

Short Stories

Dalila's World

- Albert Russo

excerpted from his novel Eclipse Over Lake Tanganyika

PRINCE RUEGO'S DIARY I

Somewhere in a safe, hidden under a pile of documents, lay a notebook. No one knew of its existence until the death of Prince Ruego. The safe had been wrenched open and its contents stolen, except for the notebook. It was a diary and the writing unmistakably bore young Ruego's imprint. He must have been in his mid-teens when he started writing it, a few years before he left for Belgium to attend Louvain's Catholic University. This is the only personal account we have of him. Its style reveals a sensibility that is at times very foreign to African culture. But then during his formative years, the young prince had been exposed to a concept of life his forebears would have found totally alien. The diary is titled 'R. in Buja', with an asterisk leading to a footnote circled in red: 'Do beautiful things always have to be shortlived?'

During his short stays in the capital, the prince seemed to have spent much of his leisure time at the Asian quarter. Though it is impossible to ascertain the veracity of what these pages disclose, they do throw some light on the prince's later political inclinations, his strong ties with the Islamic world and his taste for things Russian.

At the gate of the Asian quarter is a cinema called the Kit Kat. It was there, on the advice of a Belgian schoolfriend who had introduced me to the music of Russian composers, that I saw my first Soviet film, Sadko, graced by Rimski Korsakov's magnificent music. The impression it left on me was staggering. It also triggered a turning point in my life.

... Words. Aquatic music. Suave, mellow colors. Symphony in blues and greens. The Princess of the Seas murmurs to Sadko:

"... I am the child born of Wisdom, the water sprite and the terrifying Ocean. My brethren are the rivers that flow into the azure horizon. Yet so few of them reach their moments of bliss. Instead, they merge into anonymity. You have searched for so long, braving the Elements' treacheries. Come Sadko, you have almost won. There lies the kingdom of my father. His crystal palace is concealed under deep cerulescent gorges. Follow the wake of the silver fins until you encounter three sharks. They guard the secret entrance to a fabulous world..."

Strange creatures people this kingdom, creatures unknown to the common run of mankind ... witnesses of prehistoric times, others, so old that human memory cannot recall. A wonder lamp ploughs its way in the green darkness of the ocean bed, whilst a starfish glides by -- one would love to pin down on a glass stand. A sea-fan suddenly lights up like a bonsai Christmas tree, illuminating the generous, bloated sponge everyone seems to ignore. Farther away, a school of pelican eels has surrounded a pellucid feather, transfixed by a pink-eyed indicus whose saw-like teeth flash in a monstrous grin. Innocent anemones stare at the skeleton of a sea gherkin, next to a bald-headed atolla that looks as pious as a monk, appearing so terribly vulnerable opposite a giant cypris. An orange octopus swirls as gracefully as a ballerina. And all around, a legion of scout fauna twinkle in a hundred whimsical colors.

I am a partaker of this deep-sea fairyworld with its immersed castles and its riot of subdued lights. Oh wait! Here comes the King with his retinue. They escort him to his shell-throne. Long white hair, curly beard, framing an emaciated face. He is imposing with that sever

look of his. At once paternal and compassionate, not only is he the undisputed master of this realm but also the conductor emeritus of Rimski Korsakov's symphonic poem.

