

Chapter V

A deep silence reigned within the mausoleum which served as Sultan Mahmoud-Shah's state-room. Suddenly, all voices were quelled, and, while not spoken, the hatred and enmity felt towards the outsider and enemy were only more ardent. From the eyes of the Aceh, particularly those of the women, it flashed towards the soldier. Straight as a board, head up, pacing firmly, unhesitatingly yet without braggadocio, he followed between the Aceh guards, without seeing where he was being taken.

A large area had been cleared before the throne, upon which the Sultan was sitting in a quasi-hieratic pose. The Dutchman, judging by the decorations on his uniform, held the rank of ship's captain. He was a man of 40 or so. He was placed in the middle of a half-circle whose circumference was guarded by Aceh and Orang-Sakay soldiers. Then, the doors of the mausoleum were closed again.

In the cage, the ape-man was standing still and watching.

The Sultan gave an order and the blindfold was taken from the officer's forehead. He looked around calmly. The *panglima* of 22 *moukims* stood beside Mahmoud, as it devolved to him to question the Dutchman.

"Officer," he said, "what brings you here. You presented yourself to one of our outposts and asked to be brought before our most serene Sultan, our Lord, submitting yourself to any conditions which would be imposed. Your wish has been granted. Enemy of our country, you are in the midst of those you persecute. You stand before the Lord, Son of Allah. Speak."

The officer bowed respectfully before Mahmoud, and, straightening up, said:

"In the name of my Lord, the King of Holland, represented in this country by Colonel van der Hyeden, I, ship's captain, spokesman, claiming my right to free speech, I bring you, Sultan Mahmoud-Shah, and you all, inhabitants of the island of Sumatra, those propositions which are made to you and upon which the future holds. Are you prepared to listen to me?"

"Speak," said the *panglima*.

"I have nothing to impart to you that you don't already know. Our weapons have overwhelmed your brave resistance, and while praising your courage, I must not hide the fact that all hope is lost for you. Our vessels have retaken the port of Oulaylay and have successfully blockaded the coast. At Deli, we have captured your arsenals and a large corps of Battaks was forced to surrender. Finally, the victory at Samalaggan has made us masters of all the regions north of Kota-Rajia. You are surrounded by an ever-tightening circle of steel and fire. Our troops await only a signal to mount a decisive assault on this *kraton*, your last fortress. You are courageous, you are strong, but against the strength of the European armies, all your efforts would be in vain and would only result in a pointless massacre.

"Enough blood has already flowed; enough catastrophes have befallen your poor country. In the name of reason, in the name of humanity, I come, on my master's orders, to ask you to end this deadly struggle, the outcome of which is no longer in question. Instead, we offer you peace."

"Under what conditions?" said the *panglima* in a voice trembling with anger.

"Your people, your properties, your religion, your customs, your women will be respected. Your soldiers will leave the *kraton* and give up their arms. All the redoubts, forts, and public buildings will be turned over to the protection of the Dutch. You, Sultan Mahmoud, shall be deemed sacred and our troops will answer for your security. You will be at liberty to discuss the conditions of your surrender with our leader."

"That is to say," said the *panglima*, "that you come here proposing to soldiers, patriots, men who have guns and feel themselves to be free, that they commit the vilest of cowardice?"

"I am a soldier," replied the Dutchman, "and I know better than anyone that the necessities of war are cruel, but the more valiantly one has fought, the more honorably one can accept defeat. If you accept the proposals that I bring you, your honor will be intact and your independence guaranteed under a European protectorate; if you stubbornly continue a fight—which I assure you, without bragging, would doom you to defeat—before the Sun sets, our shells will destroy your homes, your palaces and your mosques; steel and fire will open the way for us, and our troops will complete their work of conquest.

"Sultan Mahmoud! It is to your justice, to your humanity, that I make this appeal. There is still time to spare your people from the horrible experiences of a last battle in which so many lives will be pointlessly sacrificed. Give your assent to an immediate capitulation, one which will be honorable and

which, I pledge in the name of my master, will not hurt your feelings of righteous pride. Europeans will then enter no longer as enemies, but as friends and protectors.”

As he spoke, without raising his voice, in an even and firm tone, a fever appeared to possess all the listeners. They did not interrupt him, but their looks, their gestures, their hands worrying about their weapons, the twitching of their limbs, all pointed to their growing rage being ready to explode.

But the one who was least able to control himself was the Sultan.

Unmindful of his dignity, he leapt to his feet, and, arming himself with a nearby saber, he ran to the officer and struck him full on the forehead, shouting:

“Dog! How dare you insult me with your disgraceful proposals? Die then!—and so all those who dare insult the noble Aceh.”

In an instinctive gesture, the officer had turned aside the weapon, which glanced off his skull, scraping along his skin. Blood came forth from the wound. He cried out:

“This is a most cowardly act! I am here as a peace envoy, protected by sacred law. You have no right to lay a hand on me!”

The *panglimas* threw themselves before the Sultan and were barely able to contain him. They were displeased to see the Son of Allah lower himself to taking on an executioner’s role.

