His father, Woo Boh Swee, had chased after the English in that shy, breathless Chinese way, hating the necessity of it and making his embarrassment into haste. He had gone from Canton to Hong Kong to work on an English ship and later had come to Ayer Hitam to supply the rubber estates with provisions. But the rubber price had fallen, many English and American families left the town, and the Chinese who replaced them imported or grew their own food; so he started City Bar.

It was the biggest coffee shop in town, the meeting place for a secret society – but the gang was only dangerous to other Chinese and did not affect Woo's regular trade, the remaining English planters, and the Tamil rubber tappers. Woo – or 'City Bar' as he was known – was thoroughly Chinese; he was a chain smoker, he played mahjong on a back table of the shop, he observed all the Chinese festivals with ang pows. The shop smelled of dusty bottles and bean curd, and dark greasy ducks and glazed pork strips hung on hooks in the front window. He and his wife were great gamblers, and they had two children.

The children went to different schools. It was as if, this once, the Woos were hedging, making an each-way bet. The girl, Jin Bee, was at the Chinese primary school; the boy, Reggie, had been to the Anglo-Chinese school, then to Raffles Institution and the University of Singapore. He was the English child; he played cricket and tennis and was a member of the Ayer Hitam Club. He had distinguished himself by appearing in the Footlighters' production of Maugham's play, The Letter. It was the first play to attract a local audience; it ran for a week, and Reggie's picture was in the Johore Mail. That picture, bright yellow with age, was taped to the wall of City Bar. Everyone had hopes for Reggie. He was that odd figure you sometimes see in the East, the person who leaves his race behind, who goes to school and returns home English. Ayer Hitam was not an easy place to be English, but Reggie, an actor, had certain advantages. He was right for the part. And though drinks at the Club were more expensive than at City Bar, Reggie was at the Club, drinking, nearly every evening.

One night I saw him alone in the lounge. He looked like an actor who hadn't been warned that his play was canceled; dressed up, solitary, he was a figure of neglect, and his expectant look was changing into one of desolation. I joined him, we talked about the heat, and after a while I told him he ought to get a scholarship to study overseas.

'I wouldn't mind!' He brushed his hair out of his eyes. 'How do I go about it?'

‘That depends,’ I said. ‘What’s your field?’

‘Philosophy.’

I was prepared to be surprised, but I was unprepared for that. It was his clothes, narrow trousers, pointed shoes, a pink shirt, and a silk scarf knotted at his throat. ‘It would be strange,’ I said. ‘A Chinese from Malaysia going to the States to study Oriental philosophy.’

‘Why do you say Oriental philosophy?’ He looked offended in a rather formal way.

‘Just a wild guess.’

‘A bad guess,’ he said. ‘Whitehead, Russell, Kant.’ He showed me three well-manicured fingers. Then a fourth. ‘Karl Popper.’

‘You’re interested in them, are you?’

‘I studied them,’ he said. ‘I wrote on the mind–body problem.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

The Fulbright forms had to come from Kuala Lumpur, so it was a week before I looked for him again, and when I looked he wasn’t there – not at the Club and not at City Bar. ‘In Singapore,’ his father said. ‘Got business.’

There were eight or ten people at the Club the night Reggie came back. I noticed they were all Footlighters. I waited until they left him – they had been gathered around him, talking loudly – and then I told him I had the forms.

‘Something’s come up,’ he said. He grinned. ‘I’m going to be in a film. That’s why I was in Singapore. Auditioning. And I got the part-lah.’

‘Congratulations,’ I said. ‘What film is it?’

‘Man’s Fate,’ he said. ‘I’m playing Ch’en. I’ve always adored Malraux and I love acting. Now I can draw on my philosophy background as well. So you see, it’s perfect.’

‘What does your father think about it?’

‘It’s a job – he’s keen,’ said Reggie. ‘It’s my big chance, and it could lead to bigger parts.’

‘Hollywood,’ I said.

He smiled. ‘I would never go to Hollywood. False life, no sense of values. I plan to make London my base, but if the money was good I might go to the States for a few weeks at a time.’

‘When are they going to make Man’s Fate?’

‘Shooting starts in Singapore in a month’s time.’

And the way he said shooting convinced me that the Fulbright forms would never be used.

After that I heard a lot about Reggie at the Club. Ladysmith, the English teacher, said, ‘City’s Bar’s son’s done all right for himself,’ and Reggie was always in sight, in new clothes, declining drinks. Squibb said, ‘These things never come off,’ and some people referred to Reggie as ‘that fruit.’ But most were pleased. The Foot-lighters said, ‘I can say I knew you when,’ and cautioned him about the small print in contracts, and when they filed in at dusk for the first drink they greeted him with, ‘How’s our film star?’

Reggie’s reply was, ‘I had a letter just the other day.’ He said this week after week, giving the impression of a constant flow of mail, keeping him up to date. But I realized, as his manner became more abrupt and diffident, that it was always the same letter.

Then a job came up at the Anglo-Chinese school: a history teacher was needed. Reggie’s name was mentioned, it was his old school, he was out of work. But he turned it down. ‘I can’t commit myself to a teaching post with this film in the pipeline!’ He lost his temper with the Chinese barman who mistook tonic for soda. He shouted at the ball-boys on the tennis courts. Like a film star, people said.

Twice a week, when the program changed at the Capitol Cinema in Johore Bahru, Reggie made the sixty-mile drive in his father’s van, usually with an English girl from the Club. There were rumors of romance, even talk of marriage; names were mentioned, Millsap’s daughter, Squibb’s niece. Reggie spoke of going to London.

One day he was gone. I noticed his absence because the Club was holding rehearsals for a new play, and Reggie, who had not missed a major production since The Letter, was not in the cast. It was said he was in Singapore, and I assumed they were shooting Man’s Fate.

Sometime later, the glimpse of a face being averted in a post office crowd reminded me of Reggie. I mentioned him to my peon, Peeraswami.

‘At City Bar,’ said Peeraswami.

‘Then he is back.’

I remember the night I went over to offer my congratulations, and I could find it on a calendar even now, because there was a full moon over a cloud that hung like a dragon in the sky. The usual nighttime crowd of drinkers and idlers was at City Bar. I looked for the figure in the scarf and sunglasses I had seen so many times in the Club, but all I saw were Chinese gesturing with coffee cups and Tamils drinking toddy – everyone in short-sleeved white shirts. A hot night in a Malaysian town has a particular bittersweet taste; the chatter and noise in that place seemed to make the taste stronger. I fought my way into the bar and saw Woo Boh Swee, scowling at the cash register.

‘Where’s Reggie?’

He jerked his thumb inside but stared at me in an excluding way. When I saw Reggie in the back, hunched over the mahjong table in the short-sleeved shirt that made him anonymous, his legs folded, kicking a rubber sandal up and down, I knew it would be an intrusion to go any further. I heard him abuse his opponent in sharp, unmistakably Cantonese jeers as he banged down a mahjong tile. I left before he caught sight of me and went back to the Club, crossing the road with that sinking feeling you get at a national boundary or an unguarded frontier.