We rather disliked children; we had none of our own, but that was seldom noticed because the local kids were everywhere. They strayed from the staff quarters and the kampong into the club grounds, meeting in threes – three Tamils, three Malays, three Chinese, as if that was the number required for play. They usually quarreled: it was an impossible number – one was invariably made a leper, victimized, and finally rejected. Alec called them villains. He blamed the theft of his camera on one particular threesome who played their own version – no teams, no net – of the Malay game of sepak takraw, kicking a raffia ball the size of a grapefruit back and forth at the side of the clubhouse.

There was a solitary one, perhaps Malay. It was hard to tell how dark she was beneath her dirt. She had uncombed hair and bruised legs and elbows and she wore a soiled waistless dress of the sort sent in bales from America and England and distributed by bush missionaries. She was not tall, but neither was she very young. The dirt gave her skin the texture of greasy fabric. Her feet were cracked like an adult's, she was solemn, she did not play. She squatted on the grass with her arms folded on her knees, her tangled hair drooping, and she watched the other children taking possession of the parking lot, the gardens, the old bowling green. She looked upon them with a witchy aloofness. She was, for all her dirt, free.

All this I remembered after she joined us.

Late one night, over drinks, Tony Evans was describing how a tennis ball should strike the racket if it was to have maximum top-spin. There were three of us in the lounge – Tony, Rupert Prosser, and myself – and it was October, just before the second monsoon. Tony was still in his white tennis outfit, having made a night of his after-game drinks; there were spills of pink Angostura down the front of his Fred Perry shirt.

'You should concentrate on your game now that the Footlighters have folded,' he said to Prosser, the pink gins giving what was meant as a casual remark a leaden pedantry. 'Jan's got a weak serve – she should be working on that.' He sipped his drink. 'Now, top-spin. Ideally, the ball should hit the racket at this angle.'

He touched the ball to the strings and then with a sudden hilarity hit the ball hard. It shot out of the window and made a dark thump in the grass.

'You weren't paying attention.'

Prosser said, ‘You’re drunk.’

But Evans was heading for the door. He said, ‘Now I’ve got to find my bloody ball.’

We heard him stamping around the lawn and swishing through the flowers under the window. He cursed; there was a cry – not his – like a cat’s complaint. The next we knew he was at the door and saying, ‘Look what I found!’

He did not hold the girl in his arms – she was too big for that. He held her wrist, as if he was abducting her, and she was trying to pull away. She had the haggard, insolent look of someone startled from sleep. She did not seem afraid, but rather contemptuous of us.

‘She was at the door,’ said Evans. ‘I saw her legs sticking out. These people can sleep anywhere.’

‘I’ve seen her around,’ said Prosser. ‘I thought she was from the kampong.’

‘Could use a bath,’ said Evans. He made a face, but still he held her wrist.

In Malay, I asked her what her name was. She scowled with fear and jerked her head to one side. Her thin starved face allowed her teeth and eyes to protrude, and she smelled of dust and damp grass. But she was undeniably pretty, in a wild sort of way, like a captive bird panting under its ragged feathers, wishing to break free of us.

‘Call the police,’ said Evans. ‘She shouldn’t be sleeping out there.’

Then he said with unmistakable lechery, ‘She doesn’t look like much, but believe me she’s got a body under all those rags. I felt it! Give her a bath and you might be surprised by what you find. All she wants is a good scrub.’

I said, ‘We ought to call the mission.’

‘They’ll be asleep – it’s nearly midnight,’ said Prosser. ‘I’ll ring Jan. We can put her in the spare room.’

Prosser went to the phone. Evans picked up the bowl of peanuts from the bottle-cluttered table. He showed her the peanuts and said, ‘Makan?’

At first she hesitated, then seeing that she was being encouraged she took a great handful and pushed it into her mouth. She turned away to chew and I could hear her hunger, the snappings and swallowings.

Evans nudged me. ‘Listen to him’ – Prosser was drunkenly shouting into the phone in the next room – ‘I’ll bet Jan thinks he’s picked up some tart!’

