



A BIT OF EARTH

AN EXCITING SAGA FROM THE FIRST SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE WINNER

"Suchen Christine Lim has always had a sensitivity for time and place, and ... she brings her artist's eye and deft hand, working in broad and detailed strokes, to animate both."

Ronald D Klein
Hiroshima Jogakuin University

SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM

A Bit of Earth is an imaginatively rich and aesthetically accomplished novel. Lim's clever fusion of fiction and history, and her use of simple, supple, and controlled diction, enriched with occasional humour and a spattering of sparkling imagery, make the novel a brilliant, stimulating, and a compelling read.

Mohammad A. Quayum
*Professor & Head Department of English Language and Literature
International Islamic University, Malaysia*

A Bit of Earth is important both as a literary masterwork as well as a historical document telling in fictional terms the social history of Perak's Kinta Valley. It also has the virtue of being un-put-downable—a sure sign of a master storyteller, but over and above this, the novel affirms Suchen as one of the most important writers to have come out of Malaysia.

Wong Phui Na
Poet, Malaysia

A Bit of Earth chronicles the visceral and cultural struggle of a young Chinese immigrant to survive in an equally struggling Malay nation. His experience reminds us of the significance of origins, how it defines us as individuals and as members of our community. Likewise, this experience confirms how difficult and confusing it is to locate a liminal ethnicity within the diasporic and postcolonial contexts. The immigrant earns his bit of earth only by continuously re-inventing himself and by negotiating with the forces of history. The novel makes history personal. It is a joy to teach and a riveting read.

Lily Rose Tope, Ph.D.
*Professor, Department of English & Comparative Literature
University of the Philippines*

Astonishing tour de force. You have created a physical and social landscape and peopled it with characters with real human feeling on issues of political import as well as on the everyday strains of personal and social survival.

Martin Marriner
Poet, Scotland

I was very impressed by the range and scope of the novel—how you pack in so much very fascinating history. Also how you deal with the conflict within families as it relates to a political situation. Tuck Heng is a wonderful character and I was totally hooked on his particular story. And you bring the whole thing to a splendid climax. I enjoyed learning so much about other cultures and was sorry to get to the end of the book!”

Diana Henderson
*Poet & Writer
United Kingdom*

Her novel brings into sharp relief conflicts over colonization, nationalism, and community. The central question explored by *A Bit of Earth*—how individuals transform and yet maintain feelings of belonging in a rapidly changing world—is as relevant in Singapore and Malaysia today as it was during the time in which the novel is set.

Philip Holdstock
*Associate Professor
Department of English Language and Literature
National University of Singapore*

Suchen Christine Lim's *A Bit of Earth* depicts the emergence of national consciousness in nineteenth-century Malaya amid the engrossing, complex relations between multi-ethnic characters and their families. A compelling and dramatic novel that draws the reader easily into the life of its main protagonist Tuck Heng, the immigrant from China made good, *A Bit of Earth* deserves to be read for giving us a sense of a past not usually experienced in contemporary Singapore fiction and for provocatively getting us to question the way we make sense of history, what we remember and what we forget.

Angelia Po
*Assistant Professor
English Language and Literature
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A BIT OF EARTH

SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM



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To my grandparents who came from Tangshan, the land beyond the mountains of Perak, and to my farsighted mother, who made sure that I was sent to school.

And lest we forget where we came from, this novel is also dedicated to the descendants of Chinese immigrants—Tay Kok Leong, Tay Kok Kiong, Lim Chi Minh, Lim Chi Sharn, and Shannan Wong, and to the descendants of Straits-born Chinese—Ophelia Ooi, Ngiam Gek Kim, Juliana Lim, and the late Aileen Lau.

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SLASH AND BURN 1874



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I, Wong Tuck Heng, was born on the fifteenth of the seventh moon in the seventh year of Ham Fung, in my native village of Sum Hor, in the Canton Prefecture of Kwangtung Province. My father was Wong Tin Keng, the village physician ...

Chapter One

He went over one more time what he had composed inside his head when he was tossing in the middle of the South China Sea, in the *tongkang*, the barge which had brought him to this part of the world.

When I was thirteen years of age, my father, Wong Tin Keng, the village physician, was imprisoned and tortured upon the orders of a corrupt magistrate. This vile slave of the Manchu devils accused my father of being a member of the Heaven and Earth League, a noble society founded by the loyal sons of the Chinese earth to overthrow the Qing dynasty and restore the glory of the Ming throne. Because my father was a loyal son of the Chinese earth, he was tortured to death. Soldiers torched our family home. I was the only one who escaped death.

Then he shut his weary eyes against the splinters of sunlight bouncing off the waters of the Bandong River. Once again he heard his mother yelling, "Run! Tuck Heng, run!" She pushed him out of the door. "Aiye!" A fiery beam crashed down upon her. Instantly she was engulfed in flames.

Screams and the odour of burning flesh had pursued him for the next two years, turning his sleep into nightmares. Manchu devils had hounded him by day, and Memory Ghosts had devoured him by night. He had to watch his mother, brothers and sisters burn to death, night after night. Rough hands had stifled the screams that rose from his throat—hands of his parents' friends and relatives. If they had been caught shielding him, these brave souls and their entire families would have been killed. "Pull out the weeds, destroy their roots!" That was the edict issued by the Qing emperor for those who dared to oppose the Son of Heaven. To avoid the destruction of their families, many Chinese scholars had had to serve the Manchu invaders, his father had told him. "But not your great-great-grandfather. He left the capital and returned to our village, and we, his descendants, became doctors instead of scholars." This knowledge had lodged like a gold nugget in his heart ever since. Even as he had scuttled like a gutter rat, hiding in dark dank holes while making his way to the coast. After the fire, his sole duty to his parents was to stay alive, and this had sustained him and given him the tenacity to endure squalor, hunger and danger.

