

CHAPTER 3 DAVID AND SALLY MEET HARRY

Harry was a planter. Not working for the same company as David but for a much rougher outfit. One which did not have an Estates Manager or a very impressive structure at all. Instead, it had a cynical old accountant, Mac, who had – it was his answer to everything – seen it all. He kept the books in Markham, organised the sales and was the contact with the Board in Sydney, which felt it had somehow been lumbered with something it did not want.

Harry's company – Mac really – got its expatriate plantation managers in New Sudan: there were plenty of men who did not want to go home for some reason. So long as they could do the job and proved honest enough in their dealings with the company, they would do.

Harry was about average in terms of humanity as a whole but a little above it in terms of the company. He had an agricultural degree and he was an honest, competent and even, on rare occasions, imaginative manager. He found the copra and cocoa plantation – with some grubby, hump-backed Brahmin cattle on the rougher ground – easy to run and the salary sufficient for his needs. He liked the life. He liked being on his own; he liked working with his men; he liked the quiet of the nights and the long walks under the moon; he liked the worn-out, hot, lazy feel of the plantation in the sun-bleached middays; he loved the roaring rains of the wet season when a wall of black water swept the country, isolating him in the old bungalow. But above all, he loved the lack of contact with other Europeans. His monthly trips to town were the only times he had any contact with them; most times, the only white man he talked to was Mac, the only one, after all, who understood him.

Harry's plantation was about twenty miles down the coast. Access was via a rough road that Harry himself maintained. Sometimes the beach became the road. It was impassable at the height of the wet season.

When Harry met David and Sally, he was 32. He was 33 when David was transferred back to London. So he was always a bit older than them.

They met at the Port Markham Club. Not what it had been: anyone could join these days, so long as you could pay the fees. Thus the more undesirable elements were kept out. Some of the companies paid for their senior staff, David's amongst them. Harry paid his own fees. It was a convenient place for him to stay in Markham because it had a few simple bedrooms and you could get something to eat.

The club had been rebuilt after the Japanese occupation but it maintained an atmosphere of old colonial leisure, with wide verandas, humming fans and lots of servants dressed in spotless lap-laps and white shirts. Situated at the head of the golf course, there was a stunning view out to sea towards a mountainous headland and the distant volcanoes of the Van islands. It impressed David and Sally, indeed anyone who had not seen that sort of

thing before. Harry took it for granted; he could remember when the golf course had been the airstrip. He liked the seediness of the place.

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Even hardened and determined bachelors, tough, antisocial types such as Harry and Mac, have to eat somewhere, and Mac reckoned that Nosh Nite at the club, on a Friday evening, was the best investment in nutritional and calorific intake there was around. The women members, mostly expatriates – and by some sort of rotation in groups, which no one fully understood – cooked a big buffet meal for everyone else. Plenty of servants to do the washing up. For this great big feed and no effort, you paid about two dollars. That is, the same as the daily wage for one of the servants who did the washing up. It had been started by some interfering woman, tired of her husband's Friday night beer binges, with the idea that the massive weekend intake of alcohol would somehow be reduced by the food. The idea had caught on and become a holy club tradition amongst the expatriate population of Port Markham. Indeed, those expatriates who did not attend were considered rather beyond the pale, if not traitors to their race. Generally, the men stayed around the bar, the women hung around the food and then the lounge area, the children made a noise on the veranda and, in the school holidays, the adolescents sulked on the golf course or otherwise worked on their carnal knowledge where ever they could. Alcohol intake by both males and females had never been higher, enhanced by the introduction of a pre-Nosh Happy Hour about the time David and Sally arrived.

Nosh Nite at the Port Markham Club then. Mac and Harry sitting at a small table, apparently silently disgusted by the domestic dramas going on all around but eating a good meal all the same. Beer stubbies and elbows on a red and white chequered cloth.

