



A STORY WITH A MAJESTIC SOUL

BY JUNE MONG-LOFTIN

MY FATHER WAS a plantation man through and through, and we grew up in lovely mansion bungalows on rubber estates. But fêtes, seminars and parties at The Majestic were wonderful excuses for him to drive the family out to Kuala Lumpur to stay at this grand dame of a hotel. My memories of my childhood are idyllic, spent in well-kept gardens with tree-houses and aviaries, and an odd assortment of pets.

Years later when I fell in love in London, it was the recollection of these plantation days which were seductive and exotic for my future husband. On our second meeting in Shoreditch I gave him a copy of a novel about two French planters in the 1930s by Henri Fauconnier called *The Soul of Malaya*. The novel won the Prix Goncourt, and my lover's heart for me.

I've now come back to the Majestic Wing of this lovely hotel to recapture that Malaya of my girlhood, and to give my husband a taste of some of those giddy halcyon days. We had but two days to do it before our flight took us back home to England. We rocked up to our butler-service-only suites in the Majestic Wing on a Friday afternoon unencumbered by suitcases but laden with the expectation of touching that which had made my childhood so happy.

Our car drove up the curved driveway of the original entrance of the hotel and we were greeted in front of the tiny wood-panelled reception of the wing by our butler, who was full of experienced charm as she fielded all of our anxious questions.

'We have a massage reserved at the Spa and Greg wants to fit in a hot towel shave. But we're also very hungry!' we said, half despairingly. 'Would you like me to unpack your suitcases for you while you have tea?' she asked, looking from me to Greg. 'No!' he said, shaking his head. 'Yes!' I exclaimed, clapping my hands in glee.

CURRY PUFFS AT FOUR O'CLOCK

It was almost four o'clock and because we must have scones the way my mum used to bake them, we were ushered down to take tea at the Lounge. We walked into a bright, airy space with dappled sunlight streaming in from the south-facing bay windows. On the grand piano the septuagenarian resident pianist Mr Ooi was playing *It Had to be You*, that Gus Kahn song immortalised by Doris Day. 'Perfect,' I thought, 'my parents played a lot of Doris Day when we were young.'

A sweet-natured waitress in black YSL-style frames, came to our

table with a smile and an indefatigable air, 'Would you like some tea?' 'What sort of tea do you have?' we asked. 'What sort of tea would you like?' she asked confidently. Greg and I turned to each other with delight in our eyes. The waitress continued, 'We have 52 types of tea you can choose from. Come, follow me, and I'll show you.' At the tea table we were confronted by aromatic teas, black teas, fragrant teas, white teas. It was Oolong Peach for me, Nepal Gold for Greg.

Lovely petit fours soon appeared on a two-tiered stand but it was not the scones which appealed to us in the end. It was the dainty curry puffs which reminded Greg of Indian samosas in England that were a hit.

Before fresh reinforcements could arrive Greg realised he had forgotten to pack a silk handkerchief for the jacket he would wear for dinner that night. The man for the job turned out to be Jay who would be sorely tested by us and our hectic schedule in the next two days. 'Jay, I need a silk handkerchief that would match my navy jacket tonight. My shirt has polka dots in lilac and white...any chance you might be able to find me something?' He didn't bat an eyelid and merely asked what time Greg needed it for.

ST JAMES' AT THE MAJESTIC

We wound our way through The Smokehouse, which is modelled after a gentleman's club and passed a suited fellow watching CNN in the lounge as he nursed a cocktail made by the Humphrey Bogart of bartenders, Johnny Yap.

The oldest barbershop in the world has a branch in the basement of The Smokehouse. In London Truefitt & Hill take care of the grooming needs of the Duke of Edinburgh no less, and of the male royals before him for the last 300 years. So Greg felt he should be in pretty good hands. Ashkan, a handsome, perfectly coiffed man, greeted us and politely signed to my husband to settle into one of two commodious, well-padded barber-chairs. He then opened the barbershop door, turned the sign from 'Welcome', to 'Barber services in Session'. No turning back now, I thought. Greg has no choice but to leave the premises looking like a million ringgit.

Just before Ashkan wrapped my husband in a hot towel, there was a soft knock on the door. It was our redoubtable Jay. He had located a paisley silk handkerchief and brought it on a tray for Greg! Result. Well done, Jay! Twenty minutes later, just before the barber's third lathering