A week later the girl was still with the Prossers.

‘She’s landed on her feet,’ said Evans. ‘Couple of bleeding hearts. They always wanted a kid.’

‘She’s no kid,’ I said. ‘Has Prosser told the police? Her parents might be looking for her. Who knows, she might have had amnesia.’ Evans was shaking his head. ‘She might be a bit simple.’

‘Not according to Jan. They’re thinking of taking her on as an amah. She learns fast, they say. The only thing is, she hasn’t said a blessed word!’

‘Suppose she’s not Malay? Suppose she’s Chinese? We should get someone to talk to her in Cantonese or Hokkien. Father Lefever could do it.’

‘You don’t want a mish for this,’ said Evans. ‘My provisioner’s just the man. I’ll put him onto it. You’re in for a treat. Pickwick’s a real character.’

That afternoon, as I was walking into town, a car drew up beside me, the Prossers’ Zephyr.

‘Give you a lift?’ said Rupert.

I thanked him, but said I’d walk. Then I saw the girl. She was in the back seat, in a beautiful sarong, with a blouse so starched it was like stiff white paper enfolding her dark shoulders. She smiled at me shyly, as if ashamed to be seen this way. The blouse was crushed against her breasts, the sarong tightened on her curve of belly. Cleaned up she looked definitely Chinese; her face was a bit fuller, her eyes deep and lacking the dull shine her hunger had given them. She was a beauty in tremulous trapped repose, and the Prossers in the front seat were obviously very proud of her.

‘We’re taking Nina into town to buy some clothes,’ said Jan. ‘She doesn’t have a stitch, poor thing.’

‘We had to burn her dress,’ said Rupert, grinning. ‘It stank!’

‘Filthy! She was caked with it,’ said Jan, who like Rupert seemed to relish their transformation of the girl.

Rupert glanced back admiringly. ‘We gave her a good scrub. Jan wouldn’t let me help.’

Jan was coy. ‘She’s hardly a child.’

The girl hid her face against her shoulder: she knew she was being discussed.

I said, ‘What does she have to say?’

‘Not much,’ said Jan. ‘Nothing actually. We think she’ll open up when she gets used to us.’

I told them my idea of asking someone to speak to her in Chinese and how Evans had suggested his provisioner.

‘Wonderful,’ said Rupert. ‘Send him around. We’re dying to find out about her.’

‘You know her name at least.’

‘Nina? That was Jan’s idea. We always said if we had a girl we’d call her Nina.’

And they drove away, like a couple who’ve rescued a stray cat. They looked happy, but I was struck by the sight of their three odd heads jogging in the car’s rear window. If the girl had been younger, if she had not looked so changed by that hint of shame, I think I would have let the matter rest. There would have been little to describe: a lost child – and children look so much alike. But she was different, describable, almost remarkable in her looks, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, all her moles uncovered, a person. Someone would remember her. I knew Jan and Rupert wouldn’t forgive me for going to the police, so the first chance I had I rang Father Lefever at the mission and asked him if he could find out anything about her. The mission net was wide: Johore was a parish.

Evans’s provisioner was that unusual person in Malaysia, a fat man. I distrusted him the moment I saw him. He had an obscure tattoo on the back of his hand, three linked circles, and he had that wholly insincere jollity the Chinese affect when they are among strangers.

Evans introduced him as Pickwick and the fat man laughed and said his name was Pei-Kway. He said, ‘Too hard for Europeans to say.’

I stared at him, pursed my lips, and said crisply, ‘Pei-Kway.’

Prosser was leading the girl into the room. She was even prettier than she had seemed in the car, but her look of wildness was gone; she was slow, uncertain, domesticated. She watched the floor.

‘Ask her how old she is,’ said Jan.

‘Go on, Picky, do your stuff,’ said Evans.

Pei-Kway spoke to the girl, and getting no reply he repeated his question in a slightly different tone, licking at the words and gulping as he spoke.

The girl’s answer was little more than a sigh.

