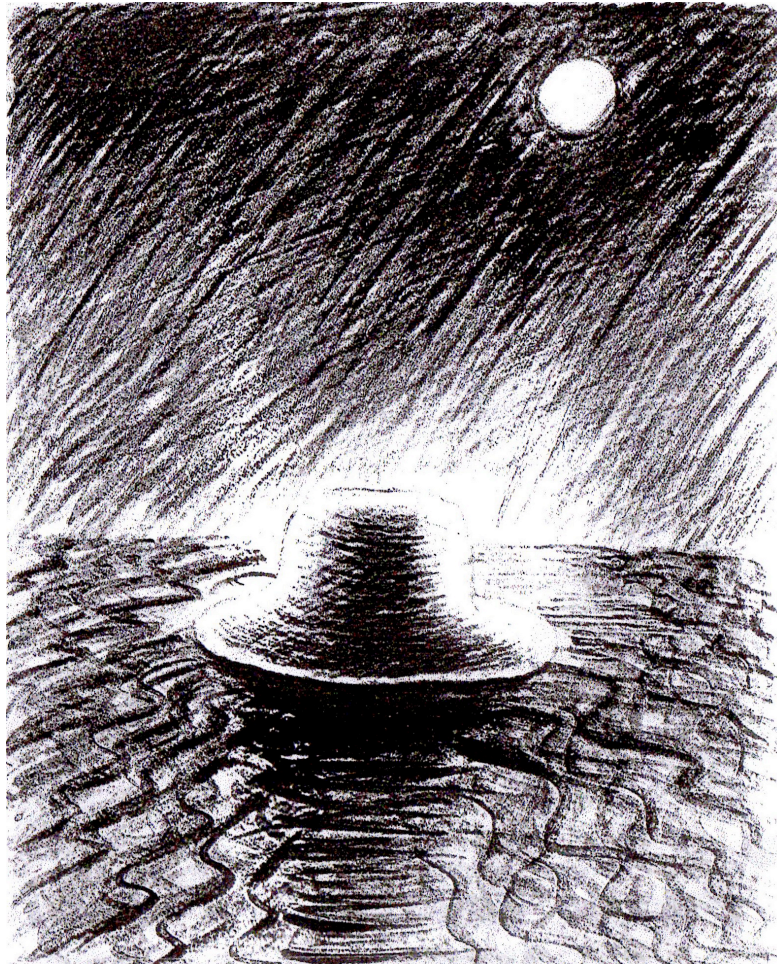


SHOCKWAVES



Trevor Hughes

He still wore his broad white hat despite the warm stillness of the tropical night and the scented breeze blew towards him as the old ship strained forward against the dark water. Carefully he selected his last ever Java cigar from the four which still remained in his cigar case and tried to smile as he remembered that the superstition among the Java Chinese that four is the number of death.

The stars hung far away in the black night sky. An occasional flash of phosphorescence glistened in the night, a transitory radiance in the dark brooding sea. The Spice Islands they were called, where he had come to make his fortune in that time which seemed so far away, and he had made this trip many times, had stood on this same wooden deck, under these same remote heavens and smoked his cigar, and perhaps he had always known that one day it would end like this.

Very carefully he cupped his hands against the balmy fragrant breeze which lightly caressed his cheeks, dipped his cigar into the bright fierce flame of the Lucifer match, drew it down, deep and bright against the night and tried not to be afraid.

He had put the papers in the drawer of his desk where he knew she would easily find them. The first policy he had taken out normally, after the passion had flared between them, as a sensible precaution against the dangers of his transitory, tropical existence but he had told her nothing for they suppose, the Chinese, that to insure against a peril is to invite that same disaster upon them, and so he had kept his own counsel and quietly made his payments even as the money drained away between his fingers.

He put the remaining cigars back into his pocket, not that he would have need of them now, but he was a methodical and frugal man, and he smoothed the jacket of his linen suit, leant against the low ship's rail and smoked his cigar against the night.

The second he had taken out only a few months before when he had known, finally and certainly that his business was in ruins and that nothing could save him. He had paid his premiums, substantial as they must be for a man of his age to the man in the dark suit and the hostile eyes who was the representative of the Dutch East India Insurance Company. The money he had raised by selling carefully and surreptitiously all that remained of his Father's legacy, his watch, his rings, the two small paintings which had stayed hidden in his trunk for his wife had disliked them and they could not, therefore, be displayed.

Now as the vessel strained cheerfully into the wind and as he drew again upon his cigar he tried to divine again upon the air the scents which had drawn him so many years before, had beckoned and lured him with their exotic promises towards this final reckoning.

There was a sound from the sea and he caught a flash of fire and saw the ripples spreading away into the night. Suddenly, painfully he remembered as a small child sitting with his father on the shores of the lake and how his father had tossed in a pebble and told him that the shockwaves would spread slowly, endlessly until eventually they would surround the world. He remembered and looked now far out over the sea, and pulled again on his cigar.

