and I were a princess at a ball. I felt a little giddy as I stood up and curtsied. I hadn't had that much to drink.

We floated across the hardwood floor. He was a good dancer; his arm around my waist, secure; his steps, confident. His gaze was warm and soft as he explored my face with youthful enthusiasm. He was a man, and I was in his arms. How long had it been? I felt a shiver go down my spine.

He leaned over and said softly into my ear, "Have you ever read the Song of Songs? A most extraordinary piece of religious erotica." And then he began to recite from memory.

*How beautiful, how entrancing you are, my daughter of
delight... The scent of your breath like apricots, and your whisper like
spiced wine flowing smoothly to welcome my caresses gliding down
through lips and teeth.*

Percival leaned even closer so that his lips almost touched my ear, and I could feel the warmth of his breath on my neck. "Tonight, my daughter of delight, be my Bathsheba at her bath that I might be your David." I shivered.

O-oh! He was smooth. I had never expected him... at his age... and using Bible stories, no less. I felt successive chills of excitement and dizziness. Perhaps he **had** drugged my drink, I wondered. That's one of the problems with drugging somebody, you always think others will do it to you. I couldn't believe Percival would use drugs. But I sure felt dizzy.

*...and now my consolation is in the stardust of a song
Beside a garden wall when stars are bright
You are in my arms...*

We danced. It had been a long time since I had felt the arms of a caring man around me, holding me. He made me feel so, so loved and safe, although light-headed; I rested my head on his shoulder, closed my eyes, sighed and felt a happy feeling that made me want to start crying, and we danced on to *Stardust*.

Suddenly, in the middle of... of the dance, Percival stopped, put his hand on his heart, and rolled over in pain while at the same time apologizing for the inconvenience. I mean, he fell to the floor and rolled over.

I ran as fast as I could to find Chong On. He came, saw the situation, and checked for a heartbeat. He told me Percival was unconscious. Then he ran for the car to take Percival to the hospital; there was still a chance, he said. He would arrange for another car to take me back to town as soon as possible. Considering the situation, he thought it would be better for all if I wasn't found at this house, in case Percival didn't regain consciousness. And that's the last I saw of Percival, lying there on the... lying there.



The chills I began feeling when Percival asked me to dance continued in waves during the entire trip back to town, each one lasting longer than the one before. I was shaking badly in the unusually cool evening air, or so it felt to me, even though I was drenched with sweat. By the time I got back to the hotel, I realized that the chills I had felt when Percival first touched my hand, the shivers when we were dancing... it wasn't love; it was malaria!

Malaria is a headache, a dog whistle that you hear and then have a desire to howl. It pierces your head; it is unkind. No, worse. Malaria is merciless. Grand Inquisitors only dreamed of being able to inflict such headaches.

Malaria begins with a chill, a flush of excitement, a rush of giddiness as if you were being asked out on your first date. Dainty dew forms on the brow, and soon perspiration drenches the armpits. There's dizziness; your eyes won't focus; nausea grabs the back of your neck and hangs you in the air by a clamp at the base of your skull; there's a looseness of mind and of

bowels, an overwhelming weakness that makes raising an arm to switch off a light as impossible as climbing Mount Everest on roller blades. You feel an I-want-my-mama depression growing darker by shades into Why-was-I-born? despondency; eventually you struggle with unemotional, smoothly-logical-sounding thoughts of suicide.

There is a blizzard raging inside you. You get the hippy-dippy shakes like St. Vitus with his finger stuck in an electric socket; at the same time you feel as if red peppers are being rubbed into every pore of your skin. You get drenched; streams form, rivulets of sweat flow along your skin; an Amazon pours into the bedsheet-sea in which you lie. I recommend malaria only if you are dying to lose weight fast and can't stand the taste of arsenic.

I went to bed feeling awful that night, vowing never again to forget to take my malaria pills if only I would **please, please** feel better in the morning. The next morning, I woke up, wishing I hadn't. I rolled over and slept through the day. I woke again that evening, showered, although the walk to the bathroom was exhausting, and I had to sit on the toilet to rest up before attempting the climb into the bathtub. After a dribbling shower, I rested again, shivering, before attempting the long sweaty trek back to bed.

My room had two double beds. I changed to the other one, the one with dry sheets; it also was closer from the bathroom. I didn't even bother to clean my junk off, just swept the stuff onto the floor and flopped down.

I lay on my back and began to shake, so I covered up and started to sweat, so I kicked off the sheet and, shivering, stared at the fan that was helicoptering above me. I followed the whirl of the fan with my eyes, trying to isolate the spin of a single blade, thereby giving my mind another reason for feeling dizzy. I decided to enjoy it and lay back to let the images swirl.

What followed was delirium—a hall of mirrors, an echo chamber, attic chatter, flashes from stories mixed with a drainage cleanser jingle, and a close-up of a movie goddess, lipstick on her teeth. Bits and pieces were spinning, reeling so fast that, if I could relate them well, it would make you feel sick too. Let's fast forward, instead, through all the repetitions of images to where I began to see a red thread, a pattern running through it all:

To make a long story short, I somehow came to have this feeling, a sort of spiritual certainty, that King Solomon actually had hidden his gold under

the star of Spica, "*the golden grain in the hand of the Virgin*," certain, too, that roomful of gold was located somewhere near Malacca with its entrance through a well near a grave.

Now you've got to understand that at that time my thoughts were not arranged all pretty and logical like. Not when you're spinning with malaria. It was like a film loop with no beginning, no purpose, no promise of ending; it was as disjointed as a dream, and as exhausting as a long sermon when one has a hangover. So I was relieved to find, when I opened my eyes, that it was Alfonso who was shaking me gently, nudging me, and calling my name.

"Cin," he said. "Cindy Anna. Aah lah! Look at you, lady! You are swimming in your own sweat. *Adoi!* Go take a shower, lah! I'll go try to find some dry towels and sheets and a doctor, although San Pedro only knows where I'm going to find a dry doctor at this time Saturday night." His rat-a-tat laugh echoed in the large, open hallway outside my door.

When the doctor arrived, he felt my forehead and then my pulse. I listened, detached, while Alfonso recited my symptoms. Then he and Alfonso gently rolled me over on my stomach, and he stuck a needle in my tush.

From then on I was cared for like a baby child by Alfonso. I was swaddled in a dry towel and helped onto a dry bed. What a luxury this dryness was! This I was thinking in the middle of a severe drought.

Whenever I awoke, Alfonso was there, dabbing my forehead with a sponge, giving me ice to suck on, spooning water for me to drink, nursing me back to life. I remember once, looking up at him, smiling idiotically and saying, "Life is full of contradictions but, then again, it isn't," then laughing weakly before I blanked out again. I slept more than a cat.

When the fever finally broke, I felt as if I had been washed clean, inside and out, by an industrial strength *dobi wallah*, that's an Indian who washes clothes by slapping them against a wet rock. I was bleached clean, whiter than white, a baby on a blanket on a warm spring morning. Alfonso was smiling down at me. He looked as relieved as I felt.

"You're a nice man, you know that?" I told him.

"Sure I know it. Surprises the hell out of me, too." He released his rat-a-

tat laugh. "Guess I couldn't see letting you drown yourself especially in bed on dry land in the middle of a drought. Not after all the trouble I went through grabbing you out of the sea when you fell off that tanker."

