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Munshi Abdullahs Horrible Murder- the Ceretera darihal Haji Sabar Ali


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Second Murderer: What shall we do then?
First Murderer: Let's throw him into the river.
(Marlowe: The Massacre at Paris).

The term “horrible murder” is usually associated with Henry Mayhew and his account of the ballad-mongers of his day (Mayhew 1967:222, 225, 229), but the topic is one that has attracted the attention of not a few English writers, e.g. George Orwell, who in his ‘Decline of the English Murder’, looked back with affectionate regret on the latter half of the 19th century as “our great period in murder, our Elizabethan period, so to speak” (Orwell 1968:98). There are many, however, who would argue that the real “golden age” of the English (and Scottish) murder was the first half of the 19th century. The blood shed in the Napoleonic wars had barely congealed when Abraham Thornton was tried — not once but twice — for the murder of Mary Ashford, creating legal history at his second trial by invoking the right of “trial by battle” with his accuser. A few years later (in 1823) William Thurtell was tried for the murder of William Weare — an act of butchery that prompted De Quincey to write his “On Murder, considered as one of the Fine Arts”. 1828 was a vintage year: in England it witnessed the trial of William Corder for the murder of Maria Marten in the ‘Red Barn’ that was to feature in so many subsequent melodramas; in Scotland it saw the trial of William Burke, the senior partner in the body-snatching firm of Burke and Hare. The 1830’s were distinguished by James Greenacre’s idiosyncratic use of the (recently invented) omnibus, while the 1840’s showed that murder could involve, if not kind hearts, then at least coronets, when Lord William Russell was murdered by his valet, Courvoisier (Courvoisier’s

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execution was witnessed by a crowd that included Dickens and Thackeray, the latter being inspired to write ‘Going to See a Man Hanged’). 1849 was another vintage year for murder and murder trials, in particular those of the Mannings and James Rush; according to Mayhew’s informants, public interest in these two trials was so great that no less than two and a half million broadsheets were sold (to say nothing of the porcelain figurines of the condemned produced by the Staffordshire potteries).¹

This interest in homicide was not confined to the lower orders. The first half of the 19th century was a time when British newspapers were just getting into their stride and all of them, from the popular weeklies such as The Observer and The Weekly Chronicle right up to The Times, gave more than ample coverage to crime and its perpetrators. Even The Illustrated London News, founded in 1842 and now regarded as an exemplar of good taste, owed much of its original success to its extensive (and illustrated) coverage of murder trials.² Given such widespread interest, it is not unreasonable to assume that, by the middle of the 19th century the British public, high and low alike, were as informed as any in the world in judging the merits of a good murder.

Given such connoisseurship, the excitement generated among the British residents of Singapore by the trial of Haji Sabar Ali in 1851 is a tribute to the “classic” nature of the murder and the ensuing trial. It is not easy to place one’s finger on the qualities that command the attention of the public to such a degree that one can speak of a “classic” murder. Despite the title of De Quincey’s essay, it is not simply a matter of the artistry involved, for many of the most sensational murders have been singularly lacking in artistry. It would seem rather to stem from a reluctant admiration for the matter-of-fact way the murderer has gone about what for most of us is a fairly unusual task, viz. the killing (and disposing of the corpse) of a fellow human being. In the case of Greenacre referred to above, the horror of cutting off a woman’s head and disposing of it is reduced to (almost) comprehensible proportions by the story that went around that when the murderer, carrying the head of his victim in a parcel, boarded one of the new omnibuses and asked how much the fare was, the conductor replied “Sixpence a head”, causing Greenacre to wonder whether he should pay single or double fare (Altick 1972:40). Again the horrific story of Burke and Hare prowling the streets of Edinburgh to collect bodies — often prematurely — to sell to Dr. Knox, the noted surgeon and University lecturer, becomes a mere matter of supply and demand in the popular verse:

“Up the close and doun the stair
But and ben wi’ Burke and Hare
Burke’s the butcher, Hare’s the thief,
Knox the boy that buys the beef.”³
It is probably due to its possessing, to a high degree, this quality of blood-stained matter-of-factness, to coin a phrase, that the trial of Sabar Ali caused such a sensation in the Singapore of the 1850's.

For most of the European residents in the island their first acquaintance with the case was a notice in the Singapore Free Press of Friday 27th September, 1850. The newspaper reported that:

A shocking case of maiming and wounding was brought to light on Friday last . . . the victim, a lad of about 12 years of age, who appears to have been held in a species of slavery by his master, made his escape from the house of the latter on the morning of Friday last with three severe wounds on each of his arms, one on the calf of the right leg and a deep wound down the sole of each foot, which he declares to have been made with a red hot iron . . .

The master of the unfortunate boy was Haji Sabar Ali, a Tamil Muslim of some standing among the Muslim community in Singapore, who had formerly been employed as the Tamil and Malay interpreter at the Police Court and was thus not unknown to members of Singapore's European community (under the name of "Saffer Ally"). His victim was a boy of Arab extraction called Aman, whom Sabar Ali had brought back from Aceh. Sabar Ali was a hard master and Aman had previously run away from home and sought refuge in the Temenggung's compound at Teluk Belanga, but Sabar Ali had discovered his whereabouts and brought him back, determined to teach him a lesson. The lesson was given on the night of Thursday 19th September, and took the form of burning the soles of his feet with a red-hot iron. Presumably the point was to prevent the boy running away again, but if so the lesson was a failure; badly burned as he was, Aman managed to crawl away from the house and attract the attention of a passing policeman who brought him to the Acting Superintendent of Police, Mr. Dunman. Dunman summoned the government surgeon (Dr. Oxley), who examined the boy and sent him to the Pauper Hospital for treatment. Aman was subsequently questioned by Captain Man (the Sitting Magistrate) in the presence of Sabar Ali and as a result of the investigation a summons was issued for Sabar Ali to appear at the next Criminal Session, after which Aman was sent back to the hospital.

The Sessions opened on Wednesday, 9th October, but before Sabar Ali could be brought to trial Aman had vanished — Sabar Ali's men had kidnapped him on the night of Friday 11th October and taken him off to the nearby island of Riau. The result was that when Sabar Ali's case came up for hearing on Tuesday, 15th October, the prosecution's chief witness was absent, but in view of the suspicious circumstances, the Recorder (Sir William Jeffcott) did not throw out the case but postponed it to the next sessions. Sabar Ali was forced to spend the night in gaol, and it was the evening of the next day (Wednesday, 16th October) before he was discharged.
That same night Aman was brought back to Singapore, to be kept prisoner in the coal-shed in Sabar Ali’s back yard. Upon arriving home from gaol, Sabar Ali apparently decided that Aman had to be eliminated and sent one of his hangers-on (Sinna Marikan) to summon Barid Mastan, a “strong-arm” man. Oli Sab (one of the boatmen who had taken Aman to Riau and brought him back) went off to borrow a rowing-boat (Sabar Ali’s house was situated on the banks of the Singapore River) and the three men (Barid Mastan, Oli Sab and Sinna Marikan) took Aman out of the coal-shed and put him on the boat, telling him that he was to be taken on board a ship that was about to sail for India. However, when the boat reached one of the deeper spots in the river, Sinna Marikan took hold of a projecting branch (to keep the boat still) while Oli Sab seized Aman and held him down for Barid Mastan to cut his throat. Barid Mastan was a professional, and Aman must have died almost immediately. The body was lashed to a heavy stone (with rope supplied by Sabar Ali) and thrown overboard, along with the knife used by Barid Mastan.

