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There is no song to this city, Singapore: there is the silent grapple of money grabbing; the limousine purr of luxury; the scrape, gurgle and scratch of half a hundred languages rasping next to each other; there is the hell-scream of the So-na clarionet; cacophony, stridence—no unity, no harmony, no song.

It is a city with a mind, a calculating business mind; with busy, gifted hands; and enormous strength for work; a city with entrails; with vision; with a soul—but with no singleness of purpose, no unanimity, no heart.

Yet it is a great city, wondrous in wealth, rich in people, great in time; some say the most varied, most fascinating city on the earth.

Raffles founded it, Western history claims, in 1819. But already at that time ruins of royal residences and a temple and the tombs of Malay kings lay in twisted rambutan trees on the summit of the Forbidden Hill; to Malays, Indians and Indonesians, to all Eastern peoples who know the history of the kingdoms of Sri Vijaya and Majapahit, it was founded by Sang Nila Utama, prince of a Sumatran royal family, who named it Singapura, the Lion City.

The Javanese called it Tumasik. In 1376 they sailed over the intervening sea and sacked it; and from 1391 for several centuries—inside its narrow waterways and mangrove swamps—the ruins of Singapura lay abandoned to sea-gypsies and pirates.

Today, a wonder skyscraping the margin of the Eastern sea, it is known to the local Chinese as Hsin-Chia-P’o.
In all their variety, Chinese form more than three-quarters of the city’s population. Throughout the nineteenth century, from the time when the Temenggong (the Malay governor) and Tengku Hussein (the enormously fat Malay Sultan) agreed to hand the jungle-clad marshy island over to Raffles and the East India Company, through the early decades of the twentieth century up to the Second World War, the Chinese made their way to the new ‘boom’ town in the South Seas. Like ants attracted to a piece of honeycomb, they came at first in small straggling groups — menfolk only — then they began to pour in swarms down the long sea-lashed coastlines of Cambodia and Malaya, crowded junk-loads at a time — we can see those junks on old Chinese postage-stamps — and later still they arrived smokily, sedately, by steam coaster, families of boisterous immigrants all together. And like ants they sank their mandibles into the commercial sweetness of Singapore.

They came to trade, to farm, to buy land, to build, to grow rich. Some brought their money from China and lost it; others multiplied it a hundred-fold; many brought nothing at all, but worked long, lived hard, prospered, became towkays. It was all a matter of luck.

Simultaneously with the growth of the new settlement thousands of Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese disappeared into the tiger-infested jungle which covered the interior of the island. While some hacked out plantations and orchards and grew pepper and gambier or bred pigs and poultry, others lived only for gambling and opium-smoking and existed by robbery, piracy and every kind of lawlessness. All were members of the thousand-year-old Thian Tai Huey Society, the savage ritual and terror of which they brought with them from Amoy, Canton or Macao. Settlement homes and shops were raided night after night by powerful gangs of robbers and cut-throats from the jungles and swamps of To Tangling and wild country up the Katong river. Police and secret societies contended for mastery. Life was cheap, death violent.

Piracy was rampant around the coasts of southeast Asia, especially in the archipelago of green islands to the south of
Singapore. One of the earliest orders of the first East India Company resident of Singapore was that hundreds of human skulls, some old, some fresh, some with scalp clinging to them, some with teeth filed to points, should be gathered up from the shore where they were lying and dumped in the sea. It was on the beach at Singapore that pirates used to decapitate the sailors and merchants they captured.

Temporarily, in those early years, the settlement became a new market for slaves. It was possible to buy a slave girl, imported by sailing boat from Bali or Celebes or Sumatra, for less than fifty dollars. The slave dealer would open her clothing and show her off to potential customers. Chinese, Indians, Malays—it seems that all races were eager to buy these girls. That trade was suppressed by the British.

The settlement grew.

Out of violence, out of greed, out of lust, out of hard work, faith, wisdom, compulsion of international commerce, it grew.

Always the population was predominantly Chinese. They came, made money, multiplied themselves, built shop after shop, shop-house after shop-house, narrow street after street. In 1819 the village that was Singapore—all that was left of ancient Singapura—could boast 150 souls. In 1954 the city had a million people (in 1985 the population was more than 2.5 million), 16,000 shops, more than fifty miles of pavements, more than 50,000 motor vehicles, and 17,000 motor accidents a year. The birthrate was one of the highest in the world, and over half the population were under twenty-one. Seldom did you see an old face. Of every ten faces eight were Chinese.

In the clamorous, vivid, bustling streets of Chinatown, the immigrants from China and their descendants packed themselves close, 800 to the acre. As more and more relations, friends and strangers arrived, each tall narrow house ceased to be a home but became, instead, a warren of cubicles. Half-a-dozen children slept under a family bed; adult couples took turns to sleep on it: it was possible, so, for a family of fifteen people to live without exceptional discomfort in an ill-ventilated room ten feet square. That is how a hundred thousand of the poorer Chinese
lived in Nankin Street, China Street, Chin Chew Street, Pekin Street, Hong Kong Street, Upper Hokkien Street, Upper Cross Street, Amoy Street, Peck Sean Street, Tras Street, Temple Street, Keong Saik Road, Sago Street, Sago Lane—all over Chinatown.

