

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

SCORPION ORCHID
LLOYD FERNANDO



LLOYD FERNANDO was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1926, and migrated to Singapore with his family in 1938. After obtaining his PhD in Literature in English from Leeds University, he served as Head of the English Department at the University of Malaya from 1967 to 1978, then took an early retirement at 52 to study Law in London. Fernando was admitted as Advocate and Solicitor of the High Court of Malaya in 1980, at the age of 54.

Fernando is best known in the literary world for his novel *Scorpion Orchid*. His other novel, *Green is the Colour*, also explores the issues of identity and cultures in a multi-ethnic society. For his contribution to the University of Malaya, he was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus in 2005. Fernando passed away in 2008, leaving behind his wife, Marie, two daughters and four grandchildren.

SCORPION ORCHID

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LLOYD FERNANDO



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For Sebastian, Benedict,
Fernando and Caspian

Introduction by Robert Yeo

IT IS INSTRUCTIVE to read *Scorpion Orchid* together with Lloyd Fernando's essays collected in *Cultures in Conflict* (1986) and essays collected by his wife Marie, after his death, in *Lloyd Fernando: A Celebration of His Life* (2004). In both books, there are revealing passages that inform about his citizenship status, the novel's theme and characters. I am never convinced about D. H. Lawrence's advice to trust the tale and not the teller as I am sure a knowledge of what Fernando was doing with *Scorpion Orchid* will greatly enhance our reading of it. In the second book, Fernando wrote an essay *Engmalchin* and the opening paragraph is revealing:

During my life in Singapore in the 1950s, I became aware of the many races in this country and the incompatibility of our colonial upbringing with the concept of a united society of multi-racial origins.¹

Undoubtedly, this is the theme of *Scorpion Orchid*.

Fernando lived in Singapore in the 1950s and it was a very tumultuous period politically. The Japanese Occupation of

Singapore, 1942-45, alienated the local population from its brutal Asian rulers but it also saw disenchantment with colonial rule because of British surrender to the Japanese. When the colonisers returned after the war under the British Military Administration (BMA), there was resentment among the local population which had strong urges to be free of foreign domination. For freedom to be achieved, the multi-racial society of Singapore, comprising the indigenous Malays, the majority Chinese, Indians (children of migrants) and other peoples on the island, had to be united. But they were not and what divided them were race and politics.

The Maria Hertogh case of 1950 had aggravated race relations. Maria was a Dutch girl adopted by a Malay woman Cik Aminah. Years after her adoption, the colonial administration allowed her biological parents to start legal proceedings to claim their natural daughter against opposition from Aminah, relatives and Muslim sympathisers. Tension, racial and religious, mounted, and when the courts ruled in favour of returning Maria to the Hertoghs, riots erupted. Muslims were pitched against Christians, Malays against white people; Eurasians, who were deemed white by enraged Muslims, were attacked.²

In 1949, Mao Tse Tung triumphed over the Kuomintang and China became Communist. Pro-Chinese fervour in the overseas territories in Southeast Asia took on a distinctly Chinese and Communist bent, inflaming opinion and inciting violence in places like Singapore, which had a significant Chinese majority.

Lloyd Fernando lived in this cauldron. In the 1950s, he heard of violence in Ceylon between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Ethnically Sinhalese himself, he made a commitment then. Years later, in 1998, in his essay *Engmalchin*, he wrote:

Ethnically, I was ashamed and disgusted by the narrow-minded and selfish stand of the Sinhalese community and I choose Singapore's citizenship because it promised a united way of life, without prejudice or dominance by any sector of the society...³

In 1957, Malaya achieved independence and in 1959, Singapore became self-governing. In 1960, Fernando joined the English department of the University of Malaya and it may be around this time that he accepted Malayan citizenship. In his academic career, he thought much about conflicting cultures as reflected in many conference papers he delivered and essays he wrote. In 1986, he collected these in a book, published in Singapore, entitled significantly, *Cultures in Conflict*.

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In *Scorpion Orchid*, there are four young men—Santinathan, a Tamil, Guan Kheng, a Chinese, Sabran, a Malay, and a Eurasian, Peter D'Almeida.