His dark eyes searched the Bandong River now for the silent lords—the harbingers of death. A large black log was floating perilously close to their sampan. Chan Ah Fook had warned him to look out for those evil beady eyes.

"It's the eyes; they're the only signs which give them away," he had whispered. "If not for the eyes, ah, you won't know they're crocodiles! And only a Malay boatman can bring us up the river safely. They've got special prayers and charms. But remember, once we're on the river, don't ever say the word 'crocodile'. You'll offend the beast. This land is full of jinns and spirits. Hill, rock, valley and river—all have guardian spirits. Newcomers have to be careful not to offend them. Understand that, don't you?"

And he had nodded as he listened to the old coolie in silence.

Their lone sampan inched its way up the river, pushing against the current. The boatman's oars sliced through the muddy waters in stroke after stroke, his eyes on the riverbank, ever watchful for the slightest movement in the thick foliage which fringed the river. The jungle guarded the water's edge. For miles there was nothing but an impenetrable wall of green, broken occasionally by a few brown huts built on stilts. Tuck Heng wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his coolie tunic. The

heat was oppressive. The silence on the river was beginning to weigh heavily upon him. River, sky and jungle for mile after mile. River, sky and jungle. He had come to the land of foreign devils.

White-skinned and brown-skinned devils had crowded the pier where Chan Ah Fook had met him. What a babble of tongues and noise then! And now this unbearable silence, as though they were in a cavern never before traversed by man. He muttered a prayer. Hidden eyes were watching them as he untied his queue, mopped his brow and rewound the length of hair round his head. Clutching his cloth bundle, he pressed it hard against his chest. His thin hard face looked older than his fifteen years. His brows were creased in a dark frown against the shafts of light bouncing off the river. The afternoon sun hung in the sky. Implacable like a god.

He fixed his eyes on the back of the Malay boatman. By the power of my ancestors, Malay devils, row faster, faster, he kept thinking and wished that the acute pain in his chest would stop. Let him live through whatever ordeal Fate had in store for him in this land of the brown-skinned devils. He pressed his cloth bundle against his chest. Harder, harder. He would cut off an arm or a leg if that could ease his pain. Curse this oppressive silence! Curse the Manchu dogs! The bastards! May they die without a place to lay their bones! Without descendants to mourn them!

“Psst!” Chan Ah Fook’s weather-beaten face came up close to his ear, his square jaw jutting out as he strained to keep his voice low.

“Throw this red packet into the water. Sweeten the guardians’ mouths with sugar. Pay your respects and tell them you’re new.”

Tuck Heng flung the red packet into the river and watched it sink into the murky depths. A sudden rustle of leaves. He started, his eyes searched the shadows. A monkey screeched. Then a flock of birds rose from the trees. The air was cool at this stretch of the river which was shaded by the jungle trees. The sun had dipped behind the dense wall of green by now. An uneasy silence settled upon the river with the onset of the tropical twilight.

“Watch out!” Ah Fook hissed. “Hakka dogs might set a trap for us here!”

His shoulders stiffened at this hint of danger. His nose sniffed the air like a dog on the alert. When a bright blue kingfisher dived into the water, his hand reached for the knife in his belt. But he relaxed when he saw that it was only a bird.

“Quick, quick!” Ah Fook hissed at the boatman in a tongue which sounded like gibberish.

But the boatman understood Ah Fook’s heavily accented Malay, and the sampan moved fast upriver.

“Nearly there. Keep your eyes on the riverbank.” Ah Fook switched to the familiar Cantonese dialect of their native Sum Hor and then, back to Malay, “Stop here!”

“You speak very well, Uncle.”

“In these parts you must speak the Malay tongue. Don’t fear shame. Open your mouth more. Soon you’ll be speaking like me.”

Their sampan slid to a halt.

Night had fallen by this time, and the riverbank was a mass of shadows. Tuck Heng thanked his gods and ancestors for his safe arrival. Clutching his cloth bundle, he stood up eagerly and jumped out of the sampan. Down he sank, knee-deep into the soft mud. Fool! He cursed his own stupidity. He clambered up the riverbank. Slipped. And climbed again.

“Shit up to your knees. Shit and mud. Symbols of wealth.”

“Shut your mouth!”

“Curb your tongue! Wait for Uncle here. I will lead the way. Show you where the dungholes are.”

The boatman's laugh and Ah Fook's words stung him. He loathed mistakes. They were signs of weakness. How could he have been such a fool as to mess up his first step on the new land! And he had fallen upon it. Bowed before it. A good omen?

“Humbled by the guardian spirit of this place, that's what! Be patient, young dog. Those who are too hasty, like your father, get killed. Follow me. I know this place like the back of my hand.”

Chastened, he followed Ah Fook down the path to the settlement. The moon had risen, and he could make out the dark shapes of the huts and the patches of yellow light beyond the bushes. There were many questions inside his head as they plunged into the wilderness. Before he could ask them, the night was shattered.

“You're in luck, young dog! They're going to drown the bitch tonight! Come!”

Chan Ah Fook raced ahead. The gongs grew louder. When they reached the village square, it was swarming with hundreds of miners and a sprinkling of women. Everyone had gathered in front of the temple, and the air was thick with Cantonese curses and obscenities.

“Drown the bitch!”

“Let the whore die!”

The men were pushing and jostling to get to the centre of the square. A miner swung his lantern above the heads of the crowd. “Throw her into the river!” he yelled.

“Not so fast!”

“The bitch must die a slow and painful death!” the men on the other side of the square roared.

“Whip her! Whip her!” the crowd chanted.

