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CONTENTS

PART ONE
The Double Land page 11

PART TWO
Oriental Rococo page 83

PART THREE
The Woman on the Treadwheel page 151

PART FOUR
Passing through Babel page 193

PART FIVE
Imperial Vestiges page 249

PART SIX
Looking Gods in Their Faces page 275

Index page 335
ILLUSTRATIONS

1 Taxila: a nomad girl 32
2 Transport on the Great Trunk Road 32
3 Rawalpindi: the scribe 33
4 Pathan Tribesmen 33
5 The Khyber Pass 48
6 Lahore: the Shalimar Gardens 48
7 Tibetan monk at Mussoorie 49
8 The Buddhist shrine at Darjeeling 49
9 Shrine on the road to Kalimpong 80
10 Bangkok: the Tombs of the Princes 80
11 Ancient pagodas at Ayudhya 81
12 Ayudhya: the Reclining Buddha 81
13 Bangkok: the Temple of the Dawn 96
14 Temple doors in Bangkok 96
15 Ayudhya: a temple garden 97
16 The temple over the canal 97
17 Chieng Mai: the guardian of Wat Sutep 128
18 Chieng Dao: the pool by the Sacred Cave 128
19 A Thai canal 129
20 Chieng Dao: a village house 129
21 Cambodia: people of the jungle 144
22 Cambodia: workers on the Mekong Project 144
c

23  A floating village on the Tonle Sap  
24  The lagoon at Chnang  
25  Angkor Thom: faces of the gods  
26  Angkor Thom: the causeway  
27  Angkor: the Temple of Banteay Kdei  
28  Angkor Thom: celestial dancers  
29  Angkor: the destroying jungle  
30  Angkor: the courts of Preah Khan  
31  Penang: a Malay kampong  
32  Singapore: a street in Chinatown  
33  Malacca: rain in a Chinese temple  
34  Malacca: a buffalo bathes in the harbour  
35  Macao Harbour and the hills of China  
36  The quiet streets of Macao  
37  Hong Kong: fish at Aberdeen  
38  A village in the New Territories  
39  A woman gardener at Katsura  
40  Nara: trippers at Horyuji  
41  Kyoto by night  
42  Contemplating a Zen garden  
43  Kyoto: a Shinto shrine  
44  Two ladies of Kyoto  
45  Tokyo: ceremony at the Meiji Shrine  
46  The streets of Tokyo  
47  Nara: sacred deer at Todaiji  
48  The garden of the dead
PART ONE

The Double Land
For a whole day after leaving Suez the ship sailed through the Red Sea out of sight of land. Tankers laboured northward, low in the water, stirring the purplish beds of plankton. Otherwise the sea was empty, lifeless, becalmed, with a lustre of blue satin under the hard sunlight. The atmosphere became intolerably dense and humid; only the hardier passengers stirred out of the air-conditioned lounges to lie on the decks like limp, damp fish. The sun swelled into an enormous vermilion ellipse as it sank over the invisible Sudan.

On the second morning we saw Asia, the rocky edges of the island of Perim, and then the coast of Arabia. A grey heat-haze blurred the empty Yemenite beaches; behind them the sand hills rose in pale yellow ranges, sweeping backward into the desert where saw-edged outlines of volcanic mountains lifted their blue silhouettes; the shadows of these mountains were dense, almost black, and their tips glittered in the morning sun like obsidian, but their effect was nevertheless curiously flat, a neutral background to the lifeless desert. It was a land for despair and endurance; one felt no surprise that it should have been for so many centuries the burning centre of Islamic fanaticism. Only a faith held with ferocity could make life acceptable in such a setting, a faith of fiery visions and of beliefs as extreme and unequivocal as the coldness of the desert night and the heat of its midday sun.

The rim of Asia, hard yet dissolving, drew nearer as the morning passed on. Lateen-sailed dhows, with high poops like the ships of Columbus, sailed slowly towards Ethiopia across the paths of the tankers; seaweed floated by like bunches of yellow grapes. Late in the morning, having gone through the strait of
Bab-el-Mandeb, the Gate of Tears, we swung eastward and, passing the glittering white oil refineries under the knife-sharp peaks of Little Aden, entered the harbour formed by the mountain mass of Aden itself and the shallow isthmus that links it with the continent.

As we swung to anchorage in the inner harbour, the aspect of Aden was starkly orderly, as if the Pax Britannica still ruled undisputed over this rocky outcrop of Arabia. Police boats buzzed from ship to ship, manned by tall, black-skinned Somalis with white uniforms and blue fezes, and port workers in green overalls and scarlet turbans manipulated the floating pipelines of the oil installations. The elaborate white superstructure of a P. and O. liner rose over the green murky water like a great cliff-top hotel, and beside it the rusty freighters with their Liberian and Panamanian flags were dwarfed. On the yellow-grey slopes of bare rock above the harbour, massive stone buildings reached up the mountain.

December is the cool season in Aden; the temperature averages a mere eighty degrees, but the humidity is still overpowering. ‘Like a warm, damp gym suit,’ Inge remarked, as we stepped from the launch on to the slippery stairs of the pier, and walked through the harbour gates into the blaze of noise and the skirrmish of clutching hands. ‘Taxi, sahib. . . . Come to my shop, sah. I give everything away. . . . Have tea with me, lady and gentleman. No obligation. Very friendly. . . . Taxi to Crater. Taxi to the Oasis. See the caravan, many camel, sah, all going to desert.’

Like an expected ambush, the contradictions of Asia surrounded us, as they had done in India two years before. From the water, the arcaded buildings and the cars passing to and fro in the streets had a familiar look, European perhaps, at most Levantine. But as soon as one touched land the ambiguities began to emerge from behind the mask. The clerk in the post office spoke immaculate English; his hair and beard were dyed orange with henna to proclaim that he was one who had gone on the Hajj to Mecca. A shining new Mercedes taxi pulled up near the quay; out of it stepped two women, veiled with extraordinary thoroughness; a scarf of taut silk covered the anony-
mous features, like the cloth over the face of a man about to be hanged.

These concealed faces of women in voluminous, shapeless garments brought the strange flavour, dry in the mouth, of Moslem puritanism out of Yemen and the Hadhramaut into the midst of the incongruous crowds who mingled in the arcades before the open-fronted Arab, Indian and Jewish shops along the harbour front, stacked with customs-free goods from every manufacturing country of the world. Through this Asian Andorra strolled the passengers from the liners and the sailors from French and American warships, peering through cameras, haggling over typewriters and tape-recorders. But their province was only the single main avenue, curving round the shrubberied gardens. Another world lay behind this façade, in the little streets that branched off towards the mountain-side and into the quarter inhabited by the Arabs, Somalis and Indians who form the greater part of Aden’s population. Between the houses with their screened, secretive windows, camels paced with an air of grudging disdain, dragging behind them absurdly small carts; goats and sheep picked over the heaps of garbage, the only pasture of a grassless land; blind beggars, led by small boys, chanted in a shrill Arabic wail. A spicy smell of kebab hung in the air. Shopkeepers, dressed in white shirts and sarong-like skirts, with embroidered skull-caps over their sharp Arabian faces, sat on string beds, outside their cavernous shops, talking slowly and smoking tall water-pipes. Over the market-hall a notice proclaimed in English and Arabic: ‘Outsiders sleeping on stalls will be prosecuted.’ Where the narrow streets frayed out on the mountain-side one could see the hovels, built of fragments of plank and sacking under overhanging rocks, in which the Outsiders found a refuge.

According to all reports, discontent was explosively fermenting in the native quarters of Aden. Only a few weeks before pan-Arab extremists had attempted a series of terrorist acts. But events of this kind—unlike major crises such as war or successful revolution—make their impact because of the uncanny ordinariness of the life into which they fall like meteors. The bomb is
thrown, the general is unharmed, the assassin is hauled off to third degree in the police headquarters, but business in the market through which the news ripples goes on as usual; merchants must still put aside for old age and calamity, and people must eat. When we walked in them, the streets of Aden were peaceful, the people indifferent; life seemed as sluggish as the exhausting air. But the reports were true. Next morning, as we sailed over the Arabian Sea towards Karachi, the ship's newspaper reported another terrorist bomb at the Aden airport.
The hard angles of dockside cranes slashed the cobalt morning sky of Karachi. We stood sweating in the iron-roofed customs shed as the coolies brought the luggage slowly off the boat, piece by piece, balanced on their thick turbans. We filled in long foolscap questionnaires. How many watches were we carrying? How many sewing machines? How many rifles? A young woman in a sari questioned us about money and jewellery. A young man in a white uniform argued about the value of my tape-recorder. There was an air of obstructive efficiency about it all.

Outside the dock gates lay the dull yellow of sand, and the chaos of the city sprouting out of the desert. New buildings, half-completed buildings, holes in the ground, huts and hovels, and everywhere sand, drifting over the streets, dusting the trees and lying like a brown rime over the few green patches among the rising walls; as we drove through the sprawling centre of Karachi to our hotel several miles from the docks it seemed more like a vast, unplanned encampment than a city.

By afternoon a slow yellowish veil began to creep over the bright sky of the morning. We were just leaving the minute National Museum, located in a Gothic mansion left by the British, and the palm trees in its garden whipped and swished in the rising wind. The kites, which circled endlessly in the sky above Karachi, were blown off their gliding courses by sudden gusts until they disappeared from the darkening air with mewing cries. A great dust storm was blowing in from the west, from the deserts of Baluchistan and Sind, and by the time we got back to the hotel, sneezing and half blinded by the irritating sand particles, a false twilight had fallen. For two hours the dim out-
lines of the trees bent before the wind, and dust silted through the cracks of the closed windows.

That evening we sat with two Pakistani friends, drinking tea and experimentally nibbling the peppery mutton puffs to which Karachi people are much addicted, on the verandah of a boating club which overlooked one of the smooth salt inlets that probe into the edges of Karachi. The remnant of the storm still hung in the grey air; it became a kind of membrane by which the invisible setting sun suffused the whole dome of the sky with an intense mauve light. A high-pitched voice called from the distance.

‘Allah-o-Akbar, ash-hado an la-ilaha all-Allah...’ Allah is Great! I bear witness that there is no God but Allah!

As the last plangent tones of the Azan died away, one of our friends, a radio producer, remarked that it showed how modern Pakistan had become; tape-recorders and loud speakers on the minarets had taken the place of the traditional mullah.

We stayed four days in Karachi, but those first impressions remained—the dust and the desert, the insistent voice of Islam and the chaos of the city where in every direction we would see sophisticated modern buildings of dazzling whiteness rising up in apparently haphazard juxtaposition to wastes of cane shacks and governmental ghettos of corrugated-iron sheds put up twenty years before by the British Army and slowly rotting away over the heads of Pakistani bureaucrats. It was a city which had grown up in less than seventeen years from a sleepy seaport between the desert and the salt marshes into a ramshackle metropolis of two million inhabitants, whose raw expansiveness reflected the makeshift newness of Pakistan, that land which emerged as a geographical, political and economic anomaly and has survived to the world’s astonishment.

As in all of Pakistan, the rifts between the modern and the ancient, the sophisticated and the primitive, the western and the eastern, run deep in Karachi. Past the newest buildings the camels come plodding in from the desert, with necklaces of blue beads round their curving necks and gilded bells jingling from their knees, and on the busiest corner of the city the tomb of a Moslem
saint stands in the middle of a filling station, where the devotees prostrate themselves at the hour of prayer while the cars drive in and out and the tinkle of the cash register sounds an ironic obligato.

The people who crowd the broken pavements of these noisy streets, swarm in the dingy alleys of its bazaars and every night fill the cabarets of its expensive western-style hotels are a cross-section of all the races and classes of Pakistan. When the country was founded and Karachi became its first capital, Moslems from all over India flocked to the city, and very soon the original Sindhi inhabitants were submerged by people of different languages and cultures, by robust, ebullient Punjabis and hawk-nosed Moplahs of Arab descent from the Malabar coast, by lean, fair-skinned Pathans and plump, sepia-brown Bengalis, and by intellectuals and aristocrats from the classic Islamic centres of India, Lucknow and Agra and Delhi. These immigrants quickly gained control of the cultural and commercial life of Karachi, for long they dominated its political life as capital of Pakistan with their regional feuds, and now they form its ruling cosmopolitan upper crust.

During our days in the city I spent most of my time collecting material for a radio documentary on Pakistan. I was lucky enough to have an introduction to Altaf Ali, one of the programme directors of Radio Pakistan, and he not only placed his time and his car at our disposal during every evening we stayed in Karachi, but also, with Punjabi thoroughness, arranged a long series of visits to schools and colleges, and interviews with teachers, journalists, bureaucrats and anthropologists. In these interviews and in less formal encounters when Altaf took us to the houses of his friends, I met men and women from almost every region and race of Pakistan, but, significantly, I never met anyone born in Karachi. Everyone to whom I talked was an exile, with an exile’s dreams, an exile’s resentments, and an exile’s obsessive preoccupation with the cause of his expatriation, in this case, India.

In some ways this made social intercourse in Karachi rather monotonous. I found conversations tending to run in the same
cyclic patterns. I would always be asked what I thought of the perfidy of Nehru in Kashmir; I would always hear a variety of recollections about the events of Partition, which Pakistanis talk about as obsessively as old soldiers talk about the last war; and I would always encounter some reference to the two-nation theory, which contends that the Moslems and Hindus represent two different civilizations and therefore cannot possibly live together. Some subjects seemed to be taboo, though I suspect that they were at the back of most people's minds; one of them was the possibility of eventual reunion with India, which I only heard one courageous man ever advocate during the whole of our time in Pakistan, though to an outsider it seems obvious that the present division of the sub-continent is so absurd both geographically and economically that at some time or another the situation will have to be changed.

