



A Rude Awakening
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My suspicion is that in Heaven the Blessed are of the opinion that the advantages of that locale have been overrated by theologians who were never actually there. Perhaps even in Hell the damned are not always satisfied.

-Jorge Luis Borges, THE DUEL

'The idea of prostitution is a meeting point of so many elements lechery, bitterness, the futility of human relationships, physical frenzy and the clink of gold that a glance into its depths makes you dizzy and teaches you so much! It makes you so sad, and fills you with such dreams of love!'

'But one can live a full life,' suggested Claudin, 'without frequenting prostitutes.'

'No, you can't,' thundered Flaubert. 'A man has missed something if he has never woken up in an anonymous bed beside a face he'll never see again, and if he has never left a brothel at dawn feeling like jumping off a bridge into the river out of sheer physical disgust with life.'

-Robert Baldick, DINNER AT MAGNY'S

'Remember you were of the Fourteenth Army and never say die.'
General Sir William Slim, disbanding the Forgotten Army

The wild life in Medan was something neither night nor DDT could stop.

Beyond our steamy windows, the darkness held all the breathability of a sailor's armpit. A winged and nameless shitbag came hurtling in from the murk, full of offence and fury. Its manner was of one intent on shattering preferably for ever the world speed record for Tropical Hirsute Insect Nuisance Flying.

It burst across the room at drunken velocity, maintaining an altitude of approximately two inches above the heads of the assembled drinkers. The drinkers were tanking themselves up for the arrival of a lorry-load of unleashed Dutch girls, and failed to notice this freak of



evolution. Still accelerating, the shitbag gained height and ploughed its way through a cloud of assorted mosquitoes, flies, moths, and fluttering uglies which had appropriated our central light as a zone for combined aerial combat and propagation of species.

I saw it because I was leaning against the far wall of the mess, listening with Jock Ferguson to Johnny Mercer on War.

'The generals have done their best, but it's been a bloody untidy war all along,' he was saying. 'Do you wonder we're stuck here in such a right old cock-up? You can't say the war is over, even now.'

'Och, you're exaggerating, man,' said Jock Ferguson, straightening up, squaring his shoulders, and pouring a half-pint of whisky down his throat. 'You'll be saying next it didn't begin properly, either.'

'When did it begin, then?'

'September, 1939, of course, when Britain went to war against Germany over Poland,' Jock and I said together, with minor variations.

Johnny shook his head. He had been a teacher in civvy street, and liked to lecture. 'Wrong. I'm talking about when the World War began the one we're still involved with, not the little local European war starring Adolf Hitler. The World War began in 1931, when Japan invaded China. The poor old Chinks have been at it ever since. That was when Japanese aggression started.'

It was at this point that I spotted the winged shitbag, cutting a swathe through the lesser phyla of its kind.

'Ah, but the real war started in '39,' said Jock.

'If so, then it ended in 1940,' said Johnny. 'After the fall of France in the summer of 1940, all of Europe was at peace, unified by Hitler. Nothing else was going on, except the British bugging about on the fringes. The Yanks were reading their comic books. The Russians were frigging around doing nothing in particular. It was only later that the yellow-bellies got things stirred up again.'

Johnny gave his high-pitched laugh and scratched his arse.

Some of us had heard his weird version of history before.

'Whatever you say, VE and VJ days finished the war, all the separate bits of it,' I said.



'Balls. There are wars going on everywhere still, in China, everywhere. What about Spain? What about here? What about Indo-China?'

'Yes, but they aren't real wars. They're not called wars.'

'Horry's right, and you're wrong as usual, Mercer,' Ferguson said. 'They're just local conflicts.'

Mercer was not discomposed. 'Speaking for myself, I prefer a war like a good book it's got to have a beginning, a middle and an end.' He laughed and tottered off in search of a drink.

'The feller's no' heard of armistices,' Jock Ferguson said, and also stomped off leaving me exposed to the drunken mercies of Sgt Wally Scubber, shell-shocked survivor of the Arakan and already as pissed as he was every night of his life. He clutched my arm, cunningly detaining me and supporting himself at the same time. The winged shitbag executed a few crafty Immelmann turns overhead without in any way losing flying speed.

'Merdeka, Wally, how're you doing? Time for beddy-byes?'

'I was shaying to Charlie Meadows, in Blighty you got proper househesh to live in, with proper shanny with lavatories that flush properly and all that. Not like bloody Medan, Horry see what I'm getting at. Curtains. Carpiss on the floor...'

I took a deep drag on my cigarette. As Wally rambled on, I tried to listen to other conversations. My old mate Charlie Meadows was saying, '...since we are an army of occupation, we must conduct ourselves accordingly. There are certain laws which armies of occupation have to follow, but we are so bloody under strength that'

The mess gramophone started up. Ron Dyer was playing the well-worn hit-record, 'Terang Boelan', and the glutinous words drowned out what Charlie had to say. I took a deep swig from my beer glass and sank into an armchair. Wally perched himself on the arm without interrupting the flow of his talk. He had even invented a way of drinking without swallowing which allowed him to go on spouting while the liquor trickled down.

'Everyone agrees that Blighty's the cunt hup, sorry, the country with the highest culture. Good roadsh. Before the war, I was a member of the Automobile Asshociation. Well, that'sh special to England, the Automobile Asshociation. It's all part of the shit'



'What shit are you on about?'

'Hup. The shituation as I shee it.'

The shitbag, infuriated by the smoke and heat of the mess, had worked itself up to maximum speed. Making a sudden banking turn, it dived and struck the wall just above my head with a resounding thhhwerr-ujjjkk.

Fast on the wing, slow on reaction time, the shitbag hung there for a moment, its head pressed thoughtfully against the wall, its multitudinous members still vaguely propriocepting. Patches of distemper and odd wing-cases flaked off at point of impact. Then the creature dropped. It spun tangentially away from the wall and nose-dived into my beer.

Wally noticed nothing. 'Only the British, Horry, my dear old mate, only the British are truly shiver-shiverlised.'

'I must go in a minute, Wally. I've got a date.'

'You wouldn't call the French or the Belgiums shiverlised, would you?'

I stared down at the shitbag. It made vague motions in my direction, either swimming or beckoning.

'America. They're shiverlised, Wally. China there's a very ancient culture for you.'

Giggling, Wally jogged my arm. My glass slopped. The beer revived the winged shitbag. It caught my eye and made a spunky attempt to heave itself out. I experienced a moment of fear, in case it washed up on my flies and burrowed in before I could check its progress. It looked like the kind of creature that devoured sexual organs every morning for breakfast.

'Ancient, yes, yes, ancient all right. Too fucking ancient by half. That's China. No Automobile Asshociation there. I know the Chinks, Horry. RA the Rickshaw Asshociation, that's them.' He laughed, leaking cigarette smoke, and his wrinkles opened and shut like the pleats of an old accordion.

'Christ, Wally, the fucking AA isn't the be-all and end-all of shiverlisation. The Chinese were cultured when we were running round naked with our arses painted blue. The AA wasn't invented then, either.'



He stirred restlessly on the arm of the chair, dropping ash in my lap. 'Leave the AA out of this. We're talking about the Chinks, now, and what a dirty lot they are. You've only got to look.'

'Arseholes, chum, they're a sight cleaner than we are and more shiverlised'

'You only shay that because you've got this Chinese pusher down the bazaar. The Chinks shiverlised! They're a tropical race, Horry, a tropical race, and you can't name me one tropical race that's shiverlised. Look at Africa, India and Burma...'

'Don't talk to me about Burma, mate. I was there in the thick of it with fucking 2 Div.'

Lighting up another cigarette, I glanced at my wrist. Two watches were strapped there. One was a beauty in a black gunmetal case; it had been made in Holland. Unfortunately, it did not work very well. The other was an expensive Indian watch with a red sweep second hand, which looked good although it kept poor time. Taking a mean reading, I decided it must be eight-fifteen or eight-thirty, or perhaps a little later. I could soon leave politely and go and see Margey.

The party was nominally in my honour, since I was flying home in only four days' time; but there would be another party in the sergeants' mess on the following night, just as there had been one the night before.

The winged shitbag was a terrifying mass of claws and antennae and legs, not to mention four stubby wings, with which it was whipping my lifeless Indian beer into foam. Its body comprised a chunk of chitin and armour-casing, from which a mass of pubic hair burst in all directions. It was a perfect scale model of a tank squashed in a bramble bush. Fixing two dull black eyes on me, it redoubled its efforts to home in on my flies or throat.

'The Chinks are really beaten, schmashed, just like the Dutch... I mean, the Dutch are practically a tropical race too, they've lived here for centuries...'

The 'Terang Boelan' record finished. I was able to hear Charlie Meadows again, still talking about army conduct. A good man, Charlie, and an old Burma hand. But Jackie Tertis kept butting in.

'That's okay as far as it goes, Charlie, but take it from me that no native population has ever yet been kept down by leniency. You must



show 'em a firm hand. That's all they respect. By God, if I had my way'

'Thank heavens, you aren't going to get your way, Jackie,' Charlie said mildly. Jackie Tertis was a slightly built man; unlike the rest of us, he was always dapper, his uniform always smartly pressed. Tertis was different, leading his dark sexless life under another star. The sun which baked most of us a solid brown had turned Tertis a hot foxy hue. He was always stoked to furnace temperature.

Wally was the temperature of cold Irish gravy. Blowing cigarette smoke over me, he continued his lecture.

'Horry, you've been away from home too long, talking about getting demobbed here! There isn't a man in this mesh tonight that wouldn't give his head to go home next Monday in your place. I'm telling you this for your own good, Horry... These little Chink hours with all their dirty shexual habits'

Just for a moment, Wally Scubber interested me more than the winged shitbag. The latter had dived to the murky depths of the Indian beer to see if glass-drilling operations would get it anywhere. 'What dirty sexual habits do you happen to fucking well have in mind, Wally?'

His mottled face was lopsided with reproof, as if he suspected that we were talking at cross-purposes.

'There I think you know better than me, Horry, isn't that right? I don't wish to be spesh speshicif give details, but Chink girls aren't brought up like English girls, are they? No churches or schools or general discipline. No knickers. Bloody slant-eyed hours it'll spoil you, Horry, onnis, going with your Chink bit down in the bazaar. When you meet up with some nice English girl'

I belched and heaved myself out of the chair.

'Finish up my beer, Wally, there's a good lad.'

I handed him my glass, which vibrated with the enraged activities of the shitbag. I wove my way across the room. 'You cunt, they do wear fucking knickers,' I announced to the assembled company.

Johnny Mercer's laughing face loomed into mine. Johnny was shorter than I, a red-faced, rat-faced Cockney who made an indifferent RASC sergeant.

'I was watching you catch that bit of wild life in your beer, mucker,' he



said. 'It reminded me of what the old Venereal Bede said about human existence, that it was like some horrible hairy flying abomination belting in through one window of a great hall straight into some poor cunt's wog beer.'

He started howling with his homemade brand of laughter, and I joined in. Smiting him on the shoulder, I pushed through the crowd towards the mess door. It stood open to let the heat and smoke out. I blundered through, emerging almost at a trot into the steaming night.

You could tell blindfold that Medan was just one degree off the equator. The air suppurated like primaeval broth. A million monstrous little things unknown in England expressed their beings in sound so urgently that it was hard to know what was air, what noise. I stood there, swaying slightly, and flipped my fag-end away into the night. Its parabola was cut short in midair. Something had gobbled it up before it fell.

The headlights of a battered fifteen-hundredweight truck penetrated the darkness and moved down the road from the direction of the guardhouse.

They turned uncertainly in at the mess gates, revealing themselves as two eyes the colour of mule urine. They backed away to one corner of the enclosure. There was a smashing sound, sustained and quite leisurely, as the fifteen hundredweight struck our old wooden summerhouse and ignored it. RSM Dickie Payne was returning, drunk as always.

I stood there listening with remote pleasure as Payne drove forward and then, presumably more by accident than in a spirit of revenge, back again, continuing the demolition of the summerhouse. Johnny Mercer staggered out of the mess to see what was going on.

'Merdeka! Our beloved RSM still battering his way through life... I need a pee...'

He turned to a nearby bush. The sound of his urine streaming on the grass reminded me of similar needs. As I moved to one side of the building, lobbing my tool out, the RSM's vehicle swerved forward again. The glow of his headlights swept the ground ahead.

Two frogs lay clasped together, one on top of the other, in a shallow puddle it had rained heavily at sunset. The frogs were motionless, staring ahead into a cold Nirvana of amphibian copulation. I directed a scalding jet of piss on them with such force that they were flipped over, showing their death-yellow bellies. I laughed as I pissed,



churning them up, watching them struggle.

The damned truck was nearly on me. I was so taken up with the frogs that it almost ran me over.

'Payne, you pissy-arsed fuck-pig!' I yelled, jumping backwards as the ghari reared forward.

Payne had the truck door open, holding it with one hand while he steered with the other. He was half falling out of the cab as he backed the truck towards one side of the mess. He shouted something incoherent as he shot by, sweaty face gleaming.

And then the amazing happened. At the time, standing there clutching a dripping prick, I thought only how appropriate it was that the rear end of the truck should begin to sink slowly into the ground. The RSM's response was to rev his engine. The ground collapsed. The truck settled down on its haunches, cab rearing into the air. Mud splattered from its still-spinning front wheels.

Cursing, Dickie Payne fell clear, landing on hands and knees in my pissy puddle among the frogs. He scuttled away into the bushes while the engine died. As the truck sank backwards still further, the yellow beam of the headlights swung upwards till it illuminated the top branches of a nearby tree. With avian imprecations, a terrible feathered thing took flight and clattered into the darkness.

Johnny was at my side, laughing as if his ribs were trapped in a suit of armour. 'The bloody cesspit's caved in!' he kept saying. 'The bloody cesspit's caved in! Isn't that just like life?'

This statement, no less than the truth, somehow settled the question of whether or not I should hang around the mess. Politeness had kept me there; after all, they were standing me a farewell party. But there had been a similar thrash the night before, and another was planned for the day after, all three being designed as a wet run for a grand party on Saturday night which, it was foreseen, would be traumatic enough to require a succession of tailing-off parties, continuing long after I had flown to Singapore to catch the troopship.

For the moment, enough was enough. I checked to see that my revolver was in my holster and my old man in my trousers, and slipped away into the night. Margey, I told myself, meant more to me than all the sergeants in the British Army laid end to bloody end.



At the far end of the road from the sergeants' mess stood an MP's guardpost. It marked the official entrance into the perimeter of our lines. There, the redcaps underwent their primitive life-cycles, lowering barriers across the road after dark, arresting drunks, and generally making themselves obstreperous.

Inside the perimeter was a heterogeneous collection of soldiery: a small detachment of the Royal Mendips, of which I formed part; several squads of 26th Indian Division, comprising both British and Indian troops; some sinister Dutchmen belonging to PEA Force; and a few other odd bods, including some Japanese troops, who were too useful for nasty jobs to be sent home to Nippon, and a solitary Chinese major who spent his days searching for unmarked Chinese graves. This miscellaneous rabble formed part of the occupying force; we were billeted in varying degrees of comfort in what had been a Dutch suburb, before war overcame the Netherlands East Indies four years previously, early in 1942.

The perimeter defences, like our duties, were ill-defined. Despite many alarms and shoot-ups, we could not get it through our thick heads that the Indonesians meant us harm. After all, we had come to liberate them from the rule of the Japs. The general fucking-about meant that a curfew was imposed between midnight and seven in the morning. During that period, those of the occupying force not on duty were supposed to remain snug within their own lines. The redcaps on the gate knew me better than that.

A searchlight burned above their post, drawing a tangle of ghastly winged life into its net. As I entered the lighted zone, a motor-bike zoomed up behind me. I jumped to one side, fearing another drunken driver. Jackie Tertis pulled his heavy old BSA to a halt a few inches from my Number Elevens, pushed up his goggles and grinned evilly. He left the engine roaring. 'Want a lift into town?'

'What about the piss-up?'

'Like you, I skipped it. Better things to do with my time. Climb on haven't got all bloody night.'

He flashed a pass at the redcap who challenged us. Despite my reservations concerning Tertis, I climbed on the pillion and latched my hands under his belt. He was a dangerous bugger in every way, not least as a driver.

Back in our unsophisticated days in India, Jackie Tertis had been a pale little squaddie with wanking problems, afraid to enter a brothel or say boo to a gobble-wallah. Burma had changed all that; after



Kohima, Jackie had become tough and nasty, closed to his mates. Promotion had come his way and he remustered as Intelligence. Now he worked on Dutch detachment, prising confessions out of Indonesian prisoners for Prevention of Enemy Activity Force. In truth, I was partly afraid of him.

Beyond the MP post was a sinister dark stretch of road, with empty houses standing on either side. Tertis accelerated through that bit.

'You going to have a poke?' he shouted over his shoulder.

'Yes. You?'

The noise of the engine drowned part of his answer. I caught only the last part. '...bloody British Army... no discipline any longer.'

Ahead was a level crossing, made melancholy by a solitary light burning above the gates in the darkness; the railway lines glinted like oiled rifle barrels. Two Dutch officers had been ambushed and shot dead at this spot only the week before. We bounced across the track. To one side lurked the dark shape of the railway station. Beyond it was a small market. After that, street lighting began, each light surrounded by a sphere of illuminated insects; after that, you were in the centre of Medan.

The great thing was to be alert, and drop like a stone if you heard anything. (Some weeks later, I made a fool of myself in Winchester High Street, by falling flat on my face when a car backfired.)

We sped over cobbles. There were two or three pedicabs moving about; otherwise, anyone going anywhere went on foot, walking purposefully. Medan was dangerous after dark.

The centre was rather picturesque. Succeeding occupations by Japanese and British troops had not altered the arrangement of modest Dutch buildings, among them the Hotel De Boer, Reserved for Officers, which stood round four sides of the large open green. The green was fringed with European-type trees, while in its centre stood a fine Batak house, all timber, perched on stilts, its steep roofs curling like sails up to the sky.

Beyond the green Kesawan, the main street began. The Chinese quarter lay to the right. There lived my lovely Margey.

Tertis pulled in to the curb when we reached the square.

I climbed off. I did not ask him where he was going.



'Watch it,' he said.

'You too.'

He roared off down the Kesawan.

Despite all my mates said, it was fairly safe in the Chinese quarter. The Chinese were neutral in the struggle between the Indonesians, Dutch, and British. Also, Holland's tough colonial troops, the Ambonese, were billeted here, and ready to go into action at any moment. In these narrow side streets was more humanity than in the main thoroughfares. Many Ambonese strolled about the roadway, sat in cabs, relaxed at streetcorners, in windows, or on pavements. They played guitars and sang my god, there was 'Terang Boelan' again! and they never forgot to tote their Yankee carbines. With all those Ambonese about, the forces of Soekarno were not likely to try anything in Chinatown.

On the corner of Booth Street, near Margey's house, a caf did thriving business, its worn tables and chairs spilling out on to the pavement. Lanterns burned, supplementing the erratic electricity supply. The Chinese who ran the caf had set it up as soon as the Japanese surrendered, taking over an old shop whose owners had fled or been killed. From the depths of the shop came the reedy whine-and-throb of Chinese music. Many a time when I took Margey there to eat, mine was the only white face to be seen. As I passed, one of the Chinese waiters smiled a greeting. Horatio Stubbs was known in Sumatra.

I felt good. The heat never bothered me; I was born to roast. I had on my jungle greens, puttees, boots, web belt with service revolver, and battered bush hat which I had worn all the way through India, Assam, and Burma, and which I had refused to change for new-issue berets. At the top of my sleeve was the green flash of the Royal Mendips, with my three stripes beneath it. I wore my four medal ribbons Long Service, Victory, Burma Star, and Pacific (the latter illegal) in a bar over my left breast pocket. I was neatly turned out. I had shaved and showered three hours earlier, and applied talc to my prickly heat. I clocked in at thirteen stone one, was twenty-three years of age, circumcised, brown as an Indian, sweating gently, and eminently ready for a good fuck.

The metal tips on my boots clipped on the broken paving of the arcade. If any trouble broke out, I was immediately ready to strike or to shoot. I felt like a real good soldier, and a spot of bother would not have come amiss.



At the next side street, I paused, looking round before proceeding. It was a useful position for an ambush. Numerous yards opened up, from the entrances of which it would have been easy to snipe at an enemy and escape laughing. All was clear this evening but the area remained ill-lit. A sort of service lane led behind Bootha Street, allowing just enough width for lorries; but in these downfallen days, lorries had disappeared. At the far end of the lane, a dim discreet light shone from a doorway. I knocked and looked in.

A flimsy curtain masked the entrance. Behind it, six men sat round a table, smoking and playing cards in shorts and vests. The room had few basic features: a cobbled floor, whitewashed walls, a flight of wooden steps up to a loft against one wall. It had served as a store in pre-invasion times. Now there was nothing left to store and it had been commandeered for human habitation. Table and chairs, an ancient sofa, and silk banners on the walls effected the transformation. An old Chinese lady in blue work-overalls sat on the sofa, stitching, watching over a sleeping baby. She looked up and smiled when she saw me. This was Auntie of the round brown face. I was always glad to see her, though she never said a word.

The men at the table were also Chinese, varying in age from a slip of a youth to an old man with a straggly white beard. They were sharing a bottle of beer between them. They had an air of permanence, but in emergencies people tend to spend a lot of time sitting at tables.

Margey's brother-in-law called to me; he was a podgy yellow man, Hwan Fat Sian.

'Harrow, Missa Stuss, how you dis eebnin'? You rike drink one bee' wit us?'

'Hello, Fat. Apa khabar? I can't stop, I want to see Margey. Is she upstairs?'

He made gestures with his hand, as if bouncing a large ball. 'Yeh, yeh, Margey usstair, she wait you, Missa Stuss. She tink you not come.'

'Okay.'

I trotted up the stairs to the floor above. Here the empty space had been divided into compartments by sheets of material hung on wires. There were four compartments, each just big enough to house a bed. A further flight of wooden steps, little better than a ladder, led via a hole in the ceiling to the attic. I called Margey. She answered, her face appearing radiant in the gap above, and I went up to her.



We hugged each other on the landing. I lifted her off her feet and kissed her.

From the canteen I had brought her a little present, consisting of a tin of sardines, a tin of gooseberries, a fountain pen, some dates, a bar of chocolate, a bottle of burgundy, and a packet of custard powder. Margey accepted these exotic delicacies with small screams of delight and patted my cheeks. 'You too kind your Margey! Aei-ya, how I love Bird's Custard Power!'

The other day, I came across a photograph I took in Sumatra all those years ago, back in 1946. It shows Margey buying an ice cream from a wooden street stall. Other people loiter about, grinning self-consciously at the camera. There are ruined buildings in the background. Only Margey is elegant. There she stands in a European-style dress, smiling at me. Although I remember her as plump, she looks undernourished. Her face is broad, her eyes large. Her head is slightly on one side, as if mutely appealing to be forgiven some minor offence or maybe she was just trying to look like Rita Hayworth, her favourite film star. It is hard to realise that Margey is probably still alive, growing older like the rest of us; the present tense lies with that faded snap by the street stall.

She was laughing as we carried the parcel into her little room. She had curled her dark hair. It was naturally straight; now the ends curved upwards like the gables of the Batak house. Her teeth were white and perfect, so that when she smiled, revealing them, corpses stood up and beautiful things happened about her cheeks and the contours of her chin. She put her arms round my neck and nuzzled into my shoulder.

'Horry, is after nine o'clock and you so late. I think you don't come. I must eat some supper. You drink too much beer, very bad for you.'

'Sorry, there was a piss-up in the sergeants' mess, everyone getting boozed.' I told her about Dickie Payne driving into the cesspit, and we laughed.

'You sergeants all drunken filthy men! All soldiers are so horrible. Oh, I hate soldiers! All except you, Horry. You good man. When you don't come, I afraid you go with that Miss Katie Chae. She very low woman.' Katie Chae was her pet hate.

I laughed as I handed out cigarettes. 'I never even saw Katie Chae. I came here straight from the mess.'



No breeze stirred. She kept her window closed at night to shut the insects out and it must have been a hundred degrees under the low roof. She saw I was sweating and said, 'I go fetch you nice cool beer.'

'I've had enough bloody beer. Make me a coffee and let's go on the bed.'

She clouted me playfully on the hip. 'Every day bed, bed you terrible randy man, Horry. What you think poor Margey's cunt? Lie down here and have a smoke while I bring you tea. No coffee. Coffee all gone. Why you no bring me more coffee?'

Margey left the lamp with me while she went to prepare the drink.

The attic had been intended for human habitation of a mean order. At the far end of the landing was a cramped area which served as Margey's kitchen and bathroom. The rest of the space under the roof was occupied by two small rooms separated by wood panelling. The ceiling was plastered; some of the plaster had fallen away to reveal laths beneath.

One of the rooms was Margey's own. It had a curtained window, the view from which always delighted me with its spectacle of rooftop decay, and a deep sill on which stood a plant and one or two precious possessions. I set the oil lamp on the sill and undressed. Processed beer oozed from my skin as I did so; even the mosquitoes had fainted in the heat.

Margey's wooden bed was covered with a faded blue quilt, on which I sat to remove my boots. An upturned orange crate standing behind the bed served as a table; on it stood an old alarm clock and a carving of a Balinese dancer which I had given her. Under the bed was a precious metal-trimmed rattan trunk, in which Margey stored her clothes.

On the wall hung a little mirror framed in mahogany with a shelf below. Lipstick stood on the shelf, perfume in a knobbly bottle, and an extravagant manicure set which I had bought Margey whilst on leave in Singapore. A snap of me in swimming trunks was tucked into the edge of the mirror.

The only other items in the room were a towelled bathrobe which hung behind the door and a black and white photograph of Rita Hayworth, wearing an open raincoat and swinging her hips in an inviting way. Margey worshipped Rita Hayworth.

Rolling up my ankle puttees, which I had refused to exchange for



gaiters, I tucked them in my boots and set them in one corner. It was good to be in that shabby cubicle, heat or no heat. Yet I, like Margey, had my anxieties. Before stretching out on the bed, I padded over to Margey's bathrobe and felt in its pockets, dreading to find a french letter or similar incriminating evidence of other men. I found a small tortoiseshell comb, I took it out and turned it over several times. It was something of hers I had not seen before. Who had given it to her?

Slipping it back, I relaxed on the bed, thinking of her, imagining her working by what light came over the top of the wooden partition, boiling water on her tiny charcoal fire. A man's voice yelled at her in clattering Chinese. She went to the gap and answered. A brief exchange took place before she returned to her stove.

When she entered the room carrying two small mugs of tea, I asked who had called.

'Is only my brother-in-law, Fat Sian.' She stood before me, looking down as I sat on the bed, patiently accepting my foreignness.

'What did he want?'

'He is only being friendly. Making an enquiry.'

'Does Fat come up here when you are alone, Margey?'

'I tell you many time, Horry, but you not believe.' She stamped her foot. 'He not come in here, except maybe bring some food. He not fuck me like you think. I not like to fuck Fat Sian I am good girl with proper education, but you not believe.'

'But he has fucked you, hasn't he?'

'Aei-ya, you damn drunk soldier, how I hate when you make such rude question! Drink your tea.'

In a week, less, all this would be forever beyond my ken. I could never work it all out. The thought made me despair. The muddle of Margey's psychology and her life-style was at once pain and delight to me.

I knew something of her early history. She loved relating it to me, often with tears running down her face. Margey and her sister, Chin Lim, together with the rest of the family, had lived in a village near to the town of Tsingtao, in Shantung Province, China. That musical name, Tsingtao, ran like a thread through much of Margey's conversation; it was the place she had loved to visit, the place she longed to get back to, somehow, some time if she could not get to



London, the other city of her dreams, where women were all like Rita Hayworth and everyone lived in gigantic houses complete with cooks, dogs, and horses.

Little did I understand. I was too young. Way deep down inside, I was shallow. I regarded Margey's vision of Hollywood- London as one more broken dream in a land packed with them. On the other hand, I saw no reason why she could not pack a bag and go back to Tsingtao if she really wanted to.

Margey was not simply a dreamer. She was a practical girl who learned to survive yes, now I understand. She read the local and Singapore newspapers when she could get hold of them. So she knew that boats and planes went to London regularly. Nothing went to Tsingtao any more. The Japanese had sacked Shantung and now it was in the hands of the revolutionary Communist armies of General Mao Tse Tung. Margey conducted her dreams like her household practically, and in the midst of chaos.

The Japanese shelled and invaded Tsingtao. Many of Margey's family were killed, including both parents, her brother, and a rich uncle who had financed the despatch of Margey south, to be educated at Shanghai University. Chin Lim, the elder sister, had just got married to Hwan Fat Sian. Fat had a car. When the Nips were on the march, Fat cunningly exchanged his car for a cart and an ox, which does not need petrol. He loaded both sisters and a few household goods on the cart, and headed for Nanking.

Terrible mishaps befell them. They had to survive both snow blizzards and drought, as well as bands of robbers. After many months of travel, often on foot, they caught a refugee boat sailing down the coast for Singapore. The boat was loaded to the water line. Progress was slow. They arrived in Singapore only a few hours before the British ignominiously surrendered and the Nips took over. The plague of civil disruption pursued them.

Everyone was in a panic, knowing exactly how the Japanese treated the Chinese. Some Chinese gangsters shot dead the captain of the refugee ship, slung him overboard, turned the vessel around, and steamed for Java. There was fighting aboard, with more people flung to the sharks. In the middle of a storm in the Berhala Straits, they ran out of fuel. Some days later, the ship drifted on to a mudbank off the coast of Sumatra. Everyone was starving by then.

'Oh, I never go on any ship again!' cried Margey.

Her stories were exciting and confusing. To ask for an explanation



merely complicated the issue. Her English was like a half-built house. The kitchen was complete and you were safe in the bedroom; but most of the other offices existed only as foundations.

She could bear to tell me only one episode at a time. So the stories arrived randomly, prompted by chance recollections, recreating in themselves the disorder Margey had lived through. Her confusion became mine. I liked the chaos of her life, thought of it for hours, with admiration, even with envy. My simple experiences were nothing beside hers. She had had more adventures than I'd had NAAFI suppers.

The survivors of the shipwreck waded ashore somewhere near a place called Muaratungkai. By Margey's account, it was a treacherous strip of coast, and the party she was with became separated from a group which included Fat and his wife. They were arrested by Dutch officials and imprisoned in the town of Palembang, feeling lucky not to be shot as part of an expected Nip invasion. Margey's party became lost in swampland. Several of them fell ill of fever, some died. The survivors eventually reached a kampong on the banks of the River Hari, where they were able to persuade two Eurasians with a small motor launch to take them to the local equivalent of civilisation. Margey fell sick on the morning of embarkation and so was left behind. She was still stuck in the native village when the Japs, as long expected, invaded the NEI. The Fates had made a mighty journey after Margey, not less than the distance from Morocco to Lapland which is nothing to a ravening young Fate.

Palembang is an oil town. The Dutch garrison put up some resistance and was annihilated. The Japanese went on a triumphal spree of looting, shooting, and raping. Chin Lim was raped and bayoneted but Fat escaped both fates. Weeks later, he and Margey met up again almost by accident; they reached Medan dressed as coolies, travelling mainly by bullock cart. In Medan, they met other people from Shantung who helped them, and there they weathered out the rest of the war and the time that followed.

The world's great storm had blown and was still blowing round the globe, a strong Force 6 breeze. Just for a while, there was a lull which becalmed Margey and me, both far from home, in this little stuffy room on the equator.

I had undressed and climbed under the blue cover. She put her tea cup on the window sill before beginning to slip unceremoniously from her clothes. The shadows of the bars of her lamp curved across her naked back as she pulled her blouse off. Away came her European-style brassiere with its red polkadots (French, all the way from



Saigon). Her tender breasts with their little sharp tips swung free as she stooped to remove her peasant-style trousers and then the dainty pair of silk knickers. In the treacly light, that beautiful pale body conquered me. How far beyond all computation that it should be this particular body, shipped all the way from Tsingtao as unattainable as a figure in a painting which was snuggling in beside me!

We lay still for the moment, staring innocently up at the swagger of Rita Hayworth.

'Margey, you are so bloody gorgeous!' I put an arm round her and made her feel the hardness of my prick.

She giggled.

'You evil bad man, Horry! All soldiers so terrible randy men, I don't know. What you think I do with this big terrible thing you have? Where I can put it?'

I showed her.

She screamed with pretended laughter. 'Aei-ya, I am too small girl for that monster thing! Is like a deformity. First I drink my tea, then maybe we try.'

As we sipped our tea, I egged her on with sexy talk in her ear. 'You just have to concentrate very hard and then it will slip in easily, you'll see. You may be only a little girl but you have a lovely big slippery hole, haven't you, all juicy and soft inside, like a tropical fruit?'

'I am no tropical girl. I am from almost a cold climate just like London. Sometimes in Tsingtao snow falls in winter and makes it beautiful when I am a baby. So I have only small cold hole.'

'Well, I can warm it up for you. If there's any snow up there, I guarantee to melt it.'

She pretended to become indignant. 'Oh, you speak so filthy! What you do in my bed here, you foreign devil rapist-soldier? Get out or I call my auntie! I not want that dirty big thing up my body or I catch a filthy disease and die, all my fresh fall off my bones.'

'What are you talking about? I gave it a wash before I came out, scrubbed it with a scrubbing brush. It's as clean as could be. I soaped it very carefully under the shower and told it that it would be seeing you this evening at which news it pricked up its ears immediately.'



She smothered a laugh in her hand. 'You are mad, you know, really? A grown man to talk with his penis like that. Twenty- three years old! I bet I know what you did, I bet! You gave yourself a good hand-wanking in the shower, isn't that right?'

By way of illustration, she ran her fingers down my stem as if playing a flute.

'Is that what Chinese men do?'

'All the time, all Chinese man, and they don't care who sees, hand-wanking every day, even inside the fields and paddyfields. Is disgusting, yes?'

'I don't believe a word of it. Only Europeans and Americans wank themselves off. So I'm told. You are a liar, Margey! What about Chinese girls? Do they get up to the same dirty tricks, tickling their sly little clitorises? I believe you told me but I've forgotten the details.'

She set her cup down and waved a finger at me. 'You are typical absolute foreign devil, always thinking every bad thing is invented in London. Gunpowder and writing and hand- wanking are all invented in China, every bit in Shantung Province, very likely. But China girls they no do hand- wanking.' She laughed, flashing her beautiful teeth and eyes. 'They have other naughty habit. I tell you what they do...'

She put her arms round my neck and snuggled down with me until our heads were on the pillow, and her tits on my chest, when she began whispering hotly in my ear ending by jabbing her tongue into it. The essence of her rude little story, which she liked to tell me, often with amazing embellishments, was that girls in Shantung Province, from an early age, resorted to gherkins, graduating to successively larger and more knobbly ones as they grew up. Grabbing my fingers, pretending they were gherkins, she demonstrated to me exactly how the manoeuvre was carried out, giggling and squirming as she did so.

That was one of Margey's favourite ploys and, before it became too much for me and I flung myself upon her, she was off in the series of delighted writhes and squeaks which marked her orgasm. To plunge into that sumptuous hole while it was in the throes was my pleasure. Margey squealed and locked her legs round the top of my thighs, under my buttocks. Our bodies became one plunging machine which worked without our volition, powered by sweat and magic. Joy, joy, the whole spirit was bursting upwards like a waterspout!

We lay in each other's arms, breathing easily and sweating together.



Despite all the hardships she had undergone, Margey was quite plump. Still round her meaty little waist were the marks of the elastic of her knickers.

As I lay with my head on her belly, I caught the aroma of that little bivalve between her thighs. It reminded me of fresh-caught lobster, of the tang of the primordial ocean in which first life was born. With its salts and chemicals, here was where sentient things gave their earliest twitch, long before land took shape.

I could see her face in the half-dark. The bridge of her nose was flat, but the wings of her nostrils, the chiselling of her mouth, the curve of her eyes as they moulded into her cheeks these things moved me and filled my thoughts with their perfection. Never had I known an English girl I thought half as lovely.

The potency of her attraction lay in her not being English in her being, not only Margey, but Cathay, far Cathay.

Gazing up at the mottled ceiling, Margey said in a level voice, 'Nex' Monday morning, you go Singapore leave Medan for ever, and catch the big steamer for London. Your poor dear Margey will be broken-hearted. How you think she live in Medan without you?'

I slapped a mosquito which had zoomed in on my arm.

'My soldiering days are done. I have to go home... I don't want to leave Medan or you.'

'Then why you go?' she asked sulkily. It was a question she had asked before, a question I had endeavoured to answer before.

This time I was spared, at least for the moment. A footfall sounded, the ladder to the attic creaked. I became aware of the world outside; rain was falling, breaking through the oppressive heat. The climber emerged on the landing beyond our room, and a cautious female voice called in Cantonese.

I could distinguish Margey's Chinese name, Tung Su Chi. She called a brief answer, propping herself up on an elbow.

The other woman entered the adjoining cubicle. A faint light showed on the ceiling above the bed where we lay, framed in giant shadows thrown by the top of the partition. The woman sighed heavily as she sank down on her bed. Daisy had come home.

Whispers, faint soggy noises, the smack of a wet breast, told us that



she had her baby with her and was nursing it.

Daisy was no relation of Margey's. She was simply one of the people who found refuge under this particular roof until affairs in Sumatra took a turn for the better. She spoke no English, so there was never any contact between us. All day she left her baby in the care of old Auntie downstairs while she worked on a nearby farm, returning only in the evening. Daisy had no husband and the baby was half Japanese. She and Margey were in Margey's words- 'friendly but no too friendly'.

'She's late -it's nearly curfew,' I whispered to Margey. 'How about a drink?'

Margey would not be deflected. Wrapping a sheet round her body, she got up and closed the window against the rain. She had propped it open before joining me on the bed. Then she turned and looked at me, her face in shadow, her eyes dark, the smooth line of her shoulder gleaming in the lamplight.

'Take me to London with you, Horry. You see, I will be good girl, not tease you or sleep with other man, I promise. London good prance. I dress very beautiful in latest fashion, become great fashion sensation like Rita Hayworth.'

I sat up impatiently.

'Margey, darling, we've been through all this. You know I can't take you with me.'

'Is impossible you jus' vanish next Monday. How can bear that, Horry?'

'I don't know how we'll bear it, Margey. I can't stand the thought of it even now. It's just one of those shitty things that will have to happen. My time's up.'

Rain was falling more heavily. It drummed on the tiles overhead. Water started to splash heavily on the landing beyond our door. Giving me a hard look to keep me going for the moment, Margey padded out barefoot and set a bowl under the drip. Immediately, a steady ping-ping-ping began.

Marching back into the room, Margey took up her position by the lamp, folded her arms, and said, 'You very deceive your Margey you got other girl-friend in London, you sweaty swine. Is that girl Sonia you tell me about. The one with the freckles.'



'I've told you, I've had one month in England during the last five years. It's a fucking foreign country as far as I'm concerned. All the girls I once knew are probably married and toothless old hags by now.'

'Sonia got terrible disease by now.' She spoke with vindictive pleasure.

'Yeah, well... maybe. Babies at least already learning to shave.'

Instead of laughing, she renewed her pleas. A moth came over the top of the partition like a flung duster and settled on her bare shoulder. Margey ignored it.

'You take me with you London, darling. You and me very good each other, all time have fun and make love. How you think you can live in foreign country without me?'

'Don't cry, Margey. Honestly, I think about the problem all the time. I don't know what to do. Try to understand. My time is up. Christ... All my mates think I'm mad because I don't want to go back to the Blight. My time is up, I'm time-expired. I've served my seven years and I've got to return to Civvy Street. That's orders. I couldn't live on in Medan even if I wanted to.'

She put her hands up to her cheeks, gazing down at her toes. The moth crawled on to her neck and she brushed it away. Rain fell solidly outside as if it would not be content until it broke down every rotten roof in Medan. Our small lamp-lit drama was wrapped about in liquid sound.

Margey suddenly climbed back on the bed, wrapped the sheet about us both, and tucked my shrivelled prick into the palm of her hand.

She spoke confidentially, as if she did not wish Daisy to hear.

'One man tell me you can get army discharge in Singapore. Singapore belong Britain. Prenty British in Singapore. You get job in big firm like Cable & Wireless for good pay. I come along too, look after you, like first-class China wife.'

Speaking, her face filled with the vision of us together in a place at peace, and she smiled, showing those delicious teeth. At the same time, she gave my prick a playful squeeze.

I lay back, staring at the lamp on the sill with the packet of Bird's



Custard Powder beside it. If only Margey would shut up...

'Who told you I could get demobbed in Singapore, Johnny Mercer?' It was a possibility I had never mentioned to her.

Instead of answering the question, she bent and kissed my idling organ.

'I show you many pleasure in Singapore. Is great good city, maybe next best in the world after Tsingtao and Peking and London and Paris. We can have much fun. Horry, you know, all time go many parties, live in big new flats now they build in Bukit Timah Road. I not tease you or look at any other man. Do you hear? No feel any penis except this lovely one all the time.'

It at least began to show enthusiasm for the proposed regime.

'I've got to get back to my fucking family, Margey. Orders are orders. I can't explain. It's how things are. I don't run the bloody world... Listen to that fucking rain...'

'Fuck the fucking rain!' Margey looked angrily at me, pulling her ugly Temple Watchdog face. She knew I dreaded her temper. 'Why you mention about your family? You no care them you had drunk son! You never write any letter your mother or papa. We go Singapore, just you and I, then I learn speak much more good English and love you every way, like a slave, okay? That really is best for you, I know.' She struck her bosom angrily. 'My god, Singapore is lucky place of the Far East.'

That was a matter of opinion, though it was hardly the moment to argue with her. As far as the British were concerned, the whole disaster of Singapore stood out as a prime example of their failure to understand or care about any race East of India. During the nineteen-thirties, it had been fortified up to the eyeballs so as to be impregnable from the sea; in the nineteen-forties, the Japanese walked in through the back door and the Singapore garrison feebly surrendered. They surrendered to an enemy they had always regarded with contempt, a race of little men hardly worth fighting.

I had personal feelings about Singapore. When 2 Div finally pulled out of Burma, the Mendips had been given five weeks' rest in Calcutta, and then our brigade had moved to Madras to undergo amphibious training with 26 Div. We were limbering up for the infamous Operation Zipper; our task was to take the impregnable Singapore from the Japanese by seaborne invasion! Bloody madness. Fortunately, Harry Truman got his finger out and dropped the A-



bomb in the nick of time. We were spared our seaborne massacre and shipped over to Sumatra to repatriate Japs instead.

The war had been mad enough, with its interlocking maze of arbitrary decisions, but it was merely a consequence of the lunatic peace which had preceded it. What vain hopes Singapore represented in that direction! Its fortifications cost the British taxpayer twenty million pounds sterling, a fortune indeed in the twenties; and in the very week when those fortifications were started and the first stone laid, the financial wizards in London lent the Japs twenty-five million pounds sterling to build a navy with which to destroy Singapore and the rest of Britain's power in the East. What a masterpiece of imperial idiocy! No wonder we lost the bloody empire!

