

Guerilla from the Schoolroom

by

L A Summers

Chapter One

Zita came round the building from the direction of the stables in her jodhpurs and boots, bare above the waist except for her black bikini top, her shirt carried over one shoulder. She stopped, looked at the plantation workers sat on the grass, remembered that her father had said that he would speak to them this morning and walked casually round to the back of the group and sat down. One or two of the tappers, men whom she recognised glanced at her, their faces showing surprise and curiosity. But no one said anything and she did nothing in return except smile briefly back. Her father however, gave her a short, penetrating stare.

In trouble again!

Bill Wright, the estate manager put up a hand and gained immediate silence. Though he could speak Malay he addressed the labourers in English.

"You all know that Major Skeffington has been killed by the guerillas," he said. "I'm pleased to be able to tell you that Mrs Skeffington is recovering, though she will remain in hospital for some time. But she has decided to hand over control of the estate to her brother..," he indicated Zita's father, "Mr Vetzell will be live-in owner from now on."

Zita groaned inwardly. That probably was the best way of explaining to the Malays the pronunciation of the name von Wetzel und Baden Hessian. But why not just use first names?

"Now, Mr Vetzell knows that there were certain complaints about wages and other things. He would like to talk to you about those matters himself."

Karl von Wetzel, Zita's father moved to the front of the group. There was silence among them, men and women, all of them listening intently for what was to be said; the atmosphere was chill with the sensation of expectancy.

"Good morning to you all," he began, his English marred by a soft north German accent; "Mr Wright has told me about the complaints. I promise that I will look into them all. You will understand that I cannot do that straight off. What I have told him however, is that I will increase the wages of everyone by 10% immediately..," there was a gasp and then a crescendo of applause, "...If you will be patient and work with me and my family, supporting us all as one workforce, then we will, I hope, be able to overcome these difficulties."

There was no need to say anything else. That was what they wanted to hear. After a few more words Bill Wright got them on their feet and about their work. Zita too got to her feet; she was perspiring profusely, her body covered in a thin layer of moisture; around the waistband of her jodhpurs it showed darkly in the off-white of the material and also in the cleavage above her bikini top.

"Good speech, papa," she said, "You should go into politics."

"And you, young lady, have you already joined the revolution?"

Zita was not surprised by his reaction, they were very close but her father was sometimes unsure how to handle his intelligent 17 year old daughter.

Bill Wright prevented her replying and it may be that he did it deliberately.

"That was an interesting gesture, Zita," he said.

"Mr. Wright..?" unsure what he was talking about.

"Sitting with the tappers, identifying yourself with the plantation workers, if you are serious about that, it might break down some of the problems we've had to deal with over the last few years."

"Oh, she's serious," von Wetzel put in without any rancour in his voice, "She's so left wing she makes Karl Marx look like a fascist."

"Papa.."

"If you're interested I could get Ali and his boys to show you their work," Wright said,. Turning to her father, he explained, "Ali would be happy to show her how the latex is harvested."

Zita made no reference to the fact that she had already met Ali, she simply said, "I'd like that, Mr Wright, yes."

"Would you have any objection to that, Karl?"

"It wouldn't matter if I did object, Zita would find some way of getting round my ban."

It was said without rancour but not without feeling. Zita saw the manager's eyebrows rise very slightly, he had noted the remark, added it to his store of assessments.

"Good, then, I'll see what I can arrange. "

Karl addressed his beautiful daughter once again.

"What are you going to do now, Zita?"

"I thought I'd cool off in the swimming pool, if that's all right," she added, prodding him again.

"Of course. Electra and I have to go into the school in an hour, so you'll have to get your own lunch. That won't

be a problem will it?"

"With all these servants around, father?" she grinned.

She was bantering him and he knew it, the one thing Zita would not do was to expect a servant to do something she could do for herself. Then she moved closer to him, shutting the Estate Manager out. He could sense the not unpleasant aroma of perspiration on her body.

"You will let me make the final decision about the school, won't you?"

"Of course, but we need to settle our concerns first."

