

Foreigner's Rock

by

David T. K. Wong

The anchor clung like a grotesque insect upon the prow as the white painted liner edged alongside. Passengers crowded the decks in spite of the fierce tropical sunshine. They were in high spirits, drinking in the faded charm of the betel nut island of Penang, one of the original trading posts of the British East India Company. On the pier a motley collection of immigration officials, shipping functionaries, tourist guides and stevedores made ready to carry out their divers duties.

Four weeks into their world cruise, the passengers had grown accustomed to tossing streamers, blowing hooters and waving to complete strangers. Having paid good money, they felt entitled to their fun.

Krishna watched their antics with a wry smile. His cotton shirt and drill trousers, immaculately starched and ironed, were photic in their whiteness. They contrasted sharply with the almost negrito blackness of his skin. He had wavy black hair, dark flashing eyes and sensual nostrils. But it was his fleshy mouth, dimpling superciliously at the corners, that gave him the aspects of an arrogant Hindu god, seemingly possessed with the power to play havoc with feminine hearts.

But being twenty-seven, the father of two children and still stuck as a guide with Paradise Tours weighed upon Krishna. What a way to earn a living, he thought, as he waited for the gangplank to be heaved into place. He held a placard in one hand, ready for display. Written upon it in bold capitals were the words "Mrs. Jodie Hamilton".

He wondered what specimen of American womanhood he was to be lumbered with. This one was supposed to be a widow from Dallas, Texas, travelling alone, and apparently so lacking in commonsense as to sign up for the exorbitant seven-day *de luxe* tour of the island.

He had an antipathy towards American women, particularly those arriving on luxury liners. It was an aversion shaped by eight years of misplaced hopes and cruel disappointments. They never turned out as he had imagined, like the beauties in Hollywood films or the uninhibited hippies roasting themselves silly on the remoter beaches.

Instead, they came over-fed and over-aged, too ready to be thrilled by bigness and awed by antiquity. But it was their emotional and sexual untidiness he particularly disliked. They seemed to expect every casual liaison to turn into some grand passion, though -- truth to tell -- he had often exploited their confusion to his own financial advantage.

He wondered whether Mrs. Jodie Hamilton fell into that category. Widows were often romantically vulnerable, though he was at the moment in no mood to offer services beyond

the call of duty. There was, to the best of his knowledge, no panic over medical expenses or school fees. Besides, his wife, Soo-ling, had to be handled with care. She was always suspicious of large tips.

As the passengers disembarked, Krishna envied the guides assigned to one-day tours. They would be rid of blue-rinsed hair and gross, unbecoming buttocks by evening, whereas he had to mouth tall tales, potted histories and facile flatteries for the next seven days.

He held up his placard with resignation as he ticked off mentally the elements in the de luxe programme. A funicular ride to the top of Penang Hill, viewing rusting cannons at Fort Cornwallis, visiting the Snake Temple with its dozing pit vipers, feeding the Rhesus monkeys at the Botanical Garden, walking the beach at Batu Ferringhi, inspecting a motley selection of temples and mosques. The whole thing should not last three days. The trick was to spin it out for another four.

After a while, he saw a woman in a cotton frock of a bright floral design taking leave of fellow passengers. She strode majestically towards him, on long, elegant legs. She looked cool and crisp and young in the colourful dress. He then noticed the dazzling blue eyes and the blonde curls cascading upon her shoulders like burnished gold.

"Hi! I'm Jodie Hamilton," the vision said, extending a well-manicured hand. Her voice was soft but deep-throated.

Krishna caught a whiff of expensive perfume. The hand clasp was firm and friendly. He flashed a smile in response, displaying a set of strong white teeth.

"Welcome to Penang, Mrs. Hamilton," he said, in English carrying a distinctive Dravidian lilt. "Krishna of Paradise Tours has the honour to be at your service. A car is waiting. If Madam will identify her luggage, I will escort Madam to the hotel."

He noted swiftly that the lady was older than he had at first imagined, for he could now discern an incipient double chin and a certain pleasing maturity in the fullness of the figure. He judged her to be around her mid-thirties.

