

Chapter One

I

All that Mr Wright, the rubber estate manager, ever knew of the business was that an army patrol had ambushed a band of terrorists within a mile of his bungalow, that five months later his Indian clerk, Girija Krishnan, had reported the theft of three tarpaulins from the curing sheds, and that three years after that someone had removed the wheels from an old scooter belonging to one of his children. As it never occurred to him to look for a possible connection between the three incidents, he remained unaware even of that knowledge. In Malaya, at that time, there were more important facts to ponder and attempt to correlate. Stolen tarpaulins and missing scooter wheels were trivial mysteries; and, although the ambush itself was not forgotten, it was remembered more for its proximity than its novelty.

Mr and Mrs Wright had been at breakfast when they heard the sound of firing. It began with a flurry of submachine-gun bursts and continued intermittently for about two minutes.

The truck which took the tappers off to the work areas had not yet left the compound; and, although there was a lot of shouting and excitement, there was no panic and little confusion. Almost before the firing had ceased, the barbed-wire barricades were in position and the inner defence posts

manned. During the long silence that followed, Mrs Wright, a woman of character, calmed the servants and ordered fresh toast and tea so that she and her husband could finish breakfast.

At eight-thirty the patrol appeared: fifteen Malay infantrymen under a British subaltern, and two R.A.F. radio operators. They had been in the jungle for several weeks and their success that morning would probably earn them a rest period. They were smiling and talking as they toiled up the steep track to the compound.

Shortly after they arrived, Girija was summoned to the bungalow. As he went up the veranda steps he could see the officer, a downy, blue-eyed Englishman with paratroop wings on his jungle-green bush shirt. Mrs Wright was pouring him a cup of tea.

'All Chinese, and on their way to mine the main road by the look of things,' he was saying. 'We got the lot.'

'Nice work,' said Mr Wright.

'Could have been better, sir.' The young officer grinned. 'They were all killed outright. You can't ask them questions about their chums when they're dead.'

Mr Wright chuckled and then, seeing his clerk waiting outside, beckoned him in.

'Girija, this is Lieutenant Haynes. He's just wiped out a gang of terrorists. I said we'd let him have some men to help bury them. Will you see to it?'

'Certainly, sir.' Girija turned with a slight bow to the officer.

Lieutenant Haynes nodded genially. 'I left two men there on guard,' he said. 'They'll give your chaps a hand if you send extra spades. The ground's quite soft, I think. Shouldn't take long. If you'll speak to my sergeant he'll detail a guide for you.'

'Thank you, sir. I will make all necessary arrangements.'

The officer's grin faded slightly. 'Seen many dead terrorists around these parts?' he asked.

‘No, sir. Have not had that pleasure.’

‘Well, mind you spread the good news.’

‘I understand, sir. Two men from each kampong?’

‘That’s the idea. And tell them they’ll be seeing plenty more before we’re done.’

Girija smiled politely and withdrew to organise the burial party.

He was well aware of the reason for it. The Malay villages in the area had long been suspected by the authorities of aiding the Communist guerrillas with food and shelter. It was not that the villagers approved of the invaders, but simply that the savage reprisals that could follow any refusal of aid were more intimidating than the possibility of having fines or other collective punishments imposed by the British. They were not warlike people; their villages were often isolated; the British forces were scattered. In the past, glib official assurances that the police and army were at last gaining the upper hand and able to protect the outlying areas from the terrorists had been given too often, and too often proved baseless. Now, the villagers believed only what they saw themselves, or what had been seen by their own people. Dead terrorists had to be shown to be dead. The burial party was in the nature of a morale-building or public relations device.

Girija found the head tapper and explained what was wanted: two men from each of the four neighbouring villages, and picks and shovels. Then he went to the Malay sergeant and secured a guide. Within twenty minutes the party was ready to move. The head tapper was obviously hoping to go with it, but Girija sent him off with the truck and the remaining men to the work areas. He had decided to take charge of the burial party himself.

The action had taken place in a deep gully carved out of the red laterite hillside by the monsoon rains, and flanked on both

sides by bamboo thickets, fern trees and dense tangles of croton undergrowth. It was a natural route for men to use on that otherwise trackless hillside, and a perfect site for an ambush.

