

The Company's Reward

A Dutchman in Siam

by Bill Greer

About the Author

Adventure travel expert Bill Greer is the founder of GORP.com, the early Internet era's leading community for outdoor and adventure travel, selected as one of the Top 50 sites on the web in 2000. More recently, he is the author of **The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan**, a novel of New Amsterdam that paints a real and bawdy portrait of Dutch life on the Hudson through the eyes of a sharp-tongued bride who comes among the first settlers. Visit Bill at www.billsbrownstone.com.

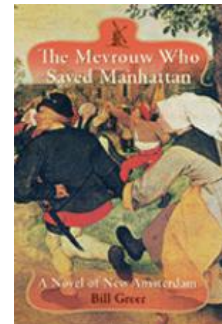
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From de Halve Maen, Journal of the Holland Society of New York, Summer 2009

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JUSTUS SCHOUTEN THREW off the filthy blanket as the footsteps approached. He scratched the scabs where the bugs had broken his skin, then pulled his hands back in self-abhorrence. Weeks in this prison had destroyed the attention he normally paid to his toilet, a habit he had learned to enjoy early in his years in the east.

The door cracked open. A dour minister of the Dutch Reformed Church strode into the cell. He peered down at Schouten's cot, his loathing not hidden behind his beard. "Repent your sin," sneered the Reverend, "save your everlasting soul."

Schouten glared back, tempted to show his own disgust with this arrogant clergyman and the hypocritical church he represented. But he looked beyond to where the jailer stood ready to apply more persuasive techniques if the promise of salvation alone did not induce a confession. He had no wish to feel the red hot irons in the guard's hands burning his flesh, so he placed a mask over his thoughts, as he had so many times before.

"Repent!" repeated the minister. He motioned the guard forward. One way or another, the Church was determined that this deviant would admit his crime before he was led to the execution ground at dawn.

The scandal had rocked the European community in Batavia on the island of Java, headquarters of the Dutch East India Company in Asia. Schouten had been a loyal servant of the company for decades. When he first sailed from Holland in the 1620's, the company, barely 20 years old, desperately needed talented men. Few were willing to risk drowning in the icy waters off the tip of Africa or burning up in a tropical fever, but Schouten had stepped eagerly into the void.

The Dutch had been in revolt against their Spanish rulers. A cannonball through the gunwale could disembowel a young merchant trying to help the company wrest control of the Asia trade from Spain and her Portuguese ally. Schouten had faced and survived the

danger, and launched a brilliant career. Of all people, how could he, who had risen to chief merchant, who had directed one of the company's most important factories, who had represented the Dutch ruler to Asian kingdoms, have possibly committed the vile act of which he stood accused?

His friends had rallied to his defense. Schouten was at the pinnacle of his power, a close confidante of the most senior officials of the company. Surely that would bring some quarter. But the prosecutor had described his actions in all their sordid detail, and the evidence had been overwhelming. The company was never one to forgive, whether it was a few coins carelessly spent or a fall from grace in the eyes of God. None of the appeals from his influential supporters could persuade the Governor General to commute the sentence. The stake at which he would be strangled and burned stood ready.

The condemned man's eyes glazed over in despair. His shoulders slumped. "I am guilty," he whispered. "It began in Siam."

THE FIRST TOUR, 1624-1629

SCHOUTEN LEANED ON the rail as Ayudhya came into view. His ship had crossed the bar at the mouth of the Menam River a few days before and begun the 100-mile voyage up to the Siamese capital. Now he could see the city jutting out where the river made a wide bend. The long tortuous journey from the Rotterdam of his boyhood was coming to an end.

After an hiatus of two years, the Dutch were reopening their factory in Siam. They had originally begun trading in Ayudhya in 1604, hoping to buy Chinese silks and other products for transshipment to Europe. With the capture of Formosa in 1622, that island had become the Company's source for Chinese goods, and the Governor General had decided the reduced Siamese trade could be conducted without an expensive factory. But now a new Governor General had taken over in Batavia and wanted to pursue opportunities in Japan. Siam would supply deerhides, rayskins, and assorted woods for

which the Japanese would pay silver bullion. A permanent factory was again needed to ensure adequate supplies.

Schouten had been thrilled when the posting in Siam came through early in 1624. As an ambitious youth roaming the streets of Rotterdam, he had hung around the wharves to hear sailors describe wild adventures in the Eastern seas. Porters unloaded barrels of spices, the pungent aromas promising riches unimaginable in the Lowland countries of Europe. The temptations built until he could resist no longer, so he introduced himself to the merchants of the struggling East India Company. They tested his resolve with tales of hardship and tried his courage with the names of their comrades who were buried far from home. His will was strong, however, and he had enlisted as a junior assistant, entering the mercantile world on the bottom rung.

Energy surged through his veins at this first sight of Ayudhya. Across the base of the river's loop, the Siamese had cut a wide canal, creating a man-made island for the king's capital. On the southeast corner, the port bustled with activity, contrasting with the rest of the island where a pattern of temples and pagodas reflected a more contemplative pace of life. Along the riverbanks leading up to the island, small bamboo houses stood on stilts. The river had overflowed with the summer monsoon, covering the ground in a shallow flood. Naked women bathing in the brown water turned shyly away as the boat passed.

Schouten breathed deeply, the wind carrying a mixture of salt, spices and strange scents he had never encountered. He gulped another chestful, not sure it was entirely pleasing but certain the air would cleanse the putrid odors of lice-infested men and rotting salt pork. Thank God he was getting off this abominable ship.

The mate came up beside Schouten. "She's a barbarous country, but my blood quickens just thinking about her silky delights. Orientals of every size and description - the natives plus Malays, Chinese, Peguans, Moors - each with its own quarter surrounding the king's island. And everything for sale," he added with a lecherous grin.

"And the Portuguese." Schouten pointed at a ship riding at anchor, flying the Cross of Christ.

“Yes,” the mate continued, “but they don’t cause much trouble now. We’re much more in the king’s favor. The merchants keep to their business and the sailors chase the same pleasures as the rest of us. But beware the Jesuits, the evil buggers care nothing about our trade but they will slit your throat for your heresy.”

The mate gestured at the right bank. “The Japanners. They are the power to be reckoned with. Some say their leader pulls the king’s strings.”

Schouten watched the community with interest. The Japanese had first migrated around the turn of the century, when the daimyos had begun oppressing the Christian converts and driving them out of their homeland. Several thousand had settled in Siam, where their new religion would be tolerated. He had heard wild tales of their headman Yamada, who had organized the king’s bodyguard. Rumors said he had even kidnapped the king during the last succession and extorted various privileges and treasure.

“But forget these worldly concerns. The little ladies will delight you,” promised the mate, “scurrying around with nothing but a cloth around the waist. So modest and eager to please. You can set up house with one of the Peguan women, or if you want to sample the lot, go to meet the Okya Meen. He has hundreds available. But watch your soul with him, he will offer anything.”

A COUPLE OF WEEKS after their arrival, van der Elst and Schouten stood on the riverbank admiring the profile of the city. “The temples remind me of home,” Schouten remarked, “with the church steeples rising behind the harbor.”

Van der Elst turned toward the younger man and pointed at one of the enormous Buddhas seated in a courtyard. “Do not overlook the pagan idols,” he admonished. Clearly he did not appreciate the comparison between their own monuments to the glory of God and these heathen pagodas. “They will remind you that we are dealing with an ungodly people.”

Schouten nodded contritely, thinking that the physical presence of the Director itself was a sufficient reminder of how different the Siamese were. His stern bearing,

accentuated by the full mane of hair flowing to his shoulders and the coarse woolens shrouding his portly frame, contrasted sharply with the timidity of the natives whom they encountered in the streets.

Nonetheless, the similarities he had observed during his initial days in Ayudhya were even more striking. Back home, Amsterdam was the commercial capital of the western world. The Dutch ports were forests of masts, with fleets delivering Virginian tobacco, Baltic timber, Venezuelan cocoa. Immigrants arrived from across Europe, attracted by the Dutch tolerance for whatever beliefs a persecuted sect might hold. The skills they brought, combined with the Hollanders' mercantile acumen, fueled a prosperity never before seen on the continent.

The Siamese had created a metropolis that rivaled Amsterdam as a trading crossroads. Foreign ships mixed with local craft to clog the river. Calicoes of bright reds and blues were piled high outside the warehouses, beside baskets of sweet-smelling fruits. A cosmopolitan blend roamed the city, the native elite ready and willing to exploit the specialized expertise of each nationality.

The nobles paraded the resulting wealth as they wandered through the streets in brocaded silks, retinues of servants trailing alongside. Schouten admired a slender servant girl passing by, her legs pressed against the thin cotton pagne wrapped around her hips, her tiny rose-tipped breasts in full display.

Van der Elst frowned as he followed his assistant's eyes. "God has granted us a great opportunity here in the east," he chided. "Our commercial success will require that we adapt to many of its customs, however uncivilized they may be. But remember, we are serving His aims. He will strike us down if we yield to its temptations."

Schouten noted the lesson well. He had never doubted that the Dutch were predestined to emerge preeminent in this world, and knew that any actions deviating from Calvinist doctrine needed to promote that cause. In the coming months, the spectacle of the royal fleet ferrying the king and his court upriver in gilded barges might fill him with awe, much like that felt by a European peasant reaching the outskirts of Amsterdam. But he would remember this conversation and keep his thoughts to himself, lest the Director

think his judgment was blinded by the riches displayed in the upper circles of Siamese society.

