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THE MYSTERY OF THE FIRST MALAY NOVEL (AND WHO WAS ROKAMBUL?)

Without exception all accounts of the development of modern Malay literature — from Za'ba in 1939 to the numerous studies that have appeared in recent years — state (occasionally imply) that the first Malay novel published in the peninsula was Sayyid Shaykh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi's *Hikayat Setia 'Ashek kepada Ma'shok-nya atau Shafik Afandi dengan Faridah Hanum*.¹ *Faridah Hanum*, as it is commonly known, was published in Penang in two volumes in 1925 and 1926, and

¹ See, e. g., Za'ba (Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad), "Modern Developments", in R. O. Winstedt, "A History of Malay Literature", *Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, XVII, 3 (1939), pp. 152-156; Cyril Skinner, *Prosa Melayu Baru* (London, Longman, 1959), p. 70; Kassim Ahmad, "Perkembangan Kesusasteraan Melayu Moden", *Bahasa* (Singapore), II, 1 (1959), p. 50; Mohd. Taib Osman, *An Introduction to the Development of Modern Malay Language and Literature* (Singapore, Malayan Publishing House, 1961), p. 19; Omar Mohd. Hashim, "Perkembangan Cherpen Melayu Sa-belum Perang", *Dewan Bahasa* (Kuala Lumpur), V (1961), pp. 343ff.; Hamzah, *Pertumbuhan Novel2 Melayu* (Singapore, Pustaka Malaysia, 1962), pp. 4-5; Yahaya Ismail, "Novel Melayu Sa-belum Perang Dunia Kedua", *Dewan Bahasa*, VII (1963), p. 437; Agus Salim, *Tokoh yang Kukoh dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama dan Baru* (Singapore, Pustaka Nasional, 1966), pp. 42, 152; Li Chuan Siu, *Ikhtisar Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Baru, 1930-1945* (Kuala Lumpur, Pustaka Antara, 1966), p. 96; M. Hassan Arshad, "Tanya-Jawab Bahasa dan Sastra", *Dewan Bahasa*, X (1966), pp. 274-275; Sulaiman Hamzah et al., *Sastra Melayu Moden* (Kota Bharu, Pustaka Aman Press, 1968), p. 116; Arifin Nur, *Sastra Melayu Moden* (Kota Bharu, Pustaka Aman Press, 1971), pp. 53-55; Wan Shamsuddin Mohd. Yusoff, *Sejarah Sastra Melayu Moden (Sesudah Tahun 1800)* (Alor Setar, Sharikat Kerjasama Kredit dan Permodalan Pegawai2 Melayu Negeri Kedah, 1971), p. 40; and Yahaya Ismail, "Syed Sheikh Ahmad Alhadi: Reformis, Ahli Fikir, Novelist Progresif", *Dewan Sastra* (Kuala Lumpur), II (1972), pp. 3, 49, 53. The first original Malay novel with a peninsular setting and characters is commonly thought to have been Ahmad Rashid Talu's *Ia-kah Salmah?*, which appeared in 1927; cf. Yahya Ismail, *Satu Kajian Mengenai Karya2 Ahmad Talu* (Kuala Lumpur, Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1970).

reprinted in 1927-28 by Sayyid Shaykh's own Jelutong Press, the latter seemingly founded on the financial success of the novel. It was reprinted in Singapore in 1958 by Qalam Press in four volumes and appeared most recently in a one-volume romanized edition from Pustaka Antara in Kuala Lumpur in 1964. There is no doubt of its capacity to continue to attract readers, nor about the fact that in 1925 it was in many respects daringly innovative. Depicting as hero and heroine two young, upper-class, primarily Western-educated Egyptians, its setting is the Cairo of the 1890's; a tale of much thwarted if eventually successful love against a background of controversial religious and social change relating especially to the emancipation of women. Not, as is manifest, an original work in the Malay, with a local setting or characters, it is nevertheless an example of what came to be known as "*cherita saduran*", *saduran* implying not merely translation but adaptation in some degree. So far as the present writer is aware, the provenance of the Egyptian *Faridah Hanum* is not known, nor has any attempt been made to compare the Malay and Arabic versions, though if Sayyid Shaykh's is indeed an "adaptation" rather than simply a translation his alterations or additions may be of some interest in the context of the Malay society of the time, and perhaps also linguistically.

But whatever *Faridah Hanum* is, and whatever its continued significance for social or literary history may be, it was certainly *not* the first Malay novel, even of the *saduran* kind. What, then, was? It would appear (though clearly this, too, is subject to correction), to be a detective story entitled *Cheritera Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* (Tale of the Theft of Five Million Dollars), published in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, in January 1922, by Muhammad bin Muhammad Said, and printed at the Majlis Ugama Islam press, with finance supplied by "Mahmud Ikhwan".² No great credit may be, or is, claimed for making this observation. That *Faridah Hanum* has retained its position in the canon for so long obviously reflects its much wider popularity and familiarity throughout the peninsula, as well as, it is possible, its undoubtedly greater social significance. It may also be argued that, save for historians, historical precedence is of no overwhelming importance.