"Krishna? Isn't that the name of a god in these parts?" Mrs. Hamilton asked, with a warm smile.

"Yes, M'am. Krishna is the Hindu god of fire, lightning, storms, the heavens and the sun, the eighth avatar of Vishnu."

"Well, seven days in paradise escorted by a Hindu god is not to be sneezed at. I'm looking forward to it. But let's drop the formality. Just call me 'Jodie'. We Americans don't go in much for formality."

"That is most pleasing to know. May I suggest a walk around the city after checking in? That way, your bearings will be -- how do you say it -- better oriented? The streets around here can be confusing. When you are ready, I suggest lunch in the hotel."

"I don't lunch, Krish. But don't foresake your meal break on my account." Mrs. Hamilton's blue eyes sparkled beguilingly as she spoke. "You don't mind my calling you Krish, do you? It sounds more friendly. I'm not being too familiar, am I? I don't want to go against local usage."

"No, not at all. Krish will be most acceptable."

"Good. Now, Krish, don't worry about me foodwise. Forget about hamburgers and sirloin steaks. I'm very adventurous. I'll eat anything. In fact, I'm dying to sample the local fare."

"That is also most heartening to know," Krishna said, mesmerized by the blue eyes and the dulcet tones coming from the soft painted mouth. "As you can see, we are a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. So we have a wide choice in food, ranging from Malay to Indian to Chinese, plus some hybrid dishes known as nyonya food. It will be my pleasure to introduce you to whatever you wish."

"Great. Let's get the luggage and be on our way."

After checking in, Mrs. Hamilton repaired to her room to freshen up. As Krishna waited in the hotel lobby, he could not suppress a ripple of excitement. What luck! He has actually landed an attractive American for a change! He wondered if her adventurousness over food extended to other appetites.

He tried to think of ways of eliciting further information about his charge. But when she rejoined him, he found himself on the receiving end of questions instead.

"I hope you don't mind a lot of silly questions, Krish," Mrs. Hamilton said, diffidently, as they strolled out of the hotel. "It is just that I know so little about this part of the world. The main thing about travelling is to get to know other cultures, isn't it? There seems to be so many different races here that I can't tell exactly who are the natives and who are the transplants. Are you, for example, indigenous to these parts?"

"Not really. I'm a transplant, although this is the only home I know," Krishna replied. "My family are Tamils, from southern India. My grandparents came as indentured labourers, to work as tappers in rubber plantations. My father was born here but my mother came from India upon marriage. She and my father also worked as tappers, although my father is now a foreman. I was born here and was lucky enough to get sufficient schooling to become a tourist guide. That's progress, I suppose."

"Good for you! And what is a tapper?"

"Well, a tapper goes out early in the morning to slice the bark of rubber trees. That causes a milky fluid called latex to ooze out. The latex drips into small cups placed at the bottom of each cutting. At the end of the day the latex is collected for processing. I can show you tomorrow."

"I would love that. Your family is now settled here for good?"

"Well, yes and no. My grandparents are dead. But I think my parents still feel more Indian than Malaysian. They observe Indian festivals and stick pretty much to old habits and customs. They visit India whenever they have enough money. I think they would rather go back if they could make a decent living there.

"But not me. This is the only home I know, although I don't feel I quite belong. When I was in school, this country was ruled by the British. Now it is independent and it is ruled by the Malays. Either way, I'm a second class citizen. The trouble is that India doesn't mean much to me either. I've never been there and I've no desire to go.

"I can't speak Tamil at all well, let alone read and write it. I was taught only Malay and English at school. Some call that cultural imperialism. But whatever it is called, there's no denying people like me are getting messed up culturally. Marriages across racial and religious lines make matters worse. To be honest, I am only Indian in my appearance and in my choice of food."

"Oh, how sad!" Mrs. Hamilton said, with undisguised sympathy. "Let us at least honour that part of your heritage by having an Indian meal this evening. But I want the real McCoy, not stuff served up in fancy restaurants for tourists."

"Indian food can be very hot."

"I'm used to that. I've had plenty of Mexican food in Texas and some of that's pretty darn hot."

"Ah, but not as hot as vindaloo. People say vindaloo is so hot that if you fed it to a corpse it would sit up!"

