

*Fireside Stories
for a Winter's Night*



Klothild de Baar

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Frederick, Maryland

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To All My Readers who Love Stories and to the One who Inspired Them.

From Silent Night, Silent Tear

It was in the summer of the Year of Our Lord 3034 when she returned to old Earth One, where she had been born almost a thousand years earlier.

She stood by the old lake in the evening sun, and then approached cautiously on the gravel path. All was quiet in the park. All was peaceful...pristine... not a flower out of place...almost bucolic...just as it was then, so many years ago.

Little waves still played with the shore and lapped the pillar of the footbridge where the brook gently cast itself into the lake. Shades hugged the surrounding hills beyond, now slowly embracing dusk. In the distance, the panorama of snow-peaked mountains still glowed at the end of the fading day, as it did on that evening of what seemed to her a lost eternity ago, gaping large before her as in petrified silence.

The lake seemed still the same. Its water fowl still lured the visitor, drawing concentric wakes on its surface towards her. She was strangely touched at that. The small, black *Seebuchelis* reached her first, foregathering nervously, diving and surfacing, their beady eyes on her, defying her to move the blooming hand that should feed them! The swans were slower, but not far behind, their heads tilted quizzically.

But she had no bread. She had only vivid, ancient memories, a steeled heart, and a silent tear....

Sounds now...muffled and merry. They came from the Villette Estate, once a Biedermeier mansion in the middle of the park that was then its garden. It had been home to the wealthy and powerful Am Rhyns, famous for their steel-blue eyes and straw-blond hair. They had kept the view over the lake to the mountains unobstructed, open to the landscape that had shaped and defined them for generations that spanned the centuries. Determined. Uncompromising in their reach for the stars. Unconquered warriors from the dawn of time down to the last bachelor, who sold Villette to some rich, coveting Chinese at the end of his life sometime around the middle of the twentieth century.

She was young then. It had been the fashion then to embrace all things foreign and to deny one's own. A kind of embarrassment had briefly taken hold of the stilted and fatted hearts in the West of Earth One. Westerners were resting on their laurels, as they played thoughtlessly with a rising East and South. Doing so, they had become careless of their possessions, cavalier about their dominant and rich culture, and almost indifferent to their vast achievements, to the point of disinterest. In their idle pride, they had thought their theatrical largesse to be generosity, rather than what it really was: mental fatigue. Gradually, their military powers were squandered and their scientific leadership abused, taxed to the limit, and usurped by stronger nations they had been too sleepy to take seriously, until it was too late.

Hers had been a rather silly, degenerating generation, not very proud or admirable in the annals of history. They traded with the new parvenus abroad in a benevolent way, with their thumbs in their bums and their minds in neutral, and so, naturally, their trade deficits soon made them debtors to their emerging protagonists. One by one their factories closed to produce their goods in the profitable dirty sweat shops of the East. Her people atrophied gradually, supported by social taxes.

Oil was used then to warm billions of their homes and cars and planes. She

chuckled at the thought of those early aerodynamic machines that had transported them clumsily through the atmosphere from one point of the earth to another, exposing them all to as yet unconquered mortal dangers.

When the ill-dressed upstarts to the East and South made a determined grab for fuel, their sources of vital and affordable oil and gas began to trickle. Prices rose and drove them into ever increasing debt. Thus, when a huge, worldwide oil crisis started to squeeze them, they began to use food crops for energy, resourceful as they had always been. However, food got scarcer, and the hungry began to revolt. Like the Roman Empire, which had been dealt its death blow by agricultural crop failures and hunger, theirs then faced the same fate two thousand years later.