Sally and David enter: fixed smiles. As if, as if absolutely at ease, they weave their way around groups of humanity. They are evidently spoilt by the demanding choice of upon whom to bestow the favour of their convivial presence. Usual balancing act of plate – macaroni cheese, baked beans, sausage roll and mashed potato – gin and tonic in tumbler, knife and fork, red paper napkin. Find themselves in zone of local members – oh, so difficult to know what to do – see Mac and Harry, white males, zoom in, sit. Mind if we join you? Favour you old ruffians with our educated, cosmopolitan and cultured presence? Harry smiles; seems to suggest it's a pleasure to be visited by two such exalted and heavenly personages. Mac shuffles to one side recognising, just in time, that their (fucking?) right to exist more or less equals his own. David satisfactorily establishes to himself that they have landed on an inferior planet where natives friendly but may become embarrassingly deferential. These little green men will, he knows, benefit from our, at any rate, my, educated presence. Sally follows lead.

Chapter 3 David and Sally Meet Harry

For all she is a superior being beneath whose feet we are barely worthy of being trodden, she is a delightfully chatty sweetie really and they must not bow down on bended knee; or if they do, it must not be too embarrassingly obvious. Thinks David: she is getting quite good at this enhancement of my towering personality. Looks at her for five seconds – anyway, three. Gratitude beats in English breast – Port Talbot way: thank God I found her: every appearance of the upper-ish middle classes and cheap at the price. Gratitude spreads to himself.

He looks at Harry. Then he looks at Mac in relation to Harry, and he dismisses Mac as a broken-down old drunk; as detritus that the receding tide of colonialism, he says to himself, has forgotten upon the abandoned beach of empire. This is because the Macs of the world frighten David. They are, apparently, independent types, also isolated, like himself, but isolated by choice – some choice, at any rate – rather than by emotional deficiency. A Mac, David suspects, might not even notice his existence, let alone make the conscious decision to dismiss him.

So, anyway, with Mac conveniently dismissed, David turns back to Harry. He looks at him and tries to work him out. He doesn't fail but he backs away from his immediate, disturbing reaction. He starts again, according to a tried formula: too young to be a Mac; too old, by a decade at least, to be one of the volunteer aid workers whom he could easily patronise. Not in work clothes but nonetheless untidy and uncared for. Hair needs cutting; shirt needs ironing. Wonder what sort of shoes he's wearing? I have on my old English country brogues. His table manners are inoffensive but not English and the man will scoop up his food with his fork, elbow on table. He might have removed that elbow with the entrance of My Wife, but he hadn't.

All the same, all the same, for all his apparent casualness, David notes, consciously – and Sally unconsciously because in a way she expects it – that this good-looking man with a big mouth has welcomed them. When they had arrived at the table – having lost their dazzling retinue along the way – he had welcomed them with a smile of such warmth on his whole face that he might have been madly wagging his tail. And, as it happened, it was true: despite his usual taciturnity, Harry was pleased by the appearance of this obviously insecure couple who so badly wanted him to adopt them. He would adopt them. Sally and David appeared in Harry's vision just at a point in time when he felt well fed, relaxed and secure inside himself; not, as was usually the case, wanting to rush back to the plantation with a sort of panic-driven desperation. He was happy, for this evening at any rate, to give these two people whatever it was that they might want of him.

David might have indeed dismissed Harry as an ill-educated, ignorant type – and in a small way he did – but, and against what he would have described as his own better judgement, he didn't want to. He was attracted. Harry reminded him a little of the doctor's son.

As he said to Sally later, while he undressed: “Odd fellow that Harry Whatisname. Don’t know what to make of him.”

Harry, also, was interested in David Pryce-Williams. Later, Mac said that Harry was only interested in them as a pair, as a couple, as a social specimen or, even, as a phenomenon. But he was only partly right because Harry was also interested in each of them as an individual component of the phenomenon.

