THE CROCODILE DIES TWICE

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CHAPTER I

Ali takes forty winks

The Botanical Gardens in Singapore are very quiet in the mornings. There are few people about, and the sounds are not man-made but soothing and restful. You hear the splash of fish throwing themselves about like jugglers' knives in the lake, birdsong, the scuffling of monkeys in their dark, leafy verandahs, and, high and regular as a dynamo, the note of cicadas.¹

In the afternoons more people arrive, and the sounds of animals and insects are hushed. Cars crawl into the Gardens in low gear: with magpie chatter and shrill squeals the Chinese amahs² and children begin to gather around the bandstand. At this time the Gardens are still comparatively peaceful, a refuge from the petrol fumes of the city streets and the hawkers' cries of Chinatown; but they are not quite as they were in the morning.

At no time of the day do they seem a likely setting for a scene of violence and terror; and yet it was here and in the morning that terror first revealed itself to Ali bin Mustapha. The Gardens were the starting point in which fear like a snake first uncoiled itself in his heart. And for the three weeks that followed Ali carried fear with him—until at last it grew as familiar and tame as the cobra that the snake-charmer carries in his flat basket outside the Adelphi Hotel.

Ali came to the Gardens about ten o'clock that morning. His headmaster had suddenly announced a school holiday to celebrate last year's examination results. This reminded Ali that his own examination was not very many months ahead of him. There were still large gaps in his knowledge which only hard study could fill. It seemed scarcely worth while cycling all the

¹ *cicada*, a winged insect which makes a loud, shrill noise.
² *amah*, (Malay word for) children's nurse.
way back to his uncle’s house on the fringe of the Bukit Timah Forest Reserve. His aunt would not be expecting him home so soon; and anyway a household full of young cousins, he had already discovered, was not a very suitable place for study, except at night when the children were in bed.

So Ali had taken a history book with him and cycled to the Botanical Gardens. He hid his bicycle in a clump of bamboos near the lake, padlocking the rear wheel. Then he set off on foot to find some spot where he might do two or three hours work without interruption.

It was a fine day. Sunlight dappled the surface of the lake and glittered on the leaves of the overhanging trees. The stretches of green lawn above the lake looked cool and inviting—but Ali felt that the restaurant near by might disturb his studies. He decided to put several hundred yards between himself and the temptation of iced drinks. He moved on in the direction of the Palm Valley. There are many trees and clustering shrubs in the Palm Valley, and he could be sure of finding a quiet, shady corner where there would be nothing to interrupt his work.

Ali settled himself at last on the grass at the edge of a patch of woodland where interlacing creepers and shrubs formed a kind of cave. A gebang palm screened the entrance with its fan of saw-toothed leaves. Ali opened his history book and began to read about Sir Walter Raleigh. But before very long he found that he was not concentrating on the meaning of the words he read. The shrill cicadas were singing around him, and the high, metallic sound reminded him of his childhood in the Johore forests.

Ali’s father, Mustapha, was a forest ranger in Johore, and he had always intended that Ali should follow him into the Forestry Service. Ali had proved himself a bright pupil in the kampong school, and the excellent reports his teachers gave him fired old Mustapha with a wider ambition for his son’s future. Ali should still enter the Forestry Service, but it should be as an officer. There was every chance, so the old people impressed on him, that

1 kampong, (Malay word for) village.
if Ali won a scholarship to the University he might become Director of the Department one day. And what a day of pride and rejoicing in the family that would be! But first of all Ali must go to Singapore, and study hard in a secondary school. He was to stay during the school terms with an uncle, also a forester, employed in the Forest Reserve at Bukit Timah.

It was more than six years ago that Ali, miserably homesick, had first come to Singapore and been entered as a pupil at Victoria School. Although he had grown used to the life there, he was still unsure whether he liked Singapore. He liked his school and had made many friends there. He liked his work—or some of it at least. He persevered as far as he could in those subjects he did not like, for he could not forget the many sacrifices Mustapha and his family had made to send him to school and to keep him there. But Singapore city, with its noise and bustle and glare, did not appeal to him. At week-ends he would escape, on long bicycle rides or walks away from the main road to places he knew of, which the tentacles of brick and concrete spreading over Singapore Island from the city had not yet discovered. Sometimes he would camp out with friends on the banks of the Seletar reservoir: sometimes he would accompany them on fishing expeditions among the small islands south of Singapore; and whenever possible he would join his Uncle Kassim on his routine patrols of the Forest Reserve.

