Chapter 28

The Voice of a Goddess Touches Weilin's Heart
A Lookout Helps Further Some Business Discussions

The school was in a square functional building on Boundary Street, a mile to the south. The student body was entirely Chinese but the subjects, excepting only Chinese language and literature, were taught in English. In most cases this meant Chinglish, for most of the teachers were local Chinese; but the senior Mathematics master was a dark-skinned, silver-haired Sri Lankan, Economics and European History were in the hands of a very tall, very bony, very sarcastic gentleman from Bristol, and an elderly square-built Australian woman took English Conversation.

William found the curriculum very arduous at first. Blitzer had performed a miracle with his English speaking and listening skills, but offered very little training in the written word. Since most of the school's textbooks were in English this was a severe handicap, mitigated to some degree by the fact of most of his classmates being in the converse situation. They had been studying from English textbooks all their brief lives, but none had had any very conscientious training in the spoken language. They had all memorized great slabs of text about the Napoleonic Wars, but none would have had much success placing an order at Macdonald's. William, by contrast, conversed breezily with the foreign teachers but could never quite finish a homework assignment for want of time to look up all the words. Furthermore his education since the age of

eight had been disrupted by all the movements, so that he started off seriously behind his coevals in everything.

In consequence of all this, William was not a good student. Indeed, it took him a year to become a merely average student. Only in mathematics did he feel himself on a secure footing. Here his poor reading skills were of little importance, as all the important facts were embodied in symbols. And here his lack of educational background mattered less, since a natural intuition for the subject allowed him to see through the problems and theorems much more quickly than his classmates. Algebra he knew well enough from his mainland schooling. Geometry was more or less new to him, but everything it stated seemed quite obvious, though it was some months before he saw the point of formal proofs. Trigonometry the class had only started one term before he arrived, so there was little catching up to do, and as with geometry the theorems so laboriously demonstrated seemed self-evident to William.

It was in trigonometry that he scored his first public triumph. The subject was taught by the Sri Lankan, whose name was Mr Kuruneru. Mr Kuruneru had a reputation for mild eccentricity, but obviously loved his subject. He was given to small, feeble jokes at which he himself laughed more than anyone else, and to frequent digressions from the main syllabus. Since these digressions were not examinable, the students took them as opportunities to doze or catch up on homework assignments. In this style, while discoursing on the general properties of the triangle, he rambled off into a brief account of Morley's theorem, which asserts that by trisecting the angles of any triangle at all, and marking the intersections of the trisectors in a certain fashion, a perfectly equilateral triangle can always be found. William thought this wonderful: that hidden inside any triangle, no matter how irregular, was a little jewel of perfect regularity, and that this gem had been invisible until Mr Morley discovered it. *Who had put it there?* he asked himself over and over again—without, of course, being able to arrive at any satisfactory answer. The triplication of triples also pleased him, bringing to mind the opening chords of the bird man opera Gordon liked so much. He hoped that Mr Kuruneru would proceed to a proof. But the master perceived that he had strayed too far from the

3791-DERB

path set for him by the Examining Board, said only that there was no proof accessible to students at this level, and returned to the Cosine Rule.

William thought the Cosine Rule already as plain as the sun in the sky. He shut out the lesson and set to scribbling. When the lesson ended he went up to Mr Kuruneru with a proof of Morley's Theorem in twenty lines. The teacher chuckled, swept up the page with his other books, and left. That was a Thursday. The following Monday in morning recess Mr Kuruneru summoned William to an empty classroom. He was sitting at one of the student desks with William's proof in front of him. William sat at the adjoining desk.

"This is your own effort?" asked the master.

"Yes, Sir."

"Had you ever heard of Morley's theorem until last Thursday?"

"No, Sir. It isn't in the textbook."

"No. Indeed it isn't. The proof is considered too difficult, or perhaps too tedious, for courses below the university level. In fact it has always been cited as an example of a simple result for which there is no clear or elegant proof. You seem to have put an end to that."