There were ten bodies there; four within a few feet of one another, and the rest scattered along the gully for a distance of some twenty-five yards. It was easy to see what had happened. Concealed in the undergrowth along both lips of the gully, the patrol had been able to open fire at point-blank range without fear of hitting each other or the smallest chance of missing the enemy below them. One or two of the dead men were lying in attitudes which suggested desperate split-second attempts to claw their way to cover behind the roots of a fallen tree. One had been hit in the back as he turned to run. One, the farthest away, had tried to return the patrol's fire; there were empty shells scattered on the ground by him; but he was as dead as the rest. Nobody in the patrol had been hit.

The two Malay soldiers left on guard were squatting on their heels by a Sterno fuel stove, heating cans of tea and smoking. They took no notice of the burial party. Beside them, on a groundsheet, were stacked the arms and equipment collected from the dead: machine pistols, boxes of ammunition and road mines, and canvas belts with pouches containing hand-grenades.

The soldier who had guided the party from the compound joined his friends at the stove. Girija knew that they would not help with the digging unless he told them what Lieutenant Haynes had said; but he made no attempt to do so. During his brief inspection of the gully he had made two small discoveries. They had aroused his curiosity and made him wish to know more about the dead terrorists. He put the burial party to work and sat down on the ground nearby.

The first thing he had noted was the fact that, although the bodies had been searched and stripped of all arms and equipment, there had been no cooking utensils of any kind found on

them. This meant almost certainly that they were within a day's marching distance of their camp; which meant, in turn, that they were probably living off one or more of the four villages near the estate. They would be known, if only by sight, to at least two members of the burial party.

His second discovery had to do with the arms and equipment. He was sure that the machine pistols were new; not new in type necessarily, but newly acquired. His father had been a subahdar in the British Army and Girija had spent his childhood in barracks and cantonments. He knew the look of a new gun and how soon it acquired the patina of use from normal cleaning and handling. At least three of the machine pistols on the groundsheet had been so recently unpacked, and so little used and cleaned, that traces of brown preservative grease were still visible on them. The ammunition boxes, the mines and the grenades were also new. The grenades were of an old type with cast-iron fragmentation cases; but the grey paint on them was fresh and the pins were clean and bright.

The gully was only partly shaded by the overhanging trees, and by eleven o'clock the sun was shining directly into it. The tappers were craftsmen, used to the careful work of milking rubber trees without damaging them. Digging graves on a hillside, and in ground which, despite Lieutenant Haynes's assurances, had proved to be rock hard, was not a job which they could be expected to tackle with enthusiasm. The excitement of the occasion and the sight of ten bloody corpses were novelties that had soon palled. By the time the third grave had been dug, most of the men had lost their customary good humour. Criticism began to be voiced of the soldiers squatting in the shade and drinking tea while others cleaned up the mess they had made. There was even an exchange of remarks, meant to be overheard, to the effect that the tuan's clerk might, without serious loss of face, enhance his already

considerable popularity by taking a shovel and doing a bit of digging himself.

Girija was able to ignore this unworthy suggestion with equanimity. The tappers' complaints interested him for reasons other than their substance. He was almost certain now that he knew the area in which the band had made their headquarters. Only two of the burial party had remained cheerful. Malays were not good at concealing their emotions, and although these two were trying hard to conform to the mood of the others, their satisfaction with the turn of events and the task in which they were engaged kept showing through their scowls. Girija watched them dump one of the bodies into its grave with unmistakable gusto, and then glance round guiltily when they caught themselves grinning at one another.

The two men came from a village named Awang on a river three miles away to the west. Once there had been tin mining in the district, but falling yields and rising operating costs had made the mines uneconomic. The small labour force of Awang had been gradually absorbed by the rubber estates.

Girija had been to the village once or twice to pay sick benefits to the families of men in hospital; but he did not know it well. It was at the end of a secondary road which had degenerated in recent years to no more than a cycle track. Beyond the old tin workings the jungle-covered hills stretched all the way to the borders of Thailand. In that lush wilderness, small groups of disciplined men with minds and bodies adapted to the environment could remain healthy and mobile almost indefinitely. At that period, it was impossible either to police the area effectively or to halt the stream of Chinese militants filtering down the peninsula from the north. Villages like Awang became staging points for the terrorist bands cautiously working their way southward towards the politically more sensitive areas of Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Malacca and Johore. The men now being

buried had probably made their camp within a mile or so of it; going in at night to receive food, gather information, browbeat the headman and talk earnestly to potential recruits.