I was under a clean sheet, dry, and naked. "Thanks for taking care of me. And thanks. I was completely out of it and yet you didn't take advantage of me. I couldn't have stopped you if... You know what I mean. A lot of men would have."

"A-ah, lah!" he was flustered. "Maybe 'cause I save you once, I don't know. Maybe a few years ago, I try. I always did. Had an eye, you know." he flashed his piano keyboard and wiggled his eyebrows. Rat-a-tat.

"But truth be told, I am personally not attracted to chicks with malaria. Now go back to sleep." Rat-a-tat.

Arthur came over a few days later, bringing me some flowers for my stale-smelling hotel room and a leaf for me to chew on. He said, "Just a minute until I bring a chair over closer. My friends tell me I am hard of hearing, but my doctor tells me not to listen.

"Now, about that leaf, when I was a boy of about five years old," his story began even as he was moving the chair, "— oh my arthritis—after my father died—there." Satisfied with the positioning of the chair, he sat down. "After he died, my older brother and I were sent away for a while until our mother could find a means to get us all back together again. We went to live on a rubber plantation with an old uncle. Maybe he wasn't even a relative, I was too young to know. Funny how clear it comes back. The memory of the old is farsighted.

"Anyway, we both came down with malaria there, my brother and I. I remember it was during the rainy season, and I was shivering on a thin grass mat laid out on the cold cement floor; the rain was drumming on the metal roof, and the old Indian man covered us both with a single thin sarong to keep us warm. It was not enough. When the rain stopped, he took us outside to a certain bush, picked two leaves, and gave us each one. It was a very bitter leaf to swallow, but he forced us to chew with his fierce eyes.

"We recovered from the malaria in a few days. And since that day, neither my brother nor I have ever suffered a relapse, although, I can tell you, my arthritis is a trial every day now. I told you of my recent

operation?"

I told him he had. He looked disappointed but went back to talking about the leaf. "I sent a few of them as samples to the university in K.L. but never received a reply. Maybe it isn't worth anything. But if it is, I hope they find this plant before the rain forest is all cut down."

That leaf had, by far, the bitterest taste I have ever come across in my life, with an aftertaste that flavored my food for days. I never want to put that in my mouth again. Incidentally, I haven't had a relapse of malaria either in the year or so since I chewed that leaf.

Several times I tried to phone Percival from my room, but had no luck. I called the hospital, but they would not disclose information over the phone about their patients—if Mr. Wiggins was, in fact, a patient—unless I was next of kin.

I asked how they would know if I was next of kin or not over the phone. They said they "cannot, lah!" and that I should "call back later, then." And then they hung up on me.

I found a taxi driver who said he knew where *Rumah Wiggins* was. I had him drive me out there, only to find he was "out station, lah." The people at the big plantation house said they didn't know where he went but thought he might have gone up to Kuala Lumpur. It was as if he had disappeared. Chong On, too, was gone.



It's hard to explain what it's like to be alive on the other side of malaria. After having French-kissed the face of death, I was happy that my blind date with malaria had ended with nothing more than heavy petting. It was "A.M." for me: After Malaria. The morning of my new life.

Having been so near death, I felt all the more alive, lucky to be alive, blessed, somehow chosen, special. I felt as if my life meant something, as if somehow it was a hologram of the entire universe. Because death **could** have come so easily, the fact that it didn't make everything less probable and, therefore, more poignant. You see, if chances are against something

happening, and it still happens, it seems all the more destined and, at the same time, magical.

In this post-illness euphoria, I felt the forces of nature more strongly, felt more sensitive to the spirits around me. I was in the mood to indulge my dreams, to move toward the poetry, to search for the gold!

It was in this light-headed, other-worldly state that I decided to test my fast-recovering energy with a leisurely walk along the crest of Bukit China in the warm, early-morning sun. When I came to the gravesite where Percival and I had stopped to admire the view, I sat down to rest and think of him.

I recalled what he had said about this grave. There was something strange about Lucky Lim's will, that he would prefer to leave his wealth to the person who cleaned his grave. I brushed some leaves from the grave; you never know....

This gravesite, Percival had told me, was favored by punters who came here for inspiration when picking their lottery numbers because of its good *feng shui*. They were convinced that it must have been excellent because rumor had it that Lucky Lim paid a small fortune for this plot of land. He insisted he would have no other for his grave.

I also remembered that Percival had said something about the grave being lined up in some way with the triangular-shaped Mount Ophir. That's odd, I thought. Of course it's lined up with that mountain. A line can be drawn between any two points. It takes a third point to make a significant alignment. I sat down on the bench of the tomb and found myself looking straight out across the rooftops and across the water, right at the island of Upeh. The third point!

Ed: I knew it!

Cin: The island was visible between two skyscrapers, like football uprights, the only tall structures that had been allowed to be built in the heart of the city. All the buildings in between remained the old-style, two-story shops so that the view of the island from his gravesite was unobstructed. Lucky for him!

Lucky? What if it wasn't luck? At that moment it struck me. I would have bet anything that the Lucky Lim estate owned the deeds to all that

land from the foot of Bukit China all the way across the old town as far as Kelebang Beach where he'd had his country home. If my hunch was correct, and if it were at all within Lucky's power, nothing built in the future was ever going to interfere with his view of that island from this gravesite, of this I was sure.

Upeh was where I would find the mysterious source of Lucky Lim's vast riches, the room filled with gold. By intuition, I was equally convinced that it was the same submerged room which Anyi, the Javanese princess had found almost five hundred years ago, a chamber filled with tons of gold hidden nearly three thousand years ago by agents of King Solomon.

Ed: Wait a minute! What was Lucky Lim's riddle? Twelve soldiers standing in six rows, four in each row, right? I think I've got the answer. *I drew a sketch to check.* Yes! That would be all the points and intersecting lines in a six pointed star, Solomon's Seal. Lucky **must** have found Solomon's gold!

Cin: You're a clue ahead of me there. I never figured that one out. But it sounds right.

Anyway, if it was the same gold that Anyi found, it would be down a well located near an old Muslim grave. Was it the same well Ahrihan fell into? Was there a well on Upeh Island? If there was, I was sure it would be the watery entrance to a room filled with a hundred tons of gold, more wealth than I could conceive of in my wildest imagination.¹⁴⁰

Now, even in my light-headed, born-again euphoria, I didn't really believe all those fantasies. I mean really, how does one go about expecting to find hidden treasure? I told you I felt like a child again; I felt like playing a game of pretend. I had almost died of malaria and recovered miraculously. I had been given another chance, and I wanted to—to romance it, to indulge my fantasies of hidden treasure, to fly with the spirits in the wind! I figured much of my excitement must be the euphoria of recovery, but it had been a long time since I had felt anything as magical as the call of that hidden gold.

I was on a roll! I wanted to give the improbable another chance to happen. I decided to go to Upeh that day. My resolve was as strong as it

140 At the rate of \$385 an ounce, the estimated value of a hundred tons of gold would be U.S. \$1,232,000,000. Ed, ed.

was impulsive.

Alfonso was busy, he told me before I even had a chance to ask him to go with me. His boss had found out about his moonlighting excursions as a cigarette smuggler, and he was in deep trouble. In order to make things better at his place of work, Alfonso had agreed to do a little after-hours favor for his boss.