He shoved and elbowed his way to the front. Kneeling before the temple, hands tied behind her, the object of the crowd's wrath was splattered with mud and dung, and bleeding from several lacerations on her face and arms. She had been whipped, and the lashes had cut deep into her flesh. A purple gash on her temple had left a trail of blood on one side of her face. Miners, bare to the waist and sweating like workhorses, were pelting her with lumps of dung.

“Slut! Whore!”

But the woman showed no sign that she had heard. Her eyes were glazed and fixed on a point above the heads of the mob. Her impassive face was oblivious of her tormentors. A miner went forward and gave her a violent kick. She fell onto her side. No sound escaped her lips. She lay where she had fallen, an inert figure that drove the men and the few women in the crowd into a frenzy. More lumps of pig's dung flew through the air. One of them hit her in the eye.

“Ancestors, open your eyes! See the shame she has brought upon our village! We women of Sun Hor have a good name! But this she-fox has soiled it! Let me dig out her eyes! Her heart!”

A big-boned woman rushed forward and seized the bound victim by the throat. If the men had not pulled her away, she would have strangled her.

“Good, Ah Lai's mother! Kill her with your own hands! Your no-good daughter-in-law!”

“She's no daughter-in-law of mine! I curse the day she crossed my threshold!”

“Didn't you buy her for your idiot boy? Didn't you?”

“I was blind at the time! By the gods, I swear I was blind!” the big-boned woman shrieked, her eyes blazing with rage.

Throughout this exchange, the victim maintained a stoic expression. Is it strength or indifference, he wondered. He had never witnessed the punishment of an adulteress before, although he had heard

stories of how such women were drowned in rivers and lakes back home in Sum Hor. He peered at the woman as he would a trapped rat. Even a rat would shriek when tortured, but she neither cringed nor whimpered. Her silence incensed the mob.

“Whip the bitch! Whip the lust out of her!”

The women started to flail her with bamboo poles. The louder their men urged, the harder the women hit. It was as if they had to prove their own fidelity to moral law.

“Kill her!” the men ordered.

“Stop! By our ancestral laws, she must die by drowning!”

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“Tai-kor Wong Fatt Choy, Lodge Master of the White Cranes in Bandong. The man you must obey.” Chan Ah Fook had emerged suddenly at his elbow. “I will bring you to him when this trouble is over.”

Tuck Heng studied the broad unsmiling face of the thick stocky man. Big Brother Wong had a high forehead. His queue hung down his back like an emblem of his authority, unlike the coolies who had wound theirs round their heads.

“Brothers! We, the White Cranes of Bandong, are faithful to the laws of our clan and village—laws laid down by our forefathers in Sum Hor, laws obeyed by hundreds of generations. An adulteress shall die by drowning in a pig basket!”

His foghorn Cantonese voice rose above the cacophony, the voice of ancestral authority and continuity in the new land. The miners, uprooted from home and hearth, clung to that voice and obeyed it.

“Drown her in a pig basket!”

“Let me scratch out her eyes first!” Ah Lai’s mother lunged forward.

But the men yanked her away. One of them brought out a large cylindrical rattan basket used for ferrying pigs. Two miners held the basket firmly, while two others thrust the bound woman into it. The mob jeered and pelted her with stones. The pig basket offered her scant protection since there were large gaps through which the men could see her.

“Big Dog! Big Tree! Take her down to the river!” Tai-kor Wong ordered.

Two burly miners, heavier and taller than most of the men, stepped forward. Using thick twine they secured the pig basket to a bamboo pole and hoisted the pole onto their broad shoulders, the basket swinging between them.

“To the river!” Tai-kor Wong barked.

“Drown her! Drown her!” the mob started to chant.

There was a carnival air about the procession. Some men carried paper lanterns, some were beating gongs and tin pans, and the rest were cursing and swearing at the top of their voices.

“The sow slept with a Hakka dog!”

“Throw her into the river! No burial for her! Let her be a nameless ghost!”

No fate is worse than this, he thought. Dead and clanless. What could be worse?

Several miners poked and jabbed the woman in the basket with the sharp ends of their bamboo poles, hooting with wicked glee as she writhed in pain. The basket swung wildly between the carriers.

“Take this! Stick it into her!” A miner handed him a bamboo stick.

“Do it, young dog!”

“Give her a hard one!” Ah Fook’s voice ripped the air, yelling with the rest of them. A devilish

fever had swept through him.

The woman in the basket let out a piercing squeal like a pig being slaughtered.

“Good, good!”

They whooped and hooted like fiends from hell. A grizzled old miner thrust his hand into the basket and ripped off a piece of the woman’s clothing. He flung it into the air, and his mates roared and guffawed. They surged towards the pig basket. Eager calloused hands, starved for the touch of woman’s breast, thrust through the gaps in the rattan. They squeezed and pinched and groped. The basket swung wildly. Shrieks pierced the night’s foul air. They’d broken her silence! The mob hit the gongs and tin pans in reckless glee, mad malice glittering in their eyes.

The men plunged into the river with their victim. More men waded in. They beat the water with bamboo poles to keep the crocodiles at bay. Those on shore kept banging on their gongs and tin pans, calling on their ancestral gods and spirits to witness their righteous punishment of the adulteress.

As the pig basket was dropped into the river, a wild cheer rose from those on the riverbank. The gongs clamoured and clanged. Above the din, he heard a thin shrill cry. It sliced through his heart like a blade, and bleeding, he staggered back to shore, pushing his way through the mob.

Chapter Two

The village square was deserted. Only the temple was aglow with oil lamps and candles. Inside the thatched hut, some women were laying out bowls of food on the altar. He caught a whiff of boiled sweet potatoes. Heaven would be eating a piece now!