It was now early in the morning of Thursday, 17th October, and the murderers reported back to Sabar Ali, who was duly grateful. After scrubbing the blood (or most of it) off the planks of the boat, they were invited in to take betel with Sabar Ali and the four spent an hour or so smoking and chewing betel. Eventually the murderers left for home, satisfied in the knowledge of a job well done.

Their satisfaction did not last long. In their earlier efforts to trace Aman, the police had noticed that the day after he had last been seen at the Pauper Hospital, one of the sampans usually moored in the harbour was missing. It turned up again on the evening of the 16th October and the police at once set about questioning the boatmen as to the reason for their prolonged absence. Eventually they won from them the admission that they had taken Aman to Riau and back and had then handed him over to Oli Sab in Sabar Ali’s back yard. Oli Sab was arrested early the next morning (Thursday, 17th October) and before the day was out Barid Mastan and Sinna Marikan had also been rounded up. The police soon discovered — apparently from Oli Sab — where the body had been dumped and the next day (Friday, 18th October) they began to drag the river, although it was not until the afternoon of the following day (Saturday, 19th October) that a police diver succeeded in bringing up the body, which had already started to decompose (the marks Sabar Ali had burnt on the feet were still clearly visible, however). A Coroner’s inquest was empanelled that same evening, but was adjourned to allow the police to continue their investigations. When the inquest was resumed (on Wednesday, 23rd October) a number of people were charged with being implicated in the case and four of them — Sabar Ali, Barid Mastan, Oli Sab and Sinna Marikan — were ordered to stand trial for murder at the next
In the ensuing months, Sinna Marikan agreed to turn Queen's evidence and so did not join his accomplices in the dock on the morning of Friday, 21st February, 1851, when the trial began. It lasted all day, but the evidence was overwhelming, and when the jury — all Europeans — retired (at 9 o'clock in the evening) it took them less than five minutes to find the accused guilty.

A week later the three prisoners were hanged outside the gaol on Pearls Hill. The crowd had begun to assemble as early as daybreak, and by the time the prisoners were led out of the gaol and on to the scaffold some thousands of Singaporeans had gathered to witness the execution. The size of the crowd, while remarkable by Singapore standards, could hardly have surprised the Europeans, most of whom must have witnessed public executions in their native land, but there were of course differences. Compared with the drunken and unruly mobs that assembled to watch the more notorious felons of England and Scotland being “turned off”, the Singapore crowd must have seemed both silent and sober. There were for example no hawkers or “running patterers” fighting their way through the crowd to sell, for a penny or so, the broadsheets purporting to give a “Full, True and Particular Account” of the criminal and his trial. Indeed, the nearest thing to a broadsheet on the Sabar Ali trial did not appear until some six weeks after the hanging, when Keasberry's Mission Press produced the Ceretara darihal Haji Sabar Ali (The Story of Haji Sabar Ali).

As one turns over the frontispiece with its stylized picture of a turbaned and bearded Sabar Ali grasping the rails of the dock, and reads the lengthy title (“This is the story of Haji Sabar Ali who was hanged along with Barid Mastan and Oli Sab in Singapore because the three of them conspired to murder an Arab boy called Aman”), this 34-page pamphlet does at first sight seem to have a good deal in common with the “murder-broadsheets” composed by the gin-sodden bards of London's Seven Dials district. However, as one reads on, it becomes clear that while “cashing in” on the sensation caused by Sabar Ali's trial and execution, the work is nonetheless a tract, a tract put out in the hope of converting Malays and Malay speakers to an Anglo-Saxon Christianity, or at least persuading them to adopt what with apologies to Lewis Carroll and Agnus Wilson might be termed “Anglo-Saxon attitudes”. The account of the murder itself takes up just over seven pages and another seven pages are devoted to an account of the trial, but the remaining nineteen pages are concerned to argue (a) that Sabar Ali was given a fair trial, and (b) that, in its impartiality, British justice comes close to Divine Justice (at least as outlined in the New Testament). The Christian tone of this latter claim is brought out in a long quotation from Paul's ‘First Epistle to Timothy' and is further emphasized when we are told that the Law
of God can be summed up in a single phrase, “Love your fellow man as you love yourself”, which would seem an obvious reference to phrases such as “Thou shalt love... thy neighbour as thyself”, found in the Gospel according to Luke (Chapter 10, v. 27).6

Such overtly Christian sentiments may seem difficult to reconcile with Buckley’s statement that the work was written by Munshi Abdullah (Buckley 1965:557). However J. T. Thomson, Abdullah’s friend, tells us that although “Abdulla(h) lived and died a Mahomedan” (Thomson 1865:xx-xxi), he apparently had no objection to assisting the missionaries in compiling various works on the Christian religion. Thomson goes on:

...For a professing Mahomedan to do this often struck the Europeans, as well as the natives, as being inconsistent, and I, amongst others, entered into conversation with him on the point. To my questions he had full and ready answers, and the following will give some idea of the position he assumed: He held that the labours of the missionaries were unquestionably devoted to good works, and for this cause alone would he be an earnest helper, more especially as his convictions had much in common. Further, that it was consistent with his religion to believe that Christ was the greatest of prophets, though Mahomed was the last. Turning to the translation of the New Testament in which he assisted, he would open it at the sermon on the mount, and read several verses, such as ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’, ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled’, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God’, ... ‘Love your enemies, and bless them that curse you’. He would add, ‘This teaching was truly directed by God, because it is above men’s power’.

Abdullah told Thomson that while generally he believed in the inspiration of the New Testament, nevertheless, ... there are parts where the last prophet has given us a new dispensation. For instance, turning to Romans, viii, 14, 17, it says ‘For as many as are led by the spirit of God they are the sons of God. And if children, then heirs: heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ’. And again, in Galatians, iii, 26, ‘For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus’. This makes man a part of the Divine essence, which is contrary to our doctrines — mankind being one species of the created intelligent beings, which are angels, genii, and men; man being of earth, and, with the others, a mere creature or slave ... Again, (John) iii, 16, ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life’. This makes Christ the Son of God, while we only believe Him to be a prophet; indeed the greatest of prophets.
The initial point of our belief is, in fact, this: 'There is no Deity but God. Mahomed is God's apostle' (Thomson 1874:310-312).

Although it is difficult to believe that Abdullah would say that "Christ was the greatest of the prophets" (which cannot really be reconciled with the statement that Muhammad was the last of the prophets — it seems more likely that Abdullah was too polite to correct Thomson's misunderstanding of the matter), the passage does seem to confirm that Abdullah, while remaining unshaken in his Muslim faith, was on occasion prepared to quote the New Testament. A further point in support of Abdullah's authorship of the Ceretara darihal Haji Sabar Ali is the fact that both style and calligraphy are clearly Abdullah's. The most we might allow is that while Keasberry might have suggested the Sabar Ali case as a likely subject — he may even have preached a sermon about it, in Malay (Buckley 1965:321) — Abdullah was given a fairly free hand in composing the pamphlet.

