



LONG Road To MERDEKA

Kamarul Zaman Ariff



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Saudara Adnan,

Best regards.

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12.9.2020

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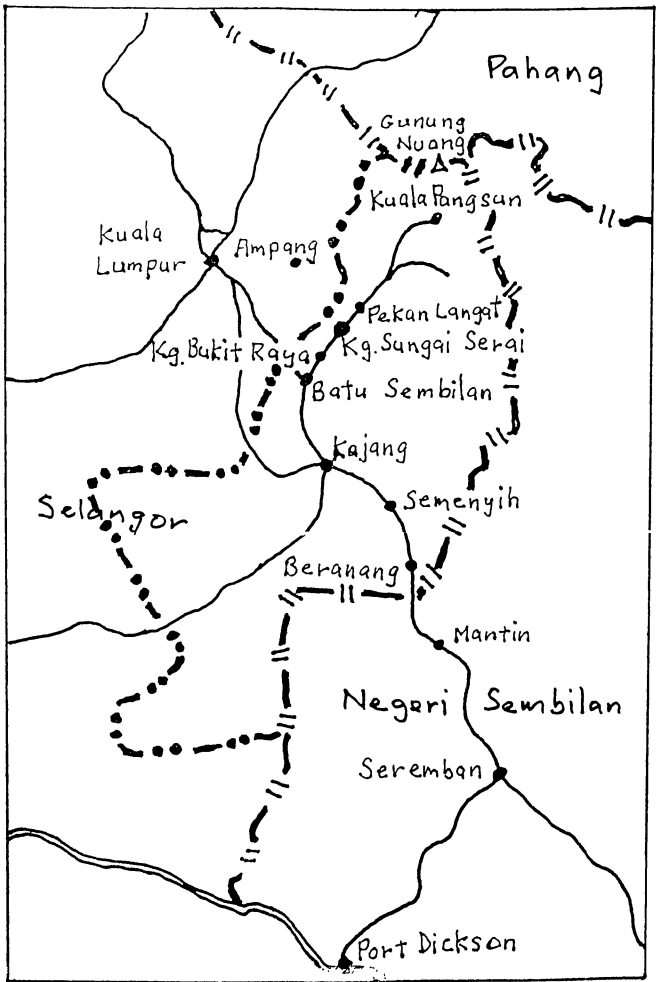
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Kamarul Zaman Ariff



Chapter

1

Omar lay on a thin mattress on the floor whimpering with fever. Near him sat his friend, Ananti. His face was slicked with perspiration and his whole body was aching. All he could do was stare helplessly at the ceiling above where he thought he could see a shivering energy moving in a circle. Occasionally, it reached down like an inverted geyser just above his face and he trembled. In his inner ear he heard an irritating sound – like that of a cricket. Shaken by what he saw, he closed his eyes. The shivering image still remained, this time in his feverish head. He knew it was something to do with his body temperature, but he was too weak to explain it to her.

Young Ananti looked at her friend. She had never seen him in such a miserable state. She was unsure if he even knew that she was sitting beside him. She touched his forehead. It was hot as if there was fire burning inside. So were his neck and shoulders. What was it that happened to him up there near the reservoir in Sungai Puteh Hill that she did not know about? Even if she knew, there was nothing that she could do to be of help. She hoped Uncle Latif would be here soon. Earlier that afternoon she had gone with Halimah,

Omar's mother, to Paya Indah, the village wetland, to ask for Latif's help. Calling upon Latif, the shaman, was not their idea. It was the suggestion of Saunah, Omar's mother, who had experienced such an illness once before. But Ananti wondered why Uncle Latif come only after dusk.

"He should be here any minute," Halimah said as soon as she appeared in the room.

"It's late. He should be here early."

Now they heard someone at the front door.

"Must be him talking to Grandma," Ananti guessed. Like Omar, the girl called Halimah's mother 'Grandma'.

Latif entered the room accompanied by Ismail, Omar's uncle. He brought with him a bunch of green bracken leaves, while Ismail came with three tender coconuts, the tops of which had been sliced flat so that the milky water could be extracted easily when required. Grandma Saunah, who came in from the kitchen, sat next to Ismail, her elder son.

Latif sat on the floor with folded legs close near Omar. He touched his patient's forehead with his right palm and observed him in silence.

"I think *demam panas*." High fever was all that Halinah could think of.

"Did you give him anything to drink?"

"Yes, he asked for cold water."

"Good."

Omar was feeling miserable and he whimpered more frequently.

"Where did he go before he became ill?"

"Up the hills near the reservoir with her," pointing to

Ananti.

“What were they doing there?”

“Collecting mushrooms.”

