

Essay on The Mysterious Old Man

He came like the wind, as if from nowhere. And as the gentle wind, ruffles the placid surface of a still pond, his visit caused small ripples on the smooth surface of the peaceful life that prevailed in our small kampung. At that time none of us had the foggiest idea of the shape of things to come.

To appreciate what I mean you have to step into our shoes. Perched on the sea-facing slope of a hilt that forms part of a mountain rampart along the seaboard, our village is a perfect haven for anyone who hates modern civilization. It takes a half day's walk by a foot-path to the nearest town. The march of time has left us behind by many decades. In a way, we are happy that the wind of change did not blow in our village. We are contented with life as it is, for it is very much the same as it used to be for decades. Our kampung folks are mostly fishermen and peasants. The fertile land and the bounteous sea are very generous towards us in their gifts. And then there is Ah Seng, the village shopkeeper, who gets for us the few things we need from the outside world. Visitors from the outside world are few and far between. Who would care to visit such a god-forsaken place? When occasional visitors come, they inevitably arouse our suspicion. And so it was when this stranger came.

To be frank, there was nothing strange about him. But to the simple folks of our village, anyone from the outside world is strange and mysterious. So from the very beginning, we looked upon him with suspicion. He was first seen at Ah Seng's shop. Ah Poh, the coffee-shop attendant approached him to ask him what he wanted. Taking his seat, the stranger placed his canvas bag on a table and ordered coffee. Ah, Poh brought the coffee; while mopping up the table, he lifted the canvas bag and placed it on a chair. Two bloodshot eyes that seemed to see through everything transfixed Ah Poh.

"My bag," muttered the stranger curtly, "will remain where I placed it. No one shall touch it."

Ah, Poh just managed to mumble something apologetically. He placed the bag where it was: The stranger sat there, sipping the coffee and puffing a cigar. There were only a few people in the coffee shop then. They all glanced at him through the corners of their eyes as if they did not want him to know that he was being watched. None dared to approach him, There were whispered comments it was certain that the stranger had aroused their curiosity. Meanwhile, the stranger sat there, as if in deep thought, his eyes distant. He was about sixty, lanky of the frame, with a droop at the shoulders. After paying for his drink, the stranger went along the foot-path that led towards the nearest town. Those who saw him leaving hoped that they would see no more of him in our kampung.

There were proved wrong; he was there again on the next day and the next. Did he frequent Al? Seng's coffee shop; meanwhile, news of the stranger figured prominently in the gossip of our village. They all had something to say about him. But opinion varied as to whether his frequent visits were a good omen or bad. Elderly people like Mr. Ten and old Haji Yusoff were decidedly against it, for "such strange visitors often bring some misfortune with them," they argued.

It was really startling news to us when we heard that the had rented out a room in Madame Ho's house. Madame Ho is a widow; her only son, Chin Siew, the village carpenter, having gone to town in search of work, the old woman was living alone in a three-roomed Attap house. We were a bit puzzled when we heard that the old man was going to stay among us. Mind you, it was not because we had anything against him it was simply because it meant some changes, at least; and we were not used to changes.

Days rolled by and once again life in our village returned to normal. As eventless days passed by, life continued to flow with that same unruffled, placid quietude, but we did not know that it was the calm before the storm; we did not realize that we were sitting on a dormant volcano.

The stranger seldom spoke to any of us. A man of few words, he seemed to move in a plane entirely different from ours. We suspected that there was something shady about him. For one thing, he was very secretive. We knew very little about his movements; not that we cared about it, but how would you feel about a fellow who lived by your side and of whom you knew next to nothing? He used to go out early in the morning, no one knew where to. At sunset, he was back, none knew from where. Like a frightened rabbit, he would look furtively at anyone who was near him and scuttle off from the company.

A fortnight or so later, two strangers called at Ah Seng's shop. They wanted to see a friend of theirs. The description they gave of their friend fitted the old man exactly. Ah, Seng showed them Madame Ho's house and told them their friend was staying there. "But it's no use going there now; he has gone out," Ah Seng informed them. This seemed to satisfy the strangers.

"We'll come tomorrow; we know he'll wait for us," they said and departed.

They were lying: they came to see him – that night itself.

The next morning our kampung awoke to witness the bloodiest scene we had ever seen. The murder was committed in Madame Ho's house. The mysterious old man lay in a pool of blood. A ten-inch dagger, plunged into his chest, had skewered him-to the floor.

Utter panic gripped the whole village. Fear and consternation could be seen on every face. Ah, Seng alone had a head cool enough to act wisely. Having instructed the curious crowd to keep clear away from the dead body, he sent his boy, Ah Poh, to the police station in the nearest town, but before Ah Poh reached there, the police were already on the scene. They had caught the scent of the murder somehow or other. The inspector in charge of the police party surveyed the scene of a murder with an expert's glance and asked, "Didn't he have any personal belongings such as a bag or a box?"

"Yes, he used to carry a canvas bag," volunteered Ah Seng.

"It is missing, but I didn't expect to find it. There is a reward of \$5,000 for this rascal. The murder was his business. He is the third of the notorious 'Five Diamonds' to meet with his end. Now, the remaining two, who have got away, will slit each other's throat for that canvas bag. It contains a fortune in diamonds and precious stones."