Well, I write this a long time later, and Singapore, that elegant rat-race, has now gone its own way, free of British control. I have the advantage of hindsight. But it's easy enough to see how such lunacies repeat themselves. The Soviet powers build up their vast armaments steadily year by year, while the West subsidises them to do so; Poland alone has been given ('lent' is the technical term) millions of deutschmarks with which to buy agricultural machinery. When the Warsaw Pact countries attack us, we shall all be astonished and indignant, forgetting how for years we have been sharpening the razors with which they cut our throats. Every decade, the distinction between war and peace becomes less, their yin-yang relationship more obvious.

But all I said to Margey at the time, as she clutched my prick and the moth singed itself on her lamp, was, 'Fuck Singapore!'

She began to sob another liquid sound far more noticeable than the others surrounding us.

'Oh, pack it in, Margey. I love you but my fucking time is up. It'll break my heart to leave you but that's the way it is. Kismet.' Checking with my watches, I worked out that it must be eleven o'clock, give or take ten minutes. The rain was dying out.

Margey turned away from me and curled up in a foetal position, still sniffing.

'You say you love your Margey, so you say. You say you like be in the East, so you say. Then why you go England? Now you must decide! For safety sake, since Medan is so dangerous, we go Singapore short time, okay, you and I? Later time, when Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek throw out the rebels from China and law-and-order come back, then I take you Shantung, show you Tsingtao. We can go on the railway



train! I have a pre-war timetable in my trunk. Is easy journey!' She sat up, smiling again, stretching out her arms as if to embrace all China. 'Aei-ya, Horry, just you think! You can see the Yellow Sea and those occasional beaches like I told you, with all the trees with flowers on when spring comes down from the mountains. I bet you like that, Horry, I really bet!'

'Yeah. I would.'

Yeah, I would like it. Sweat rash apart, yes, I loved the East: I loved the extraordinary people, the muddle, the failure, the hope, the climate, the ghastliness, the perennial courage, the Jack of pretension. Everything was much more real and exciting than anything I had known in England. But...

And Margey. Temper apart, yes, I loved Margey. She was so vulnerable, yet so bouncy, oppressed yet serene. She embodied in her frail plump self the whole teeming confused Chinese nation, that extraordinary half of the globe, that secret and alluring half, which existed almost like a female counterpart to the gun-toting, overcoat-clad West. Passionately, I longed to know her and, through her, her people better. I longed to dive deeper and not be jerked suddenly out of context like a carp out of a pool. But...

'Oh, you so insc'utable! You say nothing!' She kicked her savage little feet under the cover. 'You say you love me, you no love me jus' because I China girl, I got yellow skin, you fool ignorant soldier!'

'That's all balls, Margey. Look, you are far paler than me.' To make her look, I stripped the sheet back. There lay our bodies, soon to be divided for ever unless I got a fucking move on, lying together on the same bed, knees touching. I struck out angrily at a mosquito feasting on my leg, and left a smear of blood. Years of sun in India, Burma, and Sumatra had toasted my torso to a dark mahogany. From the waist up, I would have passed for a Dravidian on his annual holiday in Bermuda. By contrast, Margey's soft figure was as tallowy as the sheet beneath us. I slid my hand between her legs, clutching the lips of her twot. 'China girl skin like ivory. Horry love his China girl.'

With spirit, she said, 'You no go with Katie Chae or I die. That girl got bad terrible disease.'

'Horry love this China girl.'

'Stink-pig, no make fun how I speak! If you try speak Shantung dialect, I make fun you, you foreign devil, you take your filthy disease hand out my cunt fast, or I scream for Daisy.'



Laughing, I overcame her resistance and kissed her. You were full of hope in these days, dear Margey, as I was. Have you lost it all by now, and the years ground you down?

At the time, I told myself that I still had a chance to make up my mind and to plan accordingly. Matters could be arranged. I would have to get military permission to marry Margey; otherwise, there was no way in which she could leave Sumatra. 'Do you, Horatio Stubbs, take this China girl, Tung Su Chi, to be your lawful wedded wife?' Then we could get to Singapore at least. Not that I wanted to stay in Singapore. There was India, but India was passing from British hands. And in England I flinched to think of the cretinous reception Margey might receive there; the attitude of my mates in the mess gave me warning enough on that score.

In order to arrange anything, I had to get in touch with Captain Maurice Boyer, my company officer. I had left it a bit late, because Boyer was not in Medan. He was in Padang, on the other side of the island, and I would have to speak to him over the air.

There was another difficulty, which I had often tried to explain to Margey, who steadfastly refused to believe a word of all the unlikely formalities which constituted army regulations. I was in Medan on detachment from the Mendips. My battalion was stationed down in Padang, four hundred or so miles away, the other two battalions of 8 Brigade having been shifted to Batavia in Java, where the British and the Dutch were having more trouble than in Sumatra. Major Inskipp had recently been repatriated. Now it was the eccentric Boyer I had to speak to, and I knew how difficult it was to hold personal discussions over a wireless link.

One other possibility existed. I could talk to Captain Jhamboo Singh, the dandified officer under whose supervision I came officially whilst in Medan. He was perfectly capable of taking decisions, being Commanding Officer of the British personnel of 26 Div and such odd bods as me. But I failed to visualise how I could talk to an Indian about my chances of marrying a Chinese girl.

Too violent to last, the rainstorm was fading away. The dripping into the landing basin became more slowly spaced and deeper in tone. Daisy could be heard singing softly to her baby on the other side of the partition.

'There's a good film showing at the Deli Cinema tomorrow evening. Shall we go and see it?'



'I don't want see any films. Why you change the subject? Why you are ashamed to be see' with me in London if you don't mind in Medan? You think I not pretty enough for Mayfair or something, you bastard? Anyhow, what is this rotten film you mention?'

'Melvyn Douglas and Joan Crawford in They All Kissed the Bride. Comedy.'

'Aei-ya, I love Joan Crawford. Really great, though not so hot as Rita. Will you take me along, in spite my bad temper, honest?'

'What do I get if I do?'

'You so kind man, Horry. Though you do not love me, you so sweet man.' She rubbed her face against mine so that one wing of that night-black hair swept my cheek, while her naughty little hand teased my prick again. As I began to respond, she rolled over so that she was half on top of me, opening her legs and gently chafing her fanny against my thigh.

Her titties swung into my grasp like two mangoes, her nipples became imprisoned between my thumb and first finger. In the heat, we were juicy together. She had that beautiful clear scent, which was in part an artificial aid but mainly emanated from her body. As we started to stir, the covering slid from us on to the floor. Shadows lay across our flesh. Part-seen, Margey was wholly lovely.

She had my prick in a curious grip, her thumb pointing up its stem. Up came her right leg and pwop! she'd slipped cock and thumb yet it was the tiniest little delicate petalled hole you ever saw up that succulent passage and was immediately working on my knob, while smiling impudently into my face, as if determined to sharpen the blunt end to a fine point. Sliding over on the bed, I pulled her right on top of me, grunting at her in encouragement.

'Aei-ya, you muscle-brute!' She bounced away so positively that I was afraid, as I counter-thrust from below, that I would lose her. Her legs were spread wide now, she clutched at my torso. Working my hands down between her little tight buttocks, I nailed her in place with one finger up her bumhole. As ever, that induced tremendous voltage on both sides. She always came when I did that. 'Illegal, illegal!' she cried. We went over the top.

We were having a smoke. The downpour ceased. Margey got up and opened her little window. Draughts of cool air blew in, tickling our flesh. Outside, water dripped from innumerable broken gutters. From Daisy in the next compartment came only silence; she and her baby



were asleep. Checking with my watches, I found the Amsterdam one had stopped; I wound it vigorously. The Indian one indicated a time somewhere near eleven-twenty, but the hour hand looked a bit loose. It was time I thought about getting back to the billet.

A shot sounded only a couple of streets away. It was answered almost immediately by rifle fire. The first weapon replied, then a sten opened up, firing bursts. I stubbed my fag out and jumped to the window, pushing the lamp and custard powder away so that I could lean out.

'Horry, you get shot, come in!' Margey called.

In the alley, all was quiet. The action was taking place in the street beyond.

Running feet could be heard. A dog was barking. The sten opened up again for one brief burst, then a vehicle engine started a Jeep by the sound of it. Whatever vehicle it was, it belted up Booth Street from the direction of the Kesawan, and I caught sight of the wash of its lights as it shot past the entry to the side street in which we were ensconced. Then silence. A minute later, I could hear its engine distantly, still going like the clappers. No more shots.

Night airs moved against my cheek. Wild dogs yelped dispersedly from the direction of the Deli river. Incredible to think that next Monday night only next Monday night I would be away from here for ever, waiting in Nee Soon stinking transit camp for the boat to take me home. It was like a sentence of death; all this would exist only as something shrivelling slowly in memory, flowers in an empty vase.

Margey smacked my haunches.

'Why you must stick your head out there, you foolish soldier? Why they shoot so close here? Never before so close, I think. Aei-ya, never any peace, nowhere! After the Nips are beaten, now come these terrible Indonesians under Dr Soekarno, to make new troubles. Will they shoot again, Horry?'

'That'll be it for tonight.' I drew the curtains and put the lamp back. 'Probably just some trigger-happy MPs, or some nut trying something... I'd better get on back.'

She clung to me with fierce strength.

'Damn you, why you have no proper feeling? What do men think, blast them? Listen to me, Horry, I no speak more of coming to live London with you. Not London, not Singapore, not Tsingtao, not any place on



this round globe. But I much hurt in my heart, okay. You know I am educated girl with Shanghai degree. I understand more than you how us two live different places me here, you there only no, I no can find words, my Horry, tell you all things... Fuck it, forget what I say... Just stay here with me in this humble room tonight, all night. Just sleep and love, no more jig jig, just stay in Margey's arms, my English love.'

I looked down at her, half in anger.

'You know I could lose my tapes if I was found staying out all night with no pass.'

She waved her arms above her head, and then had to clutch at the sheet.

'What's that answer? Oh, you time-expired man, you not care what army do how often I hear you say that? Yet for Margey not one thing you do, not one single thing! You think I utter fool because I no can speak English so proper!'

'Sorry, Margey, I'll stay the night if you want. You never asked me before, that's all.'

I clung to her, feeling all her strength and energy. Her arms went round my neck. 'I get you fruit,' she whispered.

'You are a terrible girl, Margey. I love you more than anything.'

As I sat down on the bed, she looked dubiously at me, smoothing down her silky black hair. Now she saw that she was to have her immediate wish, she was calm. Her lips came together, her forehead wrinkled in a thoughtful frown.

'Now stay here, Horry, you devil. Not look out window. I go get you fruit and bread and beer. Then we smoke cigarette and sleep all night together.'

Still frowning, she slipped into her knickers and the towelling robe.

From her finger, a cautionary wag before she disappeared. I heard her carry the bowl of rainwater from outside our door and fling it out of a window.

As soon as she was gone, anxiety possessed me. I pulled the curtains over the window and began to dress with immense haste.

It was not that I distrusted Margey. But I suddenly felt myself alone in



the heart of a hostile city. Even in the peaceful Chinese quarter, army training warned me to remain alert for danger. Of all the races churning about in Medan, the Chinese had least reason to hate the British, but they had their survival to see to, and I was one man on his own.

Silence from the other side of the partition. I stood for a moment, then buckled on my belt and revolver. I took the gun out of its holster, walked out to the landing, started to descend the ladder, peering through the shrouded dimness as I went.

As for Margey's despair... How could she exist without resorting to prostitution, penniless and unprotected as she was? Fat was little use to her, except as a pimp. She must be a whore, however desperately she tried to hide the truth from me; why else her perpetual obsession with disease? Besides, Johnny Mercer had been slipping her a length before I arrived in Medan. If Johnny, many others, white, brown, yellow. Some of them would have a personal interest in this house, and would know when I, Margey's current purchaser, was in occupation. The bitch could get me shot.

Dear Ghost of Margey, that was how I calculated then. I shied from the thought of your whoredom, I understood little. I was a cold young man from Europe, brought up with a traditional middle-class suspicion of sexuality. I thought I had renounced all that crap, but it lay under my surface like permafrost, even when the spring of your body was on mine.

On the floor below, people were already in bed, horizontal behind their dividing curtains. Their presence could be felt. The air was thick with a sweet Chinese smell, a mixture of cooking, sweat, perfumed soap, and revolting Jap cigarettes. Taking courage from my revolver, I continued on down to the ground floor.

It was very dark. One naked bulb burning in the living area, a small oil lamp dim in the kitchen area. Night had changed the almost changeless scene. The card-players had gone. A battered bamboo screen had been drawn round the sofa; behind the screen, Auntie slept restlessly, dreaming of faraway lands.

Two men sat at the table. One was Fat Sian himself, still in greasy string vest and shorts, smoking with his cigarette almost vertical in his mouth. The other was a Chinese I had noticed about the place before. They had been talking quietly together over a bottle of Red Fox; now they lapsed into silence and watched me.

I went over to them, ostentatiously holding the revolver and enjoying



my role.

'Man shoot,' Fat said. 'Bang, bang, bang.' He raised his plump right hand and fired it three times in order to get his meaning across. In addition, he smiled and nodded.

'That's right,' I agreed. 'Merdeka, bang, bang, bang...' Merdeka was the Malayan cry for freedom, the slogan of the Indonesian campaign.

I gave Fat's companion a hard look. He returned it. He was a slender man, neatly dressed with a white shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled down against mosquito bites. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles. His hair was brushed to the back of his head.

Margey came out from the rear, carrying a plate of apples and mangusteen and a glass of beer. She looked tense, smiling at me without speaking.

'I'm checking to see that the place is properly secure,' I said. 'Ground floor windows all shut.' Walking across to the door into the lane, I found that it had no lock and the bolt was broken. There was only a simple catch. Fat said something, laughing, and Margey translated. 'Fat Sian sleep in his bed so no man ever break in here. He pull bed in front this door. China people all very scare Malayan murder-thief.'

'The back?' I crossed to the kitchen area. A door with cracked glass panels led into a cluttered little yard surrounded by other yards and premises. I could make out puddles on the stones. My expert eye told me that in case of trouble in the front one could escape out the back. It also noted a platoon of cockroaches reconnoitring round Margey's sink. I tried the lock on the door. Although it was secure enough, an armchair had been pushed against the door, another indication of Fats commendable concern with security.

'Who is this man with your brother-in-law?' I asked Margey, pointing the gun at the man with the gold-rimmed spectacles.

At this point, Margey showed extreme embarrassment, and put the refreshments down on a cupboard to recover herself. I stared at her in surprise, never having seen her behave like this before. I was immediately suspicious.

'Come on then, sod it, who is he?'

'He is only journalist...'

At this juncture, the man in spectacles spoke up for himself. He said,



'You have no need to shout or shoot, sir, I am only a journalist, as Tung Su Chi says.'

Acting heavy, I walked slowly over and looked at him. He countered by rising from the table as I approached and regarding me with a half-smile.

'You speak English. What's your name? Do you live here?'

'I live in Medan. Not particularly through choice.'

I moved a pace nearer. 'Do you live in this particular fucking building?'

'I live nearby. Sir.'

'Is he a relation of yours?' I asked Fat.

Fat had been devoting his attention to smoking and blinking. He continued to blink as he said, 'No, sir, no rela'. On'y fren'. He Tiger Balm, run China newspaper.'

The other man produced a grubby visiting card. 'You see, sir, I am known by my journalist's name of Tiger Balm. My name is Chae Lieng Sing, and I am acting editor of New South China Times, published from Boulan Way, where I also live.'

Glancing hopefully at my two watches, I said, 'It's nearly curfew.'

Tiger Balm nodded. 'I shall be on my way soon. Meanwhile, why don't you sit down with us? Su Chi, please bring over your friend's beer.'

There was something mocking in the way he spoke. I mistrusted his flawless English, and the point he made by addressing Margey by her Chinese name. She came forward with the beer and the fruit. Fat immediately seized on an apple and began to munch before his sister-in-law could fade into the background. I looked for a signal from her but she gave none.

Lifting his glass, Tiger Balm said, 'It is a pleasure to talk with you. Shooting sometimes makes for friendliness. May I offer a Singapore cigarette?'

Perhaps it was time to make amends. I sat down opposite the two Chinese and pulled out the field-dressing tin which I used for a cigarette case. 'Have an English fag.'



All three of us lit up. Margey stood watching in the background, saying nothing.

'Let me ask you why the British authorities do not stop all the shooting,' said Tiger Balm. 'Surely they could do so if they wished.'

'It's only a few extremists. They live in the kampongs and come into town to cause trouble. Things are far worse in Java, as I expect you know.'

He shook the match until it went out, in an idly contemptuous gesture.

'Of course I know it. Nevertheless, what happens in Java and what happens here is all part of one process, the endeavour of the Soekarno Freedom party to rid NEI of colonial rule. It is not just a matter of a few extremists, as you represent.'

'Bang, bang, bang, "stremis",' echoed Fat. We ignored the man, and he gradually disappeared behind a wreath of cigarette smoke.

Swigging down the beer, I said heavily, 'As you probably realise, the Japs here started handing out their weapons to the natives as soon as they were defeated, to stir up trouble for their victors. The British mission when we arrived here last October was simply to pack the Japs off to Japan and let the Dutch resume their rule. What you might call restoring the status quo, eh? But nobody wants the Dutch back, so we have to hang around and keep the peace as best we can.'

As I peeled a mangusteen, Tiger Balm pressed his argument.

'Excuse me if I say so, but you do not keep the peace so very well, sir. In Sourabaya, your troops fight pitched battles with the extremists. You bomb towns, kill innocent people. You also use the defeated Nipponese to help. Why are you allowed to ally yourself with a defeated and disgraced enemy in that way? It brings unpopularity.'

'The real wars are over, in case you've forgotten. We had Hitler to fight as well, you know. Now we want to pack up and go home. We're short of men, owing to the demob programme, so we well, the trouble is that the local population encourages the extremists. You have to inflict peace on them.' I laughed.

Silence reigned, inside and out.

He smoked his cigarette concentratedly and made a comment in Chinese to Fat. To me he said, 'You see, sir, what you have to say



about the situation is not at all exact. You must face one fact, that the old world of the nineteen-thirties is totally shattered. None of us can go back to those times. Demons are loose.'

He paused as if considering what to say, tapping impatiently with long fingers on the table. 'Myself, I am a wanderer on the earth's face, but let me give the example of the family who employs me, who owns the New South China Times. They remain here in Sumatra under Dutch rule since five generations. They come from Swatow, a fine port you should visit if ever you would. They are Overseas Chinese, not mere refugees like Fat Sian and I. But who can say what will happen to them before the end of 1946? How can they go back to China, where civil war rages? Sumatra is their place, they understand everything about it...

'We sit here, you and I, and talk in this poor building. It once housed a spare what do you say? an auxiliary printing press of the firm's. The press was stolen, the mechanic who guarded it is killed. Many unlawful things happen...'

'Look, the curfew'

He sighed. 'I see you do not care to learn. Please give me another cigarette. I mean no harm, I even admire the British in a way. But I wish you understand my meaning. You hear the shooting, you enjoy certain pleasures with Su Chi. You think you are in old Medan.

'Let me tell you, sir, that you are not. You are in a new place, and the hairs on your head should be standing upright in alarm.' He laughed with sudden ferocity. 'You are in a snake's den. You are in a town of the new Indonesian Republic! You appear not to understand that. Do you know that Dr Soekarno declared the Netherlands East Indies dead and gone in 1945? We now remain in a militant new republic, with its own flag, under which certainly no colonialists will be allowed. They will kill off all white foreigners, ten to one.'

It irritated me to be lectured at. Swigging the beer, I said, dismissively, 'Well, it's their bloody country, after all.'

He laughed, and again made a rapid remark in Chinese to Fat, who blinked expertly. 'My godfather, is that the British point of view, sir, the famous British sense of justice? Murder is okay on home ground, is that what you say? If so, why don't you clear off, every one of you? Or if you do not clear off, why don't you send more troops, Indians if necessary, and crush this whole damned Soekarno Merdeka movement once for all? Do one thing or the other, for god's sake!'



'Look here, it's a difficult'

'Restore real peace, get business picking up again, introduce a proper legal currency, open up trade with outside world. Then if local discontent dies, support for Dr Soekarno dies.'

'It's a difficult political situation for the British. You know the name of Jinnah?'

Tiger Balm leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head, smiling.

'You refer to Mr Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League Party of the Indian Central Assembly? Naturally, I am tolerably familiar with the name.'

'Then you may be tolerably familiar with his noises about the wrongs of the British using Indian troops in a foreign country. If our troops took Jinnah seriously, we'd have a mutiny on our bloody hands. I can't think why they don't lock Jinnah up.' I laughed.

He laughed too, without humour. 'As you say, your hands are already bloody. You have already locked Jinnah up, and Jawarhalal Nehru, and Ghandi and it did no bit of good. Your gaols were not oppressive enough. As a result, the days of the British in India are numbered.'

'That's all the more reason why we shouldn't fight for the Dutch in the NEI.'

Tiger Balm got up and walked about, smoking, on the other side of the table. He wore light grey trousers of a local cut, and made a dapper figure. Looking up at the rafters above his head, he said, 'You will leave a bloodbath here when you quit.'

At this juncture, there was an admonitory cry from behind the screen. Fat wagged his head a few times to check that it was still there and said, in his imitation English, 'Missa Stuss, Auntie, she say she ha' bad head, prease you no tor' so row', she want go slee'.'

Ignoring him, I banged my fist on the table and told Tiger Balm, 'If there is a bloodbath when we leave, it won't be any fault of the British, so stick that in your next editorial!'

'Some Indian was trying to tell me the other day that there would be a bloodbath in India, when the British left there. Okay, then why is everyone so keen to kick us out if they are going to massacre each other when we've gone?'



The question appeared to me unanswerable enough to pass for rhetorical, but Tiger Balm merely said, 'The reasons of course lie in colonialist history. Whatever the price, people want their freedom, as the British in 1940.'

Fat put a finger to his lips, 'Prease, be mo' quiet. D'ink a 'no' bee'!

'I'm going to bed. And I presume Mr Tiger Balm is going home after curfew.' I got up and followed the latter round the room. 'So tell me, whose side are you on? Do you want British or Dutch rule? Or do you want Soekarno and Co. to take over? It isn't your country any more than it is mine.'

He sighed and helped himself to a cigarette from his pack on the table.

'History is not that simple, Mr Stubbs, sir. Ask your little "Margey" what she thinks of the British. She could hardly tell you. We Chinese respect and slightly admire the British, although we do not believe that the Far East is your part of the world any more than we regard Europe as our part. Since you have been beaten so easily by the Nipponese in Malaya and you surrendered so weakly in Singapore and elsewhere, we think it is time you finished your adventures in the East. You have lost face and now you must go home. The lion, let's say, has its tail between its legs.'

At this I felt myself getting extremely angry. I sat down at the table and lit up another cigarette, wondering whether to hit him.

'You've been reading the China Times too much, chum. You forget how the Chinese got mopped up by the Japs, left, right, and centre. Besides, the Japs caught the British unprepared the Fourteenth Army really massacred them in Burma I was there. We've evened up the score okay now. So do you want British rule or not?'

He leaned against the wall, unmoved by my anger, considering his answer. 'There's no question of British rule here, sir. The British contingent leaves in the late summer as the Dutch certainly understand, even if you don't. You have failed in your mission. You have made a mess of it. You were too nice. You cared too much for political justice and conserved too much ammunition. That's fatal. And of course the Dutch cannot hold down the whole republican movement without British and American support.

'So the new state of Indonesia will come soon into full being, and the red-and-white flags fly everywhere. As you say, it is their country. You quote Jinnah, but you do not understand the meaning of what you



quote. Jinnah is a Muslim. Indonesian Republic will be officially a Muslim state. That is one reason why Chinese people fear a bloodbath: Chinese may be Christian, just a few of them, but we are never Muslim. Buddhists never become Muslim, I don't know why. When you and the Dutch quit, then, in the sacred name of religion, Indonesians may be tempted to kill many thousands of Chinese to get their hands on their property. Who can Chinese people turn to then for protection? Nobody. Nobody.' He let the word hang in the air before looking pointedly at Margey, who waited silently in the background, and saying, 'That, sir, is why many Chinese people try many ways to leave Sumatra. And why you are at least moderately welcome on these premises. Our next lot of visitors may have less friendly intentions.'

With these words, he bowed soberly, stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray on the table, and walked out of the door into the night.

Fat and I sat where we were, saying nothing. Margey too remained where she was. Auntie sighed behind her screen.

Addressing the remark to Margey, I said heavily, 'Let's hope that things don't turn out as badly as he supposes. Tell Fat that he ought to take you to Singapore as soon as possible.'

Fat had understood. He made a negative gesture. 'Prenty too much men Sin'apore. Twice so many men, three year. No job. No house. No food. No live. Better we stay here, maybe trouble go 'way.'

He reached out for another apple.

I took Margey's hand. 'Let's get upstairs to bed.'

Without another word, we crept upstairs, past the sleepers on the upper floor, into our familiar attic. We undressed in silence, fearful of waking Daisy and her sleeping babe.

3

Spring; an English spring; visited Sumatra for one hour after dawn every day. Even my fellow sergeants, when they got up that early, had been known to scratch their hairy arses and exclaim with pleasure at the morning. Cool breezes wafted through our billets, birds called, and a decent mist lay over the land. The insect population still slumbered.

In that hour, the sun steered close to the horizon, losing itself among shaggy palms. The air was loaded with rosy hues and steaming bars of



shadow. Ox-carts moving towards the fields proceeded with a ruminative rhythm. The natives in their sarongs, the women going to the well with bronze pots on their heads, walked slowly, as if in a dream among the trees. Later they would appear more bent, as the load of sunlight became too great.

Nipping back from Margey's at this good hour, I cut down one of the Out of Bounds roads that bordered a kampong. The thatched bamboo huts, set beside a stream amid tall palms, looked too idyllic to be anything but fodder for some fucking travel poster. Hens clucked among the huts; there were tethered white goats, cats sitting staring at the water, and an old man, bent double, brushing a path with meticulous care, as if each grain of dust were familiar to him. It was hard to believe that anyone wanted to shoot me at this hour.

Too soon, the scene would be different. The sun would be roused from its pleasant lethargy and zoom to the zenith of the sky, showering fire as it went. The fog would vanish; the day would buzz like a saw; every squaddy alive would break out in a muck sweat; monkeys would start to pass out in the trees.

Climbing down into a ditch, I dodged between strands of barbed wire and climbed through a hole in the tall mesh perimeter. The hole had been made by ill-intentioned BORs taking short cuts to town. My way to the sergeants' quarters lay through the Other Ranks' lines.

Some BORs were slouching between houses, across their neglected gardens. They looked like apes with towels about their shoulders as they made their way to the wash-ups. As I rounded one of their billets, I came face to face with Johnny Mercer, the day's Duty Sergeant. An unhappy corporal trailed behind Johnny, explaining something to him at great length.

'Merdeka,' I said by way of salute. He responded, but looked no happier than the corporal.

'Stubby, we can't get these shagging Other Ranks out of their billets. What do you think we ought to do?'

I looked at my watches. They seemed agreed that it was approximately seven-thirty.

'Bit early, isn't it? What's the drill?'

He gave an abridged version of his laugh. 'Agricultural Duties. They're supposed to be up and out digging the field for planting potatoes from seven till eight. They refuse to get out of their charpoys.'



While I was mulling this news over and having a good yawn, the corporal addressing Mercer but plainly repeating for my benefit a remark he had made before said, 'You can see why they object. They claim that digging fields is not part of their duties. They also maintain that even if a crop of potatoes resulted, the Dutch would get it and they would gain nothing.'

The corporal was 26 Div Signals. I had seen him before. His name was Kyle. He was typical post-war material, a thin specimen with pale skin and no service behind him, young, inexperienced, and cocky as you please.

They both looked hopefully at me as I rubbed my stubbly chin. A faint grin showed on Johnny's face.

I plucked a few leaves off the nearest bush, asking casually, 'Are your sympathies with the men, Corporal?'

'Yes, very much. They are not farm hands. I don't see why we should work for the Squareheads, do you?'

I scattered the leaves. 'Never mind what you don't see, Corporal. Your job is to carry out Standing Orders. As you bloody well know, the Indonesians are refusing to supply us with fresh rations, so the GOC has ordered that, where possible, units shall grow their own food. Reasonable, isn't it? Get your men out of their bloody charpoys and on that stretch of miadan at the double! Give 'em five minutes, after which any man without a shovel at the ready is up on a fizzer.'

Corporal Kyle looked at Johnny, Johnny looked at me. Johnny started to grin more openly.

'Don't give that old bull, Stubby! Fat lot you care about Standing Orders. I know where you've been all night.'

'This "O" Section shower is very shit-or-bust,' the corporal said, apologetically. Yet I caught an undercurrent of boastfulness which set me off.

'Shit-or-bust, is it? You've not earned the right to be shit-or-bust, Corporal. You jump off the last boat with six months service in Clacton to your name and think you can swing that one, you're sadly mistaken. Christ, three or four years soldiering in the Fourteenth Army and then you're entitled to be shit-or-bust. Ever heard of the Fourteenth Army, Corporal?'



'It's disbanded.'

'It's before your time, when soldiering was pukka soldiering, let me tell you. So don't start answering me back. I don't know what bloody Britain's coming to! Now get in those stinking fucking billets, stop playing with yourself, and order those admis at the top of your voice to get fell in on the road with their shovels, in five minutes flat or else.'

'Yes, you'd better do that,' Johnny said, turning to Kyle. 'Stir the buggers up. Otherwise it's a case of mutiny, and we'll have to report it to the CO.'

That was the first time the dread word 'mutiny' was mentioned.

Kyle's expression went blank.

'You two are coming the Old Soldier on me.'

'What are you waiting for?' I asked.

Ignoring me, he addressed Mercer.

'They'll only tell me to clear off. They say the IORS should do the job. Will you come with me, Sarge?'

Johnny grinned at me and then said to the corporal, 'Thik-hai. I'll threaten to shoot the bleeders if they don't move.'

'They won't take any notice, I warn you,' said the corporal. He tailed off with Johnny Mercer. I headed for my billet. My time was up.

Breakfast restored some of my depleted energies. I was shaving in my room when Johnny Mercer entered. He took a look at the Chinese servant who was obsequiously cleaning round, and told him to get out.

'Merdeka! You're a krab sight, Horry. Getting it up too much, that's the trouble. Take my advice and pack it in a bit or you'll be dead before you reach Blighty.' These were standard pleasantries and I ignored them.

'Did you get "O" Section out digging spuds?'

'No. They said they weren't a bunch of wogs, and that digging was a job for the Indian Other Ranks.'



'Who's that feeble tit of a corporal?'

'Steve Kyle? He's not a bad bloke. It's the situation. The NEI isn't Burma.'

I dried my face and prepared to brush my teeth. 'Do you know how much this bloody toothpaste cost me? You realise that the "Q" stores is out of toothpaste? And the NAAFI. It's all going to the Dutch.'

'I've got a bit of Dutch crumpet who works in the RAPWI shop. She'll get you a tube cheap. There's plenty up the RAPWI.'

'Six bloody Dutch guilders I had to pay for this toothpaste. That's eleven bob, eleven and a kick. Daylight robbery. So what did you do?'

'They agreed to parade at 8.30 hours for Arms Inspection, and you should have heard them ticking about that. But I couldn't get them out for digging. They wouldn't bloody well go.'

He went and stood on the balcony, gazing morosely at the distant jungle. Johnny Mercer was solidly built, with a big red neck and thin brown hair. He had been in Burma and knew what was what, but this morning he was not his old self. He clutched at his big red neck.

'I've got a hangover,' he said moodily. 'I hate this fucking dump. What are we doing here, anyway? The NEI isn't our pigeon. We should have left this spot of trouble to the Dutch. I suppose you realise that we handed Sumatra over to the Dutch at the end of the Napoleonic Wars now here we go again... Privately, my sympathies are with the BORs. Why should they go out digging the fields at seven in the morning, like a lot of coolies? Still, their refusal is serious, isn't it?'

Spitting and wiping my mouth, I said, 'Very serious. Mutiny. We're on Active Service still they could be shot for mutiny. You'd better go and talk to Jhamboo Singh he's the Officer i/c. Perhaps there's some way round it.'

'Jhamboo. Yes, I suppose I had... What a bloody position.' He sauntered back into the room, still clutching his neck. 'What's going to happen to your furniture when you've gone? I like that cabinet.'

In my room, tastefully arranged, I had an ornate mahogany cabinet, a fine mahogany table, a little brass side-table, and a heavy sideboard on which my collection of Balinese carvings stood. All the gear was looted, except for the carvings, which I bought with cigarettes in the bazaar. The cabinet had come with me overland from Padang.



My room gave me a lot of pleasure, although I was so rarely in it. On my walls I had bright posters of Hanuman, the Monkey God, and little pink Parvati on her lotus leaf. Over the head of my bed hung a large pin-up of Ida Lupino, slender, browbeaten, ever courageous.

'What'll you offer for the job lot?'

He laughed. 'Nothing. I'll wait till you're gone and then I'll commandeer it.'

When Johnny left, I scrutinised my face narrowly in the glass, prodding at its pimples and folds. A blank sort of face, I thought, yet not undistinguished. What was it going to look like, perched over a suit, collar, and tie? And what was I going to do in Civvy Street? Follow father's footsteps into the bank, no doubt. Now I was a hero, tough, pretty independent; there, I'd be just one more pale-faced clerk. Now I had a smashing bird; and then...

The first heat of the day was getting through. I went to lie down on my bed, putting my hands behind my head and staring up at the cracks on the ceiling.

The Chinese cleaner came bowing himself into the room. I shouted to him to get out until I called.

Like a bird to a pool, the image of Margey's face came back to me, that mysterious oriental face with those slanted eyes, that perfect mouth, the lips in repose like something carved. Only two hours ago I had wakened to find her beside me, and my arm full of cramps because she was lying on my wrist. I lay absorbing the sight of her, the curl of her hair round her ear and neck, the inexplicable curve of her shoulder.

Margey's room with all its grotty detail was revealed to me in monochrome. Beyond the curtains were a thousand broken rooftops, all with tiles missing. Medan, falling apart at the seams...

My happiness had lasted only a moment. Came the pain, the knowledge that it was Friday, that in three days I would be swept away in one of those directives issuing from the Company Office. I sat up, and she awoke.

Then I'd left her, clung to her and left her, feeling so sick on my way back to the lines that I'd almost have welcomed a few extremists rising before me in the dawn-light and shooting me down into some stinking ditch.



I fell asleep for an hour. But circumstances were already at work to ensure that this was my last peaceful day in Sumatra...

The roofs of Medan were broken and the town was tumbling. Its occupying force was also in ruinous condition.

I had arrived in Medan only six weeks ago, having previously been in Padang or on detachment at Fort de Kock. During those six weeks, I had removed myself as far as possible from the army. It had ceased to have functional point; the closing down of the Fourteenth Army had been the final blow.

Despite my feeling of severance, emphasised by the detachment from my own unit, I could no more visualise myself as a civilian than I could visualise Margey away from Sumatra. The army had bred in me a contempt for the cushy civilian life; perhaps I clung to Margey as part of a more heroic existence.

However that might be, I woke from my sleep with an urgent resolve to marry the girl. Why fucking not? I'd show my mates how independent I was. At least I would see what the score was and today, before the weekend set in. I would speak to Captain Boyer over the wireless link and discuss the situation with him. With that done, I would face Margey and settle her complaints one way or the other for her complaints carried weight with me and then we could go and swim.

I washed the sweat off my face and neck and dressed myself. The billet I lived in was beautiful. The rooms downstairs were high and cool, the staircase had an elegant curl, and there was a carved front door. Before the war, the place had belonged to a prosperous planter who headed for Australia when the Japs arrived and got himself killed in a bar-room brawl in Darwin. Under Jap rule, the building formed part of the Neutrals Camp, where Swiss and Swedes and their assorted women had been confined for the duration. Now it was a sergeants' billet. I tried out a quick daydream about Margey's and my living here when the British troops left, complete with bearers to wait on us; but the bearers would not stay still, and became petty officials in the new Indonesian order instead.

Nobody was about outside. The sun had already achieved tyrannical power and anyone who could scrounge a way off official duties would be stretched out on his charpoy.

The line of Dutch houses, with their neglected gardens and riotous shrubs, was sheltered by deciduous trees, doubtless imported from nurserymen in Amsterdam. As soon as I stepped out of their shadow,



my body oozed sweat into my newly laundered jungle greens. A butterfly flew past me at waist-level, its wings as big as saucers.

I strolled over to 'M' Section, to get a vehicle to take me into town. Things were a bit jungly in 'M' Section. It had taken over a large thatched barn and fortified the space all round with rattan screens and barbed wire. There was a guard permanently on the gate, though he sometimes dozed under his square of thatch.

A few vehicles stood frying in the sun. In the shade of the barn, other vehicles were being repaired. Most of the vehicles and all of the repair equipment was Jap. It was an indication of feeling in the House of Commons, as well as of the situation in India and the NEI, that 26 Div had never managed to come up to strength, and relied heavily on commandeered equipment. The fact that such equipment as was permitted came via Singapore added to our problems. There was a shortage of everything the 'Q' stores could not even provide new socks. If 26 Div did not pull out soon, it was going to be reduced to growing its own food in earnest.

Colour-Sergeant Ron Dyer stood at the entrance to the barn, smoking. He was a regular, and had been through the Arakan. At his waist he wore a Jap aviator's sword, which made him look like a pirate. Apart from this weapon, and his revolver, he wore a filthy pair of dungarees, boots, and nothing else. His great chest and glistening belly were streaked with dirt. Directly he saw me, he set up an outcry and moved sluggishly about in mock-panic.

'Right, lads, watch your vehicles! Watch these tyres or they'll be all gone like shit off a hot stove. Keep your eye on anything this bloke can lift. Watch your rings! What do you want here, Stubbs? Got a gin-palace to flog me cheap?'

'You've got fuck-all here anyone would want to swipe, Dyer.'

The gin-palace scandal was something I would never live down, not if I served another hundred years in the army.

If equipment was in short supply in Medan, matters were much worse in Padang. Padang lay south of the equator, on the other side of the island. Any goods intended for Padang had to make a sea-voyage from Medan of some twelve hundred miles. Air transport was scarce. There was a hazardous trail over the island the trail five hundred miles long by which I had travelled to Medan but that had always been threatened by extremists and was now entirely in their hands.

Padang was an outpost an outpost which began to look increasingly



forlorn as the political situation deteriorated.

One thing the garrison in Padang needed: a signal station. Their radio equipment consisted of battered old 22 sets. These relayed messages up to a hill station above the town, a place called Bukitinghi, from which signals were relayed over the mountains to Medan. Bukitinghi came under threat, with a signals captain shot up on the hazardous road back to Padang. A proper mobile signals station known throughout the army as a gin-palace was ordered. The message went to Bukitinghi, to Medan, to Singapore, to Calcutta, to Delhi, and so back to 26 Div supply base, many hundreds of miles away in Amritsar.

Six months later, a supply ship landed a gin-palace at Belawan, the port of Medan.

That gin-palace was the reason for my being on detachment in Medan. I had been despatched from Padang to collect the gin-palace by road. The Mendips had supplied a truck, a driver, two BORs, a Bren gun, and a load of supplies, and we had driven that marathon road across the interior of Sumatra, over a massive mountain range amid still-active volcanoes, past Lake Toba, down to Medan. What a ride! The adventure of my life!

There's no more marvellous country anywhere in the world. We were not shot at once.

But that was six weeks ago. Since then, the Indonesians had gained confidence, knowing we were pulling out, and closed the overland route. There was no way of getting the gin-palace to Padang, except by sea.

Meanwhile, the road between Medan and Belawan port became increasingly dangerous. I was given an escort to drive to the port and pick up the gin-palace. When we arrived, we found not one but ten gin-palaces. There they were, in a line, sitting out in the flaming sun beside a deserted go-down. The signal to Amritsar had become garbled on its way back to base.

I drove our one gin-palace back to Medan as ordered. It was like driving an oven on wheels.

At Div HQ I tried explaining the whole thing to an RASC major who took a dim view of the matter. Eventually, he agreed to send a signal to Amritsar to get the situation clarified. Messages went back and forth, days seeped by. I was ordered by the same dim major to form a convoy and collect the other nine gin-palaces; they were to be guarded carefully in Medan until they could be shipped back to Calcutta.



Our convoy was fired at and one Indian driver was killed. We arrived at the harbour. The nine gin-palaces had gone.

That was the story, and many a bitter laugh it raised.

In the popular version of the story I had done an arms-deal. I was in charge of the vehicles and so was responsible for selling all nine on the black market to the local branch of Soekarno's TRI; I had made a fortune. My version of the story was that the RASC major had made the killing. What had really happened was that the Indonesians had driven them off. The vehicles had been left standing on the dockside by the Indian RASC with ignition keys in the ignition locks.

This was why Colour-Sergeant Dyer, not a man normally given to humour, cried aloud, 'Watch your vehicles,' whenever I went near 'M' Section. The one gin-palace we had rescued stood, practically unused, in his park. It would never reach Padang. Some humorist had stencilled the word MERDEKA in neat yellow letters on its sides.

I gave Dyer a fag and we had a little chat.

'It's all right for some, Stubbs. I shall have to hang on here till the Div pulls out at the end of the year. They can't do without me I've only got Wogs under me. We're supposed to be patching up any vehicles we can lay our hands on to sell to the bloody Dutch when they take over.'

'It'll be a bloodbath then, PM told.'

'You wouldn't fucking chuckle it will...'

We sucked on our cigarettes. Monkeys ran in the high branches above the barn.

'It's a terrible thought. Sumatra's such a beautiful fucking island.'

'Beautiful buggery. It's easy for you to say, mate you're off home thora pechi. They can all kill each other down to the last little black baby for all I care, once I get out of here.'

'You're being unkind, Ron. It's not like you.'

'You can stuff your hypocrisy, too. These people mean nothing to us, and we've no bloody business being here. You know who let us in the shit same as I do the bloody Americans. In particular, Harry Truman and General Fucking MacArthur. The NEI is part of the Pacific, and the Americans should have administered it themselves, instead of off-



loading it on to Mountbatten.'

'I suppose it'll sort itself out in the end.'

'They've got to sort out their own bloody troubles. Me, all I want is to get out of this fucking uniform.'

As it happened I ran across Ron Dyer a year or two later, in Civvy Street. He had joined the police. He had lost a stone or two and looked good in his uniform.

An Indian driver came over, grinning, and climbed into one of the Jeeps parked under the trees.

'There's your gharri, Stubby-lad. See that little bugger doesn't bash it up or flog it to the Sumatrans.'

I climbed in, gave Ron a wave, and we bowled down the Serdenweg and into the centre of town. As we were going at a brave smack, the whole gusto of life hit me. For the moment personal problems were forgotten. We were at the heart of things; the thought that we could be shot at at any moment just enhanced the tide of the blood. And Margey was not far away Margey, mine, mine, semi-mine. I began to sing.

I see your face in every flower,
Your eyes in stars above:
It's just the thought of you
The very thought of you, my love.

When it was travelling at speed, my voice was quite as good as Bing Crosby's.

