



A Town Like Alice

Nevil Shute

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Jeans Early Life

Jean Paget was born in Malaya, in 1921. At that time Malaya was ruled by the British and many people from Britain lived and worked in Malaya. Some of them were government officers, others were in the army and the police force, and others worked in schools and hospitals. But most British people in Malaya worked in trade and industry. The most important industries were mining tin and growing rubber.

Jean Paget's father was the manager of a large rubber estate. The estate was in the State of Perak, about 100 miles north of the capital city, Kuala Lumpur.

Mr Paget lived on the rubber estate with his wife and family. There were two children, a boy called Donald and a girl called Jean. Donald was three years older than Jean.

When the children were very small, they were looked after by an amah. This amah was a Malay woman and she spoke to them in Malay. And so the children learned to speak both Malay and English.

At first, Mrs Paget taught the children herself. But when Donald was thirteen, he had to go to school in England. Jean was only ten at that time, but she went back to England as well. The two children went to stay with their grandparents near Southampton, a large town about eighty miles from London.

Two years later, the grandparents became ill and Mrs Paget had to go back to England. She bought a small house in Southampton and lived there with the children.

When Jean was thirteen, her father was killed in a car accident. He had gone to Kuala Lumpur to do some business and it was late at night when he set out on his journey home. Probably he was tired and fell asleep in the car. The car left the road and hit a tree. Mr Paget was killed.

Mrs Paget did not have to worry about the future. The company paid her a pension and they also promised to give Donald a job when he left school.

Jean and Donald were quite ordinary children. They were not very clever, but they worked hard and did well at school. There was one thing unusual about them - they were able to speak Malay. At first, they did this as a joke and as a secret family language. If they spoke in Malay, no one else could understand them.

Later, however, they had a very good reason for speaking Malay. Donald wanted to go back to Malaya, to work for the rubber company. His ability to speak Malay would be useful. And so it was important for him not to forget the language. He practised it at home, and Jean practised it with him.

Donald went back to Malaya in 1937, when Jean was sixteen. She left school the following year and went to a commercial college in Southampton. She studied shorthand and typing for six months and then she worked for a year as a shorthand typist in an office. During the year, her mother made arrangements for her to go out to Malaya.

Mrs Paget wrote to the chairman of the rubber company for whom Donald was working. She knew that the company needed secretaries in their offices in Kuala Lumpur. She suggested that Jean might work for the company, as well as Donald.

The company were pleased with Donald's work and they agreed to employ his sister. Jean spoke Malay. It would be very useful for the company to have a secretary who could work in both English and Malay. They wrote back to Mrs Paget straightaway and offered Jean a job.

This was the year 1939 and suddenly, in September, Germany invaded Poland and the Second World War began. The war did not make Jean change her plans. In fact, she thought that Malaya would be a safe place. All the fighting was in Europe.

Fortunately, there was very little fighting at the beginning of the war. Jean was able to get a ship and leave England without any difficulty. She arrived in Malaya in December 1939.

Jean loved her life in Malaya. She lived in Kuala Lumpur and she had a room in a small private hotel which

was owned by an Englishwoman. All the people living in the hotel were English and most of them were girls who worked in offices.

Jean's office was in the centre of the city.

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