No one led. None of her people reacted. From Siberia in the East to what was then called Alaska, they had forsaken the business of their small planet and left it to their youngest nation, the brave Americans who tried to rule the West from erstwhile Washington. Alas, they were the least experienced, and perhaps the most short-sighted. They abandoned most of the structures their ancestors had built and the organizations their forefathers had instituted so firmly that they ensured their hegemony for a thousand years. Like the Romans two thousand years before them, they let them be assaulted and undermined. Their faith, upholding their structures, was questioned, their prophets ignored, sometimes testily, their corporate wealth bought and sold blindly. They ruined their democracies that were meant to be by the people, for the people, with a kind of vicious tyranny of the highest bidder or bellicose minorities, and in their mental fatigue, they pronounced it all “politically correct.” Their parliaments that were meant to be free had deteriorated into social clubs of greedy horse-traders where the true will of the majority of people no longer mattered. For all intents and purposes, that majority had voluntarily disenfranchised itself when it came to choices and issues of national importance. They belittled their forefathers, who had once spoken the unvarnished truth in their minds and had conquered most of the known world for them.

Their laws that were intended to be fair for all were in the hands of few who bent them arbitrarily. The judgements of their courts could be dictated and stretched like elastic bands to still the momentary moods of the screaming interest groups---the quasi-proletarian few who suddenly mattered...or not. Truth was managed and influenced, and in that spirit of the times, it had been considered nothing unusual for the last Am Rhyn to sell Villette to a gently smiling Chinese. Yet now, almost a thousand years later, Am Rhyns were again on Villette. She could not avoid the house now, too curious to know how a lovingly preserved version of it now looked. She intended to stay there in the attached visitors' suites, for purely sentimental reasons. Sentiments that in the New Age of Galactification were allowed only for one as old as she.

She remembered how excited she had been when an exit was offered to her, a remedy for worrying about the destiny of her people, when she was chosen for longevity, back in the Age of Communication. She had been one of the first selected to test that scientific breakthrough that had exploded like a thousand blinding suns then to change their Universe forever.

But none of that mattered just then. For the moment, she just wished to listen to the silent majesty of nature before her.... That, too, had not changed much. Sitting down

on a park bench, she remembered how quaint those times were when everybody had raw emotions. No one in the civilized modern world could understand them, but she could remember untamed emotions and wild feelings as they still existed in the early twenty-first century. She could remember how wonderful it felt when the sun of the Milky Way, up there near the Orion arm, was shining on them then, in a primitive world of wars, and peace, and progress. The world they and their kind had owned and now guided, once again, emotionless, yet with generosity and profit, in harmony with all in the Universe.

She sat down on a slated stone-and wood bench, at the far end of the island exposed to the lake. Almost immediately, ghosts from the past began to emerge from the hedges lining the path...the bushes beyond. Everywhere. Through the immense crowns of the old oak trees they came. From behind the beeches dotted strategically about the park, shading its perfect lawn, his image appeared: Max! Good, old Max! Wonderful, beloved Max! He was still there...his sunny spirit closer than ever to her heart, and in the gentle winds in the willows she thought she heard his roaring laughter, echoing. That laughter that could be heard all through the house, she missed most of all. How safe and carefree he had made her young life. So stable and unabashedly self-assured. She had danced so confidently in their world that any thought of another existence could never even have entered her mind. Their brief years together were still her most vivid memories kept alive through the years of longing that had passed without him. Max! Oh, Max!

How her father's chin had dropped at the thought that she would have chosen him, the seemingly fruitless bachelor, rapidly settling into middle age, now marrying his young daughter to love and copulate! It was so important then to marry and procreate naturally, for one was destined to die within a hundred years, if one was lucky. In fact, one's most important task was to procreate, and then see one's grandchildren before one's biology deteriorated quite naturally into often painful death. It was all so primitive. So simple...and it had been "ever thus," as their Bible, their ancient guidebook for life, would have taught them. Life was full of all manner of raw emotions then, sometimes all tangled up like spaghetti in a pasta pot.

"Max!" she whispered with a longing that seemed to melt her heart, "I have come to find out if the murder I committed because of you still matters."

She lifted her head to the stars, whence she had just transmigrated, and did what few could still do in the modern Age: She cried.

* * * * *

November 2005

A Mission on a Desert Morning

(adapted from *I Bow to Thee, My Country*)

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.*

— William Shakespeare

-Sonnet XVIII "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?"

