

•The Malacca Sultanate

BY

The Hon'ble R. J. Wilkinson.

Alone among Malayan townships Malacca may claim to be regarded as ancient and sedate. Singapore is no older than the lifetime of a man, and Ipoh has won its notoriety within the memory of a boy; while Malacca is historic. Her centuries are few, but they are full of achievement, and there is very little local glory in which she does not share. By the Portuguese conquerors she was named *la famosa*, "the Renowned;" she is linked with the memory of Camoens, Albuquerque and St Francis Xavier, and stands for whatever is melieval and romantic in a country that is lacking sadly in veneration and romance.

But there have been many Malaccas; and the oldest of all—that of six centuries ago—was a petty village of Sea-Sakai or Orang Laut, a fishing-hamlet of no fame and no importance. A humble beginning, perhaps, for so great a name; yet there are times when it is well to be obscure and when meekness may inherit the earth. The third quarter of the fourteenth century was one of these occasions. The greatest local power of that day, the Javanese empire of Majapahit, decided suddenly to play a leading part in history and to take a high place among the conquering nations of the world. It sent out its fleets, swept down on the thousand-year-old Malay kingdom of Palembang, and overthrew it utterly. It destroyed Palembang's daughter—the town of Singapore—with a massacre so cruel that for centuries afterwards the memory of that colony's awful fate was enough to deter any Malay from settling on the island. It broke the rising power of Pasai, the first seedling of a Muhamadanism which was destined at a later date to overthrow Majapahit itself. It harried Langkasuka (Ligor), and left that ancient Indo-Chinese kingdom—older even than Palembang itself—to fall an easy prey to the advancing armies of Siam. The wars of 1370 to 1380 A. D. effaced all that was then ancient and historic in Malaya. But, as for Malacca, what was there in a street of shanties and a fleet of dug-outs to attract the conquering arms of Majapahit?

So Malacca was spared to become a refuge and a shelter for the homeless people of the stricken towns, men of Hinduized Singapore and Palembang, Moslems from Pasai and Buddhists from the North. The little aboriginal fishing-village of 1370 A. D. had become a cosmopolitan trading-port in 1403 when it figures for the

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first time in the records of contemporary nations. The town in those early days was a walled or stockaded cluster of huts upon St. Paul's Hill; and right in the heart of the place there was built a wooden godown or store in which goods were warehoused for safe keeping pending the arrival of a trading coaster or junk. The currency was tin; the trade was in tin, resin, and jungle-produce. The local Chief, a Hindu by faith, styled himself *paramisura* or king, but a few years later he became a Muhammadan and took the name of "Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Shadow of God upon Earth." He was a keen man of business and made at least one voyage to China in pursuit of his own ends.

Almost all the present Sultans of Malaya—outside Selangor—claim descent from the Paramisura who reigned over the godown on the slopes of St. Paul's Hill. To this day, when the casual visitor walks from the landing-steps to the Stadthouse he can see on the slopes of the hill a weird image that an expert will tell him is a Makara, a monster of Hindu mythology, the sole surviving relic of the time when the Ruler of Malacca was still a Hindu. Among the regalia of one of the Peninsular Sultans he may also look upon a silver seal, a reputed relic of the Paramisura's later years since it bears the name of the "illustrious Sultan Muhammad Shah, God's Shadow upon earth." But the courtly genealogists of our Malayan princely houses do not stop at Muhammad Shah; they trace his pedigree through a long line of earlier kings, rulers of Singapore and of Palembang, to Chosroes the Great, King of Parthia; to Alexander of Macedon, King of Rome; to Darius and Artaxerxes, Kings of Persia; to Jamshid and Kai Kaius and Kai Kubad, Kings of Romance; as far as Kaiomerz, "son of Adam and elder brother of Seth," for it is to Seth that the meaner branches of humanity owe their origin. But The Paramisura himself knew nothing of this; he was not a genealogist; he had an eye for realities. He went submissively to China with his tribute of tin and jungle-produce, accepting in return raiment embroidered with dragons or unicorns, girdles of precious stones, gold and silk and paper money. One quaint old piece of embroidery in the ownership of a modern Peninsular Sultan seems to date back to the time when the Ruler of China honoured the Paramisura with dragons of gold and gems.