"Thanks, papa." she said, turning and hurrying away.

Von Wetzel addressed the Manager, still standing by, "Thank you, you rescued the situation there, I suppose I overdid it. Was Ali really going to show her the trees?"

He didn't answer directly.

"Due respect, Karl, but the workers appreciated her sitting with them..."

"But it had all the marks of..."

"Condescension?" He cut in, "Its as well to remember that they aren't communists, Karl, they will see Zita's actions, and yours for that matter, at their face value. It will be the agitators among them, if there are any who will needle the labourers about it."

"Are there any communists among the workers?"

"I think not, and that's despite Skeffington's attitude."

Karl picked up Zita's discarded shirt and they turned towards the house.

"Was he so very bad?"

Wright hesitated and Zita's father took the matter into his own hands.

"Look," he said, "If we're to work together we need to be completely in each other's confidence. I know Tom Skeffington was my brother-in-law but remember I never knew him. And I haven't seen my sister for nearly thirty years."

Wright maintained discretion in his reply, "Most of the planters are pretty arrogant, treat the tappers pretty poorly. I've never supported that, I saw enough after the war to know what that leads to. The Japs could have held the country much more securely if they had treated the native population better."

"I see."

Nothing more was said just then.

There is no beginning to this story except in the causal effect of related and unrelated events that go back into the mists of time. A philosopher might be able to show the chain of events back to Karl von Wetzel's early life. Certainly a beginning lay in his love affair with the wife whom everyone always called Electra. Another may be the events that led them to leave their home in the middle east and travel to Malaya to find a new life. Maybe it started on the day when Zita sat with the assembled plantation workers and their families on the grass area in front of the main house. But perhaps it was actually about some weeks before that, when the family first arrived in Singapore, tired after a long and arduous flight from Europe, to find that the promise that someone would meet them had not been kept.

No one around Payer Leber airport seemed able or willing to help and they had to resort to hiring a car and driver to take them up country. The prospect was not a particularly good one, the driver, when he presented himself was not the most prepossessing man they had ever set eyes on, his clothes were rather unkempt and his car, a big black Mercedes saloon had seen better days. The Kudu Plantation was near the town of Gemas, about 130 miles from Singapore and involved a hair raising journey of three hours through lush tropical rain forest interspersed with large rubber plantations, a few bigish towns and many small villages where animals and humans lived together in and around atap kampongs. They were all experienced travellers in different climates and by different modes of travel but when the car finally turned off the road towards the gate of the plantation they were all very relieved. Despite the open windows they were hot, bathed in sweat and uncomfortable, and von Wetzel was furious with his sister for not arranging for their arrival. But only for a few minutes longer.

Kudu was in the grip of the military. A British sergeant on the main gate almost turned them away and might very well have done so had their driver not begun to unload their luggage onto the ground beside his car and then proceed to drive off very hurriedly. Clearly he had recognised the signs. The sergeant, when von Wetzel had made him understand that he was related to the owner of the plantation was not happy about it at all. He excused himself and called an officer on a hand held radio. Several minutes later, still standing beside their luggage in the afternoon sun without any kind of consideration they saw a jeep bound up from somewhere and an officer get down. Smartly dressed in tropical uniform, the very image of Sandhurst even in this climate he addressed them directly without preamble.

"I understand that you are related to Major Skeffington?"

"Yes, his wife is my sister, Alicia. I am Karl von Wetzel and this is my family."

He shook hands with Electra and gave Zita a glance of acknowledgement. He was astounded by the beauty of the two women and their obvious relationship to each other. Most of all he noticed that both were barefoot and seemingly unconcerned by it.

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes, I am afraid it is. I'm Captain Nesbit," he said almost without pause; he glanced around him and then ordered a private to put the luggage in the back of the jeep. "Do you know your sister well, sir?" he asked at last.

Von Wetzel was becoming both irritated and rather worried. British Malaya was under emergency rule because of communist guerillas. It was beginning to look as if there had been some kind of incident.

"I haven't seen my sister for nearly thirty years and I have never met her husband."

