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Norval Morris



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The Brothel Boy

A Fragment of a Manuscript

Norval Morris*

The piece is handwritten, in Eric Blair's characteristic, cramped, meticulous script. There are frequent crossings out and emendations. There are occasional spelling inversions, such as "gaurd" for "guard," which are surprising, considering the obvious overall attention the document has received.

As an essay it is uneven. Parts reveal Blair-Orwell at his most masterful—phrases and sentences that he will use again in his later writings; parts are verbose and pretentious, like the early efforts of one ambitious to be a writer but insecure in the craft, struggling too hard for effect.

The document also foreshadows many of the ideas its author later developed in depth and subtlety, themes that later supported novels and essays. That alone would assure its lasting importance. It is a major find.

I bought it for the equivalent of \$185 while on a holiday pilgrimage, retracing Blair's travels during his period in Burma. The vendor was a Parsee; at least he was either a Parsee or a half-caste Anglo-Indian, but I think probably a Parsee since he did not affect an English accent. He bought the manuscript, he said, from some Dacoits who had boasted to him of their courage in breaking into a Government bungalow. He confessed to having purchased the few sticks of furniture and the few personal effects they had stolen. He had quickly got rid of everything other than these papers, which he now held in a crumpled, yellow, paper bag. All this was many years ago; he had turned to legitimate business long since of course—on that I could rely. He had heard of my interest in Eric Blair and thought I might like to see these papers.

It is true that Blair once wrote to his mother about a burglary of his quarters—"who should guard this guardian if he can't guard himself"—though he had not, possibly for reasons of embarrassment, reported it to his superiors in Mandalay; but he had made no mention to either of the loss of a manuscript, which is surprising.

*Julius Kreeger Professor of Law and Criminology. This essay will appear in Professor Morris's book *Madness and the Criminal Law*, which will be published by the University of Chicago Press early in 1983. That book deals with mental illness and competency to stand trial, with the responsibility of the mentally ill for criminal conduct, and with sentencing the mentally ill for their crimes.

So much for my find. The amount I paid for it, annas to the value of \$185, still puzzles me; the sum is a tribute either to the vendor's ignorance or to the purchaser's gullibility.

Here it is, gaps and all.

* * *

Moulmein
Upper Burma
1927

I wonder does any other Old Etonian roll his own cigarettes? And I'm not sure why I do. They are cheaper, of course, but the taste is not very different and bits and pieces of tobacco do drift into one's mouth and require picking off the tongue or lips, which seems to disturb some who observe it. In the Club they make no secret of their disapproval—"A frightfully low-bred habit."

"Blair, *do* take one of mine, it's so much easier."

"No thanks, I prefer these," and I watch their foreheads wrinkle in revulsion.

I had carefully rolled a cigarette and was about to moisten the paper, my tongue protruding, mouth agape, when a native boy burst into my office shouting, "Come, come Sir. Hurry please. They are killing the brothel boy."

I knew, of course, of the local brothel, but not of any "brothel boy." A homosexual prostitute seemed most unlikely in Burma, quite out of character with local values and prevailing behaviour—but I had mistaken his role. At all events, I hurried to where I was led to find several village men standing over the unconscious youth but desisting now from further violence. They were, it seemed immediately obvious, the remainder of a mob of assailants, though how I knew remains unclear to me.

The boy was unconscious, bleeding from the head and face from wounds inflicted by repeated kicks. His shoulder was twisted, obviously broken. His clothes, when whole scarcely adequate, were now gaping, torn, and bloody. He lay in a fetal curve, clutching his groin. The expression on what was left of his features was of anguished surprise, the lips drawn back, mortal fear apparent. The smell of fear and violence, of sweat and vomit, was pervasive.

Resentfully they stood back to allow me to inspect him. Then, not concealing their reluctance, they helped me carry him to the police station, where I telephoned Dr. Veraswami at the nearby hospital. By the time Dr. Veraswami had arrived I knew the outline of the events that had led to the brothel boy's beating. Some villagers

returning to the fields in the afternoon had heard a girl's screams from a heavily overgrown area near the river customarily used for washing, but not at this time of day. When they reached her the screaming had ceased; she lay, a young girl, naked in the brothel boy's arms. She had been raped. In her struggles she had apparently struck her head violently on a sharp rock. The boy had made no effort to flee.