"Thank you, Sir. But actually my proof could be even shorter. If, instead of dropping perpendiculars from the vertices, you imagine a simple reflection in each of the sides . . . "

Mr Kuruneru listened to the simplification William had worked out while walking home from school Thursday afternoon.

" . . . So now the proof is down to fifteen lines. And it's clearer."

"Yes, yes." The Sri Lankan was looking at him with a perplexed expression. "Remarkable, most remarkable." Turning away, he stared at the paper for a few beats. "Most remarkable." He cleared his throat. "Well, young William—how old are you, by the way?"

"Thirteen, Sir."

"Remarkable. Well, when you gave me the proof I assumed that it was the usual schoolboy effort, premised on error and argued without much attention to the generally accepted rules of sublunary logic. I was surprised to find it consistent and unassailable. So surprised that I spoke to an acquaintance of mine, Professor Meld at Hong Kong University. He was kind enough to look through the most recent references in the Uni-

versity library. Nothing, nothing that compares with your proof. No work on the topic at all, in fact, since Duval's, twenty years ago." Mr Kuruneru made a little laugh. "I'm afraid that trigonometry, daunting as it may appear to our students here—most of our students, I mean—is beneath the attention of professional mathematicians. For them, the noble cosine function is merely a single point in a space of infinitely many dimensions."

William was well accustomed to the master's pedantic style of speaking. He nodded politely. He had, in point of fact, forgotten all about Morley's triangle after Thursday afternoon's efforts.

"It is always possible, of course" (Mr Kuruneru continued) "that your proof has appeared in some work on recreational mathematics, some unreferenced work. I shall write to Mr Martin Gardner in New York, who is most likely to know about such things, and who I have heard is a punctilious correspondent. In the meantime, if you have no objection, I should like to submit your proof for publication. In your name, of course."

William, who knew nothing about the academic world, did not grasp what was being suggested. He only heard *publication*.

"You mean . . . you want me to write a book?"

Mr Kuruneru smiled. "Dear me, no. Only an article, a brief article in one of the journals. Actually I myself will write it up for you. I know how they like these things presented. But only your name will appear, I promise you."

William saw no reason not to agree. This all happened toward the end of summer term, his first year in the school. William thought no more about it during summer vacation, and had forgotten Morley's triangle all over again by the time the students reassembled in September.

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Three weeks into the new term Mr Kuruneru called him to the staff room. Standing at the door, he handed William a yellow envelope with red and blue airmail edging.

"You are a mathematician," said Mr Kuruneru, and beamed, and shook William's hand. William opened the envelope at once. It was the current

issue of *Mathematical Monthly*, from London. There was a book marker in it, a plain slip of rough-cut manila card, at a page which said:

> Morley's Triangle: A New Proof
> by William Leung

They had used the Cantonese spelling of his family name, but William could not have cared less. He took the journal home that afternoon and showed it to Gordon. Gordon was thrilled.

"Och, my sweet laddie! When I saw ye in the station house that time, I knew ye were something out of the ordinary. And see here the now, I didnae know the half of it!"

Gordon was on the evening shift, leaving the apartment after dinner, coming home after midnight when William was in bed. It was now understood between them that he would try his best not to wake William when the following day was a school day. For the most part Gordon kept discipline on this point, with occasional exceptions for what he described as *emergencies*. On this evening his coming home woke William anyway, as often happened. But instead of slipping into bed more or less immediately, as he usually did, Gordon went to the kitchen and was silent for a long time. Too long for William, who drifted back to sleep. Last up in the morning he saw that Gordon had been reading his proof in the *Mathematical Monthly*, and had covered half-a dozen sheets of police stationery with drawings and scribbled notes. Gordon confessed that evening.

"Made up my mind to work through your proof, laddie. And I did, too, though it wasnae easy. Anything ye produce along those lines in future, I'll take on trust. Now dinnae neglect your other subjects. Nobody ever got rich on mathematics."