It seems that the smugglers generally brought in big shipments to various small harbors along the coast, places like Kampong Kuala Lama Lama, where I had stayed with the Malay family. There they loaded the cartons of contraband clove cigarettes onto a truck, which then went to a checkpoint on a major highway running from Singapore to K.L. Here the cartons were certified as goods in transit within the country. With that stamp on them, they could then be sold anywhere undetected.

The smugglers made the arrangement safer by "enlisting" the aid of a few local authorities, one of whom was Alfonso's boss. But the boss needed to make a bust now and then or people might become suspicious, and his job would be in jeopardy. So they kept a warehouseful of these cigarettes, cartons that had gotten wet once and so couldn't be sold anyway. Every so often, someone would truck these worthless cigarettes from the warehouse and unload half of them onto the dock of some coastal village and the other half onto a boat so that it looked like unloading had been interrupted by the bust. Then the press was called to come and take photos of the contraband along with the brave, serious customs officers standing beside the "captured" smuggled goods. Unfortunately, the smugglers always seemed to get away. "Ran right into the trees, they did. Into the swamp... That stuff's all but impenetrable... How you going to chase 'em in there?... But at least the goods have been seized, lah..." After the reporter left, the damaged cartons would be reloaded onto the truck and returned to the secret warehouse until the next "big bust" was scheduled.

"What can I do? It's my job, lah," moaned Alfonso. "Being a pirate is so much more honest. But I got to stay respectable too, so I got to do it. I am going to be tired tomorrow, lah. No sleep 'til late. And then I got to go to Mass, lah!" Alfonso was, therefore, not available to give me either a ride in his boat or his support for my intended excursion.

I was drawn to that island, so I dressed for a swim, slipped on a beach

jacket and caught a taxi to Kelebang Beach just north of town, the nearest point to the island. It wasn't that far away, maybe a mile-and-a-half swim, two at the very most. I'm a good swimmer so that distance presented no problem on this sunny noon as I stood on the shore, tempted. I was walking along the gray sand, obsessed by that island, my treasure island. Did I dare attempt the swim out there? Should I trust my strength so soon after recovering from malaria? I was feeling great.

I came across a large fishing float bobbing in the water as if it had been sent to increase my temptation. I recalled Alfonso telling me that work-hungry Indonesians swam across the whole Strait of Malacca on the trunk of a banana tree. They took risks. Why shouldn't I?

What risk? I could easily make it out to the island on that float. The sea was calm, and the island looked so close. The sky was clear, and I had all afternoon to get there and back. I decided to go for it. It seemed like a good, safe decision at the time.

It was a good swim out there, with a lot course variations to adjust for the current. I was challenged, and when I touched bottom in the early hours of the afternoon, I felt a sense of relief combined with pride at my success. In my imagination, I had been a shipwrecked survivor making my way back to land.

I lay on my back, using my buoy as a my pillow, letting my body dry in the sun. The deep maroon rock mixed with swirls of beige gold, heavy in iron content, made for a very uncomfortable bed, but I didn't mind the bulges. I was pretty winded.

After resting, I took a look around. It's a small island; under normal conditions an average swimmer probably could get around it in about thirty to forty minutes. Roots hung over the edge of a cliff about twice my height, the vegetation crowded onto the island like survivors hanging onto a life raft. A monitor lizard scurried through the roots.

I could make out a path leading from the shore up through the underbrush. If my hunch was correct about this island, it would be full of poisonous snakes, but from my experience as the Snake Lady with PResto Magnifico, I knew one important fact that armed me with confidence: snakes are nocturnal. They don't come out into the sunlight unless disturbed. So I had no worries, right? I would try not to disturb anything. I

kept to the path.

I came to a Chinese temple right away and, nearby, a well. There was a bucket there, presumably for use by those faithful who came to burn incense at the temple. The water tasted brackish but potable. If this was the well I was looking for, I surmised—continuing my treasure hunt game—there should be an old Muslim grave nearby.

It took me an hour to find the Malay grave; it should have been nearer the well if the story of the fight between Ali and Princess Anyi's brother, the Knife, was true. It was quite far away, considering it was on such a small island.

I climbed a small rise from the *keramat* grave to survey the island from the top and to see if I could spot the triangular mountain behind Bukit China. The island wasn't very high, twenty-five feet above sea level, at most. At the top of the hill I found another well.

This was it! I knew it immediately, instinctively. Why? For one thing, it was a strange place to dig a well, high up on a hill through several extra yards of iron rock. Why would anyone make it harder for themselves? It would have been much easier to dig one at a lower elevation, where the other one had been dug. And, thinking about the other well, why was a second well dug at all on such a small island? Who used it?

I sat on the ground and peered over the edge of the well, the rim flush with the hilltop. The shaft near the top was surfaced with carved blocks of rock; ferns sprouted through the cracks between them. Moss grew heavier on the shady side; pale lichen grew where the sun shone. Further down, the walls appeared to have been carved out of solid rock rather than formed of carved blocks. The water reflected my silhouette far below. I felt dizzy with vertigo.

Then I noticed that on the shaft there was a horizontal line where the rock was wet but no longer under water, as if the water level had recently receded. It was the tide. The well was filled with sea water. So perhaps that was why the second well was dug, because the first one was full of sea water. That would make this well the older of the two. This was it, the entrance to the treasure room!

Now what? I had made it that far. You might imagine that I would have been driven by curiosity to go down that well, but pretend is pretend and

living is living. You can go a little too far with this sort of thing. By pretending, I had enhanced my swim to this treasure island from my imaginary shipwreck, made it more exciting, more fun. When I reached the island, the path naturally lured me to the temple; then, for fun, I searched for the grave which led me to this well. It had all been a game.

But, for me, this was where the game had to end. The next move was no game. Was my curiosity strong enough that I was willing to dive into that hole in the ground, not knowing what is lurking there, in order to check out my malarial fantasy? No way! Besides, I would need some rope and an underwater light.

I would come back another day with someone like Alfonso along to help me in case something happened, I decided pragmatically. Maybe he would like to go down and take a look.

I lay on my back in the sun and fell asleep. I must have been more tired from the swim than I realized. When I woke up and began to stand, propping myself up with my hands, I cut my finger on a piece of glass from a broken booze bottle someone had thrown there. A quick look around showed trash scattered here and there. Hey, this island isn't always uninhabited, I thought; someone is using it for something: smuggling, I suspected.

It was then I noticed the utter stillness of the air and an oppressive heat followed by a breeze teasing the treetops. Clouds were forming in the distant west toward Sumatra. I decided it was time to swim back before the waves picked up. But when I got back down to the beach, I discovered the waves had already been there and picked up my float and carried it away. Oh, boy! No buoy! Big problem!

It started to drizzle so I went back to the temple and, after a few minutes trying to kick myself in the tush, I thought over my options. The sun was setting behind me. I wasn't interested in the beauty; it merely emphasized to me that it was already too late to attempt the swim back that night. Ay-yah! I blew it!



I sat there at the temple with my jaw in my hands, elbows on my knees, trying to figure out the best way to handle the situation; I would make do with what I had. I had water to drink from the lower well and could take shelter in the temple for the night protected by fire. Someone would see it and be out to get me soon. No problem.

Oh, oh! Problem. I was without my lighter, maybe the first time in years.