The driver took me a long way round. He must have enjoyed my singing. He breezed by the Deli railway station, where the drivers and horses of two ancient gharris dozed in the sun, and braked flamboyantly in front of the signal office as instructed.

This had been the smart end of town before history overtook it. Like everything else, the building before us had been wrenched out of its intended purpose. Three years earlier, it had been a flower shop, where prosperous wives and daughters of planters came in their white dresses to buy the exotic flora with which Sumatra abounded. It was a low wooden building with large windows; now the windows were boarded and walls of sandbags were piled before it. A Rajput naik stood guard at the entrance.



Inside, each tucked into its own sandbagged nook, six wireless sets were operating, their operators working in R/T or W/T to ALFSEA in Singapore, to Batavia, or to detachments in places like Palembang and Padang. Links to smaller outposts such as Sabang and Benkoelen were worked for an hour or two every morning. A couple of the operators nodded to me; as a spare bod with some understanding of signals procedure, I had been known to take over from them for an hour or two if needed.

The superintendent came out of the rear room, clutching a piyala full of tea. It was Steve Kyle, the thin sharp-nosed corporal who had failed to get the lads out of bed for Agricultural Duties.

'I want to put through a call to Captain Boyer in Padang HQ,' I said. 'Can I borrow the R/T for five minutes?'

'There's a lot of traffic this morning, Sergeant. Is it important?'

'Of course. It's about my demob next week.'

He went over to his desk and set the mug down, looking at it rather than me.

'Your message will have to go through Admin. I can't accept private traffic.'

'I want to speak to Boyer. If you're busy, then it's quicker for us to have a chat over the R/T than to send half a dozen messages each way. Doesn't that make sense to you, Corporal?'

He faced up to me.

'It may make sense to you, but you know very well that unauthorised persons are not allowed to go on the air, nor are they even allowed in the signal office. Okay?' He looked me straight in the eye. Pale and peacetime though he was, he was a determined bugger.

Lowering my voice, I said, 'You've suddenly turned into a stickler for discipline, haven't you, Corporal? You put on a pretty feeble show this morning. Let me remind you that you have a mutiny on your hands, the consequences of which could be very serious for you as well as the blokes you think you're defending.'

He coloured. 'Don't give me the Old Sweat bit, for Christ's sake, Sergeant. You old soldiers have had it, that's why they're shipping you home. You're going to get a shock when you get to Britain: we've got a Labour government now, you may have heard. It's Attlee you're under



now, not Churchill, and things have changed. My chaps refused to dig this morning for the same reason that the British have failed to turn Sumatra back into a colony. Sense prevailed. The bloody war's over. The ordinary man's going to have his say here, at home, and anywhere else you care to name. So don't use old-fashioned words like mutiny to me.'

Some of the IORs and BORs at the sets were turning round to listen, grinning. When it came to being shit-or-bust, I could teach these rookies things they never knew; but being shit-or-bust was personal, a very different thing from the new couldn't-care-less attitude coming from Blighty with sods like Kyle. What the hell were they doing back there, Attlee and the rest of them? The Fourteenth Army had fought for India and Burma, and many a good man had gone down, including my mates, the good old lads of the Mendips and 2 Div. Now what was going on? They were giving India away, and no one knew what was happening in Burma.

I said, 'I gave you an order this morning, Kyle, to get your section out on spade parade. You failed to carry it out. You are involved with the rest of them and that's got nothing to do with politics. It's a matter of army discipline. Unless you want trouble, pack in the bullshit and give me five minutes' air space.'

He began to sweat. 'Don't you threaten me, Sergeant Stubbs! You have no business in here. I'd be within my rights to fetch the Duty Officer and have you turned out. You had no business to give me orders this morning, either. That was between Johnny Mercer and me. He's my sergeant. Perhaps you've forgotten that you were just coming in from breaking curfew. That's a serious offence too, and don't you forget it.'

He had a point.

'Thik-hai, if that's the way you want it,' I said. 'I'll sort you out later, Corporal.'

There was nothing for it but to leave. As I reached the door, Kyle came up behind me and said, 'You can see how I'm placed. I don't want trouble. The British Army has been caught in an impossible political situation and all of us'

I turned on him angrily. 'Don't try and get round me. I'm as pissed off with the army as anyone, and I've seen more cockups than you've had NAAFI suppers. But the whole point of the fucking army is to sort out impossible situations. That's what it's there for. Which can only be done with a bit of discipline. Otherwise, we all get shot up. Malum that?'



He shook his head. 'That's where you're wrong. We've only saved ourselves from being shot up here by failing to carry out impossible orders. Reinstating the Dutch can't be done. In Java, they're having a hell of a time because they refuse to recognise realities.'

'Balls. That's all balls, and you know it. We haven't enough troops here or in Java, otherwise we could get this lot sorted out in no time. Now, get back to your desk and sort yourself out.'

He pressed his hand to his lips, then turned away. I clattered down the steps of the signal office, lighting a fag as I went. The bastard had really got under my skin, but I told myself that I had better drop the matter and pursue my intention of speaking to Captain Boyer.

Ordering my Indian driver to wait, I walked over to the nearest caf and ordered a coffee. The shop owner smiled, recognising me. I thought as I had every day since I arrived in Medan how pleasant this sleepy town must be in times of peace. Tiger Balm's bloodbath theory must be wrong. Once the British and Dutch had left, quiet would descend.

These euphoric thoughts of a young man I set down here. History is rarely on the side of peace and quiet. Soekarno, the fiery revolutionary, made a doubtfully successful leader of free Indonesia. He was deposed in 1965, when the Suharto regime took power and began by massacring about a million Indonesian citizens, many of them Chinese; since they were fabelled communists, the nations of the West were not too dejected as news of the killings got about, although, as Bertrand Russell said, 'In four months, five times as many people died in Indonesia as in Vietnam in twelve years.' I imagine that plenty of the victims were ordinary people like Margey, Tiger Balm, Auntie, Katie Chae, and optimistic old Fat.

If the British would give me no help in getting through to Boyer in Padang, then my Dutch acquaintance, Ernst Sontrop, might come in useful. I paid for the coffee, bought two good cigars, and strolled across the road to the Dutch HQ, which stood conveniently next to the signal office.

It was a building of grey stone, four storeys high and so one of the tallest buildings in the city. It was constructed in a cumbersome alien style with rounded corners and heavily overhanging porticos and pediments which gave its faade several permanent frowns. Once it had functioned as a court of justice, I believe. Justice was now suspended. The occupying personnel were military. Two swart Ambonese soldiers challenged me at the entrance, stepping smartly



out from behind sandbags. They looked at my army paybook and consulted with an officer. I was admitted.

In the dim-lit hall, a stuffed tiger prowled inside its glass case, fixing glass eyes upon whoever entered. On one marble wall were mounted skulls of the two-horned Sumatran rhino, while the wall opposite supported a bright mosaic map of the Indies, fringed with exotic tribal figures, together with insects, flowers, and bright-plumaged birds. Beside the lift and the stairs, plants grew in brass tubs.

A grim old receptionist behind a desk tried to persuade me to hand over my revolver. He spoke no English. We glowered at each other before he disappeared, to return with a hulking man who asked me sharply what my business was. When I asked for Sontrop, he shrugged and led me upstairs without a word.

Upstairs were comfortable sofas and a table bearing Dutch magazines. All this foreign colour made me wonder whether any Stubbs had ever been so far from home before. I visualised generation after generation of Stubby ancestors, with big noses, grey whiskers, and bizarre appetites, receding into the mists of time; Victorian Stubbses, Tudor Stubbses, Anglo-Saxon Stubbses, Stone-Age Stubbses, all standing on their home hearth and muttering, in the manner of my father, 'Why bother about the rest of the world when you've not seen all England yet?'

What an affront to those imagined ancestors if I returned to England with a Chinese bride! There could be no more conclusive proof of the far-flung side of my nature.

As I was rather loftily accepting the envious congratulations of my brother Nelson, Ernst Sontrop entered the waiting room.

Sontrop seemed to my eyes tremendously ancient. He was thirty-five years old. A neat straight spade beard fringed his jawline, sparse hair swept back from his forehead. The beard was brown, streaked with white; the hair on his head was blond. His eyes were grey-blue, his expression set. There were deep wrinkles round his eyes and lips, as if he had once clung to a sheer cliff-face by those features.

His clothes were ostentatiously neat: his bright civilian shirt, army trousers, socks and sandals, might have come straight from a shop that morning.

'Good morning, Horatio, how do you do?' He paused, then came forward and formally shook hands with me. I offered him a cigarette which he tucked into his breast pocket before showing me down the



corridor to his office.

'Firstly, I must apologise for keeping you waiting. The Dutch ship, the Van Heutz, arrives tomorrow to take away many Dutch persons, so we are busy arranging documents.'

I assured him that I had enjoyed the wait.

'Not so many Britishers come into our headquarters, Horatio. It is a shame that our peoples do not go along better together, when we are both European races, and have common interests. Now, please to take a seat and tell me what I can do for you.'

Time was I had done something for Sontrop. When I was still with my unit in Padang, I was given the job of establishing a RAPWI area. RAPWI was the Rehabilitation of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees organisation, also known unofficially as Rape All Pretty Women in Indonesia. Among the RAPWI personnel in Padang were several Dutch girls, whom I had to fetch from the hill station of Bukitinghi, where they had been interned by the Japs. I became involved with one of the biggest blondes, Addy Sontrop a fine strapping girl, taller than I and milder than a pat of butter.

One day, I was drinking in a bar with a couple of my mates when I noticed Addy serving at the food counter. A taffy from the South Wales Borderers was pawing her and making himself generally objectionable. When he slapped a hand on Addy's left tit, I went over and punched him in the guts. Some of his mates showed up, and we had a dodgy few minutes of it.

Addy was later shifted to Medan. I met her again when I arrived there, and she introduced me to brother Ernst. Ernst was unexpectedly friendly the Dutch had a reputation for being stand-offish and he continued being civil after Addy boarded the Van Heutz and sailed for the Netherlands.

So I gave him an outline of my story, telling him just enough to explain why I wished to speak to Boyer over the radio link. Something in his face, an expression of disapproval, brought the blood to my throat before I had finished my story.

'Don't you go for the idea of my marrying a Chinese girl, Ernst?'

He dropped his glance to his neatly manicured nails.

'Of course it is not for me to give any opinion about your private affairs, Horatio.'



'Go on.'

'No, it is simply that we found throughout many years of ruling in these islands that mixed marriages never turn out very happily. For you it may be different. Let's proceed to the wireless room.'

Sontrop took me to the top floor of the building, where two Dutchmen were working a Jap transmitter of formidable size. While they were calling Padang, Sontrop summoned a uniformed native, who served us with glasses of fresh iced lime juice. I couldn't see anything like that happening in Corporal Kyle's lousy signal office.

After a certain amount of impenetrable Dutch had gone over the air, Sontrop came and said, 'Our friends in Padang at the Netherlands Headquarters are unable to telephone to the British Division. Extremists severed the cable during the hours of night, and it is not yet do you say, reinstated? Reinstalled. They will send a messenger on a motor-bike. Captain Boyer shall radio you back here in two hours' time. Provided that he may be found.'

I checked with my watches. It was somewhere about midday.

As I thanked him, he said, 'It is time for my lunch. You caught me almost as I left. Come to my house and eat with me. Let me first get my carbine.'

My Jeep was waiting outside, so I invited him to climb in. Some British troops were strolling by; one of them laughed and said something to his mates. If there was one thing regarded as more eccentric than associating with the Chinese, it was associating with the Dutch.

Our Indian driver, ever glad of distraction, made a showy turn round the park, passed the de Witte Club, and bowled up past the old deserted children's playground towards the RAPWI area. Buildings on either side of the road were shuttered and ruinous until we came to the little model village where the Dutch were now mainly housed. The guards at the gate were Japs, with the insignia removed from their uniforms.

Sontrop gave the driver directions.

We turned down a neat little side road. The trees were deciduous again, formally spaced, just as on the banks of the Zuyder Zee.

Ernst lived in something that looked like a shrunken version of an



Odeon Cinema, with a strange multi-angle tower rising above the roof-line. Curved steps flounced up to an elaborate front door. Inside, the floors were marble and there was a Rembrandt reproduction on the wall. The Night Watch.

We met a couple of Dutch women in the hall, padding round half-naked with their hair in curlers. I was immediately interested though they were ugly-looking cows since Sontrop had not struck me as a ladies' man; it was always hard to tell with foreigners. The women took no notice of us. They smoked and walked about white their hair set, presumably getting ready for some evening event. There were dances in the RAPWI area every night. Passing them politely, Sontrop showed me into his quarters. We entered a big room. A grotesque stone fireplace was the chief feature. His bed was here, and a table, some novels on a shelf, some ammo boxes under the window, little else. A door led off to back quarters.

'I bring you a beer,' he said.

'What about the driver?'

'He can have water.' He brought me a Milwaukee beer and then disappeared. I walked round the room looking at photographs hanging framed on the wall. They were all views of some foreign town where it appeared permanently about to rain. By the bed stood snaps of Addy and an older female, presumably Mum.

Nowhere in Sontrop's bare room did I see signs of female occupancy. Of course, owing to the emergency, houses in protected areas were always overcrowded. One heard funny things about the Dutch, but that did not mean that all the women in the bungalow had to be Sontrop's mistresses. I stared out of the back window into a patch of unkempt back-garden, where unkempt bushes flowered. Laundered sanitary towels were hanging on a wire to dry, five of them in a row like rabbit pelts.

Sontrop came back bearing a plate with some big thick cheese sandwiches. I saw he had no beer for himself. Perhaps he had given me his last bottle. Hospitable people, the Dutch.

As we munched, he said, 'You have heard that all the British forces are pulling out from Medan within four months.'

'Is the date confirmed?'

'Yes, as I understand. It makes our small Dutch force in a very difficult situation. But British politicians have recognised Soekarno's



Republic, which we cannot do.'

'You'd be well advised to pull out too. The Indonesians are determined to be independent. Support from Europe is a long way off.'

He shrugged. 'The natives cannot manage administration. They are unprepared for autonomy, like children. They cannot run hospitals and telephone exchanges and banks and the mercantile aspects. They cannot build roads or keep down malaria. They can hardly cook a meal without Chinese help.'

'We must stay here. We made this place! There was nothing before we came here last century, nothing, you understand, just a few stinking huts beside the River Deli. Addy's and my parents arrived here as a young married couple at the start of this century. By hard work my father became to own his own plantation, growing rubber and tobacco. He carved it out of the jungle with his own blade and killed off the snakes and other wild life. He and my mother died here, defending their land when the Japanese invaded. I was born here. How, do we just disappear weakly because we are afraid of a few extremists like Soekarno?'

'I can see how you feel.' We ate the sandwiches in silence.

Sontrop laughed. 'You know what? We get more volunteers now from the Netherlands. And I hear tell that after the German Wehrmacht disbanded, many of its officers join the French Foreign Legion to help them fight in Indo-China. They also enlist in the Dutch Army, to help fight here and in Java. So we have both our old enemies, the Nazis and the Japs, to give assistances now.'

Weevils had been baked into the spongy bread just like the bread in the sergeants' mess. I said, 'I can't see the British ever using German military aid. There would be a devil of a row if we did so.'

He wagged a finger at me. 'You British got scared by Ghandi. You should have locked him up and throwed away the key. Suddenly, the war ends and you aren't tough any more. You, Horatio, you are good at punching a man at the stomach when it is necessary, but I have a sense you do not want more fighting.'

'I've had a belly-full. I was in Burma. One of the worst theatres of war in the world.'

'No, forgive me, but Dutch New Guinea is easily First Worst. What did you did in Burma?'



So I gave him a quick run-down on the battle of Kohima, and how the fighting had raged over the DC's tennis court. I told him how Charlie Meadows and I had climbed a cliff and thrown grenades into a Jap bunker.

'Were you scared then, Horatio?'

'At the time, I didn't feel a thing. Afterwards, I got the shakes. They had to feed Charlie and me on rum. When we came out of Burma and were resting up outside Calcutta, I had a few bad nightmares. Where were you during the war? Here?'

He told me his experiences. It was quiet in the bungalow. Now and again, the half-clad women called to each other in Dutch. Outside, cries of children came faintly.

Ernst Sontrop's family lived on their plantation some miles outside Medan. When the Japs arrived in 1942, a mortar shell landed on their bungalow. Ernst was knocked unconscious. His parents and an elder brother were killed and Addy ran away in panic. A faithful servant carried Sontrop to a native hut and hid him when the Japanese troops marched in. Then followed a few weeks of hell.

The world was alive with heroes after the war. Unexpected countries were suddenly thrown open like treasure-chests, their secrets bursting into the light of incredible truth. The most ordinary people had dramatic stories to tell.

Europe had undergone its terrible upheavals, but the upheaval that took place in the Far East was grander, more terrible, more far-reaching. That upheaval still remains largely misunderstood or neglected. From the splendour and havoc of the East, few stories travelled back to the West. Those that have done so are largely misleading. To give but one example: the film of *The Bridge over the River Kwai*, which dealt with the Death Railway built largely by British and Australian prisoners of war in order to link Burma with Malaya, was a tremendous success because it glorified the white man. It showed him building a bridge which the Japanese could not have managed on their own. The truth was that the Japanese were masters of the jungle; they were ferociously brave and ingenious enemies and, as their post-war success has shown, they were fully a match for the European races at building anything from a watch to an oil tanker. Bridges were nothing to them. And they endured conditions that no white races had been trained to endure. As it was with the Japanese,



so it was with the other teeming peoples of South-East Asia then, and now. Perhaps the West dare not know.

There was another reason for not being eager to go home. As the women were beautiful, so the men were amazingly resilient. The Chinese in particular were to exhibit their capacity for endurance and for an unexcelled ability to flourish in impossible conditions. Four million of them fled from the Communist regime in their homeland and were cast upon the rock of Hong Kong. There, they made a world-success of what, under four million variegated Europeans, would have turned into a concentration camp on a grand scale.

Ernst Sontrop, the faithful servant, and a couple of friends, managed to launch a small boat from a desolate stretch of coast and sail up the Malacca Straits towards the Anderman Islands. They were picked up, half-dead after twenty-one days afloat, by a British naval vessel. They were taken to Colombo, where the servant died.

After some weeks in India, the three Dutchmen were given passage on a ship bound for England. The ship was torpedoed in the Atlantic by a German U-boat. Later, he was to discover that he was almost the sole survivor of the ship. Sontrop drifted on a lifebelt to the coast of France. He met up with members of the French Resistance and after some months made his way into occupied Holland, to fight with the underground against the Nazis.

'You had a brave time in Burma, Horatio, but fighting in an occupied country, then you need a different sort of courage. Each time you have to go to sleep, you wonder if you will waken with a German carbine muzzle stuck in your stomach.'

'Strange experience to get home and find it's an enemy country.'

'Holland is not my home. Sumatra is my home. That is why I come back here as soon as I can to fight for what is mine.'

We had another cigarette, smoking in silence.

'We will go back to the HQ and find if your Captain Boyer has made contact.'

'Will Addy return to Medan some day?'

'Of course. Once we put down this bloody Merdeka movement.' He took up his carbine from his bed and slung it over his shoulder as we made for the fancy door.



The Jeep driver had disappeared. We walked around and discovered him down by a little Chinese stall, sucking a mango- flavoured ice cream.

A message awaited me in the Dutch HQ. They could not contact Captain Boyer. He had left Padang. Nothing was said about where he had gone.

'Thanks a lot,' I said to Sontrop as I left his office. 'I shall have to go to Div HQ and find out where he has gone. If he's in Palembang or Singapore, I'm in trouble.'

'It's a disappointment not to help you more. I will see you again before you leave Medan, I hope.'

'Sure.'

'Perhaps a little celebration.'

'That would be great.'

As we shook hands in the hall by the tiger, I said emotionally, 'This is a great place, Medan, the heat, the bloody insects. I've got to go back to England, and the thought it kills me just to think of it.'

He said, 'The world owes a debt to your country. When you have returned back there, it will not be painful for you, I think. You will quickly forget the East it is not inside you here.' He touched his chest. 'As it is with me.'

'I somehow don't fancy going back to that little dark bombed-out island.'

'I was in England, Horatio. We had a vacation when my parents were on leave in the Netherlands, before the war. We spent some days in Hull, a very pleasant and historic city.'

I went to the door. 'Oh, yes, Hull! Hull's great. Well, thanks again for the lunch.'

'You are welcome.' He bowed.

Outside was the sunshine, the dusty road. My Jeep was there waiting, its driver a few yards away, chatting to some Rajput Rifles from the nearby British HQ. He strolled over affably when I emerged.

'You want go back home, Johnny?'



'Johnny...' from a bloody naik! He was fresh out from India, as Kyle was fresh out from England. Someone else who did not know the rules. When I arrived in India, three years earlier in Jan 1943 to be precise no Indian would have dared to call any British soldier **'Johnny'**. Since then, American troops, with their easy money and habits, had flowed into Calcutta and Bengal in their hundreds, and from them the custom of calling everyone **'Johnny'** had spread. Maybe the Yanks thought it sounded democratic; for anyone who served in the Fourteenth Army, it had a ring of contempt.

'You can return to lines and report back jhaldi to Colour- Sergeant Dyer in "M" Section, Naik, thik -hai?'

'Thik-hai, Sergeant.' That was better.

'And no side-trips on the way, malum?'

'Acha, sir.' He jumped into his vehicle and drove off, grinning.

A fucking great thing zoomed in from the nearest swamp and landed on my cheek. I struck it with unnecessary violence and almost laid myself out. I missed the fucking great thing.

Peering groggily at my watches, I decided that an average reading made it about one-forty-five.

The signal office shift would have changed. Corporal Kyle was no longer on duty. I strolled into the office and spent the best part of an hour trying again to contact Captain Boyer, only to receive the same answer as the Dutch. Boring old Boyer was on the wing. Maybe he had pissed off to Singapore on leave. Or India. You never knew with officers. By now, he could be bedding one of the memsahibs of Ootie, who slept only with lieutenants or above. I had had enough: I was going to see Margey.

I had some money on me Dutch guilders and worthless Jap guilders which served as currency in the bazaars. In one of the Chinese shops along the Kesawan, I found a can of Argentine corned beef, heavily over stamped 'NAAFI', going for thirty guilders, or almost three pounds sterling. Some illicit quartermaster was making a fortune. I paid up, sighing. Margey loved corned beef; her tastes were very sophisticated.

As I emerged into the street, the sky was rapidly clouding over. Wind scurried down the pavement. In four minutes, the streets would be awash. Before I reached Margey's alley, the first drops of rain



smashed against the ground.

Brother-in-law Fat was not seated at the central table. That in itself was remarkable. The erudite Tiger Balm was also absent, to my relief. The morning had been fruitless enough without him. Someone was at the table, sitting there in the gloom over a packet of fags; it was one of the most-frequented tables in the NEI. The someone was one of the interchangeable little old wrinkled men who guarded the place and kept it well fumigated with cigarette smoke.

'Tabeh, Bapa,' I said. He returned the greeting by offering his fag packet.

Auntie was not to be seen. One of her full-moon smiles would have gone down well. The screens were still round her sofa, as they had been when I left the house before dawn. Groans issued from behind them.

The old boy gestured at them and said something like 'Sakit, sakit', which I did not understand.

A Chinese came from behind the screens. His little black bag and serious air marked him out as a doctor. He was sand coloured and wore sand-coloured shirt and shorts. He started chatting loudly with the old boy at the table.

If Auntie was ill, it was no business of mine. Margey was my target. Once, not so many weeks ago, I had run, run up those two grotty flights of stairs with her in my arms. Couldn't wait to get her up there. Strong as a fucking ox, mad as a mosquito.

'Margey!' I called.

No reply. I looked at the watches on my wrist. The Amsterdam masterpiece had stopped again. According to the other, it was ten past two.

No room like hers anywhere. Anonymous yet personal, rapturous yet melancholy. The Bird's Custard had been stored away. I stared out of the window at cracked roofs running with rain, at broken gutters belching water, at the stones below under flood. Let it piss down, I thought, let it always be extreme.

On the sagging pediment of a nearby roof, a row of shite- hawks sat. They were drab brown with white heads, scraggy creatures watching for something to salvage from the flood. A rat, an unwary lizard, a fish, a sick dog, a human corpse all were welcome to the shite-hawks.



It was their war, their peace. Whatever happened in Medan, they'd do well out of it.

Under the low ceiling it was as hot as ever. I took my boots off, removed my belt, set it with the revolver upmost by the head of the bed. I stretched out and closed my eyes.

Sleep came down, zonk, like the swoop of a shite-hawk.

A slight noise and I was awake again, right hand on gun butt.

Someone was coming up the stairs. More than one person, talking in low voices. I sat up and aimed the revolver at the door.

Logic declared that no extremists would break in to this area of Medan in daylight hours, nor, having broken in, would they tread quietly up the stairs, exchanging pleasantries. However, logic had little power against a mental picture of being killed on Margey's bed.

A woman's voice. Not Margey's. Daisy's. It must be Daisy's! She called, softly, 'Su Chi!'

Daisy's cubicle was dark; since it had no window, such light as it received filtered over the partition. A match scraped in a box, lamplight glowed on the ceiling, throwing a pale wing of shadow above my head. I heard the chink of money. Then came a chuckle and the sound of someone preparing to fuck Daisy.

'The bloody Chinese...' I thought. 'Mid-afternoon...' They were at it all the time. What else was there to do when you were stuck in a country paralysed by revolution, preceded by three years of servitude under the scum of the earth? As banks closed, everywhere thighs were bound to open, the lips of those neat little Eastern twots to unfurl like buds, and fornication to commence. The savoury sounds from next door illustrated my thesis; I clutched my prick and wondered at the laws of the globe.

Although I had never thought about it before, old Daisy was not a bad screw. Her baby had ruled her out of consideration. True, she was a bit short, and rather podgy in the face, but one could imagine that good things lurked under the striped pyjamas she wore. Most of the good things were getting a hammering now. She was murmuring, making a little crooning noise, erotic enough to bestow erections on any mate within earshot, be he soldier, animal, alligator, or chicken.

Whoever the guy was, he was getting into his stride. A decided slurp came from her socket each time his piston drove home, echoed



immediately by the slap of two Chinese bellies coming together. I couldn't help fantasising about Margey, taking up that same comfortable pace with her, as we lay side by side. Something of the sort would be good even with Daisy. I could imagine her, only a few feet away. They were getting more excited now: those chubby buttocks would be going like a fiddler's elbow...

His heels were jammed against the partition, making a regular drumming sound. The sod was grunting and she was going ah-ah-ah to entourage him. She was encouraging me, too. Suddenly oh, shit! Oh, Jesus wept! I was coming all over my bloody jungle greens.

What a bloody fool, what an ape! I had not even realised I had the damned thing in my hand. It had fitted in there of its own accord. Now it lay looking smugly up at me, relaxing, heaving slightly, like an old bull elephant seal on the rocks. Leaving its trail all over my flies and jacket.

Dead silence next door. From my pocket I fished a sweat rag something I'd been issued with in Burma and mopped myself up. But the effects remained obvious.

I lay back in disgust, conscious of a tropical headache gathering like thunderclouds behind my forehead. A revolting ginger object with perspex wings and countless legs or mandibles belted in through the window. It homed in on the come-stains, vibrating a great curled tongue with glee. It could have passed for either a new evolutionary brand of hornet or the innards of a Javanese watch. I struck it away with fear and loathing and it commenced to gyrate upside-down on the floor with loud whirring sounds. It was the innards of a Javanese watch.

They had finished next door. The old chap was panting and wheezing. He could be the sand-coloured doctor I had seen down below, attending old Auntie. Standard fee: One Visit, One Bunk-Up. He was getting paid. Daisy said something in a low irritable voice, then the baby squeaked. It was on the bed with them.

I lay where I was until they went downstairs again, propping myself on one elbow and resting my head on my hand.

Life is a knocking-shop, nor am I out of it... It followed from this degrading experience that Margey was also just a little whore. Whatever was happening on the political front, whoring like the business of the shite-hawks on the roof outside never ceased to prosper. How else could she pay her way through life? From everyone, a price was exacted.



For a while I thought of Margey with hatred. She had been so bloody secretive about the other side of her life ever since we met. But the hatred went fast, like a storm blowing out to sea. You couldn't hate Margey. She had only been tactful, protecting me from the rottenness that surrounded her. She had to keep old Fat in cigarettes in exchange for this billet. Perhaps that was the arrangement.

When I had arrived in Medan to take delivery of my gin- palace, before the horrible event of the 'arms deal', Johnny Mercer was going out with Margey. He introduced me to her apologetically, and the three of us had a drink in a little Malayan shack on the edge of town.

Margey said so little that evening that I scarcely realised she could talk English. She looked small and not particularly interesting; her European-style dress did not suit her.

As we walked down the road afterwards, Margey trailing behind us, Johnny said, 'Do you want to take her on, Horry? She's very nice, though she doesn't say a lot. Her talents lie in other directions.'

I didn't know, and said as much.

'Look, she really is smashing, though she was acting a bit thick back there. Trouble is, she always wants to eat Chinese grub and it doesn't suit my stomach.' He was silent for a moment, then he added, quietly, 'It's no skin off my nose. I'm going to jack her in; I've got a bit of blonde crumpet up the RAPWI whose husband's been shipped home with his chest shot up.'

I looked back at the girl behind us. She sauntered along so innocently, her eyes directed to the ground. She was plump; the European little-girl dress was unsuitable and did nothing for her figure. As she caught my eye, she smiled as at some secret but rather shameful joke. I always remember that moment.

'Does she dance?' I asked.

The very next night, I took her to the sergeants' mess Saturday hop. Johnny faded gracefully out in the direction of the RAPWI, and thereafter was always tactful in his references to Margey. Although Margey was tactful about Johnny, I soon found out that she had not been fond of him he had not behaved 'politely'.

Margey had been open and affectionate towards me from that first dance. Such was her nature. Such was the nature of the political situation that she had to pay her way with her one natural resource,



just like Daisy and Margey's enemy down the street, Katie Chae.

I devoted a lot of psychic energy to denying the fact to myself.

You always paid more than you could afford. When I got back to the Blight only a few days to go I would lose my freedom, while pretending not to lose it, and would vanish into Barclay's Bank like my father, lost for ever to the world of wider possibilities. Surely it was better to stay in Medan.

But there were few possibilities here either. That was why Daisy and Margey were screwed regularly by whoever had a few guilders. Or a can of bully beef.

I sat up and wiped furiously at the patches on my trousers, almost ruining my matrimonial hopes in the process.

If I took Margey back to England, that would be okay. For her and me. And yet... Even here, even in Medan, even in the bloody Indian Army, even ten thousand miles from home, I still met with that stupid British prejudice from my fellow sergeants, a racialism that it would take a million years to wipe out. They would screw the local girls of any shade or persuasion. But to love them, to treat them as human beings, that was not to be thought of.

These comments set down now are inevitably coloured by all that has happened since those distant days when the warmth between Margey and me was a real breathing thing. They are coloured by memories of the welcome Britain gave to the West Indians, the Indians, and the Pakistanis, who fought beside us against Jap and German alike in World War II. They came to work here in what they called their Mother Country. Only to find the milk had gone sour.

Grunting about my headache, I climbed back into socks, boots, puttees. I stood up and put the ginger machine-thing out of its agony with the heel of a left Army Boot Size Eleven. Then I clomped downstairs. I was going back to the billet. A strategically held bush hat concealed the mess on my trousers.

I left the corned beef, all thirty guilders' worth, on the window sill, in payment for my sterile pleasure. If it had been pleasure. And I closed the window. Maybe shite-hawks liked corned beef.

At the top of the alley-way, Margey appeared. She carried her little purse, her parasol, and a small parcel wrapped in newspaper.

'Oh, hello, Horry, darling. How nice I see you. You wait for me?'



'I'd given up waiting. I was going back to the billet.'

'Come in, sit down, and I make you nice coffee, darling. Today coffee again.' She linked her chubby arm in mine. 'I been shopping a long way, to get some medicine for poor Auntie. She no well today and doctor come, poor Auntie. When I go down Chuah Street, I see in a shop real lovely little hat from Paris or some prace like that. Just is right to wear in London and look smart but costs much price. Tomorrow I take you and show, and you can see me wear it, okay?'

'I'll buy it for you, Margey.'

'No, is costing too much price. Just you see me wear it.' She grinned up at me saucily. 'Then you think you dear Margey very sexy, want make love to her in shop.'

I laughed. 'I'll buy it for you as my parting present.'

Her smile vanished immediately. 'It impossible us to part, Horry, now we found each other.' She clung to my arm.

We went back in. She started scolding the old man at the table, who stood up and started explaining something to her with a maximum of gesture. Margey became very angry and animated. I sat down at the table to watch her and keep my flies hidden. Fat appeared from the rear of the building, said something irritably, and immediately became a second object of Margey's fine scorn. She stood there, beautifully moulded, with her eyes wide, letting them have it about something or other. Daisy also appeared, lolling against the wall and enjoying every word of it as she cradled her baby. Her manner was indolent.

When the men trooped dejectedly into the kitchen, Margey unwrapped her parcel on the table. I started back in alarm. A disgusting oily creature was revealed which looked like a fish with legs. It was black; it leaked an oily substance on to the table. Daisy came up to admire it.

Margey burst into laughter at my expression, her anger vanishing.

'Don't be frightened, darling. Is only medicine make Auntie better.'

'What is that revolting thing?'

She explained that it was a common Sumatran animal which lived on the plantations. She held it up by its tail. It looked like a baby



dinosaur, ripped palpitating at foetus-stage from some stygian archaic womb. It had frogs' eyes. Along its body was a folded membrane which Margey pulled out, revealing wings rather like bats' wings. The head was blunt, with curious flaps instead of ears. I had never seen anything like it before. It was a flying lizard, believed by the Chinese community to have medicinal powers. Margey trotted it out to the kitchen to cut it up. The old man went behind the screen to fan Auntie. Daisy made little crooning noises to her baby. Fat brought me a bottle of Red Fox. Life was going on more or less as usual, scraping by.

4

That was how average days in Medan drifted along. Not much achieved; not much harm done either. An easier life than anything I was likely to find at home. A life fit for a fucking hero.

Nevertheless, a certain dissatisfaction followed me back to the lines when I returned there an hour or so before sunset. Boyer had eluded me; I blamed myself for not doing something about him earlier. You never knew where officers were going to be.

Before reaching the sergeants' mess, I heard the sound of a pump, wheezing like an asthmatic trying to climb the Great Pyramid with his grannie on his back. An Indian havildar was supervising the draining of our ruined cesspit, while the gang of men under him laid freshly sawn planks over the hole.

Charlie Meadows stood watching from the mess steps, smoking his pipe to ward off the stink.

'Merdeka, Horatio. We'd better not get too pissed tonight, or we'll be in there head-first. It would be a nasty way to die.'

'I can think of better ways to go.'

As I came level with him, he turned to face me, pulling the pipe wetly from his big mouth and pointing the end at me. 'You're a dodgy bugger, and always have been as long as I've known you,' he said admiringly. 'Jhamboo Singh has been looking for you most of the bloody day. What have you been doing, flogging more gin-palaces?'

'The sergeants' mess this time. Flogged it to Soekarno for a brothel. What's Jhamboo want, do you know?'

'You'd better go over to Admin and see.'



'All this bloody army bullshit I'll be glad to escape from it. I'd better have a shower and a change first.'

Charlie stuck the pipe in the other side of his mouth. 'You don't know when you're well off, you young lads...'

For all my assumption of indifference, the summons to Jhamboo worried me. I showered fast, yelling for the Chinese orderly to get out a fresh uniform as I cast the spunk-ridden one aside. Quick dash of powder over foot rot and prickly heat, fast dress, and I was ready.

As I made my way over to Admin, the sun was sloping down the western sky without in any way relaxing its animosity towards mankind. The duty clerk was on me as I entered the doorway, and a moment later an Indian orderly showed me upstairs to Jhamboo's office.

Captain Jhamboo Singh was a small man. Perhaps that was why he stood up as I entered and saluted him. As ever, he was immaculately dressed in khaki uniform, with razor-sharp edges to his shorts. His belt and boots shone. His little moustache was deadly symmetrical.

'Ah, good afternoon, Sgt Stubbs. I have been trying to get in touch with you all day. May I ask where you have been?' His voice was soft, almost pleading.

'I had some business down in town, sir. I am time-expired, flying out on Monday, and the RSM has excused me duties.'

'Well, we are very short of men, Sgt Stubbs. We don't get the replacements, you see. It may be that we shall be forced to call upon you for some duties.' He smiled. 'The army always needs us till the very last moment when it releases us. As a regular soldier, you will understand.'

'What did you want to see me for, sir?'

His fingers drummed on the desk.

'Perhaps you would be kind enough to wait one moment while I work on some papers. When I learned you were here, I have summoned also Sgt Mercer and Cpl Kyle of "O" Section. I hope they will arrive immediately.'

He came half-way round his desk to offer me a chair. I sat on it in a rigid 'At Attention' position.



'Please, you may smoke, Sgt Stubbs. Perhaps you will take one of mine.' He extended a sumptuous silver cigarette case; it opened like the jaws of a crocodile as it approached me over the desk. 'They are English cigarettes. De Reszke.'

I took one and lit up. Rumour had it that Jhamboo's family were fantastically rich and ate their curries off beaten gold plates while being served by naked slave-girls.

Before I had finished puffing away, the door opened and Johnny and Kyle clumped in. They halted side by side and saluted. I heaved myself up beside them and stared at a spot six inches the other side of Jhamboo's head.

'Thank you, gentlemen, no need to be formal,' Jhamboo whispered. 'We have a painful subject to talk about. It is the question of why "O" Section did not turn out to dig the field this morning, as you, Sgt Mercer, reported. That is why I have invited you to come here. Cpl Kyle, you are in charge of these men. Why exactly was Agricultural Duty not carried out as per orders?'

Our thin-nosed pale friend said, 'Sir, I asked the men very reasonably to turn out on parade but they refused. They said that their job did not include digging. They claimed to be skilled tradesmen, sir. They said I just report what they said, sir that such a job was a task for the Indian Other Ranks.'

Jhamboo Singh nodded very methodically at all these points, as if meeting them head on. A fly buzzed about and sat on his left ear; he ignored it.

'So the men refused duty as laid down. Have you anything to add to that, Sgt Mercer?' He asked the question mildly, putting his head to one side like a family doctor prepared to listen to any description of any symptom, however revolting.

Mercer stood rigidly at attention as he spoke. 'The men would not budge from their charpoys, sah. When not descending to the level of common abuse, such as telling Cpl Kyle to get knotted, sah, their argument ran that they saw no point in the proposed agricultural activity. Sah.'

Johnny loved to parody the military manner.

'The whole point of the proposed agricultural activity, Sgt Mercer,' said Jhamboo suavely, 'is that we can become a little independent of the hostile local community by growing a vegetable crop for



ourselves. Do you personally like fresh potatoes, Sgt Mercer?'

'Sah. Particularly with a little butter, sah. But, begging your pardon, sah, my culinary tastes don't enter the issue at hand. The gist of the argument as presented by the BORs, sah, in among their epithets to Cpl Kyle here, was that, supposing the field was dug and the potatoes planted, 26 Div would have evacuated Sumatra before the aforesaid root crop was ripe enough to benefit the military cuisine. In other words, sah, they claimed that digging that field would benefit the Indonesians and not the troops. Hard to produce a counter argument to that, sah.'

Jhamboo looked as if he agreed with every word that had been said, and was prepared to agree with many more; but he said, 'Unfortunately orders are issued from GHQ as instructions to be carried out and not as arguments to be discussed. Similarly, your duty was to implement those instructions, and not play any socratic role.'

Kyle stuck his nose forward at this and said, 'With respect, sir, I can't think that remark really represents your private views. I'm sure you feel as I do that wrong orders have in this instance been issued. It is an injustice that the British Army should be here at all, suppressing the freedom of Indonesians, as you, sir, as an Indian, must be aware; so it must be unjust that we should dig fields which probably belong by rights to Indonesian farmers.'

'I see.' Jhamboo's face betrayed nothing. He lit a De Reszke, never removing his gaze from Kyle. Then he said, softly, 'I will not listen to criticism of the British Army from a conscript. In any case, such policies have nothing to do with us as soldiers.'

We are discussing an order that has been defied and what we should do about it.' He stubbed out his newly lit cigarette.

'The war is over, sir, we should be trying to build the peace.'

'Corporal, 26 Indian Division is unfortunately on Active Service. For us, we have a war. It is difficult to command if nobody obeys... Impossible, to be frank.'

Kyle ignored these remarks.

'If we went to the GOC, sir, and complained of flagrant injustice, all the lads would be behind you, believe me.'

That was too much for me. As Kyle spoke, I saw terrible anger flash in Jhamboo's eye, then his countenance was again lamb-like. For one



second some ghastly bloody-minded ancestor had been glimpsed, swinging a two-bladed battle-axe.

I said, 'What Kyle is saying is beside the point, not to mention a right load of nonsense. An army exists by following orders even if it thinks them idiotic. That's how we won the Great War and the war against the Japs and'

Kyle interrupted. 'And look at the millions who got killed obeying fool orders issued by stupid generals. It's more courageous to defy an order you know is nonsense like this rubbish about planting potatoes.'

'Don't you talk to me about courage, Cpl Kyle. What do you think these medals are? NAFFI fruitcake?' I thumped my chest before turning to Jhamboo. 'There's no problem here, sir. The only problem is that you're stuck with a corporal who can't or won't give orders. You heard what he said he went into "O" Section billets and he asked the men reasonably to turn out. Of course they told him to piss off. I guarantee that if you give me the job, I'll have 'em on parade and digging away, tomorrow at sunrise.'

Jhamboo gave me a straight look and said, 'Tomorrow is Saturday, Sergeant. In any case, remember that you are excused all duties, as you were telling me.'

There was a sort of silence while we looked at each other. Jhamboo got up and paced a bit behind his desk. He took another cigarette from his silver case, selecting and lighting it with care.

Johnny said, 'Permission to ask a question, sah. I gather that it is pukka that 26 Div will pull out of Sumatra and return to India in September?'

'The GOC wants the field dug this month, not in September,' Jhamboo said curtly.

'Would you like me to get up a petition among the lads, sir?' asked Kyle. 'They'll all sign if I ask them to. We feel that you are being victimised too, having to enforce such a silly order. This is a test case, as I see it.'

Jhamboo smoked rather heavily but said nothing, so I spoke.

'Sir, with respect, would you like me to fetch RSM Payne? What we have here is a case of mutiny on our hands. Clear infraction of army regulations.'



Jhamboo gave me a tender smile, as of bride to groom.

'When I require the presence of the RSM, I will summon him by my orderly.' He thought for a moment, pacing, then went and sat down again. He drummed his fingers on the desk. 'All right. I do not wish this matter to go any further for the present. You three NCOs will not speak to anyone else about it. In particular, Cpl Kyle, you are not to discuss the matter with the men, you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Please do not simply say, "Yes sir". Also obey my order. There are still such things as orders, even in a peacetime army. Now you may dismiss. No digging parade tomorrow, being Saturday. I will have the weekend to consider the matter. I want you to keep silence until I speak to you again. What is it, Cpl Kyle?'