William was now a minor celebrity at the school. At one of the periodic assemblies the headmaster pointed him out and the whole school applauded. There were brief articles in two of the Chinese papers, and one in the *South China Morning Post*. The attention made William uncomfortable. He feared that one of the papers might send someone to ask questions about his circumstances, actually lived in fear and trembling of it for a while. However, the newspapers seemed satisfied with informa-

tion given by the school, and no journalists approached him. Fame, like wealth, is no friend of mathematicians.

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The square Australian lady had left that summer, and English Conversation was now taught by a cheerful young cockney girl called Valerie. Valerie seemed to take an immediate liking to William. When his publication became generally known she made a great fuss of him.

"What did your Mum and Dad say?" she wanted to know.

"My parents are both dead," he told her.

"Oh! Oh, I am sorry! Oh, really . . . forgive me!"

"It's all right. You didn't know."

"Who d'you live with then, William?"

"I have a guardian. Old family friend," said William. This is what Gordon had told him to say.

"Really? What, here in Kowloon Tong?" (This being the name of the district.)

"M, not far. A mile or so."

Three or four days after this, while walking home one afternoon William saw Valerie ahead of him, walking rather slowly. He greeted her as he passed. Valerie made an expression of surprise and stopped, so of course he had to stop, too.

"On your way home, are you?"

"Yes."

"Me too. I live just round the corner there. Would you like to take a look?"

"Just round the corner" was, in fact, several blocks, and well out of William's way. He wished he had not been so polite, but there was no way out of it now. Valerie shared the ground floor of a house with another English girl. The other girl worked in an office on Hong Kong side. She never got home till after seven, Valerie told him, twice.

Valerie showed him round: Living room, kitchen, bedrooms, back to living room.

"It's nice, isn't it? Come on, sit down. Make yourself at home."

She sat on the sofa, patting the cushion beside her to indicate that he should sit there. William sat, feeling that they were too close together. Valerie smiled at him.

William did not think Valerie very pretty. She had those characteristics that make some westerners seem, to a Chinese eye, slightly extraterrestrial: very pale gray-blue irises, rather a large nose, colorless straight hair pulled back carelessly behind her ears, making the ears too prominent. Her skin was very pale, a sort of chalky white, but clear and unblemished. Her hands and feet were too big, and she seemed to have more than the usual number of teeth. However, her figure was slim and neat, her smile—if you discounted the surplus teeth—sincere and engaging. She was sitting angled sideways, towards him. Quite suddenly she took his hand in hers, and placed it on her lap.

"You're so cute, William. I feel . . . oh, I don't know. I feel I want to cuddle you. Ooo, listen to me! I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that, really I shouldn't." She bit her lip in mock self-reproach, and put a hand over her mouth.

"Doesn't matter. I'm really . . . it's very kind of you to say such a thing."

"Oh, go on." She laughed. "Can I ask you something?"

"All right."

"Something personal, I mean."

"Depends. Try it." (Feeling a tremor of apprehension.)

She lowered her eyes to her hands holding his, and stroked absentmindedly with her upper hand.

"Have you ever been alone with a girl? A grown-up girl, I mean."

"No," replied William, quite truthfully.

"D'you know what happens when a boy and a girl are alone together?"

"Well. I . . . I have an idea."

"Do you? You know what a boy and a girl do when they're alone together?"

"M, more or less."

"Would you like to do it with me?"

Valerie was much more enthusiastic than any of the girls Gordon had brought home, though less imaginative. She writhed and moaned under him, and at the end gave him quite a painful bite on his shoulder. On account of the bite, which he knew Gordon would certainly notice, William confessed all to Gordon when he got home.

Gordon thought it a great joke. "Which end?" he wanted to know, and: "front or back?"

"The normal way, of course," said William. "That was what she wanted."

"And yourself. Did ye enjoy it?" They were in armchairs in the main room, Gordon grinning all over his face.

"Yes. It was very nice."