The four of them had been sixth formers together and were

now undergraduates in the third year at the university. They had moved in a group as young men who are contemporaries and enjoy company do, but the bond of their young manhood was wearing off and they were not fully aware of it yet.⁴

The company they keep include Sally, a Chinese prostitute, and the mysterious prophet Tok Said. When the novel opens, Santinathan is coping with the members of his family and his uncle's family who want to return to India; his uncle Rasu, aunt Nalini and their daughter Vasantha, prepare to leave but he Santi and his sister Neela choose to remain. This episode shows the ethnic pull on Indians (it could be Chinese) who, in a crunching time, prefer the homeland of their imagination to the land they grew up in. Later, Santi (as his friends address him) is dismissed from the university for insubordination.

Sabran comes from a poor family in Endau, Johore, which is the southmost state of Malaysia adjoining Singapore. He acts as an interpreter for activists demonstrating against a colonial employer, British Realty. In the course of the novel, he is picked up for questioning but is later released.

Guan Kheng has a relationship with Sally. Going out with her one day in his car, they run into riots in the city, he fails to protect Sally, and she is raped and badly bruised. The bond between them weakens. In hospital, Sally, who had left her husband in Malaya, wonders, "What was she fleeing?"⁵ The crisis leads to a discovery she had repressed—that she could

actually be Malay and her name is Salmah. Uncomfortably, at this time too, "Guan Kheng thought, for seeking to be firm, to reassert, in fact, rational pride of race."⁶

Peter, the Eurasian of Portuguese ancestry, is set upon and hurt because his assailants identify him as a white man. After the incident, he comes to this realisation about his attackers. "...At me...Not any of you. Me...I saw the point suddenly. I don't belong here. I don't really know anybody here and what's more with the British getting out, I don't want to. I'm getting out too."⁷

Sabran, realises that his unionist friend Huang, who acts as an interpreter for Prosperity Union against British Realty, has different aims in fighting the British. Sabran suspects that Huang has closed an eye to inordinate violence, including attacks on Eurasians. This, and the attacks on Peter and Sally, leaves him pretty disillusioned. "That was why he was going back to the Federation."⁸

Finally, there is the mystical figure of Tok Said. Many of the protagonists have met him and come up with different versions. One unalterable fact about him is that he has prophetic power and predicted the violence that engulfs Singapore, as depicted in the novel. Sally thinks he is a holy man and an Indian and has encountered him in Trengganu and various places in Pahang, the two Eastern states of Malaya. Sabran meets Tok Said and is repelled by his "long" and "blood-curdling" scream and does not think he was a holy man. The authorities think he is

linked to the Communists as an inciter of violence. Throughout the novel, the reader is left wondering, who is Tok Said? What is his role in the troubles infesting Singapore? The persistent questions asked about him and the absence of answers lend a thriller element that adds to the tension in the novel.

Two more points are worth making about this novel. True to the thinking of many in his generation, Fernando saw the political-geographical entities of Peninsula Malaya and the island of Singapore as one: Malaya. This is the novel's frame of reference. The four young men go to Singapore because the university is located in the island-state. Tok Said is a Malay-an phenomenon, spotted in Ipoh (the capital of the northern Malayan state of Perak), Trengganu, a northeastern state and elsewhere in other states.

Finally, what can be said of excerpts from classical Malay, colonial English and one Japanese book that pepper the novel? Fernando's explanation is, "I wanted a mythic meaning to be added on the persons and the several incidents in the novel, yet references to specific works could not rely on the knowledge of the reader. I therefore selected passages which illustrate the truism that there is nothing new under the sun."⁹ This is a credible explanation. It supports my feeling that these extracts, placed at strategic points in the novel, remind readers of the multi-racial origins of Malayan-Singaporean history, of early migration, the coming of the colonial powers beginning with the Portuguese in Malacca and followed by the Dutch and the

British. Indirectly, they point to the divide-and-rule policy of the British which is one of the causes of racial division shown in the novel.

Lloyd Fernando continued, after publishing *Scorpion Orchid* in 1976, to be preoccupied with cultures in conflict in fiction and this was demonstrated in his second and last novel, *Green is the Colour*, published in 1993. It is about the racial riots of 13 May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, that lead to far-reaching political consequences in Malaysia. It is a must-read novel for those interested in Fernando's take on racial problems that continue to be very relevant today in both Malaysia and Singapore.

