

# The Caves of Segada

ANTHONY AIKMAN

To my Uncle, David Aikman,  
for all his help and kindly  
encouragement"

' Across that angry or that glimmering sea White on a throne  
or guarded in a cave There lives a prophet who can  
understand Why men were born: but surely we are brave  
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand/

James Elroy Flecker

'The way of an eagle in the air;  
The way of a serpent upon a rock;  
The way of a ship in the midst of the sea;  
The way of a man with a maid/

Proverbs

# PART ONE

## The Island of Bora cay

Il do not know beneath what sky Nor on what seas shall be  
thy late;

I only know it shall be high,

I only know it shall be great/

Richard Hovey

Perhaps it is appropriate that a tale set in the South China seas should open at night, on board ship, ten hours out of Manila with the wind shrieking itself into a tempest and the rusty hull shuddering at every breaking wave.

Like all stories this one began very much earlier - but although Willis started out from Hong Kong, and Rhodes and the girl from God knows where, it was in that strange mystery of ocean and islands and races that is the heart of the South China sea where it all really began - at the tail end of a lack-lustre conversation where it was difficult to hear what the other one said above the racket the boat was making.

‘What?’ I shouted.

I only caught his final words. Elephant it sounded like, Rogue Elephant? ‘That’s the sort you shoot when they run amok isn’t it?’ I replied, and holding onto his beer to stop it sliding off the table, Willis nodded glumly.

'I hope we don't hit a typhoon!' I yelled after a particularly desperate lurch, but he just nodded again as if he hadn't heard. Our table was squashed between a rusty bulkhead and tiers of metal bunks, hundreds of them cramming the deck from one side to the other, vibrating like a million knives and forks. The deck above and below offered similar accommodation and there wasn't room to

turn round anywhere without bumping into everyone else\*

This whole overloaded, listing ark was struggling south through heavy seas hoping to reach Cebu by Christmas\* It was now well past midnight but none of the passengers seemed ready for sleep\* I wasn't sure I could blame them.

Willis sat opposite, elbows on the table, chin cupped in one hand while he smoked his local brand of cigarette with an abstracted look. His reddish hair was badly cut as though he had hacked at it himself, and despite his cheerful smile there was something wistful in his expression that reminded me of an old spaniel dog\* I assumed he was in his late twenties - I am never very good with ages, but he still looked rather a schoolboy - or perhaps that was the result of his mannerism, the way he puffed a cigarette warily in case he might get caught, or if he bit his fingernails he inspected them with a guilty frown and hid them away. The only adornment he permitted himself was a simple grass bracelet on his left wrist; a memento or a good luck charm I suppose.

I had only met Willis the day before in Manila, running to board a jeepney taxi to get across to North Harbour. By that stage we had already acquired certain things in common,

above all a mutual weariness at hearing Bing Crosby crooning 'White Christmas' every evening to the strollers in Rizal Park. I had forgotten what it was to feel cool, but the song clearly irked Willis as did the noisy fan in his hotel room. Neither of us said much about cockroaches - we were used to all that.

The jeepney had dropped us off in the slums of Divisoria. The street was blocked by horse-drawn gharries all going different ways, and grabbing directions like confetti, Willis led the way down sweltering alleys, dodging between pools of refuse, street markets and whole shanty towns of rotting hovels, until we emerged gratefully at Pier Six where boats left for the Visaya Sea and the South Islands.

We still had different destinations then. I had decided to go to Camiguin because I liked the look of the model version poking its head out of the pool at the top end of Rizal Park. Having the entire Philippines miniaturised for inspection made planning rather easier, though Willis claimed the water level was too high and half the country had sunk.

I never got there. The only boat with vacant berths was this one calling at Panay.

'Tin going on to Boracay/ Willis had suggested. 'It's just a coral island a few miles long. You can rent a shack for 15 pesos/ he added non-committally. 'It's as good a place as any to hole up for the holiday/

So T adopted his destination and shared the mixed delights of the voyage south. Flaps of canvas pulled down over the sides stopped the seas coming in and babies falling out. Neon

lamps that never switched off glared from struts inches above my nose and our old friend Bing sang a scratched recording of 'Sleigh Bells\*' throughout the bedevilled, bunk-creaking night.

All next day we ploughed south. The canvas flaps limited the view and to venture on deck was to be immediately smutted in diesel smoke. Willis went up a second time in his quest to discover even a solitary lifecraft but returned disappointed. Fortunately, no storm materialised, and in the late afternoon we lurched unsteadily into Roxas City, or rather the port bit of it . We haggled over a trishaw to haul us into the town and managed to scramble aboard the last jeepney going up north to Kalibo that day. Although designed for twelve, there were twenty-five inside already before we joined three others hanging onto the roof where the only danger, apart from occasional thunderstorms, was being decapitated in the rushing dark by low branches. The journey took six hours and we collected three blow-outs.

'Not bad really,' said Willis, as we watched the tyre being levered open for the last time outside a village repair shop\* They used an old piston ablaze with paraffin to vice down the patch and weld it into place. There were already more patches than tube. 'I'm surprised it doesn\*t melt/ I said, but although Willis was watching his thoughts were elsewhere\* 'What?' he said, 'Oh yes\* Are you hungry?'' and shouting to some scurrying children he obtained fried bananas\* He knew how to live off the land, and I guessed by the elbow patches sown unevenly on his jacket he knew how to live alone too\*

The further north we got the more preoccupied Willis became and it was clearly rather more than my petty concern about somewhere to sleep that night. In Kalibo he found a hotel with the outlandish title of High Chaparral\* The little semi-partitioned cubicles didn't exactly live up to the name, but the fan worked and apart from an enormous cockroach crawling over my face I slept soundly and next morning at seven o'clock we were packed into another jeepney bouncing north towards Aticlan at the tip of the island\*

A lush tropical panorama plunged past; steamy forests, thatch palm villages, cascading waterfalls, and clear blue sea a long, long way below. Our jeepney driver was in too much of a hurry to let anyone appreciate the view and most of the time we clung on for dear life, hoping at least to enjoy that a little longer\* The windscreen was so obscured by stick-on banners, good-luck charms, and even a large illuminated Madonna with glaring lights, that the driver spent the entire journey with his head out of the cab, but even here his view was blocked by prancing horses and whirring klaxons cluttering the bonnet.

We reached Aticlan after three hours and I climbed stiffly out into the shade of a tatty coconut palm while Willis waited for our bags to be thrown down. He nodded towards a shack perched at the top of the beach. "Let's have a beer while we wait for a boat.'

Collecting my bag I ducked onto the verandah and peered out under the low thatch towards the line of out-rigger canoes fanning the shore.

'Hey Joe, you go Boracay?' called a boatman.

Being hailed "Joe' by every inquisitive stranger is a hazard you have to get used to in the Philippines. I suppose they copied it from the Americans but it still irritated me,

"Five minutes!' Willis shouted back. A girl had just brought two refreshingly cold beers and Willis was pecking at a hard-boiled egg from the pile on the table. 'Nothing like a good breakfast to cheer you up,' he said.

Watching him eat reminded me of our conversation the previous night in Kalibo where across the deserted square from the cathedra! Willis discovered a bar still open and persuaded it to cook us hamburgers, and over a couple of beers he had become talkative. Not that I minded him silent. Willis was quite companionable silent.

£Do you know Hong Kong?' he remarked after we had been chatting a while, and although he went on to talk about it as casually as I might speak of Croydon, I got the impression he didn't particularly care for the place. He worked, it seemed, out of a stuffy office in Kowloon where the fan - one of the old slow ceiling propellers - oared the air with a creak that drove him mad. He was rather offhand about what he actually did and when I questioned him more closely he looked uncomfortable as if he had said more than he should and muttered something about his boss that I didn't quite catch. Looking up he added with a guilty grin, "Oh he's alright, I suppose. I just don't fit in very well with the expats.1

'The ex what?'

'You know,' and again the schoolboy conspiratorial grin, hheex-patriates. Bit of a stuffy crowd.'

'You make them sound like ex-cons J

He laughed at that. 'Perhaps some of them are. I wouldn't be surprised. Oh, it's the tennis-at-the chib, I suppose. All that. And the getting tai led up for it/ he tailed oft lamely as if he wasn't entirely convinced himself.

\*I suppose all colonies tend to be a bit like that,' I suggested helpfully, though for the life of me I couldn't see why he shouldn't fit in. T wondered in fact whether he might be the one who was stand-offish.

He said scornfully, Tin supposed to have gone rather native. Spend too much time in the bazaars and not enough at rhe Club. It's as caste-conscious as an Indian Railway - if you know what I mean.'

el do indeed/ I joked. Tin still recovering from travelling third class from Madras io Calcutta on the Howra Express/

He darted a quick appraising look. 'Well, you know all about it then/

I wasn't quite sure that I did but for a moment. I was back chasing between the steaming leviathans in Madras Station, clutching my ticket and dodging down the crowded platform stretching miles from the luxury air-conditioned coaches at one end towards the unreserved third class at the other, swarming with an India that even India would have preferred



to forget, hoping it might drop off or get shunted away forever into some forgotten siding, but it followed as persistently as any conscience, along with all the beggars, blind men, hawkers, soothsayers, fakirs, gurus and chai-wallahs trailing their endless procession through the packed compartments like the ever-spinning wheel of existence they were chained to.

I wrenched myself away from the recollection of that journey. Willis had mentioned Rogue Elephant again. I thought he was referring to himself, but he shook his head briskly. 'One of our boys who has taken to the bush/ he said authoritatively, and then faltered, not quite sure what to say next. 'Friend of mine actually,' he admitted. 'Big bugger. I was at school with him.' The official frowned but the old schoolchurn underneath continued, 4Head of House, Captain of everything just about. One of the demi-gods. I was his fag. He treated me like a bloody doormat/ But although he tried to sound offhand, a kind of reverence showed through.

Thinking of my own schooldays, I added rather more bitterly, 'Being flogged when you burnt your lord and master's toast or didn't spit and polish his army cadet boots to the required brilliance.<sup>7</sup>

But Willis was back in another country and his voice came from a long way off. 'He never beat me, but he made me pound the running track until I could do the 440 yards in 52 seconds.' He grinned and poured out more beer. 'Used to say if you're going to be a coward, best thing is to learn to run.'

'Are you a coward then?'

There was a battered worn hard look about him that didn't encourage this sort of question. Even the touts didn't harangue him a second time. I imagined him doing rather well in a crisis. Put a Sam Browne on him and it was easy to picture young subaltern Willis leading his troops and himself to slaughter at Mons or the Somme. But appearances can be misleading.

'I'm not a bloody fool!' he retorted hotly. 'If I can run I will. Trouble is one day I'll be too old or too fat or both.' He stared thoughtfully into the deserted street. 'I don't imagine that will ever happen to Rhodes. You know where he earned his spurs? Rhodesia. There was no relationship to Cecil I know of,' he continued, 'except he had an uncle farming in Matabeleland and went out there when he left school. Family got butchered in a terrorist raid while

'Boracay, you going Boracay?'<sup>1</sup> called out the fisherman, waving at us to come down the beach. In tatty shorts and a torn vest he led us onto a fragile outrigger and while we perched under the awning he poled it into deeper water before coming back to start the motor. Bolted down amidships was what looked like an old lawnmower engine without any reverse or neutral, but it roared alive on the second pull and we sped away, bouncing over the bright waves towards the island.

I had been watching Boracay while I sipped my beer. From that distance all you could really see was a smudge of green fringed by white shore, but as we got closer, the smudge expanded into low wooded hills and rocky headlands. An

outrigger canoe darted out of a sandy cove with thatched huts tucked under the coconut palms. We rounded a cape of twisted coral and the water ahead changed to a lovely iridescent blue. Looking down it was crystal clear and all sorts of shapes and colours stared back plainly from the depths, but what held my attention more was the long white beach ahead, spreading in a lazy uninterrupted curve along the sheltered side of the island. Then the pleasure dimmed slightly as I imagined a former guerrilla hunter probably watching our approaching outrigger from some shady verandah with lazy "binocular" eyes.

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'Where you go, Balabat, Angul?' shouted the boatman. He squatted above the hot noisy engine, controlling the rudder with a long bamboo pole, Willis, sitting up front under the awning, appeared not to have heard, so I pointed to where some canoes were pulled up. The engine cut out and we glided through the clear shallows.

No sooner had we paid off the boatman and were trudging barefoot along the beach carrying our shoes and bags than a boy emerged from the trees. "You want cottage ?'

4How much?'

One glance at our travel-worn appearances and he summed up our financial status. 'You tourists or travellers ?'

"Both/ replied Willis,

"Twenty peso each cottage. You want lady?' I

The overhead sun had reached melting point but Willis grinned non-committally, Tunny how women and islands go together,\* he remarked as we stumped along dodging spike grass and dead coconuts. "Especially south sea islands with waving palms/ he said.

"Cottage!1 announced the boy, and like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, two identical thatched huts, perched on sticks, faced us under the palm trees. Both consisted of a single room almost entirely filled by a large bed. On each verandah stood a table and two cane chairs. A window - or rather a square hole - peered seawards and a padlock fastened the flimsy door. Tf you lose the key you can punch a hole through the leaf wall to get in/ said Willis retreating to his own quarters.

I sat down on a cane chair to cool off. Beyond the verandah the sea glittered invitingly through the trees. A small boy trotted along the path, naked except for a T-shirt that barely reached his navel. Across it was printed "I am an outdoor girl". He shot me a generous grin and continued on his way making motorbike noises. Between the trees an outrigger canoe sailed slowly past.

The unexpected strains of an English hymn, whistled out of tune, had me glancing round in surprise to discover Willis covered in soapsuds astride an ancient pump, A bamboo pipe fed into a thatched lean-to. 'Our bath house!" he shouted cheerfully. There was a pile of crumpled clothes beside him. He grinned. fJust doingaspotofdhobying?

I waved, and set off slowly along the path in the opposite direction to the motorbike boy. Passing two men laboriously sawing a tree-trunk into planks, I crossed an open meadow with "Rogers Place" tacked to a tree. The village began on the other side of a coral bluff, an unfinished church of wooden beams and ugly cement blocks, a few scattered huts, outrigger canoes hauled up under the trees and stalls on stilts like sentry boxes selling "Tide", bananas, tinned sardines and baby powder. In an open space between the trees some of the island children were playing a boisterous volley-ball game and I sat on a log to watch. On the next log sat a boy holding a baby and when he turned round I recognised our landlord. He broke into a cheery grin and began the name game. "Jimmy," I told him. It always sounded friendlier than James. But that didn't satisfy him. "Family name?" he demanded.

"Bet you a Coke you can't say it right?" But he did, or near enough so he claimed a cigarette as a bonus and I learned his name and won a new friend.

For a twelve year old, Junior Rodriguez knew his way around. "Coke no good," he insisted. "Not cold. Only feel cold. One beer you, one beer me, and He switched on his most beguiling smile, "And two cigarettes?"

I shook my head. "One."

He nodded, heaved the baby over to me and took my ten peso note across to the nearest store. Out in the yard the ball game ended amid much hilarity and a boy shinned up to lower the patched net.

We walked back to the hut. A curious procession. Me with the baby and Junior carrying the beer. He gave friendship a further shove in the right direction by handing over I he correct change. In return I relinquished the baby which he took back to its mother.

‘You like drink tuba?’ he enquired presently from the other cane chair.

Through the palmtrees the sun was sinking blood red into the purpling sea. Tips of far away islands rose up suddenly and vanished. Two late outriggers sailed in slowly on the dying breeze.

‘Tuba ?’ persisted Junior.

I glanced towards the other hut but the boy shook his head.

‘Your friend he go out? I wondered how he knew until I remembered the men sawing up the tree nearby. A dozen rough-cut planks marked where they had been working.

"Come, we find tuba man. Good tuba. One peso a litre only?

And rather reluctantly I followed him back along the path past Angul village and into the twilit forest. The island swallowed us in a green gloom netted with hanging fronds,

but dodging expertly from one path to another we came

finally to a hut half-hidden behind enormous mango trees.

Ripe guavas overhung the thatch and paw-paws guarded the

yard. A dog tethered beneath sagging clumps of small wild

bananas started barking furiously. ‘Tuba man house? Junior

announced, picking his way delicately towards the open door

across a garden of Chinese cabbage and varns.

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A woman came out carrying a swill of coconut scrapings for the fat hairy piglets squealing and scurrying after her. She laughed when Junior spoke to her. 'Tuba man come home soon?' he interpreted. 'You like fresh coconut?' and without waiting he swarmed up the nearest tree. From high above a dozen coconuts showered heavily down. J

Inside the hut I sat sipping the coconut, while Junior plied me with questions. What I did, where I came from, how old was I, and was I married? A cooking fire smouldered on a sand tray beside the window and a cloud of smoke shrouded the low roof. Outside the dog barked again and the tuba man appeared, wiry and bent with a hollow bamboo container strapped over his torn vest and a machete at his waist. He looked at me, listened to his wife, and without hesitation climbed into the nearest tree where high up, instead of coconuts, hollow bamboo pips were hanging to collect the tuba juice. When he came down he poured the cloudy wine into a glass for us to try. Bitter sweet, the sizzling tuba seared my stomach lining in a single swig but Junior nodded approvingly. 'Pay him three peso/ he declared, and we set off carrying over half a gallon for which we had paid less than twenty pence. No wonder it was a popular drink.

It was pitch dark by the time we got back to the beach. At the edge of the tide unseen waves dashed into streamers of bright phosphorescence. After returning to the hut we sat on the sand beside a leaf fire to sip the tuba.

'Where your friend?' enquired Junior.

Paraffin lamps had been placed on the hut verandahs, but of Willis there was still no sign.

‘Who he look for? Lady? Boiacay person?’

‘English. Big man. Rhodes? I said.

He repeated the name, shaking his head. ‘Many tourists come island for Christmas. Perhaps Balabat, north end?’ And then he brightened with an idea. ‘We go Happy Home and eat. Perhaps your friend there. Supper only eight peso each, you, me. Lady my Auntie. You like?’

Overhead the sky swarmed with stars. We stepped along the top of the beach to a clearing where a large open-sided hut was brightly lit with lanterns. There was no sign of

I nodded. ‘What’s the matter. Toothache?’ I went back inside for some aspirins, padlocked the door after me and pocketed the key. Then a thought occurred to me. ‘Where did you sleep last night?’ I asked him.

He swallowed the aspirins with a grimace. ‘On the beach. In a boat. Why you ask?’\*

I shook my head. Boracay was beginning to exert its Alice-in-Wonderland spell. ‘No matter. Lead on Macduff.’

It came as a pleasant surprise to see the island by daylight. Groves of coconuts surrounded hidden valleys bright green with young rice, and cattle grazed patches of meadowland dotted with guava trees. We crossed brackish streams darting with crayfish and skirted Spidery mangrove swamps, and although we touched no other settlements, we often



passed stray huts set back under the trees surrounded by gardens of string beans and sweet potatoes with smoke wafting out of the windows and dogs barking. Once we passed a group of very dark people.

‘Other people,’ muttered Junior obscurely. ‘Different tribe, not speak our talk/ But most of the people we met smiled and exchanged the quaint-sounding greeting of “Happy Walking”.

For on Boracay the islanders walked everywhere. Not only had electricity failed to cross over the channel from Aticlan, neither had the four wheels. And apart from the occasional bicycle and one white horse with a bearded rider looking like an Arthurian legend gone astray, it was ‘Shanks’s pony’, all the way. Not that I minded so long as I didn’t sweat too much. I considered wearing a sarong but that seemed a bit fancy. Somehow I could imagine this Rhodes character with a sarong and a bloody great machete rucked through the waistband. Rhodes the pirate. Junks and slave girls. More likely AK-47 Russian assault rifles, I thought, remembering what Willis had said about the guerrillas.

Finally our path swooped below towering coconut palms to a cove with a few scattered huts among flowering hibiscus bushes. At once you could sense the difference, for this was the exposed windward side of the island and the breeze blew sharply off the ocean, burying the beaches in seaweed where pigs snuffled searching furiously for sand hoppers. Beyond the headlands a line of breakers marked the reefs and far out

to sea a sailing outrigger was tacking its way slowly north up the island.

As we walked across the beach a group of very dark naked infants rushed to a shelter of leaves tucked under the trees and hid till we passed. Then a man stepped out, very dark too, and walked slowly into the sea until it came up to his neck. He stayed there as long as we could see him. Junior grinned and touched his head.

\* Where's Boyct's house?'

'Boyct's girl live Suyo.' Once again the proud emphasis as if he were addressing someone special. It made me more and more curious.

We climbed back from the shore past a hut with bits of flattened tin covering holes in the (hatch. Two men were hacking at a carcass on a flat log.

"Christmas feast!' grinned Junior, rubbing his tummy.

"Pig?' I enquired jovially. "Honk honk.'

The men grinned. "Woofwoof,' said one. "Dog.'

I didn't feel quite so jovial.

'Very good meat,' said Junior emphatically. 'Sweet. You eat Christmas herewith Boyet?'

I wondered what the Croydon R.S.P.C.A. would have to say. Boyet, I assumed, was not a member.

'Boyet eat dog,' Junior boasted vigorously, 'Boyet big man!'

More and more convinced in my impression of the man as some sort of dog-eating giant out of Jack and the Beanstalk, I quite expected to hear the chant of “Fee Fi Fo Fum - I smell the blood of an Englishman” echoing through the mango trees as we continued up the shady track. However, we were interrupted by nothing more sinister than a huge sow with sagging udders strolling towards us with a horde of squealing piglets.

Junior pointed up the hillslope to where a rather unusual hut stood in a clearing. Not only was it round and verandahed but it perched twenty feet up a mango tree. I waited for Tarzan himself to swing down. /

‘House of Boyet girl,’ announced Junior flatly.

And I suddenly understood. ‘He’s not here, is he?’

He frowned. It was clearly a question of conflicting loyalties. There was no doubt who was his Master. Rather sulkily he said, ‘You want where Boyet live. Boyet lady here. She say Boyet left island early. Gone to Aticlan.’

I didn’t say anything. If he lost too much face, I might lose a useful guide. Anyway it had been a pleasant walk and I was more curious than annoyed by all this subterfuge. Poor Willis floundering about at one end of the island, me at the other. Why this enormous concern to protect Rhodes’, or Boyet’s, whereabouts. I shrugged off a smile and Junior grinned sheepishly back. ‘You come inside,’ he insisted, tugging my arm.

A ladder propped against the tree led the way up through a hole in the floor. Inside the single airy room there was little evidence it belonged to anyone in particular except that the bed was big enough for a giant. Above it some ornamental shell designs framed a simple mirror, and coconut husks full of moss and flowers hung in the open windows. Rhodes clearly travelled light. A slight movement caught my eye and from the terrace outside a magnificent grey hunting bird watched me beadily as it shuffled along a perch. Below it lay a circle of uncleared droppings.

I felt Junior tugging again at my arm. "Boyet's girl," he whispered, and in acute embarrassment I swung sharply round to face the girl who had slipped so silently into the room from the other verandah. Under a loose blouse and floppy trousers she was a slender thing, with a lovely Vietnamese face and an elf-like agelessness. But it was her eyes and her slightly mocking self-assurance that held me spellbound, for in a single glance she seemed to penetrate all my secrets, revealing none of her own, just this knowing, half-amused stare that captivated me like a bewitching lure. And such is the curse of being a schoolmaster that even here, far away on my sabbatical, the lines ... "A damsel with a dulcimer in a vision once I saw" raced into my mind from the haunts of Kubla Khan. "It was an Abyssinian maid and on her dulcimer she played singing of Mount Abora ..."

"Boyet gone to Aticlan/Junior repeated, "Boyei

I very nearly shouted, "Stop nagging me!" but then I became aware of the oafish way I had been grinning at her and shook my head clear.

"Boyet's girl/ insisted the boy. "She say you come back later for Christmas Dance at Manoc Manoc.'

Knocking crudely at the door of my brain sounded the advice of my first headmaster in broad Yorkshire on my very first day's teaching - "And another thing lad, don't "tap up" the girls!' Don't mess with other people's women - especially pirate-chiefs' he might just as well have said, and smiling as courteously as I knew how, I backed out of the hut catching my leg on the bed and nearly plunging down through the trap door.

We returned at a brisk pace across the island. "Does she speak English?' I enquired. I didn't want to appear too inquisitive but you don't often see girls like that in Croydon. Or if you do they never invite you to a Christmas party.

Junior shook his head. "She China Sea girl from Palawan Island/ he pointed vaguely out to sea westwards. 'She Boyct girl/ he added, as if that would explain everything. It did too.

\*

'You like to sail?' Junior suggested when we emerged once again on the white beach. Pulled up on the strand lay an outrigger canoe. Its sails were as torn as Junior's ragged shorts. A fisherman climbed out of a patch of shade where he had been mending a net. 'Fifteen peso/ declared Junior.

‘Special price. Tourist price twenty-five. Your frieiul/ he added pointedly, ‘him pay twenty-five/

Poor Willis. I felt rather guilty abandoning him until I remembered it was more the other way round. Anyway, just now all I wanted to do was leap into that lovely sea and swim and sail until it was time to return to Manoc Manor and the girl

The boat fell as if it would fall to pieces in our hands as we dragged it down the beach. The mast stays were bound to the bamboo outriggers with nylon twine and the tiller was operated by worn-out cords like a river row boat. Junior fixed the rudder onto its rusty pins and we pushed off.

‘We go Aticlan/ he suggested, climbing onto an outrigger as we glided away from the shore. ‘Cock fight, Aticlan. You like see?’

‘Also Rhodes-Boyet/ T thought, handing the tiller ropes over so that I could lie up front and watch the undersea corals. Anemones as innocent as the eyes of the China Sea girl stared back from the crystal depths.

If on shore the boat had felt as dead as wet driftwood, once in the water she became alive and flew. Junior steered effortlessly between the shoals until we rounded the bluffs at J

the island end and caught the wind. Blowing across the channel it charged the sea with short still waves. The mast quivered, the outriggers dipped, spray Hew and Junior laughed. I was quite content to lie back feeling the boat buck

and skim through the waves while the boy sang of heaven knows what in the quaintly falsetto sing-song way Filipinos have. He had lashed the sails tight and whenever a gust snatched us he leaped nimbly onto the lifting outrigger to trim us back upright. I baled our with half a coconut.

‘Boyet!’ he shouted, "Boyet sail outrigger alone.1 But I didn’t realise the significance of that until we had to go about, for outrigger canoes simply can’t turn through the wind on their own. A lot of energetic paddling is needed to get them round. ‘Boyet,1 panted Junior, "he turn other way,1 and his hand described a big circle. He means gybing, 1 thought. The boy laughed, 4Or he jump out in sea and push.’

Despite all our efforts we still landed half a mile down the beach - close to a ruined monster outrigger with three decks. Junior led the way to the bar above the beach where he ordered rice, fish and boiled eggs before we set off for the cock fight.

A wooden stadium housed rhe event, with tiers of benches overlooking rhe pit - raised like a boxing ring. Outside, fighting birds were squared up against one another and the bets flew thick and fast.

The next pair for combat were already armed with spurs - tiny razor-sharp knives bound to the leg with coloured thread, and thrusting out behind like miniature ceremonial swords.

Junior touched my arm. ‘See big red bird. Him belong Boyet.1

I looked around quickly but among the few foreign spectators there was no one resembling my idea of Rhodes. Junior shook his head. "Boyet not here. He go Kalibo early. Big hurry. Come back later.<sup>1</sup>

Instead I watched his surrogate - the red fighting cock. Its opponent bird was pure white and as they were lifted into the ring I had this sudden image of a plantagenet duel, the red rose and the white, Rhodes and Willis in helm and shield, facing each other across Bosworth Field. The bugle sounded - in this case a gong - the referee slipped off the sheaths and the two went for one another in a whirlwind of flying feathers and crowing. It was all over in minutes. The red was clearly the stronger. Time and again he mounted the struggling white, slashing it senseless. The referee gathered up the bleeding white cock and presented it to its red attacker until it was well and truly slain. To considerable applause, including Junior's unrestrained delight, the victor was held aloft while the loser was dumped ingloriously outside on a heap. The way Junior clapped you would have thought it was his hero himself who had won the contest.

'Boyet win! Boyetwin!' he shouted triumphantly.

I wondered what the odds on survival were even for winning birds.

"Maybe three maybe four fights/ agreed Junior more modestly as we walked away. "But big money. Red bird win two maybe three thousand peso. Boyet rich man.' He announced this proudly without a trace of envy, which puzzled me more than ever. Just what sort of man was this -



a foreigner who could win such loyalty. It took more than a simple name change. We watched another fight but the special interest was lacking. Then while I toured the stalls of the Christinas market Junior joined some friends for a basketball game in the square. After a second lunch we set off back to the island at four.

Drawn up among the other sailing outriggers at Aticlan I noticed a rather smarter canoe, sails neatly stowed, ropes coiled, an iron anchor strapped around a rock. "Boyer's boat," declared Junior admiringly. For a moment I

hesitated, but the boy regarded me craftily. 'You want dance with China Sea girl at Manoc Manor?' And when he was sure that had sunk in he added, 'Anyway you see Boyet later. He come back in time for party/ He stopped to inspect my appearance. 'You like dressing up ?'

'In what?' I laughed, imagining Rhodes and Willis and the China Sea girl twirling around like policemen and fairies out of lolanthe.

On the way back we had the wind with us and raced across the channel with spray flying, easily overtaking the crowded punt boats heading for the Manoc Manoc feast. But rounding the coral headland at the end of the island the wind died suddenly, and the sail, swinging over, cracked Junior hard on the head with the boom. He dashed away the tears in his eyes with a burst of hilarious laughter. Not for the first time I found myself impressed by the Filipino trait of laughing themselves out of adversity.

We got out the paddles and drove the canoe in towards Angul village, but it was dark by the time we had pulled it up the beach, stowed the sails and started off across the island for the feast.

