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Return to Malaya

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BOOK I

Traveller's Holiday

"It is better for mankind to be impressionable than reflective. Nothing humanely great—great, I mean, as affecting a whole mass of lives—has come from reflection."
CHAPTER ONE

THE Ishmaelites of this world are sincere and honest people. But they have this defect. More than any other category of mankind they suffer from the sin of self-deception. When they express a desire to turn their back on the rising sun and settle down, they think the desire is genuine. More often than not it is only temporary. They are troubled by the temptations of the wide spaces and by the restlessness of unrealisable dreams. Almost in spite of themselves they are forced to strike their tents and to be off again on the endless road of travel.

In British Agent I referred to "that East which I should never see again." When I wrote that line I was sincere. At that time nothing seemed less probable than that I should go back to the East. In 1928 I had exchanged a modest sinecure for a journalist's life with the Beaverbrook Press, because I was engulfed in debt. There seemed little chance of my rising to the surface of freedom again. To me, however, an improbability is a direct incentive to make the improbable not merely probable but certain. Very soon after my arrival in Fleet Street I felt the old restlessness coursing through my veins. Gradually it took the form of a desire to re-visit the scenes of my youth in Malaya.

There was certainly nothing very definite about it. As a boy Pierre Loti, who wanted to be a missionary, was shown a picture of Angkor and knew at once that one day he would visit it. At nine Joseph Conrad put his finger on the then unexplored heart of the map of Africa and saw his future in the Congo. Although I have spent more than twenty-five years of my life in foreign countries, I have never had any premonition about my movements. As far as my restlessness is concerned, travel, I suppose, is in my blood. Unlike the Preacher I have not yet reached the stage when I can say that I have seen everything under the sun and found it vanity.
Moreover, a long line of roving ancestors has left me the East as a kind of Galtonian legacy.

Two of my uncles were pioneers for the plantation rubber industry in Malaya. A cousin, a former cavalry officer, went there to die after a long life as a rolling stone. Two cousins are there now, and I have a brother, a colonel in the Indian army, who has spent the best years of his life in Afghanistan and on the North-West frontier.

Some blame, too for my Wanderlust attaches to my father. During the winter Sunday nights of our boyhood in Scotland he used to read to my brother and to me aloud. Sandwiched between Ivanhoe, Quentin Durward, Treasure Island, and the Pilgrim’s Progress were occasional books of adventure. And of these my favourite was Mayne Reid’s The Castaways, a tale of shipwreck and adventure in the Malay Archipelago. The book had been given to my father as a prize for geography when he was a boy of twelve at Partick Academy in 1870. I have it still. In one sense it has influenced my life more than any other book. For its account of giant durian trees, of sharks, of men adrift in an open boat on a tropical sea without food and, above all, without water, made a lasting impression on my mind.

The impression had active consequences. At the age of twenty-one I turned my back on the “crammer” which was preparing me for the Civil Service examination and went East to Malaya to join my uncles who foretold fortune and favour in the new plantation rubber industry.

I had spent three years in Malaya. They had been mis-spent years. I had been sent to open up a rubber estate in a Malay district where there were no other white men. I had caused a minor sensation by carrying off Amai, the beautiful ward of the Dato’ Klana, the local Malay prince. It had been my first romance. And it had very nearly caused political complications. The Dato’, an old friend with whom I had played football, had been hurt. His family, and especially his mother, had been angry, and for some weeks I had been subjected to a persistent pressure. Amai herself had been put in Coventry by her own compatriots. The courage of her race had never failed her and for some months we had been happy.

Then had come chronic ill-health. The doctors pronounced
malaria, but there were many people who said that I had been
poisoned. One day my uncle had come out to my bungalow, had
bundled my emaciated body into a motor-car, and had packed
me off home via Japan and America.