Kyle leant forward in his anxiety, resting one hand on Jhamboo's desk. 'If I might just make a general point about the overall situation, sir. I would like to offer my personal sympathy for your own particular predicament. As I see it, the British invasion of Sumatra and Java is a rank example of imperialism. This being a predominantly Muslim country, and you, sir, being also of the Muslim persuasion, it must place you in a painful conflict'

Dropping his cigarette and clutching the edge of his desk until you waited for it to splinter, Jhamboo rose two inches off his chair. From his face, the lamb had fled; the butcher took over. The docile nose became a hawk's bill. Those lambent eyes blazed like overflowing cesspits. Spirits of rapine and slaughter, which caused the Indian sub-continent to sink knee-deep in blood every century, came galloping out of that trim, tensed figure.

'Cpl Kyle, you boned fathead, you may dismiss.'

'Sir, I only' But even Kyle's unctuous heart quailed at the spectacle before him. He clicked his heels and marched out with all the military precision of a pox doctors clerk. Johnny Mercer followed him. Jhamboo motioned me to stay behind. When the door slammed shut, we confronted each other.

Jhamboo came out from behind his desk and paced about a bit, still in a tremendous state.

'What kind of a bloody fornicating pacifistical bugger is this foolish corporal?' Jhamboo demanded, waving a fist above his head as he



paraded. 'How dare that turd-devouring cocksucker question me about my religion?'

To my astonishment, I found myself blushing. There was a faint insane hope that my deep tan would hide the colour, but my cheeks were bursting with heat. Never had I heard such language from Jhamboo or any other Indian Officer, before.

He was still on the march, smiting his skull with a clenched fist as he went. 'I tell you, sergeant, if I was a cursing man I would bloody jolly soon say what I thought of such crawling arsehole-creeping vaginaphobes. Jesus Christ Almighty excuse me what sort of a piss-poor ninny is that man? Where did he crawl out from? Which arse-crack? More to the point...' He steadied himself before me, still blazing away, so that I drew myself up to full attention, partly to avoid the rich aromas of vindaloo and De Reszke cigarettes on his breath. 'More to the point, how do such men come to serve in non-commissioned rank in a once-great army, answer me that if you will.'

'I understand his family comes from Tonbridge Wells, sir.'

Jhamboo smote his palm with his fist. 'That is not sufficient explanation. The British Empire is going to the matrimonial old hounds no backbone any more! I was at Sandhurst, let me tell you, Sgt Stubbs, and in my day any little conjugal toffee- apple-nosed socialist bastards like Kyle would have had their scrotums removed with a blunt instrument. I weep, I weep.' Indeed, real tears stood in his eyes.

'What has happened in your country, who can tell it? My private theory is that the death of George V caused the setting-in of the rot. He was a fine man, soldier, fox-hunter, a real monarch, married to a proud queen. Since then, a decadent excrement, Edward VIII, running away with that poxed-up American bitch, Mrs Simpson it clearly spelt the end of any stable system of fealty, and the loss of respect near and far.' Overcome by emotion, he steadied himself by clutching the desk.

'How can you capture now, I ask you how can you capture the loyalty of your Indian subjects if your king is intercouraging the orifice off some Yankee cow all the way about Europe? You may think inwardly that I am just one more picturesque Wog, Sergeant you may, you may but I have been on leave all round Europe, yes, all round it, even including the Black Forest, in Germany, and it is simply a despicable place, not so beautiful as Britain, and totally without respects for morals. I could tell you some hair-raising anecdotes about what happened to me in Europe...'



He fished out his cigarette case, thrusting fags between my lips and his own. He lit them with his gold lighter, his hand trembling.

'I speak as one who has uncontrollably good friends in Hampstead Heath, Sergeant. Well, well, that's all over now. Good days are over. I have no optimism, none, none. The British Empire is finish, and I suppose it is for the best.' He patted my arm clumsily. 'You cannot know what a man of sensibilities like me feels, Sergeant. Split apart, split apart absolutely, top to stern. My life finish, and my career. What will India be, alone, after all?... Well, bugger that, and please excuse my outbreak of cursing, but really that familiar lick-spittle little left-wing masturbationer of a corporal, to lecture me about my religion...'

'Sir, if I might suggest it, despite the regrettable antics of Edward VIII, we have on our hands a case of mutiny. Cpl Kyle has refused to carry out an order. He should be placed immediately under close arrest, pending further proceedings. Otherwise his sort of attitude will spread, sir.'

Retreating behind his desk, Jhamboo looked out of the window at the weary plane trees, smoking furiously as he did so. Then he turned back to me, giving no sign of having heard what I said.

'Sergeant, I have behaved disgracefully in front of you. Forgive me. Perhaps you are my enemy, I don't know, but that is not what I wish. You see, I admire the British regular soldier to the highest degree, the very highest... Well, there is a saying, "A rotten fish stinks from the head." Corruption spreads very quickly and the end of everything is in sight.' He appeared wretched, and bowed his head.

'Sah.'

'Stubbs, man, make an effort, will you, to treat me just as another man, not as a bloody black officer simply.'

'Kyle did that, sir, and it marked you a bit.'

He sat down and became very mild, going so far as to toy with a ruler.

'I must explain so you will understand. India is about to achieve independence. When independence comes, and the Union Jack is hauled down and burnt, it will mean war between Muslim and Hindu populations and much blood will be spilled. Nevertheless, in policy we shall be pacifistical, and who knows what will become of the excellent British-trained army? I am trained only to be a soldier. Without an army, I am nobody...' Suddenly, he brought a bottle of gin out of the cupboard in his desk, followed by two green-tinted tumblers. He filled



them to the brim and pushed one of them towards me.

'Drink it, drink it, and good health.' He waved his hand, dismissing ceremony. 'You see, I am a rotten Muslim also, to touch this alcohol...'

'Your good health, sir, and best wishes for the future, sir, whatever it brings.'

'Thank you, Stubbs, thank you!' His eyes went misty as we raised glasses to each other and drank.

'You see, what the future will bring is uncertain. The time is out of joint. But at least I stand a fighting chance. Very excellent phrase, that, "a fighting chance". I can possibly survive in the forthcoming Free India if I am retired with a perfect military record. Now, Stubbs, if I have a case of mutiny under my command, then the military record is not perfect by a big chalk. So it is important that this matter of "O" Section and this nasty corporal is kept quiet. You understand?'

'Perfectly, sir.' The gin took a bit of getting down.

'Excellent. You see how I would be obliged if you stepped outside this room and never mentioned it again. After all, you go back to Blighty next week, so why should you worry? But it is important to me that my perfect military record is not blotted in the few months left before everything breaks up.'

'I see how you feel, sir, but discipline will go to pot if the blokes find they can defy orders and get away with it.'

He drained his glass. 'Yes, yes, perfectly so. But between you and I, the GOC must have been pissed when he thought up the idea of the men planting potatoes. I don't think British troops should have to do such menial things.'

Evening was coming down. The sun bobbed along a line of distant palm trees on the far side of the disputed potato field; it had lost all power to wound, and mosquitoes were already a-wing. An Indian sweeper was sweeping the road, bent double with his little bundle of twigs. In the office behind me, a clerk was singing. His song floated through the open window.

We don't know what's coming tomorrow,
Maybe it's trouble and sorrow
But we travel along
Singing a song,
Side by side...



I took a couple of minutes off to light a fag and stroll about under the plane trees. The gin had made me feel squiffy.

'Vaginaphobe,' I said, wonderingly.

Poor old Jhamboo was in a bad way. He had almost broken down in front of me. He was going to return to what would be a new nation, and I could not muck up his chances, not when he had made a direct appeal to me. Sontrop was in as bad a position it really hit me when he referred to Sumatra as home; but home for him was going to be a stormy place for a long while, if he didn't get killed first.

The fag tasted good. I rolled down my sleeves as the sun ploughed behind the palms; dusk fell almost at once. After the day's abortive performance, better not to think of Margey's future: nobody knew what was happening in her home of Tsingtao. India, Sumatra, China from that point of view, England was preferable.

As for all my muckers, crying aloud to get back to Civvy Street, there I reckoned I showed more sense than they. I could not see anything wrong with Sumatra, apart from the fact that we were also in the army. After seven years in the army, three and a half of them abroad, home was an unknown quality... War had changed the whole bloody world.

'Cushy for some,' said a deep voice, and the clerk from the orderly room, a little stunted chap called Wallace, went by. He had been out from the Blight about five minutes. With his terrible low hairy brow, his glistening nostrils, his blubber tips and stooped gait, one shufti at him would have saved Charles Darwin ten years of intensive research. His greeting a shorthand way of saying 'Good evening, Sgt Stubbs, you bronzed veteran of the toughest campaign of war' was an envious comment on my prospective return home. Yet what could Britain offer that ape which he could not get more of here?

Ah, Margey...

If only every screw could have taken place on a broken altar among orchids before a great grinning prostrate idol in marble that would have been perfect.

I knew she felt something of the same thing about me as I did about her. She loved and wanted me because I was the wrong colour and had funny-shaped eyes and came from England where my father was a bank manager and Winston Churchill a famous old warlord. When we got together, two exotic miscegenies thrashed about in harmony.



As I ground my cigarette-end under my boot, Jackie Tertis came along, moving among the billets, whistling. I knew what he had been doing.

'Stubbs. You eating?'

'Good idea. I'm bloody starving. I've had nothing but a cheese sandwich all day.'

We walked along in step together. His face worked in a peculiar way which I tried not to notice.

Again I recalled Tertis as a young innocent private back in India, breaking out in a muck sweat at the thought of his first gobble-wallah. Now he had three stripes on his arm and belonged to PEA Force, a dodgy action column which worked in liaison with the piratical Dutchman, 'Turk' Eastermann. Tertis was a freckled man with wiry hair; he had supplemented his uniform with brown Yankee ankle-boots, a band of yellow chiffon round his bush-hat in place of a pugharee, and Dutch flashes on his shoulder all highly contra regulations, of course. At his waist dangled a big Gurkha kukri. He really fancied himself these days, did Tertis.

He slapped me on the shoulder and walked along with his hand still resting there. 'We've got a right bloke in clink today, a bugger called Luat, a captain in the TRI.' The TRI was the Indonesian Republican Army.

'I don't want to know, Jackie.'

Tertis cackled. 'Do you know what he was saying, in his bloody krab English? He was appealing to the Atlantic Charter that Churchill and Roosevelt invented back in '41 or some time. We told him that the Atlantic Charter had nothing to do with black bastards like him.'

He pointed out some blood, drying on the leg of his uniform. 'I was practising my golf on him. Very good shots with a mashie-niblick.' More cackling. 'And there was a cow and another bloke we half-drowned him in one of those Dutch bath-things. I mean, really... Wwrrrrr, he bobbed up with the water streaming off him all purple in the face, then down, you bastard, down, drown, drown!'

He went through the motions as he spoke, laughing and half-choking. Once Tertis had been known as Baby-face; since then, his little pudgy cheeks had grown heavy and foxy red.



'It's torture. It should be bloody fucking stopped.'

He gave me a sneering look. 'Well, just you fucking try to stop it, mate. They deserve it I'll give them fucking Merdeka... You'd lick the arses of these fucking murdering blacks. You're too bloody squeamish to live, you are, Stubbs, you and your bloody arms-deals.'

'I can remember when you had the decency to be squeamish too, Tertis.'

'Piss-off! Since then, I've fucking come of age. No soap behind my arse, mate. You'll never know. I swung that fucking golf club to good effect this afternoon, must have broken every stinking rib in that cunt Luat's black body. Plus a few kicks in the goolies for luck. Teach these bastards to shoot us up. Wrrrrrr...' The noise he made was a compound of derision and vomit, as if he could not bear his own secret feelings.

'You're sick, you bastard! I don't want to hear.' I got away from him and walked rapidly ahead towards my billet.

'You'd love it too, once you fucking well tried it!' he called out. That flat laugh again. 'Wrrrrrr... Drown 'em, rape 'em, hole in one!'

Thank God he wasn't in my billet. I slammed the door behind me and went upstairs. The terrible thing was that I knew the violence in my own nature. I believed in part as he boasted, that I might love it if I tried it.

It was almost getting dark. Up in my room, Ida Lupino's smile was just a blur. I left the light off so that the windows could remain open without too much wildlife bursting in. I stripped down bollock-naked. From my billet, I could see Tertis's torture house in the distance, or part of it at least, glimpsed between other houses. Indonesians were beaten up there regularly. No one said anything. A perverted part of me always wanted to watch. It wasn't every day you got the chance to see some poor naked sod bashed to death with golf clubs.

In his cups, Jackie Tertis loved to talk about it. Many of the sergeants claimed he was making it all up. That was their defence. I stomped into the shower and leaned against the slate wall. Cold water descended like nutmeg-graters upon my prickly heat.

When I got to the sergeants' mess for a bite to eat, there was Tertis, boozing and holding forth, his face dark. Charlie Meadows pitched into him, others put their oar in from time to time, but nothing stopped Tertis. He had a long story about a young Malayan girl and



two men who had been caught in an ambush the previous evening, one of them the Luat he had mentioned to me earlier. He was very excited and drinking heavily. I tried not to listen as I attacked my soup.

'We questioned the girl all morning,' he said. 'She was guilty all right confused in her answers. We stripped her off and tied her to the table with her legs open. Wwrrrrr ... Fought like a tiger, she did. We tore every strip of clothes off of her and then raped her, all four of us, and then we mashed her tits and head in with golf clubs. Wwrrrrr...' He coughed and laughed, striking at the air before him.

Johnny Mercer gave his high nervous laugh, then looked down at his plate.

'You're a criminal, Tertis, a thug,' said Ferguson, the Scots colour sergeant. 'The GOC ought to know what's going on at yon Eastermann's place. I willne drink in the same room wi' you.' He set down his glass angrily and got up.

Tertis rose too. 'Forget it, Jock. That's the sort of treatment these people expect don't forget they've been under Jap rule all these years.'

'Aye, well, we're not Japs, thank the living Christ, and your talk turns my stomach, treating the other sex so shameful.'

Tertis began to show flecks of spittle on his lips. 'You bloody hypocrite, Jock! Wasn't it you telling us how you'd had a kneetrembler with some bloody Malayan cow in Singapore, up against the fucking walls of the cathedral? Where's the fucking difference?'

'All the fucking difference,' said Ferguson. He turned to Dickie Payne, who as usual sat there saying nothing, sipping on a beer. 'RSM, how come you tolerate such filth in our mess?'

Dickie made a slurred but expansive gesture. 'Jackie could be right at that. Murdering buggers.'

'Ach, that's no' the issue,' said Jock. He marched out of the mess, slamming the door behind him.

'You've got to civilise them somehow,' said Wally Scubber. It was his sole contribution to the discussion.

In the silence that followed, Charlie Meadows motioned to Tertis. 'Let's have no more of this kind of talk. Sit down and keep your trap shut. You talk as if you'd gone over the top.'



'Don't bloody lecture me,' Tertis said. He lurched to the bar, sticking his tumbler out to the mess orderly. While it was being filled with Indian Scotch, he said over his shoulder, 'You're all a lot of old women, that's what. Face facts. Like a pack of fishwives hiding behind your mothers' aprons waiting for Saturday, believe me. Up your pipe! Them two blokes were in possession of Jap machine-pistols, Luat a captain in the TRI. That's not bullshit, you know. Well, is it, it's not bullshit.'

He wandered back towards the table, where we all sat in embarrassed silence.

'The RSM's right, they're murdering bastards. Kill you. They were going to chop us, shoot us. They chop you up with knives, malum, that's what the Malays do, chop you up. What were we supposed to do? Catch 'em, let 'em go, like it was some fucking kid game? Butterscotch, marbles?'

He paused to stare at us. Dickie muttered, 'They do chop you up. Run amok, everything.'

The remark triggered Tertis off again.

'You chicken bastards, look at your fucking faces! "Report me to the GOC," he said. You think the old general doesn't know about PEA Force, doesn't know, doesn't laugh? He'd have liked to stuff her himself. Wwrrrrr... "Here's a medal for you, Jackie Tertis, boy, Sgt W/s, medal for gallantry, help yourself, kidder, VC, DSO, DSC, DSM, DDT, you name it, thanks of a grateful nation, upholding the old traditions of the regiment, Ypres, Somme, Dunkirk, Kohima, Mandalay, all the shagging rest."

'Rape 'em all, kill the fucking lot. Why, even my bastarding father...' He turned suddenly on Mercer, who was eating silently. **'You laugh okay, you think it's funny? Stuck here, us or them? We're sitting on a powder-keg, hundreds of thugs like Luat, all Jap weapons, you think that's funny you're round the twist, not me.'**

Looking down at his plate, Johnny said, 'The powder-keg will be exploded by your sort of mentality.'

'Ah, that intellectual crap, Mr Schoolmaster, another one. Helping primitive races, I know, don't tell me! You forget there's murder, fucking murder, going on in Sourabaya and Batavia right now. Right, our turn next, our turn for the high jump women trained to kill and all, stab in the back. You, if you'd seen her, Stubby you're always



poking some bloody Chink bitch or other you'd seen her stripped, legs open wide, wvrrrr, all helpless, Christ, don't tell me, one more bloody savage bint, you'd have fucking jammed it all the shitholing way up same as us. Well, come on now yeah? Split the bitch in two. Admit it.'

I stared at the so-called beef on the plate before me. 'Shit in it, for crying out loud, will you? You're as sick as a dog. I can't listen to any more or I'll throw up.'

He shook a fist at me as I pushed my chair back. 'Fine mates you are! Throw up, then, go on, you fucking pansy, faint, fall over, spew, piss on your frock'

I left him to it. Mercer barged out of the mess with me. We charged into the open air so fast that we nearly fell over the cesspit, now covered with loose planks.

'He should be sent home. He needs a trick cyclist.'

'Remember him in Kanchapur, back in India?' I said. 'He was the baby of the platoon.'

'Fear of death versus death-wish, pulling him apart. The way he drives around on that bike of his... The Indonesians will pick him off one day. One sniper, that's all it needs. He drove out to Belawan on Wednesday, all on his Jack Jones, just for the hell of it. Bloody madman... Coming down the RAPWI? I need a drink and we ought to have a bit of a talk.'

'Okay. I'd as soon miss the piss-up if Tertis is going to be there. Besides, I need some khana, I'm starving. I've been trying to get in touch with Boyer all day. Lets walk. We'll cool off.'

'Let's do that. I'll hitch a lift back.'

'Just let me grab a couple of things I have for Margey.'

He was standing smoking a cigar by the gate, keeping the mosquitoes off, when I returned. He said immediately, as if it was a sentence he had been rehearsing, 'I think we should let the mutiny issue drop if Jhamboo wants it that way.'

'Why do you say that? Jhamboo's only a bloody Wog.'

He laughed; it was his usual meaningless noise. 'Work it out for yourself, Horry. To use Tertis's phrase, we're sitting on a powder-keg here. If the TRI found out what Tertis and that bloody mob was up to,



they would attack here with the mess as Target No. 1. We're way under strength, blokes leaving, no reinforcements coming out from ALFSEA or the Blight. If we raise a stink about mutiny, all of "O" Section would have to be shipped to Changi for trial and imprisonment, leaving us even more vulnerable.'

As I thought that over, I lit one of my cigars.

'You realise that that sort of argument leads to the collapse of the army and the discipline on which it's built. It was fucking mutiny, aided and abetted by Corporal Steve Bloody Kyle.'

Johnny looked askance at me.

'You're a vindictive bastard at times, mate. What do you care about army discipline? You just have it in for Steve Kyle. He's not a bad bloke. It wasn't mutiny. The lads were all stoned on cheap carioca last night they just felt unable to get up.'

'Okay, let's walk...'

Although I saw there was sense in what he said, I would not tell him what Jhamboo had told me; and a sort of delicacy in Johnny made him refrain from asking.

With my package for Margey under my arm, we strolled past the MP post and along the Serdenweg. Bats were wheeling above the lamp-post, making Stuka raids on the insect population in orbit there.

It was a wonderful evening. Blossoming trees overhung the road. Soon this evening and the others like it would be mere ghosts. We walked in silence until Johnny said, 'This Dutch pusher I'm going out with was telling me that the local branch of the TRI has us all marked all the British officers and NCOs, a dossier on each of us. Frightening thought, isn't it?'

'Better wind up in a dossier than on a slab.'

More silence. But I had to say it some time.

'Johnny, you know I really am sweet on Margey. That's why I need to speak to Boyer. Would you think I was fucking puggle if I went ahead and married her?'

At length, he said, 'There's a book in our billet you ought to read, by Joseph Conrad. About a white man marrying a native girl.'



'I read it. But Margey's not a savage, she's a Chinese.'

'Horry, old pal, don't do it, don't think about it. Just have a good time while you can. You'd rot, stuck in a place like this.'

'I meant take her back to the Blight.'

He cast a glance at me.

'Her face wouldn't fit, would it? What would your Ma do if you turned up at home with a yellow girl on your arm? I know what mine would do. What would the kids be like?'

'Well, they'd be bloody smashing. You know how cute Chinese kids are. Besides, Margey isn't yellow. She's paler than I am.'

He sighed. 'The longer you're out here, the whiter they get...'

'You think she's just a whore, don't you?'

'Let's put it this way, Horry, old mate. In the long run, it's just as well you didn't manage to locate Boyer.'

We got to town, and strolled into the restaurant on the corner of Maggalaan and Bootha Street. The big fat smiling Chinese who ran the place appeared, addressing me as Missa Stubbs. We ordered beers and five eggs and chips each. I planned to take Margey out to eat later, but I was hungry now.

A trader came in from the street and sold us some black market Yankee Chesterfields. We lit up and looked round at the talent. It was an all-male, all-native clientele, except for three women sitting at a table in an area to the back of the shop which was screened off. One of the women I recognised as Margey's old enemy, Katie Chae.

We were clearing our plates when I found Miss Chae standing beside me.

Miss Chae certainly was dishy. She wore the traditional dress of Chinese women, tunic and trousers. ('How are you expected to keep your bleeding hands off them when they goes around in pyjamas all day?' as my old pal Bamber asked.) They were of a light blue and white striped material. Where Margey was plump, Miss Chae was slender, though the dress nicely revealed the bulge of bum and breasts.

Her face held those thrilling oriental planes which recall works of art.



It had nothing of Margey's kittenish look. Miss Chae's face was long and elegant, with a look about it this was my impression which could be interpreted by a Westerner as either serenely calm and benign or cruel to a marked degree. It was a dark face, with eyes very large and dark. The lips of Miss Chae were finely chiselled, full, and expressive, though it would be necessary to know the lady better to find out what it was they actually expressed.

She said to me, familiarly, 'Have you got a Briddish cigarette for an ol' fren', Horry?' Although her powers of expression were good, her accent was more corrupt than Margey's, as if she had learnt all her English off a couple of drunken Dutch longshoremen a none too remote possibility.

I gave her a Chesterfield and struck a match for her. Johnny and I exchanged winks as she lit up, bending over my hand to steady the light, breathing vapour trails through her delicate nostrils. She also managed to rub a tit against my arm.

'May I siddown wit' you, Horry? Won't you innerduce me your fren'?'

'Oh, Johnny, this is Miss Katie Chae, she's a friend, and Miss Chae, this is Johnny Mercer, he's a friend of mine.' Despite the 'friend' business, we had only spoken once because of Margey's jealousy but in Medan one saw people around and about.

They exchanged greetings. I could tell Johnny was interested.

'You are from Lonnon, Johnny?' Miss Chae asked him, leaning forward.

'I'm a Cockney but my home's in Swindon. That's in Wiltshire.'

'Too bad.' She looked at him under her dark lashes and then leaned back in her chair, blowing out smoke like the very picture of relaxation. Turning towards me and pointing the cigarette, she said, as if hardly asking a question at all, 'Where's Rosey toni'?'

'You mean Margey?'

Miss Chae sipped at her cigarette. 'Some time she Rosey, some time she Margey. Diff'ent trade mark, same goods.'

She flashed beautiful teeth at me, as if unaware of the havoc her remark caused.

Johnny scraped his chair back and stood up, calling for the bill. 'I



better get on up the RAPWI they've got a dance on tonight and all the birds will be booked if I don't hurry. Why don't you come too?'

I was still not looking at Miss Chae. 'See you tomorrow, Johnny.'

'You're a big boy now. Just remember the old powder-keg. Night, Miss Chae.' He tipped the boss of the caf and went out into the street.

My companion looked after him with disdain. 'Your fren' he like Orang Blanda girl, yes?'

'Yes.'

'Yes, I t'ink. He not wait buy Miss Chae drink. Orang Blanda girl legs very fat. India girls legs very thin. Only China and Malay girl legs very pretty, yes? You buy me drink, Horry?'

'I must go. Some other evening. I'd love to.' Saying no played hell with the respiratory system. The effect of having that countenance, with its lustrous eyes, turned upon you, was compelling.

Her conversation was a series of small raids on one's privacy. 'You been Sumatra long time, Horry. When I speak Malay, apa mengerti?'

'I know that Orang Blanda means the Dutch.'

'All people hate Orang Blanda, no want come back. Orang Ingris diff'ent, Ingris men nice, I like. When I say "saya kaseh angkau", can you un'erstan' what I say?'

What she was saying was, 'I love you'; Margey had taught me that. Feeling my cheeks redden, I rose from my chair, smiling down at her. 'You're telling me that it's time I went.'

As I put some money down on the table and left, she called, 'See you, big boy.' The quote to end all quotes from all the Hollywood flicks of the thirties.

As I strolled along to Margey's place, other terrible phrases of Miss Chae's came back. 'Some time she Rosey, some time she Margey. Diff'ent trade mark, same goods.' Misery.

The soldiers from Amboina were sitting on the doorsteps and window sills of their barracks, singing to their girl-friends songs of Pacific beaches, moonlit nights, love for ever, fornications past, fornications to come, and fornications in progress, caressing the taut sinews of their guitars as they did so. Among all the delectable smells of



hitherto unknown cuisines lay the insidious gong of drains, but it meant only that some gourmet family had just opened a durian, that delicious fruit whose stink can anaesthetise an entire street when the wind is right.

Ah, nights of Medan. At least I had sense enough to relish your mixed pleasures at the time...

5

Margey's humble home was crowded. Several old men and women, their faces brown and wrinkled like apples stored too long, moved silently about the room. The men were dressed in blue suits, the women in black. One by one, they went behind the old screen to pay their respects to Auntie. From Auntie came only an occasional moan; the curative flying lizard had not done its stuff.

In order to accommodate the visitors, the table had been pushed to one side, under the stairs. There sat Fat in his usual posture, a cigarette balanced in his mouth. With him were two men, one of the brown unidentifiable ones, and the scholarly Tiger Balm, spectacles gleaming. He and Fat nodded politely to me. Of Margey there was no sign.

According to my watches, it was about nine o'clock, give or take twenty minutes. I set down on the table the presents I had brought for Margey: a jar of Chivers' marmalade, a tin of Portuguese sardines, two bars of Palmolive, a tub of Indian-made Andrews' Liver Salts, and some envelopes.

As Fat seized upon these items and examined them with police-force thoroughness, Tiger Balm said affably, 'And are the British still preparing for withdrawal?'

'That's up to Soekarno to decide.'

My sarcasm was lost on him. He merely asked, taking another whiff of his cigarette. 'Is that the official British attitude? Now you allow people to have what they want. We read in the papers that London lets Marshal Tito take over Yugoslavia. Poor King Peter, who was your wartime ally, is left out in the cold.'

That this intellectual Chinaman should know so much about things that were going on in Europe... It was none of his business.

'I came to talk to Rosey. To Margey. Where is she?'



'Old Auntie sick, tida bagoose,' said Fat. 'Margey look see Auntie.'

But in a moment Margey appeared, smiling, and took my hand. I put an arm round her, squeezing her waist.

'Second house of the cinema in half an hour,' I said. 'They All Kissed the Bride. Joan Crawford. Had you forgotten?'

She laughed in genuine amusement. 'I forget cinema with you, Horry? Course Margey no forget. First I nurse poor old Auntie a little, then we go. After that, we eat and have fun, yes?' She smiled her lovely smile. 'And you bring me more present, you naughty boy. Now what, this time?' Fat yielded up the shopping item by item, retrieving each after she had looked at it.

Her slender arms went round my neck. 'Why you so kind to me, Horry? Poor Margey no good for you. You very good for Margey.'

'Not a foreign devil rapist soldier any' longer, eh? You're gorgeous, Margey get a bloody move-on, will you, or we'll miss the best seats.'

'Maybe I give some Andrews' Liver Salt to poor old Auntie. She very ill. Then we go upstairs for very quick time before pictures, okay? You like it? My God, Horry, I will absolutely drag your trousers down and I will make you come your orgasm in fastest rate ever, so be warn!'

After the film, the hordes poured out along the safely lighted thoroughfares, but Margey led me down various unlit and unsavoury alleyways to an area of the town which had only recently been declared safe, following the eradication of a nest of extremists. This was the busiest time of day, with trade brisk and amazing smells of cooking fighting with music in the air.

Not a hint of trouble about though it needed only one pistol shot for the streets to clear instantly. I had seen it happen.

Margey trotted along happily at my side. 'This restaurant nice pleasant prace. Once was a consulate building, you know. Now British have made a deal with Soekarno, you not get shot at any more times.'

I agreed that this was a good thing.

'When British troops go away, then begins more shooting, and much trouble for all China people. Right now, Indonesians have your people to worry about. When you gone, then they worry about our people, I think.'



'Something's worrying me. Do you ever call yourself Rosey?'

We walked several paces before she said in a tiny voice, 'Why you ask such thing?'

'Answer the question.'

'I Margey, okay. That my name ever since I go university. English names very smart and fashionable. Who this Rosey? What you mean to say? I no like all so many questions.' I listened to her working herself up and would not reply.

The restaurant was a two-storey concrete structure, built on stilts overlooking the river. Its name was the Bunga Rampaian. Its faade was scarred by machine-gun fire. As we entered, the sight of customers and the prospect of a meal made Margey chirpy again.

She knew the boss. With wide smiles, we were shown to a table. Fragrant odours filled the air. It would be strange when first the British then the Dutch withdrew; but surely the prophets of doom would be wrong and the political take-over prove peaceful, here if not in Java. Probably I could get a bank job; the Indonesian Republic would need banks. If only I could get in touch with bloody Boyer...

While I fantasised, Margey conferred with the waiter.

'They have very tasty good sea fish served with ginger, also sweet green bean soup. How you like that, darling?'

'Sounds great. Bring it on.' As we lit cigarettes and smiled at each other, a five-piece band began to assemble on a tiny platform. They started up with 'Terang Boelan' as our fish arrived. Customers applauded the tune with rapture.

With my knowledge of banking, I could rise to manager... Ah, at the time, at the time, it appeared that the future was simple if only I made up my mind. I did not grasp the fact that I was up against the futility of human relationships.

International affairs met with little understanding in those days. To the crowds who danced in London and other great cities on VE Day, celebrating the death of fascism, Evil appeared vanquished. They lit their bonfires and exchanged their kisses under the impression that the world's reserves of hatred were exhausted. In the East, matters appeared in truer perspective.

VE Day itself was the occasion for a ten-minute break for a smoke



while we got on with the task of dislodging every Japanese installed in thousands of islands and territories which stretched from Tokyo to the very gates of India. After the Japanese surrender, their will to fight smashed by the A-bomb, insurrections sprang up on every side in the territories they had freed from white rule.

No country went back into the box from which the Nipponese tide had spilled it. New breeds of angry men arose, running to new barricades waving new banners. Many leaders like Soekarno rode to power on the backs of Nippon. In the East, the one peace ignited a dozen wars.

Even in Medan, time-honoured fuses of economic interest, of race, of faith, of colour, were spluttering away. We kept our weapons clean, dry, and slightly oiled, and listened to 'Terang Boelan'.

While we wolfed down the fish, Margey extracted from me the fact that I had spoken to Katie Chae. Only when I swore that she was the ugliest Chinese girl I had ever seen did Margey relax.

'Miss Chae is no pure China girl,' she said. 'That is why she so ugly like you say, and so dark skin. I hear her father is a very bad man who ran away to Penang after a bank robbery. He is half Mongolian man.'

'What's the other half?'

'I tell you, Horry, her father one half Chinese, one half Tibet, one half Mongolian. Maybe another half Negro, I don't know.' She burst out laughing, covering her mouth politely.

'That makes two of her!'

'Miss Chae girl of many values. I not bore you with description of her quarters.' She roared with laughter again, sobering to say, 'She come from Tibet not so nice place as Tsingtao. Where you get this Rosey nonsense? One day, how I wish to take you see Tsingtao and the Shantung Peninsula. The people are all good and the landscape so pretty...' She sighed. 'Now for the present I must go home and nurse poor Auntie a little more.'

I do not remember asking what was the matter with Auntie. She was old, and old people had a habit of falling ill.

'Don't go yet, Margey. Your place is full of people who can look after Auntie.'

She laughed contemptuously, and waved her fingers. 'They no capable. They poor fish, except Daisy, and Daisy work too much hard.'



Auntie need me.' She rose, giving me a smile. I saw the enduring woman I admired, who went about her daily business the shopping, the cleaning, the tending however thoroughly the world fell apart round her.

As we left the restaurant, a knot of foreigners Dutch were pushing their way forward, talking in loud voices.

'Orang Blanda!' said Margey, in low-voiced contempt. As she spoke, I spotted Johnny Mercer in the group. A tall blonde girl, real officer-fodder, had her arm entwined with his. He did not see me, I made no sign, allowing Margey to lead me through the dark alleys.

I gave her a good-night kiss at her door and left her to do her stuff with Auntie. An hour or so before curfew. I took a stroll up the Kesawan, where shops were still open.

Pleasant daydreams filled my mind. I saw the British leaving; the Dutch leaving, the Indonesians allowed to get on with their own business, building the place up again, trading with Singapore and the rest of the world. Why not? The island had coal, oil, minerals, endless timber; anything grew in the marvellous climate. It could become the richest country on earth. This logical development has yet to take place.

A chill breeze sprang up. Rain was on the way again, moving in across the Indian Ocean. I went into the nearest shop and chatted with the shop-owner, while Malayan music twangled from an ancient radio. The old man apologised for the poverty of his stock. Tomorrow, the Van Heutsz would dock in Belawan harbour. It would unload goods for his shop, including Swiss music boxes in cigarette cases, which troops would like. Van Heutsz was very fine Dutch ship. In pre-war days he had sailed as far as Celebes on that ship. It was tranquil to be on the sea and watch day break over the waters.

The rain dried. I returned to the street, smoking a big cigar. Everyone was emerging from shelter. I stood on the worn pavement, watching a road-sweeper who covered the hole where his nose had been with a leaf secured in place by a matchstick pushed into the matter beneath. It was hard to decide whether his trouble was syphilis or leprosy.

Then I saw Captain Boyer farther down the Street.

He had a Dutch woman in tow. Impeding each other in so doing, they were climbing into the back seat of a rusty old car. They had emerged from a wine shop, in token of which the officer was clutching a bottle.



I paused a yard or so away and called Boyer's name. He did not look round. He and the woman had stuck in the door of the vehicle. All I could see of him was a leg, a backside, and an arm holding the bottle frenziedly by the neck, like a cripple trying to strangle a cat. Then the rest of him backed out, the woman fell inside, screaming resignedly, and he began to swear at her. Was it Boyer?

I tapped him on the back as he prepared for another assault on the car. His reaction time was slow. He began to look round only as he heaved himself into the back seat, so that he caught the peak of his hat and knocked it flying into the dark interior. Cuddling the bottle, he glared out at me.

'Who are you? Where's my drink? Give me my cap back.'

The light was so bad that I still could not see his face properly.

'Sar'nt Stubbs, sir, 2nd Mendips.'

His face protruded slowly out of the door, rather like paste oozing from a tube. The woman beat feebly on his back, under the impression that this would pull him back into the vehicle. His face was bevelled so as to climax in a nobly aquiline nose; all adjacent features were subordinate to his nose, with the possible exception of his eyebrows, which emphasised it as acanthus leaves emphasise the height of a Corinthian column. The eyebrow motif was echoed in his small black moustache, which hung sketchily above his lips. 'Stubbs?' these lips muttered, blankly.

'Sah.' I grinned. It was Captain Maurice Boyer, 2nd Royal Mendips.

'So it blithering well is...'

Like the passing of a rainstorm out to the Straits of Malacca, blankness faded from his face, replaced by a sort of idiot joy. He had recognised me. He was insanely glad. It might have been his old mother 1standing there. Laboriously, he heaved himself out of the car on to the pavement. Once on his feet, he slapped my back in the area where prickly heat was at its most gregarious, and tried to force me into the black cavern of the car, where unknown and carnivorous womanhood awaited me. I hung back, breathing cigar smoke into his face. He coughed, and breathed booze into mine.

Coughing in my turn, I said, 'Can I speak to you, sir? Personal and urgent.'

'Course you can speak to me, Stubbs. Good to see you, man, always



liked you. Burma days. Kohima, the DC's tennis court what a nightmare! Climb into this chariot with me and my light o' love, come and have a drinkies with us. In you go don't know anyone else in all flaming Medan.'

He encouraged me forward. As I bent to climb in, the woman was screaming from the back seat, in a Dutch accent, 'There's no rewm for any man more in this fewking automobile!'

'Move over, you difficult bitch,' snarled Boyer, plunging in and trampling his cap underfoot. He pulled me after him; I followed just behind the bottle.

As I gulped the foetid air inside the car, I could distinguish sweat, cheap perfume, sick, and another aroma which I disliked. Boyer fell across me and slammed the door shut. The unseen woman fell across him, so that I got frowsy blonde locks in my face. They both screamed with what could have been laughter and the driver started the car. I began to laugh too I'd dropped my cigar.

Boyer seized the woman with professional ease not a difficult feat, considering that she was taking no evasive action and began to talk to her and me at the same time.

'Men's welfare, my dear, don't grumble. Drinkies ahoy! Good old Signaller Stubbs, now Sergeant well-deserved, one of the best lads in the regiment. Both under fire together. Fire! Fire!'

'Not fire, only smewk,' she said, fanning at the nauseating clouds which were drifting about as we gathered speed. I had ignited the floor mat. I was fumbling at their feet for the cigar butt, pretending to be drunk in case Boyer suspected me of feeling the woman's legs.

'Dear God, the privations! Never forget it. Drive on, driver, damn you, faster, faster. Drinkies ahoy! Need a pee.' Cough, cough, cough. 'What're you doing here, anyway, Stubbs? What's the name of that restaurant, my dear? Christ, I need a pee step on it, driver, damn you!'

We soon found ourselves at the Bunga Rampaian, where I had eaten with Margey scarcely an hour earlier. We tumbled out of the car amid clouds of billowing smoke. The upholstery was inarguably on fire, though it had not enough strength, given the humidity of the night, to burst into flame. Boyer uttered the cry of one bringing forth young and relieved himself against the concrete stilts of the building. Like his cap, his bottle of drink lay forgotten in the car.

Staggering up the restaurant steps behind Boyer, I found myself next



to his Dutch light o' love. Her name was Raddle, or so I received it from Boyer. She was fat yet withered, two undesirable attributes infrequently found together. Her hair was blonde, and curled wherever possible. Her ample trunk was encased in a dress of navy blue which shone like the seat of old trousers. The looks she gave me were either of animosity or amorousness; both possibilities scared me. Three Margeys could have found refuge in her blue dress.

Inside the restaurant, the five-piece band was in full charge. None of your native muck at this time of night. Gone was 'Terang Boelan'; instead, we had genuine airs from European operettas:

All the world's in love with love,
And I love you...

The music appeared to upset Boyer, who twirled about a bit in the entrance, knocking over some flowers. Raddle skipped forward and grabbed his arm, saying, 'Attempt not to lewk so fewking drunk, you twirp.' Her English was very fluent.

Up came the manager who knew Margey. He did not recognise me. Waving his hands, he announced that no more food could be served because of the imminence of curfew. It was the fastest bit of character-reading I had seen in a while.

'Bring me a bottle of whisky, then,' said Boyer immediately. 'Or I'll have your restaurant closed down for good.'

'Sairtainly, sair, and maybe I bring you some nice kebabs, sair, for you and the lady and gentleman.'

Having shown himself so responsive to threats, the manager led us to a table by a window overlooking the river. Boyer waved expansively, threading his way between tables and leaving Raddle to take her chance being corpulent, she had to make many a detour among the diners. 'Grab yourself a seat, Stubbs. Drinkies ahoy!'

'Sir, I'd be glad to have a word with you, if you can spare me just a moment. I didn't ought to sit down at the table with you, sir.'

He hammered on the table with his fist. 'Damn it, man, take a seat, I said haven't seen you for months, what's the matter with you?'

I stood at attention to remind him of his position in society.

'Regulations, sir, NCO and officer, sir. No familiarity. No offence, sir.'



He made such a violent gesture of contempt that he swept a sauce pot into Raddle's lap just as she was sitting down. Unable to find lodgement on that convex surface, it fell to the floor and rolled under an adjacent table. 'To the devil with regulations, Stubbs, I'm giving you an order. Sit yourself down.'

Still I hesitated to be truthful, there was a gob of sauce on the vacant chair but the woman, who was fairly well oiled herself, said in a high voice, 'Sergeant, unless you are a complete fewl, will you sit in that fewking chair and keep this drunken horse's arse in quietness.'

I sat.

A waiter presented himself, carrying a bottle of whisky, three glasses, a small flower in a small vase, and a plate of steaming kebabs with chunks of pineapple and mangusteen nestling between chunks of skewered meat, covered in a hot sauce. Uttering shrieks of various magnitudes, we forgot our similarities and tucked in.

From where I sat, I could observe Johnny Mercer, his bird, and the rest of the Dutch contingent gathered round a corner table; Mercer was signalling frantically at me through a haze of tobacco smoke. One by one, the rest of his party joined in the gesticulation, pointing, shaking heads, and behaving so wildly that I began to suspect they had detected a bomb under my seat. I looked. There wasn't. They shook their heads and renewed their pointing. I shook my head in return, gestured questioningly at myself. Nodding from them. Blank looks from me. I turned to see Boyer staring nonplussed at my performance.

'Are you pissed, old chap?' he enquired, pointing his kebab accusingly.

'Sir, excuse me.' I got up and forced my way over to Mercer's table, ignoring the protests of other diners on the way. His rabble gave a cheer as I approached. Just to look at them made you feel slightly drunk. Six empty wine bottles stood or leaned on the table.

'What are you on about, you nutter?'

Johnny leaned heavily on the shoulders of the girl next to him, forcing her breasts down into a bowl of prawns, and waved four flabby fingers at me. 'Here, Stubbsy, 'mazing coincidence... You were looking all over for him, weren't you ? Boyer, you fool, it's Boyer, Boyer! Sitting at your table!'

'Jesus...' I looked down at him in pity. 'Pissed again, Mercer. I came in



here with him, didn't I?' I tottered back to Boyer's table and took a steadying draught of whisky. An involuntary convulsion seized my digestive tract. Grasping the bottle and my throat, I stared at the blurred print on the label. **BLACK TARTAN WOMBAT WISKEY Made in Scotland, Bottled by P. V. Ramakrishnan Bottling Mart, Kuala Lumpur.**

'Good stuff,' said Boyer. 'Better than that piss we had in the car. Drink up, cheers, selamat datang!'