² The title page reads: *Cheritera/ Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit/ \$5,000,000/ PerMelayuan/ Muhammad bin Muhammad Said Kelantan/ Chop Pertama/ Di-Matba'ah Majlis Ugama Islam dan Isti'adat Melayu Kelantan pada 1 Januari/ tahun 1922m dengan naskah Mahmud Ikhwan — Kota Bharu.* "Mahmud Ikhwan" was a pseudonym for Nik Mahmud bin Wan Ismail, Chief Minister of Kelantan and a close friend of Muhammad (see below).

Nevertheless, if *Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* is (or was) the first Malay novel — and even if it was not — there is something to be said for looking at it a little more closely, not least because such an examination turns out to lead one in other directions as well.

Muhammad bin Muhammad Said (1888-1939), son of the senior *khatib* of the Kota Bharu mosque, studied with a local religious teacher and briefly in the newly opened government Malay school before going to Mecca around 1905, and thence to Al-Azhar University in Cairo. He spent some eight or nine years there, returning to Kelantan towards the end of 1914, where he shortly became right-hand man to Nik Mahmud bin Wan Ismail, deputy to the Chief Minister of the State. Late in 1915, Nik Mahmud and Muhammad bin Muhammad Said were together largely responsible for the creation of a central *Majlis Ugama dan Istiadat Melayu*, or Council of Religion and Malay Custom, to assume control throughout Kelantan of all administrative, juridical and doctrinal matters relating to Islam.³ Under the auspices of the *Majlis*, which derived substantial revenues from the state-wide organization of *zakāt* and *zakāt al-fiṭr* (religious tax) collections, a variety of educational and other enterprises was embarked upon, among them the acquisition in 1917 of a printing press, thenceforth known as the *Matba'ah Majlis Ugama Islam*, together with a staff of translators and writers, and in 1918 the establishment of a fortnightly journal *Pengasoh*. Though primarily concerned with religious matters, *Pengasoh* rapidly became a forum for improving articles of all kinds and achieved wide circulation throughout the peninsula. Muhammad bin Muhammad Said was principal editor of *Pengasoh* from its inception until 1922, and for many more years one of its leading contributors.⁴ In other respects, too, it is evident that he took a keen interest in literary and intellectual life, especially in relation to the work of the *Matba'ah*, writing introductions

³ For full discussion, see William R. Roff, "The Origin and Early Years of the *Majlis Ugama*", in his edited volume *Kelantan: Religion, Society and Politics in a Malay State* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁴ Muhammad's official (as distinct from his literary) career may be summarized as follows: Secretary, *Majlis Ugama*, 1915-1919; Deputy President, 1919-20; 2nd Asst. Secretary to the Sultan, March 1916; Asst. Secretary and Clerk of the State Council in addition, January 1917; created Dato' Bentara Jaya c. 1916, and Dato' Laksamana c. 1920; appointed Kelantan's first State Secretary, September 1925 (after serving for several years in what was in effect this post); acted as Chief Minister May-August 1925 and September 1930-July 1931; resigned in February 1931. For details, see files Kel. "K" (British Adviser Series), 146/1933, and Kel. "S.U.K." (Setia Usaha Kerajaan Series) 136/1933, Arkib Negara Malaysia.

to many of the press's early publications,⁵ and in 1921-22 himself collecting, and publishing through the press, a two-volume miscellany of moral precept and practical knowledge entitled *Rampaian2*.

In addition to this considerable activity (and to his numerous duties by this date as *de facto* State Secretary) he found time in 1920 to originate and edit (with Megat Othman bin Muhammad Ali, his successor in that year as secretary of the *Majlis*) an independent monthly journal *Al-Kitab* which is of particular interest in the light of the present enquiry. *Al-Kitab*'s history was brief (it lasted for only four issues, from September to December 1920), and ultimately contentious, chiefly because its principal purpose was to publish in serial form a Malay translation of the Kuran, not from the Arabic but from Maulvi Muhammad Ali's English version, regarded by many as heretical because of its Ahmadiyya and allegedly Qadiani associations. Which of the editors undertook the translation is not known. Though Muhammad bin Muhammad Said strongly defended it in the columns of his other journal, *Pengasoh*, Othman is perhaps the more likely (were the task not shared), for he had already translated several articles from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for *Pengasoh*, and is known to have been formally educated in English (as Muhammad apparently was not), in his native state of Perak.⁶ Whatever the fact of the matter, *Al-Kitab* foundered on the rock of doctrinal conservatism, but not before it had embarked on other aspects of its self-assigned task of presenting in translation a much wider variety of "miscellaneous knowledge". Each month it published an installment of an Arabic-Malay dictionary of religious terms, a column on "public affairs" (*ilmu siasat*), and, from the second issue, a history of Islam taken from the (*Working, England*) *Islamic Review* and "monthly stories", in which were serialized, under the title "Anchuman Kekaseh", tales of the lives of such modern Middle