For an island without electricity Manoc Manoc produced a very creditable sound of music - at least when measured by volume alone — but any fanciful notions I had been entertaining of wind-up gramophones with huge ear trumpets, or amplifiers running on bottled gas were curtailed by Junior's brisk reply, 'Batteries come over from Aticlan?'

When we finally emerged from the trees we found the festivities already in full swing. A cracked basketball court hosted the dance whose rhythm varied from rock and roll to a tasteful selection of old dance tunes, all performed in the best ballroom style. But it was the costumes that really look me by surprise!

Any similarities to Gilbert and Sullivan were speedily dispelled by the outrageous wigs, dresses and make-up sported by every Filipino male present. Apart from one never-to-be-forgotten performance in the Staff-Room 'Follies' at the School Christmas Panto<sup>1</sup>, I cannot claim to be an authority on drag, but this lot brought (cars streaming down our faces and spasms of hysterical laughter until Junior and myself were clutching ourselves and howling like a pair of loonies.

I think T might have ruptured my diaphragm or something worse had not the Master of Ceremonies

intervened and started auctioning off the "Christmas Baskets" - cooked chickens and half gallons of tuba contributed to raise funds. The Major D. turned out, perhaps not surprisingly, to be Junior's father - who was also none other than one of the men sawing up tree trunks outside Angul village. For a suspicious moment I wondered if the entire family were employed on Rhodes's watchdog payroll, but his infectious welcoming smile melted my doubts. Tonight anyway Mr. Rodriguez was dressed up in a brown suit of vintage design but still very presentable in the dim lamplight of the dance. Between selling off his "baskets", he came and sat beside us offering with the aid of generous swigs of tuba, a mixed bag of suggestions for approval.

'Children make a poor man rich, Jim. You buy basket, only twenty peso. Okay? Junior good boy - very clever at school. Twelve other children. Three girls married!' He beamed at us both, and we beamed back. 'Come, Mister Jim, you buy basket, only twenty peso.' And standing up he announced, 'Next basket of chicken and tuba sold to Mister Jim. Keep dancing!' And at once he set off at a brisk if wobbly pace for the beach bearing my supper.

The chicken was amazingly tough but he demolished it at top speed, together with the tuba, pausing only for breath and to continue his discourse. 'Mister Jimmy, each child need one kilo rice a day, kilo rice cost 1 peso. Me, Santino Rodrigucz, earn 15 peso full day work. And not always find work.' But he didn't seem daunted by the impossibility of balancing his budget. Like Micawber he remained an optimist. 'Me not

poor. Poor is lacking, what do I lack? I have lovely wife Elena Rodriguez, enough food, happy kids. Mister Jim, I tell you what is poor, poor is loneliness, poor is sickness. I not poor, me a lucky man.' With that we drank our mutual healths several times over until the tuba was exhausted and we returned to the dance where I bumped straight into Willis. He was out of breath, dishevelled and rather surprisingly barefoot. He also seemed to be limping slightly.

'You have had a rough day/ I said.

He seemed at a loss for words and mopped his face on his shirt tails. But when he looked up he was blushing. 'No so bad/ he said awkwardly.

'Floundering about all day at the other end of the island can't exactly be much fun/ I persisted.

He hesitated before replying. There was a secretive look about him as if he'd just pinched a shilling from the collection bag.

'Well you can't have found him. He went to Kalibo, at least so I gather. I met his girl.'

'So did I/ he said coyly. In fact I've just come from there/ He sat down and started examining the soles of his feet. 'Look, it's a bit hot. Do you think we'll get a cold beer here? I could do with one.'

We stepped round the perimeter of the dancing to a shack selling beer at the end of the beach, with a couple of benches outside. Junior, rather surprisingly, had vanished. The beer was luke-warm but Willis didn't seem to notice. 'Ah, that's

better/ he said, drinking deeply. 'You see/ he explained, 'last night I thought of something. You gave me the idea when you once said jimmy sounded friendlier than James. Well Rhodes used to have this nickname at school - Boyet, and I thought he might have used it here. I only met with blank looks when I tried it on your chums, but at Balabat faces lit up all round. So in no time I was heading back to Suyo.'

'I suppose you know I was at Suyo.'

He eyed me curiously. 'Yes, yes. You'd gone on to Aticlan. But Rhodes's, or Boyet's, girl was still there and she invited me to stay and eat Christmas/ He frowned and bit his nails guiltily.

'Ah, rhe roast mongrel. I hope you're nor a member of the R.S.P.C.A.'

Willis glared at me irritably- 'Don't be nuts. It's their national dish. Anyway it was jolly good whatever it was, and everyone was swigging tuba.'

'And rhe girl ?'

'He'll probably kill me if he finds out,' Willis muttered. 'You see I forgot my shoes. I hope the silly girl had the sense to bung them out of the window/

I found myself regarding him with a mixture of admiration and envy. 'Good Heavens, Willis, you didn't get enticed back to the n ee house?'

He toyed sheepishly with his beer boule. 'I couldn't take my eyes off her. Whenever she looked at me I felt like Ullvses

hearing the Sirens singing, and I just wanted to row for the rocks.'

I wanted to smile. My damsel with a dulcimer and his Sirens weren't so very far apart. We both sipped our warm beer in silence and gazed out across the channel to the distant glimmering lights of Aticlan. Out there in the brooding dark she seemed to be watching us.

'Doesn't speak a word of English/ he said. 'Or pretends not to. By the end of the meal I couldn't stand those damned eyes any longer. "You, me", I blurted out. She understood. "Suyo", she said. Just one word, and set off under the trees with yours truly panting along behind. If it wasn't for the tuba I might have been more cautious,' he added, as if he were looking for excuses, but I don't think he believed it.

He glanced about uneasily. 'I don't mind admitting it, but I was a bit worried about Rhode's returning.'

Boyei, however disarming his nickname, didn't sound the sort of chap who'd take lightly to anyone - even an old schoolchum - messing around with his woman, but when

Willis had reached the clearing and whispered 'Boyet' nervously, the girl shook her head and climbed up the ladder into the treehouse. But now Willis was in for a surprise, for when he followed her out onto the verandah she feigned astonishment and slipped away.<sup>41</sup> tripped over a bloody great bird-stand!\* he exclaimed. It was only later that I realised the significance of this for the bird was no longer there. Willis was sure of that, and as he continued his story F I

had the uncanny feeling we really were being watched and it was my turn to peer uneasily into the shadows for the silhouette of a man with a hawk on his wrist. Willis was still reliving the treehouse. He had reached a point of considerable anguish, for the more he pleaded, the more the girl's indifference excited him. \*100 peso/ he begged and she stopped moving away. 4100 peso, half hour,\* Willis heard himself bargaining. His brain was racing overtime calculating the odds and prices. Quite how far he would raise the peso and shrink the time even he didn't know, but fortunately at this point she uttered the first English words he'd heard her speak, 'and very practical ones they were too,' said Willis. "Money down,' she insisted and then, leading the way inside she stopped, turned, and resting a hand lightly on his shoulder touched his cheek with the nail of her little finger and drew it slowly down under his chin and neatly across his throat.

From a distance it is perhaps difficult either to sympathise or appreciate how overcome he was. Perhaps it was her sheer indifference that spurred him on, the way she lay there beautiful but utterly detached. 'Anything, anything,' Willis heard himself praying out loud, and as if to tease him she just watched like a spectator and murmured, 'Nothing,\* until finally Willis's rime was up. 'I was still fumbling about, happy as a toddler in a sand-pit,' he declared, when she called to him more sharply a second time. 'Half-hour up!\*

she announced like the attendant at the park lake. 'Number three come in please!' Willis thought reluctantly as he rowed back obediently to the shore.

I could not resist a smile, but Willis, his confessions over, seemed more despondent than ever as the implications of dallying with Rhodes's girl weighed on him. Without wishing to hurt his feelings I couldn't help wondering if it wasn't all a put-up job. It had certainly got Willis out of the wTay. And there was the missing hawk to consider.

Willis mistook the nature of my silence. 'She fancies you too, you know,' he offered generously, 'I'm convinced of it/ He obviously felt he needed to give me a consolation prize. Judging by his experience I was not sure I needed it.

'How on earth did you come to that conclusion?' I protested. 'Did she say my time was up too?'

'Gosh/ and touching his neck gingerly with his finger he added in a subdued voice, 'I never thought she meant that/

'Anyway/ I said, glancing back at the dance, 'How am I supposed to know him if I should see him, apart from looking for a Longjohn Silver with a parrot?'

Willis frowned. 'At University he always used to stride about in an old duffle coat. Funny thing, I can never see a duffle coat these days without seeing him inside it/

Over in the square I could hear Mr. Rodriguez announcing the winners of the costume contest. I couldn't imagine any duffle coats there. Willis went on, 'I remember during one of those heated Union debates, everyone bleating away on behalf of



the poor downtrodden someone-or-others, when in stalks  
“Old Duffle Coat”. The uproar died away instantly. Rhodes  
didn’t say a word. Just took a seat beside me, lit a Woodbine  
and preened that evil hawk of his/

‘He had a bird then!’

He nodded, ‘One of his things, falconry. Ever since I can  
remember he’s been taming and training wild birds —  
completely illegal of course, but that wouldn’t deter him. He  
used them to hunt for him. Didn’t live in a Hall of Residence  
or ‘digs’ like the rest of us. Had this old caravan on the  
common. Sent the bloody birds out to find his supper/

‘Go on about the debate.’

‘Oh, you wouldn’t believe it, the effect I mean. He stayed  
until the vote was taken. I don’t know why they bothered.  
With him there it was a foregone conclusion.’

I looked at him incredulously and he agreed, ‘I know it  
sounds daft but it’s just impossible to defy him.’

‘He certainly seems to have this island in his pocket.’

Willis nodded again, ‘It’s not the first place. He’s been giving  
me one hell of a chase you know. Before Minandoa he was  
playing War Lord up among the hill tribes along the Burmese  
border.’

‘And that’s why you’re after him?’

His face shut like a trap. ‘Got to,’ he muttered sulkily. ‘Can’t  
have people strutting about the world as if it was their own

personal empire. It's not the middle ages. War Lords and Ghengis Khan are things of the past?

I wasn't so sure of that, but I didn't press the point. I was more interested for his comments on something that had been puzzling me. 'Willis, you've known him all your life, can't you reason with him? I mean all this 'impossible-to-defyetc' does sound a bit far-fetched.'

He frowned, squinting down at his feet, and replied rather petulantly, 'He certainly won't listen to me, never did. And if I try arguing or whatever, I just end up getting angry and he usually laughs. Once I,' he stopped. For a moment he was silent. One dance had ended and Mr. Rodriguez hadn't announced the next. We all seemed to be waiting. Only the sea murmured beyond the low shadowy dunes. What thoughts, what memories passed through Willis's head T wondered.

"Once you what ?' T reminded hi HE

He breathed out deeply, Tough: him\* Twice actually. Once was at school. A duel with epees in the little cloisters. At midnight. No corks or masks. First to draw blood.<sup>1</sup>

The music had begun again, pounding Manoc Manoc raw with its bear. I said, "What on earth did you fight a duel over ?'

I didn't think he'd heard\* Or the clamour of the crowd drowned out his reply. He sat very still staring forwards and said quietly without emotion, "Honour\*'

I was so surprised I nearly burst out laughing. He shuffled awkwardly on the bench. "I know it sounds a bit potty, but those sort of things, they mattered, at least they did then,<sup>1</sup> and he lapsed into an uneasy silence and lit another cigarette.

"And the other time?<sup>1</sup>

"Oh, the other was at University/

"Was that over honour too?<sup>9</sup>

"Elizabeth Taylor/ f

I was even more amazed. "What, the actress?' Willis was certainly full of surprises.

T rather admired her. He said she was awful, just to goad me on you see until in the end I had to challenge him - which was exactly what he wanted\*'

"What did you say?'

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"Oh, something like, ""I've got to fight you Rhodes." He chuckled. "It was one hell of a fight, out on the quad. He was so huge he had to win swiftly or he'd be out of breath - or so he told me after/

"And who did win ?'

"No one - bur we both had to go to the Casually Unit to be plastered up/

I looked at Willis with a new respect. "You must have been pretty tough yourself/

'Fit,\* he laughed, T was fit I think. Captain of Rowing and all that/

4And Rhodes. What was he Captain of?'

'Rhodes ran everything else. Made me run up bloody mountains every weekend. He's as hard as nails. Once we sailed off southern Ireland in a gale for fourteen hours with the lee rail under and the seas boiling into the cockpit - just because the mainsail was new and he didn't want to crease it reefing/

I raised my eyebrows, but he muttered, "I know what you're thinking, but somehow it didn't seem foolhardy - not with him. He's very calm in danger. I've never seen him flustered. He sailed with Tillman around Greenland in an ancient leaky old Bristol pilot cutter. Apparently the old boy used to dry out the tea leaves on deck for a second go/

The talking had made him restless. Testing his feet gingerly on the ground he got up and we walked down to the shore away from the dance. On this south-easterly point of the island a spit of sand swooped out towards Aticlam Buried by oncoming seas it rose again in a couple of wooded atolls clear and dark, guarding the channel.

"Tell me something/ I began as casually as I could. "Has he ever saved your life?' I realised it was an awkward question in the circumstances, but I thought it might help to explain the ambivalent attitude he had about the person he was supposed to be hunting. For a moment I didn't think he was going to reply.

He stood on the edge of the shoreline, the tide lapping his feet, staring seawards and the admission when it came, came haltingly from deep down and long ago. Above the noise of the breakers I had to strain hard to hear him.

"I gybed her wrong, you see. On the back of a wave. We were just kids, but it was a madcap idea of mine to go sailing in December. He told me that but I was pigheaded I suppose and so he insisted on coming too.\*

I watched his toe tracing a line in the wet sand. I thought it might be an initial, but he scrubbed it out.

'Anyway, once she turned over we couldn't get her upright. It was damn cold. Rhodes tied our wrists together over the bottom and made me sing hymns, rousing ones. He always liked to bellow out Jerusalem'?

\* I suppose you were too far out to swim for it?'

He turned sharply and in the pale moonlight there seemed to be a fanatical, even a triumphant look on his face. He slowly nodded. 'Only a couple of hundred yards to the rocks, but you see he'd just had his appendix out. He was trying to keep me up with one hand and hold his stitches in with the other?

When we got back to the dancing, the girl was there and Willis was clearly embarrassed about what to do. He appeared to consult his feet for an answer, but although there was no sign of any massive bear-like figure I could identify as a likely candidate for Rhodes, caution seemed to prevail on both sides. The girl deliberately ignored us and Willis kept very much to the perimeter, trying to pretend he

wasn't there, but although she avoided looking at either of us directly, I got the impression that everything she did, the way she crooned, moved, giggled with her partners and teased was for our benefit. It wasn't showing off, more a form of subtle beguilement, reasserting her spell. And there was no doubting the success of her tactics. Even Willis, like a tired marine after an unsuccessful assault on Okinawa, was prepared to take to the landing craft again.

There was still no sign of Junior, which I thought was rather odd, and shortly after midnight we headed back to Angul on our own. Partly to save Willis's feet we decided to follow the path round the coast. It certainly couldn't be stonier than the one inland.

We got to the next cove easily enough. There was a small village, just a cluster of huts and a few outriggers pulled up but we must have blundered into every backyard and roused every dog in the place before we found a way out heading in the right direction. Crossing the next headland took much longer than either of us expected, The forest was dense and the path mostly consisted of coral ridges which played havoc with poor Willis's feet. Some way ahead we saw torches approaching and heard snatches of song. The path was particularly narrow here with a steep drop on one side and dense undergrowth on the other. The revellers sounded harmless enough and we stepped aside to let them pass. Willis even called out 'Goodnight' cheerily and then suddenly grunted. Only now did I realise we were being attacked.

Strange what thoughts appear uninvited during moments of crisis. Even as we were both desperately trying to dodge the savage machete chops, yelling our heads off, and lashing about ineffectually, Willis was privately blaming Junior for treachery and I was silently accusing Willis for leaving his shoes behind.

Fortunately the attackers were drunk on tuba and kept getting in each other's way, confused and blinded by their own flashlights. I heard Willis shout 'Run' a couple of times, and 'Bastards!' which was followed by a dreadful shriek just as I leaped sideways, tripped, fell, and clutching madly at nothing, felt myself careering out of control over the edge. It was the cliff drop that saved us. In the dark it seemed to fall for ever, though I don't suppose it was more than twenty feet or so, and when T finally rolled to a stop at the bottom I bumped into Willis.

'Cover/ he cried, hake cover!' and we both burrowed desperately under a fallen tree, hands over our heads to shelter from the stones they were hurling down.

I couldn't understand why they didn't follow us but the screams of pain and rage continued unabated, 'I think they've stabbed one of themselves/ whispered Willis. 'Arc you alright?'

'Yes/ I said. 'You?'

'Just a nick, I hope. Come on, let's make a break for it/ and together we dashed blindly out into the ravine. There was no pursuit. Looking back, the beams of their torches seemed to

be weaving erratically towards Manoc Manoc. Limping and running we continued in a roundabout way back towards where we thought Angul should be, and it was an immense relief to emerge finally into the bright moonlit beach. I Hopped panting onto the sand.

T'm not built for this/ T heard myself complaining aloud.

Willis said nothing. Nursing his leg he staggered off into the sea to clean it and came back fumbling ineptly with a handkerchief. 'Bit of a gash/ he said, grinning painfully. 'Any good with a needle and thread?' And he sat down suddenly. 'Gosh/ he said, £I feel quite wobbly. Don't suppose you could lend me a hand ?'

Moving slowly up the beach we passed small fires blazing all along the shore and children firing off bamboo cannons as if they were preparing to defend the island against imminent invasion. These cannons were hollowed-out tubes of bamboo. Primed with a dash of kerosene and heated over a fire they exploded a wad of blue flame twenty feet or more.

'Getting ready to ring in the New Year/ muttered Willis weakly.

'Rather early/ I suggested.

'Just wait till next week/ he said.

I put him down on the beach opposite the cottages and went off to the Happy Home to get some beer. When I got back he had succeeded in stemming the flow of blood, but it still looked a nasty gash. 'Well? I began, 'was it just a bunch of hooligans or do you think your chum was behind it ?' But



Willis seemed too weary even to comment. His fingers shook as he lit a cigarette.

'You, You!\* came a shout from down the beach. A figure was running wildly towards us, dark against the moonlit shore.

'You!\* shouted Junior, flinging himself down on the sand. He seemed overjoyed to find us. 'You alright?\* Why you not wait, why you go oil alone?' Pausing to catch his breath he spotted Willis's hurt leg. 'You hurt both?' he demanded anxiously. 'Bad men come over from Aticlan. All drunk. They come to Manoc Manoc bleeding. Say two white<sup>1</sup> men attack them.'

There was something I wanted to know. Junior,' I said sternly. 'Who kept you ? Did Boyet ?'

'Boyct ask me favour.\* He wriggled deeper into the sand.

'Boyet my friend. You friend too,\* he added hopefully\*

'Junior/ said Willis. 'Who told you about the fight. Did Boyet ?'

'Boyet worried, Tell me hurry. See if you okay.' He sat up facing us indignantly. 'Boyet not crazy. You think he order chop chop ?'

'That's alright,' Willis continued. 'Here, go and get me some cigarettes will you? And when you next see your friend tell him I've spoken to the Barangay-Captain at Balabat, and that the police will be coming over for him from Kalibo in the morning?'

Junior regarded him with hostile suspicion. He looked at me for help but I didn't know what Willis was talking about,

though I suspected it was probably bluff. Anyhow it seemed to impress the boy who whispered directly into my ear. 4You! China Sea girl leave tomorrow on big outrigger. Sail north to Tablas Island.\* 1 quietly pressed a fifty peso note in his hand. It seemed the least I could do for the Rodriguez budget deficit. He darted away into the shadows to get Willis's cigarettes.

Willis perked up when I told him. 'We've got him on the run/ he claimed. 'We've shaken him out of his treehouse.'

I couldn't myself see how this really helped. 'I thought you wanted him to go to ground?' But Willis shook his head. 'No/ he said, 'that was a mistake. I was wrong. That's when he's most dangerous, when he's in his bolt hole. Back to the wall, Rhodes is like a primitive, drags his women along by their hair, guards his cave against wolves and bears with a flaming brand. Get him out of his lair and we've a hope of catching him in the open plains.'

For someone who's just escaped being chopped up by the henchmen of his old schoolchum, Willis seemed remarkably confident. 'Of course/ he agreed generously, 'you don't have to come along if you'd rather not.'

'Oh, I'll come.' I'd already made up my mind the moment Junior told me about the girl, although I didn't tell Willis my motives.

He pounded my back affectionately. 'Very sporting/ he congratulated, sounding like someone out of Bulldog Drummond.

Then as we sat there in the sand, trying to think of what to do next, I had an idea. 'Junior/ I said, when he came back with Willis's cigarettes, 'how do you get to Balabat during school time. You don't sleep here on the beach surely?'

'In schooltime I go home Kulohnin. Walk across island every day to High School, long way.'

'Junior/ I said. 'How would you like a bicycle?'

He spat glumly into the sand. 'Bicycle cost 200 peso.'

I conferred with Willis who, rather surprisingly, agreed. For although he might be convinced he had Boyet on the run, I didn't want any more wild goose chases. I mean, neither of us had even seen him yet. 'Junior/ I said. 'We'll find you a bicycle if you can find us another boat to Tablas tomorrow. Quick boat.'

'You go Tablas island?' he said, astonished, and then he winked slyly. 'You, you want go after China Sea girl.' But the idea of the bicycle caught up with him. 'You really give me bicycle. You crazy!' Then more cautiously, 'You really give me bicycle?\*

'Yes, but only if you help us. If Boyet stays here you tell us quick, okay?' And then I explained simply what I wanted him to do.

'And you tell him the Borangay-Captain is coming!' Willis shouted out after him as he ran off.

Once Junior had left, Willis limped to my hut and rather cunningly wired it against night intruders by looping cotton

thread all round the ground at knee height. The end of the thread he tied to a spoon dangling inside the jam jar that previously contained our simple paraffin lamp. The only problem was that it was so foolproof every 'remaining' dog on the island or wandering pig snapped it and we were panicked awake more than once during the remainder of the night until Junior came to rouse us before dawn.

It was cool and damp waiting on the beach in the half light of dawn for the boat to take us over to Aticlan. The rest of the island was still fast asleep, but out here on the shore fishermen were paddling to and from their canoes with baskets and nets, some coming back, others preparing to set out.

Willis sat on a stump nursing his leg which had swelled up badly in the night. He didn't complain but it obviously hurt him to use it. Every now and then his teeth started

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chattering.

I was looking out for Junior who had raced off down the beach to get news and when I spotted him coming back, stepping thoughtfully between the moored boats, there was something in his manner that suggested bad news. What he announced was much as I had feared but Willis was predictably dismayed.

'I've never heard such a pack of lies,' he said, glaring at the boy in disgust.

‘I speak true,’ Junior hotly insisted. ‘Boyet will come back. They only go for few days. I speak to wife of captain. She say they sail Palawan, next come back here, then go north Tablas Island and Mindoro. Captain tell her they leave bird now with Merlin.’

‘Who the hell’s Merlin when he’s at home?’ demanded Willis, wincing as he tried to move.

‘Boyet call him Merlin. Him very crazy old man riding white horse/ He looked at me for affirmation, ‘You see him, remember?’

I nodded, amused that Rhodes’s description should fall in so closely with my own. I might not have been so amused had I known the reason.

‘We go there/ declared Junior. ‘He good doctor. Your leg bad/ He glanced around, frowning as if he were searching for a solution to something. His face cleared. ‘Wait, wait!’ he cried and started racing back towards Angul village.

‘Damn!’ uttered Willis, staring gloomily out to sea. ‘Damn/ And he started shivering.

Dragged out to the edge of the tide the canoes set off over the milky-grey sea. Near us the night’s catches lay upturned on the sand; tiny fish, mostly shrimps plus a few bigger ones put aside. Women squatted around sorting them into individual piles, and children with rusty tins hovered at the ready to dart in and scoop up any left over.

'You!' called a familiar voice. 'You!' And up came Junior struggling with an oversize bicycle he had thoughtfully commandeered to transport Willis.

Once we had hoisted him into the saddle we set off, pushing the bicycle along a path that veered away from the beach in a gradual curve towards the centre of the island. After a couple of miles the palm trees thinned and we stepped into a blanket of mist shrouding stagnant pools and marshy swamps. A water buffalo blundered slowly into sight and vanished. 'Fishponds/ panted Junior, as we pushed and splashed our way along narrow dykes until we found the way barred by stout stakes and a padlocked gate. On the other side, across the still water, a cluster of huts were connected by a thin causeway.

'Merlin/Junior announced with a jerk of the head, and peering through the mist I made out a figure coming towards us in a slow stalking gait. As it got nearer I recognised the legendary figure on the white horse. He stopped on the other side of the gate and stared at us.

Merlin, we never discovered his real name, except that he once bore the title of Doctor, was a little man, spare and stooping with tufts of sparse hair and prominent pointed ears. 'A pint-size pixie', was how Willis came to describe him in private, although his flowing beard would have been prized by any one of Snow White's dwarfs. Now in the grey light it was matted with moisture and his tanned, heavily-lined face gleamed with dew. It was his watchful hooded eyes that most held my attention, like the eyes of the very

old or the very wise they scanned our faces constantly. But if any character can be discerned by looks alone, here was revealed only paradoxes, so that it was impossible to come to any easy conclusions about his real nature. One theme alone remained constant - this alertness. Poised and waiting, he watched and listened like a creature tuned into a world we could never expect to see or hear.

‘Good morning,’ called out Willis, but Merlin ignored him while he carefully listened to Junior’s excited tale in Visaya. When he finally turned to us, his mouth opened and closed a couple of times as if unsure what language to use. Fortunately for us it chose English, slow and slightly guttural. The sort of precise English learned in a German Gymnasium many years before. It was also his choice of words that was odd. ‘Welcome,\* he said with the hint of a smile, ‘human guests. Very rare within the stockade.<sup>9</sup> The eyes flickered towards Junior who nodded vigorously. ‘Very care. But welcome none the less. Like the falcon.’ He looked at Willis, ‘Your friend’s falcon. Also an honoured guest, as are all creatures in this stockade, small,’ and appraising us with his hooded eyes he added, ‘or large.’

Switching back into Visaya he delivered a stream of instructions to Junior who sprang to attention and grabbing my arm announced firmly, ‘You stay here\* I take bicycle back. Come later. You wait please. Don’t go alone in Boracay. We sail Punta Bonga, we cat Happy Home. Him,<sup>1</sup> he indicated Willis, ‘get better. No hurry. Boyer’s bird here.<sup>1</sup> Then with a sly wink he added, ‘China Sea girl come back from Palawan

for sure. You see And after helping to ease Willis down onto his good leg, he mounted the bicycle and pedalled off into the mist.

'Come/' declared Merlin, starting off along the narrow dyke, and Willis lurched painfully after him while I brought up the rear. On either side the still lagoon vanished into the mists disturbed only by the occasional plop of bubbles as though it was quietly fermenting underneath.

An air of neglect hung over the cluster of huts ahead. No dogs barked, no smoke drifted from the open windows. I noted that the huts seemed to be arranged in a curiously hexagonal pattern that reminded me of something, only I couldn't remember what exactly. 'Wasp nest,'<sup>1</sup> muttered Willis over his shoulder. He was still angry and suspicious and I expect his leg was hurting a lot more than he let on. Close up the extent of the decay was only too obvious; thatch roofs had fallen in, supports rotted away. Some of the huts had collapsed completely and lay half sunk in the lagoon.

As it happened Willis's description was not so far off the mark. Merlin's 'floating' island crawled with animals and insects of every description. These were his 'honoured' guests. Ghekkos clung and chattered on the leaf walls and spiders' webs hung like netting from the roofs. Within the pattern of huts stood abandoned courtyards, the same size and shape, all entirely overgrown. The place was an oasis, a sanctuary for all the weird and uncanny forms of life outcast from the world. Now I knew where Merlin gained his alertness. It was something he had acquired or copied from



the animals over however many years he had been here; from the pink-tongued poised chameleons and the silem snakes, the rustling cockroaches and the immense butterflies, their outsize wingspans decorating the place with stillness and colour. Only the burying beetles moved continually, like bulky tortoises labouring their hump black backs over grass and earth, and the unseen termites toiled to raise their monuments ever higher.

In the space outside Willis's room, a grey hunting-bird tugged viciously at a small lurry carcass. Though my knowledge of birds was minimal, there was no doubt in my mind to whom it belonged. Even Willis seemed satisfied and allowed us to help him to bed, for apart from his festering gash, all the symptoms of a fever had broken out, chattering, eyes unusually bright and his face drenched in perspiration\* Merlin appeared unconcerned. Having first cleaned and dressed the wound with an unfussy thoroughness, he dismissed the fever as something that would cure itself with a few days rest.

Festooned with cobwebs the leal walls of my own room ticked like a time bomb, while insect nests of magnificent proportions made each joist look like an elaborate rococo picture frame. Nevertheless I managed to grab a couple of hours cat-nap and joined Merlin with a hungry appetite for breakfast\*

I didn't mind the lack of plates - even the customary spoon was missing, and we ate off banana leaves with our fingers, but I would have welcomed something more substantial

than the meal of fruit he provided - it satisfied my hunger but not my appetite.

Merlin ate only the 'fruits of the earth' as he put it, returning from his silent forays on the white horse, his

baskets full of herbs and roots and mushrooms of every description. And just to prove they were edible he munched them raw, grinning at us with childish delight,

But at that first frugal meal he did offer some advice on how to treat the other guests. 'Like anyone, if you disturb them suddenly, they may snap back at you/ he said, watching for my reactions with his hooded eyes, 'And if you kill one of them you can be quite sure all the rest will immediately recognise you as an enemy. A threat/ he emphasised with guttural precision, 'to all of them/

Perhaps it was a good thing I had no idea who or what he was really alluding to. Washing his fingers in a coconut bowl he continued ominously, 'The island children know it. They have killed too many man-eating crabs for sport to ever risk coming beyond the stockade. You see/ he went on as if he were embarking on a lecture, 'the insect is as intently concerned with its own daily life as we are. So why are the spirits of animals, small and large, always regarded - if they are regarded at all — as so much smaller than our own, when the spirit of God is the same size, roughly/ It was only when he chuckled in his dry staccato way that I realised he had meant it as a joke.