Keasberry must have been fairly confident that Abdullah shared not only his views on the enormity of the crime committed, but also on the fair treatment Sabar Ali had received at the hands of the jury (despite its being composed entirely of Europeans). It was, after all, only a year or two since Abdullah in his Hikayat had publicly praised British justice and the British jury system, contrasting it with the arbitrary administration of justice under the Malay Sultans. Abdullah had rhetorically asked his readers:

Are your ears so deaf and your eyes so blind that you cannot hear or see how the Europeans act when they administer justice? If they execute someone who is clearly guilty and deserves to be executed, nevertheless it is only after the matter has been thoroughly gone into, making use of every suggestion, every idea and every witness, and even then only if the jury of twelve men are agreed in declaring that the man deserves to die. The judge then strives to find some way to spare the man's life and it is only in the last resort that sentence of death is passed upon the man. God save Queen Victoria! (Abdullah 1953:369, of which the above is a free translation.)

Nor did Abdullah have anything against public executions. Commenting on the arrival in Singapore of the settlement's first Recorder (in 1833), Abdullah had written:

This was the first time I had seen people hanged. Before the arrival of the Recorder, anyone found guilty of a capital offence had been sent overseas to be executed. In my opinion this is not the right thing to do because the execution is not witnessed by the people of the country in which the crime was committed. As a result, because they are not sure that the man really has been executed (and because people have forgotten all about the matter) other people will commit the same crime. When people were
hanged in Malacca and Singapore thousands of people turned up to see it — some of them were so scared that they cried while others trembled at the sight and most of the spectators took the lesson very much to heart — it will be a long time before they forget it. It is moreover an example to us all of the retribution that awaits the evil-doer. I noticed that after a few people had been hanged in Malacca and Singapore there was a considerable falling off in the number of assaults, murders and robberies committed. Therefore, let us not be too frightened when we see a great storm with all its thunder and lightning, for although there is indeed some danger and cause for alarm, it nevertheless brings us some benefit by clearing the air of the noxious vapours that are a cause of so much disease, and thus ensures our safety and security. (Abdullah 1953: 325, freely translated.)

However, in the case of Sabar Ali, while Abdullah obviously shared the view of the European community as to the cruelty inflicted upon a helpless boy, it is less certain that he shared that community's attitude towards the punishment inflicted upon a respectable fellow-Muslim. The Europeans were sure that the shocking nature of the crime and the prompt punishment, not only of the hirelings but also of the instigator, could only redound to the credit of British justice (and British administrators) and they were somewhat taken aback to find that a sizable proportion of the Muslim community of Singapore regarded Sabar Ali as not so much a monster as a martyr. Abdullah was not only a Muslim, he was, like Sabar Ali, a Malay-speaking Chulia, and thus in a far better position than any European to appreciate how Muslims in general, and the Chulias in particular, would view the execution of one of the leaders of their community for a murder committed by one of his underlings.

It was of course not simply the execution but also the un-Muslim way the corpse was treated (in effect, desecrated) that must have caused Abdullah some heartsearching. In his Hikayat he had commented on the way Raffles — Abdullah's much-admired patron — had reacted to Said Yasin's attack on Colonel Farquhar by ordering the Said's mangled body to be put on display for a fortnight before allowing it to be taken down for burial. Abdullah's disapproval of this action may seem to us to be implicit rather than explicit, but it was explicit enough for his contemporary translator to comment that:

In this short occurrence, Abdulla(h)'s prejudices and proclivities as a Mahomedan came, unexpectedly to me, more strongly out than I have perceived elsewhere, or else his credulity is greater than I anticipated ... The barbarities that he ascribes to the British gentlemen composing the European residents, I may emphatically state as without foundation, and totally inconsistent with their character. This has been a mere rumour of fanatics ...
It is, however, not difficult to see in Raffles' action a vindictiveness stemming partly from fear but partly too from racial and religious prejudices, prejudices that survived until well after Abdullah's death. Only five years before Sabar Ali's trial a Malay called 'Sunan' had been sentenced to death in Penang for running amok and causing the death of eight people. In his summing up (on 13th July, 1846) the Recorder had told 'Sunan',

...all the atrocities you have committed are of a peculiar character and such as are never perpetrated by Christians, Hindoos, Chinese, or any other class than Mahomedans, especially Malays, among whom they are frightfully common, and may therefore be justly branded by way of infamous distinction, as Mahomedan Murders. I think it is right, therefore, seeing so great a concourse of Mahomedans in and about the Court, to take this opportunity of endeavouring to disabuse their minds and your own of any false notions of courage, heroism or self devotion which Mahomedans possibly, but Mahomedans alone, of all mankind, can ever attach to such base, cowardly and brutal murders; notions which none but the devil himself, 'the father of lies', could ever have inspired...

In his final peroration the Recorder returned to this theme:
Such are the murders which Mahomedans alone have been found capable of committing. Not that I mean to brand Mahomedans in general as worse than all other men, far from it; I believe there are many good men among them, as good as men can be who are ignorant of the only true religion. I merely state the fact that such atrocities disgrace no other creed, let the Mahomedans account for the fact as they may...

Turning to the prisoner in the dock the Recorder concluded:
The sentence of the Court therefore is, that you, Sunan, be remanded to the place from whence you came, and that on the morning of Wednesday next you be drawn from thence on a hurdle to the place of execution, and there hanged by the neck until you are dead. Your body will then be handed over to the surgeons for dissection, and your mangled limbs, instead of being restored to your friends for decent interment, will be cast into the sea, thrown into a ditch, or scattered on the earth at the discretion of the Sheriff. And may God Almighty have mercy on your miserable soul!

One might perhaps question the apparent pleasure derived by British judges in ordering the judicial mangling of the corpses of convicted felons, particularly as in Britain itself the law requiring that the bodies of criminals convicted for murder be handed over to the surgeons for dissection had been repealed a decade or so earlier (in 1832). It seems
that they did so partly to prevent a repetition of what had occurred in the case of Said Yasin mentioned above. After Raffles had (somewhat reluctantly) agreed to hand over the Said's corpse to Sultan Husain, the remains were taken down from the gibbet and buried at Tanjung Pagar. The result was disconcerting: "the grave", wrote Thomson in 1873, "is to this day a place of pilgrimage, and he himself (Said Yasin) is accounted a great saint. Thus the effect of the exposure of his body took a direction opposite to what was intended" (Thomson 1874:134). It was no doubt to prevent such "canonization" that Recorders in the Straits Settlements insisted on good, old-fashioned British justice being administered and refused to allow the corpses of convicted to be given anything like a decent burial. As the editor of the *Straits Times* expressed it in his editorial of Tuesday 4th March, 1851:

The non-delivery of the cor(p)ses to their friends, particularly in the case of Saffer Ally, will doubtless deter others from the commission of wicked acts, especially among the Islam portion of the natives, who deem the absence of funeral rites as the heaviest punishment that can be inflicted and next to exclusion from Paradise. We hear preparations were in progress to give great ceremony to the burial of Saffer Ally as a Mahomedan saint; in this however the imagers were properly disappointed.

