

## Travellers' Tales of Old Singapore

*written by yesterday's travellers for the travellers of today*

Ever since the days when tigers stalked the land and pirates roamed the southern seas, travellers from far and wide have been drawn to Singapore, the melting-pot of the East. Merchants and missionaries, princes and policemen, sailors, soldiers, adventurers and tourists – all came to see the island for themselves.

In this new edition of *Travellers' Tales*, more than 80 visitors from the past provide readers of today with authentic portraits of Old Singapore. These vivid first-hand accounts – in letters, diaries and memoirs – bring the past fully alive, from the founding of Singapore in 1819 to the Japanese surrender in 1945.

**"The picture that emerges is ... a vignette of a Singapore long disappeared: idyllic, romantic, exotic." — *The Straits Times***

**"The reader is constantly thrilled by the freshness and detail of observations made by first-time visitors ... Mr Wise's collection of experiences and adventures is an exciting walk through the past, seen through the eyes of very keen observers, and I highly recommend it." — *The Beam* (Magazine of the British Association of Singapore)**

**"illuminating and entertaining" — *Business Traveller***

Michael Wise was born in London and educated at University College, Oxford. He worked in Asia and Singapore for several years and contributed to Singapore's leading newspaper *The Straits Times*. He maintains a lifelong interest in writing, travel and things of the past.

*Other titles in this series by Michael Wise are available as e-books:*

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Michael Wise

TRAVELLERS' TALES OF OLD SINGAPORE

Marshall Cavendish  
Editions

**mc**

## TRAVELLERS' TALES OF OLD SINGAPORE

*Compiled by* Michael Wise

EXPANDED BICENTENNIAL EDITION



For Review only

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**OLD  
SINGAPORE**

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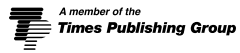
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## Note to the Reader

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Our aim in presenting *Travellers' Tales of Old Singapore* is to give voice to a representative band of travellers from the past, speaking in their own words about Singapore as they found it. Some of their material – a very small part – contains expressions which today may be considered racist in tone. These have been included here to reflect accurately the spirit of their time, and with the intention of conveying a proper sense of the place and period concerned.

Similarly their individual spelling and punctuation have been retained throughout for complete authenticity, even when not conforming to accepted usage.

All the views expressed in this book are those of the original authors and are not necessarily shared by the present publisher or compiler.

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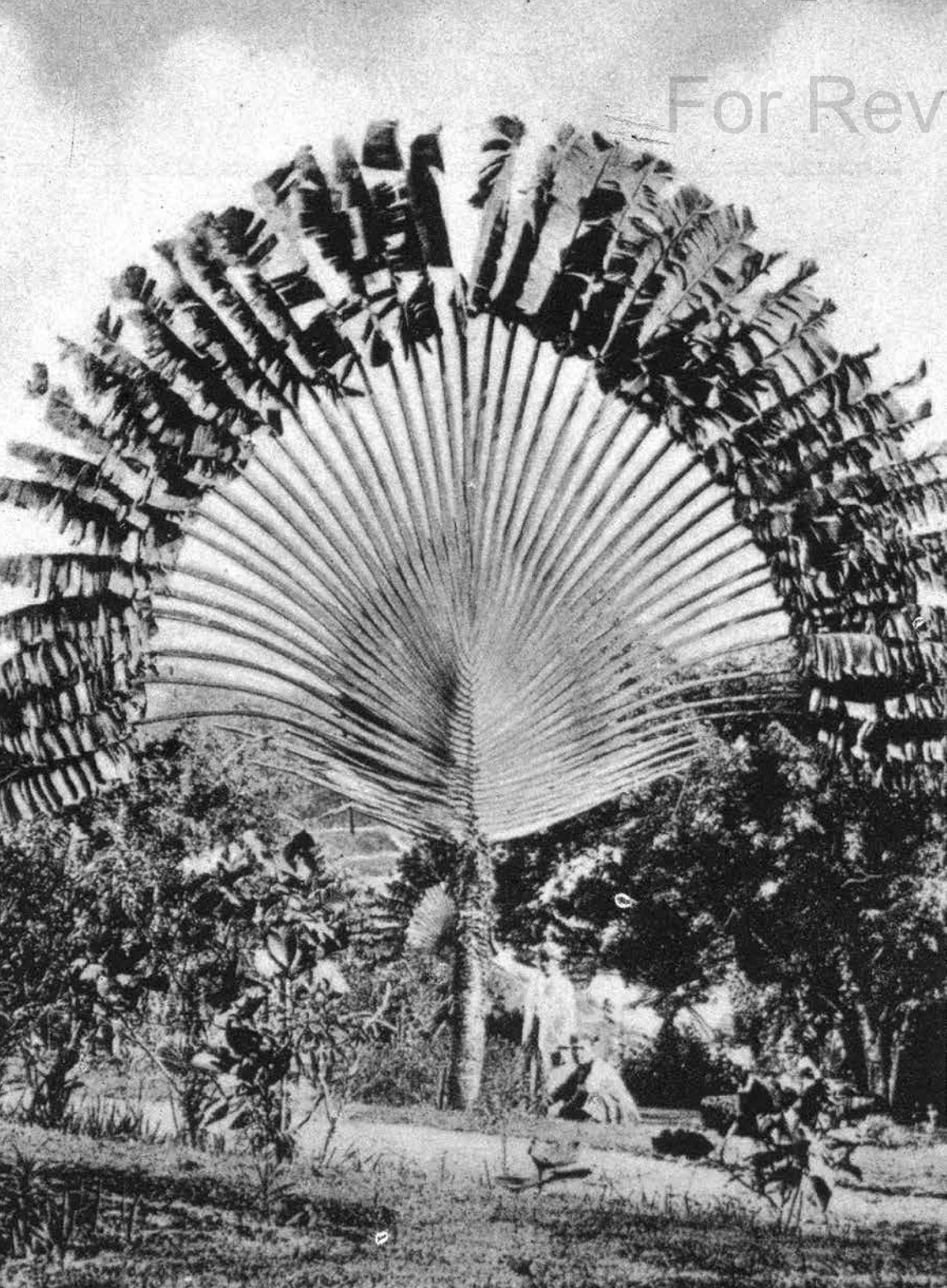
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The illustrations in this book have been reproduced from vintage picture-postcards showing aspects of Singapore life in the past. Most of these were made available from private collections, and the publisher and compiler wish to acknowledge and record the kind assistance given in this connection by the following – Lim Kheng Chye, Andrew Tan Kim Guan and Paul Yap Kong Meng.





*Traveller's Tree*

## Preface

---

“If no untimely fate awaits it, Singapore promises to become the emporium and pride of the East.”

*Sir Stamford Raffles, 1823*

Travellers to “Old Singapore” could only arrive by sea unless coming from up-country Malaya. It was not until 1934 that a regular *weekly* air service was introduced from London to Singapore by Imperial Airways. This journey, however, took eight days to complete with overnight stops along the way, and tickets cost the equivalent of a year’s pay for an average Briton. So even then it was the shipping lines which continued to offer the preferred method of travel for most.

Singapore owes its very existence to its fortunate position on the sea-lanes of the world – a fact that Stamford Raffles recognised and acted upon in 1819. The new settlement supplied the needs of maritime life and, over the next few decades, steadily developed opportunities for worldwide trade.

But when the Suez Canal opened in 1869 the pace of change greatly increased. Joseph Conrad, an author widely admired for his portrayals of seafaring life, made his home in Singapore for a year or two in the 1880s. He maintained in one of his novels that the Canal “had let in upon the East a flood of new ships, new men, new methods of trade. It had changed the face of the Eastern seas.” Stimulated by this change, Singapore flourished

and its population grew rapidly from 50,000 to over 400,000 by the time of its first centenary in 1919.

The number of visitors increased too. Traders and merchants were now joined by the new class of world travellers arriving by steamer who were described in Conrad's novel as being "like relays of migratory shades condemned to speed headlong round the earth without leaving a trace". In this, Conrad was only partially correct. A good number of those coming to Singapore, whether for amusement, business or duty, did leave a trace. They made a record of their visit, in letters, diaries, articles and books, which we can still read with pleasure today. Through their own words we can recapture the essence of a Singapore now long gone; but without that past of shophouses and godowns (and even tigers), today's successful high-rise city of steel and glass would not exist.

In the following pages we share the experiences of those men and women, not unlike ourselves, as they enjoy (or sometimes endure) life in the Singapore of former times. We may perspire with them as they push their way through motley crowds along the five-foot ways; as they try to make themselves understood while exploring markets, temples and mosques; watch wedding celebrations and strange festivals; master their first practical lessons in the eastern art of bargaining, and later perhaps find themselves, by intent or otherwise, in red-light districts.

The "untimely fate" which Raffles had considered a possibility for Singapore did indeed befall the city in 1942, and progress of all kinds stopped. But the city survived and has since prospered to fulfil the most optimistic dreams of its founder as it embarks on its third century of growth and change.

This special Bicentennial Edition of *Travellers' Tales* is offered both as a tribute to Singapore's historic past and as a token of confidence in its future good fortune.

**MICHAEL WISE**

In *Anno* 1703, I called at *Johore* in my Way to *China*,  
and he [the Sultan] treated me very kindly,  
and made me a Present of the Island of *Sincapure*,  
but I told him it could be of no Use to a private Person,  
tho' a proper Place for a Company to settle a Colony on,  
lying in the Centre of Trade, and being  
accommodated with good Rivers and safe Harbours,  
so conveniently situated, that all Winds served Shipping  
both to go out and come into those Rivers.

