

COMPETITION

# THE VIOLENT NOON

Revenge:  
J. G. Ballard

RANK and turgid, the morning sweltered in the sunlight. The road turned roughly through the jungle and the dense matted undergrowth swarmed in a tangled mass along the verge of the narrow track. The heavy fetid stench of growth and decay hung in the humid air, slowly swirling round the car as it laboured over the bumps and potholes towards Kuala Lumpur.

Michael Allison peered out of the open window into the depths of the steaming vegetation, its darkness pierced only by the faint trails that slipped away from the road into oblivion.

He sat in the front beside the driver and listened to the pulsing of the motor and the muted murmur of the jungle, and to Hargreaves droning away in the back seat.

Hargreaves was forty-five, thick and round, but his body was muscular, supple and hardened in all the swimming pools of the East, on the golf courses and the club football grounds. He sat back comfortably next to Mrs. Allison and gestured with the machine pistol.

"Look at India, Burma, Ceylon. Just given away. Given away. And we've collapsed like a pricked balloon. There used to be a lot of rubbish shouted about the Empire. Heroics and drum-pounding. But no one ever really believed all that. The Empire is built on purely economic foundations. Without the colonies England ceases to have any actual existence. She's just a minor geographic location. You don't find the Dutch listening to all this talk about self-government and independence."

"They got kicked out, though," Michael interjected, leaning back across the seat to tickle his daughter in the ribs.

"Not without a fight," Hargreaves waved the gun vigorously. "Not without one hell of a fight. They knew what they wanted and they damn near got it. For God's sake, Allison, you're a planter, you ought to know. Rubber is up to six shillings a pound. It isn't

selling motor cars that's putting us back on our own feet. It's rubber and tin and big trading centres like Singapore and Hong Kong. You can't talk of throwing them away."

"I don't want to throw them away," Michael said gently. "I merely want to give the Malayas a share in their own government. After all, they're entitled to it."

"They're not entitled to anything of the sort," Hargreaves cut in disgustedly. "Look at the average native. Completely illiterate, ignorant, diseased, no understanding or experience of government at all. You don't want them to run this country, do you? Malan may be a little crude, but believe me, he has the right ideas."

Michael made no answer. He felt uncomfortable beside the Malay driver, and saw the young man flush and stiffen at the wheel.

THE driver glanced up at the mirror and watched Hargreaves peering vacantly out at the jungle. The English, he thought bitterly, how different they are and yet how the same. The pompous manicured idiot lounging complacently in the back seat, and the slim understanding man beside him. One talks glibly of fighting and defending the Empire and doesn't even know which end of his machine gun to hold. And the other, who is so sympathetic and intelligent and genuinely wants Malay to be free, exploits its people for the greed of others, working them to disease and early death on the plantations.

Still, of the two, he preferred Allison. For all its faults his way was probably better than the Communists! Chinese gangsters and gun-happy roughnecks, no-goods from the villages, hopped up by agitators from the slums of Canton and Shanghai, promising prosperity to the people and then threatening them and pillaging their homes, slashing the rubber trees, madly shooting harmless women and children, filling the streets with fran-

tic gunfire and death.

"Should make it by lunch time," Martin said, looking at his watch. He turned and stretched across the seat.

"Susan," he called to the little girl sitting on her mother's lap, squeezing the barrel of Mrs. Allison's revolver in a tiny pink fist. Her mother pulled the gun away, and the girl reached out towards it pleadingly, and then frowned in annoyance, her fresh pretty face angry and scowling.

"Susan, stop it," Mrs. Allison warned her, and plumped the child down firmly on to her lap. "Now sit quietly and behave yourself, like a good little girl." Mrs. Allison was soft voiced and gentle, and the child relaxed and lay back into her mother's arms, cradled in the soothing fullness of her breast.

Mrs. Allison smiled tenderly at her husband, and he leant over and tickled the little girl in the stomach. Susan sat up, giggling coyly, and her mother picked her up and held her out to Michael.

"Are you all right, darling?" he asked.

The little girl never answered. The

age splashes and Hargreaves shuddered as the bullets ripped through the doors and roof and kicked at the bodies slumped in the front seat. He looked up through the rear window and saw the Chinese spread out against the undergrowth. Mrs. Allison was sobbing and whimpering and Hargreaves kicked her sharply on the head.

He opened the door, jumped out and fired off the clip. A rifle roared back in his face from the bush. He stepped back into the car and leant over the front seat, looking for Allison's Sten gun. The body was slumped heavily on to the floor, jammed between the seat and the dashboard, and Hargreaves crouched back beside Mrs. Allison and grabbed her roughly.

"Where's the gun, the revolver you had?"

Mrs. Allison looked up blankly from the pulped face of her baby, and Hargreaves shook her again.

"Where's the revolver? The revolver?" She was kneeling on the gun, and Hargreaves picked it up and moved towards the door.

Mrs. Allison got up and followed

"Yes. Yes, I did."

The Inspector was relieved. "Good," he said finally, reclining back into the seat, apparently having finished his investigation.

"But remember that everything was pretty wild," Hargreaves temporised.