"That I've got to try!"

That evening Krishna took Mrs. Hamilton to a traditional Indian restaurant. It was an unpretentious place, consisting of a large whitewashed hall resonating with lilting tones. Dark-faced customers shared benches before long wooden tables. Cuttings of banana leaves served as plates. The advent of a blonde woman brought a momentary hush to the room. Then the babble resumed.

Waiters in bare feet circulated with large earthen pots filled with Madras and vindaloo curries, tandoori chicken, grilled tiger prawns the size of lobsters, bhendi bhaji, boiled rice and Indian pancakes served with a lentils gravy. Portions were ladled onto the banana leaves on request.

"No eating utensils here, dear lady. You'll have to eat with your hand," Krishna explained. "You make your food into a small ball and pop it into your mouth. But use only your right hand. The left is considered unclean. When you have finished, there are wash basins in the back."

"Why is the left hand unclean?"

"Because it is used for other purposes."

A puzzled look crossed Mrs. Hamilton's face. Then she caught the meaning. "Right! I get it! Gosh, one learns something new everyday. A left-handed person must be in trouble in this place!"

Krishna also introduced Mrs. Hamilton to toddy, the potent fermented palm alcohol popular among Indians. She took to it readily and by the end of the evening they were both in a merry mood.

"You've done us proud, Krish," Mrs. Hamilton said. "If tonight is anything to go by, we're going to have a fabulous time together."

When Krishna got home, Soo-ling said: "You're late and you've been drinking. Don't tell me you've been with your cronies again."

"No, lah," Krishna replied, with a slur in his voice. "It's work, lah. An American widow on that damn de luxe tour. I'm stuck with her all week."

"If she keeps you out this late, I hope she's a big tipper. We're running tight again and I don't want to have to go to my father."

"What! Again?"

In order to deflect him, Soo-ling said: "Look at your shirt, lah! You've got curry on it! That's devilish to clean, man. Can't you be more careful?"

The toddy had mellowed Krishna to such an extent that he soon fell asleep, oblivious to both the family's shaky finances and his wife's admonitions.

The next morning, he showed Mrs. Hamilton a rubber plantation. It surprised him that she should find pleasure in walking around in the dank, dark shade of rubber trees, watching the slow trickle of white latex into tin receptacles. Their drinking the previous night had broken the ice so the walk in the rubber plantation proved quite companionable.

After the walk Krishna took her on the funicular to Penang Hill, the location of one of the earliest colonial hill stations in the country. During the ride, Mrs. Hamilton asked: "Are you married, Krish? Do you have a family of your own?"

"Afraid not."

"I'm surprised. Some smart gal ought to have hog-tied a handsome fella like you before now," Mrs. Hamilton said, in an exaggerated Texas drawl.

"Smart girls like men with money, not tour guides. I can barely support myself, let alone a family. I wanted to marry a Chinese girl once. But our parents objected. The one thing Indian and Chinese parents have in common is to want to arrange their children's marriages! We couldn't get our way. But that's life."

"I'm sorry to hear that! Do you still see the girl?"

"No, she's now married, with two children."

"Oh, how sad!" Mrs. Hamilton placed a hand on Krishna's arm in an expression of sympathy. "I know how it feels to lose someone. I lost Marty -- that's Mr. Hamilton -- three years ago and I miss him still. We had a few good years together, so I can't really complain. In one of Hemingway's war stories the girl only had four days."

"I've seen that movie! It was about a war in Spain, wasn't it? Didn't Ingrid Bergman play in it? It had such a sad ending."

"Yes, most great love stories seem to have sad endings. It's one of my favourites nonetheless."

They got off the funicular to stroll past the elegant bungalows dotting the hill. Then they walked along lush paths to catch the spectacular vistas of Georgetown and the rest of the island.

On the way back to the funicular, Krishna asked: "What business was Mr. Hamilton in?"

"Oil. Poor Marty! He never had a choice. His grandfather, Martin T. Hamilton, struck oil. By the time he came along his whole life had been mapped out for him. He just became Martin T. Hamilton the Third. He had to suppress his natural, unconventional streak. I think he would rather have been a guitar player or a crop duster. He was that kind of person."

