

MALAYA  
OUTLINE OF A COLONY

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## *Chapter One*

### *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

#### I

THERE is a queer time-lag in the notions we have of remote countries of the world, even indeed of the nearer ones. Frenchmen and Americans are still represented on the stage whose kind has not existed for generations—even if it existed in the first place. Malaya, or the Malay States as it was to us then, had reality for those now in their forties and fifties mainly through the books by Henty and Ballantyne they had read in their youth. These books, we remember, were all about pirates and prowls and bloodshed and ambushes in mangrove creeks. This is the background of the canvas on which so many subsequent impressions were laid. As an adult in the City, a man might take up a business in which tin and rubber statistics played an important part, and Malaya would perhaps be seen as a kind of tin and rubber producing machine with gangs of standardized coolies, identical isotypes rather than men, carrying ingots of tin and cases of rubber endlessly to standardized ships. Newspaper headlines would add their splashing brush-strokes—a naval base sticking out of the map like a bristling Colossus, a “gateway of trade” with derricks

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and lighters—until the composite conception was not unlike a picture by a surrealist painter.

But until the Japanese invaded Malaya in December 1941 the picture, whatever it was, was a minor one that hovered round the edges of the world's field of vision. The crisis brought it for a time to the dead centre of the field, where for a tense period the world's eye was focused upon it. Again the hand of the headline writer was busy with the brush. It drew in thick impressionistic lines the image of retreating armies, of the tropic sky black with Zeros and Mitsubishi's, of British capital ships plunging into the sea as blazing wrecks within a stone's throw of the famous base, and finally of the "impregnable" base itself falling to the invading army, and the Rising Sun flying from its useless bastions in place of the Union Jack. The peepshow of tin and rubber robots arranged statistically over the creeks and the cut-throats was eclipsed by the drop-scene of an imperial tragedy.

There were incidental visions of depression arising from the revulsion of feeling, the bitterness and perplexity, that seized hold of the Empire and of America at this dark time: they were of Fifth Column natives, of "whisky-swilling planters," of inert officials. They were all useful as specious explanations of what was not understood. They were useful also to the enemy, who took a hand in inventing some of them.

'So much for the popular idea of Malaya at the time of the "Fall," an idea that still would be present perhaps as a subconscious prejudice in the mind of any new visitor to Malaya's shores. There would also be the preconceptions of the specialist. The botanist whose study was citrous fruits would think first of Malaya as a place in which a new plant of the kind had been discovered; the zoologist might see a blob on the map inhabited exclusively by a new sub-species of ungulate.

It is not going to be said that all these preconceptions have got to be cleared away before a true picture of Malaya can be presented. A number of these figments do exist, or did exist, in Malaya, past or present, in whole or in part. The task will be to help the reader to re-sort them, to remove the untrue, to tone down the exaggerated, and to supply omissions—above all, to help him to an entirely new perspective. Malaya has existed for thousands of years: it will exist for thousands of years to come. It is a complete composition of mountains, valleys, plains, and rivers, of flora and fauna, and of humanity. It is a conflux of trade routes, a melting-pot of races, and a political problem on whose solution the peace of Asia may depend. It is, these things and many more. In fact, it is a country, and with as many facets of reality as a country always has.

The new-comer will be well advised to be on guard against his first impressions. If he sets foot in Singapore during a rainstorm he will be unlikely to judge fairly. The mud inspissate on the roadway will gleam there flickeringly in the light of the street lamps through the curtain of the downpour, and water will spray out beneath the flip-flop of his rickshaw-puller's feet. The oil-cloth apron in front of him will be a poor defence against the tepid rain, almost solid in its depressing welcome. The "shop-houses" with their gloomy colonnades, which he may glimpse in passing, will not prepossess him in favour of the "Gateway to the Far East."

Equally will he have to reserve his judgment if his boat grounds on the smooth sand of a sweep of beach on the east coast with its curling rollers and its fringe of feathery casuarina trees, all gilded with the gold of the departing sun. Or again, if the beautiful Langkawis, carcanet of

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emerald islets set in cliffs of marble, gashed and veined, be his Malayan rendezvous he will wisely say to himself, "Let me see more." If he were to let his imagination build on these he would be in an unsuitable state of mind to regard a bad case of elephantiasis or of yaws revealing itself in some pretty *kampong* scented with the spices of a Malayan evening. Then again he might in the luxury plane of the future bump to a standstill on Kuala Lumpur airport, concluding that Malaya was just one more standard landing-field in life's monotonous journey—or in the interim he might be a paratrooper coming down in an oozy rice-field. Not from viscous mud or insects, and equally not from the vermilion glories of the flame-of-the-forest or the piquancy of a good curry tiffin, let him argue from the particular to the general.

