The planter Gillespie swore he'd never leave. Though he remained embattled – one of the last colonials – the changeover from rubber to palm oil continued on the larger estates. After eighteen months of it, I saw a time, not very far off, when I would gladly close the Consulate – or what was more likely, sell the remainder of my lease to the Arabs or the Japanese. Gillespie wanted me to dig my heels in and stay; he typified the older sort of expatriate, his attitude was a definition of that exile – home was defeat. Estate managers who went home caught cold, drove buses, and lived an amah's life, cooking and doing dishes.

And then, like deliverance, Gillespie was ambushed, killed on the road to Kluang. His syce was handed pamphlets and allowed to go free, so we knew it was political. But even that aspect did not shake the others at the Club; they said that sudden burst of gunfire on the lonely road was preferable to a slow death in Baltimore – Gillespie was an American – and they took the view that he was luckier than some who, hacked by parangs, had gone home maimed.

I had been told to expect it as the natural result of our collapse in Vietnam, more guerilla activity in Malaysia, a resurgence of revolutionary zeal. I was not surprised to hear of incidents in the northern states, where there were borders and concealing jungle. But here, in Ayer Hitam? It seemed unthinkable. And I couldn't imagine why anyone here would kill to make a political point or want to repeat the old cycle of taking power just to give another group its turn in purgatory. Yet it had started, and one of the pamphlets handed to Gillespie's syce was titled Sejauh Mana Kita Bersabar? – How Long Must We Be Patient? It could have been the complaint of any political group – of anyone who wanted power. But in the circumstances it was a threat. If this was patience I trembled to think what a loss of temper might mean.

Seeing that the recessional might be bloodier than I'd expected, I decided to stick my neck out and see the Sultan about it – not in my official capacity, but informally, to find out, before State Department representations were made, what steps were being taken to deal with terrorists. Unofficially, I had been told that the Malaysian government expected American military support. Though they had not been turned down, Flint in the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur had told me, 'They're whistling in the dark, but if it makes things easier for you tell them we're thinking of giving them air cover.'

The American position was: we'll help if the casualties are yours. I decided to hint this to the Sultan in the Oriental – or at least Malaysian – way. My opportunity came a few

weeks after Gillespie's murder when talking with Azhari, the District Commissioner, at the ceremonial opening of a palm-oil estate, I asked if the Sultan was going to be there.

'He doesn't travel,' said Azhari, as if the Sultan were some rare wine. He searched my face suspiciously: had I meant my question as criticism?

I said that I had been longing to meet him; that I might be leaving soon. 'I'd hate to leave without having had a chat with him.'

'I can arrange that,' said Azhari.

I felt I had gone about it in the right way. The Sultan might get in touch with me, or Azhari might give me the go-ahead. I'd write a personal note and wouldn't mention security – I didn't want to talk to a general. But nothing happened. It was so often the case with the Oriental approach: one needed Oriental patience, like Gillespie.

It was a sign of our diminishing numbers, perhaps a siege mentality, that we began meeting together for lunch, Alec, Squibb, Evans, Strang, and sometimes Prosser. A club within the Club, for since I had arrived many expatriates had left and the membership committee started encouraging locals to join. It looked like tolerance; it was a way of paying the bills. Our lunches might have been a reaction to the Chinese tables, the Malay tables, the Indian tables. A multiracial club seemed to mean nothing more than a dining room filled with tables at which the various races asserted their difference by practicing exclusion.

At one of those lunches I noticed Alec carrying an odd familiar stick that I recognized and yet could not name.

'A shooting stick,' he said when I asked. 'You sit on it, like so.' He opened it, stuck it into the dining-room carpet and sat. There were some stares; the local members had not progressed to the point where they were allowed this sort of eccentricity.

'Going shooting?' asked Evans.

'Polo,' said Alec. 'I'm driving down to the Sultan's. This is the last day of the festival.'

'Hari Raya Haji's months away,' I said.

'Not that festival, you idiot. The Sultan's not a complete barbarian.' He winked at me. 'Polo festival. It's been going on for a week. This will be the best day – Pahang's playing. And tonight the Sultan awards his cup. But I shan't stay for that hoo-hah.'

'Do you mind if I come along with you?'

Alec spoke to Squibb. ‘Hear that? I told you we’d make a gentleman out of this Yank.’

And Alec even found me a shooting stick in one of the Club’s storerooms. ‘Remember,’ he said, ‘pointed end in the ground. Got it?’

