

THE FARANG

He grew up in an English seacoast village, filled with visions of honour and duty, which when put to the test in Africa, he fails to live up to. Publicity magnifies and maligns the issue.

Unable to return home, he moves on, but each fresh start seems thwarted by ghosts from the past.

A shipping disaster seals his fate in the Philippines.

He escapes to Thailand, seeking solace in the streets of Patpong and Pattaya. A solace which turns to despair as he feels a trap snapping shut his senses and his free will. He seeks refuge down the coast; a native hut; a pretty Chinese girl; an old boat; but Toy, his Pattaya girl, finds out and upsets his plans.

His dreams shattered, he creates a spiteful revenge and flees in his boat, ending up on a mountainous island off Cambodia. Here his simple fisherman's life is rudely interrupted by the unexpected appearance of a former friend turned enemy.

Fuelled by the arrival of Toy, his sense of reason turns to blind rage and he sets out on a trail of destruction with inevitable tragic results.

The characters and incidents in this novel are all imaginary, and do not refer to any actual people or events.

"LOOKING EASTWARD TO THE SEA..."

I may have left it behind but I will go back. For something or someone. Just as it drew him now it pulls me. A rising flood tugging at my timbers. I have only to wait the final turn of the tide. I came back as I had promised, only empty handed. I had set out you see with the intention of bringing him home. I really thought that if anyone, I could do it. Persuade him. Not any more. Except that now as I walk with my mother on the North Downs in the lingering June evenings, my mind's eye drifts eastward far beyond the low white line of the French cliffs across the channel, to where the dull red eye of day drops behind the Burmese mountains, or over the jungled islands of the South China Sea.

There is a bench dedicated to the Pa, where the cliff tops drop away beyond the Patrol Memorial. Here he used to stand, staring out, foul days or fine, when the Straits shimmered in the sun, or bleak breakers thundered over the Goodwin Sands. What was he watching for? The Prodigal's return? These long midsummer days I come here most evenings. There is an opaque stillness to the sea that even boats passing up and down the Channel fail to disturb. The 'Piccadilly of the Seas', as the retired Merchant Marine Captains named these busy straits. To a child the phrase felt familiar, like the Pa's 'Ladies of the Night', which to us innocently conjured images of Florence Nightingale, or his 'Ships that pass in the night', a sentence reserved for equally casual acquaintances. But in those days of boyhood when the lighthouse beam from South Foreland sentinelled dreams and the Goodwin lightship sirened the winter mists, the only ships we watched pass with interest were the lit-up P and O liners heading for the far-flung outposts of Empire. Nowadays both the searchlight and the siren are gone. Electronic Gods have come to shipping's aid. Only the gulls still mew their mocking seafarers' lament.

Yes, of course, like any messenger, from Mercury onwards, I would have wished to have brought good news. Instead, stepping slowly with my mother on a well-trodden path along the edge of the popped cornfield we talk of past times. But somehow my world has tilted further eastward than our White Cliffs of Dover. I cannot explain it, but like it or not some part of me seems to have dropped anchor out there now.

Many times when night has all but settled, I am here alone, watching nothing, waiting for no one. I wonder if it was a mistake coming back at all. I thought I ought to tell them. I thought they had a right to know. Surely I owed him that at least. So why go easy with the truth? For whose sake, his or theirs? Or how many times do you shatter dreams already long broken? And anyway who am I to judge? Perhaps truth like justice is more open to interpretation than the rule book would have us suppose. Or is that heresy? I know it would take a wiser jury than I to declare a verdict in this case.

No, the mistake is memory. Not the recent past. Oh, that is still far too busy stalking jungle outposts for honour, or enemies, real or otherwise. It is the far off past that comes crowding back when least expected. Schoolboys swapping stories, and then that bewitching trap of nostalgia, sounds and scents magic up in any off-guard moment, chasing thoughts back along paths assumed abandoned and forgotten ages ago. Across the Channel the last glimmer of daylight waits as if reluctant to be extinguished, unlike those eastern sunsets when the day fades, thickens and is suddenly lost in darkness, taking mountains and ocean with it. Here below these plunging chalk headlands, the cold North Sea recedes into the hazy far-off frontiers of the night, while inland only the dull red glow remains. The Downs floats in dusk, copse and rise stitched together, secrets holy and unholy hidden. I wish mine could lie down as easy. A cool breeze stirs like conscience. Edward once declared "Land remembers." Does it also listen and watch? Where I am standing at the edge of my past, a few hundred yards beyond the Patrol Memorial, the Pa used to recite his favourite psalms and read aloud the Ten Commandments.

Here too, I stood aghast that winter's day, unwilling accomplice to breaking the most mortal one of them all. Thank goodness the Sea buries our secrets uncaring and quick.

Mother used to say we played marbles in the gutter as three-year-olds. How our parents met was more circumstantial. My father's active soldiering ceased after Dunkirk when he was posted to supervise the coastal defences north of Dover. Edward's Pa had been chaplain with Montgomery's Desert rats only to be blown half to bits at the Salerno landings. Stuck back together after a fashion in a military hospital at Bari he was shipped home to resume his duties in the same 'Hell Fire Corner' as my father; ready to ring the church bells at the first threat of invasion and march his Home Guard up onto the cliff tops with little more than pitchforks to repel the invader. Up here too, hidden behind great concrete bunkers the giant guns, christened Winnie and Pooh and Clem, daily blasted the German fortifications across the Channel. At evening when the westering sun whitens the line of French cliffs north and south of Gap Gris Nez a mocking peace descends. How many opposing armies had stared across those narrow straits. Probably more than one of my ancestors included, for the army was as much a part of my family's tradition as the Church was Edward's. While I boasted an adjutant to Sir John Moore at Corruna, Edward claimed a mysterious connection to Cardinal Wolsey.

The list of incumbents in the draughty Norman porch of St. Margarets of Antioch went back far further, to one Thomas in the eleventh century. In many respects the parish had survived those centuries unchanged. Farms and Freedowns were those listed in the Domesday Book. The pattern of byways and beechwoods fretworking the tumbling folds of downland would have been recognisable to a Roman Legionary, and the names painstakingly penned on the yellowing parchment of crumbling parish registers; the married; the baptised; the buried; bore secrets of

earlier migrations, Norman in origin, anglicised by centuries and now francophobic by second nature. Below the gun emplacements deep within the South Foreland valley, ruined ramparts stored in their stone, memories of other would-be invaders. From these cliffs where beacons blazed to warn the Armada's approach, in earlier ages hermit monks lit lanterns in high caves to guard sailors against the inhospitable welcome from these unforgiving headlands. Nowadays geese still gabbled on the vicarage glebe, farmers in the Hope Inn grumbled over paying their tithes, a cripple in a wheelchair, cobbled boots on the corner of Reach Road. Mr. Baker kept a grocer's emporium inside a tiny flint-walled shop-front in Chappel Lane. Identical frail spinster sisters, the Misses Kenway, sold every item of hardware imaginable from a stock predating the First World War. PC Lubbock grew prize marrows for the Horticultural Show. Bert Fagg used his carrier's van to transport the local cliff-rescue team, who emerged tumbling out of his tied-together back doors along with a crate of ale from the Red Lion and frayed rope ladders. Here in between bombardments, and supervised by old Mrs. Melhuish, the doctor's mother, who escaped from the Japanese in Mongolia waving a Union Jack in one hand and a revolver in the other, our mothers ran the Red Cross by bicycle, stirrup pumps that the Pa used on his roses hanging from their handlebars ready to extinguish any unexploded incendiaries.

While my father commanded the home front the Pa masterminded the local Home Guard from the ARP HQ in the conservatory of the Cliffe Hotel, where Bubbles the barmaid captured a German spy single-handed. The walls were covered with maps and the maps with clusters of coloured pins; planes downed, bombs dropped. Somehow during this mayhem Edward and I contrived to be born within a few days of each other. Our curiosity for how it happened was not helped by an aunt who declared we were baked from dough, or the Pa who when stopping to watch the mating frogs eagerly clasping each other's backs in the village pond, remarked to the assembled out-from-school catapult clutching gangs, "Isn't nature wonderful. They're teaching each other to swim." Our mothers, meanwhile, gossiped over their sewing machines, reversing collars and cuffs and turning sheet sides to middle while on the wireless Mrs. Dale's Diary resumed its daily suburban intrigues.

An early object of interest to Edward and me, was 'Sweeny Todd', the Pa's villainous cut-throat razor. Edward regularly stood in attendance with cotton wool in case a letter from the Bishop came in the post. One morning it was our school reports with dismal comments concerning Edward's literacy, "Or apparent absence of it, dear boy," remarked the Pa, stretching his chin. "Have you thought what you want to be when you grow up?"

"A pilot. In Africa," Edward answered without hesitation.

"Ah, but you'll have to read and write to do that," said the Pa who had been there.

"Why?" demanded Edward. "I don't need to, to ride my bike, why should I to fly a plane?" The Pa whose professional concern was more in the safe flight of souls than bodies, was nevertheless so startled he came down to breakfast with enough dabs of cotton wool to pass for Santa Claus at the Christmas Bazaar. Edward alas was no scholar. His Latin was minimal. Our first morning register at Boarding School he was puzzled when everyone called out what sounded like "Absent." Confidently assuming that this was a quirky tradition to shout absent when one was present, he piped out just that when his turn came and spent the first break copying out two hundred lines of 'Ad sum, not insolence'. Just how far further back can one navigate along those labyrinthine threads of memory before myths take over? Were we taken outside the garden air-raid shelter that wartime night to watch the searchlights hunting the clouds for German bombers droning overhead or was I just dreaming what I was told?

And that the Pa was too long to fit all of himself into the shelter so his feet stuck outside and Edward's mother constantly worried lest they were blown off by a bomb. Certainly that first snowman was no dream. Proud and pygmy high on the vicarage lawn, coke knobs for eyes and nose, orange peel for mouth, one of Pa's old college rowing scarves knotted around his neck. Nor am I dreaming - I rather wish I was - the matches we played fire with in the dry windblown March grass of the South Foreland valley. And that first guilty knowledge of public wrong-doing as PC Lubbock cycled up Bay Hill to the scene like PC Blower on Children's Hour, with the whole Toytown Fire Brigade following. We only heard the bell jangling, having fled to the obscure safety of the hen house leaving our respective pa's to hand out mitigating rounds of beer at the Red Lion. More unwelcome publicity to our private world came after we exacted revenge for all the injustice heaped upon us by stoning the orchard beehive. The bees' revenge was to swarm straight through the village to the bowling green leaving a trail of havoc behind them, and sending the octogenarian bowlers scuttling for cover. Co-conspirators certainly, but from which of us did the ideas of dare-devilry originate and who had to keep old Mr. Madge talking while the other pocketed the Mars bars? I remember how Edward invariably wore brown corduroy dungarees.

I tried to picture him wearing them, when I finally caught up with him again after longer than either of us cared to count. It is hard to believe that was little over a year ago. The monsoon had started and ragged clouds shedding wispy tails of rain hung low over the Burmese mountains. Once we decided I should go out and find him, it wasn't so hard, just slow. I was to deliver the Pa's message in person before it was too late. Letters he had ignored, perhaps he never opened them, seeing in the stamp and the familiar postmark a choice he would rather not have to make. Seeing too much, interpreting what was never intended. That had always been his mistake, just as he could never take criticism other than as a personal affront. Now we

were sitting in hard homemade bamboo chairs, perched unsteadily on the rickety upstairs verandah of the thatched stilt hut he had built for himself and Dao, in a low-lying glade close to where the river snaked in a convoluted twist under the towering jungle headland of Mong Lai. Earlier rains had washed away the thunder and now the late afternoon sun glared hotly below the thatched eaves, blinding the river, dissolving and scattering the sampans of the shellfish gatherers. Even the black lines of mussel stakes seemed to sway, patrolling a disconnected surface, and along the mud banks the mangroves raised their roots in defiance like shoals of hostile crabs. Isolated in the middle distance between the river and the green wall of palms, backed by logged-out hills, stood a white bell shaped Buddhist stupa, appealing not so much for prayer as continuity. Did it approve, I wondered, of this alien interloper spoiling the scene with such a reproachable past? Edward sat leaning forwards, fingers drumming the chair frame, staring moodily ahead. Suddenly he glanced up as if he had heard or seen a glimpse of something expected. I looked where he was watching but what we both saw was probably very different. It always had been. Seawards, shrimp farms had been excavated out of brackish swamp and then abandoned. Bare mud; stagnant pools; dead stumps. To one side a cluster of thatch roofs among the dark green mango trees and a sooty iron chimney stack that I took to belong to a fish factory poking up, its plume of fishy smoke pointing across Prachuap Bay to the jagged island outposts guarding the ocean beyond. The sound of the approaching motorbike faded. Edward's alertness snapped. He turned to me grudgingly. "Where do we begin then?"

"Anywhere."

"Anywhere," he repeated surprised. Gratified perhaps that I had not insisted on Africa. "It'd be easier with a map," he suggested, more helpful now. "To show you, I mean. To explain." But his voice lacked conviction. Maps might have been an excuse once, but he had run out of excuses and maps and all they implied long ago. He forced his thumb uncertainly along the armrest, crushing countries, roads, mountains, rivers, memories until the edge of his chewed nail stopped at a splinter and tapped it as if he was sending a message in morse. Take this secret, this ideal, creed, nonsense, this letter in invisible ink, this heroic deed, this guilt, that failure. Carry it in your head. Never write it down. Beware who you entrust it to, this fragment of light, this gleam in the eye, this love, that loss. Store it among the other illusions. Follow them, pilgrim. The torchlight procession climbing up to the summit of Adams Peak, casting our candle floats onto the moonlit Sea of Siam at Loi Krathong, stumping across the frosty fields to midnight mass at Westcliffe. Off to church, off to scouts, off to school, off to . . . Africa. Ah, yes. He twisted his head to peer up into the slowly turning blades of the propeller fan, as if like the lazy spiralling currents of air, the other life was only a breath away. Whose breath? Both of us waiting saying nothing. Against the evening afterglow the mountains inland stood up sharp and clear. Twittering birds of twilight, shrilled unseen hidden among the dim bowered branches of the mango trees. Out at sea the moon poised above the black bay, posing for a moment

between silhouetted palm fronds. What was he waiting for here? What was he hoping for? I considered myself long, inured against surprises, and yet for him despite all that had happened, hope was never far away. That difference between indifference. The rickety verandah, the moon over the palm-spangled bay, the eyes watchful in the dusk, waiting for something to come, for something that should never come again unless you are very lucky, which he certainly never was. Oriental music, faint and fragmentary drifted from the village bruising the stillness, the wind a shiver, a ghekkō poised on the verandah rail, frogs croaking in the swamp. What should you expect if you build life with playing cards, to tumble and be rebuilt? Leaving but a legacy of memories, the pale wraiths of our fellow travellers, that wind-up gramophone where they live on within the sound box singing the same old never-forgotten songs. The Pa's favourite, Noel Coward's 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen', and Edward's crackling 'Zonophone' record, from which came the haunting strains of Peter Dawson singing 'On the Road to Mandalay'. Going back all those years were we different people or was it that we just didn't know what would become of us?

Edward's father had been called the Pa for as long as I could remember. Despite his limp he could shin down the church tower ladder with amazing speed. In the outhouse we used as a den his black fire-service mackintosh, legacy of ARP days, hung in silent tribute from a rusty nail, summer tacky, winter stiff, barometer of the seasons' change. Summer and winter our mothers bicycled us balaclava'd, grey mufflers, woolly gloves secured by elastic, tight blazers, knobbly knees sticking out through wicker seat baskets, up Bay Hill to Mrs. Baraclough's Emporium for infants. Here Edward spent most of each day facing the corner, a blue dunce's cap on his head. His crime, among others, a daily attempt to crawl inside the dolls' house, with foreseeable results. "It is not the eye of the needle, dear boy," hurrumphed the Pa posting yet another apology. After school, matches apart, we discovered how to flick clay pellets from springy sycamore shoots, and hidden behind hedges, we practised on parishioners passing. PC Lubbock pursued us on his bicycle as ineffectively as he gave chase to speeding motorists. It was left to the churchwardens to take us in hand. Air Vice Marshal Banting, 'George', in his seventies, baggy short-trousered, climbing the church tower every day to wind the clock, took us prawning below the cliffs, wading waist deep, our drop nets baited with limpet, crab or old kipper. Demonstrating dowsing with a hazel switch, and sharing with us confidentially, the secrets of a Sopwith Pup. "Best aircraft ever built." He had fought the Red Baron in one during First World War dogfights and got shot down in flames in the process. We shared him with Brigadier Collins, the other churchwarden, who once led us on a West African safari. The three of us crawling on all fours across the sitting room carpet, following the River Niger up to Lake Chad - a patch of white spaniel hair. Here we shot guinea fowl until hearing the news of the death of King George V over the two-way radio. We force marched north with our native porters, to Kano, situated between the foot pedals of the piano, where we all surfaced hot and dusty for a much needed glass of ginger beer.

Edward always had such a passion for maps. Old maps with blank spaces, etched out with hachured hills. South America, Asia, Africa. He would study them for hours, a look of radiance on his face as if he were out there, sharing earlier explorations, paddling up rivers, cutting across swamps, marching over deserts. I noticed that his brother emerged from listening to a radio concert with much the same expression, and the Pa when he was reading a favourite psalm.

I have just returned from Anderson's Coffee Shop, Pattaya's consular rep. (retired), titular and unpaid only. Anderson, once Consul in Amman, Oman, and elsewhere Eastern, has been filing his report. Edward it seems was on a list and would have been deported had he stayed.

"Probably. Most probably."

"Why?" I ask. But if he knows, and Anderson knows everything, he doesn't say. A lifelong career of discretion is not casually abandoned. Credentials are everything. "And Don, is he on this list?"

"Who?" inquires Anderson, innocence outward as he rearranges the table menus. It is 10 am and the usual crowd has yet to arrive for gossip, poached eggs, tuna fish sandwiches and other assorted elixir. But no chips.

"Captain Donald Fribecker. An American."

Anderson smiles "Wrong department. Different species, old boy." Captain 'trust me' Don. Surely he if anyone deserved to be on the list. Except of course, he was supposed to have died a year before in the

Philippines. Capsized, sunk without trace. Gone down with his ship, or assumed to after the 'Cruz-del-Sur' sank in flames in the Batangas Strait while Edward was on watch. Surprising who bobbed up to the surface after. Perhaps there was still hope. Hope for what? The survival of rogues? No, whatever his faults, Edward was no villain. It wasn't written in his Boy's Own scenario he had composed. Too trusting and too impulsive maybe for anyone's good, his own included. Hacking a way through the vicarage garden rhododendrons with the Pa's rusty African machete, a symbol of the Pa's pre-war service for the Rhodesian Railways Mission. "My dear boy," the Pa advised, straightening up to mop his brow, "These jungles outside. Ah yes, given the tools we can chop a way through them. But the jungles within?" He patted his heart. "Don't try, dear boy, don't try. I wouldn't risk it. Ah," he turned towards the house. "Now here comes your brother on time with the tea. As a student of Greek he is aware of the Apollonian Hymns. 'Man Know Thyself'. Such dangerous folly. Remember Plato's warning, 'If the soul is to know itself it is into a soul that it must look. The stranger and the enemy, we see them in a mirror.'"

I have almost forgotten Edward had a brother. Older by three years. "Born for the church," remarked my mother. "More a man of the church than I, any day," declared the Pa. "He'll be a bishop. Mark my words." Neither Edward nor I knew him well. Studious and well-intentioned, he always wore jacket and tie even when delivering the potato peelings for a neighbour's pig. Our few joint dealings centred around pets' funerals. Pets never somehow seemed to survive. There was the tortoise Edward tried to entice out from hibernation in the gas oven. The Pa claimed that Sunday Roasts never tasted quite the same afterwards. The goldfish we tried to change colour by adding Quick Ink to the bowl. The budgerigar fuelled for flight on a cocktail of communion wine and the Pa's whisky, soaring straight for the study window and crashing with a quickly curtailed "cheep." And pet mice constantly. Weekly, in the holidays sometimes daily, we trooped down the garden path to the cemetery behind the summerhouse. Edward leading the way with a cross hammered onto the garden hoe, Big Brother solemnly, in surplice and cassock clutching the prayer book, myself at the rear, mortal remains jam-jar'd in one hand, the other swinging a censer - an old treacle tin with nail holes and a bit of smouldering sock. We preferred burials. They allowed exhumation later. Steptoe, gravedigger-cum-handyman claimed cremations were cheap. He referred to the local crematorium as the Barham 'Bakehouse'. I suppose it did him out of a fiver. Money he needed for what he mysteriously referred to as the "Gee-Gees." Our private funeral services were thorough. For fish, frogs, anything claiming to be aquatic Edward's brother selected the service for Burial at Sea and we all sang 'Eternal Father strong to save'. Edward piped away with off-key enthusiasm. He even failed to fool Patterson, the half deaf choirmaster. The Pa advised him to open and close his mouth in time with a boy opposite but not utter a note. Sadly one of Patterson's sudden-death rehearsal raids just before pay day put an end to that enterprise.

He next tried taking the register at Sunday school, absences signed on in return for cigarette butts. But Mrs. Patterson caught us selling scribbled out copies of Steptoe's Cockney version of the Lord's Prayer, 'Our Father which art in Hendon, Hammersmith to be thy name, Thy Kingston come, Thy Willsden be done,for ever and ever Crouch End.', sold at threepence a go. We were made to copy out the Te Deum (Edward twice as he misspelled it, Tedium.) He never could spell. One school exam we were told to write an essay on our career. Edward titled his, 'My KOREA'. But, for a degree or two of longitude it proved almost prophetic.

A disenchantment with the church led him to briefly switch allegiances to more lucrative witchcraft, assisting the doctor's wife, who, unrecognisable beneath wig and veil, toured the local fetes under the pseudonym 'Madame

Zara' using her formidable and encyclopedic knowledge of surgery waiting-room gossip to prophesy upon the misdemeanours of the populace with uncanny accuracy. Sessions and seances were conducted within a plastic Woolworth's wigwam that Edward erected and sat

outside collecting the sixpences in two jam jars, his and hers, and barring entry whenever Madame hissed from within, "Don't allow anyone in, dear. I'm having a fag and my veil's down." There were evenings spent in her spacious kitchen at Bay View House, when sufficiently inspired by a whisky and soda or two, she would commune with ancestral spirits. Letters alphabetically arranged in a circle, a shiny tabletop, a clean tumbler, our eager fingertips itching to work as she hailed the spirits of the gone-before across the vast galactic aeons of eternity. Edward begged her to get us King Charles so as to find out how it felt to have your head chopped off . But he was busy so we settled for Sherlock Holmes instead.

Another lady of the parish, Miss Phillips, took the cubs in hand. This Monday evening reincarnation of Akela, the great She-wolf in Baden Powell's ingenious imagination, certainly seemed content to have us prance and prowl around her while she smiled primly, crouching in the circle centre as a dozen eager youngsters growled and dib-dobbed, seeking a peek beneath her regulation skirt.

Hens, runner beans, a few glasses of whisky and prayer rated high among the Pa's personal interests, rather to the neglect of more traditional parish pursuits. He disbanded the Mothers' Union upon arrival. "None of them are mothers and I won't have unions." He sacked the sexton more than once. The first time for not lighting the boiler. It was a winter Sunday, and the church was freezing. The Pa was too angry to take the service. "I am not in love and charity with my neighbour today!" He declared from the sanctuary steps and stormed out. Not that he really needed a church. He usually read the offices of the day taking the dog for a walk on the top of the Cliffs. "One needs space, dear boy, space. God cannot be confined within walls." Sometimes if we were out with him he might unexpectedly get down on his knees, beckoning us to follow and start intoning the Magnificat or the prayer of Humble Access. Brumas the shaggy golden retriever was used to the procedure, but Edward and I felt acutely embarrassed especially if we were near enough a footpath to come under the curious scrutiny of passers-by. The Pa rarely rebuked anyone apart from the Sexton, the Bishop, and his wife - from the safety of the study door. He saved his severest reprimands for his precious hens. "If you don't bloody well lay, I'll wring your bloody necks!" He roared at them from outside the run. No idle threat. Failure was a one way squawk to the kitchen outhouse and a final headless flap across the lawn. Once only they got the better of him. He forgot to clip their wings and they all flew to the garden treetops. He ordered them to come down, he entreated, he begged. Finally, in the gathering dusk, wrapped in his clerical robes, a glass of whisky in hand, he was reduced to kneeling on the ground, pleading abjectly with them to come home. Edward's mother was made of tougher stuff, a pretty woman born overseas in Ceylon where her father was curator of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya. She had met Pa on board ship home, he having switched boats at Aden was on his way back from Africa. They collided during a dance on deck sailing up the Red Sea in the moonlight. Although the passage through the years that followed varied

between serene and squally, during moments of crisis, usually when the Bishop or the truculent parish council came beating or bleating to the vicarage door, the famous old dance floor teamwork swung into action, perfect timing and faultless footwork. While the Pa was out scribbling sermons on backs of envelopes as he strode haltingly across the Downs, Edward's mother studied the obituaries in the Telegraph, occasionally getting them wrong and receiving indignant answers to her letters of condolence. The Pa referred to her as the Vehicle, "We are all God's vehicles, even you," he mocked, launching into a familiar tirade against women's rights. "If there are ever women priests in the Church of England I shall switch to Rome."

"They'd throw you out," she retorted.

"I shall live a life of chastity in a cave. And you will be denied your nuptial blessings forthwith," he shouted down the hall.

"Thank heavens for small mercies!" She called back.

"Close the door of thy mouth to her that lieth on thy bosom," he yelled, slamming the study door behind him, and leaning against it for safety. He winked at us. "Tee hee," he chuckled, "That'll teach her. Book of Micah," flourishing the Bible aloft. Noticing our mystified expressions he advised us to read between the lines. We took him at his word, scanning first Micah and then the Daily Telegraph with a magnifying glass, expecting to discover some secret message etched within the editorial. Edward was disappointed. He collected facts like a jackdaw, hoarding and muddling them. He couldn't recall a line from Byron but he knew Lady Caroline Lamb posted him her pubic hairs as a keepsake after the ignoble lord abandoned her. We confessed our failure to the Pa who seemed momentarily mystified that we had taken him quite so literally. "It is of no consequence," he consoled. "Nothing we do here is of any consequence but faith. Faith. Remember that. One day you will be alone in the desert, in the jungle, in yourself. There are moments when if you don't have faith you may go completely mad."

One school holiday Edward, who must have been twelve, set out on his own to discover the source of the Thames. I offered to go with him but he had to do it alone, like his Boy's Own heroes; Livingstone, Slocum, and Colonel Fawcett. They had porters or a boat while he only had a mail order tent from the Kilburn High Road for thirty shillings that leaked, Army Cadet boots guaranteed to give you blisters, and Ordnance Survey maps he could never read. A week later we got a telephone call, charges reversed. He was out of money and food and could we fetch him? It meant driving halfway across England on a busy Saturday afternoon in high summer. We found him outside a red telephone kiosk at Stow-on-the-Wold clutching a paper bag containing two cracked eggs, his last supplies. He had almost got there, he insisted, only not quite. What had defeated him? Blisters, loneliness, getting lost? All that and something else

never admitted openly. He had run out of inspiration. The dream he had grasped so firmly when he set out had flown away. For the first time he reached the boundaries of his vision only to discover they were not as broad as he had supposed. At Stow-on-the-Wold he had come up against his own limitations and that old enemy, indecision. He could go on into the unknown or he could turn back and face the familiar. Inside the telephone kiosk he had finally baulked the challenge and lifted the receiver.

Edward's grandmother lived in a large rambling house, called Kandy in East Langdon. We cycled over to see her on Sunday afternoons in winter, when sitting by the fireside she would escort us back with her into her memories of Ceylon. On the walls hung huge framed black and white photographs taken by Edward's grandfather; elephants being scrubbed in river shallows; giant lilies on a lake, big enough for a coolie to stand on; Edward's mother as a young girl, clutching a sun parasol sitting on the snaking roots of a great fig tree; behind the wheel of some veteran car, teddy bear perched on the wing mirror for luck; on an elephant howdah fording a river; bejewelled elephants at the Kandy perahara. Listening to his grandmother brought the photos and the past alive. Usually we played 'Sorry', which she always won.

Later when Irene the maid had cleared away the tea-things, she would guide us back half a century and more, so that we heard as she did the tinkle of the nightwatchman's bell making his rounds, smelled the scent of the spice trees, and the river at dawn as the village boys led the water buffalos over the shallows. As vividly as she did, we listened to the drums of the Kandyan dancers from the Temple of the Tooth by the lake silvered in the moonlight. We knew each of the fourteen house-servants by name, even the lowly wasatuti, the Tamil loo cleaner. As schoolboys our natural affection for 'shit-shovellers' was heightened by having to troop out in the autumn drizzle and applaud the royal procession at the State Opening of Parliament. The biggest cheer was always reserved for the man at the back, with a trolley (suitably decorated by a pink towel) and spade, darting left and right, picking up steaming heaps the household cavalry and his betters had left behind. Granny never quite understood our fascination with the details of colonial plumbing. She preferred to take us around the gardens, along the Royal Palm Avenue and across the Great Lawn where princes and potentates had left legacies of planted trees that grew and grew long after they were gone. Turning onto Riverside Drive now, the giant bamboo towering in clumps above the banks of the Mahawelliganga. The name somehow struck an evocative chord, and Edward who rarely read beyond a first line always cherished the opening words of his Grandfather's 1913 Guide to the Gardens, It lay in the curve of the Mahawelliganga, the great sandy river.'

It's 7.50 am in Pattaya. Another noisy morning, the army of hammerers and pile-drivers have already started work. More grandiose hotels going up only to stay three-quarters empty. Unwanted arcades unrented. The streets are unearthed for a sewerage system that will never

get completed. The reservoir remains below the pumping level despite heavy rains. The bay is too polluted for anyone to swim except the Japanese tourists who are marched down in droves with yellow towels and straw hats and then marched back again. It's pretty too, in its unorganised, totally unplanned way. A 20th century wood and cement village of jumbled designs, terraces, bar fronts, stairways, alleys, rooftops. Motorcycles crescendo the maze of potholed mud streets. Night food vendors wheel their trolleys laboriously home to cardboard shacks in the wastelands beyond Soi 17. The day vendors move in to take up their posts. A solitary farang props up a street bar counter, bleary-eyed, oblivious day has caught up with him. The bar girls lounge in silent disinterest, too weary or bored to care. Only the music blares out with vigour undiminished. The children troop smartly to school. The newspapers have arrived. Now 8 am. The National Anthem strikes up over the street loudspeaker. The traffic lights all switch red. Traffic halts. The sunglassed police strut up importantly. The passers-by fidget. The TV stations all open with prayers, kneeling soldiers bowing to buddhist monks. Today it's scouts day, boys, look sua, tiger pups, immaculate in pressed khaki shirts and shorts, yellow neckerchiefs, ghurkha-style hats, heads shaven sides and back. Honour to God and King mystically interwoven. Here, as in England. Honour. Just an empty word or more?

At school Edward fought a duel for it and lost. He was not a fencer but fortunately neither was his adversary. They stubbornly refused padding, visors or tips. Anyone with the slightest experience would have run them through in a moment. Edward's only practice was grabbing a foil from someone's locker and leaping about the junior common room pretending he was the three musketeers. This was very different. Big Ben tolling midnight, the full moon angled over Little Cloisters, shadows striped through the railings. An awesome solemnity. Seconds conferred in hasty whispers. "Will your man withdraw?" "No, he will not." Yet what it was about, does anyone remember? Would the sacrifice have been worthwhile? How many defaced military memorials to forgotten prestige dot the mountain passes of Asia and Africa? Defence of honour or pride. Edward lost but with no worse outward wound than a scratch above his elbow. So much decided on blood. At university he had a slogging match with a big brute whose Welsh mockery met a heated response. They battled it out on the college lawn and ended up in Casualty at Bangor Hospital. It wasn't his nature to run, even when it was expedient, even as kids when we were outnumbered. Was it pride or stupidity? But I cannot think of him as a coward, no matter what was said about him after Africa. What I was never convinced of was the direction of his loyalty. The Pa held a dim view of the church's authority and paid it scant respect. Edward never even managed to learn the Scout Code and progress beyond Tenderfoot. Yet they both lived in awe of something I completely failed to recognise. "My dear boy," the Pa tried to explain, "What we see here is but a pale reflection of the greater glory yet to come. But never neglect one's duty." Quite where that duty lay or to whom, he did not make clear. Perhaps he was uncertain himself, for he once observed, "Faith is rather a selfish duty, is it

not?" Edward had an additional dilemma, in a way he was already dispossessed of duty. His elder brother had assumed the mantle of the Church. The Army then?

At boarding school we were duly enrolled in the Cadet Corps but right from the start Edward found himself in trouble. It wasn't exactly that he wouldn't obey orders, it was whose orders? He preferred his own. He simply had this natural inclination to do things his own way. "You can't write your own rule book," Farnham-Flower our CO informed us tersely after yet another breach of official discipline, "until you know what the rules are!" In this case he was referring to Edward himself. There had been an incident during summer camp out on the Essex marshes. A boy had been blinded. A boy from another school.

Our platoon was advancing across an open field; leopard crawl, crouch and charge. The enemy had been sighted hidden along the edge of a wood. We were all armed with blanks, eleven rounds apiece crammed into the W-spring magazine of our World War One, Lee Enfield rifles. We even had bayonets mounted. We had been ordered to fire above heads when we came within forty yards but in the noise and excitement nobody remembered. Thunderflashes exploded at our feet like partridges whirring up out of the winter sprouts. We might have been out with the dogs and our shotguns at home. There was an excited air of unreality to it. Was war like this, I wondered, real war?

Years later after I experienced a similar sense of elation despite helicopter gunships shredding the sky, 80mm mortars roaring overhead and real bullets indiscriminate of their target. I asked the Pa if such a feeling was normal. "Yes, my boy," he confirmed. "Until you see the man right next to you shot in the stomach screaming to die." Edward was running, yelling to my left. We reached the wood only to discover a steep bramble bank. Through the smoke and undergrowth a figure in a bracken camouflaged helmet, face streaked with mud, leaped up from nowhere shooting straight at us. A hot wad singed past my ducking cheek. When I looked back he had vanished, fallen invisibly into the bracken. We only heard later a boy had been blinded. I convinced myself it could have been anyone's blank that hit him. It was something both of us avoided mentioning. In all the smoke, confusion and camouflage no one was ever the wiser. But for one thing. Up till then we both did a lot of shooting in the holidays. In those days any boy could get a gun licence at the Post Office for ten shillings. Pigeons mostly, setting decoys in the stubble and waiting, crouching beneath the stunted trees of Hope Wood, for the corn-glutted birds to come winging home at sunset. But after that camp Edward always found some excuse to shy away from using his shotgun. "It's not very fair on nature is it?" he concluded, "anyway I'm such a poor shot."

Edward daydreamed his way through school. He claimed it was more fun making up history than trying to remember it. Was he really too lazy to learn as his reports supposed? Or was it intentional, this substitution of legend for reality, what might have been for what was, until he

convinced himself it was true? He spent more and more time browsing over but scarcely reading volumes of explorers, voyages, discoveries, legends. Colonel Fawcett was one of his heroes, seeking an El Dorado in the Amazon jungle. Scott another, perhaps because we had just seen the film. Shackleton he considered too authoritarian, Slocum too knowledgeable. Often in the holidays I would find him up in the musty attic, sitting cross-legged with a torch before a trunkful of old adventure books, turning the pages of the Pa's Boy's Own Album circa 1920. Stories like 'The Wizard King' or 'Captain of the Congo'. Out of the hobby pages of those albums we constructed crystal sets, coracles, camp tents and a canoe. After each attempt we learned to loathe the irascible inventor, whose ingenious and detailed designs invariably failed expectations. Hours painstakingly fiddling the crystal sets 'cats whisker' for the faintest radio signals. Melting and daubing pitch on our coracle was apparently a lot easier in the Bible than our back garden, and the tent leaked rain in gossamer fine drizzle. Despite these setbacks we pinned our hopes on the canoe, never doubting the design despite the open cockpit set in the stern. Steptoe said it looked like a cheap coffin, but we assumed the absence of curves was some aquatic asset. The Pa hardly considered it a candidate to cross the village pond, let alone be launched on the Channel. Instead he drove us to the Stour at Fordwich, the 'Titanic', as he named her, lashed to the roof rack of his ancient black Vanguard, while passers-by doffed their hats in respect as if we were a funeral procession. At the river bank he pushed us off, but scarcely had we cleared the reeds before we sank slowly and ignominiously backwards.

An aunt of Edward's came to live in the Bay, an opera singer, "the Wells, my dear." During her concert years she had performed from Prague to Wigan Pier, and her real age remained stored in secrecy. "Stage age, my dear stage age." Edward who admired her enormously, called her the Great Diva. She had bought a house up on the cliff, where her resonant contralto echoed everything from the Messiah to the latest West End musical. She encouraged us to make use of the precipitous patch of wilderness on the limit of her land where we built a treehouse. Any other construction would have toppled head first into the bay below. The only materials affordable, were those borrowed, "transferred" as Edward put it, from other gardens, or driftwood we scoured from the high tide-line under the cliffs, using our leaky sailing dinghy to cargo it. It was surprising what we found. These cliffs were also a popular choice for "unofficial exits" as the Pa put it and as we discovered one summer picnic when without any warning a body landed only a few feet away, uninvited. Undeterred, the Great Diva continued pouring the tea. Whatever happens, the show must go on. Such stagecraft we admired immensely.

We perched our hut among the embracing branches of a great sycamore tree. A blackened British Rail guard's van stove provided heat, and smoke too depending on the wind. A gutter pipe plus red funnel was the gent's loo, a hammock swaying in mid-air beyond the verandah, umbrella optional, catered for any overnight guests, all with uninterrupted views through the pine trees over the occasionally blue sea towards the far cliffs of Calais. Our treehouse design

inspired by that same ever-inventive Boy's Own editor was less than technically perfect, particularly our lifting ladder. The Pa started visiting the treehouse to compose his sermons. "My aerial study," he announced, "midway between Earth and Heaven." One day we heard a loud crack, tossed our cigarette butts in the stove, hid the naughty postcards and looked out to discover him dangling perilously from the branches below. "My dear boys," he gasped as we fished him to safety. "I feared my ultimate demise upon me."

We feared for ours late one night returning unannounced from school. Edward had forgotten his key. As we furtively prised open the French windows the bedroom shutters upstairs flung theatrically back and out leaned the Pa, shotgun in hand, demonic in the moonlight. "I can see you. Bloody burglars!" He roared, although we were hidden by shadow. There was no time to reply. "I'll shoot!" He shouted. We jumped. A barrel full

22of pellets peppered the shrubbery as we hared across the lawn. "I'll get you yet!" We heard him yell, banging off the choke barrel just as we reached the safety of the trees. We spent the night shivering in the summerhouse where he discovered us at dawn. Fury like the tide had ebbed away. "My dear boys," he reprimanded gently, "you gave me a frightful scare last night."

At university we parted ways, Edward in an unspoken wish to emulate his grandfather and satisfy the call of the wild, had chosen to study forestry, but barely managed to scrape into the University College of North Wales. I fared better, taking up one of the school's closed places at Trinity, where life became a pleasanter extension of school; 'scouts' instead of fags; societies; college rowing; punts on the river; May balls. Although I missed Edward that first Michaelmas half, it was almost with a sense of relief. I could be myself, whatever that was, for the first time, without his shadow at my shoulder. Sometimes I found myself worrying about him. His hold on life seemed more tenuous than most, despite his forthright assertions. His letters, too, appalled me. The boathouse, by his account, was a tin hut at the foot of a shale cliff, and they had to carry the Eights, wading ankle deep across a quarter mile of mudflats. At school an assistant boatman in a grey mackintosh, a fag stuck permanently to his lower lip, used to piggy-back us into the Eights at Putney so that we didn't get our feet wet. But he wasn't complaining. In fact he had already decided it would do him good. "I think we were too pampered," he commented, reminding me of our village doctor for whom the icy sea was his cure-all, receiving himself and half the retired population of the Bay, summer and winter, as they tottered over the cold shingle in flapping bathrobes as if to a mass immersion in the Jordan river. When we swapped stories in the holidays I found myself holding back, my world and his seemed very different. I would not have wanted to swap mine, but I am not too sure about him. He didn't seem to have any friends, intimates with whom he could share his dreams. He wore an air of isolation about him I had never noticed before, and his appearance if not exactly bedraggled was certainly threadbare.

We had planned to use the long summer vacation to travel abroad. It was to be our version of the Grand Tour, following Childe Harolde's Byronic footprints across the continent, but as things turned out he was invariably away on some course or other. "Studying the stupid trees," as he put it, and although we managed to meet in Rome, Venice and elsewhere, it was not quite the same as we had hoped. I had already decided Edward's dilemma. He had chosen the wrong path, only he wouldn't and couldn't admit it. To do so would be to admit failure, and anyway what could he turn to next? To soldier on was the only solution in the hope that things would turn out right in the end. I tried to approach the Pa on the subject but he seemed vague to the point of oblivious. Perhaps he assumed I had written on Edward's behalf for he posted him a note that one could only assume was meant to strengthen his resolve. At the time the Pa had been attending lectures on the Coptic Church by their patriarch, Pope Shenouda III who was visiting London. "A holy man speaking very simply but with awe inspiring depths," he wrote. "Women in the priesthood is considered to be total heresy so I came home much comforted." Then he concluded, "Your mother sends her love and I pass on a blessing from Shenouda III, which will strengthen your soul, even if it be in a den of lions. I love that passage from the book of Daniel, 'Oh, man, greatly beloved, do not be afraid. Be strong. Yea be strong' ."

In the event, Edward managed to scrape through with a poor third. I assumed he must have been polite to lecturers for on his own admission he couldn't tell one tree from another. "I hate having to put things in categories," he complained to me one day. "It's so final. I wish Linnaeus, Darwin, Mendal and the rest had never been invented. Life would be so much simpler."

"Why would it?" I asked him. We were sitting outside.

It was Autumn already. We both felt subdued and slightly anxious for our futures, even though they had already been mapped out thoroughly.

"Look," he cried, pointing, "Why can't that butterfly just be a pretty red butterfly? Why must it be categorised into a lepidoptera-something-or-other? After all, it doesn't know, does it? Why must we always be trapped by other peoples titles?" I didn't reply. It was enough just to keep up with his unpredictable train of thought. A week later he went on a selection course run by the Forestry Commission on behalf of the Colonial Office, somewhere down in the New Forest. He sent me a postcard. "Damn tricky," he wrote. "Have invested in an 'Observers Book of Trees', small enough to sneak out unobserved. Trouble is, not a lot of use. The bloody leaves are falling." They posted him to Uganda. "I don't expect anyone cares what the trees are called out there," he remarked, not at all dismayed.

"I expect they have other things to worry about," I said, for Uganda had woken from fifty years of colonial torpor into a blaze of violent headlines.

"Why do stories of disaster always make the best news I wonder?" remarked the Pa. It was the Sunday before Edward left, four months later. We were all on edge, although for different reasons. The Pa handed him a small pocket New Testament and Psalms. "I shall pray for you dear boy." Edward went deathly pale. He pushed back his chair and rushed out of the room. We excused it on pre-flight nerves. I was the only other one who knew. That morning after Matins the Pa had gathered the congregation in the churchyard, bowed against the freezing rain. He was dedicating a tiny tombstone. On it was written, "Unknown soul washed up on our beach."

The previous autumn some new people, a retired Major and family, had taken over the Green Man pub down in the bay. There was a pretty daughter helping out, waiting to go up to college. Edward with nothing much to do except await his posting abroad decided it was high time he fell in love. I was in London much of the time, and only caught up on developments during occasional weekend visits.

"The trick is to woo," he informed me indulgently. "You just woo away and they lap it up." He made it sound slightly textbook.

"You do love her?" I inquired, "Or do you just want to . . . ?"

"No, no," he insisted hurriedly. "Absolutely not. She's very pretty." As true as that maybe, I wasn't sure if it was the answer I was after. In many ways she was Edward's exact opposite; small and petite to his shambling bulk, dark to his fair, eyes that smiled, crinkled at the corners, while he laughed with his mouth, his eyes remote and blue. "Anyway I read about it," he declared as that was the final vindication.

"Not in the Boy's Own, I hope," I retorted, but he wasn't listening.

"She loves me. I am sure of it. We read poetry together."

"Who?" He flung a worn paperback edition of Rupert Brooke in my lap. The pages fell open and I glimpsed a line "....the seagulls mocking cry, the song they always sing 'the best is over': It seemed scarcely propitious.

"And Auden," he added ".... If I could tell you I would let you know' ."

"Not exactly the great romantic," I suggested, "and what does Hilary read?"

He paused for a moment. "Donne, Marvel," muttering. "A bit dull, you know?"

Also rather more genuine, I thought, though I spared him that. "Are you really in love?" I asked him bluntly, "or just trying to be?"

"Of course I am," he snapped. "I love her, love her, love her. Won't that do?" The trilogy of love. From years earlier I heard the Pa intone his rusty Greek. "Agape, Philos, Eros . . . love divine, love of friends, love of" (a slight cough) "...ah hem . . . the body. Well, well, dear boys, what a melting pot we are, eh?" He peered at us over his spectacles. "But never cheat. Be faithful, however hard. Remember that. Be true, be honourable." I suppose at the time we were barely out of short trousers.

As he drove me to Martin Hill station in his ancient Austin 7, to catch the early Monday morning train he announced "She even wants to scrap University and come out to Africa with me." He glanced at me uncertainly. "A real Mary Livingstone type. Only," he frowned. "I'm not sure. You know what I mean?" (I didn't.) "Women on-board boats. Unlucky." His laugh failed to disguise something; guilt, embarrassment? Why, was love already wearing thin? On the platform he was all hail and farewell, but my doubts remained. Jostled drowsily through the Kent countryside to Charing Cross I wondered whether I was doing him an injustice. I wasn't sure. I didn't know. My own embryonic passions were past and real love had yet to spring its lure. But I doubted, despite his forthright protestations, that this was the real thing. Instinct insisted love like faith was felt, not explained. Staring moodily out of the carriage window I wondered if he was in love with his reflection. I had no doubt she adored him and told him so. But while he lay with her in the wood where we used to wait for birds to flight in over the fields at sunset was he just rehearsing his lines as he so often did for the school play? Years earlier up here behind Hope Point we had come upon old initials carved in a treebark, an arrowed heart and the date August 1916. A soldier off to the Somme, staring with his girl across the blue farewell sea. When Edward and Hilary read aloud Houseman and Henry V, what Hollywood pretence was he playing upon the silver screen of their passion? What goodbye embraces did he entice her to entwine in practice for his departure, and with what promises did he pay? As he lay with her under the haunted veil of leaves what did he really see as he gazed down so apparently steadfast into her face? Just fleeting clouds mirrored in her eyes from an opaque autumn sky overhead and for applause only the seagulls' mocking cry, "the best is over?"