Toumkar, Dansu, Sunday, March 9

My darling Man and Prince,

I arrived here this morning safe and sound. How I wish you were with me. Hope all is well at home. But since you are far away, and have no wish to come to this land of heat and hardship and silence, let me tell you what I am finding here.

As you know, Dansuland is the true Karifa. As one alights from the aircraft in the pre-dawn hour, dust, sand, and the distinct smell of camel greet you. Camels are one of their principal exports, mainly to the Central East, until the international disputes about their oil wells are settled and oil begins to flow.

The last flight leg here was on a regularly scheduled airline, evidently for safety reasons. We had to travel at night with all the lights inside the aircraft turned off. I was amazed to see the great number of fellow travellers to this remote Karifan outpost. We had made good time, and if the women in deep veils—and inevitably very pregnant—were very tired, their eyes, the only visible sign of life behind the moving lumps of black clothes, did not betray anything. A fair contingent of yellow Inchanians was on board. I also heard much Manreg spoken by blond giants in navy blue business suits, and indeed their CHS Engineering Office was one of the first signs I was to spot eventually on the dusty dirt roads of Toumkar City. The Anbinu women (of operatic fame), are a minority here. They are beautifully dressed. Generally of the Stianic faith, their faces are jubilantly visible and offset in soft and hot pink Karifan headdress.

The Tygep Air plane had long refuelled, been “maintenanced” and had roared down the runway again when our third reception ceremony began inside their very modern airport. The Dansunese, of the brown Baraian race, are firmly in command here, despite the fact that the much darker Karifans, the old Anibusi, are the majority (although this is disputed and one can look at the demographics in various ways). The Karifans form an increasingly demanding group, emerging in spite of, or perhaps because of, their past yoke of slavery, a practice continued in certain places by the Mespamian Baraians here in the north of the country to this very day. Indeed the current war between them has lasted for almost thirty years and, even at that point, it had started after innumerable fights with the Great Dimah, who just before the turn of the century defeated our own Rogers at Toumkar, enraging our victorious Devland ancestors into full-fledged occupation and colonisation of the country until just about the time you were born—when they hurriedly established the rule of the Mespamian minority, giving authority to them, rather than to the majority of Karifan descent. The Karifans worshiped even then predominantly in Stianic shrines and stubbornly opposed their masters’ Mespamian god. Our dear old Lord Rogers’ memory—dusted memory—lives on here for as long as we come in greater numbers than the yellow hordes from Inchan! So, you see, my dear, you are wrong not to take any interest in this part of our world.

A good one thousand people then came to see the early morning arrival ceremonies. Others waited for their luggage. I know you don’t want me to be overly involved, but I do so wish to know how people live, why they suffer and how we can best help, and as you know, Retsimin himself has said that my informal approach here in the developing world seemed to work. While I was being honoured, I saw from the corner of my eye

some new arrivals who were met right at the plane and seemed to be ‘in’ with the natives, and hence “processed” more quickly than others, but they were all waiting at the ever-turning, ever-empty carousel, while the ceremonies for me went on beside them.

The customs here are new to me. The speeches, songs and flower presentations went on...and on. It is their way to make you feel welcome, even if every natural law would indicate that sleep might be in order. Past four o’clock—past five o’clock—and then suddenly, just as the bags began trickling in beside the podium, our long ceremonies were over. They were very colourful. By then I had long availed myself of the seat that was made ready for me, and which I had foolishly refused at the beginning, thinking it would all be over with a formal “hello and welcome!” I could at least rest my weary bones, if not my tired eyes. I was terribly alone and the state president, who kept whispering things to me as the dancers danced and the speeches continued, took a dim view of my not knowing where I was to be lodged and knew nobody, etc., etc. Honestly, I did not bother, knowing full well that I would be “processed” as usual by my crew. Somehow it seemed important to him. The crew then mercifully rushed us through the fourth press presentation with exceeding haste after I affirmed *viva voce*—very resounding *viva voce*!—that I was rather tired. Nevertheless, compared to the seasoned travellers around me, who seemed to know their ropes in this sea of natives, I was terribly conscious of being alone.