Girija walked over to the two tappers and stood watching them as they filled in the grave. They had fallen silent as he approached. After a moment or two he moved in closer.

'A good day's work,' he remarked.

They looked at him warily.

He smiled. 'The past buries itself.'

That raised a sheepish grin.

'And honest men are free again,' he added.

They went on working. The body was covered now.

'The tuan was pleased,' Girija said thoughtfully; 'pleased that these pigs were all foreigners. To him that proved the loyalty and courage of our men here.'

They looked at him again. One of them mumbled: 'The tuan is a father to us.'

'It is unfortunate,' Girija went on, 'that the Lieutenant tuan does not agree with him.'

They stared at him in dismay.

Girija shrugged. 'He said that this gang was new to the district. He said that a week was no test of loyalty.'

He had them now. Dismay gave way to indignation.

The man who had spoken before spoke again. 'The tuan was right,' he said firmly. 'The Lieutenant tuan does not speak the truth.'

Girija shrugged again. 'It is not important.'

'The Lieutenant tuan is wrong,' the man insisted. 'It was many weeks.'

Girija made sympathetic sounds.

'Many weeks,' repeated the other man emphatically.

Girija spread out his hands. 'It is not my business. Perhaps you should tell this to the Lieutenant tuan.' He saw the

sudden panic in their eyes and went on smoothly. 'Myself I do not think it necessary, or wise. The pigs are dead. They are best forgotten.'

'Yes, yes. It is best. We will forget.'

Girija smiled benignly and moved away. He knew that they were watching him and wondering fearfully if he would betray them to the Lieutenant. He had no intention of doing so; but there was no point in telling them that. They would not quite believe him; and in any case they had served their purpose. He had found out what he wanted to know.

2

Girija was born of Bengali parents at Cawnpore in the United Provinces of India. He had five sisters but no brothers. When he was six his father, the subahdar, went to London with a detachment of his regiment to march in the coronation procession of King George the Sixth. During his stay, the subahdar was taken on a conducted tour of the city which included visits to the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, the British Museum, the Law Courts, Battersea power station, and, for some obscure reason, a factory in Acton where bus bodies were made. He returned to India laden with souvenirs and fired with ambition for his only son. The Law Courts had particularly impressed him. Girija would become a lawyer, or, failing that, a policeman.

Girija became neither. The subahdar was killed at the Battle of Alamein, and Girija spent the next three years in a military orphanage at Benares. When the war ended, however, his mother wrote to a brother, who had a cotton goods business in Singapore, explaining that she had only her widow's pension and asking if she might join him with the children. The

prospect of securing this windfall of cheap labour appealed to the brother, and he replied sending passage money. In December nineteen forty-six the family sailed as deck passengers from Calcutta. With them went the subahdar's medals and the precious souvenirs of his visit to London; the coronation mug, the picture postcards, the newspaper cuttings, the photographs, the ashtray from the Warrant Officers' mess at Chelsea Barracks, and the bus body manufacturer's catalogue.

In his last year at the orphanage Girija had been taught book-keeping, office organisation and the jargon of commercial letter writing. The uncle in Singapore found him useful; so useful, indeed, that after three months he got rid of the book-keeper to whom he had been paying forty dollars (Straits) a week and replaced him with Girija to whom he paid twenty. Girija was sixteen then. He stayed two years in Singapore. During them, he learned Malay and a smattering of Cantonese, and made friends with a Parsee who worked in the offices of a Chinese financial syndicate.

At that time, shortage of capital, ill health brought about by internment, or sheer hopelessness engendered by the early successes of the terrorists were persuading many British rubber planters in Malaya to sell out. The Chinese syndicate was buying. It was through his Parsee friend that Girija heard that the new manager of a recently acquired estate in the north was asking the Singapore office for a clerk.

