Even an amateur bird-watcher knows the bird from the way the empty nest is woven on a limb; and the wallpaper you hate at your new address is a pattern in the former tenant's mind. So I came to know Rogers, my predecessor at the Consulate, from the harsh-voiced people who phoned for him at odd hours and the unpaid bills that arrived to reveal his harassments so well. That desk drawer he forgot to empty told me a great deal about his hoarding postcards and the travels of his friends (Charlie and Nance in Rome, Tom and Grace in Osaka – interesting, because both couples reported 'tummy-aches'). But I knew Rogers best from the habits of Peeraswami, the Indian clerk, and the descent of Miss Harbottle.

Peeraswami said, 'I see European lady today morning, Tuan,' and I knew he had no letters. Rogers had allowed him to take credit for the mail: he beamed with an especially important letter and handed it over slowly, weighing it in his brown hand like an award; if there were no letters he apologized and made conversation. Rogers must have found this behavior consoling. It drove me up the wall.

'Thank you.' I went back to my report.

He hesitated. 'In market. With camera. Taking snaps of City Bar's little girl.' Woo Boh Swee, who owned the establishment, was known locally as City Bar, though his elder child was always called Reggie. 'European from America.'

'An American?' I looked up. 'How do you know?'

'Wearing a hat,' he said. 'Carrying her own boxes.'

'That doesn't mean she's an American.'

'Riding the night bus.' He smiled. 'American.'

A show of contempt from the barefoot mail-boy. Americans, once thought of as free-spenders and luxury travelers, were now considered cheapskates. What he said was partly true: the night bus from Kuala Lumpur was used mostly by American students and Tamil rubber tappers. But Peeraswami was such a know-it-all; I hoped he was wrong.

I saw her after lunch. She was sitting on the front steps of the Consulate, fiddling with her camera. Her suitcases were stacked next to her. I recognized her from the hat. It

was a Mexican model, and the wide brim was tied at the sides by a blue ribbon, making it into a silly bonnet with a high conical crown.

She said, ‘I shouldn’t be doing this in broad daylight.’

She was juggling little yellow capsules, changing the film in her camera. I stepped past her and unlocked the front door.

‘Are you open now?’ She looked up and made a horrible face at the sun.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Not until two. You’ve got a few minutes more.’

‘I’ll just sit right here.’

I went inside, and reflecting on that hat, considered leaving by the back door. But it was too hot for tennis, too early for a drink; and I had work to do. I turned on the fan and began signing the letters I’d dictated that morning. I had signed only three when the door burst open.

‘Hey!’ She was at the door, undoing her bonnet. ‘Where’s Mr Rogers?’

‘I’m the new Consul.’

‘Why didn’t you say so out there?’

‘I only admit to it during office hours,’ I said. ‘It cuts down on the work.’ I showed her my pen, the letters on my blotter.

‘Well, I’ve got a little problem,’ she said. Now her bonnet was off, and I could see her face clearly. She was sunburned, plump, and not young; her hands were deeply freckled and she stood leaning one fist on my desk, talking to me as if at an employee. ‘It’s to do with accommodation. I don’t have any, and I was counting on Rogers. I know him from Riyadh.’

‘He’s in Turkey now,’ I said. ‘But there’s a rest house in town.’

‘It’s full.’

‘There are two Chinese hotels.’

She leaned still further on her fist: ‘Did you ever spend a night in a Chinese hotel?’

‘There’s a campsite,’ I said. ‘If you know anything about camping.’

‘I camped my way through the Great Nafud. That’s where I met Rogers,’ she said. ‘I wrote a book about it.’

‘Then Ayer Hitam shouldn’t bother you in the least.’

‘My tent was stolen yesterday in KL, at the bus depot.’

‘You have to be careful.’

‘It was stolen by an American.’

She looked as if she was holding me responsible. I said, ‘I’ll keep an eye out for it. In the meantime –’

‘All I want is a few square feet to throw my sleeping bag,’ she said. ‘You won’t even know I’m there. And don’t worry – I’ll give you an acknowledgment in my book.’

‘You’re writing another one, are you?’

‘I always do.’

It might have been the heat or the fact that I had just noticed she was a stout woman in late middle age and looked particularly plain and vulnerable in her faded cotton dress, with her sunburned arms and peeling nose and a bulbous bandage on her thumb. I said, ‘All right then. Be at my house at six and I’ll see what I can fix up for you.’

