SINGAPORE—
A POLICE BACKGROUND

by

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Chapter One

OLD MEMORIES AND LATER DAY REFLECTIONS.

I first arrived in Singapore as a Police Cadet on the 28th of December, 1907. I was twenty years old. The voyage out had been wonderful—as so many first voyages often are. Malta, Port Said, Aden, Colombo, Penang, Singapore, exciting new places for anyone who had not long ago left school and crammer. Names to-day that many men and women will never forget. The sea, boardship life, going ashore at ports, contact with exciting fellow passengers, all were soon forgotten in the new life into which I plunged on arrival at Singapore. Among the thrills I still remember were my new uniform with two pips on the shoulder straps and the regard and authority it commanded, the joy of having a personal servant, the friendliness of everyone, the masses of people I met.

I now know that I had been in time to see something of the fascinating old pattern of Malayan life that had so endeared the country to early government officials and to its first merchants, planters and miners. It was a country that was still young, where time did not seem to matter very much, and where individuals rather than ideas carried weight; where there still existed something more than a semblance of personal contact with Asiatics, something more than a semblance of leadership and direction of native activities, and nothing, as in modern times, of competition with them.

A happy land unconscious of its past—for having been free from national or economic ties it had no real past—and in whose present the pull of collectivist ideas, such as labour or nationalism, was practically unknown. A happy land in which the absence of the growing pains of
education among the uneducated masses and of taxation and representa-
tion amongst all went unnoticed. Where, in fact, all these things or
the lack of them gave to the people a catholic brotherliness, the evidence
of which was looked upon by newcomers with wonder, and with awe by
those who had served their apprenticeship in other lands. Perhaps out
of the memory of this old Singapore and from the lessons of the war
will be born a still greater spirit of happiness and co-operation. Modern
Malaya, so free from the bickering petty mindedness to be found in the
Caribbean or the anomaly of nationalism to be met with in India, could
in truth still be called a happy land.

Against the civil administration of this country and the quality of its
people has been cast, unjustly, much of the blame for its loss. It takes
all sorts to make a world; and, of course, in Malaya there were all the
grades between good and bad. On the whole the European population,
above average prosperous, had developed a tradition of social conduct
towards all classes above average good.

When the Fifth Light Infantry regiment, an Indian Army unit of the
14-18 war, corrupted by German agents, mutinied in Singapore in 1915,
it was found necessary to evacuate European women and children from
their homes to ships in the harbour. Empty houses and offices were left
open and in charge of Asiatic servants. There was not a single reported
case of theft or misappropriation during the absence of the owners. This
was not the mark of harsh taskmasters; no more than the steady immigra-
tion into Malaya of tens of thousands of Indians and hundreds of
thousands of Chinese was the sign of oppressive rulers. Similar examples
of co-operation with and affection for Europeans have been recorded
during the Japanese invasion of Malaya. The happy prosperity of Malaya
could not have been achieved by a spineless government or by a discon-
tented population.

Reconstruction and the future political set-up, however, will not be
easy, Malaya is the land of the Malays, and their interests, therefore,
must be the deciding factor; but it has also become a cosmopolitan land,
fifty per cent. of its population being of non-Malay origin. It is by these,
controlled by British rule, that Malaya has been made prosperous for
the Malays, as well as for themselves. A fact which critics are apt to
forget when finding fault with successful foreigners. Second generation
Indians, of whom there are thousands, are no longer recognised as Indian
by the authorities in India; and the Chinese people, because of their pre-
ponderating numbers and because of the immense sums of money
remitted to China, have been tempted at times to look upon Malaya as
a terra irredenta—and without any justification, it is true, but still very
definitely so during the Chinese nationalist movements of the third and
fourth decades of this century. These were, and still will be, problems
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enough and to spare, but in spite of them the land was a happy land and
can be made so again.

