

SITTING DUCK

Martin Mallard's Journal

by

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Preliminary Word

Day One - brief encounters.

Day One: Arrival – Bootaburi nightmares

Day Two: horror in the pool.

Day Two – a sentimental fountain, an oily experience, and an inadvertent bit of eavesdropping.

Day Two – later – a dance with the devil.

Day Three – sinister developments.

Day Three – later – Warren runs amuck.

Day Three – later – elephants in their element.

Day Three – later - Makarooma tales.

Day Three – later still – an incendiary incident.

Day Four – menacing monkeys of Makarooma.

Day Five – the lake of blood.

Day Five – later – the attack at Watpindari.

Day Six – the prophecy at Pagawoop.

Day Seven – a vexatious voyage.

Day Eight – into the unknown.

Day Eight – later - the night of madness.

Lost

Day Nine – mysteries of the morning.

Day Ten – a serpent in paradise, and another oily experience.

Day Ten - the revels at Riparooopi.

A Concluding Word

Preliminary Word

This is the journal of a man about to die. Of course, Martin Mallard had no sense of impending doom when he began this account of his holiday tour of Pootapuri, an obscure island in the Bay of Bengal. He did, however, gradually come to the conclusion that he was a target for one of his fellow travellers. The murderer, I confess, was myself, and Martin's journal fell into my hands. I must admit that I have greatly enjoyed reading and re-reading it in secret over a period of years. Now its revelations can no longer harm me, and I am pleased to offer it up for the pleasure of the world at large.

Day One - brief encounters.

The departures hall at Gatwick heaves like a queasy sea of people. I'm circling like a solitary seagull, looking for a perch somewhere - anywhere. I skirt the edge of a lager-fuelled mob. Ibiza-bound, I'd guess, or Torremolinos. How can people drink pints of lager at this time of the morning? One of them catches my eye – a bald brute with a baby whale of a belly – and fixes me with a scowl. He's probably seeking a pretext for a preliminary brawl to get his holiday off on the right foot, so I move on quickly.

Are those some empty chairs there? No... a recumbent crowd of unshaven refugees are stretched supine, like walruses on the rocks. They look as if they've been there for weeks.

At last I spot a free seat at the end of a row. I swoop at it, take possession, and sit back to look about me. Near to hand, I immediately observe that there's a rather attractive woman seated opposite. Nice ash-blonde hair, trim figure. Looks to be in her late thirties, just a few years younger than me. She's reading a leaflet... Good Lord! It's the Target Holidays itinerary for Pootapuri! She's on the same trip as me. Could she too be travelling alone? The seat next to her is occupied only by a small heap of bags and clothing.

How to use this stroke of luck? It would be good to break the ice so soon with another member of the group – especially such a comely one. I get my own Pootapuri itinerary out as a useful prop, and glance at it to memorise one or two salient talking points.

Deep breath...lean forward...smile.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help noticing that you're reading the itinerary for the same trip I'm on!"

I brandish the prop.

She has startled eyes, like a rabbit caught in the headlights. The fingers of one hand dive into her hair and run in all directions looking for sanctuary.

"Oh... right. Hello."

Now she looks away, over her shoulder somewhere. I feel a slight prickling in my face, as if I might blush. I push on quickly.

"My name's Martin. Martin Mallard."

“Right.”

An awkward pause. I’m a mime artist’s impression of expectancy.

“I’m Miranda,” she says at last.

Another awkward pause is born, and matures slowly, like a fine cheese. I notice a young guy in a baseball cap nearby, pretending to read a magazine. The corner of his mouth twitches.

I wish I hadn’t started this, but it’s too late to go back.

“Have you travelled with Target Holidays before?” I say.

“Yes.”

Miranda glances behind her again after this revelation. Then, catching me by surprise, volunteers more.

“Twice.”

Fearing a stall, I get onto the accelerator quickly, blurting information.

“This is my first trip on one of these group type of holidays. More used to going away with the family to Brittany and so on. But now I’m divorced, I’m being a bit more adventurous.”

Ham-fisted, I know. But there’s no harm in establishing my credentials. I’ve never had a holiday romance, but I don’t mind starting late.

Miranda nods vaguely, and after another desperate look over her shoulder, divulges state secrets of her own.

“They’ve been very well organised – the two Target holidays we’ve been on before.”

We? Who is *we*? The question has hardly arisen when the answer pops up in the shape of a bearded man bearing two polystyrene cups. Photographic equipment has broken out all over him like a plague of boils. He’s festooned and carbuncled with cameras and light meters. He hands a cup to Miranda, moves the clutter on the chair next to her, and sits down.

“Brian...” Miranda says, polystyrene cup pointed briefly in my direction, “This is...”

“Martin,” I provide. Miranda obviously hasn’t registered my name in the mental visitor’s book.

Brian looks at me suspiciously. He has dark eyes under lowering brows. Steam from his polystyrene cup gathers around his beard, like mist clinging to the branches of a rainforest.

“Ah,” he says, a grunt just on the hostile side of neutral.

“Hello, pleased to meet you,” I reply. Already, I am not.

“Martin’s on the same trip,” Miranda explains.

This appears to make matters worse for Brian. His tangled brows knit together.

Then Miranda reveals a shocking truth to her sinister companion. “Martin hasn’t been on a Target Holiday before.”

Brian eyes me as if he would have thought not, nodding condescendingly. I offer a silent prayer for boiling coffee to slosh out of his cup all over his photographic appurtenances. Like all such prayers, it’s ignored.

However, he suddenly says, “Damn! Sugar!” and heads off again with his cup. Miranda follows him anxiously with her eyes, and then leans forward towards me. She speaks in a low voice.

“Brian’s a very jealous person, Martin. I’m sorry to have to tell you this when you’ve only just met us. But he can’t *stand* me talking to other men when he’s not there. I just thought I should explain that. It’s not that I want to be unfriendly, but it’s not worth the unpleasantness. Sorry.”

Blimey! I sit back and digest this. I’m rattled, frankly. I’ll be spending the next twelve days with this tinderbox. Brian returns with his sugar and glares at me again. I make a dignified retreat into the recesses of my Target Holidays leaflet.

Target Holidays invite you to Pootapuri - an island in paradise, the home of fascinating ancient civilisations, lapped by warm cobalt blue tropical seas. Travelling in a small, friendly, guided group, you’ll explore the archaeology, natural wonders, religious customs, and the local industries of this enchanting nirvana.

Day One

Arrive in the fading glow of the tropical sunset at your luxurious hotel in the fascinating magical capital city, Bootaburi.

I pause. Arriving at the luxurious hotel is when I’ll meet my room-mate. No single-room supplements are available on Target Holidays. If travelling solo, one mucks in with a random sleeping companion of the same sex. I’m a little anxious about this. What if he turned out to be a psychopath like Brian!

Trying to suppress this unpleasant notion, I skim a bit more:

Day Two

City tour of the intriguing city of Bootaburi, including the splendid palace, the shady botanical gardens, and the award-winning museum. In the evening, you will sample the delicious local cuisine, while exponents of the extraordinary Yetiyeti dance will dazzle, delight and fascinate you.

Day Three

Travelling northwards along the beautiful coast, you will gain a privileged insight into fascinating local industries such as roof tile making and moonstone mining.

There will also be an opportunity to ride wise and playful elephants along a mysterious jungle trail. At night, we reach the splendid Makarooma Lodge.

Day Four

In the fresh dew-besprinkled beauty of the tropical morning...

It's no good, I can't help my thoughts drifting to the worry about my incognito room-mate, and I look up, avoiding Brian's eye, to make a survey of the nearer denizens of the departures hall. My roomie could be sitting close by. I glance suspiciously at the young man in the baseball cap I noticed earlier. He's reading a car magazine. God preserve me from someone who wants to talk about cars. Or football! Or who wants to talk at all, in fact. The hotel room should be a peaceful Trappist retreat, where one can stretch out on the bed to contemplate the events of the day undisturbed.

In particular, I'll want some peace and quiet to make a proper fist of my holiday journal. It's going to be a bit of a literary effort, written entirely in the present tense to bring it to life, and with an eye to possible publication. I've already got something of a track record in this sphere. My article 'Brittany on a Budget' was published in the *Travels with a Dentist* section of *The Quarterly Review of Dental Hygiene*. I intend to aim higher, now that my divorced status gives me plenty of time for writing. I'm sure there's a book in me, and this might be it.

Speaking of books, it suddenly occurs to me that I've committed the cardinal error of packing my holiday reading in my suitcase. Ten hours on a plane without a book! I'll have to go to the airport bookshop. I stand up, catching a furtive glance from Miranda and a frank scowl from Brian. I nod with dignified politeness and make off.

As I emerge from the bookshop bearing Boris Yelnetov's *Tundra* ("A poetic triumph, fulfilling the early promise of his first work *Taiga*") my flight is called. Arriving at the departure gate lounge, I observe Miranda and Brian in conversation

with an ancient couple from the days of the Raj, all beige in safari suits and venerable with white hair. Could these be further members of the group? They look like they might peg out at any moment. The prospects for fun look bleaker and bleaker.

More positively, in this lounge I am now in the company of a large number of swarthy Pootapurians. I feel that a bit of the colour of the orient has entered the drab soulless airport. I catch the eye of a turbaned old fellow who has just sat down opposite me, and give him a friendly nod. With a great gravelly hawking sound, as if he's dredging phlegm with a bucket from some deep reservoir, he spits into a dark crumpled handkerchief. Then he gives me a little sideways waggle of the head, as if to say "There! That's how we do these things in Pootapuri!"

When I get to my seat in the plane, it's a disaster. I'm in the middle of the middle row, bang at the front of the economy cabin. My knees are jammed against the thinly carpeted bulkhead, and in front of my nose is the lower edge of a screen on which, doubtless, a flickering out-of-focus movie will soon appear. At my left a burly and morose-looking man with a reddish beard establishes his prerogative in the matter of our mutual armrest, and grunts something to his equally stout partner that sounds like "Cannaefit a bludy hen's fart into a tumphie!"

To my right is a couple from Pootapuri. I get my arm smartly onto the armrest on that side before my slightly built neighbour can get settled. Unlike the Caledonian contingent, he's pathetically eager to get acquainted. He leans towards me with a smile of dazzling whiteness.

"Rampranashi Somayatna. Most pleased to meet you!"

I mutter "Martin Mallard" and get my hand pumped up and down.

"You can call me Rami."

"Thank you."

"You are coming to Pootapuri on a holiday?"

"Yes."

"Travelling on your tod?"

"On my...?"

"Tod."

"Yes, that's right. I'm on my tod."

With an air of doing something important, I get my book out and study the first sentence with a frown of ostentatious concentration.

The old Cossack leader Oblovomid, like a timber wolf whose forest stronghold has entered his soul as a palpable force, infusing the animal rawness with an arboreal poetry of leaves, light, and wind-shaped movement, surveyed the sea of green pine trees below him and massaged his frostbitten hands gently, thinking of the last conversation he had had with Misha, that reprobate with the heart of a bear, whose lust for the exquisite honey of the most inaccessible hives had led him into such a deep torrent of swirling treachery that drowning the both of them seemed an inevitability.

What? I start the sentence again, but I'm interrupted.

"I see that is a Russian book. Do you enjoy Russian books?"

The next ten hours, I foresee, will be hell in the heavens.

Day One: Arrival – Bootaburi nightmares

We disembark in the fading glow of the tropical sunset, as promised in the leaflet, at Pootapuri International Airport. The wisps of alto cirrus that float on the horizon still blush a faint pink. I stand for a moment at the top of the aeroplane steps, savouring the warmth and the scent of exotic flowers. The British winter has been left far behind. Bliss. Then Rampranashi Somayatna jostles me impatiently from behind, a whiff of aviation fuel whisks into my nostrils, and the poetry of the moment evaporates.

The rituals of arrival take their ponderous course. I unerringly choose the queue for the most officious and myopic of the passport controllers, so when I finally arrive at the luggage conveyer belt only a few orphan rucksacks and bags are wobbling disconsolately around and around. Just as I'm about to despair, my own maroon case finally flounders into view. I am the last passenger to pass the scrutiny of the customs men, whose keen glances induce in me a guilty fear – almost a quivering certainty - that I've packed a kilo of pure heroin by mistake.

At last I'm out in the main airport concourse, my suitcase trundling faithfully behind me on its little squeaking wheels. There's a loose huddle of white-skinned folk near the exit doors, gathered around a rotund Pootapurian. He holds aloft above his bald pate a grubby piece of card announcing *Target Holidays*, and looks expectantly in my direction.

I squeak my way towards the group, noting that Miranda and Brian are there already, as are the couple from the days of the Raj. The man with the card accosts me.

“Mr Mallard, I presume? We have been waiting for you.”

“I'm sorry, my suitcase was last off the...”

“Yes, most unfortunate. But never mind, now you are here.”

Head masterly. I feel vaguely ticked off.

“Now, everyone, follow me please, and pay no attention to all these people you will find coming up to you outside - all beggars or thieves. Just stay close to me.”

We trail along in our leader's wake. Using my peripheral vision I ascertain that in addition to Miranda and Brian and Days of the Raj, the group contains one

other male and no less than four females. This is more promising. I scrutinize the spare male, who I imagine is to be my room-mate. Looks about sixty-odd. With a white beard and a baseball cap. Toting a most impressive backpack that speaks of trips up Annapurna and riding the Niagara Falls in a barrel. He catches my eye.

“How you doing?” he says.

American. Or possibly Canadian.

“Fine, thank you. How are you?”

“Warren. From Oregon.”

He holds out a hand on which burger, fries and a large coke could be laid out with room to spare. I get my own hand as far around the edges of it as I can.

“Martin Mallard.”

He tilts his head towards me slightly. “Say again?”

“Martin Mallard.”

“Okay. Good to meet you Marvin. Been here before?”

“No. Have you?”

“What’s that?”

“Have *you* been here before?”

“Oh - no. I don’t believe I have. I was a merchant seaman for twenty years, so I might have come in here one time, but I don’t remember for sure.”

This is as far as our bid to become soul mates progresses before we are confronted by the pandemonium and noise beyond the airport building’s doors.

“This way!” urges our leader, brandishing his card. Numerous optimistic figures materialize out of the darkness, teeth shining like searchlights.

“Taxi sir, madam? Taxi over here. Where you want to go? I know good hotel. You want money change sir, very good rate? You want massage sir? My sister very good massage, no expensive.”

We ignore these blandishments, and the optimists fall away again. We arrive at a farting, coughing line of little vehicles. These are no doubt the ubiquitous south east Asian ‘tuk tuks’ my better travelled friends have told me about. The drivers are sitting astride motorcycles with little two-wheeled chariots mounted behind them. These contain a bench seat underneath a luridly painted canopy.

Mr Bald ushers us hastily into a series of these mobile death-traps. Because of our voluminous luggage, we can only travel singly. Of course I’m last to be loaded

up, my maroon suitcase perching primly on the bench beside me with an air of taking its rightful place in the world at long last.

As we set off, my driver calls out over his shoulder.

“You want go straight to hotel, or you like nice relaxing massage?”

“Straight to hotel, thank you.”

“Okay. We get there before others. I know short-cut!”

Sure enough, after a few minutes we veer abruptly off the main road and into a maze of narrow alleyways where the shoddy work of the street lighting department has been counterbalanced by the meticulous thoroughness of the pothole-creation division. My head makes frequent contact with the roof of my tuk-tuk in tribute to their achievements. There seems to be something of a cattle-drive in progress in this part of the city, for great clumps of cows with humped backs keep looming unexpectedly out of the darkness like bandits. They inspect me and my luggage dolefully with huge brown eyes, and then part unhurriedly to let us through. Dogs also limp yapping into our way periodically - behaviour which might account for their limp in the first case - and on one occasion a large pig stands its ground defiantly in the feeble beam of the headlight. My suitcase keeps threatening to topple off the seat into some murky puddle, so I have to twist sideways and get my arm around it, as if clasping an unyielding maroon maiden to my breast.

Finally we emerge from this bestial nether-world into the bright lights of a more substantial street, and almost immediately pull into the forecourt of the Hamababa Hotel, replete with floodlit palm trees, a desultory fountain, and a flunky in crisp white clothing like a hospital orderly, who comes forward and manhandles my suitcase through the revolving door.

Our bald tour leader is already in the reception area - by what rapid or indeed supernatural means of transportation I don't know - and ticks me off on a list. I feel I have redeemed my tardiness at the airport and settle into an overstuffed couch shaped and coloured like a giant watermelon to await the arrival of the others.

The next person to enter is the bearded Brian. I nod in as friendly a manner as I can muster, and to my surprise he approaches me. Perhaps he's willing to be pleasant after all. I prepare to make room for him on the couch next to me.

However, after a furtive glance towards our leader, who is out of earshot talking to the receptionists, he simply leans in over me, uncomfortably close, and mutters, “Stay away from my wife, do you understand?”

I'm speechless. But he doesn't wait for a response anyway. He stalks off and sits on a big yellow couch evocative of a banana.

Stunned by this threat, I sit and watch as the rest of the group make their individual crumpled entrances, and flop into tropical fruit furnishings of their own. The female part of the Raj is the next arrival, and she musters a wan smile and a thin claw for me.

"Lucretia Crawley. Pleased to meet you."

"Martin Mallard."

After this burst of conviviality, the rest of the arrivals vouchsafe no more than glassy stares or vague glances of complicity. Everyone seems too tired for conversation. Oregon Warren is next in, wrestling his own steer to the ground in the form of his giant well-travelled backpack, which he stoutly defends from the overtures of the hospital orderly. Then the other half of the Raj arrives, closely followed by a very thin woman in her thirties who's so pale that she could be mistaken for a ghost. The next entrant however is carrying enough surplus flesh and rosy colouring to more than make up the deficit. She mops her brow wetly with a handkerchief and subsides into a kiwi fruit. There she immediately produces a fat blockbuster from her shoulder bag and gets her nose into it.

Next, Miranda shows up. In defiance of my warning, I watch her as she makes her way to her paranoid partner. I can look where I like, and he can put that in his pipe and smoke it.

Following fast on her heels is a bustling woman of fifty or so with glasses, wearing a tee shirt that proclaims her erstwhile presence at the Leaning Tower of Pisa. In bulk, she puts up some competition for the blockbuster reader. In her wake comes a smaller, dark-haired woman of an unknowable age between forty and sixty with an anxious air of not being quite in the right place at the right time.

Mr Bald Tour Leader addresses us.

"Now, I'll tell you your room numbers so that you can go to bed. My name is Mr Bompus, and I'll meet you at nine-thirty in the morning beside the swimming pool to give you my introduction to our tour of Pootapuri."

A second orderly at this point emerges from behind the reception desk with a clutch of dangling keys. The couples are dispatched first. Then Oregon Warren, to my surprise, is sent off to a room on his own. How did he wangle that? This leaves me and the four women. Thin pale ghost and large ruddy reader are paired up, and

shake hands on it. Bustling Tower of Pisa and anxious dark-haired woman are likewise matched, and head off together. Mr Bompus turns to me, the final key in his hand.

“Mr Mallard. Your room-mate travelled here independently and is in room two one four. Here is a second key for that room. Sleep well.”

I make my way up in the lift with trepidation. I was never a boy-scout or at boarding school or anything. Dormitory culture is foreign to me. What is the etiquette when turning up at a complete stranger’s door late at night and announcing that you are going to sleep with him?

However, after knocking discreetly at the door before turning the key, I find that my companion is only vicariously present, in the shape of his luggage and personal belongings. I decide to take a shower.

A single tap controls the flow of water, and temperature control is at the discretion of the management. They have opted for a Swedish sauna effect, and intervals of steaming - indeed scalding - heat are alternated with the watery equivalent of brisk and unexpected rolls in the snow. I towel myself down and wonder when my room-mate will make his appearance. I’m strangely reluctant to go to bed without meeting him. Looking at my watch, I note that it is now midnight. Unbidden, the legend of Dracula springs into my mind, and absurdly I picture a dark cloaked figure slipping into the room under cover of darkness.

I take a look at his possessions for any clues to his character. He hasn’t stinted in spreading his things around. There’s barely a surface that isn’t strewn with stuff. A capacious suitcase reposes like a coffin in the corner. Clearly my future companion is a person who travels heavy. I leaf through a pile of postcards and bills and odds and ends on the desk, hoping to find a passport and hence discover his appearance, but there isn’t one. I decide to pass the time in waiting for him by writing up my journal.

It’s after one in the morning when I look up from my labours. This fellow is painting the town red! Or perhaps he’s got lost, or been mugged. Anyway, I’m too tired to wait up any longer.

In bed, my ears tune in to the strange city outside. Dogs bark. Cats pounce on rats, or each other, with shrieking violence. Occasional cars and tuk-tuks stutter through the streets, stirring up a backwash of litter that rustles with a scouring catch

against the potholed tarmac. Distant music swells and fades, and the darkness is sibilant with the whisperings of lovers and the slitherings of snakes.

There is a fumbling at the door of my room. A key clumsily nosing at the keyhole, then a click and a turn and a rasping squeal of unoiled door hinges as someone enters my room. In the darkness I can *hear* his shape. He is huge, bald, pale as death, hunched. It is Nosferatu, the undead, his talons as long as knives. The talons scrape along a wall and push at the door to the bathroom. There is a clunk as the bathroom door closes on whatever abominations the creature is performing. Then it emerges again. I hear splashes as the blood of its earlier victims falls in great globs to the tiled floor. It drags its swollen malformed feet across the room to its coffin. I hear the lid being raised and the great creature of the night climbs in, to conceal itself before the light of dawn can blast its unholy flesh into dust.

I hardly dare to breathe. Does this monster know I am in the room? I decide I must cry out for help! I open my mouth and try in an agony of desperation to call out "*Help! Help!*" But my mouth is dry. Not even a squeak emerges.

But somehow the beast has heard. My silent scream has aroused its curiosity. I hear a creak as the coffin lid lifts, and a lumbering shuffling approach as the vampire draws near, sensing the offering of warm living blood that has landed so delightfully on its plate.