Dawn came sneaking across the desert already when the state president finally got up, took my arm and led me around the room. There was absolutely no protocol. Nobody knew what was happening, and it seemed to me the state president was just improvising because he, too, had no idea what he should do. Then a most comical thing happened. A kindly face approached us, seemingly from the crowd. He was smiling and had rather handsome Baraian features.

“Your Highness, from Devland?” he queried to my amazement.

“Yes, from Devland!” said I, addressing to him as warm a smile as astonishment could muster, .

“You Samam Astrid?”

“Yes, yes!” I responded, as surprised as I was grateful.

“Lady waiting you outside—big sign!”

“Oh, really?” said I, still somewhat stunned.

My embassy minder, Nettles, who had cleared him through, smiled while the state president watched somewhat puzzled and concerned. All this time one unknown human creature had in fact waited for me in the middle of the night, hour after stricken hour! What patience and perseverance! I thought I should perhaps clear the bottlenecked ceremonies and asked the man with the handsome Baraian features to please go and tell her that I was here and would be out presently—as indeed I was, now that the state president and I, with our respective attendants, suddenly had ‘connections.’ It now seemed my turn to be ‘in’ with the ‘bag checkers,’ whom we had to pass and whose importance cannot be underestimated here. Presently, I disappeared to a chorus from the locals: “Ah, Devland! Welcome, welcome!” and could not follow my rescuing desert Baraian fast enough!

Her name was Joy (indeed she was a joy for my sore eyes!), a big, friendly woman of the Bianum tribe from the Dansu Women’s Council, and I asked the state president

if she could ride with us. He felt there may be no room in the car, but I said I was a thin person and could make room. He smiled with his whole face way up, atop his considerable girth, and agreed. He truly is a man of enormous physical proportions. I whispered my instructions to the minder. He was a wonderful man, you know. A true diplomat. I have quite decided to ask Retsimin mother to allow me to take him with me wherever I go. Our driver was Fatasum, in white turban and floating robe.

The new day had begun when we finally dashed off, very literally, “in a cloud of dust” through the semi-desert towards the city. I learnt that Sir Lee Lauder had rung Joy from Donlan to ask her to meet me, and I was grateful to him. Sir Lee obviously knows the local customs—and ways around them that none of my crew could have anticipated—but for Nettles, to whom he had evidently whispered about the potential chaos on arrival, and how to get out of it after an acceptably decent time, with full diplomatic honours.

Hence the miraculous appearance of the above-mentioned Baraian face!
Must dash, dearest.

Love,
A.

* * * * *

November 2005

A Dramatic Event – High Above Essen

Memory, you bittersweet friend, tell me again of that cold morning, twelve thousand feet up, somewhere above Essen, with me leading my new flight. The Hadley Pages roaring towards us from some night raid. Like great cathedrals. Two Rolls Eagles, seven hundred and fifty horsepower, and four men in each.

They salute. We salute and hum on, and on, and on.

Suddenly, ground fire. All spitting flame at us. God, this is bad.

Jim Saunders down in a sudden inferno.

Tom Hagley down like a fire ball. Bagnell's crew bailing out, their shoots not opening.--- All dead?

In rage I jump a Pfalz, but it's a decoy for four Fokkers now jumping us, flashing down like lightening out of the clouds.

Hit. Perspex shattered. Rear gunner gone.

And hit again.

Jim beside me slumps over. Navigator sprawled on the floor.

I rage.

Got one! Two!

They go down smoking.

I am hit again. There goes my leg. Agony.

Smoke coming from my engine. The oil pipe! Damn it!

One Fokker right behind me. He hesitates. Signals to the other who disappears into the clouds.

This is it. I am no match for the Hun in his unscathed machine. God, let it be quick. I stare down death's jaws. I hope for a miracle. God, how I love life!

Hun tails, savouring the kill! The bloody pervert!

But suddenly, he is right beside me. A Nordic giant! Not unlike myself. He looks straight at me. His steel-blue eyes not angry. His handsome jaw not schadenfreudig.

I see his five rows of notches on DLW-1946. He looks at mine, as one airman to another.

Seconds trickle.