“What’re you doing here?”

The sharpness of the woman’s voice startled him. But he stood his ground, shoulders braced and eyes alert. The gaunt woman had a face like a bittergourd left to dry in the sun. Her coarse brown skin and deep furrows spoke of long hours in the harsh tropical sunlight. Looking at her, he was suddenly reminded of China. Peasant women, similarly dressed in shapeless garb, had given him food and shelter when he was on the run.

“Auntie,” he murmured.

“Never seen you before. Who are you?” Her voice was hard as nails.

“I’m Wong Tuck Heng.”

“Who brought you here?”

Another woman came towards him.

“Are you a Hakka dog sent to spy on us?”

The stout woman advanced, a meat cleaver in her hand.

He backed away.

“Aunties, I’m Cantonese, not Hakka! I’m from the village of Sum Hor!”

His eyes darted from one woman to the other. Six or seven of them. One was clutching a meat cleaver. Two had poles in their hands. Swiftly he assessed the danger. No chance of escaping unhurt there was a fight. He had to convince them that he was not an enemy. Beg them to believe him if he had to. Pride and arrogance counted for little if he were to die before his time. That was the one thing he had learned during his two years on the run.

“Aunties, I beg you, please listen to me! Uncle Chan Ah Fook brought me here. Ask him. If you kill me before finding out the truth, you’ll regret it for the rest of your lives!”

The women laughed till tears rolled down their cheeks. They shook their heads and wagged their fingers at him.

“What a talker! A dead man listening to him will come back to life!” the stout woman with the meat cleaver exclaimed.

“Stupid boy! Once you opened your big mouth, we knew you’re our clansman from Sum Hor!”

“It’s your accent. You can’t run away from that. And your thick black brows and those eyes. Just like your father’s. But ha!” the gaunt woman scoffed. “He was fair as a scholar. You? Brown as a coolie.”

The twinkle in her eyes and the smile on her face made him feel welcome. He gave a broad sheepish grin. The mob and the drowning had put everyone on edge, he thought.

“It’s all right. Just your anxiety, this being your first night in the new land.”

“I’ve been expecting you all day. Here’s a sweet potato. Your belly must be aching.”

“Thank you, Auntie.”

“Call me Wong-soh. Like everyone else.”

“Do you know who she is?” a woman, big with child, asked him.

He shook his head.

“You’d better respect her. She’s the wife of Tai-kor Wong.”

He put down his bowl and executed a kowtow.

“Wong-soh, please forgive my ignorance. I, Wong Tuck Heng, pay my deepest respect to you.”

“Get up, get up!”

Wong-soh laughed, her deep furrows bunching up at the corners of her eyes, which were half closed like curtains to hide the great pleasure she took in his kowtow.

“Our village doctor, the gods bless his spirit, has a respectful son,” the woman with the meat cleaver said. “Your father cured my father once. You can call me Aunt Loh.”

“My respects to you, Aunt Loh.”

“No need to be so polite!”

“But it shows what book learning can do for a boy. So different from the hooligans we’ve seen tonight.”

“Let the boy eat! We’ve got work to do. You sit there.” Wong-soh pointed to the bench.

He sat down beside the big-boned woman. She was sobbing quietly and took no notice of him.

The others returned to their work. They set out plates of boiled pork, chicken, sweet potatoes and yams before their patron saint, Lord Guan Gong, and their ancestors, whose names were carved on tiers of wooden tablets.

“Lord Guan Gong, hear my prayers! My heart is broken to bits! Ah Lai’s father, forgive me! Your good-for-nothing wife has no eyes!” The big-boned woman fell upon her knees before the altar.

“Ah Lai’s mother, you can’t be everywhere,” Wong-soh consoled her. “How could you have known?”

She tried to pull Ah Lai’s mother to her feet.

“Let me be, Wong-soh! Spirit of Ah Lai’s father, I kowtow before you. My fault! My fault! My fault!”

She banged her head upon the leg of the altar with each shout of “My fault!” The other women tried to restrain her.

“It’s the sow’s fault! She brought shame upon our village,” one of the women said.

“Lee-soh is right. Not your fault.”

“It’s your son’s fate. So many chickens in the coop and you chose this one for him.”

“Lee-soh, you’re so right! I chose the chicken so I brought the shame!” Ah Lai’s mother hit her breast.

“Let me die! Let me join Ah Lai’s father!”

“How can you say that?” Aunt Loh quickly brushed aside her ill-omened sayings. “Who is going to look after Ah Lai if you’re gone?”

“Ah Lai’s mother, do you have the heart to leave your son alone in this world?” Wong-soh asked her. “Men can fly off like the wind. But we women must remain to look after our flesh and blood.”

Wong-soh glanced at the boy on the bench. Her heart was aching for him who was not of her flesh and blood. Not yet. Not yet.

“My life is cursed! Ah Lai’s marriage was my reward for a lifetime of toil. His father’s hope for someone to sweep our graves after we’re gone. But that sow has cheated on our boy! Made him laughing stock!”

“How much did you pay for her?” a young woman asked.

Ah Lai’s mother lashed out at her as if she had been hit.

“Do you think I’ve been lying when I said I paid good money for her? That shameless daughter of a whore said to me, ‘Ah Lai doesn’t know what to do in bed. He’s dumb.’ ‘Why do you think I bought you from the brothel keeper?’ I asked her. ‘A woman like you ought to know how to teach my son. I don’t expect gratitude from you,’ I told her, ‘but I do expect to hold a grandson.’ And if you think of the money I’ve spent on her, I’ve a right to expect something back, right or not?”

“How much?” the young woman persisted.

“Fifteen silver dollars, that’s how much! Half of my life savings!”

