

THIRD PRIZE IN THE BOATHOUSE WRITING CONTEST

THE BRIDGE

By Dr. Michael Moreton (Bangkok)

It had spread to his lungs and now it was just a matter of time. He had refused the chemotherapy, wishing to enjoy whatever time he had left, seeing old friends, visiting old places and healing old wounds. He had no wish to spend the rest of his time as a professional cancer patient, losing his hair, weight and dignity. He had places to go and things that needed to be done. Thailand was one of those places; the scene of events long ago that needed some attention.

He had grown up in a two-person family, just he and his quiet schoolteacher mother; a peaceful, uneventful suburban life. His father had died in the Second World War and his absence, although rarely mentioned, was always there; a secret loss that was the background in front of which they lived their lives. They were not impoverished by his father's death, as his mother's family were prosperous builders in the North of England. Their assistance and his mother's salary had given them a comfortable life. He had attended the local grammar school, then Cambridge, followed by an unspectacular career in a retail bank. His career had been successful, no great triumphs, no great failures, no scandals or embarrassments. He had risen to head his department, Currency Exchange, where he was respected by his masters and revered by his staff. He had retired at sixty, intending to play golf, garden and enjoy his grandchildren. The cancer would soon end all that.

Growing up he had no memories of his father and rarely spoke of him. He was a baby when his father had left and had been fatherless as long as he could remember. He realized that any discussion would be painful to his mother and he could not bear to open her old wounds. There had been the 'sad days,' his father's birthday, his parents' wedding anniversary, the date of his father's departure to the Far East, but never one for the anniversary of his death, for that was not known. Eventually towards the end of her life, he had asked his mother what she knew of his father's death. She told him and showed him what little she had. His father had volunteered for the army at the outbreak of war and after training had been posted to Singapore, leaving in 1940. His mother had shown him letters telling of life in the colony. His father had complained that the war was passing them by. He felt that they were not contributing to the war effort in their comfortable, safe, impregnable fortress.

That did not last. The invasion of Singapore and its surrender had ended the serenity. His father had been taken prisoner, marched north and like so many others had worked and died on the infamous railway that the Japanese

were building through Thailand. His mother knew nothing of where, when or how he had died. She had a letter from the War Office reporting his capture; another regretting his death and a third that contained the medals that he had won and a photograph of a headstone in a cemetery in Thailand. She had never responded to the groups that were created to memorialize those lost in South East Asia, having decided that hers was a private not a communal type of grief. Later he had researched the records at the War History Museum and although not certain, felt that his father had served his time either in the camp at the bridge, immortalized by the David Lean movie, or in another camp close by.

He had seen the movie several times. He knew that it was a work of fiction based on real events, but its triteness and feel-good ending had always annoyed him. He knew that the commanding officer had been a hero, but he was not the psychopath that Alec Guinness had portrayed. The cheerfulness of the men, as depicted in the movie, grated on him. Now he was going to Thailand, to Kanchanaburi, to see the bridge, see the place where his father had died. He was coming to pay homage to a man that he had never known but whose absence he had felt like a dull pain all of his life; hoping to find something to make sense of his father's senseless death. It was not a journey or process that he was looking forward to. He would rather have spent a Thai vacation in Phuket, getting together with his old pal Roger, having dinner at the Boathouse, drinking mango daiquiris and discussing currency exchange rates. That would have been really pleasant, really relaxing.

He flew from Heathrow to Bangkok, with a stop in the Gulf. Dyson, who he had trained, was now a successful arbitrager in Singapore. He had been delighted to make the arrangements for his mentor. A car met him at the airport and took him to the Marriot. He spent two days in Bangkok, recovering from the journey and then a car took him to Kanchanaburi. He had researched it well and knew what to expect, but the commercialism and carnival atmosphere disturbed him.

He checked into his hotel and went on his pilgrimage. The bridge, the site of the camp, the tacky museum and finally the cemetery. Dyson had had a local boy locate the headstone and he was taken to it. He was aware that his father's remains did not lie here and this was a name on a memorial similar to the one on the memorial in the town square back home. But he knelt, he prayed and he wept. He wished that he and his mother had made this trip together, but it had never occurred to them to do so.

Walking back to his hotel he felt disorientated and weak, the emotions of the day and the hot sun had affected him. Seeing a café he sat down in the shade and ordered a drink. He watched the passing parade; the endless procession of adolescents in their 'gap year' and young professionals on their sabbatical world tours; all looking for whatever they were looking for. He did not approve of the way that they were dressed, tee shirts, draw string tie-

dye pants, sandals. He did not understand either their appearance or their attitude. He wondered what their good humor had to do with the brutality and suffering that had happened in this place.

A young man and woman approached him, "Can we sit here?" the young man asked. They were American, young, unshaven, uncombed, unwashed, un-everything that he held dear. Not quite his cup of tea. "It would be my pleasure." he replied. They sat down. "Goddamn it" the boy said "Last week we got 33.4, today 32.6, the fucking dollar is in free fall." "Never mind Todd," the girl replied, "Things are cheap here, we can manage."

"So, what did you do today?" he asked "Oh shit, it was great," Todd replied "we rented bikes, went over the river into the real jungle and rode some trails that we found, then this afternoon we tubed on the river, this is such a great place." "And what do you think about Kanchanaburi, young lady?" he asked. "I think it's obscene" she replied "Really, why so?" "Because this is a place where men suffered and died and they are turning it into Disneyworld. I'm surprised they don't have a theatre with phony Japanese guards beating on phony British prisoners so that the tourists can snap away. Did you see the pictures in the museum? These weren't hardened soldiers, these were kids my age, who had been drafted and finished their lives in a meaningless jungle hellhole."

"That's true" Todd said "but at least it's not all forgotten, not some cemetery in the jungle that nobody ever visits. This place may not appear to be very reverential but those guys are being remembered. They may not have felt very heroic at the time, but damn it, they are being recognized for what they went through now and I bet if they could come back now, they would be the first to join in the fun"

"What a pleasant thought," he replied, "I really think that you may be right. Why don't we all have a nice mango daiquiri and, if you like, I can explain some of the mysteries of currency exchange rates to you?"