'I thought you were in Padang, sir,' I said, shuddering at the dire things happening inside me as the whiskey deployed its forces.

Raddle had finished painting her lips and studying the effect in a small mirror. Now she decided to take some part in the conversation.

'We flew from Padang via the RAF this morning, Stewbs.'

'Did you really, Raddle?'

'Maurice kindly accompanied me since I was scared to flew. I sail for the Netherlands via RAPWI on the ship Van Heutsz tomorrow. Good-bye to Sumatra after four ghastly years. Tonight we celebrate, Stewbs! Medan's a step nearer civilisation! Cheers! To the Van Heutsz!' She raised her glass high before drinking.

The Van Heutsz was a four-and-a-half-thousand-too symbol of hope to any non-military personnel wishing to escape from Sumatra. Just to be allowed aboard that ancient vessel, to become one of its crowded deck passengers, was to savour the redemptive quality of a new life. Raddle's eyes shone at the prospect.

'Golly, she's lovely, Stubbs, isn't she?' said Boyer, looking from one to the other of us as if trying to decide which was which. 'Be honest, you can be honest. Isn't she lovely? Poignant, too. A fine woman, Dutch as they come. Maastrich born.' He shook his head. 'I want to marry her but she's married already. She was raped by the Japs, of course.' He laughed and belted into the Black Tartan Wombat. 'That's life.'

'Talking of marriage, sir, I wanted to ask you something personally'

Raddle screamed. 'This whisky's mewk! Oooh, Stewbs, that fewking aeroplane from Padang, my gosh! What bumping we had. I was so terribly sick, you know.' She gestured to make the scene more vivid to me, clutching her throat to illustrate. 'Sick over my seat, sick over the flower, sick over my frock, sick over my handbag, sick over Maurice terrible!'



'You were a bit icky, darling,' Boyer said gallantly. ' "Per ardua ad nauseam" .' He laughed and sweated a bit more, splashing more Black Tartan Wombat into our glasses.

'There's a certain Chinese girl, sir'

'I can't wait to get on the Van Heutz tomorrow, it'll be the end of four years bad lewk for me.'

'Say you'll miss me, darling, say you'll miss your Maurice!'

She started screaming in a confidential manner. 'I just want to get back to the Netherlands, to my fewking home in Harlingen. It's been snewing hard there this winter. Snew! Snew! Holy Virgin, snew and home cewking! Fresh Tampax!'

As this conversation developed, the restaurant was closing.

The last of the diners, all fairly tight, were being bundled towards the door. Johnny and his bird went out with the tide. The band offered a final selection from The Merry Widow, during which Boyer sang with ragged vehemence, 'Though you sweat, Though you shave, They forget what you gave' and crept off home to their terrible bamboo beds. Eventually, we also were bundled off the premises with Raddle practically in mid-scream, hymning her homeland.

Immediately we were outside, all restaurant lights were switched off: A wall of dark descended. Cries of protest sounded all round as the last of the revellers floundered about in search of vehicles.

Looking at the situation in cold blood, our vehicle was simple to detect, since a cloud of unpleasant smoke drifted from it; we had but to follow our noses to be home and dry. Unfortunately, an inner compulsion made us move with undersea sloth, bumping into palm trees as we went. Black Tartan Wombat is, in one respect at least, superior to any other wiskeys made in Scotland: it can ferret through the stomach lining, up the jugular vein, and into the cerebral hemispheres like a fit of greased lightning destroying anything it meets.

A suspicion came to me through the murky liquid that Boyer, having survived his aerial ordeal by vomit, was so far sunk in love of the fair Raddle that he would probably smuggle himself aboard the Van Heutz with her on the morrow. It was essential he give me permission to marry Margey before he disappeared. As this thought percolated, I became very crafty, winking and nodding to myself in



the dark.

Bumping into him accidentally-on-purpose, I grabbed Boyer's tunic and would not let go. He in turn seized a nearby chunk of Raddle's anatomy and she led us to the car. The driver materialised. He shone a torch. He was Japanese. He wore the uniform of a Jap officer from which the insignia of rank had been removed, although he retained his revolver. This struck me as immensely ironic. I began to laugh uproariously. The Jap pushed me into the back seat, heaving Raddle and Boyer after me in quick succession. It was fumey in the car; the back seat consisted of springs and hot patches. I choked and laughed.

Mistaking chuckling for cadging noises, Boyer passed me the whiskey bottle, saying, 'You aren't going to miss your poor old Maurice, you cow. 'Strue, every word of it, "Though you sweat, though you shave ..." ' He began to sing into my ear, not wisely, but too well.

'Sir, sir, I want to talk privately to you about a Chinese girl,' I said, as we drove through the narrow streets. Boyer took no notice.

'Don't speak to him, Stewbs, he's drunken. Jewst give me a cuddle.'

In the confined space, it was rather easier to cuddle Raddle than not. I put my arm as far round her waist as it would go, which was somewhat less than half-way. She was fun, I thought, and really not bad-looking. Her hair was pretty. And curly. She was very animated. Her accent was attractive. As she moved my hand to her breast, Boyer cut off the supply of Lehar to announce, 'I could tell you something about Chinese girls, Stubbs, believe me. They've got no blithering passion, no passion at all.'

'You think so, sir?'

'No blithering passion. Utterly submissive, brought up since birth to be utterly submissive. It's an akkis an accident of history. The sayings of Confucius analects, I believe they are really. Analects, Stubbs.'

'Sir.'

'Why, in China proper, where the feet of the women are still bound'

'Oh, shewt up about the blewdy Orientals, can't you, Maurice, mmm, I like it; more... What do you know about it really? Oh, yes, more of that. Harder. I've had my teeth full of Orientals. Oh, ooh, you brewt, ah...'

'Darling, what I'm saying I'm only saying the women have no passion,



no response. Christ, this car's abnormally smoky... They just lie there, flat as a pancake, no interest, no initiative. Analects. Not like you, darling. Where are we?'

'Medan, sir.'

'I know we're in bloody Medan...'

The world beyond the car was a world away. I was vaguely conscious of darkness, trees, a glimpse of sky, and lanterns burning in huts of kampongs. Raddle pressed against me on one side, Boyer on the other, and we sipped at the Black Tartan Wombat in turns as my free hand slid up her skirt. Boyer and I began to sing unpremeditatedly as one.

I love a lassie,
A bonny black Madrasi,
She's as black as the fucking ace of spades...

We collapsed into giggles. Silence fell. I was there. Her lips clamped themselves to mine. We sped on through the thick night as if the driver intended taking us back to Tokyo and was not stopping till he hit the Ginza. My hand was trapped deep in Raddle's oleaginous organ, which felt endless. Boyer dropped into a slumber on my shoulder. Existence struck me as extremely comical, if smoke-filled.

'Something tells me I can't stop feeling your vagina,' I murmured, indistinctly.

Raddle removed her tongue from my mouth in order to remark, 'Maurice, I think I'm going to be sick again...'

Pulling my hand away with a mighty slurp, I grabbed Boyer and shook him in fear, 'Maurice, Maurice, sir, for fuck's sake, wake up she's going to pewk again.'

He started laughing stupidly, saying in a Scots accent, 'Aye, weel, she was aye a passionate wee woman...'

Fortunately, at that moment a green wire double gate materialised in the dark before our bonnet. We stopped with a tremendous jerk. Raddle was ejected out of the side door, a parabola of vomit springing from her lips to disappear beyond human ken into the equatorial night.

'I think I'll have a pee,' said Boyer, 'but remember what I say about the analects. Bloody stupid word, when you come to think...'



I jumped out and had a pee too. Only in the middle of it did I take in the scene. We had arrived smoking at a Dutch enclave entirely surrounded by a high wire perimeter. On the other side of the gate was a guardhouse, complete with business-like guard with rifles and searchlights. Both rifles and searchlights were turned on us and our various bodily fluids. An electric generator hummed in the background, adding to the general obscene noises of the jungle close at hand.

When Raddle had recovered sufficiently from her gargantuan vomiting operation to start swearing at the guard in Dutch, the gate was opened and we drove in, surrounded by our private smoke-screen.

The realisation struck me that we must be some way out of town. To my saturated senses, it appeared strange that there were bungalows here with bright lights burning, and music playing on verandahs, and people dancing both indoors and under the trees. Such gaiety was paradoxical after the ride through darkness, as if one went back in a time-machine through the Jurassic and arrived at Las Vegas.

The car stopped right in the middle of the revels. We tumbled out, coughing. A band was playing, a man's voice bawled, 'It brings back a night of tropical splendour, It brings back a memory', and then we were submerged in laughing faces which shone in the dark.

Huge Dutchmen, all six foot seven, pressed Amsterdam beer and sausages into our hands. A barbecue party was in progress; figures ran insanely among low trees. Someone I recognised. He waved. Oh, yes, that chap. Sontrop. I flung him a salute and nearly fell over.

Boyer and Raddle started dancing to the music, entrusting what was left of the Black Tartan Wombat to me. I sat down at a trestle table and lit a cigar, fighting off dizziness. People were talking to me, but I took no notice.

Some while later, Sontrop came up with a friend. Although he carried a can of beer, he spoke with his usual sober courtesy. 'It's pleasant to see you here, Horatio. The Dutch are always delighted when their allies, the British, are personally friendly. This is my friend Hendrick. Hendrick Nieuwenhuis. May we enquire what you do here so late and so far from home?'

Hendrick bowed to me, smiling politely.

I gestured with the cigar. 'You see, it's simple really, I mean life's only



complex on the surface, because underneath it's well, it's a lot more complicated, but we won't go into that, but I want to marry Rosey I mean, Margey. I want to marry Margey.'

What else was said escapes me; I was trying to puzzle out why I felt unable to rise from the bench. I ate five sausages for their medicinal value.

The conversation perhaps went on for some hours. The next bit I remember was Hendrick saying, 'We are planning a little crocodile-shoot tomorrow. Perhaps you will care to come with us?'

'Don't know how to shoot crocodiles, don't be silly.'

'It's just like shooting people. We give you a carbine your revolver is no good for crocodile-shooting.'

'Okay, thanks. Fun. I'd like to bring Margey along. Hey, Ernst, you taking a girl with you?'

Sontrop looked at me and said, without anything you could call a change of expression, 'I am a practising homosexual.'

I did not know what to say to that.

'Practice makes perfect,' I said.

With a violent crash, Captain Boyer landed almost at my feet. I went on hands and knees, bending over him, trying to listen to his heartbeat. His shirt was wet with sweat. Ernst and Raddle pulled me up. I still had the bottle.

'He's not dead, you fewl, Stewbbs,' she said to me, looking red-eyed, 'only dead-drunk. So much for the fewking analects. Help me get him to bed, if it's all the same to you.'

With a certain amount of aid from Sontrop, mainly of an advisory kind, Raddle and I heaved Boyer into a nearby bungalow. He came round sufficiently to make declarations of love and sing in a phlegmy voice as the three of us tottered into a rear bedroom. The room contained little more than a wooden double bed, the statutory mosquito-net, and a bare lamp bulb which glared down on the scene, making the eyes ache.

Boyer lay back and opened his eyes. Full of innocence, they seemed to look for protection from the bastion of his nose. He started to take his trousers off.



'I'll leave you two now,' I said. 'Good-night, sir, sleep well. Bon voyage, Raddle, tomorrow.'

'Wait outside,' she said urgently as I passed her. Sontrop went out. I went out and slammed the door. It was dark in the hall. I leaned against the door, drawing on my cigar, trying to gather my wits. From their various points of dispersal, they told me that I was stuck in this parody of a concentration camp for the night, that most of the Dutch here were in festive mood because they were leaving on the Van Heutz on the morrow, and that if I was not careful I would get a lot more of Raddle than a fistful of pubic hair and labia.

Through the flimsy door, I heard her trying to rouse Boyer.

'Come on, you bastard, darling, never mind the words, show the action.'

'Oh, Raddle, darling, darling Raddle, you know I love you devotedly but I can't, I just can't ... too much alcohol ... putteth off from the performance... drown my sorrows...'

'If it's our last night, don't mewk about, then. Lewk, lewk, I strip off! Rouse yourself! Observe my figure, fewk you!'

'Oh, lovely, let me feel, oh, Raddle, how I'll live without you...'

Pounding, sucking noises, as of two goldfish colliding in anger. 'Rise up, you blewdy tiddler!'

'Oh, oh, too far gone... Black Wombat...'

'Oh, you sod, you British sod, you fewking drunkard sod from Roehampton! How you like if I go and get your hulking great Sergeant Stewbbs to make love by me if you are incapable?'

'No, no, darling, my precious, listen, Stubbs good man, good chap in Burma, you weren't in Burma blithering nightmare Stubbs doesn't love you...'

He muttered something about 'Chink girls', to which Raddle replied impatiently and jumped off the bed.

I moved. Another door led off the cramped hall. I opened it and slipped in fast. Deep breathing. Someone was asleep close by my right elbow. A person not a cobra, thank God. Cobras don't grunt as they exhale.



Darkness. I began to cough and had to smother my mouth with my hand; the fingers and thumb smelt strongly of something semi-delectable. Peering back through the door, which I held ajar, I saw Boyer's door flung open with a crash. Raddle emerged, her face black with frustration. The navy blue dress was open all the way down, to reveal secrets of nature at their most titanic. Ida Lupino would never have appeared in such a state.

As Raddle moved from the room at a canny trot, she seized some of the wiring which ran down the wall to the light switch and pulled hard. The wiring came away in her hand, bringing the overhead bulb down with it. The light sparked and went out. She charged along the hall, scattering wires, and disappeared into the clamorous night, for all the world like a bull leaving a china shop after having tasted porcelain for the first time in its life.

Instinct suggested that Raddle would not be back. Leaving the heavy sleeper to continue his act, still thoughtfully sniffing my hand, I tiptoed into the other room. Woozy sleeping noises emerged from Boyer's huddled shape. I climbed on the bed beside him, my boots to his face; I pillowed my arms beneath my head, shut my ears to the racket outside, and was enclosed by a suffocating sleep in which cars, planes, and towns burned down all round.

6

As the years of the war continue to float downstream, releasing themselves from memory into history, it becomes increasingly easy to sentimentalise them. The antidote is to recall one marked aspect of war years everywhere: how often one was awakened from deep sleep by someone shouting or someone shaking, or by a combination of the two.

Whoever was shaking me was not shouting. His silence was compensated for by sheer rudimentary vigour; I might have been a coconut palm in the grip of a starving Neanderthal. Groaning, I sat up and was motioned to keep quiet. I did not know where I was or what time it was. Both my watches had stopped. It was still dark, or barely light, and I could not recognise the man who stood over me.

Now that I was awake, he released me, bending to whisper in my ear.

'Coffee, two minute,' he perorated, and crept out of the door.

I instantly lay down to sleep again; the swine had the wrong man. Then a perfume caught my senses. I opened one eye. A woman's head



lay close by mine.

With a certain sense of dja vu, I heaved myself up again and this time came more fully awake. Orientation returned. I was on Captain Boyer's wooden bed. He was there and the woman Raddle was with him. They were both tucked inside the mosquito-net. I was outside the net. They had changed ends, either out of respect for my feelings or because they could not stand the smell of my feet. Gingerly, I climbed off the bed. It was obvious that some well-intentioned Dutchman was going to take me back to my billet in Djalan Sennal Road.

Staggering to the window, scratching and yawning sickly, I stared out at the tropical world beyond. The great light was about to bound into the sky. Terrible things were already mating or feeding in the branches of trees, celebrating the fact in querulous voices. Apart from the bed, the room was unfurnished. (Writing now, I know why: the Japanese had looted the furniture off the Dutch and the British had looted it off the Japanese.) In one corner, under the window, a metal trunk stood on its end. On top of it were a pink china figurine of a woman dancing, a cracked hand-mirror, a lipstick, and a pink comb with some teeth missing. I stared at them for a long time, whilst trying to get my lungs back into operation.

As I used the comb, my mind chugged into action along a branch line. I was looking at all the possessions that Raddle had acquired, or managed to hold on to, in the last four years. Today was Saturday, the day she sailed for the Netherlands and a new start in life. I went to have a good look at the pair of them, Raddle and Boyer, sweating together under the net. They were lying face to face, breathing into each other's open mouths. Boyer was half-dressed. Raddle had everything off. She looked as defenceless as a rather mountainous old dog.

I thought well of her. Pissed though she was, maddening though Boyer had been, she had gone back to him. Just for the last time.

What a fewking world... Faithfulness, hopefulness, and charitableness, and the greatest of these was faithfulness, if you could possibly manage it.

As I rammed my bush-hat on and tiptoed for the door, a calendar caught my eye. Write Boyer a note. Must speak to him before he flies back to Padang. Well remembered, Stubbs. Marry Margey, get her to hell out of this equatorial hell-hole.

I took the calendar off the wall, got a pencil from my pocket, and scrawled him a few lines, politely thanking him for a pleasant



evening, wishing his light o' love a pleasant voyage on the Van Heutz, and asking to meet him at the company office at fifteen hundred hours. It was a miracle of composition, all things considered: a microcosm of the world in three sentences.

The calendar showed a view of the centre of Edam, with a canal of that blue generally held in reserve for picture postcards of the Mediterranean. It was designed for 1939, the year the world stopped. I left it on top of the mosquito-net, message downwards, and hoped that Boyer would not be too hungover to read it.

The RAPWI camp lay embalmed in cool dawn air. The trees were absolutely still. On a wooden chair, a garment lay forsaken. The ashes of the barbecue fire were leprous, as if someone had been burning snake skins. The only movement came from a thin smoke, which withered and died among the branches: it rose, not from the barbecue, but from our black car. The vehicle stood where we had left it, grey cumulonimbus issuing from its gaping windows.

Just looking at the car made me feel worse. Turning my back on it, I stretched experimentally; I had been lying on my revolver all night, too besotted to move. A dead feeling pervaded me. Not only was I alone and among strangers, I hardly knew myself.

There was a movement at one of the bungalows. A figure appeared on a verandah and beckoned. When the gesture was complete, he still stood there, hand in air. As I moved slowly in his direction, another man came out of the bungalow and stood looking grimly ahead. They waited for me side by side.

They were young and Dutch. It crossed my mind that I had seen one of them before somewhere, but they conformed very much to a pattern, being tall, fair, tanned, dressed in jungle greens, stern, alert. When I reached them, one said, 'Hello again.' The other shook my hand and said, 'Jan de Zwaan.' He gave me a tin mug of coffee.

Letting slip the moment in which I could appropriately have said something in reply, I was condemned to silence. I drank. Sweet disgusting liquid seeped through all the furry obstructions in my mouth and throat, and coursed down into my stomach. The novel and, on the whole, welcome illusion of being alive overcame me. I let out a sly fart which immediately poisoned the air. The two grim young men did not twitch a muscle. Necessity was at work: I squeezed out a second fart, repressing the guilty smile on my face.

As I finished the coffee and returned the piyala, de Zwaan picked up something from behind him and swung it from one finger. It was a



Jap aviator's leather cap. 'Okay, we go,' he said.

He and the other man moved forward, and I fell in beside them. It would be a relief to get back to the billet.

Parked under linden trees was an old battered army truck. At a sign from de Zwaan, the three of us climbed into the cab. When the engine started, I looked out anxiously, expecting everyone to wake in their bungalows and curse us for murdering sleep. Nothing stirred.

Bumping slowly forward, we arrived at the gates. A guard came up smartly to let us out, and followed us with his red-rimmed eyes as we drove through the entrance. Oh yes, I thought, this was where Raddle threw up, bless her, and I looked for the place in the grass. But the dholes and hyenas would have cleaned it up. Besides, the episode belonged to an earlier stretch of history.

We moved down the road at a fair rate. Already day had dawned. This was the brief hour of spring. Natives in wicker hats guided bullock-carts or moved among the fields. Palms dwarfed their grouped figures. Over everything lay a faint mist, with radiance at work behind it. Vague in the distance were Sumatra's high mountains.

At the next crossroads, a figure was awaiting us, a carbine slung over his shoulder. We stopped. He climbed in beside us, which made for a crowded cab. It was Ernst Sontrop.

De Zwaan, who was driving, turned down a narrow carttrack with palm trees on either side. We roared up to a bullock-cart. De Zwaan hooted madly, and the driver and his wife pulled their creaking contraption over into the ditch to let us by.

Sontrop was talkative. 'Hendrick Nieuwenhuis and Jan de Zwaan say that they wish they spoke English a little more. But that will not spoil our morning's enjoyment. We come in this truck in preference to my car because of the rough nature of the ground.'

This hardly needed explanation. We had left the lane and were, as far as I could tell, driving fast over a herd of dead camels. The sun was rising in majesty over the world, the mists evaporating. Close at hand, the genuine jungle gleamed, dense, metallic, inviting.

We hit another track. It led us through a burnt-out village. Green things were pushing up everywhere through blackened remains. A few pigs ran squealing into the bush at our approach. Not a hut was left standing. 'This was once a Batak kampong or village,' said Sontrop. 'Nippon burned it all down to the ground.'



A river lay at the end of the village. We followed another track, which ran beside the river for a while and then led into jungle. We stopped. We jumped out.

Drink plays terrible tricks. Only then did I remember the invitation to shoot crocodiles. They were not driving me back to the billet. They were taking me to piss around shooting crocodiles, of all insane Netherlandish schemes. I began looking round anxiously for cohorts of the Indonesian army about to break cover and shoot us up. Everyone said that the Dutch were mad now I knew it.

The three of them went on methodically behaving as if they were sane and owned the shooting rights of the entire island. Hendrick Nieuwenhuis methodically coiled rope round his body, Jan de Zwaan broke open a wooden chest and issued Hendrick, me, and himself with carbines.

'Good,' he said. 'Bang, bang.' He grinned.

His sudden change of expression made me realise that both he and Hendrick, if I had them in the right order, were probably a year or two younger than I. He put the Jap aviator's helmet on his head, buckling it under his chin.

Nieuwenhuis had a parang or native chopping knife. With a few expert tops, he cut branches off nearby trees and arranged them over the truck so that it was concealed from casual view.

'How long is this expedition going to take?' I asked Ernst.

'Just a morning's fun. We must return in Medan at one o'clock. Then we must make a convoy to drive to Belawan, so that our Dutch people get safely to board the Van Heutzs this afternoon.'

He nodded affirmatively as he mentioned the fabulous ship on which so many destinies depended.

We set off in single file through the jungle.

Green things surrounded us. Tall trees rose everywhere, their trunks unpunctuated by any branch until they erupted into foliage. Their bases were hidden by varied bush. Each growing thing flourished in its set place according to rank, like soldiers in an army, from the humble privates beneath our feet to the lofty generals and field-marshal far overhead. The whole parade formed a gigantic organism of light and shade.



In the high canopy, birds flitted. In the undergrowth, mousy things scuttled. In the space between, against the gigantic bars of the tree trunks, were draped creepers as thick and hairy as my arm. We moved slowly through this rain forest, more marvellous than any cathedral. As in a cathedral, our senses were caught by the paradox of space and enclosure.

The track twisted where it would, and we had to follow it. We were in the jungle for twenty minutes. I had wound the more reliable of my watches, setting it at eight o'clock when we left the truck. At eight-twenty, we emerged by the river again. Here it was wide and still, more like a pool than a stream. The far bank rose steeply, perhaps a hundred yards from where we stood. The pale sterns of the forest were reflected in the tall water. Some trees had been felled, their crowns lying in the water. There was nobody about.

Nor was there anyone on our side of the river. All was silent under the sun. I saw no sign of any crocodile, and wondered what it would feel like to shoot one. Now that my system was functioning again, and the last whiskers of Black Tartan Wombat vanquished, I recalled Hendrick's statement of the previous evening 'It's just like shooting people.'

In the clearing, some way ahead of us, stood a concrete go-down. Near it was a concrete ramp with a jetty which stood out into the dark waters of the river. Ernst Sontrop put two fingers to his mouth and whistled.

An old brown man in a sarong appeared, smoking a cheroot. He gave a single gesture.

'He's Iwa,' said Sontrop, 'We can trust Iwa. He works as foreman on my father estates since many years.'

We went forward. Each of us shook hands with the old man, who performed the ceremony awkwardly, bowing as he did so. Little was said. We walked towards the jetty. The general air of desolation was emphasised by a small boat which had sunk or had been sunk against the jetty. The river was so shallow by the bank that the superstructure of the boat remained above water. Weeds grew on its roof and deck.

Moored at the jetty was another smaller boat, a worn but still serviceable launch, its peeling grey paint lending it a military air. A muttered consultation with Iwa, then we climbed in. Jan de Zwaan bent over the engine and tugged the starter cord. After a couple of tries, the motor caught, purring silently. Iwa unhitched a rope from



an iron peg and we began to move downstream. The native stood on the bank, motionless as he watched us go.

Our situation appeared very exposed. I copied the others in crouching low in the boat. The river wound and we turned with it, Jan steering and keeping us close to the left bank. We passed a riverside village on the opposite bank, where pigs rooted under the houses while naked brown kids splashed and yelled in the shallows. Gradually, the character of our surroundings changed. The jungle gave way to mangrove; the river became more labyrinthine, the banks mere stretches of mud, and the water a dull grey colour.

Hendrick pointed to three crocodiles lying dormant on a nearby bank. I made to lift my carbine, but he restrained me.

'All the coast is swampy,' said Sontrop. 'The tide comes up here, but we have now the low tide. Our Sumatra crocodiles like to swim sometimes in the sea. Before the war, they have been almost extinct, but now they breed more. The Japs give them some human bodies to eat, I think.'

Assuming that this was merely a rather unpleasant pleasantry, I smiled and said, 'How many are we going to shoot?'

Sontrop held up two fingers.

'We shoot only two. That's sufficient. The sound of our shots will make people interested who should not be interested. We pick up the bodies if we can, because of their value, and then we hurry fast back to the go-down and to safety.' He gave a grunt of laughter.

I asked the obvious question.

'You shoot one, Horatio, because you are our guest to Sumatra and our honoured friend. Jan also shoots one because this afternoon he must leave on the Van Heutsz. Who knows, he may never get the chance to come back to the tropics. It's sort of his farewell. Okay?'

'Listen, you shoot just into the eye of the beast between the eye is no good, because the skull is so thick. You can have one shot only. If you miss, then Hendrick may have a quick shot. If he misses, then I may have a quick shot. But it must be immediate. After, we have to get home fast. You understand? Bandits about...'

'Bandits' I liked.

Nothing more needed to be said. As the launch chugged quietly



forward, the grandeur of the forest gave way to a meaner growth of mangroves, and the confusions of a mangrove swamp, where birds darted for cover among the exposed roots. Dark water gargled round the base of every tree. Occasionally, we moved past long strips of land covered with flowers. Somewhere not too far ahead was the strait. We were already at its margins; the transition from land to sea was a stealthy one.

Through the mangrove maze we moved. De Zwaan crouched over the wheel, alert in his absurd helmet. He pointed ahead towards a more considerable island emerging among the trees. On it stood a hut with curving eaves, balanced on stilts. Some banana trees grew beside it. As we drew nearer, I saw that there was also a timber wharf or pier, which had collapsed into the water.

The island broke the canopy of mangroves. Sun shone in, lighting the water, bathing the small island. It bathed, too, the bodies of half a dozen crocodiles, which lay basking on the strip of shore like war canoes, ready for launch.

De Zwaan cut the engine.

We drifted forward slowly and silently. Apart from a slight watery accompaniment, we moved to the buzz of a million flies. Sontrop clutched my arm and spoke into my ear.

'Wait to shoot. I will make a sign. First shot for Jan. Then you, immediately next, understand. Fine beast, the Sumatran crocodile of the estuaries.'

Nodding sternly and pointing, he levelled the muzzle of his gun over the prow. I followed suit, aware of my heart hammering inside my sweaty shirt. It's just like shooting people. The crocodiles looked more like six turds than six people.

I estimated that de Zwaan would aim for the nearest beast. I marked out the second in line, but was too experienced to aim before necessary; in the tropics, sweat and heat blur a marksman's sight almost at once.

The croc was perhaps twice the length of a man. It was hard to judge size from where we crouched. Staring at it across a decreasing stretch of water, in which the sunlit banana trees and hut were darkly reflected, I saw its eyes open. My grip on the carbine tightened. The croc's eyes were yellow like a cat's, the colour of fresh-fallen jungle leaves.



We were gliding, not directly at the bank, but tangentially, so that I presumed we would not be directly in their path if they launched themselves into the water.

Birds hopped about the crocodiles, perching cheekily on their long skulls. The distance between us and them narrowed still further. Flies buzzed. The mud gave off a sickly sweet stench like dying hyacinths.

Jan fired. The surprise of it paralysed me. 'Now!' yelled Sontrop. I was immobilised.

The crocs were already on the move. I fired at them at random, twice. Sontrop and Nieuwenhuis both stood up in the boat and blazed away. Full of excitement and some fury at myself, I took careful aim. My sights followed the second reptile as he scuttled down his stretch of shore. I fired, carrying through the movement. I hit him just behind his right eye as he struck the water. He jerked upwards, then disappeared beneath the surface.

A terrible thrashing took place. More than one croc had been hit. The water churned madly, blood and leaves being thrown up parabolically, in the path of lashing tails. On the mudflat, one croc lay unmoving.

The racket of our shooting filled the whole world. Birds and waterfowl rose up from everywhere, screaming in protest, wheeling about and breaking free into the upper air beyond the trees, even before the last reverberations of our fire had rattled into the distance.

Jan was standing up, calling in excitement, hugging Ernst. Hendrick had the steering wheel. He started the engine, cut it again, and we glided in. The bottom of the launch bumped against mud. We all jumped ashore. I got a boot full of cold black ooze. Ahead stood the hut, utterly deserted. A patch of maize grew by its broken steps. A large crab scuttled away and sank under the water, bubbling.

Putting his carbine to the unmoving croc's skull, Jan squeezed the trigger. The reptile gave an enormous heave and lay still. I was amazed to find myself so close to the creature. Hendrick unwound his rope and started to secure the beast behind its front legs.

'Do we tow it?' I asked.

'No. Other crocs eat him. Put him in the boat with us.'

As we tied it up, I looked across the black waters behind us, listening to their endless slurp among the mangroves. The surface was still.



Silence returned.

With some effort, we heaved the poor bloody thing, broken skull and all, into the boat. It lay belly upwards. We sat on it, and Jan passed round a flask of genever from which we all swigged heartily, grinning at each other in triumph.

Hendrick clapped me on the back. 'Good,' he said. 'Good fun!'

'Great,' I said. I laughed, feeling my heart bound in my chest.

We were wet and filthy. The crocodile was covered with mud, and so was the old grey boat. Jan went over to the engine, starting it as Hendrick and I jumped out and pushed the bow free of the mud-spit. Once we were aboard again, the boat made a wide curve and started back among the mangroves. The island with its derelict hut fell away behind.

Birds were settling down in the tops of the trees, already forgetting the excitement. One bird swooped in low and flew close by the launch, sometimes darting among the arched mangrove roots in its pursuit of us; it was grey above and white below I caught the reflection of its breast in the water. It homed in on the scent of death and would not be deflected.

In my carcass, triumph burned. I had been initiated into a new mystery of Sumatran life. For a moment, I considered some of the consequences of my act. It was Saturday morning, and Margey would wonder where I was. I had, too, been missing from lines overnight, and was therefore guilty of a chargeable offence. I dismissed these considerations. I could make things right with Margey she'd be proud of me and Jhamboo Singh would see that I got into no trouble; after all, I had leverage on him. Thus reassuring myself, I turned my attention to the satisfactions of the present.

The sun broke through on the dark water, the mangroves cleared, the river banks became clearly defined. Soon, all too soon, the go-down and the jetty with the sunken ship showed ahead. We floated in to the jetty. There was no sign of Iwa. Sontrop jumped out and moored the launch.

Silence reigned. Beyond the go-down, jungle grew, surrounding us with a creepy privacy. The superstructure of the sunken river-boat, including the wheelhouse, was above water.

Tufts of foliage sprouted on the blistered deck. The wreck added a sense of ruination in which my heart perversely exalted as we dragged



the crocodile ashore. The kite-hawk which had followed us alighted on the funnel of the sunken vessel.

Sontrop drew out his parang and started to slice up the belly of the crocodile. Grey matter and red intestine bulged from the widening slit.

'We must gut it to carry it,' he said, looking up. 'Fetch Iwa from the go-down. The old boy has gone to sleep he will do this work. We must not wait about.'

Slinging my carbine over my shoulder, I walked briskly up to the concrete building. A sliding metal cargo door on one side of the building was open a few inches. I tried to budge it further, but it would not move. The metal almost burnt my flesh. Squeezing through, I found myself in near dark until my vision adjusted. Something slithered away from me, and I was immediately alert for snakes. I once encountered a cobra face-to-face in Padang, and hoped never to repeat the experience.

'Iwa!' I realised I had shouted in a whisper. Now I saw better, I moved forward with more confidence. The internal space of the warehouse was empty, except for offices and a WC in one corner, and some wooden crates piled in the centre of the area. The crates looked as if they had been standing there for years. Across one of them I saw an incongruous name stencilled: MANCHESTER.

I crossed to the lavatory, calling Iwa's name again, and kicked the door open. Inside was a Chinese-style shitter and a wash-basin. Both were clogged with shit. Ancient shit, too old to attract many flies. I turned away and, as I turned, a movement caught my eye.

A soldier of the TRI stood in the doorway, levelling a sten at me.

He was without features, seen as a silhouette in the narrow rectangle of light.

He shouted a command, jerking the snout of his gun for emphasis.

Although I did not understand what he said, the message came across. I could jump into the office behind me, but the flimsy door offered no protection from bullets. The heavy Manchester crates offered better cover. They were too far away. I visualised myself diving for shelter behind them while a stream of bullets tore into my body. The image froze me. The moment for action slipped away.

The extremist took a couple of steps closer and was no longer merely



a silhouette. His finger was curled round that well-known crude trigger which is a vital part of a sten. I slid my carbine off my shoulder and let it clatter to the floor.

He planted himself by the crates. He was a slender man with a hawkish face, no older than I. We looked at each other. A tension in his attitude told me he would fire if I did anything except stand still. I stood still.

He shouted another order.

'I'm English, orang Ingris. No understand. Tida mengerti.' I pointed to my shoulder flashes, to the div sign of the tiger coming out of the black triangle. 'Look, Ingris.'

Not that I imagined that he would have any affection for the English as such, but it gave him something to think about. I just didn't want any member of the Merdeka squad to imagine that I was Dutch.

He made no reply. Sontrop and his pals, I imagined, were still skinning the croc down by the water's edge. My throat was dry. I did not cry out to warn them.

The extremist kept me covered without moving. Filled with the blood-lust that whites imagined overtook all Malays, or just stupid?

'Tuan Ingris?'

Thank God. Just stupid. And respectful.

I nodded. 'Yes, Ingris. London. You speak Ingris?'

He just stood there, pointing the sten inflexibly. And listening.

I listened.

Footsteps were approaching from the direction of the wharf. It must be the Dutchmen. As soon as this bugger took his eyes off me to look round, I would jump him. I still had my revolver, but a quick Commando chop on the correct vertebra, right up under the occipital bone, should do him most good where it was needed most.

An Indonesian officer arrived in the go-down. Slick operation. In, back to wall, Jap machine-pistol aimed at all and sundry. Not a man to muck about.

He took in the situation at once, eyed the carbine on the floor between



me and his man, barked an order. The sten man came forward, collected the carbine, backed out of harm's way with it. I stood where I was.

The officer was solidly built with a heavy piggy face and blue jowls. A scar led down one cheek and puckered the corner of his mouth, giving him a quirky expression. It looked like a fresh scar. He had the red and white shoulder flashes of the TRI, and the two pips of a subedar or first lieutenant. There were rings on two of the fingers of the hand that held the grip of his weapon.

He moved round so as to command the door. In marched Sontrop, de Zwaan, and Nieuwenhuis, clutching the tops of their trousers. Two armed TRI soldiers hustled them in.

When he spotted me, Ernst Sontrop gave a ghastly smile and said, 'Apologies for this misfortune, Horatio. Bandits generally take Saturday off.'

The lieutenant barked at him to be quiet.

The Netherlanders were made to line up against the rear wall of the warehouse. Their trouser-belts had been removed, so that they had to hold their trousers up. Their carbines and ammunition belts had also gone, and were now draped over the shoulders of their two guards. De Zwaan was still wearing his Jap aviator's helmet.

I saw that the two guards were excited by their capture. The lieutenant spoke soothingly to them. They looked pretty nasty chaps.

They spent some time making my pals line up properly, caps of boots and foreheads against the wall. I watched for the moment to go for my gun, but the sten remained pointing unwaveringly at my belt buckle. I could only stare helplessly at three sweaty backs and the weapons that covered them.

At last they were arranged according to the lieutenant's satisfaction. The sten-gunner said something to him, at which he turned the full power of his attention on me. He came forward, standing with legs apart and fists on hips, surveying me. An ugly and aggressive sod. His scar went white when he spoke.

'You are Ingrish? No from Netherlands?'

I pointed to my shoulder flashes. 'See these? 26 Div. English. London. Churchill.'



'Make your gun down on ground. Be very care.' He pointed to the floor.

Unbuttoning the holster flap, I dropped the revolver at my feet. He motioned me angrily to kick it across to him, which I did. He ignored it.

'Where are you stay at Medan?'

An unbidden vision of Jackie Tertis swinging a golf club flashed across my mind. I saw the view of his torture house as glimpsed from my window in the billet. I thought of the fate of the Indonesians who had fallen into his hands. The thought occurred to me that it was the Japs who set the fashion for all this cruelty. Now it was going to be my turn. For the first time, I was really afraid, afraid all over and all through. The fear expressed itself as severe chill of skin and internal organs. My bladder and bowels felt as if they were about to slip loose from their moorings. Nobody could ever want the Tertis treatment.

I felt my lips tremble as I answered, evasively, 'Off the Serdenweg.'

'Serdenweg.' He studied me, keeping his machine-pistol ready. Time inside the go-down had solidified. 'Show to me your pass.'

I groped in my upper left-hand jacket pocket and produced my battered old brown paybook. When I leaned forward to give it to him, he took it without removing his gaze from my eyes, almost as if he hoped to hypnotise me. Then he looked down at the book, riffling its pages one-handed. I drew breath, looking round in search of help. Nothing there encouraged me. The Dutch stood motionless facing the wall, holding up their trousers. The two TRI soldiers guarded them. My pal with the sten now stood in the doorway, where he had a good view of all of us, as well as keeping an eye on outside. No sound came from there. Inside, bluebottles buzzed endlessly under the asbestos roof.

The lieutenant finished his inspection of my paybook and my photograph. He shut it and handed it back.

As I put it away, he said contemptuously, 'You good friend all Netherlands men.'

'We were hunting crocodiles. Not military operation.'

The bastard still looked me over, his eyes bulging.

'You speak Netherlands language?'



'No.'

'What your name?'

'Horatio Stubbs. Sergeant. As written in paybook.'

'Where you are borned?'

I named the East Midlands town written in my paybook. He stood there. I was aware that our fates were being decided. Jan de Zwaan started to call something in Malay. He was kicked viciously in the thigh, and fell silent with a grunt.

The officer ran a hand along the line of his jaw. The peel of stubble against his palm was audible. Then he came to a decision.

He pointed to the office door behind me.

'You go in opis.'

'Look, I'm going back to England next week. My friends are going back to the Netherlands on the Van Heutzs this afternoon. Okay? Let us go. We are all leaving Sumatra as soon as possible. Then it will be your island. Okay?'

The jaw angle became more pronounced. 'Now is our island. You go into opis, lekas, chop-chop, like I say.'

As I moved, he moved, kicking my revolver to one side with his boot. It was a good heavy kick. The weapon went scuttling to the far end of the concrete floor.

Unable to think of anything else, I walked over to the office and entered, turning quickly in case the lieutenant shot me in the neck. I backed against a desk and we confronted each other across the intervening space.

He raised the machine-pistol and levelled it at my eyes, glaring at me across the barrel. He came nearer, each step a threat. His mouth became smeared across his face.

'You wait here and no make move or I shooting you to pieces. Okay?'

I nodded.

The sentence was important to both of us. He repeated it with some



relish. 'You wait here and no make move. I shooting you to pieces.'

'Yes, understand.'

He shook his head, scowling. 'Ingris army finish at Medan.'

He moved out and shut the office door. The key turned in the lock. There was a frosted glass panel in the door, covered in dust. I had an impression of his retreating back, then could see nothing. I stood with my thigh against the desk, waiting as ordered, trembling, fuck it.

I could hurl myself through the window and run for the river, but they would be outside and firing before I made it. Besides, anything I did would only make the position of Sontrop and Co. more perilous. The lieutenant had all the power. We were helpless.

A discussion began on the other side of the go-down. It took place in Malayan, but I recognised the tones of Ernst Sontrop's voice, caught the anger in it. The lieutenant started shouting. I caught the word merdeka repeated several times.

Looking back, I cannot recall that I held anything more than a simple soldier's viewpoint of the political situation. The Dutch 'owned' Sumatra, and the Indonesians who were making trouble were 'extremists'.

Parallel cases exist in Palestine and Northern Ireland and other countries today, though parallels, like analogies, never prove cases. But in those simple early days after the war, when the shutters of international business had only just gone up, the notion of colonial populations being it to govern their own countries or entitled to govern whether it or not had barely penetrated. Merdeka could not really mean freedom, since it was a native word which was why the British troops used it among themselves, with their customary surly cheer, as a comic password.

The Indonesian state has survived for many years. On the whole, it prospers. It is remote from Britain. Our mutual trade is negligible. As for Sumatra itself, little is ever heard of it in Britain. The Times, only a week or two ago, reported an earthquake in West Sumatra without mentioning any names or reporting casualties. It was a four-line filler. Sumatra has sunk beneath the greater abstraction of 'Indonesia' and we know and care less about the island than we did a century ago. As a nation, we have largely lost interest in the world.

As I grow older, I regret that what was good and liberal in the British Empire is dead, and that the little, having largely overcome the great,



remains obstinately little. Well, it is proper that my generation should regret we were among the sods who shrugged our shoulders and laughed it all away. Like Steve Kyle, we forgot how to give or take orders.

Three shots rang out. They rattled about the harsh confines of the go-down with petrifying din. As they died, one more shot re-awoke the echoes. Then silence fell, thick and dismaying.

As I crouched down against the desk, arms round my head, a rusty rain of dust fell from the ceiling. I thought of the great silences of the forest, of that awful neutrality.

For an unreckoned time, I sheltered against the desk.

There was no further sound.

Finally, I tiptoed to the window and looked out. My body shook with fear. Through the dusty glass lay a view of wharf and river. The launch we had used for our fool crocodile hunt had gone. The half-sunken boat still lay at its last anchorage. The door to its wheelhouse hung open; that was where the lieutenant and his men had hidden, waiting craftily until we returned.

On the wharfside lay our crocodile. Twenty or more kitehawks fed on it, tearing shreds from its body and gobbling them down. They jostled and fought for positions in the carcass. The picture was picked out in share detail in the blazing sun. Of the TRI there was no sign.