The development of the happy spirit of Malaya had something more
to it than luck, and if we look closer into the past as into the late present,
we shall find the reason to be unselfish and sound government. The
simple and the wise people of the country have shown a consistent regard for their rulers, giving to the early officials and pioneers as well as to those who had shouldered responsibilities in more recent times a well-earned respect—though a later and less discriminating generation sometimes gave it to wealth. Always, the names of past civil servants were remembered as examples of righteous rule. Such men made a permanent impression not only because of the straightness of their public dealings but because of the rectitude of their private lives. Nowhere is a man's private life of more public knowledge than in the East; nowhere is personal touch and personal contact of such importance. The public found in these men little difference between their private and public morality, and so remembered their work with admiration and with pleasure. The record of the Malayan Civil Service de carrière has been exemplary; it was also that of the best brains in the country, which is not surprising, for it would be accurate to say that they were drawn from the same fountain that fills the ranks of the higher civil services of England and India. There were, of course, duds and misfits—as there are in every Service—and some men who owed their promotion to brilliant paper work have not been so forceful when decision and not analysis was required.

I do not know that the same excellence can be claimed for all those who joined its ranks from other walks of life—which goes some way to support the contention that in a profession where built up tradition flourishes, that tradition keeps bright the service of those who have chosen it as a permanent career. It is doubtful whether a government service in any colony would profit by the continual importation of supermen of one sort or another from other colonies, or even of men in the same colony who had achieved success in private enterprise. The former can never give or receive anything but secondhand love to or from the new land to which they have been transplanted and of which it is more than likely they cannot sense the finer differences; and the latter will find it hard to put aside established habits or private interests.

The Civil Services in Malaya up to very recently were purely Malayan. That is to say, officers were recruited in England exclusively for Malaya and none was drafted thither from other Colonies. This Malayan Civil Service developed an intimate knowledge of the country and an expert touch for handling local problems. Keeping this in mind let us consider town and rural councils.

These were made up in much the same manner as in England, but with a senior grade civil servant in place of a mayor or chairman as president. Members were elected from all professions and from all races—European, Eurasian, Chinese, Indian, Arab and Malay. Fresh arrivals in the country (such people always know best) had suggested elected mayors or chairmen. How many supporters of this idea stopped to consider the complexity of interests and private intrigues that complicate the work of members on boards or committees in such a cosmopolitan and semi-eastern, semi-western country as Malaya? Anyone but an impartial government official without local ties, but with a background
of considerable local knowledge and the prestige of his service, would have found such a position unmanageable. The subtlety with which personal interests are interwoven with loyalty to a higher cause is not peculiar to Asia, for one finds ample proof of its existence in Europe. In Asia, however, it definitely and always does exist. There, commercial and civic rivalries often result in physical intimidation of a cruder nature than the more subtle forms practised in more civilised countries, but it is open to doubt which of the two methods in the long run is the more hurtful. I can give a good example of a case in Singapore combining both.

Some years ago a once rich and honoured Indian of Singapore died in poverty and disgrace. He was credited with much villainy but before he left for India he gave the following account of himself. It tallied pretty well with official records, and gives some insight into what went on behind the scenes in early days. It showed how methods changed with the times. Asiatics never come to the point at once, for one thing it is not polite and for another they are far more cautious than Europeans. Always, as they talk they feel for the spirit with which what they say is being received. So, in the course of a rambling conversation these are the main points of his story.

"I am sick," said he, "and I will soon die. The Chinese say to a bridegroom 'may you have a hundred sons,' but what can they teach you? It is better to have a hundred ancestors, from them a man can learn much. I have no ancestors and my sons have been useless. To the end I have been the manager, and when I fell ill a few years ago everything seemed to fall with me. I have done some bad things when I was young. Who has not? As I grew older, I promised to make amends, and I have done so—but not enough, so it would seem. I have never cried out when hurt. Giving you my story means far more to me than the hundreds and thousands of dollars I have paid to many men for their favours. You would be surprised if I told you of them all. Business is a funny thing. We Asiatics think European methods strange. For instance, Europeans will cut out all middlemen, as a result, the principals make a handsome profit, and few of their friends are any the better for it. If they are already wealthy and powerful they can shut out competitors, if they become wealthy they generally do so. Now we Asiatics do things differently. We seek the help of or introduce many men into a venture. We talk it over, and everyone contributes something to the scheme—a word in season here, a present there, some information from this one, some help from that, and eventually the thing is done and many people are made happier. The rich pay out a good deal more, it is true, and rake in a good deal less; but, I ask you, which is the better method? My great mistake was that I tried to use the European method with the only means in my power: not being wealthy or influential I fought for it by myself.