With a great yell I throw the sheet off and sit up. In the grey gloaming of the stuffy room, a shape shifts irritably in the other bed. I look at my watch. It's four in the morning, and I've been having a nightmare.

Day Two: horror in the pool.

A peculiar sound wakes me up. I lie for a minute, eyes still closed, and try to work out what it is. It sounds like the noise my grandmother used to make using the bellows when her coal fire threatened to go out. A wheezing, huffing, puffing noise, at regular intervals. The bellows themselves operated almost silently. I open my eyes and find that I'm facing towards the other bed, which is empty. But, on the other side of it, the top of a tousled head of hair bobs in and out of sight. I try to piece together this visual and auditory information. Is my room-mate inflating an air bed? Engaging in sexual liaison with a chambermaid? I can't work it out.

Suddenly the whole person surges up into view, glistening with sweat. He's about five feet three inches high, with a dome of freckles and sparse reddish hair intermingled. There's a sort of perky ebullience about him, like a garden gnome who's just caught a goldfish on his fishing line. He catches my eye before I have time to feign sleep.

"Hey up! Hope I didn't wake you up with my exercises? My body is a temple. Got to keep it in shape."

I grunt noncommittally, resisting the temptation to inquire whether a pot-belly is a desirable feature of temple architecture.

"My name's Bob. Hope I didn't wake you last night, coming in?"

"No"

"Good. Excellent."

I've got his accent now. Yorkshire, I would say. I close my eyes. I can't deal with conversation with strangers while I'm still in bed.

"Mind if I take my shower first?"

I grunt assent and roll over to consider my fate. Will Bob want to talk at first light on a daily basis? Only time will tell.

A gushing Niagara of cascading water and billowing steam goes on for some time, and then Bob emerges from the bathroom door towelling his head vigorously, as if trying to twist it loose like an obstinate bottle stopper. Below the towel he's naked, and my eye is reluctantly drawn to the wagging plump little toadstool of his penis, ensconced in a bed of gingery moss.

"All yours matey!" he says, catching my eye on its return journey from this unpleasant sight. What the hell does he mean? However, a jerk of his head towards the bathroom dispels any ambiguity, thank God.

After I've alternately scalded and frozen myself in the temperamental shower, I return to the bedroom - modestly clad in briefs - to find Bob now dressed in black shorts and a lime green polo shirt. He is sitting on the edge of the bed, lacing up what appears to be a brand-new pair of trainers. I feel that the moment has perhaps come to introduce myself.

"I'm Martin by the way. Martin Mallard."

He holds out a plump damp palm, which I shake.

"Bob Toms. Been to Pootapuri before?"

"No. You?"

"No. Been all over the world, but not here. Found some lively spots out and about in the town last night - bit like Bangkok. Been to Bangkok?"

"No. I've never been out of Europe until now."

I regret this as soon as I say it. Bob looks at me incredulously, as if at some early protozoan life form that has accidentally survived into the modern era.

"Really! First time out of Europe! Well! This *will* be an eye-opener, won't it!"

Is spending one's lifetime in Europe the same as living with one's eyes closed? I let it pass. He proceeds to patronise me some more.

"I've been on a few of these Target Holidays jaunts. Vietnam, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Tanzania. Seen a bit of the world."

I have no polite reply to this. I nod as if appreciatively.

Bob kindly waits for me to dress so that he can accompany me, as a helpless ingénue, to breakfast. In the meantime I learn that he is a financial advisor from Harrogate, with a penchant for marathon running.

In the cavernous dining room, he identifies for me the various tropical fruits laid out on the long buffet table, extolling their health-giving properties, then piles his own plate high with sausages, rice, bacon, scrambled eggs and some sort of vegetable curry. I take a modest portion of toast and scrambled eggs, and join him at a table. As he shovels mouthfuls of food into his maw, he tells me about his most recent marathon run, step by step.

Fortunately a relief party arrives, in the shape of the thin pale waif-like woman and her substantially fleshier room-mate, who is balancing her blockbuster breakfast plate on a blockbuster novel.

“Morning! Mind if we join you?” says the waif.

I for one am delighted, and Bob suspends his narration mid-stride in mile fourteen.

“I’m Beryl,” says the ghostly one, shaking hands with us. As she takes my hand, she makes prolonged and rather intense eye contact. I guess she’s in her late thirties, with long, slightly wispy hair. She’s wearing a cheesecloth top and a long pale blue skirt of the same sort of flimsy material. She’s not unattractive, in an ethereal kind of way.

“Alice” adds our larger newcomer, going through the same hand shaking routine with less grace than Beryl. She plumps down into her chair with a discontented air, and puts down the blockbuster beside her plate. She maintains better eye contact with its cover than with any of us, as if she would prefer to be communing with the author than with brutish reality.

Bob and I introduce ourselves, and confirm that no, we did not come on the holiday together but have just met.

“How did you sleep?” Beryl enquires solicitously. She seems to be addressing the question primarily in my direction, but Bob leaps in.

“Like a log. That’s the advantage of a healthy body. You sleep like a log.”

He preens slightly, awaiting an enquiry into why he is so healthy. But Beryl declines the gambit.

“I slept badly. So did Alice.”

Alice nods in confirmation. A small bead of sweat escapes the black coils of her hair and trickles down the ridge of her nose. A damp handkerchief comes from nowhere to deal with it.

“Alice says she prefers cooler places.”

Alice nods again. I wonder firstly whether her views are to be represented by Beryl on a permanent basis, and secondly why she should choose to holiday in a climate of sweltering heat like Pootapuri.

“Are you an experienced traveller Martin?” Beryl asks.

“Well - in Europe, yes. Brittany in particular. But I’ve never been on one of these types of trips before, with a group.”

“Are you married?”

Blimey. Straight to the nitty-gritty.

“No. Divorced. You?”

“Single.”

I nod sympathetically. We carry on eating and chatting. Beryl seems to pick me out for her particular attention, which is flattering, but also slightly unsettling. Bob eventually gives up butting in and turns his attention to Alice, whom he wrests from her blockbuster into an account of his last marathon, taken up at the fourteen mile stage where he left off with me. She rewards his tale with no more than a series of nods.

We’ve almost finished eating when a large domed presence looms over us, smiling broadly in a professional kind of way. It is Mr Bompus, our tour leader.

“You will all be remembering that my introduction is going to occur at the patio beside the pool? That will be in fifteen minutes.”

We nod, and he passes on to the table where Brian guards Miranda from all-comers. We hear the same address being delivered and then he moves graciously onwards once more, like visiting royalty.

After popping up to use the bathroom, I head down to the pool side, where I find Oregon Warren helping Mr Bompus to arrange a circle of those wobbly white plastic chairs that always cluster about hotel swimming pools. Mr Bompus commandeers a little white plastic table, on which he deposits a disquietingly thick sheaf of handwritten notes. A slight breeze moves the papers, and he clamps them down with an abandoned coffee cup.

“How’re you doing?” Warren greets me, when he catches sight of me.

“Fine thank you,” I reply.

“Did the bed bugs get you?”

“Bed bugs?”

“No - *bed bugs*,” the deaf old coot insists, and points to a line of red dots along his legs. Some bug has indeed developed a hiking trail through the thick black hairs, all the way from ankle to hem line of his shorts, which feature more zips and pockets and places to stow Swiss army knives than any shorts I have ever seen before. I shake my head sympathetically.

“They always go for me,” he says, shaking his own shaggy head ruefully.

“Must like Yankee blood. Better than that thin British stuff!”

He chortles and moves off to a chair, and I'm left contemplating the significance of this unexpected and gratuitous slur. Days of the Raj arrive, swathed in khaki. Lucretia acknowledges me from under her broad-brimmed straw hat, and introduces the male of the species.

“Edward - this is Martin, one of our tour companions.”

“Martin Mallard,” I say, shaking hands with Edward. He has pale blue eyes and a face etched with a net of kindly lines. They all deepen collaboratively, as if catching fish, when he smiles at me.

Settling down into adjacent chairs, Lucretia strikes up with Oregon Warren, and Edward cultivates me.

“Quite a comfortable hotel, this. Usually Target put you in more basic accommodation.”

“So I've been told – by my room-mate Bob.”

“Ah - your first Target holiday?”

I nod. It's as if I've joined the freemasons.

“Well - I expect you'll see what I mean later on. I imagine living conditions will be a little more primitive out in the wilds of Aradarooop.”

He smiles again. I find my own rather rusty smiling muscles twitching into life. He seems a nice man. As we chat a little more I discover that he's a scientist in the pharmaceutical sphere. Semi-retired, but still pushing on with one final research project involving anti-viral drugs.

Gradually the rest of the group assembles. Edward turns to say something to his wife, and I let my gaze wander across the pool. It's an intense blue, ruffled slightly by the breeze. Sunlight flashes on the rippling surface. The sound of traffic is no more than a subdued background burr in this hotel garden, and the thick green vegetation beyond the pool resounds with the cries of tropical birds. I let the noises and sights sink into me, and feel the warmth of the morning sun on my skin. I am ready to enjoy myself.

Mr Bompus stands up in our midst. A broad welcoming smile is accompanied by a little bow, with both hands clasped at his chest.

“Abwami, sabmami, alahami!” he announces, or something to that effect.

Having got our attention, he explains.

“This is the traditional greeting here in Pootapuri to the stranger who arrives at our portal. It signifies *Take off your shoes, remove your troubles, and enter!* So, I

welcome you all to ejaculate the troubles of your daily lives and enter into the world of Pootapuri with me.”

Mr Bompus pauses here to consult his notes. The breeze tugs at them mischievously.

“Let me begin please with a little story about the origins of our island of Pootapuri. Once upon the time, when the world was very young, all of the gods decided that they would each claim a part for themselves. Mokbarti, the god of gold, took possession of the southern part of Africa; Abumardin, the god of leaves, took possession of the Amazon; Mishmirinata, the goddess of the pearl, took all of the little islands in the Pacific Ocean, and so on and so forth. But when it arrived to the island of Pootapuri, which was then twice the size of our modern day Pootapuri, all of the most important gods had already made their elections. Two of the minor gods - Vishkithikarti, the god of the small toes on your feet, and Obigimarta, the goddess of turtles, disputed who was to have Pootapuri.

The debate raged day and night, without agreement. The other gods took sides, and it looked as if there would be a war over this matter. Finally Obigimarta lost all of her patience, and summoning the largest turtles from the oceans around about, she set them to work chewing and gnawing and snapping until they had bitten off the half of the island. This she then instructed them that they must tow away into the middle of the ocean, leaving the other half to Vishkithikarti, who was happy to accede in this solution. His half of the island became known as Sri Lanka, and of course now he is forgotten there, because they are all Buddhists. But here in Pootapuri we worship especially Obigimarta and honour her in the form of the many turtles who live about our coasts and whose shells make such excellent ashtrays and small ornaments for our most welcome tourists.”

Mr Bompus pauses here with a genial nod and large smile. But the pause is short, and, turning to a new page of his notes, he opens a fresh topic.

“You have all seen our itinerary for the holiday, but I would like to go through today and the next day in a little detail with you and explain how everything will happen.”

There is a general sense of settling in around the group, a kind of somnolent hush as pulse rates slow and calm descends, like the last lesson on a summer’s afternoon when the teacher announces that he is going to tell you a story. A bee

drones softly around some bright red flowers behind me. A pool attendant in bare feet starts sweeping the water's surface with a long stick. All is peace.

Suddenly a wicked scurry of breeze lifts the pile of Mr Bompus's notes into the air from the table where he has imprudently put them down for a moment. Like a sudden autumn, the air around me fills with paper leaves, heading for the pool. I stand up and make a grab at them, but one of my legs has gone to sleep and buckles under me. I lurch sideways, grabbing wildly at anything to regain my balance. My grasp alights on the plump breast of Alice, who has been sitting beside me reading her blockbuster. She shrieks at this rude intrusion of the outside world and half stands up in panic. We pirouette gracefully around each other in a swirl of papers and blockbuster, right on the very edge of the pool. Then, with a horrible lurch of fear, I realise that something very unpleasant is about to happen.

Some say that at the moment of death, the spirit leaves the body and floats upwards, looking dispassionately down upon the carnal carcass it has finally abandoned. Well, that's what happens to me right now. From some suspended aerial camera of the imagination I observe the tangled fall of big Alice and Martin Mallard into the watery grave of the Hamababa Hotel pool. Only as a wall of icy water hits my warm body am I shocked back into full participation in the experience. I can't tell which way is up, and feel Alice clutching at me like an octopus from the depths as I try to regain the surface. Water rushes into my mouth and nose and a choir of watery angels sings in my ears. It's all up with Martin Mallard, they sing. Drowned in a hotel swimming pool in Pootapuri.

Gasping for air I surface briefly, only to be hauled instantly below the waves once more by the grasping tentacles of the sodden Alice, a great floundering death trap below me. Instinctively I lash out with my fists and make good contact with some fleshy protuberance. The octopus grip weakens, and I return to light and air.

A great splashing noise announces the arrival of the pool attendant. As I struggle to the pool side I sense him diving down beside me. I turn in time to see him resurface with an arm under a pale humpback of the deep, which clears its flukes with a great spurt of water before resuming the persona of Alice.

I'm helped out of the pool by willing hands. Mr Bompus looks mortified.

"All my own fault! All my own fault!" he keeps repeating. "Blasted wind. I should have weighted them down!"

I turn to give assistance to Alice, but she scowls and says very loudly “You *hit* me!” before accepting help from Oregon Warren, who looks ready to launch himself into the water if necessary, and probably has some emergency flotation device concealed in a pocket of his shorts.

“He *hit* me!” I hear Alice repeating to Warren, as between his pulling and the pool attendant’s pushing they manoeuvre her over the edge of the pool to lie gasping and angry on the edge.

“It was an accident,” I hear myself saying. “I was just thrashing about.”

“It wasn’t an accident! You hit me deliberately with your fist!”

I feel the eyes of the group upon me, a callous, cowardly brute who would pummel a defenceless drowning woman. I eat humble pie.

“I’m terribly sorry, Alice. I was in a panic. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Warren is patting her back comfortingly. She doesn’t reply. Mr Bompus takes charge.

“Well. You had both better redress in dry apparels. We will wait for you to come back, when I will resume.”

Then he turns his eyes sadly to the pool, where several pages of his closely handwritten notes are disintegrating as the pool attendant tries to scoop them up.

Day Two – a sentimental fountain, an oily experience, and an inadvertent bit of eavesdropping.

As I head back in a change of dry clothes, I can hear the echo of jolly chatter reverberating in the tiled corridor that leads from the hotel lobby out to the garden. Sure enough, beside the pool the rest of the group is now bonding like mad. Alice, I note, has returned more quickly than me, and is at the centre of a circle of sympathetic listeners, blockbuster in abeyance. I sit down on the fringe, feeling like a stage villain.

Mr Bompus gives us his abridged off-the-cuff version of the next two days' events. I notice that the dark-haired woman of indeterminate age is making copious notes in a little red notebook, possibly in shorthand. Her air of anxiety seems permanent, and twice, in a strange, slightly Germanic accent, she asks Mr Bompus to repeat things.

Half an hour later, we are sufficiently charged with knowledge to embark on our first outing - described on the itinerary as "Visit to the magnificent royal palace of Bootaburi". We file dutifully through the hotel lobby to the forecourt outside, which is a kind of concrete furnace. After two minutes, the sizzling of European flesh is almost audible. Not a moment too soon, a dilapidated looking bus bearing the legend "Chariot of Fire" on its side grunts and stutters into view. A strong smell of oil accompanies its arrival in our midst.

However, the driver who alights and bobs respectfully in our direction is a vision of dapper efficiency, clad in white shirt and dark trousers which look as if they have been ironed into a state of complete rigidity, with razor sharp creases along the length of each arm and leg. He has a rather rounded face with smooth pale brown skin, and no lines at all, in marked counterpoint to his clothing.

Mr Bompus steps forward and claps a hand on the driver's shoulder, presenting him to us. I catch a flicker of the driver's eyes, no more, towards the unwelcome pressure on his perfect crease.

"This is Wallabib, our driver on the tour. Please come on board."

"Can we sit where we like?" enquires the Germanic woman of indeterminate age. Mr Bompus looks surprised.

“Yes, yes. Of course. Wherever you like.”

We all file aboard. I occupy a seat near the front, noting that the leg room requirements of midgets have been well catered for. No one sits next to me. Mr Bompus is last aboard, and finds that the woman of indeterminate age has occupied the seat at the front, next to the driver’s seat.

“Ah - that is the place where the microphone is situated I’m afraid. You can’t sit there,” he says.

She is thrown into a flurry of confusion and anxiety, and hastily moves place to sit next to me, the nearest point of retreat.

“That’s why I asked,” she says to me under her breath. “You heard me, no? I asked.”

I nod sympathetically.

She throws a half glance in my direction, as if realising for the first time that she has accidentally thrown herself on the tender mercies of the woman-beater of the group.

“I am Rosa.” She offers a rigid hand sideways, like a railway signal, which I am unable to shake up and down in the usual way.

“I’m Martin,” I reply, putting as much humanity into the statement as it will bear. I might need friends now.

“I wish that Mr Bompus had not talked so fast by the pol.”

“Pol?”

“Yes. By the swimming pol. I couldn’t get it all don in my notbook in time.”

“Ah.”

Where the hell does this accent come from? A combination of Germanic inflection and wilful mispronunciation. The bus pulls away, juddering.

“Have you bin on a Target holiday before?”

I’m getting increasingly fazed by this question, the subtext of which seems to be ‘are you one of us?’ It’s too late however to invent a past of colourful and frequent Target holidays, since the gaff is now blown with other members of the group.

“No.”

I don’t bother to reverse the enquiry, but Rosa surprises me.

“Me neither. I usually go on holiday with my mother. To Torbay.”

Not the Black Forest then. Puzzling.

The notebook is produced and consulted. Squinting, I try to make out if her notes are in English or German, but they're indecipherable.

"According to what he said by the pol, we're going to go to the poll-ace now."

"The palace, yes, I believe so."

This concludes our conversation for the time being. I look through the window to my right at the chaotic mixture of traffic, pedestrians and animals through which we are progressing. A variety of driving styles is in evidence. Our own man seems to favour a sort of steady inexorable approach, whereby any obstacle, such as, for example, a bespectacled octogenarian wobbling towards us on a bicycle of his own vintage, is gradually borne down upon until he must either swerve or die. This works reasonably well with smaller road users, but results in one or two unnerving confrontations with large lorries, whose drivers do not seem to recognise what they are up against until the whites of the eyes are fully visible. In all cases however, the Chariot of Fire prevails, and we make slow headway.

Mr Bompus now begins to fiddle with some controls in front of him, creating a squealing of feedback from the bus's loudspeaker. I see a little muscle twitch in the back of the neck of Wallabib the driver for a few moments, and then he puts out a hand and deflects the microphone that Mr Bompus is holding. The feedback dies down and is replaced by the amplified sound of Mr Bompus's left thumb, tapping quizzically on the microphone's bulbous head.

"Ah-hem. Hello. Can you all ...(crackle)... me?" he says.

One or two sycophantic voices reassure Mr Bompus that he is indeed audible. He carries on.

"Well. We are now driving up Ballahari Boulevard. In the distance in front of you, you can already descry the very beautiful palace of Bootaburi. This is the palace of the rajahs of Pootapuri since...(crackle)... when the original palace was burned up to the ground in a most misfortunate (crackle)... "

After an eternity of inching progress and unsolicited information, we arrive at a large dusty car-park partially shaded along three of its edges by huge stooping trees, like a line of gnarled old giants queuing for overdue haircuts. Our arrival here has the effect of a hunk of bread dropped into a pond full of ducks. From the shadows of the trees, a throng of people converges on us. We file out blinking into the light. A fast-moving man as thin as a stick but possessed of an ebullient moustache arrives at my elbow and thrusts a small object under my nose.

"Nice wooden box sir? Made by hand. Look at the carving. Made from cedar wood. Very cheap for you sir."

I'm shaking my head politely when a woman's voice pipes up behind me. It's the possessor of the Leaning Tower of Pisa T-shirt. She is now sporting the Great Pyramid of Giza. Her spectacles flash in the sun as she all but elbows me aside.

"How much?" she demands in stentorian Texan tones.

The little stick man takes an involuntary half-step backwards. She's at least three times his weight.

"This box madam? For you, only three thousand ranits."

The Great Pyramid is shaken to its foundations with merriment.

"Three thousand ranits! For that little box!"

Stick man is slightly offended.

"Very good workmanship madam. How much you pay?"

"I don't want it"

"No, no. How much?"

"Three hundred ranits."

Now it is the turn of the stick man to be convulsed with jollity. When he has recovered he suggests "Two thousand five hundred? Bargain."

But he is now displaced by the Pyramid's interest in a woman displaying what looks like a tablecloth. She fingers the edge of this with an expert air.

"How much?"

"Two thousand ranits madam."

" Hmm - four hundred and fifty?"

The woman is not blessed with her compatriot's fine sense of humour, and shakes her head sadly at this suggestion.

I mop my face with a handkerchief, and wonder if it is cool inside the palace. Ochre-winged Brahminee kites float on the thermals above us. I know because there was a picture of one in the Target Holidays leaflet.

Inside the palace, it is indeed cool, but the price of bodily comfort is a painstaking explication of every dull painting of every dull event of pageantry that Bootaburi and its palace have ever witnessed. Mr Bompus is in his element.

However, when we emerge from the interminable picture gallery into a beautiful little courtyard with a small fountain at its centre he suddenly seems rather

more subdued. He takes a long look around, and sighs. Halting in the shadowy colonnade which runs along two sides of the courtyard, he points to the fountain.

“Tradition in Bootaburi says that if two lovers splash water from this fountain into each other’s faces, then nothing will ever happen to destroy their love, except for death. The reason for this tradition is that the fountain was created by the last rajah of Bootaburi for his wife. They lived happily for over forty years together, and when he died, she died three weeks later of a broken heart.”

