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THE BUTTERFLY OF THE LARUTS

The people in Ayer Hitam stopped referring to her as Dr Smith as soon as they set eyes on her. She was ‘that woman,’ then ‘our friend,’ and only much later, after she had left the district and when the legend was firmly established, was she Dr Smith again, the title giving her name a greater mockery than anyone there could manage in a tone of voice. She didn’t have much luck with her simple name; as everyone knew, even the man she married could not pronounce it. But that was not surprising: a narrow ornament, a sliver of ivory he wore in his lower lip, prevented him from saying most words clearly.

She flitted into town that first day in a bright, wax-print sarong, and with a loose pale blouse through which you could see her breasts in nodding motion. She might have been one of those ravished American women, grazing the parapet of middle age, with a monotonous libido and an expensive camera, vowing to have a fling at the romance travel was supposed to provide. But she was far from frivolous, and she had not been in the district long before it became apparent that she was anything but typical.

A typical visitor stayed at the Government Rest House or the Club, but Dr Smith never went near either of them, nor did she stay at the Chinese hotels. Her few days in Ayer Hitam were passed at a Malay kedai, a flyblown shop on a back road. It was assumed she shared a room. You can imagine the speculation. But she had the magic travelers sometimes have, of finding in a place something the residents have missed and giving it a brief celebrity.

So, after she had gone into the jungle, some of us used this kedai and we discovered that it employed as sweepers several men from a small tribe of orang asli who lived sixty miles to the north, in an isolated pouch of jungle near one of Fred Squibb’s timber estates. Their looks were unmistakable. That should have been our first clue: we knew she was an anthropologist, we heard she had taken a taxi north, and Squibb, the timber merchant, said the taxi had dropped her at the bush track which met the main road and extended some fifteen miles to the kampong. There had been, he said, half a dozen tribesmen – Laruts, they were called – squatting at the trampled mouth of the path. Squibb said they were waiting for her and that they might have been there, roosting like owls, for days.

We had seen anthropologists before. Their sturdy new clothes and neatly packed rucksacks, tape recorders and parcels of books and paper, gave them away immediately. But Dr Smith caused a local sensation. No one since Sir Hugh Clifford had studied the Laruts; they were true natives, small people with compressed negroid

features, clumsy innocent faces, and long arms, who had been driven into the interior as the Malays and Chinese crowded the peninsula. There were few in the towns. You saw them unexpectedly tucked in the bends of bush roads, with the merchandise they habitually sold – red and yellow parrots, flapping things snared in the jungle, unused to the ingeniously woven Larut cages; and orchids harvested from the trunks of forest trees; and butterflies, as large as those orchids, mounted lopsidedly in cigar boxes. The Laruts were our savages, proof we were civilized: Malays especially measured themselves by them. Their movements, jinking in the forest, were like the flights of the butterflies they sold on the roadsides with aboriginal patience. Selling such graceful stuff was appropriate to this gentle tribe, for as was well known, they were nonviolent: they did not make weapons, they didn't fight. They had been hunted for sport, like frail deer, by early settlers. As the Malays and the Chinese grew more quarrelsome and assertive, the Laruts responded by moving further and further inland, until they came to rest on hillsides and in swamps, enduring the extremes of landscape to avoid hostile contact.

Bur Dr Smith found them, and a week later there were no Laruts on the road, no butterflies for sale, only the worn patches on the grassy verge where they had once waited with their cages and boxes, smoking their oddly shaped clay pipes.

At the Club, Angela said, 'I expect we'll see her in town buying clothes.' But no one saw her, nor did we see much of the Laruts. They had withdrawn, it seemed, to the deepest part of the forest, and their absence from the roads made those stretches particularly cheerless. We guessed at what might be going on in the Larut kampong, and with repetition our guesses acquired all the neatness and authority of facts. Then we had a witness.

Squibb went to the area; he brought back this story. He had borrowed a motorbike at one of his substations and had ridden it over the bush track until at last he came to the outskirts of the kampong. He saw some children playing and asked them in Malay if 'the white queen' was around. They took him to her, and he said he was astonished to see her kneeling in the dust by a hut, pounding some food in a mortar with several Larut women. They were stripped to the waist and chanting.

'You could have knocked me over with a feather,' Squibb said. He spat in disgust and went on to say how dirty she was; her sarong was in tatters, her hands filthy. Apparently he went over to her, but she ignored him. Finally, she spoke.

'Can't you see I'm busy?' She went on heaving the pestle.

Squibb was persistent. She said (and this was the sentence I heard Squibb repeating in the club lounge for days afterward): 'We don't want you here.'

There were other stories, but most of them seemed to originate with Squibb: the

Ministry of Tourism was angry that the Laruts had stopped selling butterflies on the road; the missionaries in the area, Catholic fathers from Canada, were livid because the Larut children had stopped going to the mission school, and for the first time in many years the mission's dispensary – previously filled with snakebite victims and Laruts with appendicitis and strangulated hernias – was nearly empty. There was more: the Laruts had started to move their kampong, putting up huts in the heavily forested portion of jungle that adjoined Squibb's timber estate.

'She's a menace,' Squibb said.

He came to me at the Consulate and sat, refusing to leave until I listened to the last of his stories.

'There's nothing I can do,' I said.

'She's an American – you can send her home.'

'I don't see any evidence of treachery here,' I said.

'She's sticking her nose in where she's not wanted!'

'That's a matter for the Malaysians to decide.'