I listen spellbound to the 'Indian love song' ... a song so melodious, so captivating that all through the film I will try to hum it. Fascinated, Sadko stands in the midst of this Waterama, the Treasure Ocean. He is weeping for joy. So do I. His eyes are mine now. But where is the Princess of the Seas? A sensation of warmth on my hand. Is it the spell of all that beauty? Of those images blurred through distorting mirrors? Swaying shades stroke the movements of a diabolic ballet. That 'Indian love song again'. Against a fluorescent background the princess emerges, at last she rejoins Sadko. They exchange their first kiss under the purple canopy of the coral chamber, in full view of the royal assembly. The king, resting high on his shell-throne opposite them, nods his head with a smile, signalling that the festivities can commence. The members of the court are being served whilst a flowering of nymphs, guards, mermaids and rainbow-hued fishes suddenly appear, descending from the ocean's surface. They begin to swirl in a stupendous merry-go-round and form a glowing choreography. Explosion of fireworks, shower of sparks which gradually spreads into halos of bright greens, blues and turquoise. In the kingdom of the sea, the consummation of love is a ritual which cannot be dissociated from the wedding ceremony. "Kiss me my beautiful princess," the words flow from the young man's mouth like a wild gush of petals, and as they embrace, oblivious to the spectators, the princess helps him shed her mother-of-pearl gown. Sadko does likewise, casting off his scale jacket and seal-skin tights. The halo around them slowly changes into a bright orange glow. There is a second explosion of fireworks, like a splash of jewels, a continuous eruption of topaz, emerald, opal and jade, to hail the newly-wed and their love-making.

Again, that sensation of warmth on my hand. I look away from the screen, begrudgingly, still infatuated, still imbued with the sounds of the choir, the cymbals and the chimes. At first I can see nothing. Then I sense a presence, very close to my face, which I can gradually distinguish against the surrounding darkness. I avoid her gaze and stare down at the delicate hand resting on mine. Instinctively, I want to withdraw my hand. But it refuses, resisting as if paralyzed by the weight of gravity.

"My name is Dalila," she whispers.

I'm confused. Is this true? Can it happen so fast? Merely by touching my hand? An armor is being unlocked for the first time, the armor into which I have been so far confined. Ruego unbound. Wrenched all at once from the bonds of my ancestry, from those imposed upon me by the Catholic Church. How could she have done it, this stranger sitting by my side? Wondrous games of fate. Surprises of body chemistry. An accident, or would it rather be just a coincidence? What is becoming clear however is that I have fallen in love with Dalila-the-Princess-of-the-Seas. That music, those chants vibrating in the deep blue realm, it is all for us now, for her and for me. Go away, Sadko, you are not wanted anymore. I, Ruego, son of the Mwami, am the real prince. Don't you see, Dalila and I wish to be alone!

She has long black hair to which the screenlight lends a bluish reflection as if set alive by a cluster of fireflies. Her nose is upturned and slightly pointed. She has almond-shaped eyes, I imagine them to be dark green with a touch of hazel, adorned with bristly silken lashes. Do I see tears in them? A drop of the gem-filled Sea.

We meet again the following Sunday. At the same place, in the same row. The Kit Kat will become a sanctuary of sorts. This time it is an American film they are showing, a musical comedy. We laugh as we hold hands. Instinctive intertwining of fingers. We look at each other. Her mouth brushes my lips, she kisses me, our tongues mingle. What is happening that I cannot control my reactions? It is the first, the very first time I am doing this. We Africans don't kiss, at least not like the Westerners do -- how do they call it, kissing in the French style? It has the tang of kaki or blood orange. And I'm beginning to like it. Gentle, then fiery, ardent

kisses. There is now the taste of real blood as Dalila presses her breasts against me and is gasping for air. Our fingers are so tightly knit together, I can hear the ligaments crackle. She draws back somewhat. I release her pressure. Audacious me! I let my hands roam over her shoulders. She doesn't protest. Yet, we know nothing about each other. I haven't told her who I was. She goes to the Asiatic school, I presume. Maybe her father owns a shop in the quarter. Her family must be well-to-do, if not rich, for she is neatly dressed in the Continental style. I imagine her wearing a sari, the most noble and feminine of all garments, so similar to the traditional gowns my mother and sisters don at our royal festivities. ... Dalila and I relaxing on the lawn of an Indian Palace, guests of a Maharadjah. It could happen, it could very well happen.

Saturday afternoon. Dalila and I decide to go for a ride on a deserted beach near a fishing village I once visited with my class. I can still hear our teacher, explaining in his baritone voice the historic meeting that took place around the tall rock over there which now bears an inscription commemorating the event.