He hesitates, and then goes on. “I came here once with a young woman. We intended to marry, and we splashed the water of the fountain on each other’s faces. But she went away, and so I can report that the legend is not true.”

Someone laughs politely. I look at Mr Bompus’s face to try to gauge how serious his little story was, but there is no clue in his expression.

“If anyone however wishes to test the legend, please do so.”

Brian hauls Miranda over to the fountain and they slosh water on each other. I notice Lucretia Crawley glancing towards Edward, but he appears absorbed in squinting examination of some architectural detail high above the courtyard.

There’s a voice at my elbow.

“Martin...”

I detect Beryl hovering. She has a battered and substantial leather camera case suspended like a fat black rat from her neck, and she now detaches this and waves it at the magic fountain.

“Would you mind being in a photograph with me?”

I nod speechlessly. Bob is enlisted as photographer, and given a brief course of instruction, which he affects not to require.

“I used to have one of these old single lens reflex things. Don’t worry.” He glances professionally over at the proposed location. “I’ll use the backlight compensation setting.”

Beryl and myself are duly photographed in front of the blasted fountain, causing God knows what speculations among the rest of the group. It’s a puzzle to me too. Has our conversation at breakfast elevated me into best pal status? In spite of my fisticuffs in the swimming pool? Perhaps she likes a bit of rough in a man.

“Say cheese!” Bob urges. “Come on Martin! Look happy!”

Beryl shuffles in close beside me, almost touching. She's wearing some sort of flowery scent. At last the releasing 'click' is heard, and I can escape. Mr Bompus is dark and silent in the shady colonnade.

We follow him through a low arch out of the courtyard into a garden of shady gravel walks between great flowering shrubs. All of the flowers are blue or lilac.

"Fantastic colours these, aren't they" Bob says to me. "I wonder if they've got a scent."

He leans down to get his snout well up the interior of a flower. A sudden angry buzz and a startled cry from Bob announce that a bee already in residence has taken umbrage.

"Ow! Shit! Ow!" he exclaims, backing away with his hand to his nose.

Bob's leap backwards was so comical that I find a smile irresistibly plucking at the corners of my mouth. I try to fight it off, but while the rest of the group gathers solicitously around the wounded man, and Mr Bompus fumbles in his shoulder bag for his first aid kit, I catch the eye of Alice alighting on me. Her look says it all. She has noted my smile and it has confirmed her worst suspicions. I'm irredeemably vicious by nature.

Some sort of cream is applied to the injured proboscis, and we move onwards. Bob has a small entourage of clucking female sympathy, which dissolves away as we hit the wide open spaces of the palace forecourt.

"Well," says Mr Bompus, gathering us together in the hottest place he can find. "That is the palace. Have you any questions?"

Fortunately no-one has. Mr Bompus starts nodding his head up and down, and at first I fear a sudden onset of Parkinson's disease. But he is merely counting heads.

"Ten. Why are there only ten of you? You should be eleven."

Texan Pyramid of Giza solves the mystery.

"It's Rosa. My room-mate. She's not here."

Everyone looks at everyone else. Nobody is Rosa. The heat pours down on us. Even Mr Bompus has small beads of sweat welling out of the bald dome of his head.

"This is a conundrum," he concludes. "Well - I will retrace our steps into the palace. The rest of you can make your way through the gate there and back to the bus. Wallabib will turn on the air conditioning system for you."

He plods dutifully back towards the palace. We do as we are told. On arriving at the car park we can see Rosa through the windows of the bus, deep in conversation with Wallabib. They both look cool and comfortable. The rest of us however must fight our way through a scrum of box and tablecloth vendors. Ms Pyramid utters a kind of gladiatorial bellow, and while everyone else clambers onto the bus and sits ignoring the importunate tapping on the windows, she sets up for business at the door, where she negotiates the purchase of several boxes and two tablecloths. She bears her booty on board with an air of triumph.

“Six hundred ranits for the boxes, and nine hundred for the tablecloths” she proclaims to the world in general. “Pretty good hey?”

Time ticks by. Mr Bompus returns and climbs aboard.

“Where were you?” he says to Rosa.

“I bog your pardon?”

“Where were you? I went around the palace again for you.”

“Oh. I came back to the bos from that little courtyod. I had had enough.”

“Please be good enough to inform me if you are leaving the group. It will help to be keeping the track for me.”

Rosa looks offended, and mutters defiantly.

“I only came back to the bos. It’s not like I did a crime or something.”

Our next destination is the Botanical Gardens. After another driving display of intransigence against all comers, Wallabib brings the Chariot of Fire to rest beside the wrought iron gates of its entrance.

We follow Mr Bompus through the gates, which are adorned with branches, leaves, roots and fruits of rusting metal. A smiling gentleman in a very white short-sleeved shirt, pressed by the same laundry as patronised by Wallabib, is greeted in Pootapurian by Mr Bompus, and attaches himself mysteriously to the edge of our group.

Winding our way along paths of crushed seashells through dense vegetation we land up at a kind of shelter in a clearing. Here, wooden bench seats face a desk that looks as if it has been dredged up from a century’s sojourn at the bottom of the sea and then given a thorough knocking about. On top of the desk are rows of little labelled glass jars and phials.

We are all invited to install ourselves in this shelter. White shirt man goes behind the desk and engages our attention with a small bell.

“What the fuck is that?” Warren announces in tones that would reach a listener stationed back at the iron gates.

“It’s just the bell, see? The bell there,” explains the Texan lady at volume nine to Warren’s ten.

“Oh - okay. I didn’t see the bell,” Warren subsides. White shirt man maintains a display of shiny matching teeth throughout. His hair is as black and sleek as an oil slick. Now he lowers the bell and hoists into the air for our attention a small bottle containing something green.

“Most welcome to you all. This is sampad oil from the sampad tree. It is the symbol of my welcoming to you, because it is the oil of happiness and contentment.”

The little bottle is returned to its compadres, its symbolic work done.

“Now, I am going to give you a little talk about the oils and their health giving properties. Because our botanical garden here in Bootaburi is not just for the decoration and beauty, but it is also where research is carried on about the oils and health.”

“Why are we here?” Warren says suddenly, in what is probably his idea of *sotto voce*.

Ms Texas explains.

“It’s to do with oils. He’s going to talk about oils.”

“Boils?”

“*Oils*”

“What about oils?”

“He’s going to talk about oils and health.”

“Oh. Okay. Is this for free?”

“I think so. I think it’s included.”

She reaches forward and taps Mr Bompus on the shoulder.

“Is this included?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Warren wanted to know if this was included.”

“What is that? Included in what?”

“Included. No extra charge.”

“Of course. Yes.”

These exchanges have thrown our host into some confusion. His smile of welcome has ossified, and he looks relieved when attention is restored.

“There are four groups of healing oils. They are in harmony with the four elements. They are the oils of fire, the oils of water, the oils of air, and the oils of the earth. They have each of them their own effects.”

We hear about these effects, and are shown coloured oils and clear oils and generally more oils than you would wish to be aware of. After about twenty minutes, Mr White Shirt puts down the last of the bottles to have its moment in the limelight, and claps his hands.

There is a purposeful rustling from the dense tropical undergrowth around the shelter, and the next moment we find ourselves surrounded by swarthy figures. They are grizzled veterans of jungle combat, wearing bandannas and dangerous expressions. We are to be slaughtered as we sit here, the long-awaited scapegoats for a legacy of colonial inhumanity!

My momentary panic proves fantastical, as the grizzled newcomers smile reassuringly and line up at the front desk next to White Shirt. Mr Bompus is rubbing his hands and looking around at us all.

“Now, this is a surprise for you.”

He grins happily at Warren, who stares blankly back at him.

Beryl is sitting next to me. She fumbles urgently with her camera.

“I wonder if you could get a picture of me with these men?” she says.

But events overtake her. The friendly buccaneers are doled out a palmful of some amber oil each, and then they move into position behind us, standing in the gaps between the benches. Each of us acquires an attendant pirate, except for Mr Bompus, who has moved off to one side to take up neutral observer status. White Shirt explains.

“You are now going to be having traditional Pootapuri face massage, with wonderful aromatic oil of bampurti tree. This is an oil that makes the skin young and supple. Please take off spectacles if worn. And close eyes for safety.”

I get my eyes shut just in time as a great hot paw slaps foul-smelling oil all over my face. My neck is strained backwards as two huge hands muscle in on my cheeks and jawbones, gouging great oily tracks in my unresisting flesh. From the darkness to my right I hear Beryl.

“Mmm... this is lovely isn't it Martin? I do love a massage.”

I concentrate on the thought that this is a unique and never to be repeated experience as I am facially abused for what seems like an excessive period of time. Behind me at least one member of the group shares my reservations. I hear Warren getting to his feet abruptly.

“That’s enough of that shit! My beard’s getting all greased up.”

There’s a murmur of dissent in Pootapurian, then what sounds like a brief tussle.

“Just fuck off will you!” Warren says, with feeling.

Good for Warren. I hear him stomping away.

The ordeal eventually comes to an end, and we face each other sheepishly, our skin glistening and our shirt collars damp with the undoubtedly permanent stains of bampurti tree oil. Another clap from White Shirt sends our tormentors springing back into the forest with a cheery wave, probably to go and hoot with laughter in some clearing of their own.

“You may make a contribution to the masseurs in this bowl if you wish,” says White Shirt, brandishing a sort of cracked chamber pot that he has magicked from beneath the desk. Beryl is glowing with pleasure, and gets Alice to photograph her with White Shirt and the chamber pot. After this, he makes his retreat into the woods to share out the loot with his merry men.

“Now we have an hour to disperse ourselves in the botanical gardens generally,” Mr Bompus announces. “We must all be back at the gates where the bus is parked by midday please,” (here he glances at Rosa, who makes a note in her notebook) “otherwise we are going to be late at the restaurant where we are having lunch. There are signposts in English in various places in the gardens, and those gates are called the Kew Gates.”

I feel an overwhelming need to escape the confines of the group for this half hour, and accordingly head off blindly at a rapid walk before Beryl or anyone else can attach themselves.

Groves of towering trees with trailing canopies of leaves soon embrace me, and restore some sense of calm after the tribulations of the morning. My footsteps on the sea-shell paths are muted by the dense foliage, and the hum of insects and occasional squawk of some bird are the only other sounds. Once I catch a flash of bright blue as a small parrot whooshes across the path in front of me.

After five minutes, and a couple of random turns along side paths to throw off any pursuers, I slow down to a strolling pace. It is cool here, under the trees. I could do with a beer. To sit under the trees, sipping beer. That would be perfect.

A few minutes later, at least one of my wishes is granted. There is a shaded seat, a substantial solid bench, backed up against a hedge of some prickly stuff with pink flowers. It's in a little dip in the land, surrounded by trees. It feels like a very private, secret, calm place. I flop down with a sigh, and work at getting some of the residual oil off my face with my handkerchief. Then I close my eyes. Maybe it's jet lag from the journey, because I am suddenly very tired.

I must have drifted off to sleep for a few minutes, because I am startled to hear voices very nearby, and yet have the certain feeling that they've been there for a little while. I glance at my watch and am reassured that fifteen minutes remain to find the Kew Gates.

The voices are not approaching or receding. Someone must be sitting or standing somewhere on the other side of the prickly hedge. The voices are English, a man and a woman. Then I recognise the tones of Lucretia Crawley. She sounds upset.

"... if you'd really put an end to things with Aisha, what about that text?"

"...it was no more than a courteous few words to say that I was looking forward to working with her again when we returned from this holiday. Really, my text messages are none... you make me feel like I'm under surveillance."

"Because you can't be trusted, Edward."

"Aisha is no more than a work colleague now, Lucretia. You know perfectly well that I can't cut off all contact with her. She's a major part of this project, and she's accepted as well as I have that we're to be colleagues and no more."

"You don't end a text to a colleague with three kisses."

"Well in the case of Aisha, I do. But you're giving it a whole significance beyond reason."

I'm in an awkward spot now. The Crawleys are so close I feel I could reach through the hedge and touch them. If I move myself, they'll certainly hear me, and since their conversation is so personal, it'll be horribly embarrassing all round if they know I've been listening. I'm stuck with waiting here as still as a statue until they move off.

Lucretia resumes, in a clear voice edged with emotion.

“I feel undermined. This holiday was all about rebuilding our bridges. That text’s made me feel like it’s a bridge to nowhere.”

“Lucretia...”

“No, there’s no point in trying to hug me, Edward. I’m upset.”

“Lucretia... I love you Lucretia.”

“Easy enough to say, but you’ve gone cold to me - no - don’t...”

“You’re impossible Lucretia! When I try to show you affection...”

“You can’t have a mistress and me as well.”

“I’ve just told you! It’s no more than a working relationship!”

“And those kisses?”

“An affectionate working relationship then. You’ve got to understand – with the project – it’s too important. If we get the patents... Aisha and I can’t afford to fall out over emotional things. How can I make you believe me?”

“By treating me the way you once used to. I need affection too.”

Edward Crawley sounds exasperated. “I *am* treating you with affection!”

I hear a match strike, and a sharp intake of breath. Edward Crawley is obviously taking solace in a cigarette.

The next turn of events is now presaged somewhere in my nose. I feel a certainty that I’m going to sneeze. It’s that insistent preliminary tickle that announces you’ve got about ten seconds to go, at the most. There’s no way I can get out of earshot in ten seconds, but I can’t stay where I am either. I must act quickly!

I shoot off from my bench like a rocket, feet pounding on the crunching sea-shell path. There’s a startled exclamation from behind the bush. The sudden movement has brought forward the launch date of my sneeze, and I now make the woods ring with a force ten nasal explosion. This slows me up for a moment, and I hear Crawley voices raised in enquiry.

“Who’s there?” Lucretia falters, perhaps fearing a lurking facial masseur.

I don’t reply of course. After recovering from the backward thrust of the sneeze, I resume my race for cover. There’s a sound of parting branches and leaves, and a curse. Edward is braving the prickly hedge to try and peer through it. I’m twenty yards away now, going hard. Am I to be pursued? I decide to duck behind a thick tree trunk and hunker down.

Footsteps on the sea-shells inform me that the Crawleys have now abandoned their prickly shelter and are making their way out of the little wooded dell, which

had no doubt struck them, as it had me, as a private and secluded place. They are talking, but in much more subdued tones. In a moment they will pass my hiding place and move away, and I'll be able to circle anonymously back to the Kew Gates.

Unfortunately, it's at this point that a second sneeze announces its intentions. In agony I watch the slowly meandering retreat of the Crawleys. I slither around the tree trunk, to get as much of it as possible between them and me. Then the sneeze blasts out like a gunshot into the air, scattering noisy parrots from every tree within a hundred yards.

I've nearly scrambled out of sight, but not quite. I am acutely conscious that my shoulder and leg must be visible, in spite of my instinctive freezing into an attempted simulation of a branch. I can only hope that they don't come back to interview me. I probably can't be recognized by shoulder and leg alone.

The Crawley footsteps have halted. For a long and horrible moment I feel certain that they're going to come back and investigate. But then I hear a muttered imprecation from Edward Crawley, and the two of them resume their departure at an accelerated pace.

I am the last to arrive back at the gates, about five minutes late. I had to let the Crawleys get ahead, and then circle around to approach from a different direction. We re-board the bus, and Bob sits next to me. He chuckles and points.

"Wilma's buying something again!"

I follow his finger. Just outside the bus, The Pyramid of Giza is surrounded by retailers.

"Wilma? Is that the name of that woman from Texas?"

"That's right. She was talking to me by the pool this morning."

He lowers his voice confidentially. "Not much talent on this trip. When I've been on Target Holidays before, there's usually been a tasty bird or two in the group. But we're struggling a bit this time."

He glances over his shoulder, and drops to a whisper.

"Although I'd say that Beryl might have a sweet spot for you, don't you think?"

I am forced to adopt what I intend to be an enigmatic half-smile. I'm not going to be drawn any further into this conspiratorial laddishness. I try to convey, with this expression, that I know what I know. I hope it will make him stop. But it

doesn't. There is a goatish odour coming from his armpits as he leans in slightly and mutters in my ear.

"I notice you got a good grab at that fat girl's tits just before you went for your swim together this morning!" Then, to my unspeakable horror, he gives me a dig in the ribs with his elbow and leans forward to try to catch my eye.

"It was an accident," I reply frostily, abandoning my enigmatic half-smile. "I was off balance."

The galloping goat lowers the lid over one eye while simultaneously hoisting the eyebrow on the other side to present a paradigm of knowingness. His bee-stung nose is swollen and priapic. I feel queasy. Wilma bursts back into the bus, breaking the moment. She holds some sort of miniature version of the Kew Gates above her head.

"Nine hundred ranits! A replica of the gates, in finest wrought iron. That'll look just great on my fireplace back home!"

She settles down with her prize, and once more we surge slowly but inexorably through the city traffic until finally we pull in beside a low white building with an enormous artificial parrot perched on its roof.

"What's this, a pet shop?" Warren queries.

"No, no. This is our restaurant," Mr Bompus tells him. "It is called the *Polypodoro*, which is being the name of our colourful parrots that you will see later up in Aradaroopo province."

"I'm not eating parrot. I had to eat parrot in Vietnam. Swore I'd never do that again."

"No, no. There is no parrot."

Muttering something under his breath, Warren scowls up at the painted bird. Mr Bompus leads us in.

The interior is gloomy, with a forest theme. Large brooding plants loom possessively over the tables, all of which are empty. There are some caged parrots in a corner, squabbling noisily. In a large alcove, a single long table is laid with cutlery. I find myself sandwiched between Wilma from Texas, and Lucretia Crawley.

"I hope Mr Bompus has remembered that I'm a vegetarian," says Rosa, who is seated opposite me. She looks at the menu suspiciously. "Everything here seems to have meat in it."

Then, right out of the blue, I'm shaken to the core by another sneeze. I just have time to get my napkin up in front of my mouth. Beside me, I sense Lucretia Crawley stiffening as if injected with starch. On the other side of the table Edward Crawley glances keenly at me. A flush of blood suffuses my face and I feel like a traffic light that has just turned red.

Our food takes an eternity to arrive, but we dispose of it quickly once it comes. As we file out of the restaurant back into the waiting heat, I hear a murmur at my elbow. It's Edward Crawley.

"I'd like a word with you later, Martin, if possible."

Day Two – later – a dance with the devil.

In the afternoon, we visit the Museum of Bootaburi, a dusty maze of rooms with air-thumping fans hovering overhead like superannuated helicopters tethered in a retirement home. I spend my time keeping a sharp eye open for Edward Crawley. I'm in no hurry to hear whatever he has to say, and shrivel inwardly with embarrassment at the memory of my attempt to hide behind a tree. The man must think I'm a complete idiot. There's an awkward moment when he spies me trapped up a cul-de-sac with a collection of mummified sea-life, but luckily Wilma and Rosa come into the room, and I make a gliding exit, like a conger eel, with eyes averted.

It's because I'm studiously avoiding looking at Edward Crawley that I fail to observe Miranda dawdling in my path, and end up in a minor collision. We both put out arms to steady ourselves and the result is a kind of awkward embrace.

"Oh...sorry..." she says. Her hair brushes across my face, and my groin has momentarily docked against her hip.

"I'm so sorry, my fault entirely," I say backing off rapidly. But not before I've caught the full force of a glare from the brutish Brian, who probably thinks it was all deliberate.

I slink away, feeling like I'm holidaying in a minefield.

On leaving the museum, we find that evening has descended gently on the streets of Pootapuri. The hawkers and stall-holders have departed for their slums, and the honking flocks of traffic have thinned out to a modest press of headlights, through which, stubborn and inexorable, the chariot of fire thrusts its snout.

After an hour to rest and shower at the hotel, we are borne off again towards our evening entertainment. This is to be a display of local traditional dancing, accompanied by equally traditional Pootapuri food.

At the entrance to the Katamongipidgins Club, we leave our shoes with an imposing attendant who arranges them in wooden cubby-holes behind him. His glinting eye (the other is concealed behind a patch) and ferocious moustache reassure us that our footwear will be guarded with his life.

Beyond this Cerberus, a dark cavernous hall is filled with long tables, set out in rows at an angle of ninety degrees to a large raised stage. Ninety degrees is also the approximate temperature of the hall. A rhythmical noise is being created by a

small band of men seated cross-legged in a corner of the stage. Some pluck at instruments that look like overgrown spring onions. Others tap out a regular beat on a variety of drums, with hands that have been flattened into mere spatulas by years of percussive abuse.

Alice leads our pack to the table indicated by Mr Bompus. She settles in the orange glow of a small lamp, where doubtless there is enough light to read by. Her shoulder bag bulges with blockbusters. Miranda and Brian make for the opposite side of the table, nearest to the stage, where Brian sets to work arranging cameras and light meters in front of him, preparing to capture every visual nuance of the event for a helpless posterity.

Beryl is just in front of me, and half turns.

“Shall we go in this side, Martin?”

I nod speechlessly. *We*. What does she mean, *We*? Anyway, I follow her willingly, as this secures me on one side from Edward Crawley. Bob takes the opposite side of the table, next to Miranda. There is a slight hiatus, as the rest of the group are still depositing their shoes. Then, with the sense that an inevitable fate is placing its detaining hand on my shoulder, I observe Edward Crawley sliding along the bench on my side of the table, to land up right bang next to me. Game, set and match.

At first I'm able to feign ignorance of his presence, by keeping up a lively discourse with Beryl on the delights of the day so far.

“What did you particularly enjoy in the museum, Martin?”

The exit. However, this would make a curmudgeonly response. I dredge my memory banks for some useful deposit. She chips in anyway.

“I found the display of documents from the colonial period quite fascinating. The household accounts of the British governor were amazing! Apparently they got through a pig or a cow on a daily basis, not to mention hogs' heads of rum and so on.”

“The conspicuous consumption of us westerners is nothing new then,” I reply.

