sample of sandal away." He held up his hand for us to wait a moment, then took up the ruler from the desk. With a pocket knife, he scratched the surface. "Here, smell! The aroma of the wood was quite distinct. "Please, you must have it. Unfortunately, I only have one, but you can easily cut it into two pieces."

As he accompanied us to the front door of the building, he said: "I'm sorry. It is not a good gift but perhaps it will bring you luck."

Though Senhor Ricardo lived at the official residence with his family — his wife and daughter — he would usually take his meals with them in the main dining room of the Posada. In the evenings, when the lights on the walls of the spacious room glowed in only the faintest of red because of the town's low electricity voltage and the candles shone a thousand points of gold on the highly polished parquet floor, Senhor Ricardo would, after dinner, lead his family to the comfortable cane lounge-chairs to one side of the dinner tables, and there, soon, would group the others: the young Interpol officer we met the first day in Timor, a Portuguese doctor who had a dispensary a few miles outside Baucau on the road to Venilale and studied ringworm of the skin among the Timorese, a lieutenant from the barracks and once or twice, some of the other officers and their wives. They would bring their chairs into a circle and sit and talk long into the night, trying not to notice the two or three national servicemen hardly recognizable in their green uniforms sitting in the shadows, drinking their beer, silently watching the group, envious, for they too wanted company other than their own; they were not part of the administrator's circle. Senhor Ricardo would at first take an active part in the discussion, his deep, fog-horn voice loud, then, as the strain and multiple worries of the day caught up with him, his head would nod, then sink down to his chest. His wife would lean towards him, touch his hands tenderly and the others would continue in their talk.

Below the path to the dining room, which was a separate building on one side of the Posada, a stone wall had been erected, forming a compound for a number of Timorese mouse deer, beautiful, soft-eyed creatures with high, proud antlers. They strutted around the enclosed area, chewing fodder or drinking from the small stream that ran through their compound and no noise could be heard from them the whole day. But at night, as we lay in our beds and listened to the voices of the night, their sheep-like bleats were the loudest — not even the dogs howling to the moon beyond the Chinese shops could match these creatures. With the drone of conversation from the dining room, the deer and the dogs, we would have given anything for a transistor radio.

But gradually the conversation died, the deer and dogs settled down, and it was still.
him, he placed the cock on the ground and they all watched it peck the earth nervously. They stood in their multi-coloured rags of clothes, arguing, asking questions, prodding the cock with their tobacco-stained fingers; they had or would place a bet on him sooner or later and wanted to be sure of their investment.

The old man had not cut the cock's comb! Many Timorese believe that the bird's comb should be cut close to its head when it is a chick for better vision, but Tony said the old man thought it robbed the bird of his pride. For what was a warrior without his pride?

For the past months the old man had carried the bird in the crook of his arm, had stroked the soft tail-feathers, had given it worms from the earth, the best millet; he had exercised it in the yards at Laga, even curled up beside it in the house of his son where he slept. The bird was part of him, his hope and his fortune, it would not let him down.

The old man had stood by the market wall a long time before he could get a match. The men from Baucau, shrewd in the ways of business and used to betting on the tough, comb-cut cocks of the plateau, didn't want to lose their money on one of the birds from Laga which were, according to the tales of the cockpits, notorious as poor fighters. But finally a match evolved: it was with an old boaster from Baucau, an ugly, skinny Timorese with two front teeth missing and whose cock had survived two fights, a rarity in this area of Timor. For more than two hours the two men had squatted on the ground, had argued, spat betel-juice between each other's legs in disgust over the low wager. They had let the cocks eye each other, then for a second, threw them together: the short collar of feathers at the base of the birds' throats flared out and they raised their wings. At last it was agreed! The match would be worth the equivalent of about five dollars, and the cocks would fight later in the afternoon when the sun wasn't as hot and blinding and the air a little cooler.

The cocks are always handled by professional match-makers! These men tie the knife, or tara, to the cock's foot, usually the left, match them in the ring, excite the crowds like the true showmen they are and finally, if their particular bird loses, despatch it according to its conduct in the ring. A bird that loses never lives.

As the time of the fight came closer, the boaster from Baucau took his cock to the far side of the milling crowd and around him, as around the old man from Laga, grouped the supporters. Then the matchers came for the birds. The old man pulled himself up to his full height and proudly handed over the cock. His matcher, a towering Chinese-Timorese, carefully held the cock to feel its weight. The balance of the bird was important when the matchers threw them together. To get the cock off balance could lose the match. As he held it aloft the bird spread its wings and crowed.
The old man asked to see the knife. With the cock held in one hand, the matcher reached into his back pocket and brought out a leather case. Carefully, the old man took it from him and selected one of the four-inch blades, testing it with his thumb. He shook his head and spat foul betel-juice into the palm of his hand, then set about honing the blade. After moments he looked up and grinned, his red-stained rotten teeth ugly in his mouth. He handed the knife to the matcher. With a soft green thread of wool the blade was then secured to the cock's foot, just above the claws.

The old man gave a shout of excitement; his cock was ready to fight! Held high above his head, the matcher carried the bird to the ring while behind him came the old man and his band of followers.

The ring, built about a foot above the red earth in front of the market building, was some ten yards across and bordered by a thin line of concrete. Other rings in Timor, such as those we saw at Dili and Balibo, were walled in by a three-foot fence while at Maliana, At Sabe and Bobonaro, the fights were held on an open piece of ground without a formal enclosure.