I was in the process of trying to find a bright side to a dark night on the island when I noticed the light of a boat drawing nearer in the twilight. I jumped up with relief and started waving, but something made me stop. Here I was, a woman alone on an island, and nobody knew where I was. If somebody was coming here, why would they come at night? Maybe it would be wiser to first see who it was before announcing my presence. I hoped that no one had already spotted me waving. I hid myself in the underbrush at the edge of the temple clearing.

The motorboat arrived with seven men aboard. They went immediately to the temple and lit a fire in the middle of the concrete floor. They tied a white string around the neck of a cockerel they had brought along with them. They hung up banners written in Chinese characters as if decorating for a party or a ceremony.

Later, another boatful of men arrived and was pulled up on shore. They joined the others. There were now fifteen men in all. Some of them changed into ceremonial clothing, long white robes.

One man came near me in the underbrush, unzipped himself and began to pee while he got out a cigarette and lit up. When he was putting himself away, he was also putting his lighter away and absentmindedly missed his pocket. His lighter fell to the ground beside me, unnoticed by him. Or so I thought. Now, I'm not so sure. Anyway, I picked up the lighter in case it might come in handy later, after the party left.

In the firelight, I caught glimpses of some faces I'm sure I had passed on the streets of Malacca, piercing-eyed young men, the ones usually found sitting in the dingier coffee shops with their backs to the wall. I recognized the cocky young stud, the guy Percival and I had seen stiff the owner of the restaurant.

Then I saw Jimmy! Jungle Jimmy the creep! He was telling others what to do as if he was the commander, or more like a sergeant, passing on

orders from his superiors. He wore a scarf tied in a series of knots that looked like horns surrounding his head in a devilish halo, his demonic character emphasized by the shadows thrown up from the fire.

Three men stood with their backs to me, each with one pant-cuff rolled up. These, I learned, were the new inductees. At times during the ceremony, they all stood on one leg. There was a series of hand signals and the handling of ritualistic paraphernalia: a rope, a flute, a sandal, a fan. Then everyone grabbed hold of the white string that had been tied earlier around the neck of the cockerel.

I didn't understand what it was all about until Jimmy, standing in front of the inductees, broke from the recitation of set phrases and started speaking in English. "We, the *hong* of the Four Holes, formerly spoke only Chinese, but now some of our brother-members are Indians and Malays, so we use English, ah. These are some of the changes that are happening to the Four Holes, changes with the times, ah.

"In this ceremony, when I was allowed to enter the society, we pricked our fingers and let the blood flow into a cup and mixed it with the blood of the cockerel before we took this oath and drank it, but now with AIDS, I am afraid maybe some of you haven't been good little boys..." There were scattered snickers.

"So you will prick your fingers tonight and let the blood drip to the ground. This, also, is a change. But make no mistake! The blood you drink tonight, the blood of this cockerel, carries the same curse whether my blood is mingled with it or not, the weight of the whole *hong* is still mixed in it. You must drink it with the thought of your own death fixed in your mind, ah. Whoever betrays any secret of the initiation rites for our society, the Four Holes, will end his life as the cockerel does, under the blade."

His arm flashed and the bird's head fell onto a fan that had been placed upon the altar. Blood gushed forth from the headless body; a silver bowl appeared to collect it. All the men held the limp string in their hands, the lifeline that formerly was around the neck of the now dead fowl. That was their neck, they all were probably thinking. If they ever violated the gang's secrecy, that was their head. That was my neck, I realized, if I were caught witnessing the scene.

Just as the beak hit the fan, a snake happened by on its evening crawl

and decided to explore a new path that led to the smell of freshly-killed chicken, a path that took it directly between my legs along my—my upper thighs. Now, I had worked with snakes before and knew fear is not a safe response, but it would be difficult, even for a professional snake handler not to react instinctively when a snake unexpectedly crawls up your thigh.

"Oh!" I cried, squirming away from the startled cobra who coiled into striking position facing the light. Actually, I made a sound that was new to me and which I don't think I could ever reproduce. The important point was that Jimmy recognized my voice. Maybe I had been spotted before, and he was only toying with me, waiting for the right time to expose me. Maybe it was he who had so nonchalantly exposed himself to me, the creep. It would be just like him.

"It's the *gwailoh*, the Yank girl!" cried Jimmy "Get her! She's meat!"

From earlier that day I knew the trail that led up the hill; all other escape routes had already been cut off. I hurried away in the darkness, making as little noise as possible, but I was sure they could follow the snapping of the dry branches. I believed that the sound of my tympani-drum-heartbeat alone was enough to give me away.

I found the well and stood at its edge, watching the light of the torches as they made their way around the small island at the shore at low tide, meeting on the other side, separating once more, spreading out, and beginning, from several sides at once, to come up the hill toward me through the thick brush.

I felt around in the pile of trash I'd spotted earlier, came across a plastic bag, and wound it many times around the recently acquired lighter, and put it between my breasts. Then I dangled my feet over the dark hole and eased myself into the shaft, hanging from my fingers until I found a foothold in the brick, trying to keep three points in contact at all times. I hoped that all the snakes and vermin had decided to go hunting tonight. I was about five yards down when I noticed a light shining on the underside of a branch overhanging the rim of the well. They were very near.

I could not find the next foothold. I grabbed the edge of a jagged rock with my cut finger, lost my grip, and jumped—if you know you're going to fall, you might as well jump. Taking a deep breath, I held it when I splashed into the water and sank below the surface. Looking upward

through the water, I could see light flaring down the side of the shaft. They would see me!

A dark ledge appeared to one side and I lunged for it as the light swept past. There was no wall!

Holding my breath, I groped with my hands in the blackness until I touched what turned out to be the side of a tunnel carved out of solid rock. The tunnel turned upward. With legs kicking like mad, I broke the surface of the water, gasping for air. Below me at the opposite end of the short tunnel I had just come through, I could see a faint light glowing. Someone was looking for me down the well, looking probably with a gun pointing and waiting for me to surface.

In the secret chamber, I swam breaststroke along the surface until my foot struck bottom. I tripped on a curb-size ledge, came to another flat surface, another curb: they were steps leading upward! Six steps, slippery from being under water, then six more steps led to a dank, flat surface, slightly less slippery.

Where was I? I wanted to see. I brought out the lighter. I unwrapped the plastic, finding myself ironically thankful that it hadn't been biodegradable plastic and that someone had carelessly discarded it for my benefit.

Ed: And the lighter was still dry?

Cin: Yes, as I unwrapped it, I was careful not to drip any water on the flint. After the third flick, the light sparked on.

Ed, the sight was unbelievable! Imagine being a mouse poised between two giant ears of corn, a narrow hallway receding into the darkness, both sides of which contained "corn-kernels" glistening in the glow of my lighter! "*The golden grain in the hand of the Virgin!*"

Ed: Must have been awesome!

Cin: And then some!

Each "kernel," on close inspection, turned out to be a bar of gold weighing about five pounds; each one, I figured out later, was worth about thirty thousand dollars. Gold had been poured into molds the size of small loaf pans, cooled, removed, and stacked againsts both sides of this room three rows deep and a little over five feet high from floor to ceiling. The end of each bar was stamped with two interlocking equilateral triangles,

Ed: Solomon's Seal!