"Very well," he looked pointedly at Zita who was helping the private to load their extensive baggage; then with a gesture he drew her father aside. "I'm sorry sir," he went on, "There's been a guerilla attack on the plantation. Major Skeffington has been killed, his wife seriously injured..."

The news hit him like a sledge hammer. It had been clear that something was wrong, he had not expected this.

"...Mrs Skeffington has been taken in to the hospital in Malacca, she's not conscious but beyond that I cannot tell you how bad she is. I suggest we go up to the house and I'll put you into the care of the plantation manager."

"Very well."

They did not see much of the plantation on that first drive through the grounds, the mass of green rubber plants surrounding brown paddocks nor even the three storey rectangular house claimed any real part of their interest. Other anxieties took all their attention; they had been told that though the situation was dangerous, it was not a constant minute by minute danger of terrorist rampage. They knew what that was like, Electra in particular had suffered at the hands of lawless rebels determined to topple a legitimate government. They were not looking for what is called a quiet life but neither had they expected to leave one hazardous area only to find ourselves in another. As they drew up outside the house a man came out to meet them. He was about the same age as von Wetzel, tall and upright, his eyes showing intelligence and resourcefulness.

"Herr von Wetzel," he began, his voice strong and unmistakably English, with more than a suggestion of aristocratic diction. "I'm am so terribly sorry, Mrs Skeffington asked me to make arrangements.."

"Its all right," he cut in, "I understand, you must be the manager?"

The officer moved to introduce them but he was not quick enough.

"Yes, Bill Wright, I've been Major Skeffington's manager for six years."

"This is my wife, Electra..," he gave her a slight but meaningful bow; "And our daughter..."

But she was not there, Zita was helping the soldier to unload the bags and Nesbit, clearly surprised by this, intervened.

"Its all right, Miss. Dickenson can manage that." he said. "Put it inside the entrance way Dickenson."

"Sir!"

Zita would almost certainly have continued to assist the soldier, Nesbit's peremptory orders meant nothing to her, but she grasped with a glance what was happening and went to meet the manager. Wright put out his hand and taking it, Zita made a slight stiff bow.

"I greet you, sir."

He gave her an appraising but not unfriendly glance. Then he returned his attention to her father.

"May I suggest, sir, that you and your family bath and change your clothes? I'll arrange for some food to be provided and then we'll talk?"

That was how it really started.

They sat together in the the main dining room of the house, a dark wood panelled room subtly illuminated by hidden electric light and equipped with fine polished furniture made from local wood. The inevitable ceiling fans were a constant background noise to everything that happened there. A slight Chinese serving woman brought them an exotic but delicious dish of food that none of them recognised, then. And the table cleared, a sharp but polite knock on the door signalled the return of the manager. Bill Wright waited to be invited to sit down and it was born in on von Wetzel that this was a man who, whatever the value of his professional accomplishments had not been allowed to become one of Tom Skeffington's close associates.

Accepting the coffee that von Wetzel offered him and sat down across the table from him, Wright, anticipating his employer's thoughts first mentioned Alicia, "I have telephoned to the hospital. Mrs Skeffington has been briefly conscious and the prognosis is now good. I think you should be able to visit her tomorrow."

"Thank you, in the meantime, as far as I am concerned we have no authority here. You may be aware that certain proposals had been under discussion. For now that is all in abeyance and my relationship to Mrs Skeffington is of no importance."

As their conversation continued Wright made a more searching examination of his visitors, making certain that his scrutiny went unobserved. What he saw was certainly not what he had expected. Von Wetzel had the high domed head of the German and a tall personable appearance but his was by no means an exceptional bearing. His wife and their daughter were a very different matter. Both were blessed with a quite exceptional and obviously natural beauty

"As you wish, sir," Wright paused and then went on, "I understand that you have received permission from the authorities to take up residence in Malaya. Its none of my business but may I ask if it is your intention to live locally?"

Von Wetzel did not immediately answer, he had already said that the terrorist attack might lead to a change in Alicia's plans. His difficulty was given temporary respite by Zita's intervention.