If the reader will bear with me there is one further comment I should like to make about that first meal ... During the course of it, I asked Merlin his real name, adding lamely that we only knew the title Boyet had given him. This seemed to amuse him. 'Merlin's house of horrors, he calls it. And he has informed me that if I live long enough I will probably turn into one of my own creatures. Most amusing/ 'And what would you prefer that creature to be?' I enquired, and you know what his reaction was? He spoke to the falcon and asked it! Ha, ha. Such perception. I admire a man who is the companion of hunting birds, he has a different way of seeing.

By the time the mist had burned off the marshes, Junior was waiting for me by the stockade, ready to go sailing. I noticed during the succeeding days 'ein limbo' as Willis put it, we never sailed back to Aticlan but always north. In this attempt to keep his conflicting loyalties apart, I rather admired the boy. Should he bump into Rhodes or the girl I had no doubt he'd feel duty bound to tell them our plans, and to avoid this I don't think he even risked going home, sleeping instead on the beach nearby, curled up in a bit of old sail. The Happy Home was as far as we ever ventured, but as we went there most evenings, his Auntie was able to report to the Rodriguez family at large that all was well,

For Willis the waiting was far worse. Confined to his bed and with nothing else to occupy his thoughts, he brooded constantly about ways to outwit Rhodes and steal the girl away, like a prize of war to be established for ever more in

blissful domesticity somewhere behind the white cliffs of Dover, pushing baby prams and supermarket trolleys. Willis had allowed his daydreams to get ahead of him\* He confided in me, T could give her a decent life, kids. Not out East,' For in his rose-tinted world as he sweated out the dregs of fever, once Rhodes was finally dealt with, he would be free to go home.

Willis had taken refuge in a fantasy world from which as he himself admitted with a disarming smile, T only emerge at meal times.' It was a heroic landscape with Rhodes cast as the evil villain and himself the knight in shining armour dashing to the rescue of the fair maiden. That the fair maiden might not wish to be rescued was something he refused to consider. It wasn't written in the script, and it wasn't for me - outside runner as I was - to doubt his conviction, Perhaps she would enjoy Croydon High Street too, Woolworths, Boots the Chemist and Marks & Spencer. She might even start karate classes at school.

At this point T make no apology for digressing back once again to our first day Chez Merlin (Willis's expression). For only after this whole extraordinary adventure was over and I had the opportunity' to reflect on it did it occur to me that perhaps it was no accident we were staying there. I am certainly not accusing the boy of treachery, I don't expect he realised any more than we did then. But if Rhodes wanted us packaged safely away to await his return while he attended to other pressing business matters about which I had no clue at the time, what better plan than to have us immobilised in

a 'mock' fight and to direct us here where any information we gleaned about him through Merlin we would exult over like schoolboys, never dreaming that perhaps in his subtle way Rhodes intended us to find out, conditioning us and preparing the imaginary trail in our minds so that when the time came once more for us all to set off, he would - from a distance- have us under his remote control.

Perhaps I am wrong and my ramblings seem as quixotic as those of Willis. Certainly it should be borne in mind I had Jr no inkling of what was to come that first evening when Junior sprang on me his astounding revelations about Merlin.

On the way to the Happy Home I had asked him why he wouldn't enter the stockade, and he looked at me as if I were an idiot. 'But you sent us there?' I protested.

'That different/ he insisted. 'You friend, well, sort of friend,' he cautioned, 'of Boyct. Also Merlin put no spell on you. Better not say too much,' he muttered under his breath and set off down the path whistling.

'Junior,' I demanded, 'What's this nonsense Merlin claims about island children killing too many monster crabs to risk going in there?'

He regarded me solemnly in the moonlight, shook his head slowly and walked ahead, but I didn't think he could keep much to himself for very long and it was during the meal that he casually announced in between mouthfuls of boiled rice that Merlin was a murderer.

'What!' For a moment I thought of Willis lying there helpless in Dracula's castle.

Junior speared a morsel of meat. 'Long time ago.'

'Who?'

He shrugged. "First one his wife. She very rich, very fancy lady.' He reached for a toothpick and then changed his mind and looked for something to write with. 'I do not know how to say. Give me pen.' He took my pocket biro, and with his tongue clamped firmly into the corner of his mouth, he laboriously printed out something on the back of a slip of paper.

Turning it round he demanded, "What it mean? Teacher tell us she veiy pretty lady but also and he stabbed his finger at the spidery lettering where two inisformed words stared back. My first attempt at deciphering came up with the mildly alarming 'sexily electric' and the next attempt produced "eccentric1, although given the benefit of the doubt it could just easily have been "excellent'. Junior seemed unconcerned either way. He lowered his voice to a whisper loud enough to penetrate every' conversation in the room. "It mean she is a bit screwy?' he queried, coming round the table to study the message approvingly over my shoulder.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I suppose it probably does.'

Before turning in that night I paid a stealthy visit to make sure Willis was still in the land of the living. I found him staring at the sagging rafters. "So he murders his wealthy but

dilly-dallying wife,' he reflected. "How, I wonder?' and glanced uneasily about him, as J repeated word for word Junior's tale, the gory details of which he had delivered an hour earlier without the least trace of concern.

According to the hazy recollections of island legend Merlin had arrived with his wife just before the outbreak of war in a yacht that foundered on the reefs westward of the island during a tropical storm, and escaped internment when the Japs came. As a qualified nurse, Merlin's wife had been a wonderful asset in the community, and did a power of good, but whether she had been involved in scandal or simply succumbed to some other temptation in this island paradise, nobody but Merlin probably really knew. The official story was that she had been killed by sharks while out swimming from her canoe.

Junior's account didn't end with the head found on the beach. Almost as casually he let slip, 'Second time, during wartime, Japanese Commandant he go there/ He peeled another mango. 'Some say he go there for supper. Anyway he not come back,'

'Not even head?'

'No head. Nothing.1

As we were walking back he showed me the 'coconut' crabs. Under the palm trees the sand was pitted with holes I had always associated with rats. Now in the clear moonlight Junior put down a scrap of meat as bait and immediately out came the biggest crabs I have ever seen, waving their huge

pincers aloft and circling around as warily as boxers, 'Bite leg oft,' remarked Junior jovially, chucking a rock at the nearest crab and cracking its shell open. Instantly the rest moved in, tearing it to pieces and retreating swiftly to their separate lairs. There was not a scrap left. Junior broke into a laugh. 'You know what we call game/ he said as we headed inland to the marshes. 'Japanese Commandant!'

Willis, who had been listening to me in silence, wTiped a hand over his forehead and rested back on the pillows. 'Who's on the menu next?' he said. 'God knows what horrid little monsters lurk out there.'

I got up and stepped across to the window but the night mist had risen over the water hiding whatever dark secrets brooded below.

During the night I lay awake for what seemed hours staring at the rustling walls and listening. It was as though I only had to listen hard enough and I would hear the creatures whispering their secrets, although I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to know.

Next morning at breakfast my efforts at conversation must have sounded a little strained - but it was as though Merlin could read my thoughts as easily as if I'd spoken them\* 'Our mortal lives are such ephemeral things/ he philosophised\*

Tm sure his wife would agree/ said Willis when I told him during my morning visit.



\* Willis/ I said, remembering something I had wanted to ask him\* 'Did you really inform the Borangay-Captain about Rhodes? Or were you just bluffing?'

A bland mind-your-owmbusness look came over his face\* 'Keep local police out of it/ he admitted grudgingly\* \* Official policy\* Don't want any publicity\*'

'While unofficially you intend to nudge him off the pavement in front of a passing bus/ I laughed, 'Why not ask Merlin to oblige?'

For a moment Willis appeared to consider the possibility seriously, then he chuckled\* 'Funny how murderous you become staying here. It must be infectious. Anyway, Merlin likes him. You heard. Two of a kind in their own ways, I suppose.5

When I tackled Merlin about Rhodes he was predictably cagey. T cannot advise you when the falcon will leave. Guests can come and go as they wish.' So it was left to me to keep watch. Each morning the bird and I regarded one another with mutual suspicion. Later on after a bit of screeching it took oil and circled high above the stockade before flying away south or west, but it always returned, cleaning its beak and preening its feathers with a self-satisfied look.

'When bird not come back you go/ stated Junior simply. T nodded. I only hoped Willis would be fit by then.

Apart from going off on his horse, Merlin spent much of his time alone in his hut connected to the rest of the cluster by a thin plank bridge that he could raise to ensure his complete

isolation. Among the other still habitable rooms I discovered heaps of mouldering books, some so riddled with worm as to be illegible, but others, mostly in German, bearing titles ranging from medicine to psychology, including physics, astronomy and religion. There was even a dusty piano, full of mice. Like the books it had lain untouched for God knows how long. Although Merlin's questing eyes reflected something of the strange journeys he had carried in his soul all these years, I got the impression he had reached the point where literature and music no longer helped. Now he simply listened and waited.

'You are a wise old man,' appraised Willis, not intending to sound in any way impertinent.

'No,' said Merlin. 'I am an old man trying to forget everything I ever knew.' He grinned at us. 'Getting ready.'

\* Getting ready?'

'Getting ready for going back to school. Better to have a clear mind and an uncluttered soul,' he added mysteriously.

That day Willis got up for the first time and the following afternoon, the fourth since our arrival, we all walked slowly across the island under Junior's watchful eye. On the beach the bamboo cannons were popping off non-stop, reminding us that New Year was only a day or so away. Willis didn't seem to notice. Shading his eyes against the glare of the sun he stared west towards Palawan. I knew what he was thinking. The falcon had taken off earlier as usual and we were all waiting to see if it returned.

When at sunset the perch was still empty, we sensed instinctively that Rhodes had come back. Junior certainly had no doubts and even refused to go to the Happy Home for supper. Instead he accepted some of Merlin's food and took it to one of the small fires blazing along the beach.

Willis and I shared our last vegetarian meal with the old man. We hadn't told him we were leaving next morning but he knew. 'Remember me,' he said, where others would have simply said, 'Goodbye'.

We knew there was nothing we could give him, nothing that he would agree to accept. Willis made the mistake of trying in a homely way to suggest he might like to go back to Europe for a holiday, but the old man reacted more violently than we could have reasonably expected. 'Gott in Himmel, is that what you miss so much?' he demanded of poor Willis who was rather taken aback by the outburst. 'Damned autobahns, missile sites, toilet paper factories. Don't talk to me of Europe.' He tapped his wizened skull. 'So-called progress in one direction only — backwards.' And he sat there silently fuming.

But later in my room the same thought occurred to me about Rhodes. Did he not feel the need to go home? Was he content to be a wanderer for ever? Merlin had his stockade. Surely even Rhodes needed somewhere to hang up his boots. I voiced these thoughts aloud.

'Not England anyway,' Willis shook his head. 'The only England he feels any sentiment for ceased to exist centuries ago.' He frowned at his finger nails. 'Where you and I feel

nostalgic for ... for the Sunday newspapers or a clean lavatory or the sound of Big Ben on the radio, Rhodes ...' and pausing to open his money belt he produced from the wallei a much-folded piece of paper. Judging by the worn creases it had lain there a long time, and when he flattened it out and moved the lamp nearer, I saw the faded lines of a poem. It appeared to be a cutting. 'The school magazine,' explained Willis. I noticed it was signed 'anonymous' but I didn't comment. I was concentrating on the irregular but strangely evocative lines written all those years ago. Probably at any other time I would have dismissed them as trivial, hut at that moment, by lamplight in a hut by a misty lagoon on an island where even now Rhodes might be stalking us in the darkness, the words had a poignancy that gripped my attention.

The poem was entitled 'Inheritance'. I read aloud.

'A windy tower in the open marshlands, Over the reeds  
bitterns booming.

A lonely church haunted by ravens, A waiting boat, an empty  
horizon. Realm of Arthur, realm of Offa, Clouds alone stalk  
and shadow The long dead peasant flatlands.

Woodsmoke and earthsmoke, barn and byre, Smouldering  
heath and granite hill.

Battle cries vaulting with the curlew;

Fireside and frost. In its brittle bones

Lies England still.'

'Of course/ admitted Willis, 'he wrote it a long time ago.

Rather sari in a way. No wonder he likes Merlin.'

For the second time in five days we walked down the beach in the dim light of early dawn as the night fishermen unloaded their catches, but this time two men waited at the edge of the tide with a tiny outrigger and we all climbed aboard. 'Boyet and China Sea girl gone already,' Junior whispered as we chugged away from the island.

There was no more than an angry streak of light in the sky as we left the shelter of the southern headland and came out into the windy channel\* Dark unseen waves splashed aboard. Willis shivered, 'If it's like this here, it's going to be a rough crossing to Tablas.'

'Shhh!' gestured Junior frantically from up front, and peering ahead over the murky grey channel, we could hear the roar of a powerful punt engine. 'Boyet,' whispered Junior, and straining my eyes I could just make out the shape of a boat with massive outrigger sweeps beating northwards over the sloppy seas.

'Keep down!' cried Willis, and we crouched obediently low over the engine, although I doubted anyone could have seen our small craft dipping among the waves in that poor light.

By the time we reached Aticlan, daylight was glowing behind the palm trees and the little settlement was already wide awake. The first jeepneys were hustling customers aboard for Kalibo. The daily bus, battered by time and the

appalling roads, stood chocked up on one end while its axle was being dismembered. None of the passengers milling around seemed surprised. Fishermen were hoisting a six-foot dolphin onto the roof. We paid off our boat and while Willis and I got some coffee, Junior set off on his various errands. He came back twice. Firstly with the captain of a boat who would take us to Tablas, and then with a man wheeling a very serviceable bicycle.

‘You come back Boracay,’ the boy insisted as we carried our bags back down the beach to the waiting boat. ‘You come back, okay?’

‘We come back,’ I said.

‘Give me a Christmas,’ he demanded and rather to Willis’s astonishment he suddenly gave us one instead - a big hug and a kiss each, which surprised poor Willis more than ever. As we moved off from the shore he waved, mounted his bicycle and fell off. I waved back listening to his laughter, until the captain opened the throttle and we roared away, the huge outriggers bouncing over the waves and the spray drenching us all.

Rather than follow the course of Boyet’s boat up the west side of the island, our captain headed due east past the wooded atolls at the entrance to the channel and straight into the oncoming seas. The sky was overcast, the wind rising to gale force and beyond the long white line of reefs the seas looked enormous, but we drove into them at full throttle, bouncing and plunging from one wave to the next. Clinging

on with both hands, we glanced anxiously at the sailors who merely grinned back.

‘Perhaps it’s quicker this way!’ I shouted. ‘Perhaps Junior told him to hurry. Or he wanted to keep out of sight of the other boat.’

Willis nodded grimly. ‘Captain’s nuts!’ he yelled. ‘Going far too fast for these conditions.’

Between the spray and the breaking wave caps we could see Boracay slipping away slowly a mile or two west of the reefs.

The voyage to Tablas took over five hours. It should have taken half that time but just as Willis was speaking, we fell on our beam-ends into a steep trough between two enormous waves. ‘Almighty God!’ Willis uttered in horror.

The entire starboard outrigger had broken away from its supports and for a moment while the engine howled and the propeller clawed high above the waves, we teetered on the brink of plunging right over. But the outrigger hadn’t entirely broken away, the rear two support struts still held and as the wave passed we thumped down again, wallowing in towering seas while the captain fought to regain control.

‘Silly bugger,’ Willis called out angrily. ‘I said he was going too fast!’

I was content just to breathe freely again. Outside, the starboard outrigger flopped and strained heavily but at least we hadn’t gone down or broken up, and the captain had finally reduced engine speed.

Willis shook his head glumly, 'I wouldn't be at all surprised if Rhodes didn't have a hand in this fiasco,' he observed as we clung on.

I lost patience with him. 'Oh for Heaven's sake! I can't believe the captain would risk either his neck or his boat. He \* just went far too fast and the thing was rotten!' Willis nodded but I could see he had his own ideas.

A couple of seamen did try to crawl out but had to abandon the attempt. The seas were far too big. But the crew remained cheerful, and the rogue spar never broke away completely, so that apart from being tossed wildly about and the damage to Willis's patience, the only result was that it cut our speed right down and it was early afternoon before we limped round the southern tip of Tablas island and finally came to rest at the northern end of muddy Looc Bay.

Looc Bay was much bigger than I had imagined from glancing at Willis's map. It must have been twenty or more miles across, the southern side lost among low hills and mangrove swamps. Some distance out of Looc itself we passed a great heap of rocks mounted by an unfinished lighthouse or monument of some sort. Looc itself was blazing hot and mudbound. Not a breath of wind stirred as we ground lightly to a stop. A hundred yards away, a crumbling concrete jetty poked out across the mud and from it a leaky tub pushed by two men wading up to their armpits came over to take us ashore.



Baked by the sun and stinking of dead fish the cluster of cracked concrete huts making up most of Looc was sinking slowly into the mud beside a stagnant river. Everywhere seemed to be closed or boarded up and there wasn't a spare inch of shade except the fishmarket, hot as a bakery, where the remaining inhabitants stood aimlessly around slabs sprinkled with smelly over-ripe shellfish, ineffectually brushing off swarms of buzzing flies.

Willis decided the town had died of plague years before and any apparent signs of life were simply muscle spasms but eventually we did discover a cafe selling warm Coca-Cola and a girl who for a peso led us to what she politely called a restaurant. Naturally it was owned by her auntie; a hot, airless room with a couple of tables and some dishes of rancid slops lingering under dirty covers on the counter. Afterwards we discovered a way out across the river by a wooden bridge with all its beams missing bar one.

On the far side tall mango trees finally provided a welcome shade and girls leaning from the verandahs of rickety wooden houses competed with alluring smiles to offer us rooms at only five pesos the night. Considering the discomfort of the hard planks aboard our boat, this didn't

seem such a bad idea, but Willis was against it- 'Thai boat might leave any time if we don't stick to it, and I for one wouldn't wish to be stranded in Looc/

He had a point. Unlike Aticlan, Looc had no electricity any more. The fittings were all there; light bulbs, old 'fridges, dead fans, but the government had decided the cost of fuel

too expensive and as these islands were of no importance they just switched off the generators. Willis decided the people had probably been switched off at the same time. He tried improving his grasp of Tegaley when he could discover anyone energetic enough to reply. I bought a bar of sulphur soap. I knew if I had it I wouldn't get prickly heat and if I hadn't then I would. Then we walked back along the jetty only to find the tide had gone right out leaving the boat high and dry. There was certainly no leaving now, and only a long and tedious evening to look forward to. Especially galling was the possibility that Rhodes had doubled back after all and was laughing his head off from his treehouse at the thought of us stranded in the Looc mud. Willis, however, remained convinced that he was heading north which was just as well as the captain refused to go back anyway, saying he had passengers to pick up next morning from the other side of the bay, and would then be heading over to Mindoro. Supporting this it was encouraging to see that the outrigger had been lashed back onto its supports and the crew hadn't deserted ship. In fact with the aid of tuba they had become a lot more amenable and were busy laughing and crooning at the stern, cooking tip rice over a fire on a sand tray placed directly above the fuel tanks.

It got dark early but neither of us could settle to sleep with the racket the crew were making. Willis fished in his bag for a candle and set it on one of the thwarts amidships. He was sewing a button on his shirt and when I tried to get him talking he frowned as if he didn't care to be drawn.

‘What was all that you once said about Rhodes playing war lord up in the Golden Triangle?’\* I asked him.

He finished sewing the button, bit off the thread, put the shirt back in his bag and lit an Alhambra cigarette.

‘Not exactly the Golden Triangle,’ he finally replied. ‘Further west in the hills. The Karen Revolutionary Army are pretty active there, and we’d heard reports that he’d holed up somewhere in the forests north of the Coq river. A place called Karen Coffee Shop. Karen,’ he added for my benefit, ‘are one of the hill tribes.’

‘Coffee shop sounds a bit bizarre?’

He nodded. ‘I don’t know what it was, except I doubt it sold coffee - opium more likely. Perhaps it was some sort of headquarters - everyone had heard of it but no one had been there. You had to drive north of Chiang Mai for about three hours to Fang and from there get a lift to Tatum on the Coq river. Here the road finished and you could take a raft, or hire an elephant I suppose,’ he added.

‘Willis,’ I interrupted, ‘Why are you the one who’s always sent after him?’

He fidgeted for a reply, ‘I’m the only one who really knows him I suppose. I’ve known him since we played marbles in the gutter. He’s three years ahead of me,’

‘Until now.’ I grinned.

‘Now we don’t know for sure whether he’s ahead or behind. Do you want me to continue?’ And he went on to describe

how he arrived in Chiang Mai at dawn off the night train shivering in the cold and getting a trishaw with a driver so skinny he couldn't even manage the uphill slope to the Nahawat river bridge, and Willis had to take over pedalling while the driver sat smoking a cheroot in the back. The city was swarming with saffron-robed, barefoot monks out with their collecting bowls and the temples glittered as the sun came up over the northern plains. Collecting chuckles all the way, Willis pedalled his trishaw to the Ta Pae gate and stepped along the canal to Darit's restaurant which was a good place both to find a guide or meet up with anyone else going trekking in the hills. Willis needed both — he had already decided he would be far less conspicuous in a group, and it would certainly be safer, for the mountains along the Burmese border were swarming with bandits. At the next table he met a German engineer and a Swiss girl looking for someone to make up a party. The guide was more difficult. The one he had been recommended was away with another group and he had to be satisfied with a long-haired youngster in his late teens with a name that sounded like Tannoy. Tannoy spoke sufficient English and assured them he knew some porters in Fang, so the next day they set off, picking up the two porters on the way and ending up six Hours later on the banks of the Coq river at Tatum.

'Where you intended hiring a raft?' I queried.

'That's right. My plan was to get hold of a raft and paddle up river until we reached the trail leading to the Karen Coffee Shop. We never made it.'

‘Theraft sank?’

‘We couldn’t even find one to take us. The army had sealed off the entire forest north of the river. Either Rhodes was playing havoc with the local war lords or else he’d the Thai army in his pocket. We never got an explanation, just talk of bandits.’

Willis recalled vividly his anguish that evening in Tatum trying to reach a decision. He could go on alone - but he knew that without speaking the local language even if he got hold of a boat, it was unlikely he would find the right trail. Or he could persuade the others to agree to another route. I suggested instead that we should head north-west towards Burma. I told them we would see plenty of poppy fields and that instead of Karen and Shan tribes we would see Lahou, To my relief they accepted. To them hill tribes were all the same anyway. And the porters were pleased since they came from that area and could speak the language. My plan was to trek north-west to the frontier and then double back so as to approach the Karen villages from the north/ Willis thought it was extremely unlikely they would meet any Thai army patrols up there, and he hoped they would be able to penetrate the Karen country with a good chance of surprise since they would be coming from the direction least expected.

‘Did you tell the others this?’ I asked-

He glanced at me warily. ‘No. No I didn’t. I simply said we’d go in a big loop and end back at either Tatum or Fang. How was I to know Rhodes would get wind of us? As far as he was

concerned I was still in Hong Kong, and there were plenty of other farangs about/

‘Farangs ?’

‘Long noses, Europeans. That’s (heir word for us. You’d be surprised how many go trekking in those hills/

‘So you didn’t warn them/

‘Warn them. Of course I warned them, but the more you tell people about bandits the more excited they become. The trouble is they glamorize them into Robin Hood’s merry men and refuse to accept that they are simply ruthless cut-throats who’d shoot you as easily as spit ar you/ Willis seemed very much on the defensive. No doubt be felt responsible for whatever had happened on the trek and had I known the outcome T would have been gentler with my questions.

Out here on rhe boat the crew had retired to their sleeping quarters somewhere below the stern. I opened a bottle of the beer we had brought back from Loac and as 1 handed it to Willis I noticed his hands were shaking. Rather reluctantly he continued with his story.

For the first couple of days they headed north-west into the range of forested mountains along the Burmese border. The villages were mostly Lahou, first of all the Black Lahou - that was the colour of their costume. ‘And their teeth!’ added Willis\* \*1 suppose it's all that betel nut they chew, even the little kids/

But what surprised him more was how unfriendly the villagers were. I suppose they don't like foreigners gaping at them and taking pictures\* Can't blame them\* But Stella didn't care. Said she felt it was more wild/

'Stella ?'

'The Swiss girl/ he said, blushing as if he had been caught out, and it couldn't fail to amuse me that on the previous manhunt there had also been a girl. 'She was very game/ he insisted loyally, clearly won over by her enthusiasm\* It was on her insistence that despite his reservations they joined the villagers cross-legged in a smoky hut where the tribal priest conducted meditation. Afterwards they were ushered through a gate in the palisade fence around the "Sacred ground"/ where to the accompaniment of mournful dirges blown on long bamboo 'alpcn-horns', the priest led ceremonial loping dances round the sacrificial fire. Later the whole village retired to smoke opium. 'It seemed to be the evening occupation/ he said\* 'You see we all slept together in the same hut - on a raised rattan platform, so there was no danger\*'

Danger of what, T mused\* I suppose he meant being robbed or was he concerned about the liability of falling for the Swiss girl\* Like all romantics he had a strong puritan streak in him, but in this case I think it was more a matter of conflicting loyalties. Getting involved with Stella could interfere with decisions he might be required to make in his quest for Rhodes\* With the China Sea girl I suppose it was

all a lot simpler. Anyway here they were sharing a hut in a remote tribal village high in Tanen-taung mountains, both of them taking turns with the opium pipe while a 'black Lahou' tribesman squatted unsmiling beside a candle warming and moulding the opium with his fingers, and with a needle guiding the melting blob into the aperture each time they inhaled. And with every breath he took, Willis, to his confusion, felt himself falling further in love.

The next day their guide Tannoy led them further north up steep trails into the heart of the poppy country; lush mountainsides where every available patch was brimming with blue and white flowers. Stella said they reminded her of the Dutch tulip fields and got busy with her camera. She wanted to know everything, and Willis clearly enjoyed being her guide. 'Just scratch the side of the pod and out oozes the white resin,' he explained. 'Collect enough, leave it to harden a bit and you have your evening smoke.' Rather unnecessarily he added, 'It's like tuba, one has to try everything.'

'Quite,' I nodded sagely, and Willis puffed away more furtively than ever at his cigarette. By now, according to his calculations, they were well over the border. The villagers were certainly of Burmese origin, although they could have been refugees. The people were friendlier, the girls wore silver hoops round their middles and the men smoked green leaf cigars. Up until now there had been no sign of trouble. Along the forest trails they had several times bumped into small bands of men armed with ancient flintlock rifles - the barrels about two yards long - and sometimes these



huntsmen-cum-bandits accompanied them for several hours in the same direction. It provided Stella with an additional excitement and she prattled on wondering whether they would be kidnapped or not. So that for her at least bandits became something of a joke until on their fifth day, as they began their sweep southwards into Karen country, rounding a bend in the path, they walked straight into an ambush.

Willis glanced up with a tight-lipped smile, adding wryly, 'The only thing was they got the wrong group.'

I looked at him blankly.

'Farangs — Europeans, seven or eight at least, all milling about the track.'

They were a very shaken group too, according to Willis, which was understandable since they had only been attacked a few minutes earlier and were still getting over the shock. Apparently when the bandits first appeared their guide had run for it, but from the way they were arguing one thing was clear to Willis - that they were all convinced they had walked straight into a trap.

'They weren't robbed you see,' said Willis. 'Just searched. While two of the bandits guarded them, the other two went through their passports as thoroughly as frontier guards. Then almost as an afterthought they stole some ready cash. They didn't touch the cameras, and after a heated discussion they ran off into the jungle.' He watched me closely. 'Apparently they were extremely nervous.'

'The robbers you mean. And you think it was you they were after but the other group sprang the trap.'

He nodded. 'To our surprise we were less than a mile from the next village. It was Green Lahou, the last one on our route. The villagers were unusually hostile. There was no doubt they knew all about the attack. Stella decided they felt guilty but it was nothing so fancy. They simply wanted us to clear out damn quick. The bandits may even have come from that village for all we knew. They could certainly have been hiding in any one of the huts watching us. Those Lahou wanted to see the back of us.'

I looked at him enquiringly. 'What did you do? Or what did the others do?'

'Their guide pranced self-righteously out of the forest and started behaving veiy officiously, ordering them around like a lot of sheep. Not a scrap of shame about him. I wouldn't have stood lor it. Trouble is you can spoil some guides by being too matey and they get above themselves. Anyway, our porters got hold of some vegetables and cooked up a rice soup, but the other group were led off to another hut as though they wanted to keep us apart. Afterwards their guide led them away downhill in the direction of Fang to make a report I suppose. Our own guide was behaving veiy nervously. He wanted to follow, but Stella and the German didn't sec why we should. "It's unlikely the bandits will strike twice" they decided, which suited my plans entirely.' He paused to let me comment\*

I wanted to get the picture straight. I said, 'You knew that if those bandits had been after you there was a good chance they would strike again, but you were quite prepared to lead the others into a trap?'

He winced. 'Well no, not really\* After all the bandits hadn't harmed the other group. I assumed that Rhodes had got wind of me and wanted to whisk me off so as to deliver one of his big-brother lectures. I never thought he meant to harm them.' He looked away quickly and I am sure there were tears in his eyes. I busied myself opening a beer and waited for him to calm down.

'I suppose by now you weren't so far from ... what was it called? Karen Coffee Shop?' I suggested quietly, but I don't think he heard.

'We took precautions,' he said as though he was trying to convince himself. 'I let Stella and the German organise it. Because the German had done his military service he claimed he knew' how to manage this sort of crisis and Stella, she lapped it up. They were jabbering away excitedly in German\* Her eyes were sparkling and she was calling him 'Liebe'. What does it mean - 'Darling' ?'