His uncle was angered by Girija's decision to leave him, and talked darkly of getting a court order requiring Girija to repay the cost of his passage from Calcutta. To his astonishment the bluff failed. Girija, whom he had come to regard as a pliant and somewhat timid young man, not only laughed loudly and made a disrespectful noise with his lips, but also threatened to take his mother and sisters north with him unless their wages were immediately doubled. There was a shrill Bengali family quarrel

during which Girija uttered a further and more compelling threat. He had made a secret analysis of his uncle's accounts which he was prepared to send to the Inspector of Taxes. The uncle wept and spoke of ingratitude, but capitulated. Girija's mother embraced her son proudly and said that he was his father's true heir.

When the time came for Girija to leave, however, he asked her for only one thing that had belonged to his father: the bus body manufacturer's catalogue. His sisters were relieved. They had been afraid that, as a man, he would feel himself entitled to the subahdar's medals.

The catalogue was a quarto-size book with a brown cover on which the name of the manufacturer was embossed in green. Inside there were forty-eight pages of thick, shiny paper displaying the specifications of twenty different types of buses together with colour illustrations of the exteriors and interiors of each. There were double-deckers and single-deckers, buses designed to enable the driver to collect the fares, and buses designed to carry conductors. There were twelve seaters, twenty-four seaters and sixty seaters. There were buses for long distances and buses for local services in cities, for cold climates and for hot. The cover was dog-eared from much handling and some of the pages were loose. There was an ink stain on the title page. It was Girija's most treasured possession.

As a small boy he had sat for hours turning the pages, studying the illustrations and re-reading the text. He had, in the end, come to know it by heart. At the orphanage, when he had been separated both from his mother and the catalogue, he had found comfort in reciting it to himself, beginning with the Foreword by the Chairman (*In presenting to our customers all over the world this, the Eighteenth Edition, of our Catalogue and Price List, we are proudly conscious that . . .*) and finishing with the specifications of a forty-seat medium-range staging coach (available on

A.E.C. or Commer chassis) '*as supplied to the Argentine Government, Price £8,586, f.o.b. London.*'

One day, in the streets of Benares, he had seen a new bus that he thought he recognised as a modification of one of those listed in the catalogue. It had been just starting away and he had run for almost half a mile before he had caught up with it at a stopping place. Breathlessly he had searched for the body manufacturer's name-plate. The bus had been moving off again before he had found it; but it had been the right plate and a wave of excitement had swept over him. From that moment, he had known exactly what he wanted to do in the world. He would operate a bus service.

His first letter to the body manufacturer had been written from Singapore on his uncle's business stationery. He had been aware for some time that the original catalogue from London, precious though it was and always would be, was now very much out of date. Nevertheless, the decision to send for the latest edition had not been easily taken. For some reason that he had been unable to account for, it had seemed almost like an act of treachery.

However, the arrival of the new catalogue had given him other things to worry about. The catalogue itself had been magnificent. Unfortunately, it had been accompanied by a courteous letter from the sales manager, informing him that the company's Far Eastern representative, Mr W. W. Belden, would shortly be visiting Singapore and would take that opportunity of meeting Mr Krishnan and discussing his fleet requirements with him personally. For weeks Girija had gone in fear of W. W. Belden's arrival at his uncle's office and the humiliating scenes that would ensue when the truth was known. But Mr Belden had never come, and eventually Girija had drawn the correct conclusion. Mr Belden had investigated the financial status of this new prospective customer and decided not to waste his time.

His prudence had been understandable. The cheapest twenty-four seater now cost over three-thousand pounds; almost double the price of the cheapest bus in the nineteen thirty-six catalogue. But one thing in the new edition had caught Girija's eye; a quotation from a trade journal devoted to the interests and activities of road-transport operators. Girija had found that this journal could be obtained in Singapore, and had bought a subscription. From the articles it published he began to learn about the economics of public transportation. By the time he went to work for Mr Wright, he had acquired a reasonably realistic view of his chances of achieving his life's ambition. Unless he could find a working capital of at least twenty-thousand dollars (Straits) his chances of starting even the most modest country bus service were non-existent.

3

Girija had a one-room atap house in the estate compound, and an arrangement with one of the servants at the Wrights' bungalow to keep it clean. There were Indian families of his own caste living in a village six miles away, and on Sundays he would cycle over there for tiffin. One of the families had an attractive daughter named Sumitra, whom he thought he would one day marry. However, during the week, the curfew kept him at home, and there he always cooked his own food. Sometimes, he would go back to the office after he had eaten his evening meal and do some more work before going to bed; at others, he would listen to Radio Malaya and read and dream.