Years before there had been the inevitable rather seedy experience at school. A card in a kiosk in Shaftesbury Avenue, alongside 'French Governess strict tuition', a simple passport to paradise; 'Swedish Heaven', which suggested delights beyond the average Scandinavian tourist brochure. Edward was not the first schoolboy either to embark on that short flight upstairs to a doorbell on the fourth floor of Phoenix Court. The reports that came back were highly encouraging. "Fantastic, eighteen, blonde" Did he in his haste press the wrong bell, alight at the wrong floor? How was it that reality produced a bulging West Indian woman, dark as night, old enough to be his mother, or perhaps his grandmother even, standing in a dingy hallway in gilded high-heels and not much else, reaching out to drag him in and slam the door behind? "Three quid, love, strip and all what goes with it," she purred calypso into his anxious and

reluctant ear. Protestations were in vain. He had the money ready. And to refuse seemed impolite somehow. "Wash. No, not your hands!" (She could almost have been Matron.) The telephone rang. An inquiry. "Colour of my nipples!" She expostulated. "Cheeky bastard!" And tucked the receiver under the pillow before hoisting him aboard like an argonaut. And away he voyaged rowing her wrinkled walnut body while she, the coxswain, called time. "In and out and round-about. In and out and round-about." Occasional directions when he went off course. "No dear, legs inside not out." And when he reappeared at school teatime his tousled disarray was mistaken for glory. "I say, what was it like, eh? You lucky bugger." What else could he do but perpetuate the myth? "Fantastic, eighteen, blonde" Was Hilary his excuse to exorcise that fecund memory?

At Christmas he broke me the news. "She's pregnant!"

"What again!" For a moment I failed to grasp the significance. I thought he meant one of the dogs.

"Hilary," he moaned, clutching his head in both hands .

"Perhaps," I suggested after a brief pause, "you could marry her. Before you go. Take her out with you."

When he finally spoke, his words came almost in a whimper. "But I don't love her. I couldn't face having a child that wasn't born out of love. I couldn't live with her out there, could I!" I hardly needed to tell him he should have thought of that before.

"What are you going to do now?" We were parked where the track ended by the Patrol Memorial, close to the cliff edge. The rain trickled down the inside of the windows, and each gust seemed close to pushing us over. We were out of earshot of anyone. Edward was clutching the steering wheel and squinting out to sea through the windscreen.

"I read this thing in a book. Go ask a chemist for Ladies Occasional Pills. It was awful, I couldn't find a man to serve me. This woman only laughed. 'Never heard of that' she said. God, it was awful." Leaning forward he rubbed his forehead with his knuckles. Years before I would have put my hand on his shoulder. We would have worried together, tried to forge a plan. Now I simply nodded. He continued in the same agonised voice. "I asked for quinine. I read that too. Quinine and Caster Oil. Said I had malaria, told them I'd just come back from Africa. I was in a cold sweat anyway and my teeth were chattering. I must have convinced them. 'Oh!' They said. 'There's much better things nowadays than quinine.' 'Quinine!' I insisted, but I needed a prescription." He lifted his head to stare through the rain-blurred windscreen. The sea, what was visible of it, was a churning mass of surf. "So I went to a doctor. Miles away. Nice old Scots

fellow, retired. Doing a locum. I paid five bob to see him privately. Said I was a soldier off to Hong Kong. Astonishing how helpful he was. You know what he said? 'I know what a nuisance these girls can be. Try to trap a man. Could be anyone's bairn, I dare say. Now you're to give her this and not worry. You lucky fellow.'" Edward paused in his story. There was a shiftiness about him that made me suddenly uneasy.

"And when was this?" I asked him.

"Two days ago," he muttered. She's awfully sick." I digested this information calmly. Something more urgent had come to mind.

"Edward. Just how far pregnant is she?" When he spoke his words emerged as a whisper. His hands were pressed together in a church steeple, or as small boy praying. I guessed he had been doing a lot of that.

"Four months, more. I don't know," he said despairingly. "I don't think she knew. She just thought she was late that was all."

"And how old is she?" He twiddled abjectly with the windscreen wiper.

"Eighteen," he said

"And are you still giving her the medicine?"

"Quinine hydrochlorate 30 grams. More actually," he admitted miserably. "It's got to work hasn't it! And I'm going to Africa whatever happens," he declared as if daring destiny to try otherwise. "Nothing's going to stop me

We agreed that I should meet him at the pub next day. Fortunately Hilary's parents were away for a short pre-festive break. I was told she was upstairs in the flat. There was a stand-in barman. It was eleven o'clock when I arrived. There was no-one else, for the weather was foul, rain sheeting down and Bay Hill treacherously slippery. Edward was waiting for me. Looking awful, ashen faced, hair tousled, hands twitching. "Something's happening," he muttered, "You'd better come upstairs. She's worse." I could hear her moans the moment we opened the door into the hallway. Inside her room was a sight I'd rather forget. It might have been a cinema deathbed scene. Her pallid face was blotched red and tear stained. She made a grab for Edward's hand and once grabbed wouldn't let go. I knew she was trying not to cry out loud. Under the bedclothes her body was writhing. She was breathing and groaning in pent-up gasps. And then suddenly it happened. Her body jack-knifed, kicking at the blankets. "Oooh!" She started, but Edward clamped his free hand over her mouth, suffocating her screams. Her own contortions tore off the blankets. There amid blood and froth was something I had only seen before in books. A foetus perfectly formed. "Hide it!" He insisted. Hilary had gone limp. Fainted,

I assumed. Edward was shielding her face. I pulled the blankets round the bloodied mess and gathered it into a bundle. "Listen," he said, "I've got to stay. Be here when she comes round. Go out the back way."

"Yes," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Is it dead?" he asked, almost as an afterthought. "Yes," I told him. He nodded.

"Up beyond the Patrol memorial. Throw it over the cliff."

After Africa the Pa once remarked to me, "The ancients were very lucky. They could go to Delphi and drink the Waters of Lethe - the waters of forgetfulness. It must be so much easier to look into the future once you have lost your past."

"SOMEWHERE EAST OF SUEZ..."

Edward left for Africa in February, flying by BOAC Comet via Cairo and Khartoum. I received a postcard of the Pyramids, scribbled while he waited at the airport. I didn't really expect to hear from him. We had rather avoided each other before he left with one excuse or another, and our brief meetings were notable for what was left unsaid. I didn't ask and he didn't tell. When it came to step forward for farewell, our eyes met but for both of us it was, I assumed, a final farewell, although quite how final / neither could have had any notion. He wrote weekly to his family and it was from the Pa that I learned his news second-hand during my infrequent visits to the Bay. I got an impression of disappointment. Reality was not quite as he expected it should be.

The airport runway at Entebbe starts at the north end of Lake Victoria. The plane swoops in over water and green swamp, low red cliffs, scrubland and Palm trees. Edward arrived dressed in regulation khaki feeling like an explorer. His first act was to stop the car taking him along the lake shore and dip his hands symbolically in the shallows. "Don't do that!" Admonished his superior in alarm, hurriedly dusting the water off his hands. "You'll catch bilharzia." Visions of trips by native dugout canoe and swimming under tropical waterfalls retreated reluctantly.

Next day he presented himself to the Ugandan Minister. Dressed in a neat black suit, the African leaned back in his rattan planters chair, waved a fly-whisk at the sluggish fan overhead and in an elegant Oxford accent outlined Edward's duties, considerably more varied than he had ever expected. "Problem is," drawled Mr. M'toto, "Once our own graduates return from overseas, they consider it beneath themselves to work up-country, and dirty their hands. So." He smiled, "We leave it to expatriates." Then leaning forward he handed Edward a knobbly club. "If any of those black bastards give you any trouble, beat them!" That evening Edward got mildly drunk at the expatriates' club, and later staggering across lawns to piss in the shrubbery, he paused to survey the vast moonlit lake swelling silvery into unknown distances. Sitting down on a rock to collect his thoughts he was startled when the end turned round and glared at him indignantly. Hippo and human moved off discreetly in opposite directions.

A few days later Edward moved to Kampala to receive his marching orders. The office overlooked the abattoir. The Goanese clerk, Mr. Alvirez handed him the well-thumbed files of his predecessor. His head wobbling energetically to emphasise the seriousness of the problem, he explained how there were department debts of £50,000 from timber sales. "Very corrupt these africans - do not trust them, sir, mark my word." Apparently it was Edward's responsibility to straighten the accounts, "Cook them, sir, if you want my advice. Cook them, mark my word," - or make up the loss out of his own pocket. Instead he went off on a short safari with his superior into Mengo district, where he proceeded to make a fool of himself when a porter got bitten by a snake. The double row of bite marks indicated to his superior that it was venomous. "Don't worry. You won't die," he told the man encouragingly, as he sat down to peel a banana and scan the week-old copy of the Daily Telegraph. "It's shock that kills them instantly," he informed Edward. "But he probably will die once the poison gets going. Twenty minutes usually, give or take." Edward glanced at his wristwatch. His mind was in a whirl. "Cauterise with a red hot knife, tourniquet, suck out the venom, something?" His superior curtly dismissed all such notions with contempt. "You don't expect me to suck a nigger's leg, do you? And you won't either. They won't respect you. If he died they'd blame

you. If he survives we can cart him back to Kampala in the landrover." Edward watched the minutes tick by and the expression on the man's face. He wasn't acquainted yet with the face of death - that haunted look in the eyes. So he couldn't tell. The man moaned and writhed, his eyes rolled, but to everyone's surprise, not least his own it seemed, he survived.

His superior posted Edward out of harm's way, north east to the Karamoja region. His parting comments: "Don't ever accept a bribe. Not even a biro. The British are fair, remember that." He surveyed Edward's appearance with a critical eye. "And keep your clothes pressed. Clothes make a man out here." His own were ironed to a knife edge.

The trip up country was not quite as he imagined but not far removed. Charcoal burners; endless scrub bush; tortuous tracks; hair-raising descents after the brakes failed; pitching tents; the blacks singing around the cookfire; scouting for signs of danger; old droppings of elephant and baboon, but fresher lion dugs in the thorny dried out creek beds; sleeping close to a heaped up fire. In the night the snap of twigs nearby, and the cough of something large and ominous. The orange glow of dawn; far off mountain peaks suddenly silhouetted; scalding tin mugs of tea tasting of smoke and cinnamon; mendazi doughnuts. Stiff backed from hours of jolting jeep; the sump bolts working loose and shearing off; strapping the engine together with rubber bands; dripping a trail of oil; leaking brakes; plunging across dried-out loose sand river beds; skidding up stony ravines. Pink flamingoes pecking salt lakes; elephants trumpeting across the track on some personal pilgrimage. Stew and spuds after sunset; mealie porridge at dawn.

The Karamoja wore clothes reluctantly if at all. Many of them hung stones from their penises to extend them. The chief wearing the longest one of all. Edward's first job was to oversee elections. He was sent an interpreter and a Government fact sheet. "You are all citizens of a new democratic Uganda. You are all entitled to vote for the candidate of your choice." When he read out the list there was considerable head scratching. Apparently no one had heard or seen any of them. The chief sat cross-legged on one box. Edward on another. When the chief recrossed his legs, he had to haul in his status and lower it over the other side. Stark naked women sidled giggling up to Edward and held out their thumbs for him to press. He distributed the thumb prints as evenly as possible between the various candidates' names, but when at the end they counted the votes cast, the tally was twice the population. "Greedy beggars," Edward wrote, "coming back for seconds." Edward lived in a tin hut with a tin roof that roasted in the sun. The rust holes poked in the walls were filled by eyes eager to glimpse the curious sight of a white man without his underclothes. The mosquito net had holes as big as potatoes and the tin privy contained flies as well as peering eyes, and just as big. Scorpions lurked unless kicked away first. The tin bath never contained more than a few meagre inches of tepid muddy water and the meals sent by courtesy of the chief, and at exaggerated prices, seemed to consist of a single sausage floating in a boiling bowl of fat. Although there was the whole world of Karamoja waiting outside to welcome him, Edward wasn't able to talk to them. Not man to man. It wasn't in the script. After all according to the 1920 Boy's Own Annual he was a white officer and they were natives.

There weren't a lot of forests to concern him in the region. Most had been felled for firewood, or grazed to death by goats long ago, and as a result Edward was everything from magistrate to medical officer. There was no one else. He was due for leave but too busy to take it. And his shirts ceased to be pressed. The Pa had warned him against going "Bush happy" as he called it.

"Happens to all bundi bashers," he told him. "Isolation, talking to one's self. Keep doing things. Keep busy. Don't stop." Edward was busy enough. His main problem was not trees but cattle, or rather the Turkana cattle raiders from across the border. The Turkana weren't concerned with social niceties. Cattle were much more important. Those long knives they carried were not just for decoration. Sometimes they captured the herd boys for slaves, but generally the men were killed and the girls raped. Edward possessed one old series-A landrover and half a dozen policemen to patrol 1,000 square miles, and although they invariably arrived too late it was as if in his crumpled shirt, baggy shorts, uncombed hair, he was the last guardian of law and order from the Jade Sea to the Ruwenzori Mountains of the Moon. Just as long as he continued to wave the flag of Pax Britannica aloft the oncoming hordes were held at bay. At first he welcomed the challenge. This surely was the moment he had long been waiting for, the moment when he could stand shoulder to shoulder with his heroes - Gordon of Khartoum, Hephiastes holding the pass at Marathon against the all-conquering Medes.

He had made particular preparations to protect his own village; ditches; thorn fences; palisades. "Not even a leopard could get in," claimed the chief offering mealie cakes, maize beer and a selection of dusky damsels, at a price. Edward was confident too, of his own abilities. He had a hunting rifle hung inside his hut and although the memory of that earlier shooting incident remained he was sure he was his own man in any emergency. He even committed to memory the first lines of a poem by Cavafy, to help him remain steadfast, undaunted. 'Honour to those who in their lives are committed and guard their Thermopylae, never flinching from danger.' But did he also remember the last lines, I wondered, Knowing that in the end Hephiastes must fall, and that Medes will pass through.' You see it mattered to him. It mattered so much. So why then did he turn and run?

Sometimes we get trapped in a moment of emotion from which we cannot escape. Was that it? It had happened to him before. As boys, frozen, paralysed with panic, a rabbit confronted by a fox, a boy in short trousers shaking outside the headmaster's office, struck there when logic shouts run. But he did run didn't he? He was driving back from Gulu with supplies and mail. Darkness had fallen. As he bumped along, hunched wearily over the wheel, peering ahead, watching the headlamps, pick out the dips and turns of the trail between the interminable thorn scrub he was half mesmerised by monotony. The distant sight of flames came as a relief. He stretched, rubbed his eyes, hummed a tune, but as he drove on the fire seemed to advance. Puzzled but not yet alarmed, he spread the land map out in his mind and studied it. Grass burning? But it was the wrong season. Burning forest scrub to clear land? That must be it. Done while he was away of course, and yet? The track seemed to be heading straight for it. He was near enough to recognise roughly where he was. The dry river-beds were becoming familiar. There was soon little doubt where the fire was coming from and a premonition of disaster urged him ahead, to get there, to find out, to . . . At that instant with a sharp bang the windscreen shattered. A star of vivid cracks blurred his vision. He swerved off the track and halted. Up the low rise ahead, silhouetted by the blaze, stood the outline of what had been his village.

Attack he had anticipated even if in a rather academic way. But not like this. The attack he had planned would have come from outside his Treasure Island palisade not within. The strategy he had devised to suit himself had been reversed by others' rules. It seemed almost a cheat. He sat, staring, open-mouthed, indecisive, a spectator of the conflagration. His biggest fire till

now had been in the South Foreland valley when we were five year olds, and then what we had done? He was on the point of jumping out when something stopped him. An invisible hand held him back, made him pause, and as he did so he was instantly aware of a strange silence. Apart from the crackle of burning thatch and timber, and the whoosh of sparks soaring into the night sky, there was no human sound. And then almost as if he did not wish to waken them he tiptoed away. The hidden hand turning the wheel for him, steering him back down the track the way he had come, resisting his noblest intentions, staying his will. He never heard the pinging of bullets winging him on his way, but after half a mile the guiding arm relaxed its grip. He stopped and looked back. He turned the landrover around to face the village where a fire glow now driving, and the further he drove and the faster he drove, he seemed to be able to outpace his conscience and his guilt, leaving them up the track, far behind. By the time he reached Nairobi and checked into the Norfolk Hotel he was quite composed. After he had sunk a couple of Lion lagers in the Lord Delamere Bar, surrounded by the caricatures of all former and famous imbibers framed on the wall he was positively jovial. Karamojo was already two days away and sinking fast as a dream at daybreak. He telephoned a number that a friend of the Pa, a Colonel Hickey had given him. "If you are ever there, do look them up. I'll write and tell them." A pleasant English woman's voice answered and then a man, gruffer, military. "Wher'you staying? Com'n pick you up. We're out at Karen, take me twenty minutes. Off on Safari to the Naguramens tomorrow. Most welcome to join us." Edward sat down relieved. The immediate future seemed taken care of. And the immediate past? Discard it, he decided in a mood of carefree abandon. Excuse it, forget it, get away with it!

The Gage's home at Karen was a spacious colonial bungalow, the eaves sloping out to shade and shelter wide verandas where planters' chairs had already been covered to protect the cushions from the night dew. Flowering shrubs banked the edge of a lawn that dipped away into the darkness, horses neighed softly from an unseen paddock. Inside all was chintzy sofa, table lamps, rug carpets, photographs of children now grown up and gone away lining the mantelpiece and below it a log fire blazing. And drinks. Big heavy crystal glass tumblers tangy with gin and tonic. Edward couldn't remember when he had last been treated to such a drink. "Cheers," saluted Gage, while Mrs. Gage smiled in a motherly way, and they all drunk to good luck.

In the morning tea was brought to Edward in bed by the houseboy. It tasted like a treat. The first day of the school holidays. Later, after breakfast and a guided tour of the gardens, another landrover laden with camping gear arrived, driven by a young English reporter for the Kenyan Standard. It was decided that Edward should go with him, his own landrover having been left at the Norfolk. The small convoy set out of the green Ngong Hills dropping into the sparse scrub and oven heat of the Rift Valley. They reached Magadi at noon. The great salt lake blinding as a snow-field in the sun. Waiting for them on the far side of the causeway where countless pink flamingos tinted the shadows, were parked two other landrovers. Introductions all round. The Australian High Commissioner and his wife, her straw hat fringed by hanging corks, a wildlife expert and his wife, and a single girl, big, shapely, sure of herself. They set off across a bare-earthed landscape, where small Masai boys in red shukas and with spears taller than themselves guarded scrawny herds of goats. Ahead reared the four thousand foot high cliff-like wall of the Naguramen Escarpment. After losing the way among

the dense forest at the base they climbed up a tortuous trail, the four-wheel drive vehicles skidding on dry dirt and loose stones, the incline never less than 1 in 4, and the view expanding perilously below with every hair-pin bend. They finally gained the crest of the plateau as late afternoon sunlight slanted over the grassy rounded peaks of the Loita Hills behind them. The setting was straight from the pages of Hemingway's 'Green Hills of Africa.' So too, the camp they set up beside a stream plunging out of a deep gully and straight over the cliff edge, with a family of baboons shrieking and squabbling among the nearby rocks. Tents were pitched, dead branches dragged from among the surrounding thorn trees, folding camp chairs arranged around the big fire, tomorrow's beer cooling in canvass sacks, hung from an overhanging bough, drinks served, the houseboys preparing supper over their cook fire some distance away. The Australian High Commissioner had brought a crate of Hunter Valley red wine. "It does travel," he assured them. To Edward sitting there glass in hand, hardly hearing the hum of voices, it all tasted like balm. This, he knew, is how Africa should be. This was all that he had missed. This was perfect. Although it was sunset and a deep purple haze flooded the rift valley far below he felt as if the sun had come out and was shining once again after a long grey winter.

During supper they heard a deep throaty cough from the darkness. Gage identified leopard, adding, "Be after the baboon not us." (Laughter.) "Baboon is very sweet, or so I believe," (more laughter.) He had brought along his hunting rifle. "Should manage a tommy (Thompsons gazelle) tomorrow, for the pot." During the remainder of the evening the single girl made advances to every male around, attached or otherwise. Not even Gage's wizened cook escaped her playful smile. But it was at Edward that she really brought her charm to bear. "How romantic it must be to live alone in the jungle with the natives. Just like Tarzan." Edward who had hardly spoken a word of English to a soul in three months found himself out of his depth. He tried to be taciturn but it only seemed to encourage her. When the party broke up, "early start in the morning," declared Gage to general approval, the girl even invited him to share her tent since he didn't have one. Edward who hadn't bothered with a tent ever since he could remember, spread a couple of blankets on the ground near the fire and fell asleep, curled up, his mind an empty oblivion under the stars. At 8,000 feet the clear night grew cold and he woke up shivering. Sometime in the early hours the leopard coughed again, close by, and the girl seeking reassurance slipped out of her tent.

At breakfast Gage presented the plan for the day. They would set off along the edge of the escarpment to find the Olibotoi river and follow it inland. He pointed to the conical peaks of the Loitas. "There's a thousand foot-high waterfall in there. Seen it from the air. Never got in on foot. Don't know anyone who has, except Masai of course. Their country. Olibotoi rises maybe three, four days march beyond that. Tried to follow it down once, didn't we?" Mrs. Gage acquiesced with a nod. "Took a string of donkeys along. Climbed up from the Mara beyond the Sand river. Never got through. Roughcountry. Lot of lion and buffalo. River drops into a chasm out of sight." Edward listened, his mind far away. A secret river, a river out of Kubla Khan the sacred river ran, through caverns measureless to man.' To reach its source would be like . . . like following the holy grail. And the damsel with the dulcimer singing of Mt. Abora. Where was she? Certainly this girl did not match those expectations.

If there seems to be an air of unreality about this episode that is exactly how Edward saw it. A dreamlike interlude. Sooner or later someone would come clattering up the stairs, banging on

the door of his past. Questions and explanations would follow, but until that happened, he was content not to wake up.

The morning hike along the edge of the escarpment was no more arduous than a Sunday afternoon stroll. There was even a hunters' track of sorts between the thorn trees. The river when they found it lay in a deep turbulent sunless gully, the channel plunging this way and that between slippery rocks. The girl wanted to strip and swim, but Gage thought there would be a better place upstream where they could picnic. He led the way up a grassy knoll. Walking was difficult. They had to breast shoulder high grass, while treacherous loose stones underfoot, threatened to twist ankles. They were all spread out across the hillside with Edward and the girl bringing up the rear. So far apart, that what with the steep contour of the slope and the tall grass, one could scarcely spot the person ahead. Up front where the hill levelled and the grass thinned, Gage disturbed a small herd of Thompsons gazelle that sprinted, bounding away but he was quick enough to bring one down. The sound of the shot had everyone hurrying forward. It was only now the absence of Edward and the girl were noticed. Gage muttered irritably about the need to stay together. Mrs. Gage suggested they had probably stopped to go for a swim, and as matchmaking was a constant preoccupation of everyone overseas, nobody minded but agreed instead to picnic there and then so that the bearers could skin and gut the gazelle and carry the carcass back to the camp for supper. An hour later, when neither of the missing pair showed up, Gage decided despite cries of "spoil sport," they had better go back and look for them. First they worked their way downhill and then because there seemed to be definite tracks in the grass suggesting the errant pair had attempted a short cut straight up the slope they followed these until they reached a rocky crag. Here the trail ended. On the far side a steep cliff plunged to a patch of tall forests crowding a shallow stream. Downhill, a snaking vein of lush green led all the way back to their camp, barely visible on the distant edge of the escarpment. Colobus monkeys screeched at them, their white bushy tails darting puffs of smoke through treetops. "It's a leopard's lair," announced Gage, pointing his pipe at the heap of rocks. It was a leopard's trail they had been following, not the couple's. Rather disconsolately they set off back for camp, where arriving in the gloom a very different story emerged.

The girl had been found. The returning bearers heard a moan and discovered her, badly scratched and barely conscious. They had carried her to camp. There was no sign of Edward. By now it was too dark to go searching. For a while as they sat drinking, there was a gruff sympathy for him, out there alone, possibly mauled, but the attitude soon hardened when Mrs. Gage and the High Commissioner's wife, a one-time nurse, came out of the tent where they had been attending to the girl. "My dear, she says she's been raped." Nobody bothered to inquire who. They knew. Gage was all for setting out there and then, despite the dark, to shoot him down as he deserved. The wildlife expert thought there was a good chance of a lion or leopard getting him first. "Serve the bastard right," Gage exclaimed. Despite absence of any testimony from the girl, who had been heavily sedated by the two women, the evidence against Edward was obvious. Had he been savaged, his body too would have been found by the bearers. It was not, because, having done the deed ("You men are such animals," agonised the High Commissioner's wife), he had left her body for the beasts, so he could turn up later with some story of being chased by a lion, going off for help and getting lost. Although they were up half the night discussing it, no one thought of seeing if any of the bearers were

scratched. There was something of the misfit about Edward, the loner, that made them want to suspect him. After all his father was a clergyman. Vicar's sons were invariably a bad lot. At first light having left the women to escort the girl back to Nairobi in one of the landrovers, the men set out in pursuit of Edward. Although they had the bearers along, they never found him, that day or the next, and finally returned to Nairobi, where among other items of news was that of the tribal massacre in North-Eastern Uganda; villages burned, the Karamojo tribe virtually wiped out, men, women infants, hacked to pieces. Disaster as the Pa said always makes the best news, as this did, even if it was only little more than a one-day wonder, and especially when compounded by the young reporter on the Kenyan Standard. He was badly in need of a story and with little regard for scruples, recalled Edward's conversation with him on the drive out, examined the bullet holes in his landrover parked at the Norfolk, placed a few telephone calls to Kampala and fitting the pieces of the jigsaw together with little regard for accuracy came up with a story, which, filed through the press agency, made headlines in half the English tabloids.

"It could have read so very differently," Edward remarked moodily in Prachuap, nursing the never-forgotten grief of his failure. Brought suddenly back by my arrival, brooding on the verandah of his stilt house overlooking the black moon proud bay. "Acting District Officer averts tribal massacre - how impressed the Pa would have been!" But wherever Edward had vanished, his absence and his silence was only assumed to imply his guilt. I saw the story first on the London underground, over someone's shoulder, jostled by the rush-hour crowds.

"White officer flies white feather. Heiress raped on Safari, battered body left for the lions." The column bristling with epithets of indignation "Funk, betrayal, callous, abuse." The more libellous of the gutter press labelled him Jekyll and Hyde. Suggestions even that having raped and enslaved tribal girls, he arranged the massacre to hide the evidence. Not knowing how thoroughly reporters pursued their investigations and whether the Hilary episode would be discovered, next day I hurried down to the coast fully expecting to find the vicarage already under siege and reporters camped out on the lawn. In fact life seemed to be going on just as normal, although my mother told me one or two strangers had been snooping. Fortunately Hilary had gone to college. When I drove up to see her I was shocked how she had changed. It was difficult to recognise the pert, vivacious person of less than six months before. The girl sitting across the cafe table was short and dumpy and bruised, not just on the outside but deep within. "You needn't worry. I shan't say anything. What's the point? That's the way he is. Anyway . . ." She paused, looking down, her hair that had been combed to a raven sheen, now tousled and drab. She toyed with her coffee spoon. "I don't like men any more." She looked up to face me squarely. "I like women now." Adding deliberately, "In every way."

The Pa tried to control his emotions, to question the unwelcome publicity philosophically.

"Yes, he's an angel and a devil too, he always was. But Jekyll and Hyde, oh no." But he was hurt, deeply hurt, undermined in a way from which he never fully recovered. "He should come home," he told me, in his study. "He has no need to live out some lonely penance. He's no prodigal son who fears to be forgiven. Not Edward." He made no attempt to brush away the tears that shined on his cheek. "He's our boy, isn't he. Dear God." His voice choking back the pain and his head averted so that I wouldn't witness his emotion. "Dear God," almost a whisper, "Bless and protect him wherever he may be, and please send him safe home."

"Pray for him will you, dear boy?" he asked as I left. I walked up to the monument late that night. It was raining and blustery. The foghorn moaned its peril from the Goodwins, and the lighthouse beam from the South Foreland sentinelled the bay. "Yes" I thought, "Wherever you are."

"I was with the Masai, you see," he told me slowly, sitting out in the moonlight.

"And the girl?" I ventured.

"Oh, she was a bloody nuisance. She kept pestering me. Tried that first night. I sent her packing. I think she ended up with the houseboys." I didn't feel in a position to comment.

"And what about the next day?"

"The next day?" He sounded surprised. "Oh well, I was so far behind everyone else I suddenly decided," he paused. His elbow on the armrest, fingers gently drumming his forehead.

"You decided what?"

He turned uncertainly. "You wouldn't understand." "Try me."

"To escape, I suppose." He sighed reluctantly. "Mrs. Gage knew people in Gulu. She had started asking questions. Those trick questions to trap you. Once you start running, you know, it's easy." He paused, expecting no doubt my nod of agreement, but I waited. He went on "And something else. It just seemed to me if I followed this river upstream, where no one apparently had ventured before, upstream far enough. I might just make it." I didn't need to ask what "it" was. I doubted if at any time he knew clearly himself. A goal, a green field, a signpost at sea. He slapped at a mosquito on his cheek and grinned. "I know I sound bonkers. Probably was, a bit anyway. After what had happened I needed a way out. Only I wasn't sure where."

"You could have gone back and explained." But he wasn't listening. His eyes closed as if he was back there again searching. "You left the girl behind. It wasn't exactly the chivalrous . . ."

"Chivalrous!" He repeated with a start. "Don't talk nonsense, she was ahead of me. Stalked off in high dudgeon. What's that line about a woman scorned? She told me exactly what she thought of me and waltzed off. The track the others had made through the grass was clear enough. I called out that I'd catch them up later, and waited." His voice had quickened, there was an eagerness, an anticipation. "I hadn't a thing, only my money belt and water bottle. It didn't seem to matter. I felt free. For the first time in ages. It was . . ." he chose the words carefully. "Exhilarating." And then, more soberly, "The difficulties. The hard part was this dense wall of scrub. But when the trees finally thinned I reached the river. It flowed over shallow rocks and on the far side there was a clearing. A burnt out fire under a huge overhanging fig tree, great creepers hanging down. Two black hunters squatting there, watching me, and a plump rather jolly woman."

"They were Masai?"

He nodded. "Oh, they were Masai alright." The wizened one, called Mobashu, wore an old dinner jacket over his red shuka. Apparently the legacy of some white hunter from a bygone age. Over this he had attached an entire armoury; hunting clubs, firestick, arrows, spare spear. His earlobes were holed and stretched. When he ran he knotted them up to stop them catching on things." Edward chuckled. "Old Mobashu was quite a sight. The other man, Moses - the woman was his wife number two. He spoke a bit of English. They were on their way back to their Noma (village), after a four day trip to collect honey. They pointed at the river and then inland, shaking their hands. Up there. It seemed just where I wanted to go."

It was not the easiest adjustment to make after the past few pampered days. Right from the start Edward had to cope with nature at its most elemental. That first night a lion leaped growling into the clearing attracted by the two tethered goats. Mobashu and Moses fought it off with spears while Edward hastily wielded a firebrand. Next day they climbed up the slippery-steep grassy slopes of the Loitas, whose cone peaks reminded Edward of Sheba's breasts in 'King Solomon's Mines', but never slackening pace for a moment until they reached the summit. From here, as he got his breath back, Edward could view far down past the sparsely wooded fringe of the escarpment plateau, suspended like some lost continent above the great Rift Valley beyond where, among the worn-down mountains he could make out the distant greeny-pink glimmer of Lake Natron, and nearer the white snow mirage of Magadi, and rising out of a dense brown haze the lesser peaks of Oldokasilte where Leaky discovered human life began. Somewhere down there his own life began. It was almost as if he could see back all the way he had come and then turn his head to face the future. An unknown, unexplored, horizon.

All day they strode on, keeping up a breathless pace, never pausing for a drink, stopping only to steal honey. Using firesticks the Masai thrust smoking brands into the tree holes, drawing out dripping combs, regardless of the angry stinging bees. If the hive was too high to climb they would patiently chop the tree down. One night they camped by the stream and were overrun with stinging safari ants scenting the spoil of honey, the next day they slept on a ledge overhanging the river chasm, just below the roar and spray of the mighty Olibotoi falls. Here a goat went missing, taken they suspected by a leopard. The day after it was a climb on all fours, clinging hold of anything to arrive above the falls, where they reached another higher plateau, green with wooded hilltops and open grassland. One time he counted over two hundred buffalo grazing, another moment just one charged them down a game path. They camped on a rocky knoll under a shady tree beyond the forest wall but close to a hot spring welling out of the rocks. Unseen in reed swamps beyond a narrow defile, some hippo snorted.

By now Edward had learned to make fire from a spinning firestick plus a handful of dried blossom; to recognise edible roots and the insipid wild carrot to quench his thirst; to spot animal tracks. That evening he helped Mobashu suffocate the remaining goat, drain off and drink pungent blood and squeezing the warm intestine clean between his fingers, chop it into pieces and chew it raw. A Masai delicacy. He also, despite Moses' warning, set off alone unarmed in the dawn mist, making for the hot springs, lost his way back and only narrowly escaped encounter with a lion. By the time they reached Moses' boma two days later, Edward was declared, by common consent, a fully fledged blood-brother to the Masai. Without realising it he had risen to the ranks of his Boy's Own fictional heroes, but more importantly, for the first time in his life he was no longer limited to being a Muzungi (a white man). He had the passport to be whatever race he chose.

Edward glanced across at me, his anxious expression captured by the lamplight. I was unsure of my own reaction. The unspoken appeal for understanding I could well remember from way back but the years in between had hardened me, along with the message I had to deliver, and the trouble I had experienced tracking him down. This had all taken its toll on my patience and my sympathy. "But why didn't you go home?" He turned away slightly as if to avoid my unforgiving gaze. His face no longer reflected the lamp glow. Beyond the verandah the moon

had moved, like a silent watcher departing, slipping back discreetly through the palm trees to resume its voyage over the black waters of the bay.

When he spoke the words came cautiously from far away, as if they had been stored there a long time, occasionally brought out for rehearsals, dusted down and then put away again. I wondered who had been his last audience in the far flung outposts where he found himself, or was that privilege reserved for the crowded auditorium of his own conscience? "I couldn't, could I?" he said. "I was too ashamed. I couldn't bear to show myself, and . . . stand the scorn." Silence followed, disturbed only by a dog barking far off.

"The Pa wouldn't have allowed . . ." I began, suddenly uncertain how he could have prevented it. "He always believed in you." I added, looking away from him, surprised by how hard it was for me to say that. Haunted still too vividly by that last visit to the vicarage where I had been Edward's stand-in, sitting beside the bed we had lifted down to his study some weeks before so that he could be near his books. And that large unfinished portrait of Edward, as a boy, lounging rather sullenly in a wicker chair, staring out across the as yet uncharted vistas of his own life. I watched the Pa's troubled gaze, the lines of pain softening under the massive dose of morphine Doctor Melhuish had administered before sitting with Edward's mother in the next room, waiting. She could not bear to see the end. The elder brother hastily telephoned would never arrive in time either. I, alone was left to guard and to witness. "I wish I could take you with me, dear boy," he whispered to the painting. I watched his eyes peering further and further away, his chest rising and falling and not rising again.

"I know he believed in me," Edward's voice came harsh and strained. Moon shadows striped the verandah in disembodied light. "That's what made it worse. Not going home, I mean." His head was lost, as if doomed forever in darkness, only his hands unencumbered, clutching at nothing lay revealed, bare and white. I knew those hands; small and grubby, fisted for fighting, fumbling for wild flowers, caterpillars, kittens. Ink stained, plundering exercise books, shuffling cards badly, cheating at Monopoly, the thumb that flicked back the rifle bolt, the hands that pulled a first Eight oar, and fingers counting pills to quench that too brief still-born legacy, of a still-born love. Hands that made fire in the Masai heartland, fielded a fencing epee in a midnight duel of honour, that made love and delivered death. Sittingn there so near him and so far away I felt sudden anger not at him but at the futilities of life; the signs and symbols sought, then trapping us in their vice-like grip. A gong sounded in the distant temple. Perhaps buddhists were blessed with the most convenient ideal after all, to care for nothing, to be free of that bond altogether. It was a message that had made little impact on Edward. From darkness where a strip of darkness guillotined his head, I heard him remark rather self-consciously, and barely above a whisper, "You don't know how desperately I need a cause." He was wrong. Had he forgotten I played Iago to his over-acted Othello all those school-play years ago? And on Ko Chang when he finally found it, was the cause a just or merely a jealous one?

I have almost forgotten to add the girl later withdrew her accusations. Said it was all a ghastly mistake, claimed she had never intended it in the first place but her mind was in such a whirl she didn't know what she was saying. Explaining how she had slipped and bumped her head and got scratched to pieces falling through thorn bushes. The newspapers printed their tiny tucked-away disclaimers, apologies that only a magnifying glass would find. By then the damage had been done, by then history had already caught up with him and sent him packing.

Driving back up the dirt trail towards the Jade Sea he was apprehended at Maralal. Told to turn back. Dishonourably discharged. But what was he intending anyway, driving back into lawless Turkana territory with a hunting rifle in the back of the jeep? He never said.

His next port of call was Lamu Island, its white crenellated Arab fort guarding the sea lanes of the offshore archipelago. Sitting outside Petney's Inn on the waterfront, he watched the ocean-bound Arabian dhows, with bellying sails and creaking spars, dropping anchor in the East African sunset. Despite the printed disclaimers that he never saw, in his imagination Edward was already on board and out on the high seas bound for wherever the winds of fate would take him. Steering here and steering there, but never home. On paper the drama of those weeks appears as empty as the old unexplored maps of Africa herself, or were the blanks partly the result of his own attempt to paint over the events a patina of self-deception? After all, had he stayed to fight alongside his imagined heroes he would have surely fallen with them too. 'I hope I have the courage to betray my country rather than betray my friends,' wrote E M Forster. As Edward waited for a wind at Lamu he was bereft of both.

Now years on, at Prachuap, there was little purpose insisting to know what really happened out there. All I could get was, "I can't remember. I don't know." Yet just below the surface of his consciousness the facts blazed like a firebrand. In a very short space of time he had experienced both the shame of failure and soon after with the Masai a singular sense of enlightenment, but the one couldn't extinguish the other. There remained a price to pay, a penance, he never fully understood but which became his constant companion. His past trailed him like a shadow. The haunting melody of a tune never forgotten.

"ON THE ROAD TO MANDALAY..."

News of Edward reached home infrequently, a chance encounter, usually hurried, with an old acquaintance, letters, never very often, never with any answering address. Never giving away much, just 'scraps', that the Pa hoarded to himself thoughtfully in his study. Edward was on a trading raft along the upper reaches of the Amazon. An envelope postmarked Puerto Villerhoel had the Pa getting out his Readers Digest Atlas and carefully tracing his finger down the wobbly thread of the Ichito River, the Chapare, the Mamore. "I do hope he's getting enough to eat?" worried his mother. The letter had mentioned dried howler monkey-meat that they had to rinse in the river to flush out the maggots; the raft capsizing on a snag; caulking the cracks with river mud; avoiding piranhas; a villainous looking Chinaman nicknamed Ho Chi Min; armed cocaine smugglers and mosquitoes blotting out the sunset. "The trick is," commented the Pa, knowledgeably, "clip the net under your hammock with clothes pegs. Do you think he's thought of that?" he added anxiously, for while the Pa had sent Edward off with a Bible, it was his more practically-minded mother who had supplied the First Aid manual, albeit printed in Ceylon fifty years earlier, bound in black with a white cross on the cover. Edward carried it everywhere, but like the Bible, opened it rarely. During his travels, he sometimes met up with other wanderers, for the most part earnest students seeking some personal Shangri La, over the horizon. In Cuzco, or was it Quito, he vaguely recalled an evening in company with a serious young Scot. Later as he voyaged down river on the trading raft he had real reason to consult the First Aid manual only to discover it had become mysteriously swapped for the Scottish Book of Common Prayer. He wondered how the Scot must have felt on the Sabbath, reaching for the spiritual comfort of the psalms, and finding instead treatment for pneumonia. On the raft, drinking water was scooped from the river, 'Bolivian whisky' joked Ho Chi Min, admiring the colour as he picked his teeth with a murderous knife. For days the Indian crew had pestered Edward to exchange for tobacco a large chunk of soapy cheese he had purchased from a Chinese store in Puerto Villerhoel before they embarked. He had been eking it out ever since, nibbling a little each day. He finally consented to a swap the day before they reached Trinidad, when the crew were sprucing themselves up and tweezering out their face hairs in readiness for the bocca negra (black holes), a reference to the local ladies of pleasure. To his astonishment Edward watched the crew dip his 'cheese' in water and proceed to lather themselves down, from head to toe. After that he learned to doubt all Chinese shopkeepers, particularly those who answered his inquiries with a too ready affirmative.

Unable to advise him personally the Pa followed his voyages vicariously. Edward had been in the Yemen driving a jeep for an Italian aid agency. He had tried to cross the Empty Quarter, setting out from the ruined dam at Marib, the fabled Queen of Sheba's long-since ruined citadel, for the Omani mountains a thousand miles of nothing away. Emulating explorer Thesinger, I wondered. He failed. His jeep stuck fast, buried up to the axles. Armed bandits he had paid to help, instead robbed him of his possessions. The Pa flapped the letter at me in excitement, "Listen," he insisted, reading aloud, The night I was desperately miserable, lying on the hare ground, not even a blanket, bitten alive, the jeep immovable. Kneeling in the sand I raised my hands to the heavens and shouted with all the strength I had left, 'Help me, God!' After that I felt a sort of security. At dawn I trudged east through high dunes when suddenly to

my surprise I stumbled upon a military outpost. Up there on a hilltop, a cluster of sand-blown tents; an old pick-up truck that thundered into life when we pushed it downhill; the conscripts laughing and joking and shooting off their AK47's in the back, a cable that plucked out my tiny Suzuki jeep and pointed me on my way. I tell you Pa,

I knew God heard me...." The Pa glanced at me sombrely. "It's not what you think. It's not arrogance. It's humility. One sees an Old Testament picture. Abraham on his knees? A voice crying out in the wilderness, eh?" It was not for me to deny him this tribute to their faith. Later we learned that Edward had been in the Solomon Islands helping with the Melanesian Mission. A reference was required but before this could be submitted he had moved on. He was always moving on. Usually we never knew why. After the Solomons, however, the Pa received a letter from a forestry officer who had been in Edward's year at university. They had met in the open market at Honiara by the wharf, the chanciest of meetings. The man, who had married a local girl and lived above the small town, meaning to be hospitable, asked Edward for dinner. He never showed up. Two days later while waiting at Henderson airfield for a colleague to arrive on the twice weekly flight from Brisbane, he saw Edward checking out. For some time after he vanished there was silence. And then to everyone's surprise came a long letter from Ceylon - the family always insisted on using the old name. Edward had taken the up-country train from Colombo Fort to Kandy where he stayed at the Queen's Hotel overlooking the lake, "...at dusk the drums rattle from the Temple of the Tooth and the ravens squirt holy shit from the giant rain trees along the shore. I caught a bus from the market to Peradeniya." "Ah, pilgrimage to Peradeniya," beamed the Pa, "Now in his mother's day she would have taken a rickshaw, I daresay." I nodded. I knew. I too had shared the haunting cadences of those far memories. The framed photographs from their grandmother's house, now hung in the study; elephants bathing in the twilight at Katagastura, coolies balancing on the huge lily leaves in the lake, his mother in a howdah heading towards Hatton and the long torch lit climb up Adam's Peak. Pilgrimage to his past. Whatever did he hope to find there? "They put me up in the Curator's bungalow - your bungalow," he corrected. "Mother, the travellers palms are still at the bottom of the garden, and the drive winds up as steep as it must have seemed the first time you drove Grandpa's car." That was the photograph he carried in his wallet. His mother, pretty and seventeen, at the wheel of an open Renault, smiling, Teddy Bear for luck perched on the wing mirror. Edward neglected to add that the view from the terrace had altered irrevocably. The golf course where the Kandy races were held, replaced by a university. But then Edward had a reverence for the past that would allow him to edit the present. "I slept in Mama's room," he wrote. "I don't think the plumbing can have changed." His mother was delighted. He had promised to send photographs and when these arrived I noticed he had taken views identical to those in the original Guide Book. The Great Lawn, the Royal Palm Avenue. Views that had only grown with the years. But what must have been in his mind as he toiled the thousands of pilgrim-worn steps to reach the shivering summit of Adam's, or Buddha's Peak at daybreak? The temple gong echoing over the still unawakened world far below as the rising sun cast the peak's pyramidal shadow like a sign in the sky. A sign for him? How much was he pinning his hopes on a destiny that could never be granted? The largesse of God never seemed to land on his dry shores.

He moved east, picking up jobs as he could. Being typically English as he was always helped. He did not usually elaborate. He often travelled rough, sleeping sheltered by deck crates on a listing cargo boat up the coast of Sumatra. "The SS Diny," he wrote, "is a ship no Lutine Bell will ever mourn since no Lloyds underwriter in his right mind would ever insure it. Her hull plates are rusted wafer thin and tarred over, her plimsoll line a distant memory. Listing ever more steadily to starboard the Djakarta dock-hands loaded her until her deck lay awash." The Pa enthusiastically followed his progress through the Sundra Straits, past Krakatoa and up into the Andaman Sea. The Diny's Captain spent all his time playing chess in his cabin below the bridge, while the one-eyed cabin boy steered, in between being chased around the deck by the fat love-crazed cook in a greasy smock waving a carving knife and crying sweaty tears. "All of us kill the thing we love," mused the Pa, "Wilde you know. How does it go on, dear boy The coward with a bitter....'?" He was staring at the study window, "That little square of blue. We prisoners call the sky." Outside in the warm June sunshine the parish stalwarts were mowing the lawn and setting up trestle tables for the fête. Years before we would have been doing just that, helping and hindering. He suddenly announced, "Do you remember the time we put on the Gentle Giant, at Christmas? Edward always liked it." I watched the back of his head. His hair was grey and thin, and neglected, like the Giant's garden. Yes, I thought, Edward did like gardens, secret gardens. There was one up on the cliffs by the old ruined lighthouse, a gate half buried by bushes that opened onto not very much, but Edward's imagination had taken command. "I wonder if he's found it yet," said the Pa, and turning back to me added, "We're all looking, aren't we? That's what it's all about, surely. The search." He paused, "I do hope he hasn't become a buddhist?"