Gordon looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, laddie, I'm glad. Means I havnae made a bugger out of ye. I wouldnae want that on my conscience. With your looks, ye'd be a raddled old pansy queen at thirty. But she's a cheeky thing, a wanton young lass indeed, to be going after a lad barely fourteen. What a disgrace!" And he threw back his head and laughed long and loud.

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It was at about this time that William began to like western opera. He had heard plenty of it, living these months with Gordon, and knew many of the themes and melodies, but it had not really gripped him in any way. Then, one evening, Gordon in the main room playing one of his records and William doing homework on the kitchen table, the Goddess spoke to him.

The particular item of homework was Chemistry, a subject William disliked. There was a complicated problem about the behavior of some molecules in a reaction. To solve the problem required William's remembering an experiment the teacher had done before the class some days before. William could not remember. Instead of conscientiously taking notes, he had been doodling at a problem concerning prime numbers, which Mr Kuruneru had brought to his attention in a journal of mathematics. He sighed, chewing his pencil. It was still light outside, and he

thought if he went for a walk the fresh air might jog his memory. Failing that, he thought he might telephone one of the classmates.

At this point Gordon, in the next room, turned up the hi-fi, as he did when the opera reached a part he liked. A woman began to sing. It was a light song with a straightforward and rather attractive tune; but it was the woman's voice, the quality of her voice, that caught William's attention. The voice was very clear and pure, yet beneath it was a kind of fierceness and wildness, an *unruly* quality, that made William's skin go cold. He got up and went to the doorway that led into the main room, and stood there listening. Gordon was in his armchair, his hands steepled in front of him, his face bent down to touch the fingertips. That woman's voice—the terrifying, marvelous voice—filled the room. It seemed to William to be coming from another world—a world which, he thought, on the whole he would prefer to know nothing about. And yet the voice captivated him completely.

"What is it?" he asked, when the song had finished.

Gordon smiled. He had got up to turn down the hi-fi again.

"Did ye like it?"

"I don't know. It sounded so strange. Like . . . I don't know. Not quite human."

Gordon laughed, sitting down again. "Well, ye got that right, laddie. A little more than human, our Maria. Or less, some would say."

"That's her name, Maria?"

"Maria Callas. One of Heaven's occasional gifts to us suffering mortals."

"What was the song about?"

"Och, the poor girl's just given her heart to a rascal. It'll all end in tears. But of course, she doesnae know that yet. She's a lonely wee thing and her daddy's a hunchback."

Gordon told him the whole story, which William thought very cruel and bitter. Still that one song haunted him. He always listened for Gordon to play it again, and in this way paid more attention to the other songs, so that in time he could recognize several of them. He even took out the records sometimes when Gordon was on evening shift, and found the song, and played it to himself over and over, thrilled and yet repelled

every time just as the first by that woman's pure wild voice. He was not very surprised to find that the voice had a story behind it, which Gordon told him, not that first time but on some subsequent occasion.

The Voice That Broke

Once there was a woman who loved opera. She had a beautiful voice, so she became a singer of opera, and was soon world-famous. At first she sang operas that everyone knew. People said they had never been sung so well. Then she began to sing operas that had not been sung for a hundred years, and when people heard her, they said: What beautiful music! How can it be that we have not heard this for a hundred years? Then every singer wanted to sing those operas, and the operas became famous again, as they had been a hundred years before.

Alas, the woman loved opera too much. Although her voice was beautiful, it is never enough for a singer's voice to possess beauty. It must also have strength and stamina—*an iron constitution*, as English people say. The woman's voice was not strong enough to contain her love for the music. She strained and struggled to sing the music as she knew it should be sung, as she could hear it in her heart, but the strain was too much. Gradually her voice began to break.