Ah Wing met me in the driveway as Abubaker swung the car to a halt. Ah Wing had been Rogers’s cook, and he was old enough to have been cook for Rogers’s predecessor as well; he had the fatigued tolerance of the Chinese employee who treats his employers as cranky birds of passage. He said, ‘There is a mem in the garden.’

‘Wearing a hat?’

‘Wearing.’

She had spread a ground sheet on the grass and opened one of her suitcases. A half-rolled sleeping bag lay on the ground sheet, and she was seated on the second suitcase, blowing up a rubber air mattress. She took the nozzle out of her mouth and said, ‘Hi there!’

‘You’re not going to sleep here, are you?’

‘This suits me fine,’ she said. ‘I’m no sissy.’ The implication being that I was one for

using a bed. ‘Now you just leave me be and pretend I’m not here. Don’t worry about me.’

‘It’s the grass I’m worried about,’ I said. ‘New turf. Rather frail.’

She allowed herself to be persuaded, and gathered up her camping equipment. Inside the house she said, ‘You live like a king! Is this all yours?’

‘It’s rented from the Sultan.’

‘Taxpayers’ money,’ she said, touching the walls as she went along.

‘This is considered a hardship post by the State Department.’

‘I haven’t seen any hardships yet,’ she said.

‘You haven’t been in town very long,’ I said.

‘Good point,’ she said.

She was in the bedroom; she dropped her suitcases and sat on the bed and bounced. ‘A real bed!’

‘I suppose you’ll be wanting dinner?’

‘No, sir!’ She reached for her handbag. ‘I’ve got all I need right here.’ She took out a wilted branch of rambutans, half a loaf of bread, and a tin of Ma-Ling stew.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ I said.

‘Whatever you say.’ On the verandah she said, ‘You do all right for yourself,’ and punished the gin bottle; and over dinner she said, ‘Golly, do you eat like this every day?’

I made noncommittal replies, and then I remembered. I said, ‘I don’t even know your name.’

‘Harbottle,’ she said. ‘Margaret Harbottle. Miss. I’m sure you’ve seen my travel books.’

‘The name rings a bell.’

‘The Great Nafud was the toughest one. Rogers didn’t have a place like this!’

‘It must be very difficult for a woman to travel in Saudi Arabia.’

‘I didn’t go as a woman,’ she said.

‘How interesting.’

‘I went as a man,’ she said. ‘Oh, it’s really quite simple. I’m ugly enough. I cut my hair and wore a burnous. They never knew the difference!’

She went on to tell me of her other travels, which were stories of cheerful privations, how she had lived on dates and Nile water for a week in Juba, slept in a ditch in Kenya, crossed to Lamu by dhow. She was eating the whole time she spoke, jabbing her fork in the air as if spearing details. ‘You won’t believe this,’ she said, ‘but I haven’t paid for a meal since Penang, and that was a misunderstanding.’

‘I believe it.’

She looked out the window at the garden. ‘I’m going to paint that. Put it in the book. I always illustrate my own books. “With illustrations by the author.”’

We finished dinner and I said, ‘I usually read at this time of day.’

‘Don’t let me interrupt your routine,’ she said.

We had coffee, and then I picked up my novel. She sat in the lounge with me, smoking a Burmese cheroot, looking around the room. She said, ‘Boy, you do all right!’ I glanced up in annoyance. ‘Go ahead – read,’ she said. ‘Pretend I’m not here.’

Days later she was still with me. Ah Wing complained that her food was stinking up the bedroom. There was talk of her at the Club: she had been seen sniffing around the Sultan’s summer house, and then had come to the club bar and made a scene when she was refused a drink. She got one eventually by saying she was my houseguest. I signed the chits the next day: five gins and a port and lemon. It must have been quite an evening.

Her worst offense was at the river. I heard the story from Peeraswami. She had gone there late one afternoon and found some men bathing, and she had begun photographing them. They had seen her but, stark naked, they couldn’t run out of the water. They had shouted. She photographed that. It was only when she started away that the men wrapped themselves in sarongs and chased her, but she had taken one of their bicycles and escaped.

‘They think I haven’t seen a man before,’ she said, when I asked her about it.

‘Malay men are modest,’ I said.

‘Believe me, they’ve got something to be modest about!’

I decided to change the subject. I said, ‘I’m having some people over tomorrow for drinks.’

‘I don’t mind,’ she said.

‘I was hoping you wouldn’t.’

‘And don’t worry about me,’ she said. ‘Just pretend I’m not here.’

I was tempted to say, ‘How?’ I resisted and said, ‘You don’t do much painting.’

‘The light’s not right.’

