

Professor William Granville Eccleston, Ph.D.

From a purely academic standpoint, the professor was pleased by what he saw. A preponderance of sharp, long blades and needle-like instruments and a complete lack of hacking, sawing, or chopping tools on the table near the sacrificial altar tended to support the idea that his research on the native Sentilili people had been, at least in part, “right on the money,” as his students would say. Or rather, they would if they’d been foolish enough to follow him here and had remained in any condition to speak after the ordeals...

Unfortunately, lying face down on that very same sacrificial altar, his hands and feet bound, his mouth gagged (since he was likely to scream, quite prodigiously, he expected), and his head restrained, Professor William Granville Eccleston, fellow of the Salem Normal School’s Department of History and world traveler, was, to say the least, slightly concerned. This wasn’t due just to the fact that the Sentilili had manhandled him into this position, or even the fact that his face now appeared to be stuck to the altar, glued there by something dark red and viscous. No, it was the anticipatory waiting, the excitement to see the fruition of his work, combined with the apprehension that he would not live long enough to tell anyone about it, that fueled his disquietude.

Professor Eccleston had traveled to this particularly isolated island in the Alamarian Chain, about halfway between Andaman Island (claimed by India) and the

southern mainland of Burma, to get answers. He'd come to the conclusion that the Sentilili, unlike other bloodthirsty tribes that populated these islands, did not simply settle for removing the heads of transgressors. Instead, they performed a sort of primitive "exploratory surgery," the kind that could be quite fatal, especially when one considered that the Sentilili began their incisions at the base of the skull.

For some reason, in all the time he'd been researching these fascinating people, it had never once occurred to him that such surgery must have been performed not only without anesthetic, but with the subject completely aware. And it was only now, when faced the prospect of experiencing their ministrations firsthand, that he realized how truly painful this was likely to be. Right up until it killed him, which seemed very, *very* likely. Especially when he allowed his eyes to wander to the errant flies that had begun steadily feeding on that sticky fluid.

The scientist in him took over a bit as he began to consider the question that suddenly popped into his head. If by some miracle he did survive what was to come, which of the two dozen or more deadly local diseases would he succumb to first? Given his choices, he hoped it would be yellow fever. At least he'd have a chance to survive. Plus, several of the others tended to be, well...to put it delicately, icky.

Adjusting his head slightly within its restraints, the professor looked around for his guide. "Guide"—that was the nearest he'd come to a joke in months. Shashi was very

nearly the greatest criminal mastermind Professor Eccleston had ever met.

It was difficult to see anyone other than those directly responsible for the ceremony, given that the number and size of the fires in the area not only raised the temperature a good ten to fifteen degrees Fahrenheit, but created a haze of heat and smoke beyond the central ring. But as he focused, he began to make out the assembled crowd, all standing silent as witnesses to this sacred ceremony. Will couldn't help but see their faces as slightly hostile, though that was probably more his opinion than fact.

As he continued to scan the crowd, at least as much as he was able to given the restraints, he finally spotted Shashi standing between two of the largest Sentilili warriors he had ever seen. He changed his assessment from "standing between" to "restrained by" when he noticed the expertly tied ropes about the child. The professor might have even called the sheer amount of rope "excessive" if he hadn't already seen the child's proficiency with the "extralegal arts" for himself.

Once that dawned on him, Will couldn't help but wonder if perhaps they hadn't used quite enough rope. That's when he saw the rest of the warriors. Surrounding Shashi and the two largest thugs were a group of at least half a dozen other (albeit smaller) warriors carrying spears and knives. Well, it seemed that they were just as aware of Shashi's abilities as he was.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the ceremony, the Sentilili high priestess, a venerable woman Will thought was named

“Batari,” was performing all the appropriate ritual movements and reciting the appropriate incantations. He wasn’t exactly sure about her name, given that the Sentilili used a mishmash of Hindi and Indonesian. While he spoke both languages, theirs had obviously interwoven from the two bases to form a distinctly different dialect.

In any case, she was conducting the ritual nearly exactly as Will’s research had laid it out. Watching it was mesmerizing, seeing all his years of hard work come to fruition so effortlessly. He lay there watching for several minutes as the ritual built to a crescendo. As Batari’s supplications grew more tumultuous, the other priests inside the ring of fire began moving faster and faster in an orgy of ritualistic glee.