**ALEXANDER HAMILTON**  
*A New Account of the East Indies (1727)*



# For Review only

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 1819, a treaty was concluded by the Honourable Sir Stamford Raffles, as Agent to the Governor General, with the Sultan of Johore, and the Tomongong of Singapore; in virtue of which the British flag has been planted on the ruins of the ancient capital of Singapore, where a Residency has been established under Major Farquhar, late in charge of Malacca.

This post seems admirably chosen with regard to geographical position, which we have no doubt will, in the course of a short period, give it very great commercial and political importance. ... it is easy of approach by day or night, free from all hidden danger, capacious, affording excellent anchorage, and well protected in all weathers.

Good water is abundant and easily procured, as well as plentiful and cheap supplies of fish and turtles. The native population of the island is not numerous at present, but the industrious Chinese have already found their way into the interior, and in order to reap the riches of its produce, do not hesitate to undertake the labour of clearing the surface of the soil which cannot be surpassed in luxuriance by that of any of the Malay islands. ...

We congratulate our Eastern friends, and the commercial world in general, on the event which we this day report to them. They will rejoice in our having occupied the position which was required as a fulcrum for the support of our Eastern and China trade, and from whence we can extend our commercial views and speculations.

**CALCUTTA TIMES**  
(19 March 1819)

1819

## Skulls on the Sand

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When Singapore was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir was only twenty-two. He came to Singapore to make a living as interpreter, language teacher and, on occasion, as private secretary to Raffles. These extracts from Abdullah's autobiography describe the very early days when William Farquhar was helping Raffles to develop the new settlement of Singapore.

Now at this time the seas round Singapore, so far from being navigated freely by men, were feared even by jinns and devils, for along the shores were the sleeping-huts of the pirates. Whenever they plundered a ship or a ketch or a cargo-boat, they brought it in to Singapore where they shared the spoils and slaughtered the crew, or fought to the death among themselves to secure their gains.

The Sea Gypsies in their boats behaved like wild animals. Whenever they saw a crowd of people coming, if there was time they made off quickly in their boats: if there was not time they leapt into the sea and swam under water like fish, disappearing from view for about half an hour before coming to the surface as much as a thousand yards away from the place where they entered the water. Both the men and women behaved like this. As for their children words fail me. Whenever they saw anybody they would scream as though death was upon them, like someone who catches sight of a tiger. All these people brought fish for the Temenggong to eat. None of them knew any way of catching fish except by spearing them. The fish most frequently caught by spear was the *tenggiri* though occasionally they would get other kinds, for instance dorabs. ...

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The Temenggong ordered the Sea Gypsies to sell fish to Colonel Farquhar's men. Although they did come bearing fish it was with great reluctance, and they were astonished at the sight of the tents and men wearing clothes and so on. Whatever price was offered for the fish, or if it was bartered for a little tobacco or rice, they would take it and go away. Whenever they came Colonel Farquhar gave them money and clothes and rice to make them more amenable, for he saw that they wore no clothes. After this had gone on for a day or two they became fearless enough to rub shoulders with the newcomers. Only the children remained wild, to such an extent they became ill with fright at the sight of people. One child was even drowned at sea off Telok Ayer because he was so frightened when several men walked near his boat that he instantly jumped into the water, at the time when it was high tide. They waited but he did not appear again, and was lost after being carried out to sea by the current. ...

All along the shore there were hundreds of human skulls rolling about on the sand; some old, some new, some with hair still sticking to them, some with the teeth filed and others without. News of these skulls was brought to Colonel Farquhar and when he had seen them he ordered them to be gathered up and cast into the sea. So the people collected them in sacks and threw them into the sea. The Sea Gypsies were asked "Whose are all these skulls?" and they replied "These are the skulls of men who were robbed at sea. They were slaughtered here. Wherever a fleet of boats or a ship is plundered it is brought to this place for a division of the spoils. Sometimes there is wholesale slaughter among the crews when the cargo is grabbed. Sometimes the pirates tie people up and try out their weapons here along the sea shore." Here too was the place where they went in for cock-fighting and gambling.

One day Colonel Farquhar wanted to ascend the Forbidden Hill, as it was called by the Temenggong. The Temenggong's men said "None of us have the courage to go up the hill because there are many ghosts on it. Every day one can hear on it sounds as of hundreds of men. Sometimes one hears the sound of heavy drums and of people shouting." Colonel Farquhar laughed and said, "I should like to see your ghosts" and turning to his Malacca men "Draw this gun to the top of the hill." Among them there were several who were frightened, but having no option they pulled

the gun up. All who went up were Malacca men, none of the Singapore men daring to approach the hill. On the hill there was not much forest and not many large trees, only a few shrubs here and there. Although the men were frightened they were shamed by the presence of Colonel Farquhar and went up whether they wanted to or not. When they reached the top Colonel Farquhar ordered the gun to be loaded and then he himself fired twelve rounds in succession over the top of the hill in front of them. Then he ordered a pole to be erected on which he hoisted the English flag. He said "Cut down all these bushes." He also ordered them to make a path for people to go up and down the hill. Everyday there was this work being done, the undergrowth being slashed down and a pathway cleared.

At that time there were few animals, wild or tame on the Island of Singapore, except rats. There were thousands of rats all over the district, some almost as large as cats. They were so big that they used to attack us if we went out walking at night and many people were knocked over. In the house where I was living we used to keep a cat. One night at about midnight we heard the cat mewing, and my friend went out carrying a light to see why the cat was making such a noise. He saw six or seven rats crowding round and biting the cat; some bit its ears, some its paws, some its nose so that it could no longer move but only utter cry after cry. When my companion saw what was happening he shouted to me and I ran out at the back to have a look. Six or seven men came pressing round to watch but did nothing to release the cat, which only cried the louder at the sight of so many men, like a person beseeching help. Then someone fetched a stick and struck at the rats, killing the two which were biting the cat's ears. Its ears freed, the cat then pounced on another rat and killed it. Another was hit by the man with a stick and the rest ran away. The cat's face and nose were lacerated and covered with blood. This was the state of affairs in all the houses, which were full of rats. They could hardly be kept under control, and the time had come when they took notice of people. Colonel Farquhar's place was also in the same state and he made an order saying "To anyone who kills a rat I will give one *wang*." When people heard of this they devised all manner of instruments for killing rats. Some made spring-traps, some pincer-traps, some cage-traps, some traps with running nooses, some traps with closing doors, others laid

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poison or put down lime. I had never in my life before seen rats caught by liming; only now for the first time. Some searched for rat-holes, some speared the rats or killed them in various other ways. Every day crowds of people brought the dead bodies to Colonel Farquhar's place, some having fifty or sixty others only six or seven. At first the rats brought in every morning were counted almost in thousands, and Colonel Farquhar paid out according to his promise. After six or seven days a multitude of rats were still to be seen, and he promised five *duit* for each rat caught. They were still brought in in thousands and Colonel Farquhar ordered a very deep trench to be dug and the dead bodies to be buried. So the numbers began to dwindle, until people were bringing in only some ten or twenty a day. Finally the uproar and the campaign against the rats in Singapore came to an end, the infestation having completely subsided.

Some time later a great many centipedes appeared, people being bitten by them all over the place. In every dwelling, if one sat for any length of time, two or three centipedes would drop from the attap roof. Rising in the morning from a night's sleep one would be sure to find two or three very large centipedes under one's mat, and they caused people much annoyance. When the news reached Colonel Farquhar he made an order saying that to anyone who killed a centipede he would give one *wang*. Hearing this people searched high and low for centipedes, and every day they brought in hundreds which they had caught by methods of their own devising. So the numbers dwindled until once in two or three days some twenty or thirty centipedes were brought in. Finally the campaign and furore caused by the centipedes came to an end, and people no longer cried out because of the pain when they got bitten. ...

There is a story about how Mr. Raffles and Colonel Farquhar together debated the best way to enlarge the Settlement. Colonel Farquhar considered that Kampong Gelam should become the business quarter, that is to say a tradings centre with markets and so forth. But Mr. Raffles thought that the business quarter should be on the near side of the river. Colonel Farquhar said "This side is very unsuitable as the ground is all muddy and the water is not good. It will be very costly to reclaim the land. Besides, where can we obtain sufficient earth for banking?" Mr. Raffles replied "If Kampong Gelam were to become a business area this side

of the river would remain unimproved for as long as a hundred years." Each of the two men held firmly to his own opinion, the one saying this the other that, each trying to find support for his view. They thought the matter over for three days. Then it occurred to Mr. Raffles that the small hill near Tanjong Singapura might be broken up and the earth used for banking on the near side of the river. The next day the two of them considered this idea and agreed to it. ...

After three or four months the hill was flattened out and all the muddy pools, narrow water-channels and swampy ground were levelled off. There remained a few huge rocks, some as tall as elephants, and others even larger. These rocks were very useful, for the Chinese came in scores and broke them up for house building. There was no payment for the work, for everyone rushed to ask for the stone which was just given away.

It was then that they found at the point of the headland a rock lying in the bushes. The rock was smooth, about six feet wide, square in shape, and its face was covered with a chiselled inscription. But although it had writing this was illegible because of extensive scouring by water. Allah alone knows how many thousands of years old it may have been. After its discovery crowds of all races came to see it. The Indians declared that the writing was Hindu but they were unable to read it. The Chinese claimed that it was in Chinese characters. I went with a party of people, and also Mr. Raffles and Mr. Thomsen, and we all looked at the rock. I noticed that in shape the lettering was rather like Arabic, but I could not read it because owing to its great age the relief was partly effaced.