Malaya is a mosaic of Heracleitan opposites: she is a maiden who reveals her charm *and* her shrewishness impartially and gradually to the impatient lover. As always in this world the seen is but a fleeting footprint of the unseen. The unseen, visible only to the imagination, is the real and the enduring. One man may spend a lifetime without getting a glimpse of Malaya's soul; another will be *en rapport* with it from the first instant of contact.

The Malays in the terms of their poetic animism have a better vision of the elusive spirit of Malaya than most Europeans ever have. The Malay becalmed at sea (as Sir Richard Winstedt tells us) will invoke the wind to let down her long hair to fill the sails of his boat; he propitiates the unseen maleficent powers of hill and forest, river and tree, beast and copse, that bring sickness or death; before he plants house-pillars he propitiates the spirit of the soil he is violating. Before he begins to fish or hunt he addresses the spirits of sea or forest with conciliatory words, and to the fish and beast he declares that it is to his gun

or net, not to him, that they must attach the blame of molesting them. Tigers are called "grandsire," crocodiles "tree-log," snakes "living creepers." The whole of animate nature he feels in sympathy with. Even the seed-plant he plants tenderly, pretending he is restoring a child to its mother. Such are his aids to beholding and loving Nature as she manifests herself in Malaya.

But whether one is mystically or poetically inclined or not, it is certain that some abstraction will arise from extended experience of the country, and will be summoned up into the mind's eye whenever it is mentioned. Such a symbol a man can create only for himself; in these descriptive pages the aim will be to provide material from which the reader may build up an image, *ersatz* no doubt, but without exaggeration or untruth, and one that will remain in his inner consciousness if ever he has the luck to visit Malaya's magic shores.



## Chapter Two

### THE FACE OF MALAYA

*Were I Chinese, one word I'd write or two,  
And mists and mountains would rush into view,  
Add but a third slip in a dash or stop,  
Temples would gleam men fish and torrents drop.*

MARTYN SKINNER, *Letters to Malaya*

#### I

The name Malaya has come into general use only within the last thirty years or so. Before the British unified the Peninsula under their rule and protection, the two main divisions were referred to separately as the Straits Settlements and the Malay States. Then, in 1896, four of the states that were now under British protection were federated, and thus a third entity, the Federated Malay States (or more colloquially the F.M.S.), was created. But a need was felt for a single compendious term to describe the country as a whole. For a while British Malaya was used to describe collectively the British territories in south-east Asia, but after that "British" was usually dropped as redundant. The word Malaya is a modern English one, manufactured by adding an "a" to the name of the Malay people. (It is still a common illiteracy to refer to Malaya as "Malay," a word that describes only the people or their language.)

Malaya in its wider sense is used to include not only the territories of the Peninsula but also the British possessions in Borneo—Labuan (one of the Straits Settlements), Sarawak, the protected state of Brunei, and British North Borneo, governed by the British North Borneo Company. Also, by a political accident, Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean

and the Cocos Keeling Islands are part of the Settlement of Singapore, though widely separated from it geographically. But this book deals only with Malaya in its narrower and more usual sense, and that is the British possessions of the Peninsula. These extend from Singapore in the south at latitude  $1^{\circ} 24'$  North up to the northern corner of Perlis,  $6^{\circ} 44'$  North.

The Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements comprises Singapore, Penang (with Province Wellesley, a strip on the mainland), Malacca, and Labuan.

The Straits Settlements account for only a small portion of the total area of Malaya, covering 1,356 square miles (about the size of Gloucestershire) as compared with a total area of 52,528 square miles, which is slightly larger than that of England without Wales (50,874 square miles).

The Malay States are made up of the Federated Malay States, *i.e.* Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang, and the Unfederated States, *i.e.* Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trengganu. Brunei in Borneo is also a protected state outside the Federation.