What most fascinated me was the conflict which these people experienced between the western ideals to which their education leads them and the Islamic traditions within which they were born. Superficially the Moslem creed seems much nearer than other Asian religions to western ways of thinking. It springs, like Christianity, from Judaic roots, and it has, at least in theory, strong egalitarian tendencies. At the same time, with its fatalistic acceptance of the Will of God, Islam lacks the dynamic progressivism which Christianity passed on to western liberalism, and Moslem customs have tended in the past to be obstinately conservative. The rapid impact of European concepts since Independence has therefore created great contradictions in personal and family life, which seem to affect even the most liberal-minded of Pakistanis.

My diary of the days in Karachi is peppered with instances of such contradictions, and when I read through them I realize that all in one way or another centre upon that revolutionary issue, the changing position of women in modern Islamic society. A philosopher who has studied at Cambridge under Bertrand Russell and who completely accepted his rationalist viewpoint, apologized to Inge that he could not bring his wife with him to visit us; she insisted on remaining in purdah, and he did not feel
that he could press the issue. A young British-educated woman, assistant editor of a Karachi periodical, had to leave an evening party at eleven o’clock because her mother telephoned to the hotel and objected to her being out at so outrageously late an hour. A business man who told me that he had long ceased to be a Moslem in anything but name, and even sneered at those who still prayed five times a day, carefully supervised the hours and company kept by his twenty-two-year-old daughter, a school teacher, lest she should damage her chances of marriage.

But the feminist revolution is certainly in progress, and it may eventually become the most dynamic social movement in the country, since it is being deliberately encouraged by the Pakistani Government, who have given women equal political status and have created for them a security they have never known before by regulating polygamy and ending the Moslem custom which allowed men to divorce their wives at will. Educated young women from the universities and colleges are seizing eagerly their new opportunities and embarking on careers; they have an enthusiasm and a nervous vitality which make them some of the most dynamic people one meets in Pakistan, and those who continue their careers, for example as doctors or school principals, show a dedication and a force of character which their male colleagues rarely equal.

Admittedly these are all women from the middle or upper classes. Education is not compulsory for either sex in Pakistan, and except among the wealthier classes, far fewer girls go to school than boys. This means that for the time being education actually serves to widen the class barriers. Among the lower classes purdah is still the rule; their women walk through the streets veiled from head to foot in white burkas, and only the very poorest of them, like the sad-looking hags who sweep the streets in Karachi, appear with their faces uncovered. Even among the middle class there are some curious contradictions. Some women combine a desire for education with a fear of breaking the symbolic link that binds them to the past; a high school principal told me that 30 per cent of her girls remained in purdah, and I even saw students in that stronghold of feminism,
the Government Women’s College, who still wore the veil.

Sometimes a single Karachi family embraces all the variations of feminine behaviour, as we found on the one occasion when Inge was able to go behind the symbolic curtain of purdah. Ironically, we owed the opportunity to one of the most fervently emancipated young women we met in Pakistan, a very attractive girl named Sophia Ahmed who had interviewed me as a visiting author at Radio Pakistan and who combined the careers of teacher and journalist.

It was on our last day in Karachi, when Altaf Ali had taken us, with Sophia, on a trip to Bhambore, forty miles along the coast, the only place of historical interest in the whole Karachi region; there the Arab traders landed in the eighth century and established the first Moslem settlement on the Indian sub-continent. We drove through the flat wasteland, tufted with thorn and scrubby cacti and receding to a monotonous, featureless horizon, which Karachi people call ‘the country’, until we reached a narrow estuary where pyramids of white salt glittered among the mudflats. Above the salt works and the beaches from which the sea had long receded, rose the mounds of Bhambore. The great bastions were still there, rooted deep in the sand, but only the shell of a city had been left by the ever-recurrent dust-storms of six centuries of desertion, and a broken floor of tesselated tiles marked the site of the mosque where Islam had first been preached in the country which is now Pakistan. History was recorded in the potsherds lying thickly among the dry grass, in the olive glazes of China and the green of Egypt which showed how the traders of Bhambore had ventured along the far shores of Asia in the centuries before the Europeans first sailed into the eastern oceans.

Pakistanis, even when they are not very demonstrative Moslems, are proud of the Islamic heritage which distinguishes them from the Hindus, and as we returned through the evening to Karachi Sophia suggested that we should visit the Shia shrine, where the great crown of gold and silver was being exhibited which would be sent as a gift on the next Hajj to Mecca. Most of the Moslems of Pakistan adhere to the Sunni sect which
flourishes in Arabia, but a minority, to which Sophia’s family belonged, follow the more liberal Shia doctrine which arose in Persia at the time of its literary and artistic greatness. Sophia explained that the crown, this fabulous offering of the faithful, was six feet high and weighed many hundreds of pounds. ‘The name of Fatima is written on it in diamonds,’ she added, ‘and if you make a wish when you are looking at the name, it is inclined to come true.’ As we climbed the steps to the open courtyard of the shrine we could see a steel cage, and within it a large construction which gleamed with the pale silvery yellow of electrnum. The glimpse was all we achieved, for a guard barred our way with his rifle. He spoke in quiet, bitter tones to Sophia. Infidels could not approach the crown. Our very presence might desile a holy object bound for Mecca.

Both our companions were embarrassed by the incident. It is the custom of intellectuals in Pakistan to stress, sometimes against the evidence of history, the religious tolerance implicit in Islamic doctrines, and Sophia was obviously mortified that her own sect with its liberal reputation should show itself hostile to strangers. Impulsively she invited us to her house; there at any rate we would be welcome.

‘We live in a typically Pakistani way,’ she remarked, as we stopped outside the high wall surrounding the garden through which we walked to the open French doors of her house. It was a joint household, presided over by the grandfather, who was at his prayers. One of his daughters, Sophia’s aunt, received us, a woman with a sharp, clever face, dressed in western clothes; she worked for an airline and was one of the three women in Pakistan to hold a pilot’s licence. Sophia pointed to the heavy curtain that hung over the end of the room. ‘I’m sorry you won’t be able to meet my mother,’ she said to me. ‘You see, she is in purdah.’

But the prohibition did not apply to Inge, and after we had taken coffee and eaten kebab and green halva, she was invited behind the curtain while I stayed with Altaf and the grandfather, who had now appeared, to indulge in another conversation on the rights and wrongs of Kashmir. It was not until we returned
to the hotel that I was able to hear Inge’s account of her experience.

She had been received in a kind of combined kitchen and living-room by a woman dressed entirely in white. Sophia’s mother did not know any English, and her sister, the pilot, acted as interpreter as the conversation followed the usual Asian pattern, beginning with health and going on to children. Once these subjects were exhausted Inge began to wonder what she might say to a woman withdrawn from the world. She found that even in purdah mundane things are not ignored. ‘Would you like to see my jewellery?’ said her hostess. ‘Would you like to see my saris?’ said Sophia. And then, almost in competition, the women of the house began to bring out worn jewel cases and cardboard boxes, and to pile their contents on the table. ‘I’ve never seen such a collection,’ said Inge. ‘Whole sets, collars and bracelets and ear-rings, encrusted with every kind of gem... diamonds, rubies, sapphires, pearls... And then the saris, stiff with gold!’

This glittering treasure was the private bank of a middle-class family in a country where people still believe, like Wemmick in Great Expectations, in the virtues of portable property. It was wealth, like women, in purdah. The fact that so much capital is kept out of circulation in private treasures is one of the most serious reasons for the slow economic development of many eastern countries.
Departure from Karachi had a festive and almost frenetic atmosphere. The platform from which we left for Rawal Pindi was crowded; red-turbaned coolies jostled by, their heads rigid under cases and bedrolls; young men pushed barrows piled with pyramids of fruit and gaudy packets of locally-made cigarettes; each passenger was the centre of a whole band of relatives and friends, chattering and laughing in a high-pitched babel of Sindhi, Punjabi and Pashtu. The sheer volume of combined noise produced an extraordinary feeling of excitement, as if we were all bound on some great migration from which none was expected to return.

Before the train left we found there was no bedding in the air-conditioned compartment. I went over to one of the offices on the platform. ‘Out of the question, sir.’ The inspector in charge waggled his pipeclayed solar topee. ‘Not even a sheet, sir. Everything gone.’ I remembered the ways of India. ‘Perhaps you have overlooked two bedrolls,’ I said, rubbing my fingers quickly together before his eyes. ‘Impossible, sir. But I will just look.’ The bedrolls were found, and only just in time, for immediately afterwards the train started off in a storm of shrill farewells.

In the dead, salty land beyond Karachi, isolated palm trees stood tall and ragged as ripped banners among the thorny kikars. Every few miles there were wells and small oases, with rice growing jade pale in the damp hollows, and a few adobe houses huddled together, their corrugated-iron roofs weighted down with mud bricks against the desert winds. Some of the villages were deserted, mud walls falling into rubble, but whether this was due to a failure of the water or because the people had been
drawn away by the magnet of Karachi we had no means of knowing. Curiously, for such a dry land, it rarely seemed empty. Even when there were no other signs of life, the goats would be there, nibbling the bushes on which no other animal could live. Occasionally we saw fowlers, with long guns in their hands and rough game bags on their backs, going along the faint camel paths between the islands of scrub and looking out for sand-grouse.

As the sun fell and its rays grew almost horizontal, giving squat bushes the long shadows of marching giants, the desert turned a warm copper colour and the airborne dust created a pink haze through which wild duck came flying; by nightfall we reached the point where the desert met the Indus. The great river flowed dark blue in the dusk, while the palm trees of the villages beside its bank etched themselves in black silhouette against the violet western sky and the lights of Hyderabad grew bright in the falling darkness on the far side of the river.

During the night the train followed the valley northward, through Khairpur, Bahawalpur and Multan, and when we awoke the desert had ended. We looked out on the dappled early morning shade of the tree-lined highway running through the fertile irrigated plains of the south-western Punjab. For once the country was thickly populated. Ploughmen in white lungis which looked much more like sarongs, followed slow teams of buffalo down the long strips of cultivated land. The dome-shaped kilns smoked densely among tall ramparts of firewood in a potters' village. And along the roads, under the wide nim trees, white trotting oxen drew their light carts and camels carried loads in wooden racks fitted to their humps. The cotton hung like snow on the bushes, and the sugar cane stood dense and dark. But there were places where a white scurf lay like poisonous manna over the ground; a few decades of irrigation was wrecking the land with its own salt.

This region had been desert until the British drove canals through it, after they conquered the Punjab from the Sikh kings in 1849. To the north, beyond Lahore, where the first shadows of the hills lay along the horizon, we came to the ancient wheat
lands of the classic Punjab, the kingdom of Porus, where Alexander marched and Menander ruled over a Buddhist kingdom of Indian Greeks. Here the villages grew on the rubble of old settlements, so that each was a man-accumulated hill on the flat alluvial plain, rising out of the prehistoric past in tiers of mud walls, patterned with the brown discs of drying dung-cakes, and crowned by the sugar-white lanterns and cupolas of mosques. On the highest mound stood the old town of Gujrat; the snow peaks of Kashmir shone behind it through the haze of distance over the wide golden bed of a winter-shrunken river.

As we looked idly through the isolation of the train window at the industrious life of this landscape, nothing seemed to have changed very much since Menander reigned two thousand years ago. On the threshing floors outside the villages the peasants were shovelling grain from golden pyramids into sacks which they loaded on the backs of donkeys. Out in the fields the children tended camels which tramped in circles, tethered to the sweeps of tall wheels that spilled water into the irrigation ditches from a series of earthenware pots. And along the heron-haunted water channels, lines of fishermen in loincloths laboriously waded, using conical basket-work traps which they plunged in the water quickly with one hand, inserting the other through an aperture in the top to seize any creature that might have been trapped. Yet even such vegetative ways of life are caught in the continuum of changing Asia, and beyond the fields, in park-like pasture land, the tanks and wireless cars of a Pakistani armoured unit stood under the trees, camouflaged with nets and branches. They looked mercilessly efficient, the iron other mask of Pakistan, the militantly nationalist modern state where power rests with the army.

Beyond Jhelum the plains ended, merging into hills of soft reddish stone which the weather of millennia had scored and gouged into a Gothic disorder of mock castles and towers, pinnacles and flying buttresses, a fantasy of architectural prototypes roughed out by nature and left in a wild solitude, with trees growing out of spires and caves opening into turrets. For many miles the train strained upward through this strange un-
populated Thebaid, until the sunset fired the pinnacles volcanic red and turned the gullies into crevasses of darkness. In the pallor of twilight we descended through terraced fields and, as night fell, reached Rawal Pindi.
The nights at Rawal Pindi were cold, frosty and uncomfortable. Because of the presence of the central government, accommodation was scarce, and though our hotel had magnificent Victorian gardens and an elegantly modernized façade, we had to sleep in a dark unheated room in one of the annexes; the beds were string charpoys and the mattresses of lumpy cotton. But the mornings were fresh and luminously clear, with the rime turning quickly into an iridescent dewy moisture on the lawns and the air warming rapidly to the heat of the sunny noon.

On our first morning we decided to go to Taxila and at ten the driver appeared. Yussuf was a man of the northern hills; with his thick, black beard and heavy nose, and his curly hair crowned by a flat Chitrak cap, he reminded me of an Assyrian sculpture, at least until I met his eyes, which were a clear grey. Standing beside his antique, dusty Ford, in his Pathan pantaloons and his tweed overcoat torn at the armpits, he looked as untrustworthy a bandit as any romantic could wish to encounter, but his voice was unexpectedly soft, and his smile illuminated his heavy dark features with an incongruous gentleness.

Taxila lies in the southernmost folds of the Murree Hills, the last wave of the mountains that flow in descending ripples from the Hindu Kush and the Karakorums and finally melt away in the great sandy plains of the Indus valley. As we drove out through the avenues of Rawal Pindi on to the Great Trunk Road, the ancient trade route that runs north-west towards Afghanistan, the landscape was bounded to the north by the ranges of soft sandstone, cut by dark, crumbling gullies. It was a countryside worn and scarred by a vast ancient erosion. When the Persians and Greeks first came more than two millennia ago,
there had been forests here, extending in tangled jungle southward towards the Indian Ocean. Now, in December, a thin pelt of winter-brown scrub covered the arid hillsides, and the farmers, whose parched fields barrenly awaited the scanty rains of the frontier, lived in dusty villages of flat-roofed mud houses or in caves cut into the soft stone of hillocks left by the floods of a distant past. The look of the country reminded me constantly of the great bare regions of the Mexican plateau, but the people and their way of living were quite different.