The other group was late in arriving and got its share of jeers and taunts. In the middle of the ring, the matchers placed the cocks on the ground for a brief moment to let them regain their balance and feel the sand, then lifted them high for all to see. The other matcher, an acne-scarred Timorese in shorts and dirty singlet, shouted a final round of abuse. The cocks flared up and with the same movement the matchers placed them together on the red earth. The fight began!

The Baucau cock, snow white and its comb shaven to a pink line, attacked first: its wings were strong and lifted it up off the ground and above the other. Its claws came up, then down as the wings stalled in the air like a glider. The razor-sharp blade protruding from the back of its foot, spur-like, cut down vertically, deep into its opponent's side.

A roar of delight went up from the hundred-odd men crowding the ring and the two men grabbed their cocks to pull them out of the match. The cock from Baucau was held high, almost in victory, while the other, cupped in the matcher's hands, had its beak open, gasping for breath. A thin line of scarlet ran down its side over the Chinese-Timorese's hand and like an open artery down his arm. I couldn't bear to look at the old man for his
This time, the cock from Laga didn’t wait for its foe to make the first move. It attacked first and flew above the other, stalled and came down, its claws out before its body, the knife almost vertical above the other’s back. Down it came on the wing, cutting deep. The Baucau cock stumbled, crowed weakly, then with an effort, rose and flew against the other. But it was too late; again the Laga bird was above him, not high this time, but still above and down swooped the knife, cruel in a vicious arc, pricking the other’s neck.

The crowd was wild with excitement; they hadn’t seen such a well-matched fight for a very long time, as usually the fights are nothing more than short encounters that end with one bird running from the other. The loser, coward that he is, is then dispatched with all the brutality the matcher can muster. But this was different!

Again, for the third time, the birds came together in mid-air without the matcher’s coaxing. They were tired now, the knives didn’t rise high but cut low from the side as the two birds drew apart. The Laga cock in one last desperate lunge, lifted himself up from the ground, wings outspread, and the blade flashed down on the other’s back. The incision went deep into the chest and back.

With a shout of victory, the Chinese-Timorese pulled the cock from the other and held it high. The bird from Baucau, its white feathers spotted in scarlet, made one attempt to get to its feet, stumbled and lay still, its eyes wide open, beak gasping for air. The men were in the ring now, a thick, brown, sweating, jumping, dancing mass in a mad ecstasy. Their cock had won.

On the far side of the ring the group that had sponsored the bird from Baucau crowded around the bleeding cock. It lifted its head, its eyes blinking in the dust; it had fought hard and valiantly, it would die quicker than some others. The Timorese matcher reached down, grabbed it by its feet, lifted it high and in a white arc trailing blood, he crashed it down on the concrete border of the ring. The twisted flesh was thrown on the ground and contemptuously the matcher strutted away to his next fight. Silently, the men looked down at the remains of the cock a moment, then each in turn spat betel juice on the white feathers and raw flesh and joined the others now interested in another fight. They had lost their money on a cock; there would be others.

The old man from Laga, his fist tight around the sweat-soaked escudo notes, squatted alone under the shade of the market wall, his arms outstretched and elbows resting on his knees, the bleeding cock trembling between his thighs. The old man squatted alone; he had won a fortune and the cock would soon be dead. But had the bird lost, he would have watched it being killed, wanted to kill it himself with all the brutality that flowed...
The Baucau cock was held high, almost in victory

through his angered blood, for when a bird, after having shared a man's life and hopes for so many months lets him down, how else can it be rewarded?

So the old man put the money in a pouch under the cloth he wore around his waist, close to his skin so he would notice if it should fall out, and slowly rolled himself some tobacco in a dried leaf while the cock died in its pool of blood at his feet. Then he rose, lit his cigarette and gave the bird to a Baucau man he knew well and liked and went to find his son so that they could start on the return journey to Laga.

The Road Eastwards

We had no police inspector in Baucau to arrive at our hotel to take us to areas in the country where tourists seldom travel, but had to hire one of the Posada's jeeps to see the eastern end of the island. When we arranged the jeep with Senhor Ricardo, he was delighted.

"Oh, the eastern tip is very beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful in all Timor," he said in his enthusiastic way. "You must take plenty of colour film."

The trip, about sixty miles to the tip of the island to the village of Tutoia and, weather permitting it, the most eastern Portuguese island of Jaco, would take about four hours of driving and the return journey about five for we would detour a few miles inland to see the main village of Lospalos. So early on the Monday morning, we packed into the green Posada-jeep. We had hired the jeep at fifteen cents a kilometer, including the driver, who, Senhor Ricardo assured us, was the safest of chauffeurs in Timor. As we were ready to leave, Senhor Ricardo and the driver came down the steps of the Posada, carrying a rather large and seemingly heavy ice-box between them.

"Angelo has packed plenty of beer and wine with your picnic lunch," the administrator said. "I know you Australians always like beer. You see, I take good care of my guests." Needless to say, we were delighted at this extra service.

Angelo, a curly-headed Portuguese-Timorense with an infectious grin and a nose that looked like a veteran of quite a number of squabbles after the
Timor Journey

J. GERT VONDRA
LANSDowne