Many learned men came and tried to read it. Some brought flour-paste which they pressed on the inscription and took a cast, others rubbed lamp-black on it to make the lettering visible. But for all that they exhausted their ingenuity in trying to find out what language the letters represented they reached no decision. There the stone rested until recently with its inscription in relief. It was Mr. Raffles's opinion that the writing must be Hindu because the Hindus were the oldest of all immigrant races in the East, reaching Java and Bali and Siam, the inhabitants of which are all descended from them. However, not a single person in all Singapore was able to interpret the words chiselled on the rock. Allah alone knows. ...

At the time when they were auctioning land Mr. Raffles said to me



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“You should take up four or five pieces of land here, for in the future the place may become densely populated.” I replied “Sir, where can I get money enough to pay the price of the land, for I notice that a single piece of land sells for as much as \$1,200 or \$1,150 and how shall I find the money to build a stone house?” Mr. Raffles smiled when he heard my words and said “Don’t you worry about money. You can settle that later, as long as you take the land first.” But in my stupidity and ignorance I thought that if perchance I should run into debt it might be difficult for me to return when I wished to Malacca. And at that time it was easy enough to make money in Singapore. It was my practice to return home to Malacca for six months at a time and I thought that if I acquired land and built a house I should certainly not be able to go back there. Moreover, I did not believe for a moment that Singapore could become so densely populated, nor did I realize that the land was being auctioned for nothing, no money being taken. It was an auction in name only. Later I saw that in selling in this way Mr. Raffles was being very shrewd, for if the land were merely given away free it would be grabbed by poor men who might never be able to afford to build houses of stone. Therefore the lots were auctioned for a high price so that only rich men would buy and they would build quickly. So it came about that because of my lack of foresight and my stupidity I did not follow Mr. Raffles’s advice when he told me to take up land, and now I regret my mistake. But to what purpose, for as the Malays say “Realize your mistake in time and you may still gain something, realize it too late and you gain nothing.” ...

After that Mr. Raffles moved house to the top of Bukit Larangan (The Forbidden Hill) because many white men came wanting to put up houses. Instructions were given to clear the ground all round the hill. The men came across many fruit-trees as large as durian trees, six feet or more round the trunk. But owing to their great age their fruits were no larger than a durian just after the flower has faded. There were *dukus*, and lime trees and pomelo trees with fruit no larger than dwarf lime, and many other kinds of fruit like *langsats*, and fruits with a bad smell like those of the *petai* and *jering*. ...

One morning Colonel Farquhar went for a walk by the side of Rochore River taking his dog with him. The dog took to the water in

the river when suddenly it was seized by a crocodile. A moment later Colonel Farquhar was told that his dog had been eaten by a crocodile, and he ordered the men who were there to put up a dam blocking the river. The crocodile was hemmed in by the obstruction and speared to death. It was fifteen feet long. This was the first time that people realized there were crocodiles in Singapore. Colonel Farquhar ordered the crocodile’s carcass to be brought along, and he hung it on a fig tree by the side of the Beras Basah river.

**ABDULLAH BIN ABDUL KADIR**

*The Hikayat Abdullah* (1849)

Trans. A.H. Hill

1824

## The Fate of Singapore

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As a Dutch officer, Colonel Nahuijs was naturally unhappy about the British settlement on Singapore. However, his remark that the Dutch were still disputing possession of the island showed that news had not yet reached him concerning the treaty signed in London just three months before in which the Dutch formally withdrew their objections to British occupation. Colonel Nahuijs' letter dated 10 June 1824 was addressed to the Lieutenant-Governor of the Netherlands Indies, de Kock.

I believe that no person with any feeling can help being impressed when setting foot in Singapore, because he can now see as a seat of European trade and industry a place which only five years before was a cavern and hiding place for murderers and pirates. This impression, it is true, is considerably dimmed for the Hollander by the thought that the English are settled in a place to which only his nation had a right, but as a friend of humanity, he must prefer seeing this island in the possession of civilized Christians to it being in the hands of pirates and murderers who made the journey through the Straits of Malacca exceedingly dangerous. And, let me ask you, would Singapore not still have been to this date the same den of murderers as it was in the past had it not been taken over by the English? ...

As a Hollander I regret that we ourselves did not wrest Singapore out of the hands of these pirates instead of leaving them in the possession of this island which we are now disputing with the English nation. But enough of this.

The island of Singapore, separated from the mainland of Johore by a very narrow strait, is nearly thirty English miles long from east to west

and twenty-one broad from north to south. The climate is healthy, but very warm, the thermometer at mid-day mostly registering from 86° to 92°. The drinking water is very good, but, especially in the case of lengthy droughts, of insufficient quantity to supply many ships at the same time. For this reason reservoirs or rain-troughs were being constructed. The soil seems to be suitable for the planting of pepper and gambier, but not for coffee. Before the occupation of Singapore by the English, some Chinese living a few miles inland earned a livelihood by planting and preparing the gambier.

Ground standing vacant is obtainable by any person without payment whatsoever. Anyone desiring it simply applied to the Resident, who thereupon issued a grant free of charge, unless the ground was owned or occupied by natives, in which case it was necessary to make an agreement regarding the transfer with the natives beforehand.

The land is mostly hilly and is thickly covered with trees. Many of the hills in the neighbourhood of the beach are already adorned with houses of various Europeans ... The house of the Resident also stands on such a hill. From it one has the best view of the Roads, the Straits of Singapore and the Straits of Malacca, as well as the neighbouring islands. The house itself, however, did not attract me very much and seemed very cramped ...

The houses of the settlers or traders are close to the shore and are well built. Most of them are raised high above the ground and roofed with stone tiles, which are partly brought from Malacca and partly from China.

Most of the houses are on the left bank of the river, which divides the town into two parts. A few are on the right bank, where the Chinese and Arab settlement containing more than one hundred good houses is situated. There is a good bridge over the river 200 feet long and 32 feet broad.

Singapore can already boast of about thirty tastefully built European houses. These are placed a short distance from one another and in front of them runs a carriage-way, which they all make use of in the afternoons. This riding and driving appears to me to be very similar to riding around in a riding-school, because one has to go round the same circular road four or five times in an afternoon in order to make a tour worth the name. ...

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Many servants and coolies are Chinese, whose number totals about 5,000; most of them are occupied in agriculture. The Malays seldom work for the Europeans; they are too lazy and indolent by nature to devote themselves to a definitely daily task. The Malays settled in Singapore for the most part submit to the so-called Malayan Tommagung, the former head of the pirates, whom the British government support with a monthly payment of Sp. Piaster 700. In addition to this income of Sp. Piaster 700 per month he also enjoys certain revenue arising out of the ferrying across the river and some small charges which he levies on native vehicles and on the cutting of timber. This Tommagung is generally said to have a very good understanding with his elder brothers the pirates and to maintain an active correspondence with them, giving them regular news of the comings and goings in Singapore harbour and the destination, cargo and strength of the different ships. The Tommagung lives with his dependents a short distance away from the European town on a site allotted to him by the British government of Singapore, on account of the frequent quarrels and murders for which his dependents have been responsible.

Over all these people as well as over the Bouginese settled in Singapore, the British Resident has not the least authority, even when they attack the Europeans ...

Two companies of Bengalese and a detachment of 25 European Artillery must hardly suffice to ensure the safety of their people and the large values which are lying in Singapore warehouses in the way of goods, especially opium and piece work, two valuable articles which the natives particularly prize. Many of the residents are not without anxiety that a man like the Malayan Tommagung, tempted by the large treasure, could easily be induced with the underlings and a great many of his friends the pirates, to attack the weak garrison and citizens unexpectedly and then clear off with his booty to places where he could not easily be traced. People were hoping therefore that a good fort would be built, that the garrison would be strengthened and the port guarded by a couple of the Company's cruisers from Bombay.

As a measure of precaution the British government after the minor dispute with the natives have ordained that nobody other than of high rank, whose names must be registered at the police station shall have the

right to go about within the European establishment carrying a kris or other weapon. ...

In the fundamental laws which were laid down by Sir Stamford Raffles on the foundation of Singapore all gambling, without exception, was forbidden and it was assumed that this would never be permitted, even though farmed out. The leasing of the dice gambling by the Resident has put up the backs of most of the good settlers, especially the magistrates, of whom many have tendered their resignation. ...

Another circumstance which makes the settlers in a sense dissatisfied with the present Resident is that he is very economical and saving with the country's funds and undertakes few public works in contrast with Lieutenant-Governor Raffles, who was not very sparing with Government money and laid it out for the public benefit and for the improvement of Singapore. So long as the fate of Singapore is undecided and it is still uncertain whether that establishment is to remain in the hands of the English it seems to me cautious and sensible not to lay out too much money on this insecure possession.

**"Extracts from the letters of Col. Nahuijs"**

Trans. H.E. Miller

*Journal of the Malayan Branch,*

*Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. XIX. II. 1941*



1824

## The Flag on the Hill

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In the old days, many young men came out to Singapore in search of adventure and fortune. Among them was Walter Scott Duncan who arrived in Singapore four years after its founding and got a job as a merchant's clerk with A.L. Johnston & Co. Duncan's diary is one of the earliest accounts of life in Singapore during the pioneer years.