For this was a strictly Moslem countryside. No women worked in the fields or tended the herds of small cattle or the flocks of dumbas, the fat-tailed sheep of the Middle East. The men, whose main occupation at this season seemed to be carrying dried dung to the fields in baskets, were light-skinned, with the aquiline profile of the frontier peoples; change their shirts and lungis of grubby white cotton into suits, and most of them would have passed at first sight for Greeks or Italians.

Twenty miles along the Great Trunk Road we turned into a lane which ran through the narrow bazaar of the modern village of Taxila. North of the village lie the three cities of ancient Taxila: the pre-classical city of the Bhir Mound where King Ambhi paid tribute to Alexander; the hilltop city of Sirkap which the Bactrian Greeks founded and the Parthians embellished; and the final citadel, built two miles away at Sirkush by the Kushana emperors and destroyed by the White Huns who stormed over the passes in the fifth century A.D. and put to an end the cosmopolitan culture, richly composed of Indian, Persian, Greek and Central Asian strains, that had grown up in the two millennia during which Taxila was the great religious and commercial centre of north-west India.

For centuries before the White Huns arrived Taxila had lived a double life, its common people following their Indian traditions and living like their compatriots in the Ganges valley, and its ruling classes preserving a Hellenistic veneer which was fostered, even after the destruction of the Bactrian Greek principalities in the first century B.C., by a succession of Central Asian kings of Scythian and Parthian race. When the Parthian dynasty
ended two centuries later, the Asian religion of Buddhism paradoxically kept alive the influence of Greece in this remote land beyond the Hindu Kush.

There was, in fact, a close link between the Greeks and Buddhism in Taxila. When King Agathocles laid out the city at Sirkap he engraved on his coins the symbols of the Buddhist faith, the lotus and the bo tree, and his successor Menander, who led the Greeks in the great campaign down the Ganges valley to the Indian capital of Patna, became a convert and to this day is celebrated as a saint as far away as Bangkok. Both Buddhism, with its rejection of the traditional Hindu social order, and the Greek kings, with their humanistic culture, lived precariously on the margin of Indian life; their alliance was natural, and so close that it was in the art of Buddhist monasteries that the final strains of Hellenistic influence persisted in Taxila and Peshawar, percolating through Central Asia to the fringes of China.

The director of the small museum which lies at the base of the valley of Taxila delegated one of his attendants, a fiercely-whiskered little man in blue uniform and turban, to act as our guide. ‘Go first to Jaulian,’ he suggested. Jaulian had been one of the famous Buddhist monasteries of ancient Taxila. The guide directed Yussuf along the dirt road up the valley between the empty winter fields. The hills closed in, cultivation lapsed and the road came to an end. It became a land for sheep herders, the sky bright and distant, the air lucent, the silence complete.

We followed the guide through a scanty grove of pepper trees growing beside a stony stream bed and began to climb the uphill path between gnarled acacia trees and thickets of thorny berberis. A green pocket of meadow lay beneath us, fed by some constant trickle; donkeys were grazing and a shack of branches and straw had been built like the byre in an Italian nativity. A small dark figure came running across the meadow and up the path behind us. ‘Baksheesh, sahibji!’ she panted. ‘Baksheesh! Baksheesh!’ She was ten or eleven, barefooted and dressed in black trousers over which she wore an extraordinary assemblage of dark and threadbare garments, culminating in a man’s tweed waistcoat of incredible raggedness. A mop of uncombed black
hair hung over her face, and through it glinted a single large silver ring that swung from her left ear. Her eyes were large and dark, her profile sharp, her skin pale; dressed and groomed, her wildness would have turned into beauty. She brushed her hair out of her eyes with apparent shyness as Inge photographed her, and immediately afterwards clamoured for more money. The guide shook his head. 'These people do not belong here.' He began to describe their nomadic shepherd life. 'They come over the mountains from Kaghan. Very wealthy people.' Inge glanced at the girl's rags. 'They always look poor, memsahib,' he insisted. 'It pays them.' His tone sharpened with the ancient distrust of the man who lives in houses for those who live in tents, as he turned and hurried in long strides up the path, leaving us to pant behind him to the ruins on the hilltop.

Jaulian was built in the second century A.D. Like everything in ancient Taxila, it came to an end when the White Huns arrived. They set fire to its buildings and slaughtered the monks in their cloisters. So wide was the devastation in Taxila, and so thorough the depopulation, that the murdered men were left where they lay and their skeletons were only discovered, preserved by the dry air, when the excavators started to work at Taxila fifteen centuries later.

As we saw it, Jaulian had the neutral, diagrammatic look of sites that have been tidied up by over-assiduous archaeologists. All that had been covered by roofs in the past was open to the sky, and the fragments of walls stood like artificial barriers marking off court from court and cell from cell. On the other hand, in the courtyards where the stupas once raised in the open their domed and seven-ringed pinnacles, glittering with red paint and gold leaf that flashed back the splendour of the sun, there were new roofs to protect the square bases, covered with stucco Buddhas, which were all that remained of these monuments, once so splendid and so gaudy. The best sculptures had been removed to museums, and those that were left merely reflected the monotony which theological changes eventually impressed on the Greco-Buddhist art of Taxila. Mahayanist Buddhism has always tended towards a rather mechanical view
of the accumulation of merit, and in this region, during the last two centuries of Buddhist florescence, it became the custom to seek escape from the wheel of desire and suffering by covering walls and stupas with hundreds of large and small figures of Buddha. This mechanical repetition made Jaulian artistically disappointing, yet it suggested, far more faithfully than the tranquil desertion into which Jaulian has fallen today, the true past of the monastery. When Taxila was a thriving city, with its warlike noblemen, its pious ladies and its rich Greek merchants, Jaulian had been a pilgrimage resort, crowded with worshippers and donors to whom the monks of its twenty-nine cells had acted as the busy spiritual advisers. The atmosphere was probably very much like that of a well-visited Russian monastery of the kind described by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; no one has yet thoroughly considered how far the conventual institutions of the Greek Church were influenced by Mahayanist monasticism, which spread far into Central Asia and to the bounds of the Byzantine realm.

As we ambled through the deserted courtyards, the clink of chisels cutting stone echoed from among the low hills covered with wild olive trees, and the invisible workers began to sing in a kind of falsetto yodelling. These were the only sounds in that empty landscape. After a while we went down to eat our lunch beside a pool with a few trees around it. Yussuf and the guide declined our invitation to join us, for Allah alone knows what enormities infidels may carry in cardboard boxes, and we sat alone on a pile of stones in a little scrap of shade, watching the wagtails skittering along the edge of the murky water. We had guests after all, for the girl who had begged from us came with two small boys, equally ragged, to sit on the stones of the opposite bank. They edged slowly around the pond, stopping occasionally to skim a stone for the sake of appearance, until they stood in front of us, staring with hungry fascination. The girl said something in her hill dialect and held out her hands. The children devoured like hungry animals the stringy slices of mutton, the cold potatoes and mouldy-tasting bread which the hotel had given us for lunch and which we had picked over with
distaste. 'Beggars,' said the guide censoriously when we returned to the car. 'Very rich people.'

Down the valley we came to Jandial, the temple where, in the first century, Apollonius of Tyana sheltered while he awaited the Parthian king's permission to enter Taxila. Its worn walls of grey stone and its broken silvery columns survive as the skeleton of the only truly Grecian shrine which has yet been discovered on the Indian sub-continent, though there must have been many others in the cities founded by Alexander and the Bactrian kings. Grey lizards lay spreadeagled on the fallen Ionian capitals, but there was nothing left of the bronze statues of Alexander which Apollonius had seen. Centuries of plunderers had left the temple a broken core and had even taken away most of the stones from its columns.

As we were getting back into the car to cross the valley to the hillside where the foundations of Sirkap made their chequered pattern of shadow, two peasants came running up the path to Jandial. They had seen us from the hamlet whose dome-shaped haystacks grew like gigantic fungi out of the fields beside the ruined city. They held out their open hands; one hand contained two worn silver coins, the other a little Buddha head carved out of grey stone. The guide, who knew that the traffic in archaeological objects was illegal, turned his back, and Yussuf came over to interpret. The man with the coins shouted, 'Iskander! Iskander!' and then a long stream of dialect. 'He say Alexander make them,' Yussuf explained, and smiled more gently than ever. I looked at the coins, searching for the almost feminine handsomeness of the world conqueror. Interested against his will, the guide turned round. 'Only two coins of Alexander found in Taxila,' he remarked. The coins which the peasant held bore Arabic lettering. What impressed me was not the petty attempt at fraud, but the fact that to Yussuf and these illiterate farmers from the Murree Hills the name of Alexander still rang like magic. To them anything ancient was somehow linked with this strange being, the Two-Horned Iskander, who had inexplicably become one of the great culture heroes of the Islamic world.
1 Taxila: a nomad girl
2 Transport on the Great Trunk Road
3 Rawalpindi: the scribe
4 Pathan tribesmen
At Sirkap, we found that the Parthian capital, built above that of the Bactrian Greeks, had been excavated and preserved, with its outlined buildings and its vestigial stupas. But so intrigued were the excavators with what they discovered that they were reluctant to disturb this late city by digging to the original town beneath. This is the more unfortunate since none of the many Greek cities founded by Alexander or the Bactrian Greeks has been thoroughly investigated in either Pakistan or Afghanistan; the very locations of many of them have not yet been clearly identified. Only in the plan of Sirkap, in the rectangular patterns traced by the main avenue and the right-angled side streets, was the hand of its Hellenistic creators still evident. Now one sees only the blurred outlines of half-buried walls mantled by turf, but when the city was new, when the spires of its Buddhist stupas and the towers of its Parthian fire temples glittered over the long white rows of houses built low to avert the danger of earthquakes, when the armies and caravans marched down the wide processional way past the royal palace in which, according to the legend, Saint Thomas converted King Gondophares. Taxila must have been one of the most splendid cities of Asia, the great mart of the Indian borderland and the cultural meeting-place to which Greek philosophers travelled, like Apollonius, seeking that wisdom of the East for which the men of Hellas and Alexandria thirsted in the centuries after the passing of Christ.

In regions where different cultures have always been in confrontation, there are certain recurrences which tempt one to think in cyclic terms of history. Taxila was only the first city in the frontier region to become the citadel of an alien civilization; Sakala had its turn under Menander, Peshawar under the Kushanas and the Sikhs, and Rawal Pindi completed the series, for here the British created their great military centre in the old, undivided India. Rawal Pindi, of course, had its native quarter and its native life, as we found when we came back from Taxila and walked in the smoky, spice-smelling, all-masculine bazaar, where huge signs advertised CHICKS, and CHICKS turned out to be neither two-day-olds nor dancing girls, but merely the cane
blinds which are a speciality of the town. But the great plan of Rawal Pindi, with its cantonment and its Civil Lines, is as British as the great plan of Sirkap was Greek.

Just as the Greeks remained in Taxila under the Parthians as doctors and engineers, so, now that Rawal Pindi is Pakistan’s capital, the British are still there as technicians—men from the provincial universities, talking in Cockney and Yorkshire accents, and hardly troubling to mime the manner of the sahibs. The true descendants of the sahibs are the native patricians who have moved to Rawal Pindi in the Civil Service or as officers in the army. Like the Parthian kings of Taxila who conversed in Greek, these upper-class Pakistanis are more at home in English than in Urdu, and one does not have to twist historical parallels to see a resemblance between the nomad chieftain of first-century Taxila who maintained his fitness with the discus and javelin, and the Pakistani officer who plays his round of tennis before going to a mess where the regimental customs established by departed British officers are followed as meticulously as a Masonic ceremonial. In its decay the British Empire seems to cast as long a shadow over Asia as the dying Hellenistic empires two thousand years ago.
The morning was just breaking and the high notes of bugles sounded distantly from the cantonment when Yussuf called us for our journey to Peshawar and the Khyber Pass. Along the Great Trunk Road the countryside was already awake as the sun flushed up over the eastern hills and set the sharp edges of the mountains glowing. Cyclists in old army raincoats, their mouths covered with tartan scarves to keep out the noxious morning air, came riding in straggling companies from the outlying villages. Double-decker buses, superannuated from the streets of English towns, trundled past the barracks. Trousered hill-women walked by the roadside, carrying on their heads long, swaying bundles of canes. And ox-wagons, loaded high and wide with straw, were goaded slowly forward by men so voluminously wrapped in brown blankets that only their eyes could be seen. Time and again they blocked the road, and Yussuf muttered angrily to himself in Pushtu.

As the sun rose higher, the brooks and ponds steamed like hot springs under its rays, the apricot haze lifted from the snow peaks to the north, and the white farms glistened like teeth on the distant hillsides. We passed the ruins of Taxila, and more mysterious mounds which stand isolated like Palestinian tels, waiting for the day when archaeologists will begin a thorough survey of the classic invasion route into India and at last unravel the mysteries of Alexander’s cities beyond the Hindu Kush. And then for many miles we drove over sun-brown melancholy uplands with grey villages desolate under the high clear sky. Each village had its cemetery among the winter-bare fields, with jagged slabs of rock at the heads of the rough mounds of earth, and on isolated hillocks coloured flags hung limply over
the tombs of the *pirs*, the Sufi saints whom the Moslems of the
hills worship in pantheistic devotion as their ancestors worship-
ped the spirits of the earth.