She probably called evciyone 'darling'.'

Willis nodded morosely, and then with an effort went on. 'Once clear of the village, we stopped and sorted out our things\* Under the German's instruction we put our money down our socks and in our underpants, hid the cameras and

just left a few baht in our wallets. Then in single file, thirty paces apart, we set off.'

The country they crossed that afternoon was ideal for a surprise attack. The narrow path twisted and turned like a corkscrew in the dense jungle, and the tumbling hills and steep valleys made the going extremely hard work.

Sometimes they had to cross small clearings or ford streams with the uncanny feeling they were being watched, and once the path was blocked by felled trees and for a moment they mistook the woodcutters for bandits. For two hours they continued without a break. He looked at me bleakly, 'It was hot work.'

'But nothing happened?' T said.

He shot me a queer look and didn't answer directly. 'By now the German had decided we were out of the danger zone, and we climbed down to a waterfall to cool off. Even Stella was a bit startled when just as we were taking a shower, four huntsmen appeared, but it seemed they only wanted a drink, and we gave them cigarettes. Later in the afternoon we crossed a plateau covered with tall open forests and came to a village of white Lahou.'

'I thought you were in Karen country?'

'We were. I suppose this was a sort of outpost. According to our guide there were Karen villages all around. In fact it was Karen territory all the way south to the Coq river, but the porters spoke Lahou and preferred to stay here. Anyway it was a pleasant place, with a view south over the plains.'

Thickets of bananas grew around the village and when we got there women and children were leading the buffalo back from the fields. They were much friendlier, these people, some of them even smiled. Stella was delighted. 'We have had all the excitement of bandits without being actually robbed," she said.'

'An unusual observation?'

'I don't know. She was like that you see. Very vivacious. I ...' But he didn't continue, and I didn't enquire. It was obvious by his expression that while he was telling his story a very different one was going on in his head. And it was the wishful thinking, hopes, dreams and guilt of the other tale that showed so clearly in his face.

'After the other villages this one must have seemed very civilised,' I observed. Willis didn't respond at once, but then he spoke at a rush, his eyes bright with embarrassment or pain or both, and he was obviously trying to apologise. But not to me. Indirectly he was calling to the others wherever they were.

'Put me oil my guard you see. Instead of shoving past and spitting, these were all smiles. Besides we were bloody hungry. Nothing but boiled rice and greens for days. Felt half-starved. So we clubbed together to buy a pig. Tannoy and the porters seemed pleased and went off to bargain. Only cost us a couple of hundred baht and it was a whopper — could hardly lift it. The porters knocked it over the head and slit its throat. Stella was very agitated - not by the killing but because they weren't doing it properly. "You must hang it up

and drain off the blood” she insisted, putting her camera down and helping to haul it up to a beam.’

From then on while Stella supervised the butchering, Willis and the German prepared a fire, cut a couple of supports and once the pig was soundly skewered on a large split bamboo, hoisted it over the embers to roast as slowly as their patience allowed.

The porters had taken the legs, liver, heart and head for themselves, but word quickly spread and children gathered hopefully in the shadows at the edge of the firelight. They weren’t disappointed. There was more than enough meat to go round several times over and I got the impression from Willis that they rather enjoyed handing it round.

‘Stella said it was just like Christmas/ Willis smiled wistfully. ‘And you can’t believe how pleased those grubby kids were, bowing with their hands pressed together, just like Buddhists.’ Which, fortunately for Willis as it turned out, they were not. Some of them even said “Thank you” and they kept coming back for more. By the time the pig had been devoured and even the bones taken away to be gnawed, the three of them and all the children were well and truly-glutted.

Returning to their hut they were pleasantly surprised to find that though tea was prepared for them, Tannoy and the porters had removed their things and were presumably sleeping elsewhere. Usually they kept everyone awake half the night with their incessant chattering and snoring, Stella seemed especially pleased but though Willis found the

German regarding him with a very cold expression, he didn't take any notice and got under his blankets on the hard rattan floor, only to find he couldn't get to sleep. For one thing Stella and the German were murmuring together, but apart from that he simply felt uneasy. "The German said I'd eaten too much uncooked pork, and Stella laughed.'

Willis stopped abruptly as if he were listening, but the only sound was water lapping the boat's hull as the tide rose slowly over the mud, and the crew muttering in the stern.

Willis continued, T went outside for a pee. The place was unusually silent - almost unnaturally so. Not even a dog was barking. Suddenly a child rushed out of the shadows, grabbed my arm and pointed earnestly towards the forest. When I looked at our hut he shook his head firmly. I recognised him as one of the kids from supper. Once the message was delivered he was off like a flash and vanished in the shadows.\* It was pretty obvious to Willis what the boy meant but the other two were unconvinced, even stubborn in their determination to remain. "You go. Go on, don't let us stop you,' they told Willis as he hovered in the doorway, reluctant to leave them. And then Stella did something that not only made him want to get out as fast as he could, but shattered all his illusions at the same time. She laughed.

'She was always laughing,\* I suggested.

'Yes, but you see she was laughing at me.'

Poor Willis. It must have been as difficult for him to admit it now as it was to accept it then. He blushed furiously. 'She

called me a boy scout. Told me I'd seen too many cowboy films/

Willis hesitated no longer but even as he went in to get his blankets he realised they had moved their things and were now huddled together in one corner. Although it must seem naive, all the while Willis had been adoring Stella from the close proximity- of the sleeping platform, it had never occurred to him that the other two had probably been wanting to get him out of the way for days. Now, with the porters gone was the perfect opportunity. As he left the German said, 'You may bring us tea in the morning/ 'Two lumps, please/ added Stella. Willis looked at me for help. 'I could hardly have stayed after that?'

'Hardly/ I agreed.

Despite the shattering blow to his morale, when Willis left the hut, training and reflexes combined to make him as quiet and cautious as a cat. Tip-toeing round huts, crouching in the shadows, darting low across open spaces, he found himself next to the palisade encircling the "Sacred ground".

Suddenly he had the idea that here was a far better place to hide in than the forest. He had learned enough about the tribal religion in the past few days to know that unless the Medicine Man was present this sacred spot was taboo and no one would dare enter. Once inside, he thought, he would not only be safe but he could also keep a look-out. 'I could keep an eye on things from there/ he told me. 'So I crept under a pile of sticks and waited/



‘Did you hear anything?’

It was the wrong question to ask. ‘I tried not to,’ he admitted painfully. ‘You see there were noises from our hut, gasps and things, only I thought that ../’

‘And no one else spotted you/ I interrupted quickly.

He shot me a grateful glance. ‘I’m sure half the village knew where I was/ he agreed frankly. ‘But they didn’t let on. Next morning when I crawled out I found everyone silently gathered outside our hut and inside in the corner the two of them lying together just as T had left them, but with their throats slit/ He frowned and added abstractedly, ‘Just a small neat gash - rather like (he pig/

I shuddered and involuntarily reached for my own throat, but it was another finger I felt there, not my own, and a vision of the China Sea girl facing me with her slightly mocking smile. I pulled my hand away and borrowed one of Willis’s cigarettes. ‘No one there laid a hand on you, tried to stop you leaving, or anything?’

‘No/ he said, staring at me blankly. When he had stepped outside, the whole village watched him in silence. Over their heads the rising sun cast long chill shadows but this was not Chiang Mai, there were no gleaming temples or saffron-robed monks — only barefoot children in their grubby white-lahou tunics. Willis shouldered his pack and the crowd parted to let him through. Ahead of him the hills tumbled down into the plains. He had only to keep on walking. Suddenly he sensed a movement beside him and turning swiftly, his arm

raised to strike, he saw instead the boy who had warned him in the night. For a moment they looked at each other, then the boy pressed a grass bracelet in Willis's hand and raced back to the huts.

Willis held up his wrist. 'I suppose it was all he had to give,' he said.

I nodded slowly in agreement.

'I suppose you think it was all an accident, just like the boat this morning.' Coming out of his story had left Willis touchy and irritable and I decided it was better not to say anything, but he did it for me. 'Reds under the beds. I know what you're thinking, you're thinking I'm paranoiac.'

'Look,' I said, 'I know it must have been a horrible shock, and I wasn't there, but it could have been a vicious, what's the word-unpremeditated, accident?'

'It could have been,' he allowed grudgingly. 'But it wasn't.'

There were any number of questions unanswered, but I wasn't sure that now was the time or place to ask them. Even allowing for the excuse that the attack had gone badly wrong, Willis remained convinced that Rhodes had issued the instructions. But if it had been the work of Rhodes and not just hill bandits, did it have the required effect? What did Willis do then? Did he heed the warning? Did he run? I couldn't believe it somehow. 'What did you do then?' I asked him.

There was a wary look on his face. 'I was ordered back to Hong Kong in disgrace and the Thai army was sent in to flush

the rebels out, Rhodes included, and they had no orders to bring him back alive.' We faced each other like two con-spirators in the candlelight.

'How did he get away?'

He shrugged his head. 'I dare say he had plenty of warning. He always seems to have.'

'But you don't know where he went?'

For a moment he looked rather evasive\* 'If you really want to know, I didn't go back to Hong Kong - not directly\* I took a bit of sick leave. I let my boss assume I was whoring on Pataya beach or along Patpong road.'

'And what were you doing?'

'Doing? I was holed up in a monastery in Chiang Mai\* I knew if he came south he had to pass through.'

'A monastery?'

'Guest houses are too obvious\* It's amazing how unrecog-nisable a shaven head makes you.' He laughed crisply\* 'And you wouldn't believe how cold it can be at six o'clock in the morning barefoot in Chiang Mai with only a saffron robe on and a begging bowl in your hands.' He felt his shaggy crop of red hair. It hasn't grown back properly yet\* I must have still looked bewildered, for he explained patiently, 'Those monks are the eyes and ears of the town - very little takes place without their knowing and their training helps them to remember every detail\* Rhodes was spotted all right, but unfortunately by the time I got the message he had

slipped away. Probably a good thing. I was madder than hell - I'd have fought him in the open street, knives, axes, anything. As it was, I chased him south down the entire isthmus certain he was making for Phuket\*' Willis had forgotten his earlier dejection in the excitement of that chase but he was going too fast for me - a saffron-robed monk, hectic thousand-miles chases through Thailand. 'Slow down,' I laughed. 'I can't keep pace with you.'

'Ban Don,' he spelled out, 'is where you pick up the rickety ferryboat for Ko Samui. But it's a bit of a mess making the connection-jeepneys, trishaws, all that\* I may have been only an hour behind him but at Ban Don everything seemed to conspire against me and the long and short of it was that I just missed the boat\* Saw it leaving the quay,'

I gestured helplessly, 'What time was it, morning, noon, night? Just how far distant is this Ko Samui anyway?\*

'Early evening. It was getting dark. The night boat gets into Ko Sarnui early the next morning- It's a slow old tub - you know the sort of thing? He leaned over towards me, 'That night the ferry was attacked by pirates, the two armed guards were shot and some hostages taken - one supposedly was a bigfarang?'

Despite everything I could not resist a smile of admiration, but Willis was brooding again. 'The whole of that coast is ruled by pirates. For a couple of days no ferry dared leave, and by then it was too late, the seem was cold?'

‘So Rhodes hoisted his Jolly Roger and sailed cast for Palawan?’

‘Palawan?’\* Willis looked surprised. ‘Oh, you mean the girl. No?’ he shook his head. ‘No. He has any number of women. Always had. Seduced half the school maids before he was fifteen?’

[I decided not to share with him my exciting vision of our pretty China Sea girl leading the boarding party to Rhodes’s rescue, a cutlass in one hand and a falcon hovering overhead, its talons stretched. Instead I returned her to the more housewifely role that Willis undoubtedly preferred.

‘I suppose he set her up in that treehouse, so he could visit her between spells of duty?’

It was Willis’s turn to look puzzled.

‘Mindanao/ I said. ‘Surely you claimed he was down there with the rebels, freedom fighters — whatever you want to call them?’

‘Freedom fighter!’ he exploded angrily.

‘I suppose it depends whose side you’re on?’

‘The only side Rhodes has ever been on is his own and the only freedom he’ll ever fight for is his own freedom. Don’t make the mistake of thinking he’s another Lawrence of Arabia?’

At ten o’clock, just as we were sorting ourselves out on the cabin floor, we were surprised by two of the crew who crawled forward along the narrow deck outside and started

hauling up the anchor. Willis promptly went to find the captain and came back none too pleased. 'He tells me there's an onshore wind here at night and wants to drift across the bay to a harbour on the southern side where he claims we have to go anyway to pick up passengers tomorrow morning/ As if to calm our doubts a breeze had sprung up and instead of using the engine the crew hoisted a loose stay-sail, lashed the tiller and retired below back to sleep.

By now I was also ready for sleep, although it was a sleep haunted by Burmese bandits chasing pigs, waving knives and yelling their heads off In fact they made so much din I woke up to discover Willis, highly agitated, pointing over the side. 'We're going to drift onto the bloody lighthouse if we don't look out I' And he rushed off to the stern.

He was the only one concerned. The crew were unusually silent and even the captain remained conspicuously absent while Willis unlashed the rudder and managed to bear us away moments before we would have bumped softly aground beside the unfinished monument. Rubbing my eyes and yawning I failed to see why he was so agitated for we seemed to be moving very slowly and would probably have come to no harm. It was only as the wind filled the slack sail and we drew slowly clear of the rocks that we saw revealed on the far side, silhouetted in the bright moonlight, Boyet's boat from Aticlan outlined darkly against the gleaming silveryness of the open sea beyond.

It was a moment suspended in time, scarcely believable afterwards, like a dream that floats to us in the night, beyond

recall. A glimmering ghost ship full of devils hiding - for we could see no movement aboard her, as she waited. And neither of us had any doubt who she was waiting for.

Willis whistled under his breath. 'If we hadn't woken up we'd most likely be feeding the sharks by now. Rhodes, you uncanny bastard. It's as clear as day, we were meant to go aground!'

What Willis said would have been hard to believe without all the other incidents. Why shouldn't we have just drifted aground by mistake, but then what on earth was that other boat doing out there without lights if it wasn't waiting for a rendezvous ?

When our captain finally emerged grumbling, I eyed him with a new respect. Could he really be such a villain? Could he really have intended to snore his head off while his boat was silently boarded and the passengers thrown overboard? Even as we drew away from the "lighthouse" I half expected the other boat to suddenly unfurl its skull and crossbones from the masthead and come chasing after us with bloodcurdling cries and rattling their machetes. But it remained silent and motionless in the moonlight, watching us like a bird of prey biding its time.

I watched, mesmerised, as Boyet's boat receded into the distance with agonising slowness until it was finally lost among the sparkling seas. My heart was pounding madly and my fingers gripped the wooden rail. I was still terrified in case we should suddenly hear the roar of their engine starting. As I waited I imagined Boyet's girl smiling at us softly across the

glittering sea. Then with a violent shiver I remembered the Swiss girl lying with her throat slit on the hut floor of that Lahou village.

‘Why doesn’t the captain use the bloody engine/ I urged Willis.

‘Says he needs every drop of fuel to get across to Mindoro,’ Willis replied. ‘Claims there’s no fuel to be had there.’

When asked about the other boat, our captain shrugged and muttered something which Willis couldn’t make out, but we caught the word “Mindoro” repeated a couple of times and we had to be content with that.

All through the rest of that long night we sat up on deck trying to keep awake in case, as Willis feared, the captain had any other tricks up his sleeve. Overhead the creaking sail flapped and filled in the unsteady breeze and the waves slapped at the hull as we edged our way slowly southwards. Ahead of us the dark waters of the gulf gleamed under the dying moon, and Willis stared out towards the open sea smoking in silence. He only spoke once and that was to apologise - unnecessarily as far as I was concerned - for his earlier outburst about the rebels in Minandoa. ‘I’m afraid that expression “freedom fighter” always gets my goat, and you see I was down there a couple of months back. Don’t worry,’ he added hurriedly, ‘I’m not blaming Rhodes for once. At least not directly. It was more a case of catching the wrong bus at the wrong time, but it’s still pretty fresh in my mind - my arm only came out of plaster the day before we left Manila.’



I didn't comment. Willis seemed to have an uncanny habit of attracting misfortune. Apparently during the past year rebel activity in Mindanao had increased alarmingly, at least that was how the central government in Manila viewed it, and it was during this period that reports of Rhodes started to filter back to Willis's office in Hong Kong.

'So once again you were sent down to investigate?'

'Had to clean my slate.<sup>1</sup> He looked away. 'I wasn't exactly proud of the way I handled the Karen business.'

We had had quite enough drama for one night so I was grateful for the matter-of-fact way in which he briefly re-reported the Mindanao incident. In fact, sitting up on deck, while the stars swung overhead in the clear sky, Willis's voice could easily have been reading aloud from a newspaper something that was of no concern to either of us.

'The bus was ambushed just outside Zamboanga,' he said quietly. T should think the driver was killed instantly. I heard the rattle of a machine-gun, windows shattered, and as I ducked down the bus careered into a steep ditch and toppled onto its side. Above the screaming pandemonium came bursts of firing. The gunmen had climbed onto the side of the bus and were shooting at point-blank range into everyone - soldiers, women, children, everyone. Suddenly the shooting ceased and T suppose the men made off. For an instant there was an uncanny silence and then the clamour of shrieking and weeping began again.<sup>1</sup>

I found myself inspecting Willis for bullet wounds.

‘Fortunately - for me anyway - a government patrol came up in the nick of time.’

‘And you were unharmed?’

‘I was sitting on the side that went over. I had about a dozen bodies sprawled on top of me, half of them riddled with bullets.’ He held aloft his arm.

‘You were lucky to get away with just that,’ I said, wondering how many of his nine lives were already accounted for.

All night we sailed steadily south across the dark waters of the gulf. The moon finally went down about three, I suppose, and towards dawn we smelled the damp half-rotten smell of land close ahead, and with the captain crooning at the tiller, we picked our way up a channel between mudflats to a wooden jetty poking out on rickety stilts over the mangrove swamps. There was barely water enough to tie up but I scrambled ashore after Willis to try and discover a cup of coffee. Rather to our dismay there was no settlement at all, just a couple of rather derelict thatch huts at the end of the jetty strangled in flowering hibiscus and teetering shakily over the swamp below. Willis succeeded in rousing awake the occupants of one of the huts and persuaded them to boil us some coffee. While we waited Willis combed his hair with his fingers and completed the rest of his washing in a cracked cup. With very little more water he would probably have managed a complete shower.

As we drank our coffee a truck rattled down from the hills and unloaded its cargo of passengers and belongings, and half an hour later we were setting off once more out of Looc bay on a north-westerly course for Mindoro island. Flying fish skimmed ahead of the outriggers, and the human cargo grimly tried to endure the bumpy crossing by forcing themselves to sleep.

According to Willis's map the only complete road in Mindoro lay up the east coast, so there was no doubt where Rhodes would be travelling. Three hours later we put in at Roxas. (Not to be confused with the Roxas City on Panay Island.) There was no harbour. Not even a protected bay, just a spur of steep shingle and a few windblown trees. The actual settlement was a mile inland.

For three peso porters carried us ashore on their shoulders. The alternative was getting soaked, and even Willis chuckled at the thought of Rhodes being lifted this way. 'He must weigh more than twice any of these chaps/ he laughed.

A trishaw loaded with NINE people took us into the town.

We were so overladen in the back that everyone had to lean forward, and even so the front wheel vaulted skywards every time we hit a rut.

In Roxas itself, even though it was not much past noon the final jeepney north to Calapan was about to leave, but we persuaded the driver to wait while we grabbed a bite to eat. Willis was in high spirits. He had learned that the other boat had landed and put off two passengers who had

subsequently got on the Calapan bus. By the descriptions Willis was convinced they could only be Boyet and the girl.

"The bus only left an hour ago. We're bound to overtake it in the jeepney/

I didn't wholly share his enthusiasm, and I knew from earlier experience how many things could go wrong on a jeepney journey - especially one taking eight hours. We appeared to have three good tyres but the fourth was bald, and Heaven knows how many patches stuck the inner tubes together.

I spent the entire trip on the roof - coming inside only when we approached police check points at the various small towns scattered along the way. At least it gave me a chance to see ahead and spot the bus. Inside as usual the passengers were squashed worse than sardines.

The road was better than we expected. Some of it was even asphalted, but that didn't prevent us getting two punctures. We never caught up with the bus. For several hours we toured the coastal hills and plains and in the twilight passed a large volcanic lake.

It was nightfall before we reached Calapan and drove directly to the harbour where we discovered to Willis's relief that owing to a typhoon off Southern Luzon no boats had left for three days. The only likely ferry was the one plying between Puerto Gallera and Batangas. Puerto Gallera lay three hours to the north, at the northern tip of Mindoro, and as there were no jeepneys leaving until next morning we had to be content with staying put for the night,

By this time both of us needed a decent rest and we were fortunate in finding a clean inexpensive hotel with a hot shower. After a good meal of chop suey and a succession of welcome beers, I went to bed with the fan on full blast. Rhodes had probably gone on, decided Willis, so the only attacks I had to fear in the night were a few dive bombing mosquitoes. Nevertheless I bolted the door and forced the back of a chair under the handle. Despite my weariness, I couldn't get to sleep. My mind was too alert to relax. It wasn't supper that was hard to digest, but what Willis had told me during it, and even putting that aside there was no dismissing the strange situation we were in. There weren't just the two of us travelling across the length of the Philippines but three or four if you counted the girl; silent partners never seen but unavoidably present, shaping our thoughts, controlling all our decisions, there but not there, so to speak - Red Indian scouts stalking the wagon train.

It had never occurred to me when I denied Camiguin my visit and nailed my colours to Willis's mast that I would be linking my fortunes also to Rhodes - or Boyet. And another thing - these dual names, the one inherited the other acquired, seemed to imply completely different personalities. Can nicknames prophesy? For in the small boys who invariably invent them, there are no keener critics or stauncher hero worshippers. Even Willis didn't know the answer to that. 'He'd already got it by the time I started school/ he replied when I questioned him at supper. I've always called him Rhodes.'

'No first name?'

'A first name seemed trite somehow.'

'And what did he call you ?'

He grinned\* 'Billy\* Everyone else calls me William or Bill.

Except you that is. It was the name he called me when he taught me how to throw marbles. T probably wasn't more than three?

Billy, Johnnie, Jimmie - kids' names that we all grew out of to everyone else. But not to Rhodes. T liked that.

That was the trouble ~ the danger. This gradual liking of someone as dangerous as he undeniably was. It took you off your guard. When I asked Willis, 'Does he like to be liked?' he shook his head. T don't suppose it ever occurred to him. He's always been liked, or feared, or both.'

'Can one be liked and feared ?'

He nodded. 'Take my word for it, Rhodes can.' He hesitated. 'You mustn't make the mistake of applying your own standards to him. I admire him - I'm bound to, I mean he's everything Tin not, never will be, but it's like a tiger - you couldn't really have one as a pet. And then if it did suddenly claw you to death could you blame it for something that's in its nature?'

But what was his real nature? Lying there with the fan buzzing all manner of fanciful speculations crowded into my thoughts. What strange constellations of stars had heralded his particular instant of birth. Or, like his dual names, what

unexpected bonanza of chromosomes and circumstances had combined to promote him towards a destiny so different from everyone else. For whereas most of us have jobs of some description, Rhodes acted out title roles in imaginary Hollywood movies. During supper Willis had briefly outlined some of them.

In the Solomon archipelago he'd been declared "White Rajah" by one of the smaller islands seeking independence, and Willis had lost him after a chase that sounded far more spectacular than any trek in the Burmese hills. When he tried to reach the island quietly by canoe it was attacked by sharks, and when Rhodes finally made a dash for it, a chase ensued from New Georgia to the Russells, Tulagi and finally Guada-canal where he vanished into the mountainous jungles and Willis spent a month trailing him up river to Papamanchua - the highest peak of them all. Also the traditional home of the gods where no white man had ever set foot before and where Rhodes, perhaps typically, was supposed to be holding out. That time Willis was stopped by monsoon rains, leeches, an impassable waterfall and one of his Melanesian porters getting gashed to death by a wild boar. 'Every time we waded across a river, the crocodiles slid in behind,' he added as an afterthought.

Two years later Willis was after him again. This time among the arid wastes of the Southern Sahara where Rhodes had joined forces with the Tuareg tribes of the Hagga mountains in their desperate bid to resist the new African states encroaching into their traditional nomadic empire and their

feudal way of life. In that instance Willis had found himself rather sympathetic to their struggle. He couldn't fail to admire these magnificent desert riders, proud and undaunted. Sworded warriors with faces shrouded since birth, who considered even reading a menial occupation and one better left to their slaves.

From Willis's description it was easy to understand why Rhodes espoused their cause. A feudal warrior was just his cup of tea, but it was harder to take seriously Willis's attempts to rout him out. 'How did you reach him?' I enquired and his reply astonished me, making me realise that for all their common upbringing the two of them were as dissimilar as chalk and cheese.

\*I had this old 50cc motorbike - the sort with pedals, Willis explained. I must have looked incredulous, for he added patiently, 'Don't laugh. Several times I had to dismantle it to get across ravines. I could hardly have carried a landrover on my back!'

A dozen different questions besieged me. 'What about fuel?' I began.

'You generally find someone with a barrel when you reach an oasis,' he shrugged. 'Anyway those bikes run for ever. I carried a spare can in my knapsack.' He laughed. 'Worse thing was this salt lake. There was a mud causeway, but you weren't supposed to risk crossing after September. By now it was the end of November and there had been unusually heavy rains. I know it sounds a bit clottish but I was in a hurry.'



'And you got stuck/

He chuckled. 'Worse. No sooner had I set off in blinding rain than floods cut off my retreat. Then, every time I started the bike, bloody skit kicked up and shorted the motor. I tried plastic bags, everything, but in the end I had to push the whole damn way. I saw the sun come up and go down twice. Very depressing.'

T bet you were pleased to see the other side/

'That was the worst part/ He grinned. 'It was like a mirage. I saw the line of palm trees glittering for a whole day but they never got any nearer/

I didn't need to ask what happened in the end. The outcome was obvious, otherwise we wouldn't have been here still pursuing him, but as I liked to have the jigsaw completed without unnecessary blanks, I was content to listen while a rather crestfallen Willis described howr he had been forced to flee from the pursuing Tuaregs into the country of the ksars.

'Ksars?'

'Stone forts dotting the mountain tops/ he explained. T think some had once been fortified granaries - they were all in ruins. Certainly the one I chose was/ And it was there that Willis sat out his siege in a walled-up tower surrounded by a lot of blood-thirsty tribesmen. Through a crack he saw his bike being flung over a cliff and was considering that it was about time to make his will, when Rhodes turned up and led away the attackers. 'Told me to bugger off and mind my own

business/ admitted Willis. 'Had to actually. No bike, no food except some dates and a tin of Danish cheese marked "Famine Relief, not for resale". Even took away my clothes. Rhodes said I was lucky he didn't tar and feather me.'

When I asked how on earth he got out, he shrugged. 'Just waited. Jolly cold I can tell you but people grow out of the stones in North Africa and in the end someone always pops up. At least I had nothing more they could steal from me, and I wouldn't have made a very good slave. They took me to one of those underground encampments. I forget what the tribe was called. They live in burrows, like rabbits, cool in summer, warm in winter. Bit buggy though.' He scratched himself at the memory.

'And what happened to the Tuaregs?'

'Oh I think Chad, Algeria and Niger divided them up in the end. Confiscated their tents. Made 'em live in houses with tin roofs and sent 'em all to school to read and write.'

'And Rhodes moved on to pastures new.'

'I expect it'll be the Amazon next- I remember when we were kids I once asked him what he was going to do later on. "Look for my lost tribe," he replied, "if I'm not too late." I told him, "It's probably wandering around somewhere inside you".'

'And what did he say to that?'

'He laughed and said, "That's not nearly such a good excuse for an adventure".'

'I'm surprised he's never popped up in the newspapers.'

'Keeps a low profile — I'm not sure publicity interests him, and perhaps/ Willis paused thoughtfully, 'perhaps he knows that live heroes are not what revolutions want any more.

Dead ones are far safer and more politically reliable. When the myth takes over/ he added.

I suddenly remembered rounding a bend in Italy and seeing on a cliff face normally daubed with political slogans the simple statement "Il mito vince sempre" - the myth always wins. At the time it had seemed above politics but perhaps it was the political slogan to cap all the rest. I said to Willis, 'In his case the myth seems to have already taken over/

He nodded but his eyes were far away, 'Ever heard of Lady Hester Stanhope, the famous traveller in Arabia?' he announced slowly, but I shook my head. 'She virtually ruled Lebanon from a crumbling hilltop palace at the time of Byron, one hundred years before Lawrence of Arabia/

'Djoun/ I suggested hopefully, for I had vaguely heard of her. 'She was something to do with William Pitt, wasn't she?'

'His niece. She travelled all over the Middle East, got shipwrecked, crossed the desert by camel, was hailed as an Empress by all the wild tribes, before finally building that great labyrinth at Djoun. It's become a sort of legendary 'Shangri-la,' he explained. 'And she became quite a legend too; intolerant and domineering but also enormously admired. People travelled thousands of miles even then to pay court to her - a pretty dusty court it was too by all accounts. She was hopelessly bankrupt. I suppose she's one

of my heroes - rather like Byron. The myth has taken over you see, at least it certainly has in Greece and Italy. Have you ever seen that statue of him in the Borghese Gardens?

'You're going too fast for me, Willis/ I broke in gently. 'Is there any special connection between Rhodes and this Lady Hester or just a romantic appeal ?'

He watched me carefully before replying. 'Rhodes has a Djoun somewhere/ he said slowly. 'I'm sure of it/

'In Lebanon?'

'Oh Lord no. That was all demolished years ago.'

I felt perplexed. Surely this had been settled that last evening at Merlin's. 'I thought he carried his Djoun in his pocket; Karen Coffee Shop, Hagga mountain, Pap- anywhere it was in the Solomons.'

