

King Rat

The Transsexual Passages

The action takes place in Changi, the Japanese-run prisoner of war camp in Singapore, during World War 2. The prisoners are mostly British and Australian, with a small American contingent. The Japanese treat the prisoners with considerable cruelty, denying them adequate food and medical supplies, so that many prisoners die from starvation and from treatable tropical diseases.

The main characters are Peter Marlowe, a young and naïve British Flight Lieutenant, and “The King”, a hard-bitten American corporal. The King is a skilled and ruthless trader on the black market, and as a result he enjoys a standard of living considerably above that of all the other prisoners. This has earned him the respect, or hatred, of all the prisoners. Marlowe has started to help the King, at first from altruistic motives.

Sean is a transsexual, but in those days the concept was unknown and attitudes to gender ambiguity were almost always hostile. This story does not have a happy ending for Sean.

.....

‘Hey Peter!’ The King was looking up the slope, his mouth agape.

Peter Marlowe followed the King’s gaze and his stomach turned over as he saw Sean approaching. ‘Christ!’ He wanted to slip through the window out of sight, but he knew that that would make him more conspicuous. So he waited grimly, hardly breathing. He thought he had a good chance of not being seen, for Sean was deep in conversation with Squadron Leader Rodrick and Lieutenant Frank Parrish. Their heads were close together and their voices intent.

Then Sean glanced past Frank Parrish and saw Peter Marlowe and stopped.

Rodrick and Frank stopped also, surprised. When they saw Peter Marlowe they thought, Oh my God. But they concealed their anxiety.

‘Hello, Peter,’ Rodrick called out. He was a tall neat man with a chiselled face, as tall and neat as Frank Parrish was tall and careless.

‘Hello, Rod!’ Peter Marlowe called back.

‘I won’t be a moment,’ Sean said quietly to Rodrick and walked towards Peter Marlowe and the King. Now that the first shock had worn off, Sean smiled a welcome.

Peter Marlowe felt the hackles on his neck begin to rise and he got up and waited. He could feel the King's eyes boring into him.

'Hello, Peter,' Sean said.

'Hello, Sean.'

'You're so thin, Peter.'

'Oh I don't know. No more than anyone. I'm very fit thanks.'

'I haven't seen you for such a long time-why don't you come up to the theatre sometime? There's always a little extra around somewhere – and you know me, I never did eat much.' Sean smiled hopefully.

'Thanks,' Peter Marlowe said, raw with embarrassment.

'Well, I know you won't,' Sean said unhappily, 'but you're always welcome.' There was a pause. 'I never see you any more.'

'Oh, you know how it is, Sean. You're doing all the shows and I'm well, I'm on work parties and things.'

Like Peter Marlowe, Sean was wearing a sarong, but unlike Peter Marlowe's, which was threadbare and multifaded-colour, Sean's was new and white and the border was embroidered with blue and silver. And Sean wore a short-sleeved native baju coat, ending above the waist, cut tight to allow for the swell of breasts. The King was staring fascinated at the half-open neck of the baju.

Sean noticed the King and smiled faintly and brushed back some hair that the wind had caressed out of place and toyed with it until the King looked up. Sean smiled inside, warmed inside, as the King flushed.

'It's, er, it's getting hot, isn't it?' the King said uncomfortably.

'I suppose so,' Sean said pleasantly, cool and sweatless as always – however intense the heat.

There was a silence.

'Oh, sorry,' Peter Marlowe said as he saw Sean looking at the King and waiting patiently. 'Do you know -'

Sean laughed. 'My God, Peter. You are in a state. Of course I know who your friend is, though we've never met.' Sean put out a hand. 'How are you? It's quite an honour to meet a King!'

'Er, thanks,' the King said, hardly touching the hand, so small against his. 'You, er, like a smoke?'

‘Thanks, but I don’t. But if you don’t mind I will take two, if it’s all right?’ Sean nodded back towards the path. ‘Rod and Frank smoke and I know they’d appreciate one.’

‘Sure,’ the King said. ‘Sure.’

‘Thanks. That’s very kind of you.’

In spite of himself the King felt the warmth of Sean’s smile. In spite of himself he said, meaning it, ‘You were great in *Othello*.’

‘Thank you,’ said Sean delightedly. ‘Did you like *Hamlet*?’

‘Yes. And I never was much on Shakespeare.’