Two hours after leaving Rawal Pindi we entered a range of
small hills of blackish rock, still shining with the morning
dampness. In the folds of these hills stood ancient Moslem tombs
with moss-mottled fluted domes. We passed through the town
of Attok where the occupants of the tombs had once lived, and
crossed the Gorge of the Indus by the suspension bridge; khaki-
clad police stood on guard there, armed with carbines and bayo-
nets. There have been guards for many centuries on the Indus
crossing at Attok, which lies on the route of most of the great
land invasions of India. Alexander crossed the great river there
by a bridge of boats, and Tamerlane followed him several
centuries later on his way to the sacking of Delhi. Since his own
ancestor Babur had also travelled this way to the conquest of
Hindustan, the Great Moghul Akbar realized the strategic
importance of the Gorge, and it was he who in 1581 founded the
town of Attok and built its great fort.

Still Akbar’s fort stood, a structure of high crenellated walls
with hooded arrow slits, spreading in rigid slabs of masonry
down the curved smooth rock of the hillsides that sloped to
the edge of the Gorge. Yussuf swept his arm appreciatively
towards the uncrumbling bastions. ‘Pathan never capture
Akbar’s fort.’ It was meant as a tribute. As a man of the hills,
Yussuf had no doubt that the Pathans were the best of all
warriors and that the most important wars were still those
fought by tribal marksmen in the mountain terrain of the
Hindu Kush.

At Attok the Indus was already a wide, powerful river, which
had run hundreds of miles through Kashmir, Gilgit and Swat
from its source in the uplands of western Tibet, and it rushed
darkly, with deep perilous-looking eddies, between the rocks
that formed beaches under the high black cliffs. Through this
treacherous passage a Greek captain named Skylax sailed on an
expedition in the employ of the Greek King Darius two centuries
before Alexander came to India. He was the first European to
explore the Indian sub-continent, but part of a sentence in Herodotus is his only monument in history.

Beyond Attock, our way to Peshawar lay along the Kabul River, which joins the Indus a little way above the gorge—a broad river, flowing slowly between willow groves and small terraced fields, and opening to the Peshawar Valley, a wide oasis rimmed by the austere grey slopes of the Suleiman Mountains. Here the copses were turning yellow and the apple and pear trees in the big orchards had shed their leaves; but the fruit hung ripe and brilliant among the dark evergreen foliage of the tangerine groves.

At last the skyline of Peshawar came into sight, the silhouette of a Central Asian city outlined against the mountains, with minarets pointing upward like stone fingers over the squat domes and broken rectangles of flat roofs. We passed through the smoky suburbs of mud houses and, skirting the bazaars, entered the green avenues of the Cantonment.

Our destination in Peshawar was the city museum, with its celebrated collection of Gandhara sculptures gathered from the monasteries in the surrounding hills. We stepped into a bleak Gothic hall where old bearded men in white turbans huddled over charcoal braziers among the grey Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, standing stiff in hieratic postures. As we walked past these long lines of Greek-faced statues, a young albino attached himself to us, squinting painfully through his long pale lashes. He spoke a little English and led us into the office where the curator sat huddled in an overcoat, with a heavy Kashmir shawl over his shoulders, examining with a magnifying glass a tray of gold and silver coins.

The curator welcomed us with the surprised, happy smile of a man relieved from winter boredom; visitors interested in his treasures did not come often in the cold season. He clapped his hands, and almost immediately one of the old bearded men came in with a tray on which stood three fragile bowls of translucent porcelain. It was green tea, perfumed with spices, the customary drink offered by the Pathans who, for all their ferocious reputation, are as fervently anti-alcoholic as the Band of Hope in a
Baptist conventicle. We sat for an hour discussing some of the problems I had encountered in the research for my book on the Greek invaders of India, while the curator searched in his safe and produced a collection of photographs of Gandhara sculptures which he pressed upon me as a gift. Afterwards, he walked around the galleries with us, explaining where the exhibits had been found, and how some of them had been rescued from the iconoclastic fervour of the Afridi tribesmen. Beside the Gandhara Buddhas, there were gauche wooden horses, carved by the Kafirs, those enigmatic fair-skinned people from the Hindu Kush who still celebrate at each grape harvest a rite resembling the Bacchic festivals of ancient Greece. The place of honour in the centre of the museum was occupied by a crude little bronze box, crowned with stubby figures of the Buddha and his disciples, which provided one of the most fascinating clues to the links between East and West in the classical age. It was the reliquary, meant to hold a fragment of the Buddha’s bones, which the Greek architect Agesilas made with his own hands and placed in the great pagoda he designed for King Kanishka at Peshawar in the second century A.D. Kanishka’s pagoda was a vast structure of stone terraces and wooden roofs 700 feet high, the tallest building in ancient Asia. The pilgrims came from as far as China to admire its magnificence and listen to the music of its thousands of bronze wind bells.

Yussuf had followed us into the museum, and we came upon him gazing ruminatively at the figure of a Bodhisattva with hyacinthine curls which rivalled in luxuriance the wigs of the Italian gentlemen whom Bernini portrayed in his sculptures. I asked Yussuf what he thought of it. He paused, searching for the right answer. ‘They pretty good mechanics,’ he finally pronounced. And there, however, unintentionally, this iconoclastic Moslem touched on the central weakness, not only of Gandhara art, but of all Buddhist art.

We left the museum and went to the local tourist officer to get the necessary permit to enter a restricted tribal area. Then we set off for the Khyber Pass, driving out past the green lawns of the university campus towards the Suleiman mountains. The
point where the dry shaly foothills of the range began to rise from the plain was marked by the turreted fort of Jamrud, shaped like a ship of stone; it was built by Ranjit Singh, the Sikh King of Lahore, to keep the mountain Pathans out of Peshawar. Outside the fort the barrier was down across the road; the sentry motioned us to leave the car, and we went into a roadside shack where a sharp-nosed, blue-eyed policeman sat over an immense leather-bound register, whose replicas we had seen in remote police posts on other distant frontiers, in the Andorran Pyrenees, in the Indian Himalayas, in the Peruvian Andes. He took our permits, scribbled in his book, exacted two rupees, handed me a grubby scrap of paper with some incomprehensible pencil marks upon it, and said curtly, 'Back by five. Not after.' The Pakistani authorities do not guarantee a stranger's safety in the pass overnight unless he has some arrangement with a leading local tribesman who is willing to give protection, which according to the Pathan code of honour implies an obligation to avenge any injury to the visitor.

The old Ford ground painfully up through stony lower valleys and in among dry, rubbly ranges, yet there was never anything very daunting about the journey. For the whole twenty-three miles from Jamrud to Torkham on the Afghan border, the road wound over gradients that must have been as easy for camel caravans or marching men as they would have been for a better car than Yussuf's antiquated taxi, the relic, as he now boasted to excuse its slowness, of some departed American consul. The arid crumbling mountains crowded at times oppressively close to the road. They never rose to any great height, but there was hardly a hundred yards of the highway that was not commanded by some crag or bouldered hillside from which Pathan tribesmen could have fired on troops or terrorized passing caravans. The British cleared and fortified the heights, one after another, until the pass became one of the most heavily defended areas in the world. Every spur of rock supported at least a turret of rusty stone, clinging like a swallow's nest to the cliffside, with the loopholes and windows protected by heavy sheets of iron. Every bridge had its pillbox, and every
signal-box on the narrow-gauge railway that climbed to within three miles of the Afghan border was a miniature fort.

These defences were built for two purposes, to prevent invasion from the far side of the Suleiman range, and to protect the Pass itself from the Pathan tribes, particularly the Afridis who inhabit the nearby valleys. Nobody has completely subdued the frontier tribes since Alexander gave them a drubbing 2,300 years ago, which earned him such a lasting respect that even today the Afridis claim to be descended from the soldiers of Two-horned Iskander. The British bombed and bribed the Pathans, but never brought them completely under control. Nowadays the Pakistani Government has concluded an uneasy truce; the Pathans refrain from making raids outside their valleys, but at the borders of their territory the law of Pakistan ends and the law of the tribes begins: vendettas continue unrestrained unless they are compounded by blood money; hospitality is a sacred duty; the jirga, the assembly of adult males, governs the affairs of the village; and the land is redivided every few years to give each tribesman his chance of cultivating fertile fields. At the same time, enjoying both ways of life, the Afridis in particular have entered the Pakistani business world as middlemen and carriers.

The crowded buses of the Afridi Transport careered past us up the road, screaming to a halt whenever a group of baggy-trousered, rifle-bearing Pathans stood waiting, and then dashing off at breakneck speed while the last man was still hanging on precariously. They were all bound for the bazaar at Lanti Kotal, the summit of the pass, and at last Yussuf's car boiled up the hill behind them and subsided to a halt in the cloud of dust that hung over the parking area. As we got out, Yussuf asked me to advance him a hundred rupees. 'I want to buy some things,' he said, when I looked at him doubtfully. Rather reluctantly, I gave him what was the major part of the day's fare.

The bazaar lay in a big hollow beneath us, a jungle of irregular tiled roofs over which the thin minarets of the mosque pointed their loudspeakers in all the cardinal directions. We clambered down broken steps into a labyrinth of narrow arcaded alleys,
protected by drooping and ragged canvas awnings, between which the sun fell in solid-looking moto-laden masses. The flies buzzed and danced around our heads, and the air irritated our eyes with a combination of woodsmoke, curry and sizzling mutton fat coming from the open eating-houses where delectable-looking patties were being fried in open pans a yard across and eaten by customers sitting in rows on string beds. The customers were all men. In fact, there was not a woman to be seen in the whole bazaar. Down the alleys the tall Afridis strolled with the erect, deliberate bearing which they carefully cultivate, rifles hanging from their shoulders and Afghan daggers thrust into belts around the long blue, shirt-like garments which they wear over their full pantaloons. Their great aquiline noses and their pale eyes glittering out of weather-darkened faces gave them a stern and predatory expression, but when they smiled most of them had, like Yussuf, a look of incongruous gentleness; some wore a peculiarly frivolous headgear of a gilded basket decorated with a twisted blue silk scarf, which made them look as if they had just raided the Easter parade of an American Women’s club. The older men, the fierce-eyed maliks with their clipped beards, ignored us both. The younger men would sometimes smile at me, and a few of them said ‘Hullo!’ but even they treated Inge’s embarrassing presence by acting as if she did not exist. This suited her purpose, since all the time she was taking surreptitious photographs.

It was soon obvious why Yussuf had asked me for a hundred rupees. Lanti Kotal owes its very existence as a bazaar on this bleak mountain ridge to the smugglers who operate over the mountains from Kabul, and who are tolerated by the Pakistani authorities as part of the price to be paid for Pathan goodwill. I doubt if there was a single merchant there who did not deal in contraband; they all looked so sleek and well-fed among their transistor radios, Luger pistols, Swiss watches and German cameras. They were even selling portable TV sets, in a country which has no television network, and I am sure that on order they could have provided one with a cut-rate computer. Every now and again we would see Yussuf seated on the platform of a
different stall, drinking green tea with the fat, bearded merchant
and conversing with the ceremonious procrastination which is
thought proper for business dealings among the Pathans. When
I asked Yussuf if he had bought anything, he shook his head,
but later on he seemed very relieved when we got through the
police post at Peshawar without the car’s being inspected.

On the way down to the border at Torkham we passed one
of the strange Pathan villages which remind one of San Gemign-
nano, the city of hostile towers, since each of them consists of a
series of small forts. Each of the forts is inhabited by a single
joint family; it has mud walls, twelve to fifteen feet high, three
or four loopholed firing-towers, and a single massive wooden
gate which is the only means of entry. The Pathan’s home is
literally his castle, and I have heard of villages where the dwel-
lers in these fortified houses had to dig trenches in order to reach
the neutral territory of the highroad without being shot up by
their neighbours. On this occasion Inge asked Yussuf to stop
the car so that she might photograph the village. He refused,
with alarm in his voice. ‘No! Not now! Pathan see you . . . he
go zing!’ He aimed his finger like a bullet at his brow, and, since
we assumed that he knew the inclinations of his own people, we
compromised by taking a snapshot through the window.

The predilection for going zing is so accepted among the
Pathans that every party of Afridis we passed on our way from
Lanti Kotal to the Afghan border, with its train of pack ponies
or mules, had at least one riflemen walking at the head of the
caravan and keeping a wary eye on the heights around. Almost
every family has in its past some deed of blood for which an-
other family may any day decide to take revenge.

On the frontier at Torkham we sat on the high terrace of the
dak bungalow, overlooking the border post, and ate our dry
hotel sandwiches. It was a small oasis, with the shadow of trees
and with flowering shrubs which looked wonderfully fresh and
bright after the dreariness of the shaly mountain-sides. A few
yards down the road from the Pakistan barrier stood a red-and-
green sentry-box, and a single guard representing Afghanistan;
he wore a rough grey uniform with a Russian cut which con-
trasted with the distinctly British style of the Pakistani uniforms. All we could see of his country was a valley running down between the same kind of hills as we had already traversed and a grove of poplars surrounding a yellow-stuccoed building a few hundred yards along the road. It was, doubtless with intent, the most slackly held frontier I have ever seen. The Afghan and Pakistani guards kept an ostentatious watch over the road itself, but along the dry river bed beside it, towards which their backs were resolutely turned, we watched a train of twenty loaded ponies entering Afghanistan unchallenged, and a group of three heavily armed men bringing their pack mules into Pakistan.

As we were leaving the dak bungalow we passed a trio of western-dressed Pathans sitting over a blackened iron bowl which contained some kind of curried mutton in a deep brown sauce. They were eating the rich-looking mess with their fingers; the eldest of them stood up and invited us to share their meal. I was delighted to discover that the famous Pathan hospitality was not a mere matter of legend, and tempted to try their food, hot and unhygienic as it looked, but Yussuf was signalling in the background that it was time to leave, time to get out of the pass before darkness fell and guns began to go zing. So, after a moment of conversation, we left. As we drove into Peshawar, night was settling over the wide valley of Gandhara, and the last sunlight faded over the Suleiman mountains towards Kabul.
In the Khyber Pass we had felt very near to the Iranian heart of Asia, to the great highlands of Persia and Afghanistan. When we returned through Rawal Pindi to Lahore, we felt already the pull of India. Lahore is Pakistan’s second largest city, and its very way of spreading chaotically through vast, untidy suburbs, reeking with the smoke of dung and aromatic wood, reminded us immediately of the cities of northern India. Even the visible relics of Lahore’s heritage of Moslem culture paradoxically enhanced the resemblance. With its old Moghul fort, its mosques dating from the days of Jehanjir and Shah Jehan, and the surviving fragments of Moslem domestic architecture in the narrow lanes of its old quarters, it took its place in one’s mind with the other great Moghul cities which the accident of modern history have placed across the border in India—with Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri, with Agra and Lucknow.