Of course, she knew that her voice had broken before anyone else knew it. She developed all kinds of artful tricks to disguise the fact that her voice was breaking. She was a very gifted actress as well as a great singer, so for a time she could use her stage skills to distract from the growing problems of her voice. At last, however, the truth could not be hidden. People began to notice that her voice was breaking. She fled to the arms of her lover, a wealthy man who cared nothing about music or singing. But because he cared nothing and she cared everything, he soon tired of her, and at last left her for a more glamorous woman, the widow of an American President. The

woman retired from the world to an apartment in Paris, where she lingers on like a ghost in a life whose purpose has gone.

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There were more trysts with Valerie, all through the rest of that school year. Every one happened in the same, *faux*-accidental way: he would pass her on his way home, they would stop to talk, he would go to her apartment. The artificiality of these encounters was emphasized by the fact, which William quickly grasped, that Valerie could walk home from the school by a much shorter route, and had obviously chosen this one, and dawdled on it, for the purpose of meeting him. This went on all through their acquaintance, although (William often reflected) she must have known that he knew that she was manufacturing the encounter each time.

William actually found the arrangement very convenient. If he did not want to go with her he could turn aside when he saw her ahead of him in the street, as she never looked back for him but always waited for him to come up. In this way he regulated the encounters to little more than one a week.

Their maneuvers, once together in Valerie's apartment, varied little all through the nine months of their affair. There would be some talk about school, about Hong Kong, about England. Then they would perform a single act of *tongfang*, in the commonplace position, on Valerie's bed. Valerie seemed not to want to expand the repertoire, and William was afraid of doing so for fear he might betray more knowledge of these intimate matters than was appropriate to a boy of fourteen.

He knew Valerie was very fond of him. She often said so, lying on the bed running her hands over his body after the act.

"Lovely," she would murmur, "lovely . . . lovely boy. Oooo, I wish you were five years older, our William! What times we'd have!"

In school she kept good self-control, never showing him undue favor; except that when William published again in *Mathematical Monthly*, halfway through the summer term, and the news was announced to the school assembly, Valerie applauded longer and louder than any of the other teachers, and beamed at him across the stage with a radiant fervor

William thought the classmates packed in the hall below could not help but notice. However, if anyone thought Valerie's enthusiasm improper, they kept their thoughts to themselves.

Valerie's contract was for only one year, at the end of which (she told William, walking to her apartment one afternoon in June) she planned to do some sightseeing in Asia, then make her way back to England.

"Damp, poky old England," she sighed. "I shall miss Hong Kong. I shall miss you too, Willum." (William had tried to teach her some Cantonese, but she had got very little farther than his own given name, which she pronounced "Willum", and the universal greeting *Sikjo faan mei a?*— "Have you eaten yet?"—which she rendered as "sick jaw fan may, uh?" with a blithe disregard for all seven of the Cantonese tones.)

William was secretly glad she was leaving. He liked her, and enjoyed their *tongfang*, but he thought Gordon could not maintain his attitude of tolerant good humor indefinitely. The longer the affair with Valerie went on, the more Gordon was bound to think there might be some serious attachment developing. There was not; but William understood enough of worldly things now to see that the suspicion of it alone might be enough to estrange him from Gordon, a thing he did not want at all.

In July of '72, when her contract expired, Valerie begged William to see her off at the airport. The girl she shared her apartment with, who knew nothing of what had been going on between them, would be there too (Valerie said)—but she would just introduce him as a favorite pupil.

At the appointed day William went to her apartment to help with her bags, and rode with Valerie and the other girl to Qide Airport, which he now called by its Cantonese name, Kai Tak. The other girl, whose name was Gillian, was a big-boned pink type out of the Old English Dairymaid mold, with a brisk motherly approach that made William think it would have been more suitable for her to be the schoolteacher and Valerie the clerk.

At the entrance to the departure area, Valerie said something to Gillian, then took William aside.

"I shall miss you, Willum. I really shall. Our little Wednesday cuddles." (Because of the school schedule, most of their meetings had been on Wednesday afternoons.)

3791-DERB

"I'm sorry," said William, not quite knowing what to say. "I hope everything goes well for you in England."

