The End of the Flight

W. Somerset Maugham

I SHOOK HANDS with the skipper and he wished me luck. Then I went down to the lower deck crowded with passengers, Malays, Chinese and Dyaks, and made my way to the ladder. Looking over the ship’s side I saw that my luggage was already in the boat. It was a large, clumsy-looking craft, with a great square sail of bamboo matting, and it was crammed full of gesticulating natives. I scrambled in and a place was made for me. We were about three miles from the shore and a stiff breeze was blowing. As we drew near I saw that the coconut trees in a green abundance grew to the water’s edge and among them I saw the brown roofs of the village. A Chinese who spoke English pointed out to me a white bungalow as the residence of the District Officer. Though he did not know it, it was with him that I was going to stay. I had a letter of introduction to him in my pocket.

I felt somewhat forlorn when I landed and my bags were set down beside me on the glistening beach. This was a remote spot to find myself in, this little town on the north coast of Borneo, and I felt a trifle shy at the thought of presenting myself to a total stranger with the announcement that I was going to sleep under his roof, eat his food and drink his whisky, till another boat came in to take me to the port for which I was bound.

But I might have spared myself these misgivings, for the moment I reached the bungalow and sent in my letter he came out, a sturdy, ruddy, jovial man, of thirty-five perhaps, and greeted me with heartiness. While he held my hand he shouted to a boy to bring drinks and to another to look after my luggage. He cut short my apologies.

“Good God, man, you have no idea how glad I am to sec you. Don’t think I’m doing anything for you in putting you up. The boot’s on the other leg. And stay as long as you damned well like. Stay a year.”

I laughed. He put away his day’s work, assuring me that he had nothing to do that could not wait till the morrow, and threw himself into a long chair. We talked and drank and talked. When the heat of the day wore off we went for a long tramp in the jungle and came back wet to the skin. A bath and a change were very grateful, and then we dined. I was tired out and though my host was plainly willing to go on talking straight through the night I was obliged to beg him to allow me to go to bed.

“All right, I’ll just come along to your room and see everything’s all right.”

It was a large room with verandas on two sides of it, sparsely furnished, but with a huge bed protected by mosquito netting.

“The bed is rather hard. Do you mind?”

“Not a bit. I shall sleep without rocking tonight.”

My host looked at the bed reflectively.

“It was a Dutchman who slept in it last. Do you want to hear a funny story?”

I wanted chiefly to go to bed, but he was my host, and being at times somewhat of a humorist myself I know that it is hard to have an amusing story to tell and find no listener.

“He came on the boat that brought you, on its last journey along the coast, he came into my office and asked where the dak bungalow was. I told him there wasn’t one, but if he hadn’t anywhere to go I didn’t mind putting him up. He jumped at the invitation. I told him to have his kit sent along.

“ ‘This is all I’ve got,’ he said.

“He held out a little shiny black grip. It seemed a bit scanty, but it was no business of mine, so I told him to go along to the bungalow and I’d come as soon as I was through with my work. While I was speaking the door of my office was opened and my clerk came in. The Dutchman had his back to the door and it may be that my clerk opened it a bit suddenly. Anyhow the Dutchman gave a shout, he jumped about two feet into the air and whipped out a revolver.

“ ‘What the hell are you doin’?’ I said.

“When he saw it was the clerk he collapsed. He leaned against the desk, panting, and upon my word he was shaking as though he’d got fever.

“ ‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘It’s my nerves. My nerves are terrible.’

“ ‘It looks like it,’ I said.

“I was rather short with him. To tell you the truth I wished I hadn’t asked him to stop with me. He didn’t look as though he’d been drinking a lot and I wondered if he was some fellow the police were after. If he were, I said to myself, he could hardly be such a fool as to walk right into the lion’s den.

“ ‘You’d better go and lie down,’ I said.

“He took himself off, and when I got back to my bungalow I found him sitting quite quietly, but bolt upright, on the veranda. He’d had a bath and shaved and put on clean things and he looked fairly presentable.

“ ‘Why are you sitting in the middle of the placc like that?’ I asked him. ‘You’ll be much more comfortable in one of the long chairs.’

“ ‘I prefer to sit up,’ he said.

“Queer, I thought. But if a man in this heat would rather sit up than lie down it’s his own lookout. He wasn’t much to look at, tallish and heavily built, with a square head and close-cropped bristly hair. 1 should think he was about forty. The thing that chiefly struck me about him was his expression. There was a look in his eyes, blue eyes they were and rather small, that beat me altogether; and his face sagged as it were; it gave you the feeling he was going to cry. He had a way of looking quickly over his left shoulder as though he thought he heard something. By God, he was nervous. But we had a couple of drinks and he began to talk. He spoke English very well; except for a slight accent you’d never have known that he was a foreigner, and I’m bound to admit he was a good talker. He’d been everywhere and he’d read any amount. It was a treat to listen to him.