"Do you know that before ever I came into the cattle trading business, I learnt about men and business on the wharves of Singapore, years before Captain Chancellor became Superintendent of the Dock Police and
cleaned the place up. There I once used to earn my food and three dollars a month (seven shillings)—not long ago I was worth half a million. I next started a money changer’s business on the wharves, and after some months of physical strife I and my men established a monopoly, and I made a fair amount of money, but what is more, I made a name for myself. I also learned a good deal about the cattle and sheep importation trade. The trade was easy, but the early traders were not content to share profits, and so they employed bullies who interfered with the arrangements of rivals. It was about this time that one of the original firms invited me to join them. Later, what with the death of the original partners and dissension among the juniors, I bought them all out, and before the war (1914) I became known as the Cattle King. The old system of intimidation and assault was carried on by every rival firm that sprang up periodically, but I was not afraid of that sort of thing. Also, I paid out more tea money*. I had a good deal of luck with my shipments of cattle, managing to get them home before quarantine restrictions delayed them at the various ports from which they were collected. People only remember the rough side of this competition, and as I was better at it than the others, I was, of course, judged to be the worst of them all. But I really overcame competition on the quiet by knowing more about how things were run. I invented better methods of competition. I undersold rivals; I introduced completely free-meat days. I have continued this practice for the faithful (Muslims) on their holy days. Naturally, when competition had been killed, I raised the price of meat, especially mutton, to a reasonable figure. The fluctuation in the price of meat will bear comparison with that of most things. Cotton vests, for instance, which everyone needs, which if made in Japan are cheap and if made in England are expensive. I succeed and I am called a rogue, for others it is good business. A Municipal President told me, when I built my big house at Katong and gave it the Indian name of Karikal Mahal—Karikal being my birthplace—I should have called it Kambing (sheep) Mahal!† He conveniently forgot the increasing prices of municipal licences and rates. This house cost me 500,000 dollars. This house made living very expensive for me. The marriages of my sons from under its roof cost me a fortune. It has proved ‘Mahal’ indeed. Having to live up to it has helped to ruin me. The house itself affected land prices in this vicinity. I had been asked by landowners to build a house in various places so as to put up the local price of land; but I never went in for that sort of thing, nor for land speculation, in spite of advice from people who knew the ropes. That was never my line as a young man, and so I did not know how to use it when I became old; so I made enemies. When I was very rich, clubs and societies wished to make me a patron or asked me to take a hand in public affairs. For a little while I thought of it and gave large donations—once 25,000 dollars, to one of them, but soon

* The expression tea money derives from the Chinese custom of drinking ceremonial cups of tea when making visits or discussing any news or business transaction. In Singapore it came to mean anything from a small tip to a shady form of commission or a serious case of bribery.

† Mahal in Hindustani means great, in Malay it means expensive.
found that my cattle rivalries, or devilries, if you like, were small when compared with what went on elsewhere. I have given large sums of money to charities in Karikal and Singapore. In Karikal I was persuaded to back some unknown man at the municipal elections, and later was awarded the Légion d'Honneur, as my candidate was elected! I think I got my J.P. Singapore not only for being a leading Indian but for giving 10,000 dollars to the Red Cross fund in 1917. I also gave 20,000 dollars for Raffles College. The Government did not return these sums to me when they deprived me of my J.P. ship. My present disgrace was brought on me by what has come to be known as the market murder case, when a meat stallholder was killed by one of my watchmen, the murder being put down to trade rivalry. But you know that such an act would not profit my trading position, which had not been good on account of European firms having come into the market. For years and long before Sikhs were engaged for such purposes, the descendants of convict labour were often engaged as watchmen. People thought them brave. They were often much taller than local people and were very good at stick-swinging (a sort of Indian single-stick art). These men had feuds among themselves, into which their patrons were often drawn when defending them against the attacks of the servants of other men. The murder case, in which one of my watchmen was concerned when working for my son as a meat stall holder, was such a case. My enemies have used it against me. But if you consider that the rival firm to mine, whose servant it was, had European backing, do you think that I would organise murder to re-establish a trade monopoly lost for good, as everyone knew? The murder which was the outcome of a brawl was used against me very cleverly. It is too sad to talk of, and my enemies have got a sick man and a ruined man to hammer. Let us talk of other things."