Sean laughed. ‘That’s praise indeed. We’re doing a new play next. Frank has written it especially and it should be a lot of fun.’

‘If it’s just ordinary, it’ll be great,’ the King said, more at ease, ‘and you’ll be great.’

‘How nice of you. Thanks.’ Sean glanced at Peter Marlowe and the eyes took on an added lustre. ‘But I’m afraid Peter won’t agree with you.’

‘Stop it, Sean,’ Peter Marlowe said.

Sean did not look at Peter Marlowe, only the King, and smiled, but fury lurked beneath the smile. ‘Peter doesn’t approve of me.’

‘Stop it, Sean,’ Peter Marlowe said harshly.

‘Why should I?’ Sean lashed out. ‘You despise deviates – isn’t that what you call queers? You made that perfectly clear. I haven’t forgotten!’

‘Nor have I!’

‘Well, that’s something! I don’t like to be despised – least of all by you!’

‘I said stop it! This isn’t the time or the place. And we’ve been through this before and you’ve said it all before. I said I was sorry. I didn’t mean any harm!’

‘No. But you still hate me – why? Why?’

‘I don’t hate you.’

‘Then why do you always avoid me?’

‘It’s better. For God’s sake, Sean, leave me be.’

Sean stared at Peter Marlowe, and then as suddenly as it had flared, the anger melted. ‘Sorry, Peter. You’re probably quite right. I’m the fool. It’s just that I’m

lonely from time to time. Lonely just for talk.’ Sean reached and touched Peter Marlowe’s arm. ‘Sorry. I just want be friends again.’

Peter Marlowe could say nothing.

Sean hesitated. ‘Well, I suppose I’d better be going.’

‘Sean,’ Rodrick called out from the path, ‘we’re late already.’

‘I won’t be a moment.’ Sean still looked at Peter Marlowe, then sighed and held out a hand to the King. ‘It nice to meet you. Please forgive my bad manners.’

The King couldn’t avoid touching the hand again.

‘Happy to meet you,’ he said.

Sean hesitated, eyes grave and searching. ‘Are you Peter’s friend?’

The King felt the whole world heard him when he said, stumbling, ‘Er, sure, yeah, I guess so.’

‘Strange, isn’t it, how one word can mean so many different things. But if you are his friend, don’t lead him astray, please. You’ve a reputation for danger, and wouldn’t like Peter hurt. I’m very fond of him.’

‘Er, yes, sure.’ The King’s knees jellied and his backbone melted. But the magnetism of Sean’s smile pervaded him. It was unlike anything he had ever felt. ‘The shows are the best thing in the camp,’ he said. ‘Make life worth living. And you’re the best thing in them.’

‘Thank you.’ And then, to Peter Marlowe: ‘It does make life worthwhile. I’m very happy. And I like what I’m doing. It does make things worthwhile, Peter.’

‘Yes,’ Peter Marlowe said, tormented. ‘I’m glad all’s well.’

Sean smiled hesitantly a last time, then turned quickly and was suddenly gone.

The King sat down. ‘I’ll be goddamned!’

Peter Marlowe sat down too. He opened his box and rolled a cigarette.

If you didn’t know he was a man, you’d swear to God that he was a woman,’ the King said. ‘A beautiful woman.’

Peter Marlowe nodded bleakly.

‘He’s not like the other fags,’ the King said, ‘that’s for sure. No sir. Not the same at all. Jesus, there’s something about him that’s not -’

The King stopped and groped and continued helplessly, 'Don't quite know how to put it. He's – he's a woman, goddamit! Remember when he was playing Desdemona? My God, the way he looked in the negligée, I'll bet there wasn't a man in Changi that didn't have a hard on. Don't blame a man for being tempted. I'm tempted, everyone is. Man's a liar if he says otherwise.' Then he looked at Peter Marlowe and studied him carefully.

'Oh, for the love of God,' Peter Marlowe said irritably. 'Do you think I'm a queer too?'

'No,' the King said calmly. 'I don't mind if you are. Just as long as I know.'

'Well, I'm not.'

'It sure as hell sounded like it,' the King said with a grin. 'Lover's quarrel?'

'Go to hell!'

After a minute the King said tentatively, 'You known Sean long?'

