Journey into Malaya

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Chapter One

ARRIVAL

QUENTIN ROSS closed the door of Cabin Number 51, leaving his neatly stacked luggage ready for disembarkation, and made his way to the deck.

The ship was slowing now as it swung around Blakang Mati Island, and moved in towards the wharf. Singapore at last! This was the moment he had been longing for now, for almost a year. Ever since, in fact, he had been flown home emaciated and wan, suffering much pain from a persistent and vicious amoeba, which would not respond to treatment in the East. During the weeks in a large city hospital, and later while forced to endure a lengthy convalescence at a quiet seaside town, Quentin Ross chafed at the delay that kept him from his beloved rubber estate. For rubber was the passion of his life. To know all about rubber, its growing and care, its place and price in world markets, and the research being done on various methods of processing and production. He also had dreams of one day managing a large estate, being able to speak fluently in Malay, Tamil, and one or more of the Chinese dialects. But after only twelve months in Malaya, he barely had his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. And it had taken him all that time to get reasonably fluent in Malay.

So often during his convalescence he had pictured the bungalow where he and another young planter lived. Would his little terrier know him again? Dinah with the sharp alert ears, and the wide-awake eyes watching his every move. He hoped someone had taken the trouble to wipe the mildew from his large and varied collection of books; otherwise they would be spoilt by now. And A-Kim, the stream-lined and silent, would he still be there to be his 'boy' about the house? He wondered whether he would have the bungalow to himself when he
returned. He hoped so. For the social life of the estates with its incessant round of drinking parties interested him not at all.

He was brought back to the present by the wave of strong perfume that assailed his nostrils, and the shrilled greeting nearby, 'Oh, hullo, Mr Jones! This is where you and your wife leave the ship, isn't it?'

Quentin groaned. The ship's bore and her coquettish daughter had found another victim! But why pick on that nice chap, Michael Jones? You'd think people of her ilk would want to keep far away from missionaries! Anyway, he was glad that Mrs Smythe-Williams had not seen him first.

'Yes,' he heard Michael Jones reply, 'and it seems we will have a warm welcome to a new land!'

'Fancy anyone having to live here in this heat!' exclaimed Gloria the daughter. Quentin grimaced wryly. It took all kinds of people to make up the world, he thought. For himself, he had lived for this day when he could walk off the ship, and be on his way back to the estate....

'But you're not staying in Singapore are you, Mr Jones?' he heard Mrs Smythe-Williams interrupt.

'Only for a few days. We go on to the Federation....'

'The Federation! That's worse still. Why, it's positively dangerous. I don't know how you can bear to go there. Fancy taking your wife and that darling baby daughter to live in a place where all those terrorists are!' Quentin who had been frankly listening, sympathetic, but nevertheless rather enjoying the encounter, turned in time to see her exaggerated shudder that sent her long, green earrings dancing crazily....

'Ugh!' Gloria put in. 'And the tigers and cobras and all the other horrible jungly things! I don't know how you can do it, Mr Jones.'

Michael laughed. 'Well, we aren't exactly doing it for a health cure, you know,' he replied.

'Oh, yes, you're missionaries....' the matron said vaguely, and, hailing another acquaintance, she hurried away. A moment later Gloria's frivolous laughter floated back to the two men, where Michael Jones had joined Quentin at the rail.

'There you are, Michael,' teased Quentin. 'But seriously, as
I've told you before, a New Village in Malaya is no place for a European to live. There are crowded dismal little homes, packed close together . . . there's no privacy in the village, and nowhere else to go.'

'Yes, but there are people there,' answered Michael quietly, 'and people are our job! And not everyone feels as you do about the villages, Quentin!'

'No?'

'No! The High Commissioner, Sir Gerald Templer, has invited missionaries to go and live in the villages. He has called for one hundred right away!'

'Whew! That sounds a lot.'

'Not really, when you think that there are some four hundred villages . . . but then you know that as well as I do . . . .'  

'I've been away for a year. Things may have changed some. Still, I think you'll find it harder living than you imagine . . . the lack of privacy, noise and all that, you know!'  

'We don't expect it to be easy. . . .'  

Quentin was genuinely distressed at the thought of a fine chap like Michael, with an attractive wife and baby, going to live in one of Malaya's New Villages. His memory of them made him shudder; drab, unattractive shacks, set down close together in a barren, hastily-cleared spot . . . practically no trees or flowers to relieve the stark monotony. He liked Michael and Valerie Jones . . . had been attracted to them from the first of the voyage and they had had good times together.

'Hardly a missionary . . . ' he had answered laughingly. 'But I suppose being the son of a Vicar leaves its mark. I try to live a decent, clean life, keeping out of debt, and living up to the Golden Rule as far as possible,' he had added, and had been mildly shocked when Michael had suggested that 'Christianity is not merely believing a Creed, but loving a Person.' He had been baptized as a baby, confirmed in his teens, and had sung as a choir-boy for a number of years. He still made it a rule when at home to go to church at least once on Sunday. He had been perplexed to learn that Michael did not consider that enough. But it had not kept him from liking them and enjoying their companionship.
Valerie Jones, with baby Jocelyn, had strolled along and joined the men. With her came the two new recruits, Betty Watson and Philippa Keane, and they all watched silently now as the ship drew slowly alongside the wharf. The faces of those who had come to welcome various ones, began to take shape and form to the watching passengers on deck.

