

# Rhodesland

*Salafis*

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To my children—Lubna, Farhan, and Ayman



# CONTENTS

1	SIGN OF DEATH	1
2	SHOOTOUT AT DAWN	12
3	THE ORDER OF RHODES	23
4	ROCHAS' LEGEND AND THE SECRET BRITISH PLAN	36
5	THE SINCLAIR RITUAL	45
6	ASSASSINS STRIKE AGAIN!	49
7	IN SEARCH OF THE COLONEL	57
8	THE NOTORIOUS BABA OF RUNNYMEDE	61
9	ESCAPE FROM RUNNYMEDE	68
10	NEW FRIENDS AMONG THE VELIRS	73
11	GAPLA, AN INSCRUTABLE GUIDE	79
12	FIRST DAY AT SHAWS HALL	91
13	STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN	95
14	ESCAPE FROM SHAWS HALL	100
15	AN OLD ENEMY SEEKS REVENGE	107
16	BANDA AND HIS BAND OF PARTISANS	119
17	SOJOURN IN DROOGMUND	127
18	BACK TO BUSINESS	134
19	BANDA MEANS BUSINESS	139
20	A MEETING OF OLD FRIENDS	146
21	DRAMA NEAR THE COURTHOUSE	149
22	A MISSION FRAUGHT WITH DANGER	156
23	THE DUNGEONS OF FORT MONTFORD	169
24	THE THREE SISTERS	174
25	IMTI ASCARI	183

26	A DAY OF TURNCOATS	193
27	RETREAT TO THE HILDEGHAT HIGHLANDS	201
28	GIFTS OF THE MAGI	209
29	TRYST WITH DESTINY	216
30	THE LOST SEPULCHRE	233
31	RATTRAY MEETS HIS END	242
32	DAY OF RECKONING	248
33	“I SHOULD HAVE KILLED YOU LONG AGO”	253
34	LORD GURNARD AND GAPLA TAKE A BRAVE STAND	261
35	THE PROMISED ONE	271

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## SIGN OF DEATH

Ipoh, Malaya. 11th October, 1961. I remember that morning well. A spot of bother in the street below didn't just go away; it got more strident every minute. Worse, someone had the audacity to use a bullhorn in our usually peaceful neighbourhood. The announcer led the chorus: "Go back, Alaric! Go back!" Doddering up to the window, I peeped outside to check what the fuss was all about. A long line of marchers with black headbands was moving towards the main road, calling for a day of rage. Protests and upheavals dominated much of that year, belying claims of the end of the war, which the British had—on the advice of their banks—insisted on calling as the Malayan Emergency. I could imagine what would have triggered this wave of protests. Already, a palpable sense of foreboding had filled the air, threatening the peace as dust settled on the dark days of the Emergency. Often, things came to a head as odious incidents surfaced now and then, such as this one involving a Commonwealth commando team, which had run amok in a village called Budung near the northern border and killed twenty-one people. The case was before the apex court for quite some time.

## *Salafis*

I returned to the window carrying the day's paper and some coffee. The newspaper's headline screamed in a large font:

*EMERGENCY LAW LETS BUDUNG MURDERERS FREE—  
GOVERNMENT IN CRISIS CONTROL*

I threw the paper down in disgust. A cream-coloured envelope fell on the floor. It carried no postage but only a hurried scrawl: "To, Mr. Sinclair."

"Harry," I called out. "Here's a letter for you. Harry! HARRY!"

He tucked under the sheet.

"It came with the *Daily Tribune*." I left it near his bedstead, mumbling that only old Uncle George can pull up such a stunt.

Harry sat erect at the mere mention of the name.

"I'll be damned," he said, fumbling for his glasses. He scanned the cover and then pulled out a small note.

One look at its content, and his countenance changed to one of haunting.

"What's it?"

"Trouble," he said, handing me the note.

"Talk of the devil," said I, relishing at the prospect of reading another of old Colonel George Higgins' list of invectives reserved only for his godson. "The deuce—"

*"Runnymede." Meet us today 5 p.m. Café Rollo, Town hall. Rest in person.  
~ E. S.*

"Runnymede? What's in Runnymede?"

"You tell me!" said Harry, looking irritated. "Ooh, that racket! It's driving me nuts. What's happening outside? A wedding?"

I examined the note again.

“It appears to be the handiwork of someone new to Ipoh,” said I.

“How’s that?”

“If you had read the papers of late, you’d recall that the town hall is now a high security area, all geared up to welcome the city’s new commissioner,” I said, handing him the *Tribune*. “Also, people will be converging there for a massive demonstration today. I don’t know how the security forces will react... What a day to select for the ceremonial welcome!”

The import of the note was still not clear to me, but Harry looked sufficiently shaken. None of us could decipher the person behind “E. S.” or his partners in this missive. I looked out the window; the rumpus had still not died down. Giving Harry something to muse over, I moved on to get ready for the day’s assignment.

As a news photographer for *Standard Courier*, I made a name for myself covering the Malayan Emergency. Though the “Emergency” was officially over a couple of years ago, the Commonwealth forces—from Britain, Australia, and New Zealand—continued to remain in the peninsula for reasons best known to them. My war assignments nearly wrecked my life, and my editor consented to let me cover civil lines. Life was easy covering Asian royalties, races, and such stuff that I seriously considered finding a girl and settling down. So you can understand my apprehension when I first heard the rumble of protesting marchers. It was, therefore, with a pensive mood that I went about gearing up. When I looked at the mirror, I could see that preoccupied expression—which I tried so consciously to cast aside—returning to my visage, making me appear older than my thirty years. Reluctantly, I set my favourite red beret in position.

“Going out?” Harry wanted to know. “Better watch out.”

Another look outside convinced me that busy times were

here again. Plumes of black smoke from burning tyres or garbage rose from different quarters of the city. Men, women, and children of all races were carrying placards and banners denouncing the Supreme Court's verdict.

"My, my!" said I. "That's quite a reception for the new commissioner."

"He's selected the wrong day to begin work."

"And a wrong guy, too: Captain Alaric Quinn of the Ninth Ulsters. He's one of the men let off by the Supreme Court judge."

Harry read the news piece with a frown, and then began his usual session of reading it aloud to me—a nasty habit, which I always found irritating. I quickly got up.

"Hey, what about Café Rollo?" Harry looked concerned. "I don't want to go there alone; especially if the subject is Runnymede."

"Ah, the mysterious sender," said I, opening the front door. "Don't worry! We've got plenty of time. We'll meet after lunch."

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Later that afternoon, we walked along with an ambling group of protestors and reached the town hall in good time, but a large police presence ensured that none entered the square. Restive crowds had already converged around the square, protesting against the Court's verdict, the new commissioner, or both. More people made their way to the square as time neared for the arrival of the new commissioner. Although grossly outnumbered, the armed guards valiantly pushed back the protesters every time they pressed forward. The square was about a football field in size, and in the middle flew the Commonwealth field flag, fluttering madly with the wind.

A constable hurried towards us.

“Do you want to get murdered, Tuan?” He was breathing heavily. “Look around you. A sea of yellow faces. Very angry.”

“Oh,” said Harry, looking amused. “Don’t worry, we are with the people. Is it okay if we cross the square? We need to go to the café.”

It was impertinent of Harry to belittle the earnest constable’s concern. The good officer pursed his lips, looking irritated and ready to burst, but before he could utter something nasty, a volley of gunshots down the road stopped him. The crowd, which was restive until a moment ago, stood in silence.

“It’s too late,” said the officer, turning away. “I’d still advise you two to wear this.”

He held out a few headbands, similar to the ones worn by the protesting multitude. “It’s for your own safety.”

We took a couple of headbands, and the constable quickly left.

Many roads converged at the square, and we were on a major road through which Captain Quinn’s 9th Ulster grenadiers were expected to arrive. A large posse of riot police lined our side of the road, forming a sort of barricade between the protesters and Quinn’s men. I tried to break the cordon and cross the square, but a cop pointed his gun and ordered me to stay put.

Another volley of gunshots down the road followed by celebratory fire upped the ante. Five horsemen wearing orange sashes blew their horns as they passed us. Then came the drummers followed by the members of the 9th Ulster grenadiers marching in perfect order. An armoured personnel carrier came behind the marching troops, accompanied by a convoy of military trucks. Popping over the manhole of the personnel carrier was the face of a man whom I came to know from the paper as Captain Alaric Quinn. He must have been in his late thirties; I could say that at a glance. He appeared a lot differently in the newspapers. His arched eyebrows nearly

reached the sideburns, making his eyes look glassy and gaze more vicious. With his auburn hair, hat, tilted head, flat face, and fixed smile, he presented a fearsome prospect. One wouldn't want to get into trouble with this man.