On the evening of the day of the ambush, he stayed late in the office trying to make up for the time he had lost by going with the burial party. The following morning he would have to drive in with Mr Wright to the bank at Bukit Amphu to cash the

weekly wages cheque, and he had not yet completed the time sheets.

The work required care and concentration and he was glad of it; for it postponed the moment when he would have to entertain once more the dangerous thoughts which had come to him in the morning.

The things he had observed at the scene of the ambush, and learned from the two tappers, had made it possible for him to reconstruct the recent history of the dead men with reasonable certainty.

They had only recently arrived from the north and were relatively inexperienced. Of that he was sure. Their use of the easy route offered by the gully showed that. True, they had had a lot to carry, but that did not excuse carelessness. In an area where British patrols were being supplied by the R.A.F., a fact which they could scarcely help knowing, they had not even troubled to send scouts on ahead to feel the way, but had blundered straight into the ambush in a body.

The Lieutenant's opinion was that they had been on their way to mine the main road. Girija did not agree with that. The quantity of ammunition they had been carrying was out of all proportion to the needs of such an operation. And how was the lack of cooking utensils and food supplies to be explained if they were going so far from their base? To Girija there seemed only one possible explanation. What the Lieutenant's patrol had ambushed was a supply column on its way to deliver mines and ammunition to another gang operating farther south.

It had been at this point in his argument with himself that Girija's heart had begun to beat faster, and that an unpleasant sensation had come to his stomach. If his reasoning were correct it could mean only one thing. The base camp near Awang was a guerrilla arms dump.

He finished his work, locked up the office and walked slowly

back across the courtyard to his house. It was a warm, humid night. He took off his shirt and khaki drill shorts, washed himself carefully all over and then put on a dhoti. There was some lentil soup in an iron saucepan. He lit the oil burner under it and sat down to wait.

What had disconcerted him had been not so much the nature of his thoughts, as the way in which they had presented themselves. He did not regard himself as being fundamentally honest or dishonest, idealistic or corrupt, law-abiding or delinquent. He did not think of himself as definable in such terms. His dilemmas had always been capable of resolution into simple questions of choice. Choice A would be wise (advantageous). Choice B would be stupid (disadvantageous). The discovery that his mind could explore enthusiastically the possibility of his committing a major crime, with only a belated and distasteful glance at the path of rectitude, had been disturbing.

And a major crime it undoubtedly would be.

He had heard about these dumps and caches. It was known that the arms were brought in by professional smugglers operating from beyond the Thai border and employing different routes from those used by the guerrillas. A number of consignments had been intercepted; but it was generally believed that a far greater number always got through. Terrorists captured far to the south in the Kuala Lumpur area had been found to be in possession of substantial quantities of weapons, ammunition and explosives of the same pattern as those intercepted in the north. It was said that there were not enough troops in the whole of Malaya to patrol the border with Thailand effectively.

Just before the burial party had finished its work that morning the Malay sergeant and four more soldiers had arrived with packing crates strung on bamboo poles. When the ammunition and grenades had been loaded into the crates, they were taken

off to the compound. While the machine pistols were being gathered up, Girija had asked the sergeant a question.

The sergeant had looked down at the machine pistol in his hands and shrugged. 'How should I know what they cost?'

'But don't you know how much your own cost, Sergeant? Supposing a man lost one.'

'He would be court-martialled.'

'But surely he would have stoppages of pay, too?'

'Oh yes. Two-hundred dollars perhaps.'

'So much?'

'They do not grow on trees.'

The sergeant had gone. Girija had turned and looked at the row of graves. Each man had had a machine pistol; and ammunition was costly stuff. It was more than likely that what the ten men had been carrying between them was worth anything up to three-thousand dollars. It would be interesting to know how much more there was where that had come from.

The soup began to bubble. He poured it into a bowl and, when it had cooled a little, began to eat.

The penalty for being found in the illegal possession of arms was death. Whether or not knowledge of the whereabouts of smuggled arms would constitute possession, and whether concealment of such knowledge carried the same penalty he did not know. One thing was clear. The illegal *selling* of smuggled arms would certainly be a hanging matter; at least while the emergency regulations remained in force. The best thing he could do was to go to Mr Wright immediately and make a clean breast of the matter.