⁵ See, e.g., *Chahaya Pernama* (Kota Bharu, Matba'ah Majlis Ugama, June 1918), a primer on the principles and tenets of Islam written by Nik Mahmud, the Chief Minister, under his then title, Dato' Sri Paduka Raja; and *Kitab Semangat Kehidupan* (Kota Bharu, Matba'ah Majlis Ugama, November 1922); a collection of homiletics put together by Wan Muhammad b. Haji Wan Daud Patani and Nik Mahmud, apparently in 1917. Both were intended for use in the *Majlis Ugama* school.

⁶ Cf. Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi, "Notes Towards a History of Malay Periodicals in Kelantan", in *Kelantan: Religion, Society and Politics in a Malay State*, *op. cit.* In an introduction to the first issue of *Al-Kitab*, pp. 2-10, the editors set out their reasons for choosing Muhammad Ali's version of the Kuran, and state that they have received permission from Muhammad Ali to translate it.

Eastern heroes as Amir Faisal and Mustapha Kemal, translated from the Arabic.

Already, then, by 1920, Muhammad bin Muhammad Said had become attracted to and actively involved in the translation of English and Arabic works for the Malay reading public. While it is true that all the translations with which he had been associated had a didactic purpose, this was not wholly absent even from the detective story he was now to publish, for as he wrote in his foreword: "I have put this into Malay so that it may be read and understood by our own people; how wily and cunning thieves elsewhere are, and how quick-witted, smart detectives may uncover their secrets and pull them in. Furthermore, though the title of the story is "The theft of five million dollars", the money stolen is used and distributed by the gang of thieves in ways that benefit others." Not, he added, that the activities of these or any other thieves were to be approved or copied. The story was one to be read for enjoyment, like any other tale. Stories of the sort were nowadays frequently made into cinematograph films,⁷ and if readers or viewers were sufficiently developed intellectually they took from them the appropriate moral, if foolish nothing but superficial pleasure and a waste of valuable time.⁸

So, suitably admonished, to *Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit*. Its involved plot is scarcely worth reciting in detail, but an outline is to the point. The principal characters, heroes indeed, are two crooks, John Sinclair, a well-known English thief, and Jack Hooker, an equally notorious American con-man, and we meet them first shortly after Sinclair's arrival in New York on board the liner *Mauretania*. Together they plot to relieve a dissolute young playboy, William Frond, of the inheritance he has just been left by a deceased uncle. To this end they meet Frond when he arrives from London a day or so later in the *Lusitania*, and, with one of Hooker's gang masquerading as an envoy of the Plaza Hotel, have him "mugged" (as would now be said) in Central Park ("*taman kerajaan yang besar*"), spirited off, and replaced by Jack Hooker in disguise. Installed in the Plaza, with Hooker as Frond and Sinclair as his manservant, the two discuss how to obtain the \$5 million inheritance (a simple matter of misrepresentation, it turns out), and how to dispose of it. After some consideration, they

⁷ Cinemas were still a rarity in Malaya in 1922, and anticipating the problems of some of his readers Muhammad adds in explication, "like the *bangsawan*", the modern Malay "opera" or stage show of the time.

⁸ *Cheritera Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit*, pp. 2-3.

decide to use it to build ten apartment blocks ("*rumah yang besar2*") in various parts of New York City ("*pada beberapa kampung didalam bandar ini*") in order to provide shelter and food for the poorer labouring classes ("*segala kuli2 yang fakir miskin*"), to be operated at a quarter of actual cost, charging only ten cents for a bed and five for a meal. To make this charitable enterprise possible, it is suggested, ten additional blocks should be built and let at market prices, their rents subsidizing the welfare group. In all, Hooker and Sinclair estimate, this will consume some \$ 2 million. What is to be done with the remaining three? Well, another ten blocks can be put up especially for working women, supported in a similar way by a further ten to rent. And the final \$ 1 million should be spent in building trades schools for orphans ("*sekolah2 pertukangan bagi anak2 yatim*").⁹