The landscape lay there, impaled by sunlight. In the background, the felled trees and the standing trees reflected in the calm river. In the foreground, the terrible feast.

That magnificent land which has everything food, cash crops, minerals that magnificent land of mountains, volcanoes, rivers, jungles why has it not risen to become one of the most enviable of all countries of the globe? Standing trembling in the office next to the stinking latrine, I seemed to know the answer to the question. The tribes of man became the dominant animal in temperate zones. In the tropics, where man began, his position remains less assured: below Cancer, the fevers of the equator work against him. The heat and its allies make a perpetual war, grinding him down. And some dreadful thing in human nature defeats human nature.

Tears came to my eyes as I stood at the window.

For I was innocent, I whispered. I loved Sumatra. I had been about to



leave it against my will, as a soldier must take farewell of his wife. Now, my Dutch friends having been shot down, the guns were being reloaded for my execution. Over and above the fear I felt was an awful depression at the uselessness of everything, the bloody war, the fucking peace.

I stood and listened for them. Only gradually did it dawn on me that the extremists might have gone, that fear of reprisals from the British might have caused them to spare my life. Silence. The buzz of flies nearby; outside, the occasional cries of the scavenger birds.

Sweat burst out upon me. Behind the desk stood a metal waste-paper bin. I picked it up, hurled it through the frosted glass pane of the office door, and ducked under the desk. After a clatter of falling glass, the noise of the bin rolling over concrete. Then silence again.

Making a great effort, I came out from cover, went over to the door, and located the key on its outer side. I unlocked the door and stepped out on to the floor of the go-down.

Ernst Sontrop, Jan de Zwaan, and Hendrick Nieuwenhuis lay huddled together by the far wall. A communal pool of blood spread under their bodies. Jan still wore his old Jap helmet. He lay face upward, his eyes open, looking sternly at the ceiling. His two friends lay face down. I could not see which of the three had needed the extra shot.

Weakness overcame me. I leaned against one of the old Manchester crates, feebly wiping my face. I broke into enormous sobs which rose from the centre of my guts. They came pumping up in reverse peristalsis, disgorging all that had to be suffered.

7

After midday in Medan. The city in its trance of sunlight. The smart native cop on duty at the Kesawan crossroads, with little traffic to direct except for a few leisurely bullock-carts making for the railway station.

I stood with Captain Jhamboo Singh by his jeep, in the shadow of the grim Dutch HQ. He was all concern.

'Come back to the lines with me, Sergeant. Have a meal, take a rest, or I will drive you to the Field Ambulance and you can enjoy peace and quiet under observation for a day.'

'I'm fine, Captain Sahib, thank you. I just need a drink.'



'No, no, you come back to the lines and have a clean up. At present you are in a bad state, especially with regard to your appearance. Get in, get in.' He tapped the side of the Jeep with one fingernail. He was himself immaculate as usual.

I climbed in behind him and we were driven back to the lines. On the way, I tackled him about my missing revolver: losing it was a chargeable offence. Jhamboo brushed the question aside. He would indent for a new one; no charge would be brought. He was happy that I had come through the incident with my life.

As to what had happened, it was best that I spoke to nobody about it, nobody. He would be seeing General Hedley in the morning, when he would report the incident personally. Such events occurred in difficult situations. This was a bad campaign in which nobody had any glory. For the rest, the three killings, that was the business of the Dutch. I must not concern myself. If I had been killed, that was different; then the Division would have been forced to mount retributive action, with a general hotting up of tension all round. Mercifully, we were spared such unpleasantness. All that could be said was that there must be no breaches of discipline. He and I were old campaigners and had survived in difficult theatres of war; now it was peacetime, despite appearances, and both of us were entitled to retire with honour to our peacetime destinies.

'Peacetime,' I said, and laughed.

He presented his case and offered me his De Reszkes, pressing them on me when I refused. 'No, no, Sergeant, take one and smoke later, after your shower. There are different conceptions of wartime and peacetime, as we come now to realise.'

I took a fag and lit up automatically when he did.

'I let myself be taken by surprise. Asking for trouble... I feel responsible for their deaths.'

'Yes, yes, I understand, but you must tell yourself that is not so. To survive is not a disgrace, but rather a virtue. Confidentially, give me just one platoon, Sergeant, one platoon, and you and I would wipe out these murdering swine for ever.'

The jeep dropped me before my billet in Djalan Sennal Road. I climbed out, drew myself up, and ripped Jhamboo off a smart salute. He returned it, his expression lamb-like again as he regarded me.

As I peeled off my filthy uniform and climbed into the shower, recent



events kept returning vividly before my mental gaze.

After I left the go-down, I had to make my way back through the jungle alone. The Indonesians had removed Jan's truck from its place of concealment. I walked on through the burnt-out kampong and eventually emerged on a road where a Dutch patrol found me. Good old Dutch, they never gave up!

They drove me straight to their grey Medan HQ, where Ernst Sontrop's office was. There I was given a cup of coffee, a ham roll, and a cigar, while four officers assembled to question me. One of them was a grey-haired man with mild gold-rimmed spectacles and a brutal mouth. He belonged to PEA Force and introduced himself as a friend of Jackie Tertis.

The room filled with smoke. More coffee was brought. A good deal of phoning went on.

Jhamboo arrived. I greeted him with relief. A friendly face! The Dutch had tried to contact the elusive Boyer, without results. Throughout the interviews, the Dutch even the villain from PEA Force were unfailingly courteous, unrolling their faultless English like stair-carpet down each step of the enquiry. All the while, I felt like a prize shit; I knew they thought I should have died with my pals.

From my description, they identified the TRI lieutenant with the scar as a man called Hamil.

'He's just returned from Java, we happen to know,' said PEA Force. 'He's not a good man, but we shall get him.'

'Hamil's a tough egg,' agreed one of the other officers, with a cool mastery of English slang.

By not executing me, by refusing even to take me captive, Hamil had avoided a possible confrontation and snubbed both Dutch and British authorities. He showed that he knew we were withdrawing, and that that withdrawal meant the beginning of the end for the Dutch. The TRI wanted us out of the way with as little fuss as possible. Their battle was half won.

All of which must have been gall for the Dutch, but they just made a few more serious phone calls. The questioning was over. They rose and thanked me for my cooperation; apologised for my misadventure, congratulated me on my escape from death, and hoped that I would return to Medan after the uprising had been quelled, when they would be happy to see I had a pleasant visit and could shoot crocodiles in a



more congenial atmosphere. I shook hands all round and left with Jhamboo.

By now, as I stood wearily under the cold shower, an armed escort would be out at the go-down. If the three bodies weren't collected quickly, the shite-hawks which had feasted on the crocodile would be greedying it in the building. How do you eat people? It's just like eating crocodiles...

Iwa? No doubt the terrible men in PEA Force would sort out his role in the ambush to their satisfaction if not to Iwa's.

When I had dried myself, I stretched luxuriously on my charpoy and reached for my tin of cigarettes. I never made it.

Some maniac, some vaginaphobe, with his hand on my shoulder was asking me if I wanted to buy a battleship.

Groaning, I heaved myself up and looked blearily round.

'You want to lay off the kyfer before it kills you! I thought you were bloody dead, mate. I've brought you a late lunch.'

There was Johnny Mercer; behind him, the Chinese mess servant, standing grinning with a tray of food and a beer.

My Indian watch told me that I had been asleep for only twenty-five minutes. All the same, I felt better. Putting a towel round my middle, I sat on the edge of the bed and began shovelling the food in the top. Johnny took it for granted that I had been with Margey, and proceeded to go into great detail concerning his adventures of the previous evening, which revolved about the twin axes of alcohol and women. It appeared that he had had a good time.

It was impossible to concentrate on what he had to say. Before my eyes floated a picture of three bodies lying against the wall of the go-down, while ants meditatively inspected their life-blood. I wondered how I could behave naturally before my friends, now that this terrible knowledge was in me. Coming back alone through the great forest, with nature at its most luxuriant all round, I had been startled by a chain of monkeys swinging in the branches high overhead, screaming as they went. Perhaps the monkeys knew death. But monkeys were innocent. They did not know Harm. It was Harm that I had discovered, and instinct demanded that I should conceal that discovery from my friends.

'How about a game of badminton? I've been on ration duty all



morning.'

'No, thanks, I bloody must go back into town.' I scraped up the last of my treacle-sponge pudding.

Mercer looked a bit embarrassed and stuffed his hands into his pockets. 'Did you speak to old Boyer last night? About this problem of yours. You know, about marrying this Chinese girl?'

'You mean Margey?'

'Of course.' He gave his neighing laugh.

'Then why not fucking say so? You know her, don't you? You fucking well used to screw her, didn't you?'

'Keep your bloody hair on. I only asked if you spoke to Boyer.'

I put my plate down, rose and started to dress.

'Boyer was pissed as arseholes. His bird's off on the Van Heutz this afternoon.' I checked with the watches; one said twelve-twenty-five, the other one-fifteen.

'What's the time?'

'One-forty.'

'I'm supposed to be seeing Boyer this afternoon at the company office, three pip emma. Ten to one he won't turn up.' I heaved myself into a clean uniform.

'Look, Horry, for fuck's sake take the advice of an old mate. Forget this idea of marrying Margey. It's not on. There are oodles of bits of crumpet back in the Blight, lying around with their legs open and their little twots pulsating, just waiting for handsome young sergeants like us to come home.'

I looked at him. 'Young? Piss off!'

'Well, old, then. It's a bugger, Horry. I was a kid when I joined up now I feel about fifty. Where have the years gone? Still, I still think you'd be mad to marry old Marge. If I may say so without offence, you don't have to do it just to impress your mates, you know.'

'Who'd want to impress you?'



'Give those gin-palaces back and I'll tell you.'

I punched him lightly on the chest. 'Come down the bazaar and I'll buy you a drink with the ill-gotten gains.'

At the canteen, I bought five hundred Blighty Players, a tin of Coleman's Mustard, a packet of Edwards' Desiccated Soup, a bar of chocolate, and some Branston's Sweet Pickle. At the company stores, I left a note for Captain Boyer telling him where I would be. At the office, I collected a green slip from Jhamboo, which I handed to the Armourer-Havildar at the armoury. He was an enormous man with handlebar moustaches. He issued me with a new revolver and made me sign without comment. Pistol, Revolver, Webley .38 in MK. 4.

As I emerged into the sunshine, Mercer rolled up in the mess Jeep. I climbed in beside him.

'Bloody Tertis has just gone tear-assing by on his bike. Business as usual.'

'They'll get him one day.'

'Today, I hope.'

We drove past the grey fortress of the Dutch HQ. Poor Jan de Zwaan would never catch the Van Heutsz, on which many of his countrymen and women were even now embarking. I could not get over the sight of his face in death, with the absurd Jap helmet still on his head. The memory came between me and the outer world. Death followed me like the speeding bird which had shadowed our launch back to harbour.

I'd have to write to Addy about Ernst.

A thunderstorm was building up, with high vivid clouds the shape of anvils piling above the rooftops. Sunshine became a searchlight.

We pulled into Margey's alley and stopped. I saw that something was pinned to her door. Bright objects glittered among what was faded and grey. We drew near. Elaborate Chinese characters had been cut out of red and gold card and attached to the entrance. Strings of little white flowers, painstakingly threaded together, hung wilting on the old blistered doorway. I put my hand against the stone to study them better. They conveyed a meaning, but not to me. The door stood ajar. Mercer pushed in and I followed. Of course, he'd been here long before I had...



The room was transformed. It was draped in white. Dozens of small candles in tin holders burned about a coffin, which occupied the centre of the space. The coffin itself was smothered in little foil decorations which gleamed in the candlelight. A heavy scent hung about the room, languorous yet threatening. For a crazy moment, I thought they must have collected Sontrop.

Many people stood by the coffin in their best clothes. They kept their deep Chinese gaze away from Johnny and me. Some of the old women clutched flowers in their weathered hands. Daisy was there, carrying her baby; she glanced at us, then away.

As we paused, someone hurried from the rear of the throng and blocked our path, raising his hands before him. It was the Chinese journalist, Tiger Balm, immaculate as ever.

'You may not come in here today, sir. It is not convenient.'

'I am in, mush. I'm not going to cause any trouble. What's going on?'

He shook head and hands. 'You must depart quietly, please, sir. Buddhist ceremonies are in progress, following the death, so we have to require you to leave. This is not a place for British soldiers. Go, please.'

'The old lady's dead? I'm sorry she was a nice old girl.' I tried to push forward as I spoke, but Tiger Balm remained unmoving.

'Yes, old Auntie's spirit has departed, and you must not interrupt the ceremonies. The military have no business with mourning.'

'Look, drum, I'm not going to break up your bloody ceremonies. I just want Margey. Where is she?'

'Let's sod off, Stubby,' Mercer suggested. 'We can come back later. Lets go and have a drink.'

While I hesitated, Tiger Balm said, 'Good idea, Sgt Stubbs. Go and have a drink or two. It's in your line.'

Margey's brother-in-law came panting up from the shadows, shaking his head, tutting, waving his plump paws.

'Ah, Missa Stuss, poh Auntie pinnish. You no come, you go, I give cigalet.'

'I don't want your fucking cigarettes, chum. Where's Margey?'



More waving of hands. 'Margey no here. Margey go Brastagi.'

'Brastagi? What the fuck's she gone to Brastagi for? Why didn't she tell me she was going?'

'Keep your voice low, sir, if you please,' said Tiger Balm, edging Johnny and me towards the door. 'Acts of devotion are in progress and must continue during two days. Such is our form of worship to the dead. Margey will return tomorrow, escorting some relations.'

The coffin and the mourners confused me. Existence suddenly appeared threadbare, and I was inclined to be pugnacious about it. 'She didn't tell me she was going to be away. What's going on?'

'Margey could not speak with you because you did not come here this morning as you promised. Please leave without further high spirits.'

Fat echoed the suggestion. 'Yessah, Missa Stussa, prease lee, see Margey 'moller.'

So did Johnny. 'Let's go and get a bloody drink. Coming or not?'

'Okay, okay.' I looked angrily at the Chinese. Tiger Balm bowed slightly, Fat bowed and smiled, exposing gold teeth. Behind them, Daisy's baby uttered one brief cry. The room was stuffed with sweet and sour smells. I pushed the things I had brought for Margey into Fat's arms, and left with Johnny.

Almost opposite the Deli cinema was a little Malayan bar where we sat and drank carioca and Red Fox. No sooner had we arrived than rain fell in great gusts, filling the streets with noise. Thunder pealed morosely overhead.

'Brastagi's miles away,' Johnny said, wiping his eyes. I could guess what he was thinking: 'If the bitch just keeps out of the way for two more days, Stubbs will be safely on his way home.'

It grew dark inside the tiled room. A number of Sumatrans dashed in to shelter in the doorway, the main source of light. The manager greeted Johnny like an old friend and summoned his wife from a back parlour. The wife's name was Che Jah or something similar. She spoke some English, having worked in the British Consulate in pre-war days. She sat at our table and talked, pleased to air her knowledge of the language.

Che Jah wore a sarong and a smart white muslin jacket fitting tightly



about her generous breasts. Dark hair pulled back from a handsome olive face with broad cheekbones. Sitting talking to Johnny with controlled ease, she leaned forward across the table, smoking a cigarette, smiling as she spoke. Her teeth were perfect. Her wrists, her smooth hands, her fingers, one adorned with a silver ring, moved with delicate precision as she lifted the cigarette to and from her broad lips. The fabric of her tightly buttoned sleeves, chafing against her arms, made a faint sound, as of thigh moving against thigh.

How magnificent women were! Life's answer to death! What an experience it would be to share the existence of such a vivid creature. In her was the spirit of Sumatra incarnate, rather than in my pale Margey...

Brastagi was a long drive from Medan, approximately fifty miles. Margey had spoken of some distant relations there, whom she had once visited with the old Auntie. It was an agreeable mountain village with a cool climate. I had driven through it early one morning as a sea-grey dawn was breaking. I remembered long houses on stilts by the roadside and three women standing in a striking monumental group, dressed in tight black clothes, wearing heavy turbans. We could have been in Tibet, rather than on the equator.

That had been during the momentous drive overland from Padang, that arse-breaking unforgettable trip. The day before reaching Brastagi, we stopped at a village called Prapat, on the shores of Lake Toba. It seemed one of the remotest places in the world. Lake Toba itself must be all of seventy miles long you could heave the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg into it and leave but a splash yet only the Dutch have ever heard of the place.

It's beautiful, cool and high. The lake itself is formed out of one crater of a string of volcanoes which blew themselves out long before man emerged on the planet. In the middle of the lake lies an island, Samosir. You couldn't miss Samosir from Prapat; its malachite cliffs rise sheer across a narrow stretch of water. I had stood on the bank, looking across at it. There were people on that island. Then one of my mates called to me and we had to move on.

In my mind's eye, I still saw Samosir, its peak crowned with jungle. I had resolved that one day I would return to Prapat and go across to the island. Now I knew that was impossible. People died, men were shot like crocodiles. There was no place for the Dutch and British on Sumatra. The events of the morning made it clear that if I was going to marry Margey, we were going to have to live somewhere else. And wasn't it the spirit of Sumatra itself I really wished to embrace?



That animated face only three feet away, with those moulded lips, those liquid eyes, those fine eyebrows, and that clear skin, was still talking to Johnny Mercer. A Batak woman. Orang Batak. Cannibals, ferocious people, said Margey. In her face dwelt a sort of fire. Yet it was difficult to see her clearly, so sharp was that dusty image of de Zwaan lying against Sontrop and Nieuwenhuis in a spreading pool of blood.

Che Jah turned and darted me a direct look. My eyes flicked away from hers, lest she saw the dead bodies. She said, as if we were long familiar with each other, 'You will go back to England next week, and that is best.'

I met her gaze, and then looked down at the cane tabletop. 'I shall never forget Sumatra.'

'Is best for all mens go back to the land where they belong.'

Only a day earlier, I might have interpreted her words as consolatory. Now I wondered if they concealed a threat; perhaps she and all the other inhabitants of Medan had already heard of the TRI's coup that morning. In any case, the good simple sense she appeared to speak was meaningless upon examination. Not everyone had places to go.

This was Ernst Sontrop's country as much as hers. Margey would not be welcomed in her dreamed-of Shantung Province. What rude awakening was I in for when I returned to the Blight?

Leaving the table, I went to peer out of the doorway at the rain, which hit the pavements so hard that it sent up a knee-high mist. There were displacements for the whole damned lot of us in the pitcher of time. I recalled fragments of old ABCA lectures, passages from history books. Both the English and Dutch were of that Indo-European stock whose origins lay in the sub-continent from which the British Raj was now being expelled. Come to that, the Bataks were descendants of nations driven south from Indo-China by Mongolian invaders. Despite all territorial claims, nobody belonged in Che Jah's sense to any particular land, only to the globe itself. There was no real settling down.

They called me back to the table. Coffee had arrived, bitter and black. I smoked a cigar while the others talked. I was trying to work out how bad I felt, and whether I felt bad because I'd been nearly shot, or because I'd not been shot.

The woman and her husband were coaxing us to go behind the shop and eat with them. Johnny was all for it and wanted my company; but



restlessness forced me to excuse myself. It was a good moment to leave the caf the rain had suddenly tapered away and died.

In the street, compulsive anxiety took over. Supposing Lieutenant Hamil appeared, walking casually down the road, should I shoot him? Would he perhaps shoot me? And why in hell had I not told Johnny what had happened? I hated the vein of self-protective secrecy in my character.

De Zwaan lay dead before my eyes, slumped in his ridiculous helmet, while ants investigated the liquids draining from his body. Shooting people is like shooting crocodiles.

Tertis went roaring by on his motor-bike. He called to me, a savage shout whose meaning I could not determine.

It was the hottest time of day. Evidence of the recent downpour was vanishing rapidly and the streets steamed. Red and green lights danced across my retinas. When nausea moved in my throat and stomach, I tried to amuse myself by thinking of Raddle being sick, but the exercise was too dangerous. There was a shop to my right. I lurched through its open door and sat down on a wicker stool inside. Weakness made me rest my head on the counter. Although I became aware of shuffling noises near me, I was unable to look up.

The dizziness slowly cleared. Still I kept my head down. Fear of death, fear of fear, fear of spewing they gradually gave way to a fear of social embarrassment. I felt a right cunt sitting there.

At last I lifted my head and tipped my bush-hat straight. A thin old man with a little fat lady beside him stood regarding me perplexedly. The shop contained so little stock that it was hard to decide what kind of a shop it was. A cardboard box shop, judging by the evidence. On the other hand, a few hats six or seven lay in his small window, together with a bolt of cloth and a bowl containing yellow heads. It was a head shop. Or a hat shop. Or a bolt shop.

The old man said something excitedly in Malay, pointing to the door.

'Thik-hai, thik -hai,' I said, 'I'm going, don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you or your girl friend.'

He still kept pointing, first at me, then at the street, letting off a stream of Malay. The little fat lady joined in.

'Relax, will you, fuck it? Tida bagoose. How do you know I don't want to buy one of your sodding hats?'



'Has? Sodding has?' he asked. I made a putting-on-head gesture, which he imitated. Fetching a blue felt thing from his window, he attempted to fit it on my head.

'It's not for me, you old cunt! Blue isn't my colour!' I started laughing.

The little old man joined in without looking any less anxious. It occurred to me that I ought to buy the hat for Margey, just to please him. She had said she wanted one. But the bitch was in Brastagi probably plying her trade, for all I knew, flogging her flesh, hawking her hole.

A desultory haggle began from which I could not see how to extricate myself. The old man was writing down prices in Dutch guilders (absurd), Jap guilders (possible), and cigarettes (reasonable), when a shadow fell across the threshold and a young lad entered, leading Katie Chae. She looked as if she had changed only a minute earlier into crisp new pyjamas.

'Oh, Miss Chae, hello.' I was as sweaty as she was damp- proof.

'Hello, big boy. This shopkeeper send along his son fetch me, case you die in his shop. He know you fren' of me.'

'I thought he was trying to tell me to get out of his shop.'

'Why you should think that? This is very nice old man, I know long time since before war. He send along his son fetch me. Son he say you no well, so I come along lend a hand.'

I stood holding the blue hat, feeling more than somewhat of a prick. 'I'm fine, thanks, just a touch of the sun. Please thank the old man and tell him that I do not want to buy the hat.'

She and the old man exchanged short bursts of Malay. Miss Chae stood there very calm and collected; the old man appeared somewhat apologetic. She turned back to me, arching her eyebrows.

'This shobkeeper he say you to take the hat as presen'. If you no can afford to buy, he give.'

'Christ, I don't want him to give it to me. I've got not use for the fucking hat.'

She rapped something at the old man and he replied.



'He say it very good hat, made special in Paris. He like give to you.'

'Fuck it, look, Miss Chae, tell him I'm very grateful but'

'Why you not call me Katie? That my name. All people call me Katie. I call you Horry, same your fren' Rosey, okay? All be friends till the las' moment. You take the hat.'

'Look, I don't want the fucking hat.'

'You no say "fucking" too much, is rude, Horry, be kind boy. Please take the hat, is pretty, this kind old man be plenty insult.' Quick exchange of Malay with the old man again.

'All right, Katie, tell the old man I will buy the hat at his price. Jap guilders, okay?'

More Malay.

'Okay, Horry, he say four hun'red Jap guilders.'

'He say three hundred before.'

'I tell you is a bargain at four hun'red.'

'Not for something I don't shagging well want, it isn't.'

'Please you no say that again, Horry. You plen'y difficult guy.'

As I paid up, the old man, smiling now as well he might produced cigarettes for Katie Chae and me. His fat little wife parcelled up the hat in sheets of newspaper. Finally, I bowed my way out of the shop, with hat and Katie Chae, who strolled elegantly beside me.

'Jesus, do you wonder I feel ill...'

She gave me a look of concern down her long nose. 'Honne' to god, you look plen'y ill. My place just round the next corner. You better come in and take the weight off your feet. I give you a cup of cool tea, okay?'

'No, I'll get back to the billet. I need a beer.' I took a last drag at my cigarette, which had been made of used coffee grounds, and flung the stub into a gutter.

She tutted and waved a finger at me. 'Is no good for you drinking beer when sun is up. I take charge of you just one hour, make you feel



plenty better.'

Relishing the implications of the conversation, through my exhaustion I said, 'You really are a lovely girl, Katie, and don't think I think otherwise, but it's better if I don't come to your place, not even for an hour.'

She looked hurt. A frown creased that beautiful forehead.

'I come to see if you sick, I help you buy hat, now you no trust me anyhow! You must be awful man, Horry, to hate me like that when I only want help you.'

'No, I don't hate you. I admire you, if you want to know. I just think I should be getting back to the billet.'

She stopped, so that I had to stop as well.

'Why you no come my place one hour, take weight off your feet? Maybe you afraid Rosey?'

'Margey.'

'Maybe you afraid Margey find out you come my place, eh? I no tell Margey, honnis' to god. Anyway, that girl go away Medan this morning.'

'I know, Katie, but that's not the reason...'

'Okay, you tell me reason.'

Katie Chae's place was grander than Margey's. She had two rooms over a small shop, and a lavatory and washing-cooking place behind the shop on the ground floor. Of her two rooms, the front one was a lounge with sofas and tables, the rear a bedroom with a big bed, a mirror, and a desk used as a dressing-table.

She watched me as I prowled about.

I sat down on one of the sofas, still clutching the blue hat, while she went to pour us some tea. As soon as I began to drink it, I felt desperately ill.

Excusing myself, I staggered downstairs to have a shit, shutting myself in Katie's little earth closet. As I crouched there with my trousers round my ankles, arms wrapped round the cold sweating flanks of my belly, the murders came rushing back. Blood leaked



irretrievably on a concrete floor. My bowels fell out of my body. Shaking violently, I had to crouch there for a while before I summoned enough strength to use the paper provided.

As I wiped my arse, good feelings poured into me. Fuck it, not being shot was more fun than being shot; England held all sorts of excitements I knew not of; and so on. Even world peace can't stop hope from springing eternal. The massive bowel movement had literally taken a weight off my mind.

Christ, here I was with the mysterious Katie Chae. This was hardly a moment for grief. Even illness could be fended off awhile. Whatever her game was, two could profitably play it. I dragged my trousers up and buckled my belt, reflecting on the mystical aspects of a good crap.

Tottering out of the crapper, I almost collided with Katie. She had followed me downstairs. I was embarrassed by the ripe old stink that followed me out of the closet, but she took my arm and said, 'You kinda sick, big boy. Come, I give China bath, then you feel much better. This punk climate no good. No, no, don't worry, your Katie plenty useful girl, one time work as nurse, know how take care soldiers...'

I did not protest much. If there was one thing I already guessed about Katie Chae, it was that she knew how to take care of soldiers. Once again, she got her way.

Well, I was feeling weak.

In no time, she stripped my clothes off and I was squatting in a stone stoup, trying to look like walking wounded. She ladled water over me with a bowl and, when I climbed out, she dried my flesh from head to foot. Then we went back upstairs. I lay on the bed white Katie painted me with potassium permanganate a favourite whore's trick.

At this point, I was all anticipation, and showed it, yet I let Katie play her little game. She arranged a light cover over me. Lying beside me, she began to massage my neck and temples with supple fingers. How innocent, even childlike, she looked, that long face on a level with mine, her almond eyes serious upon me. She whispered gently in an alien tongue. Against my own intentions, drowsiness descended upon me like a fog. My lids would not stay open. Lazily, I put an arm about her and sank into deep sleep.

It was not at all an ordinary awakening. It seemed as if I was taking up some old favourite conversation. Katie Chae was naked against me and I was already screwing her. God knows what witchcraft it was, but



I swear that for the one and only time in my life I had begun to fuck someone whilst in a complete sleep. Not only that, but I was about to come, the first faint foghorns of orgasm were already sounding through the mist, and her unprecedented body was telling me that it was high time I came. It gathered from my scalp and from the purple-painted soles of my feet, and tossed us yards up the beach from the ocean, at the very moment when I believed myself drowning.

'Oh, oh... oh, oh, Katie, Katie, you incredible... oh...'

She held me. I held her. I drifted back into sleep, smiling as blissfully, as perpetually, as a dolphin.

When I roused again, Katie appeared to be lightly asleep in my arms. A few heads of sweat lay on her upper lip. I gazed at that loaded oriental face with gratitude and delight; as I gazed, I felt with joy that my prick was rising up again. She sensed it against her, stirred, opened her eyes. For a moment, while we stared at each other, her expression did not change. Then she gave me a conspiratorial smile, slipped her hand down the bed, took my prick, and guided it into her luscious body.

Well, there's no use going on about it after all these years. After all, enough good things have happened since. But, oh my darling Katie Chae, there really was something you had that nobody else ever did. You really were some sort of a witch, one of those delicious succubi that men are not supposed to go with if they are to retain their souls, or keep any of the marrow in their spinal cords. That really was communication of a high order.

We finally staggered out of bed and got dressed. I felt pretty delirious fit but delirious. Because of a kind of awe of her, I found little to say. She brought beer. We sat and drank it as the world grew dark outside. Beyond all the changes of the light is something permanent, rarely glimpsed.

In no time, I imagined myself in love with Katie Chae, and presented her with the felt hat.

If you have ever seen an Englishwoman lumping about in a cheongsam, you will know how silly Katie looked in a blue felt hat. Silly but cute. She herself was amused, but she held both sides of the brim and bent almost double, laughing with delight as well as amusement so that I saw the ridges on the roof of her mouth and felt lustful all over again. Again that primaevial stirring in the trousers, reminiscent of a conger eel preparing to belt back to the Sargasso Sea where it belongs.



There was a call from the bottom of the stairs, and Katie leaned over the banister to answer. The spell was broken. I thought back over the events of the day. Again the three figures appeared on the concrete floor of the go-down. Poor old Sontrop but after all, he was only a fucking queer, and they were soldiers the same as I was, and it's a soldier's duty to get himself shot occasionally. It was none of my business. I'd come through the incident, just as I'd come through all the hell of Kohima and Burma. That was war now here were the spoils of war, in the shape of Katie Chae.

I sidled up behind her and ran a hand lightly across her thigh. Katie Chae took firm hold of my wrist, and continued shouting angrily at the man below. Looking down, I admired her slender arm, the beautiful line of her breast. Margey had always said Katie was a whore. Of course. It was natural to think of Katie as a whore; with her talents, what else could she be? War, with its scuttling morals, was her natural element.

Grateful thoughts of Captain Jhamboo Singh arose. There was a way in which I could show gratitude: I could introduce Jhamboo to Katie Chae. He could enjoy himself before returning to India and the scrap heap.

Katie got rid of the intruder and turned her miraculous laughing face into mine, still wearing the silly hat. 'Oh, you lovely sexy Briddish boy, do you have a Briddish cigarette for your o' fren' Katie?'

I produced cigarettes and we lit up. I grasped her bottom.

'Katie, you are the most gorgeous bit of goods I ever came across. Just fantastic.'

She looked at me with almost closed eyes, very Chinese, very sexy, blowing smoke from her lungs.

'Mm, your little Margey warn you 'bout me, I think. She know the genuine hunnerd per cent quality item, take my word.'

This was not a moment at which I particularly wished to discuss Margey. I said, 'I'm feeling better. Lets get back on the bed, Katie. Astonish me again.'

'You give me present. This hat not enough.'

'Anything.'



'Oh, you bring me five hunderd Player cigarette.'

I was dismayed at the demand but dared not argue. I said I would deliver as soon as possible if we could get back to bed.

'No, I must smoke now, rest. Cigarettes first, then more bed. You unnerstand?'

'Um.'

That subject was dismissed. She stood up. 'Now you not feel punk. You like something to eat?'

With visions of the way Margey cooked for me, I thought, if she cooks likes she fucks... and agreed it would be a good idea. Judging by my watches, I estimated that it must be seven o'clock.

'You take me somewhere? I know good place we go. You strong enough? Oh, you so strong man, Horry, you take me good place eat!' She clapped her hands and looked very pleasantly at me.

She deflected a further attempt to return to bed. Almost before I knew what was what, we were going down her stairs, with Katie Chae clutching my arm in the friendliest way. At least she left the felt hat behind.

'Dear Addy,

'It's been too long since I wrote to you last, but I suppose you recall all too well how days pass in the tropics, how unable you feel to sit down and write letters, so I will not make too many excuses. Anyhow, thanks very much for your last letter. Leiden sounds like a very nice place and I was glad you had got a good office job and were feeling that you could settle down in the cold European climate. Soon you can think of me doing the same sort of thing, somehow or other, and I will write to you next from England.

'Meanwhile, I have to give you some awful news. I hardly know how to tell you. You will have heard officially, but I must also drop you a line. At least you understand how bad things are out here in Sumatra.'

Still clutching my fountain pen, I began to examine my left foot. I caught sight of it, lying on the carpet, moderately close to my right foot. I rested it on the edge of the chair and picked at the callouses on the side of the big toe. It smelt all right; I had just had a shower and was clad only in a towel, knotted round my waist. There was still a trace of foot rot. Foot rot had followed me all the way from Kohima,



almost two years ago: a little bit of Assam carried as indelibly on my body as in my heart.

'This is Sunday morning here in Medan. Only yesterday morning your brother Ernst took me out on a crocodile shoot with two of his friends.'

Only yesterday, but two weeks would pass before Addy got the letter. Yesterday would gradually sink back into the past like a dead log in a swamp, but Addy was always going to stub her foot on it. My foot was still resting on the chair. Next to it, fat and complacent, slept my prick. The towel had fallen back to reveal it. It took no notice of me. I tried to take no notice of it. But, Christ, it did look a bit red. Could be just natural soreness, only to be expected. Five hundred Players.

I padded over to a drawer in the bookcase and brought out a magnifying glass I had bought in Padang. Under the glass, my knob definitely looked spotty. Beneath the innocuous-seeming surface lay a virulent scarlet rash, just waiting to break out. I inspected carefully round the rim. Nothing definite but that too was worrying in its way.

Of course she had been with the shagging Japs, and it was well known what terrible diseases they brought with them out of the jungle. When you caught that sort of thing, the MO gave you a pack of K-rations and ordered you to march off into the bush and die.

Despite my unease, the bloody thing was stirring in my hand. What fucking impertinence! As if it had not had enough more than enough on the previous day... I tucked it away under the towel where it could not see me, the way old ladies cover the cage when the parrot swears too much.

'I am sorry to have to tell you that we were ambushed by extremists. Things have got much worse here since you left.'

Worse for the Dutch, better for the British. Worse for just about everyone, except the British, who are pulling out. Presumably it was a gross military error to send us here in the first place. Some sort of mad global strategy involving the lunatics in command: those well-known good guys, Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Harry Truman, swathed in a welter of cigar-, pipe- and fag-smoke, had called together such chums as Chiang Kai-Shek and Smuts and de Gaulle, and cooked up a series of instructions for various admirals and generals hanging about in the ante-chamber. Accordingly, with a rattle of sabres, Zhukov, Montgomery, Eisenhower, and MacArthur trotted off with Poland, the Suez Canal, half of Berlin, and all the Pacific in their respective fangs. Lord Louis Mountbatten got



lumbered with the NEI. Well done, master-strategists! The Americans had been so busy clobbering British imperialism that they had hardly noticed the way the Soviet Union was sweeping various European states up its left trouser-leg.

You can see with hindsight how the NEI fell a bit beyond any major sphere of interest, leaving aside the simple geographical fact that it lay somewhere to the south of Singapore. The only advantages accruing from the whole farcical operation was that the British, under the splendid General Templer, became experienced enough to cope with Communist infiltrators in Malaya, to kick them out and keep them out; also we acted once-bitten, twice-shy thereafter and refused to get involved in reinstating the French in Indo-China. The good old Americans stepped in to help promptly there. So what if they lost the war: they got lots of publicity.

'Internationally, things seem to be in a terrible mess as before. Whatever became of Peace? I'm sure you will weep and ask yourself that.'

Poor dear Addy! And everyone else will ask themselves the same question. Alas for Hope! What should have happened in our time is simple. The US should not have been so isolationist in the thirties. Then her diplomats and all the rest of them who proved so bloody unrealistic would have understood that the most feasible plan for world peace lay with the English-speaking world by which I include people who can nearly speak English, like Indians, Australians, and Norwegians. Then the States would not have hung about on the touch-lines for three years while Britain took such a pasting from the fucking Krauts (who, grant them that, respected the British Empire more than the old Yanks did).

Mind you, it's possible that the Yanks saw through the British. We've fumbled all our chances: the twentieth century hasn't even begun in England yet how we came out on top in two world wars, I'll never understand. You have to admit, we did need the Americans to bale us out.

Right, so the Soviet Union signs that pact with Hitler, thereby showing its true colours, underlining the basic similarity between fascism and communism. So when Hitler starts invading Russia, the Allies cease chivvying him in the West and let him get on with it. Bombing Germany stops and, with the aid of the good old Duke of Windsor, and Mrs Simpson, Hitler agrees in exchange to stop mopping up the Jews so fast.

While this is going on in Europe, similar crafty moves are afoot in the



East. The Japs are allowed to march into India. The Wogs are permitted to see how much they fucking well enjoy that; within a year, they are on their knees, begging the British to come back. None of our brave buggers are lost in one single lousy jungle out there, throwing away their lives for sod all. The Japs, who never know when enough's enough, stream northwards out of the Khyber Pass and start attacking the USSR through Georgia. The USSR strikes back. Jap kamikazi planes strafe Vladivostok. Soviet Air Force bombs Imperial Palace. Jap sub fleet takes Leningrad.

Gradually, the whole war is centred on Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union, right across to the Pacific and including the Japanese Islands. British and Americans sit back peacefully, now and then grabbing odd bits of the globe, such as Borneo, Malta, Africa, the West Indies, Iceland, and Tierra del Fuego. No one mucks about with poor old China. Meanwhile, we're making a whole mass of A-bombs.

When the Germans, the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Russians, the Kurds, the Japs, and anyone else who gets in the way, are down to a few platoons slugging it out in Yakutsk, or some other dreadful place nobody has heard of, the British and the Yanks plaster the whole damn place with A-bombs. We wipe out every single city, and put the entire area under the plough, from the Rhine right the way east to the Pacific, including Japan. Plant the whole bloody sheebang with oak or pine or whatever suits, with barbed wire all round the perimeter and huge signs saying TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Peace-loving people who do not or prefer not to speak English such as the Basques, the Israelis, and the Welsh are settled in new homelands in Inner Mongolia. The Arabs not to put too fine a point on it get the Gobi. Quiet reigns.

The rest of the world receives free English lessons. When you can speak English as fluently as any inhabitant of Detroit or Liverpool, which isn't asking much, you get a World Passport not before. Then all we have to do really is conquer South America, discover a final solution to the Irish problem, and sort things out with the Blacks. In comes an era of world peace such as has not been known before. The Chinese will be encouraged, particularly the women. Chinese restaurants and knocking-shops in every village.

It's a simple plan, it could work. But what good are such utopian schemes? Supposing you did all that, bastards like Tertis would still float to the top and spoil it all.

'Ernst and his two pals were shot down in cold blood. I shall be attending the funeral today and will think of you at the graveside.'



Fat lot of good that will do Addy or Ernst. God, I'm such a shit. That sod Hamil should really have done for me too, instead of handing me a chit saying, 'British, excused Death'. I mishandled that and I've mishandled the business with Margey. It's no good, I'll just have to go home tomorrow as ordered. As directed by global strategy. Fucking global strategy. It's just a few bastards at the top. The trouble is, there's always a constant supply of bastards underneath...

'There is so much I could say which I can't write. Perhaps we shall be able to meet some day somewhere in Europe. Ernst was very brave, so you must be brave and try not to grieve too much. I hope there are people to comfort you in Leiden. I send love and kisses to you from poor old broken-down Medan. Yours lovingly.'

It was difficult to imagine Leiden, or any Dutch town. Had I once seen one of those traditional Netherlands paintings, showing chaps and girls skating on ice with folded arms, and windmills and little brick Brueghelesque houses complete with stalls and ox-roasts, labelled 'Leyden Fair'? I had left England when I was a mere kid. Now I was virtually an old man, and Europe was all a story to me.

The whole world was a story. A sprawling picaresque, telling itself on and on until some sort of contrived happy ending became possible. Last night, when I took Katie Chae for a meal, she had regaled me with episodes from her past life. There was an exotic tale indeed!

Katie had been born the only daughter of a rich Chinese merchant in the Province of Sinkiang. Since I was forced to reveal that I had no idea where Sinkiang was, Katie imperiously summoned a waiter and had paper and pen brought to our table. She drew a map which I have to this day. A big X marks the spot where Katie Chae was born. It is one of the westmost parts of China, almost as far west as Delhi, though thousands of miles north of Delhi. Sinkiang lies north of the Himalayas, north of Tibet, and borders on Afghanistan and some of the grottier bits of the Soviet Union. The sort of remote place that no right-thinking Englishman could ever get straight in his mind.

In the prosperous Chae household, three languages were spoken: the Sinkiang tongue, which was the grand language; the Uighur tongue, which was the language of servants; and the Kazakh tongue, a language used only for boasting and swearing. The Chaes had two homes, a stone house in the mountains for summer, a wooden one for winter in the plains, in the city of Urumchi.

One spring, the young Katie and her mother and her two brothers were being driven to their summer residence. Bandits appeared and



captured them. They were taken into the mountains to await ransom. The bandits were fierce Kirghiz tribesmen of nomadic habit and, for three years, Katie was continually on the move with them over the limitless grasslands of Central Asia. This was her formative period. She learned to ride ponies like the wind. On this unending trek, her mother died. The ransom was never paid.

During a drunken fight, the chief bandit suffered a headwound. The tribe made its way to a desolate region of mudflats which extended further than eye could see. In the distance, snow-capped mountains floated on blue air. Everyone tied planks to their feet to serve as skis while they waded across the dangerous mudflats. They walked over the mud for four days. Bandits and dogs drowned in the clinging stuff.

The survivors arrived at a low island rising above the mud. It was no more than two hundred yards long, and covered with stinking weed.

As the party dragged themselves exhausted on to the eminence, they saw that on its far side lay a sullen river, winding into the distance among shoals. On the island, remarkably, a large wooden house had been built; its windows were shuttered, it was deserted.

Here the bandits remained, week after uncharted week. They pulled fish from the sullen river and hunted crabs and a species of wild cat found on the mudbanks. The chief bandit was going mad from his wound, and filled the house night and day with his cries. One of Katie's brothers drowned in the river whilst swimming.

The day dawned when a boat was sighted distantly on the waters. The bandits became alarmed. Katie was sent out to signal to the craft. The bandits took cover. The boat pulled in to the island; a handsome white man reefed the sail and climbed out. The bandits sprang from their hiding places and seized him. They flung him in the cellars of the house and tortured him. This torture continued for many weeks.

One moonless night, the bandit chief went raving mad. He broke his bonds, burst through a wooden wall, and fired a musket at all and sundry. He killed Katie's surviving brother. In the general panic, Katie crept down to the cellar and released the white man. Together, they escaped to his boat and cast off into the darkness. When they had drifted some distance from the house from which shots and cries came faintly they ran up the sail. By morning, the old wooden building was almost out of sight.