The word "imagers" here is difficult to excuse. While it would be unrealistic to expect *all* contemporary Singaporeans to share the views of the government surveyor (J. T. Thomson), who considered (rightly) that "the sentiments of the Koran appear as a reaction against image worship" (Thomson 1874:342), one might have hoped for a more enlightened view from the editor of a newspaper in which the London publisher, George Routledge, had chosen to advertise a popular edition of Washington Irving's *Life of Mahomet*. We might conclude by asking what the feelings were of another "imager" — the author of the *Ceretera darihal Haji Sabar Ali* — upon reading such views. Could it be that some of the vehemence of his arguments as to the ideal nature of British justice is an attempt to convince not only his hypothetical readers, but also himself?
Bahwa ini ceretera dari hal Haji Sabar Ali yang kena gantung bersama2 dengan Barid Mastan dan Oli Sab dalam negeri Singapura sebab ketiganya telah sepakat membunuh scorang budak Arab yang bernama Aman

tercap dibatu dalam negeri Singapura diatas Bukit Zion kepada tahun Masihi 1851.

* Based upon a microfilm of the text in the British Library, print no. 14625. aa. 2 (1). The text is in Jawi, and in romanizing it I have added punctuation marks and capital letters. The romanization I have used is a modernized version of that employed in Kamus Déwan (Kuala Lumpur 1970). Brackets denote material not found in the text.
INI CERETERA HAJI SABAR ALI

Bahwa ini suatu peringatan dari hal seorang orang Keling Islam yang bernama Haji Sabar Ali serta seorang budak Arab yang dari dalam rumahnya yang bernama Aman. Maka tiada kami mengetahui dari hal asal usul budak itu entahpun hambanya entahpun bagaimana keda-tangan budak itu kepadanya, Allahu (a)`lam, melainkan adalah kami [p. 2] mendapat hikayatnya itu tatkala bicara di dalam Kort negeri Singapura di hadapan Tuan Reka(r)dar Jefkat serta saksi2nya dan dihadapan tuan2 Geran Juri dan Péti Juri demikianlah adanya.

Sebermula maka adalah dari hal budak Arab yang bernama Aman itu adalah telah dianiyakannya entah beberapa kali dipukulnya dan dipengapakannya maka pada sekali disiksakannya itu budak itu telah larilah membawa dirinya ke Teluk Belanga kepada Temenggung. Maka apabila didengar oleh Sabar Ali budak itu ada di sana maka pergilah ia meminta budak itu kembali maka entah bagaimanakah halnya [p. 3] sudahlah dibawanya pulang ke rumahnya. Maka kemudian dari pada itu kepada suatu malam maka diselarnyalah budak itu dengan besi hangat di kaki tangannya dipegangkan oleh beberapa orang dan anaknyaapun bersama2 sehingga kasihan budak itu tiadalah dapat berjalan lagi. Maka dibubuhnya pula rantai dituruhnya dalam rumahnya. Hatta maka dengan kehendak Tuhan yang amat mengetahui hal hambanya daripada lahir dan batinnya maka budak yang tersebut itu dibiakan pulang dengan beberapa orang daya upayanya mematahkan rantainya itu lalu ia berkisut2kan dirinya larilah keluar, ada pukul [p. 4] empat pagi hari sampailah ia ke jalan raya dengan berkisut2 itu maka bertemulah dengan mata2 orang yang berkawal di jalan itu, lalu diperiksa oleh budak itu dikatakannya segala hal ahwal semuanya maka dibawa oleh oleh mata2 itu akan dia kepada Tuan Danman. Maka serta didengar oleh Tuan Danman akan hal yang demikian dibawanya oleh polis maka diperiksa oleh oleh Tuan Majisterit lalu dicereterakanlah oleh budak itu segala hal ahwalnya daripada permulaannya sampailah kepada kesudahannya, bagaimana dibakar oleh Sabar Ali itu dengan besi panas kaki tangannya dan orang yang memegangkannya akan dia serta anak Sabar Ali itu memanaskan besi [p. 5] itu sampai mérah baharu diberikannya kepada bapanya. Maka sekalian pengaduan budak itu ditulislah oleh Majisterit. Setelah itu maka dibubuhlah waran(t) kepada Sabar Ali lalu datanglah ia ke polis. Maka diperiksa oleh Majisterit maka jawabnya: “Budak ini bohong, ia
sendiri terbakar waktu malam orang Hindu mengarak berhalanya, kena damar, bukannya sahaya bakar”.


* ‘(di)pisik’ is not given in the Malay dictionaries but is obviously an alternative form of ‘pisit’ — to interrogate (cf. ‘risik’ — to make enquiries).
Munshi Abdullah’s ‘Horrible Murder’


maka jawab meréka itu "Salah". Kemudian ditanya pula salahkah Oli Sab itu maka jawabnya "Salah". Maka setelah salah ketiga2 meréka itu maka baharulah Tuan Reka(r)dar itu dengan beberapa kasihnya serta nasihatnya akan meréka itu maka dengan beberapa pula susah hatinya sebab hendak meletakk hukum itu maka dengan [p. 15] tiada berdaya diletakkannya hukum akan ketiga meréka itu digantung tetapi tiada ditentukannya hari apa.

Sebermula maka kepada dua puluh dua haribulan Februari tahun Masihi sanat 1851 kepada pagi hari Jumat pukul enam maka ketiga meréka itu digantung. Setelah mati maka ditanam di dalam kawasan jél itu juga tiada diberikan mayatnya kepada warith2nya.

Bahwa adalah kamu sekalian bangsa yang duduk di dalam negeri Singapura ini telah mengetahui dan telah menengar bagaimana yang [p. 16] telah jadi darihal Haji Sabar Ali dan Oli Sab dan Barid Mastan itu dalam Kort besar pada hari Jumaat yang lalu yaitu kepada duapuluh satu haribulan Februari tahun Masihi sanat 1851. Maka bahwasanya adalah darihal perkara yang tersebut itu telah sudahlah diperiksa serta dengan diselidik oleh Tuan Reka(r)dar di hadapan tuan2 Juri orang2 yang baik dan yang kepercayaan istiméwa pula dengan selidik Tuan Keristian Baumgartën yaitu loyar Sabar Ali itu akan bicara itu serta dengan saksi2nya sebelah menyebelah yang telah diletakkkan hukum mati. Maka pada sangka kami adalah juga sangka2 [p. 17] orang Keling dan Hindu dan Islam bahwa hukum yang telah diletakkkan ke atas ketiga meréka itu terlalu keras atau zalim atau yang boléh lagi diringankan atau dilepaskan. Maka sekarang hendaklah kamu sekalian mengetahui bahwa dikala kiranya kamu sekalian mengetahu akan hal soa1 jawab yang telah jadi dalam hal itu nescaya tiadalah syak lagi kamu sekalian akan hal itu. Pertama2 sekali2 hukum yang telah diletakkkan Tuan Hakim itu tiadalah zalim sebab segala perkara itu telah diperiksa oleh Tuan Hakim di hadapan [p. 18] majelis yang sebegitu besar seperti yang telah kamu lihat lagipun di hadapan orang yang pandai2 yang ada mempunyai pengetahuan yang boléh menangkap kesalahannya istiméwa tuan2 Juri duabelas yang telah terpilih yang bukan kehendaknya sendiri atau dengan setauanya ia akan jadi juri pada masa itu lagipun tuan2 itu sekalian yang bukan makan gaji Kampeni atau yang telah kenal pengenal dengan orang yang akan diperiksa itu. Dan lagipula dikalau barang orang yang juri itu tiada disukai oleh orang yang diperiksa itu, boléhlah dikeluarkan2nya digantikan pula orang orang yang lain. Maka sebab segala hal juri [p. 19] yang tersebut itulah menjadi suatu kenyataan besar hukum itu adil serta benar adanya.