"Why should he?" I was surprised.

"Not that it isn't very meaningful, dear boy, but you see there's no God, no Divine incarnation. A spark in the unending sea. I need to approach the greater glory." (A deprecating chuckle)

"Be it ever so 'umbly, ever so 'umbly. There's so much that I'll never learn in this life. Haven't enough time. Isn't that what they used to write on our reports? 'Room for improvement.' This," a vague gesture at the busy scene through the window, "well meaning, but such a mire. One needs to approach the greater glory, does one not, dear boy, and behold."

We next heard of Edward from the Philippines. It was a letter to me, oddly, because he rarely wrote to me. I preferred to learn at second-hand from the Pa. I didn't relish the responsibility of what or what not to censor when he asked me. I needn't have worried. My next visit the Pa announced. "He's been living in a doss-house in Manila." He coughed in mock reproach. "Next door to some sort of dance hall. Ladies of the Night, I daresay. But I may be wrong." His letter to me had been more explicit. ".... The Hotel Romansa is where the girls from the Firehouse bring their short-time clients. Some of the girls are lovely, too lovely. There's a saying here, 'You can take the girl out of the club but you can't take the club out of the girl.' It's the way they move. All those hours dancing before mirrors. And the mirrors are amazingly polished. At Christmas the girls dress up in bibs and bobs of Santa Claus. Outside the temperature is steaming, and Bing Crosby is crooning 'White Christmas' over the loudspeakers in Rizal Park. Inside, the bar fine has gone up to 150 Pesos for the holidays and the Romansa is busy as Piccadilly Circus. I have an inside room with air-conditioning and no windows, which is a blessing as the noise in the street outside never stops even in the early hours...."

At first he worked as a freelance reporter of sorts. One of the bar flies at the Press Club down by Lunetta waterfront, a big bald Dutchman, who used him from time to time, laughed contemptuously. "Ya, I can send him anywhere and he will do it." The Dutchman omitted to add what everyone else knew, that he got both the byline and the credit while Edward risked getting his arse shot off by the NPA up in the Cordilleras, or south among the Moros in Zamboanga. Then he switched jobs. "Edward's working in films," the Pa declared. "I always said he'd make a fine actor." The truth was less grand. Edward had played a caucasian in various Japanese video movies being shot on location near Manila. Cameo parts principally, out of Pagsanjan or at the Red Quarry overlooking Laguna Bay.

Japanese producers liked the Philippines because the actors were cheap and the extras expected to perform stunts as a routine part of a working day. Edward's first bigger role was a sadistic white colonial adventurer. He remarked that there was a lot of waiting around but the food was good. He quickly graduated to an English Colonel 'Blimp', in 'Revenge of the River Kwai', filmed with no regard to historical fact and strictly for Japanese audiences. The main problem was language. The Filipino extras spoke Tagalog; the Europeans, varieties of English; the film crew, Italian; and the 'Japanese' soldiers, Korean. They gave up early morning starts out of Manila and moved to Pagsanjan, only recently recovering from being used in 'Apocalypse Now', the boatmen still demanding outrageous prices to ferry one up to the falls past various destroyed film-set villages and bridges. It was here, where he had remained after piloting one of the Apocalypse river boats, that Edward fell into the company of Captain Donald Fribecker. In fact they met at the Magellan Bar down in the Plaza, presided over by an exiled Scot named Sandy. Captain Don was expecting his 'ticket', any day now. Circumstances (he did not elaborate) had conspired to rob him of this elsewhere, but here in the Philippines such technical difficulties were easily overlooked if 'greenbacks' were distributed in the right direction. The only drawback was time or the waste of it. Captain Don had been waiting awhile in the Magellan Pub, helping to prop up its unreliable resources against police bribes and bankruptcy.

During days off, Edward enjoyed Pagsanjan. A leisurely breakfast presided over by Victor at the D and C, a leisurely stroll to collect his Manila Bulletin in the Plaza, crossing the river to Mandapio and hiking upstream under the canopy of coconut palms, watching an impromptu street basketball game. He liked paddling down river in the deepening twilight. The stubby domed tower of the Spanish church, ghostly pale above the palm trees. Stranded on the flats below the steep bank, dugout canoes upturned under shrouds of cut palm fronds, lying there in doomed hundreds, queuing for better days - for an invasion of tourists that never came. Roofing the banks with rusty tin or thatch rose a shadowy huddle of houses, window screens fretworked in translucent shell, verandas bowered with hanging tendrils of greenery while unseen from the crowded alleys sounded the cheers of children's games, the squeal of pigs, cries of "Balot" from the wandering duck-egg vendors. Closer at hand, the plop of river carp breaking surface, the slap of paddles beating laundry to death in pallid murky tableaux along the water's edge.

In the half light, it represented a sort of insubstantial peace. Not sufficient to salve his soul, but enough to quieten the turmoil for a while in a brief but welcome respite. Upstream between the dark forested hills, rose the far thunder of the falls where the few boatmen still employed battled their tourists there and back each day. As Edward watched them set off in

the early slanting sunlight from the crumbling terrace of his riverside bungalow, he had no wish to join them, to find himself confronted with other falls, other memories. Sometimes he climbed the wooded hill behind the village, named Little Baguio, after the summer capital, meant to be cooler but what with the steep trudge up, little to feel relief about. Only the view. That jigsaw pattern of flooded rice fields carpeting the plains north to Laguna Bay, where the faint shore-side lights of Santa Cruz lay buried behind half a mile of invading weed, the fishermen had to chop spidery channels through to reach their nets. And across the inland sea, the purple mountains of Luzon riding the luminous evening sky. But this, too, was only an illusory escape. As the night darkened so he had to come down. A cold beer in the plaza at Concha's store, snack kebabs of spicy pork and pineapple at a peso apiece and the stroll back through the gloom to his riverside room, followed at furtive intervals by murmured commentaries. "Hey, Joe, what you do? Hey Joe, where you go? What you looking for?" It occurred to him suddenly as these things often do, that they were right. What was he doing? This was no solution. Despite all familiar colonial landmarks he felt as much an alien here as anywhere. Then he met Don, who took him to cockfights, brothels and boxing bouts. Don wanted an audience and Edward, though whether he had need of one is open to doubt, wanted a mentor. As circumstances turned out his choice proved fatal but at the outset it seemed to make sense. Don invited him to trust him. "Do me a favour will you. Just trust me." Edward felt flattered honoured even. It was the first time someone like this, someone if not exactly out of the pages of the Boy's Own, a suitable candidate nonetheless, had invited him inside, inside the covers of the story itself. He felt almost at home.

Don organised an evening barbecue up-river. A modest affair; suckling pigs; chicken by the boxful; a crate of local gin; six canoes of teenage prostitutes bussed in from Santa Cruz and a glee band. Living on a boathouse moored below the Lodge, Don was in an ideal position to arrange such festivities. Sometimes he picked up a .22 calibre air rifle and took harmless pot shots at surprised Japanese tourists heading up river, shouting "Banzai" as he did so, and bowing ceremoniously low. Or dressed up as a cleric in Monsignor robes, he blessed the plaza, scandalising those emerging from Mass in the big Spanish church. Once he stuffed blown-up condoms under his ecclesiastical skirts and dived into the Lodge pool already filled with Saturday night merry-makers from Manila, with spectacular and turbulent results. Despite local consternation these activities were considered relatively harmless. The 'other' side of his character, as Edward put it, had yet to emerge.

When his 'ticket' finally worked its way through the system, and he was given the job of Master of a passenger ferry plying between Batangas and Karibo, for a small Chinese operator, he offered Edward a job as Second Mate for only a small 'investment', on his part, the uniform included. "After all," persuaded Don, "just a couple of trips would pay for a Master's ticket. After that, well who knows?"

"Navigation?" queried Edward, whose only maritime exploit of note until then was when the two of us sailed across the Channel in a leaky little two berther with a Christmas cracker compass and road lamps in the rigging, one painted over green. Not that it mattered, Edward could no more tell port from starboard than right from left. He never could. But, as he declared, "We've only got to leave Dover and turn that way (flinging out an arm), and we're bound to hit France sooner or later." I had tried to borrow life jackets from the Doctor's yacht, 'Jose', moored in the Eastern Camber, but he hadn't any. "If you're going to drown, the sooner

the better," he declared. He did however offer valuable advice about Man Overboard drill. "A cut-loaf handy, and keep tossing the slices when you go about. That way you'll have something to follow, if your man is still afloat." And a parting comment. "Treat the sea like boiling oil. Don't play around with it." And that was from a man who once spent a week getting from Alderney to Rostoff, twenty miles distant, and then spent a full day off-shore, peering through binoculars and surrounded by charts, trying to decide which continent it was he'd arrived at.

"Trust me," said Captain Don. It was not the first time, Edward had heard him use the words so confidently but he didn't forget it. They were sitting in a port side bar at Batangas, where Edward had just gained a flea up his trousers and had to go to the loo to try and evict it. When he returned Don was sitting in the half light toying with the latest of many bottles of San Miguel beer to be set down on the table. His voice was getting slurred. Moored off the wharf, their ship, the 'Cruz-del-Sur', rocked palely beneath the overcast sky. Their earlier discussion had centred around the communist guerillas, the NPA, who had been recently stepping up their campaign of sabotage and killings and had publicly declared that foreigners particularly Americans were regarded as reasonable targets. Captain Don, waxing belligerent with alcohol, was not going to be intimidated. Elbows on the table, scratching his unshaven cheek, he peered moodily at Edward across the empty beer bottles. The lights from the bar glinting on his spectacles, and a patina of perspiration beaded his brow, which he turned now and then to catch any cooling breeze the sultry night offered.

"Hell, Edward," he declared, "Did I ever tell you about the time I took a man out with one blow in Brazil? A single blow?" he repeated, gazing into his half-filled glass. "This negro sailor, one of the biggest men I've ever known, he said to me, 'Cap'n Don, let me do you a favour, teach you the killer blow, take a man out with a single hit'." He glanced back at Edward. "Did too." He nodded gravely. "I was in a bar in Port Belem with this shithouse shipping agent. One of your fellow Brits. Name of Johnson?" he added inquiring, as if by some remote chance Edward might have known him too. "Standing up at the bar. We started something. Can't remember what about. Bit of a brawl, and I hit him. Just one blow. The blow. Down he went." Captain Don rubbed his chin and gave a grimace that was part surprise and part achievement, and then shrugged. "Had this black chick with me. Took her back to the boat." He delivered Edward a knowing smirk, "Got to dip your pen in the inkwell once in a while." Edward nodded obligingly. "Heard the news over the ship to shore radio next morning. By then we were heading out to sea. Johnson had died." He emptied his glass and filled it from a fresh bottle. "So what do you think I did?" he demanded. Edward, who had no idea, waited. "I forgot about it," Don announced. "I erased it completely and absolutely from my mind. The whole incident, Brazil, Port Belem, Johnson, the lot. I shipped them overboard." Edward nodded to shield his misgivings. There was something about Don coming to the surface he hadn't seen before, and felt increasingly uneasy about. "I went East," Don continued. "Diego Garcia. British flyspeck in the Indian Ocean. Big American base. Couple of Brits left to raise the flag and sing Rule Britannia." He lowered his head and peered querulously across the table expecting Edward to comment. "Fucking Brits, wet as babies nappies. Not you, Edward. Just 99 percent of your compatriots. Such a help to us in the Vietnam war, weren't you?" Edward writhed uncomfortably, but did not rise to the jibes. Don changed back, "Met this skipper one night.

Had a few drinks. Told me the story of how he killed a man once. Man called Johnson. Threw him off a cliff near Naples. Same name. It all came back, Brazil, Port Belem, the bar fight. Tried to hide it in drink. Block it out. Went on a bender for two days. Smashed the place up. Had to go before the bloody British magistrate who kicked me off the island. Came here. End of story, eh?" And then he reached over and to Edward's surprise tapped him on the wrist. "Not over yet," he added in a conspiratorial whisper. "Still everything to play for. Trust me, eh?"

Next morning a typhoon was blowing down the straits, seizing the channel in great gusts of wind and spray, hurling the sea sideways. With the canvas awnings lowered, the passengers clutching their deck chairs and being sick, the overloaded 'Cruz-del-Sur' skewed her way, listing heavily across the channel to the shelter of the islands off Puerto Gallera. To Edward, clutching the bridge rail to keep upright, those occasional glimpses of the welcoming shore, torn through the squally mists, might have been the sight of another world, a safe haven from all his anxieties. Even Captain Don seemed disconcerted by the conditions, but he was quite sober and Edward pinned his trust on him.

They finally dropped anchor in the sheltered bay at Puerto. The local ferry had commandeered the wharf, but boatmen came out to bring ashore anyone who wanted. It was the night before Christmas Eve. The hotel bar beside the wharf was strung with bunting, 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year'. All day Captain Don sat in the bar drinking, and staring out to sea. There was a gap between two jungled headlands where you could glimpse the white spray-spat breakers roaring past. Patches of grey and white cloud swooped low over the uncertain horizon. Don, Edward knew, was determined to be in Karibo for Christmas. "There's a particular little whorehouse off the main square. That's where my Christmas present is waiting." He squinted at Edward trying to get him into focus. "Fucking weather. But it'll blow itself out, you'll see. We'll get off tonight. Hey!"

He cried across to the girl behind the bar, "More beer will you. Merry Christmas, isn't it?"

The register said 500 passengers, but that was only because the list was full up. Edward privately estimated there were at least 1,000, possibly more crammed between the two top heavy decks. A mass of three-tiered metal bunks, linked and rattling together, in a vast web of uneasy sleep spanned the decks. Overhead neon lights glared down onto faces of troubled sleep. Whole families fitted to a single bunk, trying to shut out the scratchy recording of Bing Crosby's 'Sleighbells' crackling over the loudspeakers. Up on the bridge the blaze of lights made it difficult to see outside. An inky swaying dark pressed against the ship sides, interrupted only by turbulent splashes of foam as the bows lifted through heavier seas. Barring a compass there were no navigational aids. No ship to shore radio. Nor were there any life rafts, although a cabin crammed with life jackets was locked up in the stern. A Filipino named Riccardo stood broad legged at the wheel, a big bearded fellow who gave Edward a reassuring gap-toothed grin, and offered him a swig from his gin bottle. Captain Don sat slumped on a bench wedged between the bulkheads. 'Sleighbells' crooned on unceasing. Outside on the observation deck Edward could make out nothing. The sky was as pitch black as the sea. The rare pinpoints of light that showed and vanished could have been stars as easily as ships floating in this vast empty galaxy. Suddenly to his surprise he spotted a red light ahead moving across their bows, sliding sideways. Nothing else visible. Just this solitary bright red eye. A boat? Of course it was a boat. But coming which way? Was red port, or was it

starboard, and which one was left? And just as he had decided, a green one showed as well. Which way was it heading? He leaned into the bridge, his eyes dazzled by the bright lamps. "Riccardo, boat ahead." Riccardo grinned and tapped his skull. "This radar. No boat." "But there is!" Edward insisted. "Come, look."

Riccardo shrugged, beckoned for him to take the wheel and peered outside.

"What boat?" he called back. Edward let go the wheel for a moment and came out, narrowing his eyes against the glaring cabin lights and the wind. It was total blackness. No lights. Riccardo clapped an arm on his shoulder and pulled him inside. "You see Christmas lights, Eddy. Any boat see us a million miles . . ."

Before he could complete the sentence a head-on crash shuddered through the ship throwing them both off their feet. Edward collided with a bulkhead. As he crawled dazed out onto the companionways a scalding blast flung him flat on the deck. He shielded his face from an exploding fireball that swallowed and smothered the darkness, illuminating into eerie relief the silhouette of a coastal tanker they had ploughed into. The sheer force of the collision had heaved it broken-backed across the 'Cruz's' bow, while its cargo of ruptured fuel drums toppled like skittles onto the foredeck, jetting a dragon's breath of liquid fire right into the open sleeping heart of the ship. For a few macabre moments the only sound was the drenching roar of igniting fuel and the hiss of flames upon the sea. Edward, paralysed partly by fear, partly by fascination, remembered the same shocking stillness one night in the Solomon Islands the instant an earthquake struck, and the pandemonium to follow. It was like that now. Faintly at first, but quickening in crescendo rose the horrified cries of the passengers waking in panic to find the fury of the flames already engulfing them - a terrified bedlam of frenzied screams gaining in momentum as if in a vain attempt to smother the implacable fury of the inferno. This sound of human terror alerted Edward into action. But what to do? A dozen thoughts flashed through his mind - life jackets, alarms, fire hoses, pumps, distress flares, his own peril, and then nothing. There was nothing he could do. He was witnessing two giant fire-eating monsters wedded together in a death duel at which all the onlookers were doomed to perish like ants on rotting logs, that as boyswe had consigned to the camp fire. By now the wall of flames had advanced steadily along the ferry. Burning fuel gushed unhindered through the open ship, swamping the engine room and setting the stern alight with such a roar the 'Cruz's' own tanks must have exploded. "Jump!" Cried a voice. Was it instinct? Self-preservation shouting directions at him? "You can't do anything here. Jump!" The same instinct that had diverted duty into cowardice in Africa? He dithered. Flames were rising around him. Smoke poured up thick and choking. His eyes were smarting, he could barely breathe. Suddenly he realised the voice was coming from below, from where, balancing on the deck coaming, life jacket in one hand, Don was staring up at the bridge. "Jump!" He coaxed. "Jump. Trust me."

Edward surveyed the savage spectacle of sea aflame and bobbing with hundreds of dark shapes struggling in the oily troughs. Directly beneath him, an empty unlit wave, cruising past seemed to invite. He didn't so much dive as let go. Reluctantly, feet first, fists clenched, scrabbling at nothing, not wanting to see or feel anything but the Holy, unhopd for, security of safety, plus a plea to God to hold him as he fell.

Edward had always been a reasonable swimmer, but his size had given him an advantage over other people. He could hold his breathe a very long time. I remember a biology lesson, blowing into a jar of water to measure our lung capacity. The figure for most of us was 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 litres. Edward astonished everyone, our teacher included, by continuing to expel air from his lungs while the level in the bell jar lowered below the 5 litre mark. The result seemed to make little difference in athletics where he was only a fairly medium runner, or rowing where he usually took a bowside, number 5 oar. But he could swim underwater further than anyone I knew. Now instead of rising to the surface he struck out in the calm undersea currents unsure where to go but determined to swim just as far as he could and a bit further from the Hell above. With his sandals kicked off, his light clothes hardly impaired him at all, nor his money belt, which patched and repatched, he had rarely allowed himself to be parted from, day or night, since Africa. The tawny glitter above him faded, as did the muffled moans echoing through the unseen depths. He counted another twenty strokes without any breath left, his lungs at bursting point, before striking up through the turbulent surface into an angry buffet of waves and spray. Luck or instinct had guided him out of immediate danger and the mountainous seas swaying him aloft gave him a mast-head view of the disaster, tossing and pitching in its death throes a safe distance away. The petrol tanker had broken in two, both bow and stern ablaze and sinking fast amid a guttering of subdued underwater explosions, but the 'Cruz' by now burning all along the waterline lay uncertainly on the fiery illuminated swell, the piteous cries from its cargo of doomed souls drifting slowly away.

It seemed a long while later when the 'Cruz-del-Sur' finally succumbed and sank. From his sea-borne haven the flames had been something of a comfort to Edward. Now as the sea-fires flickered out and only a faint chorus from the drowning penetrated the pitching dark, the utter misery of dying alone overwhelmed him. He started praying out-loud but the nauseous stench of oil and charred flesh made him vomit. He choked on seawater, sang or spat 'Jerusalem', and remembered lines from 'Rock of Ages', and when next he had the opportunity to look about him he spotted an orange light far off. The only light in his entire world. For a while he wondered if it could be from a searching boat. Unlike a lighthouse beam it didn't flash. Even if it was a star he decided to aim for it. "Just so long as it stays up there," he determined grimly, "so will I."

Miserable hours passed bringing fresh fears. Thoughts of sharks, sting rays, giant jelly fish, set him thrashing about in panic, but his orange light stayed steadily, low in the sky. Finally the black night thinned. A pallid angry glow outlined the black sea horizon, As the tide of dawn flooded in, above the grey slopping waves his beacon faded, replaced gradually by the outline of dark brooding mountains, cliffs along a jungle shore, and a mile ahead at the most, a backwash of breaking seas tumbling together onto clashing rocks in a thunder of soaring spray. The current cruised him in towards the cliffed shoreline, but as he got closer relief changed to anxiety. Weary and waterlogged, eyes stinging, lips raw, he made one final plea, one of those never-to-be-forgotten-in-the-years-ahead promises. "If only...." And the wall of water towering above him seemed to relent, to loosen for a moment its iron grip, exchanging its captive to the mercy of lesser eddies that floated him from one gully to another, lifting him safely past treacherous razor sharp corals where black crabs stared at him with their red storked eyes, scuttling sideways when he reached out for a hand-hold as he was swept on, before being abandoned momentarily in a shingled gap where he prised himself slowly out on

all fours sinking face down and bursting into tears, on a drier firmament than he had ever dared hope he would touch again.

When the local fishermen found him, clambering down the rocks to see what bounty the storm had flushed in, it was a slightly unnerving experience since one had only a stump for an arm and the other had his hand stitched up into a claw. For a moment Edward wondered exactly what underworld he was being welcomed to. But the fishermen, who spoke only Tagalog, fed him a little of their rice and dried fish, and to drink - raw tuba, coconut spirit that burned his insides, and set him coughing until he cried. The fishermen helped him up the cliff to the coastal track, flagged down the next passing jeepney going to Puerto Gallera and hoisted him on board, announcing to everyone that this "Joe" they'd fished out of the sea was stoned on ganja. Edward tried to find the strength to smile at his audience, for his dishevelled appearance certainly won no approval.

The dirt road followed the rugged jungle coastline, while out at sea, glimpsed between the heads of the passengers opposite and a windscreen adorned with bright red dangling madonnas, the grey storm waves had given way to bright blue seas and white breakers. By the time the jeepney had reached Puerto, Edward had dried out and regained some of his composure. Apart from his bare feet and the obvious lack of baggage, he looked little different to many other travel stained foreigners who wandered cheaply between the islands. He avoided the hotel by the jetty where he might have been recognised, and rented a cottage instead a mile away at Fishermen's Cove, buying a pair of 'flip-flops' for the walk. Here in the quiet privacy of his hut he washed, dried out his money belt, slept and waking up in mid-afternoon tried to decide what to do next.

There were too many conflicting alternatives. What he wanted more than anything was news. In the late afternoon he walked back to Puerto. The tumbledown port of rusted tin roofs and small trading stores gave no hint of mourning. Loud music bellowed, people were laughing, crowded jeepneys slipped in the mud, boatman called out, "Hey, Joe, you go Sabang?" As before he avoided the hotel, but by now he was considering the fact that even if a copy of the ship's list existed at the port office in Divisoria or Batangas, it was unlikely his name would be on it. After all he only had Don's 'trust me' word that he was a member of the ship's crew. And Don, he presumed, had perished with everyone else. Nevertheless, shouldn't he volunteer as a witness, report to the police, make a statement? Tell them what he saw? But could he risk that? He had been on the bridge. They could claim the collision was his fault and arrest him. They would have to arrest someone just to show justice was being done. A foreigner would be a much better scapegoat to blame it on. And after all he had been on watch. He shut his eyes tight to blot out the memory. "Hey Joe," a voice pipes. "Hey Joe, where you go?" He looked down to find a boy in neat white school shirt and shorts grinning at him. "Hey Joe, you give me one peso, please?" Edward automatically fished a coin out of his pocket wishing he could pawn his immediate past as easily.

He wandered slowly down the dirt road to the far side of the headland where he had been driven in that morning. The poor side of Puerto. Thatched fishermen's shacks crowding the back of a steep eroded beach heaped with refuse, and a few derelict boats stranded above the high water line. What attracted his attention now were the clusters of men and boys wading out among the breakers, lunging with bamboo poles. Other groups appeared to be digging. As he approached he realised it wasn't just filth and refuse spoiling the sea but oil. A thick film

coated everything it clung to, particularly the sacklike objects fished out of the swell; bodies or parts of bodies, charred and chewed, washing listlessly ashore in a steady unrecognisable unrecorded procession of death. Edward waited hesitantly beneath the scattered palm trees, unwilling witness to the macabre spectacle, but unable to turn away. He remembered PC Lubbock's gruesome description of suicides over the St. Margaret's cliffs after the crabs had been at them, particularly the 'fleshy bits'.

Once as schoolboys swimming early morning in the Hyde Park Serpentine, he had felt a cold hand press on his shoulder and cried out angrily to quit fooling about, when ahead, around the island appeared a rowing boat with one policeman at the oars and another throwing out a grappling hook.

It was Hammond their coach who first noticed the body floating near Hammersmith Bridge and beckoned the 1st Eight to push it ashore, where he performed the kiss of life on the spot and claimed he only just failed to save her, rather contradicting the coroner's report, which stated the body had been in the water so long as to be unidentifiable. Who's body? - His body, or Don's down on the beach. He shuddered, shivering despite the sultry heat. And then the stench reached him. Now he realised the purpose of the digging. There seemed to be no attempt at identification. Cries of triumph greeted the discovery of wallets or rings. Perhaps later a lorry load of cheap coffins would arrive for decent funerals but somehow he doubted it. The only sign of authority was a police jeep pulled off the road at the far end, its occupants lounging and smoking, waiting for their cut no doubt. A fire started blazing. Edward didn't choose to investigate. Funeral pyres already?

In Manila he had visited the Chinese cemetery where the houses of the dead were far finer than most of the living ever had, some even possessed air-conditioning and all contained letter boxes. "To mail requests to your ancestors," quipped the guard. Yes, the wealthy Chinese had the best of whatever you want; in Manila, Bangkok, Djakarta, even in death, except today none of the hastily buried or burning black heaps looked particularly prosperous. Nor were there any letter boxes inviting requests.

It was my first night in Prachuap. Dao had come and gone. She had brought supper prepared in the market and we had eaten Thai style on the floor. While she was there Edward was alert, attentive, almost subordinate in a way I had never seen before. But now in her absence his brooding restlessness returned. The moon had faded in a tawny glow behind one of the outer islands. The lights in the village had gone out. The wind had died away. Only the occasional motorbike rattling along the coast disturbed the stillness.

"I had this desperate need," he admitted wearily, "For someone. Something. I had never felt so utterly alone." He started rocking slowly forward and back in a hunched up, rather foetal manner. "I didn't know then that 47 people had been rescued. I don't expect that would have mattered though. I just needed someone. To hold. So much." His voice was pleading. I don't know why he should doubt my understanding. After all he had been through it was hardly unexpected. The need for reassurance. A body, any body, he confided in a whisper, that would clutch him back and moan under his caresses. Just to prove he was still a living force. "I was standing on the wharf where the Batangas ferry docks," he went on. "It was twilight now. There was this young voice, singing high pitched, almost falsetto, the way they sometimes do. Sexy, sensual. God it was!" He exclaimed. "Up in the bows. I couldn't make out who. Just a white shape in the dusk. I felt on fire for it. I had to have it. Whoever it was." His voice seemed

to agonise over the admission. Why? I wondered. "We walked back to my rented hut in the cove. It was very dark. I had no torch. We kept tripping over and clutching at each other. Inside the hut I fumbled lighting the bloody lantern, I was twitching so much. I had never seen anyone so beautiful naked, never experienced such a desperate longing, an aching to . . . have." His voice was trembling in the telling, blurry and indistinct. I had to lean forward to catch the words, the two voices, 'How much?' 'Two hundred pesos.' 'One hundred?' 'One hundred half hour. Money down'." It sounded curiously remote, unfeminine even. I pictured the scene. Damp notes hurriedly peeled off the table where they had dried. "All mine," he declared proudly, "the body, the limbs, the arms, the smell, the sweat, the outside, inside . . . everything. Everything!" He cried triumphantly. "But the voice only murmured back, 'Nothing, nothing'." So the body gave but the soul withheld. And yet the indifference somehow excited him even more, until suddenly the voice announced "Half hour up." "It was like those row boats on Regent's Park pond. 'Number 69 come in now. Your time is up'. Run out! I don't know what. Ecstasy! Need! I have never felt like that with anyone, ever, again."

Yet the wish to recapture it remained. The need to know he was alive, and not burned to ashes in a funeral pyre on the sands of Sabang, was not so easily abandoned. Edward returned to Manila and virtually took up residence in the Fire-house. It was in Manila an incident occurred that made him wonder if he was going mad. He had poured a dash of Mekong to my glass, and topped his own with ice that clinked as he clutched it unsteadily, squinting at the lantern. "I was in Chinatown, or rather the end of it where it sinks into the crumbling morass of slums and canals of the Divisoria Port Quarter. I was walking aimlessly along the street when I happened to see myself coming out of a doorway." He waited for my reaction. I nodded obligingly.

"Probably your own reflection. What do you think it was?" I suggested, perhaps carelessly, "The Fata Morgana?" He gave an involuntary shudder that shook the whole hut. The lantern flared, revealing the haunted look on his face.

"I don't know, my conscience maybe. But it was me. I tell you. The other me. And I ran," He went on, sitting bolt upright, one arm poised as if to strike. "I ran across the road and jumped down some steps beside a bridge. I think it was some sort of market, big wicker baskets, low tatty awnings, puddles, boxes. I dodged this way and that, but whenever I glanced back he was there, coming after me. It was hard to escape. There was a high wall on one side, and a row of cardboard shacks on stilts over this stinking canal. The path turned a corner. When I looked round he was closing in on me. About fifty yards ahead, the shacks stopped and in the gap, steps dropped to the canal. A rope hung across with a lopsided pontoon attached. I jumped on board so fast the thing almost capsized, flung a peso to the boatman and started tugging at the rope myself. I got away," he gasped triumphantly. "I left him there. On the other bank where he couldn't reach me. I could hear him calling, 'Stop! Wait!' But I didn't. I ran along this slippery wharf. The canal below had dried out to black ooze and refuse. Overhead huge seagulls were screaming above the tumbledown tin roofs of the Divisoria market. I hurried inside, squeezing along narrow, crowded paths between heaped stalls. I felt safe in there. I hoped he wouldn't find me." He looked away. "I suppose you think I'm mad."

"No," I said quickly. "God I'm no psychiatrist but after the sort of experience you'd just come through, I shouldn't wonder if the imagination can't play some nasty tricks." He stared moodily into space, slumped forward in his chair.

"It wasn't imagination," he said with quiet obstinacy.

"In that case," I resumed briskly, "did your . . . did he catch up with you again?" Edward shook his head slightly.

"Not yet anyway. I think I gave him the slip." And then he added something else that astonished me. A memory from a long way back, lines the Pa once quoted I never expected him to remember. "The stranger and the enemy, we see him in the mirror."

For a moment in Manila, his past had crept up on him like a statue of the Commendatore in Don Giovanni to drag him down to Hell. A reminder, he decided, that for him there was no redemption.

"WHERE THERE AIN'T NO TEN COMMANDMENTS..."

If redemption there was, then his penance, although he failed to see it at the time, would be Pattaya. "I don't have a future, only a past," he observed, months later after he had finally quit 'Sin City', and sailed single-handed to Ko Chang. "But at least that's reassuring. So long as you edit out the bad bits. Or try to," he added. In Pattaya for a time, on the surface at least, he seemed to achieve just that. "Pattaya," wrote a friend overseas, "is tinsel-town. Take away the massage parlours, strip shows, the girlie bars. Bolt up the short-time rooms. Tear down the glitter signs wishing Merry Christmas and Happy New Year ALL year round. Eliminate the happy hour and the even more illusive short time. Pack up the paragliding chutes. Ban the water scooters before they mutilate any more swimmers, intrepid enough to risk skin rash by venturing into the fetid waters without a chemical protection suit. Set free the six foot stork imprisoned in a six foot cage at the end of the Narok Pier. The chimpanzee too; the snakes doped in sacks; the chained baby elephant whose only sight of greenery is the baize on the snooker tables. Wheel away the trolleys of pirated cassettes and the fake Rolex wristwatches to their owners' shacks up Soi 17. Close down the sweat-shops churning out designer clothes by the dozens. Seize the bulging bags of the fake leather wallet merchants, and the women whose diminutive infants ply the beaches with caged birds, begging 'twenty bahts' off tourists to set them free (and gain merit), only for the birds to fly straight back to be encaged again. Take away the tourists and the U.S. Fleet on whose Rest and Recreation visits the town relies, and what's left? What's left when the party's over? Not so long ago I remember it was a fishing village. Now overloaded sewers spill over the sand and there's not a live fish in sight except in the reservoir, which rarely rises to the level of the pumps. The infrastructure," he added, "is sadly lacking."

The letter was written by Anthony Hope, whose elderly mother lived in the Bay. Hope, in the course of a varied and circuitous career, had recently been employed with Less than authorised credentials as legal adviser to a Chinese 'front' firm, in Silom Road, Bangkok. Before that he had managed to promote himself to a Governor of the Reserve Bank of Laos. That was back in 1975, before the Pathet Lao communists concluded their uneasy pax with Prince Souphana Phouma, and sent the gentle old King Savang Vattana and the rest of the Royal Family to a re-education camp in the malarial forests of the far north, never to be heard of again. Inquiries at the abandoned palace in Vientiane, always got the same answer. A hand pointing silently north. Hope, by his own admission, had to be something of a Master of Ceremonies, getting his colleagues to dance. The four parties to this financial charade were the United States, Japan, France and Britain. When a decision had to be taken on a development funding, the Japanese wanted to know what companies would be employed, the French were interested in the political fall-out, the British inquired if the scheme was really necessary and the Americans always said "Yes." They were still saying yes when the Pathet Lao stormed the bank building, but by then Hope was already swimming across the muddy moonlit Mekong River to Nong Khai, with a considerable quantity of the currency reserve of Laos, tucked in his pockets or floating like a paper chase behind him.

Hope did not make the most reliable of witnesses since his personal view of events was subject to entertaining elaboration. Nevertheless he was there, and we weren't. After Edward

fled Manila for who-knows-where, there was no one else we could ask, and also no one better qualified to track him down. Two months passed before Hope's letter arrived. It appeared that after some time in the wilds (it was only later I found out where and why), Edward had succumbed to the allures of Pattaya. Hope, solicitous of his own part in this assumed, or claimed, the unlikely role of the Pa's personal envoy. He went on to explain at some length how he finally confronted Edward. "Your father's very ill," I reminded him. "You could at least telephone." But he ignored me as if he hadn't heard. As if he didn't wish to hear." The explanations as I realised later could have been because they had met in the Narok Bar where one had to bellow or lip-read. "Should I shout the news out loud," Hope went on "above the raucous screech of the Thai opera, the rock music, the sound tracks from a dozen different equally disregarded film videos, the sinuous wailing accompaniment to the boxing bouts. 'He's dying! He wants to see you!' Instead Hope mouthed this message across the noisy U-shaped bar counter, past Madame Ouan, an international display of bottles, a dozen bar girls waving in new customers, with "Sit down please," to where Edward sat high stooled on the other side, among the Good, the Bad and the Ugly, (Hope's choice of words). I wondered in which category he considered himself. Deaf to Hope's entreaties, Edward was busy fondling a new friend on either side.

In Pattaya, as I learned later, there is no shortage of friends. Like the flash jeeps, they are all for rent by the hour, the day, the week, and even the month. The bodywork always highly polished, the upholstery a little worn, the radio blaring, and the name providing scant clue as to performance. "Your friend; Best friend; New friend; True friend; New Star; New Lover; Best lover; Laredo (for the cowboy); Manhattan (for the sophisticate); Butterfly (for the collector); Safari (for the al fresco). But sign the contract and drive off into the sunset or dawn chorus, and you soon discover you don't get quite the smooth ride the package promised. Toy was Edward's promise. Hope only revealed this reluctantly. Like all magicians he liked to pull his best trick last out of the hat. At the start he probably didn't know. And he was also puzzled by Edward's response to his news. No mention had been made of Edward's recent escape from the 'Cruz-del-Sur' disaster. Possibly to avoid worry, it was not something he had written home about. Whether he ever told Hope, I have no idea. Hope however made the apt comment that Edward "....seemed to be running to keep up with life, as if living is something you can achieve by pursuit alone...." And reading this I had a sudden picture of the Pa's hens, necks rung, flapping squawking across the vicarage lawn. Death was an enemy. Just the shadow of its wing across his path was more than Edward could bear.

To put events in brief chronological order, Edward frightened by the encounter with his own 'mirage' in Manila, tried to lose himself, and everyone else by retreating into the wild, only to discover he had little desire for places where his mind was free to roam. He felt this need, urgency almost, for the haunts of men. People who spoke his own language. Jovial laughter. Girls who pressed themselves into his life for shorter or longer time. The mirrored short time rooms at the Suriwongse Hotel provided a crazy kaleidoscopic duplication of desire. It was only after it was over and he lay there alone that the same mirrors haunted him. But in Bangkok as in Pattaya there was little opportunity to be alone for long. "I go with you?" they purred in his willing receptive ear. And it was all so perfectly civilised. Usually the manager presented a photo album of intimacies to help you choose your number. He avoided 27 after a painful episode in a Patpong massage parlour where she jumped up and down on his back like

a trampoline and he had to crawl out with the aid of the banisters. At the Paradise, as elsewhere, there was always a short-time room upstairs. If funds were getting thin, you only had to wait until 3.00 am and the bar-fine ceased to apply. Choose your number from the girls on display and acquire an instant friend. True, new, best or one friend. Edward admired the facility. Up to now his life had seemed such a bloody lottery, picking a future at random, never knowing what to expect. Now, at last, he felt he was living with the total freedom to follow his imagination.

From a corner stool at one of the back bars of the Narok - "Hell as it appropriately translates, for all who enter,"

claimed Hope, "are surely doomed to eternal damnation," - he watched the boxers fight it out, fists and feet in the ring, while the wailing music numbed his senses. Not far beneath his seat, the rising tide rinsed out the 'lacquer' kids and the 'heroin' kids from their hide outs between the pilings. A constant parade of acrobats, snake charmers, flower sellers and child hustlers passed him by. He only had to swivel his stool to study the colourful cacophony of the Thai opera, blaring out bejewelled from a stage propped precariously over the harbour, or he would lean on the pier rail and watch the moon rising unconsidered over Pattaya Bay, and sniff the effluent overflowing from the sewer outfall just below the Penis temple where those with particular needs plied their prayers, while gaudy wooden phalluses up to six feet long, lay stacked like dead logs. Most of the male population wore ornamental polished wooden pricks tied around their waists. For many of the children, these were undoubtedly bigger than their own.

Yes, that first visit of Edward - so very different from his later ones. Even Hope was taken aback by the naive enthusiasm he displayed as he toured him around the bars, showing them off with the confidence of a connoisseur. Hope's detached condescension was partly due to his choice of hotel. As always, he opted for the opulent luxury of the Royal Cliff Beach, from which commanding view, much of Pattaya Bay blazed like a bright toy. A spangled crescent of lights. Hope felt considerable empathy with the towering, recently gilded statue of Buddha on a nearby hilltop whose smile beamed understandingly down on the human frailties struggling so strenuously down below. Hope misquoted Ezra Pound's Parcellus in Excelsis, "being beyond humanity, why should I assume its responsibility, or don its frail attire?"

Edward on the other hand, lived as he always had, more earthily. His bungalow, and I had Hope's

description to go by "....lay festooned by falling palm fronds, beneath a tangle of towering bamboo, stuck on stilts over a stagnant klong, whose miasmic vapours dissolved even the light fittings, while troublesome termites devoured the rest, so that things fell with psychic unpredictability." This observation rather belied the charming address 'Crystal Garden', or 'Clystal Galen' as the Thais called it, mixing up their R's and L's, switching 'farang' into 'falang'. Hope also commented, "Upstream, rarely seen except by the undergrowth, McArthur, a Glaswegian American, rebukes his dogs and his houseboy. From the far side of his rickety footbridge he recalls ten years before, when the stream was clear as crystal, and points out a small dinghy he used to paddle to sea and go fishing. 'Usually pissed,' commented another pith-helmeted neighbour, 'but now reformed.' In the intervening years the klong had become the open sewer for South Pattaya. Even water plants perish and

only rats, catfish and terrapins lurk beneath its fetid surface. To reach Edward, one crosses a rickety footbridge in the centre of which he has devised a drawbridge to forestall unwanted intruders...." Intruders into what? Not very much according to Hope, at least ever since Edward took up with Toy, who managed to put off everyone, Farang and Thai alike. Hope spoke the language with some fluency, unlike Edward, who at that stage could summon up half a dozen words if he was lucky, and those mispronounced. Toy was a Lao from the drought stricken poverty trap of the north-east, where the Mekong river curves a lazy loop along the border. Toy - it was her nickname, everyone without exception had a nickname, chosen at birth - came from Nakon Panom. Across the river the purple peaks of Laos rose crookedly above the skyline. This province of Paak Isaan used to be the rice granary of the entire country, but the rains had either failed altogether leaving the crop to wither in the dust, or there were floods at harvest time, and what could be salvaged had to be cut under water before it rotted. Now many of the families had abandoned their fields altogether and fled to Bangkok, some to become taxi drivers, fifty to a fanless room, renting their cabs for four hundred baht a day before they even knew the city.

But for many of the emigres the future pointed to Pattaya, to work on construction sites, living in camps of tin huts, or inside the unfinished apartments, touring restlessly and wide-eyed the evening streets of the tinsel-town they were helping to put together with often little more than their own bare hands. Toy's family graduated to a cement room behind Soi Yen Sabai, "a misnomer if ever there was one," remarked Hope grimly, "it is neither cool yen, nor comfortable sabai. A filthier undrained quagmire of flying refuse would be harder to find anywhere." By the time she was eleven, Toy was spending more time in nearby Danny's Billiard Bar entertaining foreigners than going to school. From there she graduated to Ouan's Bar on the Narok Pier. When she met Edward her education had long since been completed. Toy, or so Hope fulsomely declared, was Edward's salvation. Perhaps at the time she was. Edward may have been less convinced. Among the litter of his left overs, strewn carelessly around the bungalow after his hasty departure, shortly before I arrived, and where Toy went on living, the rent having been paid in advance, I came upon a poem scribbled, like the Pa's sermons, on the back of an envelope. If his 'Pattaya Girl' was meant to be Toy, then it was grossly unfair, but as a clue to his mood at the time, quite illuminating.

"Her lips were fire, her skin was tanned

She smoked and drank, her breath was damned.

I loved the tattoos on her thighs,

I loved her for her enterprise.

I loved the way she won at pool, chalking her cue, potting her shots,

Not giving a damn for the loves she won,

not caring a toss for the games she lost.

God, she was fun!

I loved the way she showed up late,

revving her bike across the lawn.

Switching on lights, flushing the 'John',

blaring the radio full on.

Breathing smoke in my face, snoring 'till noon. God she was fun!

I loved the way she never read,

never mended, never cleaned.

Never cared for this and that.

Even loved the way she spat!

But what I love most is when she farts, Thrusts out her hand and begs Ten Bahts. God, what a girl!"

(And then two more lines crossed out)

"And so we loved a month or more

until she moved on or I moved out."

There was almost a Miss Joan Hunter quality to it, though I'm not sure Betjeman would have agreed.

Hope's account had ended. At least it told where Edward was, if not how he got there. The gap of several weeks after he left Manila remained unaccounted for, which wouldn't have mattered had it not been that by the time I managed to follow up Hope's letter and got there myself, Edward had once again moved on, or back. But why? Perhaps, as he himself later implied, he had begun to realise he couldn't go on plundering bodies for ever like some happy-go-lucky pirate. Perhaps something inside refused to go along with the plan, as if despite his commands, the crew had mutinied, leaving Captain Bligh bobbing about in the 'Bounty's' longboat. Suddenly the tiny man inside the wind-up gramophone had started to sing another song. Edward wasn't altogether certain he approved. If this was fate of Buddha guiding him towards a more spiritually rewarding plateau, then he would not object, but if instead it was his body that was crumbling and he was becoming as bereft of desire as of sight and sound, then the future seemed particularly bleak. "Pattaya is a trap," he informed me in Prachuap, with all the insistence of a reformed poacher. "I'm going to break free of it. I have broken free of it," he added hastily, but with less conviction.

"Perhaps some people enjoy being trapped." I intended the remark harmlessly enough, but I could tell the notion annoyed him. Dare I suggest it wasn't Pattaya, but his own fantasy that failed him. For fantasy demands mystery and that has to be sustained. Try as one might, Pattaya was a hard place to rekindle dreams once the flames had flickered out.

Naturally by the time I finally reached Pattaya, circumstances had changed as they invariably do. I had an uneasy suspicion the Edward might have bolted, but my fears were not realised until after I had checked into the friendly PN Guest House, rinsed out my travel weariness under the hot shower, rented the ubiquitous Honda Dream motorbike from the soi outside, and set off along Beach Road for the Crystal garden.