So that is how it all started: as a not very serious dilettante-ish interest on all their parts. But, it was always a bit lopsided. There was David and Sally, the single animal recognised by Mac, on the one side, and there was Harry on the other. In the end it would be the animal, the beast more like, going off, leaving Harry behind. All the same, Harry was not at a disadvantage because, as Mac had noted, it was Harry who was the manipulator, playing on the inexperience and the emotional dishonesty of David and Sally. To start with, there was a lot of social posturing, especially on the part of David and Sally. They could say – to each other – that they loved Harry, but they did not. Their use of the word love was general. The words love and nice more or less covered everything they liked. And because they were dishonest, they did not know themselves, or rather, they were afraid to know themselves, and therefore they buried their social responses under the construction of, of the public beast that enabled them to survive each day under the public gaze. It was the relationship with Harry which changed all that.

Sally and David and Harry, therefore, at the same table in the club. The outcome of the possible, the potential, the potential social dynamics is, they are terrific. On our little spinning planet, these three meet, stay together for a while and work themselves out upon one another. They suffer as a result. But is it not suffering that makes life significant?

And Mac? He detached himself, and watched. It would be interesting to see what happened because the essential Harry was, as Mac well knew, a loner. He was not the type to mess around with these social types. These bon viveurs’. Something interesting was bound to happen.

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A tropical night of thick and heavy darkness, damaged, like the flaws in a black diamond, by a maddening random array of conflicting and discordant disturbances that appear and are gone without sense: yellow light, hot body parts, fabrics, human sounds and fragments of emotion.

But David focuses: “Busy isn’t it?” He barks at Harry to be sure he is heard.

Mac watches.

Harry smiles upwards from his plate: “Yes it’s the food I suppose. Friday night and all

that.” He returns to the plate.

David cannot place the accent, which disorientates him. There is an Australian drag in the intonation but also a more rounded pronunciation that suggests English upper-ish middle class to David’s practised ear.

It seems as if while the two roughnecks, one of whom is not so rough after all, are happy to share their table, they expect the newcomers to entertain themselves. David – unusually – does not feel put down: the man, this particular man, who interests him, does not appear to be deliberately ill mannered, merely uneducated. He ignores his wife who is smiling blankly at the entire company, for all the word as if she is dead drunk. He shouts at Harry: “I’m David Pryce-Williams by the way,” shoving his meaty hand at Harry’s face, “I work for Haldan and Cruikshank. You?”

David’s hand hangs in space until Harry takes it, holding the weight of it rather than shaking it as if testing its validity. Testing his own, more like. He retains his fork in the other hand: “Harry Williams,” he says, “maybe we’re related.” He smiles back at David, eyebrows raised in mock astonishment, as if one of them, at least, would find the idea astonishing.

Mac watches as the two men hold hands above the food. He has seen this before. He goes to the bar.

It is for David to disentangle his hand. Nonetheless, he holds Harry’s awhile as if thereby more able to categorise the Harry-ness of it. He tries but again backs away from the idea. When he finally lets go he begins to eat Harry-style, scooping up the food with his fork. It is not the usual David way of eating, which is to hold his knife and fork like pencils, close to his body, tight as if his eating is a very private – English – affair. Wow! Not this Harry-style at all, elbow sticking out into Sally. What’s up? Does he want to point something out to her? Or perhaps he wants to push her away? Whatever it is, she notices nothing.

Now they are all eating.

Is it an awkward silence?

It is not.

Harry is happy: meals are for eating, not for conversation.

David is happy: he knows not why and he does not associate his contentment with this man, Harry.

Sally is happy that they are not alone and that they are sitting with someone who appears to be an established member of the club. When Mac returns with more drinks she waves at him as an old friend. Such a character and, for her, he will be a character if that is what she wants, the stupid woman. He will get drunk enough to fall down the steps later if she wants.