Dan lagi pula orang yang diperiksa itu pun diberi bébas yang boléh ia membawa loyar akan menyelidik akan perkataan hakim itu serta saksi2nya, dikalau ada yang boléh ditangkapnya salahnya atau bohongnya supaya didakwanya akan dia sambil ia mendapat sesuatu
jalan yang boléh dilepaskannya akan dia. Maka sekalian perkara itu telah diberi dan diluluskan sehingga orang yang bersalah itu mendapat waktu yang boléh ia membawa saksi yang meringankan akan dia. [p. 20] Dan lagi kamu sekalian telah melihat juga apabila telah selesai bicara bagaimana Tuan Reka(r)dar serta Tuan Baumgartén itu menyatakan segala hal itu daripada mulanya pula diulanginya kepada tuan2 Juri itu dengan terangnya yaitu supaya boléh menerangkan pikiran tuan2 itu menjawab yaitu kalau salahkah atau tidak. Maka setelah habislah sudah perkataan itu maka baharulah segala juri itu dibawa oléh orang Kort itu ke dalam suatu bilik dengan bersumpah ti(da) boléh bertemu dengan seorang pun orang di luar [p. 21] maka dikuncikan pula pintu itu serta ditunggu sampai mereka itu bermuafakat sekalian itu sekata, jikalau belum sekata tiadalah dibukakan pintu. Maka serta sudah (di)bukakan pintu dengan tiada boléh pula mereka itu bertemu dengan seorang pun lalu masing2 pergilah deduklah ke tempatnya maka ditanyalah oleh Tuan Hakim akan mereka itu katanya “Tuan2, salahkah atau tidak?” maka dijawablah oleh mereka itu bagaimana sangkanya. Maka setelah itu maka baharulah diletakkkan oleh hakim akan hukum itupun dengan beberapa kasih dan sayang akan orang yang (salah) itu atau dilepaskan [p. 22] tetapi Tuan Hakim dan Gubernur pun tiadalah boléh mengasihani akan orang itu sebab segala juri telah menyatakan dia.

Syahadan maka sekaranah telah sudahlah kuringkaskan akan cereteranya hukum Kort seperti yang tersebut di atas ini. Maka sekaranah pun barang siapa yang membaca surat ini yang ada menaruh pikiran dan timbangan maka hendaklah ia berpikir supaya boléh ia mendapat dengan kenyataannya bahwasanya adapun hukum yang diletakkan oleh Tuan Reka(r)dar itu semata2 adil dan benar adanya karena [p. 23] ia tiada memandang muka manusia baik kaya atau miskin, baik orang besar atau hina maka sekalianannya itu takluklah di bawah hukum. Maka sebab itu bahwa inilah aku memberi nasihat kepada segala tuan2 dan encik2 adapun hukum yang tersebut di atas ini beralas dengan hukum Allah adanya karena adalah tersurat dalam kitab Injil demikian bunyinya: “Adapun hukum itu diadakan oleh kebenaran kehakiman dan orang yang tidak menakuti hukum adanya dan orang yang durhaka dan kepada orang yang tiada menakuti Allah dan orang yang berdosa dan kepada orang yang najis [p. 24] dan perlenté dan kepada orang yang membunuh bapa dan ibu, kepada pembunuh orang dan orang yang berzinah dan kepada orang liwat dan kepada orang yang mencuri orang, (orang) pembohong dan kepada orang yang menjadi saksi bohong dan kepada barang sebagainya yang melawan pengajaran yang tetap ini”. Bahwa adapun orang yang membuat salah suatu daripada segala perkara yang tersebut itu inilah ditangkap oleh hukum serta merasa kekerasannya dan siksa sehingga putus, akan tetapi jikalau barang orang berpegang kepada
benar dalam segala perbuatannya maka bagaimanakah jalan hukum [p. 25] itu hendak mendapat akan dia karena keduanya sama benar jadilah keduanya muafakat; maka sebab ituah kata kitab demikian itu, “adapun hukum itu bukannya diadakan kepada orang benar”.


Munshi Abdullah's 'Horrible Murder'


Maka sekarang inilah nasihatku kepada segala tuan2 yang ada menaruh budak2 dan anak2 janganlah menurut jahat dan bengis dan ania Sabar Ali itu karena mereka itu pun sama juga kejadiannya dengan kita, sekalian hamba Allah adanya.

Dan lagi sebab perkara yang demikianlah telah dibencikan oleh orang2 Inggeris serta dengan meletakkan hukum besar kepada orang yang menaruh hamba, sebab segala celaka yang tersebut itu semuanya datangnya sebab hamba. Maka jikalau kepada orang merdeke atau kepada orang gaji, boléhkah disampaikannya perbuatan yang demikian itu? Maka dapat tiada kelak dilawan orang itu akan dia maka terlepaslah ia daripada celaka sebesar itu. Maka sekarang dengan pengetahuanku sendiri serta mengaku kepada tuan2 maka adalah dua orang, seorang budak hitam seperti Habsyi dan seorang budak Cina, yang telah mendapat entah beberapa kali ania yang disiksakan oleh tuannya, dibubuh lada matanya dan diasap dengan berbagai disiksakan sehingga ia hendak membuangkan diri di dalam hutan, tiada takut harimau dan sebagainya; ia berjalan ke hutan maka tiba2 bertemu dengan dia anak2 murid lalu diikutnya datang ke bukitku. Maka aku bertanya kepadanya maka dikatakannya segala hal ahwal itu maka kasihanlah aku akan dia karena sama juga, iapun hamba Allah juga seperti aku adanya. Maka sebab itulah aku ada memeliharaan dia serta mengajar membaca surat dan memberi pakainya kalau kelak mudah2an supaya ia boléh menjadi baik seperti segala anak murid2ku juga adanya.