Right on cue our drinks arrive, murky pink drinks with a kind of Sargasso Sea of fruit floating on the surface. I sip mine gingerly. Sweet, but not unpleasant. Beryl goes on.

“I enjoyed the display of traditional outfits too. I expect the dancers might be wearing something similar tonight. Those silky sarong things would look very

fetching on a supple lady dancer, don't you think?" Beryl arches an eyebrow and looks at me sideways.

I sip my drink to buy time. I don't cope well with being flirted with, if that's what's happening. I'm so long out of practice that I can't be sure. I go for a slight change of subject.

"I suppose there'll be male dancers as well."

"Mm - they'll probably be all muscular and lithe. I should get my camera ready. If they have one of those bits where the audience are invited up to have a go, will you take a picture of me Martin? Unless you go up as well of course."

"There's no danger of that. I'll get a picture for you."

"Thanks."

Rather stilted stuff, but I'm desperately thinking of something to prolong the conversation when the dreaded voice at my other side summons my attention.

"Martin..."

I half turn, avoiding Edward Crawley's eyes.

"Do you remember I was wanting a word about something?" he goes on.

"Oh - yes."

"Well, it's a little too crowded just here. But perhaps we could step outside?"

There's something about his calm manner and precise enunciation that radiates confident authority, and I find myself nodding helplessly. Embarrassment is the Englishman's scourge, and on this holiday I'm clearly destined to feel its lashing thongs to the full.

We make our way back towards the exit and then, to the puzzlement of the smiling servant who is waving us graciously towards the toilet sign, we go out into the street. I catch a glimpse of the moustached shoe attendant with his nose buried deep in a lady's sandal. He withdraws it in a hurry, and then glares defiantly off into space with his one eye.

Edward Crawley offers me a cigarette.

"I don't, thank you."

He lights one for himself, exhales a long thin stream of smoke politely away from me, and then addresses the matter in hand.

"Martin - back in the botanical gardens earlier today, I believe you might have inadvertently overheard a conversation between my wife and myself?"

His blue eyes lock on to my own. It's like talking to a human lie detector.

“I ... I did overhear a few words,” I manage to mutter.

“I thought so. And naturally you were a little embarrassed at finding yourself the recipient of unwanted information?”

I flush at the memory of my futile concealment behind a tree trunk.

“Yes. I thought it would be embarrassing for you to know that someone else was listening - accidentally listening - and I tried to get away before you realised.”

“But your nose betrayed you.”

He’s smiling now. His eyes never leave mine for an instant.

“I sneezed, yes.”

Edward Crawley takes another dose of smoke on a tour of his lungs and glances back towards the interior of the Katamongipidgins Club. Then he fixes me again with those eyes.

“Since we are to share each other’s company for the next several days, Martin, perhaps you’ll forgive me if I give you a little more information. You see, I don’t feel easy in my mind about what you may have overheard. You may have formed a mistaken impression of the situation between my wife and myself, based on a few words spoken in anger.”

I give my hand a deprecating wave.

“I wouldn’t dream of giving the matter any more thought,” I say. “Really, I’d almost forgotten all about it already.”

“Nevertheless,” he goes on, “if you’ll be patient for a couple of minutes, I’d be grateful for a chance to set the record straight. Do you mind?”

“Please - there’s no need.”

“Ah, but there is for *me* I’m afraid Martin. I need to clear the air, and then we can all be relaxed about things again.”

What a start to a holiday! How can one get so embroiled in a single day with a bunch of complete strangers? In microcosm, I’ve acquired two enemies, an admirer, and now a confidant. I nod my enforced agreement, and let him get on with his story.

“My wife Lucretia and I married twenty four years ago - a second marriage for me. My first wife, sadly, died in an accident.”

I wonder how quickly we’re going to get through the next twenty four years, but Edward seems to read my thoughts.

“Don’t worry Martin, I’m not going to give you a history of our marriage. Allow me to jump forward to a time about twelve months ago, when I discovered that Lucretia was deceiving me with another man.”

This is a turn up for the books.

“Yes - I see you had formed another impression. Perhaps you heard the name Aisha being mentioned?”

“Yes - I did hear that name I think...”

“Lucretia has decided that attack is the best form of defence. In an attempt to put the proverbial boot on the other foot, she’s concocted an entirely fallacious notion that I am carrying on an affair with a colleague at work.”

He takes in a good dose of smoke while he lets me absorb this information. This is all very difficult. I’m sure that in the Botanical Garden he seemed to admit tacitly to the affair, but claimed it was over. Has he forgotten that? I’m confused. I can’t think of a single word in response to his story. I rub my toes uncomfortably in the dirt.

“So,” he resumes smokily, “after extracting from Lucretia a promise that she will give up this other man - a completely unsuitable character by the way, who is more attracted by her wealth than her person - I suggested that we should endeavour to rekindle the spirit of our marriage. A romantic holiday, in an exotic place.”

Why come on a group tour, I wonder privately.

“Well, imagine my feelings, Martin, when, the day before we departed, I found in my wife’s wardrobe a letter from this - person - dated from last week. The gist of it was that he couldn’t wait for Lucretia’s return, and looked forward to seeing her again *at the usual place*. I was - as you will appreciate - devastated.”

I shake my head in an attempted simulation of mute sympathy. I don’t want any of this information. None of it.

“I don’t tell you this Martin in order to make you dislike Lucretia. I’m still doing my damndest to build our marriage anew, in spite of this blow. I just couldn’t bear to think that you were carrying the impression that *I’m* the guilty party in all this. I feel I need your support, however silent. For the sake of my morale.”

This concludes matters it seems. Edward Crawley fixes me with the blue eyes on full wattage, and holds out a manly hand. I shake it automatically and he rests the other hand momentarily on my elbow. We are bonded, in a quiet, masculine, understated way. Blood brothers. He heaves a sigh.

“Well, that’s a weight off my chest, Martin. Shall we return to the festivities?”

We make our way back to the table, where Edward re-positions himself on the opposite side to me, next to the allegedly perfidious Lucretia. I now have Rosa as a buffer zone between the flirtatious Beryl and me. Rosa is busy explaining something to Beryl with the aid of her notebook. I’m at the end of the line on my side of the table, and looking across to the other side I meet the eye of Mr Bompus over the top of some sort of cocktail glass heaving with tropical fruits and little paper umbrellas. He emerges with a frothy upper lip, and gives me the characteristic Pootapuri sideways waggle of the head.

“You will be enjoying this show enormously,” he says loudly over the music.

I nod, noncommittally. I’m prepared to believe this proposition provisionally, although I fear proof to the contrary may emerge shortly.

“These dancers - they train from birth you know!” Mr Bompus adds impressively.

Dancing babies in nappies circle improbably in my mind’s eye.

“It is necessary so that they can achieve the suppleness. You will see, they are like rubber people. Do you like dancing?”

There is only one polite answer.

“Yes. Very much.”

A mistake.

“Excellent! There is opportunity to join the dancers later on. You will be up there like the shot I’m sure!”

I’d rather *be* shot. However, I nod smilingly. I’ll plead a sore toe or something if pressed.

The evening wears on. Unusual Pootapurian delicacies make their appearance at regular intervals. Spicy humus in banana leaves. Pickled squid in rice beds. Pigeon tartlets. Mr Bompus makes sure I miss nothing out. He does himself proud, calling for extra portions on occasion and generally wallowing in the trough. I presume this is all a perk for bringing us here. His face grows visibly rounder and shinier and greasier, and his thunderous belches are only partially drowned out by the hideous cacophony that is being perpetrated on the stage.

The performance is a lengthy one, in which intervals of drumming and wailing are interspersed with galloping onsets of wiry characters in brightly coloured silk

costumes. The male dancers concentrate on displays of acrobatics, vying to outdo each other in preposterous feats of strength and agility. The females, quite a fetching bunch, flow about the stage in a sinuous wiggling fashion, which is not disagreeable.

At the end of the table I observe that Brian is in cameratic overdrive, a mere blur of interchangeable lenses, light meters and popping flashguns. Miranda observes me watching him and catches my eye. Is there the merest hint of an ironically raised eyebrow, as if she is sharing my amusement at his antics?

Finally the predicted audience participation opportunity arrives. In anticipation of this, I have devised the plan of retreating to the toilets at the critical moment. As the dancers descend from the stage towards us and Mr Bompus rubs his hands in gleeful anticipation, I stand up quickly and mutter something like “quick visit to the toilet” to explain my imminent disappearance.

But my strategy goes badly awry. Before I’ve got clear of the table, Mr Bompus is waving vigorously to the dancers to draw their attention towards me.

“Here!” he cries. “This gentleman is a dancer!”

Among our group, heads turn with interest. Horrified, I can read their thoughts. Martin Mallard a dancer eh? Dark horse! Beryl is framing a photograph of me, and Miranda tugs at Brian’s camera straps to alert him to this new development. Bob’s face is a picture of enthusiastic encouragement.

“Bravo Martin! Show ‘em the Brits can shake a leg too!”

As if in a dark nightmare I am quickly seized by a grinning duo of muscular male dancers. There’s no escape. They lead me towards the stage. A smattering of applause comes from the other tables, where the cognoscenti of Pootapuri society look forward to a European interpretation of the dancer’s art.

But worse, incredibly, is to come. Seemingly a companion is required for my efforts. The lady dancers have singled out the lumpish form of Alice for their prey - probably in order to shed an even more flattering light on their own charms. Grimly, Alice clings to her blockbuster and refuses to stand up. I have to give her credit for a determined resistance. But she’s worn down by a combination of mass social pressure and physical force. All the other women in the group encourage her vociferously, no doubt in the full knowledge that if she doesn’t do it, then one of them will have to.

“Go on Alice! Be a sport!”

“It’ll be fun!”

“Something to tell your grandchildren!”

The lady dancers pull on her arms with a sinewy strength, and finally she’s prised from her limpet-like grip on the table and forced to her feet.

By now, I’m up on the stage in the full glare of the limelight. The one thing that Alice has not yet appreciated about her predicament is the identity of her dancing partner. As she is hauled up the short flight of steps to the stage, her eyes fall on me.

“Jesus!” she exclaims, and stops dead in her tracks. But it’s to no avail, as a ripple of applause comes welling up from the auditorium, and her captors propel her with a final powerful shove onto the boards.

We face each other like Easter Island statues. Sweat is coming down Alice’s forehead in a continuous torrent. At my elbow, one of our tormentors begins to explain our fate.

“You follow moves we do, you just copy. It is easy, easy. All right? Just watch, then copy. Yes?”

Then he takes up position beside me, and his female counterpart slides gracefully into place next to the deliquescent football of flesh that is Alice. Music strikes up, the eager chatter of anticipation in the audience dies down, and all eyes are upon us. I concentrate like hell, and pray that it will all be over quickly.

My man begins with an easy move, simply holding both hands towards his partner, palms outwards, and then turning his wrists in a gesture that I would interpret as one of supplication. He looks at me, and I copy his movements. He smiles encouragingly, revealing teeth that gleam with a superhuman whiteness.

“Good. It is easy, yes?”

Now it’s Alice’s turn. Glumly she observes her mentor as she puts a hand up in front of her face and swivels her eyes coquettishly at her suitor. I don’t like the way this is going.

Neither does Alice. She puts a clump of podgy fingers in front of her mouth and scowls at me over the top of them. There is no coquettish ocular swivelling. In fact, she looks as if she might throw up.

“Good, good!” says her lady dancer, although I think I catch a slight flicker of an expression which is less positive.

Now my fellow hitches himself up onto one leg and points the toes of his other foot towards his partner. He wiggles his big toe, and pivots around on the spot

until he is facing away from her. Then he stands flat on both feet and folds his arms. Clearly he is cross that his overtures are rejected.

I'm about three feet taller than this fellow, and feel like a stork as I balance precariously on one foot and wiggle my muddy toes at Alice. Then I hop around to turn my back and get back onto both feet with a sense of relief. I forget to cross my arms.

"Your arms sir. Cross your arms please."

I do as I'm told. I am now in the dark as far as the female riposte is concerned, because I can't see what comes next. However, I soon feel a clammy hand on my shoulder, and realise to my horror that Alice is actually in physical contact.

"Now you watch carefully, carefully," the male dancer tells us. "We both move together now."

I squint sideways to see what's going on. He executes a half turn and goes down on one knee. At the same time, his partner wiggles around him in an elegant circle before perching weightlessly on his other knee.

"Now you," he says, and they both watch expectantly.

For a moment I contemplate faking a heart attack, but I can't quite make up my mind to do it. So I do my half turn and get down onto one knee as required.

The ball is now in Alice's court. She stomps around me in a wide circle like an enraged brontosaurus and then crashes down onto my knee in what I can only describe as a vengeful manner.

Naturally I crumble under this weighty assault. As I roll to the floor with Alice on top of me, I'm aware of a barrage of flashes as everyone in the place who owns a camera puts it to use. There are cries of merriment from the audience, and a clucking of concern from our advisors.

"Oh deary me! No, no. That is not right."

Alice rolls off me, using her elbows in my chest to gain leverage. I'm momentarily winded, and lie gasping for air on the boards for a couple of moments. There is a ripple of applause. I have the impression that Alice is taking a bow. I guess that in some ways it must have looked like Big Daddy getting the drop on an unwary opponent in a wrestling bout.

By the time I sit up, Alice is off the stage. I'm allowed to follow her, tail between my legs, while our torturers seek out more apt apprentices from the Pootapurian tables.

Mr Bompus shakes his head sympathetically as I take my place opposite him once more.

"You were doing very well Martin," he says, "but your partner let you down. Never mind, there may be other opportunities for dancing later in the trip."

God forbid.

Day Three – sinister developments.

Nine thirty in the morning, and the Chariot of Fire is nosing its way out of the morass of Bootaburi and along the heavily congested road northwards along the coast. Off to our left there are tantalizing glimpses of white sands and sparkling blue water, but mostly the view is blocked by a disordered line of tumbledown structures made from corrugated iron and woven palm leaves. The road frontage is crammed with little enterprises selling fizzy drinks, car tyres, ironmongery, coconuts, fruit and vegetables, plastic washing up bowls, and lottery tickets.

A crowd that spans all generations seems to be passing their day just standing or sitting around watching the traffic go by. Since we're travelling at walking pace for much of the time, there's a frequent stir of interest when our pale European faces are spotted. Small boys, in particular, abandon whatever else they were doing in order to run alongside with shrill little cries. I observe that the seasoned traveller Bob has a prepared response for this. He has a plastic bag full of cheap bios on his lap. Periodically he flings one out of the window. Eventually I work out that the bird-like chirruping of our pursuers is in fact the cry "Pen! Pen!" Either they knew Bob was coming, or tourists here are understood generally to be supporters of scholarship.

My travelling companion today is Beryl. Her room-mate Alice is well out of earshot on the back seat, buried in a blockbuster, and Beryl is taking the opportunity to fill me in on how things stand.

"She's cross with you, you know Martin."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well - mainly because you hit her in the pool. But also because of the dancing last night. She feels you were trying to humiliate her in front of everyone."

This stings a little.

"What! That's not fair! I was as reluctant to be up there as she was!"

"That's not how she sees it. She thinks it was you who pointed her out to the dancers."

"What!"

"Well, you know how she has her nose in a book all the time. She wasn't aware of what was going on until they came to pull her up on stage. And then the

first thing she saw was you standing there. She's convinced you told them to go and pick her out. I think she's a bit paranoid actually. She told me that she doesn't forgive things like that in a hurry."

"Bloody hell! I'd better explain to her."

"I wouldn't bother. She doesn't strike me as a very rational person. I'm sure she'd think you were just lying. She's got a real thing about it."

I stare glumly out of the window. I know I'm not the life and soul of any party, but I like to feel liked, as much as the next person. Yet already I'm the leading contender for 'least popular member of the group'.

Bigger gaps are starting to appear amongst the straggling mess of settlement beside the road. We are entering the leafy suburbs of Bootaburi. The motley huddles of huts and rusting lean-tos are now separated by large plantations of palm trees. As the Chariot gains speed, a hideous crackling sound announces the first informative sally of the day from Mr Bompus. Wallabib reaches hastily across and adjusts the volume knob.

"In about.....minutes, we will be making our first stop. This is for the purpose of visiting a factory where they are making the roof tiles. It is a good example of our local.....here in Pootapuri."

Beryl is excited.

"This is the sort of thing I like about these Target holidays! You get to see the sort of things most tourists wouldn't even guess were going on."

Warren is less sanguine.

"Did he say we were stopping already?" he shouts.

"We sure are. At a roof tile factory," Wilma informs him.

"Hell, we only just got going! What are we stopping there for?"

"To see how they make the roof tiles, I guess."

Warren subsides into muttering, and I can hear the chink of coins and the rustle of notes as Wilma investigates her purse's resources. I wonder if she's hoping to buy a new roof for her home at a bargain price.

About ten minutes later we pull into a muddy forecourt in front of a large shed-like building. Quite a few small children scatter at our approach - enough to give the impression that we might be arriving at a nursery school. There are stacks of pallets storing curved red roof tiles all around us.

We disembark. Already the morning heat is building, and it's like stepping into a warm bath. One or two of the juveniles have already learned the word "pen" and yip excitedly at our ankles. Bob dispenses largesse. Mr Bompus leads us to an opening in the side of the main building, where a large lady wearing fine brightly coloured silks and bedizened with gold greets us warmly. Her smile reveals that even her mouth is a little storage vault for miniature bars of the precious metal.

She says something in Pootapurian, and Mr Bompus translates.

"This is Mrs Savanapatani, and she welcomes you all to her enterprise, Savanapatani Tiles. Now, please follow, and you will see how everything is managed here."

Our first port of call is a large cleft in the wooded hillside at the back of the building. Here, two skinny characters with picks are gouging out big piles of shiny red clay, which two more skinny characters remove in wheelbarrows. Mrs Savanapatani remains fastidiously at the back of our group as we observe this frankly messy sphere of action.

Next, it's into the dark interior of the building, threading our way between precarious towers of tiles stacked on splintery pallets. The pack of small children accompanies us, dodging in and out of the alleyways of pallets with cries of delight. We're clearly the highlight of their day, or possibly their whole lives so far.

In the middle of the building, surrounded on all sides by the maze of pallets, is the heart of the business. Teams of women, who smile pleasantly in our direction, are carrying rectangles of damp looking clay to two men who operate large presses. These oily machines have been engineered to achieve the maximum number of options for crushing fingers or hands during operation. With split second timing the blocks of clay are laid under the press, and then the operators heave on great handles as if playing overgrown one-armed bandits. The rectangle of clay is squashed into the characteristic wavy profile it will exhibit for the rest of its days. Another team of women ferries the newly formed tiles away to waiting pallets, where they are left to harden.

Edward Crawley murmurs at my elbow, making me start. He moves about so quietly.

"This place would be closed down within minutes in Britain, wouldn't it Martin! I could probably count a dozen infringements of health and safety requirements from where I'm standing - and I'm no expert."

“It does seem a little dangerous. All these children running about too!”

“That’s right. It’ll be their mothers who are carrying the tiles. Did you notice the little boy with one arm?”

“No.”

“I’d hate to think how many accidents must occur in this place over the course of a year or two.”

Brian and Beryl are applying their distinctive photographic styles to the venue. Brian is off in a corner with a tripod and a light meter, probably trying to come up with something arty. Nearer to hand, Bob has been entrusted with Beryl’s camera while she poses with a roof tile beside the pressing machine.

I decide to take a small stroll along the highways and byways of the factory, and set off on my own down a narrow alley between pallets. I’m trying to work out what my feelings are about this place. I’m in here for twenty minutes, and it’s like glimpsing life on another planet. The smiling workers are in this for life, and maybe their children too. *They* can’t walk out and climb into an air-conditioned bus and be whisked away to the next attraction. They’re stuck with their miserable, dangerous existence. It’s not a comfortable thought. I’m glad I didn’t see the boy with one arm.

I turn a corner at the end of the alleyway into an even narrower aisle and pause for a moment with my guilty feelings. Suddenly there’s a bumping sound above. I look up. The pallets to one side are swaying violently! With a slithering, clattering roar, an avalanche of tiles starts to cascade towards the ground. Instinctively I hunker down and cover my head with my arms. All around me there is the sound of crashing and smashing and damage. Absurdly, instead of considering my own danger, my predominant thought is an embarrassed fear that somehow I must have been responsible for all this.

I take several painful hits on the arms from tiles. As the sounds of destruction subside, I lift my head cautiously. The main landslide seems to have occurred a little further up the aisle, the way I was heading before I paused. There’s a pile of tiles there that would have crushed me. Beyond the debris, in the floating airborne dust I see a face appear momentarily at the end of the alleyway. Almost like a ghost flitting past. A pale, fat ghost. A ghost like Alice.

We depart from the tile-factory under a slight cloud. Mrs Savanapatani has to be propitiated with a small wad of notes produced by Mr Bompus to cover the value of the destroyed roof tiles. It strikes me that the boot should have been on the other foot, and the woman is lucky not to be pursued through the courts for admitting tourists into her death-trap.

Back on the bus, Beryl is attending to the wounds on my arms as we drive along. She dabs solicitously at the grazes and cuts with wads of disinfectant-soaked cotton wool from the emergency first-aid box triumphantly produced by Mr Bompus.

“Are you up to date with your tetanus jabs?” she enquires.

I nod. I turned myself into a human pin-cushion in preparation for my first extra-European adventure. There’s scant chance of any tropical bug arriving in my bloodstream without being greeted by a lynch mob of the appropriate antibodies.

I turn to the thought that’s preoccupying me.

“You didn’t happen to notice, did you, where Alice was at the time of my accident?”

“Alice? No. I was getting Bob to take some photographs of me, and I don’t remember seeing her. I think she must have wandered off, like you.”

I say nothing.

“Why?” Beryl enquires. “What has Alice got to do with it?”

“Nothing, I’m sure,” I reply. “Ouch!”

“It’s bound to sting a little.” Beryl lowers her voice. “You don’t mean you think Alice did something... *deliberate*... do you? Something to do with the tiles falling?”