THE DUTCH YACHT *Zeelandt* cruised up the river, hoping to anchor off Ayudhya by nightfall. This trip was the pilot's first to Siam since the factory had reopened two months before, and he was looking forward to carousing with his old friends who had been transferred from Batavia to staff the office here. The pilot could see the shadows of two galleons in the dusk, but the light was too low to make out the flags. He knew that the Portuguese still sailed these waters, but also that they would not dare commit any acts of piracy within the heart of the Siamese king's domain.

As the yacht drew level with the first of the ships, the galleon pulled into the current and headed up behind the Dutch boat. The other ship moved into the middle of the river ahead, preparing to block the way. The pilot heard a voice ring out in Spanish. "Heave to. We're coming aboard."

The pilot realized the trap too late. He feinted a run at the west bank to squeeze past the forward galleon and make the port. But all the seamen knew the *Zeelandt* did not have the speed to avoid being cut off. When the pilot swung around, hoping the following ship had gotten too close and he could slip past downstream in the current, the galleon barred the way. The Spaniards hurled grappling hooks over the *Zeelandt*'s side and leaped onto the deck. They quickly overpowered the Dutch sailors and steered the yacht to an anchorage under their guard.

"**N**UMBER NINE," Schouten counted as the final corpse was laid out in the factory yard. No sooner had he settled into the tasks of the counting house than this storm had swept the city. Now he was detailed to bury the Dutch dead, caught in the crossfire when the king sought revenge on the Spanish upstart. The violence and fragility of life in the East had reared its head and spit in his face.

“The king is furious,” van der Elst had announced when he returned from the home of the Phrakhlang, the king’s foreign minister who was the Dutch window into the Court. “First he is outraged that any foreign captain would seize a ship in his waters. Now this one, de Silva’s his name, is producing excuses to avoid appearing at the Court.”

Signals that the Spaniards were preparing to depart had pushed the king over the brink. A convoy of warboats, manned with hundreds of Siamese and Japanese troops, had swarmed down on the Spanish ships. When the smoke cleared, 150 Spaniards lay dead, along with 25 of the king’s men. The Siamese threw the remaining Spaniards into prison and confiscated their ships. They also recaptured the Zeelandt and her crew from the Spaniards and were now unloading her cargo into the king’s own warehouses.

Schouten ordered the laborers to begin digging the graves for the less lucky of the Zeelandt’s sailors. In this climate, decay was already beginning to appear on the curled back lips of some of the faces. Then he hurried in to where the Director was addressing a somber gathering.

“The Phrakhlang has informed me that Captain de Silva is among the dead. God rest his soul, he may be fortunate that he will not face the king’s wrath. Let us pray for all the dead.”

When the prayer was concluded, van der Elst turned to business. “On the positive side, our enemy has suffered a serious blow. De Silva was commanding the major fleet trading to the Japans this year, and the Spaniards will never recoup this loss. On the other hand, we also are at risk. The Siamese have our ship and our goods, and we will no doubt begin a tortuous round of negotiations to recover them.” He turned to his second in command. “Organize the assistants to prepare a complete inventory of the Zeelandt’s lading. I will write the Governor General; we will need all the help we can get.”

Schouten stepped up to the Assistant Director as the group broke apart and volunteered to lead the listing of the cargo. However tragic this episode might be, he would seize the opportunity for baptism by fire.

THE BOATMAN STEERED the pirogue between two craft piled high with vegetables. An old lady, balanced in one, waved a purple gourd to attract Schouten's attention. He would like to have stopped to sample the curry she had bubbling in the stern, letting the hot liquid slide down his throat. His colleagues insisted on dining on roasted venison, but he was learning to savor the burning sensation of a spicy Siamese stew settling in his stomach.

However, he needed to get on with his task and motioned his man to paddle through. Van der Elst had deputed him to make the rounds with the Translator, distributing the gratuities essential to keeping the wheels of commerce greased in this corrupt kingdom. Since noticing his initiative following the Zeelandt incident, the Director increasingly called on him to handle dealings with the Siamese.

The factory was off to a good start. A plentiful rice harvest had enabled the Dutchmen to purchase record levels at bargain prices. Foodstuffs were desperately needed in Batavia, where the insurgencies on Java had created a life-threatening shortage. The Dutch were gaining control of shipments further east thanks to the Zeelandt incident. The excitement had subsided quickly, not so the king's anger. While he did not banish the Portuguese for their alliance with Spain, he had effectively barred them from the Japan trade. The Dutch were thus left to manage the export of Siamese deerhides, which were in high demand for the armor of the Shogun's soldiers and the tabi socks of the entire populace. The resulting profits would at least offset some of the loss of the Zeelandt, which the king so far had refused to return.

If the Dutch could keep the Siamese satisfied with a reasonable share of the proceeds, the factory would earn excellent returns. These orientals were shrewd, unfortunately. The Phrakhlang, managing Dutch access to the court, expected several hundred guilders over the course of a year. That minister's assistant held his hand out next, and a series of junior scribes queued up behind. Most important was the translator himself, appointed by the court. This individual could provide a wealth of intelligence or disrupt all exchange, depending on his sympathies and his satisfaction with the lining of his own pocket.

Schouten leaped onto the bank as the boat scraped bottom. The translator came out of the crowd. Schouten took his proffered hands in both of his own, being sure to show the proper respect expected for their relatively equal positions. He worked hard to cultivate this friendship. The interpreter was guiding him through the intricacies of local customs. Success in this rigidly controlled society demanded that one follow a strict etiquette, governing everything from hospitality to marriage. A native could have his back lashed raw and bloody for not performing the proper obeisance when meeting a superior. Foreigners were given little more leeway in complying with these customs.

The coins jingled as the translator placed the bag within the folds of his pagne. No doubt many of the florins would never leave that home. But Schouten knew he could count on this helper to place the rest in the right palms, supplementing the extravagant gifts which had already been delivered in public display.

“Now let me entertain you.” The translator took Schouten’s hand again and led him into the bazaar. The Dutchman smiled to himself, anticipating an introduction to another slice of native pleasures. The alleys were teeming with bodies, their smell mingling with the stench of pickled fish sauce. They stopped at one stallkeeper and selected some small nuggets roasting on a grill. The morsels crunched between his teeth with a dry burnt flavor. “Broiled ants,” the guide informed. At an adjacent stall, a Chinaman was tasting samples of dung to determine which would most vigorously feed his plants. Slightly nauseous, Schouten let himself be led further into the strange world.

The pair stopped in front of another alcove, where a well dressed merchant and a court official were engaged in heated negotiations. A teenager stood meekly to the side, eyes downcast. The merchant ran his hands up and down the young body, pinching the pink flesh. He cupped the buttocks in one hand and ruffled the short-cropped hair in the other, apparently satisfied with the goods. He barked out what sounded like an offer. Evidently it was sufficiently generous and the deal was consummated.

“The Okya Meen will be your friend,” advised the translator, introducing the merchant. Schouten felt his loins stir, remembering the picture painted when his ship sailed into the harbor many months ago. These Siamese seemed like a moral people,

always abiding the teachings of the Buddha whom they so revered. Yet their norms were so at odds with his own people's behavior - allowing a rich man to keep several wives, permitting even a wife to insist on divorce. And now this, the sale of a daughter into some dark carnal underworld.

Schouten suppressed his shameful attraction to the pubescent creature. But when the Okya Meen took his hands with an ingratiating smile, he followed him further into the bazaar.

“I SUPPOSE WE ARE lucky we got even the ship back,” said a frustrated Van der Elst. Over a year had passed since the Zeelandt incident and still the king refused to return the cargo. Van der Elst had delivered gifts, had even had Batavia send craftsmen for the royal shipyard, but nothing placated the king.

Exasperated with the Phrakhlang's antics for avoiding the issue, the Director was turning to Schouten for advice. Now in his second year in Siam, Schouten had become the Director's key aide when it came to maneuvering through local politics. Although personally unapproachable, van der Elst treated Schouten as his most trusted confidante when it came to the business of the kingdom. The assistant's understanding of the Siamese mind proved invaluable, and allowed the Director to maintain his own distance from what he regarded as a heathen culture.

“The King is still angry that he has not received a royal letter from the Netherlands,” Schouten apprised the Director of the local gossip. A Siamese embassy had traveled to Holland in 1621 to present the king's message and gifts to the Dutch monarch, the Prince of Orange. The Court had been waiting several years for a return mission. “Only a senior emissary is likely to assuage his temper.”

They agreed to solicit the Governor General for an ambassador with suitable trappings. When Jan van Hasel arrived in that role, Van der Elst instructed Schouten to guide him through the intricacies of the court.

Schouten helped the diplomat work with the Translator to sprinkle gifts around the Court. Most critical was their visit to the home of the Phrakhlang. A slip of protocol could destroy any goodwill created by the very expensive present. Schouten labored nervously to ensure the ambassador did not unintentionally convey an air of superiority. He would never forgive himself for a serious faux-pas, which could derail the progress of his own career.

The visit began well, with the ambassador posturing appropriately and taking the place of honor on the right side of the room. He remained impassive when the Phrakhlang spoke in a rather haughty tone. Of course, the Translator removed any demeaning language, intentional or not, before passing the message on.