The chapters that follow — a sort of comedy of errors — are largely devoted to the adventures of Hooker and Sinclair in avoiding exposure by one or another erstwhile girl-friend, mistress, or associate of William Frond, the two crooks taking it in turn, as circumstances dictate, to play Frond and his manservant, while living in the Frond house on Fifth Avenue (the latter thoroughfare described accurately enough by the translator as "*sebuah kampung tempat kediaman orang2 hartawan didalam New York*"). In the course of this we learn that the deceased Jefferson Frond, uncle of William, was in fact murdered by his secretary and one of William's estranged girl-friends, Margaret, and that the same pair have conspired to kidnap William's illegitimate son by another woman in order to force William to take Margaret back. Much of this information is obtained by a complicated (though nowadays doubtless unnecessarily crude) bugging device, by means of which Sinclair, in a rented room above Margaret's apartment on 60th Street, bores a hole through the ceiling near the electric light fixture, lowers a microphone into the recesses of the Chinese lampshade, and listens in on the conversation below.¹⁰ Only at this stage, the crooks having done most of the detecting, do the detectives appear — the redoubtable Nicholas Carter, hot on the trail of his old enemy Hooker, together with "Mr. Baxter", Chief of Police in London, similarly in pursuit of Sinclair. Both turn out to be rather gullible, each is taken in by the other's quarry pretending to be William Frond, and the climax occurs when, in ignorance of each other's presence in the Fifth Avenue house at mid-

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

night, intent on capture of their foes, they are attacked, chloroformed, bound, gagged — and eventually arrested by the New York police, whom they have telephoned to assist them in the capture of “two miscreants”. In the confusion, Hooker and Sinclair make good their escape — having taken care in the interim to settle half a million dollars on the kidnapped (but now released) child, deducting this sum from that allotted earlier to trades schools. They leave behind them documentary evidence of Jefferson Frond’s murder, and a teeth-gnashing Carter and Baxter, who resolve that next time, at least, they will get their man.

Why did Muhammad bin Muhammad Said select this particular novel for translation? Possibly because of its emphasis on the moral desirability of the redistribution of economic wealth, attractive to the man who, perhaps more than any other, saw this as one of the prime functions of the Kelantan *Majlis Ugama Islam*, which during its early years had before it a number of innovative projects in social welfare — though nothing like five million dollars to employ on them. In the absence of evidence one cannot say — he may simply have thought it a rattling good story. If anything, the evidence is perhaps to the contrary, for the stories he chose to translate as sequels to *Kechurian* appear to have had little of the same moral purpose. In an epilogue to *Kechurian* he wrote that if it proved popular he intended to bring out two more, entitled *Dua didalam Satu* (Two in One), and *Taligram dari Perut Ikan* (Telegram from the Stomach of a Fish).¹¹ The first of these — actually, as the title suggests, two stories in one — was published serially in the Kota Bharu journal *Al-Hedayah* in 1923, and relates further adventures of Nick Carter, in which the famous detective does, this time, figure as hero, unquestionably on the side of moral right but without quite the flair for economic redistribution that *Kechurian* displays.¹² The second, *Taligram dari Perut Ikan*, seems not to have

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹² The first of the two stories in *Dua didalam Satu* is titled only “Nicholas Carter”; the second “Nicholas Carter dengan Wakil Sulit Kerajaan Brazil” (Nicholas Carter and the Brazilian Government Secret Agent). The first, which appeared in *Al-Hedayah*, I, 2-8 (June 1923-Jan. 1924), was in the form of a forerunner of today’s “lift-out”, with its own title page (at p. 45 of I, 2), and with its own internal pagination, separate from that of the journal (39 pages in all). The “Brazilian” story appeared in *Al-Hedayah*, I, 10 (March 1924) and II, 1-7 (June-Dec. 1924), and carried the normal pagination of the journal (53 pages in all). The first story concerns a fraud

been published in Muhammad bin Muhammad Said's lifetime, though it did appear in Kota Bharu in 1941.¹³ No copies are known to have survived, and though, like *Kechurian*, it was a "Hooker" story, its content is unknown.

All three (or four) stories clearly belong to the extensive "Nick Carter" genre, and it is to this we must now turn to learn more of the provenance of what, on the face of it, may claim to have been the first Malay publication in novel form. Nicholas Carter, detective extraordinary, was introduced to the world in 1886 (a year before Sherlock Holmes), in the pages of Street and Smith's *New York Weekly*, in a story written by John Coryell, a young man who, after a roving career which included a period as United States Vice-Consul in Shanghai, had returned home to become a freelance writer.¹⁴ Though Coryell was the creator of Nick Carter, a name which, as his son has said, was destined to become almost a synonym for "detective",¹⁵ and wrote many of the original tales, the principal task of production was taken over in 1889 by Frederic Van Rensselaer Dey, who for seventeen years, until 1906, turned out Nick Carter novelettes virtually at the rate of one a week, writing, by his own account, more than a thousand in all.¹⁶

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perpetrated on elderly women in New York; the second appears to be a fairly straightforward "secret agent" story. Both were said to have been translated by one "To' Guru", a member of the editorial board of the journal, but as Muhammad bin Muhammad Said was on the board authorship is undisputed.