“Aren’t we like small frogs never out of the well?” Lee-soh exclaimed. “Fifteen dollars. Big cartwheels to us. But loose change to the traders from Penang.”

“I know, I know. But how could I buy a nice girl at this price? So I said to myself, don’t worry. A girl from a good family might not want him, but a girl from a brothel will thank the gods if I offer her a good home. That was why I bought a used hen like her. Tell me, all of you, would you have paid more for her? Would you? Would you?”

“Calm down, Ah Lai’s mother.”

“No, Wong-soh! The butcher’s wife insults me, and you ask me to calm down? Are you taking the other side?”

“Ah Lai’s mother, I’m on nobody’s side. But as the saying goes, ‘Once a whore, always a whore.’ If we buy trash, we get trash, right or not?”

“Right! You’re all right!” Ah Lai’s mother screeched. “If I had more money, I would’ve bought him a good girl from China! But I’m a poor widow with an idiot son. Gods in heaven, I curse that bitch!”

“Ah Lai’s mother, let the dead rest!” Lee-soh looked as if she had more to say, but she went back to trimming the lamps.

“Say what you want, Lee-soh! Say it to my face now! Not behind my back later!”

“Ah Lai’s mother, did you know that Ah Fah used to cry her heart out? Each time we went to the river to wash clothes. ‘I’ll go mad soon,’ she said to me one day. ‘My mother-in-law is turning me into a madwoman.’”

The other women tried to stop her, but she pushed them away.

“Your son is twenty-eight this year. But inside his head, he’s only six years old. When you locked him in the bedroom with Ah Fah, he kicked and bit her. She showed me the teeth marks. And the lashes. You caned her every night, she told me. A mother-in-law is the sky and daughters-in-law are the earth. You can do anything to her as long as she’s under your roof. So she looked for another roof.”

Ah Lai’s mother was strangely quiet after that.



“Tuck Heng!”

He stumbled out of the temple.

“Where the hell were you?” Chan Ah Fook bawled at him.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Ah Fook. I was hungry so I went into the temple.”

“Stay close to me from now on!” Ah Fook turned and yelled at his men. “Look out for Hakl

dogs!”

Ah Fook’s dark brows were drawn forward over his eyes as he scanned the crowd filling the village square rapidly.

“Some things never change,” he said bitterly. “Thousands of *li* away from home and we are at war with the Hakkas again! Those blood-sucking parasites shouldn’t even be here. We were granted the right to mine in Bandong Valley, you know that?”

He shook his head.

“We were the first in this valley! Then it was just jungle and death. The *menteri* of Bandong had begged us to come here. The chief minister owed us large sums of money. To pay off his debts, he granted us the mining rights in Bandong. Then things changed. Those wily Hakkas bribed him. As the saying is, ‘Money can make the devil push your cart.’”

Tuck Heng cast a worried eye over the sea of faces. Hundreds of miners, thirsting for vengeance, could lead only to one thing, one huge almighty brawl before the night was over. People could be killed. He sighed. What an ill omen for his new life here! He’d hoped to find peace and safety among his clansmen in the new land.

“When do we begin?” a man yelled from the back of the crowd.

“Soon.”

“How soon? My beard is turning white!”

“As soon as Tai-kor Wong says so, you swine!”

Ah Fook searched for the hecklers. But the oil lamps and paper lanterns around the square had thrown an ominous yellow light upon the faces of the miners. How could he tell friend from foe?

“Some Hakka dogs are among us!”

Tuck Heng reached for the dagger hidden in the folds of his waistband.

“Got a knife?” Ah Fook asked.

He nodded.

“Good! If you see any of the Hakka maggots, use your dagger! You understand?”

He nodded, numb with fear. Let there be no fighting, he pleaded with the gods. No killing. No burning.

“On your knees and kowtow!” a White Crane guard yelled.

Ah Fook pulled him down beside him. “Kneel and do as I do!”

Big Dog and Big Tree stood on either side of the temple door like sentinels at heaven’s gates. Tuck Heng kept his eyes on the sea of kneeling men, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed out the miner’s bloodthirst. Drowning the adulteress had not appeased them. A multitude of voices rose from the village square.

“Kill the Hakka dogs!”

“Kill those who defile our women!”

The temple drums boomed.

“Master of the White Cranes of Bandong!”

Men bearing blue flags with the white crane symbol flanked Tai-kor Wong. His square bronze coloured face with its wide heavy jaws was unsmiling. He held three lighted joss sticks, their incense rising in white swirls above his head. He stood before the large stone urn in front of the temple and raised his joss sticks high above his head. The crowd in the square kowtowed three times.

“Lord Guan Gong! Hero of the Three Kingdoms! God of War! Protector of the poor and oppressed

Lord of courage! Prince of loyalty! Knight of integrity! We bow before thee!”

“Kowtow once! Twice! Three times! Rise and stand!”

Big Dog and Big Tree barked the orders in rapid succession in the time-honoured ritual of the White Cranes.

Tai-kor Wong stuck the joss sticks into the urn of ash, kowtowed three times and stood with hands clasped above his head.

“Lord Guan Gong, we kowtow before your lordship! We bow before you and offer your lordship our humble greetings! Please accept your humble followers’ kowtows!”

His great voice resounded through the square of three thousand miners as he intoned in formal Cantonese:

“Your Honour, please hear us, your humble supplicants. Spirits of our revered ancestors! The Earth God of Bandong! We beg your lordships. Please bend your ears and listen to our report on the drowning of that shameless sow who has defiled our village! Before you we stand, your unworthy descendants! We beg of you to accept our deepest regrets and our abject apologies for this blight upon the good name of the White Crane *kongsi*! We vow before your eminence that we will never rest! Not until the honour of the White Crane is restored!”

