Sunrise in the Dindings River
KATHARINE SIM

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MALAYAN LANDSCAPE

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With an introduction by 
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"Bukan mudah bercherai kaseh,
Laksana wau menanti angin.

Hard the divorce of love and lingering,
Like a kite that waits the wind."

Malay pantun

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INTRODUCTION

A TAMIL EXAMINEE, confronted with a question on the meaning of “Virtue is its own reward,” hazarded the reply that the saying could refer only to remunerative employment. His pragmatic solution of an old psychological conundrum flashed into my mind, a reproach to my altruism, the moment I had dropped my letter beyond recall into the scarlet letter-box. What reward could I expect for my offer to read the manuscript of a book on Malaya by a new author I had never even met? An examinate picture of Malayan forests that teem with life? A stagnant impression of tropic seas whose glitter I can yet see under the bows of my yacht? Was I not doomed to share once more Marianne Dashwood’s boredom at being told that “in the East Indies the climate is hot and the mosquitoes are troublesome”? The arrival of the typescript that was the chrysalis of these coloured chapters affected me like the inexorability of a Monday morning. And then after reading a few pages I perked up. Virtue for once was to be its own reward.

It was an accident, of course, but here were the very bays where my launch had often dropped anchor thirty years back. Here, as it happened, was the coast where a Perak Sultan went for a picnic two centuries ago, accompanied by a Malay poet (“dependent as a bat” on his royal patron), who has left posterity his old-world impression of the places visited:

Antara laut Pantai Remis
Pasir-nya bagai san tan di-ramas;
Gelombang dan bakat habis-lah kemas,
Sa-buah pun tidak mara dan chemas.

Tempat-nya endah terlalu élok,
Sungai-nya banyak di-dalam telok;
Gunong berator, batu berkalo,
Aneka rupa sampan dan balok.

“The sands on Cockle-Shell Beach are as white as milk squeezed from a coconut. Breakers and flotsam are all tidily packed in the narrows, and no boat runs risk of harm.

The spot is remarkably beautiful. Streams there are in many
in the bay. There are mountain-ranges and encircling rocks. And there is every kind of boat and dug-out."

Apart from rapidly silting estuaries, the passage of time brings little change to these sequestered places, once familiar to a few of us as Piccadilly is now: the boulder-strewn sands of the Dindings, Gunong Bubu (or Fish-trap Mountain) touched by rosy-footed dawn, the tentacled clutch of innumerable mangrove roots like giant spiders caught in quaking mud. No detail, no scent, no murmur from the Malayan scene escapes the author of this book, but artist by instinct and training she gives us no dull transcript, she transmutes her material to the purposes of a vivid impression. To the visual scene where the Malayan swallow-tails perform their "yellow flutterings" and sunset flushes the white underwing of the tern, she adds dimension by recording the stridulous telegraphy of crickets, noting "the heavy wafts of the pigeon orchid" and shrinking a little from "the acrid bitter-sweet muskiness of the Malay." Malaya has captured her, and her pulses race untired and exploring through quiet hours terribly apt to dispirit Europeans of less spiritual enterprise. What is more, she can get this personality of hers across the page, which is the whole duty of artist and biographer.

"Oh for a life of sensations rather than thoughts!" exclaimed the youthful Keats misled by the dichotomy of a philosophy now outworn. For sensations defined are ideas, and here is an ideal Malaya, beyond the clutch of Japanese war-lords and rubber-kings and the officialdom of a day, the real Malaya shy and reserved to all but her lovers. It is the Malaya which a new generation will have to "experience on its pulses" in order to heal its wounds and win confidence again.

For, as fate willed it, not the least absorbing pages in this book are those describing the grim trek down the Peninsula before the Japanese invader, the abandonment of household gods and faithful servants, the numb incredulity of the Malay at the broken departure of people he had thought pre-eminent in wisdom and power.

RICHARD WINSTEDT
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* Photographs by Stuart Sim
I.

STINKS AND COLOURS IN KRIAN

It was hot, so hot that the cabin became unbearable: we lay wide-eyed, listening to the purring fan as it churned but did not cool the humid air. The Indian Ocean was in one of its stickiest and most depressing moods. About two o’clock in the morning we staggered up to the boat deck, armed with cushions and pillows, and sank wearily into long chairs.

That was the beginning of the day on which the ship was due in Penang. I was new to the country; if this was a sample of the climate of Malaya then I was not looking forward to the next three years. . . .

We must have slept through the washing of the deck, because when we woke up it was wet and scrubbed around our chairs. Everything was damp and shining, even the air had freshened and seemed less sticky.

The ship was moving slowly into the lovely straits between Penang Island and the mainland. The sun was rising in a superb flame of colour over the dark blue mountains of Malaya; Penang Island, like a milky opal, swam in silver mists. The cool dawn and great beauty were encouraging: so, I thought, perhaps Malaya is going to be quite pleasant after all. . . .

As soon as the sun cleared the mountain tops and pierced the mists we could feel its burning heat. We collected our damp pillows and bedraggled dressing-gowns and went below.

Penang was a place that never failed to delight. I often wondered that it was not more famous for its loveliness. However you approached it—from the mainland across green paddy fields, or rounding its rocky northern coast, or from among the island clusters in the south—it was enchanting, friendly and yet variable. After you had lived on the mainland and were sick of the sight of endless acres of dark rubber trees, or of tall palms that hem a garden round, it gave a lift to the spirit to come out into the paddy lands of Province Wellesley and to see
ahead, across that flat expanse, the hills of Penang, and the mountains of Kedah in the north.

We went ashore at eight o'clock and drove to the Runnymede, one of the most attractive hotels in Malaya in those pre-war days; it was open to the sea sounds and scents, cool too and bright with flowers: banks of hydrangeas and hollyhocks, and, on every table, sweet-scented, old-fashioned red roses. The rooms were constantly filled with the gentle sough of the waves and the whispering of the casuarina trees which grew along by the low sea wall. There was a ferry across to Butterworth on the mainland where we caught a train for Parit Buntar. It had been a bitter disappointment to hear we were to be stationed at Parit Buntar, for we had rather foolishly set our hearts on Lumut, a village on the rocky Dindings coast. Parit Buntar, in the mosquito-ridden paddy lands of Krian, was one of the least popular of Government appointments. But being on the state boundary, between Province Wellesley in the Straits Settlements and Perak in the Federated Malay States, it was quite a busy customs post.

During the short hot journey we looked out gloomily at every stop, and felt considerably chastened. For each station seemed rather more scrubby than the last. However, Parit Buntar was, after all, gay with red and gold cannas, and Mac of the Customs was on the platform to meet us. He wore an impressively large wide-awake felt hat. He and Mrs. Mac were exceedingly kind to us in the first rather uncomfortable days.

An avenue of mossy angsena trees led to the small town now sizzling in the white noon-day sun. As we drove along, Mac explained that the man who was in the Government house allotted to us had flatly refused to turn out, so there was nothing for it but to make the best of the Rest House, which we had to do for three long weeks instead of the customary two days. While all we possessed—wedding presents, books, pictures—remained at the station in cases, and we itched to unpack and arrange everything in the house. I had heard lurid stories of the ravages of white ants and silver-fish and imagined our belongings would be rapidly crumbling into dust and decay.

The young man who refused to make way was about to leave the country, and by rights should have turned out as had been arranged; several friends had offered to put him up. But