Until the last days of the British Raj Lahore retained a certain Moghul elegance, and Sikhs exiled in Delhi still talk of the city with nostalgia and with anger at the thought that the capital of the great Ranjit Singh should now be in the hands of their enemies. Somehow, in the chaotic events of the last two decades, during which the old multi-religious society was torn apart, both the elegance and the sense of the need for it have vanished from Lahore. What now impresses one is the contrast between the decay that is overtaking the city of the Moghuls and the restless vigour of a new city, modern, industrial, overcrowded, and somewhat frenetic, that is growing up within its shell.

The Punjabis are probably the most energetic people of the Indian sub-continent, a quality which they attribute to their habit of eating wheat instead of rice. In Pakistan, as in India, they
have gained positions in government and business in a ratio far out of proportion to their numbers. But one of their qualities is a tendency to strive for ambitious goals and to neglect the small, immediate tasks. And so, in Lahore, we stumbled constantly over broken paving-stones, and walked at night at the peril of our lives over open manholes and other traps through the gloom of badly lit streets, while around us new blocks of apartments and offices were being pushed up rapidly by a strange but efficient combination of modern building machinery and large gangs of low-paid navvies.

Because this new Lahore rises out of the decrepitude of the chaotic old city, and not, like Karachi, from a barren desert, one experiences there a feeling of the compression of time, or perhaps rather of the dissolution of the normal sequences of progress. A new class of hard-jowled business men in English-cut suits has arisen; they fill the chrome-plated modern cafés in the centre of the city, and personify the era of the construction sites and the American and Italian cars parked in serried ranks under the aristocratic trees of The Mall. But the older world of the poor still lives in the nineteenth century or in some even older and less definable past. It was the constant juxtaposition of these two ways of life, representing in objective terms two completely different stages of social evolution, that dominated one’s impressions of Lahore.

The images of the city which stay in my mind are those that fix such impressions in concrete form. A night scene, for example: the great evening chorus of starlings has just ended in the gardens of the neglected Victorian houses, the chill that follows twilight has set in, and, under the trees outside a new concrete building, groups of people have appeared, no-one knows from where, and have lit tiny fires of sticks on which dung cakes are beginning to glow. The acrid smoke drifts on the light wind across the face of the building and moves in slow wisps under the trees, and the small flickering flames dimly outline the squatting faceless figures, muffled in cloak-like garments and cooking some kind of meal over the miserable fire they have succeeded in making; no one interferes with them, and they in turn seem to
regard as non-existent the other world that ignores them. The sharp clip of horseshoes rises above the bourdon of motor traffic, and a little rough-haired pony trots by between the shafts of a decrepit horse cab. The driver, white-turbaned, white-bearded, calls out hoarsely, and one of the figures around the fire stands up, turns a dim featureless face, and calls back. The cab drives on, the clip of horseshoes dies away, and the standing figure turns and sits down again, dimly outlined by his little fire.

Except for such flickering impressions, and for the Shalimar Gardens, that exquisite concoction of lawns, trees, water mirrors and airy incidental architecture constructed at the order of Shah Jehan three centuries ago and still attractive as a geometrical abstraction in the art of landscape gardening, we did not find Lahore either pleasing or sympathetic. It projected an indifference, an impersonality, which we had not encountered in other Pakistani cities. But this perhaps is another way of saying that in Lahore we did not experience those accidents of personal encounter which can make the dullest town enjoyable. On the contrary, we found all our intentions frustrated by a curious perversity of circumstances. Some of our disappointments were obviously accidental. An archaeologist I had missed in Peshawar by one hour and hoped to overtake in Lahore had already gone on to Karachi. A writer I had hoped to meet was in New York. One had to accept such setbacks as merely coincidental. But there were two incidents ambiguous enough to arouse the temporary paranoia to which a writer is always susceptible when he travels in a country that is both foreign and police-dominated.

A woman professor at Lahore University, with whom I had been in correspondence, had promised to arrange a series of introductions so that I might meet people who could talk about social and political problems in modern Pakistan. When we arrived she refused to see me; her secretary told me that her mother was ill and she felt too distressed to meet strangers. I had a letter to one of the high university officials, so I did not treat this setback at all seriously. That afternoon we had tea with the Dean and two of his colleagues. They were bland, English-educated men, adept at inter-academic courtesies, but unwilling to
talk about Pakistani problems—not theirs fields, after all!—and equally unhelpful in suggesting people who might be willing.

We walked out with the feeling of having been coolly brushed off, and I mentally shook from my feet the academic dust of Lahore. Was there not, I began to ask myself, a link between the two incidents? I imagined the woman professor, having agreed to help us, becoming afflicted with the fear of compromising herself, going to the Dean, receiving his advice to have nothing to do with inquisitive foreigners, and presenting a convenient excuse for breaking her word. The Dean, of course, having advised caution, practised it himself. Almost certainly I was wrong, but such speculations are part of the subjective experience of travel. Now I see them, in this particular case, as a projection of one of the anxieties one always feels in an authoritarian country, the anxiety which asks not, ‘Am I in danger?’ but ‘Am I being told the truth?’
From Lahore we flew across the winter-parched Punjab to Delhi. Since we had to cross the 1,000 miles of India from East to West Pakistan, we intended to spend Christmas and New Year in that country before proceeding on our journey. It meant passing from the indifference of Lahore to the abundant hospitality of a city where we had many friends, some of them of very long standing and others—both Indians and Tibetans—acquired during our travels in India two years before.

We spent our nights and little more, at the International Centre in the southern part of the city, a recently opened institution where scholars from all over the world could stay and meet their Indian colleagues. The intent and the architecture were magnificent. But the charges, which we had somewhat innocently imagined would be tempered to the purses of academics, were higher than those of any hotel in Delhi except the Ashoka. Unfortunately the service did not match the bill; Inge never felt happy there from the moment, half an hour after our arrival, when, suspecting that her bed had not been freshly made, she opened it out and discovered a pair of Pan-American bedsocks. Nevertheless, it was pleasant to be located beside the Lodi Gardens, to hear the jackals barking at night among the Moslem tombs, and to walk over in the daytime, past the schools of gamblers seated on the brown grass, to the house of our friends Patwant and Keeny Singh in Ratendon Road, where, over the whole Christmas season, which the internationally minded people of Delhi celebrate as enthusiastically as they do their own Sikh and Hindu festivals, the doors were open to all acquaintances and an unending series of parties was conducted with true Sikh hospitality.
5  The Khyber Pass

6  Lahore: the Shalimar Gardens
7 Tibetan monk at Mussoorie

8 The Buddhist shrine at Darjeeling
Our days in Delhi passed very quickly, meeting old friends and making new acquaintances. In Connaught Circus we encountered Mulk Raj Anand, on holiday from Chandigarh where he had become a Professor of Art History. With Rasil and Roman Basu, on leave from their Mekong River assignment in Bangkok, we spent a gargantuan evening at the Punjabi restaurant, Moti Mahal, eating quail, chicken and sand grouse, cooked in clay ovens. And at one strenuous party I met the Mexican poet Ottavio Paz, enraptured over the beauty and spirit of the Delhi women, and muttering darkly, ‘Why are they so delectable, and the men so . . .?’

There were other things to occupy our time during what seem in memory the very scanty intervals between bouts of extreme conviviality. I lectured on Orwell and delved into the Gandhara relics of the Delhi Museum, while Inge spent some freezing hours in the unheated library of Sapru House, studying certain aspects of Tibetan art. Finally, there were mornings waiting at consulates to collect visas for the rest of our journey through Asia. It was the 29th December before we finally set off, in a crowded Land-Rover driven by an English woman refugee worker, on a visit to the Tibetans in the Himalayan foothills whom we had met on the journey I described in *Faces of India*. It was a hard and at times rather dangerous journey, for we were caught while crossing the plains of Uttar Pradesh in a hailstorm of extraordinary violence, and later, climbing the mountain roads, we realized that the tyres of the Land-Rover had worn so smooth that it developed an alarming tendency to slither over towards the precipice whenever the road was damp or muddy. But we got there, and at New Year we were in Mussoorie, staying with our friend Mrs. Rinchen Dolma Taring at the Tibetan Homes Foundation, where there was a Canadian Home for fifty children which we had helped to establish through the Tibetan Refugee Aid Society of Vancouver.

The Tibetans, who have their own lavish New Year festival, determined by the lunar calendar, have also adopted what they call ‘International New Year’, and so we celebrated the arrival of 1964 in Tibetan manner by climbing with Mrs. Taring to the
craggy spur of a mountain-top that looked south over Mussoorie and the Indian plains and north towards the white peaks of Nepal and the lost plateaus of Tibet itself.

As we sweated up the mountain path we saw lines of coloured prayer flags flapping in the wind, hundreds of children dotting the slopes like living shrubs in their brown chupas, and a thin blue column of smoke rising toward the sky from a holy fire of aromatic shrubs. On the hilltop, among the cairns sacred to the mountain spirits, stood a stone altar where the Dalai Lama had prayed a year before, and in a semicircle before it five maroon-robed lamas were seated. They greeted us silently, and motioned us to places facing them. Below us, down the hillside, were the children, and their thousand voices rose solemnly, chanting in chorus the Tibetan prayers for the New Year. On the altar a collection of sacred objects symbolized the presence of the Dalai Lama. The chanting continued; the smoke rose towards the clear blue mountain sky; the flags flapped in the wind, each flap a prayer for the suffering world. Then the voices became silent, and young novice monks walked among us with bowls of tsampa, the roasted barley meal that sustains men in the rigorous climate of the Tibetan plateau. We each took a pinch. The lamas raised their hands and cried: 'Lha gye! Lha gye! Victory to the Gods!' They threw their tsampa into the air and we all followed suit, shouting to the deities of the mountains. Then we looked at each other, our heads white with meal, and began to laugh, the lamas loudest of all. Afterwards we went down the hill and the children danced to the sound of bamboo flutes, weaving the circular patterns of the traditional dances of Tibet, each pattern a religious truth given shape and flesh.

A week later we visited the Dalai Lama himself, travelling by rail to Pathankot, and by a car, which he had sent down to meet us, the remaining seventy miles of mountain road to our destination on the wooded heights overlooking Dharamsala. It was a strange January for the Punjab Hills. At Mussoorie the weather had been sharp and dry, frosty at night and sunny at noon, but here the rain fell steadily for days on end, descending in snow on the mountains towards Tibet, and the thunder rumbled away,
echoing in the distant valleys. The refugee lamas tinkled their thunderbolt bells, beat their skull drums, and prayed for fine weather. On the day we visited the Dalai Lama at his bungalow on the mountain-side, the rain ceased for the whole morning and fell in torrents as soon as we left his presence.

As the Dalai Lama came forward to meet us at the door of his audience chamber and to take the white scarves we offered, it was clear that the trials of his country and of the Tibetans had weighed heavily upon him; he was as free as ever with his laughter, and yet, as we sat talking in that yellow room hung with painted scrolls of Buddha and of Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Dalai Lama's yellow-hat sect, his manner was permeated with the sadness of a compassionate man who is powerless to alleviate the unhappiness he sees around him. When we last visited him he had talked mainly of Buddhist doctrine. This time he talked almost entirely of the future of his country and his people.

Like all leaders of exiles, the Dalai Lama thought constantly of the possibility of return. He admitted frankly that he did not see how this could happen in the immediate future. But he seemed less inclined to resignation than two years before, and reminded us that his predecessor, the Great Thirteenth, had also come into India on what seemed a hopeless journey of exile in 1910, and then had returned to establish the independence of Tibet. Refugees were still crossing the border into India in considerable numbers and at great risk to their lives; they brought reports of a systematic extermination of any open expression of Buddhism, of continued killings and deportations, but they also told of the obstinacy with which the Tibetans secretly clung to their beliefs.

The feeling that history, which brought the Thousand-Year-Reich to an end in a few short years, might destroy the seeming permanence of Communist rule in Tibet, was undoubtedly an important ingredient in the Dalai Lama's attitude to the future of the 80,000 Tibetan refugees in India and the small Himalayan states. To him they were not merely homeless people who must somehow be resettled. They were the nucleus who could pre-
serve in exile the traditions and religious beliefs now being destroyed in Tibet, so that one day they might return to rebuild a holy Buddhist order of society, a Tibet no longer isolated from the world, and organized politically and economically according to liberal and co-operative ideals. As for his own position in such a society, the Dalai Lama remarked that this must depend on the will of the people; if they thought him inadequate, they must depose him. ‘I am just a monk, after all.’

We talked much that morning of the idea of a Tibetan university. The Dalai Lama explained that he was already turning a camp of 1,300 lamas at Buxa in Assam into a Buddhist seminary; he hoped to combine it eventually with a college where Tibetans and Westerners, lamas and laymen alike, could exchange their knowledge to mutual benefit. His last remark typified the man and his attitude. ‘Whatever we create must not be for the good of Tibetans alone, but for the good of all mankind.’

In Dharamsala, as we had done two years before, we stayed in the nursery for Tibetan refugee children, as the guests of the Dalai Lama’s elder sister, Mrs. Tsering Dolma. Like her brother, Tsering Dolma seemed to have aged rapidly in the two years since we had first met her, to have grown tired in her efforts to deal with the hundreds of half-starved children who had been coming to her from the hardships of exile in Nepal (at one time she had 1,100 of them in her charge). On the morning we left she talked, without spirit, of taking a holiday, of perhaps consulting a doctor in Calcutta, though she was too traditionally Tibetan in her view of life to have much faith in western medicine.