The mans name was John. He was an English explorer. He spoke a little Kazakh, and he and Katie conversed in that language. He said that he had escaped from Kazakhstan, where he had been held



prisoner by Russians. He was gentle and kindly, and took Katie's virginity in the bottom of the boat before the sun was an hour above the horizon.

As, during our meal, dish followed dish, so adventure followed adventure. Katie and John were completely lost. At one time, they remained many months in a country where the people were so impoverished that they lived off dried apricots and small birds caught during annual migrations. In another place, John performed simple conjuring tricks which so alarmed the inhabitants that they presented him and Katie Chae with their one means of transport, the ancient village yak, on condition that John left immediately and never returned.

They rode the yak for a period which could have been two years, forging ever eastwards until, one bitter night, the animal died. They passed days beside its carcass, drying strips of its meat, curing the hide to make themselves warmer clothes, and eating the brains and more tender parts. By now, Katie spoke fairly fluent English and could recite those parts of The Rubiy t of Omar Khayym which John remembered.

As they were leaving the bones of the yak, they were attacked by two savage brothers, one of whom had had his tongue cut out by Chinese soldiers. Both of them had their way with Katie, who was now possibly fifteen. After that, they proved friendly, promising to escort John and Katie towards the fabulous city of Peking. That haven was still a thousand miles away over impossible territory.

The incidents in the story multiplied richly. There is delight in hearing tales of starvation whilst tucking into great bowls of fried rice, crab, octopus, sea cucumber, and nameless things. Katie and I refilled each other's glasses with a poisonous wine while I goaded her on with her story. I came to the conclusion that she had invented all of it, just as one of my first loves, Virginia, had invented a more desirable version of her past. Such tactics seemed to me then, and still do, a recipe for misery except, of course, for the listener, and even he has to have a special taste for such inventions.

Among other highlights in her imaginary career, Katie claimed that she and the mysterious Englishman, John, were captured at a customs post ruled over by a luxurious customs official called Ha Ha Bum, a name not lightly forgotten. Attracted by Katie's youth and beauty, Ha Ha Bum made her his favourite concubine. John was imprisoned, and each one of Ha Ha Bum's fornications was scored upon John's back with a leather whip.



One day in spring, the customs post was attacked by a party of men from the hills. They claimed they were not bandits but revolutionaries. Their conduct was not easy to distinguish from banditry, since they killed Ha Ha Bum, took John prisoner, set fire to the customs post, and raped Katie, although they read passages from Karl Marx while so doing.

The revolutionaries formed a small communist army. They numbered some two hundred men. They had a stronghold in the hills, together with a very old armoured car which had to be pushed everywhere. Women and children lived among them. The communists were suspicious of all foreigners. After a mock-trial, they decided to execute John as an Imperialist before the entire company; they heard him recite passages from Omar Khayym, and that was enough. Katie, however, discovered their plans from one of the women, and persuaded the leaders that John could be exchanged for another armoured car, or possibly for petrol, when they reached civilisation. Katie gave birth to a child in this camp. A little girl with fair hair who was put to death after another mock-trial.

'You must have wept!' I exclaimed.

Katie Chae laughed. 'I wanted to weep a lot,' she said, 'but the climate was plenty dry.'

A plate full of satie came along. As we tucked in, she continued her saga.

Leaving the hills behind, the ragged army entered a terrible barren area, destitute of grass, destitute even of a single stone. It was a frigid desert of rock, in which some of the revolutionaries went mad from drinking their own urine.

In the middle of a dust storm, they stumbled upon an amazing city, built of white marble and totally uninhabited. The city was constructed in the shape of a great square, with sixty-four buildings to a side. The outermost buildings facing the desert were modest, but each succeeding row of buildings as they progressed towards the centre became larger and more grand.

Finally, in the centre of the four thousand and ninety-six buildings, they came across a gigantic structure where the centremost four buildings merged into one. This structure towered to the heavens. Its ante-chambers were panelled with gold.

The army crouched in the golden ante-chambers and slept until the sandstorm passed. Such were the resonances the buildings set up



with the wind currents that by morning the whole city was swept clear of sand. In this way, the city could never be buried.

Katie Chae had been pressed into military service as a nurse. She was tending the sick when scouts came in and reported that this magnificent token of human life in the midst of the death of nature was nothing more nor less than a mortuary. The thousands of houses were but glorified tombs, each enshrining a mummified corpse. The central building enshrined the king of this lost nation. In alarm, the revolutionaries rapidly quitted this megapolis of death and shrine of capitalism. They forged eastward again.

Eventually, they entered the Inner Kingdom through a break in the Great Wall. John had by now been elected a leader of the revolutionaries. His manner became remote and dedicated. Katie went through a form of marriage with one of the other leaders, bearing him two more children, both boys. Somewhere in the north of Shansi, the main body of the army was ambushed in a pass and had to fight. John was slain. Katie was captured and, of course, raped. Some time later, they arrived by boat at a port on the Gulf of Chihli. Katie fell desperately ill. Some Spanish nuns looked after her and with one of them, Maria, Katie had a lesbian affair which aided her convalescence.

In the town, she met a Chinese journalist and fell in love with him her first real love affair only to find that he was one of her older brothers, who had long ago left Sinkiang for the cities. The Japanese armies were advancing; she and this brother were the last to escape from the port, both disguised as nuns. Following many travels, they found sanctuary in Sumatra. After a year, the Japanese entered Medan, and there was no further escape. She showed me a photograph of her brother over a last glass of wine. It was the journalist Chae, who called himself Tiger Balm. Perhaps her incredible story was partially true.

We staggered back to her flat, arm in arm. I spent the night with her, lying in her spotless arms, embracing history, geography, as well as a tender female body. She woke me just before dawn, and I made my way grudgingly back to our lines with my revolver ready in my fist.

I owed her fifteen hundred cigarettes.

It was one of those mornings. Sunday. Heat. Guilt. At least I had written to Addy; that was a decent act. Even shits act decently on occasion, since doing good is as tempting as doing harm.

The incipient sores on my prick were nothing to the sores on my



conscience. I had spent the night with Margey's enemy, the hated Katie Chae. Margey would be bound to find out, or Katie would see to it that she found out. The sooner I got away from Medan the better.

That was the other worry. I had to tell Margey properly that marriage was off, had never been on the cards, that I'd been mad. Maybe she already knew as scores of girls in her position had found out that necessity rules, despite all protestations of love. Yesterday's killings had persuaded me working on my cowardice and my age that Sumatra was no place for Europeans. Ernst's and Jan's fate would be mine if I stayed. Medan was under the curse of change.

So I should steel myself to inform Margey that I was yellow. No, that was the wrong expression in the circumstances. That I was scared. That way, she would keep her self-respect. She would survive.

Bloody Margey, what a pain in the neck she was, making me feel so bad, just because we went to bed together. And separately. All the things I had given her... Guilt, guilt... If I got rid of her smartly enough today, then maybe I could have another look in at Katie Chae. Christ, what a fantastic gift Katie Chae had! Her gift was no less than the gift of being a poet, musician, or philosopher. While that radiance shone on me, I must bloody well bask in it. Margey could go to hell if it allowed me one more session with Katie Chae, that slender, elegant creature.

Older now and wiser, I can see that there was something in Katie's make-up which encouraged full response. Everywhere, there are women like that, who instinctively fan the great masculine fire just as there are women who instinctively quell it.

I fell into an intense erotic daze. Tomorrow, the plane... There were things to be done, if I could exert myself to do them. Somehow or other, I must face Margey this morning; she would be back from Brastagi. Then this afternoon was the funeral of Sontrop, de Zwaan, and Nieuwenhuis, to which I had volunteered to go. After that, Katie Chae.

From the canteen I bought fifteen hundred Players in thirty round tins of fifty each.

Katie, you understand. You want no promises, you utter no promises. You would never regret that I was leaving tomorrow; you are always on good terms with men, and so another man will always come along to treat you well, to worship your gift. You are truly fortunate, Katie even war only brings you more profit. You don't piss around with marriage and security arrangements. You're a priestess of the world's



oldest religion...

Or maybe I should shoot myself.

I took my revolver out and placed it on my little green table next to the envelope addressed to Leiden. My gaze went to it as I dressed, as I sat and put on my boots and puttees. A compact, business-like machine. I weighed it in my hand, pressed the muzzle against my temple, holstered it, and went downstairs into the bright, the burning sunshine.

'Cushy for some,' said a deep voice, and Wallace from the orderly room, mess tins dangling at the end of his simian arm, ambled by.

'That man,' I shouted in my sergeant's voice. 'Get your back up! Walk like a man, not a ruptured fucking dromedary!'

He looked back, grinned, offered me two fingers. One of bloody Corporal Kyle's men, of course.

The sergeants' mess was regularly full of walking wounded at breakfast time. I was late. Five bods remained there Ron Dyer, sitting alone on one side of the table, resting his hairy belly on its edge, and RSM Payne, Jock Ferguson, Scubber, and Charlie Meadows in a desolate huddle at the top end.

'Watch your vehicles,' Dyer called as I entered. The others just twitched.

'Get knotted,' I responded pleasantly, taking a seat opposite Dyer.

Our dining room was undistinguished, painted in a pale lime green calculated to make anyone entering with a hangover feel ten times worse. Only a year before, Jap officers had lodged here. They had filled the room with grotesquely heavy gothic furniture looted from the Dutch. Eagles, bears, and corpulent rosettes studded this menacing woodwork. There was also a large coloured print of Fujiyama, which Dickie Payne had insisted should not be removed.

The Chinese orderly appeared to tell me that breakfast was all pinnish. I cut him off with a request for coffee. A neglected piece of toast lay on the table. As I scoffed it, I inspected the quartet on my right. Payne had eyes like pissholes in the snow; Jock was no better; Charlie somewhat worse. Wally Scubber looked like a ghost.

'Ever tried Black Tartan Wombat?' I asked.



Charlie answered in a frail husk of a voice, conveying as much information as possible in as few words as possible. 'Malacca Refined Palm Spirit. Death.'

'You lads never learn.'

Dyer belched. 'Looking pale yourself, Stubbs. What have you been up to?'

I contemplated one of the eagles, perched stiffly high behind his head. 'I've been wondering whether to shoot myself, if you must know.'

'Don't waste the ammunition. We might need it for a better cause. I suppose you realise that the BORs held a party for you last night, only you didn't show up. Discourtesy. Bad for relationships between NCOs and Other Ranks, wouldn't you say? Or I suppose you couldn't care less, like everyone else in this shower.'

'Fuck the BORs. I've no doubt they managed to get blind drunk without me, as on every other Saturday night.'

The orderly brought coffee and poured me a cup. Dyer reluctantly pushed the sugar across and relaxed his inquisitorial act as he lit a cigarette.

'Ah, first of the day always the best! Yes, they were really going at it last night. A bacchanalia. Disgusting.'

'Don't mention drink,' Payne whispered, clutching his head. 'Never again...'

Ron Dyer blew smoke into the air and continued as if he had not heard. 'Mind you, they had provocation, give them that. The Jap stores delivered them a whole crate of crme de menthe yesterday afternoon. You know cr me de menthe? That green muck Windmill Street whores drink in the bar of the Regent Palace.'

'You'd know more about that than I would.'

The coffee was almost cold. I swigged it with distaste, watching Charlie light a fag with trembling hand and half listening to Dyer. The Jap officers must have indulged in similar conversations, while the same waiters served the same lousy coffee. I had a sad feeling that here I was involved in this sordid affair of drink, spunk, and shoot-ups, and all the while there was another Horatio a saner, kinder man who had become lost amid the machinery of alternatives which proliferate in time of war; I wondered if I would ever find him again.



'But a whole crate. That's forty-eight bottles! The silly so- and-so's were going at it like nobody's business, all clutching pint glasses full of the stuff. How'd you fancy a nice fresh pint of crme de menthe right now, Jock?'

'Away with ye,' husked Jock Ferguson, coughing fruitily into a handkerchief.

'I looked in on them at curfew and they were going full blast. Like savages. Throwing up everywhere. You never saw such a night.'

'Ah, well, Ron, brutal and licentious soldiery... As Shakespeare has it, "Not once or twice in our fair island story Has the road to ruin proved the path to glory." ' I thought that was fairly bright for a man in the throes of terminal syphilis, but Dyer ploughed on unmoved, shaking ash into the remains of marmalade on his plate.

'At two in the morning you could hear their gramophone still going. They debagged Corporal Kyle, so I heard. Raving drunk. Bad soldiering. There will be some thick heads round there this morning.'

I poured myself another cup of coffee. Undrinkable, if truth be told.

'Good news about that cunt Kyle, anyway.' I had completely forgotten the BORs' party. Happy though I was to have missed total immersion in cr me de menthe, appearing to snub the Other Ranks was just one more thing to feel bad about. I rose from the table, nodded to the RSM, and clapped Ron Dyer on his bare shoulder as I went by.

'Cheero, Ron, see you in the bar of the Regent Palace some time. Merdeka!'

Outside the mess, three swart members of the Indian Pioneer Corps were pulling planks and tarpaulins about, trying to repair the cover of the cesspit. Their sluggish movements suggested that they were not optimistic about the outcome.

Medan on a Sunday morning was quieter than usual. All the shops were shut. The Dutch, and such of the local population as had been converted to Protestantism, were at church singing European hymns to a European god. This might be one of the chief cities of the new Indonesian Republic, but it chugged along still under the mores of a Netherlands provincial town. One of my watches said five to ten and the other nearly a quarter to eleven, so I reckoned it must be at least eleven-twenty. When I wound them both vigorously, I was making the loudest noise in the street.



My last days in Sumatra return vividly as I write, although they have been stored away forgotten for years. Yet I cannot remember any part of the way from our lines to the Kesawan, except for the railway crossing a point of danger. Only an old faded photograph reminds me of what the de Boer club looked like. This must be because, whenever I walked that way, my head was pleasantly filled with thoughts of women; my surroundings scarcely registered. Which suggests a new reason why people recall the days of their childhood so clearly: childhood is the only time of life when one's brain is not preoccupied with hopes, regrets, recollections, lecherous anticipations, of the other sex...

Naturally, the story of Katie's adventures was stuffed with lies. All those rape fantasies, for instance. She gloried in sex. I asked her where she acquired her knowledge of the art of love; she replied that it all came from the Spanish nun. That could have been said in order to titillate me. You would never get to the bottom of all the mysteries about Katie Chae.

Tomorrow, my flight to Singapore. There I would have to hang about in Nee Soon Transit Camp until the old Otranto arrived for the voyage home which could mean a wait of up to a fortnight. Would Katie come over and visit me for that period if I paid her? We could probably get a room in Nee Soon village; there were some quite striking houses where the Arabs sold rugs and pouffes. I had plenty of back-pay. But how many cigarettes would it take?

What a swine I was to even think of such a thing! Above all first I must get things straight with Margey.

In the Chinese quarter, the Ambonese were taking over the pavement, strolling and stretching and calling to each other. Big amiable black men sat at the open windows of their billet, tuning guitars or cleaning machine-guns. Christ, Amboina must be some place! Shite-hawks swooped above the street, hoping that the guns would go off. On the corner of Bootha Street, the restaurant was open and doing no business. Two waiters lolled outside, smoking; we exchanged greetings.

I made an effort to quicken my pace.

The signs of mourning were still on Margey's weather-beaten door. The exotic characters had curled up in the sun like flabby hedgehogs. An overnight rainstorm had caused the red dye of the paper to run down the door, where it resembled the blood of a leukaemia victim. The white flowers had died and were infested with small flies.



A paper casket stood on the table in the middle of the room, surrounded by fresh flowers. It was an emblem of the real coffin, now decently buried: the processes of corruption are fast on the equator maggots burst out of eyes not closed twenty-four hours since. Several old people, with the wrinkled walnut faces age etches on the Chinese, were shuffling round the room. The Brastagi relations, no doubt.

Inevitably, boring old Fat was there, sitting in one corner smoking watchfully on a bamboo chair tipped back against the wall. He called to me, beckoning with a languid paw.

'Ha, so, Missa Stuss, you so kine come bag this house 'gain after rong ti'. I no 'spec' you come bag this house any more ti' you go fry bag Ingrant.' He made plane noises and zoomed his hand around to help convey his meaning. I didn't think much of the standard of imitation.

All the same, he deflected me enough to try and solve a minor mystery. I asked Fat how it was that Tiger Balm, Katie Chae's brother, came here when Margey so hated Katie Chae. As far as I could understand his answer, the Tiger Balms of this world were lofty pillars of the local Chinese community, while the Hwan Fat Sians of this world were lowly worms. The Tiger Balms had established the Hwans in accommodation in their hour of need. Money also changed hands but from whom to whom, and exactly why, or how earned, I could not determine.

Cutting short a rambling socio-economic survey in pidgin, I said, 'Where's Margey, Fat? Upstairs?'

'You priss no worry Margey.' He jerked his thumb towards the back yard. 'Margey busy do prenty wor'.' He spoke feelingly, as if suffering from the same complaint.

Going moodily to the rear, I caught sight of Margey through the glass door. She was in her working pyjamas, bent double over an old bucket. Sunshine hit the wall behind her. As I pushed the door open, I saw that she was doing something vigorous with water washing a pair of Fats winter trousers or drowning a turkey were two possibilities that sprang to mind.

'Hello, Margey!' Spoken rather coolly. This could be my last meeting with her, and I wished everything to be dignified and decent.

She looked up from the bucket, smiling and frowning as she straightened. I saw how small she was, how lost she would look on Number One Platform, Kings Cross. Or in the bar of the Regent



Palace.

Then she flicked her head, scowled, and went back to the washing/drowning operations, turning her back on me. If anything, this response made me feel worse than the terminal syphilis did.

Entering the yard, I circled her in order to get a look at her face.

'Missed you yesterday, Margey.'

Furious scrubbing was her answer.

'You didn't tell me you were going to Brastagi, Margey.'

Savage scrubbing. The turkey was getting hell.

'Stop that, Margey, and pay attention. I've got a present for you.' (I had brought along a tin of Euthymol tooth powder, a packet of frizette mixture, a jar of red currant jelly, a box of liquorice allsorts, a comb, and two tins of Portuguese sardines.)

Without ceasing operations, she said, 'I no want your beastly present. You give to one your other girls.'

This was going to be tricky.

'Sounds as if you had a bad time in Brastagi. I'm off if you won't speak to me properly.'

She gave a grunt. Her face was red with anger. Like a little fury, she whirled round, swinging the turkey/trousers above her head. I was trapped in a corner of the yard. As I instituted the first impulses of retreat, Margey struck me with the sopping object squarely across the head and shoulders. Caught off-balance, I fell backwards and sprawled in the filthy yard. The bag with the presents broke, scattering goods across the flagstones.

Margey leapt upon me, still beating me with the lethal object and screaming as she did so. Water drops flew up into the air, sparkling as they dropped again.

'Why I speak you properly, hog-pizzle? What you do deserve I speak you properly? You low thing, I go Brastagi only for family duty. First I watch for you like proper faithful China girl. You no come here yes'erday like you promise. Why you no come here like you promise? Aei-ya, you dirty disease soldier, you no care where Margey am, if I live or dead!'



Protecting my face with my arms, I struggled to my feet. She continued to beat me. By now I was drenched from head to foot, and the turkey hurt.

'Pack it in, you stupid bitch! I'm soaked! I had to go crocodile-shooting. How did I know you were suddenly going to disappear? Why didn't you leave me a note you're so bloody educated, aren't you?'

She stopped beating me as she gathered what I had said. We stood staring at each other, panting heavily. Even flecked with suds, she looked immaculate. Dirty water poured from my shoulders. I heard a scuffle behind me; Fat and the Brastagi relations were jostling for a good view of the quarrel. In fury, I grabbed up the jar of red currant jelly, which lay by my font, and hurled it at Fat's face. Fortunately, I missed the window. The jar struck the stone wall and broke.

Enormous wasps the size of carrots descended on the red chunks of goo as they hit the flagstones.

'You call it crocodile-shooting now, hey, you man-pig? I know what you get up direct moment my back is turn. You same like all men, no sense only for that stinking thing in your pants.' She kicked one of the tins of sardines flying. 'Why you not have more respect', go and stick that that hairy blood-sausage up any dirty disease hole comes along, you foreign monster, pig, shit, pizzle, bumhole!'

She shook her head as she spat the words out. With a scream, she began to larrup me with the drowned object again. I grabbed it and wrenched it from her.

'Cut out this bloody senseless useless yelling, for Christ's sake! What the hell are you going on about? I did bloody go crocodile-shooting yesterday, and nearly got myself killed, while you were pissing about in Brastagi.'

Instead of showing any remorse, she jumped at me and grabbed back the drowned thing. There she stood, silent and dramatic, regarding me with haunted eyes, clutching her elbows as I had seen Ida Lupino do. She held the pose long enough to strike terror into my heart, ignoring the wasps which zoomed about us. Then she lifted an accusing finger and began on a new tack, speaking slowly at first.

'I see, I unnerstand all what you say, Horatio, you shit-sergeant. You go crocodile-shooting yes'erday. And that's why today in the bazaar Katie Chae wear new blue felt hat with matching silk ribbon, is it?' On the last words, her voice rose to a blood-churning scream of triumph; even the onlookers flinched. She knew I was undone.



I was undone. Pointless to try and argue that there was, in fact, no casual connection between the crocodile-shoot and the hat-bestowal. After one or two false starts, during which I was screamed down, I tried the red-herring tactic of explaining that the hat in no way represented payment for services rendered, or at least had not been obtained originally as an object intended for presentation in exchange for services rendered, and indeed had been procured only with extreme reluctance by the accused, who had regarded himself as rooked at the time of the transaction and who, furthermore, had not, in his innocence, anticipated any services whatsoever being offered, never mind rendered; and moreover who, had he had the wit to anticipate the full, generous, delicious and oft-repeated nature of those services, would probably have procured, not one, but half a dozen fucking blue felt hats.

'Lying diseased dog-swine! Pizzle, shit!' She waved her fists above her head, stamping her foot at the same time. 'How you think I feel? I just turn my back only one day, for duty go and fetch honoured relatives to this place of mourning and gloomy reverences, and you you who say you love me, you swine- liar! you at once go madly fucking and distributing hats to all biggest whores in Medan!'

'What are you saying, you bitch? All? All?'

'Not all but at least biggest that Katie Chae. How many times I warn you about Katie Chae? Every day I tell you I hate that disease whore, I tell you stay away Katie Chae, no speak her, even. You smile like a puppy-dog, then direct moment my back is turn, bish, you in bed with her and stick that filthy prick of your up her dirty evil hole! Jesus God! Can't you understand, you fucking deprave Blighty soldier-murder-bastard, I no want touch you any more after you go lie with that whore!'

I pulled the drowned thing from her grasp it was a garment of some totally inscrutable kind and flung it into a pile of crap at the back of the yard.

'Look, for God's sake, Margey, calm down, will you? And stop calling Katie Chae a whore, too, or I'll get angry. We met by chance, if you must know, so what we did wasn't whoring, okay? I'm sorry if you are upset but it wasn't planned and'

'No whoring! No whoring!' She screamed, shaking her head so that her hair swirled round her neat neck. 'You say no whoring? What you think that Katie Chae is? How much she charge you, eh, how much?'



'I'll bloody belt you in a minute. Don't you talk to me about whoring, Rosey'

'Why I no talk? Just why? When I ever make charge to you, Horatio? Maybe you like better deprave girl who charge high price, you scum-sergeant!'

'You may just have noticed that I've come round this morning to see you, not Katie. Bloody good welcome you give me!'

'I give you some good welcome. I hate her, I hate her!' She started slapping me with her hands. I caught her thin wrists. The feel of her made me more angry. I lifted her off the ground and swung her to and fro.

'I don't know what Katie's done to you, but just don't take it out on me. Calm down, or I'll beat you.'

'Oh, oh, oh, you kill me!' Margey struggled furiously in my grip. 'She take all my men, that's all why I hate that poxy whore. What she got that's so good poor Margey don't have, I like to know? Every time, every time, Katie Chae make poor Margey disgrace. Margey real good girl and be faithful to her Horry, yet this terrible Katie Chae she take him away so easy in one day, just one lousy day, and charge too high price, I bet.'

When I set her down, she covered her face and wailed. Now the self-pity act. Intuitively, I saw what would follow: the cuddles, the kisses, the making up, the unbidden promises to take her with me to Singapore, to England, the offers of marriage. I knew my own weakness in that respect. Bringing up my hand, I gave her a wallop on her shapely little bum.

She let out a marvellous yell of rage. Once started, it sounded as if it would never stop. Heads popped up over the wall and popped down again while Margey was still in no more than mid-yell. She shook her head, letting her dark hair scatter across her face, while she waved her fists at my nose.

'You dare hit China girl, you smelling rapist dog! Oh, oh, oh, may the gods see this bad hit and pass judgement to cut off your piss-cock, you bastard man! Ged out of here, out, out, out, away, murderer, never speak me once more time again!'

Another scream, decibels flying. I decided that was it. Turning to flee, I struck my head on the lintel of the door. Wasps wheeled about me bearing blond-like gobbets of jelly. The pause gave her time enough to



snatch up the bucket of dirty water. With aim and energy born of fury, she flung it. Even as I reeled from contact with the doorway, striking at stars and wasps, I got the works in the nape of my neck. I blundered through the establishment, scattering water over cowering Brastagi relations, barging past Fat, running for safety, yelling for help.

'You'll be lucky if you get off tomorrow, Stubbs. You know that nothing in Sumatra ever runs to time. The bloody Van Heutsz never turned up at Belawan yesterday.'

Charlie Meadows and Johnny Mercer were helping me pack. My two tin trunks were full. Ida Lupino and the Monkey God were down off the wall.

They filled me in on the Van Heutsz. The RAPWI convoy, under an escort of South Wales Borderers, had arrived at Belawan the previous afternoon to await the ship. It never came. The whole party was forced to return to Medan before darkness fell. Later a message was received from Singapore to say that engine trouble had developed; the boat would arrive twenty-four hours late. So today the convoy was setting out hopefully again.

'The RAF will do better by me tomorrow,' I said.

'Face it, Horry, in your subconscious you're longing to get back to a hero's welcome,' said Mercer.

I kept thinking about the city of the dead Katie Chae had described, wondering that even people who lived in frigid deserts should be prodigal enough to provide so grandly for their dead. The revolutionaries with whom Katie was living at the time claimed that the nearest marble quarry was a seven-week journey away. What were such people like, I asked myself. Nobody could tell me that. Only if I went there, travelling the ground myself, would I be able to find some sort of answer to the question.

And when I got home to England, when people asked me what kind of people lived in Medan, in Sumatra, there was no sort of answer I could give that would satisfy me, let alone them. There was no answer. The people who lived in Sumatra were absolutely like everyone else, and totally different.

It was possible that nobody would ask the question. They would not want to know. I visualised England itself as a sort of mortuary in a frigid desert. Sweating-hot Sumatra was where the marble was quarried.



Meanwhile, my bloody neck ached from the impact of that well-aimed bucket.

The Dutch cemetery occupied a site on the outskirts of Medan, near the Deli river. It was entirely surrounded by a low piaster wall with yew hedges on the inner side of the wall. Shelter was afforded by catalpas and plane trees such as you might find, I suppose, in any small Dutch town. I was touched by the way the Dutch clung to their Dutchness on the equator, though I grew impatient when the British did the same kind of thing in India.

A smart Ambonese guard paraded at the entrance to the cemetery, where one of their Jeeps was parked in the shade. Sitting in the Jeep was a white officer, operating a wireless set. The Dutch were maintaining their customary state of alert. They knew what a good opportunity an event like a funeral provided for Indonesian surprise attacks.

Also parked under the trees was a three-tonner and a Jeep with 26 Div flashes. The three-tonner had brought a military escort of South Wales Borderers, who were parading at ease inside the cemetery. The Jeep belonged to Jhamboo Singh, representing British officialdom. There was a section of white Dutch troops in the cemetery, together with civilians with black crepe bands round their arms, relations of the dead men. All told, not a large turn-out. A good percentage of the Dutch community was at Belawan, enjoying the time-honoured sport of waiting for the Van Heutsz.

I ripped Jhamboo Singh off a salute and said, 'I don't suppose this will take too long, will it, sir?'

Jhamboo rammed a cigarette-holder between his white teeth and said, 'Sgt Stubbs, you have come to this place to render your final respects to three brave men. As such, you are a representative of both the British and the Indian Army. Your turn-out is a disgrace. Why is that?'

He was himself dapper as usual, twinkling from cap-badge to shoes. His KD uniform was freshly starched and ironed without wrinkle or sign of sweat. He was fragrant. By contrast, my jungle green was already wet under the arms and between my shoulder-blades. My old bush-hat, veteran of Assam and Burma campaigns, drooped nonchalantly over my face. My bar of medal ribbons also slanted a little across my left breast-pocket.

'Sorry, sir. I'm an old campaigner, sir. I done myself up smart as I could.'



' "I did", Sergeant, not "I done". I detest slovenly English in NCOs that way leads to slovenly discipline. Your belt has not seen blanco at least one whole week. Please get it attended to.'

'Yes, sir. You know I'm time-expired.'

'Indeed. So are the dead we are here to honour.'

His expression was lamb-like but grim a sheep contemplating destiny. I dismissed and moved away. Either he was regretting being so friendly earlier, or he was just staging a little public officer behaviour.

As we were speaking, a vehicle drove into the cemetery. A blue-jowled Dutch army chaplain jumped out and began to supervise, in a business-like way, the unloading of three coffins. Each coffin was covered with a Dutch flag, on the top of which lay three small bouquets of flowers. At the same time, three kite-hawks arrived and perched in the highest tree nearby, to remind us that even if men's souls belonged to God, their bodies were excellent protein.

It was my feeling that the Dutch civilians knew who I was and wanted nothing to do with me. They did not even look in my direction. We fell into file behind the coffins and the armed escort, our heads bent in the hot sun.

Directly we were drawn up beside the newly dug graves, the chaplain started to speak. His delivery was brisk and unsentimental.

His pace reminded me of the crocodile-hunt: in time of danger, everything is done at the double. All eyes were on him, or downcast on the fresh earth. In that earth, little avid things moved, worms, centipedes, beetles in particular, their carapaces glinting blue or viridian as they scurried down into the hole. It wouldn't take them long to bore into the boxes. Their work too was done at the double.

Although I couldn't tell what the old boy with the dog-collar under his uniform was saying, I hoped he was making reference to the shite-hawks and the beetles, and having a word to say about how the tropics are much better than cold climates at setting life and death slap up against one another, practically in a copulating position.

It was hard not to think of death in Medan as hot and ardent, rather than cold. The image came back to me of the three men lying in curious attitudes on the go-down floor, but its force had been eroded by the ministrations of Katie Chae. Perhaps the old boy was chuntering on about Sontrop being a practising homosexual. Well,



that was another thing you couldn't practice, six feet under. There was a law against it down there, plus a similar law against fucking.

As the stream of Dutch flowed by us, I let my gaze wander. A British army vehicle was drawing up on the other side of the wall. Someone was late; the coffins, with their bouquets already wilting in the heat, were about to be lowered. The vehicle was a gin-palace.

That was curious. I found myself looking for something before I knew what. I was looking for the word MERDEKA, stencilled in yellow paint just behind the cab. It wasn't there. It was not our vehicle. This was one of the gin-palaces stolen from Belawan.

This gin-palace would be packed with Indonesians. Because of its British origins, it could slide in beside the unsuspecting Ambonese guard at the gate without being challenged.

I was standing with Jhamboo behind the South Wales Borderers, who were raising their rifles to fire a salute as the coffins were lowered. I seemed to stand there for ever, frozen, while that dark vehicle glided in under the shading trees.

Then I grabbed the arm of the second lieutenant who was in charge of the Borderers' detail. I blurted a warning.

'Jolly good,' he said. 'Thanks so much. Everyone take cover behind the wall, schnell, schnell! Take cover!'

'Haast, haast!'

People were pretty haast, mourners and soldiers alike. Jhamboo grasped immediately what was happening. As a Dutch major turned, angry at the interruption, Jhamboo explained and pointed out the gin-palace.

The major's grey eyes lit. His head thrust forward. I never saw pugnacity overtake a man so fast. His little white moustache crackled with static. He was a well-built man with greying crew-cut hair and one of those distorted mouths you find on people condemned to spending a lifetime talking Dutch. He made it to the cemetery wall at a run, cleared it with a flying leap, and gave the word to the Ambonese.

The Indonesians, seeing their ruse was discovered, flung wide the rear doors of the gin-palace and opened fire.

They had a Japanese machine-gun mounted on the floor of the vehicle. The sod behind it bared his teeth as he let go his first burst.



From the cab, another extremist fired a light machine-gun. The whole sunlit afternoon started to go up in smoke.

'Take cover, don't panic!' yelled Jhamboo. He ran up to the wall, drawing his revolver.

The coffin-bearers let go of the ropes. Down went the coffins plunging head-first into the ground. Everyone dived for cover. One matron jumped in after the coffins.

The good old Borderers commenced rapid fire.

Molotov cocktails started to explode among the graves. Amateur things in old Red Fox cans, without great force. The Indonesians had been caught on the hop, their quick strike had misfired. Even the machine-gun, mounted as it was on the floor of the gin-palace, was incapable of firing over the top of the wall into the cemetery. It could only create havoc outside the gates.

Yet the place quickly looked like a battlefield, with the explosions from the Molotov cocktails. The Ambonese, those guitar-playing brigands, were in the thick of the fight. Jhamboo and I were behind a tree, firing intermittently, with poor vision forward. Our little universe consisted almost entirely of lunatic noise, with bullets flying everywhere. It was easy to imagine that the Ambonese had been killed, every last man jack of them, in that first spray of machine-gun fire.

The three-ton lorry on the other side of the wall was hit in its petrol tank. Its cab was immediately enveloped in flame. The fire jumped upwards, catching the canvas, which burned fiercely. Next minute, the flames were in the catalpas above our heads, and smoke blew across the scene.

The Borderers kept up their fire. The sod in the cab of the gin-palace was knocked out. Cab windows burst outwards, and screaming came from inside. The gin-palace gave a convulsive jerk and began moving off in a series of lurches. Its rear doors swung to and fro. The machine-gun was still firing, the gunner lying flat on the floor.

Heat from the blazing lorry and tree drove Jhamboo and me to find fresh cover. The gin-palace moved through the smoke up the cobbled street. Ambonese scrambled from beneath it they had dived for shelter between its wheels when the firing began. The major with the crew-cut had climbed on top of the vehicle and was trying to ram a Mills bomb through its ventilator; he sprawled on the roof with his legs dangling as the vehicle wove its course away from the scene of



battle.

Inside the vehicle, behind the machine-gunner, two members of the TRI were running from side to side in complete panic.

The Borderers abruptly held their fire. They would not risk hitting the major. Comparative quiet fell. We watched as the vehicle jerked away up the road, both its rear tyres flat.

One of the Ambonese who had taken shelter under the gin- palace was still hanging on and being dragged along on his back over the cobbles. He had his left arm hooked over the generator tow-bar at the rear of the vehicle. In his right hand was a grenade.

He lobbed it in. It exploded.

The force of the blast came our way. Leaves from trees swirled past us. The shock released me from a kind of spell; I tore myself from cover and ran out through the gate into the street.

All danger was over. I heard myself laughing insanely. The Ambonese who had flung the grenade was lying on the cobbles, protecting his head with one arm as if dead. The interior of the gharry was in flames, filled with smoke and ghastly bloody things writhing about.

The Dutch major had been flung clear by the explosion and actually landed on his feet. He stood in the middle of the street, shouting and shaking his fist at the gin-palace which retreated in a series of frantic leaps and bounds up the road, veering first to one side and then the other like an epileptic wallaby.

Orders were shouted in Dutch and English. Metal-shod army boots clattered on cobbles. Jhamboo was reassuring the civilians; the military assembled in the street. The Borderers spread out to guard the area while chaos was regularised.

Despite the havoc, only one man had been killed the radio operator in the Dutch Jeep. One Ambonese had been shot in the upper arm. He was a meaty fellow. His mates brought him to sit in the grass against the wall. While his sergeant examined the wound, he smiled, showing white teeth. Several other people suffered minor scratches and grazes, nothing serious. The Dutch major declined to be examined.

The three-tonner was a write-off; we got the Jeeps to safety and let the trees burn.

With commanding calm, the Dutch padre returned to the graveside



and completed the service. He finished by saying a few words in English.

'Our duties here today are to those who passed over, but we pray that the Lord will also bring comfort to the hearts of those who still frequent the scene of events. We all hope to gain life everlasting. Until such time, life is more important than death.'

Ernst would not have been displeased by the manner of his burial. I felt a pricking behind the eyes as we filed out of the cemetery, under the smouldering trees, where the stink of cordite lingered like an ugly perfume. The incident convinced me that I no longer had stomach for the incidents of war: it really was time to go home.

The radio operator had sent a warning message through before he died. As the last amens were said, fresh vehicles and troops arrived. A lieutenant directed them in pursuit of the enemy gin-palace. The mourners retired to the funeral parlour, which stood almost opposite the burial ground. First aid was given to the lightly wounded and big tots of genever to everyone. The Ambonese, of course, were left outside on guard. Jhamboo was the only non-white present in the parlour.

The general consensus of opinion was that my timely warning had saved everyone from following Sontrop and Co. into the grave. Drinks and big fat cigars were thrust upon me; I was engulfed in broken English and gold-toothed smiles. An aged aunt of Jan de Zwaan's, who had spent the war interned in a Jap prison camp, made everyone drink a toast to me. Shame rose red in my cheeks. If only they knew how the heart to fight, so strong in Assam, had left me! If they'd seen me crying in the go-down... I thanked them. When I announced that I was starting on the road back to England the next day, they cried and protested, and more drink went the rounds.

Jhamboo insisted on shaking my hand too.

'Acute observation on your part, Sergeant Stubbs. You add one more small detail to the heroism of the British and Indian armies. The Empire depends on such valour. Tomorrow, I shall break this wretched "O" Section mutiny by facing the men myself. That I'm determined. You will be in the air then, but you must think of me, facing my very last challenge as a commissioned officer. I shall shoot to kill if they charge at me, and you will read the incident in The Times.'

'Actually, I think it was hangovers as much as mutiny, sir.'



'Nonsense, nonsense mutiny is mutiny, and I shall stand firm.'

'I'll be thinking of you, sir. Good luck, sir.'

'Thank you, Sergeant Stubbs.' His moustache vibrated.

We saluted each other. The Dutch major with the crew-cut applauded.

After all this, it was inevitable that we moved en masse to the Dutch major's bungalow in the RAPWI area. There was a sense of surprise when we emerged from the undertaker's parlour into the street, to find that the burnt-out lorry was still there and the trees by the cemetery still smouldering. I was bundled into a civilian car, where I immediately started to weep gin-flavoured tears on some woman's shoulder.

At the major's place music flowed as well as drink. The major began to laugh a great deal. Several attractive pushers showed up, wearing low-cut dresses. A party got under way. Everyone became light-hearted, even the older people and Jan's aged auntie. A gramophone was brought in. A big gleaming blonde took charge of it and played 'Dark Town Strutters Ball' over and over.

**I'll be round to meet you in a taxi, honey,
Better be ready 'bout a half-past eight...**

Everyone was dancing. Jhamboo grabbed a small blonde; I grabbed the big gleaming one. 'Ya gotta be there when the band starts playing...', she sang, warmly, moistly, in my ear.

After a little while, I went into another room and wept again. My Indian watch had stopped during the shooting. I wound both watches and wept for their inefficiency, which embodied nameless things. The crew-cut major tiptoed in with a woman, patted my shoulder and said, 'We all owe our lives to you.'

Bullshit. I seized his hand and said, 'I wish I had your superb courage. Proud to know you.'

Then we both wept. Or maybe that did not happen at all. I was not so much drunk as intoxicated. There's such a difference between friendly people and people who are friends.

Some while later, a surge of new guests entered the bungalow. Cries and uproar preceded them. It was sunset. Time had passed. Laughs, groans, cheers, shrieks, wild shouting in a foreign tongue, greeted the newcomers. A woman left me, rushing towards the door and throwing



herself into the arms of a blond male replica of herself. The commotion was a mystery to me. Alienation closed in. I did not know how to get away.

The major jumped on an armchair and called for silence. He made an announcement, greeted with mad catcalls and jeers and a sort of generalised frenzy. I realised that the Dutch were stark flaming mad. Two little ugly orderlies rushed in with boxes full of lager bottles, and the party started up again.

'The wrong party,' I shouted at one of the orderlies, grabbing up a bottle of lager. 'I'm at the wrong party.' I determined to escape. I lurched into the other room and there that's silly, I thought there before me were Maurice Boyer and his light o' love.

They were surrounded by a crowd of people, predominantly female, all in a high old state of animation. Something remarkable was happening on or to Raddle's face. The head was nodding in a manner suggestive of laughter; the mouth was hanging open; tears were running from her eyes, slime from her nose. At the same time her whole considerable body was heaving back and forth with such a violent motion that saliva, tears, and slime were scattered about the crowd. Happily, the crowd was engaged in similar activity, although to a less marked degree. Recalling Raddle's ability to vomit, I marvelled at this new feat of expression before realising that I was watching someone simultaneously laughing and crying at the top of her bent.

Boyer was standing with his back to Raddle, talking emotionally to two men, gesticulating in a manner foreign to him. When she caught sight of me, she burst past the Dutch women and threw herself into my arms, in a scatter of various moistures.

'Oh, Stewbs, Stewbs, I never think I see your drunken face more!'

She gave me a big perspiring kiss like a smack in the face with a hot slug.

I clutched a lot of her. 'Oh, you are a darling. I thought you'd gone for good.'

'Plaything of fate...!' She was incoherent. I mopped her face. A nice woman, for all her faults.

We started dancing round. Boyer arrived. He had stopped laughing.

I had started laughing. 'What the fuck are you doing here, sir?'



'It's the blewdy Van Heutz, Stewbs,' began Raddle, when Boyer produced a large handkerchief and also mopped her face. He worked with broad punitive strokes.

'What are you doing here, Stubbs? This is an officers' party.'

'I was invited along.'

'Well, let's not hear any more about your personal troubles, right? Everyone here has got blithering personal troubles. You don't see any other non-commissioned officers, do you?'

'Don't be like that, Maurice,' said Raddle, starting to go into her laughing/crying routine again. 'It's not his fault the blewdy Van Heutz ran ashore on the sandbag.'

'Have a drink, sir,' I said, proffering a bottle.

'Not Black Tartan Wombat, is it?' A look of paranoia crossed his face.

'It's lager, sir. Heineken.'

'Stomach hasn't recovered from that other filthy muck yet.'

He took my bottle and started to swig. Between swigs and interruptions, he adopted a mellower tone, now that I had put Raddle down, and explained what had happened.

'As the old girl's just intimated, the blithering boat ran against a sandbank or a sunken wreck nobody knows which exactly in Belawan harbour, about two miles offshore. You know how shallow it is there, or maybe you don't.'

'I do.' He had finished off my lager.

'Destiny plays a charade with us, Stewbs. Fate amewses himself with abrupt twists of the tale.'