Robert Yeo, 2011

NOTES:

1. Marie T. Fernando, *Lloyd Fernando: A Celebration of His Life*, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.
2. Joe Conceicao, *Singapore and The Many-Headed Monster A look at racial riots against a socio-historical ground*, Horizon Books, Singapore, 2007. See chapter, *The Maria Hertogh Riots*. See also *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse* by Dennis Bloodworth, Times Edition, 1986, Marshall Cavendish 2005, especially the chapters on the 1950s.
3. As in 1, above, p. 9.
4. Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2011, p. 17.
5. *Ibid*, p. 93.
6. *Ibid*, p. 85.
7. *Ibid*, p. 73.
8. *Ibid*, p. 120.
9. As in 1, above, p. 10.

SCORPION ORCHID

1

SHE STOOD A little to the corner, out of the way and watched Santinathan take a nail and carefully hammer it down. Her eyes followed the arcs of the hammerhead in the small taps as the nail was being confirmed in its place, then in the swings which first widened and then diminished, ending in a double tap when the nail was fully in. Half kneeling before the box, the singlet stuck to his back, he paused, the muscles on his back relaxing their tightness. In Vasantha's eyes he suddenly seemed ashen, old. Then he was up and he walked round the box, head cocked on one side. "That ought to hold it." His eyes moved carefully over the box.

Aunt Nalini came in and stopped. "What on earth is in that big box?"

It's a coffin, Vasantha said with her eyes.

"It's got all the things I won't need here," Santinathan said, going out.

Nalini looked at the box. "What are you doing in that corner? Go and get dressed. Now. Go."

"Why isn't Santi going to come with us?" Vasantha's sweaty face was expressionless, only the eyes questioned. But they

seemed to say that no possible answer would be comprehensible.

Nalini put her hands to her head and shouted, "Oh stop asking questions and do as I say."

Santinathan came back. "Don't shout at her."

"If she persists in being so—"

Thrusting her lower lip in resentment, Vasantha said, "I'm not stupid. You're the one that's stupid."

"There! You see. Perpetually talking back." Nalini went up to her and caught her by the arm, speaking through clenched teeth. "Now you go and get dressed this minute or else I'll—"

"Stop it." He did not move; he spoke quickly. "Please be kinder to her."

"Kinder. You don't have to put up with her the whole day as I do. Nor Neela. And where is Neela, can you tell me that? Going about with white men. She's nothing but a—" He saw how she bit back the word prostitute. "And you. You show no respect to your elders. Is that what you learn at the university? You go to lectures in the morning and come back at night—if you do. It's easy for you to say be kinder. Do you know what she did this morning?"

"I don't know and I don't want to know."

"That's just like you. And you dare to tell me be kinder."

"Santi!" The voice came from the verandah above their quarrelling.

He turned to Vasantha. "Go and get dressed." It was his

look. She stepped round the trunks lying in disorder on the floor, but knocked the picture frames which lay at the edge of the table. They fell with a triple clatter.

"Santi, the lorry." His uncle's voice came again.

Santinathan said, "Help me with this trunk." Nalini helped to heave it on his back, and watched his torso go out. There was a thud and then a scraping sound as the box was arranged in place on the lorry. When he came back she said, "Is he drinking?" although she knew the answer. A lorry man had come in, and the two worked systematically and silently, except for an occasional grunt. From the verandah old Rasu, Santinathan's uncle, watched them gradually denuding the house. The samsu was now fully in his system like a warm, thick vapour imprisoned in dark corridors, tilting his frame slightly this way and that. The last box thudded onto the lorry and he spoke to the slim dark figure as it went past him. Santinathan approached him, face and bare shoulders rashed with sweat.

"The money for your fees is with Mr. Desai. Each term when they are due, all you have to do is go and ask him—"

I know.

"There's just enough for five terms. You can't afford to fail—"

I know.

"—it's only for one and a half years. Then you can come back and join us—"

Santinathan was thinking how the words slid out of his uncle's mouth like slobes of refuse pouring out of a burst pipe.

Burst, that's what you are. Bust. You're bust after paying for all your passages back, and my fees. You're bust because you're running away. "No!" he suddenly shouted.

"But we can't leave without Neela. Whatever she has done, we can't leave her here. After all, she's our own flesh and blood."

"I've been there once," Santinathan said, breathing hard in his effort to speak quietly, "and I'm not going again. She said she won't come no matter what you do. And that's that, as far as I'm concerned." He turned and walked in.