My Malayan venture had brought me neither credit nor cash.
But now, twenty-five years afterwards, in the futile London of
Fleet Street, it was to Malaya, the golden Chersonese of the early
voyagers, the Insulindes of the poets, that my thoughts turned, and
not to Russia or to Central Europe where I had spent what most
people would call the exciting years of my life. "Lockhart in
Quest of his Youth" seemed an attractive dream.

British Agent and, in a minor degree, my enthusiasm for Loti
were instrumental in giving material shape to my dream. British
Agent, which provided the financial substance of my voyage, was
begun at the old monastery house of Millicent, Duchess of Suther-
land, in Anjou. It was to her tiny villa in the Vendée that I went
to celebrate the book's success and to spend my first earnings as
an author.

It was a pleasant holiday. There was good food and good wine.
A huge Mercédès was at my disposal, and within easy range there
was the whole of the Clemenceau country to explore. I made
numerous visits to "La Bicocque," the little sea-swept cottage to
which the embittered cynic of Versailles withdrew when his own
countrymen repudiated him.

Clemenceau had carried his bitterness into the grave. In the
cottage, where everything, even to the hair-wash and the tooth-
brush, had been left exactly as it was in his life-time, there was
a little writing-desk. It was a primitive collapsible affair which
pulled out from a window overlooking the Atlantic. On the desk
were the quill pens with which he wrote his books and a sand-box
in place of blotting-paper. On the immediate right was a large
bookcase and in the shelf nearest to his hand an English book
entitled The Man Who Didn't Win the War. The sub-title was
"An Exposure of Lloyd Georgism"!

It was a curious manifestation of the Tiger's egotism, for "L.G."
and he, united by the bond of courage, had worked well together.
And if both men had lost the peace they had been indisputably
the two chief agents of the Allies' victory.

But it was not only the Clemenceau country which interested
me. Within motoring distance was Rochefort, the home town of my boyhood hero, Loti. The little Frenchman had been the first French author that I had ever met and, indeed, after Andrew Lang the first author on whom I had ever set eyes. The meeting, like so many meetings with the heroes of one's student days, had been something of a shock. But it had not diminished my admiration for Loti as a writer. I had read all his works, and *Le Mariage de Loti* and *Les Désenchantées* had been the propelling force that finally turned my footsteps Eastward. To Rochefort, therefore, I made a pilgrimage of gratitude.

How well I remember that visit: the permission shyly sought from M. Samuel Vialaud, the author's son; the grey November morning; the motor-drive through the bocage of La Vendée; the marshlands of La Rochelle, where as a schoolboy and Oxford undergraduate Mr. Anthony Eden, the young British Foreign Secretary, used to come to learn French from a Protestant pastor; the long alleys of tamarisks, and then just before Rochefort itself, the superb view of the Atlantic with the tiny Ile d'Aix, where Napoleon spent his last days on French soil before surrendering to the captain of the *Bellerophon*.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, when France still held her colonies in the New World, Rochefort was a great port. To-day, the town has lost its ancient glory. It has ceased even to be a naval base, and the neighbouring town of Brouage, still famous as the home of Champlain, the founder of Quebec, is now a ruin left high and dry by the receding sea.

But, if the remote past is dead, the immediate past is very much alive. The spirit of Loti haunts the town. There is a fine Loti street, a Lycée Loti, and several Loti charities. And at No. 141, in the street which now bears his name, is the Loti house, kept piously to-day by the son in the same exotic state as the father left it.

At the door I was received by a fine old servant in a black and yellow waistcoat. He was not "Mon Frère Yves," the sailor hero of Loti's most successful novel. But he was the next best thing—an old rating who had taken part with Loti in the Tonkin and Boxer campaigns. He bowed me into a room full of family portraits, waved an arm towards the Japanese room heavy with Buddhas and samurai armour, piloted me through a gimcrack Louis XVI salon, and left me standing in a vast banqueting hall
with a high roof, a staircase, and an inside balcony. I surmised correctly that this was the medieval hall. At this point in came M. Viaud, a dapper, slim Frenchman, very neatly dressed, with small black moustache, deep-set, very earnest eyes, and a charming modesty.