¹³ *Al-Hikmah* (Kota Bharu), VII, 351 (1 Sept. 1941), notes the recent publication of *Taligrap* [sic] *dari Perut Ikan, atau Perlawanan Hooker dengan Benham Carter, Ketua Polis Amerika* (Telegram from the Stomach of a Fish, or A Struggle between Hooker and Benham Carter, American Chief of Police) translated by Dato' Laksamana [the late Muhammad bin Muhammad Said] and published (*di-lahirkan*) by Nik Mahmud bin Haji Abdul Majid. It may be remarked that in *Kechurian* the New York Chief of Police is named Benham, and the detective, of course, Nicholas Carter. The elision of the names here must be put down either to translator's license or to error, for it is improbable that they appeared like this in the original. Finally, it may be noted in passing that Za'ba, "Recent Malay Literature", *Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, XIX, 1 (1941), p. 11, refers to the (undated but seemingly mid-1930's) publication, apparently in Penang, of a *Cherita James Carter or Penyamun Muda* [The Young Thief], which helps to thicken the confusion.

¹⁴ Russell M. Coryell, "The Birth of Nick Carter", *The Bookman* (New York), LXXVI, 454 (July 1929), pp. 495-502. But cf. also Alma E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (Port Washington, N. Y., Kennikat Press, rev. ed., 1968), p. 139, which gives the date as 1884.

¹⁵ Coryell, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

¹⁶ Edmund Pearson, *Dime Novels; or Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1929), p. 214.

Other writers, too, took part (a total, it is said, of perhaps a dozen),¹⁷ and between 1891 and 1915 three separate paper-back series of Nick Carters appeared: The Nick Carter Library, with 282 titles between 1891 and 1897; the Nick Carter Weekly (later the New Nick Carter Weekly), with 819 titles between 1897 and 1912; and Nick Carter Stories, with 160 titles between 1912 and 1915.¹⁸ The average story seems to have been about 25,000 words long (it is difficult to estimate the length of *Kechurian*, but it is much of this order), and around 1902 earned its author perhaps \$ 50.¹⁹ Few if any of the stories had literary merit or pretensions.

Given the vast corpus of Nick Carter materials, and the ephemeral form in which they appeared, it is scarcely surprising that it has not been possible to identify the original *Kechurian*, its author, or its date of publication.²⁰ Some clues as to date, and therefore perhaps to authorship, are, however, available. It was certainly written no earlier than the end of 1907, for the Plaza (still one of New York's leading hotels) was opened on October the 1st of that year. As to the latest possible date of composition, we may perhaps safely say no later than early 1915, for the *Lusitania* was sunk in May, 1915, with fearful loss of life, and it is hard to imagine anyone making casual use of the ship's name in a light-hearted novel in the year or two that followed.²¹ We know, too, in any case, that the flow of Nick Carters began to run dry around 1915 or 1916. What evidence there is, then, suggests that the original of *Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit* was written between 1908 and 1914. What does this tell us about likely authorship? Not, alas, very much — though it is clear that it was not written by Dey, who stopped producing

¹⁷ Jacques Barzun & Wendell Hertig Taylor, *A Catalogue of Crime* (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), p. 481, entry no. 2444.

¹⁸ Charles Bragin, *Dime Novels. Bibliography, 1860-1928* (Brooklyn, 1938), pp. 12 & 15. After 1915 according to Bragin, Carter stories continued to come out in pulp magazines.

¹⁹ Pearson, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁰ Were it worth pursuing, the problem is mainly one of discovering a large enough holding of Nick Carters. The biggest collection of American detective fiction is at the University of Texas, in Austin, and has not been catalogued. The second biggest is at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, of which there is a descriptive account, Mary S. Cameron & C. Hugh Holman, "The University of North Carolina Detective Collection", *The Bookmark* (Chapel Hill), Sept. 1958. For details of this and other bibliographical guides see Barzun & Taylor, *op. cit.* It is possible, in addition, that there exist major collections of Dime Novels, amongst which Carter stories are to be numbered.

²¹ The *Lusitania* was torpedoed by a German submarine on 7 May, 1915, en route from New York to Liverpool, with the loss of 1,201 lives, including many women and children.

Carters in 1906, and probable that it was not written by another of the stalwarts of the syndicate, George Charles Jenks.²² Of the numerous writers whose names are associated with Carter, however, none appears to have been more prominent in the twentieth century than the Rev. Samuel Spalding, who is said to have written over a hundred stories between 1910 and 1916.²³ Was it, then, Spalding? On the face of it a clergyman might well have written such a moral tale, but this is scarcely enough to go on. The style itself was changing by this time. In the bulk of the Nick Carters, certainly during the heyday of "the world's most celebrated detective", Carter is depicted as an embodiment of the manly virtues, a clean-cut athletic figure with the strength of ten, an incisive mind, and no observable vices, who, despite often appalling trials but with immense daring and courage always (or nearly always) gets his man.²⁴ With the onset of the twentieth century, however, American detective fiction began to show some of that "romantic indulgence towards rogues" which had long been a marked feature of French and English tales of this kind.²⁵ There is no question that in *Kechurian*, while evil does not at all in the ordinary sense triumph, good is embodied in a pair of warm-hearted and idealistic thieves engaged, as Robin Hood, in putting to rights moral wrong and social injustice. It would have a certain appropriateness were a young and doubtless idealistic American clergyman (Spalding was perhaps 35) and a young Malay Muslim official (Muhammad was only 34) to have felt similarly attracted to a view of social justice of this kind.²⁶ But it may be stretching matters too far to suggest this, and the question must remain, at least for the moment, unanswered.

