

HAPPY DAYS IN MALAYA

*Where Life is Always Changing But
Much Remains the Same*

(By CAMERON WILLIAM TAIT)

THE author of this article was a New Zealand journalist who went to Malaya in 1936 to an important position in the rubber industry. He was then thirty-one. Four years later he died of Japanese river-fever at Kuala Lumpur. His parents, who came to New Zealand from Peebles, Scotland, in 1913, now live in Onehunga. By their kindness we are able to print these notes found after his death among his personal effects.

IN KUALA LUMPUR

IF you want to study the changing East come to Kuala Lumpur, a microcosm of all eastern Asia, whose ways of life are changing even as you idle along the five-foot way.

"Click-clack, click-clack." The old Chinese woman shuffles gracefully along the stone-flagged, five-foot way under the shop-houses that line the street. Substitute *T'rompah* for *Click-clack* (*t'rompah* is the Malay word for the sandals she is wearing) and you have, as near as language can render it, the sound of the drag and clack of the most primitive footgear in the world—a wooden sole with one flexible band over the toes. Her black cotton trousers, cut wide below, like a sailor's, flap on her legs. Her black tunic, half-sleeved but high round the throat, hangs outside her trousers. Her hair, black too, and shiny, is pulled back from her forehead and twisted into a little bun behind. Stiff, formless, sagging—she is truly, to Western eyes at least, the drabdest woman in the world.

Beside her, and behind her when the ubiquitous bicycles are stacked more than three deep at the side of the five-foot way, walks young China—slender, powdered, graceful and alluring in high-heeled shoes and a Petaling Street adaptation of Europe's latest fashions. "Ma" may disapprove, but seems quite pleased to walk abroad with her and, if "daughter" is ashamed of the frumpish figure at her side, she does not show it.

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OLD AND NEW

OLD and new, old and new, that is the ever recurring theme of the street. You pass a thrumming sewing-machine set in the open front of a shop, and tending it is a patriarch out of the Scripture books of your Sunday School days. His bare feet treadle industriously and his long, white beard sweeps down over the cheap cotton cloth he is stitching. Will that mechanised Western needle ever catch up a wisp of that Eastern beard and cause the patriarch to howl with rage and anguish?

A Chinese schoolboy pulls up the front of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face and, with true Chinese

economy of effort, at the same time cool his little tummy. There is a whole shoal of them here, alternately racing among the traffic and dawdling in groups that block the way. But no one minds that here, for children seem never to be out of place in Asia.

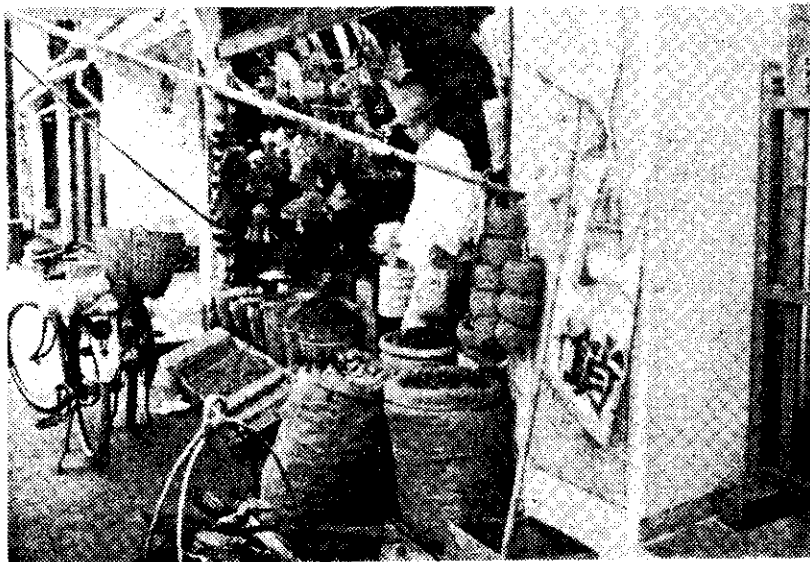
"Cattle Grazing Prohibited" reads a notice on a vacant lot; and to emphasise it, three cows graze peacefully beside it! Perhaps an English notice is useless to keep off Asiatic cows, but one suspects that Asiatic cows and their keepers are much the same as the suburban cows of New Zealand, and take their grazing where they will.

Who is this figure in a long green stole, his head and face and throat clustered with luxuriant and oily ringlets of black hair like some old King of Nineveh? Surely there is no dignity elsewhere in the wide world to equal his, and the fine-cut face is saintly.

A straggling procession of Indian coolies comes along the street. Leading, a man wheels a bicycle and on the carrier is a little oblong box covered with gaily lettered paper. One figure follows, also wheeling a bicycle, and his head is bowed. Behind him straggle a score or so of others, some riding, some walking, all Tamils from South



NEAR KUALA LUMPUR: The rickety enclosure round this village police station suggests a peaceful, law-abiding community



STREET SCENE in Malacca, showing the ubiquitous bicycle — and the ubiquitous Chinese greengrocer

you will forget. It means "for those born in Penang." The "old home town" spirit in Asia.

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DIGNITY IN SHIRT-TAILS

NOW come out with me along this Baltic Road, for so is it called; the road that leads to Terak, to Penang of the spices and the old John Company, to Kedah, and to Siam where the King had fifty uncles, each of them head of a Government department. (That is roughly why they had a revolution, I am told.) Come past the mushroom cinemas where Hollywood and Elstree must meet the competition of Madras and Canton, past the bookshops that sell strange scripts, past the timber-yards where Chinese are using saws possibly like those that cut the planks for the navies of the Pharaohs, past the rickshaw parks and the Japanese hotels, and buy some stamps at a little suburban post office.

Perhaps the knot of Asiatic folk at the counter will stand aside for you. A few years ago they certainly would. A great bearded Sikh, speaking in soft and pleasant English that sounds incongruous from so hirsute and imposing a personage, serves your wants.

Linger awhile. Down he sits to fill up his forms and tot up his figures. Three feet of greasy-looking black hair is bound up on the top of his head within the swathes of his turban. Majestically his voluminous shirt-tails sweep below his tailored coat and drape themselves about the legs of his office stool. When will that hair be cut off? We do not know.

Prejudice dies hard. But if he considers his comfort, so long as he works in a tropical country he will allow the pomp and circumstance of his shirt-tails to flaunt themselves behind him—even as he rides home from work on a gleaming three-gear bicycle!

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India. Some, at the rear, talk to each other in long, rolling, incomprehensible sentences full of reduplicated consonants and nasal vowels. They move swiftly. They have gone before we can guess that the little box contains the body of a child and that the man who wheeled the bicycle behind is bowed down with the grief of a father.

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EAST AND WEST

THE beating of drums and gongs and the ululating voice of a woman singing herald the approach of a placarded lorry. Gramophone, loudspeaker, and small boy produce the effect, and it advertises the latest Indian "talkie."

A little brown urchin scoots across the road in a Tom Mix hat and not much else below it. Just to make sure, the hat is labelled "cowboy." He stops and stands enthralled before the posters for a cinema. Here for a very small sum he can see *The Last of the Mohicans*. But perhaps the placards will have to be enough for him.

Here is a sign over a place like a café. "Penang Club" you can read, but there is another word in between which