“You who listen to me!” continued the officer, whose bloodied face was a terrible sight, “already, in the past, you have killed my wife and children! Are you nothing but a race of assassins?”

At that moment, a high pitched, heart-rending cry rang out. Parting the Sakay ranks, who, in their keen interest in the scene, had somewhat relaxed their vigilance, Mayha, pale and disheveled, ran to the officer and threw herself in his arms, shouting:

“Wilhelm! My Wilhelm! You’re alive! O save me! Save your children!”

“Luisa!” the officer cried out in turn, hugging her to his chest. Thus, in the past, had the husband believed his wife and his dear children to have been massacred; and so she had been convinced that the same fate had happened to him. But now, they were reunited after so many years, in yet an even more tragic circumstance.

At first, Mayha, dispirited, broken, had not paid any attention to the scene which was going on. Her mind distracted, sluggish, she had barely heard the words which were spoken. Then, all of a sudden, she seemed to recognize the voice that was speaking; she had given ear to it and, suddenly, when the officer, overcome with despair, had spoken these words: “My wife, my children!” she had woken from her torpid state as from an electric shock.

The impossible might be true! The dead had risen from their tombs! And now, both of them were clasped in each other’s arms, in the middle of this hostile, maddened crowd which roared like a host of wild beasts. The *panglima* of the 22 *moukims* was trying in vain to calm the crowd down. Igli-Otou, the madman, cried out:

“To the Toko! To the Toko! All of you! The man, the woman, the children! Sakay, Aceh, avenge yourselves and make Antou look upon us with favor ! Death to them! Death!”

At his barking voice, which rang out like a bugle, a rush started in the previously hesitant masses. In the blink of an eye, Wilhelm, Mayha, who, for the first time in years, had rediscovered her true name—Luisa—the tiny George and poor Margaret, whose weaponless father could not even attempt to defend, were grabbed and taken away towards the execution grounds on the Toko plaza, littered with low-set huts, stores and tents. In an instant, the mausoleum was empty, the Sultan himself having been drawn along with the crowd towards the plaza.

None had considered the ape-man who was still in his cage, behind the metal grillwork. He then arched his back, braced his arms against the steel bars, and, in a superhuman effort, his enormous muscles tightened. The bars, bending under this astonishing force, twisted and broke. An opening was made.

But the creature was large, his shoulders wide, his chest colossal. Nonetheless, he managed to slip out, bruising himself, tearing his skin and drawing blood, but this did not prevent him from pushing his frame up against the steel and forcing it to spread apart. He found himself outside, standing in the middle of the stones which marked the tombs of the Sultans. For a moment, he paused before these gold-inlaid and jewel-incrusted markers, as if pondering something. He also looked around, curiously, as if hypnotized by the gold and ruby-laden oriental ornamentation. Then, he shook his head, reached the door, which the crowd had left open, and slipped through the trees behind the straw huts, crawling or jumping, moving forward.

Meanwhile, the Orang-Sakay, satisfied at last to have their hands on their victims, dragged them along to the execution grounds. They arrived, and, in the middle of a quickly improvised circle, the two Europeans and their children were grouped together, waiting for the final blow.

A short deliberation occurred: a huge Sakay, bearing a two-handed saber, was to fill the office of executioner. The crowd was howling with impatience. Why such a delay? Why had one not been stuck down yet? Why could the people not yet throw themselves upon the corpses and fight it out for a bloody trophy?

Two of the *panglimas* had approached Igli-Otou and were involved in a heated discussion. Evidently, they were proposing something which he refused to accept. But the Aceh leaders, joining the *panglimas*, were addressing themselves to the Sakay chiefs, trying to convince them—but of what?

It was this: less naive than the crowd, the *panglimas* had understood that the words of the European were no mere bluster. What he had said was true: the Dutch would, under the protection of their artillery, deliver a furious assault upon the city, and, as valiant as the defenders of Koto-Rajia might prove, the outcome of the battle was not in doubt.

But a way of turning this defeat into a victory presented itself. A number of things come about by happenstance. The dramatic recognition of husband and wife, of father and children, exposed a situation from which a marvelous, foolproof advantage could be taken: it was a gift from God to the besieged—why throw it away? And the *panglimas* finally won their point. Igli-Otou allowed himself to be convinced and, strong in his undisputed authority, he quelled the crowd's impatience and restlessness. Then, Toukou Polim, *panglima* of the 22 *moukims*, approached the Dutch officer, Wilhelm Villiers.

The latter, prepared for death, had had to a final exchange with his beloved Luisa, in which they had expressed all the emotions of their past, remembered their former happiness, their trials, and their sufferings. In a few words, they exchanged thoughts which encompassed years. The mother, forgetful of the peril, held little Margaret, who—as such mercies are afforded to infants—was asleep. George, pale, already understanding, but putting on a good face, held his father's hand and gazed upon him with loving eyes.

“Captain,” said Toukou Polim, “will you allow me a moment to talk to you.”

Wilhelm's smile was full of irony.

“There is nothing I can refuse you,” he said. “What do you wish from me?”

Then, taking him aside and speaking in a low and hurried voice, Toukou Polim explained to him that he was lost: his death, that of his wife and children, was only minutes away; yet, he could save himself and those he loved.