'He was in my squadron,' Peter Marlowe said at length, 'and I was sort of detailed to look after him. Got to know him very well.' He flicked the burning end of his cigarette and put the remains of tobacco back in his box. 'In fact he was my best friend. He was a very good pilot.' He looked at the King. 'I liked him a lot.'

'Was – was he like that before?'

'No'

'Oh, I know he didn't dress like a woman all the time, but hell, it must have been obvious that he was that way.'

'Sean was never that way. He was just a very handsome, gentle chap. There was nothing effeminate about him, just a sort of . . . compassion.'

'You ever seen him without clothes on?'

'No.'

'That figures. No one else has either. Even half naked.'

Sean was allowed a tiny little room up in the theatre, a private room, which no one else in the whole of Changi had, not even the King. But Sean never slept in the room. The thought of Sean alone in a room with a lock on the door was too dangerous, because there were many in the camp whose lust swept out, and the rest were full of lust inside. So Sean always slept in one of the huts, but changed and showered in the private room.

'What's between you two?' the King asked.

‘I nearly killed him. Once.’

.....

The King and Peter do more deals together, and as they get to know one another, they lower their defences. They are talking now about the forthcoming theatrical performance.

Peter Marlowe caught the look and smiled faintly. ‘You’ve nothing to worry about, old chum. I wouldn’t do anything foolish, if that’s what you were thinking.’

‘Sure.’ The King smiled. ‘We got a lot to look forward to – and tomorrow’s the show. You heard what it’s about?’

‘Only that it’s called *Triangle*. And it stars Sean.’ Peter Marlowe’s voice was suddenly flat.

‘How did you nearly kill Sean?’ The King had never asked bluntly before, knowing that with a man like Peter Marlowe it was always dangerous to ask direct questions about private matters. But now he had felt instinctively that the time was correct.

‘There’s not much to tell,’ Peter Marlowe said immediately, glad that the King had asked him. ‘Sean and I were in the same squadron in Java. The day before the war ended there, Sean didn’t come back from a mission. I thought he’d had it.’

‘About a year ago – the day after we came here from Java – I went to one of the camp shows. When I finally recognized Sean on the stage, you can imagine what a shock it was. He was playing a girl, but I didn’t think anything of that – someone always has to take the girl’ parts – and I just sat back and enjoyed the show. I couldn’t get over finding him alive and fit, and I couldn’t get over what a sensational girl he made – the way he walked and talked and sat – his clothes and his wig were perfect. I was very impressed with his performance – and yet I knew he’d never had anything to do with theatricals before.’

‘After the show I went backstage to see him. There were some others waiting too, and after a while I got the weirdest feeling that these fellows were like the character you meet at any stage door anywhere—you know, chaps with their tongues hanging out waiting for their girl friends.’

‘Finally the dressing-room door opened and everyone surged in. I tagged along last and stood in the doorway. It was only then that it hit me that the men were all queers! Sean was sitting on a chair and they seemed to pour all over him, fawning on him and calling him “darling”, hugging him and then telling him how “marvellous” he was—treating him like the beautiful star of the show. And Sean--Sean was enjoying it! Christ, he was actually enjoying their pawing! Like a bitch in heat.’

‘Then he suddenly saw me, and of course he was shocked too.’

‘He said “Hello, Peter” but I couldn’t say anything. I stood staring at one of the bloody queers who had his hand on Sean’s knee. Sean was wearing a sort of flowing negligée and silk stockings and panties, and I got the feeling that he’d even arranged the folds of the negligée to show off his leg above the stocking—and it looked as if he had breasts under the negligée. Then I suddenly realized he wasn’t wearing a wig--all that hair was his own, and just as long and wavy as a girl’s.

‘Then Sean asked everybody to leave. “Peter’s an old friend I thought was dead,” he said. “I have to talk to him. Go on, please.”

‘When they’d gone I asked Sean, “What in God’s name has happened to you? You were actually enjoying those scum pawing you.”

“What in God’s name has happened to all of us?” Sean answered. Then he said with that wonderful smile of his, “I’m so glad to see you, Peter. I thought you were very dead. Sit down a moment while I clean my face off. We’ve a lot to talk about. Did you come on the Java work party?”

‘I nodded, still in a state of shock, and Sean turned back to the mirror and began to wipe the makeup off with face cream. “What happened to you, Peter?” he asked. “Did you get shot down?”