In the course of seeking to uncover the background to the first Malay novel, however, other matters turn out to arise involving connections between Muhammad bin Muhammad Said, the displaced Sayyid

²² The *Dictionary of American Biography*, X (1943), p. 51, suggests that although Jenks, who had begun writing dime novels in 1886, produced many Nick Carters, he had turned to other fictional heroes by the early century.

²³ Barzun & Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

²⁴ See, e.g., the informative introduction to Robert Clurman (ed.), *Nick Carter, Detective* (New York, Macmillan, 1963), pp. xii-xv.

²⁵ Murch, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁶ Samuel Charles Spalding (1878-1962) was 32 years old when he began writing for Street and Smith. A brief (79 pp.) autobiography, *I've Had Me a Time*, was published privately by Spalding in 1961. I am indebted for this and other information to J. Randolph Cox, Reference Librarian, St. Olaf's College, Minnesota — who may yet solve the mystery of the provenance of *Cheritera Kechurian Lima Million Ringgit*.

Shaykh Al-Hadi, and detective fiction. If one assumes *Kechurian* to have been the first Malay novel, it would seem certainly also to have been the first example in Malay literature of detective or "mystery" fiction. The most famous crime stories in Malay are undoubtedly those of Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi, known as the "Rokambul" series and generally held to have introduced the genre. Here again, as with *Faridah Hanum*, though he appears to have been forestalled by Muhammad, Sayyid Shaykh's tales are much better known, and indeed vastly more numerous, no fewer than seven large volumes having been published, first in serial and then in book form. The first "Rokambuls" were probably published in 1928, episodes appearing monthly in Sayyid Shaykh's journal *Al-Ikhwān* under the title "Rokambul di-Paris" (possibly initially "Rokambul dalam Jail"), and subsequently being transferred to his weekly paper *Saudara*.²⁷ Like *Faridah Hanum*, the "Rokambul" stories were translations (or perhaps *saduran*), but though it is widely thought that Sayyid Shaykh took them from Arabic versions of stories published first in French, no identification appears to have been made of the French originals. Who, then, was Rokambul, the famous and intrepid criminal-adventurer-detective?

In an article appearing in Malay in *Dewan Bahasa* in 1966, Winstedt is credited with saying that Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi "wrote detective stories on the model of Arabic stories by Gobyneau."²⁸ The author certainly referred to here (and doubtless so named by Winstedt) is the Frenchman Émile Gaboriau, who in the late 1860's wrote a notable

²⁷ Li Chuan Siu, *Ikhtisar Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Baru*, p. 150 (following Za'ba, "Modern Developments", *op. cit.*, p. 154), lists the seven Rokambul volumes (giving the title of the first as *Cherita Rokambul dalam Jail dan di-Paris*), but wrongly states that they appeared first in *Saudara* (which began publication in September 1928). The present writer's notes are incomplete, but it is known that at least as early as August 1928 the story "Rokambul di-Paris" was appearing regularly in *Al-Ikhwān* (II, 12), and did so appear until November 1928, it being noted in the December issue that the usual Rokambul episode had had to be omitted for lack of space. After this the series was probably transferred to *Saudara*, as it does not appear again in *Al-Ikhwān*.

²⁸ M. Hassan Arshad, "Tanya-jawab Bahasa dan Sastera", *Dewan Bahasa*, X (1966), p. 275. No reference is given for the Winstedt quotation, which has not been found in the materials listed in the bibliography in J. Bastin & R. Roolvink (eds.), *Malayan and Indonesian Studies: Essays Presented to Sir Richard Winstedt on his Eighty-Fifth Birthday* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 10-23. In an article on "Malay Literature" in *Asian Review*, LVII (1961), p. 207, Winstedt says, "The present century has seen the translation of French detective stories from Arabic versions . . .", but suggests no French originals.