Drinks were brought. Schouten watched nervously when he realized the servant carried perfumed water. He had told van Hasel that he must accept tea, but that he could refuse other items such as betel. If he shook his head at this unexpected substitution, who knew what insult this unpredictable Siamese might perceive?

The petite girl knelt in front of the honored guest. Schouten tore his eyes away from her glossy skin and watched the diplomat's reaction. After a moment's hesitation, he held out both hands to accept the cup. He sipped discreetly. Only when he had drained the liquid did Schouten breathe, fearing that like most of his countrymen he would be repulsed by the odiferous sweet flavor. Schouten was the only one who preferred it even to the rancid water they all endured on the voyage out.

Ultimately the efforts paid off. Although the king remained irritated that the Dutch ruler had still not personally paid his respects, the generous offerings, combined with a proper show of subservience, had secured compensation for 60% of the Zeelandt's cargo. By the time van Hasel sailed back to Batavia in 1626, two sailing seasons had been lost since the original incident, on top of the sizable cut of goods retained by the king. But the Dutchmen knew they could never have expected the wheels of diplomacy to turn faster nor the king's appetite to have been sated with a less substantial portion.

“WE SHOULD DONATE 500 guilders and we need another 100 to decorate the factory,” Schouten informed the Director. Van der Elst frowned. This support for the annual water festival was going to be a serious drain on company accounts. But it was impossible to refuse the king his share of the graft that was so endemic in Siam.

“The contribution will help us secure merits for our rebirth as well,” joked Schouten, hoping to lighten the mood. His superior grimaced further at this reference to Buddhist precepts. His expression made Schouten realize the analogy with a Christian afterlife.

“This outlay is purely an investment. Asian idolatry is nothing short of the work of the devil, and I advise you not to make light of it.”

Schouten cursed to himself for yet another slip with the Director. This was hardly the first time his accepting attitude had raised eyebrows. He took the funds from the strongbox and hurried away.

Frankly, Schouten did not understand why his countrymen considered this Asian culture so barbaric. He harbored no doubts about his people's role as God's Chosen, but he could still recognize that in some ways the Siamese were more advanced than western civilization. Their art might not follow classical lines, but its aesthetics were every bit as appealing. The attire might not fit within European society, but the level of hygiene far surpassed that in his own world. Personally he was more than willing to embrace Siamese habits, confident that the closer he came to the Siamese mind, the better he could serve the company and the more he would be rewarded. So long as he could avoid more indiscretions.

In the event, the water festival turned out to be a tremendous success. The Phrakhlang followed it with a gift of silks, along with a note on how pleased the king had been with the factory's adornments. Even van Der Elst looked satisfied, though Schouten suspected that was more from his calculations of the returns to his outlay than any appreciation of the spectacle he was witnessing.

Schouten himself had vowed to make the most of this opportunity to experience more of the subtleties of the east. Twice before he had watched the annual festival from

the safety of the factory walls, not daring to jump first-hand into a revelry that rivaled any pre-Lent celebration. This year, he spent the day beside the Director, forcing himself to join the discussions on how to leverage this event to further their own business. Near dusk, when the staff was drifting away to other activities, he slipped off for a closer view of an evening when the Siamese dropped all their normal reserve.

The alleys had been a crush of humanity which dragged him along in its tide. He brushed against one wet body after another, tripping along the muddy lane. As he landed in one puddle, a startled maid fell atop him. Her skin glistened with a dewy foam. She loosed a mouthful of warm water in his face, giggling with delight. He rubbed her drenched pagne, the thigh soft beneath his fingertips. Then the crowd swept her away, leaving only the cloth grasped in his hand. Another group pulled him to his feet and enveloped him in a whirling dance of naked adolescents. Muscled arms held him upright until the whole mass tumbled into a shallow trough. Slowly Schouten emerged as the boys extricated themselves from the jumble of torsos. He was immediately hit with more splashes of water, laughter surrounding him.

Finally this gang moved on, no malice intended in their good-natured fun. Schouten stepped into a doorway to catch his breath. His heart raced, and he realized how stimulated he was from all the bare skin rubbing his own. He hurled himself back into the melee, knowing he would not be missed until morning.

SEVERAL MEN SPRAWLED in the courtyard when Schouten returned from an evening's entertainment at the Okya Meen. The surgeon was wrapping bloodied bandages around the battered ribcage of a young sailor. Most of the others were awaiting treatment for one injury or another. At least none displayed the effects of a serious knife thrust or pistol ball. Schouten shook his head and inquired what had happened.

"The frigging Portuguese welched on their bets," replied one of the other assistants. "We taught the bastards a lesson." Another brawl, so common when gambling over cockfights was sweetened with the Arak distilled by the natives. Watching one bird sink

a razor-sharp spur into the chest of another and being showered with blood spurting from the heart was one sensation of the east which Schouten could live without.

Van der Elst came out to survey the damage. "Tomorrow I want the lading of the Brotcha completed," he ordered, referring to one of the freetraders' ships. "Keep these idiots working until sundown." Schouten nodded, pleased at another sign that the Director saw him emerging as the leader that could keep the unruly men in line.

Schouten was glad he avoided the raucous gaming. His own leisure passed sampling the wares of the Okya Meen were so much more stimulating. Ayudhya was a cosmopolitan city, and the beauties came from all corners of the world. Those wanting virginal fruit would find that 12 was an acceptable age for Siamese girls to enter the trade. Schouten had learned that children were not to his taste, but he knew his friend could always find something exotic to arouse his passions. Tonight's angel had been lovely, her deep bronze skin suggesting she came from one of the islands to the south. He breathed deeply, trying to recapture the soft scent of sandalwood she used to perfume herself.

And practicing pleasures behind the Okya Meen's screens kept his own indiscretions away from the Director's eyes. With his third anniversary in Siam recently passed, he was growing anxious for the promotion that would officially recognize his accomplishments, and put at least a bit more change in his pockets.. He had clearly shown the diplomacy and business acumen required of a Merchant. A little more time building the Director's confidence should bring him that title.

THE SIAMESE YEAR of the Rabbit, 1628, dawned a few months later with a clear sign that whatever doubts he may have raised, the company appreciated the intensity which Schouten brought to his assignments. He was appointed Assistant Director, second-in-command and a member of the factory Council, along with the Director, Surgeon, Bookkeeper, and Supervisor of Stores. His behavior may have stretched the norms to which a typical employee would go, but the Dutch had always been willing to relax their

scruples in the quest for greater profits. Worship of Mammon was hardly sacrilege when the proceeds enriched God's servants and strengthened them to vanquish His enemies.

Adrian de Marees had arrived before year-end to assume the Directorship from van der Elst. Schouten confidently set about advising him on the affairs of the kingdom. A clear demonstration of his insights would establish himself on near-equal footing with the new Director. He intended to secure colleague status immediately, not repeat the years he had spent ingratiating himself with van der Elst. Showing himself as the clear expert would also eliminate any questions about his wanderings, nocturnal or otherwise, around the city.

"Rumors have begun circulating that the king's health is deteriorating. A succession struggle seems to be brewing," Schouten reported to de Marees and his Council. "Ong Lai, head of the Royal Household, is restricting all access to the king. I've not gotten a clear reading on him, but he is evidently a distant cousin of the king and a completely ruthless individual."

"One legend says he's the illegitimate son of King Ekathotsarot," the Surgeon added, referring to the ruler who reigned 20 years earlier. "In any case, he has been jailed several times, most recently for cavorting with a wife of the king's brother. It's amazing he still has his head on his shoulders. Apparently he fought valiantly against the Cambodians and retained the king's favor."

"The Kalahom, minister in charge of the Military, appears to be mobilizing the faction against him," continued Schouten. "We've no way of knowing which way the wind will ultimately blow, so my advice is that we stay out of the intrigue and distribute generous gratuities to both sides."

"Which way are the Japanese leaning?" inquired de Marees.

"Who knows? Yamada may hold the trump, but he is too clever to reveal his hand."

TENSIONS IN THE COURT continued to build, but two events in mid-year kept the Dutch community in high favor. In May, two galleons, the San Ildefonso and the Nuestra

Senora de Pena, entered the river flying the Spanish flag. Within hours, they rained cannonfire on the Siamese and Japanese junks and sank three. Captain Juan de Alcaraso sent a clear message that Spain had a long memory. Satisfied with the havoc he had wreaked as vengeance for the soldiers killed in the Zeelandt incident almost four years earlier, de Alcaraso hoisted sail and escaped before the king could marshal his troops.

The smell of spent powder hung over the city for days. Smoky air burned the eyes continuously, reminding all the king's subjects of the inexcusable affront to his dignity. De Marees expressed his outrage to the court, but privately Schouten congratulated the Director. The attack would further inflame the king against their Portuguese competitors and seal the Hollanders in their privileged position.

In July, the long-awaited letter from the Prince of Orange arrived. The king's displeasure with what he perceived as a snub by a European monarch had cost the factory dearly in the terms of trade. But his annoyance evaporated instantly, to the point that he bestowed a tremendous honor on the Dutch by receiving the letter ahead of the customary 14 day waiting period.

