MALAYAN SYMPHONY

Being the impressions gathered during a six months' journey through the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, Siam, Sumatra, Java and Bali

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Illustrated with Photographs by the Author and others

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# CONTENTS

## PART I

**BRITISH MALAYA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. The &quot;Call of the East&quot;</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Through the Straits of Malacca</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The &quot;Gate of the Far East&quot;</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The Lighter Side of Singapore</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Johore Bahru</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Malacca—the &quot;Mother of Malaya&quot;</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. In and Around Malacca</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Northwards to Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. The Copra and Tin Belt</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X. Ipoh to Penang</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART II

**SOUTHERN SIAM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XI. The Journey to Bangkok</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII. An Orientalized Venice</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII. Impressions of Bangkok</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV. A Model Oriental Kingdom</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV. The Birth of a Constitution</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVI. The &quot;Wats&quot; in Bangkok</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART III

**THE DUTCH EAST INDIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XVII. Across Sumatra to Lake Toba</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVIII. Among the Savage Bataks</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIX. Balige to Fort de Kock</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX. Matriarchy among the Menangkabau</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXI. Java—The Mecca of Tourists</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>CONTENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXII.</td>
<td>In the Heart of Java</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIII.</td>
<td>Djokja and Solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIV.</td>
<td>Ancient and Modern Java</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXV.</td>
<td>Bali—the &quot;Garden of Eden&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXVI.</td>
<td>Southwards to Den Pasar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXVII.</td>
<td>A Bulwark of Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXVIII.</td>
<td>Bali's &quot;Road to Heaven&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIX.</td>
<td>In the Shadow of Gunong Batoer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXX.</td>
<td>Northern Bali</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MALAYAN SYMPHONY

PART I

BRITISH MALAYA

CHAPTER I

THE "CALL OF THE EAST"

The dull rumble of the traffic floated up to my ears through the open windows, punctuated at intervals by blatant motor-horns or shrill cries from newspaper vendors. I sat at my desk, dumb and motionless, staring out with blank eyes over an uncompromising maze of roofs and chimney-pots. A yellow haze of smoke cloaked the sharp outlines of the ugliness of the view, while a pale afternoon sun strove to pierce the gloom. It was an uninspiring outlook, contributing nothing to ease my deep depression of spirit.

My mind was far removed from London. I was conjuring up delightful memories of scenes witnessed in past wanderings about the world. It was an afternoon in late September, and London was sunless and cheerless. My soul ached for the warm sunshine and clear atmosphere of tropical lands; to be freed from the irksome shackles that bound me hand and foot, to be set down among strange peoples in distant lands. The wanderlust was strong within me. The world stretched wide before me—north, south, east and west. It beckoned over the vast spaces, and I wanted to respond to that alluring invitation. I felt myself imprisoned. Rebellion at my lot was gnawing savagely.

In imagination, I could hear the silver-toned pagoda bells in Burma; the musical notes of the mule-bells on the roads in Yunnan; the tinkle of a woman’s anklets in the Chadni-Chauk of Delhi; the soft-footed patter of a Chinese ricksha-coolie in Shanghai; the strident call to prayer intoned by a muezzin from a lofty Arab minaret in the Persian Gulf; the chug-chug of a stern-wheeler nosing its way up the Nile between Khartoum and Rejaf; the thunder of the foaming cascades of water over the lip of the majestic Victoria Falls; the coughing, grunting roar of a lion, menacing and challenging,
on the Athi Plains of Kenya; the monotonous rhythm of the *ngoma* drums in Zanzibar; and the kiss of the Atlantic Ocean against the bows of a mail-steamer ploughing its way southwards to Cape Town.

All were old familiar friends in my travels, and I positively ached to renew their acquaintance. I felt terribly desolate in the midst of London and its teeming millions. You can experience a devastating sense of loneliness in the heart of a big city, yet are never conscious of being so in the vast, unpeopled wastes. I have been so desperately lonesome in London, New York and Chicago that I could have sat down and howled with misery, or else drowned my sorrows in strong waters; but have always found peace and contentment when quite solitary in the wild regions of Africa or elsewhere. There is ever a deep and satisfying sense of novelty to uphold you, which is entirely absent in the big cities. Many will know exactly what I mean: must have suffered in just the same way.

A year in London had brought me to the verge of dark despair. Boredom gripped me by the throat with an iron stranglehold, yet I was powerless to escape from the toils. An insistent voice whispered in my ear—"Pack up your trunk—and go!"

I would have given much to obey; yet questions of finance made it impossible. Here was I, marooned in a grubby and prosaic office in the heart of London, condemned to pursue a deadly sameness of daily routine, when every fibre of my being urged me to spread wings and fly far afield. I knew myself hopelessly out of tune with the immediate environment: just flogging mind and body to perform their allotted daily tasks. Dreams and memories were poor substitutes for realities. I wanted something much more colourful than a vista of drab London roofs to gaze upon. Gad—what a life!