The girl was taken to her home. More villagers arrived. The boy was attacked. He might or might not have been killed—my arrival may have saved him for the hangman. Or the villagers may have overcome their dislike of the Raj's justice sufficiently to bring him to me. It was, after all, a fairly clear case—a young girl, a virgin, raped and injured by the brothel boy.

And it became an even clearer case when, a few days later, she died from the combined effects of the head wound and septicaemia. A villainous mixture of local herbs which the villagers had applied to her head wound probably hastened her death. Dr. Veraswami had not been called.

The law began its processes. By this time I had been long enough in the service of the magistracy to know what must be done to prepare for and carry out a trial in a capital case. In such cases I usually acted only as judge and prosecutor, avoiding the further incongruous role of defense counsel I also assumed in less serious crimes. It was not required, but I had fallen into the practice of asking one or other of the three Burmese claiming some forensic skill to represent indigent natives accused in serious cases. But this time my requests were firmly rejected. There was nothing to be said. He had raped her and she had died. He had been caught immediately. He did not deny what he had done. The only question was whether the villagers would kill him or whether the Raj, with its quaint, imported formality and pretense of independence, would do so. They could see no reason in impeding the Raj. So I was judge, prosecutor, and defense counsel, equally untrained in all three roles, though with developing experience in minor disputes and lesser criminal matters. Certainly the boy could not do much for himself.

I interviewed him under close guard in the hospital. I tried to talk quietly to him; I didn't hurry, sitting silent for long periods. He would look down and away, immobile, never volunteering a word or gesture. The emanation was of one cloyingly anxious to please, but not knowing how to. Whenever I asked him what happened by the river, he would rush to sweaty verbosity, his head and shoulders bobbing forward with exaggerated sincerity, "Please Sir, I paid, I'm sorry Sir. . . . Please Sir, I paid, I'm sorry Sir," the words running on

with rising inflexion, flooding incoherently into one another, until he would begin to sob. When the crying stopped he would return to his motionless silence. And if I again even remotely probed the events by the riverside, the same miserable routine would be followed.

If I asked him to do something, to stand up or sit down, to open a window or a door, to bring me that chair, he would leap to obey, diligence gleaming in his eyes, ingratiatingly obedient, like a well-trained dog. But I could achieve no communication with him beyond his prompt obedience to simple order. I tried different tacks to relate to him, asking him about many things, always speaking clearly and slowly, but to little effect. Sometimes he would seem to understand and give a monosyllabic reply, accompanied always by a clipped "Sir," and sometimes would offer a shy and innocent smile, but words and smiles seemed quite random, having little to do with my question. And as soon as I approached the matter of the girl, or washing by the river, or even money, out would spill the "Please Sir, I paid, I'm sorry Sir" flowing to tears, sometimes preceded by the incongruous smile.

"A 'perseveration,' I believe it is called," Dr. Veraswami told me. "Over and over and over he says the same things in the same words in his mind, believing them completely I think, but not an idea what they mean. Sometimes he will say it all, sometimes bits and pieces, you will find, but always in the same sequence, going round and round, exactly the same. You will get very little more from him. It is all his silly mind will let him think about. Perhaps not silly, isn't it. Safer so. But I doubt he pretends; he does not malingering, I think. He tells you all he can tell himself."

So it proved. The boy was obviously stupid. And the meaningless repetition and cringing self-pity became increasingly distasteful.

I went to the brothel to try to learn more of the boy. He had, it seemed, been born there some twenty or so years ago. Who his mother had been was remembered—she had worked for the previous owners of the brothel but had died a few years after the boy's birth. His father was, of course, undiscoverable; any one of the older male population of this or neighbouring villages could be a candidate for that unsought honor. The present brothel keeper, a smarmy lady of large physique, expressed unqualified praise of her own virtue in having let the boy stay when she bought the brothel some years ago. He was, she said, until now an entirely reliable punkah puller, willing to keep the fans moving for the more prosperous clients who wanted them and would pay for them, while he faded into the background.

I could understand how unobtrusive he would have been. As interested in him as I was, I found it hard to see him as a person at all. On any subject apart from the crime, he said only what he thought he ought to say. Otherwise, immobile, slight, turned away, he seemed as present as the furniture.