How he had worked and schemed and planned. He had been captivated, enslaved, utterly bewitched and seduced by her dark and sultry beauty. In whatever circumstances he had found himself, whatever the price he had ensured that she should want for nothing, she who sustained and loved and awaited him. He had counted the costs and none had been too great. He should, he knew have employed a different, trustworthy estate

manager for the villainous Celebese he employed plundered him mercilessly, but the only person he could have trusted would have been a European and his wife had pouted at this needless extravagance and he had acquiesced with a feeling of nobility and sacrifice.

He had put away a little money too for the new seedlings, without which it would be impossible to prosper, but she had set her eyes on the silk dresses from her native China and her eyes had sparkled with a joy to make him forget the rest.

Perhaps if he had been able to supervise himself the running of his estates, instead of this bi-monthly sea journey from Java but his wife's delicate constitution forbade that she should leave the large, comfortable two-storey house which he had purchased for them amid the comforts of Djakarta and so he was reduced to these regular, bitter recriminations which flew between himself and his manager as the yields became slowly less and the costs always more.

Another deep pull on his cigar and it was half done now and his time almost upon him. He had endeavoured that night at dinner to give no hint of his troubles. He had been excessively jovial, had laughed, joked and caroused and drunk as much as he could, indeed far more than was his normal ration and when the Captain, with whom he had kept these voyages for many years had winked at him, asked for his secret, he had hinted at some stroke of fortune, some happy accident which would bring prosperity upon him.

He stared into the blackness of the night, astern, trying to discern the shape of the hills of Java against the blank horizon but he could see nothing. They would assume he had fallen overboard, drunk. He had never felt more sober in his life.

She had been everything a man could wish for; daintily and exquisitely beautiful,

loyal and trusting and uncomplaining. She had held his hand as he had told her, tiredly of the troubles of his small business, and had soothed his brow, kissed him, gracefully, served him and he had given her everything at his command and would have given her more.

He had escorted her, fiercely proud to the dinners at his Club, ignoring the unwritten rules, ignoring the supercilious strictures of his peers, ignoring the jealous asides from those whose pale European wives could not compare with the astonishing radiance of his bride. He remembered now, again the night when she had placed her tearful head upon his lap, the moonlight reflecting through the window on her dark shining hair. You are beautiful, he had told her, far more than any woman tonight, or any other night, but still she had cried for the poverty of her adornments compared to those worn by some of their disdainful hostesses. He had spent half a year's earnings on a stunning and exotic necklace and he smiled still with pleasure as he remembered her standing like a queen before him.

He could feel now the heat of the tip of his cigar against his fingers. He looked astern but not now to the sky but to the ocean, looking for the luminous flash in the sullen, silent sea which would betray the presence of one of the sharks which always followed the ship. They followed for the scraps of food and offal thrown over the side by the cook. He had watched them many times in the day, circling endlessly, evilly as if waiting for the gods of the seas to yield them up another, more substantial prey. And tonight, he thought, very soon their prayers would be answered. He felt the cigar heat upon his fingers and tried not to be afraid.

He had written her no note; no token of farewell for it was vital that the insurers should think his death an accident. He stood and prayed that she would not follow him, stricken in a paroxysm of grief to do herself to death. The insurance policies would see her comfortably off for the rest of her life. His heart ached as he thought of her and that never would he see her again. Such a beauty when they met, still after all these years she was a superlative stunning sloe-eyed enchantress, and she had been his, and only his. Any man she could have had with a flick of one long, dark, enticing finger, but each two months he had said good-bye and patiently, faithfully she had awaited his return. Now it was ended for him, but the failure was his alone, not hers, and in this way he could repay at least a small portion of all that he owed her.

It was a perfect night. It had been nights such as this that he had stood upon this spot and dreamed his dreams and offered up his thanks for his life and his woman. The sultry breeze plucked at him, the stars smiled upon him and his cigar arched far out over the rail, piercing the darkness like a shooting star and fell with a small hiss into the vastness of the ocean. He shouted a silent farewell, and with a brief prayer to his God he took three steps to the rearward. Then he ran forward and leapt up, and out, and away.

And then there was nothing left, only a white hat floating gently on the face of the waters, and a small shockwave which spread slowly out, to the East, towards the green hills of Japan, to the North, from where he had once come and would never, now return, and to the West, towards the Dutch East Indies and towards the woman who though she did not yet know of it was no longer his wife.

In a comfortable two-storey house in Djakarta, in the darkness, suddenly a woman sat

up, gasping, clutching the thin sheet to her breasts, her eyes wide and fearful, her heart beating in her chest like a drum. She panted shallowly and looked fearfully around the room as someone who has heard a far cry in the night and is afraid.

‘For God’s sake what’s the matter with you?’ snarled the man who lay beside her.

‘Seen a ghost have we?’ he sneered.

‘I’m sorry, I thought.....’

‘Thought what?’ he shouted, savagely. ‘Go back to sleep damn you!’

He flung the sheets over him, rolled over and soon they both slept.