series of *romans policiers* featuring the detective Lecocq. Lecocq, however, was not the original Rokambul, but his lineal descendant. For "Rocambole" was the creation of the Vicomte Pierre-Alexis du Ponson (1829-1871), who under the name Ponson du Terrail was commissioned in 1853, at the age of 24, to write a *roman feuilleton* in one hundred installments, to be published cumulatively under the title *Les Drames de Paris*. Out of this, modelled at first on Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*,²⁹ emerged the young Rocambole, initially a twelve-year-old street urchin, friend of an elderly tavern keeper and merely a minor character in the series, who gradually grew to importance, however, as the personal servant of the villain. *Les Drames de Paris* was so popular that Ponson was urged to continue, and between 1853 and 1859 he produced a total of no fewer than 22 separate tales, in which Rocambole, by now a cynical, fashionable and elegant young gang-leader, became the undisputed hero, and through which the generic *roman feuilleton* began its transformation into the specific *roman policier*.³⁰ Rocambole was killed off by his author in 1859 (he was, at least, left for dead after being burned with vitriol), but his public would not let him die, and he reappeared again in at least twelve additional complete volumes of tales between 1862 and 1867, figuring now as a kind of early private detective, a thief turned to catching thieves in the interests of justice.³¹ Though Ponson du Terrail was prodigiously productive (it is said that in one period of two years he produced 73 novels of all kinds), the Rocambole series brought him much the greatest popularity and reputation, as well as setting the pattern for generations of fictional rogue-heroes both in France and elsewhere. It may be noted, indeed, in the present context, that Rocambole has been explicitly compared with Nicholas Carter, whom he is said to resemble even more closely than he does Gaboriau's Lecocq.³²

The problems involved in relating Sayyid Shaykh's "Rokambuls" to

²⁹ Eugène Sue (1804-1857), the French novelist, had published the serial *Les Mystères de Paris* in the *Journal des Débats* between 1842 and 1843. It may be noted that what is generally regarded as the first ever detective story, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", had appeared in *Graham's Magazine* only in April 1841.

³⁰ Murch, *op. cit.*, p. 118. For a discussion of the transition from *roman feuilleton* to *roman policier*, with special reference to Ponson du Terrail's role in this, see François Fosca (pseud. for Georges de Traz), *Histoire et Technique du Roman Policier* (Paris, Ed. Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1937).

³¹ Murch, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

Ponson du Terrail's enormous oeuvre, though not as great as with Muhammad's "Nick Carters", are nonetheless considerable, and the task has not been attempted here. Ponson, as has been seen, is credited with some 34 Rocambole tales, of which Sayyid Shaykh translated (from Arabic intermediaries?) an uncertain number, published in seven complete volumes before his death and for a time in the columns of *Saudara* thereafter.³³ Za'ba lists the titles of the seven volumes (which ranged in length from 296 to 509 pages), but they seem to bear little correspondence to the titles used by Ponson du Terrail — though these themselves appear confused and confusing.³⁴ There is not, however, much perhaps to be gained by trying to make this particular "French connection".

One intriguing point remains, which may serve finally to tie the ends of this tale together. At least one Nick Carter story is known, on the testimony of its author Eugene T. Sawyer, to have been "Americanized" from an original by Émile Gaboriau,³⁵ and it is of course possible, given the family resemblances between Gaboriau's Lecocq, Ponson's Rocambole, and the various heroes of the "Nick Carter" series, that other Carter stories were taken from Gaboriau — or Ponson. It would be a fitting irony, suitable to the convolutions of the genre, if, all unwittingly, Muhammad Said's "first Malay novel and first Malay detective story" (as this paper has argued them to be) had themselves been translated from the very author who later provided Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi with

³³ Za'ba, "Modern Developments", p. 154. It has not proved possible, here, to trace the Arabic versions of Ponson, though this clearly constitutes a further field of enquiry.

³⁴ Editions of Ponson du Terrail, in various languages, are numerous, and titles appear to vary. Perhaps the most useful is the uniform (though certainly not complete) edition, in eight large volumes, published (in French) in Verviers, Belgium, at a date not given, by Gérard & Co. in their Bibliothèque Marabout Géant. Volume 1 of this edition has a foreword (pp. 5-10) by Léon Thoores, giving something of the history of Ponson and Rocambole, and Volume 6 (inside rear cover) has a full-page biography of Ponson.

³⁵ It may be noted in passing that several Nick Carters by the Rev. Samuel Spalding are known (personal communications from J. Randolph Cox; see Note 26) to have been re-written from British "Sexton Blake" stories published in the *Union Jack* — and that as a further conjunction at least one Sexton Blake, "The Mystery of the Potbank" was translated by Ahmad Murad for the Malay Home Library series of the Malay Translation Bureau, and published as *Cherita Sexton Blake* sometime between 1929 and 1936 (Abdullah Sanusi b. Ahmad, *Peranan Pejabat Karang Mengarang Bidang2 Pelajaran Sekolah2 Melayu dan Kesusasteraan di-Kalangan Orang Ramai* (Kuala Lumpur, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1966), p. 47).

what have up to now been *held* to have been the first Malay detective stories — the one from the French through the English, the other from the French through the Arabic. But who can say?