"Yes. Yes, I know. You put up a great fight. We're all proud of you. But don't worry any more about it."

They drove on in silence.

"Do you think you'll be able to find them?" Hargreaves asked a little later. "I think so," the Inspector answered casually. "It ought to be quite simple. Don't think the case presents any real difficulties."

The Inspector seemed confident, and Hargreaves wondered how he hoped to find four Chinese in all those thousand square miles of jungle. He turned to look at Mrs. Allison, and thought of the baby girl and Allison and the driver. Shock had driven the horror of their deaths away from him, and he shuddered at the memory. He wondered how Mrs. Allison would take it all, and remembered how gay and pretty she had been, fair skinned and happy amongst the jaded sunblisters womenfolk of the planters.

And Allison. Poor man. Allison had always trusted the Malayas and Chinese working on the rubber estates, driving around with his wife and child, and the natives in return seemed to have respected him.

But who could hope to explore the barren reaches in the labyrinth of the Asiatic mind. Allison had tried to comprehend something of their mentality, and where was he? Killed by hoodlums, has child's little body ripped to bloody shreds, and his wife derelict and probably ruined for life. A twenty-three year old girl, lost and friendless, a brief item in a news report, widowed in this wilderness.

"Do you feel all right, Mrs Allison?" he asked her softly.

"Yesh." She seemed to have recovered completely and Hargreaves didn't venture to console her.

THE next morning Hargreaves was sitting restlessly in the lounge of his hotel, reaction from the previous day shivering through him spasmodically, when the police Inspector, Brodie, came cannon-balling in.

"Hargreaves, we've got one of them," he announced happily.

"What?" Hargreaves was incredulous. "Where did you find him?"

"Oh, in the bush somewhere. Want you to come along and identify him."

"I don't know whether I can," Hargreaves said guardedly.

"Don't worry, you will. Anyway, we've got Mrs. Allison in the car and she's coming along to the station as well."

"Is she well enough to?" Hargreaves asked.

"Looks all right to me," Brodie answered. "Quite all right."

Brodie was right. Mrs. Allison greeted Hargreaves cheerfully, and seemed alert and self-contained. The lip swelling had subsided, and the lip was less pronounced. She and Brodie talked continually on the way to the station. Goddammit, thought Hargreaves, here this girl has had her husband and child shot to hell and she's as steady as a rock, and I'm jumping around all over the place as if I'd spent the night in the electric chair.

"We'll get the others in no time, Mrs. Allison, in no time at all," Brodie was saying pleasantly. "This is an open and shut case."

HARGREAVES turned and studied the policeman's hard broken features, and his tough wiry body. What the hell's he talking about, he thought, the man's a maniac.

Brodie took them into the station and led them to the orderly room. He ordered the suspect brought in and gallantly offered Mrs. Allison a chair.

A couple of constables opened the door and dragged in a bewildered frightened Chinese, in cotton pants and tunic, his head shaved to the grubby scalp. The policemen jerked the Chinese to his feet and Brodie turned to Hargreaves.

"Well?" he asked.

Hargreaves paused. He looked at the Chinese standing limply in the middle

J. GRAHAM BALLARD who shares the first prize of ten pounds with D. S. Birley in the "Varsity" Crime Story Competition



is now in his second year at King's and immersed in the less literary process of reading medicine.

He admitted to our reporter yesterday that he had in fact entered the competition more for the prize than anything else, although he had been encouraged to go on writing because of his success.

The idea for his short story which deals with the problem of Malayan terrorism, he informs us, he had been thinking over for some time before hearing of the competition.

He has, in addition to writing short stories, also planned "mammoth novels" which "never get beyond the first page."

first bullets the terrorists fired shattered the windscreen and hit her straight in the face. The driver, struck about the head and chest, sat back in the seat and then rolled round against the door. The car careered straight off a bend in the road and tore through the heavy foliage, ripping the vines and fronds and branches, and jolted to a stop with a shuddering jerk that flung Mrs. Allison forwards over the seat and knocked her front teeth out. She gaped down vacantly at her husband with her broken mouth and began to whine to herself quietly. Michael had been shot through the neck and cheek and was dying in a foam of blood that bubbled out of his mouth and the wound in his face.

"Get down," she heard someone say, and Hargreaves squeezed her roughly to the floor. She knelt there and fumbled with the dead child, jibbering to herself.

THE four terrorists, armed with two old Japanese rifles, an American B.A.R., and a hand grenade, stepped out of the jungle and walked quickly towards the rear of the car facing them on the other side of the road. They were shabby nondescript Chinese, identical in faded cotton clothes, with their shaven heads and pinched features. They paused and glanced up and down the road before approaching the bullet splattered car.

Hargreaves was fumbling with the machine pistol. The bullets passing through the windscreen had splashed his face with broken glass and he wiped the blood quickly on to the white sleeve of his tropical suit. He wondered whether he was going to collapse and leaned slowly round the window and fired a rapid burst from the gun at the Chinese. One of the terrorists dropped his rifle and sat down suddenly on to the ground. The others scattered away out of Hargreaves' range and the Chinese with the B.A.R. fired a raking burst into the car.

Flame jerked out of the gun in sav-

him.