“No, no. Of course not. It’s just that I wondered if she was definitely somewhere else at the time.”

“You *do* suspect she had something to do with it, don’t you Martin?”

I shake my head. “No, not really. It’s too melodramatic. It was just that you’d been telling me how she’d got it into her head to dislike me, and she happened to be the first person I saw after the accident.”

Beryl seems to ponder this for a few moments as she administers the final dabs.

“I’ll see if I can turn the conversation towards your accident when I’m next on my own with Alice,” she offers.

She packs away the medical kit.

“If she says anything odd, I’ll let you know.”

Day Three – later – Warren runs amuck.

As the clock at the front of the bus reaches noon, the Chariot is fairly flying along at about forty miles an hour through fully-fledged countryside. Other traffic is minimal, although the road surface is used extensively for a variety of non-vehicular activities such as drying out rice straw, herding cattle and just sitting about and passing the time of day. Wallabib's instinct on seeing any such situation ahead is to press harder on the accelerator and to give a couple of blasts on the horn. The horn on the Chariot is an especially loud one, and usually causes a flurry of panic. Perhaps Wallabib is well known on these roads. Limping, sandy coloured dogs in particular watch the Chariot's progress with a wary eye.

At about half past twelve, Mr Bompus comes on the airwaves again.

"It ... mine ... soon. We will be having picnic lunch afterwards. You will see how... from the ground. Very interesting."

A few minutes later we pull in at a car park beside a large muddy looking lake. A path leads off through coconut palms, and at the side of the path an old metal dustbin lid on a post bears the painted message: *This way to the moonstone mine.*

We make our way along this path until Mr Bompus halts in a clearing beside a thatched roof supported by four spindly uprights. There are some benches in the shade beneath.

"After your visit to the mine, you will be coming back here please by two o'clock, and Wallabib and myself will have prepared a picnic here for you."

He gives us a moment to memorize the geography of the location, and then we proceed.

After five minutes we emerge from the coconut grove into another, smaller, car park. This is empty except for one Mercedes saloon and a scattering of bicycles. Beside the car park is a modern structure with tinted plate glass windows and a chunky air-conditioning unit. From within emerges a male counterpart to Mrs Savanapatani, a barrel-chested man with a golden smile and a ring for every day of the week on his podgy fingers, which he waves in exuberant greeting to Mr Bompus.

"Ah - there you are! Spot on time as always!" He pumps Mr Bompus's hand and grins around at the rest of us.

“Welcome, most welcome to the premier moonstone mine of Pootapuri! My name is Mr Mogo.”

Mr Bompus retires gracefully, and our host commences an informative tour of his enterprise.

Our first port of call is a kind of brown shallow pond, where silt is being sieved by some very clay-coloured men in shorts. Other men in shorts are bringing buckets of silt into the area, while a third contingent is hosing away the post-sieve material into a clucking water channel. I haven't a clue what they're up to, but I am quickly enlightened.

“This is the place where the silt that is brought up from the mine is examined for the stones. Hawal!”

Hawal comes over to us bearing a shallow dish. Mr Mogo fishes in the dish and pulls out a small stone. It looks quite unremarkable to me.

“Here is a moonstone. This will be cleaned and cut and polished by my people in there,” (he waves vaguely towards the modern building) “and then used in the manufacturing of the most exquisite jewellery of Pootapuri.”

Now we are led a short distance to a little structure with a thatched roof. In its shade, men are lowering and raising buckets on a rope and pulley system over a shaft in the ground. Our host gestures proudly towards the shaft, and we peer over the edge cautiously.

About forty feet below us we can see the bent-over back of the man with the worst job at the moonstone mine. He is digging with a shovel under the surface of a pool of muddy water at the base of the shaft, and bringing up silt to load into the buckets.

We don't hang about for too long at this location. Dabbing his brow with a silk handkerchief, Mr Mogo leads us with an air of relief towards the modern building. Once inside, we exchange broiling heat for arctic coolness. Goose pimples immediately rise on our bare arms. The workforce in here is entirely female. They wear long sleeves and shawls, and work away at a variety of buffers and belts and polishers to turn the raw stones into something that you can shove into a gold or silver setting and call an adornment.

Our final port of call, rather predictably, is the retail side of the business. Here are glass display cases where rings, necklaces, earrings and the like are lovingly laid

out on beds of dark blue velvet and presided over by highly scented sales-ladies in silk outfits and full arrays of demonstrative jewellery.

I make straight for the exit, on the heels of Warren and Bob. As I close the door behind us I hear Wilma's voice loudly questioning the price tag on something. On the verandah of the shop there's a little shade. It's too hot, but better than the cold inside. Bob looks out into the surrounding palm plantation.

"If it wasn't so hot I could have time for a run before lunch," he says. "A quick five miles would do me a world of good! My body needs it, you see. It's like a drug. I get all fidgety without my running."

Warren heaves a sigh.

"There's one thing I don't like about being taken around on a tour like this, and that's being taken to places where they expect you to buy stuff. I come on holiday to see things, not to buy stuff."

We nod in agreement. He's struck a chord. Warren develops his theme.

"Stuff is just a nuisance, in my experience. I've spent years trying to get rid of stuff. I hardly have any stuff in my house in Coos Bay."

Again, Bob and I nod our approval. Warren looks pleased with our response. His rheumy old eyes even sparkle a little with the excitement of the topic.

"A lot of folk think you need stuff that you don't need at all. I don't have a bed for example."

Bob and I exchange a look. This seems to be taking anti-materialism quite a long way.

"What do you sleep in?" Bob enquires.

"What's that?"

"What do you sleep in?"

"Don't sleep in anything. Just sleep on the floor. I've got a good deep shag on the floor, so it's not too hard."

Bob snorts and turns it into a cough. I presume that Warren is not referring to sexual activities or sea birds.

"Then there's cooking," Warren continues, as if this is a *sequitur*.

"Cooking?" I confirm.

"That's right. Lot of folk think you need a stove. But you don't. I eat mainly fruit and bread and cheese and stuff that doesn't need cooking. If I take a fancy to some meat, I've got a barbecue out back. Or I can just go to MacDonald's."

Bob is now coughing somewhat convulsively. I fear that I am not going to keep a straight face for much longer myself. There's a pause, and Bob pulls himself together. But Warren hasn't finished.

"Or clothes. In the summer when it's warm you don't need clothes, as long as you stay around your own house."

That's the final straw for Bob. With a kind of spluttering explosion he strides off into the palm trees.

"Must need to take a leak I guess," Warren suggests, watching him go. He glances at his watch. "Half an hour until the chow's ready. Do you feel like a stroll down to the edge of the lake?"

I don't have anything better to do, so I nod. We set off through the palm trees. I don't have much idea where the lake is, but Warren seems confident, and the trees put him in mind of his native Oregon.

"Back home there's woods that just go on and on for as long as you could keep walking. In fact you'd just drop dead before you walked your way out of those woods, even going in one straight line."

I nod politely, and make a mental note never to venture off-road in Oregon.

"Now - these coconut palms are a hell of a useful tree you know, Marvin."

I nod and glance upwards at one in feigned appreciation

"There's coconut milk, and there's a local liquor they can brew from the sap, and there's the leaves for thatching roofs, and there's the fibre they can use to make mats. There's a whole bunch of stuff they use these trees for."

Again I nod appreciatively. I don't bother to mention coconut shies at fairgrounds.

"There were times in Vietnam when I owed my life to a coconut."

I don't follow this up. He'll tell me if he wants to.

The shade of the palm trunks and leaves, although incomplete, takes the edge off the heat. The grass beneath the trees is short, which makes for easy walking, and we soon arrive at the margins of the muddy lake. Warren casts an expert eye over it.

"Not too good for fishing, I wouldn't expect. Fish like good clear water. But it sure would be nice to take a cooling dip in there, wouldn't it Marvin?"

I stare at the old fool in amazement. A less inviting prospect would be hard to imagine. Not only does the water itself look like a mud bath, but also the margin of

the lake is a reedy expanse of grey slime, probably oozing with snakes, toads, and malignant insects.

But Warren is starting to unbutton his shirt.

“I just can’t resist it!” he says. “Come on Marvin - it’ll freshen us up!”

I shake my head and stand by as Warren gets the rest of his kit off. His body is brown and wrinkled all over, like a dried fruit. He seems excited by the prospect of his bathe, and grins broadly at me before joshing me lightly on the arm.

“Come on Marvin! Don’t be a stuffy old Englishman! Get your clothes off!”

I take a step backward, but this further excites Warren. He crouches slightly and advances on me like a wrestler circling an opponent. His arms are outstretched. He’s like a bearded crab, all grinning teeth and flexing pincers.

I would turn and run, but I have a horrid feeling that he would pursue me vigorously. I try good-humoured reason.

“Ha! Ha! Come on now, Warren! I’m not going swimming in that lake!”

“Oh yes you are!” he cackles. Jesus, the man’s insane! I make up my mind to flee and start to turn away. But I’m not quick enough, and am brought to the ground by a rugby tackle around the knees. Before I know it, the naked Oregonian has scrambled on top of me and is pulling at my shirt buttons.

“You’re goin’ for a swim, boy!” he grunts.

He’s got a wiry strength well beyond what you might expect from looking at him. I would punch him, but I’m frankly frightened of turning the situation into a genuine brawl. So I’m reduced to a losing battle to retain my shirt.

“Get off me you old maniac!” I hiss.

“Old? Old?” Warren yells. “I’ll show you what an old guy can do!”

He transfers his attentions to the belt buckle of my shorts. I redouble my resistance. Just then there’s a soft cough a few yards away. Warren obviously doesn’t hear it, but I turn my head and espy Edward Crawley standing with a cigarette in his hand and surveying the scene with an amused smile.

“Help me for Christ’s sake!” I call, and he ambles into Warren’s sphere of vision. Warren leaps to his feet with a shamefaced grin.

“I was just trying to persuade Marvin here to join me in a swim!”

“It looks as if Martin didn’t want to join you,” Edward replies, at a volume loud enough for all parties present.

“Martin? Is *that* your name?” Warren says, turning to me.

I nod.

“Hmm – you should have said so. Well, I think you need to loosen up a little! You Brits are just... You *really* not coming in?”

I shake my head firmly.

“Okay. Well, here goes nothing!”

And with a whoop of excitement, he squelches vigorously across the muddy margin of the lake and plunges noisily into the water beyond.

I straighten my attire. “Thank God you turned up, Edward!”

“A pleasure to be of use. Our colonial friend seemed to be getting carried away somewhat.”

“Carried away is right. He was trying to get my clothes off! It was horrible.”

“Most unfortunate. It might be advisable to avoid being alone with Warren. It looks to me as if he’s got a thing about you.”

This awful thought is a new slant on the affair. I suppose that if you come across a naked man trying to undress another man on the ground, you might think something of that sort.

“I certainly will avoid being alone with him! He’s as mad as a hatter!”

“Yes. They really ought to vet the clientele for these holidays a little. One can find all kinds of oddballs.”

Warren is now heading for the middle of the lake using a noisy, splashing style of swimming stroke.

“Shall we leave him to it?” Edward suggests. I nod, and we fall into step, taking a course along the edge of the water.

“I thought you were choosing moonstones?” I say, to change the subject.

“I’ve given Lucretia *carte blanche*. I just popped out for a smoke while she made her choice. I’ve not got much of a clue about jewellery. Have you?”

“Not really. I used to have to buy it sometimes at Christmas and birthdays, when I was married. But it was always a bit of a journey into the unknown for me.”

“Absolutely. A bit like marriage itself eh? A journey into the unknown.”

“Well - you think you know where you’re going, at the start, don’t you?” I say.

“An illusion. You’ve really no idea. But... I’m sorry, you said *when* you were married? Is your wife deceased, or...?”

“No, no. Not deceased, divorced.”

“Ah... I’m sorry.”

“No need. It happens, doesn’t it.”

“Yes. Well, I’m anxious that it doesn’t happen to me. I’m really trying to make this holiday something special for Lucretia. I’m afraid that if I don’t, I may not get another chance. Once we’re back in England, she’ll be back in the line of temptation. I really need a proper understanding with her before then. I say, you don’t mind me confiding in you like this do you? Just say if you’d rather not hear about it.”

“I don’t mind at all Edward,” I say, trying not to grit my teeth.

“Well, I promise not to go on about it too much. But, since you had the bad luck to get involved, I’m afraid I’m rather relieved to have someone to talk to. We men don’t usually have anyone to share these sort of things with. Did you find that?”

It’s true. Margot had all her female cronies to cluster around and drink wine while our break-up and divorce were in progress. I had to muddle through on my own, pretty much. I nod agreement to Edward Crawley’s question.

We are now at the end of the lake. Warren is a distant speck, out in the middle. God knows what water-borne parasites are attaching themselves to his person. Serves him right.

“Well, I must return to the jewellery front,” Edward says, exhaling the last of his cigarette. “I think it’s this way.”

I glance at my watch. “I’ll make my way to the picnic spot I suppose.”

“Okay. You’ll head a little more that way then, I should think.”

He points out a direction. The palm plantation is pretty featureless. I take his advice anyway, and our paths diverge, for now.

Day Three – later – elephants in their element.

The palm plantation goes on and on. The regimented lines of trees march away from me to infinity in every direction. The sun is right overhead, and the lake a distant memory. It's two o'clock, and there's no sign of the picnic spot. I come to a thoughtful halt.

Warren's doleful words about walking until you drop dead come unbidden into my mind. But these are no trackless Oregon forests. This is merely a man-made plantation. There's sure to be human activity nearby. I listen. At first I detect only silence, but then I pick up the occasional cry of a bird. Then I start to notice that faint sort of crackling noise that you get in intense heat, the sound of grass and leaves curling up and losing moisture to the dry sucking air. I decide to head back the way I have come, back towards the lake's edge.

After attempting to retrace my steps for about fifteen minutes, I'm starting to feel a little panicky, and I'm very relieved to spot Miranda in the distance sitting against a palm trunk reading a book. There's no sign of Brian, and I walk up to her.

"Hello! I was a bit lost. Are we near the picnic spot here?"

She nods, and looks anxiously around her.

"Brian's gone back to the shop, to get me a surprise," she says, explaining the absence of her other half.

"The others are just over there," she goes on, indicating a direction with a nod of her head. Sure enough, now I can see glimpses of coloured clothing through the tree trunks. I hear someone laughing.

"Thanks," I say, and prepare to carry on.

"I'm sorry I'm not more sociable," Miranda says. "You know...Brian..."

"Of course, don't worry."

"Are you enjoying the trip, Martin?"

"Oh, yes. Splendid. Fantastic."

Just then there's a bellow from behind us.

"Miranda?"

Her face is transformed, and with a tiny tilt of her head she silently urges me away. I catch sight of the looming bearded beast and his eyes flash angrily at me. I

move off towards the rest of the group at a good pace. God knows what further trouble this innocent little encounter will cause!

At the picnic place, Mr Bompus and Wallabib are presiding at a small folding table spread with newspaper. Bread, cheese, tomatoes, bananas and a few unidentifiable offerings are spread out on its surface.

Mr Bompus waves me over.

“Here we are. Not all gone! Did you think I said half past two?”

“No. I just got a little lost in the trees, that’s all.”

“Ah. Yes. Well, you are not the only one. In fact we are still one missing even now.”

I glance around, hoping that perhaps Warren has been taken by a crocodile. But he is over there, leaning against a palm trunk picking crumbs of bread out of his beard.

Just then, Rosa comes stomping into view. She looks as if she has been through a washing machine but not yet hung out to dry. Strands of her dark hair are plastered to her forehead. When she arrives at the food table, Mr Bompus wags a finger disapprovingly.

“Two o’clock was the time of the picnic. It is now a quarter to three.”

“*But you said to be at the bos at two!*” Rosa replies in an aggrieved tone. We all pretend to be deeply interested in our sandwiches.

“No, no. Not at that place. The bos? What is that?”

“The BOS! At the car park!”

Mr Bompus works it out. “Ah, at the *bus*. No, no. Do you not remember me pointing out this place to you?”

“Yes, but you didn’t say to com here!”

Mr Bompus opens his mouth, but then appears to think better of it.

“All right. Never mind, never mind. A misunderstanding. Well, there is still plenty of food here. Please help yourself.”

Rosa puts down her knapsack and starts picking fastidiously at the remaining food. Mr Bompus makes a general address.

“Now after our lunch here, next it will be time to go on the elephant ride. This will happen near tonight’s place of accommodation. So if anyone doesn’t want to ride on the elephants, they can stay on the bus and we will take them to the hotel. The elephants will cost one thousand ranits per person, to go along a jungle trail for

two hours. When we are nearly there I will be asking you who is going to ride on the elephants.”

My elephant, seen up close, is an impressive and dignified creature. His eyes meet my own, as the howdah girdle is tightened about his middle regions, and they seem to say *Okay, I'll carry you about for a while, but don't forget I could squash you into pulp if I chose to.*

Eight of us have elected to take to the jungle by elephant. Wilma, Bob and Warren have been loaded onto elephant number one, a huge grey brute with a mean look. Next, on elephant number two, Miranda and Brian have struggled aboard with the contents of his travelling camera shop, and have been joined by Rosa. This leaves elephant number three, a slightly smaller creature than its compadres, with the prospective combo of myself and Lucretia Crawley. Edward Crawley, pleading a headache, has gone on to the hotel with the other two non-participants, Beryl and Alice. Beryl too has a headache, and Alice presumably is at an exciting point in her book, and does not want to be distracted.

I ascend a small platform, like a diving board, and the plodding pachyderm is brought alongside. I step gingerly over the void onto the howdah. This is not the grand affair with a roof as seen in illustrations for *Around the World in Eighty Days* and the like. Rather it is a crude wooden board with a low metal handrail, precariously strapped onto the elephant's back with a lot of padding underneath.

Once I've got myself more or less stabilized, I hand in Lucretia Crawley, who takes up position beside me. As soon as she's settled, our mahout, or whatever they call elephant drivers, straddles the beast's neck, and we're off. The rolling motion of the elephant's back beneath me is reminiscent of being on a boat.

“A pity Edward didn't feel up to it,” I comment, breaking the ice. However, I've chosen an unfortunate topic.

“He was tired, and he's been on an elephant before. Anyway, it's good for us to spend a little time apart. You can imagine why.”

She pauses, glances away, and then looks at me again.

“I know you overheard us arguing. In the Botanical Garden. Please don't be embarrassed - it was our own fault.”

My role as a Crawley confidant is clearly to be a double-sided one. I'm trapped on an elephant's back, and I fear revelations are heading my way. I'm

irritated. Why can't these old folk conform to their allotted stereotypes? Their volcanic qualities should be extinct by now, all passion spent! I will aim to be sexually and emotionally inert at their age. I've made a start already, albeit unwillingly, at the age of forty two.

"He can be a cruel man, Edward. You wouldn't think it, would you?"

I sort of clear my throat and make a sound that could be "yes" or could be "no". She's looking at me squarely now, and I feel myself forced into facing her. I look at her properly for the first time. She has large, deep brown eyes, carefully shaped eyebrows, and a finely boned face. A magnet, perhaps, to men of a certain age. Perhaps Edward Crawley has reason to be jealous.

"I think his work has made him cruel," she goes on. "They use animals, you know, to test the drugs he works on."

I raise an eyebrow. I don't want to encourage her, but I can't make no response at all.

"I suppose it's in a good cause. He's applied for patents on a new drug. It could make him wealthy. He'll need plenty of his own money to feed his gambling, once I've divorced him."

"Oh," I say, unable to avoid making a sound in the expectant pause that follows these pieces of information.

"I apologize, Martin, for these confidences, but there's no-one else, you see, and I'm frightened."

"Frightened of what?"

"Of Edward. You see, he's not going to want a divorce. Our lovely house was bought with my money, and he's gambled away every penny *he's* ever earned. He may not want *me* any more, but he certainly won't want to let go of the house and my money."

"I'm sorry," I manage to blurt out, after too long a pause.

She sighs.

"Well, I won't go on any more Martin. It's not fair to burden a stranger, even a kindly stranger, with one's personal woes. But just let me say one more thing. I have a small favour to ask of you. When I next have a few minutes to myself, I'm going to write a letter to my solicitor, changing my will. If anything happens to me, I don't want Edward to get anything. I've got family – nephews and nieces. Anyway... when I've done that, I'll put it in an addressed envelope, and I wonder if

I could give it to you to keep, until we return to England? Just in case... in case anything should happen to me.”

This strikes me as absurdly melodramatic. The woman’s read too many Agatha Christie novels. However, I can hardly refuse to look after a letter for a few days.

“That’s fine, yes, of course.”

Lucretia smiles wanly, and then, as if to draw a line under the episode, shifts her gaze to our surroundings. After a moment she exclaims “Look! Isn’t that a monkey?”

She points eagerly off into the trees. Sure enough, perching on a fence post is a small grey monkey. It’s attempting to pull away a plastic bag that has become entangled in a barbed wire fence. Our mahout nods cheerfully back at us.

“Monkey, yes. Very bad. Steal things all the time.”

Then he says something sharp to our elephant, and taps its side with a stick about five feet long. The business end of this has a small pointy hook - which the elephant no doubt is well aware of. He speeds up into a lumbering trot until he’s narrowed the gap on his two pals in front.

I can’t help but observe that our jungle trail falls somewhat short of the virgin forest I had imagined. Stands of trees are present admittedly, but so too are barbed wire fences enclosing small pig-rearing establishments, a scattering of lean-to shacks and huts, piles of rubbish, and the occasional abandoned motorcycle.

“What do you do for a living, Martin?” Lucretia enquires, once the excitement of the monkey has subsided.

“I’m a dentist,” I say flatly. I’m always loath to permit this extraction. It rarely meets with a positive response.

“Oh - you must meet a lot of people.” This is about as good as you get. A grimace and a nervous reference to the state of the speaker’s own teeth is more typical.

“Yes, I suppose so. But they can’t usually talk.”