Something fine, tragic about him. He nods. Just once. Then he salutes. I salute back, and he is off like the shot, he didn't fire to finish me.“

Good luck to you, too, my friend! I hope we'll both get through this shambles!” .

* * * * *

April 25, 2012

An Unexpected Turn of Events: Variation on a Theme by Nevil Shute

I owe old Johnny Wilson my life. Without him risking his own, I would have drowned in heavy seas after my ditching at flying school. That was 40 years ago. He was my flying instructor in the RAF at Lossiemouth, before he retired to Tasmania and dropped out of my life. And now, he came back on this cold and rainy night, as I was driving home, dead tired after an endless flight from London, via Canada to Sidney, where I caught the commuter to Hobart, my home, anxious to embrace my wife and children--- and then a long rest in my own warm bed.

The very thought of it relaxed me dangerously on the road. The wireless in my Morris Minor broke for news, as I drove down Hester Street. Strange how in extreme fatigue a corner of the mind seems to concentrate automatically on any audible human voice. I followed the broadcast vaguely until ABC reported that a Captain Johnny Wilson had crashed his Auster on isolated Quart Island, fractured his skull, and lay unconscious in a peat crofter's cottage. In a storm that had grounded everybody else, Johnny had attempted to rescue the peater's child, in agony with acute appendicitis. He was not expected to live without urgent medical attention.

I could not ignore that radio broadcast.

Beth, my darling and constant wife, smiled as I entered through the garage door and embraced me with the warmth that had never failed me. She had a hot supper ready for me, and the smell of fine cooking permeated the hall. Moxi, our Scotch terrier, greeted me proudly with his usual exuberant enthusiasm and then did not leave my side, fearing, no doubt, that I would leave him again. The children watched television. I kissed them, then ate and told Beth of Johnny Wilson and his accident, before I changed into civilian clothes and headed for the airport. I knew there were a couple of Austers at the flying school, airworthy and ready. Duty called.

The only doctor in the back country of Hobart was Johnson, a very young general practitioner, who had no experience with head operations, let alone on a kitchen table with rudimentary instruments. Also, he had never flown in an aeroplane and was petrified.

Still, there he sat right beside me in the narrow passenger seat, stiff as a board, clutching his brown medical bag with all his strength, as I steered the plane over the bumpy grass runway to take off into almost gale-force winds. That bag contained most of his equipment, some bottles, and medication.

I threw a rapid glance at him. He was not a strong man. Some five foot five and as frail as they come.

As Met had predicted, the fog lifted briefly, as we circled above Quart Island, and we saw the house. I brought my Auster around and headed into wind, flying at fifty or sixty on the clock and throttling to lose height. The noise of the engine was deafening, and conversation impossible.

At four feet, as instructed, the doctor began the deplaning manoeuvre. He barely managed to push out his padded bag before the door slammed shut.

I took a long run up the second time. He got ready again to jump. Five feet, three feet, one foot, and I throttled a bit more. The Auster shook. I put the stick forward a

little.

We were motionless, with the tail up and a good bit of engine power.

“GO!” I shouted to him.

He lifted the catch and shoved it open. The strong blast of the slipstream from the propeller made his task doubly difficult. I tried to counter the increasing drag by opening up the throttle. It made it worse.

I shot another glance at him as he struggled. With both hands, he could only open a couple of inches.

With a sick feeling in my throat I realized that we were up against something here that I had not reckoned on. Even using all my skill in putting down upon that strip, the doctor could not possibly get out of the cabin of the aeroplane.

I shouted to him to shut the door and took off again. By the time I could bring her around once more, the fog had moved in everywhere like thick soap suds. We would have to return to Hobart until the Met gave clearance again.

For but a split second, I could see the fire pots again the peat-crofter’s wife had put up to indicate the start of the runway, and then they were gone. In that split second I knew that it was now or never. My eyes glued to the spot in the fog where I had spotted them, I risked the life of the only doctor in the district, and my own, and crashlanded. Hell would have to be paid for this if we survived.