We were ready to set off down the mountain-side to the head of the road, where the jeep would be waiting to take us on our journey, and the porters had already started with our luggage, when the Dalai Lama’s secretary came hurrying down on foot from the pontifical bungalow. He carried a long bundle wrapped in a white silk scarf and tied with thongs of rawhide. ‘His Holiness wishes you a propitious journey. He sends you a small keepsake.’ The small keepsake turned out to be a magnificent thanka
illustrating the incidents of one of the earlier lives of the Buddha. It hangs now in the room where I am writing, and I find a constant fascination in pondering over the miraculous episodes, each rendered with the sharp detail of a miniature in colours as clear as those of an early Italian tempera painting, and in detecting the double strands of Persian and Chinese artistic influence which unite with the Indian iconography into a combination that in a quite undefinable way is so individual that it could be nothing other than Tibetan.

Mrs. Tsering Dolma accompanied us down the steep path, which was so slippery from the rains that we had to support each other to avoid falling; and when we reached the jeep she gave us her own parting gifts, to Inge a hexagonal silver charm box on a necklace of turquoises, and to me a Tibetan tea-bowl made of a wood-burl covered with chased silver of Lhasa workmanship. We hung white scarves around each other’s necks, and then we said good-bye. ‘I have a feeling that we shall never see Mrs. Tsering Dolma again,’ said Inge, as the jeep ground down hill between the wooden houses of Macleodganj. We had been home less than than six months from our journey when we heard that she had died in London.

After a day in the little stone hill town of Kangra, where the hyenas laughed half the night outside the mission-house in which we slept, we returned to Delhi and found the capital stunned by the news of Nehru’s first stroke. For seventeen years India had relied on ‘the P.M.’, and he himself had accepted his rôle as the paternal leader so literally that, when he was stricken, no one could prophesy who would become his successor. The outcome was that men in leading governmental positions evaded making positive moves of any kind, lest these might count against them in the struggle for power which everyone feared would ensue if Nehru died at this time; the whole administrative machine in the capital ground to a standstill during the two weeks when there was doubt whether he would recover. It is never easy to obtain a definite decision from an Indian government department; now it became impossible, as we ourselves discovered.
We wanted to visit Sikkim, the little principality under Indian suzerainty which lies between Nepal and Bhutan on the borders of Tibet, so that we could observe a functioning Mahayanist Buddhist state before visiting the Hinayanist countries of Southeast Asia. Since the Chinese invasion of the Indian borderlands of 1962, permits to Sikkim have been hard to get, for militarily it is an extremely sensitive area; a narrow tongue of Chinese-held Tibetan territory, the Chumbi Valley, runs down its eastern border to within a few miles of India. Entry visas have to be approved by at least three Indian Government departments, including the army. However, we had the advantage of an invitation from a Sikkimese landowner, and at first the Indian officials seemed favourable to our request. Nevertheless, after two days our application was rejected, though the rejection was sweetened by a permit to enter the less important areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, on the borders of Sikkim.

By now we knew enough of the customs of Delhi, which are different only in degree from those of other capital cities, not to accept the rejection as final. The next move was to go over the heads of the lower Civil Servants, and, as soon as I learnt that one of the highest officials in the Foreign Office was a man I had met when he was abroad on diplomatic service, I went tramping down the long chilly corridors of Lutyens’s administrative mausolea, with peons springing to attention and salaaming at every few yards, until I found X, snuffling with hay fever, in his almost viceregally magnificent office. Over cups of black strong tea he listened to my story and promised to do what he could. This was at 1 p.m. Three hours later I telephoned him. ‘Nothing more easy, old chap.’ The permit would be granted. If it were not delivered at the International Centre before we left the next morning, it would be telegraphed directly to Darjeeling.

It was at this point, when everything seemed settled and our visit to Sikkim assured, that the irrationalities of bureaucratic action intervened. At seven, three hours later, I returned to the International Centre; the clerk handed me a message from some unnamed person in the Foreign Office telling me ‘not to take
the permit for granted’ unless I heard of it again. We dismissed the message as the fabrication of an annoyed underling, and, even though we had not received the permit by the time we took the plane next morning, we expected to find it waiting for us at Darjeeling. There, however, the Deputy Commissioner had received no word, and was unable to issue a permit on his own responsibility. There was no second rejection. The permit merely did not arrive. We could do nothing but send a telegram to Delhi and wait.

We waited, day after day, on that magnificent frontier, making our trip through the deep jungle of the Teesta Valley to Kalimpong, climbing each morning to the top of Observatory Hill to look at the massive, glistening splendour of Kanchenjunga, and watching the Nepali festivities in honour of the goddess Saraswati, when processions of young people from all the various corners of the city flowed down through the narrow alleys, dancing and singing to the sound of tambourines and throwing purple powder over each other and over the spectators as they escorted the images of the goddess to the point of convergence on the banks of the river, where the clay statues were cast into the water to disintegrate in the stream flowing downward towards the Holy Ganges.

The sixth day arrived and with it came a telegram from Delhi. It asked for information about our intentions in Sikkim. Since that information has already been supplied and incorporated in files and dossiers, it was obvious that the delaying tactics of bureaucracy were in full operation, particularly as the officials in Delhi knew that our permit to remain in Darjeeling expired the next morning. It was pointless to postpone any longer our journey to East Pakistan.
We left Darjeeling before dawn, travelling down the mountain in the early light to the little airport at Bagdogra on the edge of the flat lands of Bengal. From Bagdogra we flew south to Dum Dum airport, outside Calcutta; as we waited there for the afternoon plane to East Pakistan, we tried to get news of what had been happening in Dacca.

While we had been travelling in India there had been a resurgence of violence between Hindus and Moslems. This time religious differences had been complicated by the rankling issue of Kashmir; the affair began with the stealing of the Prophet’s Hair in Srinagar, which brought the Moslems raging into the streets. Stirred by newspaper propaganda which neither government attempted to modify, and by provocative statements from both Indian and Pakistani politicians, the feeling built up, bringing to the surface the obscure unrelated resentments which find their outlet in pogroms. The riots reached their peak in Bengal, the perennial focal point of communal violence. The most murderous riots took place in Calcutta, where the Hindu devotees of the dread goddess Kali murdered hundreds of Moslems; but Dacca was not far behind in the ferocity of its massacre of local Hindus.

Nobody at Dum Dum seemed to know very much about the actual situation in Dacca. The riots were said to have ended, but there was talk about a curfew and very few people were taking the chance of travelling. Barely a dozen people boarded the little Fokker plane whose daily flights form the tenuous link between India and East Pakistan.

The plane climbed above the palm groves and lotus-red pools east of Dum Dum, and flew over the intricate network of chan-
nels into which the Ganges and the Brahmaputra divide as they flow sluggishly through their low-lying deltas towards the Bay of Bengal. The border of East Pakistan began only a few minutes' flight from Calcutta, and the two countries blended imperceptibly. The tangle of silvery waterways interlaced like veins in the misty jungle, and pools and flooded paddies threw back the light like mirrors worked into a dark cloth. The only border was in one's mind, and that seemed less important than the contrast which memory created between the green waterlogged land which now floated below us and the austere aridity of the North-West Frontier. The thousand miles of India divided the two parts of Pakistan into geographical opposites.

In less than an hour the plane began to describe its slow circle over the flat roofs of Dacca. It was half an hour before sunset, time to get to the hotel, we decided, even if the curfew were still in force. In the airport building a guard herded us into a waiting-room and collected our passports. We waited and an hour passed. Nobody was called to the passport control, and when we looked through the glass door of the waiting-room we could see that the customs counters were deserted. We began to feel a little apprehensive, and to wonder whether rioting had broken out again in Dacca, or whether the Pakistanis had decided to close their frontier. We had become almost reconciled to the thought of being shipped back to Calcutta, when a sweeper appeared in the corner of the lounge, idly sloshing a damp cloth over the floor with his bare foot. An Englishman who spoke Bengali went up to him; he came back laughing. 'Just their bloody Ramadan,' he explained. 'The immigration men went off at sunset to say their prayers. Incidentally, I'm told they've lifted the curfew.' It was still half an hour before the immigration officers actually returned—small dark men with large revolvers and cartridge-filled bandoliers, quite unlike the tall light-skinned officials who had supervised our departure from Lahore—and began entering our names laboriously in their registers.

Ramadan continued throughout our stay in Dacca and we were never able to ignore the smouldering fanaticism it seemed
to engender. It permeated the whole city and insidiously dominated even our life in the Shahbagh Hotel. The Shahbagh was a new hotel, built since Dacca became the capital of East Pakistan, but a few monsoon seasons had beaten it into a bedraggled Bengali shabbiness; on the walls of our room the distemper peeled and blistered, and the furniture had a look of ancient exhaustion. The servants seemed to have emerged from some immeasurably older past, as they stood in the dining-room with their hook-nosed, fever-yellow faces under gold-braided turbans, and their long white beards which looked lifeless, like hanks of bleached Spanish moss. They might have been the cast of a Gothic melodrama of ancient Baghdad; there were even smirking dwarfs to open the doors. They were fanatically devout Moslems, and every evening, just before the sunset, the hotel would run down to a halt, the lifts ceased to move, the bells ring unanswered, and the guests, tramping irritable up the stairs, would listen to the falsetto chanting of prayers and walk to their rooms past lines of bearded bearers kneeling in the corridors and making their complicated prostrations towards Mecca.

I never understood the intricate patterns of Ramadan behaviour—why the streets spluttered with fireworks one evening and were silent the next, or why a Moslem acquaintance refused a cup of tea one afternoon and the next day joined us in a hearty Bengali lunch of rice and fish cooked in mustard oil. Certainly everyone we met in Dacca, except for the few Buddhists and Christians, observed the fast in some degree, and most of them thoroughly, to such an extent that every day the city slowed down at four in the afternoon as the shops and offices closed to let their employees reach home in time for the sunset prayers and the great meal that followed once darkness had fallen.

In every way Dacca impressed one as much more self-consciously and aggressively Moslem than any of the towns we had visited in West Pakistan. The reasons for the difference soon became obvious. West Pakistan is Moslem by inheritance and long tradition; its people, like members of old Catholic families, wear their beliefs with ease. East Pakistan is Moslem by comparatively recent conversion; we met people in Dacca whose fathers or
grandfathers were the first members of their families to accept Islam, probably as a means to escape from the stigma of Hindu untouchability. To the enthusiasm of the convert is added the fear of the isolated. West Pakistan is part of the great sweep of Moslem territory that stretches unbroken from Lahore to Casablanca. A thousand miles away, East Pakistan is an Islamic island; with Buddhist Burma on the east and Hindu India on the north and west, its fifty million people live crowded into their damp little land of jungles and rice paddies, almost a thousand of them to every square mile, one of the densest rural populations in the world. Mass claustrophobia, a sense of being hemmed in by each other and by the world without, is unavoidable. In Dacca we felt it ourselves and recognized it in others: the feeling of a city besieged by fear of what lies outside, but also by the violence of its own inner resentments.

Dacca is one of the saddest towns of Asia, and one of the ugliest. From the somnolent river port of British days it has changed into the administrative and commercial centre of East Pakistan, and now it is really two cities. Between the railway and the Buruganga River, still embraced within its crumbling ancient walls, lies the old Moghul city where the Moslems set up their seventeenth-century citadel among the hostile swamps of Bengal: a medieval labyrinth where ancient high-wheeled horse carriages drawn by skeletal ponies jostle with gaudily decorated motor rickshaws among the crowds of narrow lanes and congested bazaars. In Karachi we would occasionally pass the putrefying gullies among the sand dunes on the edge of the city where the remnants of the Punjabi refugees still live in their kite-infested settlements of mud and straw hovels, but nothing that we saw in West Pakistan equalled the concentrated poverty of Old Dacca. The people were ragged, emaciated, unsmiling; one saw faces rotting with disease, children with grotesquely swollen bellies, and the distorted rickety limbs of men grown old long before time had made them so.

On the other side of the railway, over the miles of reclaimed marshes, spread a new city of concrete villas and gaunt office buildings, growing up along uncompleted roads and over boggy
land still scored and pitted by ponds and channels of soupy green water which was frequented by large flocks of ducks and by dhobis washing the grey underwear of the local bureaucrats. Over the railway lines at dawn the beggars would hobble from the Old Town to take up their places outside the shops of new Dacca. I counted six who would stand every day under the sun outside one grocery store in the arcade of the Shahbagh Hotel, hopping like wounded storks on their crippled legs and wailing at the cars of the English and American customers, who usually ignored them with a self-conscious stoniness.

The people of Dacca are an almost congenitally aggrieved race, rather like the French in Canada; their record, before and after independence, has been one of consistent complaint, always vocal and often violent. They feel that they have been neglected by the world, that they have been the victims of discrimination by Hindus in the past and West Pakistanis in the present. The temptation to dismiss their grievances as the product of irrational mass paranoia disappears as soon as one realizes the nature of the struggle which East Pakistanis face, the struggle to achieve a decent existence in an overcrowded fragment of land where the average peasant owns two or three acres of rice paddy, divided into six to ten small and separated plots, and where millions live even below that miserable state and below the average income of £20 a year which makes Pakistan a pauper country even in terms of Asian poverty.

The talk of India was even more intense and sharply pointed in Dacca than in Karachi. We spent most of our time with professional intellectuals and government officials, who merge more freely in Asia than they do in most other parts of the world, and we found that even they were dominated by the double pattern of an aggrieved memory of past relationships with Hindus and a fear of what might happen if India ever drew tight its surrounding coils and absorbed East Pakistan.

One afternoon, well before the hour of prayer, we were taken to meet an old pioneer of the Moslem League who had been a minister in Jinnah’s first government of Pakistan. He was a patriarch of a kind that will die out in Pakistan now polygamy
has been restricted; as we sat talking to him in his study lined with old leather-bound law books the excited voices of the youngest of his twenty-seven children competed in the garden outside the French windows with the atonal evening music of the crows in its tall fig trees.