"Ooo, don't worry about me." Valerie laughed. "I shall be all right anywhere. But you, my sweet Willum, you should find yourself a nice girlfriend. Don't let all those lovely stiffies go to waste." She giggled. "I'd hate to think of you wankin' away alone."

"I'll be all right," said William. "I can find someone, don't worry."

"I bet you can." Valerie laughed again, squeezing his hand, then flung her arms round him and kissed him frankly on the lips, a long wet kiss. Over her shoulder William could see Gillian, eyebrows raised and mouth part-open in query, the brain behind the eyes rapidly computing the sum total of numerous tiny and hitherto unexplained anomalies of her life with Valerie.

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In August Gordon had family to stay again. This was a double-header: an elderly aunt and uncle bent on investigating the Shopper's Paradise of the East (as Hong Kong was beginning to be promoted), and a niece from Scotland, "doing" Asia in her college vacation. William was packed off to Washington Guest House for two weeks. He had a room in the annex again and made a very idle time of it, rising late and watching TV in the lounge half the day, or sitting there catching up on schoolwork, playing solitaire or working on his small mathematical puzzles while the life of the guest house clattered and hummed around him.

It was the tourist season and all the rooms were occupied, though often at the daily rate. Young Australians and Americans passed through, some of them hippies who scorned to express themselves other than in sighs and grunts, some more earnest inquirers, courteously attentive to all around them, fearless explorers of the Mansions' back alleys, talking among themselves of the temple rites in Bali, the beaches at Penang, the prospects of hitching a CIA flight to Luang Prabang. One, a Frenchman named Didier, astounded William by speaking to him in perfect Mandarin with only a trace of accent, and sitting in the lounge reading the local Chinese tabloids, guffawing at the exposés of the private lives of Chinese

movie stars, occasionally asking William for help with one of the odd nonstandard characters used to transliterate peculiarly Cantonese expressions. Then there were the entertainers engaged by the foreigners' hotels and nightclubs around the colony: a huge bison of a man, a full-blood Maori, with a voice of astonishing sweetness and feeling . . . a flamenco guitarist from Spain itself, who sat with William in the lounge telling stories from Lope de Vega while, with the tenderest love, rubbing fragrant oils into the wood of his guitar . . . a Korean dancer, a lovely straight-backed girl with pearly skin, who smiled at William in a way he was beginning to recognize, but who had a blazing row with Papa Wu and flounced out before shadow could turn to substance. And, of course, there were the *achas*, the inner cadre of Papa Wu's clientele.

The cast of *achas* had changed somewhat in the year and a half since his first stay. Harry was still there, in the same room, still toting his boxes of 'rubbish' to and fro. Lal and Chandu had gone to fresh fields and pastures new. Ranesh was still in his room, but had suffered some disastrous turn of fortune.

"Four years ago his Dad sent him to Hong Kong with a hundred thousand dollars," explained Harry, "and told him not to come back till he'd turned it into a million. But the poor chap is not a very good businessman. He tried, I know he did, but somehow he lost it all, so now of course he has no face to go back to his family. He has applied for a job with the Hong Kong civil service, but I really don't know what his chances are. He has the B.A., of course, but" (a shrug) "he is *acha*, not a British citizen. Unless he has some influence I do not know of, I fear it is a lost cause."

Ranesh had fallen into a listless depression. He languished in his room most of the day, emerging only to take meals at the *acha* restaurants on the Mansions' lower floors, and to watch comedy programs in the evening on the English TV channel. He was not altogether without consolation, however. The room that Lal and Chandu had shared was now occupied by a new resident called Gov—pronounced to rhyme with English "stove"—and a woman called Bina, whom William supposed to be Gov's wife. Gov was related in some way to Ranesh, said Harry. He and the woman Bina seemed to consider themselves as under therapeutic obliga-

3791-DERB

tion to Ranesh. They would go to Ranesh's room and spend long hours in there talking with him. Sometimes Gov would go in alone, and sometimes Bina alone. Gov and Bina were running a business of some sort ("import-export", was Harry's only explanation) but seemed to have no fixed hours.