"... The last word received from the English missionary was dated October 1869 and it said: 'I am leaving for Manjuema, at the source of the Nile. With the help of God I shall return to the village.' "

I point to Dalila the inscription on the rock. My mind travels back, far, far in the past, during the reign of my great-grand-father. My heart starts reeling. Visions of copper rings, of bronze statuettes and of calico. A white man in khaki clothes and wearing a colonial helmet has just arrived. He looks dirty, exhausted. He is surrounded by a dozen curious, half naked Africans. He is being introduced to the chief of a local tribe. They are now palavering. I can almost hear them, they're so near. The white man spells out his name, drawing the letters with a stick on the ground : S T A N L E Y.

It happened here, close to the rock, around that cluster of shoddy huts. I can picture the village, once colorful, brimming with a strange animation. The market square is crowded, for the most part, with natives in shackles and a handful of robed Arab slave merchants, yelling out orders at them. Stanley looks shocked and questions the tribal chief. Minutes later, a white man appears, staggering out of the bush, accompanied by a flock of children. There is sudden silence. The white man is in rags, he can barely walk, he's so thin and gaunt. His face seems burnt, dried up like parchment. The moment Stanley sets eyes upon the stranger, he knows it can only be Livingstone, the missionary whom many at the Royal Geographical Society in London had written off as dead.

I draw a spiral around the tiny shell at my feet and bury it in the sand. When I look up, I stand at the same spot, but a century later ... gazing at Dalila.

Eyes closed, she is stretched on my large bath towel. Between her lips there is a glistening thread. In the splash of white sand around us her skin has the matness of cobalt. She suddenly sits erect, hands cupping her face and says:

"Why, this sun is treacherous. Let me spread some lotion on your skin."

I start giggling. She giggles after me: "How stupid of me. Of course, the sun can't affect you."

"No, no, go on. I'd like to know what it feels like to be anointed like those European Mademoiselles I see offering themselves in their bikinis to the sun god around the swimming-pool at the Cercle Nautique. Just pretend I am as pale as an oyster."

Dalila spreads the heavily scented oil abundantly over my neck and then over my shoulders. I enjoy the sight of her long glossy fingers exploring me. Her touch is artful, delicate. It makes me drowsy. I could stay forever in this position. Can almost hear my pores scream with glee. Am I day-dreaming? Subcutaneous euphoria. Must shake my head, pinch myself, not to fall asleep. My eyes wander

in her direction. Through moist lashes I see her leaning over me. Her hair seems anointed with the attar of roses.

"Kiss me, Dalila, love me, nymph of my life ... the day they separate us, I shall die."

"You're talking nonsense, Ruego," responds the young woman, a bit startled. "Come in the shade, it is getting very hot."

We huddle up against each other under the vigiland branches of a palm tree. New games. Games of virgin love. We kiss, we tease, we cajole. Our hands are free. They forget the meaning of pudor and caress those intimate corners of our flesh never before exposed to daylight. I feel a strong, hard, wonderful sensation between my thighs. I know not the meaning of shame anymore. We roll over, clutched together in the warm sand. Dalila unzips her bathing costume and slips it off. I am dumbstruck. Her naked body is a living wonder. The dark tuft below her navel shows a coral line. I strip too. Dalila's eyes sparkle with a blissful glow. We are relishing the newness of this exquisite moment, just as, I fancy, do the sole witnesses of our rapture: lake Tanganyika, wide as a sea, the celestial infinity strewn with lackadaisical clouds and the wild briar, sizzling about as if to voice its admiration. I feel vigor climbing, delectably, ineffably in my midriff. I am moist with desire and search the recesses of Dalila's flesh. She is a bud opening into a flower. Sighs alternating with groans of pleasure. My whole body stiffens in ecstasy, irresistible oneness. My heart leaps with her pulsations. Mingling of the pubic hair. Mouths tightly sealed. Blood flowing wildly in our veins. Then, a volcanic eruption. Our bodies are held together in fluid unity, then jolted as though stricken by a succession of thunderbolts. We have touched the bottom of the chasm. Comes now a delightful appeasement of the senses. It's almost intangible, like threads of sand running through fingers, like ivory powder blown by a hot, swirling breeze. And above us the world rotates, dazzlingly at first, then in slower motion, this way, then counter clockwise, creating a wonderful confusion of the senses.