The Dutchman looked attentively upon this tanned and wrinkled face, on which one could only read wiliness and lies.

“What must I do for that?” he asked.

“Return to your camp and announce that we will offer our submission.”

The officer, momentarily perplexed, looked at him in surprise.

“Let the Dutch enter our city, not as enemies, but as friends, as you yourself stated; let your leaders come first to discuss the terms of our capitulation; let your sailors come amongst us confident, not as soldiers ready for carnage, but as brothers. We wish to deal in particular with Colonel van der Heyden—personally. Persuade him to come here as an ally, a protector, with an escort that represents neither a provocation nor a threat—such is the mission we offer you, Captain, and should you accept it, you will be freed.”

Wilhelm now understood: what they were proposing was simply a shameful betrayal, to draw the Colonel and the top officers of the Dutch army into an ambush. The long-ago massacre, from which he had miraculously escaped, would occur all over again. However, he pretended to not have caught his interlocutor's lies.

“What of my wife and my children?” he asked.

“You will agree that it is fair that we keep them as hostages. If you promise to bring us the Colonel and his entourage, under peaceful conditions, and have not deceived us, we will honor our promise and free them too. However, if unlike what we have agreed upon, your countrymen arrive here as enemies...”

“You would cut the throats of those hostages. Well! Noble *panglima*, know that a European officer is not and cannot be your dupe. You’re asking me no more and no less than to deliver my leaders into your hands. This would be both stupid and a crime. I will not buy our lives at that price.”

“Ah! Be careful! Just a sign from me and the executioner will have the better of your insolence.”

“I don’t doubt it; however, noble lord, will you hear me out? Time marches on, and it was arranged with my superiors that, if I did not return within two hours of my point of entrance into Kota-Rajia, the attack would proceed. These two hours are up. In turn, since I am not dead yet, I call upon you one last time to submit, otherwise our artillery will know how to impose our will upon you.”

The *panglima* cried out in rage:

“Ah! So that is how it is going to be! Well! At least we shall be avenged!”

And he ran towards the Sakay to give the order to execute the prisoners. But, at that very moment, as though the result of the setting in motion of some great clockwork, an awful whining was heard in the air, and a shell came crashing down on one of the straw huts in the Toko, strewn about its debris. Men fell, curses burst out. A second bomb left its trail through the sky and, this time, fell amongst the Sakay—it was a massacre.

Wilhelm had told the truth. At the precise moment the bombardment began, the Dutch troops broke through the gates of the *kraton*.

The artillery raged on. The Aceh and Sakay were fleeing from the missiles raining down upon them. The officer grabbed a weapon and, leading his wife and children, he sought to cut his way through the crowd.

But would Wilhelm and his family not be hit? The Aceh’s panic, at least, gave them some hope of escape.

“Listen!” said Wilhelm to Luisa, “I can hear our soldiers’ bugles. They’ve forced open the doors; they’ll be here in a few minutes. Have courage! Hold Margaret tightly to your chest. George, don’t leave me!”

And he continued to advance under the hail of steel and fire which miraculously spared him. Already, the Dutch uniforms were appearing on the walls of Kota-Rajia; the artillery, well directed, modified its firing to give the attackers an open field.

“We’re saved!” cried out Wilhelm.

But, at this very moment, Igli-Otou, who did not wish to see his victims escape, and who had followed their trail, seized upon a moment when little George, in spite of all his efforts, had lagged back a few steps. He sprang on the child, snatched him away, ran off between the huts, losing himself in the ruins, and disappeared.

He held the child tightly. The sorcerer believed in his magic. By autosuggestion, he was convinced that his God, Antou, a shapeless idol he served in the forests of Malacca, required a human sacrifice. If the blood of a white man was shed, offered to that monstrous divinity, all these cataclysms, the bombardment, the screeching of the shells, the march of the enemy troops clambering up the ramparts, all would suddenly stop—and the Dutch would be struck down.

He had taken little George, and, leaping amongst the rocks which overhung the *kraton*, managed to finally reach a platform which sloped sharply over a fissure so dark and so deep as to appear bottomless. It was a favorable spot. He dropped the child heavily upon the cold stone, then raising his eyes towards the sky in an invocation, he drew a dagger from his belt, the blade of which was notched like the jaw of a crocodile.

George saw this, was horrified, and wanted to cry out, but the hand of Igli-Otou nailed him to the ground, while the other raised the horrible weapon.

Suddenly, a form which seemingly appeared out of nowhere, dropped in a gigantic leap from a stone above and landed heavily on the platform. It grabbed Igli-Otou by the scruff of the neck, raised him in the air like a puppet, then, with a sudden release, dropped him down the fissure. The Sakay smacked against the wall, spread out his arms, scratched the granite with his nails, whirled and disappeared.

The child had remained in place, motionless, having fainted away. The ape-man, the mysterious creature, then knelt, took the child in his arms, approached his lips as though to kiss him, and, supporting him against his chest, allowed himself to quickly drop to the bottom of the rock, ran, reached some woods, plunged into them, and disappeared, taking George with him.