Lucretia laughs. She sounds as if she has a ready laugh, when the horizon is unclouded. “Of course not. But do *you* talk to them?”

“Not a lot. It wouldn’t really be fair, would it? A conversation where one person can only grunt.”

“Sounds like my marriage at the moment. *Sorry* - I promised I wouldn’t!”

She teases out some of my history from me, and talks about her own previous career as a language teacher and then a translator. Putting aside what I know about her from Edward, she's a charming companion. I find myself liking her.

We arrive at the margins of a large swamp, where the other members of our elephant troupe have paused. Clumps of rushes and small islands of low huddled bushes poke out of the muddy morass. Floating on the surface of this hideous stew are innumerable brown clods with a hint of grassy straw about them. We have evidently arrived at one of the world's premier elephant toilets.

Our mahout indicates the mess with his pointy stick, and grins at us over his shoulder.

'Now we going through there! Yes, incredible no? Elephant will go through there!'

'Is the water very deep?' Lucretia asks nervously.

'Deep? No, no. Elephants can touch bottom of water!'

Already Wilma, Bob and Warren are being borne off into the swamp. I can't see his face, but I've no doubt this is meat and drink to the crazed Oregonian. I half expect to see him stand up and dive into the brown filth for one of his refreshing swims. Bob on the other hand is visibly nervous, and pulls up his dangling legs just in time to save his shoes from the water. Wilma has already drawn up her ample chubby knees under her chin, and looks like a castaway.

'Isn't there a way around this?' I mutter to Lucretia, looking up and down the edge of the bog. But our elephant, with an air of finding something worthwhile at last in the proceedings, belly flops into the water sending a spray of swamp sewage cascading over our heads. The mahout turns to share our joy.

'This is fun, not so?'

'Not so,' I agree.

We all progress, three slowly moving islands of hapless humanity in a sea of shit. Elephant number one, who has had the look of a trouble-maker about him all along, dips his trunk into the water and sprays a jet of filth into the air over his passengers. There's a colourful oath from Warren, touching on the elephant's possible Oedipal activities. Bob solicitously holds his day-sac over the head of Wilma, who clings to him like a coquettish ball of dough.

'I hope our elephant isn't going to do that?' I say with some asperity to our mahout.

He looks a little crestfallen, this no doubt being a highlight of the trek, but he waggles his head from side to side in what I take to be capitulation.

Eventually we gain the other side of the noxious floatarium, and return to plodding progress through more woodland, fences, and rubbish heaps.

When our original embarkation point comes back into view, I hear Lucretia take a deep breath.

“I hope you won’t mind, Martin, if I just return, very briefly, to our conversation at the start of the ride? I was hoping that - well - you wouldn’t think badly of me?”

“Think badly of you? Why should I do that?”

“If - if Edward should tell you anything bad about me, then I want you to know - well, it might not be true. Sometimes I - I’m frightened by the things he thinks and does. I don’t want to say any more. I know you don’t want me to say anything at all. But I wanted to take this little opportunity - I wanted to feel - if you don’t mind - I wanted to feel that you were a friend, Martin. Only in a small way of course. Only a holiday friend. But someone who doesn’t think badly of me. Could you be that? My private friend? It won’t involve anything more from you.”

I’m embarrassed. Why does this matter so much? Why has Lucretia dragged this stumbling request out of the hat? I make the best of it.

“Of course I’m your friend Lucretia. And I don’t think badly of you at all. I like you.” Not a bad effort. Brief and to the point, and hopefully all that is required.

She flashes a quick look of gratitude at me, and then we are back at our disembarking platform. The first, and, I hope, final elephant ride of my life is over.

Day Three – later - Makarooma tales.

Wallabib is waiting for us with the bus, and it is only a ten minute drive to our hotel. Its name is Makarooma Lodge, and the tropical night has fallen quickly by the time we reach it. It lies at the end of a long bumpy track (much muttering under the breath from Wallabib), and is surrounded, as far as I can tell in the darkness, by gardens and trees. Flickering oil lamps in orange glass spheres reveal that it's a low rambling structure with shallow Tudor gables. It could have been plucked from some leafy nook in Surrey.

Mr Bompus awaits us in a cane chair in the lobby, surrounded by potted palms. The lobby is roofed over, but open at the sides to the night. He is sipping some sort of cocktail. He jumps up like a jack in the box as we troop in wearily, and his nose wrinkles fastidiously as he presumably gets a whiff of elephant dung.

“Splendid! Splendid! Welcome everyone to the Makarooma Lodge, one of our most traditional and commodious hotels of Pootapuri. You will be liking very much indeed the way it is all done here. Very pukka and old-fashion. Now, I have all your room keys here.”

The keys are distributed. In the background the white-robed hotel staff drift about in a vague ghostly manner. None of them come forward to help with our baggage or show us where our rooms are. They just hover superfluously in the background, and you feel that if you went too close they might dissolve.

As it turns out, the rooms are easy to find anyway, since they all open off a single long verandah, thick with fluttering moths the size of your hand. Bob and I struggle for a while with the ancient key to our door, which seems to be too small for the keyhole. Alice pokes her head out of the adjacent door to see what the noise is, like a sour tortoise peering out of its shell. Eventually the key turns when held at a slight angle. We gain entry to a huge room furnished with four gigantic wardrobes fashioned from some extremely dark wood. Their doors gape open and they look like coffins awaiting occupants. Bob dumps his suitcase down with a sigh of relief, and throws himself onto one of the beds, where he lies on his back, like a garden gnome knocked over by a strong wind.

“What are these?” I enquire, pointing upwards. Suspended from the ceiling above our beds are what appear to be two large jellyfish - lumpy rotund grey

creatures composed of some semi-opaque substance. Dangling umbilical cords hang from these bulging presences. They look rather threatening.

Bob chortles happily at this new evidence of my lack of extra-European experience.

“Mosquito nets! Look!” He levers himself up on one elbow and gives a sharp tug to his cord. The jellyfish is disembowelled, and a tent of diaphanous creamy gauze descends, tinged yellow with age.

“Look - pull it out around your bed - see?” Bob demonstrates. The enveloping shroud reaches to the floor on all sides of him. He points from within to a small worm-like spiral thing in a saucer on the table between our beds.

“And there’s a mosquito coil. We should light that before we go to supper.”

“What does that do?” I’ll let him enjoy his treat.

“It just smoulders away and releases some smoky stuff that mozzies dislike. It’s not an unpleasant smell though. Look, there are some matches. I’ll light it when we’ve had our showers.”

“Do you want to shower first?” I offer.

“No. I’ll just rest up for a few minutes. You go ahead if you want.”

The bathroom is at my end of the bedroom, opposite the door to the verandah. It turns out to be nearly as big as the bedroom itself, and a small barred window looking out to the primeval darkness reveals that the two rooms together occupy the full width of the wing of the lodge.

I’m just out of my clothes when a splashing sound followed by a feminine yelp alerts me to the existence of an interconnecting door to the next door bathroom. I presume it’s locked. There’s an opening above it. Through this I hear faintly the voice of Edward Crawley in a tone of enquiry.

“The shower - it came out with a great gush of cold!” I hear Lucretia’s reply, much clearer and closer to hand. Forewarned by her experience, I stand well back from my own rusting nozzle before turning the taps. While I perform delicate adjustments to the hot and cold supply in an attempt to find something I can step underneath, I become aware of another watery cascade starting up on the other side of the wall, where Beryl and Alice are staying. I shudder as the image of a blubbery malevolent Alice showering naked only a few feet away comes unbidden into my mind. I picture her as reading a book, in a transparent plastic bag.

Of course, it could be Beryl who's showering. I listen carefully. If it were Beryl, I imagine the water from the shower would hit the tiled floor with more force than if it were sprayed and dissipated by the great bulk of Alice's head and shoulders. I cock my head to one side, trying to guess the identity of the showerer by sound alone. I still haven't started my own ablutions.

There's an interconnecting door on that side too. It has a large old-fashioned key sticking out of it. Which suggests, in turn, a large old-fashioned keyhole. It's unlikely there would be a key in the other side too - it's probably secured on that side with a bolt.

I approach the door, naked. I'm drawn by some perverse curiosity. It's not that I actually *want* to see either Alice or Beryl without their clothes on. But what's the harm of a little peek anyway? Gingerly, slowly, relying on the covering sound of splashing water on all sides, I withdraw the key.

So far so good. I put the key down next to the sink. I'm filled with a smutty school-boyish excitement. I hope it's Alice on the other side. It would feel as if I'd got one over on her, by spying on her shower. I'll be able to glance her way, during the day's activities and think to myself 'Oh yes Miss Fatty-two-shoes. I know what your big wobbly bottom looks like!' Ignoble, I know, but satisfying nonetheless. What's the use of wicked impulses if you never give way to them? I stoop down and put my eye to the keyhole.

I can't work out what I'm looking at. It's darker on the other side than I had expected, and certainly not the revealing scene of well-lit soapy flesh I had hoped for. Then a gleam of light reflecting on the side of a glistening orb reveals the horrible truth. I am eyeball to eyeball with whoever is on the other side of that door!

I leap convulsively backwards and then dodge sideways to stand panting against the wall of the bathroom, out of the line of sight. Then, keeping below keyhole level, I retrieve the key. Approaching the door again from the side, I ram the key firmly and noisily back into the keyhole. Whoever the sneaky spy is on the other side can take that as they please! They're as guilty as me, or worse. They probably had the idea first. I feel low, and sullied by stooping to their despicable level. My only comfort is that Alice - or Beryl - probably couldn't tell who they were looking at either. It could have been Bob.

Supper is served in a vast shadowy room. It would appear that the members of our party are the Lodge's only guests tonight. We are seated at a long table, and I have Beryl next to me, and Warren opposite. Soon there'll be no one left with whom I can converse without awkwardness.

Warren however seems to feel no embarrassment about his assault on me earlier in the day, and is indeed in garrulous mood. There's a bit of excitement when the ceiling fans are switched on, and a large lizard is disturbed from his resting place atop one of them. Centrifugal force carries him to the extremity of one of the whirling blades, where he clings on gamely until the fan accelerates to its full speed. Then he's flung across the ceiling before descending to the floor in a graceful arc. On landing, he shakes his head as if to dispel a bad dream, and scuttles away through an open doorway.

"He hee! See that critter fly!" Warren exclaims. "We got lizards that big and bigger along the west coast. Even more of 'em down in Baja California where it's warm and dry. You got lizards Martin?"

"Have I got any?"

"Yeah. In England. You got lizards?"

"Er - yes. Small ones. Newts."

"What sort of size lizards?"

"*Small ones!*" I shout. A few heads turn.

Warren chortles. "Thought so. 'Most everything about England is kinda small and puny ain't it?"

He looks at me. Insolent colonial braggart! I can't be considered small at five feet eleven and three quarter inches in my socks. I admit I might be relatively puny, since the culture of working out in gyms has passed me by. Warren develops his theme.

"I was there one time. Went into a supermarket. Everything for sale was in these tiny packets, like they were for dwarfs or something. And the cars were small too. Give me a good old American pick-up truck any day over one of these Japanese nimby-pimby little things! Your feet get stuck between the pedals."

I'm not sure whether or not, as an Englishman, I'm supposed to pick up the cudgels on behalf of Japanese automotive design. Warren looks at me combatively. I'm irritated. My view is that many Americans are too large and fat for normal human-sized things to fit them.

“Your feet are too big,” I say, reckless.

“What’s that?”

“Your feet are too big!”

Heads along the whole length of the table turn this time.

Warren has gone a slightly purplish colour. Irascible old fool. He’s obviously trying to work out if this provocation is extreme enough to warrant a duel, or at the very least, a pistol-whipping. Beryl laughs nervously.

“Martin’s only joking, aren’t you Martin?”

I nod ambiguously. A sort of slow nod, an ironic nod - for those that can read such things. Warren can’t, which is probably fortunate. His colour recedes a little.

“You don’t make jokes about a man’s extremities where I come from, Martin. In Coos Bay you could be rowed out to sea and drowned for a remark like that.”

Either Coos Bay is full of psychopaths like Warren, or it’s a sort of fantasy township that he invokes when required, to back up his own deranged frontier-land values.

Beryl starts a conversation with me, in a diversionary fashion.

“How’s your room?”

Not much of an opener, and obviously grasped at in haste. I rack my brains. How *is* my room?

“Erm - it’s fine. We had some trouble getting in, with the key.”

This is about the worst thing I could have said, bringing up as it does the topic of keys and keyholes.. But either Beryl is a very cool cucumber indeed, or she was not my counterpart in the spying game, for she doesn’t bat an eyelid at this. In fact, she goes even deeper into dangerous territory.

“Us too. And what about the bathrooms! Isn’t it weird having those interconnecting doors!”

She must be innocent. I glance towards Alice, but she’s too far down the table to overhear our conversation.

“Are there interconnecting doors? I didn’t notice,” I reply blandly.

“Yes - at least, our bathroom had doors on both sides. I mean, why would people need to get from one bathroom to another?”

I shrug, suppressing a vision of Bacchanalian bathroom-parties in which crowds of naked revellers surge from one shower to another in promiscuous glee.

Beryl is arching an eyebrow at me.

“I hope you won’t be thinking of sneaking in while I’m in the shower!”

Bloody hell. I muster all my powers of gallant badinage.

“Just give me a double knock on the door, and I’ll know when to come through!”

Beryl smirks and bats me on the shoulder. I think I’d rather be fighting with Warren. Bob, on Beryl’s other side, has picked up on this ham-fisted flirtation, and brings things up to a new notch of subtlety.

“Give me double knockers and I’ll come in no time at all!”

Thank God some food arrives at this juncture. Beryl gives me a quick look that reflects poorly on Bob’s contribution to the conversation. Then we all become occupied in speculation as to the identity of the culinary offerings wafted silently into our presence by the ghostly servitors. Rosa, next to Warren, announces predictably “I hope it is not all meat dishes. I told Mr Bompus I am vegetarian.”

I suspect that, like the saying of grace in some circles, this refrain is going to be a regular prelude to all meals on this holiday.

We’re all hungry, and once we’ve helped ourselves to the various dishes, a relative silence falls over the table as we eat. The food is very acceptable - rice, roasted vegetables of different kinds, and some tasty curried meat and fish dishes. Even Rosa is propitiated by the rice and vegetables.

After a while, Mr Bompus makes an announcement from his end of the table.

“If, after eating, you would all please gather in the lobby, where it is very comfortable, I will tell you a little bit about this place, and about Makarooma, which we are going to be seeing tomorrow. Thank you.”

So, a little later on, we all sit in a circle of cane chairs around Mr Bompus, who has a pink cocktail at his elbow. I wonder if he’s supplied with cocktails on a grace and favour basis at all the places that we visit. The recollection of his momentary sadness at the lovers' fountain comes to me. Perhaps he is drowning a disappointment in love. Bob has treated Beryl and myself to some of the local beer, which costs about twelve pence a bottle – an appropriate price.

“Now then. Is everyone here? Very good. Well. This place where we are staying,” (here Mr Bompus waves an arm generously around the room, just missing the straw of his cocktail by millimetres) “the Makarooma Lodge, is a place of legends and mystery. You know that tomorrow we are visiting the ruined city of Makarooma, home of the ancient Pootaroomi emperors. Well, here in this place

where is now the Lodge, for many years have been stories of seeing the ghosts of the ancient Pootaroomi people.”

I resist the temptation to point out that these could have been sightings of the hotel staff, who are at this very moment gathered in silent white-robed observation at a little distance from us. The light of the oil lamps flickers eerily on their dark faces.

“All this land in this western part of Pootapuri was home for many hundred of years to the Pootaroomi people. It is said that although that civilization declined, and the people were eventually driven away, their ghosts still walk here and claim this land as their own. And so there have been some very strange occurrences here at the Makarooma Lodge.”

“I do like a ghost story!” Beryl whispers in my ear.

I sip my beer and reserve judgement. I do actually possess a slightly nervous disposition when it comes to things supernatural. I put it down to my rigorous Catholic upbringing, during which the fact that my every move was being watched and noted by supernatural beings was rigorously asserted by the various De La Salle brothers and assorted Jesuits through whose hands I had the misfortune to pass. Not only was my guardian angel lurking censoriously at my back all day long, but also God was stationed overhead, his white beard wagging sadly as I let him down time and time again. Furthermore, there was the Devil and his legion of evil spirits to think about. If I wasn't good, *they* would get their talons into me at the end of the day. No wonder, even all these years after throwing in the Catholic towel, I'm still a little subject to the heeby-jeebies in the dark.

Anyway, Mr Bompus is laying the ground for his revelations.

“Now, it would be taking very much time to tell you all these things, so I will just tell you two stories. The first is concerning when this Lodge was built, which was in the year of your Lord eighteen hundred and seventy.

The chief architect and builder was a man called Rafael Mungwadil. He was a very cultured man, whose mother was of the Italian top-drawer, and whose father was a very influential diplomat and politician. He was not the sort of person who would be superstitious or easily frightened. A very educated and professional kind of a person.

Well, they were clearing the ground here preparatory to the laying of the foundations for the building. One night Rafael Mungwadil was lying on his bed in the temporary little house he lived in during the project. It was a very dark and rainy

night, and he was reading by the light of an oil lantern - very like these lanterns you see here, which are very old lanterns. Suddenly he became aware that someone was standing in the shadows just outside the door to his bedroom.

‘Yes, what is it?’ he said, thinking it must be one of the workers coming to tell him something, even though it was a very strange time for someone to be visiting. Then he heard a deep voice from the dark shape. Rafael Mungwadil wrote that one of the strangest things was that it spoke in a very ancient form of the Pootapuri language, and yet he could understand it perfectly well. He felt as if his mind was being taken over by the deep voice.

The voice said ‘I am the High Priest of the Emperor Woomabab of Makarooma. I am come from the grave to tell you that you must not build here on this sacred ground, where is the burial place of the Makarooma warrior caste. So that you will know that this is true, I leave you this.’

There was a great thud on the floor, and the dark figure vanished as silently and mysteriously as it had come there. Rafael Mungwadil looked at the floor, and there, rocking gently on the ground where it had just been thrown, was a human skull!

Now, Rafael Mungwadil was very frightened. Although he was a rational man, he had the solid evidence of what had happened in the shape of this skull. Very much not liking to, he picked it up and quickly put it away in a cupboard. Then he spent a very restless night.

In the morning, he was not sure what to do. He paced around his little house in the early light of the dawn. He went to look in the cupboard, and imagine his surprise to find that the skull was no longer there. He could hardly believe it, but he decided that everything must have been a nightmare. He had some strong coffee, and went to the site where the Lodge was going to be.

In the middle of that day, the workers who were digging in the ground to make it all level found an old coffin of rotten wood. They called over Rafael Mungwadil, and with his own eyes he was seeing that they lifted out the coffin very carefully from the ground but it broke open because it was so rotten. And inside was a skeleton without a head!

Now, the workers did not like this, and Rafael Mungwadil was very frightened. But he could not afford to let his reputation as a rational man and a good builder be spoiled, so at that time he told nobody about his visitor in the night. Even

so, the workers refused to carry on, and for a time no progress was made on the Lodge.

But it was very important to the father of Rafael Mungwadil - the influential political man - that the Lodge should be finished. This man, who had travelled widely, and had married, as I told you, an Italian lady of the highest notch, wanted people from other countries to come to Pootapuri and to see how it was. Of course at that time his motive was to increase the trade with other countries. But in a way he was the father of tourism in Pootapuri, because he caused to be built various lodges and hotels.

So, he arranged that Tamil workers from India would come over and finish the building. Rafael Mungwadil, his son, remained in charge of the project.

Well, when they started work they found many more coffins and skeletons I have to tell you. The Tamil workers didn't like it either, but they were well paid, and they could go home and forget it afterwards. So they took away all those skeletons and buried them again a little distance away, in the forest.

So eventually this magnificent Lodge where we are staying was completed. But I have to tell you that Rafael Mungwadil never made another building. Because just after that he was in a very bad accident while riding a horse, and his neck was broken. The story about the headless skeleton was then discovered in his diary - he had never told anyone about it while he lived."

Mr Bompus looks around at us with an air of satisfaction, then takes a long swig of his cocktail. Everyone is a bit subdued by this tale. Personally I've got goose pimples as I look out from the verandah lobby into the dark trees beyond the wavering glow of the oil lamps. Somewhere under those trees are all the skeletons.

"That gave me the shudders, that story," Beryl says to me. "Just imagine that skull landing on the floor!"

"Bit of a shock, I would think," I agree.

But Mr Bompus hasn't quite finished with us yet. He drains his cocktail and resumes.

"Now then, one more story for you. Ever since the Lodge has stood here, there have been strange occurrences. In one of the history books of Pootapuri, our famous author J.K. Rowlisthani devotes a whole half of one chapter to the subject. But my second story is a very special one, because it is something that happened to me personally when I came here as a young man of about thirteen years old.

My family was not rich, but we were not poor, and one holiday time my father took my mother and me on a small tour, staying in the nice hotels. It was to celebrate a promotion that he had in his work.

Well, we spent the day looking at the magnificent ruined city of the Makarooma emperors, as you will do tomorrow, then we came here to eat our meal and go to sleep.

I had a bedroom next door to my parents. When it was bedtime I, like Rafael Mungwadil, lay in my bed reading a book until it was very late. Then I heard a knocking noise. I thought it would be my mother, knocking on the wall to tell me to turn my light out. So I called out 'Good night!' and turned out my light. I wondered how she could tell that I was still awake.

But after a little while, as I lay there in the dark, the knocking began again. It sounded like a bone knocking against wood. I didn't know anything then about Rafael Mungwadil or any of the other stories, but that was the idea that came straight away into my mind - that it sounded like a bone knocking against wood.

I called out for my mother, but very quietly. I was frightened, although I didn't know why. I felt too frightened to call out loudly, and too frightened to put my hand out from under the bedclothes into the darkness, to turn on the light. And the knocking went on. As I lay there, it seemed to me that the knocking was not coming from just one place all the time. It was moving about, sometimes away in a corner of the room, sometimes right underneath my bed.