A close unwelcome encounter with two vicious snapping mutts, called off by commands in the unmistakable lilting-drawl of Edward's neighbour, gained me my introduction to McArthur, who, once he had escorted his hounds back across his plant-lined footbridge, scratched the back of his toupee where it perked up under his white golfing cap. "He's been away now awhile." His diphthongs purred. He smiled amiably as a schoolboy at my undisguised disappointment. "But she's still there. Aye," his mouth puckered as he hoisted a glance sideways. "Aye, she's still there." His voice lowered in a whisper, "but she won't tell you anything. Lao." The vowel opened his whole face. "Lao. Very secretive. Lucky if you get a word out of her." A sound from the house had him glancing back anxiously. "You'll excuse me. I've got a new houseboy. Other one let me down." He shook his head with a grimace. Later I overheard in Anderson's Coffee Shop how recently, while McArthur was staying at the

Suriwongse in Bangkok, he met a visitor just arrived from Pattaya. He recounted an amusing episode of how he met this very friendly houseboy, who told him his master was away and invited him back. Snarling dogs,

footbridge, smelly klong. At some startling point McArthur realised it was his own bungalow that was being described. Even his own bed. When he got back, he sacked the boy on the spot, only to be robbed of everything a week later while he was out. Now he lived in a state of siege waiting for the next thing to go wrong. "Can't trust them, you know. Very cunning. I even have to mark the level of the marmalade, and check the time he takes to go to the market, otherwise he'll stop and chat to his chums. He's not allowed to speak to anyone around here you know. I don't want any of these other farangs poaching him off me." He peered about as if they were already lurking with lassoes in the undergrowth. "I've told him if he talks to anyone he'll be tired. Oh, well, I'd better see what he is up to. Swigging the sauce bottle more likely. Sorry about your friend. Perhaps you should ask in Anderson's. Maybe he knows." He went across the footbridge before he called back. "I know he paid the rent. Three months. Mr. Sid told me."

Although I had arrived nursing the possibility that Edward might not be here, as I crossed the rickety drawbridge, nothing could have prepared me, certainly not Hope's scant description, for the figure that confronted me on the far side. The door was open. She watched me from behind the mosquito screen. A mangy dog lying, head between paws on the wooden verandah, cast an expectant glance, tail poised to wag-welcome its lost master, flopped back with a sorry snuff and resumed its mourning. I pushed open the screen. Had she too been hoping I was someone else? Her disappointment already disguised, she was seated on the rattan sofa. She ignored me, staring stubbornly into space. It was not so much her physical beauty that took me by surprise, but some indefinable sensuality that surrounded her, elusive and waiting to be discovered. Yes, I thought, it was easy to see Edward steering straight for her siren charms. And unless I was mistaken, there was another legacy of their time together. Something in the listless way she moved as if she was bearing another burden. Not one, I am sure,

Edward even recognised, although if he did, perhaps it provided another clue to his hasty departure.

At our first meeting, it was some time before she even admitted, albeit grudgingly, that she had ever heard of Edward. Communication was not helped by her refusal to speak English and my lack of any Thai to speak of. Words were repeated over and over. Most of hers were Mai 100, (Don't know) although I was quite sure she knew far more than she admitted to. "They call it the Land of Smiles," Hope had written. "It is also the Land of Lies, or untruths. They invariably offer a version of events they think will satisfy. Question too much, probe too deep, displays a lack of trust and they lose face. Never make a Thai lose face. They won't easily forgive you. Anyway, it's just a choice of which story to accept. One will be nearer the truth than the others. But they'll never tell you what they don't want you to know." Digesting this insight, I wondered whether Thailand was so very different from anywhere else. Here at least they smiled. Although not Toy. Not often anyway. There was something about her. Alongside her beauty, lay her insolence, a coyness that could switch suddenly into cold command.

I could picture her in another age, caparisoned on a bejewelled elephant, ordering her armies into extermination, or with the merest of nods, have her lovers' heads chopped off. Later I discovered her moods had no rationality. Sometimes she seemed just a kid, pretty and playful. Or she would swap into a cunning schemer. Little wonder that Edward had fallen blindly under the spell of her enchantment, but what I wondered did she get out of the bargain? A rat infested bungalow by a smelly klong, and possibly . . . it was no more than a guess . . . a child. Certainly the only legacy he could ever leave her. It amazed me that one so young, she could not have been more than sixteen, although Thai girls always do seem to look young, could be so self possessed. So sure of herself. Perhaps it was all an act. A princess who had been painstakingly taught her courtly condescension. In another moment my imagination would have elevated her to just about anything. Yes, she had been well taught by various teachers, and yet here was no common courtesan. I took stock, just as she must have done so often, setting her soul adrift as she lay down her body to be plundered.

I learned her story, or some of it, from Jan, a gruff Danish sea-captain, with whom she had shackled up during one of his shore leaves from the Gulf, before Edward had even hove into view. Jan, had it from Ouan. Large, friendly, treacherous Ouan rented a bar where Toy used to work, loaning her funds when she needed them, introducing customers and collecting half the receipts, shopping those farangs to the police she did like, or didn't without discrimination, and collecting a percentage of the get-out-of-jail bribe money. Dressed in black, she sat behind her bar, six rows back from the boxing ring. The black widow spider. Procureess-general of the Narok scene.

Toy, it seemed, had escaped along with her family and several thousand other refugees across the Mekong river, fleeing the Pathet Lao communists who having exiled the old king to a reform camp where the harsh conditions killed him off, seemed intent on subjecting the rest of the population to similar treatment. Toy's family, coming from a village near the Ho Chi Min trail, were fleeing an enemy far more alien than their own. I got the story in Jan's heavily accented English, over several beers outside Danny's bar in Yen Sabai. Only round the corner, in fact, from Toy's home, although if you passed her she gave not the slightest sign of acknowledgment. I rather liked Jan. Short, round and jovial. He came here for fun, and fun he meant to have. Just now though, he was scratching his unshaven jowls, and nodding thoughtfully. "Young nervous GI's. Patrols ambushed. Viet Cong melting away into the jungle. Every chink-eyed 'Gook' a sympathiser who smiles as she points the way out of her village, straight across a minefield, or bows gracefully as she offers a basket of bananas with a hand-made bomb hidden inside." Jan leaned across the table. I could smell the beer on his breath. "The first time soldiers came to Toy's village, they grin and hand out cookies and say 'Okay'. Toy, she doesn't understand them, but learns 'Okay'. Except have you ever heard her use it? She understands English but she never speaks it, ya?" he grunted, raising his bull head to peer at me. "Next time they come, Toy and her sisters pour them water but the soldiers don't smile. The third time they act crazy, shouting, pointing, pushing, throwing things over, and then the shooting starts." He nodded solemnly at his drink. "So maybe they don't kill everyone." He moved his ponderous head closer to mine, tapping with a stubby finger. "It was one of those incidents that never get reported because it never happened. Officially, no patrol within a hundred miles of the damn place. Whatever they were doing was classified." He spat out the word. "Ja, classified, and that my friend conceals a great multitude of sins. Officially,"

he nodded ponderously "The Polish Officer Corps were never massacred by the Russians at Katyn." He raised his hands like balances. "Officially and classified. Two wonderful words. This misunderstood war. But why do Americans always get it wrong? Back the wrong side? Now they invade here for R and R, seven thousand marines at a time." His arm swept unsteadily across our limited alley horizon. "Warships anchored out in the bay." He raised an arm to the ceiling, "banners, ya?" 'PATTAYA WELCOMES US NAVY'. Girls bussed in from Bangkok. And what do the girls think of these invaders, eh?" His fingers rubbed greedily together. "Dollars. Guess how much they spend in five days? One million dollars." He paused to swallow his beer. "How did Toy escape? She did not say. I did not ask." The small hairy fist moved over to tap his chest. His look was conspiratorial. "She bury it deep. Not to bring out again."

I left him to his last evening's leave. Whatever ordeal, whatever compliance she had to suffer to escape, it might explain her indifference, even hostility to foreigners, and yet her need for the security they could offer her. I assumed Edward knew her story. It seemed to me as it may have occurred to him that but for a trick of fate, her Lao village could be his Ugandan. What would be her reaction I wondered if she knew? Probably very little. I had the impression that like him, she was no longer interested in the past. Pattaya lived for the hour, the day, the night. That was enough. When she returned in the early hours and crawled into bed beside him, to sleep through until the next afternoon, all that mattered to her was that she was safe for another day.

"Sometimes I wouldn't see her for days," Edward admitted reluctantly in Prachuap. She was out all night playing cards, or snooker, or going to discos. I used to think she had another falang." Alone, waiting for her to come back, listening for the sound of her motorbike, drove him half crazy. Going out looking for her was just as bad. "Once I needed to ask her something urgently. It was after midnight. I tried the Butterfly Disco. I spotted her across the floor but when I went over she ignored me. The Thai next to her asked 'Do you know this falang?' 'No,' she said. I couldn't believe it, or rather I could. I just had to walk out. You can imagine what sort of fool I felt." I nodded. It must have been a humbling rejection.

"Perhaps," I suggested, seeking excuses, "Perhaps she didn't want to be embarrassed. Perhaps she thought you would drag her out by the hair."

He rebuked me gently. "She ignored me. Surely you don't ignore someone you are living with, as if they didn't exist?" What could I say? Edward had probably just finished cleaning up after her. If there was a simple formula for explanations, life would be a lot more predictable, but there wasn't.

"There must have been times when you got on," I tried.

"Sometimes," he agreed, almost reluctantly. "But never for long." An awkward pause followed. "Yes, there were times," he admitted. "When she was fun. Could be."

Gradually as memory beat a path back to those happier days, he smiled in reminiscence. "Go-Kart racing in the afternoons. The track wound round a lake with pink lilies. She always thrashed me. I know she told the mechanic to give her a fast car, but yet, it was fun, haring neck and neck round those turns . . . and water scooters . . . and evenings before she went off with . . . Evenings," he corrected, "when we played snooker." He nodded at the memory, lips pursed in concentration. "She nearly always won. No matter how carefully I cued my shots. She never hesitated, never lined up a ball, and down they dropped." He frowned. "Problem

was, she was ashamed to be seen with a foreigner. Just to eat dinner together at some restaurant, we had to travel separately. I was crazy about her then." The admission sounded flawed somehow. "She could have anything she wanted," he went on uncertainly, "but she destroyed it all, didn't she?" At a loss for words he poured himself a stiff measure of Mekong. The glass shook in his hand. "She killed it."

"Killed what?"

"Why, love of course. She destroyed it." The ambered ice in his drink glinted in the lamplight. He stared at it from some far away bastion, as he had watched the moon rise over Lake Victoria, the sunrise behind Adam's Peak, the moon climb above Pattaya Bay.

Living with Toy seemed to be like living with someone on the top of a cliff. On the edge of the world. Their love, if such a name for it applied, was a windblown rootless creation, with few shared secrets and more shared lies. Her reticence was fear of giving too much of herself away in case he might use it against her, while her denial to him of her soul, or so it seemed to him, for when he made love to her she often refused to kiss, but lay a passive party to his pressing endeavours. Her denial confronted him like the raised drawbridge of a moated Camelot. How he longed to be let in. When sometimes in her sleep she spoke out in a language he could not understand, or laughed aloud, he was consumed with a bitter jealousy for this private world of hers he was forbidden access. In essence, Toy's needs were extremely simple and the fact that he refused her made her equally disappointed. She wanted him to take her back to England.

"You wouldn't like it," he told her, "believe me." But she didn't. "It's cold and no one speaks Thai. You wouldn't like the food." But she still didn't believe him. She was convinced he had someone else there. Someone to go back to. To make matters worse for Edward, he met Jan, the Danish sea-captain. "A Jolly jack-tar," he told me in Prachuap, "who spent most of his time propping up a bar." Jan irritated Edward by greeting Toy like an old shipmate, explaining how they had 'berthed' together at the Crystal Garden. That was before Edward's arrival, but only just. "I think that it's unnecessary to tell someone that you've been living with, their . . ." He seemed to have difficulty choosing the right word. " . . . friend, before them," he complained bitterly. "I wouldn't do that. Would you? There, everyone brags about it. 'Oh! I know her. She's quite good in.... She does this, or she does that.' It's awful!"

I nodded. "It's the game there," I suggested.

"Yes," he retorted fiercely, "and I don't want to be a part of it any more!"

Sometimes, but never for long, they played 'Happy Families', as Edward put it. Toy came home with hot spicy plastic bags of food she spread on the floor like a picnic. (He never could persuade her to sit at a table and eat with a knife and fork.) Sometimes she brought back a small pressed wad of raw marijuana and rolled a fat joint they both shared out on the verandah, sweetening the foul miasma vapours of the klong. Upstream, McArthur sniffed it as he shampooed his dogs in the shower. Downstream, retiring to bed, Edward drifted above his phantom Toy lover, floating tantalisingly just out of reach.

"But did you really love her?" It wasn't a question I would have worried about had I not got to know her a bit during the time spent in Pattaya, trying to winkle out his whereabouts. A search she became increasingly curious to share. Studying maps and name-places, talking to people who had known him. It would have been an exaggeration to claim I enlisted her enthusiasm, but it would be hard to deny I had become drawn, just a little, under her spell.

"I suppose I was . . ." He selected the words carefully, "obsessed with her. But it was always being at the end of someone else's convenience. I ended up her bloody slave." He frowned in concentration, as if trying to clear the cobwebs of suspicion and pick his way back to what had once been, or seemed, clear and uncomplicated. "Sometimes," he admitted, "her indifference excited me even more. Her lack of response made me kiss her more passionately, made me ache with longing to be . . . in her." He glanced up to see if I understood. A tangle of emotions. Eagerness, love and shame written across his drawn features. "Sometimes," he said finally, "I used to steal love from her when she was half asleep." He gave me a shy grin. "That's what made it exciting. Wondering if she'd wake up. Wondering if I would get away with it." Get away with what exactly? Was love something one 'got away with'? A boyish prank; scrumping apples; breaking bounds; stalking across Major Took's, our local ornithologist, snowbound tennis court at midnight, in the Pa's big motorbike gauntlets and later reporting sighting pterodactyl footprints. "Mmm," he mused, adjusting his cycle clips as he prepared to ride off across the Downs, binoculars slung over his shoulder. "I had the rare sighting of two boys performing a ritualistic dance on my lawn." Was love to Edward no more than an escapade?

"I was sort of in love with her," Edward admitted doubtfully. "With Dao it's quite different," he added forcefully. "With Dao it's spiritual. You know what Dao means in Thai? A star." He pointed. Above the moonlit sheen of Prachuap Bay the velvet sky stood emblazoned. "A star, or just a Toy. You can surely see the difference." he defended. "Agape, Philo, Eros." The Pa's voice from way back. "There are far worse sins than sex, dear boy. In fact I rate it rather low on the list, But never be unfaithful." Sometimes clutching Toy's body was an act of sheer desperation.

Poor Edward. He had wanted to be everyone's hero and now he had to be a pirate. It was a change of mood rather than a change of destiny. He was living in the wrong century. The heroes were all past. The empires all over. "Make believe it," I suggested. I was surprised by his own admission.

"Why I've been make-believing it all my life, I suppose." Yes, I thought, picked out in the savage searchlight of his own imagination, how did he see himself? A composite of fallen heroes, people long dead, places no longer real, books no longer read. "I just don't understand women," he exclaimed in exasperation in Prachuap, when the cosy world he had created with Dao crumbled to pieces in his fingers. "They are so unpredictable. Like listening to modern music, you never know what'll come out next." In a parallel voice, I could hear the Pa, "If they permit women priests in the Church of England, I shall go to Rome." Rome'd throw you out in six weeks," Edward's mother replied. It's only the C of E that puts up with you." The Pa was never promoted. Not even to archdeacon, though he should have been. After he retired, the Bishop refused to renew his licence to preach. "It's of no consequence," he commented. "I'll simply go on as before." But we knew how it hurt him. Did they both, Pa and son, inherit the same narrowly defined attitude to women? When was it first revealed? As cubs growling in our Monday night circle around the great She Wolf, skinny-kneed, skinny bodies, dib dobbling? She benign, luxurious, big-bosomed, hearty thighed, innocent as we were of our secret aspirations. Incarnate flesh or the fecund spirit? Earth goddess. The Jamaican woman in the flat at Phoenix Court? Hilary? Toy? How many in between? How are the genes disassembled

and put together again? Class teams lining up to play 'Sharks' in the gym hall. "If your feet touch the ground, you're dead!"

Was Toy's mistake to misjudge his religion? Like most Buddhists she considered it very shallow. After all, one only has to seek forgiveness to have it granted. No need to try to attain merit. For her the loftiest idea was to get beyond caring. For him this in itself was heresy, but one he seemed incapable of not committing.

But in Pattaya I still had to reach him. The nearer I got, the more I dreaded it. After so many years of just letters, rumours, hearsay, it wasn't only my doubts of what he had become in the meantime, but of what I had become also. But if a part of me was concerned with what I might find, there was a more powerful motive urging me on. A wish that had remained stillborn already, far, far to long. The desire to finally confront him, face to face.

"THE TEMPLE BELLS ARE CALLING..."

Anderson's air conditioned coffee shop stood discreetly located in a dusty soi, a block back from the beach. Following McArthur's advice I called in there next day and again in the late afternoon when, as I had hoped, everyone would be getting back from the beach and the place would be empty. Anderson unexpectedly pointed to someone outside. "Francois is your man. He knew Edward. Story goes he brought him here." Up till then Anderson had not shown much concern about my quest. I have already mentioned he was Pattaya's official, if unpaid, Consular representative, and as such, responsible for reporting the deaths of Her Majesty's citizens. Anderson's primary duty was to Anderson however and who can blame him for it? The purpose of his coffee shop was profit. It was also a small air-conditioned oasis where seated behind the till, he presided over the local chamber of gossip. But he did like his customers to make use of the menu and not just, like Edward, come in for a cup of tea and read the newspapers provided. Not merely the Bangkok Post, but a variety of English papers as well. He only had limited space and objected quite rightly to someone like Edward occupying an entire table for an hour mid-morning, just for a ten baht tea, to the impatience of the waiting bacon and egg brigade.

There had been rumours. What these rumours were, Anderson declined to elaborate. "Just rumours." One of the rumours circulating concerned a list of undesirables. Sixty they said. Sixty people the police were anxious to get rid of. Who they were and why, was never revealed. Was Edward on it? Was Anderson? The police were supposed to have stopped him outside his apartment, telling him. "We know why you are here and we're going to get rid of you." Anderson claimed it was because of the reports he had to make of the various Britons found mysteriously dead in their beds. Deaths the police always put down to heart attacks. Others remained less convinced. Be that as it may, on my second evening as I dawdled, dunking biscuits, sipping tea, wondering where to go next, Anderson was at his most affable. "There's Francois." He pointed through the window to a very large man loading groceries onto the basket of his motorbike, pausing only to put out one cigarette and light another. There was scarcely time even for introductions.

"Come," he said, "I still have to go to the market at Naklua to buy prawns." He glanced at his wristwatch. "And I have people coming to supper in half an hour." He threw up his hands with a gallic shrug of submission to the fancies of fate.

Had it not been for his sheer bulk, the bulging red sweatshirt and bulging plastic shopping bags, I would never have been able to follow him in the busy twilight rush-hour. He swerved between the pell-mell traffic with a casual assurance I found impossible to match and seemed to possess an instinctive forewarning of hazards ahead; potholes; floods; food trolleys wheeling suddenly out from side streets. All of which he cruised around at high speed with nonchalant unconcern, even lifting both hands to light a cigarette, while I was gripping mine like a vice and desperately trying to keep him in my sights.

In the centre of Naklua, a huge overhanging tree, blessed and wound around with faded lengths of coloured cloth, divides the road. Between - it and the mud shoreline, stinking with refuse, stands the market. During the daytime vegetable stalls fill the square, but by night, the glaring neon strip-lamps wired up haphazardly to the nearest power pole, illuminate a variety of food trolleys. Francois parked his motorcycle and with scarcely a glance to check if I had

arrived, forced his way into the jostling throng, dodging flaming woks, clouds of acrid cooking fumes, heaped wicker baskets, ducking low strung tarpaulins, diving into dim alleys, collecting as he moved handfuls of king prawns, chicken wings, pig kidneys, green crabs, mushrooms, rambutans. His was a language of hand-signs and facial expressions, and the stall-holders seemed used to reading him as he raised fingers, fluttered his hand, a shrug, a frown, a nod, a smile, disbursing baht from an old worn wallet. "You, bagman." He grinned lighting a cigarette and loading me with produce. "Come. Finish here. Home." He spoke in the staccato of a man who has lived in many languages and races but rarely his own. Francois drove back along a dirt road between busy construction sites, ending up on a palm treed headland. We parked the bikes and climbed down a worn flight of steps towards the shore. The verandahed house loomed above a spit of rocks where windblown palms leaned out over a curved beach, and silhouetted on a low headland opposite the dark and daring outline of a remarkable temple. A cluster of pagoda roofs rising in steep ornamental eaves, crested by flying carvings, soaring up to a statuesque steeple. Dusk and Francois obscured the detail. "Ah!" he observed in monetary deference to my astonished stare, before bringing us back to more domestic matters. "Now this," he declared, entering the house, ducks quacking outside, a rag parrot in an ornamental cage, two boys jumping off the sofa with a mock salute.

"Francois!" they cried.

"Work," he commanded, emptying bags on the table. "You," pointing to a saucepan, bubbling lips and fingers to indicate instructions. "Cut first. Small. You," to the other. Outside again, emptying charcoal on the barbecue, arranging chairs, glasses. "Ice. Ice. Nam Kang. Quick." A boy came hurrying out with it. "My family." Francois grinned. "Poor, good. Fishermen's sons. You good boy." He grinned at the ice boy. "Now this," pointing, "and this." He had given me the job of drinks and bottles, but caught me instead peering over the bamboo palisade out across the dark cove. "All wood," he declared, slicing kidneys, arranging kebabs, fanning the charcoal, sprinkling sauce and spices over the sizzling titbits. Curling squid. Crimson crab. Licking his fingers. "Thirty metre teak logs. From Burma. All religions, four faces. Krishna, Christ, Allah, Buddha. All faces the same. Pointing North, South and so on. Elephants, Angels. All wood. Walk there later. Now this. Please,

over here. And hand me that, please."

Here was an empire of a man, rumbling at the corners but surprisingly agile for all his hulk. The heavy lidded eyes shrewd, watchful. The face able to break out suddenly into a crooked rather boyish grin. The stories as I learned later were many. The truth less certain. A parachutist at the siege of Dien Bien Phu. A rally driver. The owner of one of the best hotels in the Congo who made the mistake of backing the wrong president in a coup and had to leave in a hurry. A man whose byways were littered with the accidents of former wives, lovers. He carried a notebook in which he was forever sketching his plans. A child's one-dimensional attempt at architecture. No ordinary abodes but desert island, Robinson Crusoe dwellings. Although rooted in this world by desire as much as by destiny, he liked to pretend he could, and would, one day escape. "See. Here. Join these two huts together with a covered verandah. Bamboo screen there for privacy. Now wooden steps down to this dug-out pool. Or the sea. Generator noisy. Solar panels? A boat? Must have. And clear water. Crystal. You know

Boracay? Sex?" An impish wink. "Ship it in from Pattaya to start with. Oh, they love a holiday. Hah? What do you think? Look here! Kitchen. And there. Sliding walls. And that!"

"Edward," I announced, deciding it was high time I brought him in. Francois scarcely paused to straighten up before resuming his labours over the barbecue.

"So you look for him?" There was something about the way he put it.

"Do you find that so odd?" I asked. From the back I could see him solemnly dip his head.

"Take my advice. Leave him alone." He reached round for another plate of prepared kebabs, and glanced at me. "If you really want to find him, you have to go back to East Africa. That is where I think most of him still lives." There followed a few moment's awkward silence that Francois broke with a confidential grin. "Someone tell you I bring him here, yes?" His eyes widened and his head bobbed like a boxer's.

"Anderson."

"Ah," he nodded. "I found him outside." He pointed to the darkness. "I bring him in. He eat my food, he sleep my house, he listen my music, watch my videos, enjoy my sex shows." This last in the litany, I suspected, was to test my reaction, but I had none. Two days in Pattaya had dulled my responses. The ducks started quacking, Sounds on the steps above, and voices. Something occurred to me.

"That temple, did he . . . ?" Francois head swivelled slowly out to sea and back. Lights of fishing trawlers fairy-lanterned the hidden horizon. Across the bay the temple pressed a demonic outline onto the paler sky.

"He had his own temple." Francois made a derisory snort. "Every night he go visit Buddha on the hill. Buddha, he says, sometimes smiles, sometimes not so much." Francois chuckled in reproach. "Edward, my friend, I say, 'how can a statue smile? Just for you?' Guests had entered the garden, but he continued talking as if they knew anyway. "He tell me he go there to ask Buddha to send Toy back. When they have a fight. She always comes. Of course." He sighed as one might about an idiot child. "Of course she come back. But he believe Buddha send her. He say it was a miracle." He extended his arms in weary exasperation, and with the same movement welcomed his friends. "Angelo, Comment ca va. Bien?"

For a while, the quacking ducks were stilled by a medley of French, German, Italian. The clink of ice dropping in glasses. The spitting of fat on flame.

After a while, I found myself close to Angelo, hunched up in a bamboo chair. He had pushed his plate away and was filling an old pipe from a tin of black tobacco. The bald head and the hooked Punch and Judy nose were a caricaturist's delight. This, coupled with big stick-out ears, and bulging eyes, so closely resembled one of those stretch rubber face masks, I was tempted to tug it off to see what lay underneath. His washed-out clothes were worn for occasion only. One felt he was more at ease,

stripped half naked under the sun, working on his boat, which as he indicated in a rather bored manner that belied the fact his every waking hour and most of those destined for sleep, were spent in it, on it or under it, lay moored out in the bay. A barely discernible masthead lamp gleamed faintly in the darkness. Angelo had been personal physician to the last King of Yemen, and after the civil war, stayed on as a doctor. The only one in the entire mountainous

country for a while. He knew its tracts, oases, and tribes from the humid Tirhama desert bordering the Red Sea to the Empty Quarter in the East.

"Edward," he sighed, as one might over a recalcitrant child, trying hard to remember something good to say. "He likes boats. And ropes." His brow creased. "Things. Yes, he was good with things." He stared at his drink. "With people and gods I am less sure. He kept muddling them up. If I must admire a religion, then it is Buddhism, because there is no God. No almighty ego. Just our own. Enough surely," he spared a wry grin. "But Edward liked it because he can pray to a golden idol on a hilltop that smiles at him." I nodded politely, before indicating Francois, volubly engaged with a Parisian poet introduced earlier as Baron de Curzon.

"Edward, Francois. They were friends?"

Angelo chuckled dryly, as if years of the desert had desiccated his humour. "They were boys together looking for a coral island to build a dream. Francois found him up in the north, among the Hill tribes and brought him back. Afterwards they both set off to explore islands. Near Cambodia." He puffed at his pipe only to find as if expected, that it had gone out.

"Whatever they were seeking they did not find. After they returned, Edward vanished. A month or two ago." Another dry chuckle "I expect he is lost again. Even in the Yemen he was always getting lost and having to be rescued." I started in surprise.

"I had no idea you knew him there." Angelo nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes. I knew him. He worked for me. For a little while.

Driving and so forth." He looked at me, inviting the next question. Yemen, it seemed, was a closed chapter.

"Have you any idea where he's gone now?" I asked. He leaned his head back, his protruding eyes staring up, his bony shoulders almost touching his ears. He must have been over seventy, little more than skin and muscle, but I had rarely seen anyone so fit.

"Where?" he mused, "I don't know. He told me he wanted a bay." He lit his pipe carefully and inhaled an experimental puff. "A bay with a river." His free hand started to draw designs in the air. "Jungled headlands. And islands. A seaside town. A fishing jetty. A temple on a hill. A Buddha." He turned to me with a solemn stare. "Find that and you find him. Perhaps." He turned aside seeking other companionship, other conversation more agreeable. Nobody it seemed could bear talking about Edward for very long.

Next morning however, Anderson continued to be affable. Possibly my judicious choice of a large breakfast helped. "He doesn't seem to have been particularly popular," I ventured, but Anderson was not drawn that easily.

"He kept rather to himself," he said with the discretion of a diplomat. And then with a rash generosity he probably regretted. "We thought he was a British officer retired, cashiered, who knows? He had that dash in his appearance. Lawrence of Arabia style. Didn't Francois tell you?"

"No," I said. "There wasn't a lot of opportunity." Anderson frowned. A lifetime's training to give away as little as possible is not easily broken.

"Your chum," he volunteered grudgingly, "had been wandering among the hill tribes north of the Kok river. What he was doing there I wouldn't hazard a guess, though I doubt it was for the scenery." Having pity on my puzzled expression, he explained. "People go there to smoke

opium, or fuck hill tribe girls, or both. Francois, who went up there with a retinue of nubile maidens to cater to his every need, discovered him laying in a hammock outside a squalid hut, getting over a bout of malaria. Francois, having just arrived, was in the process of being fanned, fed and massaged at the same time, found himself regarded with some intensity by a rather emaciated and bedraggled farang, who managed to find the strength to struggle out of his hammock and stumble unsteadily over, extending a shaky hand, and announcing, rather humorously, or so Francois thought, considering the circumstances. 'Doctor Livingstone I presume'."

"I had paddled down the Kok river from Tatum," Edward told me when he took up the story from Prachuap. "I had two boatmen for guides. We drifted downstream on this bamboo raft two days, landing at a Karen village on the north bank. Dusk gathering. A faint glow on the water. Elephants being led down to bathe, kids frolicking in the shallows naked. Fish breaking surface midstream. Smoke rising from the native huts, and the mountains purple in the twilight." He nodded sombrely at the recollection. "I thought at first I could live there a long time, but a French doctor arrived handing out pills, and then an American missionary doing the same with heavenly promises." His snort of contempt could have been the Pa's. Then he went on. "I arranged to hire a couple of elephants." He chuckled. "It's quite cold up there at night. I had to borrow a blanket and the bugs kept me awake. I was quite pleased to be roused at dawn. The elephants backing slowly up the verandah, climbing into the howdah, plodding off between the rice terraces and up mountain paths through the forests. Amazing how sure-footed these beasts are. There's not a lot you can do to steer anyway. A nudge behind the ear and a bellow, but if they spot something tasty, there's no holding them."

"So how long," I broke in, "how long did your . . ." I purposely avoided saying the word, safari, "your trek go on for? And where were you going?"

"North," he said with a conviction that reminded me of an American hitchhiker beside the Route Nationale 1, outside Lyons, holding up a sign that read 'North Pole'. "North," Edward repeated more dreamily.

"Why?"

"I thought the answer might lie up there."

"What answer?"

"Oh, I don't know." He shuffled uncomfortably, adding, "this and that." Then, more spiritedly. "They have their own religion. The sacred spot is inside a palisade. In the middle is this stone they put rice on and fire it. There's a couple of musicians booming out dirges on long bamboo horns, like Alpine horns. The holy man leads everyone in a dance." He laughed. "Bit like the conga but slower. De dee de dee de dum dum."

"Edward," I suggested gently. "Were you stoned all the time?" I could see his knuckles whiten as he gripped the armrest. His voice when it came after a long silence sounded sincere enough but unconvinced.

"After Manila and the . . . well after all that, I found it hard to be with myself. I needed to blur the edge. Do you remember long ago making up dream worlds. A kingdom, a Shangri-La you could slip into when things were bad."

"The opium helped?" He looked at me for a moment abashed, then turned away.

"No, not really." Staring down he added solemnly. "But then it didn't matter, did it? I was off to find my Shangri-La." Before or after you met Francois? I wondered. "Anyway," he declared,

"There's a lot of crap about opium. It's part of their culture, like watching T.V." The comparison startled me. He added "Better stop them chewing betel. That really rots the teeth."

"Not the mind?" but he ignored me.

"Those poppy fields are very pretty. Patchwork of red, white and blue all up the mountains." Before I could comment, he added forcefully, "better than chopping down all the forests and growing bloody cabbages, and poisoning the run-off streams with insecticide and fertiliser." I nodded.

"And one day," I suggested, "the haze cleared and there was Francois with his harem." He seemed to resent my remark, as if unsure what other information I was about to reveal.

"I met him," he declared, "in this Karen village. Funds were low. I couldn't afford to go on hiring the elephants. More's the pity. It had been Shank's pony for the last couple of days. Not quite sure where I was heading. I didn't have a map. ("You never had," I was tempted to add). "Couldn't understand the language. Bit down on supplies too. The village wasn't over friendly either. Sweated it out for a day or two, splitting headache. Woke up one evening as this chap turns up out of the dark, followed by a line of half naked girl porters. Sits down panting on the verandah of the hut opposite, one girl rolling up his shirt, another massaging his back, another fanning his face, another one giving him a drink, others busy cooking his supper. I could scarcely believe my eyes. I got up and went over to him, made a joke about Dr. Livingstone. He invited me to eat. Gave me some pills too. Later on the locals lit a big fire for dancing and he danced along with them. He looked ridiculous. Huge and overweight lumbering about, flapping his podgy hands. Their movements were so graceful. I would have felt such a fool, but they seemed to like him for it, laughing and stroking his paunch and calling him 'Papa'. There was one girl dancing." He corrected himself. "At least I think she was a girl." He darted an embarrassed glance in my direction. "In Chiang Mai there are a lot of lady boys, sometimes it's hard to tell. This creature was like the spirit of the night, beautiful and mysterious. As she came up to me, I said, 'what are you, boy or girl?' 'Which do you want me to be?' it answered, as if wraith-like it could change just like that to suit one's desire. Later she went off into the night with Francois. I felt quite jealous," he added, after a pause. "Next day Francois asked if I wanted to come back to Pattaya. I'd never heard of it. He said it's the only place he knew where you could live out your fantasies. I wasn't sure exactly what he meant. I know now. But I don't regret it, even if . . ." He paused again. "Pattaya," he informed me gravely, "is something we all have to go through. It's a way of cleansing the soul of desire." I couldn't resist a chuckle.

"And have you?" He frowned.

"It's not what you think. I was searching for something." I nodded, but my obvious disbelief irritated him. "I nearly found it too. And lost it." A sense of desperation crept into his voice.

"The end of desire is supposed to be the start of enlightenment, isn't it? Why is it, I feel so . . . empty?"

I found Angelo on his boat. The dingy was moored alongside and I had to swim out. Back on the shore I could see Francois on his verandah, no doubt watching. When I left him the night before, he had taken me aside for a moment. "Go ask Angelo. Perhaps he help you. Perhaps he have a better view into his mind. After all," a light laugh. "He is a doctor." He lowered his voice confidentially. "Angelo say he is mad. 'What do you think of Edward?' I ask him. 'Mad' he

says. 'Mad mad? Or mad bad?' There are many ways to be mad. 'Just mad,' he say. He knew him in the Yemen." Francois stretched himself and yawned. "I would say mad is an exaggeration. I am not mad, and I am a good deal madder than him. It takes a lot of hard work to be mad. Or none at all."

Aboard the Cha-Cha (slowly slowly), Angelo was busy fixing a dozen different things at once. My swim out had given him time to prepare, and he was able to disguise his irritation at being disturbed. "Tomorrow we go to Ko Pai," he explained briefly, pointing out a blue smudge on the horizon. "If the weather holds." He hesitated. He was wearing only a pair of briefs. His skin resembled cracked leather. In the cabin, wire, hammer, screws, pliers lay about. Just now he was below crouched over a pump that failed to function. I sat above handing him down tools as he called. Oily black water slopped about the bilges and the stink of diesel was stifling. He gave a final wrench to the locking nut and straightened, wiping the back of a greasy hand across his domed brow. The sweat gathered again instantly as raindrops. He climbed up into the light, clutching the deck hatch for support. "Always things to do, always things to do. You go to my house?" The inquiry was cautious.

"Yes." I had. Barked at by dogs and glared at suspiciously by a hostile crowd of tattooed and lacquer-sniffing youths.

"I provide only the rice," he admitted reluctantly, clearly disliking the necessity of explanation.

"They come. They go. I am not here to change anyone. I provide only room and rice. Room and rice," he repeated. We sat on deck. The afternoon sun slanted across the sea. Fishing boats were coming in to the long wooden jetty beyond the headland, where the temple soared aloft, unrivalled. "I suggested he try Prachuap. It was a pretty place twenty years ago." He stared at me quizzically. "He had certain precise requirements you know."

"You told me. Bays, headlands, islands, rivers."

"He likes water," Angelo shrugged. "He is a strange man."

"Francois says you think he is mad." Angelo smiled faintly, a little abashed. He was joining two wires. They almost seemed to connect the veins cabling his hands, arms, neck.

"The arabs call it magnoun. It is a quality they respect, regard as spiritual . . ." I waited, sensing there was something he didn't quite know how to tell me.

My appeal to him as my only witness to Edward's time in the wilderness gained a grudging response. Searching about for insulating tape, he said, "He had convinced himself he would discover something there. In the desert, I told him that unless he was a prophet there was nothing to find. Why else do Arabs call it the Empty Quarter? But he wouldn't listen. He never did. He changed his money into Maria Teresa silver dollars." Angelo gestured cynically. "The desert tribes have no trust in paper money. He borrowed a jeep and set off." Angelo wound tape carefully around the joined wires, and peered across the deck for the next job to do.

"We had a letter about it," I remarked. "He got robbed." Angelo's laugh was mocking.

"Of course he got robbed."

"And he got rescued," I added.

"Yes, by God," he said sarcastically. "Only Edward has to be rescued by God. The rest of us do it ourselves." He paused. "Once in Sana'a he pestered me to drive him out to Job's Tomb. It was on the top of a mountain, a great slab of rock. The way up little more than a goat path. The final bit is very tricky. Three small domed tombs. Quite empty. Job, he insisted was his

favourite prophet and why? The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Praise the Lord." Contempt or bitterness edged into his voice. "Only a fool praises a God who takes away." "Or a madman?" He seemed unsure how to respond, and didn't. We sat a while in silence. Over the water ducks started quacking furiously.

"Francois's ducks," commented Angelo.

"What exactly was he doing in Yemen?" I ventured. Angelo raised a sigh.

"Well may you ask. It was not an easy place to be. There was a civil war on. The Russians ran the army. The Americans the air force. They called it Lockheed to be polite, but all the pilots were wartime. Korea. Vietnam. The Americans flew the Russian advisers around the country. That was at the height of the Cold War. 'Alice in Wonderland', Edward called it. He may be right. The Romans had another expression. 'Felix Arabia'. Some say that was because of the quat."

"Quat?" I queried.

"It's a narcotic shrub. Just the tips of the leafy shoots. Everyone chews it. In the afternoon the whole of Yemen stops for quat chewing. Even the Civil War. It has an anaesthetising effect." He chuckled, "but it is hard work on the jaws. Edward said he would not have liked to be a camel."

"He tried it then?"

He peered at me with mocking astonishment. "Of course. He tried everything. He considered that his duty. He said it helped him escape the nets of the world." The words caught me by surprise. I was back in the vicarage where we had been helping the Pa fumigate the rafters. Now we were trying to rinse out the taste with tea. "Oh, to escape the nets of the world. Free from these mundanities that drag us down to earth. Oh for the soul to fly unburdened. For a kingdom of Heaven without a roof to mend. Ah, dear boy." The Pa put down his cup with a grimace. "I'm so sorry. The milk is off. I do apologise. Perhaps you'd prefer a whisky, or have I drunk it all? Yes, indeed, in the midst of our tribulations we hope for heavenly grace. The comforter."

"It happened in Jibla." Angelo quietly announced, filling his pipe.

"What happened in Jibla?"

"He went mad." He paused, holding his lighter. I followed his gaze across the bay to the temple where the lengthening shadows picked out the winged angels perched above the pagoda eaves. "It has probably all been destroyed now, but Jibla was a very beautiful place. Against the head of a valley suspended, or so it seemed, above a shallow river. From a distance the white minarets, one over the other, appeared almost as if they were flying. I sent him there. Perhaps I shouldn't have. The war was on. The rebels controlled the countryside. The government were bombing and shelling the villages. Perhaps I thought," he uttered the words in obvious distaste. "I might get rid of him."

"Angelo! Angelo!" Across the bay a boy was waving from the rocks below Francois house. Angelo gathered up his tools and untied the dinghy rope. Over his shoulder he said, "I sent him to help at the Southern Baptist's Hospital. Jibla was the last town the rebels held in the South. The government were bombing all the villages, and Edward's job was to get the wounded back. It was the sort of thing he was good at," he added. "And First Aid. He had a Walter Mitty fantasy about being a paramedic."

"What happened?" I suggested jokingly. "Did he amputate the wrong limb?" Angelo gave a wry grin.

"In the Yemen anyone can buy a white coat and hoist a 'Doctor' sign over the door. They always advised you to go to an old one." He gave a deprecating chuckle. "Everyone learns by their mistakes, even doctors. No, it wasn't a medical accident he made. He became a Muslem."

A temple gong boomed over the water. Five times. Five o'clock. Like the pips before the hour news. Less clear was the chanting. A wavering repetitive plain song, rising and falling. Angelo commented. "In Jibla young boys sing the call to prayer from the minarets. They don't use loudspeakers. It can sound rather beautiful. Haunting even. Those cadences. A nightingale singing against a background of gunfire." But I was hearing another song. The cracked zonophone record spinning

round the old HMV wind up gramophone. '....the temple bells are calling, come you back to Mandalay....' "Yes, in a way Jibla was a mystical experience." Angelo continued. "You hear the Christchurch College Choir singing carols and believe in Christmas."

"Is that what happened?"

"I don't know. He claimed he was so spell bound by the singing that he wanted to get closer, following the crowd through the gate into the courtyard. Next moment he was within the mosque itself, along with the fanatical throng, kneeling and calling out the Shehada, the Muslem creed, and the ninety nine names of God. Afterwards I am told they carried him shoulder high around the town, presenting him with his jambir, the ritual curved dagger." But now it was Houseman I was hearing, the day he won the town race. "....Man and boy stood cheering by, as they bore him shoulder high...." It wasn't so very different. Not for him. Not for Edward.

I could see the Pa facing us earnestly across the kitchen table. "In moments of crisis, and don't think I haven't been beset by them, dear boys. Don't imagine I have never been tempted by the alluring song of the sirens. In such moments one prays for divine inspiration to guide us out of our darkness, out of our despair."

"Yes," Angelo confirmed as I followed him down carefully into the rocking dingy, clutching the sides for support. "He became a Muslem. And he fell in love," he added almost as an afterthought, crouching in the stern, fiddling with the outboard motor, an old black Seagull. "In love." I said, trying to sit steady amidships. "With the place?" The engine roared into life. Angelo looked round, shaking his head and saying something I couldn't make out.

"So he became a Muslem and he fell in love." Francois chuckled. "Or was it the other way round. Love he need like a puppy. Toy love he don't understand. He feel cheated." He stared thoughtfully out to sea. We were sitting in the sun lounge, overlooking the garden. White cushioned window seats and panoramic views. A ceiling fan slowly oared the air above our heads. One of Francois's scantily clad helpers came in with a tray of tea and cakes. Francois slid a hand beneath her yellow bath towel and stroked her thigh. "This one, very good in bed. She do everything you want. You like her?" He frowned and puffed his cigarette. "They are all toys. To play with, but not to fall in love. Oh, my Toy, my girl, my . . ." He sighed, leaning back and closing his eyes. "Is it so very simple? Does he assume by sleeping with her he owns her?"

His heavy eyelids opened a fraction. His big head rocked slightly on shoulders that resembled an American footballer, padding included. "Out here you own nothing. Not even your own soul. My friend, the only thing you own here are dreams. Everything else is strictly leasehold." He reached across and patted my arm. "How do you do your own cooking and sit eating it on your own? When the Thais see this they say 'keened falang'." He leaned across. "You go to the Narok bar already. You see the men there who go to pick up boys? You know what the Thai think? That they are too poor to sleep with girls. A girl is 300 baht, a boy 50, 100." He roared with laughter. "In Thailand there are no morals except money."

"And the greatest sin," I murmured, "is foolishness." His lips pursed, his eyebrows raised. His face seemed able to melt into a thousand subtle reactions.

"Edward met a man, an American in the Philippines who told him 'Animalism is the highest form of aestheticism'. Edward liked the idea but he couldn't put it into practice. His Christian conscience kept getting in the way." He pointed a stubby finger at his oiled cropped head. "You know what the buddhists say. The head is the holiest part of the body, the feet the basest." He peered down at his belly. "The middle, the cock or the cunt, that is neutral. What that gets up to is its own affair. It is only the head or the heart that can sin. Not the kuay." He used the Thai slang for penis.

From way back I heard the Pa telling us in his study. "Dear boys, there are far greater sins than sex. Pride, malice, envy, greed, injustice. Sex is often such a non sequitor. Yours truly speaking of course," he guffawed with self deprecating laughter.

Francois puffed at another cigarette. Across the bay the great spired temple soared above the sandy headland, protected with scaffolding. By night, I had failed to notice this. Now by day it resembled more than ever a make believe film set, built against the encroaching reality of high rise condominium tower blocks. Temples of the future? Outside a palm frond snapped off and fell with a loud crash. Angelo's boat was rolling on the incoming swell. The offshore islands were obscured by a grey veil. "The south-west monsoon is starting maybe," Francois commented. As he spoke a gust shook the house. On the shore the palm trees were bending, fronds flailing in the wind, and the high seas had started to roar like a restless crowd. "It only needs one strong wind to blow this all away." A theatrical flourish of his arm. "You. Me. Pattaya. The Pattaya we all know. The crude, gaudy, wild-west Pattaya. There is a plan to tear down the Narok bar and build a marina, but the owner still refuses. You see him, no shirt and a stick. Looks as poor as a beggar, but a chauffeur helps him out of a Mercedes." He stubbed out his cigarette. "Yes, they want to turn Pattaya into a business convention centre." He raised his sights to the gloomy horizon, as if he could identify a future there blind to the rest of us. "There is a list, you may have heard of it." I shook my head. He nodded, looking more worldly wise than ever. "I am on it. It was leaked to the French Embassy in case they might wish to warn their nationals. I am on it. Angelo too. Edward! Who knows. Sixty people they say. Undesirables. There has been so much bad publicity about this place. The British television made one film. They interviewed this girl, Dahn. You see her often at the Narok. Very pretty. They ask her on the camera why she do it. Dahn looks sad. "I need money," she say, and then with a smile adds, "and because I like it." But they cut the film before she smile." He shrugged, his earlier good humour had vanished. "These moral dictators, searching out sin, they make me sick, taking cold baths to stop themselves being tempted to do what they daren't. And why? The Thais are only doing what they have always done, enjoy themselves. And getting

paid for it. These kids are the heartbreakers, not the falangs." He stared moodily out to sea. Black clouds were beating up the gulf. "Last week the police picked up two falangs on trumped up charges. It cost them 150,000 baht each for the charges to be dropped. Next month it will cost more. I shall leave soon. I was once under house arrest in Africa for six months. I do not like bars, even if you cannot see them."

"Is that why Edward left?"