The next evening she had changed into a clean dress. I could not think of a polite way of getting rid of her. She stayed, drank more than anyone, and talked nonstop of her travels. When the guests left, she said, ‘They were nice, but kind of naive, you know what I mean?’

‘Miss Harbottle,’ I said, ‘I’m expecting some more people this weekend.’

She smiled. ‘Pretend I’m not here.’

‘That is not a very easy thing to do,’ I said. ‘You see, they’re staying overnight, and I was planning to put them in your room.’

‘But you have lots of rooms!’

‘I expect lots of guests.’

‘Then I’ll sleep on the grass,’ she said. ‘I intended to do that anyway. You won’t even know I’m there.’

‘But if we decide to play croquet we might disturb that nap you always have after lunch.’

‘It’s your meals,’ she said. ‘I usually don’t eat so much. But I hate to see food go to waste.’

That was Thursday. On Friday I had a visit from Ali Mohammed. ‘It is about your houseguest,’ he said. ‘She took some cloth from my shop and has not paid for it.’

‘She might have forgotten.’

‘That is not all. The men she photographed at the river are still cross. They want very much to break up her camera. And Mekmal says she scratched his pushbike.’

‘You’ll have to see her about it.’

‘This is serious,’ he said, glowering and putting on his songkok. ‘She is your houseguest.’

‘She won’t be much longer.’

I can’t say I was sorry her inconvenience extended to Ali Mohammed; he had been in the habit of saying to me, ‘When is Tuan Rogers coming back?’ And then it occurred to me that an unwelcome guest is like a weapon. I could use Miss Harbottle quite blamelessly against Ali or Peeraswami, both of whom deserved her. An unwelcome guest could carry annoyance to your enemy; you only had to put them in touch.

‘Ali Mohammed was in the office today,’ I said over lunch. ‘He says you took some cloth from him without paying for it.’

‘I thought it was a present.’

‘He didn’t think so.’

‘When I go to a country,’ said Miss Harbottle, with a note of instruction in her voice, ‘I expect to be given presents. I’m writing a book about this place. I’m promoting these people.’

‘That reminds me,’ I said. ‘I’ve decided to charge you rent.’

Miss Harbottle’s face fell. ‘I never pay,’ she said. ‘I don’t carry much cash.’ She squinted at me. ‘That’s pretty unfair.’

‘I don’t want money,’ I said.

She said, ‘You should be ashamed of yourself. I’m fifty-two years old.’

‘And not that either,’ I said. ‘Your payment will be a picture. One of your water colors for every night you stay here from now on.’

‘I can’t find my brushes.’

‘I’ll buy you some new ones.’

‘I see,’ she said, and as soon as we finished eating she went to her room.

Late that same night the telephone rang. It was Peeraswami. He had just come from a meeting outside the mosque. Ali Mohammed was there, and Mekmal, and City Bar, and the men from the river, the rubber tappers – everyone with a grievance against Miss Harbottle. They had discussed ways of dealing with the woman. The Malays wanted to humiliate her; the Chinese suggested turning the matter over to a secret society; the Indians had pressed for some expensive litigation. It was the first time I had seen the town united in this way, their single object – the plump Miss Harbottle – inspiring in them a sense of harmonious purpose. I didn’t discourage Peeraswami, though he reported the proceedings with what I thought was uncalled-for glee.

‘I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do,’ I said. She was Rogers’s guest, not mine; Rogers’s friends could deal with her.

‘What to do?’ asked Peeraswami.

‘Whatever you think best,’ I said. ‘And I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if she was on the early bus tomorrow.’

In the morning, Ah Wing woke me with tea and the news that there were twenty people in the garden demanding to see me. I took my time dressing and then went out. They saw me and called out in Malay, ‘Where is she? Where is the orang puteh?’

Ah Wing shook his head. He said, ‘Not here.’

‘Liar!’ Peeraswami yelled, and this cry was taken up by the others.

Ah Wing turned to me and said, ‘She left early – on the Singapore bus.’

‘Liar!’ said Peeraswami again. ‘We were at the bus station!’

‘Yes,’ said Ali Mohammed. ‘There was no woman at the station.’ He had a stick in his hand; he shook it at me and said, ‘We want to search your house.’

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Did you see a European?’

‘A man only,’ said Ali Mohammed.

‘A fat one,’ said Peeraswami with anger and disgust. ‘He refused Mekmal to carry his boxes.’

I’m sure my laughter bewildered them; I was full of gratitude for Miss Harbottle. I loved her for that.