'They're as browned-off as I am,' Squibb said. He became solicitous about the Laruts; odd – he had always spoken of them as a nuisance, interrupting the smooth operation of his lumber mills with their poaching and thieving.

A day or two later, the District Commissioner dropped in. He was a dapper, soft-spoken Malay named Azhari, educated in London; he had a reputation as a sport, and his adventures with various women at the Club were well known. There were 'Azhari stories.' He informed me politely that he was serving a deportation order on Dr Smith.

'What for?'

'Interfering in the internal affairs of our country,' he said. I wondered if she had turned him down.

'You've been talking to Squibb,' I said. He smiled; he didn't deny it.

It was Azhari's assistant who cycled to the village with the deportation order; it was he who brought us the news of the marriage.

At the Club, people said to me, 'You Americans,' and this was the only time in all my

years at the Consulate there that Ayer Hitam was ever mentioned in the world's press. It was so unusual, seeing the town in the paper, mentions of the Club, City Bar, the kedai where Dr Smith had stayed, each one shabbily hallowed to a shrine by the coarse prose of journalists. They attempted a description of our heat, our trees, our roads, our way of life; struggling to make us unique they only succeeded in making us ridiculous (I was the 'youthful American Consul'). They spelled all our names wrong.

There were photographs of Dr Smith and the chief. She wore a printed scarf across her breasts in a makeshift halter, her hair knotted, and around her neck a great wooden necklace. He had headgear of parrot feathers, leather armlets on his biceps, and heavy earrings; he was a small man of perhaps fifty, with a worried furrowed face and tiny ears. In the photographs he looked cross-eyed, but that might have been his worry distorted in the strong light. She towered over him, triumphant, wistful. His arm was awkwardly crooked in hers. Around them were many blurred grinning faces of Larut wellwishers.

'We are very much in love,' she was reported to have said. 'We plan to have lots of children. I know my duties as a Larut wife.'

It was not simple. The Laruts, idle and good-hearted, were polygamous. The chief had eight wives. Dr Smith was the ninth.

This was the last we heard of her for several months.

Father Lefever from the mission came to see me one afternoon. He was circumspect; he asked permission to smoke and then set fire to a stinking cheroot. In the middle of casual remarks about the late monsoon he said, 'You must do something about that woman.'

'So what Squibb said about the dispensary is true.'

'I don't know what he said, but I think this woman could do a great deal of harm. The Laruts are a simple people – like children. They are not used to this attention.'

'I haven't heard anything lately, though Squibb said they're treating themselves with native medicine – they've stopped coming to your dispensary.'

The priest looked down. 'And to church.'

'That's their choice, one would guess.'

'No, it's her. I know it. Not the Laruts.'

'But she's a Larut,' I said.

Azhari was firmer. He came demanding information on her background, by which he meant her past. I guessed his motive to be resentment: a man he regarded as a savage had become his sexual competitor. But the whole affair was beginning to annoy me. I told him it was none of my business, her marriage had given her Malaysian citizenship, and as far as I was concerned she was no longer an American subject. I said, 'I don't see what all the fuss is about.'

'You don't know these chaps,' said Azhari. 'They are special people in this country. They don't pay taxes, they don't vote, they can go anywhere they wish. And since that woman came there's been a lot of loose talk.'

'Of what sort?'

'She's stirring them up,' he said. But he didn't elaborate. 'If you won't help me I'll go over your head to the Ambassador.'

'Nothing would please me more.'

All this interest in the Laruts, who until then had only sold butterflies, and were famous because they did not use violence.

Late one night, there was a loud rapping at the front door. Ah Wing answered it and seeing the visitors, said 'Sakais,' with undisguised contempt.

A boy and an old man, obviously the chief. They came in and sat on the floor, the old man quite close, the boy – who was about twelve or thirteen – some distance away. They must have walked all the way from the village; their legs were wet and they had bits of broken leaf in their hair. They had brought the smell of the jungle into the room. The chief looked troubled; he nodded to the boy.

The boy said, 'He wants you to take her away.'

'His wife?' The boy jerked his head forward. 'I can't do that. Only he can do that. Tell him he is her husband.'

This was translated. The old man winced, and the scars beside his eyes bunched to tiny florets. He said something quickly, a signaling grunt. They had rehearsed this.

'He has money,' the boy said. 'He will pay you.'

'Money doesn't matter,' I said. I felt sorry for the old man: what had happened? Bullying, I imagined, threats of violence from Dr Smith; what pacifist tribe could contain an American academic, a woman with a camera? I said, 'There's a way. It's

very simple – but he must be absolutely sure he never wants to see her again.'

'He is sure.' The boy didn't bother to translate. He knew his orders. He listened to what I said.

And it was so strange, the boy translating into the Larut language the process of divorce, the old man shaking his head, and the word for which there could not have been a Larut equivalent, recurring in the explanation as vuss … vuss. The old chief looked slightly shocked, and I was embarrassed; he was having this new glimpse of us, a revelation of a private cruelty of ours, a secret ritual that was available to him. At the end he wanted to give me money. I told him to save it for the lawyer.

The newspapers were interested; there was another influx of journalists from Singapore, but Dr Smith left as soon as the chief engaged a lawyer, and this time she didn't pass through Ayer Hitam. The journalists caught up with her in Tokyo – or was it Los Angeles? I forget. The pity of it was that they took no notice of what followed, the Laruts' new village (and prosperity for the chief) in the remotest part of the state, the closing of the mission, and Squibb's timber operation, which, it was said, made that little bush track into a road wide enough for huge timber trucks to collect the trees that were felled in and around the derelict village.