The bareness of the living room depressed him. Its lived-in untidiness had disappeared. Only the altar remained. Vasantha was on a chair carefully taking down the garlands that draped the picture of Vishnu and Lakshmi. The bronze figure of Nataraja already lay on the table face down. "Leave the picture for a moment. And the oil lamp," he said.

"Why?"

He tried another approach. "Santha, please get me my shoes from the bedroom."

She fumbled unnecessarily with the garlands for some seconds longer before she got down and went out.

Outside, the ordinary sounds of living seemed to recede. The room became oppressive as the heat surged in waves and pounded his ear drums. In the oil lamp the little flame flickered convulsively and was still. The walls of the room fell away and the earth was in darkness. His body burst and he was nothing, only the flame remained, a yellow arrested explosion retreating

swiftly. He followed it eagerly, seeking to be one with it. Yearning grew intense within him and he strained powerfully to penetrate the folds, to see the voice, to touch the flame now diminished in size but roaring white as from a jet. The splintering of glass was muffled in the squat plop of oil as the lamp hit the floor, and he felt the numbness pass.

"Athan, what about Neela?" Aunt Nalini asked. "We can't leave her."

Old Rasu watched his stranger self scream, "She's not fit to come with us. I could have arranged such a good marriage for her. What would her father have said if he had known she would come to this. All the time—"

Vasantha watched the figure of her uncle sway in the way she had come to dread. The whites of her eyes stared out of the corner into which she had shrunk. Would he be like this on the ship? Santi had told her how exciting it was going to be with the deck rolling, and the sea breezes—

"Santi!" old Rasu shouted.

Almost immediately Santinathan's voice, near at hand, said quietly, "Everything's ready on the lorry. If we leave now, you'll have just enough time to settle your things on board before the ship leaves." He had put on a crumpled shirt to match his dirty white trousers. He had wiped the sweat from his face but it was still shiny.

"Santi, come here."

"We've got to leave now. Ten minutes is all you have to—"

“Come here.”

Santinathan stepped forward eyeing his uncle’s mottled face coolly.

“Why doesn’t she come back? Doesn’t she realise we’re leaving? Who will take care of her?” He gripped his nephew’s shirt front, but the youth’s face, inches from his uncle’s, was expressionless. This is the last time you’ll do it, old man.

“There is a man, isn’t there? Who is he—who is he?” The nephew looked at the faces behind his uncle: Vasantha’s wide-eyed, uncomprehending; Aunt Nalini’s eyes lowered, hair awry, an irregular line across her forehead, like a long scar. “She’s a slut, she will spoil our blood. After all I’ve done for her, see what she’s done.” He released his hold on Santinathan’s shirt. “We must get her. You must go again.”

The youth looked at his uncle steadily.

“I’ll come with you.”

His gaze remained unblinking.

“We can’t—”

“I’ve told you. I’ve done everything I can. I’m not going to see her again.”

“But why? She’s your sister. You can’t be—”

“That’s why. Now if you don’t get ready this minute I’m going out, and you’ll have to find someone else to help with the boxes.”

Old Rasu sat down suddenly and looked at his nephew.

A lizard came down from the ceiling to where Vishnu used

to be. He stopped and waited for a long time, motionless, as if not sure of his bearings.

The lorry with their baggage had left. The taxi remained. In the late evening they could look at last at the sun, a glistening ball of red glass. On the road little vehicles ran about, open-shirted figures promenaded, wholly unaware of the group that was leaving them. Santinathan, gazing on the busy strangeness of the scene, wished for a moment that he too would be on the ship taking them all away. He turned and shouted, “Vasantha!”

“Goodbye, house,” Vasantha was saying on the door step. Though she heard his call, she turned her back on him and listened to the silent house which had witnessed the innumerable occasions on which, uncomprehending, they had scolded her. She went backwards down the steps slowly. “This is the last time I shall walk down the steps.” She touched the stone balustrade at the foot. “This is the last time I shall touch this—this—” she puzzled, “—this.” She returned and touched it again quickly.