"How did he keep himself?" I asked the proprietress of the brothel. She was lyrical in her praise of her generosity. She kept him without charge. Actually let him sleep inside. Clothed and fed him. And sometimes, she said, customers, anxious to show off, would give him a few annas. And she would, in her bountiful kindness, let him keep them. This was, I supposed, the source of his savings, which he tried to give to the girl he killed. "Did he help the girls if they were treated badly by a customer?" I further enquired. Indeed not; that was her job. And, archly, there were always men of the village to whom she could look for assistance if she needed it. But that was very rare. The girls knew they should expect, even encourage, vigour in some customers. They were often the best customers. And the girls knew she would care for them if they were hurt. It would be most improper for the boy to intervene. He was enough trouble to her without that.

All he was expected to do; she explained, was to keep the punkah moving gently to begin with and perhaps later slightly more swiftly so that, by different methods, he and the girl could cool the customer. She laughed with betel-gummed delight at her own wit and then explained to me that the boy's job was very easy, that often he did it on his back, his arms pillowing his head, his heel in the loop of rattan which by regular pressures waved the overhead punkah. She developed this theme of his sloth and her generosity at some length.

"What of his schooling?" I asked. And this confirmed her view of the idiocy of the white servants of the Raj. Powerful eye-rolling laughter was her response, so that I had that often recurring sense of how alien and useless I was in this Burmese setting. A brothel boy at school would be more at home than this assistant police magistrate in Upper Burma. And about as useful, I suppose, in her view.

I asked the brothel keeper if she knew how the boy had met the girl he killed. Her already ample bosom rose, swelled, and trembled with indignation. He had met the girl when he helped her with her parents' laundry. Washing was men's work, but the girl's father was often unwell and the girl did it for him. It was, of course, the brothel boy's duty, in return for the brothel keeper's munificence towards him, to do the washing for the brothel, which took him daily to the river. The boy had, she thought, on occasion assisted the girl by helping her

carry some of her parents' laundry to and from the river. She had, it appeared, most unwisely chatted with him in a friendly way when they met. The proprietress had on occasion made it her business, indeed gone out of her way, to warn the girl that the boy was a fool, a simpleton, not to be trusted, and that she should behave towards him like everyone else, not talk to the stupid boy except to tell him what to do or not to do or to reprimand him. But the girl would not listen. She was only a child of twelve or thirteen, but even so she should have known better, as the younger girls in the brothel all understood, certainly after the kindly but firm warnings so generously given.

I turned to Dr. Veraswami to try to understand the boy and his crime. As usual, Dr. Veraswami was pleased to talk to me about this or any other subject, it seemed. Both of us lacked friends and conversational partners in Moulmein. Dr. Veraswami's children by his first marriage were grown and departed, those by his second were old enough to love but not to talk with. And his present wife would run to hide in the kitchen when she saw me approaching their bungalow. She had, the Doctor told me with a gentle smile, "many fine qualities indeed, indeed, but the confidence in conversation of a particularly timid mouse."

Dr. Veraswami was the only person I enjoyed in Moulmein, certainly the only one I felt at all close to since, try as I would, I could never establish any reciprocal warmth of feeling with any of the natives, though I think some of them knew I respected them. My servants would not talk at all of the crime, looking anxiously resentful and falling silent if I mentioned the boy. By contrast, in the Club, it was a subject of unending, energetic, circumlocutiously salacious chatter, the details of which I spared myself by stressing that since the matter was *sub judice* I should not mention it or receive advice about it. This did no good, of course, but it did give me a further excuse to avoid the Club, and confirmed the prevalent view of me there as a posturing outsider, probably a coolie lover.

Dr. Veraswami had, after all, worked in a mental hospital, and he was closer to the Burmese, certainly in their illnesses, than anyone who was not Burmese. So I turned to him.

The evenings on the porch, the rattan armchairs, the foliage still hanging heavy from the regular late-afternoon rain-shower, the smells and sounds of the village and the nearby hospital and jail, the heat abating, and the bottles of Watney's beer with their wired glass stoppers clinking among the few tired lumps of ice in the oval bucket, made an oasis of mind talking to mind profoundly different from the relentless ritual

phrases of the Club. And it was good to have the chance to learn from him about matters my reading had neglected.

"The boy iss, I think, quite retarded, but to what level iss hard to tell." Dr. Veraswami seemed perplexed. "Iss not easy to be sure. After all, my friend, he iss quite illiterate. Unlike you, he and books move in different circles, always have and will. Measuring such a mind iss beyond me, and others also issn't it. But he iss certainly far backward, far backward."