He crushed his cigarette carefully in the ashtray. Down below the ducks had started quacking. Someone was coming. Francois shrugged. "Edward ran away. He did not know how to love here. This is not England. This is not 'nice'. Here is not I love you, you love me, church bells ringing. We are falangs. The Thais see us as a money box and can you blame them?" There were voices down below. Any moment the thread of our conversation would be snapped. "You mean he ran away from Toy even though he was obsessed by her?" His big bull head lowered solemnly.

"He was obsessed with many things, and had been running away from them for years. You know that. Pattaya was the fantasy world he hoped to find refuge. Toy was his island. In his gullible romantic heart perhaps he hoped they would build a treehouse together, or a boat and sail away into the sunset and leave the past behind like a forgotten dream. In the end all he can do is plunder her body like some pirate and hoard the spoils afterwards on his own." Footsteps were mounting the stairs. A voice called out "Francois?" Francois hitched his towel and got up to see who it was, announcing "Viens. Je viens." He glanced back at me. "Soon he will run out of places to escape to."

"Why?" I needed to know. He stood there, a Goliath of a man, still, his arms spread wide.

"The trouble about being brought up to defend a tradition is that denying it, you not only commit heresy, but treason too."

"You believe that?" He grinned.

"No. We French are far too pragmatic. But Edward he believe this. I, myself was puzzled, I ask him treason to who, to what? Why to yourself, your own ethos, treason to your soul." He wiped his hands pontifically on his towel, and strode out of the room. "So you see," he called back. "Wherever he runs he is doomed."

"ER ARM UPON MY SHOULDER..."

"This is where I belong." Edward declared, leaning out over the bamboo rail of his verandah. Embracing within the arc of his arm, a horizon sweeping round from the cloud-wrapped wall of Burmese mountains, eastward to the jungled headlands guarding Prachuap Bay and the purpling evening ocean beyond. The river before the hut curled back so close to shore it all but created an island. A tangle of mangroves inland, a tall line of slender palm trees leaning out to sea. This was Edward's domain.

Birds shrilling from a clump of mango trees serenaded the sunset. It was evening the day I arrived. I had caught the midday train from Bangkok's central Hualamphong station, pulling slowly through the overcrowded outskirts, lunch served on trays as we jolted unhurried across the lush heartland of the Gulf. Later the landscape opened onto coastal plains. Green paddy fields shepherded by solitary palms, their fan fronds raised in Fleur-de-lis salute, and far off isolated peaks. Jagged outposts of a more primeval past. Nearing the coast an unspoiled line of blue gleamed beyond the empty shore. As we approached Prachuap, the sense of welcome was more than mere anticipation. I really felt Angelo might be correct, that Edward could be here.

The station was of the sort seen now only in English country calenders of bygone days. White fenced, ornamented with flowers, wood beams, tile roof, overhanging eaves for shade, a blackboard chalked with times of Up and Down trains. Outside, tricycle rickshaws, Samlors, parked untidily beneath the spreading trees, their drivers lounging back in the seats, chatting. My driver was no more than a kid. He had to stand on the pedals to bump us through flooded potholes. There must have been a shower earlier, for the steaming streets glinted in the late afternoon sunlight, slanting between the wooden verandahed houses. We passed the night-market where evening food stalls were already being unstacked off trolleys, and on down an avenue of pink flowering bougainvillea to the seafront. When I described Edward, my young driver gave a broad grin. "Eddy!" he cried enthusiastically. It amused me that here, finally, Edward had allowed himself to be abbreviated. If indeed it was Edward and I was not about to be deposited before the door of some total stranger. "Big-Big," volunteered the boy, stretching a free hand high above his head. "King Kong!" I had heard Edward called many things before but not this, and yet there was something about him that encouraged a second glance. Partly height, for he stood head and shoulders above most people. Partly what appeared to be his smile, although actually it was his face screwed up to stare ahead into the wind and sun. Thai kids, Anderson informed me, took to him, accepting him as a fellow member of the gang. Young street vendors, cigarette sellers, hustlers. Mind their money for them. Tend their tray for five minutes.

We braked sharply to avoid a truck roaring off the jetty ahead where fishing trawlers were being unloaded, and slewed round a corner stall onto the seafront. I glimpsed assorted lewd pin-ups for sale, along with posters of venerable Buddhist abbots. With a backward nod, the boy indicated a terrace restaurant bearing the sign of a large jolly prawn. "Dao," he panted. I shook my head puzzled. "Lady him," grinned the boy displaying fine white teeth. "Suay . . . beootifool." I nodded in benign agreement, not quite sure why.

As we pedalled along the shore I matched the view to Edward's list of requirements. Bay, jetty, headlands, even a couple of precipitous offshore islands. At the southern tip of the bay was

what appeared to be a military airfield, from which a small squadron of vintage biplanes presently took off, droning as they darted into the still sky. We passed below a wooded crag capped by a small temple and dizzy ascending flights of steps. Screeching monkeys capered under our wheels. "Mirror Mountain," gasped the boy, pointing out a strange eye-glass hole through the crag. Ahead a river emptied into the bay between tidal sand spits. The boy stood on the pedals to force us over a narrow bridge and sat back as we wobbled freely down the far side. Inland the river widened into a lagoon blazing with sunlight. I shielded my eyes against the glare. Sampans were being paddled slowly between the stakes of oyster beds. Beneath a clump of coconut palms overhanging the bank, boats with long-tailed engines lay pulled up in the shallows. The boy released the handlebars long enough to point. "Boat Eddy," indicating an open craft, green paint peeling off the hull, a knotty bamboo mast with a stained white sail bundled between lashed spars. It certainly suggested Edward's handiwork, as did the untidy tangle of ropes and nets. "Go islands, tok plaa, fishing. Water come in too much." He laughed breathlessly making baling motions with a spare hand. I nodded, staring ahead to where red temple roofs appeared through the trees, saffron robed monks stepping solemnly along a cement footpath. A gong sounded. Five strokes. Ahead the long sandy shoreline curved out of sight. Small boys gambolled naked in the waves.

We turned off down a dusty track, the wheels burying in the loose dirt. The boy struggled with the pedals, gave up, grinned back at me, jumped down and pushed the samlor to the side. He wiped his face on his arm. "Okay walk?" he said. I followed him to the river bank. A footbridge suspended on rusty cables swung across close to a low stone weir. The wooden slats were partly missing. "Fai," declared the boy. I nodded as if I understood. I

didn't think he meant "Fee Fi Fo Fum...", but it might

have been appropriate to the haunt of King Kong. Upstream the raised river was half buried beneath massed clumps of water hyacinth, reaching into midstream. We followed a rutted footpath a hundred yards until the boy hesitated, glancing at a dilapidated wooden jetty with signs of recent laundrying evident. Muttering something, he made up his mind and grabbing my hand, dived down a path overhung in thick foliage. We emerged into a clearing where partly tacked to a dead tree, and listing unevenly on crooked stilts, stood a house I instantly recognised could belong to no one else but Edward.

At school our carpentry teacher had rewarded Edward with the title 'Wood Butcher'. Later as a forestry officer, unable to understand the principles of shear and stress, he had constructed bridges by the simple rule of felling the biggest tree he could. Little wonder kids called him King Kong, when everything, self included was on a giant size. Even the treehouse we built as boys was made almost entirely from driftwood washed in by the tide and ferried back below the cliffs in our leaky sailing dinghy. Edward declared it added character. Our local doctor had a treehouse where the bottom step was a hospital crutch. Unable to emulate this, we decided nevertheless our toilet funnel had whimsical charm, and Edward's misspelling, "Trespassers will be persecuted," was straight out of Pooh Bear.

This listing stilt hut, with its steep thatch roof and overhanging verandah was just like one of those model souvenir houses on sale at Bangkok airport. A toy house. The bottom section of the ladder raised like a drawbridge, the bell being a string of jangling sea-shells and a 'dumb waiter', slung from a pulley, hoisted tubs of water filled by bamboo pipes from the river. No doubt, I thought, the lamps would be jam jars of trapped glow worms. Certainly there

appeared to be a sort of windmill up a pole which I discovered later was connected to a ceiling fan. Perhaps on still days he had a treadmill of mongoose to turn it. Yes, I felt sure 'Boy's Own, circa 1920', would have been pleased to list him among their alumni. My samlor driver clearly agreed. He tapped his head astutely. " Keng rn aak," he declared tugging the bell pull. "King Kong" he called up. "Fiend you," and beckoned me towards the ladder. After a moment's delay, Edward appeared on the verandah above, hair on end, pair of scissors in hand. Not looking directly down he failed to see me.

"Ah Narong," he greeted jovially, making snipping motions at the boy's already virtually shaven head. Then following the direction of the boy's vigorous sideways nod, he found me. If he was surprised he didn't show it. "I've been expecting you," he said. How or why he didn't explain. He never did. "Come on up."

He must have released a rope, for the raised section of the ladder lowered. Treehouse security. As boys we had discussed it often enough. For a second I glanced wildly around for impaling stakes or nets poised to bundle me aloft. Edward put a stop to these bizarre fancies with an abrupt "Have you paid him?"

"No." I put my bag down to get some money out.

"I've an old pop-pop you can borrow to get around on," he said after I had seen off the samlor boy and climbed up to join Edward on the verandah. I had forgotten how tall he was. I seemed to be staring at his knees. He went on matter-of-factly. "It's a bit hard on them cycling out this far." He carried my bag inside, calling out, "thirsty? Hungry?" Only got rain water or Mekong. Dao usually brings the ice."

"I've brought you some bad news," I said, not wanting to keep him waiting. He reappeared in the doorway, holding an unfilled glass.

"I rather thought you had." He half turned, his free hand gripping the verandah rail. "I couldn't bring myself to telephone," he said quietly. "Not after all that time. I couldn't bear to hear . . ." His voice tightened and stopped. I watched where he was staring, beyond the palm trees and over the evening ocean. I could only guess what he actually saw. "Poor old Pa," I heard him murmur, and then without looking at me, added "I was hoping it'd be you who'd come. I was rather dreading another visit from the illustrious Hope."

I wanted to say many things but somehow I couldn't bring myself to. We had begun our friendship with shared joy, and we renewed it now, many years and many miles from home with a shared sorrow. "I was with him. I thought you'd want to know." I didn't tell him how hard it had been for the Pa to let go. For one who believed firmly as he did in the life to come, how desperately he

train if they knew he was coming. Just as they always woke him up in time to get off . Here was no downland scenery. Fish farms had been scraped out of the swamp and later abandoned. The cattle grazing drier patches could have been imported from Africa. White humps and sagging necks. I wondered if they reminded Edward. Or the white egrets, long necked, sepulchral cormorants muddy pools. A largely uninhibited but pecking nonetheless reassuring landscape to drive through in the dusk. Isolated headlands towered seawards. We gathering

seemed to be making for one on a narrow isthmus that the sea all but surrounded.

Edward parked the motorbike among some trees by the rocks and bounded off without another word expecting me to follow. As I mounted a flight of steps cut in the cliff, three boy monks, wraithlike in saffron robes, emerged silently from the shadows and ran up ahead. I passed two huge garishly carved sentinels clutching swords. The unfinished partner of the pair as faceless as the invisible man, rusty iron sinews poking from the cement stumps of his arms. High above I glimpsed the two filigree temples they were guarding, perched on the headland. Far below the still bay mirrored an impassive night sky. Hurrying on, ducking creepers and spiny cacti, picking my way blindly up the broken steps balancing precariously on broken slabs, I finally reached Edward waiting beside a gaping shaft. Without time to catch my breath I was hurried down the remnants of a massive wooden ladder into a vault, where as I grew accustomed to the dark I dimly made out the paler outline of a giant reclining Buddha, below which Edward was busy fiddling with a broken lantern. He needn't have bothered for as we fumbled forward, pinpoints of candlelight glowed ahead, shielded from flickering draughts by our novice monks. Silent sentinels marking the way into a roofless cavern where piping bats wheeled and twitted above our heads and where an assembly of hundreds of kneeling robed priests awaited our arrival. It was only after a stunned moment that I realised they were stone. One of the novices handed Edward candles and incense sticks while the other two stationed at intervals ahead seemed anxious to guide me on. I followed them through more galleries, dry stalagmites in plenty but no more somnolent Gods.

On my return I found Edward outside already and fidgeting to be away, as if to stay a moment longer would risk breaking whatever spell he had cast for himself. We rode back through the village of Ao Noy and under the rhino-head shaped peak at the north end of Prachuap Bay, where he parked the bike and stepped down the beach. The moon haunted by shadowy clouds revealed a tawny glow. The tide was ebbing, the broken water gleamed fitfully. Far across the bay loomed the southern headland, a dark crooked peak thrusting out of the black sea.

"It's like Papamanchua," Edward pointed. "The peak in the South Seas spirits of the dead fly to. A sort of Mount Olympus where the local Gods live . . . I tried to climb it. Could see it from my river hut. Every night, thunder and lightning flashes. The Solomon islanders claimed the Gods were having family squabbles, like Zeus and Hera . . ." As if in confirmation a lighthouse flashed from one of the outlying islands. "I was teaching at this mission station, though I learned more from the kids than they ever did from me. Papamanchua was taboo, but I decided to have a go. Easter holidays. Bunch of kids for porters, carrying yams, fishing, building leaf shelters. Bloody rain. Rain, rain, rain. Leeches, mosquitos. Struggled up for three days. Came to this incredibly high waterfall, just like . . . bowled you over. One or two kids climbed up, but without ropes we couldn't get any further. The Gods or the ancestors didn't want to be disturbed." He stared silently across the black bay. "I'm not sure I'd really want to

meet mine again afterwards." Turning hastily he added with rather ludicrous politeness. "I'd always be happy to see you again of course."

My silence seemed to irritate him for he suddenly burst out. "You never liked mysteries did you? The Pa always believed in mysteries."

"There's a difference," I objected hotly. "I've never been sure what yours were." He failed to respond directly. We stood together but apart, as we had so many times before, captives in the same dilemma.

"You always were a sanctimonious old bastard," he replied, not unpleasantly. "It must be wonderful never to have made a mistake."

"No," I countered. "We all make mistakes only some of us try to avoid repeating them." Even as I uttered it, I realised how indeed sanctimonious it sounded, and remembered the Pa woefully declaring, "Experience, dear boy, is making the same mistake again, and again, and again. I do it all the time."

"Well, this time I'm not making a mistake I can promise you," he insisted. I didn't say a word. "It's Dao," he continued enthusiastically. "I owe everything to her.

Everything. She really rescued me." From what, he omitted and I prudently failed to inquire. "I just wish.

Tonight I mean. Now that you've told me." His voice dropped to barely a whisper. "I just wish the Pa could have met her. I just so wish I could have brought him something decent. Something he could have been proud of me for once." He was proud of you, I thought. But I couldn't bring myself to say it. "It's quality God sees in a person, dear boy." The Pa informed me mistily. "Not ability." I was never quite sure what he meant.

"He would never have spoken a word against you." I told him. It sounded like a consolation prize for failure, and it set him off back to where he never left for long. He squatted native style on the sand, scratching a circle idly round him with a big twig.

"One day I'll sit under an African tree and teach kids." He glanced up at me. "You know that's where the world began. Africa . . ." Your world, I thought. "I even wanted a war," he mused, fiddling with the stick. "Then there would be heroes and villains." Even his wars, I thought, were out of picture books. Noble knights, valiant crusaders, Robin Hood. "But where were the heroes?" He paused awkwardly. "I tried to imagine myself like Gordon of Khartoum making a last stand. The picture in the Boy's Own. Gordon halfway up the palace steps, pistol drawn, arms flung back. Only it didn't fit." He bowed solemnly to the sand. "Or I didn't fit into it. Perhaps if I'd had a uniform it'd have helped." I resisted an urge to smile. Why? What did he need to disguise.

I remembered a school play. Edward acted a Roman centurion and Rossetti the director accused him of being more interested in his breastplate and greaves, than learning his lines. I

heard him continue, rocking slowly backwards and forwards on his heels. "What was I doing there? What side? Whose war?" I could picture him, long before the actual incident, alone, perspiring in his stuffy tin hut, patiently fitting the pieces together, except they never seemed to stick. Not for long. Then suddenly he found himself running backwards, away from all the scenery he had designed in those preceding years, backdrops to a play in which he found himself unexpectedly cast as principal part in a one-man performance. "I'll get help," he convinced himself staring back at the empty retreating stage. "I'll get troops, police. What use am I on my own?" And once he started running it was all the easier to keep going, even when he ran out of excuses and heroes, than to stop or turn back.

Out in the bay a ghostly green phosphorescence haunted the breaking waves, appearing and vanishing like magic. "Tell me about Dao," I suggested, trying to edit from my mind, images of Toy and Pattaya. He needed no more prompting.

"She is," he began fervently, and then as if attempts at description failed to do justice. "Well you've just got to see her, that's all." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "She usually comes at about nine when the restaurant closes. That's where I met her you see. I was sitting in this restaurant near the pier. Pra Mong." He chuckled self-indulgently. "I've been correcting their English breathlessly. He turned to me, his look of pleasure switching to doubt. "You won't . . . ?" His hands raised as if to bar my advance into his secret realm should I refuse. "You won't say anything?"

"Edward." I affirmed. And why should I have told her any more than he, I thought, following him up the ladder. Only it made me realise, as she came towards us stranded in shadows between the points of flickering yellow light like a fragile gem, just how perilous they were when only a murmur from his secret past could pitch them both overboard into a sea of confusion and doubt. For she trusted him implicitly. I could tell that at a glance. The way she came straight up to his elbow. Her pale features flawless. When he wrapped his arm around her, he seemed big as a bear. Shielding her from what, I wondered? The outside world? He seemed to take it for granted that because he stopped, the world stopped, and anyone dishing out dirt stopped. Edward retained this childhood legacy of fair play. He only had to jump up and shout "Pax!" and the scuffling would cease. But like it or not there was a lot of dirt in Edward. Shake him and out it would tumble and the world would applaud. He ignored, at his peril, the rapacious animal instincts of people. Dirt was what they wanted to hear. You might have thought he'd have learned this after Africa but Edward never learned anything for very long. I don't know whether he forgave or forgot, but he made the mistake of assuming others forgot too. They didn't.

As the two of them stood there, lantern lit, suspended on the edge of their small world, I wondered who was guarding whom. I like to think it was the girl. A tiny possessor with a large possession. I could only imagine what teasing jibes she had to endure from her Thai friends. And this place, their haven from storm, the hidden harbour where they had dropped anchor. What made their relation all the more poignant was the simplicity of communication. Dao spoke no English and Edward's Thai was of the me-Tarzan, you-Jane variety, plus a few gestures he had picked up from Francois. I witnessed this when it came to making tea. Plans to cook supper were wisely abandoned and we all returned to Prachuap night market, where amid pungent smarting whiffs of acrid cooking fumes, blazing woks, glaring lamps, we consumed a variety of spicy dishes Edward called for, that Dao had to re-order since no one

could understand his Thai. The two sat opposite and embarked on what I guessed was a frequently repeated discussion on local girls wedding older farangs. Perhaps it was designed to bolster their confidence but I also wondered if, for Edward, love was rather like a revolution. It couldn't be permitted to lie down. Love had to be questioned, redefined, put on trial. He seemed to need her constant affirmation.

We returned to the hut after first escorting Dao back to the Pra Mong, where her betel chewing mama cast her customary appraising eye over Edward and didn't discover much to satisfy her in his potential qualities as a son-in-law. "It's money here. They claim it doesn't matter, but it does. One's supposed to be generous, and they imagine every foreigner is rich." He didn't need to complete the picture. I guessed Dao's mother despised him for his unironed clothes, his self-cut hair, his general battered appearance in a country where appearances were everything. "Anyway," he added without complete conviction. "Dao doesn't mind." I am sure he was right and yet for all her obvious sincerity of affection, Dao's appraisal was hopelessly superficial. He was her knight in shining armour. The big fair haired farang out of the Hollywood movies, and he treated her accordingly, as his princess. Perhaps she refused to admit he was more than twice her age, with a lot more than twice her history hidden behind their convenient inability to communicate. In every love there is a measure of illusion and self-deceit. With Edward and Dao, one felt that their pretend world was as frail as the autumn leaves. One strong gust would send them showering down, leaving nothing but the bare unlovely winter of their lives.

Next day we went out sailing. We had been talking half the night. I remember his face in the lantern light, contorted by conflicting emotions. "Do you know what it is to feel shame? Every waking day? When even as you wake up it's the first thought to confront you? There, like a gaping hole that no matter how many excuses you spade in, will never fill up, even the slightest." Now it was morning, bright, with a fresh breeze across the blue bay. Once we had sorted out the usual chaotic confusion of conflicting orders, the mast lowered to get under the bridge, the anchor forgotten about until after the long-tailed propeller shaft was thrashing up mud in the shallows. A rush to get the oars. Going around. Edward leaping out and leaping in again. Cursing and grinning. Dao looking nervous, clutching her straw hat. Then cruising into calmer waters, the curve of the bay spreading out green and undistinguishable behind us. An ancient camouflage painted DC3 lumbering sluggishly skywards from the airfield. Edward raising the sails up the knotty mast, the rope lifting the gaff like a white wing, but the boom thrashing this way and that, burying us in sail. Edward's cheerful cry, "Be alright in a jiffy." And amazingly it was. Two or three jiffy's notwithstanding.

The rudder steered on ropes like rowing boats the Pa rented out years ago at Pangbourne, when on a caravanning holiday we glided along the Thames under Goring Gap, the river still, the meadows drowsy with buttercups. I could see the Pa sitting amidships, sublimely watching the waterside while we two took turns catching 'crabs'. Here, instead of Edward's mother in the stern with the steering ropes and the picnic hamper, it was Dao, frowning with concentration.

This boat had an appalling drift. At least 30 degrees, but Edward was blind to it's faults. "Oh I know it won't go about," as if tacking was of no account. "We can always jibe her around with the wind up her stern." He apologised for her faults as one might for being the proud

possessor of a three legged racehorse. "Sorry about the smooth by centuries. We looked out onto nothing but ocean and islands. I immortalised the moment with the obligatory instamatic snaps. I have them now. Edward with his arm around Dao. "I owe it all to Dao," he admitted.

"Dao sabai. Okay?" he questioned, giving her a playful hug.

"Dao sabai," she agreed squeezing his hand. At that moment I wished briefly I was a priest and could give holy unction. "The church does not marry people," I remember the Pa saying. "It only asks God's blessing." "But can't you do that yourself, Pa?" Edward had argued."

"Would you like to get married?" I asked him as we sailed back, keeping an eye on Dao lest she understood.

"I feel we are, in a way," he replied, adding after a slight pause. "We've been up to Buddha you know." I nodded. He had taken Toy to the Buddha above Pattaya, and years before Hilary up to the Dover Patrol Memorial. Yes, I thought, he used monuments just as others needed lawyers and contracts.

Later that same day after we got back with only minor mishaps, I was to learn he had taken up Thai boxing. Each afternoon he spent an hour practising at Kee Lin's, an old warehouse behind the fishing wharf, a punch bag strung up outside and various well muscled and oiled youngsters aged twelve to twenty, sparring or training. Kee Lin the Chinese proprietor resembled a Sumo wrestler. His hair in a top-knot, a vast red paa-kamaa wrapped round his haunches as he presided, squatting on a dais of polished teak wood. He said very little, leaving the instruction to two cauliflower-eared trainers, who, with pads strapped over shins and stomachs to take the onslaught of kicks and fists, resembled embattled gladiators. It was into this forum that Edward vanished each afternoon, emerging an hour later, usually the worse for wear. "Why?" I asked him. "Aren't you a bit too old for this?" He tapped one of his front teeth which had a chip missing.

"I had a bit of a scrap down in Pattaya. Along Soi Yen Sabai. Rather outnumbered. Didn't go down, but there were a nasty few minutes. Couple of Frenchmen I'd been speaking to didn't even warble a Gallic war cry, let alone join in. I couldn't do that, could you?" Just watch?"

"It wasn't your first fight," I remarked, for I had heard Francois remarking how at Angelo's birthday party he had got into a row, when everything started flying including the birthday cake. "At least I feel safe with your friend around," Francois had commented. I wasn't so sure. He had never been one to pick fights. He had always avoided them where possible.

"One gets out of practice of actually bashing someone in the face," he explained. "Even a punch bag isn't quite the same, and the old reflexes aren't what they were either." Then he added a comment that rather surprised me. "It's like a monastic order these boxers. No sex. Up every morning at five o'clock. Except they don't pray, they run. But you've seen them praying in the boxing ring haven't you. A bit like crusaders." I failed to see the comparison, but I was intrigued he did.

That evening after Dao departed, he turned to me. "Have you ever thought," he said, "how easy it is for some people to catch something and die, and how hard for others. And the ones that deserve to live, often don't. It seems unfair."

"Why?" I asked him, curious.

"It's the trick of life I suppose," he went on. "The lucky, the unlucky. The rich, the not rich, Those that deserve, don't. Those that don't, do."

"Ah," I said, wondering what was coming next.

"Sometimes I wake up when we're together. Beyond the bed is lands end. If anything went wrong, I'd want us both to leap off together. After all," he added quickly, "I've had a good run for my money. I don't think I could put up with all that crap again."

"Does the lady approve," I remarked jovially.

"I think suttee, should be made obligatory in the Church of England," declared the Pa, carving the Sunday roast. "After facing the snares of Hell together in this life, why should one have to face them alone in the next. A little prussic acid with your lamb, my dear." Steptoe had his own ditty for those who bypassed his graveyard for the Barham bakehouse. "Ashes to ashes," he waved at the departing cortege, resting on his spade. "Into the flames Miss Spry dashes."

"It's like," Edward began, "like somewhere . . .," he amended, in a scrambled sort of way.

"Ah," I said wisely to disguise my puzzlement. Later at Ko Chang, I recalled that conversation.

He was staring across the night sea at the blazing remnants of Don's plantation beach restaurant, he and Nom, his Herculean deaf-mute, totally loyal, self appointed protector, had just torched only half an hour before, hoping that Don would be inside, paralytic with drink. And Toy too? Was he listening for her screams? Was that why we were waiting? I watched the dancing flames reflected in his eyes, the dark waters of Salakpet gulf a silent witness to the deed.

"Here," he said, patting the bamboo arm-rest like a good dog. "They don't treat me like shit."

And who was 'They'? I wondered. Or was this 'break in the clouds', this 'day outing at sea' because he had Dao like a secret voice in his soul, singing the songs he wanted to hear? A new bright weave woven in the tiresome tapestry of his days. Yet it needed only one thread to come adrift and the rest of his life would unravel. He stared glumly out to sea where the monsoon clouds were massing over the headlands. Around the rim of the bay the smooth grey fingers of the tide spilled over the mudflats. We had been talking all night and now the pale dawn glowed opaquely over the horizon. "On the right day," he announced suddenly, "You can see Mercury. Just as the sun comes up." Whether this was his right day, I still couldn't decide, but watching him I felt a sudden sadness welling up inside. Not for him, but for what a lucky bastard he was. He still discovered stars when most of us switched off the light and slept.

Edward's young samlor driver cycled me back to my hotel opposite the night market. A stone Buddha dozed in the roadside shade as if waiting for a bus. A ten year old rode his grandmother to market on an ancient motorbike, the old lady seated side saddle, a sack of something in her lap. On her head, a straw hat as big as a bucket. This was a society where one accepted the responsibilities of adulthood early. The filling station pumps were manned by twelve year olds, the market stalls by girls in their teens. Thin old men shuffled along, puffing Sai Fohn cigarettes, pausing by bookshops featuring girl pin-ups and Thai boxers. Matronly women shoppers spied on their small change, alert as street dogs. This was not a society that happily harboured eccentrics. Only priests were permitted to pray. The rest had to work. Or play, for when the Thais play they pursue it vigorously, usually with the help of a bottle. Where, I wondered did Edward fit in, if fit in he did? What did he tell them when they asked, as they always did, how did he earn his money? I had listened when in his pidgin Thai he had jokingly tried to explain, he was teaching his soul to fly, Jitjai mai bin, prodding his heart, flapping his arms ineffectually. His Prajao oey pon (God Bless You) fell on deaf ears in a religion where they didn't believe in God anyway. Or he cheerfully mispronounced Sweet Dreams Fan wan which they misunderstood as Sweet Teeth. An odd way to greet Goodnight.

The end of my first week coincided with the festival of Loi Krathong. Krathongs are small floats decked in flowers and candles which are set alight to drift out to sea, carrying our prayers and hopes. This was explained to me by Dao. The festival also attracted a funfair and fireworks. A typical Thai recipe of religion and enjoyment. As the festival fell just a few days short of Guy Fawkes, Edward was doubly delighted. Bonfire night had always been a high spot in his calendar, and here there were no restrictions. Rockets snaked across the crowded beaches, bangers were lobbed like grenades under passing cars. The music from the funfair boomed out beyond Mirror Mountain, where the three of us walked slowly along the shore away from the crowds. Even the monkeys had retreated up to the temple on the crag top for the night. We came to the mouth of the river and Dao crouched on the sand, striking matches and shielding her krathong from the fitful breeze. To my surprise Edward seemed unsure whether to join her, and hovered uneasily in the background muttering to himself. I had noticed he had acquired this habit. Perhaps it came from living apart from the mainstream. Of talking aloud as if to some imaginary companion.

On the pier, watching fishermen lob loading boxes up to the quay with the ease of a rugby pass, he exclaimed although he must have seen it a hundred times already. "I couldn't do that. Could you do that?" Or if he heard something out of the ordinary. "I can't believe that," to his unseen associate. "Can you?" The Pa used to talk to himself, but that was not the same. He used to pause in the centre of the village High Street, and declare, "You fool boy, you bloody fool." Behind the shop windows of R T Jones Greengrocer, Dewhurst Butcher and Madge's General Store, the parish twittered and gossiped over their shopping bags.

Edward startled me from my reverie by suddenly demanding, indicating Dao who was now paddling in the shallows to release her float. "What do you think of her?"

"She's a very attractive girl," I agreed without any reservations, but it didn't seem to satisfy him.

"But not the right girl for me. Is that it?"

"I didn't say that," I retorted. Whatever he was about to say he didn't, for at that moment Dao looked back with a faint cry for assistance and Edward bolted down the beach to help. Before he reached her she stood back, her flickering ship of faith released at last onto the eddying wavelets. All along the shore fireworks were going off, whizzes and flares and bangs, while near the pier an armada of hundreds of flickering krathongs lay rocking in the shallows, but it was Dao we watched. Edward's arms outstretched, willing it away to sea. Even so it kept floating back, as if the future could not sustain it, or it was not bold enough to venture out into such a great unknown. Half a dozen times it bobbed back, the candles spluttering out, needing to be relit. Dao was determined. A wraithlike figure, wading up to her knees, shipping her hopes out, only to have them washed back at our feet. Yet as we finally gave up and reluctantly walked back along the shore towards the lights of the funfair, it was not Dao's dashed hopes I was thinking of, but his. He carried something inside him. I didn't know what it was, except like a dormant plague virus it had something to do with death.

"Sorry I sounded mad at you," he said next day. "Yesterday evening I was a bit excited.

Wanted that stupid float to work. If she'd have let me. Could have waded out, but I didn't want to interfere." His apologies were a schoolboy's. Hasty repentant promises not to do it again. A small boy driven by impulses. Must do this, do that. No amount of reasoning could deter him once he had set his mind on something. Afterwards when the world had come

crashing down around him, he always had the decency to admit he had been wrong and a fool and that it wouldn't happen again. Except of course, it always did. It was evening of the next day. Earlier we had taken a picnic up the coast. There was an isolated statue of the Goddess Yomdoey, who was loved equally by two suitors, so that her enraged father tore her in two and threw the pieces in the sea where they became islands. All of which was rather bad luck on Yomdoey, and certainly her statue too seemed a bit neglected on this isolated stretch of coast with no one to admire it. Edward threw away the dead garlands and searched for fresh flowers. We returned to the house where Dao evicted us out to the verandah while she swept. Now she had gone to the restaurant, promising to return later. Edward was leaning against the verandah rail, his head cocked slightly. "Can you hear it?"

"Hear what?" The deepening twilight had brought its own stillness.

"Listen." The faint cries of children's laughter drifted over from the village. "I had been here a month before I even noticed it and yet it had been there all the time. Children, laughter, love." He made it sound so easy. He had convinced himself it was here in Prachuap he had started to live again. "Normally," as he put it. "And to grow old." Edward's brave new tomorrow that he could stride optimistically towards.

He watched a butterfly with black wings fluttering above the reed tips. "I used to want a cause," he said, staring at the river. "Yemen, Solomon Islands. Tried to find a cause I could believe in. Throw myself into." His voice tailed off into silence, before he concluded briskly, with a mocking laugh. "At least I don't need any bloody causes here. Just Dao. She's enough." I felt relieved, even if I didn't fully believe him. He had finally abandoned idealism which had failed him as much as he had failed it, for love. I just hoped a similar fate didn't await him. "It's good in some ways," he announced with careful deliberation. "That I'm attuned to the oriental way of life. You are nothing and everything at the same time."

That night and the next and the next, we were too busy exorcising the past to consider the threat the future might be about to impose. It never occurred to me that Toy might be aboard a fishing boat in Naklua, getting a free ride south across the gulf. Just as it never occurred to anyone a month later to foresee Edward's vindictive letter to the Bangkok Post, exposing the Narok Bar and people he knew in Pattaya. Nor that the owner of the Narok Bar would be shot dead as he stepped from his Mercedes outside the police post on the corner, by two helmeted motorcycle assassins who sped away into the morning traffic. All these fateful torrents still waited to be unleashed that night as we sat talking, trying to lay the past to rest finally and for all, so that Edward could step out with his Dao along the dancing moonbeam of his future.

"Africa, if only . . ." Back we went yet again. Half listening, with a patience easy to keep there on the verandah, the palm fronds brushing the moonlight, the dark ocean's murmur, and those moving pinpricks of light, fishing trawlers setting off from the busy pier, brim-full with crushed ice. Even as we spoke a boat was approaching neither of us ever dreamed would turn up. Edward had moved on to Manila. "That mirror image of myself chasing me along the dank alleys. It was like the Devil come to claim me." He trembled violently. "To take me back." I stifled a yawn. I knew how important it was for him to sever himself from these memories if he was ever to be free. Something the Pa once said strayed into my thoughts. "Sometimes, dear boy, to save the body, one has to cut off a limb. Sometimes to save the soul, one has to abandon the body." At that moment we heard the noise of a motorbike coming up the track. It didn't have the familiar purr of Dao's Honda Dream. Edward looked puzzled. The machine

revved up and pulled away. "Sounds like a taxi. Who on earth . . . ?" He didn't complete the sentence. In the same instant a voice called up from the clearing. A voice both of us instantly recognised.

I am sure Edward wished, as I wished, that some cataclysmic spirit would swallow the space, the time, the voice, and that when the moon came out of hiding behind the cloud, his world would be as untrammelled and as unspoken as before. "Edeee!" she called up again.

"Toy," cried Edward, his voice strangled in an agonised appeal. "Oh, God!" At this completely inappropriate moment another motorbike drove up. I need hardly add it heralded the arrival of Dao.

If it hadn't been so tragic, the situation was reminiscent of one of those Whitehall Theatre farces. Everyone showing up when they shouldn't. I remember the Pa in his amateur theatrical days. 'See How They Run' I think, running across the stage of the Parish Hall in long johns and dog collar and how we laughed. No one was laughing now.

I would prefer to forget the following day. Toy moved in. Dao moved out. What they said to one another in the process I am not in a position to comment, as I understood next to nothing of their conversations, except that "falang" came up frequently. I think at first Edward confidently hoped to salvage something from the debris. But if he thought he could pass Toy off as a casual acquaintance, it soon became obvious she was no party to his conspiracy. In fact the two girls went off together, with quite a bit of shared laughter, most of which I gather was at Edward's expense. Only Toy returned. "Where's Dao," he demanded.

"Dao not come. Dao say falang has girl too much. Dao say . . ." She paused smiling at me, clearly satisfied at her adroit handling of the situation.

"What?"

Toy sat quite still, a reluctant confidential silence, that she finally broke. "She say Eddy keeneo mak mak, (very mean). Not buy her clothes."

"I bought . . ." Edward started heatedly, but the earnestness in his voice tailed away. Yes, I wondered, what did he give her? What did he give any of them, apart from discomfort? Hikes up mountains to hack bamboo masts, getting bitten by red ants in the process. Dao had obligingly shown me the scars. Soaked with sea spray. Cheap food cooked badly. When did he ever give some visible sign of affection? What had Francois suggested? A thin one baht gold necklace? It wasn't expensive. He probably spent more repairing his motorbike. He beguiled them with fantasy. A dream to escape into together, which was fine serialised on television. Reality was rather different. What girl, Thai girl anyway, wouldn't swap the disadvantages of a treehouse for clothes, perfume, presents. Anything imbued with the largesse of loving. I may be wrong but somehow he failed to do his women justice. Was it as cardboard cut-outs he saw them? Boadicea, Florence Nightingale? His Boy's Own heroines didn't survive long in the pages of the everyday world.

Edward always had a problem with perspective. In Art at school his best effort was uneven lines of telegraph poles heading towards a horizon in the wrong place. His life seemed to be peopled by pre-renaissance two dimensional characters. He knew there were more to them than that, but he couldn't probe it. He stripped off his clothes and indulged in the flesh, but flesh apart there was little else of himself he could share. In the foreign lands where he foraged for love, any sharing was as limited as the lack of a common tongue, and sex had to

assume responsibilities of communication it was never equipped for. He became adroit at balancing what he gave for what he got. It never occurred to him that the less he gave, the less he had to give. The very values he scorned as mediocre or middle class were the core to a world of intimacy he felt excluded from without comprehending why. He brought them wilderness when they wanted comfort. He gave freedom when they wanted captivity. Only now he had nothing left to give, and no one to give it to. The dream had popped, the deserted moonbeam glittered like an empty enticement in the ocean dark.

Toy had been making a desultory attempt at sweeping up. Packing up. I knew she was taking him back to Pattaya. He knew it too. He watched her, defeated. "Run after Dao," I said to him, slumped dejectedly in his rickety cane chair. "Explain. Tell her the truth. Tell her!" But he just shook his head.

"It's no use is it?" And then. "Perhaps it was doomed anyway. Perhaps it's all doomed." He glanced up. "We're all creatures of circumstance. You can't escape your fate. What is it the Arabs say? Inshallah. 'What is written'."

"Rubbish Edward," I said with exasperation. I believe I would have shaken him if it would have done any good. But it wouldn't. Toy was wrapping him up, taking him back. Back to the bungalow at Crystal Garden and the bridge over the smelly klong. Why did she want him so much? Or was it that she just didn't want anyone else to have him?

If I had any other criticism it was that he accepted defeat too easily. He always had. A word from Toy and Dao fled. Toy reclined in her place on the verandah hammock. Edward seemed powerless to act. "Do something," I urged him. "Go to her." But the loss of Dao left him immobile. Staring into space.

"Why do they always take everything away?" he remarked morosely.

"They? Who?"

"Oh bloody fate. The powers that be, I suppose."

I didn't want to travel with them. I saw them off on the morning train. Crowded, third class only, the windows dirty. A dog sick in the aisle, getting to Thonburi late afternoon. From there a boat ride across the river, a No.40 bus to the Ekamai terminus, and the coach back to Pattaya. I stayed behind promising to tidy the place up, sell the bike and anything else, if I could. Find someone to keep an eye on the boat. Talk to Dao? No. I declined that one. That was not my affair and to be honest I was a bit afraid. He had said before he didn't mean to be at the end of someone else's convenience. I didn't mean to be at the end of his love affairs, impelling as it might be. It wasn't a question of loyalty, it was more a matter of pride.

As we waited on the platform, Edward kept glancing nervously up the track and forlornly over his shoulder as if hoping against hope that even now at this last moment, Dao might come riding up to reclaim him. The signal clanked down. A lamp glared green. We could hear the points switching just like the old station points at Martin Mill. "I did go home. Nearly." Edward spoke rapidly. "I managed to talk my way onto an evacuation flight. I hadn't any money. I was sleeping rough under cardboard boxes on the pavement outside the Odeon Leicester Square. I only had my khaki clothes. It was freezing. Early morning the corporation dustmen hoisted my shelter into the back of their cart with a hearty "Get up you effin' tramp." He looked at me with a naive innocence. "Only a bit before I had ruled one eighth of Uganda." He gave me a puzzled frown as if his own downfall had taken him by surprise. I suppose it had.

"Why?" I asked him now.

"I had to tell him, didn't I? The truth. I had to bring that back at least. But," he spoke with slow deliberation, "when I telephoned the vicarage, I heard him pick up the receiver. 'I say the line is clear to Kampala,' he said. I just couldn't say where I was. I was too ashamed. I hung up. I hitch-hiked to Dover and camped on the cliffs near Langdon Bay for a couple of days. Before going away." The train came in with a rush. The doors opened. A glance at Toy's profile was enough to confirm my suspicions as they crammed inside. The windows were too dirty to see through, but did I glimpse Toy's satisfied smile?

At the hut I found a letter in the Pa's familiar scrawl, or rather part of it. I looked for the rest but failed. Edward never kept letters. But this one seemed the more remarkable considering the Pa must have been on his death bed when he wrote it. "....I have decided that heresy is a necessary irritant for a man of destiny. A deceitful torpor would descend and turn us into Lotus plants. Consider the following, impatience; pride; gluttony; luxury; blasphemy; rage; despair. Are not these things permitted to keep us human and therefore potential recipients of divine truth? Therefore rejoice at the Hostiles, they have done these much evil. May the Lord reward them accordingly. However have they not done you a favour? I see writing on the wall. Only you must come out of the jungle. I see an honorific future. A testimony of the soul. I close my eyes but still the vision haunts me to be discussed only in the lowest of tones and then only by men of vision. I see the Pope and thou art dressed in red. I see a dragon and thou art defender of the faith. Ah, the vision fadeth, the mists of Confusion have succumbed me. Alas I have been blind to the future. But it will be so. It is written! Watchman what of the night. I shall be most interested to hear your thoughts. We are all well. Your mother is playing bridge at a rate of knots. Holding forth in great zest. When I can, I go to Minster church, lovely ancient services. Have done little to the garden of late but it is a restful place in spite of louts throwing stones at my greenhouse. How hard it is to forgive a lout."

"PS. The new archbishop looks like Captain Bligh, fifty lashes Christian, and all that!"

"THE SILENCE HUNG THAT HEAVY..."

When I got back to Pattaya a week later, one of the first things I did was visit Anderson's coffee shop. It was about eleven in the morning and for once, surprisingly, the place was deserted. "Have you seen this?" Anderson demanded, thrusting yesterday's Bangkok Post in front of my face almost before I had a chance to sit down. It was the first time I had seen him so agitated since a customer walked out without paying. "Your friend! Your friend!" He emphasised contemptuously as if the mere mention of his name would bring on instant thrombosis. "He certainly shot his bolt this time. Have you seen this?" Stabbing a finger at an open page. "This! You seen it? What the hell for? I'd like to know? Slitting his own throat and everyone else's in the process. Isn't it a recognised fact you don't shit on your own doorstep? So why? Why?"

"I've only just got back," I said, trying to glimpse what he was so intent on showing me, but brandished about instead.

"Don't let him dare show his face in here again, that's all!"

"I haven't seen him yet. What happened?" I asked, by now quite alarmed.

"He's mad." Anderson declared obstinately. "He's mad, mad, mad, mad and bad," he concluded finally slamming down the open paper in front of me. "Read that!" After his outburst I found it hard to concentrate. The words swam in and out of focus. "This is your master traitor," Anderson fumed over my shoulder, his finger directing my attention. "I tell you it'll bring the whole house of cards tumbling down. But why did he do it? Revenge? We know what the press once did to him. But to his friends?" Incredulity overcame him. I laid the paper aside appalled, not so much by what I had read, for the facts were quite familiar to anyone living long in Pattaya, but why he should so deliberately have set out to malign the few friends he had left in the world.

"Here," Anderson stabbed his finger. "See, it mentions the coffee shop, and the Narok Bar. He might as well have put names and addresses down as well. You don't have to be a witch doctor to guess who he's referring to. 'Underage sex orgies at a beach house in Naklua, a la Francaise.' You hardly have to be a genii."

"Francois," I said.

"Yes," Anderson declared. "He phoned me from the airport. He's on his way to Manila now. And Francois was supposed to be a friend. It's a bloody massacre. Who's that thinly disguised?" He pointed.

"Angelo," I admitted reluctantly.

"And then the Crystal Garden where he's living himself. Tell me what it is? Suicide! Read the editorial. He's worse than Gino Vrenko who started stirring things with his bloody articles in French. Fortunately only a few thousand people ever read them. I suppose this is him. 'The 'good' French pederast, who declaims the horrors with his pen hand while fondling a Narok boy with the other.' Read the Editorial. Plus there's a photograph. The police have already started rounding people up. That Italian who always sat at Ouan's bar. They raided his house near Wong Amat last night. Extracted confessions from the girls that he was pimping them to his friends. I've heard the figure of two million baht proposed. Girls to change their statements. Say what a nice man he was. Two million cuts a lot of ways. Judge happy. Minister

delighted. Everyone all the way down to Ouan who shopped him." I whistled in genuine surprise.

"Doesn't stop there," Anderson continued. "Police rounded up a lot of underage kids in bars, on beaches. Interrogations. What farangs have you been with? What hotels? Houses? You know John?"

"John?" I heard myself protesting. "But he's too drunk?"

Anderson grunted. "This boy claims John buggered him. The owner of the Narok Bar is negotiating a deal I've heard."

"How much?"

"250,000. There are Arabs in the goal threatening him."

Probably told to pay pretty damn quick or else! I tell you, I'd advise Edward to leave Pattaya quickly. Change his name too. I wouldn't put it past John to pay someone to shoot him. And tell him . . ." I was already on my feet in alarm. "Tell him if he ever dares set foot in Pattaya . . ."

This to my back as I hurried outside where the snarl of a passing motorbike drowned his final threats. I didn't stop until I reached the Crystal Garden. The by now familiar path led through tangled undergrowth to the noxious stink of the klong, black ooze and sewerage exposed in the eddying tide. The loose slats on the footbridge clattered as I crossed. The dog wasn't there, but the outer door was open. Peering through the gauze screen I made out Toy curled up asleep on the cane sofa, facing a blank television screen. No sign of Edward. I went inside and switched off the video. Toy took a lot of waking up, and when she did, she regarded me sullenly. "Mai yoo," she yawned, "not here. Go Prachuap, get boat. Why you come back? Him think you stay Prachuap. Come back boat together." She eased herself off the couch and walked to the refrigerator, drinking cold water from a bottle.