The dining room gave onto the open loggia that ran round the house on this level; night had fallen, a bright tropical night alive with the clicking and screeching of myriad insects. Almost unnoticed Zita had got up from the table and gone out onto the loggia to look at the stars and the lights that showed where kampongs and further away, towns huddled in the anonymity of the night. She was wearing a backless cotton dress that reached to just above her knees. It emphasised the long willowy build of her body and brought out the dark tone of her olive brown skin.

"Could I go outside for a look round?" she asked.

Von Wetzel looked at Wright for advice.

The manager saw that she was still barefoot, just as her mother was.

"She should be safe enough, sir, the guerillas won't return tonight," he turned his attention to Zita. "Don't go too far from the house though, there are snakes and other things that might just turn nasty, better to be careful," he told her, then added as if an after thought, "You've had all your injections I take it?"

"Yes, sir."

Bill Wright went on. "You are obviously dark skinned, you may well have natural protection from all but the real nasties. And we don't get many of those around here."

She shot her father a glance and he waved her away.

Once she had left the room Karl attempted an answer to Wright's question.

"We were discussing with the Skeffingtons the possibility of taking up residence and thus allowing them leave to return to Europe. What effect this attack may have on those plans I don't know."

"Yes, sir, I see."

Electra had remained silent throughout but now she took a hand in the discussions.

"Mr Wright, as Karl has said, we have no authority here, there is no need for any formality between us. Please, lets put things on an easier footing, my husband's name is Karl, everyone calls me Electra, would you please do so too?"

He had not expected that but he quickly recovered himself and in a way that took Electra by surprise.

"Very well, and thank you," he said. "My name's Bill, if this Electra has no murderous intentions, then I will regard myself as her friend."

Electra grinned, understanding at once.

"Sorry, Bill," she laughed, "Wrong Electra, my real names are actually Zita Joanna, but I have always been called Electra because my parents did a lot of pioneer work on the development of small scale electricity generation. They were the "electricity nuts" and I was their daughter, inevitably I became..."

"That's typically English," he cut in, "Turning an insult into an accolade..."

"Oh it was no insult," she intervened. "It was very important where we were. My parents were local heroes in a way I could never be."

That was only true taken at its narrow face value but Bill Wright was not to know that. Electra's intervention warmed the relations with the plantation manager very considerably and the rest of the discussion that evening was undertaken in an amiable atmosphere.

It was after about an hour that Zita reappeared, a glow on her face which had nothing to do with the fact that even in the cool of the night the air was very humid.

"There is a stable behind the house, there are horses there," she began.

Bill Wright was the first to respond to her outburst.

"Do you ride, Zita?" he asked her.

"Yes, we all do, even papa," was her uncompromising answer.

He glanced at Electra.

"That is so is it, you ride do you?"

"Yes, it has always been a very important part of my life. And Zita's," she added.

"Good, I am delighted to hear it. Abdul's been fulminating for months about having no one to exercise our horses." He turned to look at Zita, a slightly mocking grin on his face. "Can you get up early of a morning, young lady?"

"Of course."

"Then if you and your mother present yourselves to Abdul tomorrow he will allow you to ride with him. He will be glad of the help, I know it."

The horses were the first hint that they might find in this place a home in which there could be contentment. But it was these same animals that were the starting point from which began the seemingly unavoidable series of events that form the core of this story. Incidents which were to place them all in very grave danger and, for Zita, a danger that taxed her intelligence and courage almost beyond endurance but thereby provided a rite of passage into full womanhood.

Abdul greeted the appearance of Zita and her mother the following morning with a degree of reserve that resulted from very mixed emotions. Bill Wright had left a message for him to the effect that his search for riders able to exercise the horses was at an end but he had not really expected that this help would be two women, both of whom were very attractive and also very alike. Electra was clearly Zita's mother though she retained a youthful beauty which belied the fact that she was not far short of her fortieth birthday. There was no hint of grey in her long hair and she had the same elegant appearance as her daughter. Abdul's initial reaction was that people such as this, dressed like English women in jodhpurs, and log boots, and crisp white shirts could not possibly ride powerful horses with strength and talent.