The line of trader-princes did not die with Muhammad Shah. His son, Iskandar Shah, paid two visits to China, one in 1414 and the other in A. D. 1419. Iskandar Shah died in A. D. 1424 and was succeeded by "Sri Maharaja," otherwise Ahmad Shah, another merchant-king. In the days of its poverty, Malacca had been a village of mean huts served by humble dug-outs, but the visits of the great Chinese junks made it grow into a trysting-place for the traders of the Eastern seas. Whole colonies of strangers flocked to the port from Java, from Burma and even from distant Madras. Suburbs sprang into existence. Bandar Hilir began as a Javanese settlement; so did Kampong Upeh (Tranquerah); the Tamils and the Burmese had also quarters of their own. St Paul's Hill was

merely the citadel, the heart of Malacca, the abode of the Sultan and of his Malay nobles, the ruling centre of the town. But the days when the Sultan attended personally to business were over: a new generation of Malay princes had sprung up, eager for fame and wealth yet averse to labour: greedy of glory but not of the risks of war. The toll levied on the trade of the port enabled the Sultan to send out armed bands of hooligans who forced the little hamlets on the coast to bow to the dominion of Malacca. This was the second Malacca the imperial city of Mudzafar Shah and Mansur Shah (1445-1470 A. D.) the old Malayan Empire at the very height of its greatness when it ruled over Pahang, Kampar, Siak and Indragiri.

What was it like, this chief among Malayan cities of the year 1460 A. D.? The old primitive semi-aboriginal village of the Paramisura had been swept away; it had known no houses except dug-outs, and no luxuries except matting, in the making of which the women excelled. The new Malacca lacked its modern hinterland of rice-fields and orchards; it was still a thin line of houses stretching along the sea and river front. But the line was longer than before and the character of the houses had changed with the character of the town. The place swarmed with adventurers from all parts of the East. In its stories we read of Afghan swashbucklers; Indian jockeys and mahouts; Kling warriors who—after the manner of their kind—advanced when the enemy retreated and retreated when the enemy advanced; and men of religion from Arabia, sometimes genuinely pious, sometimes merely hypocritical, but always thoroughly unpopular. Indeed such a cosmopolitan seaport town was no place for the practice of the meeker virtues. We read of a government, stern, severe and corrupt; of municipal surveyors who induced the Sultan to decree that a street must be straight in order that they might be bribed to certify to the straightness of the crooked; of judges who took presents from one side on the clear understanding that they were not to be blamed if they took presents also from the other; of the election of a prime minister by the simple process of setting all the candidates in a row and letting the Sultana say "choose Uncle Mutahir." In such a city of the strong no weak citizen was really free; every man sought a patron, the mightier the better, for it was better to pay toll to one chief than to many. Thus it came about that the greater nobles lived in walled enclosures amid the huts of their own followers and slaves. There at least they were safe from the irresponsible bravoës who levied blackmail for themselves by asserting falsely that they came in the dreaded name of the King. At night every enclosure was bolted and barred against the intrusion of thieves, trespassers and illicit lovers; and even policing was unpopular since it exposed the patrolling minister of police to the risk of finding his sovereign in places where the Sultan did not want to be met. For in this

city where every other law was broken daily there was one rule that was kept inviolate: no man, whatever his wrongs, dared lift his hand against the King.