We did, and that night, at 3:34 a.m., Johnny Wilson opened his eyes, still lying on the kitchen table that had served the doctor as his operating base, smiled at the peat crofter’s wife and child, then at the doctor and myself, nodded briefly, and lived.

* * * * *

April 17, 2012

Ottawa Will Never Hear of This!

Arrived Phnom Penh on schedule.

I had thought it would be nice to stay in an old colonial mansion instead of the run-of-the-mill INTERCONTINENTAL, which was the standard government white-page listing. So I had changed the secretary's reservation by e-mail from Hanoi to the PAVILLON, a delightful old French colonial mansion. It looked smashing on the internet and was very reasonable in price, which should please the beancounters back in Ottawa. The Cambodians had turned it into a fine, old-fashioned hotel to help their starving economy.

You entered the PAVILLON through a heavy, solid mahogany garden door some eight feet high, opening into a veritable jungle of trees, all walled in. Wide benches with pads and cushions everywhere. Large mahogany garden chairs under lush vegetation so dense that you could not see the main house. The garden chaises looked more like four-poster mahogany beds with canopies on top and lots of comfy white cushions and even sheer curtains flowing gently in the breeze, presumably to keep any bugs out in the evening. Little artificial streams permeated the manicured grounds. A natural stone path meandered over them, and presently I scurried on it behind the houseboy who had materialized from somewhere to pick up my bags. The streams filled lovely ponds here and there, and I noticed people relaxing in some of them as we passed by, so I assumed they may be hot tubs.

Finally, the main house appeared behind all this happily thriving vegetation. In fact one nearly stumbled into for it was all surrounded by the most marvelous, exotic flowers I had ever seen. One was like a gigantic pink sunflower. Beautiful. They perfumed the air with the scent of honey.

All the way up the path, I had noticed that my arrival seemed to cause a bit of a stir. I had the feeling that this may be a private club, and I was the unknown newcomer they found curious. Still, they did not seem hostile or anything, and there were other women there.

One very German or elderly Scandinavian-looking gentleman in a reposing position under some lush tree canopy even made a little welcome reverence in my direction, to which I responded with an equally friendly "how do you do" in passing, sensing his curiosity and aware of his assessing regard that followed me.

At the front desk, I claimed my reserved room on the top floor. The young receptionist looked very perplexed and told me they had no reservation for me. I whipped out the confirmation papers, complete with the reservation number.

The beautiful young thing asked me in sweet, but very broken English, if I wanted to stay one full night?

"No, THREE nights!"

She asked me then if I wanted the full treatment. I quickly inferred that she must mean meals and declined.

She looked puzzled.

What was the nature of my business in Phnom Penh?

I said I was there on government business, and I would appreciate government rates, as per my reservation.

She seemed reassured by that.

While she was carefully, carefully going over her reservation books again, I was admiring the magnificent hall with fine, heavy mahogany armoires and colonial chests and furniture, thinking what a wonderful home this would have been in its hay-day. I looked forward to my evenings here---my escapes into our storied past.

That is when I noticed that there seemed to be only white, middle-aged to elderly gentlemen going in and out, but regardless of their age, there was always a very young Oriental girl, beautifully or scantily attired on their arms, or reposing nearby in the gardens.

While I was drinking all this in, I faintly heard the sweet young receptionist asking, "Which government do you represent?"

"Right!"

I muttered something about probably being in the wrong place and could she check if the INTERCONTINENTAL did have rooms by any chance.

She did, and they had a vacancy.

I hightailed my fanny out of there like greased lightning, ignoring the giggles behind the reeds. This time the houseboy was trying to follow ME. God, I felt like Hyacinthe Bouquet and hoped the embassy...

The embassy! Oh, my God! I had sent them the standard notice of accommodation change, and they would have checked the type of hotel it was! I could only hope that Ottawa would never hear of this.

When I got to the garden door, my driver had left, of course. So, I asked the houseboy, if he could possibly call me a taxi. He said it would be difficult to get one to come. That was all I needed now, being stranded in front of an unsavoury house of ill repute.

What if the embassy had already dispatched a car to get me out of my predicament? The embarrassment of it all. How could I possibly be taken seriously during our discussions and negotiations.