“We're in a big mess!” I pointed to the crowd, which was becoming restive again.

The armoured vehicle did one roundup of the square and stopped near where we stood. Captain Quinn got up on top of the vehicle, faced his men, and, in what I consider a major coup, began to outline his plans for the city, unmindful of the edgy crowd around him.

“I am only here to say that Ipoh will be secure for the present and the future. There will be no bloody terrorists within a hundred miles of where I stay. You all know me. Let the terrorists know that I am here. Waiting. If they want more blood, tell them we are ready. As a wise English poet had once said, ‘For every fallen soul, there's a Little England.’ So you all know what I mean like.”

This little speech delivered in good Geordie did not go down well with the common folk of Ipoh, who began to raise their pitch giving full air to their lungs. Captain Quinn looked dismayed.

“I'll be knackered if I am told that I do not belong here.” He stomped the armoured vehicle and then surveyed the crowd with disapproval. His eyes fell on a particularly bulky man wearing a black headband. Harry returned the stare with remarkable aplomb. The captain motioned him to come forward. On his part, Harry responded with gestures, which the captain thought was offending language to a person of his stature.

Now I must tell you something about Harry. For all his appearances and bourgeois attitude, there's nothing to link him to the accounting profession except for a pair of thick glasses that he wears. He is a six-foot giant quite easy on diet,

extremely argumentative, and very muscular.

Captain Quinn jumped off the vehicle and, after brushing away the cops manning the cordon, demanded that Harry remove the headband and hand it over to him immediately.

“Don’t talk rot, bloody!” Harry replied.

The captain’s face changed colours, to orange, like the sash he fancied on his shoulders. The crowd stepped back a respectful distance. I thought it would make for a perfect shot for tomorrow’s edition of *Standard Courier* and clicked a couple of pictures. This only angered the captain, for he tried to reach my camera, and, failing in the attempt, turned his attention to Harry. He caught Harry by the collar and looked hard into his eyes. I turned to the cops for help, but they were too afraid to stop Captain Quinn. Harry, however, made the first move. A clean left hook sent the captain down. The editor of *Standard Courier* would like this, so I clicked another picture of the captain sitting on the road with legs stretched. The captain squinted when the camera flashed and turned his wrath towards me. With a scream, he sprung; and I, in an effort to stave him off, raised my arm and in the process gave him, which I came to know from the papers the next day, a black eye. I did not realise until then that the people were already in full swing dispersing Quinn’s supporters and the Ulster grenadiers. It was an opportunity that we didn’t want to miss. As we made haste to get out of the square, we distinctively heard Quinn’s words: “By Saint Dunstan, I’ll kill you both, fat one and freckled face. You just wait!”

I paused long enough to turn back and cry out, “Plonker!” A strong hand tugged me; it was an elderly peasant with a native bamboo hat. He ordered me to keep quiet as he led me away, to the safety of a narrow bye lane.

I mumbled my thanks in broken Mandarin.

“Suffering catfish!” he said. “Wait here, bloody Ivanhoe! And keep bloody still; I’ll get the other bleeding idiot!”

It took me a while to collect my wits and recognise that jaunty walk and voice.

“Uncle George!” I cried, as the old man disappeared into the crowd, feeling a bit dazed.

Colonel George Higgins was the only soul that Harry had by way of family; well, actually, his godfather, in which capacity the old colonel took care of Harry’s upbringing when he was orphaned many years ago. Uncle George, as we called him, was a playful soul of the old school. He lived in Runnymede, a small town in India’s wild northeast, where he managed a plantation. How this insufferable old warhorse got himself implanted here I do not know, but I waited for the old ruffian with a glad thought.

A few minutes later, he appeared holding Harry by the small of his neck.

“It was the other fellow, I keep telling you,” said Harry. “He did it first.”

“Had I been a bit late, you two would’ve been caught, trussed like turkeys, and parcelled to Runnymede,” said Colonel Higgins, still seething. “Do you know where this lane leads to?”

“Selangor main road,” said I.

“We can get a taxi there?”

“Of course.”

Once inside the car, he placed his arm over me and gave a peck. “Boy, you were chubby last time,” he said.

I assured him I was doing fine. “Some heavy-duty work, Uncle George, but what a pleasant surprise seeing you here.”

He said nothing more during the drive. We stopped for lunch at a roadside eatery in the countryside. The colonel, a raspy old man and bon vivant, was not his usual self as he pensively picked his food and ate in silence. Even the usually



thickheaded Harry was quick to notice something amiss in the colonel's demeanour and remained reticent.

"Listen to me well, boy," the colonel said at last, turning to Harry. "Did someone turn up looking for you in the past couple of days?" Harry thought for a while, and the colonel offered some help. "A stranger, you know? Things of that sort. I had asked my friend to warn you."

"No, not a soul," said my friend. "Why?"

"They have found you out, Harry. They know that you are alive."

"After all these years? I thought she had given me up for good."

"So it seemed, my son," said the colonel, nodding. "Until a few days ago."

They looked at each other in silence, and then the colonel dropped his head.

"It was my fault," he said in a low tone.

It was for the first time that I saw this man looking so glum and crushed.

"A few days ago," he continued, "*Rosedally* had a break-in while I was away. Although the whole of Runnymede knows I possess nothing of value in my house, the men did not come for valuables—they were looking for your whereabouts and took away your mail."

"But...but you had asked me to stop writing years ago."

"Yes, I know. It was my fault that I did not destroy them, for I treasured them, my boy; those were letters you wrote when you were in Penang."

"Thank God! But this is Ipoh. I never sent anything to you from Ipoh. They can't find me here."

"They will, if you go about making stunts like the one you

did today at the square... Well, don't do anything foolhardy again."

He then turned to me and said, "Sorry, all this may seem odd to you, Willy boy. It is enough said that Harry's life is in danger."

"Why would anybody want to kill—" I looked at Harry, and became even more curious. "A clerk?"

"He's a Sinclair!" said the colonel resolutely, as if it made complete sense. "The last of the Sinclairs. To the thousands of Velir tribals in India, he is the only impediment to their future. He's an obstacle to their redemption. Don't ask me anything more, son. It's a long story. I don't have the time or inclination to whet your interest. It is enough said that he should now be living more discreetly."

The colonel was not usually terse, and this was the first time I experienced such treatment from him. All that I could gather was that some murky past of Harry's family was now in the open. I decided to feign my disinterest, but then I had to remind Harry about the note that arrived in the newspaper.

"Ah, yes! I received this in the morning," said Harry, producing the letter. "Probably, a prank by one of my colleagues."

The colonel snatched the paper and glanced at its contents.

"It's him!" he whispered, looking around furtively. "It's Edward. Edward Swelteran. I know his hand."

"Our enemy?" asked Harry.

"Tut, tut. A true salt...a good friend. I asked him to touch base with you before anything happens," said the colonel, looking more tensed. "Edward's always prompt unless... Well, he should've contacted you days ago."

The door of the humble inn crashed open to reveal a short, balding man with a huge rucksack strapped to his shoulder.

He staggered a bit and stood in the doorway, as if he were searching for someone. A crack of gunfire rankled outside. The stranger swooned, and we all immediately ducked.

“Edward!” cried the colonel and moved towards the figure spread on the floor.

I rushed out to look at the assailants, but could only see the back of their car. I returned to the fallen man and felt his pulse.

“He’s only fainted,” I said.

“The rucksack saved his life,” said the colonel, pointing to a hole. “What’s that in his hand?”

The man tightly held a small yellow piece of paper. The colonel pulled it out to have a look.

“It’s what I’ve been fearing all these years,” he said as the paper fell from his hand. “The sign of death!”

The parchment was of rich viscose material with a sceptre embossed on it. In the middle was the victim’s name written in a strange flourish.

## SHOOTOUT AT DAWN

Edward Swelteran panted as I removed his rucksack and turned him over. He may have been in his late fifties but he looked quite boyish.

“We need an ambulance!” cried Harry, looking at the shell-shocked innkeeper. “Quick! Somebody call for help!”

“No, no, you call nobody,” said the colonel. “I know what he needs.”