At some time or another in their lives, most people have had an urgent desire to wander abroad. Indeed, many must have wished to seek more than just pleasurable travel: an escape from the utterly commonplace. Surely everybody has experienced an honest curiosity to see with their own eyes what lies beyond their narrow daily horizon; to get away from the rush and turmoil of modern city life, with its crude shams and sheer banalities; to witness life in its primitive state; to know something of romance and adventure under blue skies and warm sunshine; and to explore the quiet backwaters of distant lands?

A tantalizing little bug is the *wanderlust*! It is rather like malignant malaria: never wholly eradicated from your system and liable to attack unexpectedly, but generally when funds are at real low ebb.

On this particular day it had bitten me badly. I knew the symptoms far too well for any possible error in my diagnosis. There was within me an imperative urge to heave up my anchor and set sail
into the unknown—anywhere, just so long as it was far removed from London and an escape from deadly monotony.

Means and health permitting, it is good for all to travel and see something of the world in which we dwell; to broaden our horizon and cease to be parochially-minded; and to learn, at first-hand, of the many strange countries and the queer people who inhabit them. There is no better tonic for jaded nerves than, for a spell, to enjoy freedom from our usual house of bondage; to be relieved of the dreary sameness of our ordinary existence; and to wander abroad with no more exacting masters than personal inclinations and the limits of our financial resources.

To-day it is so very easy to see the world. There is no end to the variety of our choice of routes, and all may be travelled simply and comfortably. The modern fashion of world-cruises has helped materially to widen our knowledge of the earth, though giving only a rapid surface skimming. If you are prepared to eschew luxury, the world can be travelled at no great cost. There is really no limit to the opportunities for cheap travel.

The majority of the former dark spots of the earth are now floodlit; the rough places have been made smooth. Many thousands of miles of railways and metalled motor-roads have dealt a shrewd blow at romance and adventure. The "Darkest Africa" of David Livingstone is a thing of the past and relegated to the dusty bookshelves of the Victorian era. "Luxury Cruises" now even call at the loneliest isle—Tristan da Cunha. To-day practically no part of the world remains outside man's knowledge, and its accessibility is becoming increasingly simplified. The gates of the world have been thrown open wide to all who care to enter. To many—and I count myself among them—this must be a source of profound regret, for nearly all the sugar has been eaten off our cake.

Modern progress in methods of transportation by air, sea or land, however, has been unable to smother all the charms and characteristics of some of the distant corners of the world. Though much of the romantic adventure of discovery is now denied, yet there still remains a great deal for us to enjoy. Other lands and the customs of their people will never fail to provide novelty and instruction, even for the most satiated globe-trotter.

In modern times there is discernible a marked disposition among travellers to abide temporarily in countries which offer unusual fascination, coupled with an equitable climate. As the human race grows more and more air-minded, and the facilities for air-travel are widely extended, it will become popular to spend one's annual vacation in distant lands rather than at seaside resorts nearer home.

Such reflections were passing through my mind when the insistent ringing of the telephone bell at my elbow recalled me to mundane things. Reluctantly, I picked up the receiver and answered the call.
MALAYAN SYMPHONY

The voice of an acquaintance spoke to me from a distant office-building, and his words framed a seductive temptation. Instantly, I was all attention and my pulses raced.

"Can you undertake a mission for us in the East—Malaya?" he asked. "If so, come round and see me as soon as possible. We can then settle terms; and I'll give you our instructions."

"I should jolly well say I could!" I answered emphatically, without a second's hesitation. "I'll be round right away, before you've had time to change your mind. When d'you want me to sail?"

"Embark at Marseilles—two weeks from now."

"My Fairy Prince, I salute and thank you!"

I found myself clutching a silent telephone and grinning happily. All my gloomy outlook on life had evaporated like the morning mists before the sun, and the world seemed a mighty pleasant place. Honestly, I did not care whether it rained or snowed—not even if London suffered from a black-out through fog. "Malaya...!"

I whispered to myself.

Now, how the devil did he know that I was longing to be in the East again; and at just that particular moment? Was it due merely to the long arm of coincidence; a case of mental telepathy; or just my lucky day? Malaya, too, of all places!

Once, many years earlier and when homeward-bound from China, I had spent a few cheery hours in Singapore; but British Malaya and the adjacent countries were new fields for me to explore. I had always wanted to investigate thoroughly that portion of the globe, and wander about it from end to end; but opportunity had been strangely remiss in presenting itself. Now the door was thrown wide open miraculously, and I could escape from durance vile. What stupendous luck!

I replaced the receiver, grabbed up pen and paper, and wrote a hurried note resigning my appointment. This despatched by messenger, I seized hat and overcoat. Within a few seconds I was outside that dingy office, face wreathed in smiles, and headed for the street. Ignoring the lift, I raced down the stairs with the light-hearted agility of a markhor in the Himalayan ranges. Halfway down, I almost collided with a journalist friend, who was plodding his way upwards.

"What's your hurry, and why the gladsome smile? Got a 'scoop'—or what?" he demanded, in surprised and suspicious tones.