The capital quickly emerged from the malaise that had followed the attack. The entire populace turned out to witness the tribute being paid to their ruler, so sharply contrasted with his treatment by the Spaniards. As a people, the Siamese might appear shy in demeanor but they loved the fun of a festival. For his part, the king needed this opportunity to enhance his prestige, so recently threatened by a foreign navy.

The celebrations began with a tremendous convoy of warboats conveying the letter upriver to the capital. Dozens of rowers pulled rhythmically, the drumbeat carrying to where Schouten and his colleagues watched from shore. The golden bows glistened in the morning light as they sliced through the water. A quadrant of royal umbrellas rose amidships in one state barge, shading the Dutch message in its place of honor.

The Prince's ambassador had died en route, so de Marees and Schouten obtained the privilege of presenting the letter. After several days for translation and negotiation over protocol, the Dutchmen escorted the letter to the king's palace accompanied by a great procession. The king's white elephants paraded within the first courtyard. At the inner

gate, they removed their shoes and advanced another 300 steps crouching on their knees. The king's ministers arranged themselves by rank and a guard of a few hundred soldiers encircled the hall.

With a fanfare of trumpets, the king appeared at an elevated window straddled by 3 posts, each with several umbrellas to symbolize his exalted position. At his appearance, everyone present joined their palms at the forehead and touched their heads to the ground three times. Schouten observed the king discreetly as he followed suit. Seen on elephant back or perched in the royal barge, the monarch always appeared as a remote majestic being. Schouten was now taken aback to find nothing more than a small frail man. Nonetheless, the bejeweled costume, the courtiers bowing low, the orchestrated pomp, all combined to surround the king with what seemed an invincible aura.

The ceremony began with a reading of the Prince's gifts. De Marees then handed the royal letter to the king in a golden bowl, lifting it high over his head so the king would not have to stoop from his window. The interpreter asked the formal questions about the Dutch monarch's health and the well-being of his country. De Marees replied briefly, as the Phrakhlang had advised that the king would be insulted by a lengthy response. After offering betel to the Dutchmen, the king retired with another fanfare and salute from the prostrate audience.

A member of the Court delivered presents from the king that evening. The factory always strived to follow Siamese customs, and it rejoiced at the success of the ceremony. "This little victory will serve us well in the trial ahead," speculated the Director, anticipating the tumult that would result from the coming rivalry to capture the throne. "I want to personally express my appreciation to Mr. Schouten for how well he has guided me during my first months in this strange land," he continued. Schouten basked in the applause, hopeful that equally elaborate praise was carried to Batavia in the Director's reports.

Only one thing marred the festivities. The ship carrying the royal letter had brought a second message. Jan Pieterszoon Coen had arrived in Batavia in 1627 to take over as Governor General. He was reviewing policy with an eye toward consolidating

settlements and relying more on freetraders. The Ayudhya factory was high on the list of potential closures.

“YOU SEEM TROUBLED, my friend,” noticed the Okya Meen, “yet my contacts assure me your audience was a complete success.” He clapped his hands. “Bring tea for our guest.” A maid hurried forward with the warm brew.

“Only the concerns of business,” returned Schouten. He put his guard up, knowing he should keep any talk of Dutch plans out of this house.

He was indeed anxious. The idea that the Company would consider shuttering the factory seemed absurd. So absurd that it could never materialize, he assured himself. But he was in a brooding mood after several drafts of Arak during the celebration, and his assurances sounded hollow.

“Let me introduce Pridi,” the Okya Meen intruded into his thoughts. “She will ease your worries.”

Schouten eyed the delicate flower bowing her head. She had the slender frame and demure look that he found sound attractive in the Siamese, though in his current mood she did little to stir his desires.”

He forced a smile onto his face. No use raising the suspicions of the Okya Meen by refusing his gifts. This one would be a pleasant enough companion for the next few hours. And she might even bring him out of the dark mood created by the Governor General's silly proposals.

LATE IN THE YEAR, a chasm splintered the Court. The king anointed his son Chetta as the crown prince, bypassing his brother who under Siamese tradition was the heir apparent. Ong Lai, who had been massing loyal troops around the capital, intimidated most of the ministers into acquiescing to the king's wishes, although the Kalahom and the Phrakhlung argued vehemently that the ancient laws of the kingdom could not be violated in such a manner.

The nightmare broke just before Christmas. The factory awoke one morning to see severed heads peering down from the city walls. Schouten recognized the face of the Phrakhlung. Flies swarmed over the blood-caked chin. The skin was already drawing back into a hideous mask. But the eyes were unmistakable, staring unnervingly at the Dutchmen as they had during so many intense dealings.

They soon learned that Ong Lai had summoned all the senior ministers to announce the king's death, and to trap all those who had not vigorously endorsed the king's son. His men marched their principal opponents to a gate of the palace and sliced them in two. The son Chetta ascended the throne. Ong Lai manipulated the 15-year old into naming him Kalahom, with control of the military. He convinced the child-king to replace himself as Head of the Royal Household with his brother.

Along with all the officials of the government, the leaders of each foreign community were called to the palace to drink the Water of Allegiance to the new monarch. Schouten observed the faces as the Brahmin priests consecrated the water and administered the oath. Those who had followed Ong Lai wore haughty looks, but most kept their eyes averted to hide the terror that lurked in them. He swallowed his own draught cleanly, then prayed none of his countrymen would choke on the perfumed liquid they found so revolting. A Siamese several paces ahead had not been so lucky. When he coughed up a few drops, the guards hauled him to the gate and disemboweled him.

As the reign of terror continued, the Dutch stayed close to the factory, the mood gloomy. "This could not have occurred at a worse time," de Marees informed his Council. "The Governor General is predisposed to shut the factory, despite our profits. If this turmoil disrupts our shipments, he'll have all the excuse he needs."

"Deliveries to the factory are at a standstill," noted the Bookkeeper. Everyone looked to Schouten for an idea of what was occurring.

"The market is shuttered for all intents and purposes. The only people in the streets are soldiers. Yamada's Samurai control the city." Schouten recalled his narrow escape as he was making his way back from the Okya Meen the prior evening. Three Japanese had surrounded him. The officer screamed gibberish into his face. The words may have been

incomprehensible but the message was clear. The foreigners better keep within their walls and not meddle in politics. Schouten had secured his release only after several pieces of silver exchanged hands.

“Prince Sri Sin, the dead king’s brother, slipped through Ong Lai’s hands,” Schouten continued. “He escaped into a monastery, and now he is untouchable as long as he wears the yellow robes of the monkhood. Ong Lai has to see him as a serious threat since his claim to the throne is at least as legitimate as Chetta’s.”

“And Yamada, which way are the Japanese turning?”

“Not at all clear. Yesterday, Yamada embraced two officials as the executioner was about to strike and persuaded Ong Lai to pardon them. So the two obviously have some sort of alliance, or at least truce, between them. But the rumors are that Yamada has also made overtures to Sri Sin.

“Our best hope is that Yamada throws his support one way or another. We need one faction to consolidate power so things settle down to normal. It matters little which one prevails.”

Schouten’s wishes soon materialized. Yamada beguiled Sri Sin into leaving the monastery, pretending his samurai would help him claim the throne. He even convinced the prince to shed his yellow robes to show his followers that he was a man of heart and action. With the monk’s habit gone, his body was no longer inviolate, and the soldiers seized him. He had been cast into a pit to starve to death.

Within weeks, Schouten could report that the court was resuming its normal functions. “We can now turn this situation to our advantage,” he advised the Council. “The young king needs all the backing he can find. With the letter from the Prince of Orange so recent, he is looking on us as favorably as ever. And as the key to his international trade, he knows we fill the coffers of the Royal Treasury.

“The new Phrakhlang is a longstanding crony of Ong Lai. I am sure a well-placed present can win him over.”

“Affairs are looking up,” responded de Marees. Indeed all the Council members were feeling a bit more hopeful. “Draft a summary for the Governor General. We must make him understand how well positioned we are.”

By the new year, the Dutch strategy appeared to be working. De Marees and Schouten attended another royal audience. In return for their long and loyal service to his land, the king honored the Dutchmen with the insignias of royal office, a silver betel box for the Director and a gold saber for his second. Schouten wrote to Batavia proudly that his sword ranked him as an Okkun of the realm, a knight in the Christian manner. He hoped the Governor General would heed the honors.

“**A SPECIAL TREAT TONIGHT,**” promised the Okya Meen. “To celebrate the honors the king has bestowed upon you.”

Schouten smiled, partly at the possibilities for the evening's pleasure, mostly at the sly way this merchant always maneuvered him out of a few extra coins. Nonetheless, he had nothing to complain about. The gentleman's suggestions frequently shocked his sensibilities, but the sensual delights extended far beyond his own imagination.

The merchant showed him into a room where a petite figure was kneeling over the tea kettle. His companion worked slowly, the pace intended to relax the client. The candlelight sparkled off a shiny scarf draped over the bent back. Schouten watched as the boiling liquid was poured into a china cup, then proffered to him with a bit of sugar candy to clench in his teeth as he sipped. The effeminate face smiled shyly as Schouten nodded his appreciation.

When he turned over his empty cup, he reached out. This creature was oddly attractive, moving with a strange, almost clumsy bearing. He moved onto his side, anticipating the gentle hands rubbing his body. The oil was warm and the grip strong kneading his shoulders. Long fingernails scratched into his scalp. A musky odor mixed with the scented wax.