He opened his hip flask, at the popping sound of which the fallen man’s visage underwent a change. The colonel sprinkled some of the contents on the man’s face.

“Mi-mi,” murmured Edward. To grab the bottle in one swoop was a matter of an instant, and to empty its contents in one swig was another.

“Not so fast, comrade!” said the colonel, recollecting his self. “Leave some for me.”

After emptying its contents, Edward fell flat again and began to snore hard.

“Same old chap,” said the colonel, with a sigh. “He worked

as my batman in Normandy during the War. Poor fellow!”

“He must have followed us all the way from the square,” said I.

“And brought with him the assailants,” joined Harry, quick to figure that out. “Those men may be looking for me as well. Quick, there must be more on the way. I say we move now.”

“I think my dimwit is right,” said the colonel, looking at me. “We’d better move.”

We paid for the innkeeper’s silence, and the kind man arranged for our transport on a truck that had just arrived to deliver supplies. We were able to convince the driver that our friend had crossed the Plimsoll mark and must get back to his wife. It was nearing nightfall as we made our way to the town. An hour later and after changing a couple of taxis, we reached our humble residence. As we entered, the landlord, Mr. Keeble, gave us a disapproving look.

“No drunkards, sir!” he said, giving an eyeful to the colonel and then Edward. “This is a decent neighbourhood.”

We left the colonel to handle the landlord as we laboured our way up with Edward in tow.

“Hello, Popeye!” said the colonel, ignoring the man’s looks. “Every year I keep reminding you that I’m not a sailor; I am a soldier. Got it? Jesus! You look potty with that monocle. Hi, doggy, doggy! Come here...come to papa.”

“Gladstone! Mutley!” Mr. Keeble was outraged. “Bark! Bark, bark, bark! Bark at strangers!”

“Dogs love me,” I heard the colonel say good-humouredly. “Reminds me of my Dingo back home. Bye, bye, Popeye. Got to go.”

We reached our tidy apartment and deposited Edward on the couch. The inconveniences he endured in the past hour or so seemed to have stirred him.

“Ah...the thugs,” said he. “Brutes!”

“The rucksack saved your life,” the colonel said. “Not regular acquaintances, I suppose, those fellows?”

“Lapdogs of a gangster syndicate... They’ve been following me for days!”

“Good Lord, what’d have happened if we had met at Café Rollo?” wondered Harry, looking a bit stirred.

“Yes, it’d have been a bad idea,” said Edward. “Damn pleased to meet you, Mr. Sinclair—at last. Eh?”

Harry grunted and shook his head, muttering something.

The colonel patted the short man kindly.

“Not for a moment did I entertain any misgivings about you fulfilling your charge, Edward,” said the colonel. “I began to fret when things back home developed way beyond my pace—I thought I must forewarn Harry at all costs. I took the first available boat to Malaya.”

“You did well,” said Edward, and he began to narrate the chain of events that led him to Ipoh.

About a fortnight ago, he received a telegram from the colonel containing a cryptic code used in the Great War. Warn Harry—it said—that assassins from Runnymede are coming after him. For Edward, this missive to Ipoh coincided with a highly classified mission in nearby Camerons. In fact, he had been preparing for the Camerons assignment much earlier, creating a new itinerary circuit, changing his appearance and forging a new identity. The moment he set foot on the Malay coast, a big surprise was in store for him—posters announcing a reward for his capture. His disguise did serve him well but a turncoat quickly relayed information about him to unfriendly sources for some consideration. For the next four days, he was on the run with pursuers closing in on him every passing hour.

Harry gave out a long whistle. “You paired me with a bona fide criminal, Pappy?”

“Manners, Harry!” The colonel raised a warning finger. “Mind your manners. Edward risked his life for you...”

“I am a foot soldier of the revolution, Mr. Sinclair,” said Edward. “A friend of the dispossessed people; I suppose that makes me an enemy of the rich—not a criminal.”

“Yus!” The colonel shot a fierce glance at his godson. “This Edward here is a true salt and the only true Anglo-Saxon revolutionary after Guy Fawkes! Why, this here is Willy, Edward. Have you met Willy?”

After brief pleasantries, Edward became poignant.

“I was sure that I had shaken them off,” he said. “But the chaps were right behind my back all the time.”

“But the Sign of Rochas!” said the colonel, more in whisper. “You clasped that note in your hand!”

I showed him the parchment.

“Oh, that!” said Edward, smiling broadly. “I followed you to this inn and was about to step in when a car stopped by. The driver gave me this slip and asked for the address. There was nothing in it but this curious sign and my name neatly typed. When I looked up, I saw a man in the passenger seat pointing a gun at me. In fact, he pulled the trigger but it jammed. It was then I ran into the inn.”

“It is the code of death,” said the colonel. “Harry’s father received one before he died.”

“O Good Lord!” Harry crossed himself.

The colonel continued. “The sign is an ancient custom of the Velir tribes in India; they invoke the name and sceptre of Rochas against their enemies.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, the men in the car were looking different from Malays and Chinese,” said Edward.

“Velirs!” said the colonel with a significant nod. He then

got up and moved aside. "This complicates matters, Edward. I need to have a word with you. But first, have you brought the papers?"

"Yes, in here!" said Edward, rising up and patting his pocket. "You like the name 'Rupert Stromberg,' Mr. Sinclair?"

Harry looked suspicious and high strung.

"All for your safety, boy," said the colonel. "We are leaving for Singapore now. Pack up, boy. Business is always brighter there."

Harry's scruples about his commitments only rubbed the colonel the wrong way, who professed his wish to ceremoniously throttle the life out of the beefcake in front of a cheering Velir crowd.

"Unfinished business, he says!" the colonel sneered. "They'll finish him!"

We watched in merriment as the two men bickered hard and finally threshed out a settlement.

"One week is agreed," said the colonel, looking tired. "If you are alive!"

"Old bully!" murmured Harry.

"What was that, boy?"

"Oh nothing... Just wanted to know about Willy."

"You coming to Singapore, son?" the colonel asked of me. "Edward here will arrange for your papers. He's also into that business."

"Yes, in a jiffy," said Edward. "You like the name 'Max Grisham'?"

"No. Heavens, no!" said I, trying to control my amusement. "I have a lot of work here. Anyway, I visit it frequently."

"You make me sick talking like a married man," said the



colonel. "When I was your age, I'd travel with only a toothbrush."

"And a box of chocolates," said Edward, nodding and looking at his nails.

"And a box of chocolates," said the colonel, looking at Edward with disapproval. "But I don't blame you boys. Children of the War are a pampered lot, eh, Edward?"

The good man nodded.

"Now, before I leave, I've got a small private matter to settle with Edward," said the colonel, winking at me. I nodded and walked to the kitchen to fix something to eat while Harry went out to fetch a cab. A few minutes later, the colonel came out, looking drawn and deep in thought. Edward was in his cheerful self.

"I don't know how else it can be," the colonel said to Edward. "It's difficult to conjure such things up, especially, when the subject concerned is a woman."

"I'll look out for the lady, if it pleases you," said Edward. "But I must insist... The Velirs and the Club are not alike—it's impossible to put them in the same room."

"I know. I know. But politics often has odd bedfellows, you know."

Both men smiled, shook hands, and embraced.

"I shall keep my promise," said Edward. "We'll have more information in two days' time."

Harry announced that the cab had come, whereupon the colonel carried his small bag and marched towards the door. He kissed Harry and hoped that he'd see him soon.

"Until then, I'll be spending sleepless nights," he said, and shouted below. "Don't shut the door, Popeye!"

We saw him off and returned to our place.

“Such a fine old warhorse,” said Edward. “Do you boys mind if I spend the night with you? I’ll sleep on the couch.”

I was quite pleased, but Harry simply stared at him.

“It’s our pleasure,” said I. “My room is all yours.”

“I’ll sleep on the couch—I am pretty good at it,” Edward said. “I’ve promised the colonel that I’d leave this place after morning coffee. Buff trouble. I don’t want you boys to be in soup. When’s the first bus to the Camerons?”

“I think it’s at six-thirty,” said Harry.

“Ah, never mind the bus,” said he. “I’ll find some other mode.”

“Are you sure you want to leave so early?” I had many thoughts on my mind. “Maybe I can help you. I know many people here. I am a photographer with *Standard Courier*.”

“Good for you,” he said. “But not so good after today’s gig with the new commissioner. I was standing near the café when you had that tiff with him. Alaric has a huge following in the army. And, he is a vengeful man.”

