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The mood of Merdeka

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BERKAT Tuhan (God's blessing). That was how Malaysians regarded the downpour which had drenched the Merdeka Stadium and delayed proceedings on the momentous morning of Aug 31, 1957.

"Everything was behind schedule," recalls 72-year-old Hugh R.M. Storey, "everyone was late."

But no one minded.

"The air was electric with excitement," continues the sprightly septuagenarian. "There'd been much upping and downing of flags on the Padang - now Dataran Merdeka - the previous midnight and, that morning at the stadium, all was alive with anticipation."

The nation on the brink of birth had looked forward to this day "with mixed feelings," he says: an eagerness to "get on with the job"; anxiety at the possibility of making a mess of it; pride at going it alone; and dismay - at going it alone.

"I was told, 'You'd better take a whole lot of gratuity when you get pensioned off'," he remembers, "'because it'll be mayhem in Malaya within a year.'

"But I didn't think it would - and I was right. I began drawing a pension in 1960 ... and I still do."

Why had Storey been so confident that the fledgling Malaya wouldn't come to grief?

"Perhaps I knew people better than others did," he smiles. "They were sensible people. And," he says quietly, "they were my friends."

"Malaya's was a damn sight better than some 'colonial withdrawals' I could name - absolute disasters!" he continues. "Here, there was no fighting; everything was orderly; no one was popped into jail. Well - the only people popped into jail were the ones who, years later, would be popped into it again by Umno!"

But on Aug 31, there wasn't a jail in sight. No discord marred the morning. Officialdom was decked out in suitably impressive finery, representatives of the Queen of England duly present and correct.

"Out they all came," recalls Storey of the scene at the stadium. "The Duke of Gloucester, uncle of the Queen, was in full military regalia. He hadn't fired a shot in his life, but because of his royal blood, he was some kind of general."

Everyone went through the motions, he continues with typically English understatement, and "Tunku Abdul Rahman shouted, 'Merdeka!' seven times."

"We shouted it, too - seven times, not three as the Press would have it ... but I was there, and they weren't."

And then?

"And then we all trooped off again!"

Born in 1929 into an upper middle-class family in the south of England, Storey was the younger of two brothers. His father - 62 when he was born - "didn't then do a hell of a lot"; but he HAD been a mining engineer.

The family, he recalls, "must never refer to the servants as 'skivs'; and must NOT be seen playing with the gamekeeper's boy."

"It was all quite tedious, and somewhat dull - and it could be devilishly cold!"

It was a rather lonely existence. And the Storeys' isolation deepened during the war, the family having retreated to the remote Welsh hills.

Their imagination fired by fantasies of the East, the brothers took

flight. Succumbing to the lure of foreign parts, the elder brother "knocked about the world for a bit, married a French girl in Paris and lives in the south of France."

Storey himself arrived on Malayan shores in 1948.

He was just 19.

Even before Emergency was declared, he explains, there'd been "problems with the Communist Party."

"But, in the beginning, things weren't really dangerous.

"At first, they hadn't known much more than we did about guerilla warfare - and we knew precious little of it. All we'd been taught was, 'down, crawl, observe, sight, fire', as on Salisbury Plain ... and that didn't get us very far in the jungles of Malaya!"

But, he says sombrely, by Sir Henry Gurney's time the danger was real - and everywhere.

"Gunfire," recounts Storey of the high commissioner's death at the hands of ambushing communists, "must've come down the middle as his car drove to The Gap to Fraser's Hill. Pak Din the driver was shot in the shoulder, but carried on. Private secretary Dennis Staples, in the passenger's seat, was untouched.

"Gurney leaped from the car down the embankment ... to draw fire, say his admirers, away from his wife in the back.

"He was killed instantly."

The high commissioner's wife was unscathed. Gurney lies buried in Cheras. Staples - "a nice chap", according to Storey - went on to serve in the Chief Secretary's department.

And Storey was later to make the acquaintance of the son of ... none other than Pak Din the driver.

Malaya needed a new high commissioner. And the high commissioner needed a new private secretary.

"The first time I met General Sir Gerald Templer," says Storey, "a Malayan was bleating to him that the country didn't want the British to leave. Awful suckerbums there were then!

"Templer looked down his nose and replied in the clipped tones of a first-class soldier: 'Young man, it doesn't matter a blue fart if you want us to go or not - we're going!'"

Templer, says Storey, was "fun. Firm, but fun."

Not so his successor.

"Sir Donald MacGillivray's private secretary told me Malaya's last high commissioner had once spent an ENTIRE day debating a point of protocol. The governor of Singapore was to visit; and MacGillivray dithered deciding whose flag should fly where!

"He was a bureaucrat, through and through. But he was a a damn fine civil servant."

Upon independence and the subsequent Malayanisation of the civil service, Storey had to resign, and reapply.

"They spat in my eye, naturally!", he laughs good-naturedly. "In the breadline" for six years, Storey would become president of the Malaysian Society of the Orthopaedically Physically Disabled. And he would receive Malaysian citizenship in 1978.

What does he think of the mood of Merdeka today?

"We're getting more and more like England all the time," he replies dolefully. "That first Merdeka, there was tremendous confidence in the Alliance. It garnered 90 per cent of the vote; one couldn't say that of the present setup!

"Templer made perhaps one speech a week. Today, politicians run around opening doors, windows ... anything you ask 'em to!

"And ours must be the most garrulous chaps in the world!

"I thought I'd hear about the Duck Race on the news; I thought I'd be told about Parti Rakyat.

"Instead, all I got was Likas!"

High commissioners aren't the only people he remembers of Malaya's heady early days, either.

"In Templer's day, Mahathir Mohamad was a fiery student at the University of Malaya in Singapore, writing furious letters in the Press about what he considered the appalling administration."

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