Ananti stared again at Omar. She remembered that it had rained for two days, and in the late evening the day before yesterday, the rain had ceased. An army of flying ants with fully developed wings found their way into her house, attracted by the lights from the oil lamps. Her mother had then told her that when ants fly out in great numbers from the highlands, it was a sign that edible white mushrooms will be there in abundance. Boiled in water and mixed with onions, tapioca powder, spices and a few grains of salt, the white mushrooms would make for a delicious soup. Satisfied with her explanation, Omar had agreed to take her to the Sungai Puteh Hill the next day. But that morning she was late. The sun was almost overhead when she arrived at Saunah’s house, and he seemed rather irritated, having waited for more than an hour. He had a cold at that time. She apologized and explained that her mother wanted her to tidy up the house before she left. He brooked no fuss and the two kids took the hilly narrow road leading to the reservoir a mile westward from the village. Popi, came as well, running ahead excitedly. The gradient turned steeper as they walked and she remembered Omar was panting by the time they came near the reservoir. There they left the road and entered the forest and after a while they reached an area where the trees thinned out slightly. From a distance they could see white mushrooms glowing softly in the filtered rays of light that penetrated the canopy. The mushrooms were growing

in wild abandon on the spongy ground and they picked the bigger ones that were not yet fully opened.

“About what time was this?” Latif asked further.

“It must have been after mid day.” Halimah saw no need to confirm this with Ananti.

“Did he stray away alone at any time in the forest?”

Halimah could not answer this, and Ananti exchanged glances with her. Since Ananti was actually there with Omar that afternoon, Halimah thought this girl could explain the situation better.

“May I?” Ananti said.

Halimah nodded.

“Go ahead.”

“Yes, he did, ... for a while”

“Where did he go?”

“Half way through picking mushrooms, he left me saying that he wanted to explore the surroundings. Popi followed him.”

“Who is Popi?”

“My dog.”

“Did he walk far away?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Did Popi bark?”

“He howled several times. I thought it was strange.”

“What happened after that?”

Ananti turned and looked at Omar, who was moaning. She followed his wide-eyed stare which seemed to go straight up to the ceiling.

“And then what happened?”

Ananti turned to the shaman again. “Popi returned alone, the hair on its neck standing up ... face looked agitated. It was quite a while before Omar rejoined me.”

Latif nodded to himself and then he looked at Ananti. “What did he do there, do you know?”

“I think he wanted to locate strange sounds - of some birds. When he came back, he said that there were migratory birds among the high trees.”

“Then what did you both do?”

Ananti was unsure if she should tell Latif what they had encountered. When they were about to leave the forest, a large iguana lizard emerged suddenly from a nearby old stump and startled them for a second. It seemed annoyed at their disturbance and was unafraid! It lashed out its long narrow split tongue, then turned its pointed head upward and strutted off into the undergrowth. She wondered if it had been a bad omen.

“Did anything happen after that?”

For a few seconds she glanced at Omar who continued to stare at the ceiling.

She decided to end her story. “We left the forest and returned home.”

“That explains it then!” Latif concluded. He turned to Ismail. “This is no ordinary high fever.”

Ismail seemed to understand and whispered to Saunah. She left the room returning soon with a basin of water and a small towel. Unbidden, Ismail soaked the bracken leaves which seemed to make the pool of water colder.

Latif said to Halimah, “Come, sit closer”

Halimah moved over nearer to Ananti and Latif placed the palm of his right hand again on Omar's forehead and looked directly into his eyes. The shaman muttered a strange spell and then suddenly blew out a pungent breath over the patient's face.

Everyone was shocked into silence and there was no sound except for the slow ticking of an old German wall clock in the living room. Everyone gazed at the shaman, and just then Omar saw a black beetle flew into the room knocking its helmeted head against the ceiling above. Seeming to feel some new discomfort, Omar moved his head from side to side several times and then ruffled his hair. Then suddenly - as he explained to Ananti a few days later - a shrill noise pierced both of his ears and, hallucinating, he seemed to see an angry old demon on the ceiling above.

“Didn't you see my grandchildren playing? You nearly trampled one of them!” the demon growled.

Omar remembered his Grandma once cautioned him not to stray away in the forest at mid day. A lot of forest spirits around. He became really scared and could feel his body temperature rising. He felt his head turned heavy as though a big rock was over it. He felt suffocated and thrashed a bout, and suddenly, heaving himself to a sitting position against the window, he vomited a dark greenish fluid into the darkness outside. It landed on Halimah's bougainvillea bush on the ground below. He then collapsed back onto his bed whimpering and looked up. The demon, like a vortex of energy, was still at the ceiling above peering at him.