What if that smiling gentleman had been a member of the yellow press and found out from the receptionist who I was? I could see the headlines now in the *Ottawa Citizen*: "Government Officer Caught in Brothel!" or worse: "Government Officer Moonlighting in Phnom Phenh Brothel!"

I saw a mini-tuc-tuc across the street and rushed across. I asked the driver of this curious three-wheel contraption if he could possibly drive me to the INTERCONTINENTAL.

Of course, he could, and so I hauled my cases into his vehicle and myself beside them, and off we went.

I was greatly relieved. It was rather fun riding in an open "taxi" under a colourful canvas roof, pulled by a motorcycle that went no faster than 15 km /hour in this city of racing drivers.

At the entrance of the INTERCONTINENTAL, he stopped, obviously wondering if he should dare drive me up the long circular driveway to the grand entrance of the hotel, or not.

I motioned to him to go right ahead. He seemed pleased as Punch, sat straight up as he continued "full speed" up the magnificent driveway through the green, well-watered lawns and past the ponds with the Versailles-like fountains.

There were three liveried gentlemen standing at their desks by the main door, nearly splitting their sides at the sight of us. Only then did I become aware of the fact that one probably should not arrive there in a smoking mini-tuc-tuc, polluting the rarefied air of a world-class hotel.

The driver's confidence seemed failing him, too, somewhat, but I reassured him that it had been great fun, and would he give me a receipt. Naturally he had neither pen nor paper, so one of the liveried gentlemen got some from his desk.

Whatever faux pas I may have made, it seemed to have broken the ice instantly, and I was warmly received by the hotel staff and treated with great curtesy during my entire sojourn. Everyone seemed to know my name, and when I left Phnom Penh, a large number of them foregathered at the front entrance to see me off, and wish me bon voyage. By then, I was very aware that nobody else got that royal treatment.

I felt treated like one of their own, or rather like their queen. The Embassy never asked questions and Ottawa never heard of it.

Saum Arkoun Preahcheamcheasa!

* * * * *

May 2012

Sorrow, Idle Sorrow

(adapted from *I Bow to Thee, My Country*)

*Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.*

*Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the under-world,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.*

*Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.*

*Dear as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Tears, Idle Tears”

She turned her head, heavy with thought, towards the window, away from the stony face of her government's Head of Intelligence. The day had risen, gray and clammy, over her gardens, the walls, the wrought iron gates, and the city beyond. It could offer her no consolation for her aching heart full of dark suspicions, the kind a bright sunny day might have promised to lift her spirits. But today, within and without her, there was utter gloom. The moment of truth was at hand!

"Who did it, Sir Chinchester?"

"Two of my operatives, Your Majesty, Richard Shortman and Nicholas Archer. They were the two called upon by the crown prince to attend a private audience. I believe it was the Lady Camombert who arranged for the meeting—through Aaron Vinell, my chief of operations—and who received them. We had solicited the help of the Meharicans overseas, but they categorically refused all assistance, Your Majesty. Since the matter was believed to be sanctioned by the crown prince, and was to remain strictly covert, there was no need to inform Your Majesty's government. Plausible deniability, you see! In the unlikely event that...that public questions were to be asked in Parliament, they could be denied with complete honesty, and the monarch, of course, cannot be questioned. That is why I can be frank with Your Majesty."

The queen slowly turned her head to the left. Staring, but not seeing, her gaze glossed over her desk through the window again, which, from her vantage point on the other side of the room, only framed the heavy gray clouds in the sky. It lingered there as if transfixed. A piercing pain crossed her heart. She held her breath to soothe it.

After an appropriately long pause of silence, she breathed in heavily, slid her left foot almost imperceptibly behind her right ankle and let it ride on it slowly to the right, where her toes supported both on the floor, while she moved her left hand over her right, resting on her upper thigh, to sit quite erect.

"How was it done, Sir Chinchester? How does one create a guaranteed fatal accident?" the queen asked almost mechanically.