"Where'sh you going?" she lisped through her broken teeth. She grabbed the collar of his coat and held on to it tightly.

THE Chinese darted out of the jungle and ran across the road. They picked up the wounded bandit sitting quietly in the middle of the road and dragged him off into the undergrowth.

Hargreaves tried to fire the revolver but the safety catch was on. Mrs. Allison was hanging on to his jacket and he jerked her in the ribs with his elbow.

"Get away," he shouted, and fired at the figures disappearing into the jungle. But the Chinese had gone. Hargreaves sat back limply in the seat. "Christ," he muttered to himself. "Christ Almighty."

Mrs. Allison was kneeling on the seat beside him, calmly peering out through the rear window. She was quiet and composed.

Neither of them made any attempt to move the bodies in the front seat. They just sat there, in the shambles of the chaos that had exploded about them, Hargreaves steadily wiping the sweat off his face and Mrs. Allison watching out of the window, until a lorry passed by half an hour later.

THE English police Inspector who drove them into Kuala Lumpur was a hard gaunt man, tough and energetic. He wasn't in the least dismayed by the sight of the bullet smashed bodies and the splintered car, and appeared to accept Mrs. Allison's broken teeth, swollen upper lip and blood speckled face as her natural features.

"Did you see the Chinese?" he asked when they were in his car.

Hargreaves paused doubtfully. "Yes."

"You saw them?" the Inspector pressed.

of the room. They all look the same to me, he thought, but I'm sure this isn't one of them.

He turned to Brodie, waiting there, certain and confident.

"Well, it's hard to tell, but I don't think so."

Brodie glared at him, furious.

"That was one of the bandits, Inspector. I'm absolutely sure of it," Mrs. Allison was clear and precise and the lip had vanished.

"Excuse me," the Chinese said in a thin squeaky voice.

Hargreaves turned to listen sympathetically. It's ridiculous, he thought.

Brodie walked up to the Chinese and smashed the man savagely in the face with his heavy fist.

"Shut up, you yellow bastard," he snarled. The Chinese crashed to the ground and lay there, bleeding in the face.

Hargreaves felt a sudden insane desire to run out of the room.

Mrs. Allison was sitting on the chair, composed and unmoved. Brodie walked over to her.

"All right, Mrs. Allison. Thanks for the help. We'll get the other three for you."

"What if this man has an alibi, Inspector?" Mrs. Allison enquired as the constables dragged the bleeding Chinese away.

"Oh, don't worry about that. They all have alibis and a hundred witnesses to prove them. We don't pay any attention to them. You go home and rest, Mrs. Allison, and we'll get the others in a couple of days."

THE summing-up by the judges of the finalists in the Crime Story Competition will not appear this week, due to pressure of space. Full details will, however, be available next week on this page.

HARGREAVES followed Mrs. Allison out in blank amazement. How could she be so sure of recognising the Chinese? And how could that timid, frightened peasant tell Brodie where the gunmen were hiding? The Inspector was crazy, he'd never catch them.

But Brodie did. The next day when Hargreaves was taken down to the station he found them all there, standing helplessly in a row. Mrs. Allison had already identified them as the terrorists.

Hargreaves looked carefully along the line, hoping for some sign of recognition. The Chinese were subdued and seemed beyond the question of their guilt. The man who had been questioned the previous day stood staring weakly down at the floor, slouched and broken in his ragged calico. What nameless jagged horror overtook you in the night, Hargreaves thought. He looked away to the others. Their stupid bovine faces were mute testimony to their innocence.

One of the gunmen was wounded, Hargreaves remembered thankfully. He'd remind Mrs. Allison, and of course she'd see her mistake.

He walked over to her and said quietly: "Didn't I hit one of the men who attacked us?"

Mrs. Allison looked at him steadily. "These are the bandits," she said, her voice cold and even.

Hargreaves wavered under the sombre scrutiny of her eyes. He walked away from her and turned his back on the prisoners.

THE justice of vengeance, he thought. These innocent men must pay for the deaths of others, yield their lives to give a little consolation to this grieving widow, be martyred in the vain hope of rebuilding her ruined world. Who am I to say no, to invite the anger and resentment of all who have lived and died resisting the onslaught of Communism, who am I to condemn yet more pitiful souls to an ironic death, to the brutal fury of Brodie? Who am I to condemn this woman to mourn unavenged?

He turned to the Inspector: "Yes," he said, looking sternly at the limp pathetic line of prisoners, "these are the bandits. I'm quite sure of it now."

A PUBLIC MEETING.

**VICTOR GOLLANCZ**  
Can We Avoid War?  
WEDNESDAY, MAY 30th  
at 8.15 p.m.,  
in  
**The Union Debating Hall**  
Chairman:  
THE REV. PROF. O. E. RAVEN, D.D.

**THE MEMORIAL CHURCH (Unitarian)**  
EMMANUEL ROAD.  
REV. H. STEWART CARTER, M.A.  
Sermon Subjects for May 27th:  
11.0 a.m.: CIVILISATION AND EQUALITY IN GOD.  
6.0 p.m.: THE PURPOSE IN RELIGION.

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