Ali had learnt from earliest childhood to distinguish the many sounds of the jungle: and now above the insect chorus he made out the queer little broken song of a murai. He looked up, trying to catch a glimpse of black and white feathers through the leaves surrounding him. And then, with an effort of the will, he shut his ears to the sound and tried to give his whole attention to Sir Walter Raleigh.

For a page or two he read with attention. Even through the dry sentences of the history book Sir Walter was beginning to come to life for him. When he had finished the chapter Ali put the book down and lay back, thinking of Raleigh's last adventure
in the jungles of South America. Raleigh had been seeking El Dorado, the city of gold which (legend said) lay in the unexplored forests south of the Orinoco River. He had failed to find it and returned to his country to be beheaded at the orders of a covetous king, disappointed of loot.

Of course, Ali reflected, there had never been an El Dorado. One did not find cities of gold in the forest, or his father Mustapha would be by now a millionaire. El Dorado, thought Ali, only existed in the imagination. El Dorado was the ideal that lay beyond the spirit of adventure and the thirst for knowledge. People sought it all their lives along different roads.

Mustapha's life had brought him many adventures. Ali remembered the stories his father had told him in childhood. There had been tales of man-eating tigers which Mustapha had tracked and killed; stories of Mustapha's fight with the gang of opium smugglers who had made their headquarters in the forest. Ali was not too young to remember the Japanese invasion. He had even helped to carry food to two English soldiers, cut off from their unit by the rapid Japanese advance. Mustapha had hidden them for several weeks in a woodman's hut and at last guided them safely through the jungle to the coast.

For Ali, Mustapha had mapped a different road to El Dorado. A more boring road, it seemed to Ali. He was to become a Director of the Forestry Department, and to do that he must study Empire History for the Cambridge School Certificate. He must learn facts and dates.

Ali picked up his book again, and tried to get the dates by heart. It was a boring business. It was as much as he could do to prevent the book slipping from his fingers. 'In 1608 Raleigh . . .' 1608. 1608! He must remember that. The examiners would not want to know what Ali thought about Raleigh, or Raleigh might think about Ali: they would look for facts and dates.

The murai had drawn closer. He could hear the little cascade of notes very clearly. The small singer must be concealed only a few feet away among the bushes.
Ali closed his eyes. The book slid from his fingers and fell, its pages spread open on the grass beside him. He did not pick it up. He had forgotten about dates and facts. He was even beginning to confuse Sir Walter Raleigh with Mustapha. He was seeking for El Dorado with Sir Walter Mustapha in the jungles of Johore. . . .

Ali shook himself. He was feeling very drowsy. It would never do to fall asleep. He would lie with his eyes closed until he had counted up to forty, and then he would pick up his book again. Forty . . . winks . . . Sixteen hundred . . . and eight . . . winks! Ali slept.

CHAPTER II

A body, a book and three thieves

Ali awoke, startled out of sleep. He had heard, in the instant of waking, a cry—a cry for help strangled short. He sat up, listening intently—but now there was only silence around him. The patches of sky he could see between the leaves were a dark purplish grey, like a great bruise. While he slept a storm had been blowing up. The Gardens were smothered in the heavy silence that precedes a tropical storm. There was no sound of insect or beast or bird. It was as if the earth lay holding its breath, waiting for the downpour.

Ali too held his breath and listened. The cry was not repeated. Perhaps, thought Ali, the shout had been part of his dream. Perhaps it was his own cry as he struggled to wake out of nightmare. But, if that were so, he could recall no detail of the dream that had disturbed him. The cry he could remember with perfect distinctness. It seemed to echo still inside his skull: a high scream
for help—a man's voice—followed by a horrible choking, sobbing sound. Then as Ali sat upright he was aware only of the weird, suffocating silence, the tingling, electrified air that foretold a storm.