The villagers had made much of the girl's virginity; I wondered about the boy's sexual experience. Dr. Veraswami was again hesitant, but did not doubt my speculation that the violence by the river might have been the boy's first experience of intercourse. He had witnessed much, of course, but the brothel girls would certainly see themselves as superior to and distant from the boy. Chastity, in the sense of absence of congress with a woman, may well have been forced on the boy.

"Is he mad? Was he mad?" I asked the doctor.

"To be sure, I don't know at all. . . . He iss certainly not normal. But given hiss life, dear friend, how would you know what he thinks . . . if he does think, ass you mean it."

"Mad or not, dear doctor, is he likely to do something like this again, or has he learned his lesson?" Surely the swift and brutal punishment for his venery, then the arrest and everyone condemning him, had instructed even his dull mind.

Dr. Veraswami was not so sure. "One would think so, indeed one would. But I must tell you that there are cases like hiss where even after very severe punishment the act is repeated. You must not, dear friend, underestimate . . ." and here he grasped wildly in the air for an unembarrassing euphemism, and with triumph found it " . . . the power of the gonads! . . . Of course, if you hold him in prisson for twenty years there would then be little risk—these fires do with the years burn less intensely, believe me—but I doubt he would survive so long in prisson."

Dr. Veraswami's resignation in the matter began to annoy me. "Well, if you can't help with why he did it, or whether he's dangerous, what should be done about him?"

"He will be hanged, of course."

I protested that we both knew the boy meant no harm, no evil. The more I thought about him and his crime, the less wicked it seemed, though the injury to the girl and her family was obviously extreme; it was a tragedy, not a sin.

Dr. Veraswami was relentless. "You think him retarded, and he iss. You think him ignorant of what he should and should not do, and he iss. You think he meant no

harm, just like an animal, a reaction to the girl. But don't you see, dear friend, all your English colleagues see him ass just the same ass other Burmese, indistinguishable from all other native boys. All look alike. All are stupid, ignorant, cunning, untrustworthy, dirty, smelly, sexually uncontrolled. All are the same. To excuse him because he iss just like the rest would in their minds be madness in you, not him."

I had no answer. "And," he continued, glancing toward the village, "so I fear iss the view of the Burmese. A brothel boy, yess, but in no other way different. They don't let mind speed worry them. You think he iss different and therefore innocent where others would be guilty; you may be right, probably so, but the villagers don't agree! You must do what your British friends at the Club and the villagers both expect you to do."

My testiness increased. "You seem so content in this, Doctor. The boy is surely *less* responsible than most killers; he meant no harm insofar as he understood what was happening; and you seem so swiftly to accept his hanging. Surely he is *less* worthy of being hanged than most murderers."

Dr. Veraswami was waving his head vigorously from side to side as I spoke. This, I had earlier discovered, was a frequent Indian gesture easily mistaken for dissent, but having the larger meaning of a qualified assent—in effect: you are nearly right but not quite. "The jail, the prisson, perhaps," he said, waving to the nearby dingy walls. "He could sit there on the other side of the wall with the others until he died perhaps. He will learn nothing there, ass you know. Have even less to do than in the brothel. If anything he will become even more idiot than now. And they will prey on him." Then, after a pause to acknowledge my troubled silence, "Or perhaps the place where we lock up the mad. Have you seen it? . . . Worse, I think, than the prisson. Have you been there?"

I had and it was. No psychiatrist could possibly wish to work in such circumstances and none did. It was indeed the least desirable service for any doctor, Burmese or Indian—and no English doctor had as yet ever drunk enough to find himself posted there.

"But iss it not much the same, . . . even in England?" Dr. Veraswami asked. It was not really a question. He knew. I did not know. What he implied was probably the truth.

"So what, dear police magistrate friend, would you have us do with the boy? Shall I take him home with me? Keep him here to serve us beer? Iss it not difficult enough for me to live in this dreadful place without taking him ass a son to my bosom? The villagers would indeed then reject me entirely quite. Or iss he to be a

part of the police magistracy? You would be more doubted and even less respected—a most unwise move indeed, indeed. . . .” And he trailed off to vague head wavings.

“I wonder, Doctor, if one of us could have talked to the girl before she died, what would she have wanted me to do?”

“She would have been more scared of me than of you—Indian doctors, ass you know, bewitch village maidens and turn them into hyenas or other horrible animals; English policemen merely steal them! I doubt either of us could have made her understand very much about the boy. But what if we could? How could she forgive him? How tell him? Take the money from him, perhaps . . . ? It iss offensive. No, you will get no help from such thoughts, my friend. It could not in any way have been her problem. It iss yours.”