When he rolled over, his companion squeezed a pinch of betel into his mouth. Normally Schouten would have resisted. He enjoyed slipping into the mild drug haze, but the tell-tale purple on his tongue would bring at least an implied reprimand tomorrow. Tonight the mood was right though, and his guard down. He chewed pensively.

When the massage ended, Schouten rose to his knees and pushed the slender body backward. The scarf fell away revealing a muscled breast. Schouten gazed in surprise. His hands kept moving. He pulled back the folds of the loose pagne, then hesitated before stroking the soft organ. As he realized what was being offered, he shuddered, but the titillation overcame his momentary guilt. He dipped his hand in the oil.

Tomorrow only purple juice staining his lips would mark his sin. Nothing else would escape the Okya Meen's lair.

A PROSPEROUS BUSINESS, the respect of the Court, new sensations with every trip through the city. Four years in Siam had brought all the success Schouten had prayed for and personal pleasures he had never dreamed of. But early in 1629, he would find himself stomping out of the Council, cursing the stupidity that would bring it all crashing down.

“Not achieving adequate profits,” the Governor General would write. “Trouble is brewing in Japan and we must concentrate our efforts there.” Nonsense, shutting the factory was insanity in Schouten's eyes.. The accounts were in the black and the expenses were not out of line. Freetrader ships would never make up for the loss of the factory. How could the simpletons in Batavia even consider forfeiting their favored position in Siam?

Schouten's temper would flare when the Director announced the orders for closure. He would insist that he could prepare a treatise on how the current political intrigues in the court could cement the Dutch role in the kingdom, not threaten it as Batavia seemed to believe. If the Bookkeeper compiled a good showing of the profits, they could reverse this silly decision.

De Marees would shake his head. While seething also, he would know how strong-willed the Governor General was and warn Schouten against resisting.

A warm soak and massage would calm him but do little to abate his sense of disappointment. He would miss the Siamese, so shy yet so uninhibited and eager to please. When the spice trade had brought him to the Indies, he had never imagined that cloves and cinnamon were mere symbols of the sensuality he would find. The sleeping youth beside him would remain but one example of the delights this barbaric land had to offer.

In a more reflective mood as the dawn brightened the horizon, Schouten would regard his accomplishments in Siam as a tremendous success, even if their fruit had not ripened to the company's expectations. Japan! He would seek a posting further east. Yamada's Samurai were a brutal if disciplined lot. Matching wits with their Shogun would offer an enormous challenge. Rumors were already circulating that this ruler would expel all foreigners to halt their interference in his domain. And Japan would present its own unique view of Asian pleasures. The madams of the willow world were known for catering to whatever a young man fancied.

THE SECOND TOUR, 1633-1636

SCHOUTEN LAID HIS QUILL beside the Daghregister, the journal in which the Director recorded all the factory's business. What a thrill to be back in Siam, he thought to himself, all those memories of starting out as a cog in the company's machine, pushing himself up the ranks. The work had finally paid off. After three years in Japan, a new Governor General had selected him to reopen the Ayudhya office. Director at last.

The Governor General's instructions were clear. Schouten had under a year to prove that the factory could turn a profit. Shortly after the new year 1634, he was to sail to Batavia and report on the potential of the Siamese market. Then the Governor General would consult with his council and determine whether to continue the factory.

His tour in Japan had honed his talents for maneuvering through the political and business intrigues of life in the East. The Siamese nobility might appear haughty at times, but they were mild-mannered when compared with the arrogant Japanese. Schouten had spent his years in Japan accompanying mission after mission to the Emperor's council at Nagasaki, hoping to secure the release of Peter Nuyts, imprisoned for extracting a silly revenge on some Japanese captain. He had watched as the Japanese officials delivered humiliating ultimatums, everything from demands that foreigners trample on the image of Jesus to orders to abandon the factory on Formosa and acknowledge Japanese suzerainty over the island. Any compliance only confirmed the Japanese air of superiority and led to more contemptuous commands. Resistance only led to the torture of natives sympathetic to the Dutch plight, burning to death in sacks of straw or plunging into hot springs to boil.

Nonetheless Schouten's superior Willem Jansz and his lieutenant Francis Caron had managed to maintain the Dutch foothold on Hirado. Although the Japanese would continue to taunt and threaten for years to come, they had convinced the Shogun of the benefits of reopening his borders. Schouten was determined to draw on their example as he rebuilt the Dutch position in Siam.

The knowledge gained of Japanese markets would also prove invaluable. With Dutch ships again allowed into the Emperor's ports, the Siam factory was perfectly positioned. Siamese goods were in high demand, and the Shogun refused to let Siamese junks trade directly. Nor did he want his own citizens leaving the islands on trading missions. Schouten was determined to beat the other European powers in filling the middleman role.

He did not intend to stop there. He would continue to supply staples to Batavia as well, but he really had his sights set on India and Europe. If he could build markets for Siamese products in those areas, the profits could be enormous and his reputation would be unsurpassed.

He felt he was off to a quick start. When he arrived in April, Reijner van Tzum and Issac Moerdijck had shown him the stocks. These assistants had remained in Ayudhya

during the years the factory was closed, and although they had no real authority, the two Dutchmen had been able to collect the company's outstanding debts and to maintain contacts with the local suppliers. He immediately put them to work buying deerhides and sapanwood. He wanted to get a shipment dispatched as soon as the winds were favorable.

So much had changed while he was gone. Despite the correspondence he had maintained, it still shocked him. Ong Lai had needed less than a year to capture absolute power. He had precipitated a crisis by cremating his father with honors reserved exclusively for the direct relatives of a king. When the young King Chetta reproached him, his men stormed the palace and put the king to death with a sandalwood stake through the stomach. Yamada insisted that the king's 10-year old brother be crowned, but Ong Lai needed little more than another month to depose and murder him. In the meantime, he dispatched Yamada to quell a rebellion in the vassal state of Ligor and had him poisoned by the rebel leader's brother. Ong Lai was thus free to mount the throne himself. He now reigned as Prasat Thong, "King of the Golden Palace."

Other vassals had used this usurpation as a pretext to revolt. The Queen of Patani refused to send tribute to a monarch she regarded as no better than a rascal and murderer. She had allied herself with the Portuguese to resist the new king. The Cambodians were also threatening, stirred up by the Japanese. Many had fled there when Prasat Thong burned their community and expelled them from the country for not properly supporting his ascension.

Prasat Thong's old crony still held the post of Phrakhlang, so Schouten revived the relationship he had built before his departure. This friendship would be the key to secure the trading privileges he needed to get the factory off the ground and to insinuate himself back into the Court. But it was proving costly. The gratuities necessary to accomplish any business had risen dramatically during his absence, as had the prices of many goods which the king had monopolized to enrich his own treasury. This inflation, coupled with the expenses of military support the king was demanding, would challenge the factory to produce the returns expected in Batavia.

Schouten felt confident he was up to the task. In addition to opening new markets, he intended to undertake a vigorous program to expand the factory's physical plant in Ayudhya. He had begun negotiations for land to house a large compound and for a satellite warehouse downstream at the rivermouth. Most importantly, he had quickly assumed the mantle of Nai, leader of the Dutch community. As such, the Court would hold him responsible for the behavior of his countrymen. He was well suited for the role. Abiding by local customs was critical to dealing with the Siamese elite, and he knew he was adept at adopting the habits of the natives. His superiors might be horrified by how far he carried some of the local practices, but they need not trouble themselves about what they did not know.

He closed the Dagregister. He was quickly learning a Director's work was never done. If not making money, he was involved with some crisis with the Court, some squabble among his Dutchmen, or other nonsense. But the rest of this evening would be devoted to pleasures.

THE OKYA MEEN HAD sent the new Director a bolt of silks soon after his arrival, promising a worthier gift as soon as Schouten was able to call on him. Tonight he would renew their acquaintance and indulge in whatever token of the flesh his friend offered. His mouth watered thinking of the tastes he had missed so long.

The ladies of the willow world had of course always satisfied his physical yearnings. But they were constantly pressing for a better business deal, urging him to take a long term contract on one of his favorites. And while their creatures were every bit as eager to please, they had none of the fun-loving ease which the Siamese would reveal behind drawn curtains.

When the elderly matron ushered him in to await his friend, he marveled at the variety the merchant managed to draw into his house. In Japan, most of the ladies were trained from childhood. Foreign bloodlines were tainted goods. Siam yielded so much more, a dark Moorish maiden or a bronzed islander if one tired of the native offerings.

Schouten had learned that the best way to experience all the possibilities was to place himself in the hands of the Okya Meen.

His friend swept into the room, a teenage flower on one arm, an athletic youth on the other. He held out both for Schouten's perusal. The Dutchman took one by the hand and was led further into the house.

"DIRTY FREETRADERS," Schouten screamed in anger. A Moor from Tenasserim was spreading a story that a Dutchman Jan van Meerwijck had attacked one of the king's ships outside the port of Mergui. He justified this action as revenge for being cheated by one of the king's Muslim factors and finding no recourse in the courts.

"They killed one officer and wounded two others," Van Vliet, the factory's second-in-command, continued. "The Siamese ship escaped, so van Meerwijck wasn't satisfied with the damage done. He captured another group of merchants, and after stealing their money, dumped them on some isolated island."