He observed her stately semi-profile turned up, away from him, saw her magnificent blue eyes, neither cold nor warm now, their luster fading. As always in the presence of the leader of his class, he felt the nagging awareness that her damnable, ladylike motherliness made him hold back. If only she were a man! He could deal with men so much more directly. With her, all alone, he found himself hovering in this gilded parlor between restricting, polite circumscription of the event and mildly boastful allusions, rather than in full flight, thundering the truth with the naked bravado one could use with a man and leave no doubts in the collegial crudeness of his innards.—This splendid woman's inscrutably calm façade, however, utterly disarmed him.

On the spur of that thought, he decided to dispense with all pontificating analysis of *realpolitik*, which he sensed could be construed as condescending lecturing. If Sir Chinchester had been momentarily disconcerted, the hardened spy master within him felt sure-footed again with the next breath he took.

"They were in constant touch with the driver, Your Majesty. He was one of our informers. Several earlier opportunities had come in Sarip, on Furco, and then again in Paric, and later in Libner, but it was always too risky. We knew that the sheikh maintained a grand home in Antiquita. So, sooner or later, they would be there. We

needed them to be abroad, as security is much relaxed there. The operation had to be planned underground, to avoid any spying satellites passing overhead. In fact, neither of my two operatives could ever look up under their hats, or they might have caught a clear picture of their faces. It had to be in an underground garage without any kind of surveillance. However, in the circles the princess and the sheikh travelled, that was hardly possible. A public underpass would be far safer.”

Sir Chinchester spoke mechanically again, like a well-oiled machine, hardly wavering in tone, calm and detached, as if he were reciting from his favourite novel or reading his shopping list.

“Our intelligence last month was that the two were about to escape from their cruise in the Thiergerius Sea, where the press were pursuing them relentlessly, and make a mad dash for Antiquita. Archer made sure that both cars of the sheikh’s regular driver, Sardeno, were, embarrassingly, out of commission in Antiquita.”

Here the spy master paused for but an imperceptible heartbeat. He knew that the monarch had an interest in car mechanics, and he gave her a chance to ask how it was done. But the queen did not respond, so he pressed on.

“Our informer, Mudo, was the logical back-up if Sardeno got to the vehicle in the last minute, as was his practice. He had a mistress with whom he spent every free minute and found it hard to tear away from. So chances for Mudo to be called were pretty good. He had a leased back-up sports model. Very fast, very comfortable. So the scene was set, and my men waited for further developments while monitoring their surveillance equipment, conscious of the fact that the matter was not yet urgent, should some unforeseen event change their plans.

Shortman listened in on the telephone call from Sardeno as it came through, and they knew then that the couple would be dining at the Excelsior, with Mudo as their driver. My two men met the driver at the hotel and slipped a mickey into his tea. Not strong enough to make him fall asleep, but to get him mildly disoriented in due course and produce the symptoms of drunkenness in any chemical blood test.

Mudo, of course, believed that the two of them were there for the security of the princess, and told them exactly what the plan and his route would be. Just to be certain, however, Archer pinned a dual-purpose transmitter to the car and then went ahead and fixed the relays of the electronic traffic lights to respond to it. All lights would change to green as soon as Mudo drove within range, giving his party clear sailing as they escaped the photographers who would no doubt be chasing them. Shortman had specifically leaked the presence of the princess to the paparazzi with an anonymous tip-off. Thus, Archer could foresee that, in his reduced state, the driver would see the wave of green lights and accelerate to the maximum speed allowed, all the way to the tight St. Marco underpass. He was a very law-abiding man, you see.

“Archer returned to the hotel well before the princess and the sheikh finished dinner. Their last supper was a happy affair in an atmosphere of warmth and elegance. She giggled a lot, and he laughed at her amusing stories, as people in love are wont to do.”

Sir Chinchester barely whispered the last few words, then paused as the queen took her eyes off him and, deep in thought, began to stare at the Safavid pattern on the carpet, where they lingered momentarily, appreciating the quality of it, which was rare. None of her respectable collection of far-off Fabia’s finest could compare, come anywhere near to the precision of the pattern of this Safavid, the richness of the