Cin: Near the watery entrance—the only way in or out, I was to discover—a few of the bars were missing from the stack. Lucky Lim's withdrawals, I presumed. Or Anyi's? Or perhaps both. Perhaps even others had found this cache and taken some. For who would remove it all? There was simply too much of it, and it was well-hidden where it was, having lasted safely for almost three thousand years. And hardly anybody would have enough faith in their dreams to go and even look for it.

How had Lucky found the gold, if he had? I wondered. Perhaps through his connection with the *hong*, or maybe from having spent time on this island as a fisherman. If he had an observant eye and a curious mind he could have noticed, as I had, that the water level rose or fell with the tide and, therefore, the well contained sea water. He could have questioned as I had why a well was dug at the highest place on the island instead of a lower location. And remember, he had no fear of diving into the water.

The lighter grew dim in my hand. I decided to conserve fuel as I explored. I would allow only a short flick of light every few paces. The roof of the cavern was low, and I had to walk slightly stooped over, that would make it less than five-and-a-half-feet high. I found that the chamber extended into three other dead-end tunnels, branching out in a crossed pattern about thirteen paces each from a center point and widening at the ends. It was, I realized, a subterranean Templar cross exactly as was pictured on the map of Percival's Card 32. At the center point, some tremendous heat must have been generated, for the bars had literally melted and formed a hard lake on the floor, reflecting gold, the glow more reddish than my lighter flame!

Even with occasional flicks of the light, the exploration was soon completed. Strange, isn't it? After the initial impact, a person can lose interest even in a room full of gold. I sat down on the smooth floor at the center where it was driest, and set the lighter beside me, preparing to wait out the night in the safety of Solomon's treasure room. I rubbed on this magic bark that Nujen gave me that I now wore as my charm necklace. I figured that Jimmy and his goons would call off the hunt when I didn't reappear in the well or when one of them was bitten by a snake. I hoped it would be Jimmy.

Meanwhile, I would be as snug as a bug in a rug. Well, I could have used a blanket, for the underground chamber was on the cool side, and I was wet and dressed for swimming.

I didn't feel snug. I began to feel increasingly restless, actually claustrophobic. Tension seemed literally to be building up as the ions in the air became charged. Then I heard a "Cerrack!" followed by a low rumble! Thunder in the distance. In that absolute darkness I imagined I was watching a movie of the Portuguese attacking Malacca, the sides of the black carracks spitting fire, belching smoke as cannons exploded...

That's when it struck me! Wait a minute! Thunder means lightning. And lightning likes this island! And gold attracts lightning! And I'm sitting on melted gold! It's hit here before! This place is a magnet for lightning! If lightning strikes again, I'm charcoal!

God I was scared! *She was visibly shaking now as she talked.* I was in tears with fear. I kept rubbing that bark and praying to the God of my Sunday School to spare me.

The thunder continued for what seemed like an eternity, yet it never got any louder. I held my breath as if I didn't want to be caught dead without a good supply of oxygen. Eventually, it faded into distant rumbles that were less thunderous than my hungry stomach. I came to the conclusion that night that sometimes the powers in the universe like to tease the *begeezes* out of us!

Again, I was lucky to be alive. I spent a long night in the middle of a drought again praying that we didn't get rain, listening for any hint of thunder in that silent, dark, dank room full of gold. Every once in a while I would flick on my lighter to make sure this wasn't some sort of malaria dream. No. It was for real. Rows and rows of gold receding into the darkness, potentially the chamber of my oblivion.

I must have checked it out four or five times. It's not something you find easy to believe, you know. There I was with, who knows, well over a hundred tons of gold that once belonged to King Solomon! Can you imagine?

Personally, I was totally unprepared for the events of that day. But what could have prepared me for a hundred tons of gold? Suddenly, perhaps irrationally, I became strangely confident. I figured the universe was not

going to go through all the trouble of bringing me back from the brink of oblivion, enticing me to this island, then forcing me down this well only to have me die the richest, crispiest woman on earth and forgotten! What kind of plan was **that**?

So I was safe, I concluded. It may not be logical, but it was consoling. And if I was wrong, then I was as good as dead, so why worry about it?

And yet, I did worry, especially with each crack of thunder I heard. Somehow I made it through the longest night of my life. Silence is golden—maybe sometimes. Gold is silent, for sure. But in the sensory deprivation of complete darkness, the mind won't shut up! Busy thoughts. Thinking about how I was going to climb out of this hole I was in, literally, and who would be waiting when I reached the top. Dreaming about how I was going to use the gold; how I was going to stay alive and keep the gold.



As it turned out, I had little to worry about getting out of the well. The ascent proved easy except where I ran into a patch of slimy moss, slipped, and splashed down into the water once more. My second attempt was done with much more care and success. There was no one waiting at the top. Either they hadn't heard my splash or had left me for drowned. Nice guys! There was no one on the island.

There was no boat either. I lay on the dry shore in the early morning sun to get warm, weighing my options. The waves were still too high. Without sleep or food I was low on energy. I couldn't swim without a raft, and I couldn't risk signalling for help. Neither could I stay on the island without food. My options were limited; I had to look for some sort of raft or float before I attempted the swim.

I made my way along the rocky beach until I found a plank wedged in the roots of a large tree. It was probably a piece of wood from a broken-up boat washed up onto the beach. I struggled with it, got it free with difficulty and, after resting again, for my energy was drained from all the exertion, I was off paddling with my hands into the steep waves.

When I got out into deeper water, the current swept me northward. Struggling, I swam in a line diagonal to the current, aiming for a point of land. I gave up on that idea after a little while and put all my effort into reaching for a fishtrap that was still far away. It was rising out of the water with a stick ladder leading up to a hut on stilts. A motorboat was tied to the fishtrap, but I saw no one. Since the fishtrap works by using the current to catch the fish, I had only to ride with the flow and then paddle over to the ladder and climb up to the hut. I thought I could rest there and then maybe find help.

"*Salamat datang, Putri Cin. Welcome.*" I looked up to see Aziz smiling, his hand reaching down from the doorway of the hut to help me up. "Welcome, my princess. Is it not fate that we meet like this again? Yes? *Nasib* as I told you. I knew you were still alive. I could feel it here." He held his hand over his heart.

He was being a little too syrupy, I thought, like he was reading his lines before a camera, playing his tall, dark, and handsome part. "You were on the island last night?" I accused him.

"I was one of the new recruits," his eyes flashed with dramatic pride, a pirate now to the core; I'm sure that is what he saw whenever he looked in the mirror, which I sensed was often. Aziz's moustache had filled out. His eyes had grown large, as if he were trying to study each moment under a microscope. He might have been on drugs.

"I was stationed here by Jimmy just in case you appeared and tried to escape. From here I can see the whole island if anyone tries to swim. Last night, someone thought you fell into the abandoned well at the top of the hill. We heard a splash, saw the ripples on the water surface. But we saw no sign of a floating body. Maybe that was just a falling branch, or perhaps a decoy?" He was fishing for an answer to my disappearance.

"But you are alive, my princess, and my heart is filled with gladness. My body yearns for you. I sat here, waiting, hoping, dreaming of a chance to be with you, and now my *nasib* brings you to me. You must be mine."

He started getting amorous, sniffing me, kissing my neck open-mouthed like he'd seen too many vampire videos. He was nibbling on my ear and trying to undo my swim suit top at the same time, the shack was swaying dangerously on its stilts above the water.

