

KOTA HARMONI

(Idrus)

Translated by Thomas John Hudak¹

The tram was packed with people, baskets, empty and filled containers, goats and chickens. The day was hot, and the people and animals were soaked with sweat. The tram stank from sweat and *terasi*.² The window ledges were thick with spit mixed with betel juice, reddish like tomatoes.

In the tram breathing was difficult. But the people smoked anyhow—to overcome the stink of the sweat and *terasi*. A young woman, Eurasian, took out her handkerchief, small as a *lemper*³ wrapping leaf, inhaled, then said, "Who on earth brought that *terasi* on the tram. They don't know how to behave here. After all, this is first class."

A Chinese man as fat as Churchill, offended, angrily said to the woman, "Oh, shut up. It's co-prosperity now, not just for the Dutch." The man bent over and took a small packet from his vegetable basket. Showing the woman the packet, he continued, "Here's the *terasi*. What are you going to do about it?"

An old woman, stooped and thin, her blouse so full of holes it looked as though they were made on purpose, like a lace bedspread, was berated by the tram driver, "This is first class. What are you doing here? Move to the back! If you don't, pay the extra."

The old woman begged him to allow her to stay, "It's too crowded back there, Sir. There's no room for me."

"Come on, if you don't move, then pay the extra."

Slowly the old woman went to second class. When she got there, she looked back angrily at the tram driver and said, "What a bossy jerk! Just a little power from the Japs and he acts that way. With an old woman, he's tough as nails. But you can bet if I were Japanese, he'd be bowing and scraping. Hell!"

A man, tough, shirtless, stood up and said to the old woman, "Oh shut up. Sit down!"

At a tram stop, the tram halted. People crowded around. The yell of the ticket collector could be heard, "Passengers getting out, first! Come on, hurry it up!"

For a moment, the people inside could breathe, but in another second the tram was packed again. From below came the voice of a Japanese.

1. I wish to thank Ben Anderson for his comments and suggestions on a draft of this translation.

2. *Terasi*—a pungent paste made from finely pounded fish or shrimp.

3. *Lemper*—a croquette consisting of meat and glutinous rice.

"Ret me through. Idiots!"

The crowd jammed closer together to make way for the Japanese.

A youngster looked at the Japanese, and with a sour face slowly said, "First and second class are treated the same, just like animals."

But when the Japanese stood next to him, he shut up and looked away. The Japanese hung on the leather strap from the ceiling of the tram and from the short sleeved shirt came the stink of *terasi*. The youngster took out his handkerchief and covered his nose.

Unexpectedly, the tram stopped. Perplexed, the passengers thought for sure the tram had broken down or there had been an accident. Everyone looked out. Between the rails, three Japanese stood holding up the tram. The tram driver was afraid, and to save his head, he had stopped the tram.

The three Japanese climbed in, scratching the passengers' hands with the hilts of their swords. They stood and laughed. They had just "won" against the driver.

The tram started off again, squeaking like a rusty pulley. On the curves the people swung to the side. A young girl landed on a boy's lap. As usual, the boy hugged the girl's waist and helped her stand up. But he didn't give her his seat.

The smell of sweat became intolerable. Everyone complained.

"Remember the old days?" said an Indonesian in a fine clean shirt. From time to time he dusted off his shirtsleeves. No one responded. As if those words were already common.

At another stop, a young man and woman got on, their faces red from the heat. But they laughed and spoke in Dutch. The young man said, "Hm . . . it really feels great in here—just like in a chicken coop."

The woman laughed, took her handkerchief, and clapped it over her nose, long and pointed like the nose of a Jew. "It's better than walking."

The man scowled, "What time is it?" The woman raised her left hand to look at her watch. Her right hand tugged up her *kebaya* sleeve, but the sleeve didn't move. She looked . . . the watch was sticking out from a hole in the sleeve. Embarrassed, she said, "1:30."

The tram driver walked past the old woman in second class, "Tickets, any more tickets?" The woman just looked at the tram driver. Once he passed, she pulled her lips to the right, monkey-like, and said, "Look at that monkey."

Surprised, the passengers looked at the old woman's lips. At Harmoni, the tram stopped again. From kota to Harmoni, it had taken 20 minutes.

An Indonesian, wearing a Javanese *destar*⁴ and English shoes, angrily looked at his watch and said in a shrill voice, high like the rustle of old coconut palm leaves, "It always used to take only 14 minutes. These days, everything's gone to hell."

To the ticket collector he said, "Bang, why don't you get rid of all those people on the runningboard. What the hell is this? Aren't there any rules anymore? There—those guys on the runningboard, tell them it's forbidden. They'll fall off."

4. *Destar*—a head covering used by Javanese men.

Astonished, the ticket collector stared at the Indonesian. Contemptuously, he turned his back on him and blew his whistle. Several people yelled, "Hey, wait a minute. We want to get off."

The tram was already moving, but it stopped suddenly again. People crowded on again, but a lot still wanted to get off.

The Indonesian in the *destar* and English shoes jumped toward the ticket collector, grabbed him by the shirt and said, "Who do you think you are? Doing whatever comes into your head. See what people want first, then blow your whistle."

The ticket collector grew more astonished. He said to himself, "Who does he think he is?" He turned his back on the man, but not contemptuously—scared it seemed. He thought, "Maybe he's a member of the *Chuo Sangi-in*."⁵

The tram started again. There weren't so many passengers now. Only a few were standing in the aisle. In first class, there wasn't a single Japanese.

A fat woman spoke, wiping the sweat from her neck—short as a Japanese, "Uh . . . If I didn't have to, I'd say forget the trams. They've taken away my car. Without paying too. It'd be more honest if they came out and said they were robbers."

A man next to her said, "Lady, who took your car?"

"Who else?"

The man laughed, understanding what she meant. "Be patient. The great day will surely come." The voice came from a mouth dripping like sweat off skin.

"What? Be patient? If I hadn't been patient this long already, I'd be in the nut house, like . . ."

The fat woman didn't want to continue. She sighed, "Times are hard. In the twenties, it was hard too, but not like now."

A man in dirty shorts moved closer to the young woman, quietly saying, "Don't talk like that. You'll be sorry later."

Near Pasar Baru the tram stopped in front of the theater. Crowds got on and off.

Several people climbed up through the window. A Japanese was climbing up through the window too.

An Indonesian on the tram called to the Japanese. "Hey! What are you doing? Climbing up through the window. Have you no manners?"

The Japanese muttered several words in Indonesian, broken like the curves in the road. The Indonesian turned scarlet, suddenly realizing the man he'd just bawled out was a Japanese. But now he felt humiliated in front of the other passengers. So he got his courage up and said, "That's no way to get in. Climbing up through the window."

The Japanese just kept on climbing in.

When he got inside the tram, he roared at the Indonesian, "Where do you work? How dare you tell a Japanese what he can't do."

The Indonesian didn't want to give in, but inside, his heart shriveled like Japanese cloth after washing. He said, "And you sir, where do you work? I work at the Ministry of Interior."

5. *Chuo Sangi-in*—puppet "legislature" during the Japanese occupation.

They argued, but the Japanese was unwilling to lay a hand on him because nearby stood someone from the *kenpeitai*.⁶

The *kenpeitai* man spoke in Japanese to the Japanese civilian. Apparently he was angry. Ingratiatingly, he said to the Indonesian, "I've reprimanded him. After all, he was in the wrong."

The Indonesian felt happy. He had won a glorious victory.⁷

6. *Kenpeitai*—military police.

7. *Kemenangan yang gilang gemilang*—a joke about the way Japanese victories were always described on the radio.