(Note on pronunciation of Malayan proper names.—Malays pronounce their words smoothly and rather evenly, but there tends to be a slight accent on the middle syllable of a three-syllabled word. Ng at the end of a syllable is pronounced like the ng in the English "song," the g not being hard or carried over to the next syllable, thus, Sing-apore, Selang-or.)

## 2

Imagine, then, a country slightly larger than England without Wales, or somewhat smaller than Florida; being like a slender leaf on a narrow stalk, Malaya is much more like the peninsula of Florida in shape than England. It points south-east and almost nuzzles the Equator. England



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is so deforested, so drained, so belozenged into minute cultivation, so settled and so densely populated, that it is a poor standard of comparison for Malaya. In the time of the Ancient Britons, when so much was still forest with bears and wolves in possession, the comparison would have been nearer. Florida with its everglades and cypress swamp fills the bill rather more suitably, but even there there is nothing adequately to represent the matted jungle and swamp of Malaya which still cover four-fifths of its surface.

The only generally cleared parts of Malaya are a long strip down the west coast and a patch in the north-east, so to fit England for the comparative role we should have to cover it all with forest again except for the western counties together with Staffordshire, the East Riding of Yorkshire, and a bit of Dorset and Hampshire. For Florida the western strip would extend inland nearly as far as Bartow in Polk County, the north-eastern patch to represent Kelantan would take in Duval and St. John counties. There would also have to be a number of open patches to represent the clearings along the east coast of Malaya and up the rivers.

At some distant date Malaya was joined up with Sumatra, Java, and Borneo. The seas now separating them are shallow. The country is well outside the volcanic belt that curves through the archipelago, and though Malaya has not the rich soil of Java which is due to volcanic action, it does not suffer from violent earthquakes.

The mountain ranges of the Peninsula do not form a pattern lending itself readily to verbal description. The main ones are roughly parallel and in echelon to the north and centre, with lesser ones to the lower centre and west. They are formed of granite or quartzite, or of both. They rise in places to a little over 7,000 feet (Tahan, in northern Pahang, is the highest, being 7,186 feet as against Ben Nevis, 4,406), and are clothed in forest to their very summits,

though this thins out on the highest ranges like the fluff on the pate of a middle-aged man. The rivers are rapid, rushing steeply to the sea, and they are gorged with more rains than ever the Thames could swallow. Their lengths are about 200 miles for the Pahang River, and 170 for the Perak (the Severn is 210 and the Thames 209—to bring in the mighty American rivers in this connection would be to ignore all proportion).

The limestone hills of Perlis and Kinta are among the most beautiful of Malaya's physical features and deserve special mention. They rise sheer from the plain. From protuberances little more than boulders they range to great masses with perpendicular cliffs up to 2,000 feet high. The cliff faces are bare, but the crests are rounded crowns of forest trees, and in places where the precipice has broken away and crumbled the forest trees of the summit march down with majestic tread to join the jungle of the plain. Many of these limestone formations are rather like the crags on which Rhineland castles stand, but larger. You will find almost exactly the same thing in China, especially in Kwangsi, and until you have seen them you may dismiss as fanciful the crags and pinnacles of Chinese paintings. In Perak, where their interiors are honeycombed with caverns, the Chinese have made temples sacred to the Buddhist and Taoist gods (innumerable are the stone steps the faithful and the curious have to climb to those temples round about Ipoh), and one great cavern houses a complete village.

Yet it must be admitted at once that Malayan rivers, in their lower reaches at least, are muddy. This is due largely to the silt from tin mining. But in their first stages they are usually streams of pellucid loveliness. From their sources they plunge down in sparkling cascades and over granite falls, flowing then through corridors of great trees that

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intertwine their branches overhead. In the upper reaches there are often long and tortuous rapids, and at times rocky gorges. Then in the lower reaches, where their descent is more gradual, their dark brown waters flow through country with villages on either side. On the west coast they debouch through stretches of mud-flats and mangrove swamps. This is where the crocodiles abound.