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POSTSCRIPT

Since the foregoing was written, two additional clues have been stumbled upon. I note with appreciation those who drew them to my attention in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta early in 1973. A student of Dr. Amin Sweeney's at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has discovered in the University of Malaya library a 28-page *Shaer Cheritera Bijaksana* which clearly has associations with *Cheritera Lima Million Ringgit*, in that the foreword (dated April 1923) to the first edition (probably published in Kelantan) was written by Muhammad b. Muhammad Said, the work was translated (from an Arabic magazine, *Al-Lataf*, though clearly European in origin) by two employees of the Kelantan *Majlis Ugama Islam* and published under the auspices of the *Majlis*,¹ and its principal character is one John Sinclair, in this incarnation a clever amateur detective who unmasks a thief and rescues a damsel in distress (the whole affair taking place in luxury Swiss hotels and involving the family of the late Austro-Hungarian emperor). Muhammad, in his foreword, commends the poem to the Malay reader, remarking that it is much better suited to the times than poems dealing

¹ The title page of the second (and only available) edition reads: *Shaer Cheritera Bijaksana/ Kebajikan John Sinclair bestari/ Menolongi tangan terkena churi/ Tangan keturunan pemerintah negeri/ Kerabat Emperor Austria Hungary/ (Di-karangan)/ PerMelayuan Abdul Rahman Daud Makah/ Hassan Haji Omar mashur manfa'atah/ Bumi Kelantan keluaran tingkah/ Kerana bangsa tujuan melangkah/ (Kenyataan)/ Hak Mengechop-nya di-beri uchap/ Bagi pengarang telah tersimpan/ Di-Majlis Ugama tempat penterapan/ Ini-lah kali kedua pengechopan/ Di-chetak oleh The United Press — Penang.* The edition is undated, but a note at the foot of the last page of the text records that the press itself was founded in 1927. Abdul Rahman b. Daud al-Makki is said to have been born (in Mecca) in 1909 (which would make him only fourteen in 1923, when the work first appeared), grandson of Syaykh Nik Mat Kechil, a pilgrim *syaykh* from Patani; Hassan b. Haji Omar, born in Kelantan in 1901, was one of the first pupils of the Madrasah Muhammadi, started by the Majlis Ugama in 1917, and from 1922 edited the Majlis journal *Pengasoh* (Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi, "Notes Towards a History of Malay Periodicals in Kelantan", *op. cit.*).

with fairies, devils and ghosts, and urges support for Malay writers who use the pen to advance their people in the modern world.² The introductory and concluding stanzas of the poem itself explicitly hold the tale up as exemplary of worldly wisdom and the triumph of reason allied with virtue. One of the translators had recently succeeded Muhammad as editor of the *Majlis Ugama's* journal, and the moralising which surrounds the *Shaer Cheritera Bijaksana* clearly adds force to the argument that for some, at least, the early detective story, like Aesop, could hold lessons for mankind.

The second point relates to "Rokambul". I am indebted to Mr. C. W. Watson of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for pointing out to me that numerous Rocambole stories were translated into Malay by Lie Kim Hok (1853-1912) and published in Batavia in the early years of this century.³ Lie, a biography of whom appeared at the 150th anniversary of his birth,⁴ was a second-generation Java-born Chinese, educated in Malay and Dutch by Christian missionaries, and although he wrote little that was original his translations are widely regarded as having done much to establish "Chinese-Indonesian" as a respectable literary language. Among other things he published 53 Rocambole tales between 1910 and 1913, collected in five separately titled volumes.⁵ It is clear that Lie did not know French,⁶ so it is reasonable to suppose that he translated his Rocamboles from the Dutch. Brinkman lists seven Dutch translations of Ponson du Terrail between 1867 and 1910, and though only one title corresponds directly with any of Lie's, at least two others are identifiable as Rocambole collections.⁷ In the present context, one question at least remains. Did Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi, some 25 years later, know of Lie's translations — did he, indeed, perhaps use them as a basis for his own seven volumes, differently titled, which have always until now been assumed to have come from Arabic originals? There is, no doubt, a case for further enquiry.

² *Shaer Cheritera Bijaksana*, unnumbered first page of text.

³ See Watson's article, "Some Preliminary Remarks on the Antecedents of Modern Indonesian Literature", *BKI*, 127, 4 (1971), p. 418; and cf. also Nio Joe Lan, *Sastera Indonesia-Tionghoa* (Gunung Agung, Jakarta, 1962), pp. 16, 29 & 112.

⁴ Tio Ie Soei, *Lie Kimhok 1853-1912* (L.D. "Good Luck", Bandung, n.d. [? 1958]).

⁵ For details see Tio, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ C. L. Brinkman, *Catalogus der Boeken, Plaat- en Kaartwerken die gedurende de jaren 1850-1882 ... zijn uitgegeven ...*, and supplements for 1882-1891, 1891-1900, and 1901-1910.