

The Four Dutchmen by Somerset Maugham

I was the only passenger on a journey that took the best part of a whole month.

This was due to the fact that the ship I was on really took it's time.

Slowly, oh so slowly it wended it's way through the Malay Archipelago stopping at numerous little islands.

The officers of our ship consisted of the Captain, the Chief officer, the Chief Engineer and the Supercargo. They were Dutch; they were the greatest friends, and they were the four fattest men I ever saw.

They all had large round bare red faces, with large fat arms and large fat legs, and large fat bellies.

It was a treat to see them at tiffin. Their appetites were enormous. Each seemed to vie with the other as to how high he could pile his plate.

They were like schoolboys together, playing absurd little pranks with one another. They knew each others jokes by heart and no sooner did one of them start the familiar lines than he would splutter with laughter so violently that he could not go on, and then the others began to laugh too. They rolled about in their chairs and grew redder and redder, hotter and hotter, till the skipper shouted for beer, and each gasping but happy, drank his bottle in one enchanted draught.

They had been on this run together for five years and when, a little time before, the Chief Officer had been offered a ship of his own he refused it. He would not leave his companions. They had made up their minds that when the first of them retired they would all retire.

'All friends and a good ship. Good grub and good beer. Vot can a sensible man vant more?'

However there was one problem. The Captain was very susceptible to the charms of the native girls. His English became almost unintelligible when he described to me the effect they had on him.

The Chief Officer, however, shrugged fat and indulgent shoulders. He believed the Captain was always losing his head over one brazen hussy after another, but the passion never lasted:

"De old man suffers from fatty degeneration of de heart. But as long as I'm dere to look after him not much harm comes of it."

At Macassar I disembarked and bade farewell to my four fat friends.

"Make another journey with us" they said "Come back next year or the year after. You'll find us all here just the same as ever."

A good many months passed until one day sitting in a hotel lounge I came across a back copy of the *Straits Times*. Suddenly my eyes caught a headline:

The Utrecht Tragedy. Supercargo and Chief Engineer. Not guilty.

I read the paragraph carelessly and then sat up. The *Utrecht* was the ship of my four fat Dutchmen and apparently the Supercargo and the Chief Engineer had been on trial for murder. It couldn't be my two fat friends...could it?

I went to the manager of the hotel, a genial Dutchman, who spoke admirable English, and showed him the paragraph.

“That’s the ship I sailed on. Surely these fellows aren’t the men I knew. The men I knew were enormously fat.” I asked.

“Yes that’s right,” he answered “They were celebrated all through the Dutch East Indies, the four fattest men in all the service. It’s been a terrible thing. It made a great sensation. And they were friends. I knew them all. The best fellows in the world.”

“But what happened?” I asked.

It appeared that on one of the trips the Captain took with him a Malay girl that he had been carrying on with. The other three had been against her coming—what did they want with a woman in the ship? It would spoil everything—but the Captain insisted and she came.

On that journey they didn’t have the fun they generally had. When they wanted to play bridge the Captain was dallying with his girl in his cabin; when they touched port and went ashore the time seemed long to him till he could get back to her. It was the end of all their larks.

The Chief Officer was more bitter against her than anybody: he was the Captain’s particular chum, they had been shipmates ever since they first came out from Holland; more than once high words passed between them on the subject of the captain’s infatuation.

It was the end of the good fellowship that had so long obtained between the four fat men. Things went from bad to worse.

Uneasiness...Tension....

Then one night the ship was aroused by the sound of a shot and the screams of the Malay girl.

The Supercargo and the Chief Engineer tumbled out of their bunks and they found the Captain, a revolver in his hand, at the door of the Chief Officer’s cabin. He pushed past them and went on deck.

They entered and found the Chief Officer dead and the girl cowering behind the door. The Captain had found them in bed together and had killed the Chief Officer.

How he had discovered what was going on didn’t seem to know, nor what was the meaning of the intrigue. Had the Chief Officer induced the girl to come to his cabin in order to get back on the Captain, or had she, knowing his ill will and anxious to placate him, lured him to become her lover?

It was a mystery that would never be solved

While the Engineer and Supercargo were in the cabin, horror struck at the sight before them, another shot was heard. They knew at once what was happened. They rushed up the companion. The Captain had gone to his cabin and blown his brains out.

Then the story grew dark and enigmatic.

Next morning the Malay girl was nowhere to be found and when the Second Officer who had taken command of the ship, reported this to the Supercargo, the Supercargo said:

“She’s probably jumped overboard. It’s the best thing she could have done. Good

riddance to bad rubbish”.

But one of the sailors on the watch, just before dawn, had seen the Supercargo and the Chief Engineer carry something up on deck, a bulky package, about the size of a native woman, and drop it overboard.

It was said all over the ship that these two, to avenge their friends, had sought the girl out in her cabin and strangled her and flung her body into the sea.

When the ship arrived at Macassar they were arrested and taken to be tried for murder.

The evidence was flimsy and they were acquitted.

But all through the East Indies they knew that the Supercargo and the Chief Engineer had executed justice on the trollop who had caused the death of the two men they loved.

And thus ended the comic and celebrated friendship of the four fat Dutchmen.