Throughout Chinatown, the old and the new, perfection and vulgarity, poverty and peacock living, superstition and crystal clarity of mind, utter squalor and rare beauty, the falling petal and a whisper of eternity, contrasted.

Pek Lai Wing was a hawker, selling fried groundnuts, boiled beans, and a species of watery very-mock-turtle soup the recipe for which only he knew. There were ten thousand licensed hawkers in Singapore and about twenty thousand others who operated without licenses. Pek was licensed, a bowl of his soup costing only ten cents, its quality established among a regular clientele. He generally sold from a ‘pitch’ on South Boat Quay, although for reasons unapparent to the uninitiated he sometimes retreated to Chulia Street or North Canal Road. He carried his ‘shop’ with him, fire and soup-pan slung from one end of a split bamboo, soup bowls, tiny wooden stools, washing-up bucket, other impedimenta hanging from the other end. The bamboo bit into his shoulder as he trotted from place to place. Pek Lai Wing was small, brown and wrinkled; his black hair was shorn off in a permanent crew cut; he wore a sweaty vest, stained blue shorts and sandals; the expression on his face was whimsical and wary. He had to remain on the look-out for hungry Boat Quay urchins and older spivs who would snatch the fried groundnuts behind his back if given a chance. Pek lived in a cubicle and shared, outside it, a second-floor landing in Upper Cross Street. He had a wife and six children, and cleared three hundred Straits dollars a month. Hsin-Chia-P’o, to him, was a better place than all China.
The Willem Ruys

We left England on board the Willem Ruys which was making her thirty-first voyage from Rotterdam to Djakarta. Southampton was dismal with smog. Orange, green and blue labels plastered to our baggage proclaimed that we were bound for Singapore. I had pestered the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas to recommend me for appointment to several universities in the tropics: finally, I believe, they tired of my persistence and sent me as far away as possible.

Most of the people on board were Dutch, travelling to Surabaya, Djakarta and places in Sumatra to join their menfolk. The British passengers were bound for rubber plantations in Malaya, the Borneo oilfield or commercial jobs in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. There was a sprinkling of Chinese, Malays and Indonesians returning home from universities in Europe, and a few German and Austrian engineers and scientist, including, it was said, the Austrian scientist who was mainly responsible for invention of the V-1 doodlebug.

The language of the ship was Dutch but most people included English in their repertoire. Nor was multilingualism confined to Europeans. Our Javanese cabin-boy, who wore a soft black velvet songkok with an oval crown and a thin pyjama-like blue and white suit, said he spoke 'a little English, little Dutch, little Chinese, Japanese, Tamil, Arabic, French and, of course, Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia': he was probably in his early twenties.

Eating on board was unmistakably Dutch. After becoming conditioned to the frugal cutlet and the fragment of butter permitted each week in post-war England, the evening meal on the Willem Ruys, with fifteen courses and over thirty dishes from which to choose, was a gastronomic mystical experience. One was expected to gorge to repletion on dainty hors d’oeuvres, Rhine salmon, woodcock, Flemish goose, aiguillettes de canard, wild boar, turkey, Bavarian pheasant and, as the ship approached Eastern waters, Javanese satay, nasi goreng and much besides.
By day, as on all voyages, there was little to do but watch the sea and the sky, write letters, sample the ship’s library or talk to other passengers. Mevrouw Stephens, travelling to Kuala Lumpur with nineteen-year-old Mejuffrouw Shirley Stephens, was English and had been home on leave; John Yarrow was an I.C.I. plastics salesman; Mijnheer Clough was employed by Shell in the Borneo oilfield; Mevrouw Heitz Quarles de Quarles, lipsticked and long-legged in slacks, was travelling to Djakarta to join her husband who was with a military mission; Dr and Mevrouw Pang were Chinese, smooth-skinned and charming and their small son, aged seven, provided a playmate for Antony; even the notorious Dr Gollings of V-I infamy wanted to talk: ‘Zee kinderen, zay air biological zings, like leetle organisms—but every organism is deeferent—hein?’

Most evenings one could dance—although it was not always easy to accommodate the rise and fall of the dance floor—go to the cinema, play tombola or bridge, watch pillow fights over the swimming pool or see a cabaret turn improvised by the versatile ship’s crew. After-dinner occupations, indeed, might vary from listening to a gramophone recital of Beethoven or Sibelius to backing one’s favourite in the ship’s steeplechase in the lounge, or collapsing into the sleep of the really well fed. For those with romantic aspirations there was always the boat deck and nights, very soon, of authentic ‘tropical splendour’ with no insects. Somerset Maugham plots developed after a week.

The appearance of land was always reassuring. First, Cape St Vincent, snoring in surf; then Gibraltar, too faint and far away to be properly seen; then in North Africa the sandy beaches near Bizerta and the Atlas Mountains streaked with winter snow. In the Mediterranean a storm assailed us, the same in which the mine-sweeper Solium sank near Alexandria; bottles and suitcases slid about the cabin and many people turned delicate shades of green and found excuses for not appearing in the dining-room.

The first port of call was Port Said, reputed to be a sink of iniquity, so that one approached the breakwater and the huge statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps with high expectations. In fact, there was not even a pornographic postcard in sight although the