In the noisy heat of the club they establish a sort of relationship. Like cartoon characters on a desert islet, they sit with their backs to the one bent palm tree in the middle. They look towards the distant horizon beyond which anything might lie. They make polite conversation but they hear little of what is said. It is their own prejudices. . . No, preconditioning is a better word: it is their own preconditioning which builds up ideas about the others. What else can you do in a few hours of drinking? Which, if nothing better, enables you to get through the evening; enables you to believe you have made social contact, which may – or may not – prove to be significant; enables you to fend off the thought of those encircling sharks that might attack should you test the sea, out there.

They part company in the car park. Mac does not fall down the steps although he stumbles, grabbing Sally in the process. But it is Harry who catches him this time. So Sally thinks Harry is sweet. “You must come over sometime,” she says.

“Yes, that would be nice, Sally.” But he does not look at her, and David breaks in:

“Goodnight Harry.”

“Goodnight David.”

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“They seem OK, Mac. Why don’t you like them?”

“Did I say I didn’t like ’em?”

“Not in words.”

“So, there you are. Goodnight Harry.”

“Goodnight Mac.”

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“Odd? I thought he was rather sweet. We must ask him over. I’m sure he’s lonely.” She meant it for the moment but it would not have gone any further had David not reminded her.

They lie in bed, back to back. David sees that chap Harry in his mind’s eye. He tries to catch the essence of him beyond what is his habit to construct, but fails. Harry slips away.

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“I wonder what’s happened to that Harry fellow?” David glances at the table where they had sat the preceding week. He had expected to see Harry sitting there as before but it is occupied by some other people who are. . . Who are not Harry.

“Who?” Drunken stare and fixed smile as if she is miles away but she is desperate to see someone to whom she can wave. There is no one.

“The chap we met last week.” David is cross with his wife because Harry is not there: “Planter fellow,” he snaps at her. He is cross with Harry for not being there: “Odd man; not quite. . . You know.” He snaps at Harry but Sally gets the mark. He looks around the room as

if the act of looking will produce Harry, about whom he has thought all week.

Sally interprets this as David being sweet, because his bad temper is usually aimed at waiters and the like for her sake – so it seems – producing results like a bottle on the house. It is sweet because she can act getting him out of it without having to actually get close to him because it is a predetermined thing that he will be got out of it by the adoring little wife. It is a thing he does and is all part of playing at being married. The Pryce-Williamses, so sweet with each other, they imagine people saying about them; people who mostly do not say it because they are playing the same game themselves.

But, this time, this time although Sally does not notice the difference, David really is a bit cross. Not deeply cross because already the resentment of Harry for not being there is working on him so that the cheap little poser is not worth My Crossness. Why would someone of my stature condescend to, to consort with a cheap little tick like him who is, after all, only a second-rate planter? Again, David thinks of the long-haired doctor's son. But, all the same, David's crossness is, for once, real; it is not enacted as a cover for establishing his superiority. It is indeed outrageous that an uneducated hobbledehoy like that should stand us, the Pryce-Williamses, up like this. It is an insult to My Wife.

Sally takes her cue, focusing on Her Husband to mollify him as the wifely thing to do. She takes hold of his arm and nuzzles close, the sweet Pryce-Williamses so much in love they don't care what is going on around them.

"But Darling, he told us."

"Told us what?" What outrageous thing did he tell us?

"He said he only came into Markham once a fortnight. To get the wages and things for his men." She squeezes his arm as she looks out into the room: "Don't be such a crosspatch."

"He said that to you?" David also looks out into the room, feeling a stab of jealousy. "It's not his own plantation. He's just a bum manager." It satisfies David to be able to denigrate Harry in front of Sally. He is eager for her reaction.

But there is no reaction: "Oh look there're the Bittams. Hello, Margery," she calls, leaving David to wave at one of her morning coffee/bridge/tennis/swimming/sitting and complaining about the servants friends. She is waved back at, they join the Bittams – they're OK although Bob's not quite, you know, he's only red brick – others come and go, and really it's much more fun than hanging around with thingamajig and his friend last week we did rather get stuck with them.