Malaya's great rice-growing areas are in the alluvial plains of Kedah, Perlis, and Kelantan. Here the country has an openness not to be found in the remainder of Malaya. The jungle country has its primordial beauties, but one nevertheless heaves a sigh of relief on emerging from tangles of lianas and labyrinths of pillared giants into the open sky of the rice-fields. Selangor, Perak, and Negri Sembilan are more varied in their scenery. There you wind your way along smooth roads, up hill and down dale mostly, through the dingy rubber, over mountain passes where the forest reserve encompasses you, down into valleys where you are deeper lost in treedom. From this excess of vegetation Kedah is a relief—North Kedah, that is, after the rubber has ceased—for you will now travel along roads dead straight as far as the eye can reach and on which the heated air forms in reflecting mirages.

Then there are the islands. The waters off the Malayan coast are studded with them. Penang Island itself is a "gem of the orient earth"; the Langkawis off the North Kedah coast have a wilder beauty, but in Penang, for once the hand of man has not fumbled in its adornment of nature. Pangkor, off the coast of Perak, was once a Dutch settlement, and the ridiculously tiny square fort is mouldering away there in the verdure. Off the east coast, amongst the many islands and islets, there is Tioman, which from the shape of

its granite pinnacles the Malays believe to be a petrified dragon.

Malaya's east coast has wide beaches on which the breakers from the China Sea curl, and behind them fringes of feathery casuarinas.

The coastline of Malaya is over 1,200 miles in length.

Having, so to speak, sketched in the bones of Malaya, we may proceed to describe how these bones are clothed. The mantle of the country is for four-fifths of its extent nothing but heavy folds of green drapery and tangled swamp, just as it was ten thousand years ago. The other fifth is of man's weaving—rubber plantations, rice-fields, coconuts, with smaller patches of nipah, tea, or African oil palm, and threadbare stretches where the ground has been pitted and scratched and scraped for tin.

Malaya's prettiest man-made scenery is round the *kampongs*, or Malay villages, for nearly every homestead has its plantation of coconuts and fruit trees, including the rambutan, the mangosteen, the papaya with acanthusine leaves, the mango, and the banana or plantain, and very often a clump of sugar-cane or tapioca.

The forests of the Peninsula are classified technically as littoral or inland. The first are subdivided into mangrove swamp forest and dry forests (the latter including casuarina belts), and the second into fresh-water swamp forests and dry forests (the latter including lowland forests up to 2,000 feet and high hill forests about 4,000 feet). It is the lowland forests in which Malaya's floral richness is best displayed. It is the true Malayan jungle.

The Malayan jungle is both hideous and beautiful, monotonous and various, irritating and awe-inspiring: it is a perpetual paradox.

It is grievous to see living things so overcrowded and so

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exclusively concerned in a cut-throat competition for survival. The stronger thrusts the weaker aside in the upward journey towards the giver of all life, the sun. Luxuriant creepers grip and festoon the branches; parasitical ferns and orchids suck as much vitality as they can out of their hosts. The battle is the battle for the light, though some seeds and saplings of the great can bide their time, growing slowly for a hundred years, and then shooting up rapidly as they come within the sphere of the plentiful rays. The deathly stillness, the muteness of this ruthless struggle, makes it all the more terrible to the suggestible onlooker.

When we are in it we cannot take an objective view of the jungle. Passing along the forest path we are oppressed by the ceaseless menace, and by the arrogance of the overpowering mass. It is only when we have climbed to some man-made eyrie, such as Fraser's Hill or Cameron's Highlands, high above the foliage, or where we can see the onrush of the vegetable armies arrested by a river bank, that the mind is serene enough to see its beauty. From a height above the forest we see the great rolling ocean of the tree tops sweep on over the mountain shoulders. Here, then, is a composition stressing a single chord, or rather utilizing a limited section of the solar spectrum from the silver-grey of the *meranti* tops to the grey-fawn of trees in the middle distance and the cobalt blue of the haze dissolving the far away, tree-invested mountains. The details are picked out in tender greens of young leaves and red shoots and glimpses of bark of golden yellow and fawn. The sun in his leisurely career over the heavens functions much like an art-gallery expert showing a visitor the points of a Constable or a Claude—calling attention to the subtleties, picking out the silhouettes of the masses in high lights, and enabling the layman to appreciate as a masterpiece what would else have seemed a mere blur.

On the river banks stand the upright shafts of the tree trunks, sixty feet without a branch, like the peristyle of a Greek temple. Here too are orange-flowered creepers, purple blossoms, and graceful bamboos.