Latif repeated his muttered spell over the basin of water

while gently and rhythmically rocking the green bracken leaves for some seconds. Omar thought he heard Latif's voice apologizing on his behalf. The shaman then placed a few more bracken leaves in the basin and, using the small towel that he had dipped in the bracken water, he wiped Omar's face, chest and the back of his neck. The bracken water seemed as cold as ice and with its touch Omar felt relief slowly penetrating his body and his psyche. He looked up again at the ceiling. The demon and the pulsing energy had disappeared, and the black beetle suddenly made its exit through the window! Ananti thought Omar's mesmerizing face turned normal again.

"Dip the cloth in this bracken water and mop him again," Latif said to Halimah.

Ismail then gave the basin to her.

"How often?"

"Every half an hour until his temperature subsides. You may replenish the water. But do not throw away the bracken leaves."

Next Ismail handed the three tender coconuts to Latif who muttered another brief spell. He gave a cupful of the coconut water to his patient. Ananti, watching closely, was happy it was not turmeric juice or some other bitter concoction.

"Give him a half cupful immediately after you have mopped his face," Latif added.

"Thank you *Abang*." Halimah called her cousin 'elder brother', a mark of respect.

Ananti now displayed a worried look as Latif and Ismail

were about to leave the room.

“Your friend will be all right in a day or two,” Latif said.

She touched Omar’s forehead for an assurance.

Outside peeping through the lattice window, a concerned gibbon gave a silent sigh of relief. She had been there before the shaman came. Sensing that the boy was now in good hands and would recover soon, she decided to return to the nearby Enggang Hill forest. He does not know about the spirits of the jungle, she muttered to herself. They can cause him all kinds of problems when he blunders on them.

Saunah accompanied the shaman and Ismail to the front door. Latif gave her a last minute instruction for Omar. As he was about to walk down the staircase he realized someone in the house was missing. He wondered why she was not around. He wished he could say hello to her.

“Where is Haniza?” Ismail said, before Latif could ask the very same question.

“She went to visit her aunt in Kampong Sungai Sekamat a few days ago,” Saunah replied.

They bade Saunah goodnight. Holding a torch of coconut fronds, Latif made his way to the road with Ismail. It was a quarter to ten.

“Let’s have dinner in my house.”

“Not tonight,” Ismail replied.

“I want to review the healing treatment with you.”

“Can we do it tomorrow?”

“I won’t be home.”

“Let’s go then.”

They turned to the Puteh brook and proceeded towards Latif’s house near the Indah wetland. Ismail sighed. It would be very late by the time he returned home. But he had better comply. He had been out the whole day. An active social worker, he had chaired the village committee meeting that afternoon on behalf of Haji Hamid, the Sungai Serai village headman or *Tok Empat*, who was indisposed. The meeting produced a unanimous decision to seek financial assistance from the District Office in Kajang - to enable folk with land holdings to plant rubber. Interestingly, the village committee known simply as JKKK, was divided into two sub-committees – Security, Development & Environment and the other, Welfare & Education. It had no legal power, but worked closely with the District Office and the village mosque committee. A few weeks ago, Ismail had heard that there was no longer official opposition to peasants and small holders planting rubber and this also applied to new Malay reserved lands in the whole district of Ulu Langat. And so he had brought the good news to the JKKK meeting. But still he had some doubts that the British Military Administration would have any financial scheme in place for the rural areas. In this first year after the Occupation, there were more urgent priorities that the Administration had to attend to. The village had to organize itself; look for its own funding.

But for the matter at hand, Ismail’s repeated requests to be trained in magical healing had made Latif less reluctant

to impart some of his expert knowledge. He would show no tolerance if it was misused, or if Ismail was less than keenly attentive. Latif was Ismail's elder cousin, his late uncle's son. His father was Saunah's elder brother. He was from a different *suku*, the matrilineal lineage identified from his mother's side; and he lived on an islet surrounded by rice fields near the Indah wetlands with his wife, Zaiton. Their home had a large *serambi*, an open verandah surrounded with potted plants that were Zaiton's pride and joy. There was a fairly wide compound where a few ducks and chickens roamed freely and Tompok, a white cat - with a black patch on its forehead - was also a member of the family. Folk in the village called Latif the *Bomoh Paya*, for he was a shaman of some repute, known to communicate with the spirits of the wetlands and river deltas. He acquired his healing ability from his grandfather, on his mother's side, in Lubok Karak, a village in the Minangkabau country of West Sumatra.

In the first two lessons, Ismail was given a general overview of how the healing process worked. One had to believe in the evolution of spirits which could inflict serious harm if not given proper respect. In the last two lessons, he was taught to diagnose simple illnesses and to differentiate the ordinary ones from those caused by spirits. But he took exception to Latif's method of teaching. It was not easy to learn solely from theory and he wanted direct experience. He wanted to be given a spirit to work and experience with.