He was shortly to be persuaded of another view. For a start they knew a great deal about horses. That was obvious from the way they moved around them, handling their tack with unconscious ease and then mounting up with fluid movements so astonishing that it almost stopped him dead. That was far from the end of it, Abdul and his two stable hands quickly became openly admiring of the women's riding skills and were enthralled by Zita's eager involvement in the hell for leather way they cantered off the pathways between the rubber trees and set off at a gallop across the open paddocks back to the stable. But perhaps more than that they appreciated the fact that once dismounted both women helped them with their chores, mucking out and putting out the feeding bags.

Zita stayed after her mother had left, talking to the stable hands and asking about the horses, eager to know not just their names but everything else about them. Zita was careful also to learn the names of Abdul's boys, actually grown men though only a year or two older than she was herself, keen horsemen and proud of their work. Their master, Abdul, the head groom seemed a pleasant and competent man who had a good rapport with his two assistants so the little group of equestrians worked well as a team; very shortly they were tacitly acknowledging Zita as one of their own.

That first morning Zita made her way back to the house alone. She was hot and her clothes were suffused with the sticky sweat that adhered to her body. Unthinkingly she dragged the tails of her shirt out of her jodhpurs and pulled it over her head. That was some relief at least. On their way to the stable earlier Zita and her mother had discovered a small swimming pool to one side of the house, just off the path that ran round it. It was probably the humid heat and the sensation of being almost constantly damp that drew the young woman back to it. It lay in the shade of a young rain tree, out of view of the house and of anyone on that side of the estate. The pool was lined with blue ceramic tiles which continued over the edge to form a ridge about a metre wide around each side. Though empty of water and with a layer of dust and brown foliage in the bottom, it seemed otherwise quite clean, all that it needed to put it back into use was to be cleaned and the water supply restored. A course of action rapidly forming in her mind, Zita continued on her way round to the front of the house.

A shaded veranda had been built here and beyond it, the access to the building itself was through a high arched doorway into a large hall with its ceiling well above head height. The doors at the entrance were rarely closed, even in the current situation security was provided by a young boy named Gapit who sat by the doors and whose job was to call attention to any visitors. He doubled as a shoeshine boy, any shoes left within reach he would lovingly transform into sparkling reflections of the light. Zita acknowledged him as she entered the house, knowing from what she had been told that he belonged to the tapper families that lived in the big kampong house at the other end of the plantation. Already she was concerned that he was being employed for long hours on this most menial of tasks probably at a very poor rate of pay rather than attend school. If she had known that he was not actually paid at all she would have been very upset.

The hall gave onto stairs which led upwards to the other floors. To one side was the estate office and it was here that she found her parents deep in conversation with Bill Wright. At her entrance they turned to look at her and at once she could see that there had been an important development. Bill Wright forestalled any question that she might have asked.

"Was it worth it then?" he demanded before she could speak.

"Excellent," Zita replied enthusiastically, "The grey has spirit but is so gentle a ride, you must have spent a lot of time schooling her."

"Not my doing," Wright told her. "I bought her ready trained as a polo mount though she's not the usual kind of polo pony as you probably realised."

"Hardly a pony..," Zita began.

Her father's voice cut in on her.

"Is there anything else we can do for you?" he asked.

Zita was somewhat taken aback, so were Electra and Bill Wright. She was suddenly afraid that she had committed some indiscretion.

"What is, papa? Have I done something wrong? "

He hesitated for a moment but then shrugged.

She has as much right to know as anyone, he thought.

"While you were riding Mr Wright and I went to see your Aunt Alicia in the hospital in Malacca. She's recovered consciousness and was able to talk to me for a while. She is clear in her own mind that this tragedy should not alter

her original plans. It's going to be some time before she's well enough to be released from the hospital, but when she is, she wants to go back to Baden Hessian. She wants us to buy part of the estate and take over the ownership responsibility."

"And..?"

"We were just working through the details, it'll take time to organise, for obvious reasons but we can probably afford it. Mr Wright is willing to stay on as manager."