I don't know how long I lay there. I was scared to death. At last, when the knocking stopped for just a moment, I suddenly threw off the bed covers, turned on the light, and ran out of the room to make a knocking of my own at my parents' door.

Well, of course at first they were quite angry that I was waking them up like that. But when they saw that I was frightened, they listened to my story. We all went back into my bedroom and waited, but there was no more knocking to be heard. But I was too frightened to sleep in that room any more, and my father had to exchange with me, and I slept in the second bed in the other room, where my mother was. And my father - he never heard anything at all when he was sleeping in that room.

Years later I read about the ghostly happenings here, and now I think that it was a haunted room. I remember now when I come here with touring groups never to go in that room.”

“Which room is it?” Bob pipes up.

Mr Bompus shakes his head. “Oh no! It would not be fair to be telling you that! But, I will tell you one thing...”

He leans forward confidentially. We are all hanging on his every word now, spellbound, fearful. He lowers his voice to a husky whisper.

“I will tell you this - last year there was a group here like yours. I was here with them. Someone in the party heard a sound like a bony knocking in their room at night. And in the morning, when they looked at their room, all the things in there had been moved around. And you know what? That was in a different room to the one I told you about!”

Mr Bompus leans back in his chair with an impressive and mysterious expression. There is a general hush for a few moments, and then everyone seems to start talking at once.

Day Three – later still – an incendiary incident.

I have to credit Mr Bompus with knowing how to play a crowd. But it's mischievous to curdle our blood with these chilling tales just when we're about to retire for the night at the epicentre of the horror.

"Another beer?" Bob says, pulling his chair around slightly to make a group with Beryl and me. I nod absent-mindedly, still thinking about Mr Bompus, but then realise that Bob isn't moving and it's my turn to 'get them in', as he would probably say.

"Same again?" I ask Beryl as I stand up.

"No - I'll have a coke this time if they've got it please."

I make my way to the bar. When I arrive at the counter, a white figure emerges from the shadows behind it.

"Yes please?" he says. His voice is little more than a whisper. He himself is so thin that a good wind would blow him away. His eyes shine with a spectral refulgence. With an effort I rein in my rampant imagination and speak firmly, as if to a mortal.

"Two beers and a coca cola please."

"Yes sir."

He gets the drinks and I pay him. As I'm about to head back, I realise that two trips will be needed.

"Would you like tray sir?"

"Yes, I'll have tray - a tray - please."

He produces a round plastic tray of a creamy white colour. He looks at it in an odd way for a moment before setting it down and putting my drinks on it.

"It will be full moon tonight sir," he confides.

I have to check this. He must have said something else.

"I beg your pardon?"

He points skywards, and following his bony finger I observe a ceremonial scimitar hanging unsheathed and glittering over the bar surface, like a crescent moon. One day, when the cords from which it is suspended rot away, some unfortunate toper will find himself separated from his drinking arm.

"Moon sir. Tonight, *full* moon."

“Ah? Really? Thank you.”

I pick up the tray and head off briskly. I don't want to get into any conversation about the significance of a full moon in these parts. I'm unsettled enough as it is.

“No, I've never believed in any of that sort of stuff,” I get back in time to hear Bob saying.

“I'm never too sure that you can dismiss everything,” Beryl replies. “Some things, surely, are beyond scientific explanations? Thank you Martin.”

I distribute the drinks and sit down again.

“Ah, well, there you may be right,” Bob says, pausing briefly to give his snout a quick dip in the fresh supply of beer, “but that's because modern science hasn't got the explanation for everything *yet*. There'll *be* a scientific answer there for every so-called supernatural event. It's just that our science isn't up to it.”

“Well, anyway, I'm glad I'm not sleeping in a room on my own here,” Beryl says, glancing over to the other end of the lobby where Alice has settled deep into a big cane armchair with a new book. This one has a bright red cover.

“How many books has she got with her?” I enquire.

Beryl shrugs. “That's her third one so far. She fishes them out of her suitcase, so I don't really know how many are left.”

“Do *you* get any conversation out of her?” Bob asks.

“She talks a little in the room, yes. But she doesn't say much about herself. I don't know where she comes from, or what family she's got, or if she's got a boyfriend, or anything.”

“Boyfriend!” Bob snorts. “I don't know how she'll ever get a boyfriend if she never talks to anyone.”

“You say she doesn't like hot weather?” I ask.

“Hates it.”

“Then it looks like she misread the brochure really, doesn't it? Group tour. Pootapuri. She must have meant to sign up for the Trappist holiday in Finland.”

We mull this over. Then Beryl adds a thought. “She's a very angry person. That's what I think. I think there's something smouldering away there. Perhaps it's because she's so overweight.”

Beryl could use a few of Alice's surplus pounds herself. Seeing them in close proximity puts one in mind of Laurel and Hardy. But she has probably had more

chance than any of us to form an accurate impression of Alice's character. As one of the objects of that smouldering resentment, I feel slightly apprehensive. I glance again over towards the red book.

"What sort of books does she read?" I ask

"Oh - they're all crime novels," Beryl replies. "She obviously likes to read about murder. In fact, the most animated I've seen her was last night when she was talking about 'the perfect murder'."

"What's a perfect murder?" I enquire.

"Well, apparently that's when there's very little to connect the killer and their victim. When the motive for the murder is quite trivial, or even completely arbitrary."

Suddenly Beryl jerks like a puppet being yanked into action by an invisible puppeteer, and slaps hard at her forearm. She examines the palm of her hand and holds it out for our inspection with a triumphant grin. There is a bloody corpse.

"Mosquito!" Bob exclaims. "And he'd obviously had a bit of a feed already."

He stands up. "That reminds me, I was going to light our mosquito coil in the room after dinner. I'll go and do it now."

While Bob is gone, Beryl leans forward confidentially and puts a hand - the unbloodied one - gently on my arm.

"By the way, Martin, since we're discussing Alice, she hasn't said anything odd. I did bring up the subject of your lucky escape at the tile factory, and she didn't bat an eyelid."

"But she must have said *something*, if you mentioned it. Didn't she?"

"Well - I don't want to make you dislike her..."

"I already do. What did she say?"

"Well - I don't remember exactly. But something like...do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"I think she said you were a clumsy gangling idiot, and you were bound to have accidents."

"Oh."

I sip my beer grimly, and Beryl, to change the subject, begins to tell me what she has read about the ancient city of Makarooma. Bob returns, drains his glass, and goes to the bar for refills.

Somehow or other Bob and I end up consuming quite a lot of beer. Beryl goes off to her room, and the lobby gradually empties until only the two of us are left.

Bob is trying to explain something financial to me. I'm nodding with what I intend to look like ready intelligence, but it's all a mumbo-jumbo of obscure acronyms and abbreviations.

"You see, if you use your CGT allowance every year in March, including of course any unused losses from previous returns, then put that in April into a new ISA, then you get a whole year's more growth in the ISA than if you leave it until the end of the tax year like most people do."

This sentence finally brings it home to me that I would prefer to be in bed.

"Well, that's very good advice," I mutter unconvincingly, and haul myself to my feet. Beyond the verandah, the barman's predicted full moon has turned the surrounding forest into a sinister backdrop of deep black shadows and mysterious silvery gleams. A slight wind has sprung up, and the branches of the trees wave sinuously like snakes, while the leaves hiss gently. The oil lanterns clank as they swing on their hooks, and the whole of Makarooma Lodge seems to be on the move, like a ship voyaging across dark waters. I clutch quickly at the arm of a chair as the ship gives a sudden lurch, and realise, belatedly, that some part of this nautical experience can be attributed to my intake of beer.

"Are you all right?" Bob says, with the odious grin of the accomplished drinker. "Not feeling a bit woozy are you?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

"You off to bed? Don't fancy one for the road?"

I shake my head and plot a course north by northwest towards the wing of the Lodge where our room is situated. There are shoals and rocks in the way in the form of cane chairs and potted plants.

"Oh well," Bob sighs, standing up "I might as well turn in as well. I've got the key anyway."

I make my way along the rolling deck towards the door of the room, with Bob in the rear. A trifling five minutes of fiddling with the key is enough to let us in. The room reeks of some sort of smoky incense.

"What's that smell?" I enquire.

Bob points to the mosquito coil, which is smouldering away in its little dish on the table between the beds, like a glow-worm.

“It’s nearly burnt out. I don’t mind the smell anyway - do you?”

“Not really. I just wondered what it was,” I reply.

“Better than being eaten alive,” Bob says. “Do you mind if I get to the bathroom first?”

“No.”

I sit down heavily on my bed as if on terra firma. But the bed too is a boat, bobbing on the waves of the wooden floor. Something dangles in front of my nose. It’s the cord that descends from the jellyfish above. I pull on it, and am enveloped in mosquito net. I struggle out of my sandals and lie back on the pillow, trying to will the room to stop moving around.

Bob comes back from the bathroom. “Sleeping with your clothes on?” he comments. I can’t muster a reply. I am now the jellyfish. I have no bones in my body. They have all migrated underground, where they mingle with the warrior caste of Makarooma. Bob says something about the ceiling fan, and I see its blades begin to whirl, like scimitars. Lizard shadows flee in all directions and the fan thumps the incense-heavy air of the room with a ‘woompah! woompah! woompah!’ beating sound. The skirts of my mosquito net lift, and billow in the breeze. Bob says something about a light, and there is a click, like a skeleton hand snapping its fingers. The room is plunged into darkness.

Not quite darkness. A shaft of moonlight strikes through a chink in the blind of our window, which gives onto the verandah. It creates a shining screen on the opposite wall of the room, a screen on which shadow creatures begin to appear. There are dancers, dancers with multiple arms and legs. They beckon me to rise from my mosquito shroud and join them, but my limbs are heavy and boneless, and I cannot move. Now come ghosts, gliding in and out of the moonlight - white figures in the darkness who transform into sharp hard-edged moon shadows on the white screen.

There’s Rafael Mungwadil, holding a skull aloft above his own head. There’s Mr Bompus in shorts and a schoolboy’s cap, clinging to his mother’s hand. There’s Margot my ex-wife with a rose gripped between her teeth, dancing a tango with Warren. Such a crowd, and they’ve all turned out to entertain me. What kindly ghosts!

But now a chill falls on the room. Something less kindly is coming in. It drifts from the direction of the bathroom. It is completely invisible, but surrounded

by an envelope of cold air. I desperately close my eyes and feign sleep. Perhaps it will not notice me. ‘Take Bob! Take Bob, not me!’ pleads a little silent voice in my head.

The cold ghost is hovering beside my bed. I can sense its deathly presence. Then, quite quickly, it flees back towards the bathroom whence it came.

There is a kind of “whoosh!” sound, and instantly the cold is turned to heat. I open my eyes and can see nothing but a sheet of flame all around me! I am transfixed. Is this a nightmare or reality?

“Jesus Christ!” I hear Bob shout on the other side of the wall of flame. The room light is switched on, and it dawns on my fuddled consciousness that my mosquito net is ablaze and I’m probably about to die.

“Christ!” Bob repeats. “Where’s the fucking fire extinguisher?”

Christ does not provide this information, and I hear Bob charging about the room like a herd of bison on the American plains of yesteryear. The bed beneath me, tinder-dry no doubt, is beginning to crackle. Smoke is filling the burning tent of the mosquito net, which, I foresee, will fall in upon me at any moment. This perception spurs me into desperate action. Emitting a yell of bravery, or panic, or both, I cover my face with my hands and roll through the fiery gauze and off the bed onto the floor. My eyes are shut, but I hear the thunder of bison’s hooves, and then Bob is beating at my nether regions with something soft - probably his pillow.

“You’re all right Martin!” he gasps. “You’re all right - just a bit of smouldering...there...”

He drags me to my feet and we rush to the door. Behind us, my bed is now fiercely ablaze, and the mosquito net, as I predicted, has become detached from the ceiling and lies burning on the bed’s surface.

While I’m looking back at this, Bob has wrenched open the door, and discovered just outside it a fire extinguisher. He pulls this off its hook.

“You go and raise the alarm at the reception desk! I’ll try to put the fire out!”

I do as I’m told, and stumble along the verandah. Two of the white-uniformed staff are sitting semi-comatose in chairs in the lobby area.

“Fire!” I shout. “There’s a fire in our room!”

They jump up, and one of them goes quickly behind the reception desk to emerge with a hand bell - the type of thing they used to signal the end of break time at school in my day. Clanging it vigorously he follows me and the other fellow

along the verandah. Lights go on and indistinct cries of alarm and enquiry can be heard in the rooms as we pass.

A certain amount of smoke is emerging from the door of our room as we approach. Then, clutching a handkerchief to his face, Bob too emerges, fire extinguisher dangling from his other hand.

“Got it!” he says, coughing. “It’s out!”

Looking past him into the room I can see that indeed there are no more flames. My bed is a charred foam-strewn ruin, but the rest of the room seems to have sustained no visible damage. The two staff enter, waving away smoke, and examine the bed carefully. One of them fetches a bucket of sand from somewhere, and the bed is doused liberally to ensure that every trace of fire is fully extinguished.

By this time all of our party and a sizeable gathering of hotel functionaries are on the verandah, conversing excitedly. Bob is explaining how my bed burst into flames and how he saved the day. Fair enough, he deserves his moment of glory. The manager of the hotel appears, buttoning up a white jacket over his bare chest. Together with Mr Bompus, incongruous in bare legs and a vest, he makes an official inspection and pronounces that the danger has passed, but the pitch is now unplayable.

Mr Bompus and the manager now turn their attentions to Bob and myself. A few people drift back towards their rooms, but most stay to hear the inquest.

“So, what happen?” the manager says.

I shake my head in perplexity. Did a ghost come and set fire to my bed? But Bob, to my surprise, seems willing to shoulder the blame as well as the praise.

“It might be my fault. I think that what must have happened is that the mosquito net caught fire from the mosquito coil. It had nearly smouldered down, but not quite, when we went to bed. It was on the bedside table, between our beds. With the breeze from the ceiling fan, what might have happened is that Martin’s net could have blown onto the coil. I don’t think you tucked the net under your mattress, did you Martin?”

In the state I’d been in when I got onto the bed, I could as well have tucked myself under the mattress. I shake my head. “I don’t recall tucking it in.”

Before anyone else can get a word in, Bob goes on the offensive.

“But these things are supposed to be made from flame-retardant materials these days, aren’t they? And also, there wasn’t a fire extinguisher in the room. I had to go out onto the verandah to find one.”

The manager has got the subtext of these comments in a oner.

“Quite so, quite so. Obviously the damage was not your fault at all in any way. It just one of those things, no? In fact I am most grateful that your prompt actions have prevented the fire from spreading further. In such historic building as this, with so much wood in the construction, that would have been a most misfortunate event.”

Turning to me, he observes “It was most lucky also that you were sleeping in your clothes, sir. This must have prevented burns to your skin when you were escaping the bed, not so?”

I nod, but I’m suspicious of the implication of this observation. Was the manager in the vicinity at the time when I was staggering drunkenly towards the room? However, even if privately he regards the fire as an alcohol-fuelled event, Bob’s timely remarks about fire safety precautions seem to have been well taken. He orders his staff to re-house us in a new room for the night, and the crowd disperses. Beryl speaks to me solicitously.

“Are you sure you’re all right Martin?”

“Yes, thank you. Bit of a shock, that’s all. Good thing Bob was there!”

“Yes.” She turns to Bob. “You’re a bit of a hero Bob! Well done!”

He shakes his head. “It was nothing. And I feel guilty about the mosquito coil and the fan. I should have seen that there was an accident waiting to happen.”

This modesty and willingness to shoulder blame has got to stop. I’ll end up liking the man if this goes on much longer. I shake his hand.

“Well done anyway, Bob. Thank you!”

Beryl and Alice return to their room. Alice glances back at me as she shuts their door. I don’t know if she meant me to catch the look or not, but I can read its meaning as plainly as if she had painted the words in bright red on a huge placard.

“Clumsy gangling idiot Martin Mallard strikes again!” the placard would read, and I’m starting to feel that it would be no slander.

Day Four – menacing monkeys of Makarooma.

I sleep poorly after my ordeal. By the early hours, my new found stock of good will towards Bob has been used up through listening to his persistent snoring. At the first light of dawn he's bobbing up and down doing his press-ups and his sit-ups and all the rest of it, and I can barely muster a grunt in reply to his cheery observation of "the phoenix arises!" I hope he's not going to develop a whole new line of *soi disant* humour based on the events of the night.

At breakfast there are one or two jocular remarks from others along the line of Bob's, but also a surprising display of solicitude from Lucretia Crawley.

"What a dreadful thing to happen Martin! Are you quite all right?"

"I think so, yes. Thank you."

"Thank goodness you weren't hurt."

"Yes. Better lucky than good I suppose, in my case."

We set off at about nine thirty in the morning from the hotel for the site of the ancient city of Makarooma, which is only a couple of miles away. Mr Bompus looks very pleased with himself, and I observe him taking a large sheaf of notes out of his shoulder bag and shuffling and rearranging them.

We pass through fairly flat countryside devoted to woodland and some rice paddies. In the latter, white cattle egrets stand about in disconsolate crowds on the look-out for cattle. The sky is overcast and when we're decanted from the air-conditioned bus, the air is thick with humidity.

An eerie fluting sound and a rattle of tiny drums announces the arrival of the car park's contingent of peddlers.

"Traditional Makarooma flute sir! Just exactly same as played in the days of the emperors. You see on carvings."

"You want drum sir? Very good drum. Pootapuri special drum. For you four hundred ranits only."

Other offerings include jade ashtrays, sunglasses, umbrellas and watermelons. Mr Bompus waves at the would-be vendors as if shooing bothersome flies, but they continue to follow at the heels of our group, harrying laggards and loners. Wilma buys an ashtray "for less than a dollar fifty" as she computes it.

Mr Bompus takes up a commanding position on a mound at the edge of the car park, and we gather dutifully around him.

“Here we are on first outermost earthwork approaching to the city. The city was first starting to be built in the year of your Lord four hundred and twenty approximately. Then it flourished until the year nine hundred and seventeen, when the invading Hascar peoples from the north drove away the population and destroyed many of the buildings. The Hascars never occupied the city for themselves, but they prevented the Makarooma people from ever returning. The site of the city extends over an area of more than six square miles, and at its height there would have been more than one hundred thousand people who lived in this city.”

“Baloney!” a voice announces loudly. Everyone is disconcerted, but most especially Mr Bompus. The surprising interruption has come from Brian the Beast. His face, or what can be seen of it between floppy white cotton sun hat, sunglasses and profuse beard, is a glowing indignant red. His cameras and lens cases bristle defiantly about him. He’s wearing one of those special photographers’ jackets with about two hundred pockets. Miranda shakes her head a little and takes half a step away from him.

Mr Bompus finds his voice.

“Below the knee? What is this *below the knee*?”

“Baloney!” Brian re-asserts.

“It’s a kind of German sausage. Like Bratwurst” Rosa offers.

Mr Bompus is pole-axed.

“Sausage? What is the sausage having to do with it?”

“It means *rubbish!*” Brian butts in, cheeks the colour of ketchup.

“Contemporary historical research has proved that the high estimates of populations in ancient Asian cities such as Makarooma are fallacious. The best estimate of the peak population of Makarooma is forty thousand people. That’s in P.P. Edwards’ unpublished research thesis *Makarooma - Paradise Lost*.”

“Pippy Edwards?”

Mr Bompus opens his shoulder bag and starts looking up his notes. There is something infinitely pitiable in his crestfallen fumbling, and I am not the only person present to direct a glare at big-head Brian. It’s nice not to be public enemy number one for a change.

“Never mind, Mr Bompus!” Edward Crawley puts in. “What’s a few thousand people one way or another? Carry on regardless.”

“Well - ahem. Yes.” Mr Bompus glances anxiously over at Brian, who looks about to take issue with Edward Crawley’s airy freedom with ancient populations. But Miranda gets hold of his arm and offers some counsel in a whisper.

“Anyway...” Mr Bompus goes on, “...ahem. Where was I? You will see that the city was very much centred upon the religious and ritualistic aspects of life. The Makarooma people followed an animist religion, which dictated very rigorous adherence to particular forms of worship. The priest caste was the highest and most important in Makarooma, exalted even above the warriors, as we can see both from the carvings which survive and also from the living accommodations which can be deduced to pertain to the different classes of persons.”

Mr Bompus has hit his stride again. Miranda has cleverly drawn Brian’s attention to a brightly coloured bird in a tree nearby, and he is feverishly fitting his telephoto lens onto his camera and making preparations to snap the creature unawares. His fiery redness is subsiding.

Mr Bompus gives us about fifteen minutes’ worth of general introduction to Makarooma and its citizens. I can’t help but conclude that they sound a rather bloodthirsty lot, having more in common with the Aztecs, Mayans or Incas of the Americas than with the Buddhist or Hindu civilizations of their nearest geographical neighbours. In particular they seem to have had a predilection for human sacrifice to propitiate various ill-disposed deities. We are promised the sight of numerous sacrificial altars.

At the end of this general prologue, we are led forward from the mound up a series of terraces on rising ground until we reach a crest. Here we stop and stare, as the extraordinary panorama of Makarooma spreads out before us.

From where we stand, the ground shelves gently downwards. Somewhere beyond, the land must take on a steeper tilt, for a vast blue plain of misty forest lies far below us. But filling the prospect immediately in front of our viewpoint is a great maze of walls and buildings constructed from huge slabs of honey-coloured stone.

Some of the buildings are in ruins, with trees dismissively shouldering aside the work of man to thrust through walls and roofs towards the sky. Others appear almost as they might have done when the city was in its prime, a thriving metropolis

alive with the bustle of human activity. Stupas, domes and columned temples tower upwards in profusion, on a scale that completely surprises me. Nothing I have read has prepared me for such a vision of grandeur.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Beryl says, coming alongside.

“It certainly is. I’d no idea it would be so big.”

