



A NOVICE IN HONGAPORE

by F. W. Craddock

IN Hongapore, as at other important cross-roads of international travel, the tourist in transit is welcomed not merely for the money he spends but for the entertainment he provides. Indeed, after I had been in the city for a couple of weeks and had thus graduated from the transit class, my host confessed that he often took the children to the airport just to see the fun.

The new arrival is described by the locals as stepping off the air-conditioned Super Constellation with a battery of cameras dangling from his neck and, if he is an American, a bag full of Coca Cola in hand. He has yet to discover that cameras are dirt-cheap in Hongapore and that Coca Cola has penetrated the world's most impenetrable jungles. If he is an Englishman, he has fewer cameras; but the pockets of his tweed suit bulge with tins of his favourite pipe tobacco. Tomorrow he will discover that the shops are full of it.

Although the airport at home is just as good, he pauses to photograph the Hongapore one before setting across the sweltering tarmac. It's not a long walk, but it's very, very hot even at nine o'clock in the morning. He feels his shirt sticking to his back and he recalls that Hongapore is very close to the Equator. He wonders what it must be like right on the Equator. He is half-way across now, his shoes are pinching, the nonchalant air deserts him, and he wilts a little. He wonders if the air hostess has noticed; she was really rather . . .

He unharnesses the cameras, takes off his coat, hesitates about the tie, replaces the harness, and starts forward again to arrive at last and with much brow-mopping before a Chinese immigration official wearing gold braid and an impassive countenance. This first sign of the blending of West and East is unnerving. Unmoved by the evidence of suffering all round him, the Official does him over in impeccable English. The Chinese are stoical. Quite unnerving.

But let's get the poor fellow to his hotel. The Snaffles, of course; splendid tone, very old, a high ratio of warders to inmates, and right in the soupy thick of the downtown area. "There don't seem to be any air in these parts," he says (to himself) as he slumps into a plastic-covered chair. Leather would be

more in keeping with the surrounding splendour, but it goes green and rots. Chinese waiters administer whisky and soda.

As a novice, he has indiscreetly forewarned a few friends of his arrival. With the best intentions they now descend on him and ensure that he never has a dull moment or an empty glass in his hand. Secretly he craves a little solitude while he changes into a dry shirt and reasons with his vasomotor system to see if it can't be persuaded to cope more effectively with ninety degrees Fahrenheit and relative humidity eighty-eight. He marvels at the inexhaustible energy of his friends, especially as they don't appear to consume anything but whisky and potato chips.

They take him out and feed him at last. He rather fancies some plain home-cooking; a slice of sirloin, roast parsnips, perhaps apple pie. His friends know better. Nothing but the very best Chinese dinner—ten courses, including preserved eggs (very old), shark's fin soup, and fried prawns in mustard. Foolishly he accepts a challenge to use chopsticks, is defeated, and pleads for a spoon and fork. Recalling the importance of "saving face" in these parts, he eats everything put in front of him, despite ominous rumblings from his stomach and a sort of pumping feeling

small bag round his neck, and a large, dark one under each eye, he sets forth to "do" Hongapore with all the enterprise and courage of a Dr. Livingstone. There are several expensive curio shops right in the foyer of the hotel. But he winks slyly to himself; he knows that racket. He prefers to be cheated in the hurly-burly of the main street. Anyhow, didn't somebody once tell him that those brass trays and wooden elephants were made in Birmingham?

The European shopping area has been rather nicely laid out on a physiological basis. Long ago business men observed that the pedestrian endurance of the average tourist extends about two blocks in each direction from Snaffles Hotel. With their usual thoughtfulness they have provided everything needful within this convenient radius. To the east are the banks and shipping offices, to the west department stores, to the north exclusive shops, to the south the waterfront. The shops do him in the morning. Since the footpaths are narrow and cluttered with bicycles, poultry, goods for sale, and the human overflow from adjacent buildings, he is able to rub shoulders with the natives without appearing to intrude. He may even have ventured briefly down a side street rendered almost impassable by domestic

in the head. Billious attack on the way? Nonsense, he's tough.

When at last local pride and hospitality have been vindicated, and he is carried back to his hotel, he spends a sleepless night either under the shower (he turns the tap marked "cold," tries the "hot" one, and then admits that the plumber did not make a mistake), or lying stark naked on his bed, the fan rheostats turned to "full." With electricity at sevenpence a unit this is reckless extravagance. But he's paying for it.

When his friends left him he succeeded in persuading them that he really must write to the folks at home—safe arrival, having a lovely time, and all that. This stratagem ensures a few hours to himself. So, in the morning, with one

impedimenta. He takes a picture of the bamboo poles poking from every upstairs window and carrying the day's laundry. Very colourful. Since it rains every day in Hongapore he may even have witnessed the extraordinary sight of a hundred such poles being pulled inside as if by a machine at the first sign of a tropical downpour. But there are plenty of hands for the job. Hereabouts the density of population is the world's highest—two hundred per acre. Now he's really getting the local atmosphere.

Just for the heck of it he takes (or is taken for) a ride in a trishaw. This inelegant successor to the rickshaw consists of a bicycle and side-car. It looks cheap and is slow. Visitors have the privilege of paying more than they would in a taxi.

Among other bric-a-brac he has bought five Chinese sunshades, one for each member of the family. Very cheap and most attractive. Later they prove to be just one inch too long to fit into his suitcase. So he pokes them behind the wardrobe at his hotel. As he pushes them in one side, those of the previous occupant fall out the other. He turns up the rheostats and blows all the cigarette butts out of the ash trays.

But we are digressing. In the afternoon he has a free hour before his friends call to administer more restoratives. So he has a look at the native barges in the Hongapore River. Very picturesque. He tries to diagnose the smell, and then decides better not. He retreats to the waterfront for a breath of fresh air. But there isn't any. No waves, no wind in Hongapore; in fact, no harbour. Just still, deep water, and huge piles of stationary cumulus clouds resting on the horizon. Big ships and small ride softly to anchor anywhere from a hundred yards to two miles offshore.

That evening his friends decide that he has been neglected and lonely. And he's leaving by the first plane tomorrow. Not a moment to lose. Four cocktail parties (with potato chips) and an exhaustive tour of the night spots are easily fitted in. After all, the place doesn't really come alive until midnight. Why bother to sleep, anyhow. He can rest on the plane tomorrow.

Back home, after a period of convalescence, he writes a torrid best-seller with an Eastern flavour, and follows this with an authoritative work on The Underground Movement in Hong.



★ Song Quest Judges

ENCOURAGING reports have been coming in from all quarters on the standard of performance reached by competitors in the district sections of the Mobil Song Quest. Here are some of the judges currently being kept busy by the local contests. Incidentally, the judges do not see the competitors; each entry is judged solely as a radio item. Top row, left to right: Colin Pickering and Robert Matthews (2ZA), G. F. Saunders and E. O. Schnack (2XA); below, Ralph A. Lilly and Harold Colombatti (2XN), Mrs. A. C. Fahey and C. T. E. Hopwood (3XC).

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 24, 1956. ★