‘When he started to take off the makeup I began to relax—everything seemed more normal. I told myself that I’d been stupid—that this was all part of the show—you know, keeping up the legend—and I was sure he’d only been pretending to enjoy it. So I apologized and said, “Sorry, Sean—you must think me a bloody fool! My God, it’s good to know you’re all right. I thought you’d had it too.” I told him what had happened to me and then asked about him.

‘Sean told me he’d been pranged by four Zeroes and had to parachute. When he finally got back to the airfield and found my plane, it was just a shambles. I told him how I’d set fire to it before I left—I hadn’t wanted the bloody Japs to repair the wing.

“Oh,” he said, “well, I just presumed you’d pranged yourself landing—that you’d had it. I stayed in Bandung at Headquarters with the rest of the bods and then we were all put into a camp. Shortly afterwards we were sent to Batavia and from there to here.”

‘Sean was looking at himself in the mirror all the time, and his face was as smooth and fine as any girl’s. Suddenly I got the strangest feeling that he had forgotten all about me. I didn’t know what to do. Then he turned away from the mirror and looked right at me, and he was frowning in a funny way. All at once I sensed how unhappy he was, so I asked him if he wanted me to go.

“No,” he said. “No, Peter, I want you to stay.” And then he picked up a girl’s purse that was on the dressing table, dug out a lipstick and began making up his lips.

'I was stunned. "What're you doing?" I said.

"Putting on lipstick, Peter."

"Come off it, Sean," I said. "A joke's a joke. The show was over half an hour ago."

'But he went right on, and when his lips were perfect he powdered his nose and brushed his hair, and by God he was the beautiful girl again. I couldn't believe it. I still thought in some weird way he was playing a joke on me.

'He patted a curl here and there and then sat back and examined himself in the mirror, and he seemed absolutely satisfied with what he saw. Then he saw me in the mirror staring at him and he laughed. "What's the matter, Peter?" he said. "Haven't you been in a dressing room before?"

"Yes," I said, "I have—a girl's dressing room."

'He looked at me a long time. Then he straightened his negligée and crossed his legs. "This is a girl's dressing room," he said.

"Come off it, Sean," I said, getting irritated, "it's me, Peter Marlowe. We're in Changi, remember? The show's over and now everything's normal again."

"Yes," he said perfectly calmly, "everything's normal."

'It took me a long time to say anything. "Well," I managed to get out at last, "aren't you going to get out of those clothes and clean that muck off your face?"

"I like these clothes, Peter," he said, "and I always wear makeup now." He got up and opened a cupboard and by God it was full of sarongs and dresses and panties and bras and so on. He turned around and he was perfectly calm.

"These are the only clothes I wear nowadays," he said. "I am a woman."

"You must be out of your mind," I said.

'Sean walked over and stared up at me, and I couldn't get it out of my head that somehow this was a girl--he looked like one and acted like one and talked like one and smelled like one. "Look, Peter," he said, "I know it's difficult for you to understand, but I've changed. I'm no longer a man, I'm a woman."

"You're no more a bloody woman than I am!" I yelled. But it didn't seem to touch him at all. He just stood there smiling like a madonna, and then he said, "I'm a woman, Peter." He touched my arm just the way a girl would, and he said, "Please treat me as a woman."

'Something in my head seemed to snap. I grabbed his arm and ripped the negligée off his shoulder and tore off the padded bra and shoved him in front of the mirror.

“You call yourself a woman?” I shouted. “Look at yourself! Where are your bloody breasts?”

‘But Sean didn’t look up. He just stood in front of the mirror with his head down and his hair falling over his face. The negligée was hanging off him and he was naked to the waist. I grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head up. “Look at yourself, you bloody deviate!” I yelled. “You’re a man, by God, and you always will be.”

‘He just stood there saying nothing at all, and finally I realized he was crying. Then Rodrick and Frank Parrish rushed in and shoved me out of the way, and Parrish pulled the negligée around Sean and took him in his arms, and all the time Sean just went on crying.

‘Frank kept hugging him and saying, “It’s all right, Sean, it’s all right.” Then he looked at me, and I knew he wanted to kill me. “Get out of here, you bloody bastard,” he said.

‘I don’t even know how I got out of there—when I finally came to I was wandering around the camp, and I was beginning to realize that I’d had no right, no right at all, to do what I’d done. It was insane.’