Under his guidance I now made a complete tour of the house. Upstairs there was another period room with old oak doors and stained glass windows taken mainly from local ruins. I felt as if I were being conducted through an antique store. At every moment I expected to come face to face with a waxwork figure of Loti himself. M. Viaud, however, was upset because the house was undergoing repairs, and it was to an accompaniment of polite apology that I made my way over rubble and loose stones to the top floor.

Here was Loti’s Turkish room fitted up as a mosque with the actual stones from the famous ruined mosque at Damascus. This was the best room in the house, and the presence of praying mats and Turkish coffins was a reminder not only of Loti’s love of the East, but also of his morbid interest in Death. Here, too, dressed as a Turk, he used to sit for hours in search of atmosphere. I ought to have been impressed, but in Rochefort so much exoticism seemed out of place. Instead, I marvelled at the filial devotion of M. Viaud, who lives with his wife and sons in this literary mausoleum.

Like most authors Loti was an egotist. His son is a devout Protestant whose name in Rochefort is a synonym for unselfishness and good works. There are three Loti grandchildren. Two are boys. They wish to go into the Navy. Fifty years ago, when Loti was at the height of his fame, a Paris professor asked his class to put down on paper their choice of profession. Forty out of fifty put down “sailor.” To-day, the highbrows affect to ignore Loti, although it is less than twenty years since Anatole France said “de nous tous, il est le plus sûr de durer.”

From the Turkish room we passed into a little attic with whitewashed walls. At one end was a small iron bedstead with a crucifix above it; at the other a tiny washstand, a chest of drawers, and a wooden bench covered with a white cloth by way of toilet table. In the midst of this austere simplicity there hung on the wall a set of fencing foils and two masks: a useful reminder
that this amazing little man, who in the salons of Paris wore high heels and rouged his cheeks, was a great gymnast who did his physical exercises daily until almost the last months of his life. Above the chest of drawers, too, was the "citation du jour," the French equivalent to "mentioned in despatches," commending the work in the war of the Commandant du Vaisseau, Julien Viaud. The "citation" was signed by Marshal Petain. Julian Viaud was Loti's real name.

This was the proper room for a Viaud with several generations of sailors behind him. A Viaud grandfather of Loti, a naval gunner, had died in Tarifa hospital from wounds received at Trafalgar. A Viaud uncle had perished on the Medusa, the ship which was bearing the new French Governor to the Senegal in 1817, after we had returned that colony to France after the Napoleonic Wars. The wreck, marked by a combination of bravery and cowardice almost unparalleled in the history of the seas, is immortalised by Géricault's picture, "The Raft of the Medusa." A brother, a naval doctor and twelve years older than Loti, had died of fever in Saigon.

A man of this stock had no need of all this exotic junk to remind him of his voyages. Here in this tiny white bedroom was the real Loti. Here, too, was the neatness which comes naturally to a naval officer whose life has been spent in confined space.

In the room there was one extraneous object: a box containing a cast of Loti's tiny woman-like hand and a collection of his gloves. The box had belonged to Madame Barthou, the wife of the statesman who was killed by the assassin of King Alexander at Marseilles. After her death it had been sent back to the Loti house as an exhibit. It was a token of the affection and hero-worship which Loti could inspire in women.

I have a capacity for making pilgrimages. I know none which has made me so dissatisfied with myself as that visit to Loti's house in Rochefort. Its immediate effect was to translate my dream of going East again into reality. And when in 1935 temptation presented itself in concrete form, I fell resolutely. For twelve years Lady Rosslyn has been my sheet-anchor and my better conscience. Five feet two inches of Irish Catholic saint, she is a woman who in spite of constant disappointment still believes that every moment of time is an opportunity for a fresh start. One afternoon