“Blimey!” said Harry. “What can we do now?”

“I don’t think they’ll make a fuss about it,” said I.

“You’ll see it shortly,” said Edward.

“You mean he’ll send men to arrest us?” Harry was perturbed.

“You never know,” said Edward. “Alaric has a low IQ, so it’s difficult for me to estimate his presumptuous planning.”

Harry looked more lost than ever.

“Alright, let me put it this way,” said Edward, musing for a while. “While passing by a village, our man Alaric became so incensed because the villagers did not salute him that he ordered his men to fire on them.”

Harry swallowed hard. “That bad?”

Over dinner, Edward was a different man; he talked nonstop about irrelevant things—mostly food. Every attempt on his recent interaction with the colonel was brushed aside with an asinine talk on the art of making some exotic dish. When I broached the topic about his line of business, Edward decided that it was time to hit the bed. Before turning himself in, he came closer and patted me in an avuncular way.

“I see you are very curious,” he said, smiling. “Very curious. Good, good. It is good.”

“No-no, not at all. I was wondering...”

“If I were you, I’d have my spare identity handy. You’ll need it,” he said. “No? That’s too bad.”

That night, I slept poorly and was often awake. It was still quite dark when I got up at the sound of an engine spitting. Edward was already up, standing by the window and peeping out. The clock struck five. He motioned me to come over.

“It’s the black Citroën,” said he. “The same car used by the thugs last night.”

A stout, well-dressed man got down from the car on the other side of the road and, after having a look around him, walked towards the back of our building.

“The same fellar,” said Edward.

I quickly went out and stirred old Mr. Keeble out of his bed.

“Gee’tout! I have a blunderbuss I tell ya,” screamed the reedy old cock, opening the door and peeping out. “Jesus, Mr. Caspian!”

I cooked up a story about burglars that the good man, sufficiently stirred, took up a position near the cloister below the staircase with Gladstone and Mutley. I hid myself behind the rear door just in time as someone inserted a pin in the keyhole. In under a minute, the door gave way. Silhouetted against the early light of the day was the frame of a very tall

man. He wore heavy clothes that made him look well built, but he was no more than a stripling. He warily stepped in and waited, trying to get used to the darkness. I grabbed him and sent him crashing towards Mr. Keeble.

“Don’t dare move!” said I, switching on the lights.

The man appeared to be middle-aged, thin, and obviously frightened by the teeth-gnashing mutts. I ordered the man to lie on the floor, which he was pleased to do, and I immediately seized his pistol and bound him up.

Still upstairs, Edward was feeling edgy. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s alright, Mr. Swelteran, you can come down,” said I, and turned to the man on the floor. “Who sent you here?”

“I speak no English.”

“You understand bloody well for a beginner. Come on, tell me or I’ll let loose the mongrels.”

The last word always provoked Mr. Keeble. “Thoroughbreds!” he barked.

“Where’s the other one?” Edward wanted to know. “I saw another man, too.”

I looked at him in some kind of surprise when the door burst open. One look at the visitor, we all scampered for cover. The newcomer, a giant in Cossack, without wasting any moment immediately opened fire. I returned fire using the seized weapon, whereupon after a brief stand the man fled. The fellow got into the Citroën and sped away. I ran a considerable distance chasing the car and stopped, panting hard. I sat on the pavement, disoriented and tired. After catching my breath, I rushed back home. Harry and Mr. Keeble were still leaning over our man, but Edward was nowhere around.

“He got away,” said I.

“Well, he got him,” said Keeble, nodding towards the figure

on the floor.

The binding ropes were severed and the floor was bloodied. The man was shot in his chest and abdomen, and had bled to death. I had difficulty controlling the rage that arose in me, and cursed myself for not being able to protect our prisoner. The encounter had attracted the neighbours, who started to collect before our building, and even an ambulance arrived.

“Ah, about time, too,” said Mr. Keeble, looking forward to meeting them. “Good!”

“Mr. Keeble, I don’t know what you are going to tell them,” said I. “But please don’t drag our names.”

“Not even yours?”

“Absolutely not! I’ll lose my job.”

I placed the gun in the fallen man’s hands to make it look like a burglary gone wrong and removed the rope pieces. I had no trouble winning Keeble’s cooperation to deal with the police and the resulting publicity.

“Oh, Mr. Caspian, your friend’s just left,” said Keeble, referring to Edward and handing me a piece of sheet and cover. “He asked me to give this to you and didn’t want to be here when the cops arrive.”

“Me too,” added Harry, removing his cardigan and eyeing me sorely. “Edward asked me to leave this place immediately, and I think I have a good mind to follow his example. I am going to YMCA for a week’s stay and then move off to Singapore.”

I looked at the sheet:

*Dear Max Grisham: Hotel D’Anglais, Brinchang, Cameron Highlands.  
Noon sharp. Today! Buy a Life magazine.  
~ Earl Thomson*

The cover contained the identity paper for “Max Grisham,”

a journalist for *Life* magazine.

“Oh, Mr. Caspian,” said Mr. Keeble. “One more thing: What is a *sheikha*, eh?”

“A type of kebab, I suppose. Why bother?” I was preparing to depart.

“Imperious rouge!” said he. “This dud called me that...and also dropped a word or two about my eye! I don’t know what stirs all men to make pigheaded comments about my eye.”

I halted, and looked at him. “What did you say he said?”

“Beware, sheikha... Goat eye!”

“Beware, sheikha... Goat eye?”

“Yes. I think that he spoke the truth when he said that he knew no English.”

I snatched Harry’s cardigan and stepped outside. The cops started arriving and made their way through the crowd of curious onlookers. I walked to the bus terminus and took the next bus to the Camerons. My thoughts during the journey were fast-paced and at the same time bewildering. Why did the assassin’s accomplice kill him? What did the dead man mean by his last words? Why had Edward wanted me to join him in the Camerons?

## THE ORDER OF RHODES

Only a few persons travelled on that bus, and almost all of them had someone or the other waiting for them at the Brinchang terminus. My hotel was only a few streets away from the bus terminus, very convenient in case of an emergency. After a hearty breakfast, I waddled to my room for a spot of rest and dozed off a bit, briefly stirring to the sirens of a fire engine or police car. I did not fully wake up until well past the lunch hour. Edward should have been here an hour ago. According to the girl at the reception, no visitors had arrived or called since that morning.

“So no one called Earl Thomson came in then?” I wanted to be sure. “E-a-r-l Thomson. T-h-o-m-s-o-n.”

I got away from the smiling girl and moved to the lounge to read a paper. The *Life* magazine was lying on the table. I quickly opened it and scanned through the pages...there, under the editorial, was the name: *Earl Thomson*.

A pat on my shoulder, and I turned around. A stripling wearing the hotel’s uniform stood smiling at me. “What?”

“Me Sadiq. Bellboy, Tuan.”

The fellow looked straight in my eye and motioned to the left. *Behind the staircase?* Yes, here we go.

“I heard you speak of a white man’s name to the miss there. She was not there when a white man came here this morning.”

The fellow looked hesitant, so I offered him a coin, which he pocketed greedily. “Go on, man!”

“There were two men following the stranger. And, and, and...”

“Alright, here you go!” I gave him another coin.

“Immediately, one of the men put his arms around the white man’s shoulder and the other showed him a notice. The white man kept saying that he was an American, but they took him to the car outside. The car went whoooo, whooo.”

“Which police station do you think?” I gave the sucker another coin.

“There’s only one here. In Esplanade.”

I returned to my room for a change of clothing and, in under an hour, hired a taxi to Esplanade. A humble cottage functioned as the town’s only police station. The superintendent demanded my identity papers.

“A journalist.” He held my card to his eyes. “Max Grisham.”

“I thought I should be the first to send the news of Mr. Thomson’s arrest to New York and London,” I said.

“Who said he’s arrested? Look, there he is. There, next to the water can. Sitting pretty and sipping tea.” He pointed to a man wearing a beaver hat. “We found him loitering near Hotel Regent, and when we demanded his identity, he bolted. We have only booked him; we can’t arrest him without a permit from the embassy. He’s American.”

“He’s an editor, too,” said I, giving him the *Life* magazine.

The superintendent motioned Edward to appear.