"How strange! I always thought only the poor had no choice."

"Yes, I used to think the same. When Marty died, he left me a forty-room mansion and thirty-five million dollars. Now I'm surrounded by problems. Lawyers, accountants, investment consultants and tax collectors. They drive me crazy. I'm never sure whether people like me or only my money. Rattling around a forty-room mansion by oneself is not much fun either."

"I'm sure plenty of people like you for yourself. You are a very charming lady."

"That's real sweet of you, Krish. But I would give up all I own just to have Marty back again."

"You must care for him a great deal."

"Yes. When we got married, his relatives were against it. They thought I was just after his money. He belonged to the cream of Texas society and I was just a New York showgirl."

"Did Mr. Hamilton meet a tragic end?"

"Tragic? Hell, no! He found the best way to go. He died making love to me. I always told him he worked too hard, both at the office and at home, if you know what I mean. Heck, I don't know why I'm telling you all this. We're practically strangers."

"Ah, some things can only be told to strangers. Isn't that one of the reasons people travel, to unburden themselves to people they need never see again?"

"I didn't realize you are a philosopher, Krish."

They spent the rest of the day inspecting religious monuments and that evening, back in his own home, Krishna tossed in bed trying to visualize what possessing thirty-five million American dollars meant. But he failed. He eventually fell asleep dreaming of what it might be like to expire in Mrs. Hamilton's embrace.

The next day began with a visit to the Botanical Garden, during the course of which Krishna explained that a trip to Batu Ferringhi had been scheduled for the late afternoon.

"There are miles of beach along the northern part of the island," Krishna said. "The only people there are a few fishing families and occasional visitors to the holiday bungalows. The bungalows are owned by business tycoons but they seldom use them. Such a waste. If I owned one I would be there everyday. There's good swimming. The sand is coarse but the water is warm and clear."

"That sounds great," Mrs. Hamilton said. "I'll buy that."

Later that day Mrs. Hamilton presented herself in a wide-brimmed straw hat, dark glasses, a loose-fitting Hawaiian dress and a pair of leather sandals. A large tote bag hung from one shoulder. Her attire lent her an air of casual sophistication, like that of a movie actress at play.

Upon arrival, Krishna parked the car and pointed to an outcrop of granite jutting onto the beach. "The name of the beach is derived from that pile of rocks," he explained. "In the days of sailing ships, Portuguese and Dutch sailors used to land here for fresh water. Thus the place became known as Batu Ferringhi or Foreigner's Rock."

"The beach looks marvellous," Mrs. Hamilton said, breathing in the clean sea air.

"Shall we walk a while before we take to the water?"

"As you wish," Krishna replied. "You're the paying guest."

As they strolled along the beach fringed with palms, casuarinas and other tropical growths, a gentle breeze brought the distant scent of frangipani. Tiny sand crabs scurried out of their way. Except for a few children splashing in the water, they had the beach to themselves.

After a while they found a suitable place to rest and Mrs. Hamilton indicated her readiness for a swim. She removed her Hawaiian dress to reveal a smart two-piece bathing costume which displayed her buxom figure to advantage. She began applying sun tan lotion to her limbs and body but asked Krishna to help put some on her back.

As Krishna applied the lotion, the plasticity of the smooth, warm flesh electrified him with desire. His hand almost strayed beyond permissible bounds. He suddenly remembered another time at the very same beach when he had been similarly excited while rubbing sun tan lotion on the back of a Chinese girl. That had led to a pregnancy and the near-banishment of both of them from their respective families.

"Done," he said quickly, handing back the lotion.

"Aren't you going to swim with me?" Mrs. Hamilton asked, as she made ready to enter the water.

"That is not allowed when I'm on duty. I have to watch your possessions and act as lifeguard in case of difficulties."

"There won't be difficulties. I'm a strong swimmer," Mrs. Hamilton said, as she ran towards the sea.

As Krishna watched Mrs. Hamilton swimming with a strong crawl, he felt stirred again by desire. The palm of his hand still tingled from the contact with her flesh. He could sense a physical hunger in her and he felt an overwhelming urge to possess her.