There was a gleam of conviction on Willis's face as he spoke, 'More than a cave or a hideaway or a treehouse. I really think he's found one. The ultimate bolt hole like a lost Inca city in the Andes, another Petra far away in the Arabian sands. The last refuge, where there are still no frontiers.

'Where he can sing Jerusalem as loud as he pleases,' I suggested.

Willis didn't answer.

The drive up to Puerto Gallera next morning might have been a repeat of the one from Kalibo to Aticlam The only difference was that we were back in the tourist belt. Squashed in the jeepney were several large, sun-peeled and

embarrassed Australians accompanied by pert, vivacious Filipino girls a third their size. Willis was unimpressed. "All the bar girls in Manila come here for their holidays. It's one big knocking shop/ he added warily, 'or at least Sabang is/ Certainly when we finally bumped our way wearily to a standstill Puerto seemed innocent enough. The sleepy village lay bowered beneath tall flowering trees. Trim notices in English requested tourists to dress modestly.

'We might be entering St. Peters/ commented Willis.

From a sandy bluff an imposing Spanish church dominated the tiny harbour. Beyond it a ring of pretty atolls protected the bay from the open sea.

We discovered that the ferry had been storm-bound over In Batangas for several days but hoped to get back to Puerto that afternoon, If it did, it would leave again early the next morning.

Willis glanced up at the overcast sky. It doesn't look particularly stormy/ he said, 'Perhaps we're sheltered by those islands/ He sat hunched up beside the stone Spanish war memorial while we waited for a punt boat to take us out to Sabang - a settlement along the coast, Willis's earlier optimism had evaporated, for despite two intensive circuits of Puerto we had drawn a complete blank. For the very good reason/ he insisted moodily, 'that with all these oversize tourists and their tarts Rhodes wouldn't be noticed/ The only consolation was that he had to be somewhere around and it

was fair to assume he would also be hoping to catch the ferry for Ba tangas if it left next day.

I didn't entirely share Willis's confidence. 'What makes you so sure he's heading for Manila?' I asked him, and he stabbed a finger at his map. 'You wouldn't catch a boat from here if you were going anywhere else. Besides, only in a big city can he stay anonymous. We could search Manila for months and never spot him. He'll just lie low until I give up and buzz off'

I wasn't so sure. If Rhodes had just wanted a city he could have gone south to Cebu. I couldn't help feeling that if he were going north he was going there for a purpose, and perhaps trying to bump off Willis along the way was merely incidental - no more significant than swatting a bothersome fly-

Considering a punt boat from Aticlan to Boracay cost 5 peso, then the 25 it cost to get out to Sabang indicated we were in the tourist zone. The trip itself was pretty enough, if rather wet, until we left the shelter of the islands and started along the coast when it got very wet. A headland to the east offered some protection but the short breaking waves often threatened to swamp us completely. Hugging the low jungle-covered cliffs and darting into the temporary shelter of small coves we finally rounded a point and entered a deep sheltered bay, canoes pulled up along the beach and thatch huts under the palm trees. This then was Sabang. 'Sin city itself,' grunted Willis, sounding like a Baptist minister,

I don't know that I'd ever want to spend long in Sabang as there wasn't much else to do except drink or succumb to the enticing advances of the Manila girls loitering on the balconies of their huts. Most of these seemed taken up anyway\* Not that Td have stood much chance with Willis pounding from cove to cove like a marine sergeant undeterred by cliffs, jungle or even the high tide, and "myself" following a lot less resolutely behind.

'Come on!' he called back, as I floundered up clinging to tree roots.

Tm not built for this Exploration Fawcett stuff/ I complained, when we got back battered and bitten for lunch\*

'Nonsense/ said Willis cheerily. 'Do you the world of good\*'

'Sometimes, Willis, I think you'd have been a lot happier bom a hundred years ago, marching through Africa/

'Not a bit of it/ he firmly denied. 'Stuffy solar topees and calling all the ladies Memsahib. Without modern medicines I'd probably have died of Delhi belly in the first month/

'Rice and yoghurt/ I said, 41 can recommend it/

'So you were taken too\* Bad luck/

'I was taken, as you put it, trying to get across the Himalayas - or part of them - on a rented pony at least three feet too short for me. It was an unfortunate combination.'

'With the Delhi belly and all/

'Exactly\*'

‘Poor old chap. Still you’re probably immune for life/

In the afternoon I let him go plodding off on his own and settled in the Tamarind Seed overlooking the beach, to make the most of their Happy Hour when the beer was half price. Out at sea the grey sky and the greyer horizon collided in a vicious no-man’s-land of gusts and squalls. I wondered how we would get back to Puerto the next morning in case the ferry should ever leave.

But it did. Late that afternoon I watched it dip and shudder its way out of the storm and head into safety among the islands. Then in the early evening as the Happy Hour drew to a close and I was wondering what I might do with the several smiling invitations that had come my way during Willis’s absence, he turned up, scratched and soaked but resolute none the less, ‘If that boat leaves tomorrow they’ll be on it,’ he declared. ‘I’ve found that ajeepney leaves here at six o’clock to take the school kids into Puerto. There’s a track that’s passable so long as it doesn’t rain.’

What we were going to do when we finally caught up with Rhodes was never made clear. If Willis carried a gun he kept it well hidden. But did he after all really intend to shoot his old hero, like the rogue elephant he claimed he had become, or merely worry him into making a full confession; abandoning whatever it was he was up to so that Willis could return to his stuffy office in Kowloon, where the fan squeaked, and write up his report. And what of the girl? Willis played his cards very close to his chest, but whatever



plans he was contemplating, letting Rhodes go with just a ticking off was hardly going to impress her very much.

The evening was clear and golden. The moon came out between ragged clouds and rose high over the dark silhouetted hills. Taking to the beach en masse the inhabitants of Sabang strolled up and down serenaded by song from various bars discreetly perched along the shore until well past midnight.

Willis was too preoccupied to enjoy this moonlit charm. Plodding along the damp sand he studied his feet thoughtfully as if hoping they might reveal the answer to his dilemma. I don't suppose I helped matters much by asking him bluntly if he had ever killed anyone.

'Nobody I ever knew,' he answered quickly, but the thought seemed to console him and he returned to the cabin whistling one of his hymn tunes.

I don't know what time Sabang usually went to sleep but I felt I'd barely nodded off when Willis shook me awake. 'Come on/ he insisted. 'My watch has stopped. We can't afford to miss that bus. It must be nearly dawn. I just heard a cock crow/

Any cockerel he heard must have been crowing in its sleep. We sat wearily on a bench for over an hour without the sky lightening, and then it started to rain. Slowly to begin with, it increased until the full fury of a tropical downpour lashed at the thatch roofs of Sabang as if to punish it for its naughty ways. I didn't see why we should be punished too. Unable to

beat a retreat we cowered under the most over-hanging roof we could find and only got splashed up to the knees.

There was no chance of any jeepney slithering down that track, so we waited as dawn glared balefully over the troubled sea and took our chance in an outrigger overladen with school kids. The outrigger spent more time under water than above it during that crossing but we finally got behind the islands into the relative calm of Puerto to find the Batangas ferry getting up steam and beseiged by passengers who'd been waiting a week to get. away.

Like most Philippine boats the Batangas ferry was designed to hold the maximum number of passengers in the minimum space. It was by far the tallest and shortest boat I have ever seen and as any Plimsoll line had long since vanished under the peeling rust, loading simply continued until the lower deck was just about awash. Willis decided the taipaulins were pulled down over the side not so much to prevent the seas breaking in as to stop people looking out and panicking.

We were packed tighter than a jeepney, several hundred at a guess, on three decks, and there was very little chance of finding out who else was on board amid that crush. And what with people being sick, left and right, and baggage piled to the bulkheads, it was virtually impossible even to move. Willis made the encouraging remark that at least we didn't have to worry about how far we could swirn - we wouldn't have a chance to try. 'I once sailed with our local doctor/ he shouted in my ear. 'No life-jackets on board. He claimed that

if you were going to drown then the quicker you did it the better/

In fact it was a surprisingly cheerful crossing. Even the foreigners copied the happy-go-lucky Filipinos and greeted each imminent capsizing with nervous roars of laughter.

The boat rattled and battered its way north across the channel. Willis made one attempt to get up the stairs to the deck above, but was driven back. I waited hopefully for the first sign of lessening seas that would mean we were approaching Batangas.

The headlong rush to get off quickly blocked the steep plank up to the wharf above. The upper deck, however, was level with the side and much to Willis's irritation those passengers simply leaped ashore on their own while we were still trapped below. There wasn't much of a chance to spot anyone. Improbable as it sounds I realised I was watching for a brown duffle coat. So I never saw Rhodes or the girl but I joined Willis running madly along the pier, dodging trishaws and foodsellers. At the end buses were leaving as fast as they filled up.

T saw him/ he panted, as I caught up. 'he didn't take the Manila bus. He caught one to Santa Cruz. Come on, hurry. There's another just leaving.'

I was too out of breath to speak. 'Soft drink/ shouted kids running along beside the moving bus. There was barely time for them to pour the bottle into a plastic bag and hand it through the window. A boy clinging to the open door sold

us buns before jumping dear, as with its horn blaring the bus beat a path between the bicycles and trishaws blocking the shanty-town streets of Batangas and headed for open country- 'But there's no reason to go to Santa Cruz,' Willis complained. 'It doesn't lead anywhere. Unless ... But that's too ridiculous!' He looked at me, frowning with agitation.

'What's too ridiculous?'

'There's the falls at Pagsanjan/ he declared thoughtfully. 'But I can hardly believe he's going sightseeing. No, he must be taking the long way round to Manila, changing at Calamba. Sensible really. No chance of us meeting that way.'

But Willis was wrong. Outside Calamba where the roads divided there was no one waiting for the connecting bus to Manila. And as I pointed out, in the Philippines you don't expect to catch a bus by hiding in the bushes. Anyway, there was also nowhere for them to have hidden. Rhodes was heading for Santa Cruz and I had the uncanny feeling he was leading us there as surely as the 'hare' leads the 'hounds' in any paperchase trail.

At the bus station in Santa Cruz we learned that a big European and a pretty Vietnamese girl had got off. There was no doubt they were going on to Pagsanjan. I tried to argue that perhaps he was so confident of himself that he was taking his girl on a tourist trip. But just when I was convincing myself, I saw her enticing eyes and felt her finger tip on my neck and was thrown into confusion.

The jeepney dropped us off outside a big pink and white Spanish church. We stepped across a bridge looking down on sampans loaded with tourists being paddled up river.

Downstream, huts and boats and trees and ducks crowded the water's edge.

We were informed that a tour party from South Korea had commandeered every available boat for the next three hours and Willis felt fairly sure that for once Rhodes hadn't given us the slip.

"There's a youth hostel somewhere/ he announced, consulting his notes. 'I think it'd be safer than staying at the Falls Lodge - that's one of those separate cabin places along the river/

I couldn't agree more and we followed a buffalo docilely along a riverside track until we found it. The hostel was completely deserted apart from the warden who showed us into a tiny room full of bunk beds and suggested he look after our valuables when we went up to the falls. Again this uncanny sensation of a trap. You came to Pagsanjan to visit the falls so visit the falls you must. A sampan ferried us over the river but after a mediocre soyabean-burger lunch in an airless cafe, recommended to us by the warden, (chiefly because his wife ran it), we strolled back as casually as possible to the bridge. The afternoon tourists were still being ferried upstream and I left Willis keeping watch while I went back to the hostel to have a snooze on my bunk. The air was too close and humid for comfort and I woke up bathed in

sweat, surprised to discover it was five o'clock and the afternoon was fast drawing to a close.

Willis was nowhere to be seen on the bridge. First I strolled up the track towards the Falls Lodge and then the other way to the square opposite the church, but with no more success.

As I came back a youth lounging on the bridge spat and idled across. "Hey, Joe, your friend with red hair? He leave message. Give me ten peso, okay.' I fished out a note but Willis's message - hastily scribbled on the back of the pink Santa Cruz bus ticket - merely confirmed what I already feared.

"Gone up river after R. Take first boat you can.'

I don't know whether this youth read English or not but he certainly understood my intention. Joe, you want canoe?' And sixty pesos lighter I was on my way, seated on a damp cushion while two guant paddlers worked the boat upstream from the landing.

There was nothing dangerous about the trip up river to begin with. Looking back Pagsanjan appeared like an island of houseboats with the river splitting down each side. Then we turned a curve and it was out of sight. Forests crowded the banks and masses of lilies smothering the shallows reached out to strangle the stream. The river punched its way against the current, cutting under dark wooded banks and curling around small bright meadows. At one of these the paddlers pulled up beside a shack tilting on rotten props, and here they rested for a cigarette before setting off again.

The banks narrowed and the river flew faster. Overhead the forest dropped sheer on either side dangling massive creepers hundreds of feet long. Rapids following each other in quick succession and often the paddlers had to leap out to force the canoe upstream over a cascade. Between each cataract came an eerie lull as we crossed deep pools, nosing between the dark cliffs. The light was going fast and the paddlers were getting weary. More than once I had to clamber out while they waded, pushing the canoe upstream. Somewhere ahead, over the rushing water sounded the boom of the falls, and then, emerging through a narrow defile a chill blast of wind smacked us and ahead, luminous in the dusk, a wall of spray plunged a thousand feet down the black cliffs.

Suddenly out of the gloom rushed a canoe, the paddlers Working like mad. After it, came another, hurtling out of nowhere through a gap in the rocks. In a second both of them were gone. It was too dark to make out who was in them. 'Willis!' I yelled. 'WILLIS!' but against the roaring falls his reply came back only in broken taunting echoes.

Our canoe bumped a rock and the paddlers got out Ahead across a foaming pool the river vanished through a crack in the cliffs under the waterfall. A raft of rubber tyres lay tethered nearby to ferry the adventurous across. The place was deserted, all around sheer dark cliffs soared up into the dim sky. 'Pagsanjan/ I yelled, racing back for the canoe.

The men thrust off, the stream swung us around and in a moment we were airborne, flying forward through rock and

spray. How we didn't crash I have no idea. Many times we lurched horribly, almost tipping over but somehow the paddlers scrabbled the canoe upright in time for the next plunge. In the darkness the only light came from the breaking foam as we cascaded downstream. With my knees wedged and gripping the sides I could only marvel at the prowess of the steersmen and try to ready myself for whatever lay ahead somewhere downstream in the dark.

Gradually the rapids spread out, the river widened, the cliffs drew apart, the forest lowered, the gloom lessened. We rushed towards the meadow with the deserted teahouse and beyond in midstream floated an upturned canoe with two paddlers desperately treading water as they hung on.

'Redhead/ I shouted. 'Where's redhead?' Neither said anything that made sense to me. Our canoe helped nudge them to the bank where they flopped down exhausted. One of my paddlers said, 'Your friend/ and he pointed down into the river and shook his head.

I couldn't believe it and grabbing for a spare paddle I started thrusting desperately across the river. The other two joined in, sweeping through dense fields of floating lilies choking the far bank where we found him, an arm gripping a broken paddle and his head half strangled by lily stalks. I jumped out and the lilies and the current immediately pulled me down, but I managed to raise one hand over the canoe side and with the other struggled to drag Willis free.

I couldn't tell if he were dead or alive, but he wouldn't let go of the paddle. I touched his head and his skull felt like putty.



"Bastard,' I thought. So that's what they did. Pushed him in and clubbed him. "Rhodes, you bastard!' I yelled.

Somehow I managed to support him against the canoe while it backed out of the weed and nudged across to the bank. The other canoe, righted once again, drifted past downstream, the paddlers grim and silent, muttering replies to the questions our paddlers threw at them.

Willis didn't seem dead. Not quite. We stretched him out on the bank and tried to lift him up by his feet. I had this idea it might drain out the water. Didn't babies get smacked upside down when they couldn't breathe? Willis didn't breathe but he gulped out a lot of water, so we turned him over with his face to one side, lifted his feet up again and thumped him some more. Perhaps the thumping helped his heart. In my panic I hadn't even listened for it, or a pulse for that matter. If anything, we pummelled him back to life or something approaching it.

There was no doubt his head was badly cracked and when his breath did come, it hissed out in a spasmodic jerky sort of way. He opened one eye bleakly, tried to focus it on us, muttered "Bastard,' and collapsed again.

We laid him in the canoe and paddled back to the landing by the bridge where a small crowd was waiting. The paddlers of the capsized canoe were already repeating their tale. Of the other boat there was no sign. In the dark they could have easily taken the other stream. Willis's paddlers gave nothing away. They merely squatted on the bank smoking a cigarette and shrugging when questioned. Someone said to me in

English, 'Your friend got excited and the canoe tipped over. His head was bashed in by the rocks as they swept down. He is lucky to be alive. These men expect you to pay them. They are very poor. Maybe tomorrow they will not find work.'

'They'll find work alright.' But even so I began to doubt my suspicions\* I knew how easy it was to capsize these canoes, but I was too damned angry to admit it. 'And the other canoe?'

'What other canoe?' the man shrugged.

'Ask them.' I pointed to the wet paddlers who merely grunted at the question and shook their heads.

We carried Willis inside the restaurant above the landing stage and put a pillow under his head. 'Bastard/ he said once, indistinctly, and I couldn't have agreed with him more.

## PART TWO

### The Caves of Segada

' ... Out of the misty eastern cave.

Where all the long and lone daylight, Thou wo vest dreams of  
joy and fear, Which make thee terrible and dear- Swift be thy  
flight!

Shelley

Had I been sensible I would have left there and then. Instinct told me to and I have learned never to dismiss instinct lightly. I was also able to reason fairly successfully that I had done my duty by Willis; seeing him safely into hospital, getting in touch with the British Embassy, visiting him daily where he lay like a zombie with his head wrapped in a cocoon of bandages linked up to a whole cat's cradle of tubes and drips. Nobody at the hospital could tell me how long he might remain unconscious. Did I owe him anything more? Surely I was free to leave.

In fact I tried to, I took a jeepney out to the North Harbour, once again getting hopelessly lost in the slums of Divisoria on the way, and pretended to check on the times of boats leaving for Camiguin. But the ones I actually scribbled down were those of boats that would take me back LO Boracay. I suppose I was testing myself to see if I had the nerve to return, drawn inexorably by that haunting smile in the treehouse.

Another day I took the bus to Ayala Avenue in the Makati business heart of the city and enquired at Thomas Cooks about prices and availability of flights to London, although I still had several months of leave remaining. But somehow it always seemed like running away and I couldn't entirely escape from that moment on the river bank when Willis opened his eye and watched me. That look reproached me every time I thought I had made my decision.

I stayed three weeks in Manila wishing it could have been anywhere else, but by luck I discovered little oases of calm

within the frenetic bustle of the city; one of which was the shady forecourt of a mosque in Santa Cruz, where it was a blessed relief to slip off my shoes and cool my feet like everyone else. Twenty-five centesimos gained entry to the Chinese gardens at the back of the Rizal Park where even Bing - now seasonably crooning 'April in Paris' failed to penetrate. Another refuge was the Rizal Hotel - probably the finest in the Orient, where it was almost a pleasure to be searched for hidden weapons on entering. It possessed a grace that made the Hilton on United Nations Avenue seem like the sort of bus station where I always felt under the threat of constant surveillance, as if at any moment the inspector would come up and demand to see my ticket- Further down U-N. Avenue, at the corner of Mabini Street, the tourist restaurant was another popular rendezvous. Here, attended by a bevy of pink-bloused Chinese waitresses, you got 'Coldest beer at Best Prices,' and toughest bacon and eggs on record any time of day. There was even a rather stringy chicken mami on the list at five peso a plate. It wasn't a clip joint, like just about every other 'dive' on Mabini Street with strip-tease dancers prancing along the bar-top, but cool and light, open to the hubbub of the street yet safely out of it - apart from a constant procession of shoeshine boys. There was one begging boy who impressed me especially, the only one who refused to cajole or smile. Filthy dirty in his rags he merely stood his ground with a grimy paw thrust out. And somehow I felt I wanted to win his approval, for his silence shouted louder than any other reproach from all the corners of every slum I had crossed.

Flipping across a coin, the retired American I sometimes palled up with for a beer, grunted dourly, 'Here's my donation to the Third World/

\*

If I had only stopped going to the hospital - after all the visits were pretty useless, Willis lying there stiff as a mummy - I would never have understood what he had been trying to tell me\* For, once or twice, and never when I was there, he had regained consciousness for a brief moment just as he did on the river bank\* A flicker of the eyes and a faintly uttered 'Bastard,3 nothing else. I was rather embarrassed for the nurse who felt it her duty to tell me\*

'But it's not 'Bastard' she insisted, suppressing a giggle\* 'IT'S BATAD\*'

'Bastard, Batad. His head's broken\* Amazing he says anything\*'

The nurse was a pretty little thing but obstinate as nurses so often have to be and if she hadn't come from Benawe probably Bastard was all it would have meant\* But this girl had been trained at a Protestant mission hospital for the Ifugao tribes up in the mountain province\* Batad was a remote village high up in the Cordillera range - famous for its rice terraces\* Batad, not Bastard. I had misjudged Willis. His last intention, even in a concussed state, hadn't been to cuss Rhodes (or me - I never could decide which), but to deliver a message. One word, and that word could only mean one thing - though how he found it out I had no idea

Rhodes was going north into the mountains and Willis expected me to go after him.

Of course, I knew I was still in no way obliged to follow. "Don't get involved again," caution told me. 'It doesn't concern you/ Which was true enough until I thought of the girl, loitering elf-like in the wings of my thoughts with those unforgettable eyes. Eyes that I searched for in every face I passed in the street.

If I did go, I told myself, then it was of my own free will; no one else's decision. And to appease caution, I added, after all why shouldn't T take a look at the mountain province. The official summer capital was up at Bagiu and every glossy brochure declared the rice terraces around Benawe to be one of the wonders of the world. You could hardly visit the Philippines and not be expected to go there. I could simply travel up to Bagiu and from there make a brief exploratory tour of the province. According to Willis's nurse, Benawe was the place to aim for. You could reach it by bus. After that it was a day's trek north to Batad.

Something else had been troubling me ever since Pagsanjan and I couldn't entirely shake it out of my mind. Was there another explanation for the Batad clue? Instead of our jovial Ghengis Khan yelling 'Batad1 as he clubbed down with his raised paddle, what if Rhodes on meeting Willis up by the falls had challenged him to a race, yelling "see you in Batad' or something to that effect, like a jibe as he sped past, and never waited to see the outcome. Or was that being far too generous ? Perhaps it was the nurse who was wrong? And

another thing, for all I knew even she might be in league with Rhodes and trying to lead me cunningly away on yet another red herring!

The result of all this was that I managed to convince myself fairly successfully that Willis had simply been cussing in his coma after all and Rhodes, having completed his business in Manila was now safely back en route for Mindanao. I still decided to go to Bagiu but I made the decision with a lighter heart and a tourist's tread.

I passed my last evening in Manila at the Tourist Restaurant drinking with the American. Later on "Third World" came in making his rounds. The American tried hard to get him to smile, "Hey, come on, buddy," he pleaded, 'just one for good luck/ He tried waggling his ears and wrinkling his eyebrows but the boy stood his ground unimpressed and with his paw out.

Even that didn't entirely diminish my optimism and I celebrated my departure by taking a stroll in the Rizal Park where, of all things, Bing was singing "The White Cliffs of Dover.' I thought entertainers were supposed to be impartial!

Coincidences can happen a bit too often! Willis's ravings and a pretty nurse from Batad weren't the last by any means. The receptionist at my small hotel near Padre Faure, a generally untalkative Chinese girl, brightened up tip-wise on the morning of my departure to inform me there was a direct bus to Benawe leaving from Quezon City™ a suburb of Manila. No need to go via Bagiu at all.



Shouldering my bag I caught a jeepney along busy Taft Avenue that dropped me off at City Hall and another over the river and through the million crowded streets of Santa Cruz out to the Patranco bus terminal. I barely had time to buy a newspaper, the Manila Bulletin, and grab a doughnut, before the bus left, taking me into God knows what.

The coincidence was sharing the same seat. He wasn't a coincidence for the first hour or two, just a pleasant enough fellow traveller, a Canadian as it happened, who was reading a book on biblical archeology. He stopped being a plain traveller when we left the dusty sugar-cane plains behind and began climbing up into the mountains. I found this out at a bus halt when I bought what looked like a hard boiled egg that turned out to have a cooked chick inside it. My companion laughed. 'They're called 'bolot' - ripe duck eggs. The locals say the only way to enjoy them is to cross your eyes and swallow!'

As we got back on the bus he patted my shoulder in a good-neighbourly way and introduced himself as Joe. I thought he was joking. Joe?11 looked at him doubtfully.

He chuckled. 'No really. Even the Filipinos don't believe it. But it certainly makes me feel at home, everyone knowing me.'

Joseph Taft came from a family of missionaries. His father before him had spent half his life in the Philippines and Joe had returned nine years before to continue the good work. Most of that time had been spent in Manila among the wealthy Chinese whom he admired considerably, but three

years ago he had been sent north to work among the tribes of the Cordilleras, the Igorots. The coincidence began the moment he started telling me about the tiny mission he was establishing in Batad.

‘I expect to be there another five years at least. It’ll take me that long to speak the language correctly,’ he explained. ‘It’s all clicks and grunts and the slightest intonation changes the meaning entirely.’

I was too busy congratulating my good luck to listen properly, but I heard him announce, "The Spanish never succeeded in penetrating the Cordilleras, so for the most part the mountain tribes still have their own religions.<sup>1</sup>

Nodding sagely, without wishing to offend him I couldn’t help wondering whether missionaries might not be better employed penetrating the pagan parts of London or Liverpool than busy-bodding with someone else’s religion. A few of them in Croydon wouldn’t come amiss either,

Joseph Taft was a thin, rather pale chap, neatly but simply dressed and he was an easy person to talk to since he resisted any temptation to preach. Despite my cagey silence he knew what was going through my head, ‘I certainly don’t want to destroy their culture,’ he insisted. ‘In fact for the first year or two I just lived in the village trying to become accepted and learning the language. Gradually a few of the people came to my house to read the Bible together. Now we have established a small church. I see my work is to get them to run it. Mostly we spend a lot of time together trying to explain the Gospels. For instance there is no word in their

language for love, and there are thirteen different words for rice.'

Above Lagawe the road became a single track. Not that this deterred the driver, who spun round the tortuous curves without the least concern that anyone might be coming the other way. The sunshine of the plains had given way to cool and overcast skies as we climbed. On every side green and forested mountains soared into the clouds. Water streamed along the roadsides and several times we were held up by the landslips.

We reached Benawe in the late afternoon and it was cool enough to need a pullover.

A makeshift village of galvanised houses crowded the road along the side of the valley, but the view was enough to take your breath away. For thousands of feet the entire mountainside below was carved into a million flooded terraces.

'Now's the best time to see it,' claimed Joe. 'When it's all green and growing you don't get the same effect.'

I was too impressed to comment. A dizzy spiral of overlapping contours buttressed the steep slopes, while far below the valley floor appeared like a sea of cracked mirrors.

As it was too late for Joe to continue on to Batad that night we worked our way down through the village looking for somewhere to stay. 'Mountain people are always suspicious of foreigners,' he maintained, but fortunately he was quite well known and we finally got rooms. Joe had stores to pick

up to take through to Batad next day, and I went for a stroll to stretch my legs and admire the terraces. Whatever superhuman effort had been demanded to gouge them out of the mountain, no less hard work was needed to keep them going. Women in wet skirts hoisted to their knees slapped fresh mud on the banks, while bandy-legged men in red loin-strings and patched jackets waded behind half-submerged water buffalo. Elsewhere lines of straw-hatted ladies bent over their own reflections, their nimble under-water fingers releasing rows of bright green seedlings. On the way back I climbed a hill to reach a real tribal village, squat, thatched and smoky. Full of pigs and babies, the earth floors brushed clean as a carpet.

Evening came fast and cool but it did not rain and we were able to eat outside on the verandah of one of the two restaurants. When I finally mentioned I should like to go on to Batad with him, Joe seemed delighted.

"Quite frankly I don't much like to travel down to the village alone these days/ he admitted. "There's no road and you have to walk along a steep trail for several hours through the terraces, carrying everything on your back! IL'S nojoke!"

"I'm a good donkey/ I laughed, relieved that was the only reason he didn't care to travel alone. It wasn't.

He hesitated, looking at me cautiously. "Perhaps I'd better warn you. Tve fallen out with the N.P.A/

"The who ?' I stopped eating. Like a cold breath on the back of my neck I felt a nasty premonition.

He lowered his voice, "The National People's Army', communist insurgents-whatever you want to call them. They have a stronghold here in the mountains and they object to me because they think I persuade the villagers around Batad to resist them/

I ate in puzzled silence. I didn't want to contradict him, but reading the Manila papers had given me the impression that the churches were on the side of the communists. When I mentioned this he winced visibly. 'Some priests - I must say chiefly Catholic priests - have joined the N.P.A., and are now wanted men. But I don't hold with this "liberation Christianity" doctrine. I agree the church should be on the side of the people but when it comes to supporting armed uprising ...' he shook his head in disgust. 'And another thing, Marxist priests? Why, at this rate they'll soon be making a saint of Lenin!' He paused while a girl took our plates away, before adding quietly, 'It's safe enough to talk here - but you still never know who is an informer You see they all know who I am.'

'Go on,' I said, sipping my tea.

'Clearly Marxist Christianity has strong political motivations and now the Reds are successfully infiltrating the church. '

'A KGB take-over/ I said with a grin.

He didn't smile. 'Subversion with a capital 'S'.1

'And you tell the people this in Batad?'

He nodded. 'The threats only came a few weeks ago. Just before I returned to Manila. Before that we seemed to have

an unwritten code not to trouble each other. I know they slip into the village and I suspect certain villagers are N.P.A, sympathisers, but I haven't interfered, except on one occasion.' He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. Whatever he had done and however well-meaning his motives, it was something he clearly regretted. T made the mistake of letting slip something J was not supposed to know, something I discovered completely by chance. It was all mixed up with the tribal burial rites.' He shook his head. 'The N.P.A. don't miss a trick. Anyway I made the mistake of talking to someone when I should have simply kept my mouth shut.'