*April 15th.* — Went off to the *Hastings* about half-past seven. Found that Dr. Montgomerie and Mr. Barnard were expected. ... Waited till near 9, when dreading something had occurred to detain them, we were on the point of sitting down to breakfast, when a boat answering the description of the one I had seen made her appearance among the junks making towards us. On approaching a little nearer saw there were about 5 to 6 Europeans seated in the stern. Orders were instantly issued to the cook to prepare something additional to meet the consumption of as many additional mouths. ... The heat very great, much so that one or two were obliged to leave the table in the poop, ere we had done eating. ...

*April 16th.* — ... This had been a gloomy and threatening day, and fatal I am sorry to add to three unfortunate Malays who were struck dead by lightning at Kampong Gelam about 2 p.m. A boy was likewise much hurt. The thunder was sharp and extremely close, the sky exceedingly clouded, but not followed by much rain. Alongside of the *Hastings* at 20 minutes past 4 p.m. Sate down to table 10 in number, including the Captain and Chief Mate. Had an excellent dinner prepared. ... Landed about 9. Went in to Mr. Guthrie's and had a glass of brandy and water.

*April 17th.* — To-day arrived the American brig *Leander*, Capt. Roundy from Batavia. Having waited so long for a vessel from the place in the expectation of getting dispatches, our disappointment may be easily guessed at on finding we were fated yet to wait some time longer. ... Brings accounts of the ship in which Sir T. S. Raffles had embarked all his collection of natural curiosities, the finest ever made in this quarter of the world, all his valuable manuscripts, furniture, wardrobe, and whatever he intended taking home, — having sunk in Bencoolen roads, only a few hours previous to the time he had fixed for his own and Lady Raffles' embarkation, and so very suddenly that the people on board had barely time to save their lives; to save aught else was out of the question. ...

*April 20th.* — In the morning a ship at anchor in the roads which we hoped to be the *Fazil Currim*, but which afterward turned out to be the *Good Hope* ...

In the evening a brig in sight to the eastward, for whom the flag on the hill had been flying through the greater part of the day. Went down from Mr. Read's a little while before 8 p.m. to make enquiries after her, and on landing at the godown wharf found the Capt. of the brig had just arrived before me, that he was from Batavia and had brought a good many letters. Busy assorting immediately. Only one for myself, from T. Bain. Collected those directed for Mr. and Mrs. Read, and set off to his house to deliver them to him, mostly Europe letters. He received them with singular coolness and composure. Sate down until I had finished reading Rt. Bain's long epistle when I bade them good night. Not a word of even second hand news from Zetland which has much disappointed me. ...

*April 21st.* — Saw Capt. Benson, he is extremely sick; made enquiries at him concerning the fowls for Mr. Hay. Acknowledged there were a parcel of geese and turkeys on board but that he did not know for whom they were intended; supposed any one to whom they belonged would immediately apply for them as he understood there was a letter accompanying them. There being two letters for Mr. Hay by the brig, rather than lose the chance of getting the fowls, which I saw I should be in some danger of doing unless I could shew some authority to get possession of them, I resolved on opening one which had the appearance of being a Batavia communication, although the hand writing was evidently not that of

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J. Fea ... It was a letter from Captain Lee who left this with the brig *Philotas* under his charge, on finding which I shut it again without perusing its contents. There was nothing farther for it therefore but to wait whether any other person came forward to claim them. ...

*April 22nd.* – No claimant appearing for the fowls, Capt. Benson has allowed me to send on board for them, though conditionally that if any other person shews hereafter a preferable right Mr. Hay will have to return the whole or a proportionate part of them. There were originally shipt 8 dozen geese and 1 dozen turkeys, and there are now landed only 19 of the former and 7 of the latter. Wrote Mr. Hay in the forenoon ...

*April 23rd.* – This being the anniversary of His Majesty King George the Fourth's birth day was noticed as such in the morning by a royal salute from the artillery on the Plain; another took place at midday; and the day was finished by a dinner party on the Government Hill at 7 o'clock which was so ill attended and stupid it scarce merits notice.

Received a letter from Mr. Hay by the *Fazel Currim*, in which he orders an additional supply of clothes and some biscuits. Sent them by a sampan pucat which goes across early in the morning, along with two letters from myself, one containing his Batavia letters and two copies of the last number of the Singapore Chronicle. ...

*April 3rd.* [sic] – In the morning on coming to the office, am surprised to find Mr. Read there before me, which unwonted sight may be accounted for by the American brigs making preparation for sailing. ... We send up on speculation by this brig 30 chests Patna opium of the 2nd Sale, invoiced at \$1.550 cts., in the hopes of getting it disposed of before the news of its fall in Calcutta gets wind at Canton, and as the Supercargo of the brig is a speculator in Turkey opium to a considerable amount himself ... and being too the first vessel that has gone on for that place, there is a probability if there is a market for opium at all it may turn out not a losing concern. But at the same time it is a great risk, as many accidents may occur to detain him on the voyage, and there will be numerous vessels following on his heels. ...

*April 25th.* – Sunday. Before breakfast finished a letter I had previously commenced for my Uncle Laurence. Sent John down to Mr. Armstrong's for a cloth jackcoat he is getting made for me, and

two drums of a fresh importation of Turkey figs that have been sent up from Batavia consigned to Mr. Read for sale. They were intended for Mr. Hay, in conformity with a request he makes to Mr. Read in a letter from Rhio. The drums, being larger than I had fancied them to be, I returned one. I received the Jackcoat. At midday went down to the office, where I found Mr. Johnston and Mr. Read both busy writing, chiefly for their private correspondents, unless one from Mr. J. to Mr. T. Raffles which I copied in the letter book. Finding nothing to do and disliking to leave the place while they continued in it, took it into my head to write Andrew, and once engaged in so doing, tipped William a letter also. Did not get away till near 4 p.m. Delivered the letters to Dr. Cochrane of the ship *Mary*, who sails in a day or two. Dined at Mr. Read's ...

**WALTER SCOTT DUNCAN**

Duncan's Journal

*The Straits Times*, January 1883

1830 &amp; 1833

## A Visit to the Rajah

A naturalist and surgeon, George Bennett travelled widely in the East for the purpose of “observations in natural history”.

In this spirit of scientific enquiry he paid two visits to the “rajah of Johore”, also known as Sultan Hussein, who was then living in Singapore at Kampong Glam.

One evening, accompanied by several gentlemen resident in the settlement, I went to pay a visit to the rajah of Johore. During a former visit to this settlement, in 1830, I had an interview with this exalted personage, of whom at that time I penned the following description:

“Being near the village of Kampong Glam, I observed a poor-looking bungalow, surrounded by high walls, exhibiting effects of age and climate. Over the large gateway which opened into the inclosure surrounding this dwelling were watch-towers. On inquiry, I found this was the residence of the rajah of Johore, who formerly included Singapore in his dominions. The island was purchased of him by the British government, who now allow him an annual pension. He is considered to have been formerly a leader of pirates; and when we saw a brig he was building, it naturally occurred to our minds whether he was about to resort to his old practices. We proposed visiting this personage; and, on arriving at the gateway, were met by a peon, who, after delivering our message to the rajah, requested us to wait a few minutes,

until his *Highness* was ready. We did not wait long, for the rajah soon appeared, and took his seat, in lieu of a throne, upon the highest step of those which led to his dwelling. His appearance was remarkable: he appeared a man of about forty years of age – teeth perfect, but quite black, from the custom of chewing the betel constantly. His head was largxe; and his shaven cranium afforded an interesting phrenological treat. He was deformed; not more than five feet in height, of large body, and short, thick, and deformed legs, scarcely able to support the ponderous trunk. His neck was thick and short, and his head habitually stooped; his face bloated, with the lower lip projecting, and large eyes protruding, one of them having a cataractal appearance. He was dressed in a short pair of cotton drawers, a sarong of cotton cloth came across the shoulders in the form of a scarf, and tarnished, embroidered slippers, and handkerchief around the head, (having the upper part exposed,) after the Malay fashion, completed the attire of this singular creature.

“As much grace and dignity was displayed in our reception as such a figure could show, and chairs were placed by the attendants for our accommodation. He waddled a short distance, and, notwithstanding the exertion was so extraordinary as to cause large drops of perspiration to roll down his face, conferred a great honour upon us by personally accompanying us to see a tank he had just formed for fish, and with a flight of steps, for the convenience of bathing. After viewing this, he returned to his former station, when he reseated himself, with a dignity of look and manner surpassing all description; and we took our departure, after a brief common-place conversation. ...”

The buildings of his highness and followers were now in some degree improved, being surrounded by a neat chunamed wall, and the entrance was by a gateway of brick, which had been only recently completed. Since my last visit his highness had caused a house to be constructed after the style of the European residents at Singapore, and it was situated exterior to the old boundary of his domain. We were



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ushered into the new house, the rooms of which were furnished after the English style, with wall-lamps, bookcase, (minus books,) tables, chairs, &c.; ascending to the upper room, chairs were placed for our accommodation, and the punka was caused to be moved to cool our frames. When we were all seated, a yellow painted armed chair was placed at the head of the room, as a regal seat for his highness; his prime minister came to us, and, as we thought, seemed puzzled for what so large a party of Europeans could require an audience.

At last a messenger entered the room, and, squatting down near the minister, whispered something to him, which it seemed was a desire that we should adjourn from this to the old thatched residence of the Tuan rajah. We adjourned, therefore; and, on arriving at the old residence, the rajah, one of the greatest curiosities of the human race perhaps ever seen, waddled, bending with infirmities, and seated his carcass in the aforesaid yellow chair, which had been brought from the other house, and placed in a suitable situation; and there, with his corpulent body completely jammed between the arms of the chair, received us in a most gracious and condescending manner, if such a figure really could look gracious or condescending.