“We had three or four whiskies in the afternoon and a lot of gin pahits later on, so that when dinner came along we were by way of being rather hilarious and I’d come to the conclusion that he was a damned good fellow. Of course we had a lot of whisky at dinner and I happened to have a bottle of Benedictine, so we had some liqueurs afterwards. I can’t help thinking we both got very tight.

“And at last he told me why he’d come. It was a rum story.”

My host stopped and looked at me with his mouth slightly open as though, remembering it now, he was struck again with its rumness.

“He came from Sumatra, the Dutchman, and he’d done something to an Achinese and the Achinese had sworn to kill him. At first he made light of it, but the fellow tried two or three times and it began to be rather a nuisance, so he thought he’d better go away for a bit. He went over to Batavia and made up his mind to have a good time. But when he’d been there a week he saw the fellow slinking along a wall. By God, he’d followed him. It looked as though he meant business. The Dutchman began to think it was getting beyond a joke and he thought the best thing he could do was to skip off to Soerabaya. Well, he was strolling about there one day, you know how crowded the streets are, when he happened to turn round and saw the Achinese walking quite quietly just behind him. It gave him a turn. It would give anyone a turn.

“The Dutchman went straight back to his hotel, packed his things, and took the next boat to Singapore. Of course he put up at the Van Wyck, all the Dutch stay there, and one day when he was having a drink in the courtyard in front of the hotel, the Achinese walked in as bold as brass, looked at him for a minute, and walked out again. The Dutchman told me he was just paralyzed. The fellow could have stuck his kriss into him there and then and he wouldn’t have been able to move a hand to defend himself. The Dutchman knew he was just biding his time, that damned native was going to kill him, he saw it in his eyes; and he went all to pieces.”

“But why didn’t he go to the police?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I expect it wasn’t a thing he wanted the police to be mixed up in.”

“But what had he done to the man?”

“I don’t know that either. He wouldn’t tell me. But by the look he gave when I asked him, I expect it was something pretty rotten. I have an idea he knew he deserved whatever the Achinese could do.” My host lit a cigarette.

“Go on,” I said.

“The skipper of the boat that runs between Singapore and Kuching lives at the Van Wyck between trips and the boat was starting at dawn. The Dutchman thought it a grand chance to give the fellow the slip; he left his luggage at the hotel and walked down to the ship with the skipper, as if he were just going to see him off, and stayed on her when she sailed. His nerves were all anyhow by then. He didn’t care about anything but getting rid of the Achinese. He felt pretty safe at Kuching. He got a room at the rest-house and bought himself a couple of suits and some shirts in the Chinese shops. But he told me he couldn’t sleep. He dreamt of that man and half a dozen times he awakened just as he thought a kriss was being drawn across his throat. By God, I felt quite sorry for him. He just shook as he talked to me and his voice was hoarse with terror. That was the meaning of the look I had noticed. You remember, I told you he had a funny look on his face and I couldn’t tell what it meant. Well, it was fear.

“And one day when he was in the club at Kuching he looked out of the window and saw the Achinese sitting there. Their eyes met. The Dutchman just crumpled up and fainted. When he came to, his first idea was to get out. Well, you know, there’s not a hell of a lot of traffic at Kuching and this boat that brought you was the only one that gave him a chance to get away quickly. He got on her. He was positive the man wasn’t on board.”

“But what made him come here?”

“Well, the old tramp stops at a dozen places on the coast and the Achinese couldn’t possibly guess he’d chosen this one because he only made up his mind to get off when he saw there was only one boat to take the passengers ashore, and there weren’t more than a dozen people in it.

“ ‘I’m safe here for a bit at all events,’ he said, ‘and if I can only be quiet for a while I shall get my nerve back.’

“ ‘Stay as long as you like,’ I said. ‘You’re all right here, at all events till the boat comes along next month, and if you like we’ll watch the people who come off.’

“He was all over me. I could see what a relief it was to him.

“It was pretty late and I suggested to him that we should turn in. I took him to his room to see that it was all right. He locked the door of the bathhouse and bolted the shutters, though I told him there was no risk, and when I left him I heard him lock the door I had just gone out of.

“Next morning when the boy brought me my tea I asked him if he’d called the Dutchman. He said he was just going to. I heard him knock and knock again. Funny, I thought. The boy hammered on the door, but there was no answer. 1 felt a little nervous, so I got up. I knocked too. We made enough noise to rouse the dead, but the Dutchman slept on. Then I broke down the door. The mosquito curtains were neatly tucked in round the bed. I pulled them apart. He was lying there on his back with his eyes wide open. He was as dead as mutton. A kriss lay across his throat, and say I’m a liar if you like, but I swear to God it’s true, there wasn’t a wound about him anywhere. The room was empty.

“Funny, wasn’t it?”

“Well, that all depends on your idea of humour,” I replied.

My host looked at me quickly.

“You don’t mind sleeping in that bed, do you?”

“N-no. But I’d just as soon you’d told me the story tomorrow morning.”