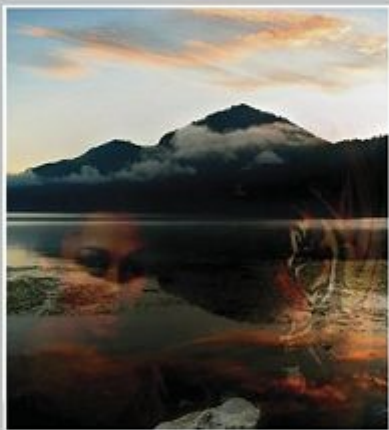


O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

The Land of Gold



Colin Holcombe

The Land of Gold
by Colin Holcombe

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THE LAND OF GOLD

—A NOVEL—

Colin Holcombe

CHAPTER ONE

Who is she? Henshall wondered as his pencil sketched the features of a woman dining with friends at a nearby table. Certainly not someone you'd forget in a hurry, he thought as he watched her tease her male companions, hearing them out in affectionate mockery before returning with some remark that set the whole group laughing again. But there was much he didn't understand of this strange country, and he transferred his attention to a couple at another table, noticing on looking up that the party-giver had left her boisterous companions. Then she was back, strolling away from him,

shawl draped on her shoulders. Exasperated, Henshall propped the sketch pad on a chair, and went to help himself to the next course, seeing the woman now making her exit, waving to guests as she climbed the flower-hung steps to the hotel foyer.

Henshall finished his meal and looked out. The palms rose dark against the sky, and the candle lights on tables bobbed and glimmered across the lawn until lost in the pale expanse that marked the beach. Whatever the commercialism, he thought, or the threadbare poverty of its villages, Bali was still the fabulous east, and he could see why expatriates were drawn to the exotic, even to women who lacked the nuances of understanding that kept couples together. For an hour he tried to sketch the scene, but when the gamelan orchestra packed up, and there was only the odd tourist left, Henshall settled the bill and walked the three miles back to his own lodgings through a night still warm and smelling of frangipani and dry leaves.

A mist blotted out the view when he woke the following morning. He pulled on a sweater and sat on the veranda, ordering a nasi goreng when the houseboy appeared under a dripping green umbrella. A couple of women went by with bundles of vegetables on their heads, and there were several of the small dogs of Bali, padding warily past with their usual craven and preoccupied air. The morning grew chilly as he finished his meal, but the trip was one he was funding himself, and he went out as though prospecting, for all that mineral exploration was tiresome, moving him on before he could absorb his surroundings.

In the afternoon he rode over to the Bali Beach Hotel, where he joined guests returned from rained-off tours. A weak sun glowed on the metal table as he sat with a couple of English women comparing handicraft prices. Henshall drank his tea slowly, and leafed through the guidebook, wondering who'd advise him on the village festivals so lavishly photographed. When the women left, still complaining about local practices, Henshall read

on and was not sure what the voice had said, or whether it had asked anything at all. 'You're more than welcome', he said. 'I'm leaving shortly.' The voice behind him laughed and said, 'That's not what I meant.' Perhaps his surprise showed, for the face gleamed with mischief, the water glistening on the long eyelashes. 'You don't recognize me, but I know you.' Henshall opened his mouth to reply, but she was already sauntering off, down the tiled steps to the swimming pool. All that day and the days following, Henshall could see in his mind the extraordinary face with the dark eyes, the features laughing at him, but their owner didn't reappear.

It was in a small village in the hills where he was sketching four of the little girls waiting to receive a sprinkling of holy water before their Legong dance, that someone settled beside him and took the pad from his hand. He knew the identity, even before the playful voice said, 'This will get you into trouble, my friend.' Henshall let her flip through the sketch pad, watching her turn the pages round to study them carefully. 'Where am I?' she asked. 'These

aren't bad, but what have you done with me?' Henshall explained that her studies were in another pad, a smaller one he kept for social occasions. For spying, she decided: why else would he draw?

'It's harmless enough', said Henshall. 'Trains the eye.'

'It is not harmless to us.'

'Something to talk about at lunch perhaps?'

'Oh that is much too forward', she said, pulling a face. 'You must introduce yourself properly when you invite someone out in Bali.'

'Peter Henshall. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?'

'Hartini Sujono', replied the woman, now springing to her feet.

When they were sat in a local eating-house, Hartini prodding the old crone into frying some fish and sending off for fresh papaya, Henshall could look more closely at the arrival. Not wholly Javanese, he realized, but taller, a straighter nose and jaw, with a warmer complexion, and an openness

that seemed to surround and take possession of what he was saying—when it cared to, and wasn't holding itself for his inspection and admiration. Henshall brought the conversation back to their surroundings, to the village with its straggle of dusty coconut palms and the terraces of *padi* that towered above them, fresh and green in the afternoon light.