Despite my curiosity I didn't enquire further about whatever necromantic practices Joseph Taft had unearthed. I was more concerned with my own immediate plans, and seeking refuge in Batad with a marked man didn't seem the best way to begin\*

He glanced around. 'I'm safe enough here,' he repeated almost gratefully. 'I've not been threatened directly, but I've had a message. Only I can't abandon my work.' He smiled. 'I like the Batad people, but I must admit sometimes it can get terribly lonely out there.'

The only jeepney going towards Batad left at 4.30 in the morning, and it was still pitch dark as we climbed up to the rutted square at the top of the village. The sky was clear and starry, and everyone was wisely muffled up against the cold in old caps and older army greatcoats. Even the tribesmen in loin strings had worn-out jackets down to their knees. In the square the daily bus to Bontoc was also waiting to leave and

nearby a man was selling hot Nescafe from the top of an old cardboard box. "Happy bussing,' he said cheerfully as we paid him.

Our own crowded jeepney plunged along unseen tracks and I soon gave up trying to peer out. "It's a good thing you can't see,' joked Joe, 'for you might get airsick.'

But it wasn't until dawn came up over the mountain peaks two hours later that I realised what he meant, for we seemed to be riding in mid-air, while through gaps in the dense banks of cloud massed below, the bottomless valley lay still swathed in darkness.

The jeepney unloaded, and laden with belongings the passengers dispersed in different directions. Most of Joe's baggage consisted of solar heating panels - "You've no idea how cold my house gets,' he said, as we earned them to the edge of the track.

The view was amazing. In front a vast amphitheatre, scooped out of the mountains, glistened with the reflections of thousands of flooded terraces. For a moment longer we gazed towards where I supposed Batad to be.

'Load me up with some of those parcels/ I suggested, but when Joe turned to reply there was a strange resolution in his face. Jim, I'm sorry, but I don't want you to come down with me.'

Fifty yards away the jeepney driver was tinkering with his engine. He shut the cover with a bang, spat, and climbed back into the cab. It was very quiet, not even a barking dog or

a chopping machete. Joseph stared over the terraces spreading out of sight below. His mind was already down there preceding him, peering around every turn in the trail, and when he spoke I wasn't really sure he was addressing me.

'They thought I'd gone for good, you see. Now they'll know I'm back. But I can't leave, I can't abandon the village can I? If I leave because of personal danger, what sort of example am I setting? Only I must go down alone. You do see that. If they're waiting I just don't want the extra responsibility of your safety, Jim. The jeepney will take you back to Benawe.'

The scene below could not have looked more peaceful. Far down the slopes, dotted about in the distance, people were already coiling away among the terraces. Joe held out his hand and grinned.

'Goodbye. No, please don't say anything. You see I've made a commitment here. You haven't. Anyway I'm probably wrong. I usually am. Look, I'll send word for you to come tomorrow or the next day when I'm settled in. Perhaps you'll be able to give me a hand with the solar panels. I'm a good cook and it'll be fun having some company for a change.' He gathered together the different packages. "Bye, Jim. What's your other name by the way? You didn't tell me.'

'Willis.' I don't know to this day why I said it. Perhaps it was the only commitment I could make. 'Willis/ Coming from my own lips, the sound quite startled me.



Joe grinned goodnaturedly and started off down the track alone. In a moment he was out of sight.

Jeepney go back now Benawe/ shouted the driver. He started the engine to show he meant it.

‘Is there another one later?’

He regarded me blankly. Jeepney go back now Benawe/ he repeated. I climbed reluctantly over the tailboard. Outside it started to rain.

I never got to Batad the next day or the one after. Just as in Willis1 s tale about the Karen Coffee Shop, the police or army ~ it amounted to the same thing - had sealed off the area and I went to Bontoc instead. This wasn’t entirely my own decision. Early next morning as I was arguing with the jeepney driver for refusing to go to Batad, a boy came our of the darkness to board the Bontoc bus. Overhearing my predicament he came across with an engaging smile to see if he could help and while the driver was explaining to him in what sounded like a rapid series of clicks and grunts, I couldn’t help noticing the absurd contrast between the boy’s helpful smile and the evil-looking hunting bird on his arm.

‘No jeepney to Batad today,’ he explained. ‘The paramilitary have closed Batad valley. The whole area is sealed off. You understand?’ The hawk squirmed obscenely under its hood, the talons releasing their grip on the leather armband, stretching and then gripping again. ‘Better go to Bontoc,’ he suggested.

'Have you ever heard of a Canadian missionary called Joseph? He lives at Batad.'

The boy frowned. 'Don't know him, but police close Batad. Don't worry. Why wait here? Go on to Bontoc. Then you can go later to your friend.'

I was still not finally decided. 'Is this your hawk?'

He smiled again. "Falcon; he corrected. "Not hawk - falcon/ He preened its feathers with his free hand, "Belong to a friend. I take it back. You want to come?'

I climbed after him into the bus with the strange feeling that I was following Rhodes's squire as he carried his lord's hunting bird. Did he also carry his smile, I wondered. The winning smile and falcon on his wrist ~ had Rhodes trained both of them to hunt?

Jonny Amboyong was a fine-looking lad, well built for his age, and one of the few boys who weren't missing their front teeth - Igo rots tend to bash them out for beauty. And he always wore a band round his forehead like a tennis player.

T go to the High School in Segada/ explained Jonny over breakfast four hours later in Bontoc. "Segada is a real nice place/ he assured me in his excellent English. "We'll look after you there/

So I was being fetched. The boy and the falcon had been sent to bring me in.

Bontoc lay in the valley bottom beside the Chiko river. The steep-roofed Lin and wooden houses and the stony wastes

along the banks made it look like a prospector's town out of an Alaskan goldrush. It wasn't very big. There was the Rest House in which we were eating our excellent breakfast and a couple of stores selling postcards of how Igo rots looked thirty years ago. The journey from Banawe had been downhill to Bontoc and the drive to Segada was getting up again. The distance was less than fifteen km's but we took over 2y hours to get there. For most of the climb I couldn't understand why we didn't drop offbackwards.

Segada was one of those places you seem to recognise even though you've never been there before. Pine trees covered the limestone crags, the people smiled and everyone spoke English. It seemed impossible that Benawe was only forty miles away - the two places seemed worlds apart.

Just as we got there Jonny rather surprised me by asking if I were an Anglican, and it took me instantly back to an Italian hill village in the Appenines where a lady leaning on her broom demanded, 'Are you a Christian or a Protestant/ 'Yes/ I agreed rather doubtfully now to Jonny, 'I suppose I am.'

'Good/ he smiled. 'Everyone is an Anglican in Segada. Father Paul is our rector. He will look after you/

Father Paul had been looking after Segada most of his life. Rector of St. Mary's Anglican Church, he lived in the Parish House, a large colonial-style building imported straight from Virginia, set on a bluff with a stone stairway running down through pinewoods to the greystone Anglican church that looked as if it had come straight out of the Cotswolds. And everyone spoke English!

I found this hard to understand until I met the Rev. John Staunton - or at least his memory ~ engraved in large letters over the Segada post office. The Rev. Staunton it seemed had penetrated the Cordilleras at the turn of the century and declared to the inhabitants around Segada, 'If you want to be a Christian you've got to clean your teeth and speak English/ He must have had an impressive personality for the entire population were converted on the spot and despite the loin strings - obligatory dress for older Igorots - they spoke an excellent transatlantic English and they all had the whitest sets of teeth you could ever wish to see - even if the front ones were bashed out.

The Anglicanism he introduced was of the highest possible pedigree and church services at St. Mary's were richly adorned with swinging censers and tinkling sacristy bells, and saints abounded. St. Joseph ran the orphanage and guest house where I stayed for 5 peso a day. St. Mary protected the church while St. Andrew managed the clinic.

The church bell never stopped < bulging. At six o'clock with dawn barely glowing over the mountains the first bell of the day tolled and the nuns at St. Joseph's burned away to their prayers. Eight o'clock heralded the main mass and on Sunday mornings the entire population turned out in a snug Eucharist. Holding high their English hymn books, 'American and Modern circa 1920', in one hand and hitching up their ancient and modern trousers with the other, they bellowed out all the rousing old favourites, adding special fervour to those to do with converting the heathen.

Jonny took me along to the church lot evensong and we came on the rector making his way dutifully across to the little parish co-operative store near the clinic. He was a small wiry man whose face constantly (teased up into an infectious wizened smile. Wisps of hair decorated the top of his chin and he paused at frequent intervals to deliver a series of dry rasping coughs, invariably lighting up a ficsli cigarette immediately afterwards. Under his dark grey jacket he wore a black shirt and a frayed dog collar, looking every inch an Anglican cleric. Leading the way through the store he showed me into the office at the back where he opened the bottle of gin he had just bought. The secret formula must have been invented by German V2 rocket engineers during the last war, as it had the strangest magic to leap skywards every time I sipped. The Reverend Paul finished half the bottle seated and without trussing his eyes. I wondered how he managed it. 'Very good value,' he asserted, screwing the cap back on, for five pesos a bottle.'

The bell for evensong started tolling and with the bottle of gin hidden securely in his jacket pocket, the Rev. Paul stepped across the lawn with patriarchal dignity and took his place among the pews. His deacon led the service. Above our heads — suspended on long strings from the dim roof of the nave — floated paper doves, while at the lower level even (the pariah dogs wandered up the aisle to scratch. 'Creatures great and small,' whispered Father P. grinning. Afterwards he ushered me outside to a grassy bank overlooking the village,

where\* in the gathering twilight he surveyed his responsibility.

Backed by pinewoods, the sloping tin roofs of Segada spreading along the head of the valley, reminded me instantly of Daijeeling. Only the snowcapped Himalayas were missing. But it was the language that continued to surprise me. Instead of dusky Darjeeling schoolboys in straw boaters or their tweed jacketed elders saying, 'Hallo old chap,' and 'Jolly good show/ here were Segandans in loin strings or padded jeans saying much the same, although with the Chatlestonian intonation that the Rev. Staunton undoubtedly favoured. Instead of cricket there was basket-ball, but it could have been any American High School team practising on the square near the store.

Father Paul grinned. 'You see we use English as the medium of instruction in our schools, not Tegaleg. For three hundred years the Spanish failed to conquer the Cordilleras so why should we give way to what Manila says now? We speak our own language, we have our own customs/

Later in the Rector y he continued to proclaim the same independent message, but it was already dusk and while he spoke the panelled walls slowly vanished in the gloom until only two worn-down sofas faced each other across a worn-out rug, relics no doubt of the Staunton era. He did not switch on the light for there was no light to switch on, and the large antiquated refrigerator stood in the empty kitchen, rather like the appliances in Looc, as symbols of other times. He sat with his knees crossed, a shadowy figure; while dog-

collar and trousers, and sometimes his teeth showing when he laughed. Clothed in black the rest of him gradually disappeared. Somewhere unseen beside him bottle and glass clinked harmoniously, and his lighted cigarette end danced in the darkness.

"Perhaps in the lowlands it is different,' he went on. "There the people are used to being tenants, to do what (his landlord tells them. Here we have always held our own land. We Igorots are accustomed to be freemen. How do you say that in English ?'

Yeomen, I suggested improbably, but he liked the idea.

"Agincourt,' he chuckled. "The famous bowmen of England. Well Igorots also hunt with bows!\* He raised his voice slightly, "And we don't want guns or soldiers, or para-military police. We rule ourselves.'

"What about the N.P.A.\* I suggested, but he scoffed at this.

"Do not exaggerate them. Although there may be communists among them they are not the Viet-Cong, they are not a communist army.\* And he went on instead to enumerate the abuses perpetrated by Central Government. It was not a short list. He quoted families, who had held their land in tribal trusts for centuries, being evicted on the grounds that they didn't possess individual title deeds. "And title deeds cost four thousand peso in lawyers' fees,' he insisted after a bout of coughing.

The cigarette darted and trembled like a firefly and the bottle clinked enthusiastically as he batted on about land

confiscation, forests clear-felled to supply American pulp companies, mass tribal eviction, valleys flooded. He was an impressive orator and caught my attention when he added - 'Would you like it if someone flattened your house for a new road and didn't pay a penny in compensation!'

"Central Government,\* he continued, 'reminds me of a blind architect I once knew. Before he went blind his designs were quite modest but once he could no longer see his

empty eyes paced the countryside creating ever stranger visions of glory. And his designs!' He laughed. 'Take the Chiko river dam. Not built for our benefit, but our people will be evicted. You say it is selfish of us to object. You tell me it will benefit Manila. My friend, it will benefit the pockets of a few big industrialists whose pockets have benefitted quite enough already at the expense of the ordinary people/

Muffled by mist and the dripping pine woods the church bell tolled its final curfew, like a sad lament for time passing.

'So we have to stand up for our rights. We have seen the landless peasants of the plains bowed by landlords. It will not happen in the Cordilleras. We must stand up for our rights. Now the CPs - the para-military, want to move into this valley. To defend us, so they say. Defend us? From whom? Our only enemy is Central Government, not the N.P.A?

He lit another cigarette and the room flared bright and staring, caught in the act of listening. 'When I attended that fateful human rights demonstration in Bontoc, the Provincial Governor warned me. He warn me!' A stunned silence



greeted this scornful exclamation broken only when he continued wearily, T wasn't there at the shooting. I was with the bishop. And when we got outside His voice slowed down like an expiring record. 'And these are the people who claim to defend us. Now you understand why I want no police in this valley.'

Across the room collar, cuffs and even the cigarette had faded. Only the voice seemed mortal in the dark. T may be shot next but I shall not cease to defend the rights of the Igorots.'

It seemed to me that Joseph Taft had claimed roughly the same distinction although from a rather different direction. T met a Canadian missionary in Batad,' I admitted rather hesitantly. 'Perhaps you know of him. I wanted to help the Igorots but ...'

Boule and glass snapped together with an impatient crack. 'Outsiders/ denounced the voice\*. 'We don't need outsiders in the Cordilleras destroying our traditions.\* Leaving me to wonder how exactly the Rev. Staunton ever got accepted; a bible- in one hand, a bottle of gin in the other? My estimation of him went up considerably. /Span from directives on teeth and language I guessed he didn't interfere too much with other liturgical considerations. Fortunately you can believe almost anything in the Anglican church and get away with it. Instead of asking any more awkward questions I sipped his rocket fuel and listened to tales of the Cordilleras. About his father who had been cook at the hospital and his son Paul

junior, present editor of the High School Magazine - I he  
Segada Postboy - whom he hoped would train to be a lawyer.  
'A lawyer, that's what we need here. Dun'i you sec!'

To avoid repetition I have compressed the gist of several  
evening conversations into one, lot during those\* Inst lew  
days at Segada 1 always seemed to bump into Fathri P. in the  
late afternoon. Either as he was resting under the trees on  
the slope below St. Joseph's, or standing by the road outside  
the co operative stoic. And always he usheied me back up the  
stone steps to the Rectory.

After our little chats Jonny Amboyong would come and  
collect me for supper. Sometimes we walked across to St.  
Joseph's where we sat at long refectory tables with the other  
travellers passing through the valley, and it reminded me just  
a bit too much of school. I preferred it when we went to eat  
at 'The\* Shamrock', a tiny shack common store on the main  
street where the\* tribes gathered each morning with their  
market produce, (Jose by, the town generator (humped out  
its cuirem, Bui like the Rectory, the Shamrock preferred to  
rely on kerosene and candles. The kindly gap-toothed girl  
who served us was obviously very fond of Jonny who  
responded with his ever ready smile.

After our meal we paid social visits to the local (the local (the local (the local  
along the\* roadsides. There was no shortage of fuel - the  
ground was carpeted with dead (wigs and branches — and  
the evenings were cool enough to enjoy poking a hole about. I  
they wear hnpiompm affairs. Fires died and new ones' bla/cd  
and anyone was here to come and go, to join in or move' on,

but at 8.30 the generator shut down, the solitary lamp gnat ding Staunton's Post Office went out and soon afterwards everyone had to go to bed.

Jonny Amboyong lived with a few other boarders in a small house behind the church where the man on was Saint Matilda. Sometimes we sat around a fire there until quite late. St. Matilda didn't seem unduly bothered about bedtimes. But whenever I asked Jonny about Batad he clammed up. 'Batad valley still closed/ he insisted stubbornly.

'And Rhodes - or do you call him Boyet ? Come on, admit it Jonny. Your hand with the kestrel/

undoubtedly/ he corrected. But he wouldn't be drawn. 'Listen/ he persisted. 'You stay here. Segada is a very nice place\*, tight? I like you soon to see the\* waterfall, to the caves. Lots of places to see. You walk down to see the tribes today at Ambasiu?'

I nodded, wondering how he knew. 'But Jonny, if I wanted to go to Batad ?'

Thru he put his arm patiently round my shoulder) and spoke as he would to an impetuous child. 'Stay here. You like I like it here, you like St. Joseph's. Here everyone speaks English. Nothing for you in Baiad now. Can you speak

Igorot?' For a fourteen-year old he could be impressively sensible. 'Listen, tomorrow we go to the waterfall. You like a swim. Just bring a towel, okay?'

After breakfast I wrote some letters. At the Post Office they were franked in front of me so there was no worry about the

stamps being peeled off - though with the Reverend John Staunton looking down from the wall I doubt if anyone would have dared. I spent half the morning with Father Paul in the Parish Office trying to fix his typewriter and in the afternoon Jonny came to take me to the waterfall.

Half a mile or so out of Segada on the Bontoc road, at the top of a wooded ravine, stood a small settlement; a few wooden cottages, one store and a weaving shop producing local patterns. Once out of earshot of the clattering looms Jonny darted behind some gardens and hurried on beneath the pine trees to the top of the ridge. The sun was in my eyes but through the trees he seemed to be waving at someone. 'Slow down!' I shouted. When I finally caught him up he was standing on a log staring thoughtfully over the valley below. 'Look/ he pointed suddenly. 'Over there. Can you see the waterfall?' Below us lay a patchwork of green paddy fields. I followed the direction of his arm towards a fork in the valley but I could make out nothing more than a couple of straw-hatted ladies in the distance, toiling away up to their waists in water.

We clambered down a sandy gully, jumped an irrigation ditch and began picking our way along the narrow mud banks. On either side rice sprouted above the water in neat green lines. Jonny scooped out a mud fish. It had big eyes and a tiny tapering body.

'What happens when the mud bakes out?' I asked him.

He threw the fish wriggling away. 'Wait,' he grinned.

'Wait? But he said it like a warning.

We reached some tall clumps of bamboo growing along the steep banks of the stream, and jumping across on large loose boulders I followed Jonny up the far side, performed another tightrope act across more terraces, struggled up a hillside chest-high in dry grass and rounding a corner in the path came upon Jonny watching something. 'See the waterfall now/ he said.

I could also see there was someone in it. But my disappointment at an intruder changed to curiosity when I realised it was a girl, naked too, who climbed out of the pool below the falls, shook her long dark hair, tossed it back over her shoulder and started climbing delicately up the rocks.

Although I watched her launch into a fine swallow dive I didn't see her hit the water, and when we reached the pool she had vanished.

Quite unabashed Jonny stripped off his shorts and jumped in. I followed, diving deep into the green misty water to avoid the spray of the waterfall and came up on the far side into a sheltered cavern face to face with the China Sea girl. To my astonished delight she poked out her tongue, disappeared under the water, tugged me down by my leg and led a merry chase around the pool where the three of us splashed and gambolled happily for half an hour or more. The water wasn't too cold and there were always the warm rocks to dry out on. I didn't attempt to puzzle her out. There would be plenty of time to do that later. Memories of Looc and Pagsanjan blew away, leaving me more than just content to bask in her smile.

Willis was certainly right, she was a lovely thing, and if I inherited her in his legacy I was perfectly happy with the arrangement. She had me hook, line and sinker and when she ordered me to dive off the rocks above, trying to look stern and then giggling as she attempted my name, despite my fear of

heights and her uncanny similarity to walking the pitaic \ plank, I obeyed and jumped with a lake brave salute, Bui I was very glad it was no highri.

About one thing only was she at all un ions. She seemed to have cypued me to be Willis. OIHV 1 caught hei out studying me with a frown which stiaight away brightened to a stfiilc. 'She says you're not like Willis/Jonny translated.

\*( should think non I'm latter and a good deal older/

A brief conference followed with Willis's name mentioned a cdfuple ol limes.

'But why did you say you were Willis?' Jonny asked me.

Now it was my turn to appear puzzled. 'I never did say that, did I ?' Bm he clammed up again.

When we sei oil to go back Jonny asked il I warned to sec the burial caves, 'Igorot people put lh<'ii <oihns in caves. Also on dill ledges,' he explained, 'so that the'spit its can get free.'

Instead of climbing the ridge above the rice fields we followed the stream on down into a deep worn led defile until a cl if! blocked the way and die stream tushed out ol sight under (he rocks. Jonny reassured me with his smile,

'don't worry. It comes out again on the other side of the mountain. There we can climb up to die\* burial axes.'

He went in from but although he knew the way it was a icky clambering down after him into the underground cavern. The faint light filtering in behind us soon gave up and the stream rippled ahead unseen into pitch darkness. I could hear Jonny striding confidently forward, and with the girl blushing against me we stumbled after him hand in hand, clinging to each other when either of us slipped.

For over half an hour we traced our way slowly forward like blindfolded pilgrims towards the ceremonial burial caves beyond, and the same poem that came to me the last time I ever set eyes on the China Sea girl I echoed

mysteriously out of the darkness to keep us company.

... In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree

Whence Alph the sacred rivet ran

Through caverns as a vet's mrasuicelcss to man

Down to the sunless sea ...

We stopped. It was cool and intimate in the sightless dark. From far ahead I heard a long-drawn-out whistle. Jonny/ I started to call back, but she pressed a hand over my mouth and drew us both down onto a dry patch of silk-sol sand.

In the inky dark I could neither see\* her eyes nor her smile. Perhaps that was better. We were creatures living by touch alone, and as we lay there her finger tip came alive and resumed the journey it had begun a month before on Willis,

down the hollow' of my throat and lightly over my chest. Under my ribs it paused as if for a moment it had lost its way, and then it began again, just the tip of the nail tracing like a scalpel blade across my belly and down ever so slowly into the groin. For a frightened instant I stared about wildly, half expecting to see risen up huge as a giant the figure of Rhodes, turbaned like Kubla Khan, his raised sword spreading in a long shadow over the tool of the cave. Then she tilted her tongue away and I felt the strands of her long hair falling over my face.

When we emerged at the other side it was a relief to find only Jonny waiting for us. He led the way up to the caves where, among nooks and crannies, scattered bones and coffins of the Igorots lay strewn everywhere. Looking at them stacked together like crates they reminded me of something, only I couldn't think what. Was it (their size?)

'Igorots are short people,' Jonny explained. 'So are old people.'

Several coffins had their lids partly off and I peeped in curiously, but others were stoutly closed, and some were even decorated by a cross and a date. I was surprised how recent the dates were. 'They still bury people like this?'

Jonny smiled. 'Why not? Christian spirits must go free like any other spirits.'

I looked for Boyet's girl but she was calmly smoking a cigarette at the entrance.

\$



'Where does the river go now?\*' We were clambering up through the steep pinewoods back to Segada.

'I don't know. It disappears into the ground. Some people say it comes out again as springs to feed the Ambasin rice terraces, but perhaps it flows into the Surijong cave.' He stopped abruptly and for a moment it seemed he and the girl glanced anxiously at one another. For once he wasn't smiling. Just this hesitant warning look.

'Surijong,' I repeated, getting my tongue round the name. I had heard it mentioned by travellers at St. Joseph's; a vast series of underground caverns you needed a guide to visit. When I had mentioned it before to Jonny he always put me off. 'Wait,' he said, or 'Soon,' or 'When we get. a lantern. Flashlight no good.' I was about to suggest it again, and ask the girl along too, when something happened which put it out of my mind.

'Look!' shouted Jonny, pointing upwards. 'Look!' For there high overhead between the tips of the pine trees hovered a great bird black against the darkening sky.

At that moment I think all of us shared the same thought. Even the girl looked unusually tense as she stared up. And then the bird vanished over the tree tops and we all laughed nervously like children who had escaped being found out.

Rather half-heartedly Jonny flung a stone after it. 'Igorot spirit fly like an eagle/ he declared. But although it was a statement Father Paul would have warmly applauded, I wasn't convinced that was what he was really thinking about.

And then turning away I noticed something else that startled me as much as the bird, for dotted among the grey crags all around us, perched on ledges or dangling from ropes, were dozens of coffins, and here and there not even coffins. Just skeletons wrapped in corn rags clinging obscenely to the rocks.

'Hanging cliffs/ laughed Jonny.

But I didn't feel quite so boisterous as we made our way back to Segada.

10

Apart from the travellers who rarely spent more than a night or two at St. Joseph's before heading back to Bomoc and the road south along the Chiko river, (here was one other semi-peljiidiri visitor, an Italian painter who lodged down the corridor from me on the upper floor. Each morning at the crack of dawn I would hear him thrust wide his shutters and vigorously breathe in 'the new day/ At breakfast he always greeted me with a brisk smile and an enthusiastic announcement such as; 'Aha, oggi - today is all 'hooker given' ntmirro due, non?'

Leaving me to puzzle out a reply over tea and toast.

He looked almost too much a painter to be true. In a shabby raincoat as paint-smeared as a palette, and an old french beret, he was lately without the essential sketch pad as he strode around Segada. And like the Pied Piper wherever he went the children raced after begging to be painted. Sometimes he would oblige and they would run off with

great delight clutching the results - which all bore a curious resemblance to himself. Once, after a more critical child glanced at him with a puzzled expression, he modestly confided to me, \*1 make a-better with i ca veil i - die 'orses/  
Adding his little joke, 'They ate a-more — how you say — easily sodisfatto — satisfied/

Whenever we happened to pass, instead of the preferable polite smile he would invariably attack me with his own inspiration. 'Amico mio/ he declared, shaking his head sadly, 'here Monet would have gone pazzo - crazy,' Fortunately coming to my bewildered rescue with, 'He could not-a-stand green. Green, capito?' And went away chuckling.

Frequently he'd stride off into the forests laden with his paraphernalia of easels, paints and canvases. Later when he displayed the results of his endeavours I always found myself at a loss for an appropriate comment, but he invariably rescued me from embarrassment by a suitably generous explanation. To understand/ he agreed soothingly. 'Like your famous painter Turner. When someone say to 'im, "I never see a sunset like you paint", 'e reply, "But wouldn't you like to?" Eh, very bufo - how you say, droll/

He beamed at me and I beamed back, but as soon as I could do so politely I went outside just to be reassured that his own surrealist visions hadn't come true.

Every afternoon I returned to the pool but the girl was never there. Jonny only laughed when I told him at supper. 'She's Boyer's girl/ he said.

Friendly as he was I didn't make the mistake of confiding in Jonny. Unlike Junior he was 100 percent Boyet's man, and anyway Segada was too steep for bicycles.

Once when I was swimming I saw a hunting bird swooping in dizzy circles far, far above. And I suddenly had the impression they were all keeping an eye on me, Father Paul, Jonny, the girl, even the bloody falcon, making sure I kept out of harm's way. And I did.

I went for long walks. At school they always recommended long walks to beat ardour out of the system. Sometimes I clambered down through the great arena of rice terraces to Ambasin, or else I strode off into the forests. Although I imagined often enough that Rhodes was breathing down my neck and started nervously on hearing a stick crack or a stone dislodge, I never really expected to come upon him or to discover any of his gunmen in the forest clearing. Old fires abounded, but then making fires was as important to Igorots as riding horses to Texans. Once I kicked up some dead ammunition from the ashes but it still didn't mean anything to me.

It wasn't until I was on my way back from a long nek north to Banga-an that I finally understood. I suppose my subconscious had been trying to tell me ever since seeing the coffins, but I just hadn't caught on. I was jiggling the spent ammunition in my pocket, searching for a peppermint sweet when a memory of the school Cadet Force came to mind with astonishing clarity. Back in my senior year the Cadet armoury was directly under my bedroom and clattering down the back

stairs I invariably glanced in through the open door to see the Regimental Sergeant Major stolidly cleaning and checking\*

Now all at once I knew what Joe had meant when he spoke about the Igorot burial rites. I knew what the coffins were used for\*

Some miles earlier I had passed a nest of diem lodged high among the rocks and I immediately thought of running back to check, but it was already getting dark and I decided I didn't want Father Paul plying me with too many questions, later at the Rectory\*

Also I needed to check with Willis's map. How far exactly was the mountain province from the coast. There must surely be a thousand coves where a boat could put in silently and unload without anyone being any the wiser\* And once they got them there, what a marvellous and cunning system of distribution! Superstition alone would protect the secret.

It was a masterpiece of a plan and I could believe only Rhodes had thought it out. Like a character in a book I was getting to know him better than my closest friends.

Now it was obvious why they had all been looking at me so attentively, I only hoped I hadn't been delayed too long. Next day I'd go back and find out for sure, but that night at supper Jonny surprised me by announcing we would finally be going to the Smijong Cave. I have a day holiday/ he explained. 'All the schools come in from Segada district and we have traditional dances and competitions/

"Aren't you going to take part?"

'Sure.' He grinned. \*We go to the cave in the morning. And in the afternoon [ dance. Traditional tier planting dance. You come and watch/

Early next morning Jonny met me outside\* Sts Joseph's carrying a bottle of paraffin and an old Colman pressure lantern - no doubt a relic of the Staunton vi a, which he had borrowed from the Rectory. I had nevvi seen bather Paul use it - in fact I sometimes doubted il he used any light al all in his house. Perhaps the gin gave him all the illumination he needed but I often wondered how his wife managed the evening cooking;

It was a warm sunny morning and I took oil my pullover as we tramped out of Segada. Instead ul dropping down towards Ambasin we kept to high ground under the shade of the pinewoods.