The creature was tame, and both mentally and physically more debilitated than when I last saw him, in 1830: he appeared not even to possess the intelligence of an orang-utan; he was attired in a dirty sarong around his waist, and a loose baju, or jacket, exposing the corpulency of his *delicate* form. A Moorman's cap ornamented a small portion of his cranium; his look was listless, and without any expression: he appeared every moment to be in danger of an attack of apoplexy. The gentlemen who spoke the Malay language, on addressing him, received a grunt, or his language was so unintelligible that his minister was obliged to repeat the answers. All the attendants sat down upon their haunches in his presence, out of respect.

On asking him his age, he replied (or rather his minister for him) by demanding how old we thought he was; we certainly thought he had not yet attained the age of reason. We were afterwards told his age was not exactly known, but it was supposed the creature was fifty. As but little could be made out of this pitiable object of humanity, we released him

from what certainly must have been to him a misery, by taking our leave. On viewing the edifices in his enclosure, previous to departing, we found the creature amused himself with building. Besides the new residence and wall, he was erecting a residence and wall for himself, neat and extensive in construction, and in something of a Chinese style of architecture. This building was certainly wanting, for the old thatched palace near it seemed ready to fall about his ears.

**GEORGE BENNETT**

*Wanderings in New South Wales, Batavia,  
Pedir Coast, Singapore and China (1834)*

1833–34

## Occupations

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George Windsor Earl was a trader and travel writer who later turned to law and Government service. At the time of this extract Earl was in his late twenties and trading extensively in the region, using Singapore as his base.

In this way he came to know Singapore well.

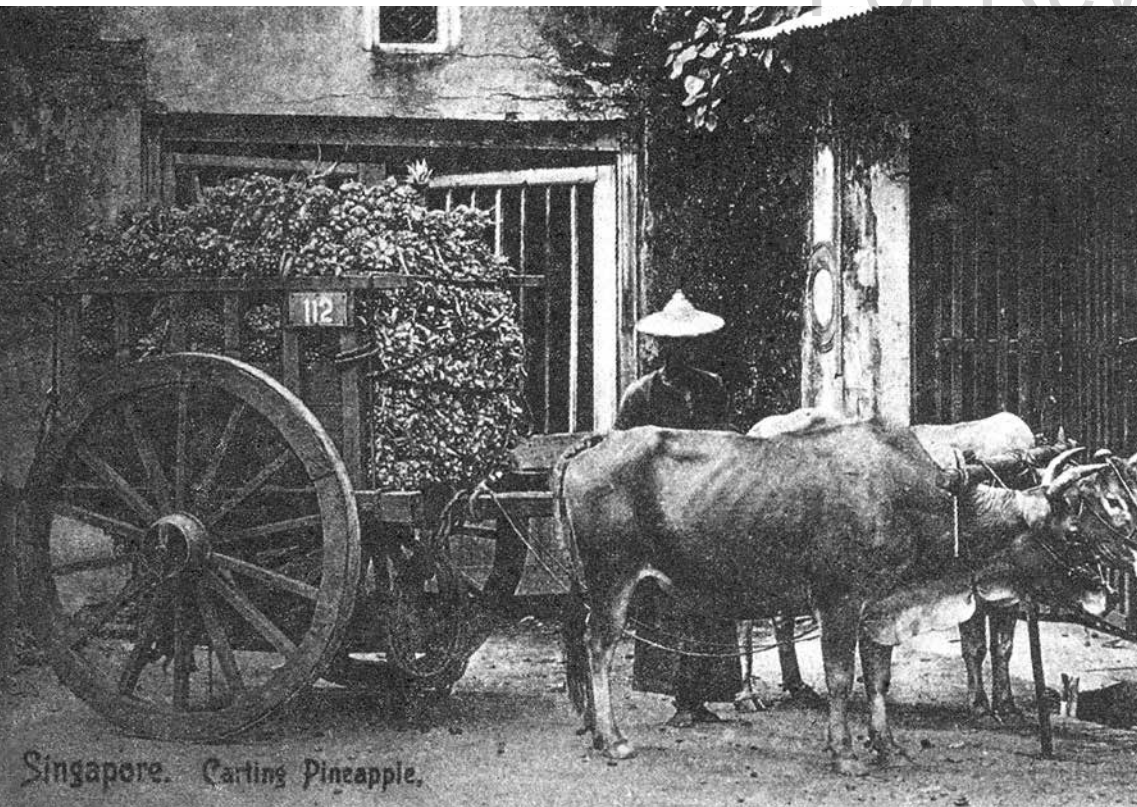
An early walk through Campong Glam will serve to give a stranger a good idea of the habits and occupations of the different classes. Near the residence of the Sultan he will meet with Malays, lounging about near the doors of their houses, chewing betel, with their sarongs, which usually hang loosely about the waist, wrapped round the body to shelter the wearer from the cool morning breeze. The main street, however, will have a very different appearance. There Chinese mechanics will be busily employed forging ironwork, making furniture, or building boats; and the level green near the sea will be occupied by Bugis, who have landed from their prahus to mend their sails, or to twist rope and cables from the materials which they have brought with them. In a portion of the back part of the campong, natives of Sambawa, a far distant island to the eastward of Java, will be found chopping young trees into billets for fire-wood, and making hurdles for fencing; and in another, Bengali washermen hanging out clothes to dry, and dairymen of the same nation milking their cows to supply the breakfast tables of the Europeans. On the roads Klings will occasionally be encountered conducting tumbrils drawn by buffaloes cased in mud and dirt; the creaking of the wheels almost drowning the

voice of the driver as he bawls to the animals, in his harsh and discordant jargon. Each nation, indeed, is found pursuing avocations which best accord with its tastes and habits. ...

From five thousand to eight thousand emigrants arrive annually from China, of whom only forty or fifty are females. About one-eighth of these people remain at Singapore, and the others scatter themselves over the Archipelago. ...

The landing of the emigrants from the junks forms a very interesting sight, and if I happened to be in the town at the arrival of a large junk, I generally stationed myself near the landing-place to watch their proceedings. They usually came on shore in large cargo-boats, each carrying from fifty to sixty persons, scarcely any space being left for the rowers. As the boat approached the landing-place, which was always on those occasions crowded with Chinese, the emigrants would cast anxious glances among them, and a ray of delight would occasionally brighten the countenance of one of the “high aspirants,” on recognizing the face of a relative or friend, on whose favourable report he had probably decided on leaving his country. The boat was always anchored a short distance from the landing-place, and a squabble would immediately commence between the Kling boatmen and the Chinese passengers, many of the latter being unprovided with the few halfpence required to pay their passage from the vessel. The Klings would bawl, and lay down the law in their guttural jargon, and the Chinese would remonstrate in scarcely less barbarous Fokeen, each being totally unintelligible to the other. After some delay the boat would be pushed in for the shore, and the emigrants, taking up their sleeping mats and small bundles, which formed all their worldly wealth, would proceed to the abodes of their friends, or scatter themselves over the town in search of lodgings. ...

The majority of the emigrants embark in China without sufficient money to pay their passage to Singapore, and these defaulters remain in the vessel until they are redeemed by their friends, who pay the amount; or by strangers engaging their services for a stipulated period, and paying their passage money as an advance of wages. The mechanics soon acquire capital, as they always work hard on their first arrival; but many, finding that money can be easily obtained, indulge in gambling and opium-



Carting Pineapple

smoking, becoming eventually as dissolute as they were previously industrious. ...

The houses in the outskirts of the town are often attacked by bands of Chinese robbers from the interior, but fortunately they are such arrant cowards that they retreat on the slightest opposition. One fine night during my stay, a body of about fifty, armed with spears and lighted with torches, attacked the village of the Bengali dobies. The dobies fled, and the Chinese seized upon the linen, clean and dirty, and hastened back towards their fastnesses, bearing away a fair proportion of the wardrobes of the European ladies and gentlemen. Although the cowardly washermen thought of nothing save flight, the robbers did not retreat unmolested, for a gentleman who resided on the outskirts of the town having witnessed their descent, mustered two or three Malays, armed

with a couple of fowling-pieces, and laid wait near the road-side for their return. As the robbers passed, triumphing in the idea of carrying away so much valuable booty, of shirts and petticoats, the little party fired, and brought down two of them, on which the remainder took to flight, utterly regardless of the fate of their comrades. The assailants pursued, and the robbers, to escape as they supposed impending destruction, dropped their bundles, so that their line of retreat was pointed out next morning by the wearing apparel scattered on the road, which was collected and returned to the rightful owners. ...

The two Malay chiefs residing in the settlement are both *pensionnaires* of the East-India Company. One is the Sultan of Johore, a neighbouring state on the Peninsula, by whom Singapore and the islands near the coast were ceded to the British; and the other is the Tumung-gung, a petty chief, nominally a tributary to the Sultan, who was found in possession of the country about Singapore. ...

The Tumung-gung is a young man, and like most of the nobles, remarkable, even among the Malays, for his depravity. Although a *pensionnaire* of the Company to the annual amount of four thousand five hundred dollars, he is strongly suspected of encouraging the pirates, who, for years have been murdering and plundering the native traders almost within sight of the harbour; and, if not personally engaged in piratical pursuits, it is well known that many of those in his confidence are absent for considerable periods under very suspicious circumstances. The Tumung-gung resides in a village exclusively inhabited by Malays, situated in a small cove about a mile and a half to the westward of the town, from which it is entirely concealed by the intervening hills.