The sky ceases to be a sky. Trees aren't trees anymore. The leaves don't rustle the way they should. But the birds keep on chirping and I ask why. The air is light and spicy. I feel its teasing contact on my skin, yet can do nothing about it. Circles that never seem to close roll up and down our limbs, in an endless whirligig, as if they wanted to be hooked.

I stare at Dalila, my lovely, nude Pahari. She offers her beatific smile to me, that is to the world, for I have just embraced it.

Under a leaden sky a breeze languidly hugs the white-washed walls of the Asian quarter. The immutable scent of spices, glued to your nostrils, permeates your lungs as if it had always been part of you. There is a touching quality about the chalky brightness that covers the narrow stalls, the colonial workshops, the oriental counters and the tumble-down dwellings with their inevitable back yards. Something promiscuous. Unhallowed. Yet genuine.

The main street is still dormant. Along the shabby, low-fronted buildings, an array of tinfoil motifs -- geometric designs and abstract flowers -- alternate with dyed laurel twigs and garlands like a chain of tawdry necklaces. At the curb of the road stands the mosque, resembling an overgrown sugar-loaf, freshly painted in hues of ochre, pale pink and pistachio green. Its minaret, spangled with electrical candles, projects a shadow on the pavement like a javelin splitting open an imaginary serpent. In a scene where human actors are absent, the sun lends a dramatic, desolate touch.

A door creaks, slowly set ajar, like lips parted by a timid yawn. A band of little urchins trickles through, one by one. You can distinguish the girls from the boys

by the plaits tied up with white ribbons on both sides of the head. Then, suddenly thrust into the glaring sunlight, a blast of colors. Mascarade of iridescent costumes. The scene remains eerily mute. You would think they were all scared to move. Scared to disturb the new order of things as if they had become intruders in their own quarter. Bluejay hair where shafts of rays indulge in orgiastic games. Chubby little faces, glistening here and there with beads of perspiration. The boys' yellow and turquoise outfits vie in exuberance with the satin and velvet dresses of the girls. There are three of them ... now four ... now six ... finally eight. Brothers and sisters? Cousins? Or both? What grave expressions they bear! Already frowning at such a tender age! Delicate filigree bells jingle around their wrists, as elusively as the muffled notes of an angel's choir.

The baby boy takes a false step and stumbles over a brick. He is ready to sob. He has scratched his brand new leather boots, and prancing with rage, he kicks the ill-fated brick several times with his right shoe. Now he starts howling. The eldest of the children scowls at him. The others silently stare at the scene, uncertain whether they should comfort their little brother or be angry with him. Haven't they been told that this was a very special day and that they should behave?

A woman stalks out, half dressed, with locks of hair hanging down her shoulders. "Stop that racket or I'll call your father. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. What will the Aga Khan think of us?"

Little Hassan certainly doesn't grasp the full implication of these words, yet, all at once he becomes motionless, like a piece of wood.

"Where's Dalila?"

"She's making up, mommy," answers a barely audible voice.

"What?" With a firm hand, the woman drags her youngest son inside the house.

The first room they cross looks like a furniture repository. It is rather dark, but after a while, the eye gets accustomed to the semi-obscurity of the place. Outlines of three low Indian tables finely chiselled with arabesque patterns -- the feet are in the shape of elephant trunks. To the left, a black and red leather tuffet with, in its center, a gilt-designed throne. A few precious objects are scattered around in neglect: a jewel-case inlaid with baby shells, small ivory statues whose garments fall with the subtlety of lacework, and an enormous carved tusk representing a tiger hunt. Somewhat hidden is a camphor chest, the pungent scent of which permeates every piece of furniture and living particle in the room. And in a nook stands a miniature replica of the Taj Mahal. How many sighs, how many intrigues have unfolded behind those draught-screens of marble interlacings?