It was a strange feeling, this loyalty of the ancient Malays. A man might murder a hero or saint, or betray a relative or friend, or abduct an innocent girl: if he did it in the interests of a royal intrigue it was a noble act of self-sacrifice according to the ethical code of the day. And strangest of all was the spirit in which tyranny was met. The chief of the King's Ministers, the "Uncle Mutahir" to whom allusion has been made, had so much love for a favourite daughter that he kept the report of her beauty from reaching the ears of the Sultan lest she should become the victim of his caprices. The girl married her cousin. The Sultan came later to a knowledge of the truth. He slew the girl's husband and carried her off to his palace; he slew the girl's father and all her family; he sent men also to carry off the wealth of the house. Yet when the dying "Uncle Mutahir" saw his own indignant son destroying property rather than let it reward the iniquity of the tyrant, he stayed him: "Is the Sultan to be impoverished and my death to profit him nothing?" Even a protest against royal ingratitude had to be driven home by self-sacrifice. A Malay noble who had grown grey in his ruler's service and had risen to be War Minister and Commander-in-Chief once saw an enemy's fleet approaching and felt that resistance was vain. He said little. He drew up a list of the few gifts that he had received from his master in the course of his long years of work—a plate or two of chipped china and a pot or two of worn brass—and sent the list, emphasizing its poverty and meagreness, with a farewell letter of thanks to the donor. The King was profuse in his penitence. But the old man would take no further reward: he named the spot at which he was destined to die and went down to meet death for a cause that he saw was lost and a master whom he knew to be worthless. Conduct of this sort was ideal loyalty, as the Malays of the time understood it.

Such loyalty degrades a royal caste. The self-made early princes of Malacca, the Paramisura and his son, were men of business and intelligence. The conqueror-kings, Mudzafar Shah and Mansur Shah, were men of ambition. But the later Kings of Malacca, born when the wealth had been acquired and the ambition realized, were gloomy, capricious and jaded tyrants who found more interest in destroying than in building up. Sultan Mahmud Shah, the last of the Malacca rulers, was a *roi fainéant*. He plundered, and violated; but he was wise enough to leave all the real work of administration to his Ministers. Foremost among them was the Bendahara who was destined to so tragic an end; next came the Bendahara's son Tun Hasan, Minister of War, and the Laksamana Hang Nadim who commanded the fleet. Even at this distance of time when

we read the cold commentaries of the Portuguese and the gossiping tolerant anecdotes of the Malay Annals we can feel that these three ministers were men of unusual character: the eldest, the Bendahara, calm, self-contained, temperate and cautious; the two younger men, passionate perhaps and hot-headed, but gifted with an energy and a persistence that is rare among men born under the sun of the equator. And Malacca needed them; for it was just when these three men were at the height of their authority that the town was startled by an unexpected and most ominous apparition—the first European fleet that ever sailed into its harbour. That was in August, 1509; the Admiral was the Portuguese, Diego Lopez de Sequeira.

*The Capture of Malacca, A.D. 1511.

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In an age accustomed to the comfort of modern sea-travel it is not easy for a writer to convey more than a faint academic idea of the hard lot of the first-comers to the Eastern Seas: the leaky ships, the stifling cabins, the stale unpalatable food, the putrid water, the dirt, the overcrowding, the scurvy, the danger of storms, the discomfort of the steamy tropical calms, and the anxiety of approach to an uncharted and hostile coast. Yet if we are to take the measure of men like d'Almeida and d'Albuquerque we must try at least to realize the task that was set before them. Columbus and da Gama had been simple navigators who staked their lives upon their skill and upon the truth of their geographical beliefs. The first "Viceroys" were men of another type, men who dreamed dreams and saw visions of empire in the seemingly hope'ss plan of pitting the small frail ships of Portugal against the untamed vastness of the Indian Ocean and against the teeming millions who inhabited its shores. D'Almeida was the apostle of Sea-Power. He saw that with all their apparent weakness his ships had at their mercy the commerce of whole continents; and he preached the doctrine of a supreme navy. Alfonso d'Albuquerque disagreed. He was a veteran and distinguished soldier, a man of authority, who believed in Sea-Power but not in its all-sufficiency. He mocked at the theory of an Eastern empire that owned no ports or docks and could not caulk a ship except by the favour of an ally. He was the apostle of the Naval Base, sea-power resting on the shore. Moreover, as a man of ancient lineage, cousin to Spanish kings, himself a knight of the Order of Christ, he would not take service under Francis d'Almeida.

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