“I’m not letting either Mr. Thomson or you out of sight—there’s a restraining order against journalists in Brinchang this week,” he said. “You’ll have to stay put under police escort till you leave the Camerons. Is that clear? Now, where do you stay, Mr. Grisham? D’Anglais Hotel? Good. I want you to take in this man as well. Remember, you both do not stir from that place. I’ll have you both watched. Okay?”

“There’s no need for that, sir,” said I, rising. “I’ll see to it that he stays in the hotel like a child. You have my word.”

“No way,” said the superintendent. “By the time you reach your hotel, you’ll find my men there waiting for you both. Good day, gentlemen!”

On our way to the hotel, Edward looked crestfallen, lost in thoughts.

“A setback, eh?” I asked.

“Oh no, I am not worried about that. Where’s Harry?”

“I left him with Mr. Keeble. Says he’s going to change residence and put his fake identity into use.”

“Clever chap! He’s quicker than I thought. Aah! That’s my stomach grumbling.”

“We’ll go to the first café on our way,” said I. “But tell me: Who the hell are you? I don’t think you are the kind of bird that the colonel seemed to believe.”

“Oh, the colonel is a child. Bless his heart,” said Edward. “He can tell a friend from foe only by the look of the uniform and that too during wartime. I run a small publication called the *Red Sun*.”

I knew the journal, an underground publication outlawed in Singapore and other countries for being rabidly communist. Its writings had ruined the careers of many a leader and triggered uprisings. Legends abound of its journalists evading arrest in many countries, but all these pale in comparison to

the escapades of its nameless editor.

“Red Pimpernel?” The name was legendary.

“In person,” said Edward, smiling.

In the 1950s, much of the talk in British high circles revolved around a neocolonialist society made up of princely families, former generals, bureaucrats, and business tycoons wanting to revive the fortunes of the empire. The chatter only gained in strength as the British elite became acutely aware of how seriously disadvantaged they were in the fast-changing political scene. The Order of Rhodes rose during these troubled times with the promise of executing the infamous will of that maverick goon, Sir Cecil Rhodes: “...for the extension of British rule throughout the world, the perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom, and of colonisation by British subjects of all lands...”

To the world, an organisation like the Order of Rhodes almost certainly did not exist—a myth fed and funded by the spoils of the empire and left to fester till such time for the hour to come. When Great Britain blundered from one conflict to another, the opportunity arose for the Order to put its plan into action and to recover as much lands as possible for the empire.

During the Suez crisis, although the British won a quick war, they suffered a diplomatic defeat because of the machinations of one man, who sent copies of the War Office papers to the governments of all free nations. The name Red Pimpernel appeared in international press. Any one growing up hearing the exploits and escapades of Red Pimpernel would have found it hard to digest that this hallowed name belonged to a weasel of a man with a mousey moustache, now sitting in the passenger seat beside me. When the Malayan Emergency was at its height, it bore all hallmarks of the Order’s involvement and Edward decided to set up camp in the archipelago.

We stopped at a restaurant for short-eats and hired another taxi.

The road down the eatery took you to the city centre, where my hotel was, but we turned left to the Kelantan mount road. Beyond the trees, the view opened out to the glimmer of a sizeable lake in the glorious afternoon sun. On a sloping meadow overlooking the lake stood Hotel Regent, a grand red brick colonial house that once was the governor's residence. Stopping by the lake, we took in the view for a while. Edward dismissed the cab.

"The cabals are meeting here tomorrow to elect their new leader," said he. "Nine o'clock after breakfast."

Then, he pointed towards a balcony window on the first floor, abutting the emergency exit.

"That'll be my listening post," he said. "The window opens to the ballroom where the meeting will take place. I recced it this morning... If my sources were right, it is the least-watched portion of the hotel and has good acoustics, too."

That misadventure landed him in Brinchang's only police station in the morning.

"Fixed a Dictaphone under a potted plant," he added. "There, the corner plant. Begonia. One only needs to switch it on and pocket the tape after an hour."

"Are you sure you can do it again?"

"Why, anyone can do it... Whatever transpires within those walls shall start a tempest of such scale that the Order of Rhodes will implode itself...the magnitude of the revelation will surprise everyone. Yes, I'll broadcast the speeches to all radio stations around the world. Tomorrow, either the world wins or we lose our world."

A few couples were frolicking and paddling in the lake. Beyond the boat club, security was tight and guards were combing the bushes. We got into a small paddler. A young

rowing couple cheerily waved to us, and we greeted them back. Another boatman, an elderly chap, who was trying his luck fishing, doffed as we passed him.

“It’s hard to believe that the world’s crooked minds will be swarming here,” said I.

“They already are. Now, watch this,” said Edwards, producing his pocket camera and beginning to take pictures of the hotel.

Before I could stop him, a whistle went off and all the friendly, frolicking couples paddling in the lake furiously rowed toward us in what appeared to be a coordinated charge. One man got overboard and snatched Edward’s camera, while a woman attempted to slap me. The commotion lasted a few seconds and by then a patrol boat arrived. The couples quickly returned to their post in the lake, keeping up their appearances. Two guards tugged our boat to the club, where a head constable ordered his men to keep us under watch as long as we stayed in town.

As the cops escorted us to the hotel, a police truck followed us at a distance and, when we reached our destination, a dozen or so men jumped out from the truck and took position around the building; this, in addition, to the four or five cops from the station already awaiting our arrival. The cops followed us to our rooms, and while entering his room, Edward turned to me.

“Just in case...” he began. “I thought I could do with some help. You’d be interested as well, because it concerns the life of your friend Harry.”

I looked at him doubtfully.

He continued. “Look what I found in the pocket of this morning’s killer.”

He held the familiar yellowing parchment. The Sign of Death.

“Turn it over.”

I did as suggested and noticed the following legend in an elaborate hand: *Harry Sinclair Montrose Runnymede*.

“Like I said, tomorrow, either the world wins or we lose our world.”

He gave me a wink and shut the door. Nothing perturbed me more than this revelation, the timing of it all. That he led me into a cesspool of conspiracies with international ramifications was an understatement, not that I needed any invitation, but the manner in which I became an actor in the great drama about to unfold is ample proof that I have condemned myself. For the next few hours, I pondered the options on hand and the more I thought about them, the less I liked them. I stretched out in bed harbouring hard thoughts on Edward when shrill blowing of whistles broke the stillness of the night followed by a commotion outside. A quick peep into the corridor unnerved a guard standing by that he ordered me to shut the door. The whistling continued for a while followed by the report of a gun. Some minutes later, the corridor reverberated with the marching of a dozen men in hob-nailed boots. Looking through the keyhole, I could see the guards dragging Edward, who seemed to have developed a hitch and wheezed hard. Edward had played his card; now it was my turn.

Fog hung over the mountains afar, and the sky was clear and well lit. The clock showed half past ten, and much of the dwellers of this laidback town had already retired for the day. Even the sentries around the hotel lowered their guard; some slept inside their truck while a couple of them smoked near it. It was impossible to prise open the grill or scale the walls; taking the corridor was the only option left. In a few hours, it'd be that time of the night when everyone and everything would enter the realm of peace and rest. I hoped to try my luck then.

Three o'clock. The sentries outside had blacked out, but those in the corridor were awake and playing cards. They seemed to be in no mood to retire. A good distraction

would do the trick. I stripped a piece of the bedsheet and dabbed it in cologne before stuffing the thing into the bottle. A few feet from my window stood a giant electric transformer, probably an important one going by its size. I lighted the cocktail and took aim at what I thought was the transformer's control unit or generator, whatever. I took my time. Then, a perfect shot. The blast shook the building and the lights went out; a series of minor blasts followed and excited cries rose from below. I opened the door. The guards—three in number—stood by a window, struggling to find out what the matter was.

Stepping out in the darkness, I took a few quick steps towards Edward's room.

A hushed voice called out at close quarters. "Over here," it said.

I felt a hand pull me to the staircase and lead me down, turning into a passage that opened into the kitchen.

"Edward? Are you hurt?"

"Ssh! Just a stubbed toe and cuts here and there. There's no time to lose! Find Gaston Lille's address from the telephone directory," said my friend. "Get in his car dickey and go to the hotel... I'll join you there. Quick!"

He was not in a mood to answer any of my queries and continued to lead me towards an exit. In a few minutes, I was out on the road, leaving Edward to his own machinations as he waddled with an injured leg. He disappeared into a dark alley beside the hotel. The whole area was without power. The place where the transformer stood was now a roaring inferno, jumping high with the wind and towards the building.