"Whoa! Cowboy! NO! AZIZ!" I pleaded, and struggled free of his grasp. The guy had a hundred fingers. Aziz was getting impatient with me. I could see his anger gather in the tightness of his neck muscles, in his closed fist. He stopped, took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and eased into a rakish smile, relaxing his hands momentarily.

"Jimmy wanted someone posted here just in case you were still alive. He said everyone's identity was at risk. I volunteered, hoping for a chance like this. I'm supposed to kill you, you know. Yet, what do I do? I risk my life for you, lah. I am going to help you escape, if you—" He smiled, suggestively, his eyebrows rising and falling like Mexican jumping beans.

He moved toward me, grabbing my breasts. "Wait!" I squirmed. "I have a better idea. I'm only one woman. What if I offered you enough money to buy as many women as you want? Let me show you where I was last night and what I found. Aziz—a room full of gold!" I was buying time; it might cost me my fortune, but I have gotten kind of partial to surviving.

"Gold, Aziz! Gold will buy you many women with blonde hair like mine, only long and fine like an angel's, and anything else you might desire. Gold!" I smiled my okay-but-later smile. (You don't date the captain of the high school football team in rural Montana and remain a virgin without learning a few tricks.) "Why don't you take me back to the island? I'll show you where that gold is hidden. We can share. And then, if you still want me..."

"Yah! We can share," he said excitedly, in a trance, already anticipating the gold and me. With my best vamp smile, I lured him down the ladder and into the boat. Trying to look sexy and keep a straight face, I watched carefully as he started the motor, trying to remember the sequence, hoping for an opportunity to use this information soon.

Once back on the island, I walked him along the path to the well at the top of the hill, all the while telling him what clues had led me to the treasure and to whom the gold probably belonged, namely Solomon, or, as Aziz would have known him, Suleiman. I emphasized the Putri Ledang connection which I felt would excite him the most. He confirmed that Upeh Island was a miniature of the much larger Pulau Besar where Putri Ledang buried her husband. Come to think of it, they both did look a bit like the handle of a *kris*.

Aziz was willing to believe my every word until I told him he would have to go down into the well to see for himself, for I was too weak from my swim after my recent bout of malaria. I would not be able to make it through the water tunnel, I told him, and that part was the truth. But he suspected a trick, and nothing I said could convince him otherwise. So he tied my hands behind my back, then my ankles together and sat me at the edge of the well shaft. It is insulting not to be trusted and humiliating to admit that in a time of crisis I lie so badly. He apologized for my inconvenience, said he only wanted to prevent my running away with the boat. See what I mean about being sorry? Doesn't mean diddly.

Then he tied one end of a large rope around a nearby tree and let himself down into the well shaft. He disappeared beneath the surface of the water. I had maybe ten minutes to get free.

I quickly looked for a broken piece of glass like the one I'd cut myself on the day before. I found one and rubbed my ankles back and forth against it—Boy, did that ever take stomach muscles!—until I got my feet free. Then, lying down, I ever-so-carefully picked up the glass with my fingers behind my back, with wrists still bound together. I went to a short tree where I wedged the glass in the crotch of a branch at a height where I could work and began sawing back and forth on the rope.

I didn't have much time. There was too much of the pirate in Aziz for me to believe he would allow me to escape, **especially** when he saw all that gold. He planned to use me physically before he killed me. Getting free before he came back up was my only chance, and it didn't look good. A piece of glass isn't a knife, and that nylon rope was tough. Absorbed in my rope sawing, trying to hurry but being careful not to slit my wrists, I hadn't noticed the dark clouds gathering, when **CERRACK!** I was thrown to the ground by a bolt of lightning, way too close for comfort. I got to my feet and ran as fast as I dared down the hill, realizing that, with my hands still tied behind my back, if I stumbled, my head and shoulders would have to break my fall. I had almost reached the temple when the second lightning bolt smashed into the top of the hill and down the well shaft.

Aziz was a goner, an electrified pirate at the pearly gates. Nice guy as far as your average attempted rapist and killer goes.

Now, without Aziz after me, I had the time I needed to get free from my

bonds. I picked up another piece of broken glass—where would I be today if it hadn't been for trash?—and, in the shelter of the Chinese temple, for it had started to rain, I worked carefully, sawing the ropes until the last few uncut threads finally pulled apart, and I was free.

I went to the boat and got it started—Thank God! As the rain came pouring down, I steered north along the misty gray coast, north, away from the city. The rain was heavy and would provide me with cover. No one could see me from the coast.

I landed on a spit of sand near Indian Point, Tanjong Kling, and made my way carefully to the nearby coastal road. I had to get out of Malacca fast to save my life. The *hong* was after me, or would be if they knew I was still alive. People get killed for a lot less than a hundred tons of gold! I remembered Jimmy's description of the "Death of a Thousand Swords." If I had to go through something like that... and knowing where all that gold was hidden made my situation all the more dangerous. I know I'd talk after the first slice. And after I talked, I'd be dead.

These were the thoughts that were racing through my mind, besides the fact that I was shivering with cold and fear, and who knows, maybe malaria coming back with a vengeance, standing in the rain in my swim suit that I'd been wearing for the last twenty-four hours, when a battered, old American car with large tail fins, a late 1950s Chevrolet, appeared around the curve and came bouncing noisily on bad shocks down the road toward me. I blew on my thumb for good luck and stuck it out.

The car stopped. The door opened. "Well, I'll be a— Hop in, honey.... I just want you to know, little lady, it wasn't the thumb but that cute rain outfit you got on that got me to stop. Country Joe Preston at your service."

I got in and took a good look at the man hidden behind rainbow-colored reflect-all sunglasses, not exactly perfect for a rainy day either, I thought. His voice sounded familiar; he looked familiar. Besides he had the biggest howdy grin I'd seen in a long time. He wore a cowboy hat with a leather band around it made from snakeskin. Dried scorpions dangled from his rear-view mirror.

He stared at me for a while, wearing that grin the size of a watermelon slice. "Hot damn! You're a sight for sore eyes! I told you I'd be waiting for you when you got out of the water! Didn't happen to mention which

water."

It was Rasta Rosco, FResco, PResto Magnifico! "And now, Country Joe PReston, capital 'P', capital 'R', ma'am." I squealed. We hugged each other and laughed. We had some catching up to do, a lot had happened since we had parted.

PResto had had some tough times for a while after I left him. He'd spent a few nights in jail in that coastal town in Spain until they discovered they could think of nothing to charge him with, so they let him go and gave him three hours to get out of town. While he had been in the lock-up, no one thought to feed the animals, and they all had died.

"The snake, Herman, I keep around my head," he told me, "That's where he used to like to sleep. Guess I'm sentimental."

"How did you know he wouldn't bite you?" I asked him.

"I had him defanged right after I got him," he told me.

"Herman was defanged? And all the time I performed with you I was scared to death of him. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you? The look of terror on your face was what was attracting all the customers." He then pointed at the scorpions, dangling from his mirror. "I never cared much for them. They're just hanging there for show. I figure they sort of advertise my country-western act.

"Oh, by the way, I heard they finally found that pregnant bugger's flattened remains in the lobby of one of the first class hotels. Some tourist must have accidentally stepped on it."

How had PResto got to Asia? "Sold the van and used the money to play some pool. Won. Bought a plane ticket, played some more pool in Singapore, and that's why I'm driving this car." He was on his way north. He figured country-western music was going to hit it big in Southeast Asia, and he had come around to open up the market and see what there was to see. "I get by because they don't yet know the difference between country-western singing and the hollering I do. I get enough to pay for gas and I get to travel to boot."