"Certainly," he said, perhaps unnecessarily at that point, "I've no where else to go."

"Well, you probably weren't going to ask for my opinion," Zita said, "But I'll go along with that."

Electra gave her a grin that had no suggestion of mockery in it.

"You have been here less than 24 hours, are you sure about that?"

"You seem to be," she replied accurately enough.

"Touché," Electra laughed. But Zita's mother was not finished, she had seen the excited look in her daughter's eyes as she had come into the office. "There's something else isn't there?" She asked her directly.

Zita said, "Yes," and began a little hesitantly to explain about the swimming pool. "Can the water be run back into it, Mr Wright?"

He gave Karl a glance before replying.

"Yes, its just shut off at the tank. The Skeffington's never used it though they insisted it was kept clean."

Zita said nothing, her father seemed irritated by something, a wrong word from her could make matters worse. To her surprise he took the initiative himself.

"Zita's almost as keen on swimming as she is on horses," he said to Bill Wright, "Would it cost very much to put it back into use?"

"Not really, given our rainfall the water's not a problem, the filters will need cleaning from time to time but that would be the only expense. When the water's changed, it's discharged down to the irrigation channels so there's actually no loss. I can get one of the men to clean the inside out..."

"No, that wouldn't be necessary, Mr Wright," Zita put in, "I could do that."

He was not having that.

"No, Zita, that's not women's work."

Karl immediately put him right, forestalling the protests already forming in the minds of his wife and daughter.

"I'm sorry Bill, but neither my wife or my daughter would accept that there are tasks that are exclusively for men or for women. If Zita wants to clean the pool out, let her do it."

Wright gave his employer a surprised look, he might almost have insisted, but then he saw that both Electra and Zita were waiting for him to do just that. He added the exchange to his store of knowledge about this family.

"Very well," he said. "If that's what you want."

The estate manager suggested that Zita took some lunch, thus allowing him time to organise the cleaning materials and she darted away very pleased by the turn of events. She did not therefore hear the short exchange between Wright and his employers.

"I hope I've done the right thing, sir," he said.

"She has that effect Bill," Karl told him, "Seems to sweep everyone along with her. But no, we're all good swimmers and it'll keep her mind occupied..."

"I see, well, this is the country for swimming beaches and pools," he returned. "And you won't find a military base without one. The personnel almost live by them."

They separated, Electra picking up her daughter's discarded shirt and taking it away with her. Bill Wright set about finding the equipment Zita would need to clean the inside of the swimming pool, an exercise that mainly involved Gapit in going hither and thither to find a broom, cleaning rags and brushes, detergent and then a barrow in which to transport them to the side of the pool.

"I am to take these somewhere?" Gapit asked in his native Malay when the estate manager appeared to be satisfied with the collection.

He was going to tell him 'yes', but had a sudden change of mind.

"No, that won't be necessary, Gapit, you go and ask Cheong to give you some lunch."

He waited until he reckoned that Cheong had dealt with Gapit then went himself to visit the old Chinese cook. Cheong provided all the food that was eaten in the house; his kitchen was very hot and the aroma of spice and sauces which he used with everything hung on the air almost palpably. But the kitchen was clean and the food he served up was always delicious.

He returned to the front of the house just as Zita came down the stairs from the family rooms. She wore only a soft leather bikini and abbreviated shorts; she was also without anything on her feet and Wright abruptly realised that apart from when she was riding he had never actually seen Zita wear shoes of any kind. He stopped her at once.

"You need a hat, young lady, and some cream on that skin."

"I've coated my body," she told him, "You can't see it very well because its brown and very quickly absorbed."

“You still need a hat,” he insisted, though he was relieved at what she had told him. “Wait here a moment.” He disappeared into the office reappearing a few minutes later with an Australian style bush hat in his hand. “Try this for size,” he told her.

It fitted perfectly and Zita made a little play of displaying it like a mannequin, letting her long wavy hair ride around it and over her shoulders. Wright laughed at her antics.