At a public telephone booth near the terminus, I took down the address of Gaston Lille, listed as the manager in charge of catering at Hotel Regent. Finding the residence of Mr. Lille gave me no trouble—the neighbourhood looked elegant and had all the markings of the presence of a large European

community. The car shed adjoining Mr. Lille's house—spacious and open—accommodated its proud resident: a large, beige Buick two-seater. A couple of necessary precautions kept my mind at rest: turning up the car's rearview mirror so that Mr. Lille wouldn't get alarmed when I opened up the boot to get in, and nudging a piece of wood near the rear clamp to prevent the boot from locking. With a few more hours to go, I took up position inside the car shed, hunkered up against the shadow of a wall.

At seven, a short, dignified-looking man walked towards the shed. Throwing in his briefcase, he got in the car and sat for a minute or two looking at something, then turned on the ignition. At that moment, I made my move. After thirty minutes of nonstop driving, the car came to a halt. I realised that we were in the hotel's parking area. No one had bothered to stop the car for security checks. After giving sufficient time, I crept out and moved to the first available door. This one was marked for the hotel's staff only, and led to a flight of stairs, which opened into a large hall where mounds of clothes were lying for laundry, and another section of the hall had clothes pressed and arranged. A piece of luck: a well-starched hotel staff uniform was more than I asked for.

It was already nearing eight o'clock and the neocolonialists had already started their busy day. The first floor of the hotel was off limits to even the likes of Mr. Lille, who was scurrying down the floor muttering curses. "They'd have water boys inside but not their manager!" he was complaining to a hotel official. My next objective was to find a tray of glasses filled with water and soda. That done, I climbed up the stair. About a dozen bouncers in Ulster uniform gave me an eyeful. I walked past them but someone cried, "Halt!"

"It's alright, Gustav. He seems familiar," said the largest Ulsterman in the group.

"Hi, what's your name, boy?" asked the shortest.

"Galloway, sir," said I, pointing to the large printed legend

on the hotel uniform.

“Let me check, G—, Gabon, Gai, Galloway. Charles Galloway. You are late!” said the short one, and then let me pass. “Go in, go in, go in.”

My only fear for the next few moments was what would happen when the owner of the uniform turned up and created a scene, but then none would want to intrude upon a gathering of the world’s powerful. The governor’s ballroom lived up to its name—high walls with teak ceiling and marble flooring. The place brimmed with at least a hundred men and women, mostly the former. A group of men in full military regalia was talking about Palestine, another about a new vaccine for the third world countries, another about oil. Over in the corner, the American ambassador was entertaining some women. At the far side of the ballroom, near the emergency exit, stood a small body of men surrounding a frail, tall woman with flowing white hair on both sides, which gave her a ghoulish look. On her every word, the men would break into a boisterous laugh. I made my way towards the emergency exit, wherein lay the Dictaphone.

As I got closer to the group, I decided to linger around for a while, especially because the subject centred on Rhodesland.

“The state I am building is democratically elitist,” said the ghoulish woman, baring her big yellow teeth. Her eyes had an unnatural glint in them, a look of perpetual incongruity. “Rhodesland invites all beautiful people, wherever they come from.”

“But, my lady, I heard of some resistance taking shape there,” said a heavily set man with long sideburns.

“Tell me of a nation or person who is free from opposition?” shot back the lady. “As a defrocked bishop you should know better, Ian.”

Ian eyed her sourly, ready to mow her down had it been a different gathering.



“Opposition is nothing new to Lady Mortimer,” said an old general, sensing the agitation in the former bishop. “In fact she thrives on it. She handled the Palestine affairs under Attlee.”

Ian shot a glance at the general but seemed to agree reluctantly.

“Rhodesland is not complicated like Palestine,” said Lady Mortimer. “Unlike the Arabs, the natives here do not have the numbers and are easily mollified. The soul of the natives is entwined with the legend of Rochas, their warrior king.” I cocked up at the word *Rochas* and stood in my tracks. “I’ve promised the natives that the state I am building will be the guardian of Rochas’ spirit. Half the battle is already won; the other half depends on whether we’ll get hold of the sceptre of Rochas. It is the soul of Velirs. You find the sceptre, you control the destiny of the people there.”

I had to replenish the tray and return to the foursome around Lady Mortimer. This time a man wearing a general’s blue uniform was discussing a point. “I don’t think Haig can sustain a prolonged campaign against the Velir terrorists; I’d place my bet on that chap Quinn, a capital fellow. Ah, there he is!”

I turned to look. The same fellow who measured his height on the road after receiving Harry’s left hook. I inadvertently ducked but retained my composure.

“But General, he is too young.” Lady Mortimer looked pleased.

“A great warrior, no doubt,” said the blue general. “He’d joined the French Foreign Legion over some trivial issue in the north. To escape sentencing, of course.”

“Ah...! The Budung Massacre.” Lady Mortimer added sugar to her coffee and smiled.

“Then he became the chief commissioner of Ipoh a few days ago,” continued the general. “But the mass unrest during

his inaugural has set the alarms ringing. He may lose the job, but he is a better soldier than Haig.”

Lady Mortimer nodded with quiet satisfaction. “Come, my dear musketeers. We have a tiring day ahead.”

A speaker reminded the dignitaries that it was time to take their seats, whereupon the assembled folk trooped into the conference room. The emergency exit opened out to a small balcony. The window was already ajar, and the large curtain provided good cover. A few potted plants lined the windowsill—the one with the Dictaphone stood on the corner. Quickly removing the staff uniform and switching on the portable Dictaphone, I listened to the proceedings inside.

Firstly, a speaker announced the unanimous election of Lady Mortimer as the new president of the Order of Rhodes. Lady Mortimer spoke on the failings of the newly independent states and success of neocolonialist states. Then, one speaker after the other spoke of the need for “mother countries of Europe” and the “great cousin America” to come together to save the empires in such words that’d inflame more than a third of the world’s population. When one speaker was talking about the betrayal of American cousins in the 1957 Sinai war, the exit door opened and out came the commissioner of Ipoh. *What’s his name? Alamein? Ambaric? Eric? Alaric! Alaric Quinn!!* How can I forget it!

“What the hell is this?” He wanted to know, but then in the next instant he knew it all. “Bi Saint Dunstan! Yee?”

His face was a scream. “Yee won’t get away this time, little dog!”

“You cannot get away with murder, Orange boy!” I spewed pidgin obscenities as I quickly removed the tape and pocketed it in my trouser.

“Hi, what is that? Give me that!”

He raised his whistle and even managed to give it his

mouthful when I landed him a sweet left hook not far from the place where Harry had struck. The fellow reeled and pulled me along when he fell. I removed my cardigan to free myself from his grip, kicked him soundly, and pushed him down the stairs. Unfortunately, the fellow got up quickly and blocked my way. He now blew his whistle at will. I rushed at him. We locked hands, kicking each other furiously, and rolled down the steps. I got up as guards from the upper floor appeared. Jumping out into the lawn, I ran towards the hotel's driveway, ducking in time to the report of a gun.

The guards at the main gate now rushed towards me with raised guns. I stood like a dog, cornered and frightened. Game over. I went down on my knees exhausted and eyes closed. Just then, an ambulance screeched to a grating halt a few feet before me.

“Get in, Mr. Caspian!” For all his mousey appearance, Edward was courageous in his heart. “Bye, suckers!”

I got in as another round of firing pockmarked the ambulance.

## ROCHAS' LEGEND AND THE SECRET BRITISH PLAN

When we parted early that morning, Edward called the local hospital to report an emergency at the hotel. A team of medics rushed to the site, wherein a large crowd had converged. None noticed an ambulance moving away from the scene and taking the road towards Hotel Regent. After driving to the vicinity of Hotel Regent, Edward hid the vehicle in the nearby woods and contemplated on his next move when he saw Mr. Lille driving to the hotel.

“I knew that you’d make a hasty exit,” he said, smiling.

He was all ears as I recounted my adventure—Mr. Lille was his acquaintance, he informed me—and, when I touched upon Lady Mortimer and her speech, his mien hardened and he spoke not a word. The cassette, he carefully wrapped it in a plastic bag and pocketed it. We continued our drive downhill, halting near a village to take a bus, and reached Ipoh by early evening. At the local YMCA hostel, there was no sign of Harry. A staff informed us that he had left early that morning. We rushed home to find Harry fussing about his driver’s licence.

