

Coco's Mess in Parliament



GREAT LIFE... Majid keeps busy with golf and his businesses



THREE KINGS AND A KNAVE... (from left) Tunku Ja'afar, Majid, Sultan of Selangor and Sultan of Kedah

Former director-general of Health Tan Sri Abdul Majid Ismail has led a charmed life. Bestowed with a photographic memory that made him a student extraordinaire, he had an illustrious medical career. Yet his beginnings were amid near abject poverty. He talks to FELICIA CHONG. Pictures by CHEW KIM CHOO

THE name Coco's Mess will ring a bell for many of the elder generation because it became the cause célèbre of a parliamentary debate in 1962. Tan Sri Dr Abdul Majid Ismail (aka Coco Majid) today laughs at the memory of the ruckus which the mess kicked up. It brought back memories of a time when he was a brilliant young doctor popular with colleagues and friends because of his tremendous zest for life.

"I've had a good life," he affirms. He frequently indulges in reverie, drawing pearls of laughter from all. He even acts out the various characters, most of them prominent figures in their various fields and in their time.

Majid is a former director-general of Health. He was the first local orthopaedic surgeon and became chief orthopaedic surgeon in then-Malaya.

In his retirement, he has kept busy with his many businesses, the most well-known perhaps being Selesa Hillhomes at the foothills of Genting Highland. Among others, he is also chairman of Infi College and Maddu Salat, the company that owns the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Golf & Country Club in Shah Alam.

He also finds time for charity, sitting on the board of the Malaysian Heart Foundation and the Malaysian Council for Rehabilitation (for the handicapped), to mention just two.

But first, I have to get to the root of the Coco's Mess issue. I have a certain apprehension in broaching the subject, for is it not something he would rather forget? I need not have worried, as he reflects it with great relish.

The mess was inspired by a clubhouse for medics of the University of Liverpool where he obtained his master's degree in orthopaedic surgery.

When he wanted to introduce the concept in Kuala Lumpur, Tan Sri Low Yat, a patient of his, leased him an apartment near the Federal Hotel and the doctor proudly proclaimed the opening of Coco's Mess.

Explaining the name, he says: "Friends from my medical college, King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore which later became part of the University of Malaya, called me 'Coco' since the ragging days.

"An Indian teacher, Sarathoo, was told to dress up like the Hollywood screen

goddess Dorothy Lamour in *The Jungle Princess*. You know, just a strong tug around her chest; Coco was her pet chimpanzee - and that was my role!"

Sarathoo died in the bombing of Singapore by the Japanese during the second year of college. 'Coco' survived and the name stuck for life.

Some of the seniors who ragged him later became prominent doctors - Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Koon (who was also a parliamentary opposition leader), Dattak Krishnamahar Singh (an eye specialist instrumental in starting the Tun Hussein Onn Eye Hospital), and Danak Dr Omar Din (a chief radiologist at the KL General Hospital).

Majid says: "Coco's Mess was, well... a man's thing."

A what? He catches my raised eyebrows and quickly explains: "It was really quite innocent... a place for doctors and friends to meet and relax, have a few drinks and play mahjong and, oh well, body massages!"

Well, that's certainly not unique but how, of all the mess-y joints in Kuala Lumpur, did it reach Parliament?

Ah... the story begins to unfold of a frustrated plastic surgeon and of political intrigue.

The renowned Seenivasagam brothers (leaders of the opposition People's Progressive Party headquartered in Ipoh), were "misinformed" and saw what they thought was a good chance to make a score.

They brought the issue up in Parliament and demanded that an investigation be carried out into this "immoral" den involving senior health officials!

The plastic surgeon in question, Majid recalled, worked under him because in those days there was no department for cosmetic surgery as almost all surgical reconstruction work was done by orthopaedics.

"The doctor was under strict orders not to do cosmetic surgery but he tried to do an eye job on a Chinese woman - against the wishes of her mother and finance. It was brought to my notice just in time for me to stop the operation."

"But undeterred, the doctor ordered surgical instruments for cosmetic surgery. This was not approved by the chief medical officer, so, naturally, he got another ticking off!

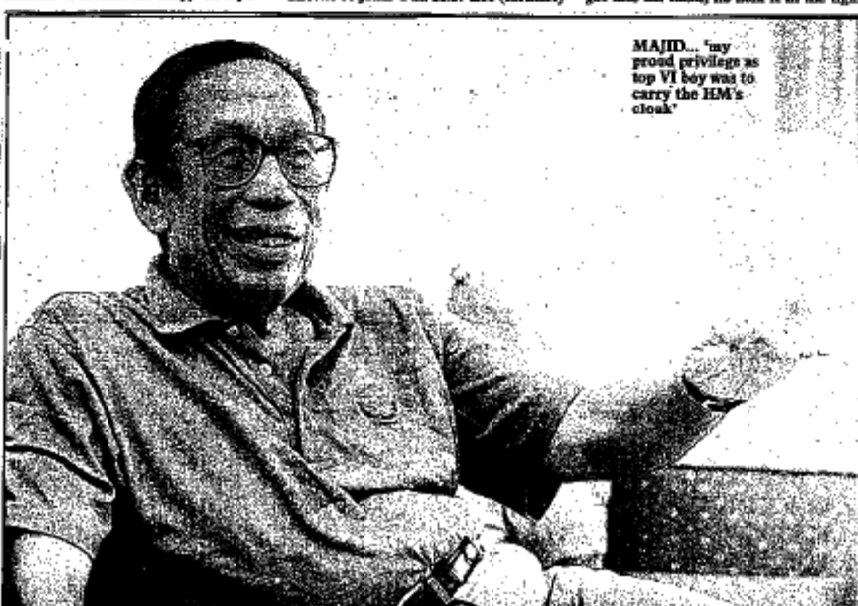
"Frustrated, he left government ser-

vice and went into private practice. Apparently, he also became acquainted with the Seenivasagam brothers and saw his chance to hit back.