We passed several smaller caves among the rocky outcrops along the way but Jonny didn't bothvi to stop. Surijong Cave was a little, oil the path and the entrain c at the base of a cliff sloped inwards like the open jaw of a shark. Stumps of worn rock poked up and the broken-oil teeth of stalactites reached down. It was a trap of an entrance that you could easily imagine snapping shut behind you with a sickening finality.

'Big python snakes live in here,' Jonny announced cheerfully, spreading his arms wide. 4lwo years ago a boy from High School was cairn whole. He went in 10 hum bats, His family found the snake and cut out the boy but ...\* he shrugged.

Out in the open the story was too much like a cartoon sketch to take seriously, but inside I wasn't so sure. The cave floor sloped down steeply into the darkness between towering rocks, and looking back up towards daylight, where Jonny was busy priming the lantern, I felt I was standing in one of those illustrations for a Jules Verne epic. From far below sounded the distant thunder of falling water.

The lantern woke with a hiss, casting a spell of blinding light that banished the eerie shadows back cowering into the cracks where they belonged. We set off downhill.

On our left a cliff dropped away sheer into a pool of inky dark. I tossed a rock over and it seemed forever before a reply came booming eerily up. 'Lake!' shouted Jonny over the hiss of the lantern. 'Big lake, monsters. Woouoooo.' And he laughed until the echoes ricocheted off the cavern walls from every side.

Careful not to slip, we picked our way between tumbling rocks into an immense gallery with a stream trickling through. Jonny went ahead at a brisk, sure-footed pace while I scrambled behind trying to keep up as we climbed rockfalls, inched up low ledges, skirted forbidding pools and passed through a cavern frozen with glistening stalactites.

"Organ loft!" announced Jonny.

It was bread-and-butter work, for Jonny moved as fast and delicately as a cat and when we finally reached the rim of a great ledge wide enough to play a game of football on, and he declared

'Dancr Hall' as casually as an estate agent viewing a maisonette, I was panting too hard to comment.

Standing on tip-toe Jonny raised the lantern towards the roof and instantly an angry black patch broke off and fell swooping and darting all around us in shrilling fragments of wings. The floor lay thick with the dry must of bat droppings.

A sheer drop ran along one side of this vast ledge. From the darkness below rose the clamour of rushing water and peering over the edge with my none-too-bright torch, I could only dimly make out a river running along the base of the cliff.

'Can we get down there?' I asked Jonny and with a nod and a reassuring grin he slipped over the edge into a sort of chimney with worn-out holds for hands and feet that guided our descent slowly but surely towards the roar of the underground torrent.

On reaching the bottom it was immediately clear that the only way ahead was to wade, and forcing ourselves cautiously forward, trying not to slip too deep or too often between the submerged boulders, we struggled slowly upstream. Ahead the gallery narrowed, blocked by a fall of rock over which the river rushed in a wild spate of foam and spray but keeping to the side we managed to claw a way up among the dripping rocks to the top where to my dismay, the entire gallery lay flooded in a deep still lake as far as our lantern shone.



Peering around it seemed to me that there was a glimmer of faint light high up near the cave roof. I pointed it out to Jonny. 'Back door,' he shouted over the roar of the waterfall. 'Big burial place. Many coffins.' He shivered dramatically. 'Many ghosts!'

sOf

'Hey, you like to swim,' he suggested once we had clambered back up to the Dance Hall where I squatted damp and exhausted among the flitting bats. Wearily I followed him down into yet another gallery where among crystal-white cliffs there was indeed an enchanting pool, bright and clear as a gem, jade-green in the lantern light.

Jonny stripped out of his clothes and leaped in yelling gleefully. I was rather more hesitant. I half expected and hoped that the China Sea girl might suddenly appear. Nevertheless the water was marvellously refreshing.

'No Boyet girl. Where is she then Jonny?'

He shrieked with laughter. 'Boyet big caveman.' He drummed his fist on his chest and released a Tarzan yell.

'Have you ever brought Boyet here?' My teeth were chattering and there were only our shirts to use as towels.

'You crazy. Why Boyet he knows this cave better than anyone. He even knows ...\*' And he suddenly checked himself.

'Knows what Jonny?' But he wasn't listening to me. He stood very still, concentrating intently. Beyond the sound of falling

water were other noises, a distant staccato of unintelligible voices and the rattle of cascading stones. Somewhere ahead, beyond the next rockfall, the glow of another lantern lit up the gallery roof. He called out something and a reply came back. I noticed him visibly relax. 'Tourists,' he said with relief.

On the way out Jonny chatted eagerly about giant pythons, vampire bats and any other nasties he could think of I was too busy trying to memorise the different features we passed to pay much attention. I had already decided to come back alone and discover for myself just what was so special to Rhodes about the caves of Segada, and the Surijong Cave in particular.

\$

By the time we got back to Segada the festival was already well under way. Tribal drums were bearing and the space outside the co-operative store was as crowded with stalls as any English country fair. Snacks of fried bananas and cold drinks concocted from crushed ice sprinkled with nuts and tinned milk were snapped up eagerly by peso-brandishing children. Spectators crowded the shabby bank beside the church and below it, suspended among the pines, the tribal field was ablaze and vibrant with all the colour and music and movement of the dancing.

Jonny performed his rice-planting dance very creditably and Father Paul ended it all! He sat on a sagging canvas chair on the edge of the field where he was visibly suffering from the lack of a drink.

Afterwards he collared me as usual - he seemed to have a knack of spotting me even when I tried to dodge around another way. He was unusually agitated as we retired to the back room of the co-operative store and it required most of the first bottle just to calm him down. On this occasion I helped reduce the level. Ever since coming back from the caves I had felt off colour. All that clambering must have worn me out.

The gist of the problem was that the Provincial Governor had just delivered an ultimatum. Because I arrived late, I had missed his brief opening appearance together with that of his armed henchmen. Cowboys, Father Paid called them. "He comes here/ he muttered, unable to suppress his outrage, 'looking like a mercenary, dark glasses and one of those speckled camouflage jackets. Camouflage, I he repeated scornfully. 'Here in Segada. A festival of peace and dancing interrupted by thugs with guns. As if we, we were the enemy! Here in our valley!' His voice backfired into a series of dry rasping coughs that he doused with the rest of the gin. By the time I returned with fresh supplies he had calmed down and was gazing thoughtfully at the wall,

stroking the wisps of hair on his chin while a cunning smile smouldered in his wiry face.

'St) what has he decided?' I asked him.

He threw up his hands with a look of blank innocence. 'We naughty Igotots need policing. The C.Ps., the para-military, are to be sent here to look after us.'

And then he added something that startled me. 'I chink/ he said, watching me with a quizzical stare, T think it's a little unwise at the'present for you to go oil on your own into the forest. Take Jonny with you, or Paul if he's free.'

For a panicky moment I felt sure he knew all about my suspicions, but then just as I was on the verge of blurting out something that might have condemned me, I realised that even if I had been watched that day as I walked back from Banga-an, they could scarcely have read my thoughts. Thank goodness I hadn't spoken to anyone about it, and remembering whatever unhappy fate may have befallen Joe, perhaps that was a very good thing.

Making my way back to St. Joseph's I reviewed the situation. Somewhere within the labyrinth of the Surijong Cave lay Rhodes's hide-out, of this I was certain. And I guessed it was beyond the Hooded gallery. How he came and went I still wasn't sure. Perhaps he used the 'back-door' entrance Jonny had mentioned, although that looked pretty inaccessible from the rest of the cave, or he came in through a continuation of the underground stream we had followed to get to the burial caves.

By choosing a cave frequented by tourists, there was the added protection that any comings and goings would be unlikely to attract attention. No wonder Father Paul was upset that the (M's. were moving into the valley. At the moment the N.P.A. could come and go as they liked. Day or night made no difference inside caves like Surijong.

But intuition told me that night was (he time when I was

most likely to find them there. That was when there would be no tourists to get in the way of whatever traffic Rhodes might wish to conduct. My mind had constructed a cavern illuminated with flares, a gun-runner's den full of weapons, greased and shiny, and despite Willis's warning I knew I was in danger of glamorizing these bandits into a scene from Treasure Island, singing \*Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum' while the parrot squawked "pieces of eight' in the corner.

I sat on the grassy bank outside St. Joseph's, brooding, while the church bell tolled for evensong. I would simply go back quietly and wait, I decided. Just a preliminary search on my own, nothing more. Sitting on top of the "Dance Hall' I could keep an eye on things. If they came through the flooded gallery in an inflatable dinghy, or climbed down from the 'back-door', or just marched in boldly from the main entrance - either way I would spot them from up there. After supper I would buy some new batteries at the Shamrock. Unfortunately I couldn't entirely banish Jonny's tales of pythons and vampires. They lurked like a shivery presence in the shadows of my imagination. Instead I concentrated on the girl. Perhaps I might even find her having a midnight swim in the green-jade pool. She was worth coming back for any time - fingernail and all!

Behind the kitchens at St. Joseph's were several old out-buildings and rummaging around I soon found what I was looking for. The machete had clearly been used to chop wood. Perhaps it had even been blessed by the nuns? It wasn't over sharp and the end was deeply scored, but it

would do. It seemed in a way ludicrous to combat a group of professional gunmen with one blunt machete but I couldn't quite see it like that any more. Rhodes had evolved — whatever Willis claimed about him - into a Samurai figure. I only hoped he would accept this responsibility when the time came and act accordingly.

'You trying to kill someone?'

I turned round embarrassed to find Jonny watching me swinging the machete about in the best Japanese tradition- I pretended I'd been cutting grass. He had Paul Junior with him and they squatted down for a chat. Paul, as I have mentioned before, edited the High School newsletter, the Segada Postboy, which provided the closest thing to a commentary on current affairs and local events that Segada could have wished for\* It was written with an editorial liberty that would have banished him into exile or worse in Manila.

I don't suppose Paul Junior was sixteen, but he could produce all the rhetorical cliches of experienced politicians- The only difference was his stubborn sincerity.

'I can show you families starving because their lands have been taken away/ he insisted. 'Why does the West support our oppressors? Don't they care? Don't they realise this will only encourage the people to look to the communists for help ?'

'But Paul, docs it have to be violent ?'

'The trouble is/ he admitted, 'most of the non-violent opposition in the country is pretry- feeble and leaderless/

And then he added something that he'd probably picked up from someone else but I remembered it for a long time afterwards. 'Peace/ he remarked, 'is only war slowed down/ He might be right, but I still wondered whether it was sufficient justification to pick up a rifle and kill someone.

11

I was sitting on the edge of my bed deciding whether to call suppici when footsteps sounded along the wooden corridor and to my astonishment Willis walked in. I must have looked at him as if he were a ghost,

'I've been kidnapped/ he announced simply, 'but I got away/ And swaying unsteadily forwards he collapsed on my bed,

he looked awful. There was a stained bandage round his head, his face was a sickly pallor and he was dressed in a most peculiar and filthy assortment of clothing, but it was his eyes that startled me most, not only were they badly bloodshot but he squinted awkwardly as if they were out of true.

'When did you last eat?' Thin at the best of times, Willis now looked like a skeleton, his wrists were as thin as sticks,

'Oh, they threw in a few slops now and then to keep me alive. Nothing exactly "cordon bleu'. In fact I feel like indulging in a large steak if I had the means to indulge that \* j is,

'I have cleaned you out ?'

I didn't have much on me but they took it all. Rather hoping you'll treat me.' He touched his bandaged head gingerly as if to reassure himself it was still in one piece,

I nodded. 'But look, why not get out of those clothes and take a shower. The water's cold I'm afraid but here's some soap. I'll find a few clothes for you and then we'll eat.'

While Willis was washing I sought out the sister who ran St. Joseph's and had her book him into an adjacent room. Then I handed his clothes to the girls in the kitchen. They were a plump and jolly pair and reminded me of two Tibetan girls in Darjeeling who had not only washed my clothes on the outside terrace, but washed themselves at the same time, and then covered from head to foot in foaming detergent marched into my room to offer me the same treatment.

Fortunately Raphael (he really called himself that) had gone to the Shamrock and as no other travellers were staying at St. Joseph's we had the refectory to ourselves. Between his wolfing down hungry mouthfuls I prised Willis's story out of him. 'Are you really fit? I'm surprised the hospital let you out.'

I'm okay so long as I don't turn my head fast. Then everything spins. Damned awkward crossing the road in Manila. Had to be led across in the end. Actually I let myself out,' he admitted ruefully. 'Can't stand hospitals. Make me fee! desperate - claustrophobic, I suppose. I climbed out of the bathroom window - fortunately it was only on the first floor.' He noticed my puzzled expression. 'The nurse told me



I'd been babbling on about Batad and I put two and two together. Where else would you have gone? I knew you wouldn't let me down. I mean you did save my life and I was worried about what might happen to you whilst on your own.'

His naivety touched me. I was glad he didn't know how earnestly I had tried to abandon him. 'Willis, you clot,' I said, 'had I only known sooner what you were up to at Pagsanjan there might have been no life-saving necessary.'

'Or we'd both be dead,' he reflected, squinting awkwardly at his plate. T paid some lad to run and get you at the hostel.

I'm afraid T just couldn't wait\* I couldn't bear to miss the chance/

I nodded\* 'Unfortunately your messenger wasn't very enthusiastic. Tell me/ I said, 'what did happen up that river. Did he club you or didn't he?'

Willis looked puzzled. I suppose it was a rather brutal suggestion but then I wasn't even thinking of the Pagsanjan Falls as I asked it, for in my mind I was already alone in the depths of the Surijong Cave waiting. But rather to my annoyance Willis couldn't help to resolve my fears\* As a result of being concussed he could remember very little. He was left with only a number of dream-like sequences he had been trying to shuffle into some sort of order. And in between only awkward blanks. He did remember hearing me yelling his name by the falls. It was when we were chasing — although quite frankly I'm no longer even sure who was

chasing whom, I know it was very dark, and the rushing water .\*/ He watched me desperately, squinting as he strained to focus his crippled memory.

‘Next thing we were going neck and neck, hurtling through the rapids. The two canoes were only a foot apart, someone had to give way. Then his paddlers forced across our bows. At least that’s what it seemed like, Perhaps they made a burst of speed or caught the current. I don’t know. It was just one mad hell of spray and rocks, I suppose they slipped through and we didn’t\*’

He bent forward blinking at his plate. The frustration of not being able to remember upset him. I suppose the sense of failing yet again wasn’t far behind.

‘Your canoe didn’t look damaged,’ I suggested.

He nodded. ‘We slewed over and filled up, At least I think so.’

‘Then how did you get your crack ?’

He peered up at me. ‘That’s just it. I don’t remember. I really don’t remember anything except this racing neck and neck for the rocks, and Rhodes's face - hut I think that really is a dream the way it haunts me, except for this one word he keeps saying.\*

\*Batad/

He nodded again.

‘And you don’t remember capsizing?’

‘No, not really, though I remember water/ he forced a grin. ‘A lot of water, but it’s terribly hazy/

'You certainly swallowed enough/ I paused. 'So he could have clubbed you as you drifted down, hanging onto that paddle.' I thought of how the tables had turned - now it was me trying to convince him that Rhodes was guilty.

Willis tried to evade the issue. 'He knows if he got rid of me they'd find somebody twice as smart to set on his trail.' He attempted a wan smile.

'But he could have/ I insisted.

'Yes/ he admitted finally with reluctance, 4hc could have/

'What did the doctor say?\*

Willis laughed. 'That I was lucky to be alive/

I nodded thoughtfully. There was nothing more to be gained from pursuing this except to upset Willis. 'Tell me about the hospital/ I suggested, and his relief was obvious.

'They couldn't have been nicer, except they were getting just a bit too proud of their 'prize patient' - the one who should have snuffed it but didn't\* Possessive isn't a word I like using, but it was certainly getting that way. Don't think f'm not grateful, some of the nurses were very kind. Trouble was they'd taken my trousers away.'

Willis didn't notice my eyebrows raise in surprise. He was too busy replenishing his plate. With a full mouth he hurried on. 'That was the first lime I tried to get out. I was more wobbly then and the porters caught me- Naturally my money and things were locked away in the hospital safe, but

I always keep a small reserve sewn up in my jacket and I managed to get this out before they took it away.'

'How on earth did you escape with no clothes?'

He grinned, it was his conspiratorial schoolboy grin, and I was pleased to see he hadn't entirely lost it. 'Only thing I could think of,' he admitted. 'Tried to pretend I was some sort of barefoot midnight jogger.'

It wasn't until midnight, Willis went on to explain, before he finally had the nerve to shin out of the first floor lavatory window in his underpants and lower himself down the pipes to the street, where he staggered away dizzily into the downtown crowds, having to sit down hurriedly every time he turned his head too fast for his eyes. Fortunately for Willis nobody in Manila goes to bed before 1 or 2 a.m. and he was lucky enough to come upon an old Chinaman with a barrow-full of used clothes, still trading. That was how he ended up with the baggy pants, flora! shirt and slippers with which, in a very much dirtier state than he had set out, he finally turned up at St. Joseph's. '

'Still, he said, 'they got me to the bus stop.'

'But why on earth did you come here? How did you know where I was?'

'I didn't. I went to Benawe.'

I tried to calculate on my fingers. 'When were you in Benawe? The day before yesterday?'

'No. Ages ago — nearly a week I should think. Didn't I tell you I'd been kidnapped?\*

'Where? In Batad?'

He shook his head slowly. 'Never got there. Couldn't by jeepney. The one that was due to leave at dawn wouldn't take me. Some cock-and-bull story about the place being sealed off. I was getting pretty agitated when this old boy comes up and says, "Joe, Segada. Joe, Sagada", that was all he told me. I say, this grub's good, isn't it?' And he reached over for more of everything on the table.

I was too surprised to pay much attention\* Joe's a missionary I met/ I explained. "A missionary from Batad. Are you sure he said Joe?'

'Good Lord, I thought he meant you. Jimmy and Joey. I thought he'd muddled you up like they call everyone Joe.' He looked a bit crestfallen at his mistake. \*I suppose I was in too much of a damned hurry to think/ he said. Then he brightened. 'Still you were in Segada. Anyway, what about this chap, Joe?'

'I'll tel! you later. You go on/

It was his being in too much of a 'damned hurry' that led to Willis's fatal mistake, for when later that evening, as he waited about impatiently in Benawe a boy ran up and told him a jeepney was about to leave for Segada\* Willis never thought twice about getting on it. T ended up locked in a filthy barn/ he concluded, disgusted by his own carelessness.

'Bloody cold it was too, I can tell you.' He shivered at the memory.

The two girls came in from the kitchen to clear the table and we walked across to the hostel where a log fire was blazing downstairs. There was still no sign of Raphael, and I was weary enough just to enjoy lying back in an easy chair. Willis, however, sat hunched up, staring into the flames with half-closed eyes.

I suppose they were trying to keep us apart/ he said, suddenly coming out of his reverie.

I nodded. The queasy sensation I felt earlier was coming back and I could have done with a shot of Father Paul's fire-water to keep it at bay.

Willis turned to me. I realised another difference about him. He seemed to have given up smoking. 'You were guarded, I take it?' I asked him. 'Not just left to rot/

'By idiots/ he agreed. 'And a murderous-looking bunch they were too. Filthy old jackets and loin cloths, and half their teeth bashed out. Sat there muttering together in clicks - I'm not at my conversational best in clicks/ he added.

'What sort of weapons did they have? They were armed I take it?'

He shook his head. 'These idiots were too clever for that. Pretended they were just simple bandits. Good thing actually when I came to escape, otherwise they'd most likely have shot me.' He frowned as if he'd suddenly lost his way in the

story, then his face cleared. It must have been a couple of nights later,' he went on, 'and these idiots were all sitting round their fire. They have this thing about fires you know.'

I nodded, 'But why do you keep saying idiots?'

'That's what they're called. Didn't you know?'

Tgorots, not idiots, Willis. He watched my helpless guffaws with patient indifference. I even had to dab the tears from my eyes, but I felt a lot better for laughing even if Willis didn't really share the joke. He pushed back his sleeves and rubbed his wrists. I noticed for the first time the livid rope burns across his arms.

It took all of those two days to work my wrists free,' he explained. 'Then I untied my ankles and leaped out of the window, landing feet first slap bang in their fire, kicking it all over them and plunging off downhill into the dark. I had no idea where I was, floundered through some rice terraces until I came on one of those mud-thatch villages - the old sort, not the tin can ones - charmed the barking dogs back to sleep and hid there with a pig until dawn.'

I wondered what the smell was/ I laughed. 'A friendly pig, I hope/

He yawned sleepily and stretched out. 'After Merlin's creepy-crawlies any pig is friendly/ he said.

I found it difficult to believe that all this had been going on unbeknown to me only the night before and just a few miles away. Willis, it seemed, parted company from his pig some time before dawn and from then on it was 'Shanks's pony\* as

he headed downhill to the Chiko river, waded across the shallows and started the really hard bit - the climb up to Segada. 'I daren't use the road, you see/ he insisted, \*1 knew they'd be watching that/

'Good Lord/ I said, remembering the bus ride, 'Nt. wonder you're worn out. Do you want to know what has been happening here, or have you had enough for one day?'

'No. No/ he insisted. 'Spill it out. My head'll hold together another ten minutes/

It took rather longer than that to put him in the picture, but he remained alert and several times had me repeat some detail he did not grasp completely. When I had at last finished he said, 'And this missionary chap -Joe. You think he's had the chop?'

'No idea, But if Rhodes is masterminding an armed revolt from here, then they certainly want him out of the way/

He put his face into his hands and rocked slowly back and forward, 'Course we don't know for certain that he did find any guns, any more than you have!'

I stared at him, puzzled. 'You don't think it is guns?'

'Oh, it's guns all right, plain as mustard/ He got up slowly and yawned again, \*1 expect they come from Vietnam, probably via the Spratly Islands, And from Ho Chi Min City. I've no doubt there's a near red line on the map running back across half the globe to Mr, Kalashnikov's factory outside Moscow or wherever it is he manufactures those assault rifles of his/



'You don't want that bandage looked at/ I suggested as we made our way up the stairs\*

'I daren't,' he grinned. 'It's holding my head together. Anyway I am still scared this is just a dream and I'll come round in that filthy barn, kicked awake by those bloody idiots.'

12

It was something much more sinister that brought him charging into my bedroom next morning before even Raphael had greeted the new day.

In his hands Willis was clutching a pair of old tennis shoes.

'Do you know what the time is!' I complained.

He indicated the shoes. \*1 heard a knock and found them outside my door, They're the shoes I left at the treehouse in Boracay. Don't you see? Rhodes knows I'm here!'

I couldn't understand why Willis was so agitated. 'He was bound to find that out. sooner or later/ I said.

He frowned and his eyes rolled erratically. He had to sit down and shut them tight before they steadied again. 'It means he knows about me being in the treehouse that time. God!' He put up a hand to his bandage. 'Rhodes is like a Sicilian brigand when it comes to women. These shoes --/ He glared at them with distaste. It's like Long John Silver getting the black spot/ he said, trying a grin and failing. "Christ, he'll make mincemeat out of me/

T had never seen him so concerned. "Have you got a gun ?" I asked him.

T did have one. It's somewhere under the Pagsanjan river/

threatened he must have felt that day when he went up after them alone in the canoe. Or how determined he was. Briskly I remarked, 'We'd better pool our resources.'

'One rusty machete/ he muttered gloomily. 'I remember a school play we did once. The Lion in Winter. Rhodes was King Henry, of course, and I was Richard. There's this final scene when he discovers his three sons have been plotting to kill him and we have to face the music. He had this mighty long sword and he raised it above his head in rage to give me the chop. Rhodes was so much in love with that part, he was the King and I the traitor, and I was always terrified that at the last moment he would actually strike me down instead of faltering in mid-air and dropping the sword in disgust as he was supposed to. There's a measure of madness in him you know, brilliant almost eerie madness.'

What he said gave me little comfort. I could hardly confide in Willis about the girl. There was no knowing how he'd take it. But one thing was sure - he'd certainly trust me less, and trust was a thing we both needed at this stage. I wondered who else knew apart from Jonny. For I had the sudden panicky feeling that the girl was all part of the trap, like the falcon and Jonny's smile, and I had fallen into it. And now

Rhodes, like the God of Israel, could feel free to exact retribution with an Old Testament revenge.

Willis wisely kept out of sight most of that day. Once or twice I tapped on his door but there was no response and I assumed he was sleeping. But there were no secrets in Segada, at least few that Father Paul didn't hear of.

'Your friend hurt himself?' he quizzed me when I met him gazing over his domain from the bottom of the steps at St. Joseph's. 'He had an accident?'

'You might call it that I suppose.' Considering the imminent invasion of the para-military into his valley, Father P. seemed remarkably relaxed. Lighthearted even, as

he chatted amiably on. When I reminded him, he was unmoved. 'Oh, we will convert them into good Anglicans,' he joked and laughed himself merrily into a coughing spree.

'When are they coming?'

He shrugged and his wizened face broke into a crafty grin. 'A day or two. Maybe three. And when they come, they will find everything very peaceful/

'Something's happening,<sup>5</sup> I told Willis when he woke up late in the afternoon. 'The cunning old fox couldn't have been more pleased - and he wasn't pretending. Nothing goes on in Segada he doesn't know about. My guess is that whatever it is it's being wound up fast. If we don't go soon we maybe too late and find they've all vanished into thin air/

'To rhe cave, you mean?'

T think we should go tonight/

Willis nodded, Tm entirely in your hands, that is if you don't mind a cripple coming along/

'Join the gang,51 laughed.

Pooling our resources we reached the grand total of my torch, the machete from St. J's. and Willis's piece of cord - T think I must have borrowed it from my pig.' Sniffing it I was inclined to agree.

The torch needed new batteries and we decided it would look less suspicious if we didn't buy them until the last moment. 'Also better if Jonny doesn't see us together tonight/ I suggested, 'else perhaps he'll think something's up. I'll tell him you've gone to bed early or something. You'll enjoy having supper with Raphael/

'Maybe, but I don't know anything about painting,' he said doubtfully.

'You don't have to/ I told him. 'He knows more than enough for all of us/

Outside the co-operative store Jonny was waiting for me with a plastic bag full of toadstools, insipid-looking things with thin tapering stalks and grey caps. 'You like mushrooms?' he enquired.

'You bet, but can you eat those things?'

He smiled. 'Very best, magic mushroom/ he assured me with a wink.

I took his word for it. If there is one thing I'll make a pig of myself with it's mushrooms. 'I can eat them for breakfast, dinner or tea,' I bragged to Jonny, though I didn't expect much flavour from the pathetic specimens he had gathered. However, they were worth a try, and perhaps a decent meal would help to perk me up. I still felt a bit shivery and feverish.

'Let's go to the Shamrock. My friend cook them for us, okay?'

His girl friend cooked us a splendid meal. Pork chops, french fries and the magic mushrooms. It was Jonny who kept insisting they were magic. 'Any mushrooms are magic to me, sport,' I declared, feeling better with every mouthful and wolfing half his portion as well. We topped the lot off with a couple of San Miguel beers. A well-filled stomach, I decided, was just what I needed to go into battle on.

'How do you feel?' he grinned as we left.

'Great,' And I did too. I even raced him up the road to the co-op store and won.

For a while we squatted around a leaf fire, and then when he had cleared off to St. Matilda I returned to the Shamrock. It was closed but there was a light inside and the nice girl opened up just enough to sell me the torch batteries. I could have kissed her.

'You like mushrooms,' she grinned. 'Now you have nice dreams.'

'Why, got any more?' I could have eaten them too. Instead I bought two spare beers and headed back to St. Joseph's to rescue Willis. He was lurking outside in the

shadows, and with the machete down my trousers and the rope under Willis's shirt we set off, keeping to the shadows and trying to dodge past the leaf fires without attracting comment.

'Are you feeling all right?' whispered Willis as we sneaked through the village like a couple of alley cats. Although I mumbled something reassuring over my shoulder the truth was I felt rather peculiar. It was a bit like stepping through a Disneyland movie, everything seemed larger than life, the fires glowed with brilliant colours they had never possessed before, and once we left the village behind, the trees came alive, their branches swaying, though there was not a breath of wind. I seemed to be floating a little distance above the path. 'Walking on air, sport,' I replied, less than confidently, to Willis.

'You look a bit wobbly,' he remarked glumly, 'but that's probably me. How far is it? I feel pooped already.'

Several times Willis had to sit down and wait for a dizzy spell to pass. My problem was more a lack of concentration for now even my head seemed to be floating off on little irrelevant journeys of its own. It was all I could do to keep it under control as we made our way along the track through the forest. I also seemed to have acquired a boisterous sense of humour.

'What are you laughing for,' objected Willis.

'I'm sorry,' I apologised. 'I just thought of something.'

'What?'

'I don't know.' I didn't either. But even now I could feel little peals of mirth waiting underground for a chance to escape.

He grunted. 'What did you eat for supper?'

'Mushrooms,' I said with relish, still tasting the flavour.

He stopped in his tracks. 'Oh my God, not the little grey things?'

'Why, did you have some?'

He squinted irresolutely. 'I think perhaps we'd better turn back?'

'Don't be silly, I'm perfectly alright. Jonny ate some too. Said they were magic. Perhaps I'll turn into something.' All sorts of fantastic visions appeared for me to choose from. It was difficult to keep my merriment under control.

'You'll turn into something alright,' he muttered grimly.

'Come on? Poor Willis, the additional responsibility of having a half looney to look after must have been a depressing burden in his exhausted condition. Not that I felt odd myself, apart from a bit lightheaded. I was fine and dandy. Jolly sight better than feeling feverish.'

'What?'

'What?'

'You're talking to yourself!' he snapped like a cross schoolmaster. 'Out loud! Have you any idea what we are doing or where we are going?'

‘Of course I have.’ This lecturing was getting irksome. Wasn’t it my plan an way? ‘We’re off to see the Wizard? I jingled. ‘The wonderful Wizard of Oz?’