“They don’t allow me to park my bike there,” he complained. “The parking attendant is demanding my licence. I need to show him the bloody thing.”

I sighed with relief and sank in the sofa. The successful culmination of our mission called for some celebration. Edward wanted nothing less than good imported bourbon, while Harry wanted his cardigan.

“My driver’s license is in it,” he said.

It was my turn to panic. “The devil!”

Harry’s cardigan and driver’s licence would have probably undergone thorough scrutinizing by the police. They would be here anytime now. The only comfort was that early Malayan driver’s licences had no photographs on them. I explained the state of affairs to Harry, who immediately went about cursing me, Quinn, his father, Malaya, and anything in sight. “I’ll get a lawyer and clear my name,” he said.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to do more than that,” said Edward. “You’ll have to get a bail, which I think no sane judge is going to give under these circumstances.”

“I am going to the police. I mean it!”

I got up and stared at him angrily, and even Edward—puny though he was—got ready to spring at the next step. Harry stood there on one leg with the other one raised, not unlike the painting of the stag at bay by Landseer.

“Ah! I see it!” he said, licking his lips. In the next moment, he charged at Edward, who immediately ran out of the room. Harry now turned his attention to me. “You rotten busybodies!”

I ran over the bed and around the bedstead a dozen times, I think, and followed Edward’s example. Harry dived at me, entangled himself in the curtain by the doorway, and slipped down the stairs. I saw Edward come unstuck from the wall near the door and descend the stairs with some concern.

“Man, he’s a moose, I tell you.” Edward stepped guardedly as he came closer to inspect the bulky frame of Harry lying on the floor.

Harry suffered a slight concussion, and we tugged him to my car. I returned to our flat, took some valuables and cash, and instructed Mr. Keeble to take care of our belongings until we returned. Edward was waiting outside the car, fearful of the awakened giant inside muttering curses and rubbing his forehead. We got in the car, and just as we were taking a turn a few blocks away, a military truck and a number of police vans stopped near our building.

“These chaps won’t talk to you, Mr. Sinclair; they shoot first, then talk,” said Edward.

We zipped through different lanes to avoid the check posts and reached the highway in less than twenty minutes.

“In two hours, we’ll reach the coast and from there we can hire a dhow to Singapore,” said Edward, feeling confident. “That’s how I entered Malaya.”

The night was upon us when we reached a small village by the coast. Harry and I waited in the car, while Edward went to meet his contact. A few minutes later, we boarded a small dhow used for smuggling goods and people. The car, well, I gave the key to the first foul-mouthed seadog I met.

The two days on the boat were a dreary affair. At dawn, on the third day, we reached the seedy fishing docks of Singapore. A half hour later, we stood in front of the tall iron gates of a stately building.

“Boys, welcome to Serendip House,” announced Edward. “My club!”

He booked us a room for a long stay with full service. A comfortable room, but it took us a while to unwind and break the misery of our recent journey. Someone knocked. An attender asked us to follow him to the restaurant if we were

ready. The restaurant was empty except for its sole occupant. The attender motioned to the table occupied by Edward and left.

“Have you seen the papers?” Edward hesitantly pushed towards Harry an issue of the *Telegraph*.

The front page carried a neat sketch of my profile with the caption *Harry Sinclair*. It devoted three columns to the Hotel Regent story. I whistled. Harry was looking up and down the page, not knowing where to begin and then began with the headline: *Terrorists Disrupt New World Meet*.

Edward scratched his head with some unease. “Well... Anyway, come on! It’s time to do justice to ourselves first.” A waiter left us coffee, toast, fried eggs, and bacon.

“It says I burnt a bloody hotel!” Harry’s finger shook as he pointed to a passage on the paper. “It’s not fair!”

“The D’Anglais Hotel got burnt,” I corrected the reported version and snatched the paper from him. “Enjoy the food now.”

“Bloody well, yes!” Edward joined, helping himself to a generous portion of bacon.

It was the first time in two days that we had some really hot and clean food. The two days in the dhow wouldn’t have been such an agonizing experience if you had no revulsion to cold Chinese cuisine on the high seas. Harry savoured the community food prepared by the dhow’s crew and found an unlikely mate in Edward. No wonder they both enjoyed the trip.

After breakfast, we decided to surprise Colonel Higgins in his hotel. Harry, though looking much harried, offered no protest and sat in the rickshaw like an obedient boy going to school. The colonel, as usual, was very pleased to meet us.

“I was really worried when I read the papers,” said the colonel, looking a bit washed out. “Well, it’s a relief that you are here.”

“I’m going to clear my name, anyway,” Harry said with a determined look.

“Oh no, you won’t!” The colonel was more vehement and determined than Harry. “Erase that idea. Desist. No more press coverage. Your life is already under threat *even* without all this publicity.” Then, he added, more to himself, “She’s not in Runnymede.”

“Are you alluding to Lady Mortimer?” I wanted to be sure. “I saw her at the meeting in the Camerons. She’s been elected president of the Rhodes Order.”

Edward narrated the recent happenings and brought out the yellow parchment from his purse. One look at the name on it and the colonel sank into a chair. Harry turned pale, and his jaw dropped.

“Oh Harry,” said the colonel. “What have you done?”

Harry stared wildly at the parchment, speechless.

“Lady Mortimer, as the head of the Rhodes Order, has a grievance against Edward. Well, that much I can understand,” said I. “But why does she want Harry dead?”

The colonel closed his eyes and marshalled his thoughts. I have always known him to be a bon vivant, a roving philosopher, and an apologetic ex-army man with a soft corner for strong ale and wild women. You know what I mean. But here he was, sitting before us like a prisoner of war, whose sole objective was not to displease his captors. With a slow, measured voice, he began to narrate this strange story.

In 1750, the East India Company tasked the Bengal Expeditionary Force with seizing all territories extending from the present-day Chittagong to miles of hill tract along the Indo-Burmese border. The objective was to subjugate Chittagong economically and politically. The expedition suffered a severe reversal at the hands of native Velirs in Llwam near the northern border. The Velirs, united under



their young chieftain, Rochas, dictated the terms and removed all white men from the three provinces, which they called the Three Sisters, under their control. The English did not forget the humiliation meted out by the Velirs or the strategic importance of the Three Sisters. Hostilities revived when Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Company's general, made secret alliances with different Velir clans and other tribes. In a war of attrition lasting much of 1753, the English surrounded and routed the reduced Velir army at Llawam.

Sir Archibald offered safe passage for men, women, and children in the native camp if Rochas laid down arms and surrendered his famed sceptre. The valiant king surrendered, but Sir Archibald reneged on his word and ordered his men to open fire on the disarmed natives. An enraged Rochas overpowered his guards, seized his sceptre, and cut through the centre of the English army with five of his bravest warriors. He sustained grievous injuries during his flight. One English soldier even managed to get hold of the sceptre, but its golden handle gave way. Rochas escaped with the sceptre's crest.

As for Sir Archibald, he marched through the hills displaying the seized part of the sceptre. For his military feat, his grateful employers made him the lord of all Velir lands—the Three Sisters and its capital, Llawam, which he renamed Runnymede after his hometown in Surrey.

Six months passed by. Then, one day, at dawn, the hill folks woke up to the call of a familiar war cry that resounded throughout the valley. Early risers who stepped out to check the matter noticed nothing out of place but then another cry—louder, more strident—swept over the valley. The men first stood frozen in their tracks and then panicked, running, yelling, and beseeching their gods to have mercy on them. The mayhem, the cries refused to cease until a voice—this time more affectionate, familiar and steady—addressed them using the very words as was wont of their beloved sovereign. All villagers in the valley came out of their homes and stood still facing the tallest mountain in Runnymede—Mt. Blue

Smoke, wondering at a spectacle not even their ancestors had witnessed. The mountain, already a singular one to behold, appeared to have come to life. A large plume of cloud in an unusual golden hue settled on the summit of the mount, becoming a stage for different shades of grey playing a game of shadows on the surface. The shadows then gradually spread in myriad lines—as if a great artist was at work—taking different shapes and gradually merging into one. As the finer lines fell in place, the people uttered a sigh that first suggested fear, then hope and joy, and all fell upon the earth prostrating for a long time. For on that plume of cloud, one could discern the countenance of their beloved king Rochas etched in elegant detail.