Ali was just about to set off for shelter before the rain should begin when another sound held him to the spot, the sound of voices that seemed to come from just the other side of the bush which formed the right-hand wall of his leafy 'cave'. For a moment he remained paralysed, a crouching statue; then, very quietly, he wriggled to a gap in the foliage by the roots of the shrub, and lay still as a lizard, peering through the leaves.

It took a second or two for his eyes to grow used to the gloom of the shadowed woodland on the farther side of the bush beneath which he lay. Then he saw... and he had to choke back a cry that must have betrayed him.

It was the dead man's face he saw first, so near he could almost have touched it. The head was thrown back, and the bitten tongue appeared between the yellow teeth and the whiter lips. The eyes stared hideously. Ali had no doubt at all, in that first second, that the man was dead. By his clothes Ali guessed the dead man was Chinese—though the livid, twisted face might have belonged to any race. Little that was human remained in that awful mask.

Bent over the body, and with their backs turned to Ali, were two men. They were going through the dead man's pockets—searching in feverish silence among the ragged, blue clothes, ripping the cloth in their haste.

In the shock of his discovery Ali felt faint. But his courage returned, and with it a sense of anger at the brutal disrespect these murderers showed to the body of their victim. They were tearing like vultures now at the dead man's singlet, ripping it away from the skin.

The man nearest Ali had huge shoulders in whose knotted muscles the neck supporting the black, curly head was sunk and lost. It gave him a deformed look. A second glance showed that
the man was indeed deformed. He had only one hand. The left arm ended in a stump an inch or two below the elbow. The right arm now groping under the dead man’s torn vest seemed enormous—too large even for that huge, clumsy body.

His companion was a very thin, pale man in black clothes—a Chinese, but taller than the Chinese one generally meets with in Singapore. He was squatting back on his heels, watching eagerly as the dark man tore away a little cloth bag attached by a belt to the dead man’s waist. When he spoke it was in Malay:

‘You have it, Ketam? . . . Is it the book?’

The brown fingers of Ketam’s gigantic hand were busy with the strings of the bag. They pulled out a fat red notebook.

‘It’s written in Chinese.’ Ketam looked quickly through the book. ‘All Chinese, look . . . But there’s a map here, Ah Foo—a map!’
'Let me see it.' Ah Foo stretched forward eagerly to take the map. 'Yes, it's what we've waited all these years for . . . The river, see . . . and, Ketam, the route they took marked in red with the halts . . . And look at this star, where the Crocodile died. That's where we'll find your tears . . .'

'But the writing, Ah Foo, the writing . . . ?'

'Give it to me. I can translate. It may tell us more than the map.'

The two men were so busy examining the leaves of the notebook that they did not hear Ali moving behind them. The next instant Ali had sprung out of his hiding-place, snatched the book and the map from Ketam's fingers, and was running for dear life through the Palm Valley. The two men were taken completely by surprise, and for a second or two they could make no move. This gave Ali a few yards' start. He did not look once behind him but ran as he had never run before, dodging and twisting among the palms and bamboos that make small islands in the green grass of the valley.

Ali did not know where he was running. All he knew was that he must reach the open, any place where he might see people and be seen by them. He heard angry shouts behind him; and at the same moment with a great roar of thunder the storm broke. He could hardly see two yards in front of him. Trees and landmarks were blotted out in grey veils of driving rain.

A whiplash of blue lightning gave him his direction for a brief instant, and at the same time he saw two running figures moving up the hill to cut him off. He turned about and ran on, clutching the book, with the map gripped between its pages. The lashing rain raised a steam of spray about his legs. Once he stumbled and fell full length on the sodden grass.

An exulting shout proved that his pursuers had seen him fall. He pulled himself to his feet and ran on. The shouts grew closer. He dared not look behind. He had almost reached the summit of a ridge. Lightning flickered again and showed him a wide pathway lined with jungle trees. Just before the thunder rumbled out