‘Hokkien,’ said Pei-Kway. ‘She is sixteen years.’

‘Amazing,’ said Evans. ‘Small for her age.’

‘Not really,’ said Rupert. ‘Ask her where she’s from.’

This time the girl seemed reluctant to speak, and I could see that Pei-Kway was urging her. He was certainly challenging her, and he could have been uttering threats, his tone was so nasty. He did most of the talking, with greedy energy. The girl replied in monosyllables to his squawks. None of us interrupted; we stood by, lending Pei-Kway authority in what was by the minute becoming an inquisition. Though instead of going closer and bearing down on her, Pei-Kway inched back as he kept up this flow of questions.

He stopped. After all that talk all he said was, ‘She’s not from Ayer Hitam.’

‘I could have told you that,’ said Evans.

‘Doesn’t she have parents?’ asked Jan.

‘Dead,’ said Pei-Kway. He made a vague gesture with his tattooed hand. He seemed satisfied, almost subdued. He had become as laconic as the girl; his grin was gone.

Now, unprompted, the girl spoke.

Pei-Kway said, ‘She wants to stay here. She is saying thank you.’ He said something to the girl in a harsh growl and I saw her react as if he’d given her a push.

I said, ‘What did you just say to her?’

Pei-Kway gave me a vast empty smile, simply a stiffening of his face. ‘I say, this is not your place.’ To Evans he said, ‘Tuan, I’m going.’

But Jan had put her arm around the girl. ‘Wait a minute,’ she said. ‘Why is it she doesn’t speak Malay? I thought everyone in this country knew Malay.’

‘They speak Hokkien in her village.’

Rupert said, ‘Where is this village?’

‘Batu Pahat,’ said Pei-Kway, who no longer looking at the girl was replying without referring to her. He appeared restless. He had announced his intention to go, but was kept at the door by the questions.

Jan said, ‘But what’s her name?’

Angrily, Pei-Kway addressed the girl. Her mutter sounded familiar.

‘Nina,’ said Pei-Kway.

For several days I saw nothing of the Prossers, but as usual when someone stayed away from the Club he became all the more present in conversation. Gossip and hearsay made absentees interesting and gave them a uniqueness that was dispelled only when they showed up.

‘Prosser’s got his hands full,’ said Evans one day. ‘Nina tried to do a bunk last night. Found her sneaking out of the house. Scared rigid, she was. Had to carry her back bodily and lock her in her room.’

‘Lucky he caught her in time,’ I said.

‘Very lucky, I’d say.’ Evans laughed loudly. ‘Imagine old Prosser, who’s in bed by midnight – and he sleeps like a bloody log – imagine him catching the girl leaving his house at four in the morning.’

‘You’re sure of the time, are you?’

‘Jan heard him. Maybe he was up splashing his boots,’ said Evans. ‘But she’s pretty, that girl.’

I had not heard from Father Lefever. I rang him when Evans left, and he apologized for not getting in touch with me. He said he had found out nothing – he had completely forgotten about the girl.

‘But now that you’ve reminded me,’ he said, ‘I will get down to business.’

I told him to try Batu Pahat.

And yet I began to feel that I was prying. The Prossers seemed happy, and Evans’s gossip I was sure was full of malicious envy. The girl had to be given a chance. If what

Evans had said was true – that she had tried to get away – then it was only the fact of the odd numbers, the three of them. I pictured them in their bungalow on the oil-palm estate, playing at being a family, as the children in threes played their games on the Club's grounds. And I began to think they had succeeded with the girl in creating one of those outposts of intimacy so rare in the tropics, a happy family. They had left us.

There followed a period of dateless time, the hiatus of the delayed monsoon, hot and lacking any event; only the whine of the locusts, the occasional roar of a timber truck, the sound of the thin breeze rattling the palms, the accumulation of dust on the verandah that was more like sand or silt, bulking against my house. Silence and the meaningless chirp of birds, the scraw of lizards behind the pictures on the wall. I wished that I had, like Rupert Prosser, found a child in a garden at midnight that I could treat as my pet.

