

HENRI FAUCONNIER



THE SOUL OF
MALAYA

winner of the PRIX GONCOURT

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PLANTER

*Jikalau tidak Karna bintang
masakan bulan terbit tinggi*

*Jikalau tidak karna abang
masakan datang adek k-mari*

I

The anniversary of the armistice was celebrated in Kuala Paya by two minutes' silence and two days' orgy. But the orgy of the second day, which was a Sunday, confined itself respectably to the club and to the homes of the little Japanese girls who pretend to invite you in for tea, and only sober cases of drunkenness were met with in the streets.

I shall never forget those two solemn minutes on the Saturday morning; then it was I saw him—the man I had been looking for and never hoped to meet again. He appeared on the veranda of the club where the British Resident, the officials, and all the would-be important citizens, stood in frozen rigidity; and bewilderment was in his eyes. He ignored the nervous twitching of the club secretary's plump hand, and came and leaned against the railing. No one moved, but from the corners of their eyes they glared at him.

He stood looking out at the Sikh soldiers on the esplanade in front of us, sprucely drawn up on their slim legs, swathed in green and straight as young bamboos. They stood in the setting of a crowd as motley as the colours of their dress: brown Malays, black Tamils, Chinese whose lemon-yellow faces, beneath the equatorial sun, ripen perceptibly like an orange.

At that moment there was a rush for the bar. But I stood still, overcome with emotion, hesitating to approach one whom I cherished in my mind as I would cherish the memory of a dead friend. I had

abandoned the idea of seeing him again because he had not answered my letters, and because the planters regarded him as an unapproachable misanthropist; at least I thought I had abandoned it. Now I realised that I had preferred not to see him again. Those fugitive wartime contacts that suddenly revealed the abysses of a man's soul, are an estranging influence afterwards, from fear of the mechanical intercourse of everyday. Him I still pictured in the light of the flares that seared the treacherous night around us. We were alone in a shell-hole; a chance encounter on the evening of a day of slaughter. Our machine-gun post was stationed near one of those calvaries that stand just outside every Picardy village. There the struggle is hottest; much blood flows at the foot of a crucifix. At that moment a vast silence had fallen, and the stranger realised that I was overwhelmed by that awful silence. He spoke to me and asked me questions. He knew what I was going through. He probed my flayed soul with gentle fingers that seem to pour out a corrosive drug. He seemed pleased to observe that I was as empty as that plain was ravaged. I had lost faith, love, and even self-respect; I had gone beyond contempt, which still offers some support, I knew no longer why I suffered since I was indifferent to life and to death....

I fell silent again because I distrusted my voice, and it is ridiculous to talk heroics in a voice that trembles. I wondered if I were not like those old women who do not weep when they think of their misfortunes but only when they talk about them. The man's insight humiliated me and I felt ill at ease. But he, who understood, came to my rescue:

"At any rate you aren't one of those who say that it would not matter if one could be sure of getting out alive. A mean attitude. Listen, my young friend; it is delightful to be alive, and more delightful still to live on the edge of death.... Haven't you yet discovered that danger is only terrible at a distance? But here it is all around us, in the shadows, and it so enhances our sensations that the mere act of breathing is a joy. The moments of most perfect happiness are just those that are exquisitely precarious."

But this is a perversion of our talk; it did not consist so much of words, as in the unuttered implications of our silences. It was like a

direct contact between us,—a grasp of the encompassing world that lies beyond expression. But it is hard to recapture such matters afterwards; they are like a forgotten phrase of music....

Later on, I remember, he spoke of far off lands that he had known, of a free and spacious life in the great equatorial forests. In that life, too, there had been anguished moments. He told me of some great beast, tracked for days, that suddenly turns and charges its pursuers; of a canoe spinning out of control round the bend of a river, when the jungle tips and turns as though the axis of the earth had shifted.

"But why," he said, "are you so excited by such stories? They are no finer than this immediate minute, and they hold no more of mystery. This is the hour of surprise attacks when the darkness begins to lift. Before I have finished this sentence, perhaps...."

"Stop!" I cried; "you'll bring them down on us!..."

"Did you ever find yourself," he went on calmly, "in open country, standing before a line of sputtering machine gun fire? The whole earth quakes; you are helpless in the meshes of that network of steel. Then you suddenly have the sense of disembodiment, an exhilarating impression. That is what is called heroism. It is no more than that."

"Do you mean to say you enjoy war?"

"No, I hate it. You've missed the point. You might as well say I was anxious to die."

He got up and went off. Went like a man insulted. It was just light enough to see one's way and he disappeared down a trench half blocked by a long bombardment. I could now see, at the edge of my shell-hole, the grass stirring under the acid morning wind, and further away a helmet moving off at the level of the ground, and I thought: "It's a tortoise...a tortoise...." My head was going round, and my body was no more than a skin with nothing inside it. But someone brought me a drink that smelt of ether, and pierced like a cold keen blade.

That night of menace, and the dreadful days that followed, I can now recall without horror. Was it my encounter with the stranger helped me to the state of calm exaltation in which I endured them? Happiness in time of war consists in forgetting that you are a hapless,