Earlier that evening, after the committee meeting and before he had any knowledge of Omar's sickness, Ismail had rushed to Latif's house for his fifth healing lesson. The

evening sun in the Sungai Puteh highlands was holding on to its fading light. And in the eastern skyline, beyond Enggang Hill, a swarm of flying foxes was slowly approaching Sungai Serai village. As he reached the compound Latif was placing a bamboo pole, surmounted by a sickle, against a bunch of coconuts. Planted by Latif himself, the tree was a special variety, less tall than any other coconut trees found in the village. Its fruits were smaller and softer but contained rich milky water.

“*Abang* what’s that for?” Like Halimah he called his cousin ‘elder brother’.

There was no answer. Perhaps the coconuts would be for this evening lesson, Ismail thought. Once he had witnessed Latif using coconut water to heal a person’s illness. The sickle at the end of the long bamboo pole was anchored securely around the bunch of young coconuts and Latif taking a deep breath pulled the pole downwards. Four pale green fruits fell on the ground, but one burst draining out the rich milky coconut water on the ground, leaving only three.

“Get me some bracken leaves, please,” Latif said. Young and tender.”

“Now?”

“Yes, please.”

“For tonight’s lesson?”

“I will tell you later.”

Bracken, known in the village as *resam*, grew abundantly at the fringe which divided a nearby wild orchard, Dusun Paral, from the rice fields. When soaked they took out heat

from the water. Having collected a bunch of tender bracken shoots, Ismail walked back to his cousin's house. Latif was now dressed in his medicine-man's attire – a Malay-*baju*, *sarong* and a thin white turban - when Ismail returned.

“Where are we going?” Ismail asked.

“Your nephew is ill.”

“You mean Halimah's son?”

“Yes, Omar. Didn't she tell you?”

“I was at the JKKK meeting. I haven't been home.”

Halimah, was Ismail's younger sister, Abdullah's wife. Ismail was a little embarrassed that he did not know about his nephew's illness. Since Abdullah's death a year ago, it became his responsibility to keep closer contact with his sister and her only son. Unlike many in Sungai Serai village, his family still believed in the clan virtue of extended family.

Now as Ismail walked along the left bank of Puteh brook behind Latif - after the healing treatment - he remembered the flying foxes that flew towards the village just before dusk. They were of a deep jungle species with orange-brown on the nape of the neck and shoulders. With wingspread of nearly four feet, they were the largest bats that invaded the village during the fruit season. They roosted by day together on tall trees in the deep jungle near the mountain range, sometimes in hundreds. Shortly before dusk, during fruit season, they flew out to the villages and returned before daybreak. By this time the flying foxes must be busy feeding themselves on the *durian* buds and nectar. Generally, not all of the buds would be destroyed and those that survived and pollinated

would grow healthy. And there would be a lot left for the villagers to sell the fruits.

As Latif raised the torch higher its flickering light fell over the long weeds near them in the unattended rice field. They reminded Ismail of the forthcoming rice cultivation season. The fields would be ploughed, and before this could be carried out the brook waters would have to be harnessed as in the previous years. Ismail felt it would be appropriate to remind Latif.

“This irrigation thing,” he said. “I have arranged it this coming Monday.”

Earlier Latif had consulted one of his wetland spirits and had conveyed to Ismail the most appropriate time to build the dams.

“Whom have you informed?”

“For Sungai Puteh, those staying in this part of the village. I will remind them again after the Friday prayer.”

“Who will be coming?”

“Many. It should be a good turnout, as last year.”

“Yes, I will be there. What time?”

“About 8.30 a.m.”

As they approached Latif’s house near the Indah wetland, they were greeted by fireflies, which had spread about in great numbers. They left the brook and passed a small pond.

“*U-wak, u-wak, ... u-wak, u-wak, ... u-wak, u-wak.*”

It was the sound of a waterfowl. Elderly folk believed the cry was for its lost mother. It held its breath temporarily when the two men passed. A green frog jumped into the

LONG Road To MERDEKA

A friendship between a Malay boy (Omar) and an Indian girl (Ananti) during the troubled period of the Japanese Occupation and the communist insurgency brought about a unity of racial harmony to a small village in a thunderstorm prone sub-district near Kuala Lumpur. But they had to endure a heart-breaking trauma as a result of bitter rivalry between the shaman and a member of the village committee especially in the run up to the first general election of colonial Malaya. Keeping in touch with the flora and fauna of the valley where the story takes place, the author creates an emotional bond between a gibbon and Omar following an unusual incident.

Long Road To Merdeka also gives a subtle glimpse of how the founding fathers pursued the challenging task of preserving racial balance and political harmony as each political party at grass root level looked after its communal interest.

Note who the nostalgic General Sir Gerald Templer wanted to meet most at the momentous occasion of the proclamation of Malaya's independence (declared by the great Tunku Abdul Rahman) and his passing thoughts on the newly promulgated constitution of this multi-ethnic country having paved the way for the Kuala Lumpur municipal election five years earlier.

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