Peter Marlowe’s face was naked with anguish. ‘I went back to the theatre. I had to try to make my peace with Sean. His door was locked but I thought I heard him inside. I knocked and knocked, but he wouldn’t answer and he wouldn’t open the door, so I got angry again and I shoved the door open. I wanted to apologize to his face, not through a door.

‘He was lying on the bed. There was a big cut on his left wrist and there was blood all over the place. I put a tourniquet on him and somehow got hold of old Doc Kennedy and Rodrick and Frank. Sean looked like a corpse, and he didn’t make a sound all the time Kennedy was sewing up the scissor slash. When Kennedy finished, Frank said to me, “Are you satisfied now, you rotten bastard?”

‘I couldn’t say anything. I just stood there hating myself. “Get out and stay out,” Rodrick said.

‘I started off, but then I heard Sean calling me, in a kind of weak, faint whisper. I turned around and saw that he was looking at me not angrily, but as if he pitied me. “I’m sorry, Peter,” he said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Christ, Sean,” I managed to say. “I didn’t mean you any harm.”

“I know,” he said. “Please be my friend, Peter.”

‘Then he looked at Parrish and Rodrick and said, “I wanted to go away, but now,” and he smiled his wonderful smile, “I’m so happy to be home again.”’

‘Marlowe. You’ve got to help me!’ ‘What’s up?’

‘It’s Sean, he’s throwing a tantrum,’ Rodrick began breathlessly, ‘refuses to go on. Would you talk to him? Please. I can’t do a thing with him. Please. Talk to him. Will you?’¹

‘But—’

‘Won’t take you a second,’ Rodrick interrupted. ‘You’re my last chance. Please. I’ve been worried about Sean for weeks. His part would be hard enough for a woman to play, let alone . . .’ He stopped, then went on weakly, ‘Please, Marlowe, I’m afraid of him. You’d do us all a great service.’

Peter Marlowe hesitated. ‘All right.’

‘Can’t thank you enough, old boy.’ Rodrick mopped his brow and led the way through the pandemonium to the back of the theatre, Peter Marlowe reluctantly in tow. The King followed absently, his mind still concentrating on how and where and when to make the break.

They stood in the little corridor. Uneasily Peter Marlowe knocked. ‘It’s me, Peter. Can I come in, Sean?’ Sean heard him through the fog of terror, slumped on his arms in front of the dressing table.

‘It’s me, Peter. Can I come in?’

Sean got up, the tears streaking his makeup, and unbolted the door. Peter Marlowe hesitantly came into the dressing room. Sean shut the door.

‘Oh Peter, I can’t go on. I’ve had it. I’m at the end,’ Sean said helplessly. ‘I can’t pretend any more, not any more. I’m lost, lost, God help me!’ He hid his face in his hands. ‘What am I going to do? I can’t face it any more. I’m nothing. Nothing!’

‘It’s all right, Sean old chum,’ Peter Marlowe said, deep with pity. ‘No need to worry. You’re very important. Most important person in the whole camp, if the truth be known.’

‘I wish I were dead.’ ‘That’s too easy.’

Sean turned and faced him. ‘Look at me, for the love of God! What am I? What in God’s name am I?’

In spite of himself, Peter Marlowe could only see a girl, a girl in pathetic torment. And the girl was wearing a white skirt and high heels and her long legs were silk-stockinged and her blouse showed the swell of breasts beneath.

‘You’re a woman, Sean,’ he said as helplessly. ‘God knows how-or why-but you are.’

And then the terror and the self-hatred and the torment left Sean.

‘Thank you, Peter,’ Sean said. ‘Thank you with all my heart.’

There was a tentative knock on the door. ‘On in two minutes,’ Frank called anxiously through the door. ‘Can I come in?’

‘Just a second.’ Sean went to the dressing table and brushed away the tear stains and repaired the makeup and stared at the reflection.

‘Come in, Frank.’

The sight of Sean took Frank’s breath away, as it always had. ‘You look wonderful!’ he said. ‘You all right?’

‘Yes. Afraid I made a bit of a fool of myself. Sorry.’ ‘Just overwork,’ Frank said, hiding his concern. He glanced at Peter Marlowe. ‘Hello, good to see you.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You’d better get ready, Frank,’ Sean said. ‘I’m all right now.’

Frank felt the girl’s smile, deep within him, and automatically fell into the pattern that he and Rodrick had begun three years before and bitterly regretted every since. ‘You’re going to be marvellous, Betty,’ he said, hugging Sean. ‘I’m proud of you.’