There were flags flying at the gateway of the Sultan’s mansion, the flags of all the states, and colored pennants fluttering on wires. Across the driveway were the Christmas lights the Malays dragged out for special occasions. The day was overcast and sultry and the spectators looked subdued in the heat – a crowd of Malays standing on the opposite side, some still figures on our side, surrounded by many empty chairs. As we passed behind the awnings of the Royal Pavilion Alec said, ‘Just follow me and set your stick up. Don’t turn around. Concentrate on the match.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘He’s here,’ said Alec. ‘I was hoping he wouldn’t be. Worse luck.’

‘Who?’

‘Buffles,’ said Alec.

‘The Sultan?’

‘Buffles. And if I catch you calling him “Your Highness” I’ll never give you lunch again.’

We were not at the sidelines – Alec said we’d be trampled there. We had set up our sticks about thirty feet from the margin of the field, our backs to the pavilion.

It was to me an unexpectedly beautiful sport, graceful horses leaping back and forth on a field of English grass; like mock warfare, a tournament, chargers in the colors of chivalry, green and gold. No shouts, only the hoof beats, the occasional crack of sticks, and the small white ball flying from the scrimmage of snorting horses.

‘Third chukka,’ said Alec. ‘There’s Eddie Pahang – awfully good player. Get him!’ Alec lurched with such excitement he drove his shooting stick deeper into the ground.

‘I say, aren’t you playing, Stewart?’

It was a high querulous voice. Alec sighed and said, ‘Buffles.’ But he turned smiling towards the striped awning. ‘Not today!’

I had not taken a good look at the Sultan when we entered the polo ground. Now I saw

him and, seated next to him, Angela Miller in her garden-party outfit, white gloves and a long dress and a wide-brimmed hat. The Sultan wore a batik sports shirt and dark glasses; his head came to Angela's shoulder, her hat shielding him like an umbrella.

'Sit here, Stewart,' he said, patting an armchair in front of him. 'Join us – bring your friend.'

Alec smiled rather coldly at Angela, as at a betrayer, then introduced me.

The Sultan said, 'I didn't know there was still a consulate in Ayer Hitam. Why don't my people tell me anything?'

'It's really a small affair,' I said.

'Ayer Hitam is lovely. Like those villages in the Cotswolds one sees. One drives through and always wishes one could stop. But one never does. Stewart, what do you think of the game?'

The Sultan was about seventy, with the posture and frown of an old toad. I had never seen a Malay who looked quite like him, certainly none as fat. And there was a greater difference – his skin was unmistakably freckled and in places blotchy, crushed, and oddly pigmented: strange for the ruler of such sleek unwrinkled people.

'– spirited,' Alec was saying.

'Yes, spirited, spirited,' said the Sultan. 'That's just what I was telling Angela.' He peered again at me, so that I could see my face in each of the lenses of his glasses. 'Did you say you were a writer?'

'Consul,' I said.

'But you know Beverley Nichols.'

'I've heard of him.'

'English,' said the Sultan. 'Frightfully clever. Wrote a book –' The Sultan fidgeted, trying to remember.

'The Sun in My Eyes, Your Highness,' said Angela.

'That's it. Frightfully good book.'

'His Highness appears in the book,' said Angela.

‘We must get it for the club library,’ I said.

‘It’s there,’ said Alec. ‘Nichols stopped for the night a few years ago. Gave us a signed copy. Bit of an old woman actually.’

Angela said, ‘Literary gossip! It makes me homesick.’

‘He stayed with me a fortnight,’ said the Sultan. ‘I had a letter from him yesterday. His book was a best-seller.’ He turned to Angela. ‘Someone’s coming to stay. Lord – who is it?’

‘Elsynge, Your Highness.’

‘Elsynge is coming, yes. Elsynge. Had a letter from him. Here,’ he said, ‘you two sit here. Do put those sticks away. You’ll be more comfortable.’ He motioned to the armchairs in front of him and after we sat down he touched me on the shoulder. ‘Somerset Maugham – did you know him?’

‘I never had the pleasure,’ I said.

‘He visited,’ said the Sultan. ‘With his friend Earl, of course. Had to have Earl.’

‘He came to your coronation, Your Highness.’

‘Yes, he came to my coronation. He was here a week. But he stayed at Raffles Hotel. He liked Raffles. If he was alive to see it now he’d die!’

Alec said, ‘He’s away!’