Later, reflecting on the realities Dr. Veraswami had held up to me, I found myself dreaming the reformer’s dreams, summoning resources of medicine, psychiatry, prisons without brutality, and a political caring ages removed from Burma under the Raj.

Did much change? I was not sure. Certainly, the boy would not be executed, since with the movement towards minimum social decencies the executioner is one of the first functionaries to be retired. But others tend to take his place. A larger self-caring often accompanies a larger caring for others. The boy might well be held until cured. And how would one ever know that? Only by letting him out. And one can’t do that until he is cured. So he must be held. The false language of treatment and cure would replace the Burmese bluntness of condign punishment—and who could tell which is to be preferred? If the boy could choose he would choose to avoid the hangman, but there would be other whips and torments waiting for him even in my dream of the all-loving State.

My daydreams of the boy and I being elsewhere and at another time, rather than here and now in Moulmein, were understandable but gave me no comfort. My decision would have been cruelly lonely had not Dr. Veraswami seemed to enjoy our discussions and to wish to help me in my thrashings around to avoid hanging the boy. Sometimes, however, he struck home hurtfully. I was pressing him for his opinion of how the boy felt in killing—caring, cruel, lost, bewildered? I suggested confusion and a sense of isolation. Dr. Veraswami looked incredibly embarrassed. “Did you not tell me, dear friend, of some difficulties you and some of your distinguished young friends . . . ass it were . . . experienced at that fine English preparatory school you attended before Eton? St. Cyprian’s, issn’t it?” I had no idea what he was talking about and remained silent. He blushed. Indians do blush,

though less obviously of course than Englishmen. "Enuresis, isn't it, I believe. . . . Flogged for what you did not know how to avoid, I think you said." And I knew that I too was suddenly blushing, the lobes of my ears scarlet, the guilt of my childhood bed-wetting still upon me. Dr. Veraswami was sure he had offended me; his agitation increased. He got up, fussing about with bottles of beer, now warming as the bits of ice he had somewhere found melted to fragments.

He was, of course, quite right. In a sense I had been where the brothel boy found himself. I had been beaten for my sins, sins which were clearly both wicked and outside my control, yet nevertheless sins, or so they seemed to me and to Bingo and to Sim, who wielded the cane and broke the riding crop on me.

It was possible, therefore, to commit a sin without knowing you committed it and without being able to avoid it. So it had seemed then, and the feeling of guilt undeniably remained, and strong. Sin was thus sometimes something that happened—to me as to the brothel boy. You did not properly speaking *do* the deed; you merely woke up in the morning to find in anguish that the sheets were wringing wet.

I tried to calm Dr. Veraswami, to assure him that he had not offended me, that I appreciated his directness, that I needed his help. This led me to an excessive confession, one I had made to no one else, and probably no one else knew about it, not even Sim. The last time Sim had flogged me for bed-wetting I remember with great pain a further loss of control of my bladder and a warm flow inside my short pants, down the inside of my left knee, onto my long socks and into my left shoe. Sim had me bent over a desk, posterior protruding; but I hoped most desperately and still in misery believe that the desk shielded his eyes from my pants and the pool which may have formed at my feet. The shame, had the puddle been seen and almost surely commented on, would have been beyond bearing. But I still don't know if it was.

Dr. Veraswami's hands were flying about in near frenzy. I tried hurriedly to make the link to the case of the brothel boy, straining thus to calm him. I thought he feared a breach in our friendship, but that is unfair; on reflection I think his only anxiety was that he was troubling me too deeply. Perhaps he was.

Were my feelings then, and the brothel boy's now, at all comparable? Had I become a ponderous, unfeeling mixture of Bingo and Sim, punishing the boy by death because of the harshness of the environment into which he had been flung, compared to which my trials at St. Cyprian's were trivial?

Dr. Veraswami would have none of it. "Dear friend, bed-wetting and rape which kills . . . how can you com-

pare them at all? . . . misplaced guilt . . . childish fears and adversities loom ever large, but no, not at all, not in any way like the brothel boy's guilt."

Perhaps gallows humor would reassure the Doctor that he had not wounded me. "At all events, Dr. Veraswami, after that beating, when I wet my sock and shoe, I did not wet my bed again. I was cured. Sim cured me. The hangman will surely cure any lack of control our brothel boy may have over his burgeoning sexual instincts!"