David's booming voice dominates the evening. He organises everyone around tables and things and orders most of the drinks and therefore pays the most money but it's alright because he earns more than they do. I'm not stuck here, I'm just learning the ropes and we'll

be back in London in a few years' time. Yes he's marked for the Board he's one of their Oxbridge men and frightfully clever at languages although that's not much use here I just shout very loud they seem to understand hahaha the Pryce-Williamses such a sweet couple and so in love they adore each other.

"You're in a Brown Study, old chap. What you thinking about?"

"Oh nothing, Bob. Have another drink? Whisky was it?"

"Thanks David. You need cheering up. Your wife's a gem. One in a million."

"Yes."

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"Let's have that chap over next week."

"Who's that, Darling?" She stretches her body inside the satiny pink nightdress but it doesn't seem to have any effect. He's drunk too much. Just like a man. And that idea satisfies her a little. He was so bossy in the club he made the other men look like shadows. She was glad she was Mrs Pryce-Williams and she wondered if they could get her mother out for a few weeks. She vaguely imagined her mother in the club, proud and a little above everyone else but charming and chatty without being boring. People grateful to be noticed by her. Mummy, you must meet the Bittams. Mrs Grant, Sally's mother, mum, so sweet. Really? The old trout. Who does she think she is?

"The planter chappy, Harry Whatsisname."

She didn't know what to say. There was no reason why he should not come over but no obvious reason why he should. She couldn't even remember what he looked like.

But David insisted: "You asked him."

"Did I, Darling?"

"You said he must come over sometime."

"Alright then, but how will I tell him?"

"Write a note and give it to the old drunk, Mac. He'll pass it on somehow."

"Was he there tonight? I didn't see him."

"He was propping up the bar."

"He might have come over to say hello."

There was no answer to this so David gave none. He had briefly chatted to Mac each time he went to the bar, watching him get more and more drunk. He was afraid the old man might say what he thought.

"You could've given him a note then," said Sally, touching his toe with hers but getting no response.

"I didn't think." Cross again. "He can come here and we'll go to the club together next

Friday. Then he can come back and stay on until Sunday. Or Monday morning if he likes. Switch off the light.”

They lay side by side on their backs in the moonlight that flooded the room. A slight breeze rattled the palm fronds outside. Black, jagged shadows broke them up into pieces under a white sheet.

“So what will we do with him? David? Are you awake?”

“Yes.” Cross.

No need to act the fond little wife here, in private. She would have made love to him if she thought he expected it. Once they got going she quite liked it. Playing with his body as something quite detached from him. She liked to suck him but in the process she would have all sorts of ideas not associated with David. She would have sucked any good-looking man. But they didn't get going so that was alright.

She thought of their first time. David had been so nice and gentle. She had imagined it would be quite violent but it was just like having a bath really. She had enjoyed his handling of her in his impersonal, efficient way. When it was over she felt she had taken a step forward in her life. The view of the fen sky from her childhood came into mind. It looked just the same but no black bird swooped. “What will we do with him?”

“Do?” He asked incredulously as if she was stupid. “Look after him.” Then, sounding happier: “I bet he lives a sparse sort of bachelor life down there. We can give him some decent food. Talk. We'll have a late breakfast on Saturday. Bit of a walk, siesta, we'll go to the club and watch the film in the evening. Maybe some tennis on Sunday morning and you can make a really nice lunch.”

“Alright.” But there was a question in her voice because it was unlike David to bother about someone who, after all, did not matter much. Although – she checked her own thoughts – Harry whatever-he-was-called had been quite nice at the club, and it would make a change.

“I know, I know he's not quite our type. And not very well educated. But we mustn't embarrass him and he's probably lonely. I should think he needs looking after.”

“Oh David,” she moved a little closer.

“What?”

“You are sweet.”

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