"When?"

"Yesterday. Say he want bring boat Naklua. I know him go back girl."

"No," I said, not sure why. "I don't think so." Then she smiled, a winning willing smile.

"Ngern, ngern, money, money." I felt in my pocket and fished out some baht notes. She appraised them without comment.

"Did you see this?" I had brought the newspaper. She shrugged.

"An mai ok, no can read Angrit."

"Well," I told her. "He's burned his boats now. Well and truly burned them."

That evening, after Sunday roast at Grotley's Corner, named not for it's grub, nor it's matey publican, but his dog, recently rescued from the mange, I rented a motorbike and rode to Naklua to visit Angelo. I found him outside his house, surrounded by half the stray dogs in Pattaya, and some rattan cages of prize fighting cocks belonging to a neighbour. He was bent over his old seagull outboard, but gestured me wearily towards the open doorway. Inside, the long makeshift table was littered with dirty plates. "I provide rice and room, that's all." He stopped and stared at the general untidiness; the disarray of chairs, the chain and padlock on the refrigerator, as though contemplating the virtue of his cause. His broad wiry shoulders stooped low like an old boxer's, his guard down, but his eyes ever watchful. I suddenly saw him as an ancient oracle, pipe and all. Merlin the 'Mago'. The magician seeing further back and farther ahead than any of us. And the result, a wry smile. He invited me upstairs. "Cooler

there." A long airy room ending in a cramped terrace, with a spy-hole view through the trees to the bay below and his boat. He accepted my gift of a bottle of Mekong graciously. "No need," he deferred, though I doubted there was much else to drink that had not already been looted by his houseful of scavengers. "But kind of you. So now." He sucked his pipe, as if to revive it. "What more can I help you about your friend?"

Unlike Anderson and Francois, he had taken the news more calmly. He poured us both a generous Mekong and Soda, and regarded my concern philosophically. "Yes, it is a pity. He has a problem. I feel sorry for Francois. Myself I am not too worried. What am I? Ah yes." He peered at his page with his reading glasses. "The Italian Doctor, ex personal physician to the Imam of Yemen." He glanced up, his salient features softened by a whimsical smile. "Not too many of those I daresay." He gestured hospitably. "If they come here what will they find? This house is a refuge. I give rice that's all." He laughed deprecatingly. "Sometimes they steal from me. Sometimes they sniff lacquer, sometimes they take drugs and sometimes they go short-time with falangs to get money." He chuckled again. "You know one time what he said.

Edward said to me, 'Angelo, one morning you will wake up and find them devouring you.' He sipped his Mekong, and held out a wiry arm. "Not such a good meal I think."

"It had devoured him," I suggested. He nodded.

"Yes, maybe. Something has, someone. Revenge is an unpredictable passion. I am rather glad that I am getting too old to care."

"Does he still care so much?" He nodded again.

"Too much." We contemplated Edward in mutual silence for a while and then I said something I had been meaning to ask him. Jibla.

"Jibla. Ah!" He pursed his lips thoughtfully, softly stroking his hand gently over his bald head.

"Yes, I think there was something for him there. Some magic. However small." He searched as someone never fully familiar with the language for the right words to convey. "It was a strangely beautiful place. A sanctuary in the centre of desolation." He spoke in the guttural tones of a North Italian, the Austrian influence of centuries seeping into his speech. With a dismissive shrug, he added slowly, "I expect it has all been destroyed now." He sounded as if he almost wanted that. A forsaken memorial to some forgotten prophet to whom no one listened any more. "Did he tell you about Marib? There is, was," he corrected, "a great dam. It irrigated the Queen of Sheba's empire. Now only the stone ramparts remain. Oh, sixty, seventy feet high. Edward was very impressed. 'Who destroyed it?' he asked the armed bodyguards we had hired. 'God' they answered. 'Allah destroyed it,' 'Why?' 'Because the people did not

pray." He sighed. "It's there in the Koran, '....so we unloosed upon them the waters of the dam. And replaced their gardens with tamarisk shrubs and nettles. Thus we punished them for their ingratitude.' It's all in there. In the Koran. Edward will assure you of that. He likes the idea of retribution. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Pattaya," I suggested. Angelo shrugged. His owl eyes blinked.

"Pattaya. Who knows? Mountaineers should perish in a blizzard climbing Mount Everest.

Writers should be prepared to be shot for their beliefs. Edward had an appropriate fate in

store for everyone. And yet . . ." He paused. "He seemed to admire traitors too. Philby, the spy, was from his school I believe?"

I chuckled. "The alumni of old boys. Yes, Admiral Bing, Clive of India. Our headmaster encouraged us to be individuals. We even had emissaries from the Chinese legation waiving Mao's little red books at our communist party meetings."

Angelo nodded. "Yes. I think I can understand better. I am glad you told me." He got up to pour us both another drink. "Did he tell you he was kidnapped? During the fighting. I don't know. He had stories. Sometimes it was hard to pick out what really happened." He sipped his drink and leaned back, his luminous eyes staring at the ceiling. "He said it was 'special' ." His eyebrows raised. "Perhaps it was."

"What was?" I thought he meant getting kidnapped.

"Jibla." His head turned towards me. "Mosques dating from the 9th century, minarets rising one above the other. 'Stepping stones into the sky,' Edward called them. Every mosque had its own pool with piped water. Swimming pools on rooftops," he mused. "Boys used to climb onto the parapets and dive in. From the ground below it looked as if they were leaping into the sky. Edward used to gaze up entranced. 'I couldn't do that could you?' 'They are only diving,' I reminded him 'But into the air,' he marvelled. 'Like Icarus. What if they fell?' Angelo seemed amused by the recollection. "He saw things differently to other people." His hands scooped into the ice bucket. "An illusion? 'Perhaps the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were like this?' Edward claimed." A fleeting smile softened his features. "Perhaps they were."

"And why was he kidnapped? Was that before he became a Muslem?" I found myself saying this with

reluctance. It sounded such a sham. Angelo chuckled dryly.

"Perhaps it was a kidnapping of convenience. Things were not going quite right for him. The Baptists, I think I told you already that he was working for them, wanted him sent back. They sent him back," he corrected. "But his jeep conveniently broke down before he got to Ib."

"I don't follow?"

"No, no, of course. But you have to understand the government in Sana'a only controlled the road through to Taiz by day. The rebels had taken all the highlands as far north as Ib. At night the army evacuated the road blocks and the rebels took them over. Edward claimed the engine failed, and by the time he got going again it was dark. He was stopped at a roadblock."

"Where did they take him?"

Angelo chuckled. "Back to Jibla of course." He leaned back, watching me. "You have known him for a long time, I think."

I nodded. "Most of my life."

"And his father was a priest? My father was a priest," he added. "I am an Italian Huguenot. 'Valdois'. Or I was born one. I don't believe in it any more.

"Edward does."

A dismissive snort. "Sometimes I think it's a game for him. In Thailand he is a Buddhist. In Jibla he became a Muslim. He kneels in the Great Mosque chanting the ninety nine names of God, and afterwards they dress him in futa robes, stick a dagger in his belt and parade him through the alleys of the town." He shook his head in unexpected laughter. "The good Baptists were

horrified." I found it hard to share his amusement or to sympathise. Angelo noticed this. "Why not?" His voice sardonic. "Burton became a Muslim."

"Burton!" I exclaimed. "He spoke about fifty languages." Here Angelo agreed.

"Yes," Edward's Arabic was limited. It didn't seem to stop him though."

"From what?" There followed a long hesitant pause.

"From falling in love. With something, with someone." He added hurriedly.

"He has been falling in love all his life," I muttered.

"Mistaking the body for the soul, or vice versa," Angelo continued, "and afterwards wondering why he had been disappointed."

"But he wasn't disappointed in Jibla?"

Angelo's domed head dipped imperceptibly. He reached for his pipe. "Girls were totally forbidden. Veiled head to toe in black. Not even the eyes peeping out. Edward insisted you couldn't tell which way they were going. Even for medical examinations they were hidden behind a screen. Untouchable. The bride price was then five thousand riyals or more. They had to be inviolate. Just to be seen with a westerner, an infidel, meant harsh punishment." A long reflective pause. Outside, below, a dog howled, a motorbike started and stopped, a brief altercation, silence, more barking. "Edward once asked me, 'Angelo it doesn't really matter does it what you love? Boy, girl, cat, dog. It's the loving isn't it?'" Angelo glanced at me cautiously. "He always likes confirmation, never judgement." I nodded in agreement. Angelo seemed to weigh his pipe between his hands. "And after all it is only another magic. Another spell, another enticement to come under. The mistake is not to recognise that it is doomed, like all ephemeral charms." He nodded in uncertain agreement with himself. Coughed and cleared his throat. "The mistake is to take it down from its minaret, out of its Christmas Carol. Like trapping a butterfly or a bird. As if in doing so we gain some of its elusive beauty, or its wildness. The difference in Edward's case was that he allowed himself to be trapped. I found him swimming and diving in the mosque pools. 'A nice way to be kidnapped,' I suggested. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'I'm sort of under house-arrest. Can't leave.' That was the last time I saw him. Scandalising the baptists, though I daresay he didn't mean to, dressed now in his futa robe, curved dagger, keffiyah head cloth. Living in a flea-hole above a tea-house. A sort of self appointed English emissary from another era. Sipping tea spiced with nutmeg and cinnamon, surrounded by kids armed with rifles, leading him eagerly about by the hand. It was the first time I saw him happy. 'They will cheat you,' I warned him. But he only smiled in a bemused sort of way. He knew it. He didn't care.

Who was it at Jibla? Amid the rattle of gunfire, the whistle of mortars, the crump of shells, lulling his soul asleep? Yes, I could imagine that. A boy singing from the minarets. Diving into pools, playing football with robes hitched up. Dodging bullets in an unknown forgotten tribal war. Yes, it was just like Edward to choose the impractical if not the impossible. To love something as ephemeral and unpredictable as a boy, or was he perhaps in doing so, simply nurturing his own reflection in the far and lost waters of his own long ago?

"FOR THE WIND IS IN THE PALM TREES..."

And now I come to the part of this episode where I really wonder whether the winds of fate did not take flight. The south westerly monsoon should have continued blowing up the Gulf for at least another month. A fine offshore breeze that would blow Edward easily back to Pattaya. Uncharacteristically, he had outlined his plans to Toy in some detail. According to her account, he intended first sailing north the hundred kilometres or so to Hua Hin, hugging the coast if need be, sheltering behind small offshore islands, or up tidal creeks.

From Hua Hin he proposed heading east for the island of Ko Pai, fifty nautical miles out in the gulf and only twenty five miles from Naklua. Ko Pai had a lighthouse beacon. If he left at sunset, Edward estimated that with a following wind he should pick up Ko Pai light by midnight, and from then on just keep steering for it. "It's better to reach an island at daybreak," he had told Toy. If you arrive in the dark you have no idea where you are." Angelo, who sailed there often, had sketched in the bays, shoals and headlands. Apart from fishing trawlers and an occasional military patrol, the island was uninhabited. Edward expected to land and rest in one of the coves, before continuing the final leg to Naklua, using that tall temple pagoda looking westward to the sea as his marker.

There was little sense then in my going back to Prachuap. As the weather remained fine, there was no reason to suppose that he had not already set off. Anyway, I wanted to be on hand when he landed to warn him about his likely reception once the farang community learned he was back. I spent most of the next two days at Angelo's, on the far side of the Naklua pier, or up on the hill of the Golden Buddha, scanning the sea view with a pair of Angelo's binoculars. On the third day, I coaxed Toy to inquire from the Naklua fishermen if anyone had sighted a small boat crossing the gulf. After all, it was distinctive enough with its gaff rig and bamboo spars.

It was also on the third day, that for some strange reason the wind shifted unpredictably to the north. Sheltered by the Laem headland, this change was barely perceptible in Pattaya Bay, which was usually calm anyway, but out in the gulf, the wind shift had a dramatic effect on Edward's progress. Without a keel, and only some homemade leeboards to slow her drift, the boat's customary thirty degree veer to leeward increased dramatically. As long as the wind was blowing up the gulf, this sideways nudge helped him, but once it changed direction and blew down from north, it pushed him far off course. Despite steering as close hauled as he could, for every four miles he clawed north-east, two miles of leeway shoved him further south. There was nothing he could do to correct the course. South of Ko Pai, and if he wasn't careful, south of Sattahip. South of Sattahip's Laem Pu Chao headland, the gulf changes shape, the coastline making an abrupt turn due east. If Edward missed a landfall there, there would be nowhere before reaching Cambodia, three hundred miles away.

Out at sea in a small boat, nothing is ever quite the same as it appears on an Admiralty Chart. Edward didn't even possess that. Just a road map and a small scout's compass. The islands were clearly if inaccurately marked, but after many hours huddled over the tiller in his small craft, he found his concentration going. He anticipated the flashing beacon on Ko Pai, but he hadn't reckoned on a similar one on Ko Chuang off Sattahip. At night, approached from the west, the lights were too far apart to be easily confused. Each beam a solitary repetitive flash

across its separate arc of ocean, but if one had drifted away unwillingly, the view might be quite different. By day with the indistinct outline of the mainland mountains as a backdrop, the islands could seem remarkably similar. Certainly when viewed from an open, unsteady boat. So did Edward in all genuine ignorance and weariness mistake the one for the other? Then shaking his compass in disbelief, as the mainland changed direction, and with the wind blowing strongly from the north, resign himself to his course and to whatever landfall in might thrust him?

It was easy enough, I suppose, for me, sitting on Angelo's verandah to wrest reason from my imagination, charting a dotted course in a rather random attempt to pursue his drift, unexpected or intended. Could it really be as he casually informed me later from his outpost at Klong Son, that he never wanted to know where he was going anyway? Was it really as simple as that? Wasn't it more likely, despite his earnest denials, that his escape was part of a carefully prepared decoy to evade Toy's clutches and his obsession for her once and for all. Just as his letter in the Bangkok Post, and here again he vigorously refused to admit as much, was not the result of any sudden brainstorm or moral outrage, but a deliberately executed order to protect him from ever returning to Pattaya again. An order in which the sacrifice of the reputation of his friends was a vital ingredient. The coup de grace against any future unforeseen change of heart or temptation that might occur to him.

"Yes," I thought when I found him, he had followed the Pa's advice to the letter. 'Sometimes to save the soul one has to abandon the body.' Pattaya and Toy were his flesh and blood, inseparably linked. Like one of his early storybook navigators. In order to encourage the crew to cast off from the Old World and continue their quest for the New, he had to convince them it was impossible to return. The shift of wind was merely a willing and timely accomplice to the deed. And what a bounty. A friendly current tilting him straight into the outer archipelago of the South China Seas, straight into his Robinson Crusoe wonderland. Or perhaps it would have been had he not finally, after more than sixty hours out of sight of land, jerked awake from a fitful doze, the tiller lashed, the sails drooping, and spied far ahead a great jungled crag, and steered for it. He had little choice. His supplies were almost gone. The boiled rice he had set off with had turned rancid in the heat. The bread was finished. He was down to his last tin of sardines and half a bottle of water that he had already been nursing all day.

Sagging monsoon clouds masked the mangrove coast along the mainland to the north and shrouded the Cambodian mountains beyond, as if to guard the island's identity. Indeed, as he drew nearer the sails yawing in the sloppy swell, there was nothing at all familiar about the jungle island peaks or the white coral strand fringing the broken shoreline. Even as he laboriously lowered his sails and lashed the spars roughly to the mast, clutching the stays for support, he had no idea where this lucky landfall was. It was only after he fitted the long-tailed outboard and used the very last drops of his precious hoarded fuel to cruise in past a wooded islet and across a glass smooth bay, first faint doubts began to puzzle him. Ahead a cluster of stilt huts appeared half hidden between clumps of mangroves. Small fishing craft lay moored in the mud, or tied up abreast of a flimsy wooden jetty. Only now did he suddenly realise he had been here before. With Francois.

The difference, as he kept telling himself that evening, sitting at the store by the jetty, trying to swallow a very spicy curry, was that with Francois they had crossed from Laem Ngob on the mainland. Coming from the north, sheltered from flurries of rain under the trading ferry's

makeshift canopy. The coincidence was that both times, he should arrive in Klong Son, a tiny coastal Kampong almost entirely cut off by a tidal creek curving back into a mangrove swamp behind. A small island of coconut palms, huts, a temple, a communal generator that switched off at nine p.m. Only a narrow footbridge across the klong connected this outpost to the jungled tip of Ko Chang island.

It didn't take him very long either to realise that no one else need ever know where he was. Assume he'd drowned; assume the boat had sunk; assume he'd been killed by pirates; assume what they wanted. He had volunteered little enough information when he had left Prachuap. "Bai thiaw - going for a trip." It was all he could say anyway and they were used to that. The dotty farang off to sea in his leaky tub, with an engine that broke down every five miles, and he hadn't come back. Edward had purposely avoided mention of any destination in case someone should try and prevent him. Not that there was any real coastguard service, but the fishermen who sold him the boat kept a protective eye on him. "Yes," he decided, yawning, as he made his way sleepily back across the soft sand under the palms to his rented hut, he really couldn't be better off. Apart from Dao of course. But then one never knew, there might be another Dao out here to discover.

As things turned out he did find a friend, and an enemy, both entirely unexpected and unnecessary. The pity was that he still refused to accept that life rarely turns out the way we predict, and despite protestations to the contrary, found it impossible to align himself to that oriental allegiance which submits our life to the winds of fortune or fate.

Back in Pattaya, as news leaked out of Edward's disappearance it was at first hailed with doubt and then delight, for it was commonly held that he not only got what was coming to him, but it was a fitting finale for the wanderer. In fact his watery demise, unseen, unheard, evened out the score, quid pro quo. In Oscar's bar if not in Anderson's, Madame Robert, the kindly Californian Scots queen who ruled, rallied a last post. They raised their upturned glasses as if to the king across the water. "Let us walk, brethren," he preached, "with our boots tied on backwards, and recall for just a wee moment anyway our brother Edward, who having set the firmament in confusion around us, fittingly perished in it. To Palinurus."

"Who?" they demanded.

"Aeniad's bloody pirate who jumped overboard in the straits of Messina and was butchered on the beach by Sicilian barbarians, you bloody illiterate, uneducated Sassenachs!" Some who misheard assumed Palinurus was Edward's surname. Very few people admitted their surnames in Pattaya. Hotel receptionists obligingly altered both names and nationalities upon request. Madame Robert's well intentioned requiem reminded me of Edward's own brief epitaph (copied from Steptoe) for unfortunate failed pets as we laid them to their rest. "Unto the father and to the Son and into the Holy-ee-goes!" But sceptical as any half-believer in the raising of Lazarus or resurrection in general, I remained unconvinced by Edward's sudden submission to mortality. He was too adroit at dodging disaster to succumb to a sea change. I studied the real charts at the Viruna Yacht Club near the Royal Cliff beach, while from the local metrological station I got the weather reports of the preceding week. Then with Toy in tow as translator, we returned to Prachuap and Hua Hin, speaking to local fishing crews. They confirmed an open pea-green boat, with bellying sail had been sighted, farang at the tiller, black dog in the bows, but further south than one would have ever intended for a run across to Ko Pai. Where then? It suddenly dawned on me. Miss a landfall at Sattahip and he would

just keep going. The wide sweep of Rayong bay with its distant oil refineries, Ko Samet island abeam. Ko Man Nok. If he had fuel or wind he might come in at the Laem Ya headland or Laem Thuam. I always find charts fascinating. They seem so empty, but they say so much. River estuaries, mangrove studded bays. One thing for sure, unless a typhoon was blowing, it was not a particularly dangerous coast to be washed up on.

There were long unbroken stretches of sand, mud and mangroves. He could have gone up river to Chanthaburi, or another hundred miles, aimed inland, up the dredged channel of the Mae Name Trat. And then I noticed for the first time an island blocking the way. It was big. Hardly smaller than Phuket by comparison and like that island, appeared to be almost a continuation of the coastline as if it had broken off long ago. A piece of jigsaw puzzle come adrift. With the aid of the chart I examined the island. Its mountainous peaks and deeply indented bays at either extremity, Ko Chang possessed a certain Treasure Island appearance. Pirate coves, a dotted coastal track, freshwater springs, everything except 'X' marking Captain Flint's buried treasure. It was an island waiting for an impoverished sailor like Edward, lost between sea-lanes to glimpse over the edge of the horizon at sunset, when hope had almost been given up.

I didn't confide with Anderson, who as Consular Representative was being badgered by his superiors in Bangkok to close the case. After all it was only a hunch. I also had another reason for discretion. That morning Lomsok Prasadit, millionaire owner of the Narok Bar, one sad baby elephant chained to a cement pillar, an irritable pecking stork in a cage not wide enough to spread its wings, a solitary, sullen chimp (and who can blame it?) locked up likewise, a chest full of doped snakes, revenue collector of six thousand baht per month from each of the forty hustling bars backing the boxing booth, patron of the noble sport, also of the Thai li-khe opera bawling away at the back till dawn, a snooker hall where juveniles gambled all night, then slept all day spread on bar stools, a ferry service to Ko Lam, plus fishing pier in Naklua, was shot in the back five times as he got out of his Mercedes at seven o'clock in the morning, by the pillion passenger on a motorcycle, that sped away unrecognised into the dawn traffic hubbub. Shot a week after Edward's denunciation of the Narok Bar, which only a year earlier he himself had proclaimed joyfully to Francois was the centre of the universe. "You were right," he had agreed with delight. "Here ALL one's fantasies can be fulfilled." Quite what Lomsok would have replied to that if he could as he lay flat on the pavement, face turned sideways, eyes open unblinking to the wide angle of Pattaya Bay, the Gulf beyond and the crowd of curious unconcerned passers-by and the mocking lament of scavenger birds swooping for garbage, will never be known.

"Wherever he is." Anderson declared, when I suggested he delay his conclusions on Edward for a week or two. "Davy Jones locker or not. Dear God don't let him come back here." This time I resisted the temptation to share my ideas on Edward's whereabouts, even with Toy. If there was any deceit it was only that of withholding information, for I had only instinct to go on. Nothing more definite. Nevertheless, I was aware Toy had been watching me studying the charts, and sometimes I found her there at the table in Edward's bungalow peering at the names. She didn't ask any questions, nor did I volunteer any suggestions. I assumed, since most Thais seem to find maps incomprehensible, she wouldn't be able to figure out land from sea, or where depth contours eddied and flowed in their undulating underwater patterns. But then I had forgotten she had been Edward's 'companion' for months, and Edward was the sort

of person who insisted everyone else could understand instantly everything he did. He made no allowances for sex. "Rubbish calling them weaker," he once stormed, after a harrowing with Matron. "They're tough as old boots, the lot of them." I'm not sure if he would have included Dao in this category, but Toy was a girl who not only out-raced most Go-Kart drivers on the track, performed aerobatics with a water scooter when the waves scared off the US Marines, defeated any opponent at snooker, any time. I had mistakenly placed her within the protective category of early pregnancy, without realising that it probably meant less inconvenience to her than it would to Edward's dog.

I accept that I may have made a serious miscalculation over Toy. A mistake that heralded unexpected consequences, but I am also convinced that events were now moving beyond the realms of control, as if some secret tribunal with awesome powers, and against whose verdict there was no appeal, had finally passed judgement and with each new click of the slowly turning time screw, the intended sentence came inexorably closer.

"THE SLUDGY SQUIDGY CREEK..."

As I climbed off the crowded pick-up truck from Trat onto Laem Ngob's puddled main street near the pier, the mountainous bulk of Ko Chang Island completely blocked the view. I had been told it took at least an hour to reach it by boat, but its sheer size made it seem close enough to swim over. I arrived late, after a day on the bus from Pattaya. Storm clouds loomed overhead, the mud streets were awash from earlier downpours and a fresh deluge threatened any second. "Hi there, pal," called a friendly American accent. A Thai would have shouted, "Hey, you!" This voice hailed from astride an old motorbike, half hidden beneath a large umbrella. Only bare feet and white shorts visible. The umbrella raised to permit a glimpse of white tee shirt and spectacles. "You'll get wet if you don't hurry. Want somewhere to stay? Hop on. Trust me." At that instant a flurry of rain swept down the street. I raced for the sheltering umbrella. "Just a few yards, pal," my host announced, steering a slalom course between flooded potholes.

We drew up alongside a white boarded house, with 'Laem Ngob Guest House' freshly painted across the upstairs verandah, plus a sign that announced 'US Owner. English, French, Spanish spoken. Proprietor Captain Donald Fribecker. US Navy retired'. Pulled-back shutters protected an open room filled with unoccupied tables. "Meet the manager," said the American, helping dust the rain off me, and indicating a pretty Thai lady. "Wife runs the Guest House. I look after the beach resort on the island." He waved a hand informally around. "New venture. Just opened. Success assured." He was going a little fast for me. It must have shown. "Ko Chang?" He peered over his spectacles. "That's where you are going I take it? That's the only reason any foreigner comes to Laem Ngob, and I had you figured for a foreigner?" He was wiping the drips off his spectacles as he spoke. I nodded. "Don," he announced, reaching out his hand as if it was a trophy.

The name meant nothing to me. Although it must have featured in Edward's rambling narrative, it never occurred to me to connect the past with the present. But if Edward had arrived from the land and not from the sea, I wonder how he would have reacted on being suddenly confronted by his old captain from the ill-fated 'Cruz-del-Sur'. Caution I expect, for despite what had happened, Don had done him no harm that he could pin the blame on. Now regaling me with the Guest House menu and sitting down to watch me eat, he proceeded to emphasise the merits of his beach resort. Don, it seemed, had acquired use of a coconut plantation backing a strip of sandy beach on the eastern tip of the island. The rest was uninhabited, unapproachable, jungled promontory. Access only by sea. "I'm having a jetty built for the Salakpet ferry to pull in, otherwise it's a days hike through the forest. If you make it at all without a broken leg, which I sincerely doubt in the rainy season. The perfect get-away-from-it-all," he eulogised, "Peace and tranquillity, that's what's on offer. And great food. Plus the diving. Of course I don't actually own it," he admitted. "Yet. Though the wife's family have land rights on the island. Call it Long Beach, after California. Tents are fifty baht a head." "Tents?" I peered through the curtain of falling rain outside. It hardly seemed the camping season.

"So why not thatch huts, eh? I'll tell you. Like another tea? Two for the price of one. I know how you Brits love tea." He pronounced it 'tee' on a high note and guffawed. "Because tents

are easier to strike if things go wrong. Not that I'm expecting that to happen. But here you never know. Land of the military. Ever seen the cabinet? There's not a minister among them not a five star general. Even though I'm married to a Thai wife, it stands for nothing. She automatically loses all her rights marrying me and I never had any here in the first place. So why are you here?" he asked, hurrying to change the subject. "You don't look the typical traveller."

It was at this point I told him. I had no reason not to.

Perhaps I should have been more cautious, but I was here on a hunch anyway. I had a lot of ground to cover and needed all the help I could get if Anderson wasn't going to officially write Edward off to a watery grave. "Edward?" He frowned. "What's he look like?" I began to describe him.

"You've seen him? He's been here?" I asked hopefully. Don laid aside his glasses to wipe his face. Rain or perspiration oozed below the hairline.

"I thought I did. Just for a moment. You know what it's like in this business, you meet so many people. Ships that pass in the night. You look surprised. Something I said?"

"Just a memory. No matter."

"Listen. If he's on the island I'll hear about it. Trust me," Don continued. "No sense your going across in this weather. There's nowhere to stay." This was far from true, as I later discovered. The National Park had built bamboo huts near the Tha Mayon waterfall, and there were rented shacks along some of the southern beaches, but at that time there was little I could do but follow Don's advice, and this was not in short supply. "Leave this to me," he continued persuasively. "Unless you speak the local dialect no one will understand you. And where will you begin? There is only a footpath along the northern side of the island. It's forty kilometres long. Although there are plans to blast out a route on the south side, it doesn't join up anywhere yet. You need a helicopter or fast launch. All those offshore islands! Why a stray farang on Ko Chang is as lost as a mango tree in the jungle!"

The more he talked the more he had me convinced. I forgot that at Prachuap I only had to mention 'Eddy' or 'King Kong' to the kids and everyone knew him. "Trust me," Don kept repeating. He made it sound plausible. Like Edward before me, I wanted to trust him. To off load the responsibility. And why not? There was little enough in his manner to suggest deception. After all he informed me more than once he was an American and an ex Navy captain, inferring, I assumed, 'Officer and Gentleman'. In addition, he knew the islands, or claimed to, while I did not. I capitulated. "Where did you say he'd be coming from?" he called back, as he mounted his motorbike and set off for the jetty. "From the west was it?"

"Prachuap," I called back. He barely acknowledged this, with a hand raised off the handlebars, before vanishing into the rain. I noticed for the first time the message printed on his Tee shirt. "Hey, Who really shot the Pope!"

I always find waiting rooms tedious. Doctors, dentists, railway stations. Subdued silence, clocks ticking. Waiting for something to happen. Laem Ngob was like that. Between rain showers I wandered halfheartedly about the village. There wasn't a lot to discover. A snooker hall with framed photos of Steve Davis smiling. A plank bridge across a stream to the Muslem quarter, with a sala or rest room in the middle. Night life consisted of prancing transvestites in a thatch hut at the cross-roads, or Bangkok whores singing sultry karaoke from a windy stage

near the pier. I settled for the ice-cream parlour where the guitar and songs were real, even if the ageing Thai hippy tended to mash up the Bob Dylan lyrics. A local bus into Trat passed a pretty tiered minaret perched over a creek at a fishing settlement. The girls in white scarves, the boys in scull-caps.

I hired a jeep and set off down the thin eastern hemline of Thailand, squashed between the ridge of Cambodian mountains and the sea. To Klong Yai which stank of fish and where you could go no further. Just a chance he might have washed up. On the end of the fishing pier the food stall girls giggled and hid. They had no idea what I was asking them. Back in Laem Ngob I inspected Paradise, a row of attractive short time bungalows spaced around a muddy hole. The playful receptionist who showed me a room stripped off her clothes without hesitation and suggested a swim.

The third day there was a message but no messenger. It arrived with the early morning boat from Salakpet. Edward was on the island. In fact he was now at Don's plantation. If I wanted to join them I should come out on the noon boat. It sounded straight forward enough and after wasting three hours sipping Nescafe in the general store at the foot of the pier, I chased up the jetty between showers and jumped on board the Salakpet boat. It was another hour and a half before we cast off. The intervening time was spent loading. Other boats destined for different locations on the island were similarly employed. Because of the falling tide, the decks were far below the level of the pier, and everything had to be thrown, grasped, heaved, clutched, humped, slid or swayed aboard. Everything meant everything. Trays of eggs; baskets of vegetables; sacks of cement; flour; sugar; tapioca. Spare parts for marine engines; motorbikes dangling down perilously from above; hessian-draped metre blocks of ice. One slip to a watery grave. And it happened. A porter toppled in after, amid general applause. Most things, porter included, got fished out of the oily swell, steaming in the sun between showers. By the time the loading was completed, there was scarcely room to move, and the lower deck outside was awash, with nothing but a nine inch sill preventing waves flooding in. When we left the pier and nudged out into the full buffet of the sea, there were a couple of jarring smacks when we lurched so far, I was sure we must tip right over. The Captain hardly inspired confidence, more interested in his bottle of Mekong than the fate of the ferry. The passengers too were drinking themselves into carefree oblivion, chasing a spirit the colour and smell of benzine with generous swigs of Singha beer. The alcohol, I learned, was a bribe from Don in return for a brief stop-over at his jetty.

The trip took two hours and once we reached the shelter of the island, the seas lessened. Earlier misapprehension soon forgotten, everyone on board asleep except the man at the wheel, I was able to appreciate the sheer size and magnificence of the unspoilt island. There was not a dwelling in sight. Jungle clad mountain slopes plunged over low cliffs, coves of white coral sand, slopping seas bluer and cleaner than I had ever seen. We cruised between two rocky atolls before changing course and entering a great landlocked sound, miles wide and deep. It reminded me of rounding Spanish Point and coming into the Great Sound in Bermuda, or the approach to Porta Azzura on Elba, except here a spine of mountains swept out to sea high above our lee shore, while far inland rising above an archipelago of wooded islets, soared an upthrust of dark green peaks, patches of ragged cloud drifting off their slopes like gun smoke. A hand gripped my arm and pointed. Half a mile ahead a rickety jetty stuck out from a

cluster of rocks. A figure in white stood at the end, waving. As we drew nearer I could make out the remains of burned-out huts on the shore behind. The Salakpet ferry bumped alongside the wooden piling. A flying rope snaked overhead. Don must have secured it. I was busy hoisting myself up among the cross-posts, onto a hardly less secure footing above where Don stood joking down to the boat captain, making gestures of mutual imbibing. After final sentiments of camaraderie were exchanged, the boat made off and was quickly out of sight, rounding a headland into the sound beyond.

Don grinned amiably. "Want to lend a hand? How was your trip? You can tell me about it later. Manage these can you?" I was only now aware of several sacks and bulging cartons that had been landed alongside me. "Just a few stores," Don laughed, clapping me on the back. "Keep the wolf from the door." He cradled a crate of Mekong carefully in both arms and set off. I followed him off the jetty, scrambling over rocks and wading waist deep through mangrove pools, trying not to trip up. A beaten path led off into murky tangled undergrowth. The whereabouts of Edward had been on the tip of my tongue since landing. I began to wonder if Don's haste hadn't been to avoid questions. After all, I would have expected Edward to be waiting on the jetty with him. But Don was striding ahead and I was too out of breath to ask. Finally the sky overhead lightened. We emerged from the jungle onto the edge of a lofty coconut plantation. Don led the way between cabbage palms, skirted a stream and stepped onto a white beach scattered with driftwood. He rested his crate and I willingly dropped my cartons.

Squatting on the ground, Don cocked his head sideways. "Listen fellow, I know what's on your mind and the answer is no. No, he isn't. He was but he left. But he'll be back. Don't you worry. Yes, my baby, he'll be back." He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the hard damp sand, and then pushing his spectacles firmly onto the bridge of his nose, stared up, watching my reaction.

I flapped my arms ineffectually, unsure what to say except, "he definitely is here. On the island?"

Dan nodded sombrely. "Trust me. I can show you the table we sat at. Why we were talking half the night. Just like old buddies. His friendly smile evaporated. A suspicious glare lay revealed beneath. "It turns out we knew each other already. Pity you didn't let on about that. Lot of old times to catch up with." Shouldering his crate, Don padded along the beach before heading off into the trees towards some brightly coloured tents. We stopped outside a lean-to shack. Sagging furniture rested comfortably on swept sand under the protecting thatch eaves. A big woman bustled out of the back. "Mama," introduced Don. "My Major D. runs the show . . . with her daughters. Doesn't miss a trick. Trust her totally." Mama harangued Don in Thai and Don offered an edited translation for my benefit. "Wants to know if the gas cylinders arrived and I said no. Didn't see any on board, did you? Wants to know where the meat is and I told her I don't know. We'll eat rats, we'll eat crabs. Hell, this is paradise isn't it?"

I wasn't sure exactly what he was referring to. Black afternoon rain clouds were looming overhead. There were no other guests visible. The place felt isolated and cheerless. Don indicated a battered arm chair. "Make yourself at home, fellow. If you want anything, tea. Oh, I know how you Brits love tea, or a beer, just tell Mama or the girls. You don't have to pay now. (He made it sound like a treat.) Mama writes it all down." He straightened up. "I've a few things to take care off. We'll have a chat later." I did as he suggested. I had a cup of tea. I

walked along the beach until my way was barred by a sheer cliff headland. I followed a creek upstream with two fishing dugouts pulled up on the sand and signs of washing clothes, past a derelict thatch hut on stilts until I was stopped by a dense thicket of rain forest. I returned to my armchair and regarded the grey sea. I was beginning to feel imprisoned. There was no sign of Don and certainly none of Edward, however hopelessly I willed him to come sailing into the bay in his pea-green boat.

Twilight gathered under lowering clouds. Feeling too restless to sit doing nothing, I set off again in the dusk along the barely visible trail to the jetty. On the edge of the plantation, a familiar white-shirted figure emerged sudden and spectral in the gloom. "Hey, fellow, where are you off to? You won't be able to get away even if you want to!" Whether this was an implied threat I couldn't decide. "No boats put in here," he went on. "Apart from the occasional Cambodian pirate with a cargo of Vietnamese refugees to party with." He made a grisly sounding grunt. "Yes, that's my baby. Heads floating in on the tide, gold teeth all gone. Not a safe place to be, out here at night on your own, is it? No." Solemnly shaking his head in self agreement. "Come daybreak, the only boat to stop is my pal out of Salakpet, and he'll only pull in if he sees me on the jetty waving a bottle of Mekong."

Close up he seemed to be staggering slightly. He reached out an arm as for a chummy pat on my shoulder but gripped it for support instead. "You'll be comfortable enough here." He thrust his face up against mine. "You Brits can't be as soft as you're made out."

Got to be a bit of 'gung-ho' somewhere." We were moving slowly back down the path towards the camp. It was like a three legged race. Who was guiding who I'm not sure. Pinpoints of light beckoned through the trees. "I've told Mama to move a tent under the lean-to. Dry there. I mostly sleep out the back. In case we have any unwelcome visitors I keep a shotgun under the mattress. Loaded." With his spare arm he pointed up into the trees. "Bang. Bang. Practice a little bird-shot occasionally. Just to let them know you're armed. Not a bad thing. Yes, sir, everyone on the island knows Desperate Don."

His hoots of laughter brought us to the perimeter of the camp. The hurricane lanterns had been lit and hung. Don acting the Head Waiter elaborately sat me at a table and flourished a menu. "Order anything. If we've got it, you'll get it. But I should go for the fish and rice." I agreed. Darkness had settled, ominous, oppressive, without any brightening stars or moon. Outside the circle of swaying lamplight, the only sounds were brushing palm fronds and breaking waves. So where was Edward in all this mystery? He'd left. If he'd ever come at all, but where to? Don seemed to sense my questions coming and dexterously avoided them. He refused to join me at supper, declaring, "can't have the owner eating with the guests." I couldn't think why? I don't suppose he could either. It was hardly as if there was a queue of customers waiting to be welcomed. Apart from a circle of scrawny cats watching my every move and each other's, I sat in solitude. Don joined me after Nescafe. His earlier reservations vanished. "How was your meal?" Great I guess. Mama's a fine cook." He held aloft a bottle of Mekong. "Want to split a bottle? Feel I owe you, bringing you out all this way."

The other lanterns had been extinguished. Mama and her girls had taken one. I watched it trail away through the trees in the direction of the hut by the stream. Don lifted the other one down and set it on the table. I faced him over the bottle of whisky. He sat awkwardly, hunched

up, elbows on the table, spectacles glinting in the lamplight. "He wanted a boat," Don announced.

"A boat!" I exclaimed, "Why? He's got a boat." Don picked up his glass and sat back more at ease.

"A real boat. A boat he can take off in. Explore the islands. Cabin, good marine diesel, not one of these old truck engines. Rig it up as a schooner. That's what he said." Although I knew Edward's passion for boats, or rather for the dream that went with them, I was surprised he had any money to buy one.

"And you had one? To sell?" I added, guessing the answer. Talking to Don was like snakes and ladders. Give him the right reply and he was pleased. It showed. The wrong ones he fended off with "Trust me, will you,"

"You gut it," Don smiled, leaning over the table to help us both to more Mekong. "That's it precisely. Mama's boat. Her son's really. Over in Salakpet. Up the klong. Only get in on the tide. Moment I told Edward he had to see it. You know what he's like." He paused, watching for my reaction. I hesitated, uncertain. Don slowly removed his spectacles and peered across. 'Couldn't wait for you.' He wheeled around, waving an arm into the darkness. "Hailed a fishing boat from the island. Last I saw of him. Said he'd be back." I nodded.

"Then he did know I was coming here?"

Don frowned as if I had betrayed him. "Trust me, will you," he muttered curtly. "What do I know about you? Or why you've come snooping? A snooping reporter maybe? Perhaps he doesn't want to see you. Have to protect one's old buddies, eh? No," he said, leaning back and patting his chest generously with both hands. "I decided it would be better as a complete surprise. Out of the blue." I was more startled than annoyed.

"A surprise! You realise I've already waited three days doing nothing. Then come out here. Meanwhile he's been and gone. Apparently." Don looked suddenly edgy and uncertain. For a moment he seemed to be struggling to keep himself under control, and then gave up the attempt. Uttering an exasperated snort, he slopped himself more Mekong, and nursed the glass.

"What is this, a bloody interrogation?" he said angrily, as if to himself. "I look after this fellow. I put him up. I feed him. I go out of my way to help him and he doesn't trust me. Bua, tiresome." He suddenly exclaimed, thumping the table angrily. "Bua! Fucking Bua! Na bua!" Is this I wondered how the conversation had gone with Edward? Was this how the conversation went with everyone as the level of the Mekong bottle lowered? "Bloody Brits. Shitless," he rambled on muttering angrily. "Help them when you can. Do they help us? Where were the Brits in Vietnam? I ask you. Licking their own arses." I got up, annoyed at this unexpected turn of events. I wondered if Don was as drunk or angry as he wanted to seem. Or was it just a clever ploy to avoid having to tell me anything? I left him muttering into his Mekong glass and crawled inside my damp tent. For a long while afterwards the lamp glowed outside. Then I must have fallen asleep.

When I next awoke needing to go outside, it was dark and still, apart from the shuffling hermit crabs. The breeze had died. Don had vanished. Next morning I was on the jetty at first light. The Salakpet boat finally cruised round the headland and with some relief I watched it change course and pull in. Still no sign of Don. We set off again, the sea glass smooth. I glanced back

while the jetty was still in sight, but Don failed to appear. It was a sombre trip back to Laem Ngob. There was no drinking. No talking. Most of the passengers dozed. I attempted to ask the Captain if he had seen a farang in Salakpet, but he seemed intent on not understanding me and I gave up. "Falang go Long Beach," he repeated. "Go Captain Don. No go Salakpet."

From the pier in Laem Ngob where we landed just after 9 am it was easy enough to find out which boats left for the western end of the island. I simply pointed. After all that was Edward's most likely point of landfall. The boat to Klong Son was currently deserted, but if yesterday was anything to go by, come midday it would look very different. It did. The boat was actually continuing round to White Beach but agreed to take me. Unlike the day before, the sea stayed smooth with only a slight swell, and the breeze hardly enough to blow away the black exhaust smoke. Kiong Son lay within an enclosed bay. At the west a fold of mountains tumbled into the sea. On the other side a narrow sandbar reached out delicately to a wooded headland. Palm trees fenced this isthmus and as we glided across the bay I could see between them back across to the mainland. The Laem Ngob peninsula and the blue Cambodian highlands, haunts of the Khmer Rouge guerillas, rising inland behind Trat. The inner bay of Kiong Son lay hidden behind mangroves, and for three quarters of the tide, the jetty stuck out high and dry over the mudflats. I happened to be lucky with the day. The boat nudged in over the shallows only long enough to drop me off, plus a heap of assorted supplies before continuing round the point. The jetty was lined with low open fronted huts on either side. I was right about Edward. It took me only a few moments of fractured conversation and gestures to locate his whereabouts. A group of shaven headed youngsters raced ahead of me to his hut.

Kiong Son did not give the impression as a particularly welcoming community. Small isolated fishing settlements often have a natural suspicion of outsiders, so it came as a surprise to realise the extent to which they had accepted Edward. Perhaps the way he had arrived helped. This strange giant of a farang appearing unexpectedly like some lost Ulysses from the sea. For fishermen who rarely voyaged beyond their island limits, and then only to Laem Ngob for supplies, 'Prachuap' as Edward indicated vaguely with an uncertain wave, was not just on the other side of the Gulf, but the other side of their world. They regarded him with the admiration reserved for heroes out of mythology. Poor themselves they accepted his poverty, his pigeon Thai and since he had lost his only pair of shoes overboard and not been able to find another big enough, the fact he went barefoot. He sat on the sand under the trees playing 'snap' with the fishermen, the only card game he could remember, the fishermen all roaring drunk, flinging down their cards with spirited yells of "SNAD!" When he walked, children ran out to pat him and race gleefully away. He was invited to the village school where he bemused the pupils and slightly alarmed the staff, teaching English by action. Stand up; sit down; run there; come here; grin; frown. At the temple he was encouraged to join the monks for meditation. "Though I found it hard to stop falling asleep," he admitted.

Edward's hut was perched on stilts over the mud. Tottered would be a more apt description, since the entire one-roomed structure trembled in spasms at the least movement. "It's better when the tide's in," he explained hospitably the afternoon of my arrival, watching me on all fours squinting nervously between the floorboards. I was trying to discover what, if anything, was actually holding it up.

"At high tide I should think it'd float away," I remarked, dusting my knees and balancing gingerly on the edge of a make-shift hammock. There was virtually no other furniture. Some worn-out grass mats on the floor and a pot or two. Edward followed my critical gaze.

"I want a simple life." I nodded unconvinced. "One doesn't actually need things," he insisted. "I suppose one doesn't," I agreed, "but it helps."

He made airy gestures, "It's simplicity I'm seeking," he repeated loftily. "In things, in relationships. It's alright to have the things you need, but not the things you want. Buddhist philosophy," he added, to endow the idea with authenticity. "I want to avoid," he hesitated for a moment, "complications," adding hurriedly, "you know. Possessiveness. Bitterness." He paused, uncertain. I was not surprised he hadn't included responsibility in the list. He always seemed good at forgetting it. "I've dumped that load of crap overboard once and for all," he announced with unexpected emphasis, "and who needs beds? It's all this material nonsense." He peered at the fish net hammock and the leaking thatch roof. "You can't take it with you." I thought of Pa's permanent struggle with the vicarage roof and how alarmed he would be at that prospect. Then I noticed for the first time Edward's clothes, or lack of. The baggy fisherman's cotton trousers hitched up round his waist in a knot. The hut was alive with biting insects, but he didn't bother to swat a mosquito.

"You might at least have a mirror," I complained, unprepared to comb my hair with my fingers as he did.