“Until the honour of the White Crane clan is restored!” the crowd roared like a sudden thunderclap. Roosting jungle birds shrieked in a rush of wings from the sleeping trees.

“Kill those Hakka dogs!”

The miners stamped their feet and punched the air. Vengeance fever was running high. Tai-kor Wong raised his hands for silence.

“My brothers, I know your hearts! The White Cranes have lost face! Not to avenge this loss is to invite the world to laugh at us! Like dung invites dung flies. The White Cranes will fight back! But not tonight!”

“Tai-kor, what are you waiting for?”

“Are we White Cranes scared of dogs?”

The voices had come from the far end of the square. Tuck Heng scanned the faces of the crowd.

“Quiet!” Tai-kor Wong bellowed. “Those sons of whores will not escape death! If I, Wong Fa Choy, fail to restore our honour, chop off my head! I swear before the gods!”

“Fight now or we’ll have your head!”

Ah Fook leapt onto a crate to get a better view of the hecklers. Tuck Heng clutched his dagger.

“My brothers, listen to me,” Tai-kor Wong went on, reason creeping into his voice. “The Hakka dogs are waiting for us to rush into battle unprepared tonight. But we White Cranes are no fools! We will show the Hakka dogs that we have the patience of a python. We strike at the right moment. They will swallow our enemy. Guts, bones and all! My brothers, return to your quarters. Your elders will plan the next move.”

Chapter Three

An air of self-satisfaction hung about him as he strolled through his large compound, trailed by a group of sycophantic retainers who kept a discreet distance between him and their lowly selves. The menteri of Bandong was known for his swift hand and quick temper. Many a man had had his throat slit or his face slapped because of an ill-considered remark. But that had not discouraged the young men who came from miles around seeking employment in the minister's service, for Datuk Long Mahmud was the wealthiest chief in these parts.

A strikingly handsome man in his late thirties, he was aristocratic in his bearing, with a high forehead and an aquiline nose with a neat black moustache beneath it. He carried himself like a warrior prince, demanding unquestioning obedience from his followers. Like his father before him.

As he strolled down the path leading to his residence, his eyes were coolly assessing the men putting the finishing touches to the *balai*, the audience hall he was building. His brown face gave nothing away except the impression that he would not tolerate fools easily. Strong men had been known to quake before him when he was angry. His reputation as one of the dashing hot bloods of Perak's nobility and his prowess in the Malay martial art of *bersilat* had spread as far north as Kedah where younger warriors uttered his name with awe.

Before his father's death, he had been a rake and a wayward wanderer, travelling to Penang, Malacca and Singapore, gambling away hundreds of silver dollars a night. Rumour had it that he often made up for these gambling losses by robbing a European vessel or two. It was no secret among those who knew him that he detested the English and the Dutch sea captains who had branded his Bugis relations as pirates and outlaws and had handed them over to the British navy for punishment. He was apt to remind his listeners that before the arrival of the Dutch and English, the Bugis were kings of the seas of Southeast Asia. They were the warriors and kingmakers, not the beggars and brigands the Dutch and English had made them out to be. However, such things no longer preoccupied him. Ever since his father's untimely death, the responsibilities of government and trade and the cares of looking after his family and clan had turned him away from all that. Now a territorial chief, he realised that a warrior's prowess was not enough. He must cultivate allies through sweet talk and wily deeds if he were to survive the intrigues in the sultan's court and maintain his hold on the Chinese miners in his district.

Two men were coming to see him that night. One was the son of the menteri of Larut, chief of the richest province in Perak, and the other was the Lodge Master of the Black Flag clan. And I'm reading he thought, pleased with the figure he cut. He was dressed formally to receive his guests. His maroon jacket of stiff Kelantan silk woven with fine gold thread shone in the evening light. The row of ornate gold buttons down the front of his jacket and the diamond rings on his fingers spoke of his wealth and good fortune. His trousers of stiff black silk, made tight round the ankles, were partially covered by a handsome sarong, which hung in graceful folds from the waist to the knees. Emerald green, peacock blue, gold and silver threads were cunningly woven into an intricate weave of ever-changing shimmers. His headdress was no less striking. It was a kerchief of stiff cloth, tied above his brow and folded over his head and arched up on the left, with a border of gold leaves. It was often reported that the menteri's attire was richer and grander than the sultan of Perak's.

Needless to say, every *penghulu*, every chief in the country had heard of Datuk Long Mahmud

wealth, and his power was reputed to be second only to that of the menteri of Larut. It had even been whispered that the sultan himself feared the Datuk and was beholden to him for numerous gifts of money and jewellery to the royal purse.

His swift ascendancy in the Perak court was naturally a worrying affair to the other chiefs, who suspected that there was more to his generosity than met the eye. His bloodline was impeccable. The descendant of a long line of noble families in the Celebes and Aceh, he was linked, on his mother's side, to the legendary Tun Perak, the greatest chief minister of the Malacca sultanate. This connection alone would have been sufficient to gain him the support and respect of all the common people.

And Datuk Long Mahmud was fully aware of the advantage of his noble lineage in times of trouble. He knew that his fellow chiefs feared his undue influence over the heir to the throne. Fools, he thought, such influence was empty without the backing of wealth and weapons! And he was not ready to make his move yet. First he had to build upon and expand his father's gains. Thanks to Allah's most gracious mercy and compassion, his late father had succeeded in persuading the sultan to cede to his family, in perpetuity, the whole of Bandong Valley, a feat repeated by only one other chief, the menteri of Larut. It was a legacy he had to preserve, he thought. And his eyelids drooped like a veil over his dark eyes, hiding all signs of what he might be thinking.