But Dr. Veraswami was hardly listening, "No, no, no, dear Sir . . . enuresis while you sleep; sexual attack while awake; nothing similar."

So I pressed the analogy, suggesting that precautions might be taken to empty the bladder. One might arrange to be awakened during the night if others would help. What were the precautions the brothel boy should have taken against copying what he had seen, and seen as acceptable, to be purchased when the flesh engorged? The brothel boy could hardly be justly punished for the desire. Obviously he had nothing to do with it, less than I had with the springs of enuresis. And whence was he to find the wisdom and control, in unsought and unexpected heat, not to do what probably seemed to him an obvious and acceptable act. He had observed in the brothel apparent gratitude by both parties, simulation and true appreciation being indistinguishable by him. Where were the differences between him and me in sinning? The distinctions seemed to favour him.

Dr. Veraswami's intensity increased. "No, you are very wrong, forgive me contradicting you, but you are off a lot. The boy must have known he was hurting her, dull though he iss. The girls in the brothel fear and complain of violence, they talk to each other about it often, the boy must have known. Once he came close upon her, he knew, he knew, believe me my friend. The cases are quite different. You do yourself too much injustice. You did not sin, he did, and most grievously. Your comparison with your bed-wetting misses the essential difference, issn't it—he was conscious of what he wass doing, you were not. And being conscious, backward and confused though he iss, mistreated and bewildered though he wass, he must be held responsible. You must convict him, punish him, hang him! He iss a citizen of Burma, a subject of your Imperial Majesty, but you must treat him ass a responsible adult and punish him. That is what citizenship iss."

I had never before heard such a lengthy, passionately sibilant speech from Dr. Veraswami. It seemed to have calmed him. Again, it didn't help me.

It seemed to me that the discussion had tilted crazily against the brothel boy. Responsibility . . . citizenship . . .

consciousness of what he was doing . . . were these sensible standards for a youth of his darkly clouded intelligence and blighted situation? And, if not, what standard should be applied, to what end, with what results?

An all-wise God could by definition draw these fine distinctions, but it was hard to think of the brothel boy and an omniscient God as in any way related, hardly an omnibenevolent God to be sure. And I knew that I was no plenipotentiary of such a divinity; a minor agent of the Raj was enough for me. My employers had never distinguished themselves in drawing delicately generous moral distinctions; indeed, they seemed to judge entirely by the results and not by the intentions, which surely must inhibit any fine gradations in attributing responsibility.

Did this mean that there was no room at all in my jurisdiction for mercy, for clemency? I decided to put the question to Dr. Veraswami.

Unlike my fellow members of the Club, Dr. Veraswami enjoyed my skill in rolling cigarettes. He rarely smoked but occasionally would accept one of my home-made cigarettes. He preferred to moisten the paper himself, I holding the enfolded tobacco out to him; but he also cheerfully accepted those the product of my own hands and tongue.

When talking with Dr. Veraswami, I found I sometimes rolled a cigarette to give me time to phrase a point of delicacy or difficulty, as many who smoke a pipe use the ritual of filling, lighting, and tamping as time for meditation. On this occasion, the cigarette rolling was a preamble to an effort to seek Dr. Veraswami's views on the moral aspects of the problem of the brothel boy. And, if he agreed that the boy was less culpable, to press him why he was so adamant about the hanging.

"Do you know a painting by Peter Paul Rubens of the Last Judgment?" I asked Dr. Veraswami. "It is a huge painting with lovely though overweight naked ladies and gentlemen going up to unclothed inactivity above the right hand of Christ. Just below His left hand there is an interesting Prince of Darkness in control of a lecherous team dragging the damned off to unpainted horrors, with a face at the bottom of the Devil's side of the painting screaming in agony."

Dr. Veraswami said he had seen a poor print of it once, he thought, but in any event he plunged ahead of my circumlocution to the heart of the question. "You ask, I suppose, my friend, where will the boy be if the admirable Mr. Rubens paints truth? Of course, I don't know. I am not a Christian but, if I were, I would guess he will not be among those damned."

"Well, then, how can you tell me to hang him? I

asked, pressing Dr. Veraswami for reconciliation of what some would see as conflicting positions.