"I hate mirrors," he retorted. "I'll never sit in a bloody barbers chair. Cut it myself." His eyes narrowed. "Mirrors. Stare long enough and what do you see? Ever notice . . . other faces taking over . . . strangers. Enemies? The back gate into the bloody soul."

"You don't suppose you're in danger of going native," I suggested mildly enough, but he reacted indignantly.

"What a bloody pompous thing to say." And then more reflectively he added, "you couldn't even if you wanted to. It's not just the language." He glanced wildly around, as if someone might be hiding in the shadows listening. "Have you noticed when kids play games, the enemy is the falang." I failed to see what was so unusual. After all when we were kids, the enemy was the 'Hun'. "Anyway," he demanded. "What's so bloody sacrosanct about being English? A race of dull, quirky, opinionated bigots who like to be ruled by a tiny elite of eccentrics." It sounded as if he had learned it somewhere. But it did fuel my suspicions why he had written that letter. It was more than his past he was rejecting. He added forcefully. "We're totally intolerant to just about everybody else. We stare suspiciously from our precious White Cliffs assuming every homing pigeon is a potential invader." He had been pacing up and down energetically while he spoke, but now he leaned on a post, his head pressed against the back of his hands, his voice subdued. "I always felt such a bloody refugee there."

"In your own country?" I said with disbelief.

"Yes." In a muffled voice, he added, "we don't own anything or anyone." Yes, I thought, poor sod, he was like a rogue elephant rejecting his own kind. Yet why take revenge on innocent bystanders? "We just rent things; places; people; for a while." Was it another line he had adapted to suit himself?

"Does that include make-belief?" I asked him, but he didn't reply.

"I just don't want anything too permanent," he insisted.

"Oh, you do. Love for one." But he failed to answer. In the awkward silence that followed, I noticed hanging on a thread from a beam, a model aeroplane. That sort of warplane schoolboys glue from kits. One landing wheel was missing and the propeller had been stuck back at the wrong angle.

"My escape route," he grinned sheepishly. "You see there's this secret herb you swallow to make you small, and whiz, up you go. The kids play with it," he added. "Local kids. Bit of an invasion. Play cards, go out in the boat. There's a spring up in the hills with some pools you can swim in. Skinny dipping."

"What?"

"Starkers. Go up there if you . . ."

"No thank you," I dismissed the invitation. "I'd prefer some sunshine. Does it ever shine here?" He nodded. "Yes," he said, "it did the day I arrived." He was sitting cross legged on the floor. At that moment the gangplank to the shore creaked, the hut leaned sideways, a shadow filled the doorway and one of the biggest and undeniably strongest men I have ever seen came inside. He grinned at Edward, a broad, generous, affectionate and rather savage grin, and then stared at me sullenly, like a guard dog, waiting to see if I was friend or foe. I didn't think I'd want to be his enemy. Edward cleared that up. "Peu-un, friend," he shouted. The man beamed, muttering incomprehensively. He tapped the side of his head for my benefit and shook it, as if something somewhere was blocked. "He's a bit deaf, and can't speak much," Edward explained. "He's called Nom. He rather adopted me, as his master." Edward smiled, bent Nom's elbow to demonstrate his biceps, yelling at him, "Kang rang, kang rang!" and to me "He's the strongest person I know." Nom beamed back, showing his teeth and mouthing something inarticulate in agreement. "Bloody clever too," Edward added. "Showed me heaps of things I never thought of with the boat." I didn't comment, but it seemed a good opening. "I've seen your friend Don. He said you were buying a bigger boat."

I didn't think anyone's expression could alter quite so dramatically, to suspicion, alarm and finally hostile anger. "What did he tell you?" He kept watching the door as if at any moment Don might walk in. Nom who had noticed his change of mood with puzzlement, now assumed a similar alertness.

"He told me you'd gone off to Salakpet, but when I asked, all he would say was, 'trust me.' He went a bit peculiar after a while."

Edward nodded. "He's a Jekyll and Hyde. I never realised before. The alcohol triggers something off. Trust me!" He laughed scornfully. "The bugger switched boats didn't he. Persuaded me to pay a deposit on a really nice fishing boat moored at Salakpet. Only viewed from afar, mind you, because of the mud. And then produced this leaking hulk with cement smeared over the bottom, and a prop shaft that spun elliptically as a yo-yo. Water pouring in, smoke pouring out. I called it 'African Queen III'."

I was a bit puzzled. "I thought you were only there a day?"

"A day!" he cried. "Virtually imprisoned me on his bloody plantation for a week!"

I sat there numbed by the news that Don had lied so convincingly and I had fallen for it. Three days! Just so that he could try to trick Edward over a boat. He meanwhile was describing an all too unforgettable scene. Facing each other across the table, the wick of the storm lantern turned low. A small arena of light in which to act out Don's play. And the special effects. The moonlight emerging from behind the clouds. The waving palm fronds. Shadows striped on the

sand. The shuffling hermit crabs. "Every time he said, 'Trust me' it sent a shiver down me. 'What colour is she? Is the engine diesel or benzine? What's her waterline length?' Christ's sake, he claims to be a Ships Surveyor! It says so on his card. Look!" And he produced it from his wallet. 'Capt. Donald Fribecker. Ships Surveyor. Yacht Broker'. He breathed out loudly. "And like a bloody fool I did trust him. I'd been here before with Francois, you know, and we almost got conned then. I wanted a boat and Francois wanted an island. We were almost sold both, only they didn't exist. I thought I could trust him, even after the 'Cruz'." His voice trailed off hesitantly.

"Why didn't you tell me," I began. "I didn't even know who he was," But he hadn't heard me. "I thought he was dead you see." He breathed out as if he was expelling more than air. "I don't say it was his fault but," his voice fell to a whisper. "I thought he'd gone down. I thought he ought to go down with it. It was too big a thing for anyone to live with. Someone," he seemed to have difficulty releasing the words, "ought to pay. Surely. For such a massacre." And then I knew why this admission hurt so much. It wasn't the blazing inferno of the 'Cruz-del-Sur' haunting his mind's eye, or Don drunk at the bridge wheel. It was himself he saw at the wheel of the landrover, and what was ablaze in the driving mirror was Africa. It was more than a continent or a colony that Edward was guilty of abandoning. And yet how should he redeem his treachery? To fall on his sword, like Brutus? To spend the rest of his life in good deeds? 'It's a pity one can't re-invent oneself," he murmured.

"Your trouble is you believe you have to be a hero. You always have. We can't all be you know." I said. He seemed to smile, but his thoughts were far out of my reach. "Don't try so hard to be a hero," I repeated.

He looked at me. "Is that what I do?"

In the solemnity of the moment, none of us had heard the local kids arriving, scrambling up the plank from the shore. They were barefoot with torn singlets. One even wheeled a bicycle with a pedal missing and a flat tyre. I couldn't imagine anyone stealing it. Schoolboy heads were shaven at the back and sides, but there were those with uncut hair. Too poor or too needed at home to pay for school. They gathered around Edward, patting him, laughing, teasing, talking rapid fire that he had no chance of interpreting. Once again I was introduced as the "Peu-un, friend," and they all paused for a moment to wai, politely, hands pressed together, bowing in respect. What strange Lilliputian land had our Gulliver arrived at? Later on I emptied his pockets, searching for a screwdriver he had requested for the boat. His clothes were hung on nails. The pockets contained an amazing assortment of odds and ends; a marble; a broken catapult; loose matches; a broken blade; sticky sweets; string. I could have been emptying his pockets when he was eight years old, there would have been little different. Had he strayed somewhere, unknowing, unaware, along a path into his past? As if he had to get back there whole in order to set out anew. His deaf mute giant, presently being wrestled by half a dozen small boys and uttering roars of glee, was in the same mental category as his cub companions. It was an odd set-up, innocent and savage all thrown in. We ate supper squatting in a circle. Boiled rice, fried fish, vegetables. Two boys cooked. Thai children seem able to cook at an age when all I could manage was heating up a can of baked beans. The stove was a clay bucket of glowing charcoal, set outside on the unsteady verandah among fish nets, oars and sails. The tide had crept in secretly, and lay lapping the barnacled

stilts. Edward's green boat had also floated off the mud. I regarded it with mixed feelings, the hero or the villain. But I had to admit, it had achieved, or survived, quite a journey. Edward had followed me outside with a plate of leftovers for the dog, now with hair fully restored. Edward petted it. "Bit of caulking. Okay Otherwise."

"Why?" I asked, "do you need these boats?"

He frowned. "I don't actually. It was Don's idea. 'Trust me, will you'," he said, attempting Don's accent. "What can you do in the piss-arse boat you've got? Now in a big boat you can really set off. Find somewhere like I have to set up shop. Make a new beginning. Build a future for yourself". Edward's effort at mimicry faded. "Buzz off. Find your own island. That's what he was in effect saying." He glanced back into the crowded noisy hut, "But I don't need to do I? What's wrong with here?" In the fading light, the smooth sea glided away before us. Dark thickets of mangrove lay hidden in their own reflection, and the thin isthmus of sand with its tumbled fist of jungled rocks at the far end, embraced the bay like an enfolding arm. "Nothing," I said. Edward leaned out. What other images did he see reflected in the still lagoon, I wondered.

He pointed. "There, on the point. I could build a tree house." I followed the direction of his arm along the sandspit. Beyond, far and faint, pin-pointed the lights of Laem Ngob and the purple slumbering Cambodian mountains, where from time to time, the guns of the Khmer Rouge spoke, lighting the sky like the mountain gods of Edward's South Pacific islands. It all seemed a very precarious idyll on which to pin plans for paradise, but it might work.

"Anyway," he concluded, "Don's at the other end of the island. It's not as if we're going to meet often. The Klong back there all but cuts off the place. Like a palisade. The only way in is across the footbridge. We could easily defend it against Trust-Me Don and his Cambodian pirates. He's armed you know."

I thought he was pursuing the Treasure Island idea a bit too far, but he insisted. "Really, He's got a bloody gun. The second night I was there. It was after he'd been drinking. I suddenly heard a shot. When I got up, there was Don blasting off into the bushes. 'That'll teach them!' he shouted. 'They won't come back in a hurry!'"

"And were there?" I asked. I had been observing Edward for some while. After my earlier impressions I realised he was steadier than when I had last seen him, more in control of himself, his features more relaxed, his smile more welcoming.

"Earlier in the evening, some fishermen arrived down the path. They asked to buy beer and Don told them there wasn't any. 'Moht, all gone,' he declared, hissing. 'The last thing my guests need is for this to turn into a beer hall.' There weren't any other guests, and it seemed to me if you build a jetty, you are bound to invite the occasional fishermen. I told him, but he disagreed. 'They are not fishermen. Cambodian pirates on the prowl, sizing up the place. If they come back I'll give them a welcome they won't bargain for.' And he did!"

I said "Do you think they were Cambodians?" The dog was whining to be stroked and picked up.

"I didn't see anybody. It occurred to me he might be blasting off just to impress me."

"Even if there were you surely don't go around shooting. Wouldn't that encourage them to come back and burn the place down?" Edward winced at the word burn.

"I think that's already happened. Didn't you notice the charred huts by the jetty? Don's first outpost. Since then he's retreated inland and switched to tents."

Stooping back inside the hut, I said, "I'm glad you haven't got a gun."

"I don't need one," he retorted, nodding in the direction of Nom. Edward's self appointed protector having finished being wrestled by half the infants of Klong Son, now squatted quietly on the floor, watching the boys playing chequers. Bottle caps and a piece of squared-off cardboard. Nom's rapt air of enjoyment punctuated with hoots of delight as someone took an opponent.

"Why did you write the letter?" I asked him.

"Why do you think?" he answered.

"A bit drastic wasn't it? A lot of people got hurt."

There was a long pause. Then. "What were those stables in Greek myths that had to be cleaned out?"

I couldn't remember the name, but I knew what he meant. "Is that what you think Pattaya deserves? You used to be there too, remember? You enjoyed it." He frowned with concentration.

"Has it ever occurred to you how we all get trapped by circumstances? We go there, meet this, do that. I'm not saying we shouldn't. Usually we can't help it. Only somehow the other party always seems to come out of it better than you do?" I nodded. So there was an element of revenge. I wondered how Toy fitted into the equation. So far she had not been mentioned. Now that I had seen what he was intent on becoming, I had no doubt she was better off without him. He likewise.

"If that's your way of saying, 'Thank you', you certainly said it." I admonished as casually as I was able. "Perhaps it deserved to be said," he retorted

I turned to him. "But not by you!" He snorted angrily.

"Then by who?" He brandished a bit of stick he was clutching. "Someone had to warn the other poor buggers who come out." He stood very still for a long moment, then he breathed out slowly. "Perhaps everyone should go through it. But I don't intend to be some shrivelled old man sitting there on a bar stool paying ten baht for a smile." And then he added solemnly. "Everyone wants answers but not everyone asks questions. Not the right questions." What the right questions were exactly, he omitted to say.

"There's a whole world out there," he heralded with an uncertain sweep of his hand. He darted a curious glance at me. "Only thing I regret is I left so much of it unexplored."

I stifled a yawn. "You've seen a fair share of it."

He shook his head. "The other world. Music. Art. When you see adults reading comics on the train and think, don't they know there's a world of . . ." Had he run out of literary heroes, I wondered. He went on. "It's an unfamiliar landscape. I get glimpses of it just now and then. A crackly bit of Mozart on the World Service."

"There's nothing to stop you catching up." But my not ill-meant reply tailed off when I saw him glance self-consciously around the bare bamboo hut, a bewildered look clouding his concentration. Yes, I thought. He is trapped. For him there can never be the excitement of a good seat at the Colosseum, just a damp mat under the trees, watching the Thai li-khe dancers perform their painted pantomime. Along with most of his possessions, he had lost his culture en route and could never recapture it. Not here. I experienced a surge of relief that unlike him,

I could return to the other world. Have it there waiting for me. Decent restaurants, Sunday newspapers, West End plays. He had gone too far out ever to return now. And he knew it.

"I need something," he solemnly announced, getting up stiffly and moving ponderously about the hut. "Very hard to do. Something so hard. A place so remote." His eyes raised as if seeking some far ice-bound pass. "Something no one," he insisted, the words blurring, "has ever . . ."

"Crossing the Empty Quarter then?" I suggested intentionally, for his reaction.

"I failed." His eyes clouded. "I failed. Something happened. It was easier to turn back." He seemed to hesitate.

"What is it? Is it this?" I glanced about the bare hut. "This isn't for you," I said. "This is nothing." He seemed to ignore my plea.

His face puckered in concentration. "Something too hard. That no one's ever done before."

"You want something that's not here any longer." "I always have," he murmured, "haven't I?"

"Why didn't you stay in Yemen?" I couldn't remember the name of the town Angelo told me. He looked startled, then embarrassed.

"It's not always easy to stay where you want." Adding with a robust dash, "they used to shit outside my door." This scarcely fitted Angelo's description. "When I lived in Sana'a," he went on. "Had this house outside the walls. Not that there were much walls left. They punched holes in them where they liked. Even the river bed was a road. But day and night, I used to get back to find a row of men squatting along my house, shitting, robed of course. Why my House? They could have gone anywhere. I tried everything. Dead thorns, sprinkling quicklime, even a mousetrap or two, but nothing would deter the dangling bollocks. And the smell! I took it too personally, perhaps? In the end I quit."

The hut was deserted. Nom had taken Edward's boat out to lay a net, with a boy in the bows thumping the water with a club to frighten the fish. It was the only sound to disturb the stillness after the generator cut out. Nom had the only lantern. And matches. The candle had blown out. The aurora of moonlight gleamed fitfully, clinging with uncertain passion to board and frame floor. A hand, a foot, nothing complete any more.

"Of course I haven't got it exactly worked out yet." He admitted apologetically, as if it was some mathematical problem. "But how would it be, if when we die, we lose our identity in a far greater one, or rather, become part of it?" He looked at me with a sense of revelation.

"Perhaps we are all part of God. Perhaps God is corporate."

"I hardly thought of God as a democracy," I replied.

He agreed reluctantly. "It's where I differ from the Pa. He wants to go on being HIM in the next life. I certainly don't want to go on being ME. I'm sick of lots of things about ME, bloody silly prejudices, dislikes, etcetera. And I am fed up with being alone. Wouldn't it be nice to suddenly find yourself in one big party for a change."

"You make death sound like a summer picnic." He turned away.

"Why not?" he murmured. "How many people can you love? One, two maybe. What must it be like to love billions?" I heard him sigh deeply. "God. Sometimes I'm so fed up with this life, I can't wait to move on."

"Fed up with life or your own cock-ups?" I suggested. I saw the back of his head nod.

"At least the cock-ups are not immortal. At least they'll get left behind, won't they?"

"I died already in Africa," he continued quite matter-of-fact. "It was during the lion attack. Look." He moved into a patch of moonlight and pointed to some old deep scratches on his knee.

"You died from that!" I said sceptically. He grinned.

"No, you clot. A spear. Mobashu's spear. I got in the way of it somehow." He pulled up his shirt to reveal a deep whitened scar, the flesh crudely pulled together and healed over. An ugly wound tucked under his ribs. "I was out for days. Dead Muzungi they said. If it hadn't been for them, I'd have been bleached bones long ago." Other lesser mortals, I considered, would have been content to have recovered consciousness. For Edward, nothing less than death and resurrection would do. Still, I suppose it was a convenient way to drop the past and start anew. He buttoned up his shirt. "They carried me for two days to their boma, their village. Mud and dung huts inside a stockade. Another stockade for cattle. Live for their cattle do the Masai."

"They couldn't have been trying to kill you?" I suggested "Steal your . . ." I was going to say money, but I doubt he had much of that. He never did. Edward laughed loudly.

"Why you old cynic, it was my fault entirely. The camp above the falls. On a knoll near some hot springs. Long grass all around but forest close by. The river punched through some rocky narrows. Upstream it was swamp. We could hear the hippo snorting even though we couldn't see them. Built a stockade of sorts around the base of this big tree. Mobashu executed another goat. That's what did it I think, brought the lion. Next morning it was dense mist. Hardly see your hand before your face. Shouldn't have risked it alone, but it was hot springs you see. The thought of a warm wallow. Masai can't understand us. Don't wash. Ever. Kids sometimes rinse down with cows piss, crouch under their tails. Keeps the bugs off I suppose. Anyway, I was on my way back when I lost my direction in the mist. Couldn't tell if it was left or right."

"You never could," I added.

Edward grunted. "Suddenly heard this throaty cough. Lion after the goat's carcass. I knew the camp was left of where we butchered the goat, but I suppose I had already gone too far. Anyway, at that moment the mist thinned. Mounted on this rock, the dark outline of a lion poised to leap. I heard a shout behind me, but turning I dodged the wrong way and ran into Mobashu's line of fire."

"You hardly expect me to believe you died," I said sceptically.

"Believe what you like," he retorted. "I don't remember a thing until I woke up in the boma. Cattle lowing, cow bells tinkling. Like an alpine idyll," he mused. "After that, the past. The immediate past," he repeated carefully, "seemed disconnected somehow. Not strictly relevant. For a while anyway." His voice trailed off, and the clicking, ticking, restless, speculating silence of the tropical night resumed.

Perhaps the tragedy, I realised much later, was that he didn't die all those years ago in Africa. Not with the Masai. That was too accidental somehow, but earlier East of Gulu. In defence of what it doesn't matter. But he would have lived on in legend. A hero to the Pa. A plain white cross in the empty wilderness. Another worn out monument to join those littering the mountain passes and forgotten frontiers. Yes, he should have gone down, sword in hand so to speak. The lone ephemeral gesture overwhelmed by the fortunes of history. And his memory

unblemished would have never have grown old. Instead, now even the few friends he had left, were glad to be rid of him.

"WHERE THE FLYING FISHES PLAY..."

I left for Pattaya the next morning. First the dawn boat to Laem Ngob, a pick-up taxi to Trat and so on. There seemed no reason to stay longer. I defied even the Pa to devise a means to successfully drape a mosquito net over a hammock, so that no biters get in underneath. And Edward's fish nets were not designed to exclude anything smaller than a large lobster. Quite apart from the discomforts, I needed to inform Anderson, lest he foreclose the dossier on Edward's disappearance.

That he was very much alive, was, judging by the expression on Anderson's face, the last thing he wanted to hear. My insistence that he wouldn't be returning did little to lighten his mood. With Toy I was prepared to be a lot more circumspect, but to my surprise, she was not at the bungalow. The emigre guard outside the Crystal Garden, bedecked with obligatory medal ribbons, purchased by the strip in the supermarket, possessed barely enough Thai to say more than she had gone. "Where?" "Mai loo, don't know." It wasn't an attempt to extort money. He really didn't know. She had upped and left without a word. I went round to Soi Yen Sabai where her relatives lived, crowded into one bare windowless room, with a single glaring neon strip light, but no running water. They regarded my presence with mistrust and told me she had gone up to Nakon Phanom. I believed them. I had no reason not to. I had not been in the country long enough to realise Thais told you what they thought you might like to hear, rather than what actually happened. It wasn't so much lies as a generous interpretation of the truth. Fortunately, I had no intention of following her up to the Mekong River, so in that regard their misinformation did not inconvenience me. But it did allow me to drop my guard, with what proved in the event to be fatal results.

I was in no hurry to return to England, currently in the throes of a freezing winter and labour unrest. I wrote at length to both Edward's mother and my parents, describing, with a deal of editing, what had happened. I recommended that Edward stay where he was and no attempt be made to bring him home. I even remember my fanciful suggestion that if they next heard Edward had entered a Buddhist monastery, not to be surprised or dismayed, for as I wrote, this seemed quite a feasible possibility. From the fisherman's blue kang-keng-leh to the monk's saffron. I was, without realising it, playing his future as if it were a shadow play, and he a cardboard cut-out, reflected on an illuminated screen. Somewhere, in Ko Chang I expect, I had lost him. He had ceased to be real, he had become a legend.

That legend came very much to life with the Bangkok Post, although in this case there was nothing to implicate Edward directly. Two small side column paragraphs. "Tourist assaulted on Gulf Island," and "Pirates attack fishing village." It took me a moment to realise both the incidents referred to the same place. Ko Chang. "Isn't that where you went?" Anderson asked me, pointing it out. "He's not at it again is he?" That was partly my fault. Earlier to put his mind at rest that Edward would not be returning, I told him something about the way he had chosen to live. I had rather dressed up his image, turning him into a minor Tarzan. A picture that seemed to appeal to the Pattaya crowd. "He's living up a tree with an Orangutan," I heard two people I had never met before, discussing in Oscar's bar. The story took hold. "Perhaps he got tired of the Orangutan," someone in Anderson's suggested.

Later that week I found myself driving along Beach Road and decided on impulse to check if Toy had returned. The bungalow lay deserted. No one had even bothered to sweep away the

dead leaves. Checking the mail, I discovered a letter addressed to me, scribbled in some haste, and postmarked Trat, four days earlier. I knew at once who it was from. He asked if I could come back. Said it was urgent. He did not admit he was in trouble. I guessed as much. But such is the fickle nature of friendship that although this was his first direct appeal to me in years, my immediate inclination was to ignore it. I have bailed him out enough I decided magisterially. He has made his bed and he can lie in it.

That same afternoon I was due to drive out to Jomtien and visit a German friend of sorts, who was slowly turning his house into a fortress, or a prison depending on how you look at it. Even the bell push had an electronic scan built in, so that Kurt could see who was at the door before he decided whether he was in or out. The doors were steel plate, the locks hand made in Switzerland. In the event the thieves bypassed his security by bribing the guard and used oxyacetylene torches to cut a way in. When last seen, the new doors were heat-proof, while outside iron spikes and razor wire isolated him from everything but an aerial attack. He lived there with his fax machine and computers, unable to leave, waiting for the next attempt. But this was all much later. The day of my visit, because I had a few minutes to spare and Kurt was a man who timed his day to the minute, if not the second; lunch 15 minutes, wash and shower 7 minutes, short time 22 minutes, not wanting to scorn his self imposed schedule, even in a land where time means very little, I turned up the steep side lane to the Golden Buddha. For once the enigmatic grin that usually greeted one was absent. Instead a cold, stern stare. The sort that makes one take stock of one's conscience. Later at the appointed hour, after his 'short time' who I passed leaving, Kurt, a great big man and a fine sailor took the trouble to hear me out. (43 minutes allowed). He said very little, but by the time I left I had come to a decision. Next morning I caught a bus back to Trat.

I spent the night in Laem Ngob, avoiding any chance of encounter with Captain Don, by not staying at his guest house. Contemplating with no relish the spartan conditions to come, I decided to spoil myself with a comfortable night at the Paradise bungalows. My sportive receptionist was not there, but it came as no surprise when a teenage girl knocked on my door just as I switched out the light. By dawn she had vanished and in the half light I was left wondering whether she had existed at all or was simply a mirage in my imagination. Her mortality was evident when she suddenly came in, bearing a heaped and unwanted Thai breakfast. Boiled chickens' feet in spinach, squid deep fried with garlic and a bottle of coke. Not my traditional choice of menu to mount the day ahead. She handed me the change from the five hundred baht note she had 'borrowed', and I handed it back with polite wais and bows from both of us.

Avoiding making a too early appearance on the jetty, the playful receptionist, now on duty, peddled me down on the back of her bicycle just in time to leap aboard the 2 o'clock boat for Klong Son. I recognised no one from the settlement, but as the only farang on board, I found myself under scrutiny more than once. Finally the Captain confronted me with the question that must have been on all their minds. "Hey, you!" (Farangs are invariably addressed "You"). "Eddy, flend you?" My nod of allegiance could scarcely have been less committed. I fully expected someone to declare with a loud spit, "Eddy, no good." But nobody did. Conversation subsided. The unremitting 'but-but-but' from the noisy smoke stack nagged us into a tired submission. The sea also lay suppressed under an uneasy calm, while the island, illuminated by afternoon light glowing beneath overcast skies, seemed endowed almost with a spectral

quality. Shrouded by its dark mantle of jungle and wreathed with wisps of shifting cloud, there was something sinister about it that sent a twinge of foreboding through me.

Whether this threatening gloom which glowered over the island dismayed Edward as much as it depressed me, I had no way of telling, for he greeted me forthrightly enough with a cheerful, "Glad you could make it. One or two wrinkles I'd value your advice in ironing out."

But after a supper of curry, at the store at the foot of the jetty, he became unusually reflective. "I long for a world," he declared, "where the old gods, the ancient, timeless deities, haunt the forest. And old Poseidon roams the sea. Whipping his black horses through the surf." His head hung at a slight angle. His hand drooped, poised over a half empty glass of Mekong.

"You believe they are still there? Or do you just want them on your side?" He nodded with slow deliberation, his lips pouted, his voice bullying.

"Of course they are there. It's just that hardly anyone recognises them." He glanced at me.

"Imagine being a God. Apollo, Zeus even. But no one worships you any more. Rustling the leaves, but no priests left to interpret the signs." He was staring up into the net of palm fronds overhead, black against the white sky. "Forests all going. Cut down. Where will the spirits of the streams dwell? Or the wind?" His voice was slurred, his hand trembled. A violent spasm of shivering caught hold of him. Was it malaria I wondered?

"Are you taking your pills?" I cautioned. "You should, you know." He turned on me, face bathed in sweat.

"Fuck the pills!" he declared violently. "I'm talking about Gods. Gods! Do you know what Gods are? And you say 'Are you taking your pills?' Like a nurse at surgery." I wanted to laugh out loud. It was his accidental mimicry of Matron. "Anyway," he went on more evenly, as if embarrassed by his own outburst. "You don't get malaria deep in the forest. You need people around to catch it from. You're more likely to pick it up in a honky-tonk bar in Hong Kong than here." I didn't argue. There were times when it was best not to argue with Edward, even though I had recently read that fatal strains of malaria were now endemic in eastern Thailand. One in a hundred of the night mosquitos were infected. The best and only protection was to avoid being bitten.

"Loong (uncle)," Edward hailed the pot-bellied proprietor, waving our empty ice bucket. The elderly Chinaman got up heavily from the floor, adjusted the paa-kamaa wrapped around his bulging waist, fixed the cheroot he had been puffing firmly in his mouth, and waddled over with a fresh supply of ice. Edward hardly seemed to notice him. He leaned across and peered at me urgently. I noticed his teeth were chattering. "I need to

teach them." He seemed so serious it was almost ludicrous.

"Teach them what?"

He frowned. "How to look after their fucking forests. What else? I have a degree in it. I was," he emphasised, "A forestry officer, you may remember."

"Yes," I said, choosing not to remind him he hadn't been able to name one tree from another. In fact he answered this for me.

"Oh, I know I can't tell their bloody names. But what's in a name? It's the forest that matters. Don't you see?" His sense of urgency was impelling. But if this really was his dream, to sit under an African, or an Asian tree and teach local kids, the tragedy was that it was too late. He

had nothing to teach. Nothing practical they would need to learn. He seemed in a sad way so empty. A hollow frame haunted by ancient spectres. Apollo and Zeus and Poseidon. "I can teach them all sorts of things," he persisted as we trudged back to his hut, the palm trees casting shifting shadows on the loose sand. "I could teach them English," he admitted reluctantly, as if this was lowest on the list.

"You probably could," I agreed, unsure what use that would be on this island. I was waiting for him to get around to why he had asked me here. The letter had given little away. "I suppose you're not getting on too well with Don?" I finally suggested.

He stopped in his tracks as if I had hit him. "That bastard!" he said, turning slowly to face me. "I was wrong. There's no room for both of us on this island. And he's leaving. One way or the other." I wondered if Don was aware of his threats.

Rather flippantly I remarked, "will he agree?" He's got rather more at stake than you." It was a careless thing to say. He retorted immediately.

"Has he! Is that what you think? A few leaky tents rented off at fifty baht a night is the great contribution to society. I took you for having a little more depth than that." I wisely held my peace. Edward's outbursts were like sudden squalls at sea, they rarely lasted long. This one suddenly changed course. "He's a bloody traitor . . .," he began, before quickly correcting himself. "Wouldn't trust him, couldn't trust him ever again. Ever!" He wheeled around. I was flapping ineffectually at a droning mosquito. "You know what he's done. He's taken Toy!"

It took a while for the significance of this to sink in. Until a moment before, Toy had been safely out of harms way in Nakon Phanom. Now history had been suddenly rewritten. "Toy's . . ." I began.

"Yes," he interrupted. "Don wants everyone to believe I raped this bloody Dutch girl. Have me arrested and thrown off the island. He sent her here in the first place. A snoop, a lure, something." We had reached the springy gangplank.

"Who? Toy?"

"They came here. Both of them together. He brought her. Tour of inspection. I didn't get a chance to speak to her. Not alone. Whisked her away in a bloody great speedboat. Roared off at a rate of knots. Just to impress her," he snorted derisively. "Well, he's welcome to her. But it goes to prove you just can't trust the bastard. After all he is supposed to be married. Thai style anyway. That woman of his who runs the Guest House. She can't stand his boozing. That's why he stays out here on the island. Do as he pleases here. But I still can't fathom what it is Toy sees in him." We entered the shack. The lantern was turned down low. An empty pot of rice and uncleared dishes littered the floor. Edward swore and sat down swiftly, nursing his foot in his hand and extracting a fish hook. He muttered something about the kids getting out of hand.

"But listen," I insisted, "It was you she must have come to see in the first place. Not him." He shrugged this off.

"How can you ever tell a Thai's motives for anything? She's shackled up with him now and they want me out. Sent this Dutch girl over. Doing research on lemurs or Something. Told me about this primate research laboratory up a rain tree in Southern India. Stiff with monkeys. Could have been making it all up, far as I know, just to wheedle her way in. Been staying at Don's beach."

He got up and stumbled about the hut as if looking for something. I had known Edward long enough to appreciate the extent his pride had been bruised. I wondered what had really happened. How did Toy locate him? The same way I had? Is that how she met trusty Don? Is that how he had lured her away, with 'trust me' promises. "Some cock and bull story," he dismissed, his eyes averted.

"And when did she come here?" I asked him. He failed to reply, staring stubbornly at the floor. I tried a different approach. "This Dutch girl. What did you do with her?"

He jumped up startled. "What do you mean, what did I do with her? I put her up here. In that hammock," he pointed, as if the fish net was the guest room. "And I took her out in the jungle to find bloody monkeys." He flapped his hand vaguely in the direction of the interior. 'Bloody bore,' he commented, using Don's expression, *bua*. "Na, *bua*. Oh she knew everything. Every name for this and that. All the fancy Latin names for everything. The way she lectured me I felt like an ignorant peasant. A monkey wasn't a monkey, but a something-something. I couldn't understand half she was talking about. Bloody patronising. I hate that. I hate it!" he shouted suddenly, his teeth clenched. Then quieter, but more sullenly adding, "Wouldn't have mattered if she was some ugly bitch, but she was bloody attractive. Kids worshipped her. Nom almost had a seizure the first moment he set eyes on her. Anyway," he said with a strange reluctance, "I left her." I looked at him uncomprehending.

"You left her where?" He nodded outside. Outside the hut? Outside the clearing by the temple where the generator had been thumping since dark like the heartbeat of the village and now suddenly, unexpectedly, ceased. Where outside?

"Nine o'clock," Edward grunted. "Always switches off at nine." Edward's hut had not been wired up even with a single light bulb and we had been sitting in virtual darkness anyway, but the generator shutting off, and the strangely watchful silence that followed, made the dark more oppressive. For my own peace of mind, I had to establish the details of the story, facts he seemed very reluctant to unfold.

"What do you mean you left her? Where did you leave her?" I sensed rather than saw him turn on me. There was no mistaking the savage contempt in his voice.

"I didn't bring her back, did I! Why should I? She knew everything. I'd had enough of being put down. I left her to her bloody monkeys and I came back." I held in check an urge to kick him, and continued the unrewarding job of cross-examining a reluctant witness. He had taken the girl out into the jungle and abandoned her. Where? He didn't remember. Somewhere in the hills. Time of day? Late afternoon. Were they near any track? No. They had passed some huts an hour before, but there was no one in them. And the crucial question once again, why did he leave her? He watched me evenly. "I made a pass, didn't I? We had a row. I told her that since she knew it all, she would know her way back." He paused, leaving me to picture the scene. Two scenes. Two jungles. Two continents. Two white girls. Two incidents. He went on. "Some forest rangers found her and took her to Tha Mayon."

"That's half way across the island!" I heard myself exclaim. "What time was it?" I asked. His reply was too indistinct. I had to ask him again.

"Next day. Next bloody day. Can't you hear? Well, she'd lived up a tree in India, hadn't she! It was only one night. The island wasn't crawling with lions or tigers! Let's get this clear. I didn't invite her. She wanted to go and I took her. I wouldn't have minded fucking her, but I wasn't

going to spend all bloody night listening to bloody monkeys just because she wanted to." I nodded. In an awkward voice he added, "I heard later she was a bit round the twist. Kept muttering things . . ." He hesitated, "monkeys probably bewitched her. They took her to the hospital in Laem Ngob. It's not my fault." Then he added quite unexpectedly "Do you remember the Pa telling us never to get into a single compartment with a woman, when trains had single compartments? 'My dear boy, they might suddenly, between Bromley South and Grove Park, disarrange their dress, and threaten to pull the alarm chord unless you hand over a fiver.'" I listened in silence. His voice had become too squeaky to sound like the Pa.

"Did she accuse you then?" But he didn't reply.

"Still," he continued after a pause. "Better than being killed. She might have, had she stayed here," I stared at him in puzzlement. He seemed surprised by my reaction. "Didn't you know? Didn't you hear? I thought it might have been in the papers," adding sarcastically, "I suppose pirate raids don't merit much space in a country where everyone's a bloody pirate from the politicians down." That was when I realised.

"So it was here."

"Course it was bloody here. And they weren't pirates any more than I am. Captain Don's bully boys from the mainland. His wife owns some sort of boat yard up the Laem Ngob creek. There's a sand bar at the mouth. Only reach it at high tide. Rumour is it's full of illegal migrants; deserters; brigands; gem-diggers; men on the run. At Don's beck and call. Pays them next to nothing. Sent them over to flush me out. It was after we had our row." With a slow deliberation he lit a candle, licked a finger and drew an outline on the dusty floor. "The bay, the headland, right? Now here is the klong ending in the swamp. Here," more spit needed. "Here's the footbridge." He glanced up to make sure I was taking it all in. I nodded. "Well, there's only two ways in unless you drop out of the sky. Across the footbridge or a sea landing." I found myself peering cautiously out of the doorway onto the dark verandah. Edward went on, his voice assured. "Your average pirate, Cambodian or otherwise, wouldn't know about the bridge, would he? He'd storm in from the sea, pillaging as he went, wouldn't he? Stands to reason." He held up a finger to bar my interruption. "But what did these bastards do? Landed by the headland and crept in along the shore so as to attack over the bridge. Flush us out you see." His expression was eager and challenging. "But who would have told them, eh? Hardly anyone here. The time Don came I saw him snooping around, and I daresay he'd have a chart too, something none of the fishermen would. Anyway, Thai's can't read maps even when you show them."

I had already glanced around the hut. I didn't see any damage. Frankly I didn't believe him.

"What would prompt Don to go to all that trouble, just to . . ."

"To be rid of me. Turn the village against me. Have them turf me out. That's what he wanted. And in a way I suppose he has. They aren't so friendly. I'm no longer the golden boy I was. Since the raid." He painted an imaginary sign. "'Falang. Danger. Keep away.' Outside the door." I interrupted hastily, "but you did get away. That night?"

"Thanks to Nom," he agreed, staring out or back into his own memory. The first unusual thing, he explained, was the generator switching off early, but he hadn't noticed that, as he used a paraffin lantern, and the kids were 'kicking up a racket'. Nom had been fishing out on the rocks, for it was the night of a particular high tide, and the klong flooded and the huts virtually islands of their own. He had been casting his weighted net, when he caught sight of figures

moving furtively among the bushes on the far side. He sensed they would be making for the footbridge, but as he hurried to haul out his net and go and find out, his bare feet tangled in the rope, spinning him head first on the rocks, temporarily knocking him out. When Nom came to, the generator was off and there were no lights. Then as he reached the temple clearing, he saw figures flitting among the coconut

palms, heading to where the row of fishermen's stilt huts stood above the tide. Unable to shout a coherent warning, he did the next best thing. Picking up a heavy wooden hammer he struck the temple gong with all his strength, and roared. That was enough to panic the bandits into action. Gunshots rang out, one of which smashed the lantern outside Edward's hut. In pitch darkness, Edward slipped off the verandah, untied the boat, and paddled out under the deep shadows of the mangroves. Nom continued to hammer the gong for all he could, and in some dismay at being discovered, Don's crew made off along the beach.

"So they couldn't have found the girl and . . . Not if you'd left her in the hills?"

"How should I know," snapped Edward irritably. "Perhaps they did. Perhaps she came back. She had two legs. Could walk any man off his feet she claimed. Perhaps they carted her off as a consolation prize and dumped her." It was a lot of perhaps.

He squatted on the floor smoking some foul smelling tobacco. Like the fishermen, he rolled cigarettes out of dried leaf. I hadn't seen him smoke for years. When we were kids we made our cigarettes from dried cow pats or any butt ends we could collect, rolled in pages torn at random from dustier copies of church hymnals. The Pa discovered us puffing up the treehouse and examined the product. After his wheezing fit subsided he wiped his eyes. "Perhaps we should christen the brand Ancient and Modern. It certainly has something of an ancient flavour. But please choose hymns longer than five verses," he exhorted.

We sat on the floor, each wrapped in his own thoughts, the ponderous silence hardly disturbed, for a stillness seemed to have descended, shrouding everything in its pall. I wondered where Nom was. Somehow I expected to find him waiting cross-legged outside. The trusty bodyguard. Reality was more prosaic. He was most likely fishing. I stood up to stretch my legs and walked outside onto the verandah. The bay glowed in the moonlight, and the low breaking waves gleamed a more violent inflorescence. Half hidden in the moonlit reflections, I could barely make out the black shadow of a boat. A big man poling with a single oar, and alternately pounding over the side with a stout wooden dip. "They do that," Edward remarked, following me out, to drive the fish into the nets." Then after a pause he added, "Don ordered me off the island. As if it was his. As if everything was his." He leaned forward on the rail, picking moodily at the rotten wood. "I'll get even. You'll see."

Out in the bay the boat had almost completed a full circle and Nom, in the stern, was beginning to haul in the net. I began, "If you must have a personal crusade, there are far better causes than defeating Don. A whole world of worthy causes . . ."

"It's personalities, not priorities," he announced tersely, sounding peculiarly un-English as he did so. "He stands for everything I loathe. If he stays he'll ruin everything. He's already stolen Toy."

"Toy!" I muttered in exasperation. "It's not as if you love her." His hands gripped the rails and he stared out.

"I did," he murmured. "She's pregnant. According to Don. Claims she says it's Jan's, not mine."

"For God's sake," I urged him. "She's a Pattaya girl. It's a bloody market place. You said so yourself. No one owns anybody there." And then I added, not quite believing it. "If it was Dao, I'd understand."

"I just want him off my island," he muttered obstinately. "Off my island. There's a principle at stake. I can't achieve anything until he is out of the way." Out on the boat, big Nom was gathering the net in armfuls, occasionally something bright and silvery slipped out.

"What principle?" I asked. He stood up straight. He might have been at attention, on parade, in church.

"He stands for everything I loathe," he declared. "He doesn't believe in God for a start. And he stole Toy. I want her back." I listened in amazement, and then I realised. He needed a real enemy. Someone he could identify. Someone against him and against God. "Do you know anything about Burton?" he suddenly asked me. "He could speak a dozen languages, couldn't he?"

"He was a racist and a rascal too," I retorted. "Listen, if you must have a hero, why don't you choose . . ."

"Who said anything about heroes?" he declared. "Anyway," he added more brightly, "I think I've made a start. Someone had to show them."

"Show them? Show who?"

"Show them," he repeated with deliberate slowness, "the error of their ways."

"That letter!" I was astounded. "That malicious letter you wrote. Error of who's bloody ways?" He glared angrily. "What do you mean by that?"

"You damn well know what I mean." Adding on a more even tone, "you were hardly a disinterested party to the playground!" He seemed genuinely astonished by my description.

"Pattaya a playground! It's a vicious, corrupting place."

"And if it is then who made it? Us! You're not God you know. You can't suddenly decide to exorcise your conscience, or your past, by playing God." He stared at me unblinking.

"How lucky you must be that in all your precious self-conceited life, you've never made a mistake."

I nodded. "But I've had to clean up after a few of yours." He raised his head and turned away. Was he a victim or a volunteer of his past I wondered. And then to my acute dismay and embarrassment he turned on me. His features savaged by a violent hatred I had rarely before witnessed in anyone.

"How many times have you slept with her, then? Don't try and deny it. You would, wouldn't you? Act the all innocent pal. The lifelong friend. Lifelong traitor more likely. How many others did you screw?" He spat the words out. "Behind your screen of concern. Hilary too? Dao maybe?" He leaned closer until I could smell the whisky on his breath, see the specks of froth lathering his lips. "What have you got," he continued bitterly.

"They can't fall for you for your fucking ugly looks. What's your trick? Money is it? 'Quiet little embrace,' you tell them. 'No harm done. Eddy never know.'" He forced his face up against mine. "But Eddy does know. Doesn't he?" He sounded very weary and out of breath. So here, on this rickety stage overlooking the silent irreproachable sea, it was for real, finally, my Iago to his Othello. The whole world against him and he, a bloody nosed infant, tiny fists clenched, fighting an enemy that didn't exist. His clenched fists crushing instead everything that was

dear to him. It was the world that had turned against him, so to blaze with the world. He had forgotten where truth lay, both inside and outside him. Perhaps I should have grabbed him and shook him until his despair fell rattling out onto the ground, but I was numbed by his outburst, the sheer force of his venom shocked me into disbelief. His rage too had given him strength, towering above me, silhouetted by the moonlight, demonic, defeated, but unbowed. His mood lent him the messianic look of a visionary seeing far beyond the fleeting frontiers of rationality. Yet he was still trapped. Like a man who had escaped the limitations of the act only to discover the limitations of the actor. And still somewhere buried beneath it all was the same small boy I had grown up with, wrestled in the sand, shared how many vital but forgotten adventures. I heard a splash of an oar as Nom paddled the boat up the channel between the stilt houses. Another splash and a creak as he threw out the anchor and climbed out, burdened with his catch. A mutilated roar of joy and greeting expressed unintelligibly together. At least, I thought, Edward still has one friend he can trust. But it gave me little comfort.

As I climbed wearily into my hammock, my torch picked out a slim grey volume, on the fish box Edward used as a bedside table. It was a New Testament and Psalms, worn at the corners, well thumbed, the spine stuck up with tape. Inside the flyleaf an inscription in the Pa's handwriting. 'To Edward, for your journey. To be digested inwardly. With many thanks, dear boy. The Pa.' It was dated January 16th, the year he left for Africa.

How many people have a destiny and abuse it? He had no destiny. The trouble was he always believed he had. He had got himself into a belief and couldn't understand why it had failed him.

"It's as if there's a gremlin inside who is determined to mess everything up." He stared away vacantly. "I would give anything to remove it." We were eating breakfast, rather uneasily together, under the sheltering tin roof of the store at the end of the jetty. Open on three sides, with steps up to the living quarters behind. I sipped my Nescafe in silence. The Chinaman waddled up with a plate of two cold poached eggs and a sweet cake. There was no bread. Edward had already apologised for his outburst the night before. "Behaved like a bloody fool. Sorry. Too much Mekong," he had excused, making a wry grin. "Getting like Don. Turning into Jekyll or Hyde, whichever it was." As he swirled the tepid glass of Chinese tea, watching half a dozen fat leaves float like flakes, a boy pedalled up barefoot, dropped his bike in the sand and came into the shop.

He waved at Edward, "King Kong, one baht."

"They baht you here just the same," he said reluctantly fishing out a coin. "Only in Pattaya it's ten." The boy was gone. We sat there in silence. "I suppose you think I am going round the twist," he said suddenly, not avoiding my look.

"No," I suggested quietly. "Just being a bit of a clot. You admitted as much."