Maka bahwasanya adapun aku karangkan surat ini maka bahwa sekalii2 bukannya sebab hendak menghinakan atau menyakitkan tuan2 atau encik2 karena adapun aku ini telah masuklah sudah dalam adat2 orang Melayu, yang telah mendapat tabiat kebengisan itu menjadi seperti suatu permainan kepadanya, jikalau anaknya membuat tabiat bengis itu, ibu bapanya tertawakan dia menjadi bertahanlah sudah tabiat dan kelakuan yang demikian itu adanya. Maka sebab itu aku cereterakan kepada tuan2 oleh sebab piatu hatiku serta sayang melihat serta menengar khabar sampai sekarang pun ada juga bagi banyak orang berani itu membeli dan menjual hamba2 Allah dalam negeri Inggeris tetapi ingat, sekalii tak sekalii, seperti kata Melayu, pelanduk lupakan jerat tetapi jerat tidak lupakan pelanduk adanya.

Tercap surat yang pendék ini dalam negeri Singapura yaitu Bukit Zion kepada duabelas hari bulan April tahun Masihi sanat 1851.

Tamama.
This is the story of Haji Sabar Ali ¹
who was hanged in Singapore along with
Barid Mastan ² and Oli Sab.³
because the three of them conspired to murder
an Arab boy called Aman.

Lithographed on Mount Zion in Singapore in the
year 1851 A.D.
THE STORY OF HAJI SABAR ALI

This is an admonitory account of a Tamil Muslim called Haji Sabar Ali and an Arab boy in his household called Aman. I do not know anything about the origins of the lad, whether he was Sabar Ali’s slave or how the boy came to be with him — God only knows — the story simply came to my knowledge when the case was tried in court in Singapore before the Recorder (Sir William) Jeffcott and witnesses and before the members of the Grand Jury and Petty Jury.

Now as for the Arab boy called Aman, he was repeatedly persecuted — being beaten and ill-treated — and on one occasion, after he had been tortured, he ran away to the Temenggung’s place in Teluk Belanga. When Sabar Ali heard that the boy was there he went and asked for his return and somehow or other managed to get him back home. One night subsequently while several men — including his son — held the boy down, he burnt the boy’s hands and feet with a red-hot iron so that the poor lad was unable to walk. He then chained him up and kept him in the house. However, God in his infinite wisdom so ordained it that in the middle of the night, by dint of incessant effort, the boy managed to break the chain and crawl away. At four o’clock in the morning he had crawled as far as the highway where he met a policeman on patrol who questioned him. The lad told him what had happened and the policeman brought him to Mr. Dunman. When Mr. Dunman heard the boy’s story he took him to the Police Court to be questioned by the Magistrate and the boy told him the whole story from beginning to end, how Sabar Ali had burnt his hands and feet with a hot iron while certain people held him down and how Sabar Ali’s son had heated the iron until it was red-hot and then handed it to his father. The lad’s complaint was written down in full by the Magistrate after which a warrant was issued against Sabar Ali who later turned up at the Court. When questioned by the Magistrate he replied: “The boy is lying, he was burnt on the night the Hindus were parading their idols when he spilled wax on himself. It wasn’t I who burned him.”

In view of the circumstances, Sabar Ali was going to be locked up but he had someone put up bail for him. The boy Aman was taken to the Government Hospital to be given treatment for his injuries and there he remained. After he had been there for a few days he
suddenly vanished and was not seen again. The boy's disappearance became widely known and the police force and the government men searched all over for him but to no avail, to the astonishment of all who had heard what had happened. It was then that Sabar Ali came to the Court to lay a complaint about the boy saying: "I didn't know that the boy — my son — had disappeared. All I know is that he was there." All those involved in the business — officers, jemadars and police peons — became very worried because of the way the boy had disappeared without any apparent reason and they thereupon commenced to search all over the place, making every endeavour to get to the bottom of the mystery. In doing so they eventually found out the truth of the matter from a Tamil called Chinna Mastan who, upon Mr. Dunman questioning him, revealed who had taken the boy away from the Hospital, how he had been put into a boat and how he had been taken to Riau and back. After the boy had been brought back (to Singapore) they had informed Sabar Ali who was very upset and said: "If you people help me get rid of this boy, I'll never forget you as long as I live", to which they replied: "He'd better be killed". Sabar Ali said: "Good", and they proceeded to do (just that). The whole story came out — who had murdered him, who the accomplices had been in taking him up-stream and killing him, where they had dropped the boy's body, with a stone tied about the waist — as you have plainly heard in the evidence given in court.

The Court immediately issued a warrant for the arrest of Sabar Ali, Barid Mastan and Oli Sab and various other people involved in the case and they were taken up and lodged in the jail. Subsequently a number of policemen, constables and convicts went to search the place where the boy had been dumped in the river but their efforts were unsuccessful. Apparently it was one of the Tamil witnesses who showed them the exact spot, whereupon divers went down and eventually discovered the boy's body, all swollen and with the stone tied around his waist and with the marks of wounding still on the body. The body was brought up and taken to the police station where an investigation was held and the results written down. They then buried the boy. All the charges arising from the boy's case were drawn up ready for the arrival of the Judge.

In due time the Judge arrived in Singapore and opened the sessions. After various other cases had been settled, the trial of Sabar Ali began on Friday last the twenty-first of February in the year 1851 A.D. at nine o'clock in the morning. The Judge sat on the right with Governor Butterworth on his left and the Resident, Mr. Church, on the left of the Governor, while the Grand Jury and the Petty Jury, each of twelve men, sat in front with thousands of people of all races in attendance. The three (accused) stood in the dock while in front of them was the lawyer, Mr. Christian Baumgarten. The Judge gave him
permission to question all the witnesses in order to find some way of securing his client’s release.

The process of question and answer went on with one witness after another until nine o’clock in the evening when the questioning of witnesses etc. was completed. Then Mr. Baumgarten turned to face the jury and began his presentment of the case, citing as precedents several cases from the law books of people who had committed serious crimes and had been pardoned, etc., drawing his examples from a number of law books. He went on to ask the jury to consider whether Sabar Ali might be pardoned or the sentence reduced. The Recorder then read out from the beginning to end what Sabar Ali and the two accused had done, and the evidence of the witnesses was also read out before the general public; this took about half an hour. Only when the jury were in possession of all the facts were they allowed to go and deliberate upon the case in order to reach a verdict upon which they were all agreed. They left the jury box with an escort of policemen and court officials — to prevent them discussing the case or asking the opinion of outsiders — and were locked in a room. After a while they asked for the door to be opened. This was done and they were escorted back to court. Mr. Kerr then rose and asked them: “Do you find Sabar Ali guilty or not guilty?” and they answered: “Guilty”. He then asked them whether they found Barid Mastan guilty and they answered: “Guilty”. He then asked them if they found Oli Sab guilty and they answered: “Guilty”. After the three of them had been found guilty, the Recorder addressed them with great compassion, offering them advice and expressing the sorrow he felt in having to sentence them, but finally he had no resort but to sentence the three of them to be hanged, although no date was fixed.

And so on the twenty-second of February in the year 1851 A.D. at six o’clock on a Friday morning the three men were hanged. The corpses were buried within the precincts of the jail and not handed over to their heirs.