But a clean breast of *what* matter? He did not really *know* anything about an arms dump. He only believed one to be there. And where was 'there'? Assuming that his deductions were correct, the dump was concealed in an area of jungle covering at least three square miles. It might prove quite

impossible to find. Mr Wright would not thank him for starting a wild-goose chase, and neither would the police. When the time came for him to apply for a local bus service franchise they might remember the trouble he had caused and hold it against him. No. The best thing he could do was nothing.

He finished his soup and felt better. He was an innocent man again quietly digesting his evening meal. What did he want with smuggled arms? Could he ever have sold them? Of course not. Who would buy? And supposing others knew of the dump, if dump there were. Ten men had been killed; but supposing that other members of the guerrilla band had stayed behind. It might be highly dangerous to start searching in the area for their camp. Besides, there was always a chance that one or two of the men living at Awang already knew where it was. Not a very big chance perhaps; the guerrillas would not have trusted their unwilling hosts to that extent; but someone might have found out by chance. Naturally, no man or woman from the village would dare to go to the police with the information; or not immediately anyway. A decent interval would have to elapse before the dump could be discovered 'accidentally'. More likely it would just be forgotten. And that perhaps was what he should do; forget about it. After all, he could always remember again later, if he wanted to.

There was a metal trunk in one corner of the room. In it he kept his catalogues and trade papers, and the schedule of a projected daily bus service linking ten of the principal rubber estates in the district with Bukit Amphu sixteen miles away. He took the schedule out, read it through very carefully, and then began to make one or two long-contemplated modifications.

A month went by before Girija made any move to locate the arms dump.

There had been no reports of any special patrol activity in the district, and guerrilla attacks in the province had been concentrated on areas nearer the coast. He had watched the men from Awang carefully without detecting anything unusual in their demeanour. But such reassurances came mingled with doubt. If no dump had been discovered, it could well be for the simple reason that none existed.

It was, in fact, the growing conviction that he must have been mistaken that gave him the courage he needed to go on. If there were nothing to find, he argued, there could be nothing incriminating in the search.

The first part of his plan called for a satisfactory cover for repeated visits to the Awang area. He might avoid going through the village itself, but he would have to use a mile or more of the road leading to it. Encounters with men who knew him, and who might gossip or ask questions, would be inevitable. The difficulty had seemed insurmountable at first; but finally he had had an idea.

The latex produced by the estate went thirty miles by road down to the port of Kuala Pangkalan and from there was shipped to Singapore. Since the emergency, the trucks from the coast had had to be provided with armoured car escorts, and, consequently, did not make the journey so often. Mr Wright had been talking for some time, and writing to Singapore, about the need for additional storage sheds. The Singapore office had been reluctant to authorise the expenditure. Girija's idea was to make the new sheds an excuse for his trips to Awang.

Near the abandoned mine workings there were a number of

derelict corrugated-iron buildings which had been used as offices, stores and repair shops. Girija wrote to the head office of the mining company in Kota Bharu, and asked permission to inspect the property with a possible view to making an offer for the material of the buildings.

He did not tell Mr Wright. If Mr Wright found out no great harm would be done. Indeed, Mr Wright would probably give him a pat on the back for his zeal and initiative in attempting to solve the problem of the new storage sheds. But Mr Wright would also tell him something he already knew; that the mining company's rust-eaten buildings were not worth the cost of dismantling them, and that it would be a waste of time for him to go and inspect them.

The mining company replied with understandable enthusiasm that Mr Krishnan had their full permission to inspect the buildings any time he liked. That was all he needed. No one person he might encounter there would know exactly how many visits of inspection he had made, nor how many might be necessary. It would be assumed that he was acting on Mr Wright's instructions. If he were ever challenged he could produce the letter.

The following Sunday he cycled out to Awang. Just short of the village, he turned off the road on to the overgrown track which led to the mining company's property. He met nobody on the way.

Ground sluicing had cleared some twenty acres of land in the bend of the river. No topsoil had been left for the jungle to reclaim and the brown scars of the workings were still visible beneath a thin film of scrub and weed. Girija walked along the river bank until he came to the shell of a building that had housed a big rotary pump, and went through the motions of inspecting it and taking notes. This was for the benefit of anyone who might have seen him and was watching from across