The taxi crept through the evening crowd of anonymous creatures in the suburb. Rasu recognised a face here, a crony there. They had been the props of his existence. He felt no regret at leaving, indeed he was anxious to leave. Too many changes were taking place, there was too little order, too much unease, uncertainty. It was a good country in which to earn a livelihood for a while, that was all. His head slowly turned left and back as the car moved, staring at the felled long-stemmed

trunks of coconut trees lying athwart one another. The little plantation, cool patch, point of rest in a strange country, had gone. Although he had been twenty-five years in the country, part of him had always been held in suspension. Now atrophied, it gave him no satisfaction going back after the long interim. They were held up on Serangoon Road by a procession.

“So many carrying kavadis,” Aunt Nalini said. “What is the matter? Thaipusam is over.”

Several bare-bodied figures came into view. They were dusted over with saffron powder and ash, their eyes were glazed as if a film of water had frosted over the corneas even in the process of washing them. A neat red dot stared out of the centre of the forehead of each like a third eye. Each carried a large aluminium frame shaped in a quarter circle from which numerous metal skewers plunged like wheel spokes, piercing the flesh of his shoulders, chest and back as if to converge upon his heart. The tongue of each was stitched once with a tiny skewer, and the mouth remained open.

Most of the penitents were in a trance. If there had been pain at first, they had now crossed its threshold and were in a dark chamber of numbness. They did not bleed. Other members of the procession, jostling round the penitents, shouted and clapped rhythmically. Clap-clap, hai-hai! Clap-clap, hai-hai! The drummer whose rhythm they kept shook his head convulsively in time with the complex beat which he produced from either side of a rope-tautened drum, low-slung from his

shoulders. Near him walked another, holding to his lips an oboe, out of the flare of which issued a piercing and prolonged variation on one note.

“What is wrong? Why are there so many?” Aunt Nalini asked again.

Something is going to happen, Rasu thought. It’s the same in Bukit Mertajam and Ipoh. It’s not safe to be here. It’s better to be among our own people.

The policeman at the harbour gate waved them in. They drove past dark, deserted godowns and emerged on the wharf. Yellow electric bulbs lit up the dirty Japanese packet that lay alongside. At one end a crane was hauling up their goods. Up, up, up they swung, swiftly disappearing into the hold. From the middle sloped a rickety gangway that rocked alarmingly as they climbed aboard. The mats were rolled out on the deck, pillows arranged under the canvas awning that was to shelter them for the next five days. Aunt Nalini was pouring out some coffee from a flask, Vasantha was at the railing looking down at the little motor sampans that chugged about. Old Rasu sat staring at his nephew arranging their luggage in a neat row at the head of the wide bunk on which they would all lie, feet towards the railing, for five days.

“Write often.”

The youth stared out at the winking lights at sea. The anticipation had vanished, and his stomach felt small and contracted within him. The men around the hold of the ship were

rounding off their tasks. A crane hook swung up loose and heavy for the last time, a rope leaped up at it like a snake and drew it firmly to the base. The last oblong of the hatch was covered and thick canvas swished stiffly over it. A dark figure leaped on the rail like a monkey bellowing out orders. Voices shouted a confused reply above Santinathan's thoughts and his uncle's voice. "After all she's your sister. Why do you hate her so much? Remember the way she alone took care of you when you had pleurisy? You were such good friends." It struck him that his uncle was not drunk any more. And further, that he seemed to be waiting for a reply. From the wide bunk a few yards away Aunt Nalini, flask in hand, stopped in mid-action and held him with her eyes. "Santi are you listening?"

"It's time for me to get off."

"I said are you listening."

"It's time to go."

"I won't let you go until you answer me."

Shutting his eyes the youth nodded.

"And when you come back you'll bring her too? You must. Understand?" His head jerked again.

"You'll be careful? There may be trouble." He forced his nephew to look at him. "You know what I mean? If it's going to be bad, leave at once and come to us. You hear?"

Figures were suddenly moving about busily. The roll of the boat became more pronounced and somewhere a bell clanged. Arms held him, different pairs of lips pressed upon his face;

hot and sweaty; cold; and fleeting.

On the wharf he looked up once at the ship against the black sky. Vasantha's squat figure was against the railing. He waved, but could not see whether she waved back. Perhaps they were all against the railing looking down and waving. Perhaps they were thinking it's useless waving in the dark. The yellow lights on the ship and on the wharf held together in a sickly pallor against the wide blackness. Then they parted. Inside him was a chill quite unlike the feeling he expected to have.