Many men will remember Kadir Sultan. In the happy-go-lucky days when the cattle and sheep importing trade was in the hands of Southern Indian merchants, their organisation, profits and rivalries were carried on in much the same manner as was done by almost every other Asiatic commercial activity of a proprietary nature in the robust period of some fifty years ago. Their first effort at reorganisation and modernisation was the employment of English-speaking clerks. Many of these men complicated rather than simplified business, for they soon had their own axes to grind. When this sort of proprietary firm with its business based on traditional local requirements and happy local relationships came into rivalry with firms organised on western lines, it went under—very much as the small proprietary shops or pubs of Victorian England have

*When Singapore was being administered from India the Government of Bengal used it as a Convict Station, and a great many Indian convicts were sent there to serve out their terms of imprisonment. In the course of time these men numbered several hundred. People in England who heard of this and who were interested in Singapore painted lurid pictures of the dangers run by the English colonists from the menace of an uncontrollable convict population. Actually the convicts were most law abiding. They were on more than one occasion called in to reinforce the police against Chinese lawlessness! The convicts were used as road makers and builders, and very good craftsmen they proved to be. On release these men settled down in Singapore; some became wealthy and their descendants have become honoured members of the Asiatic community.
been squeezed out by combines or chain stores that cover whole districts.

That is what really happened to the Straits Cattle Trading Company in the last years of Kadir Sultan's management, and not altogether as he, poor man, imagined on account of underground intrigue. Its history went back some seventy years. It was one of the last surviving links with old Singapore and its inter islands and coastal trade was carried in wooden ships by men who took physical and financial risks, uncovered by insurance or government protection. They developed a self saving technique which they considered not much different from that practised by the Portuguese against the Malays, by the Dutch against the Portuguese, and by ourselves against the Dutch, even if it all had happened a very long time ago!

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(ii)

In Singapore, having due regard to an apparently ineradicable tendency for both Europeans and Asians to consider bargaining necessary as soon as one is somewhere east of Suez, many Asiatic traders and professional men, whose clients include Europeans, had adopted western methods. Generally speaking, therefore, one knew where one was with them. But on the whole, local trade and professional methods remained peculiar to the East, and there were a few it would be difficult to find elsewhere: for instance, southern Indian money lenders who kept their accounts on leaves, brewers of monkey soup—an aphrodisiac and a leg-pull, the keepers of dying-houses where lonely people went to die, or where people were taken to die so as to save the home from trouble or bad luck. There was a gruesome side to those establishments. Inmates in extremis were always brought down to the ground floor in deference to the belief that bad luck would come to anyone living below a dying person. I knew a Chinese doctor who gave much of his time to comforting these people, and never exacted payment from patient or dying-house keeper.

As regards European enterprise—given the almost universal effort to acquire wealth more rapidly than in Europe, and that wear and tear (human and material) was even more pronounced—it would be accurate to say that all forms of professional and commercial enterprise to be met in Europe and America had their counterpart in Malaya. This is what one would expect to find, for the majority of whites out there, both in the services and in private business, came from a very representative cross section of European and American middle classes. By middle class I do not mean a money earning or social qualification only, but also an educational qualification giving its owner entry into the highest professions. The white population of Singapore were, generally speaking, the same sort of upper middle class people one met in Britain and America, and they behaved in the same way. All of them aspired, when their work was done, to retire and live at home and there to pick up the threads of old ways. The style and standard of life in Malaya was, however, comparatively several degrees higher; and even though a man on £500 a year would be better off in pre-war England, for necessities were dear in Malaya, he would have access to many luxuries out of the question