"Damn privateers have been ruining trade with a flood of Indian cottons and now they are trying to get us thrown out of the country! How's the king responding?"

"He's threatening to seize our flyboat the Velsen. Evidently, he is so enraged he even said he would send an ambassador to Manila and invite the Spanish back into his kingdom."

Schouten shook with his own rage, the color of his face matching the betel juice dripping down a coolie's chin. "Draft orders to all the captains that van Meerwijck's ship is to be seized on sight. I will have the Governor General issue a warrant for the son of bitch. In the meantime, I better see the Phrakhlang."

Schouten calmed the Phrakhlang enough to prevent him from confiscating the Velsen. But the incident exacerbated the difficulties he had been having wringing commercial concessions. He desperately wanted a monopoly on the export of deerhides, but the Phrakhlang was pressing for him to commit Dutch military aid against the rebellious state of Patani before granting any privileges. With this episode, the

negotiations took a turn for the worse. From now on, the Phrakhlang informed him, the Dutch would deal not with him directly, but with the Okluang Chiat, the Nai of the Muslims.

“This will cause insurmountable obstacles,” Schouten complained to Van Vliet. “He also ordered me to send all our cloth to the king’s factors, but I refuse to sell it at the ridiculous price he is offering.”

The Dutchmen discussed strategy and finally decided they had no choice but to do something to defuse the tension. Schouten sent for the Okphra Rai Montri, the Translator, who fortunately had been a tremendous help reopening the factory. “Draw up a list of gifts that will appease the king and this minister,” ordered the Director. It proved to be an expensive but successful outlay. The Translator brought back word that the king wanted to return to the former set up. The negotiations with the Phrakhlang resumed, though without much progress.

SCHOUTEN AND VAN VLIET were completing their morning rounds when they spotted Oeset Pegu returning from the palace. She created quite a spectacle, with her golden headdress towering over the retinue of servants escorting her back from a visit to the king’s harem. “A regal lady, you have captured,” Schouten commented to Van Vliet. He kept any sarcasm out of his voice. Oeset had, in fact, used all her charms to worm her way into the factory’s life.

Schouten himself had been her target when she lost the Dutch freetrader who had been her first husband. She still had a lithe young body, and she knew the sway of the hips that would stir a Dutchman’s loins. One evening as he was returning to the factory from an evening of pleasure, Oeset had stepped into his path. Her gaze met his own provocatively, so unusual for the timid Siamese. Her words were subtle but it was clear she was offering herself. Schouten had seen her dealing in the bazaar and he knew immediately that she was really seeking a business arrangement, not a casual liaison. He

was indeed attracted, more by her mental prowess than her body. But he had learned long before to wall his sexual affairs off from his business.

When he offered no encouragement, she turned her attentions to his assistant. She had easily taken Van Vliet in with a demure look and a soft caress.

Of course, Schouten had instantly seen the value of the relationship and had encouraged Van Vliet to take her as his wife. She was a shrewd lady. The factory was already benefiting from the trade she had brokered, even as she siphoned off a sizable cut for her own account. The intelligence she gathered through her confidences with the royal consorts was even more valuable, and the reason the two men hurried to meet her.

She sat calmly as her maid removed the headdress, then the scarf draping her shoulders. She's toying with us, Shouten observed, she must have worthy gossip. He looked at the swell of her breast, growing heavier than he remembered, her dark nipples expanding. And a slight bulge rounding out her abdomen. Soon another baby would be wailing around the compound.

"His Highness is very irritable. Poor Thepka has bruises across her back." Oeset referred to one of the king's more recent wives, who was evidently the current recipient of both the royal pleasures and frustrations. "The king grows ever more obsessed with the Queen of Patani."

Shouten groaned inwardly, knowing he could not avoid the issue of the Patani revolt much longer. The king had spent months lobbying the Dutch for military aid to support the attack he planned in the spring. This cloud had even thrown a shadow on the visit by Jan Joosten de Roij in September to deliver another letter from the Prince of Orange. The king had expressed no enthusiasm in receiving the message, choosing only to press his agenda for war. The Dutch had remained noncommittal.

Already, the Phrakhlang was assembling the army under his command. Thirty thousand men had been mustered. The infantry and horse cavalry were a motley collection armed almost entirely with bows, lances, and swords. But the hundreds of war elephants, each with a three-man crew, would strike terror into the soldiers of an upstart vassal.

“The king has reached the limit of his patience with your hesitation,” Oeset continued. “Okun Trongpanit is to take over as Translator.”

Schouten grimaced. “A spy in our midst who will do nothing but obstruct our trade.”

“Yes. You must yield. But realize the king’s anger shows how badly he needs your help. He will surely grant a valued concession in return. Insist on the monopoly.”

You are clever, Schouten apprised the young woman silently, as she met his stare. You know how much the factory needs to corner the hide trade, and how many coins that trade will put in the folds of your pagne. A promise to the king will risk only my neck should the Governor General refuse my request. “Very well, we will see the Phrakhlang.”

The staff rejoiced later in the week when Van Vliet brought word that the king had granted a hide monopoly for the next year. It would very likely be the savior of the factory. Schouten tempered his own enthusiasm with the understanding that everything depended on how effectively he pleaded the case with the Governor General. As he was preparing to sail to Batavia, the king blessed him with a reward that would strengthen his argument: a silver betel box and the title of Okluang at the Court. Oeset smiled as she congratulated him, her wry expression letting him know that she expected a reward for the role she had played in furthering his cause.

SCHOUTEN LEFT THE Council chamber feeling ecstatic. His voyage to Batavia had been a nightmare of storms, but since his arrival, everything had proceeded brilliantly. The Governor General Hendrik Brouwer had listened patiently as he outlined his plans for the factory. How successfully they had initiated the Japan trade. The opportunities in Europe and India, the potential even for supplying Formosa with goods for sale in China. The status the Dutch were gaining in the Siamese Court. Brouwer even accepted his arguments that King Prasat Thong was justified in waging war against Patani and that the Company could expect generous repayment for any aid they furnished.

Now the Council had approved six ships. The fleet would sail first to Patani to invade with the king’s soldiers. It would proceed onward to Ayudhya to unload its cargo

of bullion, armaments, and other merchandise and to take on Siamese goods. The ships would then go their various ways, to Japan, Toyan, or the Pescadores, fulfilling Schouten's dream of extending the Siamese trade in all directions.

The Governor General gave Schouten final instructions a few days before his departure. "The present building will never support the volume of goods passing through it. It's poorly located away from the river and in tumble-down condition. You must secure permission to build a new godown."

"The king has already offered access to new wharves. I am sure I can convince him to give us a plot of land. But I must have men to build, carpenters and masons."

"I will assign some to go with you. Now remember, we want this business to ourselves. Do whatever you can to turn the king against any competitors. I am particularly concerned about the Japanese, who seem to be reviving their interest in taking the trade for themselves. The Shogun has for years considered Prasat Thong a pariah for usurping the throne and treating his Japanese subjects so harshly. You must remind the king of these intolerable insults and the indignities he has suffered at the hands of the Emperor's Court."

Schouten departed, anxious to set sail. He had gotten on well with the Governor General, but the strictures of Batavia society, as much like an outpost of Europe as the Orient, felt so confining after the freedom he enjoyed in Siam. And he had no time to lose. It was already mid-May, thanks to the delays imposed by the inclement weather on the voyage in. The king's troops would be waiting.

AS THE YACHT *Wapen van Delft* cruised up the river, Schouten felt nothing but apprehension about his reception. The fleet had reached Patani in early June to find the Siamese army had retreated. To show their faith, the Dutch vessels had shelled the city and captured two local junks. He would deliver the cargo and the crew in hopes of assuaging the king's temper. But with the generals no doubt desperate to excuse their failure, they would blame the Dutch absence for forcing the withdrawal.

The king was indeed riled, so much that he forbade all his subjects from speaking or trading with any Dutchman. Nonetheless, Schouten managed to secure an audience to present his side of the story. He must have been at his most persuasive because he convinced the king that the army had withdrawn prematurely. The Royal officers' incompetence generated the collapse of the invasion. To Schouten's surprise since the king normally acted precipitately, Prasat Thong elected a special committee to investigate before deciding who to punish. Of course, the luxurious gifts the Governor General had sent helped win the case.

Eventually, the special committee concluded that the generals had Patani in their grasp but had not pressed for victory. The king's justice was swift, though not as severe as the factory staff was betting. Only one commander was beheaded. The king proclaimed that he would simply expose the other culprits to the scorn and disdain of the nation. His guards marched the guilty ministers, including the Phrakhlang, through the streets to a post on which the unlucky commander's head had been speared. There they remained for three days, with orders to view their compatriot and ponder whether he had been punished in the appropriate way.

Schouten ignored the wails issuing forth as the punishment dragged on. His years in the East had inured him to such brutalities. He had advanced by adopting local customs, not resisting them, and now was a time to find opportunities for exploiting the situation. With the king grateful for the military aid, however useless it had turned out, he renewed his demands for concessions. The king agreed to provide land and to halve the usual customs fees. Adding to Dutch prestige even more, he awarded Schouten a gold betel box. The rise in rank which the gift symbolized entitled Schouten to sit in the king's council. Now he would be able to represent Dutch interests to the king directly, without any obstructions of the Phrakhlang intervening.