In response, the watching Sentilili surrounding the ring of fire did...nothing. They remained as silent and still as ghosts. And indeed, that’s what Will’s research suggested they represented during the ritual.

Despite his curiosity, Will noticed that Shashi never stopped looking directly at him. There were no movements or attempted escapes, yet. But it appeared, at least to Will, that there was a plan in the making.

Suddenly, a loud shout from all the priests brought Will’s attention away from the child he’d gotten mixed up in all of this. When he turned away, he noted that the high priestess was no longer in the midst of the circle of fire. Instead she had moved over, closer to Will and, more importantly, closer to the assembled weaponry he had noticed when he first began his examinations of this ritual.

As she continued her now-quiet supplications, slowly moving her hands across the various blades arrayed before her, Will noticed that she stopped at the very blade that had confirmed his suspicions about this ritual. She held it up before the hushed crowd, referring to it as the “sacred blade.” Will noted that it was particularly well-suited for making what he suspected would be the first cut, vertical along the spine, if his studies had been correct.

At last she approached the altar, and Will, restrained upon it. Holding up the blade, she began speaking, loudly enough for the assembled masses to hear, but directed toward him. Unfortunately it came out as gibberish, and Will, given the stress of the situation, was unable to translate.

So, he did something he’d never done before. It was a spontaneous act, carried out with no regard for the possible consequences, but it nevertheless interrupted her ritual. “I’m sorry,” he began, using both Hindi and Indonesian, “but I didn’t quite understand you. Could you repeat that?”

While he couldn’t quite see her face, given the restraints, he could almost hear her slight smile. Very slowly she repeated her statement, as one might do for a child, but without any hint of rancor or pedantry. When she finished, he was still not positive of his translation, but it sounded to him like she had said, “If you survive, your trials will soon begin.”

Once she finished, she placed one of her withered old hands upon his head, holding him motionless with

surprising strength despite her—apparent—frailty. Then she raised the blade up, high above her head, the glint of sharpened cold steel evident to everyone assembled (except Will, of course). Then in one quick motion, she brought the blade swiftly downward, plunging it toward Will's dangerously exposed neck...

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Oddly, though his life was quite possibly held in the balance, in the moments before the blade bit too deep into his flesh, Professor Eccleston couldn't help but think about when he had first arrived in Port Blair. It had been a long year getting to that point, writing letters to various authorities to get permissions, set up guides, arrange travel, and on, and on, and on.

The most difficult part had been arranging the boat ride to the island and, from there, guides to take him inland. It was the only part of his trip he hadn't felt completely safe about. After all, once he mentioned his destination, most of the reputable guides never wrote back. Everyone in Port Blair had heard the awful horror stories about the Sentilili, and there are very few who would willingly go to their deaths, even if the money was good.

So when he heard of a man named Agung Putra, who had a reputation of being willing to travel anywhere if the price was right, Will was really in no position to refuse. When he contacted Agung, the man confirmed that his

reputation was well deserved, and soon they'd struck a bargain.

He should have known better. Upon landing, he was met by an unsavory group of men who said they were Agung's entourage. Figuring that a man willing to brave such dangers as Will believed they might encounter would need guards, he agreed to accompany them. Twenty minutes later, he was lying in a gutter in some back alley, robbed, beaten, and considerably the worse for wear, with no way to get to his destination.

At some point he must have passed out from the attack, because when he regained his faculties, it was to the sensation of someone rifling through his pockets. Given his confused state, he tried to enquire of the thief as to where he might be and what had happened to him. Unfortunately, it came out as little more than a series of low moans and perhaps a grunt or two.

But it was enough to let the would-be robber know that he was not, in point of fact, dead, but only severely beaten. Taking what little he had already removed from Will's pockets, the thief, surprised that Will was not actually dead, gave a small start and turned to run. Desperate to get to a hospital or to someone who wasn't bent on leaving him to his fate, Will was finally able to utter an intelligible word. It wasn't much, but it was all he could manage. "Help," he croaked out, not even certain that he'd used the correct language for wherever he was.

And even more surprisingly, the child—because it was, indeed, a child who had been rifling through his pockets—

stopped running away. Turning back, the urchin asked, “Did you just ask me for help?”

“Yes.” He had gained some strength back, but not enough to be sure he could make it to safety, if he even knew where that might be. “I was hurt...some men...I need to get to a hospital. Do you know if there’s one nearby?”