“Just imagine! People lived here for five hundred years and then it was completely abandoned. Just forgotten about.”

“Makes you humble, doesn’t it?” I reply. “I mean, all this is over a thousand years old. What’ll be left of *our* civilization - our supermarkets and multi-storey car parks and out-of-town shopping centres - in a thousand years, if we all just disappeared tomorrow?”

Our profound reflections are broken by the resumption of transmission by Mr Bompus.

“Now, please to follow me most carefully to see the most important places here. It is very easy to get lost in Makarooma.”

Mr Bompus' glance, as he says this, seems to fall particularly on Rosa, and then, I don't know why, on me.

We make our way down a series of steps. A stone channel with a tinkling trickle of water runs beside them. Mr Bompus wags a finger at this.

“The Makarooma people were very adept at the hydrology. They devised complex system of tanks and canals which brought water to the city from hills in the east over seventy miles away.”

We arrive at a ruined building about the size of your average medieval cathedral. Its walls are reasonably intact, but there’s no remnant of a roof. Mr Bompus points to some heavily eroded carvings on the stonework to either side of the large gap that must have been the entrance.

“Here you can see that this relatively modest temple was devoted to the monkey. All animals were sacred to the Makarooma, who believed that the deities that controlled their lives took the shape of birds and reptiles and animals of all kinds. The type of monkeys which you still today find living in Pootapuri are the same as those Hanuman monkeys that live in India and all over this part of the world. Be careful if you come near them because sometimes they steal things like hats or cameras, and also they can bite.”

Beryl gets me to take a photograph of her with the monkey carvings. Inside the temple, which the rest of the party has entered, the droning sound of Mr Bompus' voice resumes. Beryl insists on a photograph of me with the monkey carvings too.

Returning the camera to its battered leather case, she says, "There was something odd last night that I meant to mention to you, after the fire business."

"Oh, what was that?"

"Well, it's almost certainly nothing at all, but it's been preying on my mind. I'll tell you anyway. After we'd had a few drinks together in the lobby, you remember I went off to bed before you and Bob?"

"Yes. So did everyone else too. We were up late."

"Well, Alice was already back in the room when I got there. She wasn't reading, she was just sitting on her bed looking rather thoughtful. I asked her what she was thinking about, just to make conversation, you know, and she said she thought you'd been spying on her in the bathroom earlier on in the evening."

I snort, quite convincingly.

"What on earth made her think that?"

"She said she was in there having a shower when she got this peculiar feeling of being watched. She went to that interconnecting door on your side and looked through the keyhole."

"That's *her* spying then, isn't it! How low can you get?" I use a tone of injured outrage.

"That's what I said to her - well, not quite. I did say that rather made her the spy, didn't it?"

"What did she say to that?"

"She said she was sure she saw somebody's eye peering through the keyhole for a second, and then it vanished quickly."

"Could have been Bob, I suppose. There *is* something a bit seedy about Bob."

"Hmm..." Beryl considers this. "On the whole, I'm inclined to think it's all part of Alice's paranoia about you. She seems to imagine you're watching her all the time, plotting something."

"Huh! I might say the same about her!"

"Anyway, that's not everything. What was odd was that after I'd got into bed and was lying there gradually drifting off to sleep, Alice got up and went into the

bathroom. She was in there for ages and ages. I kept waking up out of being half asleep and looking at her bed to see if she'd come back, but she hadn't. I got a bit cross, because it was keeping me awake, wondering what she was up to in there. It wasn't as if there was any sound of her showering or brushing her teeth or... well, anything. It was as if she was just standing in there, waiting for something. I was about to call out 'Are you all right?' just to let her know she was keeping me awake, but right then she came back into the room and got into bed. About two minutes later the bell was ringing, and we were all out on fire alert."

I'm horror-struck at the implications of this. I think of the interconnecting door, and whether or not it could have been left unlocked. Could Alice have come through there? There was also the gap above the door. I try to recall its dimensions. Could a large and unathletic person of Alice's proportions make their way through that gap, perhaps by standing on a chair? Her reported remarks on 'the perfect murder' come back to me. Has she emerged from the mind-warping cocoon of her crime novels as a potential murderess? Could she have deliberately set fire to my mosquito net? A cold shudder of fear runs down my spine, as if I were a character in one of those very novels.

Beryl looks at my ashen face.

"Of course, I'm not saying there's any actual connection, Martin. I'm just saying it was very odd."

"Did Alice say anything after the fire?"

"Yes. She did." Beryl looks solemn.

"What?"

"She said you were exactly the kind of person who would come to a sticky end one day."

After the Temple of the Monkey there is the Temple of the Parrot, and after that the Temple of the Bapuwapu, which is something like a mongoose judging from the carvings. Next, particularly grand, comes the Temple of the Cobras. Each of these temples apparently had their own priestly sect, who seemed to vie with each other in their sanguinary demands. The cobras even played an active role in the sacrificial process, and Mr Bompus seems to relish recounting what is known, or speculated, about the manner of these hideous rituals.

“To this day” he concludes, rooting about with his foot amidst the rubble-strewn pavement of the temple, “cobras are commonly seen around this building, the descendants no doubt of those who were worshipped here so many hundreds of years ago. Please do not approach the cobra if seen. It can be dangerous.”

Personally, I feel that the cobra, if seen, will set me in rapid motion in the opposite direction, not going up to it for a friendly how-do-you-do.

By this time, although Mr Bompus does not appear to have noticed, our party has thinned out a little. Brian and Miranda vanished somewhere between the parrots and the bapuwapus, and looking around now, I can't see Bob or Wilma either. It dawns on me that I too might prefer to experience Makarooma minus the exhaustive commentary.

I feign an untied shoelace, and emerge from the Temple of the Cobras a little in the rear. Keeping an eye especially on Beryl, who tends to shadow me, I await an opportunity to slip away. It soon comes, in the shape of an alleyway off to one side of our route. A pause, pretending to examine a carving on a wall, and then an adroit sideways scuttle, and I'm free. The droning sound of Mr Bompus's voice resumes at a little distance and then recedes gradually, like a bee going back to its hive. Finally, silence descends upon me and Makarooma.

I'm not a heavily contemplative type, but I do like to be alone with a place. Just as you can't really get to know a person if you meet them for the first time in a crowd, you can't really get to know a place unless you find out how you get along on your own together. At my first sight of Makarooma I felt that it was somewhere special, somewhere with its own appealing and mysterious aura. But anything charismatic about it had fled the remorseless factual bludgeoning meted out by Mr Bompus. The magic is still there, lurking offstage, and I hope I might sense it again now I am alone.

I make my way along the alleyway, between walls decorated with crumbling carvings. Here and there something has mysteriously survived the gradual obliteration by wind and rain, and the endless expansions and contractions caused by broiling days and cooling nights. A face, for example, here on my right. A man's face, although he wears earrings and necklaces and has full, sensual lips. Was this modelled on a real person, who lived here a thousand or fifteen hundred years ago? Was he a warrior, or a priest? Or a dentist, like me? A humble drawer of teeth. I stare into his stone eyes as if they could tell me.

At the end of the alleyway, I climb up a few steps and stand on a kind of platform. Before me is a tantalising new vista of walls and temples, stupas and towers in all stages of decay and decline. It seems to go on forever, and I feel like a small child who has just discovered a whole new playground of unfamiliar swings and slides and roundabouts, inviting him to run in and explore everything. My eye travels along a possible route, anticipating the pleasure of becoming absorbed into that alluring maze. I feel mentally attuned now, in real contact with the spirit of the place. This is more like it. This is the exotic, the undiscovered, the mysterious Pootapuri that called to me like a Siren from the Target Holidays brochure.

However, my delighted absorption is rudely broken by a giggle emerging from somewhere nearby. It's followed by the unmistakable Texan twang of Wilma's voice.

"Hey! That tickles!"

What the hell is going on? There is the low murmur of a male voice, and for a moment all I can think of is that she's engaged in some sort of deal with one of the vendors of bric-a-brac from the car park. But then she giggles again, and this time it's a fruity long-drawn out sort of a giggle. Not the sort of sound that would accompany a purchasing transaction. I am both baffled and annoyed. Every time I think I'm alone, there's some sort of private activity going on nearby. I sense satyrs and fauns frolicking all about me, while I plough my lonely monastic furrow. I can't imagine who would want to make Wilma giggle, or how they might be going about it.

Anyway, I'm determined not to be drawn into another situation like that at the Botanical Gardens. Martin Mallard, eavesdropping and voyeurism a speciality. I move away quickly and silently, in the opposite direction from what I take to be the source of the sounds.

After a few minutes I begin once again to capture that elusive sense of being somewhere unique and magical. I wander at random along ancient streets and alleyways, imagining the lives that unfolded amidst these stones. To be certain, it's not a life I would have especially envied, what with the constant threat of being sacrificed to some monkey or cobra cult. But it's nonetheless intriguing to imagine what it might have been like. I begin to feel surrounded by ghosts.

I come across a great rectangular basin the size of an Olympic swimming pool, which, although empty now, must have held water in its heyday. It's

surrounded by steps, and stone channels emerge from holes in an upper terrace and slant down to the edge of the reservoir. I sit next to one of these channels, and imagine the water running down into the tank below, and the sounds of the women of Makarooma washing clothes, or their hair. I close my eyes and listen to the faint voices of the ancient past, whispering in the stones around me.

After a minute or so I can actually hear chattering. Small, foreign sounds, dropped into the silence. And a scuttering sound. I open my eyes. I have company.

Half a dozen monkeys are gathered on the other side of the stone water channel, eyeing me curiously. There is a mother with a baby clinging to her neck, and four other adults. From the hole further up, where the channel begins, a couple more monkeys emerge. Perhaps that's where they live. They are about twenty feet away, and don't seem nervous at all. Their eyes scan me speculatively, and they chatter to each other quietly. The baby breaks loose from its mother's grasp and jumps over the channel towards me. Its eyes are as big as saucers. I almost expect it to request a pen, it has such a human look.

"Hello!" I say, fatuously. But my overture is welcomed. The little chap comes even closer. Near enough to touch. I don't attempt to do so however. Mr Bompus's warning about biting and theft is still fresh in my memory.

However, the little monkey has clearly received no such warnings pertaining to the dangers of approaching human beings. He seems keen to get better acquainted, and before I know it, with an ungainly scramble he's got onto my knee, and his little hands are exploring the buttons of my shorts. This is too much like my experience with Warren. I prefer to keep my shorts to myself, and attempt, gently, to divert the little fellow's attention by pulling a handkerchief out of my pocket and dangling it in the air off to one side. It works. He grabs the handkerchief and embarks on an attempt to eat it.

Mother monkey is chattering a little anxiously, and now comes across the channel herself, accompanied by her closest friend. Behind them, the other members of the group slink forward too. I am suddenly a little alarmed. One expects animals to have a healthy respect, and to keep their distance. These monkeys don't seem to have heard about this convention. I stand up, so as to assert my superior size and status.

Junior, instead of jumping down in terror, clings tightly to my thighs. I have a horrid apprehension that he might take a bite out of my groin, into which he has now burrowed his face. I attempt, gently, to disengage him. He holds on more tightly.

Mother monkey has now got the impression that I am about to make off with her baby. With an angry chattering, she gets behind me, to block my line of retreat. I try to turn. Too late. With sudden decisiveness she moves in and gives me a sharp bite on the right buttock.

"Ow!" I yell, in a voice that echoes around the empty tank. I'm seriously worried now. I've got junior poised to chomp off my todger in front, and Mum round the back, ready no doubt to bite me as often as necessary to get her child back. The other monkeys are circling, looking as if they would join in at the drop of a hat. For Christ's sake! Am I going to be done to death by this delinquent mob of monkeys? A final human sacrifice - a throwback to the good old days when the ancestors of this lot were objects of veneration?

As gently as I can, I get hold of junior's arms and start attempting to pry him off me. He's not having it. His little fingers grip my shorts like vices, and he buries his face and whimpers. I'm doomed.

Two bananas land on the ground a few yards away. They seem to have dropped from the sky. The effect on the monkeys is dramatic. Every one of them, including mother, rushes over and begins a lively squabble for possession. Junior senses that something is afoot, and looks around. At this moment another banana lands just at my feet, and junior lets go of me with alacrity and pounces on it. I back away quickly, before it can occur to him to eat it in my company.

My saviour is Wallabib, who stands at the top of the steps, a *deus ex machina* in immaculate creased and ironed white shirt and dark trousers. He waggles his head at me and smiles.

"Thank you!" I say, climbing up towards him, and away from the monkeys.

He waggles his head some more. "It is lucky I find you here!" he says. "You are in some danger."

"Yes. Thank God you turned up to save me from those monkeys!"

"No, not just monkeys. You are in danger."

I look at him sharply. He is not smiling now. His face looks very serious.

"Come away over here please, before monkeys come."

We move off at a brisk walk. Wallabib seems to look about him all the time, like one of those bodyguards who are always lurking in the background when you see a president or royalty doing a walkabout on television.

When he judges we have put enough distance between the monkeys and ourselves, he stops and looks at me again. Then he fishes something out of his trouser pocket and hands it to me. It's a little carved piece of wood about the size of a walnut, threaded onto something like a black shoelace.

"This is amulet. This helps keep away danger. Wear it around your neck all the time. Don't take it off while you are in Pootapuri."

I'm speechless. I look at the carved shapes on the smooth wooden disc. They are unfamiliar abstract symbols.

"Well - thank you. But why do you think..."

But Wallabib is moving away now. The interview is at an end. He points down a wide street scattered with broken lumps of masonry.

"You go that way. Mr Bompus just down there with the others. You go quickly. Not safe here."

And with these gnomic words he moves briskly away and is lost to sight around a corner. I stare after him for a few moments, wondering whether he had been watching me all along. In the enormous maze of Makarooma, it would be quite an unlikely coincidence if he had just stumbled across me at such a fortuitous moment.

Anyway, I put the amulet around my neck and tuck it down invisibly under my shirt. Might as well wear it as not. Then, with feelings that are a mixture of relief and defeat, I make my way back to the safe haven of my shepherd and the rest of the flock.

Bob is watching me as I write. I'm in a corner of the lobby at the Makarooma Lodge, and he's sitting a few yards away in the company of Warren, sipping a beer. He's asked me twice already why I need to keep such an exhaustive diary of the holiday. It's a good question. I don't *need* to at all. But I had intended from the start to keep a thorough record of my first extra-European lifetime experience, and it's grown into a compulsive need to describe the dynamics of the group as well as the events of the trip. Lurking at the back of my mind is the notion of working it up later into something more than a straightforward travel journal – maybe into a kind

of hybrid between a travel book and a novel. I could embellish things a bit, although God knows the events themselves have been sufficiently peculiar so far as to need no exaggeration. As a precaution, I'm keeping the notebook under lock and key in my suitcase at all times. I don't want Bob rooting about and finding my descriptions of him.

Warren is laughing uproariously at something and slapping Bob on the knee. Then he stands up and takes himself off, presumably to bed. Before I can get my head down into my journal again, Bob spots me looking at him, and wanders over with his unfinished beer.

"You know, I don't altogether take to Warren," he says.

"He's a nut case, in my opinion," I reply.

"He was telling me stories about his time in Vietnam," Bob goes on. "And then he was going on about how important it was to keep washing away his sins. He likes to get into water whenever he can. Getting re-baptized, he called it."

"Mad. I told you."

"Have you noticed he's a little anti-British?"

"Yes."

"I think he's got some sort of hang-up. He just told me about a swimming race he had with an English guy once, in his merchant seaman days."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Apparently he bet this guy he could beat him swimming across some bay. What the Englishman didn't know was that there were dangerous currents in this bay, and Warren had been swimming there before with local people and knew all about where they were."

"What happened?"

"Warren won. The other guy drowned."

"That's appalling – did he seem cut up about it?"

"The reverse – you see, this guy had been making some sort of disparaging remarks about the Americans in Vietnam. The way Warren told the story, it sounded like he thought it served him right."

After finishing our beers, we make our way back to our room. I'm lying in bed fifteen minutes later when it strikes me like a bolt of lightning that I've left my journal on the table in the lobby! I get up in a panic, trying to think who else was

around when Bob and I left. I can only remember that Edward Crawley was still up, sitting nearby and reading a book.

I slip into my trousers and throw on a tee-shirt. Bob mutters something, half-asleep, as I let myself out of the door and hurry along the verandah. Coming the other way is Edward Crawley.

“Ah, Martin,” he says. “You left your journal behind you. I got them to keep it safe for you behind the bar.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“That’s quite all right. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to lose it. Good night!”

I retrieve my journal from the pale barman and take it back to lock away in my suitcase. It takes me ages to get back to sleep, as I lie revolving in my head the question of whether or not Edward Crawley might have read any of it. I fervently hope not.

Day Five – the lake of blood.

The next morning, and we're all back aboard the Chariot of Fire once more. Beryl has taken the seat beside me as if by right.

"Do you have children, Martin?" she asks, more or less as soon as the bus is on the move. She must have decided that it's time to find out my secrets.

"Yes, the usual two."

"How old are they?"

"Eighteen and sixteen - a boy and a girl."

"You must have had them young."

"Thank you."

"No, really. You must."

"Well, yes. In my mid twenties."

"So you married quite young."

"That's right. Repented at leisure. Have you been married?"

Beryl shakes her head with a wry smile.

"Never been asked."

"Oh - surely ... "

"Well, not by anyone suitable. I did live with a couple of guys."

"What, at the same time?"

She punches my arm playfully.

"No - of course not. Years apart. What are your children called?"

"Mike and Samantha. Mike's the older one."

"Is he still at school?"

"Left last summer. He's at university now, studying history."

"And Samantha?"

"Doing A levels."

"And they live with their mother?"

"Yes. Well - Mike's away in term time now."

"Do you see them much?"

"Fairly often."

"So, you never re-married."

"No. Once was enough."

“And - is there anyone now?”

Where is this conversation leading?

“No. Not at present.”

“Me neither. I’m footloose and fancy-free.”

I look out of the window, a slight blush prickling my brow. If Beryl was expecting some gallant flirtation, she’ll have a long wait.

In a burst of crackling and feedback, Mr Bompus comes to the rescue.

“..... Falls of Likili.....highest waterfall in Pootapuri, with a descent ofmetres, or.....feet. It is close by the road, and we will only stop for a short time, so you can take photographs.”

“It’s a day of natural wonders today,” Beryl observes, after fishing her itinerary out of her bag. “The Falls of Likili, the Caves of Atarupi, and the Pinnacle of Watpindari.”

“Aquaphobia, claustrophobia, and vertigo,” I suggest brightly. I get another gentle punch on the arm for this sally of wit, and concentrate on the view from the window again.

The road has now left the flatlands of the coastal plain, and we are winding upwards into hill country. The cultivated fields and palm plantations have given way to forest, and the occasional rocky crag. The sky is a deep blue, and every leaf and branch of every tree bristles with light and shadow, as if cut out of some especially well-defined material quite unlike the slightly blurred and indefinite shapes of British vegetation.

We pull into the side of the road at the foot of a fair-to-middling waterfall, which thunders down from a precipice perhaps a hundred and fifty feet above us. The roadside is lined with folk for whom this watery phenomenon provides a tenuous commercial opportunity. Wilma scrutinizes the ragged little stalls as we disembark.

“Looks like they’re selling quartz. I could use a nice piece of quartz as a paperweight.”

Personally I could have derived ample pleasure from this waterfall by looking at it through the bus window as we drove past. However, while the photographers and shoppers of the group swing into their characteristic activities I take the opportunity to sit on a low wall beside the road and soak up some sunshine. The air feels a little fresher up here than in the steamy coastal plains, and the day has not yet

stoked up to its full intensity. It's very pleasant, just sitting. Idly I finger the wooden amulet given to me by Wallabib. I pull it off over my head to give it another good look.

"What is that you have there?"

Mr Bompus has crept up on me, his approach disguised by the booming noise of the falling water. He looks with interest at the amulet. I wonder if Wallabib would wish me to keep his gift a secret.

"May I see?"

Reluctantly I hand it over. He turns it this way and that, and peers at the carved symbols.

"Where did you get this? From the merchants at Makarooma? The people in the car park there?"

I imply acceptance of his suggestion with a slight nod. He gives a wry smile.

"It is probably a fake. Did they say it was a relic?"

"No. Not at all."

"Hmm - it is very well done. It could almost fool someone. But I don't think a burial disc would be so easy to come across. Most certainly a fake."

"A burial disc?"

"Yes. What did they tell you?"

"Er - nothing much. They said it gave you protection."

Mr Bompus smiles indulgently.

"These people - they don't know very much. They usually get it wrong."

"So - if that's not what it's for..."

"A burial disc. Very well done, for a fake. Traditionally in the Makarooma culture these were given to people who had died and were going to be buried. On them would be inscribed the requests of the living to the gods, so that when the dead person arrived in the next world, the gods would be able to give help. It was considered the most certain way to get a message to the gods. Actually, it is considered rather bad luck to have one of these when you are living. The superstitious would say that it meant you were going to die soon."

Mr Bompus chuckles pleasantly at this absurdity.

"But I am sure you are not superstitious, Martin? Please, do not be put off wearing your amulet!"

He passes the disc back to me, and wanders off to strike up a conversation with Edward Crawley. I put the thing into my pocket. I feel a little annoyed with Wallabib, although I suppose it's possible that he believed in his own version of the amulet's significance. I wonder why I am so concerned about a little wooden disc on a bit of string. For a moment, even in the bright daylight of this noisy spot, I feel a sense of lurking supernatural forces, the gods and ghosts of the island gathered invisibly around the living, watching enviously perhaps, or even intervening in our worldly affairs. A shudder goes down my spine as I think of the crashing piles of clay roof tiles, the burning mosquito net and the group of threatening monkeys. It's almost as if I were picked out, somehow. As if the ghosts of Pootapuri had it in for me. Wallabib has in some way sensed this, and slipped his personal requests to the gods into my hand before I take my final journey.