'Think I was looking for you?' countered the head, turning on him again.

'Just wondered how you got here.'

'Hired a car. You came here yesterday as well, didn't you?' She pointed a fork. 'The young man who makes pictures.'

'Wouldn't go on too much about the young man. He's a good bit older than you.'

'Hartini is twenty-seven.'

'And Peter is thirty-four.'

The woman whistled. 'Thirty-four', she mocked, drawing out the syllables. 'A man of distinction, of

mature years. With many children: banyak anak-anak?’

‘I’m not married as it happens. Is that wrong?’

‘It is irresponsible. A man should always marry and have children, even if he doesn’t care for women. Never been tempted?’

‘Not for a while’, he said, reaching for the papaya.

‘Is that a broken heart?’ she said, resting chin on hands. ‘How romantic.’

‘Was it?’

‘So what did you expect? Guarantees? Peter Henshall, you’re not one to see the world through coloured glass. No castles in the air for our travelled Englishman.’

‘That doesn’t seem a helpful line’, he observed, now starting to divide the fruit between the two plates. A bluebottle buzzed through and settled somewhere on the atap awning. ‘But you’re right’, he said, handing her portion over, ‘I’m just passing through.’

'I'm surprised to hear that', she said, lolling her head as though to make him out.

'No doubt we make the world we need.'

'That is the wisdom of experience, is it?' She smiled to herself, and started on the fruit, appearing not to listen further.

'Wouldn't you agree?' he persisted, watching the pieces disappear into the large mouth.

She paused and looked up, a mischievous look under the dark eyebrows. 'So let's ask what brought you here. Looking for work?'

'Should I be?' The change of tone surprised him, and he frowned, the two creases giving the face a quietly humoured look.

'I thought you might ask for openings at dinner tonight', she said. 'But perhaps you won't.'

'That's without the usual admirers? After the shameless performance the other night.'

'Oh I think I can make an evening free. Just the once, for our mature Englishman.'

Henshall walked the woman to her car. Bundling equipment on the back of his hired motorbike, he drove to Kuta and the Hotel Bali Beach, where he checked in without pausing to reflect. Hang the expense, he muttered as he waited for his call to come through. Frank Norbury, Metax Mining's man in Kuala Lumpur, expressed no surprise, but said, 'Very well, Mr Henshall. I'll see if there's still an opening in the Mapura operation. We'll look forward to hearing from you in a few days.'

A different woman presented herself when Henshall appeared at eight that evening. With a slight inflection of the head, Hartini, now turned out in a short cocktail number, allowed him to escort her over to the far side of the lawn, away from the band and the spotlit dancefloor.

'So what do you think?' he said when she opened her bag and peered into the make-up mirror. 'Should we get business over with?'

She looked up.

'Just a thought', he said, watching her carefully.

The return was unnerving. 'All this amateur psychology comes from reading?' she said at last. 'Long hours on your own, Mr Henshall?'

'I try to stay abreast of events. To understand this Suvarnabhumi of yours.'

'This what?'

'So the old Hindu kingdoms called it.'

'We call it the land of shadows, Mr Henshall. Not the land of gold.'

'Do you now?' he said. 'Such a beautiful place, and all you think of is shadow puppets, the other side of life.'

'Is there some agenda we're following?'

'I'd like to know how I could be of service to you.'

'To me, Hartini Sujono?' She seemed amused, but then clicked the bag shut, as though excluding him. 'Well, if you're going to Australia. You are, aren't you?'

'I might get a job here.'

'You could take a parcel out for me. I can't take it myself, and it's got to be someone I trust. Would you do that?'

'Just a parcel?'

'It won't weigh you down.'

He glanced at her quickly, and thought he saw an earnestness as the gaze settled and moved on. 'Not drugs or anything?' he said.

'A manuscript. Just a few hundred pages.'

'Why don't you carry it out yourself?'

'Because I don't have a passport. And anyway they'd search me and take it away.' She shrugged. 'Listen, I'm an undesirable. I did have a passport, with my husband. We travelled a lot: to the States, to Holland, performing. It was a good combination. For a time we were very popular. Are you following me?'

'Yes. Your English is much too good to have been learnt here.'

'I went to school in England, but that's not the point. We were in Jakarta the time of the Sukarno

plot. Not communists, just socialist sympathizers, but it didn't make any difference. He was a little man, half Chinese, and not strong. He should have run as I did, or asked for their authority, but he didn't. I hid in the garden while they took him away.'

'Someone had to work for his release.'

'They shot him at the station, or on the way. Just lined him up, with all the others. The thousands and thousands of them.'

Henshall's look narrowed. 'So,' he said, half knowing the answer, 'what's the manuscript about?'

'The facts. We want people to know what happened.'

'Who's the we?'