On one of the pale blue walls hangs the portrait of young Karim Khan -- beardless prince whose large forehead prognosticates early baldness. It is a grossly hand-colored picture such as can be found in every Ismaelite home. Karim, spiritual chief of a Moslem sect, counting no less than thirteen million followers. Karim, the direct descendant of the Great Imam Ismael. For the faithful scattered throughout the world, he is revered as a prophet.

Mother and son then pass through a courtyard shaded by a leafy rubber tree into a cosy and comfortable living-room. Today it has been exclusively arranged for the pleasures of the table. On a plaited bamboo tray, smeary honeycombs are surrounded by flaky triangular pastries. And next to an untouched plate of almond biscuits is the appetizing cone of a sugar-dusted cake, its snowcapped peak enclosed in a glass dome.

The sour-sweet aromas that you inhale on entering seem as much a part of the room as the walls and the ceiling. The air is heavy with curry and the acrid scent

of nutmeg, mixed at times with the delicate perfume of Ceylon tea or the odor of roasted sesame seeds. You can hardly smell the two boughs of mimosa flowers mounting guard in a tall brass jug.

Little Hassan who's not habitually a bashful child gives his mother an occasional wink, his eyes fastened upon her when she is not watching as well. Still clinging to her arm, they both step into Dalila's bedroom. Pouting with surprise, the young girl leaps away from the mirror. She is wearing a beige tulle jumper on top of a baggy pair of silk trousers with a fringed belt around her waist. She hastily sets a hibiscus flower in her chignon, while holding an obviously used lipstick between her fingers.

"What do you think you're doing, painting your face like that?"

"But mother, it's the day of ... you know."

"All the more. You haven't turned fifteen yet. And look at yourself. Daubed with cosmetics. Who are you trying to imitate? Those stuck-up European girls? You're seeing too many movies. Haven't you any pride left? Any self-respect?"

"Perhaps I should wear a veil ... like you used to. Or like grandmother."

Little Hassan flattens himself against the door while his sister gets a slap across her face.

"The cheek! So this is how you waste your time, hey. Instead of taking care of the little ones. First you will go and wipe that stuff off your face. And when you are a bit more presentable, you will take the children over to uncle Rachid's. Do you hear! If they ask about me, tell them I won't be long. A good thing your father isn't around. He would give you the hiding of your life." Then, glaring at the now frightened toddler, she adds, "Stay here until she's ready, okay!"

PRINCE RUEGO'S DIARY II

Trigonometry. Leaning on my elbow, I hear the teacher's voice. Not a human sound, rather bubbles, whirrs. My thoughts are adrift, miles away. Meditating on last week's official visit of Prince Karim Khan to Rwanda-Urundi. Thinking of Dalila and the Asian quarter which stretches like an isthmus between the European town and the harbor. It's more of a village, really.

Besides the Indian community, there are Arabs, mainly from northern Sudan, but also from Zanzibar, Muslims from Senegal and Ismaelites from Pakistan; there is even a Chinese family in their midst, the Chen Fui Choos. The quarter boasts a Hindu shrine and two mosques.

I have always had a special feeling, a natural inclination for that place. I like to idle about its twisted and littered lanes for hours on end, filling my lungs with that indescribably exotic tang -- a mixture of saffron, opiated perfumes and curry ... oh curry.

Here three religions coexist peacefully. True, they all share a similar way of life, and yet, each is jealous of its own customs, its personality and its rites, each with its own idiosyncracies.

How often have I stepped over the threshold of those cobblers' workshops and marvelled at the crammed, rickety street stalls -- surprise boxes where you can find just about everything than man produces under these stars: ironmongery for native consumption, batik material in the brightest Java colors, bracelets and rings made of beads, of plant grains or elephant hair, filigree bangles chiselled by some blind Calcutta jeweler, lamp shades in wrought copper, nylon dresses, cheap plastic sandals, seafood canned in Hong Kong, daintily carved Formosan tables and the ubiquitous camphor chests, emanating the same pungent smell of naphthalene which my servants spread under the blankets for the cool season in our Muramvya residence. It is a feast of hues and scents, of aromas and

consonants, heavy at times, exhilarating always. They form part of my universe as does the mentholated breath of my Belgian history teacher.