A pack of horses galloped down the field after one rider who had broken away swinging his mallet. The handle curved as he hit the ball, which rose toward the goal. There was a great cheer from the Pahang side. The horses trotted away to regroup on the field.

The Sultan said, ‘Was that a goal?’

‘No, Your Highness, but very nearly,’ said Angela.

‘Very nearly, yes! I saw that, didn’t I?’

‘Missed by a foot,’ said Alec.

‘Missed by a foot, yes!’ said the Sultan and wiped his face.

‘They’re beautiful horses,’ I said. ‘I had no idea it was such a graceful sport.’

The Sultan said, ‘Did you say you’re a Canadian?’

‘American.’

‘Do you know what a Canadian told me once? He said horsemeat is very good. This Canadian had pots of money – he owned all the cinemas in Canada. He went on safaris and shot grizzly bears in Russia and what not. He said to me, “Bearmeat is the best, but the second best is horsemeat.” He said that. Yes, he did!’

Alec looked at me slyly and said, ‘That Canadian never tasted haggis.’

‘The syces here eat it,’ said the Sultan.

‘Haggis?’ said Alec.

But the Sultan hadn’t heard. ‘My father was a sportsman. Oh, he was a great hunter. He shot everything, too, elephants, lions. He shot the last tiger in Malaya – the very last one! You might like to see his trophies after the match.’

‘We’ll have to be heading back,’ said Alec.

‘My father said horsemeat was good to eat. Yes, indeed. But it’s very heating, he said.’ The Sultan placed his freckled hands on his belly and tugged. ‘You can’t eat too much of it. It’s too heating.’

‘You’ve tried it then?’ I said.

He looked disapproving. ‘My syces eat it.’

There was a shout from the Malays at the periphery of the field.

‘What was that? A goal?’

‘A foul, Your Highness,’ said Angela.

‘A foul? What did he do?’

‘Crossed over, Your Highness.’

‘Is that a foul?’

‘Yes, Your Highness.’

The Sultan grimaced in boredom. ‘Stewart, I was in Singapore yesterday. They gave me an escort and then they cleared Bukit Timah Road for me. Just closed the road. Too bad, chaps, they said. Took me fifteen minutes to get back from the Seaview.’

‘Fancy that,’ said Alec.

‘The Bird Park’s open,’ said the Sultan. ‘It’s full of chickens, they say. Chickens of various kinds. They wanted me to see them. Know what I told them? I said, “I have penguins.” I do – eight or ten. Perhaps your friend would like to see them after the match.’

‘We’re expected back in Ayer Hitam when the match is over,’ said Alec. He scowled at his watch. ‘Which should be any minute now.’

‘I won’t let you go,’ said the Sultan. He spoke to Angela. ‘I won’t let them go.’

‘No, Your Highness.’

The match ended soon after she spoke. The Sultan said, ‘Come, Stewart,’ and he took Angela’s arm. ‘If you don’t come I shall never speak to you again.’

Alec whispered, ‘He’s not joking.’

We were in the Sultan’s ballroom. The lights of the chandeliers were on, and the fans rattled their glass. But it was not yet dark outside; the setting sun ridiculed these lights and made them look cheap, like the garish illuminations of an arcade. Some of the glass hangings were missing or broken; the wall mirrors were imperfect and had that tropical decay that showed as gray blistered smears on their undersides. I saw the Sultan’s flowered shirt in one of the mirrors; it passed into a smear and he was gone.

The room was filled with people – women dressed like Angela, men in white suits, waiters carrying trays of drinks. The polo players were still in their uniforms, much grimier than they had looked on their horses, with mud-spattered boots. It was their celebration: they wore their mud proudly like a badge of combat.

‘Have a drink,’ said a Malay polo player. He handed me a large gold cup.

The metal was warm and sticky, and I hesitated again when I saw the sloshing liquid, faintly yellow under a spittly froth. I tried to pass it back to him.

‘Drink,’ he said. ‘It’s champagne. We won!’

‘Congratulations,’ I said, and made a show of drinking.

‘It’s solid gold,’ he said. ‘From Asprey’s.’

The cup was taken from me by a fat Malay girl who raised it to her mouth so quickly it splashed down her dress.

‘That’s okay,’ she said, and brushed at her dress. ‘It’s just a cheap thing I got in London.’

‘Very pretty,’ I said.

‘Do you like it? It’s from a boutique. ‘Che Guevara’ on Carnaby Street.’

‘The Che Guevara boutique,’ I said. ‘That sums up the past fifteen years, doesn’t it?’