'Will you help us do that?'

He stared into the distance, looked at the woman again, and said calmly, 'No doubt a mistake, but for you, Hartini Sujono, I will.'

'You are a good young man', she said, taking his hand for a moment. 'Now you can ask me to dance.'

No more was said of the manuscript, and for the next hour they were an ordinary couple dining out together, a couple who didn't know each other well, as there were long silences, which Henshall mentioned when they walked back to the hotel early, many of the guests still whooping it up around them.

'I think you will honestly try to get the package out', the woman said. 'The rest doesn't matter. I'll be leaving tomorrow anyway.'

Henshall made friends easily with women, but was now disturbed by the news. Slowly he followed her down the corridor, where she left him to get the package. 'And the mailing address?' he said as the bulky document was put into his hands. She took his arm and guided him up the stairs to his room, where she paced about while he extracted some ice from the minibar. 'Rather ships in the night', he said, handing the drink over.

Again there was a look he couldn't place, but she was only saying, 'Peter, just promise me something. Whatever happens, you will deliver the package.'

'Provided it's what you say it is.'

'Oh you men!' she exclaimed. 'Here, take the thing and read it, will you?'

Three independent witnesses affirm that in the Sungei Lantang village some 28 or 29 men, women and children were snatched from their homes on the night of October 2nd and attacked with parangs, their bodies afterwards being thrown into the river. This appears to have been a spontaneous incident, not incited by the military, but no attempt was subsequently made by the police to investigate the matter, nor to recover the property and belongings seized by the villagers responsible . . .

Our estimates for the Province as a whole are therefore in excess of 8,000 persons and perhaps as many as 20,000 . . .

There was much more in this vein, and Henshall finally put the manuscript down in disgust. 'Was it really as bad as this?' he said.

'Will you just take the manuscript?'

Henshall had read something of this in his guidebook: the abortive communist coup of 1965, the murder of five generals, the countercoup launched by the army in which large numbers of communists had been killed, the installation of Suharto as the head of the ruling Golkar party. But the words hadn't meant much. Indonesians were an open and friendly people, indifferent to anything but their families and national sports teams. Now there was a deeper side, he realized. Twenty thousand people in one province alone. Dozens killed in every village. He suddenly felt cold in the air-conditioned room, and went to sit on the balcony wall. The woman followed, seating herself carelessly on a chair facing.

'You still remember, still think about these events?' he said.

'They are still with me. Not so painful, but still there, yes.'

'But this was nine years ago.'

'I did nothing to help him.'

'What could you do? You were seventeen, just a girl.'

'Eighteen. A wife and entertainer. Everyone hummed our songs.'

'Punishing yourself won't help.'

'Peter,' she said softly, 'I'm not punishing myself. I'm performing.' She stretched her legs, and seemed bored with the conversation.

'Life has to go on, I suppose.'

'No, performing is not living. Every day I perform, but what I feel, that's something else, something only for me.'

Henshall sat down again. It had been an instinctive gesture, protective if anything, but his arms still sensed the aching fullness of the body. 'Where do you sing now?' he said awkwardly as the woman continued to stare at him.

'I have my own club, or part of it. How else could I sing? I have the wrong age, the wrong nationality, and the wrong background. I'd never keep a job if I worked for somebody else.' She paused. 'And I have a protector.'

'Imagine someone like you would.'

'Do you? Do you now!' She was on her feet and angry with him. 'Don't you understand? There's nothing on offer. I've got nothing for you.'

'I should be happy to get to know you better.'

'You can't.'

'If only as a friend.'

'That would be an unkindness to us both. You think this is Europe, where one can have a casual fling and forget about it. But here we pay with our blood. You won't understand, but we do.'

'Hartini, listen to me. I don't suppose it's wise, or unexpected, but I should like to know more about you.'

'My friend, it is late and I'm tired. Please take the parcel.'

She opened her bag, and handed him the address. 'Just keep that safe, and don't write on the parcel till you're out of the country.'

'Nothing to remember you by?'

'Please do as I say.'

'Give me your address. I'd like to think of you singing somewhere definite, even if I can't get to it.'

'You already know the place. Mapura. The Kotapalu nightclub.' She smiled at his expression. 'So I must thank you for a very pleasant evening, and bid you goodnight.' She walked to the door and waited for Henshall to open it.

'If I came back to Kotapalu, if I got a job there, would you see me?'

'Please take the parcel.'

'Why not?'

'Goodnight, my friend.' She freed herself and opened the door. For a moment she laid a hand on his shoulder as if to say more, but then turned away. Henshall watched her walk down the half-lit corridor to the stairs, the steps slowly becoming

inaudible. Then he went to bed and stayed awake a long time, sensing the slight honey fragrance that seemed comforting and then disquieting as it filled the closed room.