He kept driving; we kept talking. We stopped at the next town so I could buy some clothes with money PResto loaned me—should have seen the salesgirls' faces when I walked in dressed as I was for the beach. We

stopped again in KL so I could get another passport at the American Embassy. They remembered my name from about three months before, frowned, but came through after they checked everything out.

Then we made our way up to Thailand and parted company. I just couldn't see hanging around with Country Joe. I know the difference between country-western music and the hollering he does.

Ed: And you never told him about the gold?

Cin: Sure, I did. But he didn't believe me. That's another reason I split from him.

Ed: But you told me I didn't have to believe you.

Cin: You don't, and you don't have to hang around with me either. But you do, don't you? You believe me?

Ed: I'd like to withhold my judgment, if you don't mind. It seems to me, if you really had found all that gold, you would be tempted to go back.

Cin: Of course, and I did go back not long ago. But first I went back to the States for a while to lie low and review my options. A lot had happened to me during those eleven weeks I had spent in Malacca. I needed to sort things out. Lucky I was home. Got a chance to have some good talks with Granny and to say good-bye to her before she passed away.

It got lonely real fast after that; nobody I knew or cared about knowing was living in my hometown any more. And too many bad memories still lingered around the town where I had been a wife. And I have to admit it, I was hooked by the vision of all that gold down in that well in Malacca. I couldn't deny what I had seen, nor could I forget.

So I grew my hair long and dyed it; it had been real short right after the divorce. I also took off some weight, put on some old horn-rimmed glasses, changed my clothes style, and flew to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I drove into Malacca in a rented car late in the evening.

It had been only a little over a year since I'd been there but, Whoa! the changes were mind-boggling. This was progress? Nujen's story of the iguana biting its tail came to mind.

I turned off the main road and headed toward the coast, passing the new Petronas gas refinery which loomed above me in the night. Clouds of

smoke poured from its stacks, like a hideous dragon. Fire shot up into the night sky. If that thing ever decides to attack, is there a fighting chance against it?

I took a wrong turn and passed an abandoned village; what had once been the idyllic Kampong Kuala Lama Lama was gone; only the shells of houses remained with the windows, doors, and roofs all stripped away. It looked like so many skeletons, a community that Petronas had already attacked and defeated. All the people had been relocated by the government because of the danger of an explosion.

Closer to town, I noticed that a skyscraper, a condominium for rich, retired Singaporeans, was growing upward right beside a large slice of Malacca's limited beach. Not fair! Sort of like a tall guy standing in the front row.

Then I saw lights on Upeh. Across the dark water, I could see that they were working on some construction project. That night I stayed out at a bungalow by the beach with Upeh in view. The next morning I found out what they were doing on the island. The whole top of the island had been scraped clean of its vegetation. The snakes had been eradicated; the Muslim grave and the Chinese temple had been destroyed—never existed, said the government man.

On the island now stood several ugly half-built bungalows. Lightning rods had to be put on every building to protect them from frequent lightning bolts. I found out some entrepreneur had decided to make rocky Upeh Island into a resort for wealthy tourists.

Because they had bulldozed the top of the island, the well which had also become the unknown tomb of lusty Aziz had been filled in. The entrance to the room of gold was now buried beneath about eight yards of rubble, totally out of my reach.

Sure, I could go tell someone about it, some authority. Get permission to dig it up. Meanwhile, my life wouldn't be worth a plug nickel at a recycling center if anyone in the *hong* spotted me. Besides, who was going to believe such a fantastic story from a *Mat Salleh* who was just passing through? Who would believe me? Would you? Do you?"

She gazed up at the night sky for a moment like someone studying a map. Then she pointed. "There she is. There's Spica. See how Corvus, the Crow,

eyes it, staring hungrily at "the golden grain in the hand of the Virgin."

That, in essence, is the end of her story of how she found and then lost King Solomon's treasure. We continued our conversation, which later became increasingly personal and has been subsequently erased from the tape.

I was enthralled by the story, and more so by Cin herself. I delayed my departure for a few days to stay with her. Perhaps there is something about silver moonlight on palm fronds and a shimmering sea, with warm tropical breezes carrying erotic whiffs of durian. I was hypnotized.

Now, not another word about Cin and me. I shall, like Percival, be discreet.

EPILOGUE

I have had a lot of time to think over Cin's story since my return to Japan from my holiday in the Gulf of Thailand, time commuting on the crowded subways, time waiting in line, and time waiting for my students to respond in my English conversation classes.

As you have seen, I did a great deal of research, verifying some facts, adding more information, and checking for fallacies in the story. Here's a brief review.

It is true that Spica would have been over Malacca during the time of King Solomon, but we have no verifiable evidence that Solomon ever used this fact or even knew of it. In fact, there is nothing but circumstantial evidence that King Solomon ever conceived of such a gold reserve as Cin described.

The story of Lucky Lim is, from what I can determine, accurate. There was such a man with a grave located as mentioned which is popular with gamblers. But again, that does not prove he found the gold, nor does it prove the existence of any gold treasure.

Although there are accounts of the offer made to Albuquerque by the wife of Utimuti Rajah the amount does not stand up to historical scrutiny, varying as it does with each telling.

Neither is there anything but circumstantial evidence that the Knights Templar or organizations such as the Jesuits and the Freemasons who have inherited the splayed cross symbol had any knowledge of gold being hidden away in some cache on an island in the South Seas.

The translation of the charcoal message on the cave wall in New Guinea has been questioned by many scholars who doubted that such an expedition from Ptolemaic Egypt ever took place. However, the eclipse mentioned actually happened over New Guinea and would have corresponded to the date indicated by the style of writing. This translation is generally winning acceptance. Yet again, this message only **infers** the existence of gold and makes no mention of a cache.

The similarity in myths between cultures may indicate Jungian archetypes rather than proof of diffusion of people, and a name like Bilqis

in two places could be explained as a linguistic coincidence. Isolated examples of linguistic similarities are not considered very compelling arguments in the archaeology departments of academia.

As for the gold of Malaysia being reddish, in *The Study of Ancient Times in the Malay Peninsula and Straits of Malacca*, Braddell, on page 421, Dato F. W. Douglas affirms that the color of Pahang gold is red, but Dr. F. T. Ingham disagrees, and Mr. Harold Service of the Geological Service flatly denies that the color is anything but yellow.

This matter is still up for debate, as is the location of Sheba's gold. Traditional belief strongly indicates that the gold came from Africa, although a location that would fit the necessary requirements of the trip as described in the Old Testament has yet to be found.

Therefore, considering all of these factors, I must conclude that there is no objective reason to believe in the existence of King Solomon's room full of gold on Upeh Island **except one**: I sent a question via e-mail for a world class scientist's opinion on the properties of lightning and received a response from Professor Lao Dang, Department of Atmospheric Science, University of Minnesota, and had it translated into layman's terms by a colleague at my university. I shall quote it here:

"Lighting will find the path of least resistance. Since gold has a high conductivity coefficient, it is not surprising that a given location with a large deposit of gold would be hit repeatedly by lightning. There would be no heat caused by lightning passing through the gold since there is low resistance. However, if the material surrounding the gold has a lower conductivity coefficient and, therefore, higher resistance, there would be enough heat generated to melt the gold nearby."