“Yes, very good, but you make sure you keep it on; and be careful about the rest of your body, you look as though you have some natural protection but this tropical sun can burn in a very short time.”

“I’ll be OK,” she told him, careful not to make her words sound flippant. She went outside, to the barrow that stood on the hard packed mud path. “This is my stuff is it?”

“Yes, can you manage to get it round to the pool?”

Zita had her back to him. She lifted the barrow and moved off.

“I’ll send for help if I need it,” she replied, her tone suggesting that it was the last thing she would do.

Bill Wright was about to go back inside the house. Something on Zita’s back gripped his attention and for a pace or two he followed her, his attention on the tiny flat mole just visible against the dark olive brown of her left shoulder blade. But he said nothing, watching the manful way in which she manoeuvred what was probably a quite heavy load.

When he returned to the estate office he found Karl there; his employer looked up on his appearance.

“The worker set about her task?” he demanded.

“Yes,” he paused and then asked about the mole. “Its only a tiny thing, but it looks for all the world like a butterfly with its wings spread.”

“Der schmetterling,” Karl told him. “Its the mark of the von Wetzel family, it appears in exactly the same place on one member of every generation, my father, my sister, her son, my daughter, if you saw them together you would see that it is identical on each one.”

“Extraordinary.”

“Not really, there are some well known examples of physical characteristics inherited by generations of families, the Habsburgs for example. Some of them are quite disabling.”

“I’m not sure I want to know about that,” Wright replied wryly.

Neither Karl or Bill Wright nor indeed Electra, working on her own tasks in the small second floor study gave much thought to what Zita was doing. She seemed to slip from their attention. Since her parents had always allowed her a good deal of liberal freedom this was not irresponsibility on their part, they knew that she could attend to her own needs and required no ‘entertaining’; more often than not she would be involved with her own absorbtions for long periods before reappearing. Thus it was that when she returned to the house several hours later, having divested herself of the shorts, obviously very hot, suffused in layers of sweat and dirt, Bill Wright who was alone in the office almost started at her reappearance.

“Zita, have you been out there all this time?” he demanded glancing down at his wristwatch.

“Yes, job’s done, Mr Wright, just needs the water.”

He stood up, his eyes studying her closely.

“Tell me the truth, now,” he insisted, “Are you burning?”

“No sir, I’ve kept myself covered with herbal sun cream and Gapit brought me a water bag.”

“Gapit did? Without asking?”

He had come round the desk, he could sense the warmth of her body and the aroma of sweat that shimmered from it. His eyes travelled briefly over her, looking for tell tale signs of sun burn.

“No, he came to see what I was doing and I asked him where I could get some water. He insisted on going for it. Brought me a big leather water-skin.”

“You’ve made a conquest there, then,” he paused before going on, “Do I need to inspect your work?”

“You can if you wish.”

He decided that he would do so, not because he thought it would be necessary but because in that way he was showing her that his praise was real, that its value lay in his bothering to make an inspection. As he had expected the ceramic tiles glistened like new, probably they had never been as clean as they now were. Yet again the estate manager did not just commend her but made a point of closely examining some representative areas of the pool, not going down into the bottom and treading his own boots on the newly cleaned tiles but bending down and leaning over to inspect the wall from there. At last he stood up.

“Well done, Zita,” he said, “First class job. Now you’ll want me to put some water in it.”

“Seems a pity to just let it get dirty again,” responding to his banter.

“Right, you go and shower that muck off your body and tell your parents that we’re about ready. I’ll open the tank manifold. It’ll take a while to fill so there’s no hurry.”

Zita was about to dash off but he stopped her. He first indicated the barrow in which she had deposited the cleaning tools and a bag containing the dust and leaves that had been cleaned out of the pool.

“A workman always finishes the job,” he said, not unkindly. “Take it back to the house please, Gapit will show

you what to do with it all.”

“OK.”

But he hadn't finished with her yet. He picked her discarded shorts up off the ground.

“Try and keep my estate tidy would you,” he said, “I know very few people who work here wear much in the way of clothes but they don't just take them off and leave them lying around.”