The mood was broken one afternoon by Prosser's voice saying, 'Come over quick. I can't leave the house. Hurry, it's important. Evans is on his way.'

'If anyone rings,' I told Miss Leong, 'I'm at the Prossers'. But I'm not expecting any calls.'

Jan and Nina were on the sofa when I arrived. Nina was pale and held her face with the tips of her thin fingers; Jan was comforting her. Nina's face was shining with fear. Rupert was almost purple, and before I could speak he shouted, 'They had her in a bag!'

Hearing this, Jan hugged the girl so tightly I thought she'd break. But the girl only drew her arms together, contracting in grief and closing her fingers to hide her face.

Evans's car drew up to the verandah. Rupert paused until he entered the room, then said again, 'They had her in a bag!'

'Chinese?' said Evans.

'Three of them,' said Rupert. 'They must have been watching the house, because as soon as Jan left for her tennis they stepped in.'

'Rupert found them –'

'I had an inkling something was wrong,' said Rupert, and he swallowed hard, trying to resume. 'I was at the estate stores and had this inkling. As soon as I saw their car I was on my guard, then three blokes came out of the house struggling with this bag. It shook me. I ran back to the car and got my pistol. They took one look at it and dropped the bag and drove off. They had parangs, but they're no match for a bullet. I thought it was a break-in – reckoned they had my hi-fi and Jan's jewelry in the bag. When I saw

Nina crawling out you could have knocked me over with a feather.'

Evans, with just the trace of a smile, said, 'Lucky you came back when you did.'

Rupert bent over and tugged his knee socks straight.

'I didn't know you had a gun,' I said.

'I was in Nigeria,' he said. 'I would have shot the bastards too, but they dropped the bag. I don't want any trouble with the police. You can get a jail sentence for shooting burglars in this bloody country. Burglars! But these were kidnapers.'

'Probably political,' said Evans.

'Sure,' said Rupert. 'Communists. They want to hold the estate to ransom.'

'That sort of thing doesn't happen around here,' I said. 'This isn't Kedah. It might have been her relatives. Anyway, she's sixteen. You don't know much about her. She might be married. Her husband –'

Rupert said, 'She's not married,' and cleared his throat. 'Dead scared, she was,' and coughed, 'I got their license number. But I don't want to go to the police because they'll start asking a lot of questions about who she is.'

'The kidnapers might try again,' said Evans.

'I'll shoot them next time,' said Rupert hoarsely. 'We'll move, get a transfer. But you've got to help me.'

'I'd go to the police,' I said.

'Don't you understand anything?' said Rupert. 'We're keeping her.'

Jan said, 'We're determined now,' and jumped as the telephone jangled.

'That'll be my wife,' said Evans.

But it was Miss Leong. Father Lefever had called the Consulate. He wanted to see me immediately.

'I'm going over to the mission,' I said to Rupert.

'I'll give you a lift,' said Evans.

‘I was hoping you’d stick around,’ said Rupert.

‘You’ll be all right,’ said Evans, giving Rupert a matey slap on the back.

In the car Evans said, ‘He thinks we’re stupid. People come here from tin-pot places like Nigeria and they think they have all the answers.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘He discovered her trying to leave. He discovered some kidnappers. It’s rubbish!’ said Evans with greater outrage than I thought he was capable of. ‘He’s knocking her off. He’s setting the whole thing up. There was no kidnaping attempt. In a few weeks there’ll be another disappearance, but this time it’ll be the two of them doing a bunk, mark my words. Then you’ll hear they’re in North Borneo playing housie. Prosser’s screwing her, the lucky sod.’

At the mission I thanked him and started to get out of the car. He stopped me with his hand and said, ‘Who do you believe, him or me?’

‘I believe the girl,’ I said, and saw that frightened face again.

Evans said, ‘She’s not talking.’