The apparition's voice was as clear as a skylark: "O, my people, listen to me well for I know not what will become of me... Those of you, who stood with their king, let them know that the gods are pleased with you and smile upon you; as for those who turned their backs and did not heed my prayers, I harbour no ill will against you nor do I judge you. For, you have suffered for trusting an accursed race. The scourge of gods—the white man, the dog of war—spared neither the infirm nor the suckling child. And which lords of heaven should favour such a depraved race that crossed the seas to bring only misery, destruction, and famine? No! The star of my people will soon be on the ascendant. We have a holy covenant to resist. The lords are merciful. Victory will come with me and through me. So hold fast to thy tryst until the piece of earth under your feet willingly embraces your shadows. Tarry not—even if generations pass, for the finest hour will come to pass—and keep thy tryst, for in my passing lies my beginning. I have forgiven my brother clans Alamas, Ignoas, Warsas, Twares, Teojas, Gamase, and Oulssas. Let no one of my people kill one another, although the white man desires thus. The earth shall swallow you, O Sinclair, and one from the blood of my own will redeem my loss—my sceptre, my people. *O Laban! Farran! Aeman!* Bear witness to what I have said!"

The lone cloud dispersed with the rising sun. On the far side of the valley, Sir Archibald stood motionless behind a wall and looked furtively at the apparition. When his *dubash* translated every word of the apparition's speech, Sir Archibald flew into a rage and ordered his men to destroy all Velir temples and statues and shed the blood of any Velir man capable of defending himself. Notwithstanding this bloodlust, he climbed the mount over a hundred times to seek and kill Rochas, but the Velir king was nowhere around. In 1758, Sir Archibald built a huge place for himself, Shaws Hall, and hid the sceptre handle in a far recess of the building so that none could ever find it. In the same year, he suffered a mysterious illness and retired to a cottage, away from public eye, refusing to live in the grand Shaws Hall. Some said that he had a change of heart and spent a greater part of his waking hours making statues of Velir goddesses—the Three Sisters, representing the three provinces—as expiation for his sins. He also built St. Claire's church in Runnymede. Four years later, in 1762, he disappeared from the face of the earth. No one knows what became of him.

To forestall any insurrection among the natives, the English began a complex propaganda drive in the region spreading rumours about Rochas' death at the hands of fellow companions, pitting one clan against another. Despite this, Mt. Blue Smoke became a pilgrimage site for all tribes in the region, and the town of Runnymede grew at its foothill.

From 1870 onward, British and American missionaries began a systematic proselytization drive in the region, and English became the lingua franca for various tribes. When the Indian independence was at hand, senior British officers prepared a secret plan—the Crown Colony Plan—for setting up a colony along the lines of Basutoland, Bechuanaland, Swaziland, and Singapore, with the aim of "protecting the inhabitants." However, major tribes had signed the instrument of accession and merger accords with the Indian Union. The Velirs were the only tribe yet to sign any accord with

either India or Burma, but the elites were staunchly pro-British. Their leadership rested in the hands of a few landlords; Lady Condolese Mortimer, the biggest of them all. Discord was rife among the Velirs that an internecine war broke out among them, with each clan seeking power and land in the name of self-determination and setting up self-administered zones.

When Lady Condolese Mortimer—ennobled for her services in Palestine—took over the family's estates in 1947 after the passing away of her father, she exploited the political uncertainty to declare self-rule in the three districts and laid the foundation for Rhodesland. The land of the Velirs was on its way to becoming another British outpost like Rhodesia, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, and at least a dozen other dominions around the world. Her grandiose vision met with little or no opposition, except for a small band of partisans who led an increasingly violent uprising against her.

## THE SINCLAIR RITUAL

Sir Archibald, a staunch bachelor, penned three copies of his will—one each to the East India Company, Runnymede's St. Claire's church, and his brother in Madras. In the will, he leased his estates and Shaws Hall to the Company for a period of two hundred years, after which term these should pass on to his brother's descendants. As Sir Archibald was not on good terms with his brother then, the latter did not bother much about the will. This brother moved to Calcutta and settled down there. Meanwhile, the Company subleased the Sinclair estates to one of its directors, the Marquis of Mortimer—the ancestor of Lady Condolese Mortimer—for the tenure of the original lease.

Four generations passed when, in 1948, Tristan—Harry's father and the only surviving descendent of Sir Archibald's brother—discovered the will and an old diary in the attic, and brought it to the notice of his friend, Colonel Higgins.

Despite saner counsels advising caution, Tristan decided to visit Runnymede alone and look at the family's lair. None knows what happened next. All that his wife received from Runnymede was an envelope containing the sign of the Rochas sceptre. A week later, Harry's mother and sister passed

away mysteriously in their cottage. Poisoned. Fortunately, Harry—who was then seventeen—was studying at a boarding school in Chittagong, from whence after a few years he got a scholarship and job in Malaya.

“Once certain that Harry is safe in Malaya,” the colonel continued, “I moved to Runnymede—this was nine years back—to find out what’s become of Tristan. No one could give a clue. Shaws Hall stood grand and impressive. I bought a couple of acres near the Hall and settled down raising bees.”

“Did you get to visit the Hall?” Edward asked.

“Yes, only once. Condolese—her ladyship, I mean—has no time or inclination to meet lesser mortals. She has a man with her. Lord Gurnard, a good man but a weak one.”

The colonel poured himself a drink, and brought out a heavily bound black book about the size of a pocket Bible.

“Condolese will not hesitate to sell her soul to get this... Well, before his disappearance, Sir Archibald penned in this diary a nonsensical poem: ‘The Sinclair Ritual.’ You know the Ritual, son?”

Harry, who stood listless against a window, came to life and delivered these words like a parrot:

*Shelter'd close from glare,  
And above all affairs and care,  
Three maidens wait, O Bonny George!*

*Burden'd with a hearty charge,  
And their hands fill'd to discharge,  
So forbear and tarry, O Bonny George!*

*Let the dames traverse, O Lord in Heav'n!  
Til the goat can stand the lion well and even.  
Only an Ephesian can tell when, O Bonny George!*

“Good fellow,” said the colonel, nodding in approval. “Sir Archibald wanted his descendants to recite the Ritual on

the second week of every December. I believe the secret to the sceptre relic is hidden in these verses.”

“Were you able to crack it then?” I asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know what these verses mean,” said he. “But on the margin is Sir Archibald’s signature with the date, twenty-two September, 1761. I researched the date; the coronation of King George III fell on that day. So, putting one and one together, I guessed that ‘Bonny George’ actually meant the sovereign.”

“Excellent!”

“I don’t know what meaning the other words carry.” He lighted a Trinco cheroot and fell silent.

“So we will return the sceptre handle to the people.” Harry smiled, looking at ease.

“Glad that the descendant of Sinclair is writhing for the natives,” said the colonel, dryly. “Go sing the Ritual to Lady Condolese Mortimer, she’ll find a way to subside the pain of your death.”

Edward whistled and nodded with approval.

“To think of Lady Condolese very thievishly building her fiefdom all this time...” Edward stroked his chin. “She’s very intelligent. I bet she has a backup, too.”

“What do you mean *backup*?” The colonel was curious.

“Forgery. A phoney sceptre in case she doesn’t find the real one.”

“Knowing her, I think she already has one, but that wouldn’t stop her from getting rid of Harry. She’ll continue to view him as a threat to her plans. She views me as a threat, too. In fact, I’ve submitted a petition to the Presidency commissioner to issue a restraining order against her, for she has an eye on my activities. I know that it will be of no help, considering Runnymede is still not a part of the Indian Union.”

I recounted the short conversation overheard between Lady Mortimer and her friends on the subject of Rhodesland.

“She’s won over the Velir nobles with her idea of a new homeland, but the common folk do not support her; some have even risen in revolt in recent days. The one who holds the Rochas sceptre will decide the fate of this land. Both Lady Mortimer and the Velir rebels know this, and are keen to lay their hands on Harry. But look at him!” said the colonel, nodding towards Harry, who was scanning an advertisement in the paper and then, realizing that the conversation veered around him, looked stupid. “Do you think he is of the material?”

“Duh, Pap?” Harry appeared lost.

“I see what you mean.” Edward was quick to understand. “But you say he has a clear title? Two hundred years have passed. The lease ends in 1961, which means that Harry will inherit the Hall and titles to all lands in Rhodesland this year.”

“It’s indisputable, yes. He’ll be inheriting an estate the size of the principality of Monaco and some riches that even a prince of Liechtenstein would covet.”

None uttered a word. We all looked at the colonel as if he were some prophet.