Dr. Veraswami yielded to no difficulty in the reconciliation. Mercy, a full and forgiving understanding of behaviour, was the prerogative of whoever was God, if there was one, and if he had so little to do that he interested himself in us after we died—which Dr. Veraswami doubted. Nor did he believe, as did some Hindus, that we came back in some other form; but if we did the boy was as likely to ascend as to descend in the hierarchy—whatever it was. All in all, if God had made the boy as he was, and put him where he was, it was hard to see that the boy had behaved any better or worse than God must have expected. But all that, he argued most vigorously, had nothing to do with Assistant Police Magistrate Blair, who, admirable though Dr. Veraswami knew he was, educated and wise beyond his years, could not now help the boy. "Justice, my friend, iss your job. Justice, not mercy." And his gesturing hand fell and was still, simulating the fall of the gallows.

"Surely, Doctor, mercy can be a part of justice. They are hardly in opposition. Cannot mercy infuse justice, shape it, direct it?"

"Sometimes, sometimes, but often it iss beyond our competence." And he launched again into a lengthy speech, his plump white-clad behind balanced against the veranda rail, his black thumb and forefinger nipping at the air as if to capture ideas as they floated by. The tenor of his argument was, so far as I followed it, Freudian. If we knew all we could about any murderer, including the brothel boy, all about his inherited capacities and all his life experiences, we would find more than sufficient explanation for all his actions, including the killing. Conduct was apparently "overdetermined," once you included the unconscious and the subconscious. And for most of these pressures which collectively and massively determine everyone's behaviour, it would seem unfair to hold anyone responsible. "But, my dear friend, fair or not, it iss essential to do so! Within justice there may be room for clemency, for mercy, for human understanding, providing only the essential purposes of punishment under law are not frustrated. Here they would be. He hass killed while deliberately doing what iss a very serious crime. There iss no room for mercy, no room at all." And then as if he thought it would clinch the matter: "Why even the good Viennese doctor himself, Sisigmund Freud, holds you responsible for your unconscious. There it iss!"

"But, dear Doctor, if we can assess differences of fault, or think we can, sufficiently to reduce or increase the punishment of the guilty, to be merciful or to be severe, why can't we, why can't I, by the same means

reduce guilt itself? After all, sometimes we do that—when people kill accidentally we call it manslaughter, if they have been very careless indeed; and if they have not been careless and yet have killed, it is usually no crime and never murder. We may not be very good at judging moral fault; but in a rough and ready way we can. And surely the boy is nearer innocence than guilt."

"No, no, my magistrate friend, you make the same mistake, forgive me please. We are talking only of intentional acts, not acts of carelessness—they are quite different. That is what distinguishes the boy's act from your enuresis, isn't it. And for such acts . . ." and here Dr. Veraswami grabbed two handfuls of ideas from the air around him ". . . the boy is either to be treated as a responsible man or he isn't. There are no half-men for guilt in the eyes of the law. If there were a choice of punishments for what he has done, perhaps you could be merciful, because he has been much abused and is of weak mind. But there isn't, there isn't. It is circular you see, dear friend."

I didn't see at all, but he pressed on, now almost skipping about with the released energy of uninhibited talk, which I suddenly realised was an even more cherished luxury for him than for me—"Man is defined by his capacity for moral choice. That is what man is, nothing else, otherwise an animal." And then, chuckling at the cruel pointedness of the joke: "Dr. Freud and the law agree, you see. For his unconscious mind and for his conscious mind, such as they are, the brothel boy is twice responsible. Otherwise you would have to excuse everyone, certainly everyone you took the trouble to understand."

Though an elusive conclusion, the point was strong. Justice cannot excuse everyone, obviously. And if our judgment of moral guilt reflects mainly our degree of ignorance of the relevant moral facts, then all we would do in a mercy-controlled system of punishment would, in effect, be to excuse or be merciful towards those we knew a lot about or decided to find out about—and not the others. To my dismay it seemed to me, therefore, that if Justice stands in opposition to Mercy, we are damned (or, certainly, this Assistant Police Magistrate is); and if Mercy is to infuse Justice, to be a part of it, we probably claim beyond our competence.

Dr. Veraswami understood my difficulty in this whole matter, my search for some principle to guide me. "I think a lot about it, my friend, since it is such a worry to you. And, if I may please, I hope you agree, here is my conclusion": And after a pause, a thumb-and-forefinger, tweezer-like nip in the air to catch his words, "There is no steady principle to guide you, none at all. You must be a man of principles, not of principle."