The city looked new and strange. Its dark alleyways snaked away with new mystery, its lights glinting like a thousand fragments into which a vast mirror had shattered. Creatures, maggot-like, crawled on the thoroughfares. Santinathan stumbled past them in fear. Strange eyes stared out of pallid faces. In the bus not a single face muscle twitched. He got off almost before it had stopped and strode back to the dark, empty house.

The door creaked open. He stood silently, listening. Light, filtering from the neighbouring house, gave him the barest illumination. Softly he entered the wide dining room that was now simply a shell. Tomorrow he would leave this and move into a rented cubicle. The lizard came scurrying down the wall to where the altar had been. The young man watched it coldly. He took off a shoe and edged along the wall towards it. The house echoed as he crashed the shoe against the wall.

“Nataraja’s gone, you bastard,” he said.

The lizard scuttled away.

. . .

They led in a man whose hands were bound together with cord. When he was brought facing the master, he was ordered to bow, but he remained standing. A man came forward and struck him ten or twenty times with a bamboo cane. Then he was asked, “Do you wish to join this society or not?” But the man remained silent. Then he was asked the same question again. The third or fourth time he was asked, he replied, “No.” The master glanced up at the men carrying swords and they all brandished their weapons making as if to cut off the man’s head. I expected him to be killed. But the master stopped them and questioned him again, and again he said, “No.” Then the master ordered him to be thrown face on the ground, while two men flogged him on the back with bamboo canes until he shrieked in agony.

2

“THERE HE IS.”

“Where?”

“Talking to Huang.” Guan Kheng waved and shouted, “Hey, Sabran!” He turned to Peter and said, “Come on.”

“No, let him finish. No point going into that crowd.”

They stood to one side and watched the Chinese, Indians and Malays jostle out of the grounds, it seemed, unendingly. The lorries, neatly arranged in files, began to fill up. Banners of white cloth with slogans in English, Malay and Chinese crudely written in red and black ink began to unfurl and were held aloft on poles at each end. The men squatting in one lorry began to cheer and their applause was taken up by others. Singing broke out, ragged and out of key, but soon gained tempo. They might have been football partisans returning after a rousing game.

“Look at those banners,” Peter said. “‘British Realty is sucking our blood’, there, that one. If I were the governor I’d line them up and shoot the bloody lot of them.”

“Sabran, too?”

“Sabran is a fool to get mixed up in this.” Peter was angry

that they could not have the good times they had had when they first entered the university. “Just wait and see when he starts looking for a job.”

Sabran saw them at last and dodged through the lorries which were grinding out, to the accompaniment of bursting firecrackers. It was the eve of Chinese New Year. He wore a shirt with rolled up sleeves and crumpled trousers. He was trying to force himself to stop breathing hard. When Guan Kheng asked, “How did it go?” he said, “Fine. Fine.”

Guan Kheng, impassive behind his rimless spectacles, asked, “What does that mean? Joint union or no joint union?”

Sabran blinked momentarily. “Of course we’re going to join. You should have seen the men. I was doubtful at first. First we introduced Thian the President of the Prosperity Union. Thian spoke in Mandarin. Huang translated into English. Then I translated that into Malay. Then Rassidi the President of the Co-operative Union spoke. I translated that into English. And Huang translated my translation into Mandarin. It was going so slow I was worried. Then Thian got up again and tried to speak in Malay. It was so funny the crowd laughed. I think that did it. After that it was all cheering.”

• • •

It was then that they found at the point of the headland a rock lying in the bushes. The rock was smooth, about six feet wide, square

in shape, and its face was covered with a chiselled inscription. But although it had writing, this was illegible because of extensive scouring by water. Allah alone knows how many thousands of years old it may have been. After its discovery crowds of all races came to see it. The Indians declared that the writing was Hindu but they were unable to read it. The Chinese claimed that it was in Chinese characters. I went with a party of people, and also Mr. Raffles and Mr. Thomson, and we all looked at the rock. I noticed that in shape the lettering was rather like Arabic, but I could not read it because, owing to its great age, the relief was partly effaced.

Many learned men came and tried to read it. Some brought flour-paste which they pressed on the inscription and took a cast. Others rubbed lamp-black on it to make the lettering visible. But for all their ingenuity in trying to find out what language the letters represented, they reached no decision.