Sudden excitement quickened Quentin's voice as his eye caught sight of a neatly-dressed Chinese in spotless white shirt and trousers. He was displaying a flashing gold tooth in a wide grin. 'A-Kim!' he exclaimed, and Michael and Valerie both turned to him with sympathetic smiles.

'That's my boy,' Quentin explained excitedly. 'However did he get down from Johore to be here at this hour. There's a road curfew on from seven p.m. till six a.m. so he must have come down yesterday! Good old A-Kim! Fancy him doing that!'

Then it was Valerie's turn to exclaim: 'There they are, Michael! There's Jack and Dorothy ... and ... Oh I wish they'd hurry with the gangway!' Michael laughed at her excitement, then turned to Quentin.

'We'd better say good-bye here,' he said. 'Once we get down that gangway we will be going our separate ways. I do hope we are going to see you again somewhere though!'

'You don't know where you will be stationed?' asked Quentin as they shook hands.

'No, we'll probably have it settled to-morrow,' replied Michael.

'You said your estate was called "Golden Eagle", didn't you, Mr Ross?' Valerie joined in.

'Yes, that's right. And do be sure to look me up if you are anywhere near!' answered Quentin.

'Oh we will. Look! The gangway's down and people are coming aboard!' and Valerie with a final wave of her hand and a smile hurried off with Michael carrying Jocelyn behind her. The two girls followed. Quentin turned away and went down to collect his luggage before joining the moving queue of passengers. A few minutes later he was on the wharf chatting with A-Kim.
The boy had come down the day before, and was staying with his sister in Geylang, a suburb of Singapore. Quentin arranged for him to wait and collect the two trunks that were in the hold of the ship, and leave by the night mail train for Johore. He himself would follow on the day mail next morning.

The reason for this was that his old school friend, Tim Bailey, was out on a two-year lectureship at the University. Tim had returned from leave six months previously, and while in England had made Quentin promise to spend at least one night with him in Singapore when he returned. Unfortunately Bailey had a lecture at the time the ship docked, so it was impossible for him to meet his friend on arrival.

Tim lived in a small house quite near to the University, so Quentin called a taxi, and set off to the address he had been given. But not before he had bought a morning paper, and discovered that two of Singapore's harbour police had been shot dead the previous night and their revolvers stolen. He saw from the headlines that three terrorists had been killed on an estate in west Johore, and that in Perak in the north other terrorists had tried to blow up a bridge ahead of the day mail train. Fortunately for the train crew and the several hundred passengers, the attempt had been abortive.

'So we're still at it,' he muttered, thinking of the armoured jeep and two special constables who escorted him everywhere over the wide estate. He had got used to going about his work as if terrorists did not exist but he knew it could mean instant death from a hidden rifle if he failed, maybe only once, to take the necessary precautions.

Unfortunately Quentin did not stipulate which route the taxi should take, and the quick-witted driver, alive to his opportunity, proceeded by a somewhat lengthy route. Up Orchard Road, round Tanglin Circus to the Botanical Gardens, he thence continued along Cluny Road, cloistered with shady overhanging trees, and delighting the eye with its sequestered beauty. Quentin was glad that he had come that way after all. There was something so restful about those trees, that somehow they exuded a quietness. He found himself feeling kindly disposed towards them as the car wove its way round the long
road. They were almost as good as his rubber trees. Almost. He smiled a little twisted smile as if laughing at himself.

A few minutes later he drew up at Tim Bailey's house, in time to see his friend just come in from the University. Coffee was soon percolating, and the two men were chatting over a bachelor repast of tasty sandwiches. They compared notes on their leaves in England, and Quentin passed on greetings from mutual friends and acquaintances. Tim asked what sort of a voyage it had been.

'Oh, just the usual,' laughed Quentin. 'You know the crazy, unnatural kind of shipboard life! As a matter of fact Tim,' he continued more seriously, 'there was a very decent couple on board. They were escorting two girls to Malaya as well . . . missionaries.'

'You're welcome,' said Tim quickly. 'Not for me. Missionaries are a narrow-minded bunch, quite out of touch with everyday life. There was a group of them on our ship, going somewhere or other. Kept very much to themselves. Something wrong with people like that . . . at least to my way of thinking.'

'Oh, ours weren't like that,' replied Quentin. 'They were full of fun; and actually Michael Jones, that was the man of the party, and I, had some good lengthy discussions on world affairs. I thought all the party seemed to be pretty widely read. They asked me along to the Sunday night service on board. As a matter of fact, one of the girls played the piano-accordion quite well. The hymns sounded rather good floating out into the night air.'

'You always were a bit of a sentimentalist,' laughed Tim. 'Anyway, where are your paragon missionaries going?'

'Up to the Federation,' Quentin replied. 'They are going to rent a small house in one of Templer's New Villages, and live as close to the Chinese as possible.'

'What's the big idea?' asked Tim. 'How'll they make themselves understood anyway?'

'Oh, the Joneses speak the Chinese National language, Mandarin. They were in China for a number of years. The two new girls are going to a language school for six months first,' replied Quentin. 'You've got to hand it out to them Tim; they know
PERPUSTAKAAN NERGARA MALAYSIA