After a long time in which he seemed plunged into deep thought, he raised his handsome profile and sniffed the fragrance of jasmine perfuming the air in his compound. His eyes travelled to the distant hills surrounding his beloved valley. Bequeathed to him by his father. Bequeathed to his father by His Royal Highness. The land of his children and *Insyah Allah*, God willing, the land of his children's children and all their descendants. Not just an acre of earth for digging and planting, or measuring and selling by the white men and the Chinese.

He stopped at the foot of the stone steps. His home was an impressive building of white stone and teakwood, raised a few feet above the ground by stone pillars. It was a beautiful Malay-style house built on a much grander scale than the kampong hut on stilts. The only building of brick and teakwood in the country, it boasted a sloping roof of red tiles and eaves of carved wood. At the top of the steps was a spacious covered verandah fronting the main entrance. Elaborately decorated with carved beams of teakwood, it had a balustrade with an intricate floral design. Rich wall hangings and carpets from the Middle East, bamboo mats from Malacca, and silk cushions from India had turned the verandah into an audience chamber in which the Datuk received and dined with his guests.

Slaves and servants hovered about him. When he moved, their eyes followed him. When he stopped, they waited for a word or an order, their eyes anticipating his wishes. When he stopped at the foot of the steps, one of his female slaves descended in haste and knelt before him with head bowed and eyes lowered.

"Pardon, my great lord and master! Your most unworthy slave welcomes you home. Please pardon your unworthy slave for her slowness in greeting your lordship. May His Most Merciful and Bountiful shower His blessings on you!"

She removed his sandals with the reverence of one touching a sacred object. Then, using a polished coconut half-shell, she scooped water out of a stone jar and gently washed away the sand clinging to his feet. She knelt to dry them with a soft cloth, her lips brushing his feet lightly. He admired the suppleness of her body and the roundness and fullness of the breasts beneath her cotton blouse.

"Enough," he murmured and rewarded her with one of his rare smiles which she caught when she raised her eyes at the sound of his voice. But she hastily lowered them again and backed away with bowed head, profound salaams, and as many words of self-deprecation as demanded by custom.

“Come and serve me tonight.”

“Your unworthy slave hears and obeys you.”

More slave girls awaited him when he entered the verandah. One came forward with a towel for his face. Another brought a silver basin of rose-scented water for the washing of his hands before the evening meal. Two slave girls stationed themselves behind him, fanning the air with palm leaves as he reclined on a cushion. When their lord and master had rested sufficiently, more slaves came in. A rich meal of *nasi lemak*, rice cooked with coconut milk, and spicy curries of beef, chicken and vegetables was set before him. Oil lamps were lit and a rich warm glow flooded the verandah.

He ate slowly, relishing each bite as was his habit. Five or six slave girls fanned the air, while others waited on him in silence, discreet and alert to his wishes. It was said that among the chiefs of Perak, he owned the largest number of debt slaves and indentured labourers. So numerous that he himself had lost count. Thousands of peasants in Bandong Valley owed their livelihood to him and looked up to him as their lord and protector. When the rice harvests failed, he lent them goods and money. When they could not settle their debts, they offered him the services of their wives and daughters, who would then work as his slaves in his household. It was a practice sanctioned by law and tradition, and he had never questioned the rightness or wrongness of it. If fate had blessed him, he was obliged to provide for his peasants and collect what was owed to him. No more, no less.

“Good evening, my most honoured and respected Father. May Allah’s greatness and mercy always watch over you.”

“May He who sees all things watch over you too, my son.”

Ibrahim had the makings of a fine warrior. Fifteen years old, the son of his first wife.

“Come, share the evening meal with me. We’re expecting visitors.”

“Who are they, most honoured Father?” Ibrahim asked as he moved across the room with the padded stealth of a tiger.

He was a tall noble-looking youth with the same proud eyes as his father. His high forehead and smooth sun-browned face belonged to his Celebes ancestors, but the dignity with which he conducted himself was his mother’s, the daughter of a noble family of chief ministers.

“The chief of the Black Flag is coming to pay his respects and taxes. After that, the son of the menteri of Larut and his matchmaker. He wishes to marry your sister. Sit with me and learn. Insy Allah, you will take my place one day.”

“My most honoured Father, I thank you for your kindness and trust.”

“Is your mother well?”

“My mother asked me to let you know that she is well.”

He fumed in silence at the arrogance of his first wife. No greeting or words of respect for her lord. Just a message that she was well. Arrogant, wilful and headstrong, Tengku Saleha was the daughter of the chief minister of Pahang.

“Tell your mother that I wish her well,” he growled.

“Greetings, my lord! May His Most Gracious and Merciful bless you and your family! Your humble slave awaits your lordship!”

His face lit up when he saw the Kedah trader. Musa Talib was kneeling at the top of the steps, reeling off a string of salaams and other words of respect.

“Musa, my dear friend, come over here. Please sit.” He indicated one of the cushions. “You’re just in time to join us for the evening meal.”

“O my lord, you honour me. Please accept my thanks and gratitude. May Allah in His most gracious and bountiful mercy continue to bless your lordship and your lordship’s son!”

“May His great compassion bless you too,” both father and son replied.

“But first let this slave make his report. The Tuan Hakka of the Black Flag and his men are camped outside your lordship’s compound waiting to come into your presence. If it so pleases your lordship of course,” Musa Talib added hastily. He knew full well that all the Malay chiefs were very touchy about their dependence upon the Chinese miners for their income, and a go-between like him had to tread with great care if he valued his life.

“Ah, Musa, my friend. This evening it so pleases me to let the Chinamen wait a while. A little anxiety is not such a bad thing for our friends in the Black Flag, don’t you agree?”

He turned to Ibrahim.