After half an hour, Mrs. Hamilton came out of the sea with a majestic languor of a goddess. Her near nakedness was almost too much for Krishna to bear.

"The water was super. You should have joined me," Mrs. Hamilton said, pulling a hotel towel out from her tote bag to dry her hair, leaving it tousled and child-like. She then put on her sun glasses and lowered herself onto the sand. As she stretched out, her bosom rose and fell in rhythm with her breathing. The studs of her nipples were outlined clearly beneath her wet costume, while the golden down on her limbs caught the last rays of the retreating sun.

Krishna could think of nothing but ravishing that wet, delectable body. It seemed so ripe, earthy and available. Only the fear of being sacked deterred him from chancing an initiative. Because of the sunglasses, he could not tell whether Mrs. Hamilton was watching him or whether she had her eyes closed. Nevertheless he blatantly devoured every tempting feature of her body with his eyes.

Dusk came with tropical swiftness, aided by a steady gathering of rain clouds. After what seemed an interminable silence, Mrs. Hamilton said: "This is truly paradise. Warm water and clean air, the sense of emptiness and serenity. Everything here is so unspoilt and simple that life itself appears simple. I feel restored, as if I have caught a glimpse of eternity itself. I could come back here again and again."

That sudden interruption of Krishna's private fantasies caused a blind, mindless rage to explode in him. All the secret resentments he had harboured against the moneyed complacencies of foreign tourists flared in him. Who did they think they were, coming into his world and flaunting their wealth and their bodies, compelling him to do their bidding? The resentments were all the more acute because he knew he could be bought.

"You should leave and never come back," he said, abruptly.

The harshness in his tone of voice caused Mrs. Hamilton to prop herself up on one elbow and to remove her sunglasses. "Why?" she asked, baffled and sounding hurt.

"We in the East are hospitable by nature. But when outsiders come they alter what we have and nothing is the same again. We turn ourselves inside out for the tourist dollar and begin missing what we never wanted before. The government has just given permission for a luxury hotel to be built on this very spot.

"Just imagine this place ten or fifteen years from now. The whole beach will be jammed with holiday-makers on package tours. Fisherfolk and farmers will be turned into waiters and chamber maids, quarrelling over the division of their tips. Tour buses will jam the roads and sewage will pollute the sea. I will have to watch such things happening. I have no forty-room mansion in Dallas to escape to."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Krish!" Mrs. Hamilton said. "I haven't thought of things that way. I've been so insensitive." She gazed deeply into Krishna's eyes and lifted a comforting hand to touch his cheek.

And before anyone knew it, they were in each other's arms and the last four days of the de luxe tour were passed largely in Mrs. Hamilton's luxurious hotel room.

Krishna conquered Mrs. Hamilton as he had done in his most intimate dreams. His hands, both clean and unclean, searched out her sweet mysteries. She was different from the others, he told himself, through a haze of passion. To her he could give something of himself. During moments of exhaustion he wondered fleetingly whether he might be falling in love. But another part of him speculated upon what it might be like to drive around Dallas in one of those red, convertible Thunderbirds he had seen in glossy magazines.

When time came for them to part, Krishna said: "I didn't mean what I said about not wanting you to come back. I shall always be here, thinking of you, longing for you."

"Thanks for everything," Mrs. Hamilton said. "But I think you are right about never coming back. Things can never be the same again, can they? Hemingway's Maria had four days of love. So have I. I shouldn't be greedy. Goodbye, my dear Hindu god, and look after yourself."

As she extended her hand in farewell, she pressed something into Krishna's hand.

Krishna drove out to the beach at Foreigner's Rock after seeing Mrs. Hamilton off. He sat down on the warm sand and slowly unfolded the piece of paper that had been pressed into his hand. It was a cheque for five thousand American dollars.

What did it mean, Krishna asked himself, as he stared at it. Why had he been given a cheque for something which was beyond any price? Had it meant nothing more to her than just another service rendered? And what was the use of such a cheque anyway? It wouldn't help the

family finances. He would never be able to explain to Soo-ling why an American widow should tip him so generously.

-- The End --