She said, ‘The cup’s from Asprey’s. It cost three thousand dollars.’

The polo player smiled. ‘Three thousand eight hundred.’ As he spoke his teeth snagged on his lip.

I was relieved to see Alec making his way toward us. He greeted the girl, ‘How’s my princess? You’re looking fit.’

‘I’m not,’ she said. ‘It’s this stinking climate. Daddy insists I spend my hols here. He knows I hate it, so he bought me a car this time. Red. Automatic transmission. It’s the only one in the country.’

‘Drive up and see us some time,’ said Alec.

‘You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’ she said. ‘Excuse me, I need a drink.’ She wandered into the crowd.

‘The princess,’ said Alec. ‘She’s a hard lass. Her tits are solid gold.’

‘Who are all these people?’

‘Royalty of various kinds,’ said Alec. ‘They’re all in the stud book. Try to look interested – we won’t be here long.’

‘I was hoping to talk to the Sultan.’

‘I thought you’d had your fill of that.’

‘Political questions,’ I said. But I didn’t want to ask them. I knew the answers, and I

was certain it would only make me angrier to hear him say them.

Alec said, ‘It doesn’t matter. Whatever you ask him, he’ll turn the conversation to Beverley Nichols and Willie Maugham. Here he comes.’

The Sultan entered the room. He had changed into a buff-colored military uniform that resembled a Masonic costume. None of the medals and ribbons thatched on his breast pocket were as striking as the buttons down the front of his jacket, which turned the dim light from the chandeliers into a dazzle. There was some applause as he took his seat at the head table.

‘Those buttons are something,’ I said.

‘Diamonds,’ said Alec. ‘That’s how we kept these jokers on our side, you know. We let them design their own uniforms. Buffles is one of the better ones. True, he barely speaks Malay, he’s half gaga and he thinks Beverley Nichols is Shakespeare. But I tell you, Buffles is one of the better ones.’

‘Isn’t this rather an expensive farce?’ I said. I looked around and thought: Gillespie died for them. But Gillespie had been a polo player.

‘It’s your farce from now on. You Americans will pay for it.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘They’re whistling in the dark.’

‘We’re being summoned,’ said Alec. ‘Here comes the princess. What did I tell you? Now we have to stay.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m not hungry anymore.’

The princess said, ‘Daddy wants you to sit down.’

The Sultan had already begun eating. He was hunched biliously over his food and appeared to be spitting into his plate.

‘We’ll be right over,’ said Alec.

‘I’m expected in Ayer Hitam,’ I said.

‘Daddy said you’re to stay.’

‘I’m afraid that’s out of the question,’ I said.

Alec tried to soothe her, but she stepped in front of him and said crossly, ‘Daddy said

so.’ She went back to the Sultan and whispered in his ear. The old man looked up, trying to focus on me. He looked blackly furious, and then his cheeks bulged with a bone which he spat on the table-cloth.

‘Now you’ve done it,’ said Alec.

The princess returned to us. ‘Go, if you want to,’ she said. ‘Daddy doesn’t care. But I do. You have no right to treat him that way. You know what I think of you? I think you’re a typical rude American.’

‘If you believe that,’ I said, ‘then it won’t surprise you if I tell you that I think you’re a fat overprivileged little prig.’

Her eyes widened at me. I thought she was going to scream, but all she said was, ‘I’m telling Daddy.’

‘Please do.’

Alec said, ‘Are you off your head?’ He rushed over to the Sultan and spoke to him, and he did not leave until he had the Sultan laughing, agreeing, sharing whatever story he had concocted to excuse himself for my bad manners.

‘What were you telling the Sultan?’ I asked on the way back to Ayer Hitam.

‘Nothing,’ he said. Then suddenly, ‘You don’t have to live here – I do.’

The road was dark; we drove in silence for a while past the ruined rubber estates. At one, there was a shack at the roadside. I heard a child bawling. I said, ‘Poor Gillespie.’

Alec grunted. He said, ‘Gillespie would have stayed.’

He was right, of course. Gillespie would have stayed and charmed the Sultan and complimented the princess. I had overreacted – my squawk was ineffectual. But Gillespie didn’t matter much. He was just another Maugham hero whose time was up. Only the night mattered, and those feebly lighted shacks, and the cry of that child in the darkness, and the danger that all of us deserved. We drove down the road which was made cavernous by hanging branches, and there was no sound but the pelting insects smashing against the windshield.