'There it's stuck until they can get a tug from Singapore to tow it off. Everyone's had to return to Medan, second day on the trot. So Raddle and I have been granted a few extra days' bliss together.'

'It was meant to be, Maurice. My husband will be so fewrious, but such coincidences are in our stars; we are their pewpets.'

They fell on each other, as different couples were doing all around.



Belawan harbour was extremely shallow and the channel had not been dredged since before the war. Boats with any draught worth speaking of had to stand off two miles or more out to sea. Their goods and passengers were ferried ashore in LCTs. Geography had assisted Raddle's destiny.

I needed a pee. On the way out, I grabbed more alcohol. Boyer and his light o' love scarcely noticed me go. They were moving, I observed, into the first phases of a mating process which was going to take all night. It reminded me that I had similar commitments ahead, in particular an obligation to make things up with Margey and say good-bye honourably. I also had to deliver some cigarettes.

The crew-cut major, red in the face to the roots of his hair, swept me up with a great crowd of jostling girls. They had brought their luggage back from Belawan and it stood about their feet, making progress across the room difficult. More drinks went down, among continuous exclamations of joy and chagrin at the reunion.

Finally, I blundered towards the door, only to be caught by Boyer.

'Didn't mean to be curt with you, Stubbs. Just keep your place. I can't bear to see anyone with their paws on my charming lady. Look here, I don't want to let you down about this Chinese bit of yours. You didn't show up at the Company office, or I'd have spoken to you then. It's difficult to talk with all this luggage under foot.'

'Sir.'

'If you're crazy about her, well, we all have our impulses. I've told you my opinion of Chinese girls, bless their little slant-eyed holes, but that's only my opinion. Frankly, the way I look at it is, miscegenation is just an extreme form of heterosexuality. Quite a bit of the attraction of Raddle, for instance it's not Raddle, by the way, it's Raddl lies in her foreign'

'God, I must have a pee, sir, sorry.' Preferably within the next two point five seconds. Stumbling over suitcases, I gave Boyer a despairing look and made for the night. The darkness was intersected by lights, punctuated by music, and shredded by shouts and laughter. The area was impregnated by inevitable barbecues. I rushed behind the bungalow. Lobbing my tool out, I pissed with some force and splendour into the nearest bush, no doubt striking a profound blow at its livelihood.

For reasons I could not fathom, I felt immensely weary, bitter, and



drunk. Sinking down on the nearest wooden verandah step, I rested my face in my hands. The coriolis effect became rather self-evident. I slumped sideways against a railing.

Disaster came back to my mind, and the thought of Sontrop's body pitching head first into the earth in its box. I attempted to recall the sympathetic sights of Katie Chae with her legs open, or Margey's laugh; all that returned was the face of the wounded Ambonese soldier, smiling, smiling, as his sergeant prodded his injuries. Brave bastards, those Ambonese. You might well ask, why did they side with the Netherlanders against the Indonesians? But the army was their business; they fought for whoever paid them. In those days, Amboina was a long way from Sumatra.

As I write these paragraphs, the news headlines feature a sensational military operation in Holland, outside Bolingen, not far from where Addy now lives. Sinister people the media refer to as 'South Moluccan terrorists' seized a train full of hostages, demanding that the Dutch government put pressure on Indonesia to let them return to their native land. Negotiations came to nothing. After twenty days of deadlock, the Dutch sent in six Starfighters to blanket the area with smoke bombs. Then the marines went in. Two of the hostages and six of the so-called terrorists were shot. Now the area is being cleaned up as if nothing had happened. The bullet-ridden train was towed away into a siding.

And who were these 'South Moluccan terrorists'? The title shows how history and the understanding of it can be destroyed in a phrase. The 'South Moluccans' are our old pals the Ambonese. The chaps on the train were probably sons of the boyos who used to sit on the pavements of Bootha Street, cleaning their guns and singing 'Terang Boelan' ad nauseam.

In the 45-6 dust up, the Ambonese chose the wrong side. How were they to understand at that time that global changes were under way? Medan was almost as foreign to them as to me Amboina is as far from Medan as London is from Cairo. They were soldiering on, at a period when half the world was soldiering far from home. But try telling that to the TRI. When Soekarno finally won control of Indonesia, thousands of Ambonese had no option but to leave with their families. Where were they to go but to the distant land of their masters; in the cool reaches of North Europe, poor sods? Miscegenation in World War II was global.

Now they have no way back. There is no place for them in Indonesia any more than there was a place for Sumatra-born Sontrop in Sumatra, except six foot under.



As I slumped with my head and the wooden post feeling practically interchangeable, I became aware of an exceptionally nasty sound hovering behind one or other, or both, of my ears. I prepared myself for death, taking a swig from a bottle I found in my fist. Leopards have been known to pant before pouncing; the cobra must occasionally clear its throat of venom before striking; the rare white rhino of Sumatra bound to be on the side of the Indonesians indubitably gives a few short pants before the fatal charge. In any case, fuck it, I was too fucking shagged to move. Good-bye, Margey, good-bye, Katie Chae, you luscious, syrupy creature!

Someone shook my shoulder. I opened an eye. Two faces were glaring into mine. One had a big white moustache, one a little black one. This struck me as amusing. Internal instability warned me against laughing.

'Stubbs?'

'Sgt Stubbs!'

'Hello. Merdeka.'

The faces belonged to the Dutch major and Captain Boyer, but I didn't see what that had to do with it. The Major tolerated only a little of my idiocy before slapping me on the shoulder and walking away. Boyer settled on the step beside me.

'Careful... There's animal or something behind us.' Pointing vaguely.

'Stubbs, you're drunk, you poor stupid uneducated soldier. There's no animal here. Even pets are forbidden in RAPWI areas.'

Shaking off what in more amusing circumstances could be called Weltschmerz, I heaved myself into a sitting posture and said, 'Big animal, just behind right ear. Ten paces. Maybe five.'

'Ah,' said Boyer, brightly, raising and then waving one finger. 'I'm with you now. Not a real animal. The old two-backed beast. To be precise don't look round a young Dutch chap with his bags down is enjoying intercourse with a young Dutch lady with her knickers down. They're on a blanket of some description, not more than two metres from where we sit. Judging by the pace, which is pretty fast and furious, they can't last out much ah, yes, there they go now, by golly!' He clicked his tongue with a mixture of disgust and envy. 'Funny thing to do, when you consider it in cold blood.'



'Where's Raddle?'

'Sending a cable, if it's any of your business... To her husband, I'm sorry to say.'

My head was clearing. My mood veered wildly, now tipping towards drama and metaphysical speculation. 'What a hellhole this is! No offence to your I really like her, sir, honestly, and wish you could marry her Miss Raddle or whatever the fuck her name is, but the bloody Dutch in Medan are absolutely depraved, degenerate. You wouldn't catch the British behaving like that. Or the Chinese.'

He put an arm patronisingly round my shoulders and became nonchalant. 'That's just where you are mistaken, laddy, that's just where you're mistaken. Limited thinking. These folk, men and women, they've been through absolute hell with the Japs. Some day the story will be told. Now, another crisis with the natives. They stand to lose everything, to have their homes burnt, to be shot up and killed.'

A chap and a girl walked past us, laughing together, dragging a blanket behind them.

'Take these false alarms with the Van Heutsz, yesterday and today. Today we could see the damned vessel, stuck out on the sandbank. Think of the psychological effect of that sort of thing. Life's reduced to a wretched series of packings and unpackings. It's okay for me, because I see a bit more of my light o' love, but think of the psychological impact on them. They can't win. Pure torture, pure torture, the whole set-up. Personally, I feel very badly to think that we are pulling out and leaving them on their own, but you can't argue with the blithering War Office. How can they possibly bear up under such stress, except with escape valves like fornication and inebriation? Speaking of which'

As he began to rise, I started laughing.

'What's so funny in what I said?' He glared at me.

'Nothing, nothing. I just think "inebriation" is a funny word.'

'For Christ sake, man, pull yourself together.' He looked round anxiously, but my laughter had not stopped the revelry. 'Stubbs, you may not realise it, but you too are living on your nerves. You're distracted by love or lust, aren't you? Emotionally torn, isn't that it? Poised on a veritable knife-edge, wouldn't you say?'



'I don't know what's the matter.'

'Admit it, you are, aren't you?'

'I suppose so, yes, yes. Everything's falling apart.' I lit a fag, enjoying myself.

'I'm telling you what the trouble is. You are essentially a romantic at heart, like me loving a girl in distant lands, across racial frontiers never mind if she happens to be a bloody Chink caring for her, longing to have children by her, longing for a place in the sun well, the shade yet the two of you torn apart, ripped asunder... That's not pitching it too strong. You can't pitch it too strong ripped asunder by the tides of war. The tides of peace just as bad. Tristan and Iseult all over again.'

'I'd better go and see her now, sir, now you've reminded me. It's getting a bit late.' I stubbed the fag out in the soil and had a good cough.

He stood up and towered over me, pointing a finger as if in accusation.

'Stubbs, Stubbs, I'm going to do something for you. I'm perfectly sober, understand. For myself I can do nothing. I'm powerless. I'm a Victim of Circumstance. Destiny, as she says. The bitch is married and there's nothing I can do about that. But I can do something for you. I will do something for you. Jhamboo Singh will back me up he's a white black man if ever there was one.' He thumped the wooden railing to express his determination.

'We can ground that plane tomorrow. We can stop your Repat. We can authorise you to marry this Chink girl, if that's what you most want. I believe in it. It's romantic. In a way it's pure, or would be if it was anyone else but you. Above all, it's heroic. Defy your destiny. Defy history. Stay here and marry the Chink girl. I will support you. We can go to HQ now and I'll send a signal to ALFSEA. We'll remove your name from the list for the UK boat. For once, love shall triumph and the world will be well lost!'

I rose during his speech. By standing on the verandah step and straightening up gradually, I managed to reverse the situation so that I towered over Boyer. He was carrying the matter further than I wanted it taken.

'Sir, the trouble is...' I hated to spoil his rhetoric. **'You see, there are two girls...'**



'Two Chink girls?' He staggered back in disgust. 'Don't be so bloody stupid, Stubbs, you know very well that even in Sumatra you are allowed only one wife.'

'No, no, sir, I didn't mean that. I meant'

'I know what you meant. Well, I gave you your chance. I'm going to get myself another drink and see what Raddle's doing. I'll waste no more time on you, you and your filthy Black Wombat and your nests of Chink girls. I'm disappointed, Stubbs, frankly disappointed. I need a drinkies, a blithering big deep drinkies...' He made his way back into the crowded bungalow, where the music was going full blast.

I tried to keep pace with him, blundering over suitcases. 'Sir, I appreciate what you say. You have me wrong. Your offer it would be romantic. Ow, shit!' That was the edge of a trunk. 'Like something out of a novel. "To be or not to be. . ."'

'That's not a novel, you fool, that happens to be a play.' Boyer's manner was rather off-hand, perhaps because he had just caught sight of Raddle in the far corner, kissing a young blonde lieutenant.

'I know, sir, but the principle's the same. I mean, what I'm trying to say is oh, sod it! that I am having a bit of trouble with two girls Chink girls, sir at present. I just have to go into town and sort things out. I'm all confused in my mind oh, shit!' This time I fell against him and we knocked two dancing couples flying. 'I probably need a drink, too, I wouldn't be surprised. Can we leave your kind offer open while I sort of sort things out a bit?'

He looked grimly at me, with even grimmer side-glances across at Raddle, pulling his moustache and visibly regretting his earlier generosity.

'You have got till midnight, Stubbs. Report back to me here without fail. I shall be here enjoying myself until midnight, after which Raddle and I will proceed to bed, and certainly won't wish to be disturbed by the likes of you. Now clear off.'

'Thanks, sir. Good luck.'

'Mind your own business, Sergeant.'

I took this as an indication of dismissal and went. As I charged into the dark, I saw Jhamboo standing so close to a mousy little Dutch girl that his cigarette holder was half-way up her left nostril. I waved him



a cheery farewell, but he was otherwise engaged.

'Up the anti-vaginaphobes!' I called encouragingly.

10

To anyone coming straight from the great cities of the West, Medan must have appeared a poor provincial place no great architecture, grand vistas, arts, or even vices to rank on an international scale. But there is perspective in all things. To anyone who had spent three years soldiering in places like Burma and who moreover approached Medan by the overland route from Padang, driving down from Toba and the volcanic chain it was a city indeed. Every alleyway had its own splendour. Besides, I was young then, young and impressionable. It seemed to me the very arena of life.

The centre was bustling, despite the afternoon alarm at the cemetery. In the paralysis that gripped the city, the non-arrival of the Van Heutsz produced fresh currents of activity. The two hundred people who had failed to leave represented two hundred extra visitors, extra customers.

My last fucking night. I could forget all about the girls and have a last booze-up in the mess with my mates. In fact, I hired a local gharry and was driven back to lines. I saw their faces, watched Dickie Payne, Jock, Wally Scubber, and the others through the window. I went to my dark and silent billet next door, walked upstairs without putting on the light. The thirty tins of Players stood in their box on the table. I picked them up and went back to the waiting gharry. At least I could pay off my debt to Katie Chae.

She was not in her flat. On the beat, no doubt, thought I, with more resignation than regret. Good-bye, Katie Chae! I gave the tins with a note to an old woman who lived below. Then I went to pay my debt to Margey.

I was sweating like a beaver. A storm was brewing.

As I dived in the Chinese quarter, heading for Bootha Street, a familiar detachment overcame me. It was familiar because I had experienced it often enough during my years in the Far East. How could it matter what happened to me, provided I was not wounded or killed, as long as I remained part of that exotic bustle, that great obscure traffic of various businesses? Whatever I suffered was of little account beside the sensation of belonging to a community which I hoped some day to understand. If I was hurt by love or whoring, it didn't matter, it didn't matter, just as long as I was still entangled with



the great affair of living. Other people would always be there to embrace.

The clatter of pakia, the cry of street-vendors, the nasal whine of Chinese music relayed over a cheap radio, even the silent flash of lightning overhead, such things had entered my heart. They told me that suffering was also part of enjoyment. Better these things by far than isolation and silence. Better jungle than desert.

I still feel that vision. Time since is but a moment.

Every street lamp was surrounded by a nimbus of gold comprising dozens of horrendous and winged shitbags intent on frying themselves to a frizzle. Beneath each lamp lay a pile of expiring bodies. They were gobbled by toads and lizards which lurked in the gutters. Fresh insects perpetually zoomed in to the sphere of light like comets to the sun, only to fall away again angrily, buzzing in a fury of pain.

Poor bloody insects! That was why I had to get out of Medan, however much it attracted me. I was going to get burnt. I had been in danger enough and being killed was too much. My nerve was gone, the toads were waiting. And I had slightly more savvy than the winged shagbags.

Pausing at the top of Margey's alley, I lit a cigar. My stomach churned somewhat. Now I had to face the weaker sex. According to my watches, it could be twenty to nine. Or maybe eight-thirty. Fucking time was catching up with me fast, even by my reckoning.

It had come to the pinch. We looked at each other a bit guardedly. Perhaps she, like me, was uncertain what she really felt.

We went to a restaurant called The Haven, a big rambling wooden place where there was music and dancing. Poor Margey, she was penitent for her previous outburst of anger and grateful perhaps surprised that I had shown up again. When I saw that, I experienced a sneaking regret that I had not sought out Katie Chae and let her earn a few more tins of Players.

Yet Margey looked pretty smashing with her sleek jet hair curling inwards about her neck and her kitten-shaped face gleaming. She wore a blue silk dress of a European style and white shoes with buttons. She carried a white handbag. All told, she was a cool and delicious sight.

She appeared as eager as I to give the subject of Katie Chae a miss but



some painful subjects could not be avoided. The waiter brought our dish; tender hunks of an unknown animal were bedded on rice and served with coconut and a peppery brown sauce. As we ate, Margey looked at me askance and said, 'Horry, you go away 'morrow morning, fry to Singapore.'

'That's right.'

'You never come back Medan.'

'Afraid not.'

'Our little time was so short, Horry.'

Silence. They were playing ruddy 'Terang Boelan' again. Mouthfuls of meat found their way down between the lumps in our throats. It was nine-fifteen, or maybe somewhat later.

'Horry.'

'What?'

'Maybe we go back my place. We pretend be husband and little wife one last time.'

'I don't know. Margey we've come to the end of the road...'

'No, no, one last time. I tell you what I do when I see that terrible thing stick up at me.' She began a soft and erotic recital of what I might expect in the circumstances. My spirits sank lower.

Everyone else in the restaurant seemed to be enjoying themselves. A squaddy I knew was dancing with a ravishing Indonesian woman with her hair coiled in a bun at the back of her sleek head. Was it Che Jah? I felt as if I had wasted my weeks in Medan. Why had I not had an Indonesian woman with her hair coiled in a bun at the back of her sleek head? She would have made no impossible claims on me. I drank down my beer and angrily ordered another.

Almost as soon as we had entered The Haven, the heavens had opened. Such a flood was coming down outside that it looked as if our windows gave on to gigantic aquaria. Flashes of lightning revealed, in frozen gesture, denizens of this submarine world in flight from puddle to puddle. A batch of these denizens landed themselves at the restaurant door, shedding laughter and water everywhere. They were squaddies I knew, among them the prognathous Wallace and 'Jesus' Price.



As they passed our table, Wallace gave me a simian wink. 'Cushy for some,' he said.

Price said, 'Still at it then, Horry? We held a party for you last night but you never turned up. Crme de menthe by the gallon, lovely grub!'

'I tried to make it but I was busy.'

'I can see that,' Price said, and he and Wallace went into peals of scabrous laughter. 'We'll be having a few again tonight if you care to look in the billet, Horry. You're not a bad bloke, despite them three stripes.'

'Thik-hai,' I said.

They paused and gave Margey an insulting look of evaluation. As they moved on, shedding water, Wallace began to sing, in a high nasal tone representing Cantonese song,

One night down in old Wanchai,
Some dirty bastard spat in my eye...

It was intended as an insult to the Chinese, and to me. I jumped up, red in the face, longing to plant a bunch of fives right in Wallace's mush, but Margey dragged me back into my chair.

'No make scene. He no good man, singing silly song. You just listen your Margey.'

The Red Fox reinforcement arrived, temptingly warm, and I flung it down my throat. Margey continued with her erotic recital, to which I was able to pay little attention.

Where had my affection for her gone?

I was ashamed. During my time in India, I had found sex and looked for love, pined, moped for it. Now was I so much older, so much eroded by experience, that when I had found love I wanted only sex? These were questions I formulated without attempting to answer. Whilst feeling that I had betrayed Margey, I was myself betrayed by circumstances, by the whole impossible situation.

'Horry, you no listen your poor Margey. I really want we play that disgusting husband and wife game one more time I really stick my savage little red hole out at you ? because I know you never marry Margey, her heart and her body.'



It had to be said. I felt myself speaking in slow-motion as I formulated the words. 'Margey, you are a lovely rare girl, but the husband and wife thing is not on. It's not possible for me to stay in Medan. That's the way things are, understand. It's the system. I'm only a bloody soldier. My time's up. As a matter of fact, I nearly got bumped off this afternoon.'

Silence.

She was so fragile. Her bones were so dainty. Her flesh was so smooth and pure. I stared down at her downcast face, which the cataract of time was about to sweep away. Margey would still live, so would I; but we would live far apart.

'Well, say something, go on.'

'I no speak.' Her face puckered up as if she had been hit.

'Bloody cheerful evening this is turning out to be!'

'Horry, please understand, I very sad and no want cry. What Margey can do when you leave her? You never intend you marry Margey. You just want jig-jig and make joke of poor Margey for her body.'

I put my knife and fork down and tackled a fresh Red Fox. I patted her leg under the table until she withdrew it.

'Margey, please don't say or believe that, ever. I did, I do love you. You are marvellous and I can't think how I would have been without you really. But I'm too mixed up... it's not you, it's me, and this place, and what the hell happens to me back in England. What in God's name am I going to bloody do there? I just can't visualise the future for myself, never mind the two of us. I'm not putting this very well, but I don't want to hurt you and I can't find it in myself to well, to commit myself. You might hate England God knows, I think I might.'

'Is not so worse as this dump, that I know.'

'Well, it's not a paradise like bloody Tsingtao.'

I dared not look at her. Some squaddies over the far side of the room were getting hilariously drunk, Wallace among them.

'You no want me in England because I China girl.' She looked up, and anger made her eyes sparkle. 'Why you not say so for a change? You no understand China girl best girl in world for marriage better than



your sexy French mistress. China girl cook and fuck and be faithful her man. Always smell nice, too.' She lifted her faultless arm so that I could see one faultless armpit, like the inside of a peach when the peach stone is removed. 'She just more good as Europe girl all ways, and teeth and legs better, too.'

'I know, Margey, I accept all that.'

She leant forward, speaking into my face; bucket-hurling time was coming round again. 'Then why we no go Singapore, set up house like we plan? Why you say such thing if you don't mean? Aei-ya, I know why! You meet up that damn sex-cat Miss Katie Chae, you jig-jig with her, so now you really gone bad in the head, I know. How much you pay her, I like to know, what I give you free? That girl run like poison in the artillery of a man, that's what, that's what!'

'For fuck's sake, Margey, don't start working yourself up into a rage. Leave Katie Chae out of this, will you? I'm going to have a piss. Calm down while I'm gone and order me another beer.'

It was somewhere in the region of a quarter to ten, according to my watches. Or thereabouts. In Blighty, I'd at least be able to get someone to fix the bloody instruments so that they kept proper time. I had to report back to Boyer before midnight. If only Margey would let me off the hook that whole affair had been a disaster from the start.

Round between the tables, behind a potted palm, through a rattan door. Another door, solid wood. Standing behind it, gasping, I tried to piss against the filthy wall provided, angry with the world and with myself. One hundred degrees Fahrenheit. I understood nothing. What was I? A puppet of the stars, as Raddle put it. I was tempted to nip out of the back of the restaurant but I'd left my bush-hat at the table with Margey. Cowardly shit. Rain still belted down outside, like the liquid pouring out of me. Dogs howled.

Army boots sounded on the step outside the jakes. The door was flung violently open, catching me between the shoulderblades. It slammed me against the tacky wall. Pee flew everywhere.

'Haaaah!' The intruder marched forward, giving a stretch and a bellow as he went.

'You clumsy bastard!' I said.

He turned. It was Corporal Steve Kyle. I planted one smack in his ribs, my prick still hanging out. It was a real good blow with my right fist, my right shoulder behind it. 'One for you, you mutinous turd!'



Kyle was drunk, or half-way. Though he buckled a bit, he hit back. I went for him. Unfortunately, I tripped on some anonymous slimes and fell. While I was down on my hands and knees, he delivered a hell of a kick on my thigh.

'A parting present, you bleeding Fhrer!' he shouted, and tried to escape, but I grabbed his leg.

'I'll teach you to get some service in, you cunt!'

'Fuck off, you're bloody puggle!'

I hauled myself up on him and gave him a pasting. He caught me a stray blow on the nose. Something rang like an alarm bell in my head and all my filthy temper exploded. I was beyond anyone's control as I struck out at him, driving my fists and the side of my palms into his arms and body. If there had been a golf club handy, I would have used it on him.

I feared that foul temper of mine, and still do. For some years, I have managed to suppress it because I know how it takes control: under its spell, I experience no pain, know no fear. It's like intoxication. Kyle escaped from me only when some of his muckers, including Wallace and Price, happened to barge in and haul him away. They had to fight me to do so.

When they were gone, I spent a long while hanging over a tap in the corner of the squalid room, splashing cold water over my face. Sick. Sick as a dog. Dab the blood away. Sick. Hot. Every sodding thing falling apart. Nothing to hold on to. Sick. Fucking life take it away and bring me something more my kind of thing...

Other people entered the bog. I didn't look up, couldn't face them. Margey's arm came round my waist. She mopped at my face with a tiny handkerchief.

'Poor Horry, Margey look after you. You so worry, poor man, you drink too much drink.' Her tone became wheedling and coaxing. 'You come home your little Margey last time. I no mad you, Horry, I very sorry all trouble. Margey understand. This very difficult year for all concerned. Astrologers say it.'

Still feeling reasonably bad-tempered, I looked round. My vision was poor, but I made out the restaurant manager standing by the door. With him was someone I recognised Katie Chae's brother, Tiger Balm, his spectacles gleaming efficiently. The manager started to address



me at length in Malay, but Tiger Balm interrupted and said, in his colourless English, 'Possibly I can help here. This is the manager of this establishment. He requests you to settle your bill and leave the premises as soon as possible. He says that fighting is sternly forbidden and he threatens to summon the Red Caps if you will not go quietly.'

'I'll go when I'm ready. I'm not drunk, if that's what he thinks.'

'Correct, he thinks you are drunk. For the record, I have the same opinion. I was eating here in a private room with a friend, where the food is marginally better than that served to the troops, when I heard you swearing and fighting. Please leave immediately, as the manager implores. Take Tung Su Chi with you.'

One 25-watt bulb dangled in the centre of the fakes. Its sickly illumination made everyone look ill. I began splashing water over my face and neck. Shit, it was hot.

'I'll go in a minute. Just leave me alone.'

'You are sick?'

'Sick of everything. Just leave me alone. I'll go in a minute.'

Self-pity flooded me. Nobody wanted me. Pushing Margey away, I fumbled in my hip pocket and produced a stack of Jap guilders which I thrust out towards the manager. 'Here, help yourself. Bloody forged Jap currency, if that's what you live on. Take it.'

The manager understood this gesture and looked highly offended, which pleased me. He began to talk rapidly with Tiger Balm. Margey tried to butt in and was swept aside. Turning to me, Tiger Balm said, 'Ignoring your comments on the economy, for which the British occupation is responsible, I ask the manager how much he is owed. Now he declares with the pride of his race that if you will leave in peace now, immediately, he makes no charge for you or the lady. You understand? Frankly, between us, he is a little afraid.'

My anger rose again. 'I told you, I'll go in a minute. I'll go whether he wants my money or not. My fucking nose is still bleeding.'

Margey waved her handbag at Tiger Balm and the manager. 'Go 'way and leave him, like he ask. Can't you hear? I look after my man. You take care, both you! He strong man, nearly kill that corporal his friends take him away being carried.'



The ability to focus my eyes returned. I saw that Margey was crying. Her words had no effect on the men. By now, renewed anger was making me feel better; I was just looking for a bit more trouble.

Trouble arrived. The jakes door opened and in stomped Jackie Tertis, wearing monsoon cape and big boots and looking extremely ugly. He glared at everyone in turn before addressing me.

'Stubbs? You okay, cocker? A bloke outside told me you were having a spot of bother. Want any help? I'll soon pitch into these admis with you. Say the word.'

'I don't need help. I was sorting out bloody Kyle, that's all.'

He stood unmoved in all his foxy hue.

'Kyle, good. Want a lift home? My bike's outside. What are these natives sticking about for money? Is this your Chinese crumpet you were on about?' He bent his gaze at Margey. 'Not bad as Chinks go, are you, darling? Flat in the chest, of course.' His hawk gaze swooped to the manager, who had stepped forward. 'What's your trouble, chum? You want to say something?'

The Malay moved back again, bowing politely. Perhaps he had encountered Tertis before.

Margey was made of different stuff. I saw her go almost rigid with anger.

'You talking large bully, what you mean I got frat chest?' She spoke in a kind of scream. 'Could your mother with disease feed you only on pus, not milk? Why, you stinking hairy foreign pig-scum, I know your spotty pizzle fell off in the cradle with VD!'

A wooden shovel stood in one dim corner of the bog. Margey seized it and bough the edge of its blade down hard on Tertis's foot. Despite the protection of his boots, he gave a yell of pain.

'You slant-eyed yellow whore, I'll murder you!'

'Come on, I scratch your damn rotten eyes out!'

Tiger Balm said, waveringly, 'Let us not exchange ethnic insults in a public urinal. I shall leave.'

It looked as if Tertis would murder us all, beginning with Margey. For a moment he stood quivering; then he bent to pick up the shovel



which Margey had dropped. If he started wielding that implement in the confined space, there would be murder done.

I grabbed Tertis's arm and twisted it smartly behind his back. He yelled in pain. 'Come on, matey, let's all leave together. I didn't enjoy that remark about flat chests either.' As he straightened and tried to turn, I gave him another quick wrench to let him know what was what.

'You'll have my arm off, Stubbs, you tricky bastard...'

Margey was about to fling herself at him but Tiger Balm caught her and gave her a brisk rattle of Cantonese. She bit her lips and fell silent, looking helplessly at me. But I was occupied with Tertis.

When he was pale enough, I marched him out, up the steps and through the restaurant, keeping up the pressure all the way.

A fresh surge of sadism made me feel good. I murmured in Jackie's ear. 'You dare give me that flat-chested bullshit, you fucking torturer! I know you need a big ugly pair of tits like bolsters to wallow in, or else you can't get it up that's what makes you such a vicious little bastard, isn't it?'

'I never did you any harm. Whores is all you're good for. My lot'll settle with you, Stubbs, you wait.'

It was still raining. When we were outside, I gave him a shove and stood back. 'On your way, Jackie, you bloody fascist. If you ever insult a pusher of mine again, I'll have your guts for garters, malum? Now piss off.' In my stomach, I felt a numb fear of him.

He gave me a sick and deadly look. Water dripped on his unquenched eyes. I had sudden visions of us having a shoot-up in the roadway, as if Medan was Dodge City. His lips came apart, revealing the edges of his teeth. One of us would finish lying riddled in the gutter. Lightning dazzled, turning the flooded street into a ruinous ante-chamber of some lost underground city. Tertis turned away as darkness swooped back, became suddenly shapeless under his monsoon cape. A minute later, he drove off, revving his bike, his wheels furrowing the great puddle through which he made his way.

I breathed a deep breath.

The rain ran down my hair and across my face. I retired into the porch of the restaurant. The more reliable of my watches said that it was ten minutes to eleven; the other had stopped. I wound it without



conviction.

My nose burned. I leaned against an upright and closed my eyes for a moment.

Tiger Balm was standing by me, shaking me carefully. He carried an open umbrella.

'I have procured a pedicab. Share it with me. You need help.'

'I'm okay. Sorry for all that rough-housing in there.'

'It was not pleasant.' He looked hard at me through his spectacles, which were spotted with rain. There was something I had done or said which pleased him. 'Let's go, the man is waiting. The storm's nearly over.'

As I went forward with him, under the umbrella, I asked where Margey was.

'Su Chi was upset. She returned home. She requested me to say farewell and good journey.'

A little old Malay was sitting under a waterproof on his flimsy saddle. The hood of his vehicle was up, sounding like a drum under the downpour. Tiger Balm and I squeezed into the seat together.

'God, I need a drink. You sent Margey away, didn't you?'

'She returned home, as I said. She cried and was ashamed.'

'I suppose she's really only a whore, isn't she?'

The Malay buttoned us under a tarpaulin and pulled the hood further over, so that we could hardly see the way, but the rain was abating. The air smelt of tarpaulins.

'Your criteria of judgement are wrong, excuse me. You should not think someone is only a tailor, or only a wife, or only an Englishman. Or only a whore. Those are incorrect perceptions.'

'There was nothing I could do for Margey.'

He called sharply to the Malay, then said to me, 'You raised her hopes, then dropped them. You feel bad, so you wish to think of her as only a whore. She wished to escape from the Sumatra disaster, but you are part of the disaster, as part of the occupying force. All military



occupations bring depraved times, when injuries of all kinds cannot be avoided.'

'Christ, you make it sound like hell on earth.'

To that he said nothing. I did not wish to pursue the subject. The rain ceased as if a sluice had been turned off. Its retreat left a strange silence in the world. We bumped over cobbles. Suddenly, I felt cheerful again, recalling how I had laid into Kyle; Jhamboo would be pleased when he heard. I laughed and produced cigarettes from my tin. We lit them awkwardly in the confined space.

'What'll happen to you the Chinese when the British pull out?'

'Didn't you ask that question to me before? There may be some difficulties.'

'During our first meeting, you were talking about bloodbaths.'

'Soekarno is rather a severe man, I hear. We shall stay. It may be difficult at first. Unlike the Dutch, we have nowhere else to go. So we stay.'

Silence fell between us. The Malay called out, slowed down, stopped his vehicle by digging both heels in the ground. He came round and removed the tarpaulin from our knees. We had stopped outside Katie Chae's house. There was a light in her window overhead. Tiger Balm sat where he was. He made a gesture of invitation, cigarette in hand.

'Enter, please. My sister will be pleased to greet you. I must go elsewhere, so it is good-bye between us.'

Embarrassment overcame me as I climbed out. I peered at him in the dim light. 'You trust me to behave myself, do you?'

'I know the capacities of my sister.'

'Do you disapprove of me? I suppose you think I'm a complete shit.'

He shook his head. 'You are a soldier, Sgt Stubbs, so you are not a complete person. You are partly a uniform. We wish to be rid of you. But there are worse soldiers than British soldiers.'

He signalled to the Malay. The old boy bent his shoulders and started to pedal.

An ambiguous bugger, Tiger Balm.



When they were a long way down the road, I knocked at Katie's door and went in.

It was eleven-ten, give or take fourteen minutes. I had just three-quarters of an hour in which to report back to Captain Boyer. But, for the moment, I was at peace; in the presence of Katie Chae, it was hard not to feel at peace with oneself. She looked gorgeous, with her slender legs hooked across an arm of the sofa and a deep blue cheongsam riding up above her knees. She wore white tears of ear-pendants which went well against her long, elegant face.

She was smoking a cheap Singapore cigarette. The thirty tins of Players I had given her were not to be opened; they were for trading.

I was drinking an atrocious little drink she poured me. I sprawled on the floor with my arms on the sofa and my chin practically in her sexy lap. She smelt of powder and scent, and my sore nose was forgotten. We were having a conversation.

'Some day maybe I get marry, but not in this dump. I see girls after marry, they sew and cook and read. Those things not for Katie Chae. I hate them. I hate books. I like to swim.' She demonstrated a dainty breast-stroke in the air.

I laughed. 'You are allowed to swim after you're married, even in England. Just suppose I offered to marry you would you come back to England with me?'

Smiling, she stroked my cheek. 'You funny guy, Horry, you not unnerstand girls. When our worlds meet, okay, fine, great stuff, but they different worlds. I not care for that sort thing.'

A small silence fell white I thought about that.

'Why are you so contemptuous of reading? Because you've lived so much? Would you read a letter if I sent one from England?'

'Oh, yes, letters I read if they say nice things about me. Books I not like all that stuff is stric'ly for my brother, you unnerstand. Not real things.'

'What about Shakespeare, the world's greatest writer?'

'Horry, why you not finish your drink and take off your dirty clothes?'

'Great! But have you heard of Shakespeare, Katie? You must have



heard of him.'

Katie Chae shook her head and most of her body, in a way which indicated that there was absolutely no way in which she and Shakespeare could have heard of one another. 'I busy girl, Horry, toots. What this man he write?'

'Plays, mainly. The most famous play is called Hamlet. Hamlet's the name of the principal character. His father was the king of Norway but he's dead. No, not Norway, Denmark. It's a long time since I saw the play. Hamlet is meant to take over the throne, but instead his uncle grabs it, and marries Hamlet's mother. Hamlet is upset and doesn't know what to do. He hangs about and kills his girl friend's father, so she goes mad. And he meets his father's ghost.'

'Oooh, I scared of ghosts,' exclaimed Katie Chae, nestling closer and running a hand through the damp hair at the base of my skull in an enticing fashion. 'What happens next?'

I drained my glass. Mewk, I thought, helping myself to another.

'There's a bit of a dust-up in a cemetery where they're digging up corpses. Eventually, there's a full-scale sword fight and they all get killed.'

'Everyone?' she asked in astonishment.

'Everyone. Except one or two soldiers.'

'It sounds exciting! I like.' Her expressive eyes shone.

'Yes, it is pretty exciting, apart from some of the dialogue.'

I started to unbutton my shirt.

'Katie, you marvellous creature, tear off those beautiful clothes and stand naked before me, so that I can remember you when I'm back in England.'

She kicked her shoes off and stood on the sofa, smiling at me with slit eyes. 'What you do when you remember me? You do something naughty to yourself?' She made sly wanking gestures with a dainty hand.

'It could even get to that.'

'Okay, big boy, then I do. For world peace.' She laughed.



As she began to unhook the cheongsam, I pulled my boots off and flung them across the room. Off came her dress, sliding down her body. She was not wearing any knickers. I clasped her round the bottom and kissed her delicious thighs.

Katie put a hand over her smart little crutch. 'You mus' give me present, Horry you know I poor girl. Very punk life jus' now.'

'Yes, yes.' I didn't care to enquire how much she wanted; a pulsating penis asks no questions. I fished all the cash I had out of my hip pocket: a damp and crumpled collection of forged Jap rubbish, Dutch guilders, a five-rupee note, and some new British pounds straight from Company Office. An international collection for an international girl.

She pouted and continued to cup her crutch. A wisp of black pubic hair curled round the base of her thumb. With barely the shadow of hesitation, I added the better of my two watches to the little pile.

'Okay?'

'That is all you got?' She counted the money quickly, so that I got a look at the goods in question. Why had I expected her to be grateful?

'It's all I've got. Every penny. Come on, Katie, love.'

'You get more pay in Singapore. Give me other watch also, darling.' She covered up again and waited.

I pulled the second watch from my wrist. Fucking thing never kept time any way. Katie Chae took it, looked down at her pelvis, and slowly removed her hand from her twot, as if allowing a little bird to escape. She pressed the hand to my mouth.

I bit her fingers.

'Also your cigarettes,' she said. 'All what you got please you give. For keepsake.'

She swept the little collection together and whipped them out of sight in a drawer before turning back to me. This time she made no attempt to conceal her body but stood brazenly, legs apart, giving me a real come-on glance.

Despite the haggle, I had a towering erection. I nearly snapped it as I tore my trousers off. It thumped against my belly like a drumstick.



Katie's face was alight at the sight. She jumped back on to the sofa, unbuttoning her brassiere. This was the life she really enjoyed. The brassiere went flying behind a chair and her scrumptious little tits flowed free.

I moved in, well placed to plunge a finger between her thighs and up into her luxurious hole, grabbing a spiral of pubic hairs with my thumb, twitching them crisply between her flesh and mine.

She bent down to me and held my head. I straightened, making her left breast vibrate with my tongue as I did so. Gorgeous dark aureoles set off her nipples always the sign of a passionate woman. Pressing my tool against her belly, I cupped my hands under her bottom and, lifting her in that manner, carried her over to the table.

'You terrible man, so strong!'

'You heavenly bitch, Katie!'

As she curved backwards over the table, she opened her legs. With my hand, I felt her pretty cunt-lips part. I slid the tip of my prick in, grunting. It tunnelled its way forward into territories hitherto unknown to man or beast. She wriggled to help it along, and with every wriggle it seemed to navigate another succulent pair of lips. Salmon leaping upstream to spawn know no finer pleasure. Sighs of delight.

Just a yard more to go... Finally it had plumbed as far as it would go yet she knocked her little mons against me, sucking at the ultimate millimetre of rude joy.

My body started working of its own accord, arse plunging forward and back, working at first only from the bum but gradually getting entirely involved, with thighs, legs, whole trunk becoming part of the rhythm. We were a unity: her arms about my shoulders like my arms, my arms about her lean buttocks, one finger licking into her moist bottom, like her arms, her finger. Each knew entirely what each wanted; each gave. There was no finesse about holding back. Neck or nothing it was.

Her gorgeous juices spread from my root through our tangled hairs, down my thighs, round to the rear, up my belly. Mad excitement, snorts of pleasure. Her teeth biting into my shoulder, her ear in my mouth. That tremendous sensation that this was marvellous Katie Chae, and no one else. We fell back on the table, my arms still protectively under the rocking curve of her spine. In that position, her



legs came up, wrapping about my back, opening her twot wider, so that I could thrust still deeper, aware of the perfume she was releasing. That perfume, that motion, that unity they made the most eloquent of all languages, the most convincing of all communications.

My sweat ran with hers. Her eyes were against mine, deep dark, blazing, her breath was one with mine. We came in a clatter of hip bones and sobs, and her being was one with mine.

After a while, she said, 'Ohhh... What kind of a manners you call that, to do me on my own dining table? Come properly to bed, like a gentleman with proper manners.'

I giggled weakly. 'What a day I've had! I'm too feeble to manage it again. It's too late.'

'You no know Katie... You too rough now we try little- by-little. I give you good value for two watches.'

'They both need repair.'

As she dragged me to the bedroom, I went weakly laughing and protesting.

'No, I should report to Boyer... What a mess... Boyer and Raddle so sad it makes you laugh... One last sweet time, Katie, if I can my last bash in the Far East...'

Of course I never reported back to Captain Boyer. When I woke later with a guilty start, grey dawn was filtering into Katie's room. That beautiful head was on the pillow beside me. That face I would never see again was like a Buddha's, serenely turned away from me in sleep. As I kissed its cheek, my spirits sank. I remembered what the day was...

Charlie Meadows and Johnny Mercer were also in the Jeep. They had volunteered to see me off at Polonia airfield. My kit and luggage were piled up at my back. Although the day was still new, the equatorial sun was up, the placid countryside already glowed with heat. To our right, in the distance, slumbered the blue flanks of the mountains of the interior. Sumatra had never looked more beautiful, more peaceful, more pristine.

As we rounded a bend and sighted a Dakota through palm trees, our driver spotted a black car ahead. He slowed. Charlie, Johnny, and I drew our revolvers and crouched lower, fearing an ambush. The car was stationary, drawn in to the side of the road. A fat figure climbed



out into the middle of the path and waved to me.

'It's okay,' I said with relief, putting my weapon back in its holster.
'It's Fat. What's he doing here?'

It was soon evident what Fat was doing.

As we moved slowly level with the black car, one of Medan's venerable pre-war German taxis, Fat opened the rear door. Out stepped Margey, dressed in her best white dress and wearing a hat.

'Step on it!' Johnny yelled, banging the Indian driver on the back.

'Stop, you bastards!' I shouted. 'Stop, it's Margey!'

Her face registered surprise that we were so close. She hesitated. Fat pushed her forward.

The Jeep accelerated. For a moment, Margey and I were no more than a yard apart. She reached out her arms to me. As I responded, our gaze met. Margey!

She called my name. I rose. I was going to jump out, but Charlie grabbed me, forcing me back.

'Stubbs, you're thick as they come!'

We were past her. I was looking back. At once, she and Fat were a long way behind us, standing forlorn in the road by the black car. Their hands were at their sides.

Johnny and Charlie were cheering.

'Saved you from a fate worse than death, you sod,' Johnny said. He gave his high inane laugh.

The Jeep rounded a bend, and the sight of her was cut off. I kept looking behind.

We roared up to the barrier of the airfield. A couple of members of the RAF Regiment came smartly out of the guard-house to meet us, bayonets fixed. The barriers went up.

Sumatra fell away beneath the plane, away in space and time. Swampy coast was visible almost immediately. Islands flecked the sea, which reflected the morning sun like a shield. The air was filled with brilliance. Somewhere ahead, concealed in light, lay Singapore and all



my further destinations.

Automatically, I glanced down at my watches. My wrist was empty.