Willis clutched his bandaged head with both hands and stumbled forward, while I, with the machete smartly over my shoulder, brought up the rear, humming ‘Onward Christian Soldiers,’ and encouraging him with more boosting remarks. ‘Keep going Bwana,’ and ‘Have no fear, Jim is here,’ plus the occasional chortle to assure him I was not downhearted. Once an owl hooted and I hooted back.

‘Don’t hoot, you twit? he said despairingly.

‘Yes Bwana, No Bwana, Three bags full Bwana? I agreed to console him.

I don’t know how long it took to reach the cave. In fact I’d forgotten all about it when Willis grabbed my arm. ‘Is this it?’

‘Aha,’ I said, noting the familiar shark-jaw entrance. ‘It is begorrah.\*

‘Don’t talk,’ he hissed close to my ear. ‘Don’t.’

So I pressed my lips tight shut and followed him down into the cave. And it was now that the fun began, for despite new batteries the torchlight seemed suddenly diminished. Instead of the flooding glare from Jonny’s lantern, all we were armed with was a mere point of light overwhelmed by the vastness of this underground vault. All those features I had tried so hard to remember were jumbled up in hopeless disorder in my mind.



‘Where do we go?’ whispered Willis.

‘Not down there!’ I warned him. ‘It drops about a million feet. Here, to our right. But it’s steep.’

‘I just hope you don’t take a wrong turning,’ he said, which I thought unfair considering I’d just stopped him stepping off into eternity.

I led us in what I thought w'as the right direction, wriggling down the slope between massive ricks and trying not to slither on the loose stones in between. The torch was too weak for anything except showing where to put our feet. It was quite useless for finding the way, and in my disembodied state, progress was not made any easier by the difficulty I had in keeping my arms and legs under control. ‘Down, you mutinous dogs,’ I grumbled. ‘Who is captain of this ship?’ and then remembering Willis’s warning I hissed a loud ‘SShhhh!’ in all directions.

The slope seemed to go on much longer than I thought it should, but we finally came to a gallery of sorts where I promptly fell on my face, the machete clattering noisily away. After crawling about a bit, Willis retrieved it, cut off a bit of his cord and rather cleverly secured the handle to my wrist. ‘It’s no good me having it,’ he said. ‘I need every hand I’ve got! Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad idea if we roped ourselves together with the rest of the cord/ So the rope that once tethered a pig to its guzzling rights now joined the two of us together like a couple of ga-ga mountaineers.

Machete clanging I stumbled ahead and Willis brought up the rear. The going was easier now - apart from slipping into occasional pools, and the torchlight picked out all manner of rare colours flowing like moken gems among the rocks. I suddenly realised with delight that the cavern was enchanted; a sacred pleasure dome where all would cry, 'Beware, Beware, weave a circle round him thrice I stopped and the echoes pitter-pattered away like handclaps into silence. Leaning drunkenly against a mass of rock crystal, I roared, 'Tome out Rhodes, you shit! You bloody gun runner.' I waved the machete above my head. 'Tome out with your hands UP.' I laughed and the echoes came alive again, mocking us from every fleeting shadow.

I felt suddenly very clear and lucid. 'Tome on Carruthers/ I said jovially to Willis who stood bent at a painful angle with his eyes tight shut. Like Merlin, I felt, in my sudden surge of strength, great affection for the frailty of this world. 'Tome on you cock-eyed ruin,' I said kindly, nudging him with the machete as I passed on ahead, watching out for the cave of the stalectites.

'Fee Fi Fo Fum/ I chanted enthusiastically. 'Fee Fi Fo Fum/ and then I switched to the Grand Old Duke of York and had his Lordship marching up and down a few hills, but it didn't get us any closer to the 'Organ Loft'.

Although we probed the torch into every opening, and despite coming on the occasional stump of a stalagmite, the glittering cavern as I remembered it eluded us, and the

gallery floor spread out flat and unending, as we tripped reluctantly along it.

'Listen/ insisted Willis.

Now it was my turn to squint. I could hear lots of roaring noises but they seemed to come mostly out of my own head.

'It's water/ he said. 'Falling somewhere ahead/ He took the torch and went forward carefully. Suddenly a black chasm split the gallery floor and a stream plunged over the edge.

'If we follow the stream back/ I told Willis, 'we'll come to the flooded gallery/

He nodded gratefully. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure.' I said, but it never occurred to me that there might be more than one stream, or one gallery.

Splashing across I slipped and landed heavily on my machete. Fortunately Willis still carried the torch but it knocked the wind out of me. 'Fee Fi Fo Fum/ I tried again but without conviction. My breath was coming and going in sobbing gasps and my head swam. Lying back against the rock wall I remembered that somewhere above the stream was the 'Dance Hall\*. I told Willis but wThen I started climbing my feet slithered and my fingers couldn't grip the slippery-wet rock. 'Help me/ I whispered desperately.

Willis's voice sounded as if it were coming from above somewhere over to my left. He had chosen a different route. 'Come on, old chap/ he urged cheerfully, and what with his tugging and my own feet and fingers scrabbling for holds I moved slowly after him following the pull of the rope and

occasionally bumping into one of his feet. 'Not far now/ he said. 'You can make it.'

The dangling machete had got jammed in a crack and I couldn't tug it out. 'Where the hell are we?\*' I heard him mutter, and looking up I followed the torch beam to the roof, high above, caked in masses of shuffling bats. 'You all right?' He shone the torch down on me and I heard him gasp.

Below us, where the floor of the gallery should have been was a gaping abyss. The cave was bewitched. It had moved. We were suspended above a bottomless pit and I began shaking with panic, clutching the machete like a vice.

It was the machete that saved both of us for as he turned Willis dislodged a stone and slipped. The torch bounced away like a firecracker out of sight below and Willis came slithering past me grabbing frantically for a hold. The rope pulled him tight but if I hadn't been tied to the machete I'd have certainly plunged after him.

'Willis/ I shouted, but there was no response from the dead weight swinging on the rope.

'Help!' I shouted in utter despair, 'HELP ME!' But the only answer was the tweetering of a million bats. And then, just as I was on the point of giving up I made one final superhuman effort, kicking off my shoes as if some instinct deep inside me knew damp socks gripped that much better, and to my amazement with my free hand I managed to haul Willis back up to my own level, where though apparently unable to

speaking he gripped onto me as firmly as ever he held onto that paddle on the river below the Pagsanjan falls.

Thank Heavens also that I was becoming a bit more lucid - even if it was only a temporary respite. My head still swam but in trying to help Willis I seemed to have lost much of my own panicky fear.

'Willis,' I said, pushing him upwards. 'It can't be far. Just use your hands. I've got your feet.'

He didn't say a word but struggled gamely until I suddenly felt the pressure lift off me, and managing to drag out the machete I forced my way after him. To my intense relief the angle of the rock face eased and suddenly my fumbling hands felt over the rim of a smooth ledge and my nose pressed into the dust of a million years of bat droppings.

Willis rolled forward and stopped with a thud. But at least we were both safe. We had reached the 'Dance Hall'.

13

An age seemed to pass before my head cleared and I was back where I had entirely forgotten myself to be, stuck up on a ledge with Willis, somewhere in the Surijong Cave, without a light.

Willis was still out for the count. His head had bashed against something rough and square-ended, and tracing my fingers over it I felt the first pangs of doubt. It certainly felt like a coffin and yet I didn't remember any coffins in the 'Dance Hall\*'. Then, sitting up beside it, I noticed something else that

puzzled me even more. Fresh air - I could feel it stirring on the back of my neck. Where on earth were we?

Untying the cord that linked us, I searched in Willis's pockets for matches and by good luck I found a box even if it was crushed. I only hoped the matches weren't wet. When I struck them the first two snapped off, the third fizzed and then two flared together, illuminating for a long moment a cavern with a low roof sloping down at the far end, and scattered under it a dozen or more coffins. The cave was coming alive with shrilling bats when a rush of air blew out the match.

Sitting beside Willis I tried to figure things out, but I was simply too confused and exhausted to think straight. For the life of me I couldn't remember what it was about coffins that was so important. And if anyone reading this finds that hard to believe then they should go and eat a meal of magic mushrooms and see what happens to their rational mental faculties. That final burst of concentration, just to get us to this ledge, had wrought havoc with mine. I was near to weeping with helplessness.

I started crawling in the direction of the fresh air, the machete dragging along beside me, and I was concentrating so hard on making progress that I had forgotten all about the coffins until I banged my forehead on one.

As I grunted, rubbing the painful spot with the back of my hand, and wondering where I was, I dropped my chin on the edge of the coffin to discover there was no lid, and then raising both hands in front of me I struggled to bring the one

clutching the broken box close to the one with the bits of match, and struck.

The broken matchheads blazed for a moment only, but in that split second as I gazed down into the coffin, what I saw sent me whimpering backwards onto the cave floor; the machete clattering and the matches flying.

A kaleidoscope of coloured patterns spun around my head. There was music too, familiar chants. For a while I thought I was back in my old school chapel, sitting in my place up in the choir stalls with the light shining through the high stained-glass windows. I could hear names being called. Except it was always the same name. Must be an awful lot of brothers. I decided it was Remembrance Day, and waited for the Roll Call to finish for those familiar words of Binyon:-

‘They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.’

Like a slowly unrolling peal of thunder the whole school chanted that last line together and then after the Cadet bugler sounded the Last Post we all stood up straight and proud to sing Jerusalem\*

JERUSALEM.

I lifted my head and there he was.

I suppose for a moment or two I was so bemused I took him to be God or certainly not quite mortal. I was lying on the ground and he seemed to reach the roof of the cavern. Ezra Pound's Paracelsus in Excelsius came to mind - "Being no longer human how should I aspire humanity or don that frail attire". He appeared suspended on the wall of the cave, a vast black shadow from a bygone age with a hooded falcon on his wrist.

There was something wrong with my vision. He kept slipping out of focus and I had to struggle to fit him back into frame again. And he wasn't dressed properly. It made the schoolmaster in me rebuke him with irrational indignation. "Rhodes, why aren't you wearing your duffle coat, boy!"

I waited for him to say something but he didn't. Instead he smiled. No anger. No hostility, just this amused smile. There was something so magnetic in the way he looked that it was hard to resist liking him instantly. I struggled to recall what it was that I had to remember about him, but I gave up. If he'd held out his hand I'd have probably grabbed it. However, the machete, which dangled from my wrist like a broken talon, reminded me of some neglected duty. And then it suddenly occurred to me, where was the girl ?

"Where are you hiding her, Rhodes. You don't own her you know. The days of slavery are past. Just because you won her playing poker in Macao, or was she the spoils of a pirate raid on some half-swamped boat full of Vietnamese refugees?" My teeth had started to chatter and wouldn't stop. "Or ph..plucked her off the b...beach at P...Palawan when she



was busy with the family laundry. I know your t,,.type  
Rhodes. Conquista .. / But the word would not come out  
properly. 'Conquista - something or other / I tailed off lamely.

'It's no good arguing with him / I remembered Willis saying.  
'You just get absurdly angry and he always wins. He usually  
laughs /

Tve got to fight you Rhodes. You realise that / But even to me  
it sounded as if I were the small boy threatening to call up his  
big brother.

'I fought him once / Willis had confided in me. "At school, in  
the little cloisters at midnight / A duel with epees, sabres,  
swords, cudgels, axes, machetes ...

'I've got to fight you Rhodes / But the machete was becoming  
immensely long and immensely heavy and my knees were  
turning to water.

Lurking in the shadows I could dimly make out a ragged  
group of tribesmen. Was the girl with them? I could feel her  
presence, although whether she was there in the cave or  
idling along some passageway in my mind I couldn't tell. She  
wouldn't come clearly into view. What I could see was  
Willis's body, crumpled up where he had fallen beside the  
coffin.

Then I remembered the other coffin but although I pointed  
protestingly at it the words stuck. I couldn't get them out.

Inside my head the words swelled to screaming point. I got  
hold of my face with both hands and shook it but still they  
wouldn't come out. Rhodes only grinned. Not an evil grin,

more as if he'd just played a rather clever prank and got away with it.

I fought hard with that grin. I knew that whatever else happened I mustn't let myself be trapped, I knew that despite all its magnificence here was a doomed species. A dead end in the evolutionary pattern. A member of the last lost tribe, there was just no room for him any more in today's world. I told him.

'Do you know what a rogue elephant is, Rhodes? It's the sort you shoot when they run amok/

'It's no good arguing with him/ insisted Willis, 'I just get angry and he always wins. He usually laughs/

Getting unsteadily to my feet I moved slowly towards him, step by step, dragging the machete until I faced him, my legs apart for balance,

'The Alexanders the Great and the Ghengis Khans have all gone. Understand? Revolutions don't need live heroes!' I shouted at him, but he just smiled. 'You're DOOMED. Don't you realise it? You and that bloody eagle. Both of you. You're a myth. A MYTH/

It was like throwing brickbats, yelling Ya-hoo, poking my tongue out, cocking a snook and running away. Nothing I gibbered could touch him. He just laughed as Willis said he would and the words came bouncing back like an echo off the wall - only now it was scrawled like the Italian slogan all over the cliff face. 'Il mito vince sempre/ The myth always wins, coming back as a roar, chanted again and again by the

huge crowds filling the entire plaza. 'Duce, Duce, Duce!' And then the cheering. Why was everyone cheering?

'Revolution .,/ I began again, but I gave up. I couldn't make myself heard over the din.

Lurking in the shadows stood a ragged group of tribesmen. But the girl. Where was she? She wasn't doomed.

'I want the girl, Rhodes/ I yelled. "Hand her over and I'll let you go. Understand? Just the girl.' Laboriously and trying hard not to topple over I lifted the machete unsteadily with both hands.

Facing me Rhodes had cloned into two mirror images and peering hard I made out ahead, side by side, the vast stone Colossi of Memnon watching the centuries through bombed-out faces, guarding the realms of the dead - Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, separate immortalities.

'I've got to get past you Rhodes.'

He faced me suspended in a web of light. Bats wheeled round him. Hooded on his wrist shuffled the falcon- condor-eagle-phoenix. His filthy clothes - old jeans and a worn denim shirt glittered like cloth of gold. And on his head was Henry's Norman crown - honi soit qui ... And I lunged.

But he vanished and only the China Sea girl filled my vision, her wide still eyes and her teasing smile and a finger tip pressed to her lips, murmuring 'Nothing, nothing, nothing I felt as if I were falling down a sheer spiralling tunnel for ever.

When I finally got back to England my doctor told me that my liver was still very distended and that he would have clapped me straight into hospital for two months. However at St. Andrew's the herbal teas they dosed me with cured my hepatitis in a week. At least they had me on my feet, though for a few days I was still a bit groggy.

Of the immediate days after the Surijong Cave I can remember nothing at all. Jonny says we were both unconscious when he found us next morning. He insists we were both lying on the 'Dance Hall' floor and that a rescue party was organised to carry us back to Segada. Jonny has too friendly a smile ever to disbelieve him and who am I to deny it when I don't remember anything.

I didn't mention my suspicions of the guns again but one thing I never want to find out for sure is who was in that coffin. Unless, of course, I imagined that too. Was Joe gagged to stop him talking or because ... but that's what I don't want to know. So I just hope he's back in Manila where he wants to be, with a parish of wealthy Chinese to look after, and not flying high above the caves of Segada.

Willis, I am pleased to say, recovered well and to my surprise bore no hard feelings, either towards me for my deplorable conduct in the cave, or more significantly towards Rhodes.

'He always said I had a thick skull/ he laughed. 'I suppose I have or I'd have probably been tempted to team up with him years ago, instead of playing policeman/

So Watchdog Willis is still patrolling some remote corner of the globe\*

As for Rhodes\* Well he's probably masterminding another National People's Army in Africa or Central America, with or without the approval of Her Majesty's Government\*

But I often wonder what became of Boyet's girl\* At first the wish to have brought her back with me was very strong, but as time passed I had to admit reluctantly that it was probably for the best, the way things turned out\* I'm not sure how she would have fitted into suburban Croydon\* I can imagine her at staff-room parties slitting the throats and emasculating the imaginations of my colleagues with a sexy fingertip.

My China Sea Girl, as I like to think of her, during these recent frosty autumn evenings, when my mind strays from marking exercise books and I imagine going back to find her. West from Boracay island heading into the sunset\* That's all the navigation needed to get to Palawan with a following wind.

It seems so far away now\*

And sometimes I find myself worrying about the silliest of things - for instance whether Junior needs a new inner tube for his bicycle\*

And there is one poem in the text books that I avoid like the plague.

„\*A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.

Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song, to such a deep delight t'would win  
me ...

# Epilogue

A few days ago I received a letter from Yemen. I knew before I opened it that it was from Willis. There was no one else I could think of who would be writing to me from Southern Arabia.

Inside the envelope was a postcard of Sana'a, the mountain capital, and some sheets torn from an exercise book covered with Willis's familiar, cramped writing.

The letter was lying in my pigeon-hole at school and had to wait until first break before I could read it all. Frequently during the first two lessons I slipped the postcard out onto my desk and admired the rather quaint view; a muddled fleet of ancient houses sparred with stubby minarets, on the lower slopes of a solitary mountain. On the first page of the letter Willis had scribbled:

It's an Arabian Nights fairy tale city, as high up as Tibet on a windy plateau. A wild, beautiful dusty place - the sort of city Marco Polo would have come upon in his wanderings. The many-storied houses are like those you build with playing cards. The walls are all "tattooed" in white plaster designs, and the arched windows fretworked with coloured glass, so that by night from the labyrinth of unlit alleys stitching the whole place together, kaleidoscopes blaze in the darkness like opal gemstones.

It's an ancient place. In dark cellars camels still

relentlessly turn grinding mills, while by night a cast of colourful slaves - the akdams, come out of their cardboard shanty huts on the perimeter to clean up the mud alleys virtually by hand. Prayer calls chant from mosque to mosque in competing harmonies, drowning out the haggling souks by day and spreading like a gigantic wail over the silent city at night.

A dry river bed acts as the main highway for those Yemenis with jeeps, but Yemen must be the only country where donkeys wear car number plates tagged to their tails. The women are entirely veiled in black so you don't know if they're coming or going and men and boys all wear long skirts, Tutas', and rhino-horned jambir daggers at the waist. Everyone outside the city carries a rifle. Inside only the soldiers are supposed to, but as you can join the army at 12 they present a curious and rather scary picture. Everyone, and I mean everyone, chews qat all afternoon; qat are tender green shrub leaves that have a soothing anaesthetic effect if you ruminate long enough, or if your jaw doesn't drop off first! Even the civil war stops each day for qat chewing. The Romans called Yemen Arabia Felix, Happy Arabia/ No doubt they also chewed. Even the one reale banknote proudly displays the national shrub.

Politically the place is like the Mad Hatter's tea party. The Americans in the guise of Lockheed run the Air Force and the Russians quite openly manage the army. So that sometimes American pilots are ferrying Russian military advisers about. And if that isn't crazy enough - the Russians are helping the



Government stamp out communist insurgents! Even the Brits have about thirteen cultural attaches at their embassy — and as you can imagine there

\* Really Fruitful Arabia - although Willis was correct in assuming Felix means 'happiness' in Latin.

isn't exactly an awful lot of culture going on. Although I was asked to read Shakespeare's Henry V's speech before the Battle of Agincourt at the ex-pats' drama meeting. Common ground for everyone in the only shop selling foreign foodstuffs, owned by one-eyed Ahmed. Here World War III is fought out by burly housewives over the deep-freeze tub - New Zealand lamb and Danish sausage being the targets of interest.

The civil war has been grumbling on for years, mostly in the south, but the country is completely feudal and the tribes have a very easy-going attitude towards allegiance, I don't have to tell you why I'm here.

I borrowed a small red Diahatsu jeep and drove out to meet Rhodes at Marib?

\*

At breaktime I spread the remaining pages of Willis's letter on my desk and smoothed them out.

I no longer felt in such a desperate hurry to find out what he had to say. It was already obvious that Willis had lost his sense of urgency.

I poked my head into the corridor and asked a boy to bring me a cup of coffee from the staff room, and waited until it arrived before I went on reading.

'Three hours drive north east of Sana'a the high plateau ends at the edge of a gigantic cliff spreading north and south in immense ramparts of red rock, and seven thousand feet below lies the desert. From this vantage point, shrouded in a haze of grey and gold it has the appearance of a vast static ocean whose waves of sand-dunes, hundreds of feet high, flow like some relentless barbarian horde across the blistered surface of another planet.

Sometimes the sand gives way to wastes of black cinders, as if once upon a time the sun had come a bit too close, or as if this whole other world had been scorched by some terrible nuclear catastrophe long ago, from which it would never recover.

A trackless waste over a thousand miles across, they call the Empty Quarter, and it's easy to understand why. Look at any map. Even the tentative line of dots, marking the border gives up. Only the constantly warring desert tribes dwell in this unbelievable wilderness. The only living things are thorn scrub, tamarisk, camels and desert nomads. Nothing else appears to exist.

It wasn't always like this, so they say. Long ago, about the time the Wooden Horse was being wheeled in through the gates of Troy, the Queen of Sheba reigned from her desert capital at Marib. Except it wasn't desert then. A giant stone dam trapped the flash floods and irrigated a whole green

empire - the Sheban Empire from which the Queen set out north on her journey to King Solomon, her camels laden with jewels and spices and forty tons of gold!

The dam was destroyed fifteen hundred years ago. About the time Mohammed was born. The Koran says God destroyed it because the people did not pray! Now only the towering stone buttresses and the empty sluice gates still remain. The dry hot wind sighs over the shifting sands. I'm sure if you were here you would want to quote 'Ozymandias'. I did, out loud.

And it makes you think what might still be out there, somewhere.

But to go back a bit. At the top of the Al Fardah pass, before you drop down to the desert, is the last Government check point and here is where 'Authority' virtually ends. No friendly policemen to help you now chum! Most people, foolhardy enough to drive on, unscrew their Sana'a car plates as a gesture to the local sheiks in recognition of their suzerainty, I suppose. Also you make sure you have plenty of

Maria Theresa silver dollars, minted in the souks of Sana'a, in your pockets. The canny tribesmen of the desert place no trust in paper money.

After removing your number plates and dropping over the pass, provided you are lucky enough to avoid being held up and robbed on the way, it's another three hours hot and dusty drive to Marib.

You can see what's left of it from a long way off - a scarecrow of gutted ruins perched on a huge mound; the skeleton of a city, buried and built upon, collapsing, cracked open, hanging at unsteady angles. Here the road - what there is of it - ends. And there on the edge of nowhere, waiting to take me back, I met him.

Dressed in a long travel-stained futa, with a glittering jambir dagger tucked in the waist band and a grey kefiyeh wrapped round his head, he stood a little apart from the ragged group of armed brigands on either side. As ugly a bunch of bad beauties as you could ever wish to see - missing eyes, teeth and fingers, their faces pocked and scarred, unshaven and filthy. Every one of them toting daggers, bandoliers bulging with ammunition, and every sort of rifle, including old Lee-Enfields and spanking new Ak-47s, all beautifully polished. His Dahm raiders he called them, jabbering to them fluently in the sort of impossible Arabic they speak here. Beside him was a kid - like a page, in an immaculate white futa - holding the falcon.

"Salaam alaicum," peace be on you,' he said with a formal smile.

"Alaicum salaam," I replied. "Sabah kir," (morning of light).

He seemed pleased I knew some arabic. "Sabah nur, sabah ward," he said. (Morning of roses, morning of goodness).

"Shwia, shwia!" I cried (slowly, slowly). And his bunch of bad beauties guffawed good humouredly and shot off their rifles into the air.

The token Government outpost at Marib was a tent stretched between two spindly date palms. Whoever was there didn't show themselves.

That night there was a wedding feast and we were ceremoniously invited to attend. First there was endless dagger dancing with the drummers beating time faster and faster and the pipers, with tight bands round their bulging cheeks, waving their heads furiously from side to side as they spilled out the wild tunes. After reaching a crescendo the dance broke off in mid flight and the groom - all in white, with a headband of green leaves round his kefiych - led the way into the feast. The sheik had killed ten sheep and five cows for the feast, so we were not hungry. We squatted on cushions in a great long room, dipping our fingers (right hand only) into an amazing assortment of platters heaped with meat, buttermilk, mutton, salads, houlba, saffron rice and 'bint al saha' - literally sweet girl - a great gateau of pastry flakes dripping honey. Afterwards we moved to another house in a long procession, drums and pipes and tambourines leading the way. Here we sipped quizr - a drink made from the husks of coffee beans, and settled down to chew our way through a mountain of tender qat leaves, into a state of quiet euphoria.

Outside under the stars women lined the rooftops, all in black like fluttering birds, raising and lowering their arms and ululating in a strange trilling chorus with their tongues, the sound rising and falling into and out of harmony with the men chanting below.

“AAALLLAAAHHH” called from the minaret, a boy’s voice like a nightingale amidst the outcast ruins and the black dunes. “AlllaaalllaaahhhHHH. Lord of Creation, the Com-passionate, the Merciful.” A magical sound threading its beautiful hypnotic secret through the night’s web.

“Salat!” cried the ushers and the whole assembly, hundreds in all, bowed low on the ground and chanted the Shahadah - the Muslim creed, and all the ninety-nine names of God.

It was easy to feel spellbound out there in the desert under that luminous starry sky.

I suppose all this sounds pretty flowery, but I can’t begin to convey how impressed I was. I felt as if - as if I was on the verge of a great discovery.

Next morning, we all moved out to the dam - or the ruins of it. And standing together on the high towers of dressed stone, as we gazed out over the shifting sands, he chanted from the Koran - he knew it by heart.

“For the natives of Sheba there was a garden on their left and a garden on their right. We said to them; ‘Eat of what the Lord has given you and render thanks. Pleasant is your land and forgiving is your God’.”

The sparse wind tugged at his flowing head-dress, murmuring uneasily as it swept over the desert contours, whispering through the empty sluice gates of the high dam. His ragged tribesmen stirred uneasily and the falcon shuffled its wings.

Where had it all vanished, this Eden ?

He stared out into the gigantic emptiness. It was his page who spoke for him. "The people did not pray. Allah destroyed it."

The wind suddenly rose making a strange booming noise among the empty terrain. It wasn't difficult to imagine the voice of God speaking:

"But they gave no heed so we unloosed upon them  
The waters of the dams. And we replaced their gardens  
With Tamarisk shrubs and nettles. Thus we punished them  
For their ingratitude. We punish none save the ungrateful."

The roar of the crashing stones and falling water faded to stillness. Only the hot sparse wind sighed over the desert brooding on its loss. Standing there on the edge of the parapet, in his fluttering robes, I saw instead the Duke of Verona staring over the bodies of Romeo and Juliet and crying out loud for his bereaving city, "All are punish-ed. All are punish-ed." From beauty to desolation like a quirk of untimely fate.

They were about to set out into the Empty Quarter.

We sat in the sand brewing tea, strong and black, laced with cardamom and cloves, and with a sprinkling of nutmeg.

Afterwards he came and put his arm on my shoulder. "Galeel ahch," (little brother), he mocked, cuffing my cheek. We could have been four-year olds playing marbles.

We set out east in the late afternoon. I am giving this letter to a man of our tribe we passed heading back for Marib.'

\*

The letter was unsigned and unfinished.

As the weeks passed and I heard no further news from Willis I was not unnaturally disappointed that both of them appeared to have sunk without trace in that great Arabian sea of shifting sands. Yet somehow I doubted it. Instinct told me that Rhodes was simply not the man to vanish in that way. Weeks became months with still no word to break the silence and I started scanning the newspapers for any clue as to what had become of them. I also read up everything I could find about the region that was once the depth of the Queen of Sheba's empire. This did not amount to much. I studied Thesinger's Arabian Sands from cover to cover and the records of the less than half a dozen other explorers who had ventured into that vast arid wasteland and survived.

1

The more I read the more convinced I became that the enigma of Rhodes would not fade away into thin air. For all Willis had said I was not convinced that Rhodes had gone into this desert heartland with a band of brigands simply to spend his years as a hermit. It did not ring true. I had the feeling that he and Willis, hunter and hunted, had joined forces and would come out of that Empty Quarter as surely as the Phoenix would rise from its ashes. Whatever motive had drawn Rhodes there, I knew he would emerge triumphant. I suspect that from the time Moses came back with the Ten



Commandments few returned from the desert empty handed.

I even began to doubt Willis. Perhaps his letter had been a 'red herring' to mislead me. If so then why had he troubled to write at all. No! If Rhodes had persuaded Willis to accompany him on that desperate journey there had to be a purpose. Knowing Rhodes, I also knew that, having gone in, he intended coming out again. Perhaps it was not for nothing that Willis had met him at Marib - the old capital of the Queen of Sheba, the power of whose empire defied the centuries. Rhodes knew something! Something perhaps that no one else had discovered. A clue picked up on one of his strange journeys round the world. I could not deny that like the crippled boy in the Pied Piper, I felt hurt that I had been left behind.

I didn't have to wait much longer for the answer. Rhodes must have known me better than I realised. He even knew which newspaper I read. When it came, the message stood out as clearly as an emergency flare bursting over the sea. Half way down the personal column it lay, nicely tucked between the "Thank You's' to St Jude. "SEGADA HEROES REUNION" it read, followed by a telephone number.

I hesitated quite a while before dialling that number. It wasn't so much the voice at the other end I was scared of, as I assumed there would only be a veiled message. What really scared me was that whatever the voice said I knew I would drop everything and go. Like the lemmings I was doomed by fate, a willing victim.

I dialled the number and heard it ringing, hoping against hope that no one would answer. I could then let the opportunity pass. Suddenly the line clicked as someone somewhere picked up the telephone.

So you see it didn't finish with Rhodes and Willis setting out from Marib. The story that began in the South China seas ended, if it ended at all, beneath a Maya temple deep in the jungles of Guatemala, it ended the night the Contra rebels shelled San Juan del Sur in one of their "Piranha\*" raids and the Sandinistas were caught in a trap, or when the Indian canoes attacked our raft as we drifted helplessly down the flooded Yacuma river. But that story lies beyond the scope of these pages.