The Malay pirates absolutely swarm in the neighbourhood of Singapore, the numerous islands in the vicinity, the intersecting channels of which are known only to themselves, affording them a snug retreat, whence they can pounce upon the defenceless native traders, and drag them into their lairs to plunder them at their leisure. Square-rigged vessels are generally allowed to pass unmolested, for the pirates, who are as cowardly as they are cruel, rarely attack craft of this description, unless they have received authentic information from their spies at Singapore that they may be taken with facility.

The system of piracy is perfect in its nature, more so even than that which formerly obtained among the Buccaneers of America. A petty chief of one of the Malay states, who has either been ruined by gambling, or is desirous to improve his fortune, collects under his banner as many restless spirits as he can muster, and sails for one of the most retired islands in the neighbourhood of Singapore. Here he erects a village as a depôt for slaves and plunder, and then lies in wait with his armed prahus, near the frequented waters, for the native traders passing to and from the British settlement. Should the chief be eminently successful, he soon gains a large accession to his force, and his village increases to a small town, while his fleet of prahus becomes sufficiently numerous to be subdivided into several squadrons, which cruise in the various straits and channels.

The pirates generally sail in fleets of from three to twenty prahus. These are armed with guns, large and small, and each prahu carries from fifteen to forty men. The vessels which they succeed in capturing are brought to the settlement, where they are plundered and afterwards burnt; and the goods are taken for sale to Singapore or New Harbour, in prahus of their own, which are fitted up to resemble traders. The unfortunate natives who compose the crews of the captured prahus, are carried to Lingin, or to the opposite coast of Sumatra, where they are sold to the Malays, to cultivate the pepper plantations in the interior.

**GEORGE WINDSOR EARL**

*The Eastern Seas (1837)*

1837

## Scorpions in the Cabin

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Howard Malcolm, an American missionary, spent a month in Singapore while on an inspection tour of the missions in the region. He begins this extract by describing the conditions on board a small coasting vessel such as many Singapore visitors must have experienced on their journey.

You find, on getting aboard, a cabin five or six feet square, and are fortunate if in it you can stand erect, and still more so if it have a port-hole, or any ventilation, except through the scuttle, by which you enter. Here you eat with the captain, or perhaps off of a stinking hen-coop on deck. There can be no awning on deck, because it would be in the way of the boom; so that you stay below, while the sun blazes on the plank over your head, and keeps the thermometer in the cabin about blood heat. Your mattress is laid on a locker at night, and rolled up in the day. Perhaps you may be able to swing it. The seams on deck, neglected and parched up, during a six months' dry season, let the salt water on you in rapid drops, when the decks are washed. If it be rainy season, your confinement below is scarcely less unpleasant. Trunks and small stores must occupy the margin of the cabin, or be stowed where you cannot come at them. If you attempt to write, three times a day you must huddle together your papers, that the trunk or table may be spread for meals; or if you eat on deck, and so have uninterrupted use of the table, the heat and motion make study difficult. Your cooking is by no means scientific. The fowls, sometimes without the privilege of a coop, and lying on the deck tied

by the legs, “get no better very fast.” The smallness of the vessel makes her toss about most uncomfortably, when a larger vessel would be quite still; so that, if you take anything out of its place, it must be “choked” again with care, or it will “fetch way.” As to walking the deck, there is hardly room to turn; and if there be, you must have either the sun or dew upon you. But your worst time is at night. Several must sleep in the tiny cabin; and the heavy, damp air, coming down the gangway, gives you rheumatism, without producing ventilation. You perspire at every pore, till nature is exhausted, and you sleep, from very inanity.

There are other disagreeables, which, though worse, are happily not quite so common. Some of the captains have no means of ascertaining latitude, and still fewer their longitude. Sometimes there is no chart on board. The cables, anchors, and general inventory, are apt to be poor. Vessels in the habit of carrying rice, timber, stick-lac, &c., have always mice, cockroaches, centipedes, scorpions, and ants, in great abundance. In one of my voyages, I killed nearly thirty scorpions in the cabin, and in another, eight or ten centipedes. Thrice, on taking out of my trunk a clean shirt, I found a centipede in its folds. Large, winged cockroaches infest all Indian vessels; but in some they creep about in every direction, day and night. I had one full specimen of this. Such crowds lighted upon the dinner-table, that we could hardly tell meat from potatoes. To drive them away and eat at the same time was impossible, for they would keep off of a dish no longer than it was agitated. The captain and I just dined patiently, each contenting himself with being able to keep them out of his own plate. At night, they swarmed in thousands on the boards and on the bed, eating our fingers and toes to the quick. A hundred oranges, tied up in a bag, had not been on board thirty-six hours, before it was found that these cormorants had left nothing but the skin. It was a bag full of hollow globes! ...

These things ought not, perhaps, in strictness, to be called hardships, but they are inconveniences, which I found tended rapidly to make me old, and convince me that voyages of this sort cannot be a wise resort for invalid missionaries.

In going through one part of the town, during business hours, one feels himself to be in a Chinese city. Almost every respectable native he sees is Chinese; almost every shop, ware-room, and trade, is carried on by the Chinese; the hucksters, coolies, travelling cooks, and cries common in a great city, are Chinese. In fact, we may almost call Singapore itself a Chinese city; inasmuch as the bulk of the inhabitants are Chinese, and nearly all the wealth and influence, next to the British, is in their hands. A large part of the Klings and Bengalese are ostlers, servants, washermen, &c., to Europeans; and the Malays and Bugis occupy portions of the city by themselves. ...

A Chinese population of so many thousands, gave me many opportunities of observing the manners of this singular people. One



*Chinese Boys' School*



of these was a wedding, to which I had the pleasure of being invited, through the kind offices of Mr. Ballistier, our American consul, to whom I was much indebted in other respects. As I had no hope of such an opportunity in China, I gladly availed myself of this. The family of the bride being wealthy, the room containing the family altar was decorated both with costliness and taste. The “Jos” was delineated in a large picture surrounded by ornamental paper-hangings. Huge wax candles, delicate tapers, and suspended lamps, of elegantly painted glass, shed round their formal light, though it was broad day. On the altar, or table, before the idol, were trays of silver and rich porcelain, filled with offerings of sweetmeats and flowers, while burning sandal-wood and agillocha, diffused a pleasing fragrance.

After the elders had performed their devotions, the bride came slowly in, supported by attendants, and went through tedious gestures, and genuflections before the idol, without raising her eyes from the ground, or speaking. Her robe was both gorgeous and graceful, covering her, in loose folds, so completely that neither her feet nor hands could be seen. Beside the numerous ornaments and jewels which bound up her profuse hair, she wore several heavy necklaces of sparkling jewels, apparently artificial. When she had finished, an elder placed on her head a thick veil, and she returned to her apartment. We now waited for the bridegroom, who “tarried” a little, and the interval was enlivened by tea, sweetmeats, betel-nut, &c. Three bands of music, European, Malay, and Javanese, sent sounds of gladness through the halls and corridors; the friends passed about with smiles and greetings; the children, in their gay apparel, danced joyously, they knew not why; – all was natural and pleasing, but the slow and extravagant movements of a Javanese dancing-girl, who, in a corner of the porch, earned her pay, little regarded.

At length it was heralded, “the bridegroom cometh,” and immediately many “went forth to meet him.” He came with friends and a priest, preceded by another band of music. His devotions before the Jos, were much sooner and more slightly done than those of the lady; and he sat down with the priest, and a friend or two, in front of the altar, where had been placed chairs, covered for the occasion with loose drapery of embroidered velvet. Refreshments were handed, till a movement from



*Cantonese Woman*

within announced the approach of the bride; and all eyes were turned to meet her. She advanced very slowly to the centre, veiled, as when she retired, and, after a few gestures by each toward the other, the happy pair sat down together, her face still invisible. Refreshments again entered, and each partook, but with evident agitation and constraint. Presently, she retired to her chamber, followed by the bridegroom; and most of the guests dispersed; but we were permitted, with some particular friends, to enter with them. It was doubtless a handsome room in Chinese estimation, but its decorations would scarcely please a Western eye. The bedstead resembled a latticed arbor; and from the roof within was suspended a beautiful lamp of chased silver, burning with a feeble light. Standing in the middle of the room, they renewed their bowing, and passing from side to side, with a gravity and tediousness almost ludicrous, till he finished the ceremony by approaching and lifting the veil from her head. We were told that till then he had never seen her! She blushed, and sat without raising her eyes; but, alas for the romance of the thing – she was ugly! A leisurely repast followed, shared by themselves alone; and probably forming the ratifying feature of the solemnity, as in

Burmah. Fifty dishes or more were before them, a few of which they tasted with silver forks; but of course the occasion was too ethereal to be substantiated by veritable eating and drinking. When they rose from the table, the bridegroom, aided by his servant, removed his outer robe, which had been worn as a dress of ceremony, and threw it on the bed, as if marking it for his own. Then, advancing respectfully to the bride, her attendant raised the folds of her dress, and he unclasped the cincture of the garment beneath. This act, so gentle, delicate, and significant, closed the ceremonial. He then returned to his own house till evening, and every guest retired – a capital system, allowing the bride some repose, after the trying and tiresome ceremonies she had performed. This was about four o'clock. In the evening, a sumptuous entertainment was given to the friends of both parties; after which the bridegroom remained, as a son at home.