But now, unlike all the countless other times, suddenly they were man and woman, and Sean relaxed against him, needing him with every molecule of being. And Frank knew it.

‘We’ll—we’re on in a minute,’ he said unsteadily, rocked by the suddenness of his own need. ‘I’ve—I’ve got to get ready.’ He left.

‘I’d, er, better be getting back to my seat,’ Peter Marlowe said, deeply troubled. He had felt more than seen the spark between them.

‘Yes.’ But Sean hardly noticed Peter Marlowe.

A final check of the makeup and then Sean was waiting for a cue in the wings. The usual terrored ecstasy. Then, Sean walked on and became. The cheers and wonder and lust poured over her—eyes following as she sat and crossed her legs, as she walked and talked—eyes reaching out, touching her, feeding on her. Together she and the eyes became one.

‘Major,’ Peter Marlowe said as he and the King and Rodrick stood in the wings watching, ‘what’s this Betty business?’

‘Oh, part of the whole mess,’ Rodrick replied miserably. ‘That’s the name of Sean’s part this week We’ve—Frank and I—we always call Sean by the part he’s playing.’

‘Why?’ the King asked.

‘To help him. Help him get into the part.’ Rodrick looked back to the stage waiting for his cue. ‘It started as a game,’ he said bitterly, ‘now it’s an unholy joke. We created that-that woman—God help us. We’re responsible.’

‘Why?’ Peter Marlowe said slowly.

‘Well, you remember how tough it was in Java.’ Rodrick glanced at the King. ‘Because I was an actor before the war, I was assigned the job of starting the camp theatricals.’ He let his eyes stray back to the stage, to Frank and Sean. Something strange about those two tonight, he thought. Critically he studied their performances and knew them to be inspired.

‘Frank was the only other professional in the camp so we started to work getting a show together. When we got to the job of casting, of course, someone had to play the female roles. No one would volunteer, so the authorities detailed two or three. One of them was Sean. He was bitterly opposed to doing it, but you know how stubborn senior officers are.

“Someone’s got to play a girl, for God’s sake,” they said to him. “You’re young enough to look like one. You don’t shave more than once a week. And it’s only putting on clothes for an hour or so. Think of what it’ll do for everyone’s morale.” And however much Sean raved and cursed and begged, it did no good.

‘Sean asked me not to accept him. Well, there’s no future in working with unco-operative talent, so I tried to have him dropped from the company. “Look,” I said to the authorities, “acting’s a great psychological strain . . .”

“Poppycock!” they said. “What harm can come of it?”

“The fact that he’s playing a female might warp him. If he were the slightest way inclined . . .”

“Stuff and nonsense,” they said. “You damned theatrical people’ve got pervert on the brain. Sergeant Jennison? Impossible! Nothing wrong with him! Damn fine fighter pilot! Now look here, Major. This is the end of it. You’re ordered to take him and he’s ordered to do it!”

‘So Frank and I tried to smooth Sean down, but he swore he was going to be the worst actress in the world, that he was going to make sure that he was sacked after the first disastrous performance. We told him that we couldn’t care less. His first performance was terrible. But after that he didn’t seem to hate it so much. To his surprise, he even seemed to like it. So we really started to work. It was good having something to do—it took your mind off the stinking food and stinking camp. We taught him how a woman talks and walks and sits and smokes and drinks and dresses and even thinks. Then, to keep him in the mood, we began to play make-believe. Whenever we were in the theatre, we’d get up when he came in, help him into a chair, you know, treat him like a real

woman. It was exciting at first, trying to keep up the illusion, making sure Sean was never seen dressing or undressing, making sure his costumes were always concealing but just suggestive enough. We even got special permission for him to have a room of his own. With his own shower.

‘Then, suddenly, he didn’t need coaching any more. He was as complete a woman on the stage as it was possible to be.

‘But little by little, the woman began to dominate him off stage too, only we didn’t notice it. By this time, Sean had grown his hair quite long—the wigs we had were no damn good. Then Sean started to wear a woman’s clothes all the time. One night someone tried to rape him.

‘After that Sean nearly went out of his mind. He tried to crush the woman in him but he couldn’t. Then he tried to commit suicide. Of course it was hushed up. But that didn’t help Sean, it made things worse and he cursed us for saving him.