The factory council laughed that evening when Schouten and Van Vliet, who had received a title as well, joked about their "saakdina." Literally, the king had given them power over fields. The produce of the saakdina could potentially make them rich men, but they had no idea where their fields lay and never expected to be enlightened.

AN ELEPHANT TRUMPETING captured the attention of the crowd. From his position atop a mound overlooking the exhibition ground, Schouten watched all eyes swing toward a cloud of dust in the distance. A dozen beasts barreled toward them, prodded by several handlers with blunt lances.

The king had promised a great celebration to honor the passing of the westerners' new year of 1635. A huge entourage had journeyed to the outskirts of the city to witness the taming of the elephants. The nobility had taken their places on the elevated terraces surrounding the field. Inside the terraces, a palisade of stout timbers, each just far enough from its neighbor to allow a man to squeeze through, enclosed the ground.

The king's wives and their ladies in waiting were dressed in full regalia, the king's wealth manifested by their finery, his prowess evidenced by their beauty and the many young princes jumping excitedly between the levels. The matronly queen, no longer the favorite for his physical affections but still a trusted advisor, placed her broadening hips in the seat of honor. The object of the king's current desires took her place next. Thepka's beauty was legendary, and Schouten discreetly took the opportunity to judge for himself. Indeed, her face retained a delicate youth, her lips an inviting pout, even as her body matured to womanhood.

A dozen ministers clothed in scarlet frocks and peaked caps seated themselves cross-legged in front of the platform designated for the king. When the footmen heralded his arrival, these officials swung around and prostrated themselves on knees and elbows, their rears facing the field and their eyes glued to the ground. With the ministers exhibiting this obeisance throughout the ceremony to unfold, the remainder of the crowd could relax from the strict protocol that ensured the monarch received the proper respect.

But the crowd was not relaxed, Schouten observed, rather it waited with tense anticipation. As the elephants burst through the gate at one end of the arena, a sexual energy seemed ready to ignite the air. Two enormous tuskers chased a herd of females,

not yet realizing they had been decoyed into an enclosure from which they could not escape.

The larger bull emitted another loud blast and marked his territory. His musky scent mixed with the rising dust. He sniffed at the females, his organ growing to the size of a man's leg. As he mounted a cow, she pushed into the bunched herd, unwilling to satisfy his need.

The bulls' frustrations were only beginning. The handlers urged the tame females forward through a gate at the far end of the ground. The two bulls found themselves alone, stampeding belligerently around the palisade. The nearly naked handlers, their pagnes tied up around their loins and their muscles glistening with sweat, darted back into the enclosure, baiting and tormenting the animals. One agile young man flashed up the left side of one bull and delivered a hard blow just below the chin. The enraged beast let out a mighty bellow and charged after the fleeing Siamese. As the elephant bore down to trample his enemy beneath the huge feet, the nimble handler jumped between two timbers and the elephant crashed into the palisade. The stunned animal had barely regained his balance when another man stabbed his thigh and he was off on another futile chase.

The elephants soon grew tired. The watching crowd seemed to be expending almost as much energy, its own odor and excitement hanging in the haze. But a tension kept all eyes riveted on the arena to see if somehow the bulls could turn on their tormentors and reverse their fortunes. It was not to be. The gate at the far end opened again and the pair, seeing their chance for escape, charged through. They found themselves trapped in a small corral, the temptresses that had led them to this fate ready to corner them further. The handlers looped a rope around each foot and secured the other end to one of the cows. Each animal was towed to an even narrower stall, where the men slipped planks under his belly and hoisted him up so that his feet barely reached the ground.

"He will remain that way until he becomes the king's servant," the Translator explained to the gathered Dutchmen, "several days or possibly weeks. Then he will go to the king's stable, where he will be given a home that befits his noble personality. He will have several grooms to tend his needs and mistresses whenever he seeks their company."

He needs a mistress now, thought Schouten.

As the animals' bellowing filled the wind with their frustrations, the afternoon waned and the people slowly dispersed. The dust that burned in the eyes and clogged the lungs had taken their toll, but a sense of unrequited desires lingered in the aftermath of the spectacle.

THE OKYA MEEN'S house was busy that evening. Schouten cursed to himself. His own fondness for the Okya Meen's services was well known. The men thought he had a real taste for the native ladies. As the Dutchmen's leader, many naturally followed his example and partook themselves, although unlike van der Elst, he seldom discouraged those who preferred to spend their leisure drinking and gaming.

The consequence was that he had to increase his own discretion. With so many prying eyes around, he vowed to stick to the more traditional pleasures on this particular night. A young Moor new to the house sat in the corner. Her hair was jet black, hanging past her shoulders. Her body exhibited youthful curves, not the slenderness of a Siamese girl, whose hips and breasts would show little sign of ripening at that age. Not to his usual tastes, but since his favorite dish was off-limits tonight, he decided to try her. The Okya Meen insisted on a few extra coins, arguing that he had trained the girl well but that she remained untouched.

The merchant ushered them into a corner room, and after a few words with the girl, personally drew the curtain tight and assured Schouten that he would not be disturbed. The glow of the candle filled the room. The girl lay on the mat, watching her client undress. When he reclined beside her, she got to her knees and blew out the flame. Putting her hand to his mouth to ensure his silence, she pulled the curtain aside. Another shadow moved into the room.

With the two youth resting on either side, Schouten explored the choices the Okya Meen was serving. How well the merchant knew his client! The new visitor would surely draw this customer away from his virgin flower, preserving her purity for another

sale. And the client would receive a satisfaction he had feared he must discreetly forgo on this particular occasion.

THE ASSISTANT MOERDIJK led Schouten and Van Vliet across the plant floor, where a dozen slaves were preparing deerhides. They stopped at a table piled high with “three-sort,” bundles of hides with prescribed amounts of three qualities. “We are moving forward with a sort into five classes,” Moerdijk explained. “There is simply too much variation in the skins we’re getting.”

“I have written the Hirado factory. The Director there thinks the new scheme will help him in the Japanese market,” replied Schouten. “His distributors have been complaining about the lack of standards. It’s a shame this won’t help us in Europe.” The factory had abandoned hope of shipping deerskins homeward because the Canadians delivered a much superior product.

“We’ve refined our packing techniques,” Moerdijk continued. “I don’t think we will have a problem with worms this year.”

I hear that promise every year, Schouten mused to himself, and every year, a quarter of the crop is ruined before we even ship it. No matter, this young man is showing plenty of initiative. “Well done. Let’s check the warehouse.”

Schouten felt extraordinarily pleased on this tour of the factory’s commercial sections. In fact, the entire compound was beginning to seem like home. They had occupied the new facility in mid-1635, and it was gaining a reputation throughout the East as one of the finest of its kind, Dutch or otherwise. For all intents and purposes, Schouten presided over a self-sufficient community. Vegetable gardens and orchards supplied the kitchen. Stables housed the horses and farm animals. The men lodged in various dwellings according to rank, and their native wives and children gave the place a real sense of family. Even the location was an asset, a bit downriver from the king’s island, but safe from the fires that had devastated the city early in the year.

“The indigo plants have arrived from Agra.” Van Vliet pulled him back from his reverie when they reached the garden. “We will begin planting when the waters recede.”

“I’m anxious over this experiment,” Schouten responded. “We have had such limited success finding anything for the western markets. This could be a lucrative product if we can grow it.” He was confident van Vliet would give it a good shot. With his wife Oeset to guide him, Schouten expected his second to be ready to assume the Directorship in only a short time. He looked forward to handing over the reins and taking his own next step.

THE KING DELIVERED his judgment at the evening council. Oye Piselouck, one of the richest and most powerful officials in the country, was condemned. The king’s old crony, who as Phrakhlang had played a key role in the succession struggle that led Prasat Thong to the throne, had accused the heir apparent of plotting to seize the crown. But an investigation turned up no evidence to substantiate a conspiracy. Even worse, the Royal Astrologers warned that the accuser’s fortuitous birth promised him nothing less than sovereign power. That implied threat did not escape the king’s attention and further doomed the once-valued minister.

The ruling did not surprise Schouten. Since he began attending the councils, he had marveled at how the king kept all real power in his own hands. The brutalities were the surface: his guards virtually exterminated the family of his predecessor and thousands of others suffered grisly deaths. But the subtleties of the king’s mind ran much deeper than mere physical violence.

Prasat Thong understood the sources of power well. After all, he had proved he was the supreme practitioner of political intrigue. He reorganized the ministries to keep those sources divided among many officials, lest one become a threat. Geographic control he split north and south from the capital. The registers of freemen liable for service, traditionally the greatest powerbase, he placed in an altogether different department.

Economic control he consolidated for himself through monopolies on commodities and foreign managers for his businesses.

Schouten remained awed by the splendor of the Court, but he truly appreciated it only after watching this master manipulate the ceremonies to maintain his absolute authority. Once an insignificant minor noble, the king now assumed a God-like stature, an intimidating remoteness. He recruited a Brahmin, an expert at this craft, to manage the ceremonial functions of the Court.

The Brahmin's family was becoming a power in its own right as it seamlessly insinuated itself into Siamese society. Schouten had always prided himself on how well he melded into the local scene, but he knew he was handicapped because any violation of European mores would bring the wrath of the Company down on him were he discovered. No such inhibitions held these Indians back.