## 3

Let us descend now from our Olympian prospect amid the cool mountain breezes to the stuffy floor of the forest, four thousand feet down. If we can force our way through the spiny *bertam* palm without having our clothes torn off us, and through the other hostile undergrowth, we shall find ourselves in the midst of nature's struggling class system. We shall conclude at once that the health authorities of this vegetable municipality (if such there be) should make some move at once to secure better light and ventilation. The air, for example, is too much like hot treacle; the over-crowding is nothing less than disgraceful.

What names the individual members of the assembled proletariat bear will not greatly interest us, unless we are botanists. Some small palms and herbaceous plants will tell us that they are *Sonerila* or *Melastomacheae*, at which we shall nod politely and say to ourselves that it is only snobbery on their part—they are really Smiths or Joneses.

Somewhat higher up in the social scale (and height is the social measure) there are numerous small trees and shrubs. Some are nearly as tall as Cleopatra's needle, seventy feet high. Above them again is a group, or class, of trees that would, if the Duke of York's column in Waterloo Place were planted amongst them, nudge His Royal Highness with their top-most branches. In this class we shall find the *petaling*, the *penarahan*, and the *tempenis*, names familiar enough to Malaysians. Some of the more pushing members from the class below reach to this extent above their station. Above

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this again, at an average height of one hundred and fifty feet, and with aristocratic individuals passing the two hundred foot mark, are the governing class. To these belong the *keruing*, the *chengal*, and the *jelutong* families. Nelson on his column in Trafalgar Square, transplanted, would be shrouded in their greenery with twenty or thirty feet to spare.

Whereas money is the stuff whereby standing is finally measured in our plutocratic human community, with the jungle hierarchy it is light. Light is the virtual monopoly of the Big Five (or whatever the number is). These Rockefellers and du Ponts, Courtaulds or Monds, Mitsuis or Mitsubishis, have something like a monopoly of 'the rays of the sun. Their branches form an almost complete canopy. What light is not absorbed or shut off by them filters through to the upper middle class; what the latter in turn cannot make use of or exclude is the property of the lower middle class. The masses receive the residue rather in the form that sunlight might take at the bottom of the sea. But they all survive somehow; only the lower down the more adaptable they have to be.

The parasites—the climbing plants—are the hucksters, the lounge lizards, and the confidence men of nature, who make the best of all worlds.

In the Malayan forests the lack of seasons, or rather of sharp seasonal changes, means that the colours of autumn so liberally splashed over the woods of Britain or North America are spread over the whole year. The wealth of foliage conceals the individual display, for deciduous trees winter here as in temperate zones, but at odd times. But Malaya's palette has some strong minor pigmentation in the bright new leaves. The *penaga* goes in for new leaves of pink or red; the *perak*'s suit is vivid crimson. Some trees entice, so to speak, by lifting their skirts and revealing the

light grey silk of the lining ; that is, the underneaths of their leaves. Orange and red flowers here and there provide other colour effects, and butterflies are called in to assist the jungle display. So what is generally a monotony of blue rather than green is seen as subject to some pleasing alleviations. But, as Alfred Russel Wallace observed, it is in temperate Europe one must look for massed colour, not in the tropical forests.

The Malayan jungle, it has been said above, is both irritating and awe-inspiring. The irritation is provided by the *bertam* palm and its confederates ; inspiration by the grand oceanic sweeps of the subjected foliage.

This impressionist description does not include the palms and bamboos, the mangrove forests, or the "introduced" plants. Mangroves are of a dingy green-grey colour, but their tormented Laocoön-like roots are fear-somely reminiscent of the illustrations by Doré to Dante's *Inferno*.

In addition to the valuable timber and the mangoes used for firewood, Malayan forests are rich in other economic products : canes, damar and other gums, gutta-percha, and jelutong are produced. Gutta-percha is used principally for insulating submarine cables ; jelutong is the base of chewing gum.

## 4

And what of the beasts, the birds, and the insects that congregate in Malaya's faunal store ?

Considering the fact that the collection gathered together in this little corner the size of England is probably the most various in the world, there is some excuse for playing with the idea that Noah's ark grounded somewhere off Port Swettenham, and that most of its inmates walked off two by two into the luxuriant forests they found there. (Adam,

Untuk melihat muka surat seterusnya, sila berhubung dengan petugas kami di kaunter.