Since Upeh Island obviously has a high iron content from the description of the redness of the rock, and iron has low conductivity, it is possible that some of the gold would have been melted as Cin described; in fact, it would have been highly surprising if some hadn't melted. This aspect bears out her story. The question then is: does an extraordinary amount of lightning strike that island? Opinions vary. This may be an area worth studying in the future.

In conclusion, judging from the **facts** given, there is no way we can take her story at face value. It should be considered as what I believe it was

meant to be: a fascinating, fanciful tale. It cost me an entire bottle of gin to hear it, and it was well worth the price. Having heard it, the nights in Tokyo since my return have seemed that much drabber in contrast.

I long to believe in a treasure I might find, Ed.ed.

POSTSCRIPT

After I read the transcript, I rang up Edwin at his office. His secretary, Mrs. Yamamoto, answered the phone. It seems Professor Prebble left his position in mid-term, which she considered highly irregular. (As a matter of fact, it happens all the time, as the tensions of living in Tokyo, dealing with the crowds, earthquakes, the rains, and with always being considered an outsider begin to weigh upon many foreign teachers and cause them to go berserk and/or leave without notice. But I acted shocked for Mrs. Yamamoto's benefit.)

"One would not have expected that of Professor Prebble," complained his former secretary with undisguised censure. Her loyalty had been misplaced. She said that he had moved to somewhere in Southeast Asia and the only address she had was in care of Poste Restante, Singapore.

I set aside all thought of Edwin until I received several letters from a friend in Malacca, old Arthur Rangjit, who had helped me with research on my book *Time Travel in the Malay Crescent*. In them, Arthur sent me news about some old friends and people I asked about. Yes, he had known Planter Percival Wiggins who was "no longer with us." He had returned to England, some say because of health reasons, and has—so the betel-nut wireless relates—been reunited with his rather wealthy wife from whom he had been estranged for many years. While he had been a rubber plantation manager, she had been a hotel-hopping heiress on the Continent. The Church of England had not sanctioned divorce, and the couple has now been reconciled in their declining years.

Chong On now teaches at a cooking school and is said to be an extremely attentive instructor inclined to giving numerous pop taste-tests, and willing to work long hours. He's quite successful.

Arthur sent some newspaper clippings with his letter. One announced that a Mr. James Ng was recently elected president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. At first I was puzzled as to why he had sent this, until I read the full title. James Ng of the Tour'Ng Travel Agency. Arthur had scribbled a note in the margin of the clipping. "Jimmy in ascension." Jungle Jimmy, I presume.

The other two clippings were about Alfonso Fernandes. The first had his

picture with his name in the caption as the arresting officer. He is shown standing beside a cargo of contraband cigarettes from a smuggling operation he had personally busted. Unfortunately, said the article, the smugglers had all escaped.

The second article accompanied a photo of a bride from Sumatra. "Alfonso got married to a Batak woman, so at least she was Christian," Arthur wrote. Arthur suggested that the wedding was a shotgun affair. As he wrote in his letter, "You can go to the well only so many times before you spill a drop or two."

Besides a few pages of complaints about his arthritis, he went on to disapprove of the changes that were taking place in and around Malacca. The post office was moved from the center of town to an inconvenient location at the outskirts. One can no longer drive down the old Fort Road as it is now a promenade. Singapore was now only a three-and-a-half hours' drive from Malacca on the new expressway, so on the weekends Malacca, now a city, was always crowded.

The island of Upeh has been devastated, according to Arthur, raped of its vegetation. No natural beauty remains. A speculator built a whole slew of bungalows as a tourist hideaway. But they had all sorts of problems from the start. The pier began to crumble almost immediately because they hadn't used enough cement during construction. Then one of the bungalows was hit by lightning and burned to the ground. It seems the lightning rod hadn't been properly grounded. Then rumor circulated that this island *attracted* lightning—something connected with ancient myths and legends about the place.

Now the bungalows are empty except one. A lot of local people had been hired as staff, but they all quit when things went bad and they didn't get paid.

The only people staying there don't seem to mind all the inconveniences on that isolated, malfunctioning project; they are a couple from America, Arthur believed, who had gone to stay in one of the bungalows as soon as they arrived in Malacca. Why they like it out there no one can understand.

The woman, described as tall with long, red hair, never leaves the island. The man (whose description generally matches Edwin's) occasionally comes to town to pick up some large equipment, such as a compressor "to

fill diving tanks," he told the shipping agent.

"They won't be able to see much in those murky waters off Upeh," wrote Arthur.

He also wrote that most of the time this reclusive couple are the only two people on the island except for the staff, which has been reduced to one family. The caretaker says that he doesn't know much about the couple except that they insist they be well-stocked with tonic water and gin. The two are rarely seen during the daytime but appear on their porch around sunset for their sundowner. The caretaker's wife cooks for them, but they usually return to their bungalow to eat.

They live in a bungalow on the top of a small rise. For some reason, they wanted only that bungalow, liked the view, they said, although Arthur didn't see that there was much difference in view from one bungalow to the next. They declined to move even when they had a plumbing problem. They said that they would dig up the pipes and fix the problem themselves and, of course, the workers didn't mind. The workers were pleased to let the crazy *Mat Salleh* take care of their problem. They didn't mind in the least.

I suppose the man **could** be Edwin Prebble, yet one detail did not seem to fit well with my image of him. Arthur wrote that the couple seems extremely partial to heavy-metal music. They play it earsplitting loud in the middle of the night so that you can't hear yourself talk, or as the caretaker put it, "You couldn't hear even a jackhammer with all that racket."

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This book began at "tiffin" one day years ago on a veranda in Tanjong Kling overlooking the Strait of Malacca just north of town—Malacca was a town then; it has since become a city. I was dining with my good friends, John Gifford and the late Humphrey Ball, when John happened to mention that the island just off the coast was frequently struck by lightning. Later someone mentioned the story of the Utimuti Raja's wife and her offer of a fabulous sum of gold to Alfonso Albuquerque. The name Mt. Ophir was added to the stew and the plot began to boil, or perhaps simmer would be a better term, for I began research on it that has extended over a decade.

The more researched, the more fiction turned into fact, even the most unbelievable parts of the book, for example, the throwing of the ring into the ocean only to have it end up on the finger of the person for whom it was intended, which was told to me as an absolutely true story. And the grave on the hill used by gamblers is a fact. The love story between Duarte Fernandes and Anyi agrees with all available data; in fact, no part of the book runs headlong against historical facts.

That established readers should know that the characters in recent history such as Ahriman, Siva, Lucky Lim, Tai Tai Bong and Mei Li, and all contemporary characters are inventions of mine. The stories they tell and those told about them, however, are based on things heard or read in newspapers while I was staying in Malacca. These stories about people who lived or now live in Malacca were borrowed and amalgamated into the plot. Therefore, although the stories might seem familiar, they were not intended to represent any real event or person living or dead.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wayne Stier writes in a hammock with a laptop on top of his lap on the veranda of a house in a coconut grove on the beach of an island in the Gulf of Thailand where he lives with his wife. His previous books include: *WIDE EYES IN BURMA AND THAILAND*, co-authored with his wife, Mars Cavers, *TIME TRAVEL IN THE MALAY CRESCENT* and *HAWAII BLUE*.