Dr. Veraswami seemed to be becoming more elliptic than before, and in annoyance I told him so. "No, you misunderstand me," he replied, "I mean there iss no moral principle to guide you, moral, moral. . . . There are, of course, other guides, other principles. The main one iss that you English should use the executioner ass little ass you can—rarely, if you use him at all. And how to know how little iss ass little ass you can?" Here he paused again, hands still, achieving impressive rhetorical effect. "I have it: if the British do not wish him killed, there iss no problem unless the natives want him killed very much, and the British think they should let them have their way. If it is a native to be executed they will not care too much. But if the British and the natives *both* want him killed, ass with the brothel boy, unless he iss so very mad ass to be obviously mad to all, natives and British, you can do nothing unless you also wish to leave the service of the Raj and be seen by all ass a treasonable fool."

Hesitantly, regretting the force of "treasonable fool," he added: "I would like to help you, but I can't. Perhaps you should leave here . . . I would miss you. You would be happier in England I think. But iss this the way? Iss this the way to go? And even if you do save the boy, what can we do with him? Ass I said, the jail? . . . the madhouse?"

It appalled me to realize that I was in Pilate's role, at least as Pilate may have seen it, though otherwise the comparison made no sense. Nor, increasingly it seemed to me, did I. Perhaps it was me for the madhouse that Dr. Veraswami saw as useless for the boy. No; I understood the issue all too well; it was now clear and I was not confused. Dr. Veraswami was right. As a moral issue, the boy was nearer to innocence than most of us; at the Last Judgment I would back his chances over most. But as a political matter, what a weak reed he had in me to sustain his life.

I recalled another occasion in Moulmein when I had failed to stand for the right against public pressures. Was it to become a habit? A recidivist Pilate indeed! A few months ago, very much against my better judgment and every inclination, I had shot a working elephant that had recovered from a period of "must" in which he had damaged some property and killed a native. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him; but the natives expected it of me and I had to do it; I could feel their dark, sweaty wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. If I did nothing it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. So I shot the elephant.

I had to contend then only with native opinion; the Europeans would have divided on the question, some

holding it to be a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. Now, with the brothel boy, the forces pressing on me were different and probably greater. No one would laugh if I did not hang the boy, but both European and native opinion was agreed and vehement: that is what I ought to do, what I must do.

Memories of St. Cyprian again swept in. I remembered how Latin was beaten into me and I still doubted that a classical education could be successfully carried on without corporal punishment. Bingo, Sim, and the boys all believed in its efficacy; as in Moulmein, public opinion was unanimous about the value of physical punishment. I recalled Beacham, a boy of dull mind, not as dull as the brothel boy but certainly not bright, whom Sim flogged towards their joint goal of a scholarship for Beacham, as the heartless might flog a floundered horse. And when Beacham was severely beaten yet again for his failure in the scholarship exam, his words of poignant regret came back to me: "I wish I'd had that caning before I went up for the exam."

[Here there are pages missing in the manuscript. It leaps to a few concluding paragraphs.]

As I walked with Dr. Veraswami into the jail yard I caught sight of him. Six gaurds were getting him ready for the gallows. He stood, surrounded by the gaurds, slim and muscular, with shaven head and vague liquid eyes. He seemed genuinely bewildered, puzzled, uncomprehending though deeply fearful. The gaurds crowded close to him, with their hands always on him in a careful, caressing grip, as though all the while feeling him to make sure he was there. He seemed hardly to notice what was happening. His eye caught mine and paused while it dawned on him that he knew me and that I had been gentle with him. The vague eyes developed a semblance of communication.

By the time he stood by the scaffold no marks remained of the beating. His body had repaired itself, but the intervening weeks had not helped my mind to repair its anguish.

I walked behind him to the gallows. Though his arms were bound, he walked quite steadily. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped lightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path. The puddle—and I understood why—brought me back to the unreasoning St. Cyprian guilt. That I should be destroying a healthy conscious man, dull and dangerous though he might be. The unspeakable wrongness of cut-

ting short a life in full tide. The struggle for rational judgment came as a minor anodyne. How can I refashion the world of the just and the unjust, of the forgiving and of the prejudiced, myself an uncertain observer rather than a shaper of justice, a player without influence on the rules. Only by my own death would I escape the pain of these cruel games. I must leave Burma.

So that when he was dead, and the Superintendent of the jail asked Dr. Veraswami and me and the rest of the little procession to join him in a drink—"I've got a bottle of whiskey in the car. We could do with it."—I found myself drinking and laughing, perhaps too loudly, with the rest of them, quite amicably, natives and Europeans alike.

Veraswami was right; I must leave Burma.

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