William did not find Gov at all sympathetic. He looked older than the other *achas*. He had silver hair, though his face was quite smooth. In stature he was short—shorter than Bina, in fact—and not very well-shaped, with too much waist and not enough shoulder. William did not seem to register on his consciousness at all. He never offered any kind of greeting, never paused to pass the time of day with William in the lounge, though he often stopped to speak to Harry when he was there. William thought him cold and unfriendly, perhaps anti-Chinese.

Bina, by contrast, William thought very fascinating. She was the first *acha* woman he had seen up close. Her skin was a lovely honey-brown color, and her hair black and shining. She always wore saris, gorgeous flowing creations of pastel-patterned muslin enlivened sometimes with gold or sliver spangles, beneath which, when she moved, could be glimpsed her honey-brown feet in gold sandals, her toenails painted flaming red. When dressed up to go out she wore jewels in her hair, and a score of glittering bangles on each arm. The thing that was really fascinating, though, was her midriff. The way she draped her sari, it always left the midriff bare. Her midriff was the same color as her face and arms, smooth and soft-looking. The sight of the midriff always inflamed William, throwing him into a state of combined arousal and embarrassment, so that he wanted to look at it without being seen to look. Unlike Gov, Bina always noticed him. She talked down to him, but always in a friendly way, and William liked her.

One afternoon halfway through the first week William was sitting alone in the lounge trying to do a schoolwork assignment in Chinese History, a report on the rebellion of An Lushan. Bina came in, flowed past him with a smile and a greeting, and went into Ranesh's room. William heard them talking for a while; then he got lost in his paper, and could not have sworn on oath whether they were still talking or not.

Now Gov came in from outside. He passed William without a sign, as usual, and went to his room at the far end of the corridor. Soon he came out and went to Ranesh's room. He knocked on the door. Oddly, there was no answer. William knew both Ranesh and Bina were in there; he had seen Bina go in and had heard them talking, and had not moved from his seat since seeing these things.

Gov called out through the door: "Ranesh! Ranesh!" Then something in the *acha* language. He tried the door, but it was locked. He came out of the corridor into the lounge, and addressed William in English.

"Young fellow. Have you seen the gentleman who lives in Room 2? Do you know of whom I am speaking?"

On sheer instinct, joined perhaps with a mischievous desire to inconvenience Gov, whom he did not like, William replied: "Yes, I know him. He went out a little while ago. To Hong Kong side, I think he said."

Gov stood there frowning for a moment, then he left without saying anything. A minute or two after he had gone Ranesh opened his door and poked his head out, looking down the corridor to the lounge. "Gov?" he called out. "Gov, are you there?"

"He's gone," said William.

Ranesh went back into the room. Immediately Bina came out. She breezed down the corridor into the lounge, and sat on the sofa next to William.

"Did Gov ask you anything?" she wanted to know. She had an entrancing fragrance about her, sandalwood and oily spices, that seemed exactly right somehow for the color of her skin and hair.

"Only about Mr Ranesh. I said he had gone to Hong Kong side."

Bina laughed. She had a very fetching laugh, at once throaty and trilling. "You are a very clever boy," she said.

"I hope I didn't do anything wrong," said William.

"Not at all, not at all. You see, Ranesh and I have some business matters we must discuss in private, just the two of us. We do not want to involve Gov in the discussions at this stage. We don't even want him to know we are having discussions, until certain things have been worked out. He has so much to worry about, we don't want to burden him further. You see?"

"Yes. I think so."

Bina made her pretty laugh again. "You *are* a clever boy! Our little lookout! If Ranesh and I are having discussions again, you must send people away, just as you did this afternoon. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes," said William, intoxicated by the sandalwood fragrance, trying very hard indeed not to look at her midriff. "I don't mind."

"Our lookout!" Sang out Bina, heading back up to her own room in a flash of gold sandals and honey-brown *latissimus dorsi*. "Our clever little lookout!"