More refined deportment cannot be, than was exhibited by all parties on this occasion. The guests were not all at one table, nor even in one room; but many tables were spread, each accommodating five or six persons, and all diverse in their viands. Servants were numerous, the silver and porcelain handsome, the deportment of the guests unexceptionable, and sobriety universal. Every thing testified the high claim of the Chinese to the character of a civilized people.

I readily accepted an invitation, a few evenings afterward, to an entertainment at the same house. Order, delicacy, abundance, and elegance, reigned throughout. Of course many of the dishes were new to me, but there were many also, in exact English style. Among the novelties, I tried sharks' fins, birds' nests, fish-maws, and Biche-de-mer. I think an unprejudiced taste would pronounce them good; but only that of a Chinese would consider them delicacies.

**HOWARD MALCOLM**

*Travels in South-Eastern Asia,  
embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China* (1839)

c. 1844

### For Recovery of Health

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Dr. James Thomas Oxley was first posted to Singapore in 1830, and in 1844 was appointed Senior Surgeon for the Straits Settlements. Although it has been said that he showed more interest in his nutmeg plantations than in his official medical duties, his advice to invalids seeking convalescence in Singapore was no doubt read with respect.

Those who only purpose making the trip for the benefit of the voyage and a few days stay at Singapore can be tolerably well accommodated, at two respectable Hotels; where if they do not obtain luxuries they can at all events get good wholesome necessities, for such sojourners Hotel accommodation is sufficient, but for individuals or families who wish to avoid some of the hottest months in Calcutta by a more continued residence here it will be preferable to rent a House. These are generally procurable of a sufficiently commodious description, in eligible situations for from 30 to 40 Dollars a month, they can be readily furnished from the shops of the Chinese carpenters at trifling expense, probably realizing by auction on the departure of the owner within 10 or 15 per cent of original cost. Good fish and poultry are abundant. Fowls full grown are to be had at about \$3 the dozen, Turkeys \$2 per pair, Ducks \$3½ per dozen, Geese \$1 each, Mutton is procurable two or three times a week of excellent quality, an hind quarter costs \$3, Beef is tough, lean and generally unfit for use except as soup-meat ... I would recommend persons leaving Calcutta to bring all their household servants with them, those they will find here are of the very worst description, and exorbitant in their demand

for wages, Chinese are to be procured for out door work, but are not safe to be trusted where there is temptation, particularly by strangers, when good they are about the best class of household servants, but when bad they are clever and dangerous rogues. There are numbers of palankeen carriages for hire in the Bazaar, but they are dirty, unsightly vehicles and for the most part quite unfit for a Lady's use. The hire per month is about 25 Dollars for one of the best, so that persons intending to make this their place of residence for some months had better bring with them a Light Pony Phaeton if they wish to be comfortable, good Ponies are generally procurable for from 50 to \$100 each. If the visitor be particular about his wines he had better lay in a stock at Calcutta, those procurable here are always inferior. Europe articles such as Hams, Jams and all Oilman's stores are generally abundant and reasonable. The visitor must not expect to find many external resources here, the Community being composed of working busy people, they have no time to throw away upon idlers, who left to themselves are apt to complain of neglect, this is not altogether fair or reasonable, a man's business must always be paramount to the gratification of cultivating new acquaintances. The roads are pretty good and the drives about Town numerous, the longest Road from Town is about 12 miles. Pleasant little excursions may be made to neighbouring Islands or round the Island of Singapore itself, a trip that must afford full gratification to the lover of the picturesque, the waving outline of the Island with its pretty little coves, and occasional sandy Beach, the varying tints of foliage from the small hills which stud the Island being placed at different planes of elevation and covered with various sorts of Trees, the jutting headlands which on the northern side project so far as to give the voyager the idea of sailing through a series of beautiful Lakes, so completely do you appear to be shut in by them, the smooth clear water, all contribute to form a scene calculated to soothe the irritability of the invalid and gratify the admirer of nature's loveliness. So far the Invalid can enjoy the best exercises for the recovery of health, in occasional boating, or riding and driving in the open air during the cool mornings and evenings which he can remain out with perfect safety until 7 o'clock unless on some particularly hot morning. May and June are less agreeable than the rest of the year from the prevalence of the

*Hackney Carriage*

southerly winds and it is rather remarkable that the stronger these winds blow the more enervating they are, strangers are very apt to sit in this wind and call it a fine breeze, old Residents cannot do so with impunity, on the contrary they carefully avoid its influence. I would strongly advise all who are desirous of keeping their health to carefully exclude it, even at the expense of temporary heat and discomfort. There are no public amusements or even Library in the place and the only lion is the Chinese temple at Teluk Ayer, which as a specimen of Chinese taste and rich carving is not unworthy of a visit. Although the heat during the day is frequently oppressive the nights are always sufficiently cool to allow of refreshing sleep and this alone to an invalid is of vast importance and is perhaps upon the whole the greatest advantage to be derived by a change from continental India to the Straits.

**DR. J.T. OXLEY**

"Advice to Invalids Resorting to Singapore"

*Journal of the Indian Archipelago  
and Eastern Asia*, Vol. V, April 1851

Ed. J.R. Logan

1907

### A Favourite Place for Europeans

To mark the new century, a series of descriptive books on the Empire was produced, and the one on British Malaya included a section giving the latest information for tourists in Singapore.

The visitor to Singapore will find no lack of objects of interest and beauty. One of the first sights that tourists generally make a point of viewing is the Botanical Gardens – among the loveliest institutions of the kind in the East. ...

Another very beautiful spot which should certainly be visited is the Thompson Road reservoir, where a fine stretch of water is seen amid thickly wooded slopes. This is about four miles out of town. Again, there is the Gap – a delightful drive along a ridge of hills overlooking the sea that occupies about two hours.

As for other drives of interest, one can hardly go wrong in taking a hackney carriage for a couple of hours – it only costs the equivalent of 3s. – and leaving it to the sweet will of the driver to carry you whither he lists; for the roads of Singapore, whether along the sea-fringe or running into the interior of the island, are so good, level, and beautiful as regards their arboreal dressing, that it does not matter very much in what direction one turns. ...

In the city proper the visitor will find innumerable sights and scenes to attract his attention and retain his interest – the street life alone



CROCKERY-WARE SHOPS, SINGAPORE

*Crockery Ware Shops*

possessing a wonderful variety of colour and picturesqueness. The hub of the town in a commercial sense is Raffles Place, sometimes called Commercial Square. This has been the business centre of the colony ever since it was founded. Here at one time were situated all the big shipping and trading houses, banks, and stores. Nowadays it cannot suffice to accommodate more than a mere fraction of these establishments, and they have consequently spread to the neighbouring streets and to Collyer Quay, which is now almost wholly occupied by the shipping firms. The Square itself still remains the great shopping rendezvous for the European section of the community, and is a very busy place from nine o'clock in the morning till five o'clock in the afternoon, after which hour, however, it is almost as deserted as the Sahara. In the day-time, the never-ceasing stream of traffic – carriages, gharries, rickshas, and foot passengers, with their wealth of colour, quaintness, and movement – makes a wonderfully interesting kaleidoscopic procession. High Street, which is only a few minutes distant, is the home of native jewellers and silksellers, and should not be missed by the tourist in search of curios. Crossing High Street at right angles is North Bridge Road, which with



its continuation, South Bridge Road, forms the longest thoroughfare in town and the main artery for traffic. Along its entire length, this street is lined with Chinese shops of all conceivable kinds – silversmiths', ivory workers', rice shops, pork shops, eating houses, hotels, and what not – whilst the side streets leading from it are simply thronged with stalls on which a medley of foodstuffs and pedlars' wares are exhibited. In North Bridge Road is situated a Malay theatre where plays, ranging from "Ali Baba" to "Romeo and Juliet," with musical interludes, are nightly presented before crowded houses. This is a favourite place for Europeans to visit who want to see and hear something out of the common. The plays are presented in Singapore Malay, and, even though the visitor may not understand the dialect, he will have no difficulty in following the action of the pieces. There is also a Chinese theatre near at hand, where a seemingly interminable play goes on all night, and where it is amusing to observe the cool way in which the spectators will sometimes stroll across the stage right among the actors, to find some more convenient point of view or to exchange greetings with a friend.

In South Bridge Road and in Orchard Road, also, there are two Indian temples which are always open to inspection by the visitor. Small Chinese temples and joss-houses abound all over the neighbourhood, and the tourist will find a half-hour visit to any of these places interesting and instructive by reason of the many strange rites and sacrificial customs to be observed by the habitués. In the Chinese joss-houses one of the things that strike the European visitor as most curious is the way in which edible offerings are made to the "joss." A Chinese lady, resplendent in silks and jewellery, will come along, perhaps accompanied by her young sons and attended by a coolie bearing a huge basket replete with all sorts of delicacies, prominent among which are roasted ducks and coloured Chinese cakes. After the necessary formalities have been gone through, the edibles are duly placed out in festal array in front of the particular "joss" whom it is sought to propitiate. Then the worshipper burns some joss-sticks and coloured papers, after which the coolie sweeps all the good things back into the basket and the party go off rejoicing to feast upon them at home.

While entering the harbour, the visitor will doubtless have been struck by the numbers of small islands which lie around Singapore. Some of these are British, others are Dutch. For the most part they are uninhabited except for an occasional fisherman, but they are favourite places of resort for local hunters, who find there abundance of wild pig, pigeon, and quail; while the creeks are generally capable of affording sport to the "shikari" in quest of a crocodile. Should it happen that the steamer enter the harbour from the western end, the visitor will pass through a narrow channel between the island of Singapore and that of Pulo Brani, on which are situated the largest tin-smelting works in the world. On the Singapore side of this channel is the commencement of the Tanjong Pagar Docks, the recent expropriation of which by the Government created quite a stir in shipping and commercial circles.