There is one Arab shop I fancy in particular. It belongs to Baba Abdullah, a jolly seventy-five-year old, clad in a jellaba robe. Toothless, with a perennial smile, no sooner does he recognize me than he hails:

"C'mon in, Ruego. Tell me what's new."

Then we chat for a while, mostly about his twenty-odd children, grand- and great-grandchildren. I often wondered whether he held a proper harem.

"How's it going in school?" he asks. "I hope Papa doesn't have reasons for pulling your ears." Whereupon he claps his gnarled hands, turning towards the bead curtain in the back of his shop: "Two Turkish coffees. For me and for our honored guest!"

As he laughs, his red chechia laughs with him, bouncing on his head like a magician's hat, never losing balance.

All the wisdom of the world seems contained in that wrinkled face, in that sandy moustache, and in those silvery tufts of hair, especially when he lifts his right eyebrow. It is a hint at the same time, firm yet courteous, that he has got work to do and that the moment has come for me to leave. He never dismisses me empty-handed. When it is not a bag full of home-made candy or dried almond cookies, it is a miniature crate containing sample bottles of liqueur, in which case, it is accompanied by a half serious warning and a wink: "Don't tell anybody, okay!"

I thank him and catch a glimpse of the portrait behind the counter -- a poster-sized picture of Abdel Gamal Nasser, Egypt's cherished Rais, a figure also revered in every Arab and Moslem nation.

The visit of the Aga Khan in the Asian quarter. What a day! What a memorable event! Windows sparkled with their showpiece Taj Mahals made of marzipan, biscuits and dried fruit, in a profusion of pastel colors. Four candles towered in lieu of minarets, and the dome, smothered in whipped cream, was usually topped with a honey-coated almond or some jewel-like object. Each window boasted a more sophisticated gâteau than the next, as if this were a wedding-cake competition. Indeed! Wasn't Karim Khan, the long-awaited prince charming, the most sought after groom, this side of the Equator?

Wasn't he in every young -- and not so young -- girl's dreams? What woman, certain that she was the loveliest in the assembly, didn't feel a heady excitement when casting her eyes upon him and didn't have a flicker of hope when she perceived the quiver of his beautiful long lashes? Who would he eventually choose for a wife? Who would be blessed with the surname of Begum?

The quarter sounded like a giant music box, with its gilt ornaments, its colorful pennants floating above every house. The buildings were decorated with Belgian and Crescent flags and the streets glittered with bunting, satin oriflammes and banners, with confetti and paper streamers. Not only the Asian quarter, but the entire city, from the residential hills down to the native locations beyond the river, had undergone a thorough spring cleaning for the occasion. Buja, the capital of Rwanda-Urundi, couldn't allow itself to play the miserly host. After all, the city prided itself as a model of racial harmony.

The afternoon sun bounced off the glistening white convertibles in a motorcade of Chryslers, Cadillacs and Lincoln Continentals.

Karim Khan sat between my father, Mwami Gutara, and the Governor-General, waving at the motley crowds which came to cheer him along the capital's swankiest avenues and flower-lined boulevards. The glimmering brass band and the *Force Publique*, impressive in its starch-white uniforms and bright epaulets,

escorted them.

Never had the capital been so lavishly turned out. Not even during the royal visit of King Baudouin, rechristened by the Africans 'Bwana Kitoko', the handsome young man, or Elisabeth of Belgium, the old Queen Mother. I can still remember the hearty welcome she received in the stadium, and that drawn, bleak, almost phantasmal smile of hers under the grey veil. There was something generous, however, about her puppet-like movements. The crowd seemed spellbound, as if by some alien spirit.

But now, the city rang with the sounds of carnival. Clusters of girls thronged the official cars, pressing against each other, trying to touch the demi-god.