Across the courtyard, Father Lefever watched from his office doorway, and as I drew nearer I could see on his cassock – so white at a distance – grease marks and stains. A French Canadian, he had the grizzled appearance that dedicated missionaries acquire in the tropics; he usually needed a shave, his house boy cut his hair. His sandals had been clumsily resewn, and yet these like the stains on his cassock seemed proof of his sanctity. Eager to talk he put his arm around me and hurried me inside.

‘The girl,’ he said. ‘I think I know who she is.’

I told him I had just seen her.

‘Is she well?’

‘She’s rather upset.’

‘I didn’t mean that. Is she in good health?’

‘Father Lefever, someone tried to kidnap her today.’

‘Yes,’ he said, and shook his head. ‘I was also afraid of that.’

‘It was pretty serious. Three men came to Prosser’s and put her in a sack. Prosser arrived just in time to stop them kidnaping her.’

‘He saved her life – they meant to kill her.’ Father Lefever fingered the knots on the rope that was tied around his waist. ‘It’s the Triad,’ he said. ‘Probably the Sa Ji – they’re the fellows who keep order around here.’

Triad: the word was new to me. I told him so.

He said, ‘A Chinese secret society.’

‘Then it’s not political,’ I said. ‘But Prosser doesn’t have any money.’

‘Triads don’t kidnap only for money,’ he said. He showed me the three knots on his rope belt. ‘It is like a religious order,’ he said, grasping one thick knot. ‘This obsesses them. Purity – but their kind of purity. And they punish impurity their own cruel way. A person is taken and put in a sack and drowned. They call it “death by bath.”’

I saw Evans’s point. He had guessed that Rupert had been to bed with her; and he had a good case – fortuitous finding of the girl about to escape, the visit home in the middle of the day: adulterer’s luck. And now I understood Pei-Kway’s tattoo.

‘I suppose if the Triad thought she was Prosser’s mistress they’d do that. Punishing the adultery.’

‘I didn’t say anything about adultery,’ said Father Lefever. ‘They don’t want her here, that’s all.’

‘Batu Pahat’s not far away.’

‘She doesn’t live in Batu Pahat. Quite a bit off the road, in fact, at our mission hospital. I doubt that you’ve ever seen it. No one goes there willingly.’

‘A hospital?’

‘A leprosarium,’ he said.

‘She’s a leper.’ I could not conceal my shock.

But Father Lefever was smiling. ‘You see your reaction? You’re as bad as the Triad. It’s not the girl, but her parents. Both have what we now call Hansen’s disease. It’s not so much a hospital as a village – very isolated, because people have such a horror of the disease. The girl probably doesn’t have it, but what can she do? Her parents want her near them. She ran away six weeks ago. The priests were very reassured to know

that she is safe here.'

'What happens now?'

'You should tell your friends something of the girl's background. I'll put them in touch with the leprosarium and they can take it from there.'

'They'll be horrified.'

'Tell them not to worry. Even if she's a carrier it's only infectious if contact has been extensive. She's merely a house guest – there's no problem.'

Walking out to the courtyard, Father Lefever said, 'They are doing great work at Batu Pahat. Why, do you know that two years ago your Mr Leopold visited? He was much impressed. He's made a study of the disease.'

'I don't know him,' I said.

'Yes, you do. Leopold – he and his friend murdered that poor child in Chicago about fifty years ago. It was a celebrated case.'

I delivered the news as tactfully as possible and withdrew, wondering what would happen. Though I had said nothing to Evans he knew all about it within a week – not from Prosser but from Pei-Kway. And Pei-Kway had the news that the girl had been sent back. I never found out what had gone on at the Prossers', among those three people; and the Triad was not charged with attempted murder. The only victim was that waif, who was made a leper, and each time I thought of her I saw her radiant, captive, in a new dress entering the leper village to join those two ruined people.

Jan stopped coming to the Club; Rupert was there every night until the bar closed. One weekend he went down to Batu Pahat. We didn't know whether he was seeing the girl or taking a cure, or both. He came back alone and seemed much happier; he talked of his great luck. Evans became fond of saying, 'I give that marriage six months.'