“There is,” said the rogue, eyeing him skeptically. “But they won’t take you if you can’t pay. And I know you can’t.”

“You’re right, I can’t,” said Will between labored breaths. “But I know of a place where I can get money. And,” he added when he saw that he had the child’s undivided attention, “I would be willing to share with anyone willing to help me.”

He let the comment hang, as he could see through bleary and blood-soaked eyes that the choices were warring within the child. Go or stay, risk or safety, eat or not. There hadn’t been but a few 1/12 anna coins and maybe an American penny or two in Will’s pockets. The armed men had taken his wallet and luggage, which together contained most of his cash. To the child, the prospect of not needing to steal more for tonight’s meal might carry a lot of weight.

In the end, the grumbling belly won out. Walking back over to the gutter, the child held out a grubby little hand and offered to help him back onto his feet. For one so small, the urchin was surprisingly strong. But, Will guessed,

a lifetime of living on the streets would probably lend itself to building muscle.

He walked a few steps, the child falling in beside him, until a wave of nausea almost put him back in the gutter. Wordlessly, the child moved close and gave Will enough support to continue walking.

Though Will was touched by the effort, the child soon disabused him of that sentiment, commenting that it would take forever to drag him to the nearest hospital, and the sooner they were there, the sooner certain children would get to eat.

Will smiled then and started to thank the child, but stopped when he remembered he hadn't introduced himself. He did so, not really knowing what to expect in return, and was completely taken aback when he heard the formal greeting of the Brahmins and the child's name, "Shashi Nibhanupudi."

Of course, rather than acknowledge the gesture or simply keep moving, William tried to make small talk, noting that the name "Shashi" came from the Sanskrit word for moon. This inevitably led to a prolonged lecture about its origins in Vedic Sanskrit and Sanskrit's subsequently having become the primary liturgical language of India.

Or rather, it would have been long, had Shashi not cut him off by stating simply and unequivocally that he must be the stupidest man on earth. Misunderstanding the comment, Will tried to explain that he was actually a professor at Salem Normal College in Salem,

Massachusetts. Not understanding any of that, or at least pretending not to, Shashi asked if the subject he taught was stupidity.

After all, everyone around Port Blair knew that Agung Putra was a notorious shyster. If Will had simply thought to ask anyone here, they would have told him as much, and for not even half of what Putra's men had taken from him. Shashi's tone was hostile, but soon Will realized that the anger wasn't directed at him. Rather, it seemed to be aimed at a system that allowed bad men like Putra to get away with such things.

As they progressed down the street, Shashi, by way of conversation, asked what on earth had possessed *Prādhyāpaka* Will to converse with Putra in the first place. And again a long-winded diatribe about years of research and primitive cultures was cut short with a withering look that spoke volumes.

After Will's much-edited version of the events leading up to that moment, Shashi said something that would inexplicably intertwine their destinies forever. Since Putra had never been out of the city, there was no way he could have guided Will anywhere. If he wanted to see the "Ghost People," he'd need to find someone from that area, like Shashi.

The child went on, absentmindedly discussing the old legends and the fact that, while much talked about, the Ghost People had never been seen by any of the civilized people on the Alamarian chain. Still, there were always

stories about friends, or friends of friends, who'd seen them—or worse, been captured by them.

Will offered Shashi the same fee he'd been willing to pay Putra to be his guide. But the child declined. The money was good, but Shashi wanted something more important: a future. Eventually the money would run out and Shashi would still be stuck on the streets of Port Blair, living out of garbage cans and rifling dead bodies for loose change.

Soon enough, they came to an agreement. Shashi assured Will that everything would be taken care of once he got out of the hospital.

Three days later, having seen no sign of the child in the meantime, Will walked out the front doors of the hospital and immediately spotted Shashi. It was difficult to recognize the child, as some serious cleaning up had occurred in the previous three days. But what really amazed Will was what Shashi was standing next to. Suitcases, boxes of books, and equipment that were quite obviously the same ones Will had lost to Putra's men days ago.

Neither said a word about it. Will realized that whatever the child had done, it was probably best that he didn't know. Instead he motioned for Shashi to lead on, and together they traveled down to the docks, where a boat awaited them. Porters brought along all of the gear. Not once did Will see any signs of reprisal: a mystery which remained so till the end of his days....