"Aga, I love you," they cried. "Bless me, Karim."

Schoolchildren were standing, impeccable in their Sunday outfits, on the fringes of the road, feeling itchy and fidgety under the scorching afternoon sun.

As he rode along, Karim Khan exchanged a few bashful smiles, waving his gloved hand, whispering thank yous. At times he would bend over to receive a bunch of flowers or stroke the cheek of a bemused, half-panicked little boy held in mid-air by a pair of shaky arms.

Once the procession had passed, the crowds would disperse. Most of the onlookers, the men especially, resumed their jobs, whilst the children ran after the motorcade and then lingered in the streets. And that was it.

Yesterday, Dalila slipped an envelope in the pocket of my jacket.

"Open it tonight only," she said, "in your room."

I read the letter over and over, putting it aside in my drawer, taking it out again, then setting it back, until I could memorize every line Dalila had written. Trying as I would, I couldn't find a grain of comfort between its sentences.

Ruego dearest,

The letter I am about to pen holds such danger for both of us that I cannot even fathom its aftermath if ever it were discovered. I can't keep it inside any longer, but how shall I start? For the last month or so, I have watched your every gesture, your every movement, long before 'Sadko' introduced us. But then I felt your attraction to me, and like a magnet, you responded.

Dalila is in love with a boy who is not of her race, not of her creed. Yet, the same Dalila has been promised to Salim, Mr. Jamil's son. In our society, the promise of marriage is contracted at a very young age. No sooner do we reach the age of reason than you realize you aren't the master of your destiny.

There was no way out, so I forced myself to like him, to get used to his company. Then you entered the picture, opening my eyes.

You are as dark as he is fair, my love. Had I not found the way to your heart, I would have accepted my parent's choice without arguing. But now I feel trapped like a colibri in a royal cage. You cannot tame a colibri, for it will beat its wings and flutter until it eventually collapses from exhaustion.

Salim is studying at a most prestigious British university, the London School of Economics -- those among my people who can afford it go to England to further their education. He comes back here every summer to see his family -- and me.

Above my dressing-table is a photograph of him, taken in his sophomore year, so that he keeps a daily watch on me. His father, Mr. Jamil, who is a good man, really, doesn't let a week go by without showering me with presents, as if to make up for Salim's long absence.

It is difficult for strangers to understand our philosophy of life. My people, who originally came from the Punjab, were very poor. The only light they could see were the darting, implacable rays of the sun, and their only possession, misery. They slept on the bare ground, with a ramshackle roof for protection, often inhaling the odor of death -- I can still breathe that stench of cremation by the river -- and bitten by famished rats in the middle of the night.

Then, one day, a cousin of Mother's offered to emigrate with him to Africa. It roused a storm of indignation among the old folk, but Mother was stubborn -- she still is. That is why she is so hard to deal with. It isn't for nothing that they nicknamed her 'the tigress' or, less gently, 'the adventuress'. But without her unyielding attitude, we would probably still be wallowing in

filth and in disease and be doomed to eternal begging, like so many of our kin that has remained in the Punjab. What was it that prompted her in being so tenacious? Hope, Clairvoyance? I don't really know.

Many students of Indian philosophy see passivity as the ultimate, spiritual attainment, but it is nothing more than crass apathy. Believe me, Ruego, poverty is a curse, and we oughtn't to treat it with indulgence. Destroy it, crush it until only the inevitable nightmares remain. Getting out of the tunnel is like resuscitating. Bread acquires the taste of nutcake. Clear, filtered water becomes as sweet as almond juice. How can you not feel grateful for the amenities of life after such common yet dreadful experiences?

These are all the things that surround me: a house full of the merry shouts of childhood, of noisily slammed doors, of rattling pots and pans, for my Mother is forever cooking, whether it is for us or for our extended family, for our friends or for mere acquaintances. A house you shall never come to.