‘A few months later there was another rape attempt. After that Sean buried his male self completely. “I’m not fighting it any more,” he said. “You wanted me to be a woman, now they believe I am one. All right. I’ll be one. Inside I feel I am one, so there’s no need to pretend any more. I am a woman, and I’m going to be treated like one.

‘Frank and I tried to reason with him, but he was quite beyond us. So we told ourselves that it was only temporary, that Sean’d be all right later. Sean was great for morale and we knew we could never get anyone a tenth as good as Sean to play the girl. So we shrugged and continued the game.

‘Poor Sean. He’s such a wonderful person. If it wasn’t for him, Frank and I would have given up the ghost long ago.

There was a roar of applause as Sean made another entrance from the other side of the stage. ‘You’ve no idea what applause’ll do to you,’ Rodrick said, half to himself, ‘applause and adoration. Not unless, you’ve experienced it yourself. Out there, on the stage. No idea. It’s fantastically exciting, a frightening, terrifying, beautiful drug. And it’s always poured into Sean. Always. That and the lust—yours, mine, all of us.’

Rodrick wiped the sweat off his face and hands. ‘We’re responsible all right, God forgive us.’

His cue came and he walked onto the stage.

‘Do you want to go back to our seats?’ Peter Marlowe asked the King.

‘No. Let’s watch from here. I’ve never been backstage before. Something I always wanted to do.’ Is Cheng San spilling his guts right now, the King asked himself. *[Cheng San is a local man in league with the King, but he has been caught by the police for questioning.]*

But the King knew there was no value in worrying. They were committed and he was ready—whatever card came up. He looked back at the stage. His eyes watched Rodrick and Frank and Sean. Inexorably, his eyes followed Sean. Every movement, every gesture. Everyone was watching Sean. Intoxicated. And Sean and Frank and the eyes became one, and together the brooding passion on the stage soared into the players and into the watchers, ripping them bare. When the curtain descended on the last act, there was utter silence. The watchers were spellbound.

‘My God,’ Rodrick said, awed. ‘That’s the greatest compliment they could ever pay us. And you deserve it, you two, you were inspired. Truly inspired.’

The curtain began to rise, and when it was completely up the awful silence shattered and there were cheers and ten curtain calls and more cheers and then Sean stood alone drinking the life-giving adoration. In the continuing ovation, Rodrick and Frank came out a last time to share the triumph, two creators and a creation, the beautiful girl who was their pride and their nemesis. The audience filed quietly out of the auditorium. Each man was thinking of home, thinking of her, locked in his own brooding hurt. What’s she doing, right now? Larkin was the most hit. Why in God’s name call the girl Betty? [*Larkin’s wife is called Betty.*] Why? And my Betty—is she—would she—is she now, is she now in someone else’s arms?

And Mac. He was swept with fear for Mem. Did the ship get sunk? Is she alive? Is my son alive? And Mem—would she—is she now—is she? It’s been so long, my God, how long?

And Peter Marlowe. What of N’ai, the peerless? My love, my love.

And all of them.

Even the King. He was wondering who she was with—the vision of loveliness he had seen when he was still in his teens, still on the bum—the girl who’d said with a perfumed handkerchief to her nose that white trash smell worse than niggers.

The King smiled sardonically. Now that was one hell of a broad, he told himself as he turned his mind to more important things.

The lights went out now in the theatre. It was empty but for the two in the landlocked dressing room.

.

Eventually atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Japanese high command capitulate. The prison camp is liberated, but there are a few days before the men can be shipped home.

More men went swimming now. But the outside was still fearful and the men that went were glad to be back inside once more. Sean went swimming. He walked down to the shore with the men and in his hand was a bundle. When

the party got to the beach, Sean turned away, and the men laughed and jeered, most of them, at the pervert who wouldn't take off his clothes like anyone else.

'Pansy!' 'Bugger!' 'Rotten fairy!' 'Homo!'

Sean walked up the beach, away from the jeers, until he found a private place. He slipped off his short pants and shirt and put on the evening sarong and padded bra and belt and stockings and combed his hair and put on makeup. Carefully, very carefully. And then the girl stood up, confident and very happy. She put on her high-heeled shoes and walked into the sea.

The sea welcomed her and made her sleep easy, and then, in the course of time, devoured the clothes and body and the time of her.