The tourist should make it part of his programme to pay a visit to Johore, the capital of an independent native State of the same name on the mainland opposite the island of Singapore. Here are situated the headquarters of the State Government and the Sultan's Palace, or Istana, as it is called – a luxuriously fitted residence, full of rich and valuable furniture, paintings, and furnishings, not the least valuable of which is the famous Ellenborough plate, acquired in England by the late Sultan. The main objects of attraction in Johore, otherwise, are the gambling-shops, which are daily and nightly crowded with Chinese – both men and women – engaged in play at the favourite games of "fan tan" or "po." These shops are licensed by the Government, to whom they are sources of enormous revenues. In Singapore no gambling is allowed – indeed, the anti-gambling laws are very strict – so that Johore is the rendezvous for all the "inveterates" from the neighbouring British settlement, with which it is connected by a railway and steamboat service, the whole journey between the two towns occupying a little over one hour.

**Eds. ARNOLD WRIGHT & H.A. CARTWRIGHT**

"Information for Tourists"

*Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya* (1908)



1927

## Smuggling Opium

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The smoking of opium (chandu) was permitted in Singapore until the early '40s, but its supply was a government monopoly – and a substantial revenue-earner. However, as twenty-nine-year-old Andrew Gilmour of the Malayan Civil Service (M.C.S.) found, there were people both inside and outside the Department who preferred to trade on their own account.

One of the most interesting and exciting periods of my life came when I was unexpectedly seconded to a post outside the M.C.S. Cadre altogether in June 1927. ...

It came about like this. A brilliant ex-“Mountie”, who ... was attached to the Detective Branch in Singapore, made a secret report alleging that several members of the staff of the Preventive Service of the Government Monopolies Department (the predecessor of the Customs and Excise Department) were themselves actively engaged in smuggling opium. This Preventive Staff were a locally recruited very mixed bag, including ex-police inspectors and prison warders.

... It was decided to ask the Police to second a very senior man to take over the Preventive Service and I undertook to act temporarily until one was available. This interim period lasted for 5 months, during which I lived in a different world, functioning night and day as Head of a suspect organisation, with the specific dual tasks of catching out my own predecessor and other senior subordinates as well as the professional smugglers, samsu distillers and other wrongdoers who had many of my staff in their pockets. I met with considerable success, partly due to

the high rates of reward which we paid to informers ... Some of the old hands did not even wait to be sacked. One produced a medical certificate testifying that he was likely to die of sprue if he did not leave the tropics immediately, and sailed the same day! Another, who had failed to report to me, sent in a cavalier letter of resignation apologising for his shortcomings, saying he did not feel up to serving under a new Head. I do not think either of them troubled to draw their salaries, which had obviously been a very small portion of their income. ...

But against the long term success in clearing up the department ... there were many individual cases where we were outwitted by the astuteness of the smugglers. ...

Information came in from a ship's officer that a number of sacks had been thrown overboard during the night from the stern of a ship some distance off the Horsburgh Lighthouse. Our launches went out but failed to find any trace. We later learned that the sacks were attached to small floats which only came to the surface a calculated number of hours later, when they were retrieved by a fast Japanese fishing boat which took their contents – tins of chandu worth \$60,000 – to a hiding place at Tanah Merah Besar. Plans were now being made to bring the chandu into Singapore, where our recent successes had raised the black market price from under \$4 to over \$5 a tahl [about 1½ ounces].

Here was a test for the new broom. I was determined to block every approach to Singapore town and evolved what I thought was a complete blockade of Tanah Merah by land and sea. After three exhausting days and nights during which we earned considerable unpopularity ... I realised that the blockade had failed, because the price of chandu dropped again to \$3.80.

This is what happened, as we found out later. ... The smugglers started off for Singapore with two large open cars. The leading car had very bright headlights and was full of well-dressed young Chinese. The chandu was in the second car, which showed no lights. As soon as he saw the Revenue Officers in the lights of the first car the driver of the second car, an ex-Revenue supervisor turned crook, pulled up ... where there was a slight dip. The young Chinese in the first car were most co-operative and professed to be much amused at the idea of being searched for opium,

suggesting taking the tyres off and opening up the engine. At last the search was over and with sarcastic farewells they drove off, halting, however, when they were out of sight ... and hurrying back through the rubber and scrub whence they manhandled the chandu from the second to the first car. In due course the second car, now innocently empty, was also most thoroughly searched. Quite simple really – perhaps they deserved to get away with it!

**ANDREW GILMOUR**

*An Eastern Cadet's Anecdote* (1974)

c. 1927

### Prison and Pork

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As the headmaster of an English school in Kuala Lumpur, Richard Sidney showed perhaps a natural professional interest in another corrective institution while on a visit to Singapore.

Blue serge on police duty! It makes one sweat even to write about it.

Not the police only: postmen, Government *peons* (messengers), prisoners themselves, all wear materials either made or made-up in Singapore prison. ... If you see a cricket match played on coconut matting you may be sure that the matting was made at Taiping gaol or in Singapore; perhaps you need an easy deck chair for your voyage home – visit the prison and select one, they make them famously, in fact “the long lounge cane chair which is to be found so much in use all over the Far East was invented and perfected in the Singapore convict gaol.”

Before taking you inside let me relate an incident to show you how differently the Chinese and the European regards imprisonment (for the latter it is disgrace and degradation, is it not?). ... The gates of the prison were shut and safely outside was a close-cropped Chinese who had recently been one of His Majesty's guests: it was war time. The man looked regretfully at the closed doors – he seemed anxious to re-enter. Thinking the matter over he decided to try, and banged at the small gate. It was opened, and the warder seeing a recently discharged prisoner thought that the man had perhaps left something behind. It was not so:

the released man wanted to go back! The warder was sorry; there was no re-admittance! The Chinese raised his voice and a few loiterers gathered near; as the man was being forcibly removed from the precincts they heard him say:

“There are numerous others who came in before I did; why shouldn’t *they* be let out?”

There happened to come up to the Prison at this moment one of the visiting Justices, and hearing the noise and seeing the crowd he asked what all the trouble was. The matter was explained to him. In spite of the War, prison dietary regulations had to be observed, these prescribed so many ounces of pork per head. It was known that outside there was a scarcity of pork. The Chinese preferred prison and pork to freedom!

It was a brilliantly sunny day, the time 1 p.m. when my friend and I knocked at the small gate of Singapore prison, and immediately upon entering were taken to the Chief Warder. Somehow I didn’t feel as if I was in a prison though all round me were evidences of the fact. ...

“Better begin at the beginning,” said our guide. “Here is the Office.” It might have been an office in any business house save for the clothes of the workers, though I received a shock when I saw one whom I had previously met in very different surroundings. This brought home to me where I was and made me sorrowful. Except that his hair merely bristled through his scalp and that he looked sad he seemed very little changed. ... We learned that no man who once entered was likely in future to be able to escape detection. In the large ledgers, arranged in a manner reminiscent of the catalogue room of Cambridge University Library, was a complete record of each prisoner. There were two mysterious initials “O or H.” What were they? ... They stood for “Ordinary” or “Habitual.” Next the room where finger-prints are taken. ... The process adopted is as follows, and I have beside me the actual printed form used in this prison. It is divided up into columns for the right and left hand, and our guide kindly demonstrated how each finger after being coated with a thick black mixture must be rolled from side to side so that at least three-quarters of the finger’s impression is recorded on the paper.

“But we are not content with these impressions only,” added the Chief Warder, “we must have as well the dab impressions of the eight fingers

taken simultaneously. And the clue is a good one, for not one person in two millions has exactly similar markings.”

We may imagine some prisoner, then, coming here after a gang robbery and being entered fully in the record books and fixing his identity by means of his finger-prints. For the first night he does not enter the prison proper: he is weighed; must bathe and give up his own clothes and put on a prison suit marked with red or black letters which denote his term. In addition he will be photographed (such an interesting room the photography room – the older camera having a Ross lens, and the newer a Taylor-Hobson-Cooke), with his hands spread out flat on his chest and with a mirror on the flank revealing his side face. He will have a poor chance of escaping detection if he commits more crimes after leaving prison. ...

We have seen already the Chinese ex-prisoner clamouring for re-admittance because of the pork; a visit to the prison cook-house when meals were being prepared makes one understand still more fully why many vagrants prefer the certainty of prison life to the hazards outside it. Here we saw that each separate race (at the date of my visit the prison population was Chinese 718; Malays 134; Indians 64; and Europeans 9) had a distinct portion of the cook-house. Chinese cooks were cutting up meat; white bread was being prepared for the Europeans’ tea; and it was quite obvious that the three meals a day provide amply sufficient for the prisoner’s nourishment. Everywhere, however, what I noted particularly – except in the Hospital – was the demeanour of the prisoners, they looked so cheerful and they were voluntarily working so hard – the European warders standing about having little to do so far as the maintenance of discipline was concerned. In the photography room, for example, were two long service criminals; but the keen way in which they showed me their newer camera, the obvious pride they had in their work, seemed to show that prison life was far from degrading them. It was the same everywhere else, and as we moved to another part of the prison and noted the vividly green grass contrasting so pleasantly with the sombre grey walls while above us the sun blazed from a lightly tinted blue sky, we seemed to be walking through some specially well organised factory. The illusion was deepened when we entered a large shed.