The ex-minister sat hunched in his chair, his bright-eyed bird's face sunk in the blanket he had thrown over his shoulders, and talked with a betel-red mouth; his voice was hoarse with age, but he still spoke with the meticulous eloquence of a lawyer trained in the Edwardian courts of India. His theme was the Moslem case in Bengal, and he told how the East India Company, almost two centuries ago, had imposed Hindu landlords and created a situation in which the Moslems declined into second-class subjects and received a smaller share of wealth, education and influence than the Hindus. The demand for partition, for a separate Islamic state, arose out of this situation. But it only gained mass support when the Moslems became convinced that in a united India their interests would always be subordinated to those of the Hindu majority. To the very end some kind of union might still have been possible if acceptable guarantees had been given to the Moslem community. Nehru had refused to give them and the creation of Pakistan had become inevitable.

That is the Pakistani version of the history of India's partition. It is as much a mixture of fact and fancy as any partisan interpretation of the past. But it is history as the East Pakistanis both understand and feel it; for them partition was a release from a situation in which they had no hope of equality. The Moslem intelligentsia felt this as strongly as the Moslem peasants exploited by Hindu zamindars and money-lenders. A young Dacca professor, who had just returned from an Ivy League American university with an international repute in his own field of scholarship ('He has gone beyond his teachers,' as one of his students said) told me bitterly of his days at a college in Bengal under the British Raj. Although the two religions were fairly equally spread among the population of the province, 90 per cent of the students who reached the college were Hindus, and the minority of Moslems—of whom he was one—were treated
with open contempt as inferior outsiders. The Moslems of East Pakistan still fear the day when they may again become a minority of outsiders.

This fear of India is one of the reasons why the illiterate mill-workers of Dacca are still ready to carry out pogroms against the ten million Hindus (more than half of them untouchables) who have remained in their country, and religious fanaticism, at its peak in Ramadan, is another. But pogroms usually result from complex discontents for which the victims become scapegoats, and this we realized very quickly when we reached Dacca. There were no more riots after we arrived and day by day we observed the odd signs which formed a barometer of returning normality. People whose supplies of clean shirts had been running low rejoiced over the appearance, like bears emerging from hibernation, of the Hindu washermen who had been in hiding. Life returned gradually to the streets at evening. The curfew which had been kept on in the Old Town was shortened almost every day, until only the hours between midnight and dawn were forbidden. Yet when we tried to visit the jute mills in the industrial suburb of Narayanganj we were refused permission, and the Government Information Officer asked me not to press the matter since the police regarded it as unsafe for foreigners to visit the quarter. But gradually, as I pieced together odd fragments of information, it became evident that the stealing of a holy hair a thousand miles away in Kashmir was only the spark which had ignited an already explosive situation. Among the Pakistanis it was the students who were most willing to talk openly of the situation, and one of them, whose home was near Narayanganj, told me that the millworkers were largely refugees from Calcutta, and that a general discontent over their living conditions was the real cause of their uprising. A Canadian social worker who had visited the mills just before the riots, and since then had been kept away, put forward an almost identical explanation. Some of the millworkers had actually complained to him of the rapidly growing cost of basic foods, like rice and oil, and of the failure of their wages to keep pace with the inflation. He was convinced that anger over this situation had been
one of the most powerful of the emotions that boiled over in the days of killing and looting.

East Pakistan in fact presents an epitome of the tragic condition of the less developed Asian countries. There is neither enough land for the farmers nor enough industry to support the landless poor. The yearly increase in population regularly counterbalances the gains that may have been made in food production, and the defeat of fatal diseases merely brings a few more years of misery for those whose life-expectancy is slowly lengthened. And these problems seem almost insurmountable so long as East Pakistan remains an artificially isolated fragment of the Ganges delta region. But the East Pakistanis—at least the articulate ones—argue that their situation would have been far better if they had received as much help as West Pakistan.

One afternoon I went to visit a professor of economics in the university district, which is one of the few quarters of Dacca where there are pleasant old gardens with shady trees and green lawns laid down at the command of departed sahibs. We sat out on his verandah, with the women of the house twittering behind the screens, while a barefooted bearer served strong orange-brown tea and pink and green coconut cakes. As the professor built up the grievances of East Pakistan, his arguments seemed to carry an ironic echo of those which the ex-minister had used when he told of the ills done to Moslems in Bengal under the British rule. He marshalled his statistics with a remorseless strategy, showing how East Pakistan had received only half as much in subsidies from the Central Government, half as much foreign aid, and half as much in capital expenditure grants as West Pakistan, though its population was greater and its standard of living lower. Industry had been developed more quickly in the West, though rural overcrowding make it more urgently needed in the East. Finally, the armed forces consumed 60 per cent of the national revenue, and 90 per cent of this was spent in West Pakistan for the benefit of the warrior races, the Punjabis, Pathans and Baluchis. In recent years, since General Ayub Khan came to power, an attempt had been made to rectify the balance, but the change was too slow, and something dramatic
would have to be done if the image of a grasping, domineering Punjab were to be destroyed in the minds of Bengalis. Otherwise the unrelieved resentment might even destroy the tenuous bonds which united the country over the thousand miles of alien land. ‘There’s only one reason why we’ve endured so long,’ he said bitterly. ‘It is because our only alternative here in Bengal is to be absorbed by India. We could never survive alone.’

He stopped, perturbed by his own vehemence. ‘This is what I tell you in private,’ he said. ‘I won’t say the same thing to your microphone.’ And when I recorded my interview with him, he delivered a tepidly academic exposition of the economic problems of a divided country and carefully avoided any mention of East Pakistani discontent; he ended by asking me not to mention his name even as the author of this cautious statement. I could not blame him; that morning the Dacca newspapers reported that two opposition leaders who acidly criticized the government had been imprisoned under special powers regulations; there was neither trial nor a public statement of charges against the two men, and their confinement was indefinite.

Travelling with a tape-recorder revealed to us a great deal about the mental atmosphere in which Pakistanis live, and it made us sensitive to the unexpressed fears which conditioned not what they said so much as the circumstances in which they would say it. Like Spaniards, Pakistanis were inclined to be volubly critical of authority in the privacy of their homes. They would say strongly and even at times with a sharply satirical pungency what they thought of General Ayub and his policies. But as soon as I attempted to record their views, they behaved like primitive tribesmen who fear to give away something of themselves which an enemy may use against them. Like most people who live in a police state they had developed a self-protective instinct which made them sensitive to the limits beyond which frankness became folly.

In this way we came up against another wall of the prison of circumstances in which many Pakistanis feel themselves confined. For one of the disturbing features of the authoritarian system of Pakistan is that its nature is not so immediately obvious
as that of a more openly dictatorial state like Egypt. Neither the police nor the army make themselves conspicuous, and we travelled, except in the frontier region, with as little interference as we could have met in a country like France or Switzerland. When General Ayub Khan overthrew the rotting parliamentary democracy of Pakistan in 1958, he had the support of the majority, and he was sensible enough to realize that there was no need to set up an iron dictatorship. Instead he gave the Pakistanis an authoritarian form of government which closely resembled that of the British viceroys, except that the chief executive was called a President and was a native of the country. The new system thus has the advantage of an underlying and un stressed familiarity. Islamic societies have traditionally favoured strong leaders, and Ayub Khan, however conservative in politics, has gained support by progressive social measures; apart from his efforts to improve the status of women, he has carried out sweeping land redistribution programmes. Even in the political field he has been adroit enough to seek a way of giving the backward, illiterate mass of the Pakistani population an illusion of controlling their own destinies—hence the new system of Basic Democracy, a form of indirect franchise in which tiny constituencies of 1,200 people elect representatives to local councils, which, in an ascending pyramid of electoral colleges, elect the district councils and so on, up to the central parliament and the President. Thus a façade of constitutional government is created and theoretically opposition is allowed; in practice the façade is an elaborate false front, since ultimate authority rests with the President, supported by the army, just as it rested with the Viceroy under the British Raj, and opposition has its limits, as we realized when we heard of the arrests in Dacca, and as every educated Pakistani is fully aware.

Pakistani politics are further complicated by the presence of the highly organized groups of mullahs who run their own extreme Moslem parties and claim a special rôle because Pakistan is avowedly an Islamic state. There is no ordained Islamic priesthood; any man literate enough to read the Koran can establish himself as a mullah and perform the simple ceremonial functions
of the Moslem faith. When I wanted to record the Azan the Government Information Officer answered: 'Nothing is more simple. My chauffeur is a mullah.' A moment later the chauffeur, with his tightly clipped beard, was standing in the office, thrusting his fingers into his ears to keep the sound within his head, and filling the room with the high-pitched arabesques of his call. Many of the mullahs are working men of this kind who wield a great influence among people of their own class.

Even more respected than the ordinary mullahs are the ulema, the intellectuals who set themselves up as interpreters of Islamic law. Many of the ulema are reactionary in their approach, opposing reforms like the prohibition of polygamy, which they regard as denials of the Prophet's intent, and claiming that, since the Koran exists and is known to all good Moslems, there is no need for further laws; some, asserting that the company of the faithful is indivisible, even refuse to accept the justification for a separate Pakistani state. But there are more imaginative men among the ulema, who have evolved, out of their studies of the Koran, doctrines of social responsibility and universal brotherhood which remind one of the attempts of great Moslems in the past, like the Moghul Emperor Akbar, to dissolve the barriers of exclusivism within which the Islamic world has tended to isolate itself.

A scholar of this type was Abul Hashim, the head of the Islamic Academy, whom we visited on our last day in Dacca. He walked like a prophet into the room where we were waiting, a tall man clad in white robes, leaning on a gold-headed staff, with a white cap like Gandhi's perched on his flowing grey locks. He was attended by a court of disciples, some of whom had come from as far away as Cairo. The youngest of them guided his arm as he came towards us; Abul Hashim was blind, but when he spoke this was hard to believe for his eyes then seemed full of intensity and attention, and the life of his mind seemed to have suffered no limitation from the loss of sight.

As Abul Hashim expounded his philosophy, his speech adopted a peculiar staccato quality, increasing in rapidity as if the thoughts were coming into mind more quickly than the
words could take shape. For him Islam was more than a religion: 'It is a science which comprehends the being and becoming a man and concerns every sphere of his existence.' Since this was so, he claimed that it was reasonable to conceive of an Islamic politics. 'According to Islam, everything belongs to God; the right of ownership, which legally means absolute right of use, abuse and disuse of one's position, is denied to man, as individual and also as a society or nation. In the same way sovereignty or ultimate power rests with God; sovereignty, which means absolute right to make decisions, is denied to man, both as an individual and as a nation.' In the Koran and the other sayings of the prophet, Abul Hashim argued, there was enough guidance to help men to live so that their work would benefit not only themselves or their country, but mankind as a whole. Here Abul Hashim seemed almost to echo the last words which the Dalai Lama had said to us in Dharamsala. When he elaborated on the point, I was impressed by the basic similarity between the viewpoints of a liberal Buddhist and a liberal Moslem. For Abul Hashim asserted that in their implications the words of the Prophet represented a philosophy of internationalism and, beyond that, of universalism. 'You expand your love. You let it go beyond your family and it embraces your race. You let it go beyond your race race and it embraces the world of men. But that is not the end. For when you have come to that point, your love expands to embrace the world of animals, and at last you reach the stage when it pains you to think of a branch being torn wantonly from a tree. Then your religion is universal and you are in tune with the will of Allah.'
From the severed half of Bengal, the territory of Pakistan runs in a long narrow tail down the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal to Chittagong and the hills of the Burmese frontier. We travelled there by train, intending to fly on to Rangoon as the next stage on our journey. The railway station in Dacca was a kind of no-man’s-land between the Old Town and the new city of the bureaucrats. One approached it along a dirt road lined by open-air rattan furniture workshops, and towards train time every day this road was jammed with a crawling mass of rickshaws, ox-carts and horse carriages, among which squeezed beggars, agile boys intent on earning a few annas and sneak thieves in search of loot. As our taxi edged towards the station, I saw one of the thieves being taken by a tall Burmese, whose pocket he had tried to pick; the Burmese seized him by the throat, slapped him almost unconscious, and then began to drag him towards the police post down the road; to me, the most appalling thing was that the starved wretch of a thief neither resisted nor attempted to escape, but seemed to accept his treatment with complete resignation.

Our arrival at the station was signalized by an elaborate row with the taxi-driver, overplayed on both sides to an audience of coolies, beggars and half-naked boys. We had discovered on our first day in Dacca that its taxi-drivers are among the most rapacious in the world, refusing to travel by meter and demanding exorbitant fares concocted to fit the clothes and skin colour of their passengers. We took to travelling by motor rickshaws, which choked us with dust and unmercifully jolted our spines on the unmade roads, but which were, by comparison, very inexpensive. But when we set off to the station, with our five suit-
cases, tape-recorder, typewriter, the winter coats we had worn in the mountains, and the Dalai Lama’s thanka, we could not avoid taking a taxi, and now the attempt at extortion began. The driver demanded twenty rupees; I offered five. The driver wailed that I was starving the poor; I shouted that he was robbing the stranger. He demanded eighteen; I offered six. The scene ended by his refusing to accept seven, which I then threw on the seat of the taxi with a gesture of contempt, stalking off after the coolies whom Inge had meanwhile organized. The driver happily let fly a stream of Bengali, which I just as happily did not understand. As it was, I had paid almost twice the legitimate fare.

The Chittagong train was not due for another twenty minutes, and we settled down to wait among the crowd of peasants in check and tartan sarongs who were squatting on the platform, chewing pan and spitting rustily on to the tracks. It was the humid, hot middle of the day. The vultures squawked and jostled each other half-heartedly on the station roof; the red flags on a saint’s tomb that had been trapped between the railway lines flapped feebly in the almost windless air, and we quietly wilted, sitting on our suitcases in the sun rather than retiring to the lysol-smelling gloom of the waiting-room. A man in a soiled white suit came up to us ingratiatingly. ‘I looking after you, sahib. I keeping good place.’ He went fawning off in the direction of a Pathan officer whose great hatchet face scowled over the heads of the Bengalis with aristocratic disdain; but as soon as the train pulled in, its third-class carriages already packed to the windows, he was beside us, leading the way to a locked compartment, bawling at the coolies and the barefooted sweeper who came in to dust the seats and lingering to accept the tip which, to preserve his white-suited dignity, he took without condescending to look at it.