Schouten enjoyed matching wits with the king, though he would never let on that he considered maintaining the Dutch position at the Court a game. That would be fatal; he visibly adopted a posture of respect and subservience. The king used the carrot and stick to manipulate all his subjects, including the Dutch. Schouten responded only with the carrot, even if that meant eating crow on occasion. He might dole out the favors at a snail's pace, but he never wielded the club of Dutch military might.

As the drama of Oye Piselouck's demise played out, first with the soles of his feet roasted over an open flame and finally with his body hacked into three pieces, Schouten congratulated himself on his own restraint. Lately, despite his caution, the king had concluded that the Dutch might need to be curbed. He had shown so much animosity toward the Portuguese and Spanish that they no longer provided any counterbalance should the Hollanders get out of hand. Schouten noted the increasing tension when the Court gossiped that the king had made overtures to the other European powers, but he calmly wrote his superiors that with an iron grip on the trade, he could easily bring the king to reason.

SCHOUTEN CARESSED THE smooth slender thigh. The Okya Meen had certainly delivered a delightful parting gift. I will miss these sweet evenings, he told himself, pondering the innocent face.

Schouten was nearing his last days in Siam. He had turned the factory over to Van Vliet early in 1636, but had secured one final visit to his beloved kingdom to bring another letter from the Prince of Orange. He had made the rounds to express his gratitude to all the Siamese who had befriended him over the years and to say his farewells to the Europeans. The remaining hours he had saved for himself, to revisit each of the sights and sounds that had thrilled him ever since he first sailed up the Menam River.

During an afternoon cruise, he had taken in the full panorama of the metropolis. The profiles of the enormous Bhuddas with so many worshipers at their feet, the sky filled with colorful kites, the bathers modestly turning away as the boat floated past, all revealed the softer side of the Siamese personality of which he had grown so fond. What a contrast these scenes made with the character of the king, to whom he would pay his respects on the morrow.

A dance entertained him during the evening. The ladies bobbed tall golden headdresses and arched elongated fingers to the rhythm of a high-pitched melody. Schouten slipped away early to find a treat more to his personal taste, as the Okya Meen had promised.

He rolled the taut body onto the stomach and admired the narrow hips. How his fellow Europeans could abhor such natural pleasures he would never understand. His own body filled with heat as he bent lower.

“HAS YOUR BUSINESS been brought to a happy conclusion?” asked the king.

“I am tolerably pleased with its success, Your Majesty,” Schouten replied, “and beg your blessing to depart the Kingdom.” This final Audience of Leave offered a last look at the glory of the Court. Despite the king’s recent paranoia directed at the Dutch, he was according Schouten every honor for his years of loyalty. He expressed his pleasure at the

emerald-encrusted crown the Dutchman presented by promising to wear it on all his campaigns, although in his usual condescending manner indicated he would have preferred a more pyramidal shape.

Schouten gratefully acknowledged the gold garland and rich gown the king gave him and crawled from the hall. He would sail to Batavia with an enormous satisfaction at his accomplishments in Siam. His tenure had begun when the Dutch East India Company was little more than an irritating gnat buzzing around the Portuguese, waiting to be swatted away. Now, the Dutch were the power to be reckoned with in this part of the world. He had played no minor role in seizing the enemy's standard.

The factory represented a legacy that he hoped would endure for decades to come. With an able Director and an enviable string of profits since it reopened, the prospects looked bright. Van Vliet would need to keep his hot temper in check, but Schouten knew his wife Oeset could guide him smoothly through the intricacies of court diplomacy.

His own future looked bright as well. He had recently come to the attention of Philips Lucasz, the Director-General of the Company back home in The Hague. At his request, Schouten was preparing a treatise on Siam. He hoped to deliver it personally on a well-earned leave to Europe. The boroughs of Rotterdam seemed so far away, in space and time but mostly in experiences. With luck, the Prince of Orange might even request his presence. How fascinating it would be to regale the stodgy Dutch court with tales of Siamese splendor.

Of course, the spotlight shined with a price. He would lose his freedom to cross between cultures. No longer could he pretend to civilized proprieties while reveling in Oriental mysteries. His European colleagues would never appreciate the pleasures of the East. On company ships, those practicing the darker attractions could be lashed together and cast over the side to drown. No, he would have to bury much of what he had learned deep within his soul until he ventured back. But venture back he would, for the Indies were in his blood.

THE FINAL ACT, BATAVIA, 1644

SCHOUTEN ENTERED THE Governor General's office in response to his summons. Van Dieman had been in charge when Schouten returned to Batavia from the Netherlands in 1640. The two men had developed a close relationship over the years. When the Company encountered trouble in Malacca and Achin, Schouten had gone as the Governor General's envoy and imposed agreements on the local monarchs. The Company continued to prosper from the commercial concessions he had wrung.

For the last two years, he had stayed close to Batavia, enjoying his position as counselor of state to his new friend. He spent his days advising the Governor General on trade and political issues or preparing reports on Asian economies and cultures for the Company's directors back home.

Java was not as fascinating as Siam, its coastal principalities not attaining the splendor of the Siamese monarchy. The politics also were different, with the Dutch much more prone to impose their will on the islanders through violence and enslavement. They would never have considered such an approach with the Siamese.

Nor was it quite as easy to slip away to enjoy the delights of the East. Sitting in council, with its members dressed in their frock coats and lace collars, Schouten at times felt transported back to a stuffy European drawing room. But he enjoyed the prestige that came with his position, and he still managed to find occasional evenings to discreetly lose himself in the alleys of the native community.

Van Dieman showed a well dressed gentleman into the room. Schouten recognized him as the Company's solicitor, who served as the attorney general within its territories. Two guards from the local garrison stationed themselves beside the door.

The solicitor unfurled a scroll of parchment. "Writ for the Arrest of Justus Schouten" stretched across the top of the page. The Governor General spoke up, no sympathy showing on his face.

"You are accused of an inexcusable crime. I have reviewed the evidence. The boy has confessed his part in the act and his master has admitted that this abomination has

been going on for some time. You will hear the details in court. I personally was sickened reading them.”

Schouten gulped and prepared to respond. But the Governor General was nearly apoplectic and shut him off with a call to the guards. They pulled Schouten out of his chair and hauled him away.

THE STARS FADED as the first rays of daylight curved over the horizon. The prisoner shivered with a tropical chill. Since the trial ended, he had been utterly alone in his cell, except for his guards and that evil minister come to torment him with threats of final tortures of the flesh and eternal damnation in the hereafter.

His confession had finally come rushing out. His dual life had been pent up for almost 20 years, one side gratified with professional praise, the other with sensual release. Now they both seemed like empty shells, the experiences as far removed as his Rotterdam childhood.

Yet a seed of hope remained in his despair. The service, the glory, will bring a reprieve, Schouten begged himself to believe. His triumphal reception in Europe when he arrived from Siam. His voyage back as Admiral of the Fleet. All the loyalties stemming from careers he promoted. Surely these pieces added up to the mercy for which he prayed.

The keys of the jailer rattled him alert. The guard's face remained impassive, he noticed thankfully, at least not reflecting the loathing embedded in the judge's verdict for the temptation he could not resist. “Guilty of the filthy and vile act of sodomy, a sin so abominable in the eyes of God that He has destroyed Land and Cities with fire from Heaven as a warning to the whole world.”

He shuffled out of the cell after the guard. The stench from the dank rooms off the passageway reminded him of the overcrowded ship that had first brought him to the Indies, crammed amongst his dirty countrymen, many sick or dying. No wonder the ways of the Siamese had seemed so captivating, helping him advance in his own world while

surrounding his senses with pleasure. Now he had come full circle, back at the bottom of his society and covered in filth.

As the executioner tied him to the stake, the final hopes vanished, but the irony did not escape him. He had maneuvered brilliantly through the intrigue and barbarities of the Siamese court, only to be shamed in his own culture by a penchant for young men, a taste his oriental hosts had regarded as an acceptable indulgence. Now the civilized society to which he had returned condemned him to a punishment as brutal as any that Prasat Thong inflicted on his rivals.

The executioner tightened the chord around the prisoner's neck. His second sparked the torch into a fiery blaze.

The ashes blew in the wind.

The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

by Bill Greer

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like etchings by
Van Ostade and Steen.”

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About the Author

Bill Greer has spent much of his working life in the heart of New Amsterdam. He is a Trustee and Treasurer of the New Netherland Institute, a membership organization supporting research and education in Dutch-American history. Visit him at www.BillsBrownstone.com for more on Mevrouw's world and old New York and to read an excerpt of fifty pages from *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan*.

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Reviews

From de Halve Maen, Journal of the Holland Society of New York

“[A] romp through the history of New Netherland that would surely have Petrus Stuyvesant complaining about the riot transpiring between its pages ... Readers are guaranteed a genuine adventure that will evoke the full range of human emotions. Once begun, they can expect to experience that rare difficulty in putting down a book before they have finished.”

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“Bill Greer has deftly blended fact and fiction in his humorous tale *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan* ... The characters are rowdy, raunchy, loveable, and sometimes despicable, but thoroughly believable ... This is a thoroughly delightful story that brings the Dutch colonies to life. *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan* is heartily recommended with or without a tankard of beer, not ale, to accompany it.”

**Manhattan View Press, New York
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