

SINGAPORE SCENE

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)



RESTING on his shafts. A Chinese rickshaw-puller of Singapore waiting for a fare

Singapore and all Malaya is like that. The still-dominant jungle (minus, now, most of its pythons and man-eaters, however), even yet crowds round mines, plantations and towns, and exists, if thinned out, on little, citified Singapore island itself.

BUT once you swish through the narrow tide-race channel that divides Singapore from the first of those Dutch Islands that stretch right to Australia, you see a very different scene. Before tall, modern concrete business-blocks, stretches a long, straight street whose other side is the sea itself, fringed with a succession of small wharves and "go-downs" (seaside warehouses), and dotted to the limits of sight with anchored liners, tramps, and ships-of-war up to the score, and with tugs, launches, sampans, prahus, junks, tongkangs, and canoes by the hundred. They are not all, or even mostly, British

imperturbable Sikh policemen; tubby bronze Bengali watchmen; Pathan money-lenders in baggy white breeches; trim uniformed Malays of broad brown face and lozenge-shaped black fez; Annamese, Siamese, Tonkinese, Filipinos, Arabs; AND Chinese—ubiquitously, universally—CHINESE: Chinese coolie women in wide-legged, black "Italian-cloth," half-mast trousers; Chinese children in drawers merely or in flowery pyjamas; Chinese merchants and clerks in white ducks; Chinese factory hands in a mixture of cast-offs; barefooted Chinese labourers . . .

One-man-power carts on cycle-wheels and unwieldy cartwheel affairs pulled by humped buffaloes lumber along in this pedestrian slow flow. Through it shoot, like startled minnows in a stream, clerks on cycles and rickshaws tugged by bare-footed skeletons in cotton tatters. Once or twice an open car will glide in and out, bringing shopping a white-faced very tired-looking, very bored looking

white gloves. The Gorgon had at least to stare at individuals to turn them to stone. But a Singapore "cop" merely turns his back on an advancing host and freezes it immobile.

BUT do not gather from all this that

Singapore is a crowded and therefore dirty city. On the contrary, it is both spacious and spotless, with green suburbs and running water sparkling down the city streets. Most spaciouly in (or, better, from) their orange-groved bungalows at rolling Tanglin live the White élite. Bring round the car, syce, and off we go for the evening's pahits (drinks), and bridge at "Raffles" (grand hotel). A midnight swim to cool down? The Singapore Swimming Club's palatial dance-floor, lounge, dressing-rooms, diving towers and swimming rectangle lie scintillating under the moon. Shower completely, take a thorough footbath after your short walk across the paved courtyard, and plunge into cool tons of chemically filtered pool. All Singapore belongs, and the subscription is staggering—part of the White Man's Burden.

"Whoever rules in Malaya for the next few years, ultimately, irresistibly, irrevocably it shall be Chinese"

ships, of course. In normal times, Japanese are there, on the way to or from Europe, India, and Africa: Americans hunting cargoes round the south of Asia and its islands: and, above all, Dutch. With tiers of decks, canvas-sided to roll up and let the breeze flow through, and with corrugated-iron awnings to beat off the tropical cloudbursts, they are strictly business, if scrupulously neat, on 364 days of the year. But on the Queen of Holland's birthday, their strung flags splash the Roadstead with colour.

BUT if you really want to see a crush of shipping, come inland to where in the city's heart there lies a landlocked river-basin shaped like a wide kris blade. (Two curving, modern concrete bridges "ring" its narrow short sea-entrance). An inland quay surrounds it, fronted some yards back from the water by a continuous wall of three-storied, tinted Chinese dwellings, open fronted like office pigeonholes. But you will hardly see this; nor notice the hordes of semi-naked yellow-brown youngsters whose play along that stone parapet will keep you side-stepping: nor even taste the potpourri of mixed scents and stenches that engulfs the air.

SINGAPORE roads are streams, too—streams of most varied traffic. Out on the wide bitumen of North Bridge Road, for example, where the skyline is a phantasm of shop-tops modelled on everything from Chinese and Indian temples to "functional modernism" (in both its imaginative and its merely expense-saving forms), a ragged flow of coal-black Tamil labourers naked to the waist goes past; East Indians with shirt-tails hanging out over trousers or sarongs; bearded, turbanned, stalwart,

memsahib sunk among the back cushions. Scores of vans bright with Chinese signs and vivid with advertising pictures, run along, and as many half-ton "mosquito buses" whose rolled-up canvas sides barely contain their passengers packed vertically, and whose every inch of wall space is plastered with destination and route in three scripts and double as many languages.

A series of streams within a stream is Singapore traffic, indeed, with only two instants of concerted motion—those of stopping and starting at intersections. A cane "board," five feet by one, is the "stop-go" signal, strapped across the shoulders of a truncheoned Malay in khaki, sunhelmet, bare brown knees, and

BUT if the British rule Singapore, they don't own it. Walk down any typical street and what do you see—houses delicately tinted in Chinese shades and combinations of pinks, lavenders, greens, and blues: poles protruding aloft with an Admiral's flagship of washed trousers, male and female: characters waving on silk banners (sometimes transliterated on to boards below as "Amoy Washer Man," "Hen Sing Merchant," "No Swindle Shop," "Hop On Taler" or—the sign of a haircut in all Far Eastern ports—"Bar Bar"). Inside, of course, will be, without the intervention of plate-glass, a dark cave of local Chinese-made canned fruits, Chinese "Indian" silks, pickled octopi, dried fish, sealugs, sharks' fins, and birds' nests. Or, if it be a home, Chinese lacquer cabinets, Chinese idols, Chinese joss sticks,

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"BUT IF YOU REALLY WANT to see a crush of shipping. . . ." A scene in the heart of Singapore city

"HOW strong is the Singapore Base? What is it really like?" Fortunately perhaps it is as impossible as it would be improper for me to answer my friends' eager queries these days. Even Singapore inhabitants. I tell them, simply don't know, and hope they find that answer reassuring rather than disappointing. Then I go on to describe Singapore itself—which, anyhow, helps them to picture what is and will be taking place there much better than the most intimate figures of ranges and calibres and dispositions and emplacements ever could.

I REMEMBER the occasion when I myself was urgently asking "What is this Singapore like?" It was my first visit, and, anchored among islands most home-like to me in their mangroves and bush after deciduous, cold-sea Europe, we were lounging all morning over the rail of our Japanese tramp, impatient—against our better judgment—with the crew's slow and gingerly unloading of the holdful of explosives into the two barges alongside. "Where are we?" I asked the mate. "Just off Singapore," he had replied. "What! That? Cross-roads of the East, indeed!" I pointed to the only sign of civilisation, a group of tanks set in red clay gashes in the startling greenery of a steep little island and surmounted by a red horse and mysterious SOCONY. "Standard Oil Company of New York," he translated. "You'll see him all over the East. But it's the other island that is Singapore." Following his finger, we beheld a cliff crowned with jungle, and, at its foot, the steep, highly-incurved thatch roofs and perilous board-walks of a sun-blackened Malay village sitting on stilts in the sea. One hundred and forty years ago it had taken the imagination of a Raffles to see in that island of crocodile-haunted fever-swamps and tiger-infested jungles a mighty cosmopolitan city. Our imagination balked at it still. Well,