Now you people of all races who dwell in Singapore know and have heard what happened to Haji Sabar Ali, Oli Sab and Barid Mastan in the Central Court last Friday, the twenty-first of February in the year 1851 A.D. The case was investigated and thoroughly gone into by the Recorder before a grand jury composed of respectable and honest gentlemen, moreover with Mr. Christian Baumgarten investigating the matter as Sabar Ali’s lawyer and with witnesses being called on both sides; the upshot being that sentence of death was passed. However it seems to me that the Tamils, Hindus and Muslims consider that the sentence passed upon the three men was too cruel or too harsh or might have been reduced or the men might even have been released. But you should realise that if you
only knew and understood the process of question and answer that went on in the case, then you could entertain no doubt as to the matter. First of all, the sentence passed by the Judge was not harsh, because, as you know, the Judge had thoroughly gone into the matter in the presence of a great concourse of people, moreover in front of people of considerable intelligence and experience, skilled in detecting wrongdoing. Above all, the twelve members of the jury were chosen not because of their own wishes nor even with prior knowledge of the fact that they would be appointed as jurymen on this particular occasion; none of them were government servants or were at all acquainted with the people being tried. Moreover, if the person on trial had any objection to any member of the jury, he could secure his dismissal and replace him with someone else. These details of the jury system that I have related demonstrate clearly that the sentence was both just and honest. Furthermore, the man on trial is perfectly free to bring his lawyer along to monitor what is said by the judge or by the witnesses, so that if he is able to catch them out in any mistake or falsehood he can lodge a complaint against them, as well as find a way to secure the release of his client. The man on trial is given every facility and every opportunity — he is even given time to bring witnesses to improve his case. For you all have seen how, when the trial was concluded, the Recorder and Mr. Baumgarten went over the facts again from beginning to end for the benefit of the jury, to clarify their minds and help them decide whether the prisoner was guilty or not guilty. It is only when all have had their say that the jury are taken to a (separate) room by court officials after swearing not to meet with any outsider, after which the door is locked and guarded until they are agreed on their decision; the door may not be opened until they are agreed on their verdict. After this the door is opened and, without being allowed to meet any outsider, they make their way back to their place in court to be asked by the judge whether they find the prisoner guilty or not, and to answer according to the way they see fit. And it is only after this that the Judge passes sentence, with much love and compassion for the guilty man or he may perhaps order his release, but neither the Judge nor the Governor can show any mercy once the jury have declared him guilty.

Above I have given you a brief outline of the way justice is administered in the court. And now, anyone who has read this and is possessed of reason and consideration should reflect so that he can grasp the essential fact that the sentence passed by the Recorder was entirely fair and right because of its impartiality, which makes no difference between rich or poor, high or low, all being subject to the law. I would therefore advise you gentlemen that the above-mentioned law is based upon the law of God because, as the New Testament says: “The law is created not for the righteous but for the
man who does not respect the law, the betrayer, the man who does [p.24] not fear God, the sinner, the unclean, the libertine, the patricide, the matricide, the murderer, the adulterer, the sodomite, the kidnapper, the liar, the perjurer, and for such like people who go against this fixed doctrine". Anyone who commits any of the above-mentioned crimes is taken into captivity by the law and feels the full force of the law and its torments, but anyone who takes righteousness as his guide in all that he does, then how can the law affect him, because [p.25] both he and the law are equally right and therefore in agreement with each other; this is why the Book says: "the law is not created for the righteous".

And you must know that the sum total of the law is expressed as follows, as the Book says: "All laws can be replaced with a single word, viz. love your fellow-man as you love yourself". For consider well, the reason that Sabar Ali and his two accomplices ran foul of the [p.26] law was that they broke this commandment, in other words they did not have compassion for their fellow-men. Now I have told you that the law is impartial, whether God's law or British law, and the soul of that Arab boy who was tortured to death was as valuable as the souls and bodies of Sabar Ali and his two companions. If such were not the case what good would it be for British justice to be so widespread, for example, if a Malay killed a Chinese, what good would it [p.27] be to prosecute him in court if the court were to say: "Oh, he's from a different race". Or if a Tamil were to kill a Negro, what good would it be for the Negroes to bring the matter to court if the court were to say: "Oh, it doesn't matter, he belongs to a different race"; or if an Englishman were to kill a Malay, what good would it be for the Malays to bring the matter to court if the court were to say: "Never mind, Europeans are better than Malays because, for the English, the Malays are infidels".

If this was the way British justice functioned, then how could it be [p.28] fair, beneficial and right, for surely such justice is not impartial? And just think of the disorder there would be in a country, with each race committing crimes — murdering, stabbing and robbing — the world would be in an indescribably disastrous state. Furthermore if we are not obliged to love one another, irrespective of race, then how can we have a fair system of justice and what good at all would the law be? Who could be brought to trial, because neither [p.29] the law nor the people would be impartial or have any consideration for their fellow-men; each race would discriminate against the other, while the rich would discriminate against the poor and the aristocrat would discriminate against the lowly born. The upshot would be that everyone would do as he saw fit, following the dictates of his own passions — anyone he wished (to kill), he would kill, and anyone he liked he would love and cherish; one man would
rob another and the world would inevitably fall into indescribable confusion. And all this would stem from our not loving our fellow-men. Just think, if Sabar Ali and his two companions had taken this lesson to heart they could surely not have brought themselves to commit such a cruel deed and murder the boy.

And now let me advise you gentlemen who bring up children of whatever age not to follow the evil and vicious cruelty of Sabar Ali, for they are fellow creatures and we are all servants of the Lord. Moreover such practices are repugnant to the British who have decreed severe penalties against slave-owners, because all these evils are the result of slavery. Can such cruelty be inflicted upon free men or (free) servants? — anyone who tried to do so would be resisted and would thus not be able to commit such crimes.

Now let me assure you from my own experience of two lads, one as black as a negro and the other a Chinese lad, who had received all manner of ill-treatment and torment at the hands of their master. They had pepper put in their eyes, they were ‘fumigated’ and had various other tortures inflicted upon them, so that eventually they tried to run away into the jungle, without caring about tigers, etc. They were wandering about in the jungle when they came across some pupils of mine whom they followed up to my hill. I questioned them and they told me the whole story. I was sorry for them for they too were servants of God just like me. So I looked after them and taught them to read and gave them food and clothing, in the hope that they would grow up to be as good as my own pupils.

My reason for composing this work is certainly not to hold any of you gentlemen up to scorn or censure, for I too have adopted the ways of the Malays. I have frequently found that the habit of cruelty is one that is considered a trivial matter among them; if the son commits an act of cruelty the parents treat it as a joke, so that the habit of acting in a cruel manner becomes second nature to them. And this is why I tell you this tale, because it distresses and saddens me to see and hear that even now there are still many who dare to trade in slaves in British territory, but take heed, sooner or later, as the Malay proverb says, although the mouse-deer may forget the snare laid for him, the snare will not forget the mouse-deer.

This work was printed in Singapore, at Mount Zion, on the twelfth of April in the year 1851 A.D.