"I'm Sinbad the Sailor, and off to Malaya two weeks hence," I laughed. "God knows why, or for how long, but I'm on my way."

"Lucky hound! Singapore, eh?"

"Bright lad—get to the top of the class. Sorry I can't stop to gossip—too much to be done yet."
"Go to Hell!" he growled, as I sped downwards.
"No—Malaya!" I corrected.

A moment later I was on the pavement, hurrying through the crowds to my Fairy Prince. I left my friend staring after me, eyes and mouth wide open; and, doubtless, a bitter pang of jealousy biting him. I was selfish enough not to care two hoots for his resentment at my good fortune. The "Call of the East" sounded loudly in my ears, to the exclusion of all else; and, at such times, one is naturally selfish in viewpoint.

From London to Singapore is a long stretch—approximately 9000 miles by the sea-route; but this distance, under modern conditions of travel, need not make anyone hesitate about undertaking the journey. Distance has been bridged. What is a mere bagatelle of 9000 miles by sea, when you can fly the Atlantic in a day, or telephone from London to Hollywood, India or Japan?

The interview with my Fairy Prince was brief but satisfactory. It took only a few minutes to transform a fanciful dream into a delightful reality, for the trip to Malaya was now certain. My orders were equally pleasing.

I was to sail to Singapore on the next outward-bound Rotterdam-Lloyd steamer, embarking at Marseilles. After arrival in Singapore, I was to travel widely through the Malay Peninsula, the Kingdom of Siam, Sumatra, Java and as much of the Dutch East Indies as feasible. Nothing to do but move about at will, observe closely, and faithfully record my impressions in a series of articles; and take photographs of scenes and people of genuine interest. A most engaging programme this was, indeed! The more so, as someone else piped the tune and I was given a free hand to plan my itinerary. I would not have changed places with a soul in London.

"How long may I roam?" I asked.
"In any case, three months; possibly, even six. Depends entirely upon the value of the material you can send us."
"Better—and best!" I chuckled.

Now, you can travel far and see a great deal in three to six months, thanks to modern facilities. I had no intention of allowing the grass to grow under my feet, and was determined to miss nothing.

As I well knew, Malaya offers an unusually attractive variety of interests to the stranger within her gates. In this respect, the countries people by the Malays and their neighbours are indeed generous. Side by side, you may find primitive aborigines and people with a culture dating back many centuries. There are ancient Hindu temples, modern Moslem mosques, and picturesque Chinese joss-houses; oceans of orderly rubber plantations; tin mines of all types; virgin forests and thickly cultivated valleys of immense fertility; big game hunting and excellent fishing; and, indeed, all
things likely to suit the widely divergent tastes of those in search of
that "something new." What more could man or woman want?

All those things one can see, and still more. You may travel over
first-class motor-roads or on comfortable railway systems; and
rest in luxurious hotels or Dak-bungalows. There is also the assur-
ance of a safe progress among alien races, who not so long ago were
pirates and even cannibals in certain areas.

On the appointed day I left London for Marseilles, overland.
From Paris I shared a coupé in the wagon-lit with a Greek millionaire
from Cairo; and in the next coupé, with a lavatory compartment
dividing us, were two French ladies. One was portly and of ripe age;
the other slim, petite and most attractive.

Wishing not to be delayed in my shaving and washing, I rose
with the lark. The Greek millionaire was still asleep, and I crept
silently into the lavatory compartment but found it liberally decked
with intimate articles of lady’s underwear. This was rather a poser.
My first thought was to retreat hastily, thinking one of the ladies had
established a prior claim. I listened for a few minutes, and could
hear no voices or movement in the next coupé. With sudden decision,
I bolted the far door. Obviously they had used the compartment as
a wardrobe and were still sleeping.

Every hook was occupied with dainty garments, leaving me no-
where for my dressing-gown and clothes. Carefully collecting the
fair unknown’s “undies,” I pushed them into a cupboard under the
wash-basin until they could be restored to the hooks. Rather amused,
I proceeded to shave and wash. When I came to retrieve the dainty
underclothes, however, I was horror-stricken. The basin had
emptied over them. Everything was soaked and covered with soap
suds. I pushed them back into the cupboard, unbolted the far door
and softly retreated. A few minutes later, I was on my way to the
dining-car to escape from the gathering storm.

Just before we reached Marseilles I ventured to return to my
coupé. All hell’s furies had been loosed. I heard the riot long
before the compartment was gained and realized the storm was
raging. One of the train staff was striving to soothe the lady
unsuccessfully, but her shrill voice drowned his words. Her language
was unprintable. I sympathized with the lady in her predicament,
also deeply regretted being the unwitting cause of the mishap. Yet
how was I to know that the basin emptied into a tank in the
cupboard? Besides, she should not have tried to monopolize the
lavatory compartment as a wardrobe or dressing-room.

I crept swiftly into my coupé and shut the door. The Greek
millionaire stared at me accusingly, and his lips moved to ask the
inevitable question. The air was electric.

"What’s all the trouble?" I asked innocently.

He explained what had happened, adding that the lady had no