"Do you know, the illustrious D.R. Seenivasagam even proposed that the Health Minister's pay be cut by RM10 for not knowing what his officers were up to! The Minister then was Ong Yoke Lin, now Tun Omar Yoke Lin Ong."

Prime Minister Tun Abdul Rahman had to order an investigation which ultimately vindicated Coco of any immoderate doings. And that was the 'scandal' of Coco's Mess.

Coco's Mess is said to be operating still - but at the Sun Complex in KL. Majid gave it up in 1969 after his appointment as director-general of Health. "I became too busy," he says.



MAJID... "my proud privilege as top VI boy was to carry the HM's cloak"

Funtime for young Majid

MAJID celebrated his 76th birthday in November. The Selesa Hillhomes staff gave their chairman a big party which ended well past midnight. However, early the next morning, he was on the golf course to tee off and was back at his apartment for our interview at 11am.

Unlike many corporate people who tell journalists: "Don't talk about me, talk about my business."

Majid has no such agenda. Every chapter of his life unfolds with hilarious reminiscences, peppered with mischief and strewn with characters whose names are instantly recognisable.

In his day, Majid was a student extraordinaire, beating all fellows year after year. His father was an impoverished, illiterate railway worker who became 'addicted' to seeing the number one in his report card.

"He could not read and all he wanted to see was No. 1." So great was the paternal pride that he framed up all the report cards and hung them on the wall at home.

Majid's childhood memories remain lucid. But then, his memory has always been his greatest ally.

"I believe I had a photographic memory. A teacher could write an essay on the blackboard and erase it after a few minutes, but it was enough for me to memorise every word." During his medical college days, he needed to take only one look at a dissected body to remember where each organ was.

He was born in an era of people great enough to have streets named after them - men like Haji Taib Abdul Samad (Jalan Haji Taib in the Chow Kit area), Thamboosamy Pillai (Jalan Thamboosamy Pillai, off Jalan Putra near The Mall) and Loke Yew (Jalan Loke Yew). Together, these three owned a sizeable portion of Kuala Lumpur.

As a rough indication, Thamboosamy Pillai's family used to own the entire stretch of Jalan Tua H.S. Lee (formerly



HAPPY BIRTHDAY... former Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen congratulates Majid on his 76th birthday

known as Jalan Bandar and before that High Street) from the police station right up to the Jalan Gereja junction. He also built the Sri Mahu Mariamman Temple in Jalan Tua H.S. Lee. Haji Taib held sway from Jalan Tun Perak, right through to Jalan Raja Laut and on to Jalan Ipoh.

Loke Yew owned tracts along Jalan Ampang (where the former Selangor Turf Club was) and the Jalan Dang Wangi area, including Medan Tuanku where Wisma Loke still stands as a gazetted national heritage building.

Majid saw the fortunes of the first two fall into disarray due to, in his own tongue-in-cheek analysis, "investments in slow horses and fast women". He had first-hand experience with one family and till today is friend to the descendants of the second.

"Of the third, it was said, when a cent got into his hand, he held it in his tight

fist until it produced two cents." The only connection to wealth for poor boy was through the admiral's son of Haji Taib's sons for his Maimunah, "the belle of Kam Baru".

He recalls being taken to a bangsai (Malay opera) by another of Haji Taib's sons, who was popularly known as galim' and who enjoyed the adult's matinee idol.

Dogalim must have been a local tycoon in the management of the longhouse as he was greatly excited when he showed he would be given the best seat. A was rung and firecrackers lit to sign start of the show.

Majid remembers Dogalim as "a complete gentleman" in a smart white suit with a silk shirt and bow-tie driving a red sports car. Dogalim in a big house opposite where the Federal Hotel is now.

He remembers his grand-aunt taking him there on a rickshaw. She also brought along a box with a brooding hen's on her eggs! Till today he hadn't fig out why she did that!

"The first time I ever saw white chocolates was in Dogalim's car. I his cigarettes with money and handfuls towards the stage for the girls. I can still remember the flur fingers gathering the money from the curtains."

Majid was born in 1921 in Kam Baru, the eldest child of Ismail Ne and Esjah Ariff. He was left in the of a grand-aunt while his parents m around looking for jobs, bringing on younger sister with them. Ten more dren (three boys and six girls) were to the couple and eight still survive.

When his father obtained a permit job with the railways in Sentul, moved to Jalan Ipoh and brought h back to stay. He was about six or s then. He had his early education Malay School in Segambut.

The journey to school took him past Goh Ban Hsat ceramics factory and boys used to stop to see the potters v Today, the business is flourishing.

It was also at this time that golf ent his life and spawned a lifelong pas When he was 10, he used to caddy fo British at the Sentul course, the fir the country. He had his first taste v "swinging the clubs under the trees v