...Mr. Coleman was then an engineer in Singapore and it was he who broke up the stone; a great pity, and in my opinion a most improper thing to do, prompted perhaps by his own thoughtlessness and folly. He destroyed the rock because he did not realise its importance...As the Malays say, “If you cannot improve a thing at least do not destroy it.”

• • •

“I don’t know what there is to cheer about,” Peter said gloomily. “It means you are going to have a showdown with Realty.

And that means trouble.”

“No. Just wait and see.”

“Let’s go and get a bite,” Guan Kheng said.

“Sure. I’m hungry.” Sabran looked around. “I thought you said Santi has come back from the Federation.”

“Yeah, he’s back. He’s somewhere here.”

“The bugger looks exhausted,” Peter said. “Hollow eyes, and thin like a stick. Must have screwed all the female rubber tappers from Johore to Perlis.”

They saw Santinathan sitting on a bench at a vendor’s stall outside the grounds, eating a plate of fried mee, Indian style. He looked up, his face streaming with perspiration. “Your meeting okay?” he asked Sabran.

“Yeah. The committees of the two unions are going to meet next week. They are going to plan joint action. You want to come?”

“What, me?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“You could translate for the Indian workers,” Sabran said. Santinathan kept his eyes on Sabran as he drained a glass of pink syrup. “You’re in for trouble if you don’t look out, my boy,” he said at last.

“That’s what I say,” Peter put in. “You don’t think the police are going to stand by and watch the country go to ruin, do you?”

“Don’t be crazy, man,” Guan Kheng said.

“I’m not crazy. Just look at all those rumours. Too many

people are getting jittery.”

“You mean our unions must not join together because of the rumours.” Sabran looked steadily at Peter.

“No man, I don’t mean that. But if you have too many people excited all together with all kinds of rumours flying about, there’s sure to be trouble. Stands to reason.”

Guan Kheng said, “You better stop that kind of talk, Peter. Or you’ll get us all into trouble.”

Peter lowered his voice. “I have a cousin in the Police Force. He says they’re really worried about Tok Said. They think he is the cause of all the wild talk that’s going about. And until the talk stops, they’re not keen about public meetings, rallies, marches and so on. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

The four of them had been sixth formers together and were now undergraduates in their third year at the university. They had moved in a group, as young men who are contemporaries and enjoy company do, but the bond of their young manhood was wearing off and they were not fully aware of it yet.

The car park outside the grounds was nearly deserted, the dusk had deepened and the vendors were preparing to leave.

“We’re going to get something to eat,” Guan Kheng said to Santinathan. A single cracker explosion out on the road punctuated his speech. From another part of the city the sound of the crackers was continuous, like distant gunfire.

Santinathan lit a cigarette and sucked deeply. No smoke appeared when he breathed out. “Who’s paying? You? Okay

Acknowledgements

Permission to include the following literary extracts in this novel has been renewed for this edition. Some of the extracts have been adapted slightly.

| | |
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| page 14 | <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , page 186 |
| page 26 | <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , page 147 |
| page 46 | <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , pages 162 to 163 |
| page 59 | <i>Sejarah Melayu</i> , pages 63 to 64 |
| page 80 | <i>Memoirs of a Malayan Family</i> , page 82 |
| page 84 | <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , page 130 |
| page 97 | <i>Sejarah Melayu</i> , pages 81 to 82 |
| page 110 | <i>Sejarah Melayu</i> , pages 151 to 152 |
| page 111 | <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , page 174 |
| page 158 | <i>Sejarah Melayu</i> , page 179 |
| page 162 | <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , pages 193 to 195 |
| page 165 | <i>Syonan—My Story</i> , pages 42 to 43 |
| page 172 | <i>Pelayaran Abdullah</i> , pages 29 to 30 |

The passages starting on pages 12 and 166 were suggested by an article on the Japanese War Crimes Trial by Pakir Singh in

New Nation, 17 December 1974, page 12. The passage starting on page 173 was translated by the author from *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Bab II.

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2. *The Hikayat Abdullah*, translated by A.H. Mill, in *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 28 Part 3, June 1955.
3. *Sejarah Melayu*, translated by C. C. Brown (Oxford University Press, 1970). First published in 1953 as Volume 25, Parts 2 and 3 of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.
4. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Malay Literature Series, No. 3). Extract translated by Lloyd Fernando.
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6. Mamoru Shinozaki, *Syonan—My Story* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1975).

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