Finis
Munshi Abdullah’s ‘Horrible Murder’

NOTES

General

1 For more details, see Altick’s splendid Victorian Studies in Scarlet, especially Chapter 1.

2 Mayhew comments on the newspapers and journals of the 1840’s as follows: “The conductors of the ‘Lady’s Newspaper’ sent an artist to Paris to give drawings of the scene of the murder by the Duc de Praslin — to ‘illustrate’ the blood-stains in the duchess’s bed-chamber. The ‘Illustrated London News’ is prompt in depicting the locality of any atrocity over which the curious in crime may gloat. The ‘Observer’, in costly advertisements, boasts of its 20 columns (sometimes with a supplement) of details of some vulgar and mercenary bloodshed — the details being written in a most honest deprecation of the morbid and savage tastes to which the writer is pandering. Other weekly papers have engravings — and only concerning murder — of any wretch whom vice has made notorious.” (Mayhew 1967:229)

3 The verse is quoted in Roughead (1948:48), but without indicating the source. For the benefit of South British readers, a ‘close’ is a passage; a ‘but’ (cf. Dutch ‘buiten’) is the outer and ‘ben’ (cf. Dutch ‘binnen’) the inner room of a two-roomed house.

4 My account of the case is based upon contemporary reports in the Straits Times and the Singapore Free Press.

5 The following evening (Saturday, 1st March) a rather more select crowd — the admission fee was $ 2.00 a head — assembled at the “Theatre Royal” (i.e. the stage erected in the Assembly Rooms in Hill St.) to watch Singapore’s amateur theatrical company put on that “much-admired and laughable” farce called Shocking Events. Despite its title, there is no evidence that the piece had been chosen as a pendant to the murder trial, although it seems more than likely that among the cast was Tom Dunman — “the greatest low comedian Singapore has ever seen” —, who in his professional capacity as Superintendent of Police had taken a leading role in investigating the shocking events set off by Sabar Ali (Straits Times, 25th February, 1851; Buckley 1965:743, 745).

6 See also Leviticus, Chapter 19, v. 18. The quotation from Paul’s ‘First Epistle to Timothy’ is found in vv. 8-11.

7 I have corrected the 1953 edition’s “syiksa” to “saksi” — the editors may have been misled by Abdullah’s often preferring the spelling “sy-k-s-y” to “s-k-s-y.”


9 The editor of the Straits Times was Mr. Robin Carr Woods, who appears to have been something of a public crusader (or a busybody, depending upon one’s point of view: he took a leading part in the campaign against James Brooke). He was also the Deputy Sheriff of Singapore at this time and as such had been called as a witness at Sabar Ali’s trial, but this does not seem to have restrained him from commenting on the case. Some of his irritation with “Mahomedans” may have been the result of his hostility towards the Logan brothers; Abraham Logan was the editor of the rival Singapore Free Press, while James Logan was the founder and editor of the Journal of the Indian Archipelago, which had recently published articles reflecting favourably on Islam, such as ‘Why have Mahomedan, been more successful than Christian, Missionaries, in the Indian Archipelago?’ and ‘The Truth and Power that is Mahomedanism’ (the latter being an excerpt from Carlyle), see Turnbull 1972:25-27; Journal of the Indian Archipelago, 3, 1849, pp. 457-460.
10 Straits Times, 25th February, 1851. Irving's Life of Mahomet had only recently been published (in 1849); it was apparently based upon G. Weil's Muhammed der Prophet (published in Stuttgart in 1843), a work relatively free from prejudice. Lovers of English literature may care to note that, in the same issue of the Straits Times, Routledge also advertised a number of other works including novels by James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville and Jane Austen. It is a pity that Woods chose to adopt the mood suggested by the second of the two Jane Austen titles listed (Pride and Prejudice) rather than the first (Sense and Sensibility).

Text and Translation

1 It is something of a mystery why Sabar Ali is referred to in the English sources as “Saffer” Ally, as Abdullah consistently spells “ş-b-r”. Could it have something to do with the fact that Sabar Ali was a Chulia (Tamil Muslim) and that in Tamil characters ‘Sabar’ would be spelt ‘capaar’?
2 The English sources refer to him as “Barak Mastan” but Abdullah consistently spells the name “b-a-r-d m-s-t-n”. Mastan is the Tamil ‘mastan’ —’drunk’, ‘intoxicated’, particularly in the Sufi sense of the mystic being intoxicated by love of God (the greatest Tamil Muslim mystic poet is Mastan Sahib ‘mastanN saahibu’).
3 The English sources call him “Olisah”’. “Oli” is a common Chulia name, presumably deriving from the Arabic ‘wā-li’ (on one occasion Abdullah spells the name “w-ā-l-y” instead of his usual “ā-w-l-y”). ‘Sab’, spelt consistently as “ş-b”, derives from the Arabic ‘şāhib’.
4 I.e., Temenggung Ibrahim of Johor.
5 If Sabar Ali is referring to the night Aman escaped (or a few days before this) this would mean some time in the first (light) half of the 5th Hindu month of Bhādra. The “parading of idols” might perhaps refer to the ‘Gaṅĕśha-caturthi’ (Tamil: ‘viNaayakar-caturtti’); the 4th day of the light half of Bhādra is regarded as Ganesha’s ‘birthday’, and at the conclusion of the festivities, the image of Ganesha is borne in procession to a lake or river.
6 Roughly equivalent to ‘sergeant-major’.
7 The English sources refer to him as ‘Sinna Merican’ (Tamil: ‘ciNNa marikkaaN’) and it is possible that ‘Mastan’ is an error for ‘Marikan’. Abdullah spells the first word “c-y-n-ā” which is closer to the Tamil spelling although the colloquial Tamil pronunciation would probably be [sinna].
8 This phrase (also used on p. 16 of the text) indicates that it was written within a few days of the trial (although apparently not published until some seven weeks later).
9 The foreman of the jury at the trial was Mr. William Graham Kerr but Abdullah would seem to be referring to Mr. Alexander John Kerr, the Registrar and Clerk of the Crown.
10 The correct date should of course be the twenty-eighth of February, but Abdullah always had trouble with his dates, see e.g. my comment on the erroneous dating of his Syair Kampung Gelam Terbakar, Skinner 1973:50.
11 “Tamilis, Hindus and Muslims”. Although this translation is nominally correct (and can be justified from Abdullah’s usage in his Hikayat) it is possible that Abdullah is using the Malay words ‘Keling’ and ‘Hindu’ in the sense that they are sometimes used in earlier texts (e.g. Ahmad Rijaluddin’s Hikayat Perintah Negeri Benggala). If this is the case then perhaps what Abdullah means is: Dravidian (Hindus), North Indian (Hindus) and Muslims.
12 The quotation is from Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy (Chapter 1). The
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original (assuming that the original was from the King James version) reads:

"...the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound teaching...

which suggests that Abdullah has omitted an 'angka dua' (reduplication sign) after the word 'orang' (in the absence of which the translation would read, not "the kidnapper, the liar", but "the thief, the liar"). Although the style of the King James version is infinitely better than my own prosaic translation, it would have given too flattering an impression of Abdullah's style to have used it here.

13 See Abdullah (1953) p. 25 for a fuller description of the 'fumigation' punishment inflicted upon lazy schoolboys.

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