"I know, I know," he answered quickly. "Sometimes I wonder if I wasn't born with someone else, something else inside. Twisted like the Hall of Mirrors at a funfair. Most of the time it's under control. But then suddenly it takes over, and all I can do is watch. A sort of enemy within." He paused to dunk a piece of bun in his tea. I thought, he is like an animal. Two animals, one trapped inside the other. Two cities, the new one outside the walls with its broad tree-lined avenues; shopping arcades; cinemas. Where no one's supposed to shit in public any more, and the old town inside the gate, narrow, cramped, overlooking alleyways like ideas

delving and spanning one another with an insidious intent. Yet, he was not born there. He was no product of a ghetto mentality. He was no child of souk or suburb, and yet who knows in what Sargasso soup of genes his origins grew?

He nodded absently. "I had this dream. In it I'm watching myself. As a small boy, helping Pa chop back the rhododendrons. Do you remember how hot he used to get? And he's telling me something. Only I can't hear what it is he's saying." He stopped and stared moodily ahead. "I just wish I could somehow."

"Could what?"

"Get back there." I reminded him of a little man who lived inside the wind-up gramophone and knew all the songs. "Yes," he said quietly. "What was Pa's favourite? 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen': Then he said after another long pause. "But he's still got to go."

"Who?" I feigned.

He ignored that. "I think Nom and I will go and burn him down. You can come too, of course, only you mustn't interfere." He made it sound no different to a childhood prank. Fake pterodactyl footprints in the snow across Major Took's tennis lawn. "It's only a couple of huts and the tents. Perhaps we should knock out the jetty too."

"Edward, why?"

"Because he's got to go." He sounded quite calm and cogent. "We'll go at night. A night raid from the sea. He'll think we are Cambodian pirates. Can I borrow your pen? Look," he said, drawing on a scrap of paper towel.

"Edward, there are other people there."

"We'll come in by boat here. Yes, I know, but they'll run off into the jungle. Perhaps we should have firebrand arrows to shoot the thatch alight. Pouf, Pouf," he acted a bow shot with both hands.

"And Toy," I said, still uncertain whether to take his plans seriously. "Have you forgotten her?" but he seemed unperturbed.

"She can fry like Joan of Arc, for all I care."

"Well," I remarked caustically. "That's quite a barbecue you're planning."

Edward hardly heard me. "He's mad and he's bad," he went on. "If he had been sober, the 'Cruz' would never have collided." He grinned at me. "For once we'll play the invader. We'll be the night raiders. We'll Contra the Sandinistas." I thought of posters of Sandino throughout Nicaragua, his stetson hat and his red neck scarf and his impelling stare. Underneath the words, 'No Vender la Patria' (The Country is not for sale). What unexpected corner in the labyrinth of his mind had Edward turned to make war a game played between rival gangs up the South Foreland Valley? And then I remembered how once he had been captured by bigger boys and tied to a tree. He begged them to let him go but they only laughed and went home to tea. "You can stay out there all night," they shouted. Later one of them relented, returned and set him free. Next day we ambushed one of their gang and tied him up. "I'll let him go later," Edward assured me, but he didn't. The kid spent the night tied up in the wood, until PC Lubbock discovered him. "We'll Dresden the bastard!" he exclaimed eagerly. I had forgotten that mean streak of vengeance in him.

"Listen," I said. "Maybe you're wrong. Maybe they were just raiders. Maybe Toy wants to come back but can't. You know how difficult it is to leave Don's place." Rather to my surprise he heard me out without interruption, until he finally raised his hand.

"Alright," he agreed. "One last chance. I'll give him one last chance," he declared majestically, "to see the error of his ways."

"Oh," I said, my disappointment was obvious. "I thought you wanted Toy back." He shrugged noncommittally.

"That too. Anyway," he added, condescending. "I agree, If you agree to act as go-between. Sound him out. [can't. I'd get too bloody angry. All that 'trust me' :rap he throws around so convincingly. Yes," he nodded, warming to the idea. "You take the flag of truce to the stockade. Tell Long John Silver our terms." I didn't like to correct him that in the book it was the other way about. It was Silver who hobbled up to parley with Squire Trelawney. But Edward always got his roles and his heroes mixed up. Who was friend, who foe? And what was the message I was to take? That Don should leave Ko Chang once and for all. Strike the tents, haul down the Jolly Roger, leave in the longboat and return to Laem Ngob, where he could continue running his Guest House. Edward would have preferred him a lot further off than that, but those were the 'cease-fire' terms we agreed and which I would deliver. Toy was also included in the conditions. Don was to hand her over. She was to come back with me to Klong Son. Not I suspected because he wanted her, but because he was determined Don shouldn't have her. I could hardly see Don agreeing. He was unlikely to take Edward's threat seriously. But at least if the parleying was under way, it would delay Edward embarking on anything rash. All day the argument swung to and fro in my thoughts and by nightfall I had still failed either to convince him, or to reach a conclusion I could respect. Long after supper I sat outside on the verandah listening. Poised above the rising tide the stilt hut stood suspended in it's own reflection. Somewhere out in the darkness lay decision like mortal danger.

"AND THE DAWN COMES UP LIKE THUNDER..."

It took me all the next day to reach Salakpet at the eastern end of the island. My hastily borrowed motorbike was a boneshaker of uncertain vintage, and the coastal track equally unpredictable. Straight firm stretches, suddenly succumbed to unexpected swamps. Crossing the steep intermittent headlands was another challenge to both skill and concentration. Recent rains had washed whole sections of the track away and on more than one occasion I lost control, skidding and slipping down gullies on loose stones. Green fingers of rain forest reached out to the sea's edge, webbed between wedges of coconut palm and rubber trees. Perhaps it was due to prolonged rains, but even this cultivation wore an air of neglect. Huts stood deserted in overgrown clearings. Log bridges across lowland streams had collapsed or rotted away, leaving one a hasty choice between balancing precariously over crumbling planks, or wading through slippery torrents. Most of the time I was too busy not falling off the bike to give much thought on what I would say to Don if and when I got there.

At Tha Mayon village I managed to buy benzine stored in Mekong bottles, like some deadly red fire-water. This fuelled me the rest of the way along the coast and across the hinterland, until I finally skidded into Salakpet in the early evening, drenched and muddied from head to foot. Fortunately the tide was coming in and I found a fisherman prepared at a price to ferry me up the sound to Don's beach. The boat was no bigger than a dug-out and once beyond the shelter of the islands, I feared the incoming waves would swamp us. But the fishermen nursed the boat within a headland or two of Don's plantation, cut the engine, oared carefully inshore with a long single paddle, as dexterously as any Venetian gondolier, and dropped anchor, while I waded ashore and struggled waist deep round rocks the rest of the way. It was dark when I arrived but the familiar lanterns hanging under the thatch eaves guided me through the trees. I'm not sure who seemed more surprised as I stepped out of the darkness.

Toy, at least, managed a smile. She had been lounging, curled up in the broken armchair, reading, or pretending to read a comic, while Don was in the process of lecturing her and the deserted camp in general. He broke off in mid-sentence and stared, open-mouthed. Slowly his astonished expression framed an uncertain smile. "Hey, hey, hey," he declared. "Look who we have here." Toy shrugged.

"Know him already Pattaya. Edward fiend him."

"I guess you do, honey," Dan cajoled quietly. "Guess there aren't an awful lot of farangs in Pattaya you don't know. Professionally speaking. So Edward's buddy, eh." He nodded slowly as if to allow himself time to guess why I had come, prepare himself for what I might say. For the first time I found myself believing Edward's story he was behind the Klong Son raid. There was something guilty about him. He shuffled, peering at no one through his spectacles, adjusted them on his nose, peered some more. I noticed the opened bottle of Mekong. Judging by the level he could not have been drinking for long. Was it long enough to declare me automatically foe, or did reason still prevail? He leaned back in his chair, assumed a nonchalant yawn and slowly scratched his neck. "So Edward's bag-man is paying us a visit. This is a rare and unexpected treat. How did you get here son, fly?" I explained about the Salakpet fisherman. Don peered disbelieving between the coconut palms where unseen waves were pounding the beach.

"He dropped me off round the headland. He's waiting for me later." I added, and instantly regretted it.

"Oh." Dan picked on the remark at once. He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "So this is not just a social visit."

"Oh, absolutely," I said in my friendliest voice, not wishing to give him another excuse to get vindictive.

"So, Edward can't come himself? Sends a bag-man instead? Too busy, is he, playing Tarzan. Or is it King Kong?" He chuckled sarcastically. "Wants to know about Toy, I bet. Listen son," he said unscrewing the cap of the Mekong bottle and splashing himself a large one. "Trust me on this." He nodded sideways to Toy. "She invited herself. I never suggested she stick around. Hell, I can screw any girl I want from Manaus to Manila. I don't need permission from anyone. If she wants to go back to that arsehole friend of yours, she can leave any time she wants." He paused to shake the ice around in his glass, peering at it as if hidden revelations were revealed. He glanced up with a contemptuous smirk. "We went along to see him. Social visit. Like yours, only a little more old U.S. of A. style. I keep this Singapore speedboat over in Laem Ngob for charter. Found him, didn't we . . ." (including Toy in the remark,) "living like a fucking hermit. He's a bore, your friend. Na bua. And he expects her to live like that? Might as well live up a tree with a fucking baboon."

"He thinks you coerced her," I said, losing my patience. My words produced a violent reaction. He crashed his glass on the table and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Then he's a fucking liar, isn't he? He's got some idea he's a claim to the moral high ground. Started preaching to me about abandoning the 'Cruz', Accused me! Shit! Shit!" he shouted.

"The 'Cruz' was never my fault. That stupid bastard tanker running across my bows. Anyway, who was on watch? Out on the observation bridge! He was out there, wasn't he? Doing what he's good at. Dreaming. Don't have him start blaming my navigation. It was that other arsehole with no lights and everyone pissed or asleep. So, don't have him come me with the holy hero shit. We all know how he fucked in Africa. Ran away. It's a hobby with him. With a trail of shit behind. Now he starts a witch hunt in Pattaya, which he spent last year poking like a fucking wombat. Conscience stricken is he?" He stabbed a finger viciously at his chest. "I'm his fucking conscience. That's why he can't stand me around. Admit it or not, whatever I've done, he's done. When he sees me he's staring straight into the dark secrets of his own fucking soul." He grunted with self-conviction. "I tell you, he's his own worst enemy." He hitched up his shorts, clutching at the hut post for support. "No, son, your man's off his head. And if Toy wants to live with a lunatic, she's welcome, but I think she's more sense. Fucking gutless limey," he snorted, reaching a shaky hand for the bottle. "He'll run out of here just as he's run out of everywhere." And then he spoke rapidly in Thai to Toy. She had been watching us with curiosity. Now she looked sullen and stared back at her comic. "You know the trouble about Edward?" Don told me, clapping an arm on my shoulder and guiding me hospitably off his premises and onto the dark beach. "He doesn't fit into this world."

"This world or your world," I suggested, but he released me with a grunt. Looking back I could see him like a pale phantom through the palm trees, watching my departure.

I didn't get back to Klong Son until the following afternoon. It was nearly midnight before the boat reached Salakpet. There wasn't any moon to speak of, but both wind and waves had died down and there was no more than a slight swell slopping around. We seemed to steer blind,

though I had no doubt the fisherman knew his way. Rocky atolls suddenly loomed jet black out of the inky dark. Finally a few faint lights from Salakpet glimmered ahead. After we landed I was lucky to find a shop still open selling liquor to already three-quarter drunk fishermen, some hardly bigger than boys, sitting astride planks, in sodden kang-keng-lehs, and big brimmed hats. The shop sold me cooked rice and cold vegetables with black egg. I think they ladled all the chilies they had left onto my plate. My desperate attempts fanning burning lips reduced my audience to helpless hoots of laughter and invitations to gulp raw spirit it would have been undiplomatic to refuse. I was informed there was no place to stay except the temple. The monks had long retired.

I curled up on the floor of the gong tower where the mosquitos soon discovered me. They were so bad, I decided to give sleep a miss and set off back on the motorbike. I had come into the village that afternoon over a new concrete foot bridge, with boats moored downstream. I left over rattling wooden planks, but it was some time before I admitted to myself I was lost, and even longer before I succeeded in retracing my tracks to the village. By now even the temple floor felt soft and a sudden downpour brought with it a stiff breeze that kept the bugs at bay. Next day the drive back seemed easier, even though there was a lot more mud. A few miles before Tha Mayon I passed a great deserted concrete jetty sticking half a mile out to sea. I little realised what fateful rendezvous I should have there later.

At Klong Son, Edward greeted my news defiantly. "So he refuses to leave." I couldn't bring myself to admit to him, that was the last proposal I would have dreamed of putting to Don. "No," I said. "I think he'll stay put. He says Toy's free to go where she likes."

"Why didn't she come back with you then?" he snapped.

I felt too stiff and weary to argue beyond, "Edward, for God's sake, it wasn't that easy." He gave me a grudging murmur of assent but he was far from convinced.

"I thought if she saw you. If you managed to, if . . ." A trail of if's getting nowhere. He didn't attempt to complete it. Not for the first time I wondered why I had come to the islands at all. I would have been wiser to stay put in Pattaya.

That evening we went for supper at the general store on the jetty. The fat Chinaman hitched up his paa-kamaa and served us fish curry, but even the Mekong did little to lift Edward's spirits. Fireflies flickered in the humid dark. A boy pedalling a bicycle called out King Kong. Out in the still lagoon I could hear the regular splash of Non's stoop as he pounded the sea for fish. Edward leaned back and stared thoughtfully into the pale night sky. He had been relating some of his plans, or dreams, or both. "I even considered joining the Khmer Rouge . . ."

I heard him aghast. "That bunch of murderers."

He backed out a little. "Not exactly them, but the communists." My first reaction was how typical of him to join a cause everyone else was busy abandoning. "Exactly," he defended.

"And when everyone has joined this so called, famous, market economy, what then? Can you privatise famines and floods, can you sell shares in typhoons? They are public property after all. Does malnutrition obey market forces? Yes," he observed grimly. "I suppose it does."

"Edward," I said wearily, "You're talking nonsense. What you say is impossible.:"

"Yes. It always is." He poked at his plate with a fork. "It's the inequality I despise. Manila's fancy Yacht Club on one side of the fence, the homeless sleeping in the open on the other. It seems so bloody unfair. It's not their fault."

"It's not mine either," I retorted. "Anyway, you were a member of a Yacht Club once, as I recall, in Dover. And proud of it."

"Only the dingy section," he murmured somewhat shamefaced.

"Yes," I remarked dryly. "And the dingy was so slow the race officials had packed up and gone home long before we ever crossed the finish line."

"I need a miracle," he muttered moodily, frowning, as he stared out at the sea. What you need is discipline, not dreaming. It was what Farnham-Flower, our army CO told him crisply, all those years before. Perhaps he was right, though Edward had a discipline of a sort, like everything else home-made. There was a faraway look in his eyes as he scanned the empty ocean horizon. "It's like the desert in a way," he said. "The sea is such a lonely place. It even eats up the imagination." He nodded, as if he was in agreement with himself. Yes, I thought, he has been where few men go alone or come back, both across the Empty Quarter and the far wilder wilderness of his own soul. He turned to me. "Remember the Pa telling us, 'If God offers you a finger, don't grasp the whole hand.' General Kruger or someone. Was that my mistake . . . ? This is all I am now," he resumed after a long pause. "My life here."

I wanted to object, to deny it, to point out all the untold things that might yet lie ahead for him to achieve, but I couldn't. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps this island was all he had left.

"You can go to . . . to . . ." I searched wildly for some place he could go. Silence surrounded us like a conspiracy.

"No," he interrupted quietly. "Not for me. Not any more. I've run out of places."

"Then stay here," I pleaded. "Up at Klong Son. He'll leave you alone. I'm sure of it . . ." I hesitated and he shook his head with a wry laugh.

"You just can't see. Or won't see. He's my . . . he's sitting in my seat at the table. That shadow running after me in Manila. Now he's finally caught up. And he can afford to wait. Like a loathsome black widow spider. He'll come back. He'll go on coming back. His sort are like that. He'll go on taking just what he wants. With his 'trust me' routine, or without. Listen," he said looking squarely at me. "This whole place, this whole country is a trap. If you're wise you'll get out of here. Go back to where you belong."

"Then come home," I suggested, but he shook his head.

"I don't belong there either." He nodded thoughtfully. "I used to think tourists were lost souls, but the farangs who try to belong are the real lost souls. The cuckoos in the nest." He paused.

"Perhaps we are all tourists anyway, here on earth. I'm not sure. I'm not convinced. But in a way, realising one doesn't or can't belong anywhere is no bad thing. It's like breaking bounds. Setting free. Starting out not so much into life, but into the universe. We can still stop on the way, walk on the white beach, wave to those who wave at us, only don't make the mistake of stopping to bring them home, putting wild flowers in a jam jar. See the ruined boat under the palm tree, the ruined chateau? Don't stop and get trapped. Just imagine for a moment and move on. Sometimes I wished I lived a more civilised life," he remarked wistfully. "You know. Family; kids; milk at the door; mowing the lawn. Single somehow seems such a waste."

"You could have it if you really wanted it." He nodded obligingly, but unconvinced. "It's a commitment Edward," I added, wishing I didn't sound so patronising. "One I'm not sure you want to make." He looked thoughtful.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right." He shielded his eyes as if the darkness was bright daylight. "One thing I'd really like, really like to do." Expecting him to say Africa I was taken

aback when he continued. "Write a hymn," glancing at me, his face afire with old enthusiasm. "You know. A really grand hymn. A hymn to echo up the aisle for centuries," he mused wistfully. "Something like, something like . . ." He didn't finish. "I seem to have spent my life striving for what? Nothing," he concluded despairingly. "Why can't life give back any little presents along the way? Other people seem to get them. Some lucky bastards." "Perhaps it's in the striving," I suggested hopefully, but he wasn't impressed or wasn't listening. He released a long pent up sigh. "Dear old Job," he acknowledged. "He had all the shit they could fling at him too. But it does seem so bloody unfair sometimes." Another long silence. "Do you think land has memory? It remembers?" He said unexpectedly. "Not sea, but land," he went on. "Where cities are built. Where battles fought. Do you think it knows the secrets locked there? Lost there?"

Two nights later we were sitting in the open boat of - Don's beach, surveying the extent of Edward's 'enterprise'. Unable to convince him otherwise, I had consented to go along in the hope of having a restraining influence. Some hopes, I thought bitterly, taunting my own folly. We had sailed out from Klong Son the previous day, taking advantage of wind and tide to run down the uninhabited southern coast of the island. White coral beaches, jungled outcrops, splinters of sheer rock rising from the clear depths, clung with greenery. The embattled futility of nature fitted my own mood. I glanced at Edward squatting in the stern, his arm over the tiller, shaded by a battered straw hat, his face screwed up shut against the glare. He was sleepwalking into battle, his eyes barely open, his mind completely closed. Could he really be such an emotional adolescent? And then I remembered the duel in the little cloister. To him it went under another name. Honour. But could anything or anyone be worth risking lives over? Yes, I suppose the pundits would have us believe. To preserve the quality of life. What quality of life? There he was, a savage. Body burned half black by the sun, correcting our course, hauling in the mainsail a fraction. His expression, or what I could make of it, eager, I suppose. If I asked him was the cause just, I had now no doubt of his reply.

On the face of it Toy's behaviour seemed thoroughly unjust. She had busted his hopes of happiness with Dao only to abandon him for the arms or security of his proclaimed enemy. And yet it is hard to see things through others' eyes. Harder still to dream their dreams. Perhaps in her eyes he had abandoned her to return to the jungle. A jungle she had barely escaped from a few years before. And Nom, his trusty bodyguard, silent, but always smiling when looked at, astride a thwart. The muscle of his calves and biceps truly enormous. Strong enough, for I had seen him do it, to pluck the engine out of its socket and lay it on the beach as gently as a rare stamp. As for myself, what was I doing there? Sharing my sanity with two madmen? Or was I as mad as them? And where were we going afterwards, when this hair-brained escapade was over? Had anyone seriously thought of that?

That evening as the sun settled in a giant red orb over the sea behind us, we came ashore in a small cove under the shelter of a towering cliff headland, Laem Bang Bao. Further inshore dense mangrove thickets festooned the spreading mudflats. Edward and Nom anchored the boat fore and aft so that she floated off the tide in a couple of feet without bouncing on the bottom. Nom cut up some small pieces of raw squid pla-muk for bait and fished with no more than a hook and a rusty nut for weight. I built a fire behind some sheltering rocks on which Edward sprinkled petrol, and tossed a match. It was an unusual evening, waiting for nightfall,

grilling Nom's fish on sticks, peeling off the charred skin with scalded fingers. Silent as snoopers. Outwardly Edward appeared calm. If there was turmoil within he didn't show it, apart from one thing. "If I were to die," he whispered, "The last thing I'd want was a witness." The overcast sky helped us by hiding the moon. We set off at midnight. There was no wind. "The engine can't be helped," Edward said as we heaved ourselves on board. "There are lots of night boats chugging around, fishing without lights." But I noticed he had taken the precaution of winding cloth around the oars as a muffle. An hour later we were drifting off the end of Don's bay. Half-way down the beach a single lantern glimmered among the trees. It was an apprehensive feeling preparing to commit what Edward called justice. He was armed with a yellow five litre oil can of petrol and a box of matches.

"Just make sure there's no one in the tents," I whispered urgently as he prepared to follow Nom into the shallows.

"Don't be stupid," he retorted, "we're not going to kill anyone. Only want to frighten him." Why didn't I go along with them? My excuse, and Edward's, for I had no doubt he didn't trust my reliability, as if, half-allowed the chance, I would give the game away, was that someone was needed to watch the boat, start the engine at a moments notice. The get-away man. The truth was I didn't want to be involved. In case things went wrong. And Toy? I had let Edward convince me that by now she was most likely over in Laem Ngob or Trat playing snooker. "Toy wouldn't last out two days on this island. You know that," he insisted. "Toy doesn't go to bed. She's a bat. Night's where she gets up." He finished knotting a red rag round his forehead and straightened up. If he hoped it would disguise him, just his height was a giveaway. He grinned. "You don't have to play the avenging hero," I told him. "You can just walk out of here, out of their lives and from there . . ." He nodded with a far away smile and patted my shoulder.

"I feel guilty I let you down"

"Let me down?" I heard myself protesting, but he had already slipped over the side and vanished into the darkness. A stick cracked underfoot, a muffled grunt, then silence.

I had expected at least ten minutes for them to reach the camp and prepare their attack. It came as a surprise when after less than half that time there sounded a sudden crack and tinkle of broken glass. The lantern flared and extinguished. An eerie silence followed. I strained my eyes and ears, but sounds and movements were only imagined. Then suddenly a splash of flame burst beneath the trees. Another and another, bright, voracious, but still uneasily silent. A neat row of fires, beacons, growing and spreading, accompanied by sounds that amplified spontaneously to screams and shouts. A conflagration of a grander scale swept over what I assumed was the thatched restaurant hut. By now even the water's edge was ablaze with lurid reflections of fire. I could make out figures, black leaping silhouettes, stick arms raised as if dancing, but how many? Certainly more than two. Five? A dozen? Impossible to tell. Amid the mayhem I tried to recognise a familiar voice, but the hut was exploding in vivid balls of flame that consumed all other sounds until suddenly there was the bang of a gun.

Not a rifle's crack but the bigger bang of a shotgun. Then another. Moments later I heard footfalls hurrying back towards the boat. I had been keeping the bows pointing out to sea. Now I shipped the oars and jumped back to the stern ready to start the engine. Two dark shapes splashed out from the shore. I froze. It was impossible to make out who it was against the black jungle backdrop. "Start the bloody engine," Edward called, sounding alarmed and

agitated. Nom was already up to his neck in water steadying the bows against the breakers. Edward hauled himself in heavily over the side and flopped face first in the bottom. Nom was more agile, but his weight almost capsized us. I pulled the starting chord and nearly lost my fingers in the kick-back. Second attempt she fired, churning the sea behind us. "The place is swarming with pirates," Edward gasped, emerging the right way up. I was too busy grappling with the long tailed engine to answer. I tried to point out through the breakers, but we kept banging the hard bottom. Each time the boat timbers shook. Edward made a grab for the tiller, but I pulled his hand away. "You can't see them," he shouted into my face, pointing wildly. "Must have crossed from the jetty." He squinted back at the dark shore. "Dozens of them. Ahead of us. God knows where they came from. Everything went up. Whoosh!" he cried, raising both arms and nearly falling overboard.

"Yes," I agreed, not hearing half of it. The steering pole was bucking in my grasp. The propeller kept snagging and the transmission chain slipped on the worn-out cog-wheel. How I cursed Edward's engine. "Toy!" I yelled, hardly able to hear my own voice above the engine roar. "Did you see . . ."

"Who, who?" Throttling back by mistake, the engine cut out. It was suddenly silent. Just the waves splashing as we swung round broadside. Edward pushed past to get at the engine.

"Toy," I demanded, shoving him aside. The boat see-sawed violently throwing us both off balance. I heard Nom grunting from the front.

"Toy can bloody burn as far as I care."

I couldn't believe it. "You bastard!" The boat rocked. We were grappling each other wildly. My hands slipped to his throat. I could have willingly strangled him in my sudden fury. Waves were tipping inboard. He shouted something I didn't hear. We were fighting like savages. Like ten year olds, all reason gone, just the desire to smash the other one senseless. The boat rolled, half over, tossing us aside like some arbitrary referee.

"I saved her," he panted. "Yes. From the bandits. Then Don blasted off. Start the engine for God's sake. She's alright." He kept staring back at the shore. "Start the engine before we go aground." I didn't believe him. Grabbing hold of his head in both hands I forced him to look at me.

"Where is she?" The boat pitched in the swell and we both had to sit down hard.

"She wouldn't come," he gasped wearily. "Wouldn't come with me. Said 'No'." Out of breath, I nodded reluctantly. I let him get past me to the engine. It failed to start. There was a strong whiff of fuel. "Oars," he said, pushing back amidships, but the oars had somehow slipped out of their binding ropes. We sat there, drifting, watching the figures on the shore leaping between the trees in the fire-glow. Gradually the current sucked us into the gulf. Far behind us on the shore, the smaller fires were going out. Faint cries were getting fainter. Only the restaurant remained ablaze. There was no way of knowing what was happening, and nothing we could do about it. Edward seemed past caring, too dejected even to raise the sails. I didn't want to think. Everything had happened so fast. I deeply mistrusted his story of pirates. It all seemed such a convenient alibi. But what about Toy? And then something occurred to push even that from my thoughts. The boat started sinking.

It must have been half awash for a while without any of us noticing. Nom shouted something urgently but we were already bailing with anything we could find beneath the tangle of floating boards and twisted ropes. A half coconut shell, a water bottle, bare hands. The pump

fashioned from plastic pipes and a long plunger fell to pieces under the strain. "She's going to sink!" Edward sounded amazed, bailing with frenzy under the thwarts. Perhaps in daylight we might have discovered the leaking stream and plugged it, but now in the dark the whole boat seemed to be in rebellion against us.

"Life jackets," I gasped. I might as well have asked for wings or fins. Edward, half underwater scooping like a maniac, failed to respond. I had instant visions of Dr. Melhuish's yacht 'Jose', the mouldy slices of bread in the stern and his cheery reflections on the merits of drowning fast. Nom mouthed excited exclamations, flapping his huge arms. Could he swim? I was always surprised how many fishermen couldn't. Old Jim Atkins couldn't "Treat the Sea like boiling oil," he insisted. "A wellieful of water and I'm on my way down to join Davy Jones."

"When she goes," panted Edward, "relax and float. Keep a lot of air inside you." Soon after that admonition the water level reached my knees, and the boat slipped over sideways, filled up and sank beneath us.

I pulled away strongly to avoid getting snared in any of the trailing ropes. I heard a lot of energetic splashing. Some empty fuel cans broke surface, but not much else. Most of the wood was waterlogged already. I don't suppose the shore was more than half a mile away, but bobbing in the darkness, it seemed beyond my reach. "It's not as if you'd never been sunk before," Edward's voice called out from not far off. "At home in the bay we were always capsizing." He coughed and spat and called out something to Nom, before adding, "Lot colder there too. Remember?" And we used to sing hymns too, I thought, wrists tied together across the upturned hull, hoping to be rescued, hoping one of the retired brigadiers around the bay would be on the look-out with binoculars. Not too many of them around here. I heard Nom spitting out water. His choking became a startled yell. Convinced he was being attacked by a shark, I panicked, thrashing about wildly. My mind saw unimaginable horrors. My body steeled itself for the knifing pain. I knew I was going to die. Suddenly my feet touched the bottom. Nom was still roaring. He came back to haul me out. We had landed on a shoal that in turn led circuitously to a sandspit off a small atoll where we found an open dugout hauled up. In a matter of silent moments we had this in the water, paddling perilously for shore, hoping she wouldn't tip over. Far off, faint fires flickered innocently from Don's beach. He might have been having a midnight party. The tide was falling. We landed among slippery rocks and I stumbled ashore with no more injuries than sea-urchin spines embedded in my toe. But that was painful enough as I hobbled after the others along the edge of the dark shore.

It took us almost until dawn to reach the mangrove mudflats at the head of the gulf, and wade onto firm land. Twice during the night it rained so hard we sheltered immersed up to our necks in the sea where it was warmer. First light found us floundering through waist high grass crossing the low pass that separated Don's mountainous isthmus from the rest of the island. Fortunately this was not more than a few miles wide. We reached the same track I had ridden down the coast and within an hour we came in sight of the long concrete pier, and beyond, the jungled delta of Tha Mayon. The pier had presumably been built when Ko Chang had been declared a National Park, and stood there ever since, awaiting further instructions. Edward would have preferred continuing up the coast, but I was ready to drop. I padded wearily after the others along the half mile to the end of the jetty, where we sat, a disconsolate trio, waiting for a boat, any passing boat, to take us on board. Even big Nom looked dejected.

Edward used to claim, "feed him on shark oil vitamin drink and he will go on forever." Now Nom squatted, picking at his toenails and grunting.

"God, it's been fun," Edward suddenly remarked. If he was referring to the immediate past in an attempt to cheer me up it had the very opposite effect.

"Fun!" I stared at him, incredulous. "Did you dare say 'fun'?" In the circumstances it seemed a particular reckless choice of words. But Edward's horizon was wider than mine at that moment.

"Love, life. All of it. None of it. Even despair sometimes." His eyes widened. "A bit like watching a Fellini movie. I don't regret any of it." I made no comment. He paused for theme.

"It's all a game really isn't it? Life, I mean?" He nodded half-convinced, and then conceded an uncertain frown. "It just depends on how you play it, I suppose." I said nothing.

The smooth sea glowed iron-grey under the dull morning sky. The mainland barely distinct apart from bleak smudges of mountains to the east. Far off, round the eastern end of the island a boat came into sight. Low, squat, without the paraphernalia of bamboo spars rigged with arc-lamps that distinguished the traditional fishing trawlers. We watched it growing slowly bigger. Edward shielded his eyes. "You don't suppose," he began wearily, "there was a chance of Don spotting me last night?" He might have been worrying about the headmaster after a schoolboy prank. I was too weary to worry. I swallowed a yawn. My toe was throbbing painfully.

"Every chance I should think. But if what you said about the pirates is true, then he's probably a floating corpse with a slit throat." Then I remembered. "Toy. She would have told him."

Edward seemed uncertain. Had he told me the entire truth? It was no use asking Nom. We sat in silence watching the tiny boat grow less tiny. It had been heading across to the mainland.

Now it seemed to change course, its wake cutting a wide lazy arc across the sea, coming straight for us. Or Tha Mayon. The boat was still a mile away but the concrete pier was very exposed and our solitary figures would have been plainly visible. "The boat from Salakpet," I said. "The one that goes to Don's jetty. It never stops here does it?"

"Never," Edward insisted, squinting hard at the incoming boat. "Goes straight across to Laem Ngob. You know that. You've been on it."

"Then where's this one from?"

"Nom," he called, pointing to the boat and making elaborate gestures.

Nom stared at the boat and muttered "Sal--ok--ok," it sounded like.

"Ah, Salakok," Edward interpreted with undisguised relief. "It's an inlet down the coast. We crossed behind it to get here."

"Edward," I asked him. "Then there's no remote chance of Don being on board?"

He laughed grimly. "Not unless he ran all the way. We were ahead of him. Why?" The boat was closing fast, black diesel smoke streaming from its exhaust stack, a white wash churning up behind. There was something increasingly familiar about it.

"It's just that unless I'm very much mistaken there's a farang in a white shirt up in the bows. Can you see? Wearing spectacles."

At that moment another, smaller ferry with a tarpaulin stretched across the deck for shelter appeared from behind a wooden promontory heading straight for us. "Where's that one from?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Edward. "That's a pity!" Realising as I did, if the second boat was from Salakok, where did the first come from. Less certain was what to do. It would look ludicrous running off down the pier like naughty schoolboys. There was also a good chance of snatching a ride on the Salakok boat first. That would certainly avoid an embarrassing confrontation, since there was little doubt of the identity of the farang standing up in the bows of the bigger ferry. I looked at Edward. "Perhaps . . ." He began, but he never finished. At that moment a shout hailed us over the closing gap of water.

"You bastards!" The spectacles glinted as Don looked back to someone else hidden below the deck canopy. His next words were lost while he raised his arms in a defiant wave, except it wasn't his arm. A loud bang shattered the morning calm. I don't think Edward had been prepared for this. Nom leaped back agitated and angry. There was a second bang. Both shots fell well short. What was he trying to do? "I'll get you. You bastards!" I heard him shout. Being shot at, even if there was little chance of being hit, is unnerving. I saw him clumsily reload. Apart from a foot high parapet, the jetty offered no cover at all. At the blunt T-shaped end, barnacled steps lowered to the water, but stopped well above the fallen tide. There was not room for more than one boat to moor up at a time, and because of the low water, the approaching boats were well below the level of the pier. Fifty yards off, Don stood staring up, brandishing the shotgun, preparing to aim. Nom and I were already lying flat but Edward remained standing, leaning forward as if to get a better view of something we could not see. "What is it you want?" He shouted above the racket of the boat engine. "Tell me? Tell me?" And then I realised it was not Don he was calling to. "Why didn't anyone tell me?" He turned, including Nom and I in the more general appeal. "I want to know, damn it! All my life . . ." He didn't get a chance to finish.

"Duck, you bloody fool!" I yelled, making a grab for his ankle and missing, just as Don loosed off another blast, peppering the concrete.

"Toy!" Edward shouted, apparently unscathed. Don had to be very drunk and angry to miss at this range.

"Get down!" I cried. I thought he was just intent on facing Don out. His face bore a look of dismay. Don was bawling from the boat, but at that moment Nom leaned across and mouthed something in my ear. He too was pointing. I raised my chin a few inches. Don, shotgun in one hand, was dragging something with the other. Something I could not make out, blocked from view by the wheelhouse.

"You want her? You come and get her . . ." His voice, surprisingly firm and clear. Edward, who a moment before had seemed at a loss now looked alert. He stepped back a few paces. I suddenly realised what he was about to do.

"Don't!" I yelled. "Don't . . ." But he was already running, powerful kicking strides, forearms and fists pounding like pistons. The hundred yard sprint, and heading straight for the end of the jetty. He had always been a strong runner, but too upright, too stiff, his arms flailing, chin up, head back. He ran, as if he was satirising runners, all effort, but everyone else overtaking him. "Don't!" I yelled again, "She's not . . ." I suppose I would have said 'worth it' or 'not your responsibility any more', if there had been time, if anyone can decide for someone else just what is worth saving. I never finished. For it suddenly came to me, as it must have already to him, that she was his responsibility, just as was all his past, no matter how abandoned, mistreated, dishonoured. Worth risking his life for? Only he knew that.

The Salakpet ferry was bobbing about in the swell off the end of the pier as the pilot roared the engine alternatively reverse and ahead to manoeuvre her in to dock. The Salakok boat waited its turn beyond. A flung rope snaked over one of the two concrete bollards and slipped back into the water. Edward meanwhile was sprinting the final few yards as if the edge of the jetty was the launch board for the school long jump. On the boat, Toy was wrestling with Don for the shotgun, both of them swaying this way and that as the pilot heaved and lunged to tie on to the pier. Nothing, not even the pilot it seemed, had the power to reverse things now, once they had been set in motion. Perhaps, as Edward prepared to leap, it was not just Don or Toy he saw, or Dao, or any of them, but instead a final chance to break free of all that had trapped him for so very long, and even if he did not comprehend it fully himself, as he launched himself airborne he left behind something of his own mortality. The shortcomings and failings that had beset him. He will not have had time to remember as I did, his aspiration to soar off the top of the high white cliffs that summer morning so many years ago. "It's light," he declared,

reaching out his hand with wonder in the way one does to touch a waterfall. And turning to me, his dull and unimaginative friend, with the challenge, "haven't you ever wanted to be God? To kiss the face of the sun?" His arms parabolic'd the universe, his face glowed with his golden dream.

Was that his quest this grey and windless morning on Ko Chang, to leave the shadows behind once and for all?

Perhaps I am being fanciful, but I like to think in that moment of action, his mind was as clear as his resolution. "Hey," I heard him shout, just as he coiled to leap, just as he called when we were kids fighting the village gang for possession of the stinging nettled mound his elder brother had Latinised the Capitoline Hill. "Watch!" Did he shout or am I imagining it? But I watched. We all watched. Nom; Don; Toy; the pilot; the passengers; the crewman poised to throw the mooring rope. With a loud roar he had already launched himself off the end of the pier and into space as if he were Superman, unwilling, unable, not expecting to fall. As he leapt into space his bold cry reflected back off the flat empty sea. "Surrender!" it sounded like. A challenge to Don? A challenge to submit. A challenge to everyone and everything opposed to him.

How many thoughts can flash through one's mind in such a fraction of a moment? The Pa had this favourite story of a colourful preacher he met in Africa, one of those hell fire priests of the African Methodist Church, who was always exhorting his congregation, arms upraised, to Hallelujah, and Praise the Lord. He sported a big stetson hat, and promised one Sunday to 'Walk on de water'. "Not," explained the Pa, "the river Jordan, but a muddy tributary of the Zambesi." At the appointed time the entire population of the town turned out to watch. The preacher appeared under his stetson, strode to the river bank and stepped off. For an instant he seemed to hang suspended, as if he were between heaven and earth, and then to everyone's dismay he vanished. Only the hat floated, followed a moment later by the preacher's head, dripping mud and weed. Climbing back he stilled the rising ripple of laughter with a baleful glare. "And you know, brothers and sisters, why I could not walk on dis water?" He pointed an accusing finger. "Because dis water is sinful water," he roared, "and we,

brothers and sisters, we have made it sinful." The Pa was rather relieved when a week later the preacher came up before the magistrate for indecent behaviour behind the town loo. It was a preposterous leap by any standard, but at the very moment he jumped, a backwash pushed the boat away a precious yard and although Edward landed, his foot twisted awkwardly on the coaming just as the deck swayed. I could see the frozen expression on Toy's face as she watched him, unable to help. Don too stared, an unuttered 'trust me' pursed on his lips? But at that instant, Edward lost his fight for balance and slid over the side. For a moment his hands scrabbled for a grip on the slippery hull. One wave plucked him up, another sucked him under just as a swell lifted the boat and buffeted it against the concrete pier, scraping the side hard against the encrusted concrete stilts.

"Eddy," I heard, or thought I heard. Then I realised who it came from. Nom. A terrible look of concern across his neanderthal features. Below, everyone on board had rushed to the side to see. The pilot reversed in a roar of churning foam, dragging the boat off the concrete. A yard, two. No arm reached up. No head appeared. Edward, I thought, you can do it. How often he had evaded us in the sea as boys, emerging yards away in the opposite direction. I stared this way and that, willing him to break the surface. The seconds ticked silently by. Nom uttered a roar. Rage or anguish I couldn't tell. For a moment I expected him to leap down on the boat deck and tear Don limb from limb with his bare hands. But he did nothing. Perhaps he sensed the soul of Edward had already re-entered the immortal cycle, and could not unhallow its passage.

"He should have listened," said Don crossly, surveying the open ocean. "If he had only trusted me we could have sorted everything out." Listened to what? Listened to who? Edward had been listening all his life. He just heard things differently. What was he listening to now, I wondered, as he swayed on down in the deep? Don cupped his hands to hail, but the cry never came.

"Come back, you stupid bastard," he called almost to himself. A fleeting image came to me of the Pa on the vicarage lawn begging the recalcitrant hens to come down and on the day he died when I stood on the lawn instead and he was up there somewhere and wouldn't come down either. Yes I thought, wherever you are. "Come back," Don muttered again without conviction. I watched Toy's sullen empty face, trying to wonder what she was thinking. Come back to what? No, I thought, he had abandoned the real world too long ever to want to return to it. Poseidon and the open sea was where his course lay now.

A month later I passed Toy on her usual bar stool in the Narok Bar. Our eyes met but there was no recognition. She had dropped a curtain over the past. The wheel of life had turned. Later, I learned in Thai that Toy meant 'sting'. But if what we are born is what we become, perched in Ouan's bar stool wearing her playful toy smile, who was she to herself? To the farangs that found her, that hardly mattered.

"So he really is dead then," Anderson frowned, disbelieving, as he would never be satisfied without a body. "Well he's one person who won't become a legend. If anyone's time was up, it was his," he added, like an obituary.

Even the place seemed empty somehow. Francois had failed to return. Bought a 'banca' outrigger in Puerta Gallera, they said, and a crew of Manila's prettiest holidaying whores to man it. Angelo's boat had broken its moorings and sunk in a storm. The bungalow at Crystal Garden lay deserted across the dank klong. Fallen palm fronds littered the verandah and a

snapped off bough had crashed through the fragile wooden bridge. The old familiar faces at Anderson's were missing. "Gone away." Where to? Someone mentioned Iquitos on the upper reaches of the Amazon. Why? It was supposed to be the place, according to a Peruvian novelist, where everyone could fulfil their fantasies.

In Oscar's Bar, Madame Robert insisted that glasses were once again raised to Palinurus. "He has paid the price for his treachery," he declared. "The ghosts of honour are placated and will no longer trouble the stillness of his tomb." As I listened, a line from Seferis about the argonauts slipped into place. "Their oars mark the spot where they fell by the shore. No one remembers them. Justice."

Just like the source of the river he had set off to discover as a boy, he had followed the dream as far as he was able, only it wasn't far enough. The ultimate goal eluded him. This time it wasn't blisters or loneliness or even getting lost, although certainly weariness had played its part wearing down his determination. But the same growing burden of failure was there. A knowledge now that the boundaries of his vision would never broaden wide enough to let him through, ruled as they were by forces outside his control. Tossed here and there by waves of indecision, he was not even master of his own rate. Only this time, unlike the twelve year old in the red telephone kiosk at Stow-on-the-Wold, he had taken that leap into the unknown regardless. This time prompted by heaven-knows-what. Love, hate, revenge. All of these, and none of them. He had not baulked the challenge. Though whether in doing so he was the victor or vanquished, it would be a hard judgement to decide.

When I got home I walked up to the Patrol Memorial. It was where the Pa used to preside at the Battle of Britain Remembrance Sunday while we lay on our backs sucking grasses, staring up from the stubble fields into the hot September sky. The parade of elderly, stiff backed,

bowler hatted British Legion lowered their embossed yellow banners towards the earth as the drawn out bugle chords of the Last Post haunted the solemn stillness. Then the Pa's strong and steady voice called out the lines of a poem.

"Must it always be so

That the best are chosen to fall and sleep

And we too slow in claiming the earth they quicken Must it always be so..."

I stepped to the edge of the cliff top and stood there for what seemed an eternity staring out over the empty sea. Only the mewing lament of the gulls rose to taunt the silence. But beyond I could hear Edward's last vain call. Only now I realised it was two words, not one. "The surrender," is what he actually cried as he charged gloriously over the edge, into space, to fly or fall as the Gods chose. "The surrender," His final irrevocable submission to Destiny and whatever it held in store for him.

And I turned for home. I could hear from long ago and far away the voice of Peter Dawson singing that old scratched zonophone recording:

"...Come back you British soldier

Come you back to Mandalay

Where the sun comes up like thunder

'Out'er China 'crost the Bay."

MANDALAY

By the old Moulmain Pagoda, lookin' eastward to the sea There's
a Burma girl a-setting' and I know she thinks o' me;

For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they
say; "Come you back, you British soldier, come back to
Mandalay!"

Come you back to Mandalay.

Where the old Flotilla lay;

Can't you 'ear their paddles chunkin' from Rangoon to Mandalay?

Where the flyin'-fishes play,

An' the dawn comes up like thunder out'er China 'crost the Bay!

'Er petticoat was yaller an' 'er little cap was green

An' 'er name was Supi-yaw-lat - Jes' the same as Theebaw's
Queen. An' I seed her first a-smokin' of a whackin' white
cheroot, An' a' wastin' Christian kisses on an 'earthen idol's
foot:

Bloomin' idol made o' mud -

Wot they called the Great Gawd Budd -Plucky lot she cared for
idols

when I kissed 'her where she stood! On the road to Mandalay.

When the mist was on the rice-fields an' the sun was droppin'
slow, She'd get 'er little banjo an' she'd sing 'Kulla-lo-lo!'
With 'er arm upon my shoulder an' 'er cheek agin my cheek We
useter watch the steamers and the hathis pilin' teak.

Elephants a-pilin' teak

In the sludgy, squidgy creek Where the silence 'ung that 'eavy
you was 'arf afraid to speak! On the road to Mandalay.

But that's all shove be'ind me - long ago an' far away.

An' there ain't no busses runnin' from the Bank to Mandalay;
An' I'm learnin' 'ere in London what you ten-year soldier tells;
If you've 'eard the East a-callin', you won't never 'eed naught
else.

No! you won't 'eed nothin' else But them spicy garlic smells
An' the sunshine an' the palm trees an' the tinkly temple-bells;
On the road to Mandalay ...

I am sick o' wastin' leather on these gritty pavin' stones, An'
the blessed English drizzle wakes the fever in my bones; Tho' I
walks with fifty 'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the Strand, An'
they talks a lot o' lovin' but wot do they understand?

Beefy faces an' grubby 'and Law! wot do they understand? I've a
neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land! On the road
to Mandalay.

Ship me somewhere east of Suez, where the best is like the
worst, Where there ain't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise
a thirst; For the temple-bells are callin', an' it's there I
would be -By the old Moulmain Pagoda looking lazy at the sea;

On the road to Mandalay

Where the old flotilla lay,

With our sick beneath the awnings When we went to Mandalay! On
the road to Mandalay, Where the flyin'-fishes play

An' the dawn comes up like thunder, out'er China 'crost the Bay.