“Remember this, my son. We can ask the Chinese miners to leave our land any time we please. Keep them waiting now and then. Otherwise they’ll think that they’re more powerful than us. Might they not, Musa?”

Caught off-guard, Musa could not hide the slight quaver in his voice.

“Your ... Your lordship certainly has a point there.”

“Your Hakka friend is Tuan Yap Kim How, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my lord ... no ... I mean no, my lord. Not friends. No, no.” Musa Talib shook his head emphatically. “That Hakka is an associate. Business and trade only.”

“Good, Musa, I’m pleased to hear that. You’ve done very well in your trading with your associate.”

“His Gracious Merciful has blessed me, my lord.”

“Come, my friend, let’s eat. Then we’ll talk to the infidels.”

“Thank you, my lord, thank you. Your unworthy slave thanks his lordship. May Allah bless you. You’re most kind to this unworthy slave.”

Musa Talib bowed low as he waited for the slave girl to fill his plate with fragrant rice. He kept his eyes on Datuk Long Mahmud’s face as he scooped up a ball of white rice with the stubby fingers of his right hand and put it into his mouth. He ate delicately and sparingly despite his great bulk. He was a big-boned man with chocolate brown skin. Everything about him was broad and generous, from his wide face to his flat nose and thick brown lips. His dark eyes were watchful as he ate, his jaw masticating upon a piece of beef, like a buffalo chewing cud. He had grown up together with the Datuk in those far-off days, before the Datuk’s father had acquired land rights, tin mining rights, revenue collection rights and trading boats to sail up and down the coast of Perak. In those early days, Musa’s father, the Indian-Muslim trader, gave credit and loans to the Datuk’s father. Musa and Datuk Long Mahmud were carefree young bucks then, out to have a good time together. But things had changed ever since the Datuk became menteri. These days, it was not often that Musa was invited to dine with the Datuk. He wondered what lay ahead for him this evening.

Datuk Long Mahmud’s face was a mask in the lamplight. It betrayed none of his thoughts about Musa, whom he referred to as the *Mamak*, when talking to his advisors.

But Mamak Musa would never betray that he was affronted by the derogatory name. Why should he be such a fool? Years of serving the Malay chiefs had taught him to be servile in words and wily in deeds. He was not ashamed of his own lineage. His Indian-Muslim ancestors had settled in Kedah more than three hundred years ago; Musa had even claimed with the pride of a rooster that his forebears had once exercised a strong influence over the affairs of state and trade in the royal court of the Malacca sultanate. But that, Datuk Long Mahmud mused, was typical of Musa’s hyperbole.

stories.

“Musa, my friend. You’re pensive tonight. Your face is full of thoughts.”

“Must be the heat. I’ve been walking too much, and this fat body of mine is tired.”

“Give our honoured guest some lime juice.”

A slave girl quickly poured out a tumbler of lime juice for Musa Talib who drank it gratefully.

“I’ve asked Ibrahim to meet you tonight. My son, Musa Talib is my friend. He and I have been through much together when we were young, reckless and fearless. Is it not, Musa?”

“Aye, those were the days, Datuk.” Then lapsing into the more familiar tone of friendship, he went on, “The days when our kris and swords were swifter than the thunderbolts from heaven. We banded together to drink the blood of those English dogs who plundered our land.”

They laughed at the memory of their exploits.

“‘My beloved land and home!’ you used to bawl at the top of your voice when you had one toddled too much, and I had to lug your fat body home.” And then, in a more serious tone, the Datuk went on, “So you see, Ibrahim, it’s important to have a few good friends in life. One like Che’ Musa here.”

“You do me a great honour, Datuk, to consider me a friend still.”

“Why, Musa, I’ve always thought of you as my friend. And because I consider you a friend of my family, I’m going to seek your advice on Ibrahim’s education.”

“Your lordship honours me. Your slave is not worthy of the honour. But as always, I’m at your lordship’s service. But please keep in mind that I’m only a humble trader, and this is something new,” Musa murmured, caution in his voice.

“No, no, not new. I’ve given the matter much thought. I intend to send Ibrahim to Penang. For a year or so. Insyah Allah, he might learn something valuable from the white man.”

“Learn from the English dogs in Pulau Pinang?”

Too late! He had dared to question the Datuk’s judgement and violated the rules of *adat* or custom.

“Pardon, my lord! Pardon your slave!” Beads of anxious perspiration covered his forehead.

“How many times have I told you that it’s called Penang now?” the Datuk chided him gently. “I’ve been told by Baba Wee that the English dogs even call it Prince of Wales Island after one of their princes.”

“Aye, begging your pardon and forgiveness, my lord! Your slave craves your pardon! As Allah is my witness, I am a Kedah man, and I can never bring myself to call our island by the white man’s name. Please forgive me, my lord!”

“Musa, as always you take things too much to heart.” Datuk Long Mahmud shook his head. “Come, my friend, let’s look ahead. That’s the way to go. Now about Ibrahim’s education. I’m thinking of sending him to the English school to learn the language of the white man.”

He went on talking as if he was unaware of the shock and surprise on the faces of his audience. Ibrahim would have protested vehemently had he been less well-bred. His face was impassive. But Musa Talib was vulgar. He questioned the wisdom of sending away the heir to the seat of Bandon. The Datuk’s second and third wives and his other sons might misread his intentions and create trouble for him. Besides, what could the boy learn from the white men who had robbed the Malays of their land? Land that is Allah’s gift to those born in this country? Sending the boy to Penang to be taught by Englishmen might make him half-white and half-brown.

“So you disagree with me, Musa.”

“No, no, no, my honoured lord! Please forgive your unworthy slave who has chatted like a silly mynah bird. This unworthy slave has spoken far too much. I forgot myself. Please forgive me, please.”

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