Ending this letter is as painful as being wrenched out of an impossible dream. More than once did I think of tearing it up, for it reeks of trespassing and of taboo. The mere audacity of it makes me tremble. Then too I have this wild, recurring idea: elope with me, Ruego. And in the morning, I come back to my senses -- to their senses, I should say -- and then I see no hope. Oh Ruego! Couldn't we, couldn't we brave them, once and for all, and build a new life together, far, far away from here? I am raving, aren't I?

Farewell, my love. Why did we have to meet?

THE RETURN OF SALIM' IN PRINCE RUEGO'S DIARY

The sky is mottled with opalescent clouds and the mountains are set ablaze in the last light of day.

At half past six, a silver spangle looms in the distance. Minutes later, the plane from Nairobi, a DC 4 of Sabena, touches down. It fades away like a mirage into a blizzard of dust then reappears through breaches of high grass, majestically. Roaring like a sated lion, the aircraft finally comes to a standstill. A dozen travelers, mostly European, disembark.

"Isn't that Salim?" shouts a small boy, waving wildly at a fair, olive-skinned young man of average height who is wearing a felt hat and a crimson jacket.

"He is so thin!" frowns a woman in the crowd that has come especially to meet the university student.

"He looks rather tired. Flying fifteen hours across two continents is no joke."

"English cooking probably doesn't agree with him. Poor darling."

"Blessed be Allah that he has arrived safe and sound!"

"I am dying to hear what he has to tell us."

"Salim, my dear, dear boy. We're so happy and so very proud of you."

"And he finished his year with flying colors."

After the tearful welcoming scenes, both families, Dalila's and Salim's, meet back at the Jamils' to celebrate the young man's return.

A sumptuous tables occupies the whole length of the verandah. At each end of the table are two Hutu servants, who every now and again call overenthusiastic children to order. A little girl, heeding nothing but her impulse, dips a greedy finger in a lofty mass of spinach pie. Standing next to her, emulating what he considers a funny game, another urchin amuses himself by making holes in the fresh baked chappati, licking his oily fingers with mischievous satisfaction.

The reverberating sounds of a gong instantly drowns the hubbub of voices that has filled the living-room until now, and the guests are requested to rejoin the verandah. First come the ladies, glittering with jewels, followed by the men who file in, many, still holding on to their drinks. There's a burst of laughter and a young woman blushes, probably over some spicy joke.

Salim, especially popular among his pretty cousins, is bombarded with questions. He doesn't even get a chance to sip his guava juice.

"How many girls have you met at university? Is it true that the redheads are

moody and highly sexed?"

"Aren't they a bit frail? I mean ... their skin ... with so many freckles?"

"Did any one take you for a Maharajah?"

"No? You should have pretended."

Salim entertains his young female audience most gallantly, inflating his accounts with chivalrous anecdotes. Occasionally he gives Dalila a conspiratorial wink. He is miles from suspecting how difficult this day is for her. How hurt he would be if her enigmatic smile were suddenly to unravel the truth! Did he sense her coldness in the room when he tried to draw her close to him and she slightly pushed him back?

Sreena K.



DREAM

It was a terrible dream,
 wood entered into my body.
 That horrible words and deeds of the evil substances-
 they struck me with their invisible wands.
 Something hovering around,
 is it wind or light?
 Presence of something absent.
 Eyes are affixed with terror
 cemented into a theatre
 inside which the horror pictures moved rapidly.
 I hugged my mother tightly,
 my face on her bosom
 I could feel her breath.
 The soft touch cooled me.
 Those creatures were standing behind my mothers back
 I couldn't see them clearly,
 but I was able to feel the presence of that unearthly things.
 Suddenly she got up leaving me alone,
 in the midst of these creatures.
 I called her
 shouted
 don't leave me, don't....
 she left me without looking back.
 neglecting the small, fragile thing on the bed
 I was alone in the room.
 'Open your eyes,' I said to myself
 I saw the room in its dim light.
 opened all the windows.
 Fresh wind entered the room,
 washing away the evil thoughts.
 I laid back.
 Am alone
 Come thee creatures come.
 Take me to the dome of fear.
 I just want to perish in fear.