He had hardly salaamed his way out of the compartment when Inge took my arm and pointed to the window looking out over the tracks. A face without nose or lips was pressed against the glass; the eyes glared out of raw lidless sockets and the long yellow teeth snarled involuntarily out of rotting bared gums. It
was the face of a living death. A hand tapped on the window. We felt a sickening, hostile revulsion; the pity only came in retrospect. ‘Get rid of him!’ was the immediate thought in our minds, and I raised the window an inch, and dropped a coin to the ground so that he would have to leap down to pick it up. He ran off, wrapping a dirty shawl over his ruined face. Our reaction of horror was quite untypical, for later I saw the man begging on the platform; the people he approached looked at him with the Moslem equanimity that accepts all personal calamities as the will of Allah.

The railway runs east towards the borders of Tripura in India, and then south down the wedge of Pakistan that lies between Burma and the sea. For most of the journey we crossed the flat, populous, watery landscape that is typical of Bengal. For it is water—the water of the rivers that run down from the hills of Assam, of the still pools and tanks, of the flooded paddies where the sun’s reflections glitter through the pale fresh green of the young rice stems—that creates the tone of the Bengali landscape and gives it whatever beauty it has; water is also its bane, in the times of excessive floods, but of these we saw nothing, for it was now the height of the dry season, and the paddies which lay farthest from the rivers were dry mud, cracked in polygonal patterns like the crazed surface of a pot enormously magnified. Where there was still water, drawn up from the rivers and canals by canoe-like scoops, the preparing of the rice fields for the winter crop was going ahead with great industry: the ploughing with a forked bough shortened and sharpened to scratch the wet earth; the final kneading of the mud by ox-drawn harrows on which the farmers rode to give them weight; and the planting of young rice plants dug from the dense green seedbeds. In most of Asia the planting of rice is done by women; here the influence of the Moslem tradition was so strong—and the over-population so great—that it was done entirely by men, with their brightly coloured sarongs kilted to their knees.

This part of Bengal was almost entirely a region of single-crop farming; in every direction lay the brown and green mosaic of the rice paddies, divided by black rims of mud, and
broken only rarely by the larger yellow rectangles of the mustard fields. The final item of Bengali diet, the fish to be cooked in the oil of the mustard and eaten with rice, was being sought with an assiduous will that left no pieces of water, however small, unexplored by the black-skinned, almost naked fishermen, who worked with scoop nets and basket traps in the narrow ditches, and with seines in the rivers and canals. Such thorough fishing would very soon have depopulated English rivers, but in the warm climate of Bengal the fish breed much more quickly than in Europe, and even the paddy fields bear a double crop, of rice and of the little fish that feed in the mud between the green stems. It is only this multiple productivity of the land and water that enables East Pakistan to support its immense rural population.

The villages lay so close together that we were always within sight of several of them at the same time. They were attractive little places built on green mounds, and they gave a deceptive impression of an idyllic, well-ordered rural life. The Bengalis make neat, pleasant-looking houses out of panels of interwoven split bamboo, with screens and casements of criss-crossed bamboo slats, while around the carefully swept yards, around the gardens of yams and brinjals, and even around the haystacks, there were light cane fences to keep out the black goats which foraged between the houses and took the places of the black pigs in the villages of Indian Bengal. Mangoes, palm trees, and groves of bananas and bamboo, all growing in tropical lushness, surrounded these pleasant little compounds, and, even if the people were always lean and poorly clad, their outdoor life gave them a far healthier appearance than the inhabitants of the Dacca slums. Those for whom there was no room on land lived an amphibious existence on the canals where covered sampans lay moored along the thick blue-splashed beds of water hyacinth, forming temporary floating villages.

For a region whose people lived so thickly scattered over the land, there were surprisingly few towns. I remember two of them during the whole eight hours of our journey to Chittagong. But every quarter of an hour or so, somewhere out in the
fields, with two or three hamlets in sight, the train would slow
down and peasants with black umbrellas would come running
over the paths between the rice-fields as we stopped at a little
brick station with a short platform. The stations always looked
the same. A fat officious little babu of a station-master, in a grey-
looking pith helmet, would be shouting at a coolie in a ragged
khaki shirt. There would be a notice saying ‘Beware of Pick-
pockets’ in English and Bengali, and a tap around which the
third-class passengers crowded to slosh water over their faces
and hands. The sun shone on golden patches of marigold, and
on the somnolent afternoon air the chatter of pock-marked
peasants drifted in through the open carriage window. Blind and
lame beggars limped along the train singing Moslem chants; and
the poorer passengers pulled out knotted handkerchiefs and un-
did them to find a few pice for alms.

As the sun was falling the first low hills, covered with jungle,
appeared to the east of the railway; there were the shallower
wave of the ranges that climb inland towards the mountainous
Burmese border country. In the evening wind red lines of flames
leapt over the harvested paddies as the peasants fired the stubble,
and the fish began to rise, making innumerable rippled circles in
the ponds among the paddies. The sun sank down into the mist
over the Bay of Bengal, a swollen dome of pale yellow, its lower
part dissolving in the lilac-grey of the horizon, and the luminous
last light of the day faded into a greyness which the rising moon
quickly dissolved as it flooded the paddies with a white light
against which the palm trees stood out as black romantic sil-
houettes; at the dimly lit stations, peasants came along the train
with bundles of green coconuts.

Long after dark the train ran past the new concrete buildings
standing gaunt against the moonlight on the edge of Chitta-
gong, and creating the impression of a new city rising up in the
lush tropical landscape. Chittagong is the principal seaport of
East Pakistan, and the terminus of the railway, from which a
cost road, half destroyed by recent typhoons, runs on to the
Burmese border. The travel agencies all over Pakistan had dis-
played gaudily coloured folders fulsomely describing Chitta-
gong as a paradise of romantic tropical life and palm-shaded beaches, a kind of unspoilt Honolulu, where we planned to rest in the balmy sunlight for two or three days before we went on to the expected rigours of travel in Burma. A friendly official in Dacca had wired one of his colleagues in Chittagong, and now a deputation of four men in tropical suits met us on the platform. ‘Welcome, Sir and Lady Professor.’ The oldest of them stepped forward with outstretched hand. ‘Chittagong is yours. Our city awaits you.’ Only the garlands were missing. After an elaborate ceremonial of muscular handshaking with the rest of the deputation, we set off to the Land-Rover that was waiting outside the station gate. The lambskin-capped Pathan driver loudly bullied the emaciated coolies who were loading our luggage, and then set off, with a great jolt, driving at top speed into the town. He hooted his way through an ill-lit bazaar of tin-roofed shacks crowded with grimy dejected-looking people who moved languidly out of the Land-Rover’s way. We looked out with misgiving, but I consoled myself with the thought that the worst part of a town is always near the railway station. ‘We have booked for you at one of the best hotels in Chittagong,’ said the leader of the deputation. Our spirits rose. We envisaged one of those spacious hotels built in a fragrant garden, comfortable even if a little shabby, which the British left in so many places of India. It would open on to one of those romantic shores which the travel folders had described. As I thought of it, the memory of the lawn of the Malabar Hotel overlooking the sea at Cochin flashed into my mind. If the mosquitoes were not too bad, I thought to myself, we would have long, long drinks on that lawn before dinner.

But the bazaar became more crowded, its lanes more tortuous, and eventually we swung into a courtyard, with a dead lawn and a litter of newspapers lying in drifts around a dry fountain basin. The gaunt concrete building in the courtyard was the hotel.

‘Is this the best hotel?’ I asked incredulously. ‘There are others. They are no better,’ the leader of the deputation assured me. We resigned ourselves to registering in the little office under the hotel sign and then climbed the dusty stairs in pro-
cession, with the bearers marching ahead, the deputation following, and the Eurasian manager walking beside me, to the open balconies along which the bedrooms lay. *Our Luxury Suite is taken,* the manager explained. ‘But we are giving you A1 room, and tomorrow you will change to Luxury.’ I never learnt what Luxury meant in his vocabulary, but A1 was appalling—a big comfortless room with leprous walls, unswept floor; two broken chairs, a table ringed by the sticky glasses of a hundred guests, and beds festooned by mosquito curtains, black and greasy, which we would certainly have to use, for already the insects were buzzing in by the score through the open louvers set high in the walls. Inge walked over to inspect the bathroom and called me immediately. It was a section of an open balcony, with a wall about four feet high as one’s only protection from view. A water-pipe sticking out of the wall served as a shower, with a hole in the floor beneath it for drainage, and the latrine was just another hole in the floor; there was no toilet paper (Moslems do not use it), no soap, and the two towels were threadbare greasy rags.

Back in the room they were all waiting. ‘Are you absolutely sure there are no better hotels?’ Inge insisted. The deputation looked uneasy. ‘All ship’s officers come here,’ insisted the manager. ‘There is nowhere else for them to go,’ said the bright-looking youth. ‘But isn’t there a hotel on the beach?’ I asked, clinging to my fantasies. They looked at me with astonishment. ‘There is no beach,’ said the leader of the deputation, sadly. ‘All you can do,’ said another man, ‘is to stay here or go to the club. If you know a member of the club you can go there.’ How he thought we should know a member of the club in Chittagong I could not imagine. ‘Can’t you arrange it?’ I asked. They looked at each other unhappily. None of them was inclined to admit that he did not belong to the club. ‘Perhaps tomorrow,’ said the leader. ‘Do not worry, ma’am,’ insisted the manager. ‘We make you comfortable!’ To prove it he shouted an order to the bearer, who immediately began to spray the air with an insecticide so pungent that the deputation departed precipitously and we had to open the doors wide and let in more mosquitoes.
The manager lingered. ‘I have been in Chittagong’, he said, ‘for ten years. It is no place for Englishmen like ourselves. One day I shall go back to the Old Country. Finish with it all!’ He looked at me sadly with his yellowish doggy eyes; I knew, and he realized it, that he had never seen England, and never would. But we kept up the pretence.

In the dining-room a covey of Japanese, little crew-cut men, were eating, silent and withdrawn, and a row of ships’ officers, Australians and Dutchmen, sat at the bar in buttock-tight white shorts, getting noisily drunk on beer. The meal was execrable—muddy-tasting fish, buffalo steak, a loathsome custard tasting of hair oil. There was no fruit to be had. Only the beer was passable. As we were going out, one of the ships’ officers lurched towards me. He goggled for a moment out of a congested red face. ‘Mister,’ he said, ‘Chittagong is the world’s arse. Rectum bloody mundi!’

He was not far wrong. The next morning we were aroused, out of the dead, breathless sleep one endures under mosquito nets, into a waking nightmare of shouting, hammering, beating on metal, all going on immediately overhead. Later, when we went to breakfast, we saw that up the stairs from the street, along the corridors, and up roughly made bamboo ladders to the roof, tramped an antlike line of coolies, carrying on their shoulders bags of cement and baskets of gravel. Alterations were being made to the hotel, and nobody had thought of erecting even the most primitive kind of crane.

We breakfasted off pale bantams’ eggs and sour-tasting tropical bread. Still there was no fruit. ‘Sold out in the bazaar,’ lied the waiter. Finding our room unendurable, we went down to sit in the rattan chairs of the scruffy little lounge beside the office, looking out on to the litter-strewn square. One of the officials who had met us at the station had promised to come to the hotel and take us around the town, but he did not appear, and as we sat there the beggars began to descend like wasps on a ripe pear. First a girl in a ragged stained sari, with a naked baby whose lolling head was covered with sores; next an old woman with a battered aluminium bowl half-filled with a mess of rice; then,
five minutes later, another woman with four children. All of them were undersized, thin, incredibly dirty. We gave them small coins. ‘I wouldn’t do that. You’ll never get rid of the blighters,’ said an Englishman in a khaki bush-shirt who had just driven up in a jeep. And, sure enough, they came limping out of the bazaar like kites smelling a carcass from afar; I suppose there is some way of passing the word about a soft touch among Asian beggars as there used to be among English tramps. Two more families, and then a whole band, at least a dozen ragged scarecrows of all ages, came into the square and kowtowed before us, pointing into their mouths, rubbing their shrunken bellies and whining. The manager appeared, bustling with anger. ‘Beggars on the steps of my hotel! Unheard-of!’ he shouted, chivvying the hotel boys, who half-heartedly shoed the poor wretches away. ‘Disgusting! Disgusting!’

We gave up waiting and took a cycle rickshaw to the airways office, with the thought of booking our flight to Rangoon and taking a look at Chittagong on the way. We did not imagine that the town could all be as depressing as the hotel and its wretched surroundings. But it was. Nowhere else, even in Asia, have I seen a town as uniformly hideous. For three miles we travelled through a straggling slum of winding narrow streets, lined with dirty, decaying booths and huts of wood and cane, and crowded with a poverty-stricken, dejected populace, most of whom looked little better off than the beggars at the hotel. The air was full of dust and everything was dust-coloured, from the people to the grey-brown unpainted planks of the hovels, bleached by the rains. At last we come to a hillocky green with some meagre goat-bitten grass and a few dying trees. This was the nearest thing in Chittagong to a maidan, and around it stood the few buildings of any importance, in tropical Gothic and bare concrete, monsoon-stained.

A feeling of traveller’s duty nagged weakly at me. I felt that, dreadful as the town obviously was, we should at least stay long enough to explore its misery. Inge was moved by no such sociological guilt. ‘Let’s take the very first plane to Rangoon! I can’t stand another day of it!’
'I'd better book you all the way to Bangkok,' said the Eurasian girl in the airways office. I told her not to trouble. We would decide when to leave after we had reached Rangoon. 'You won't have time,' she said; 'you're only allowed twenty-four hours.' I explained that we had visas for ten days. We had wrung them with difficulty out of the secretary in the Burmese Embassy at Delhi; he had immediately noticed that my passport described me as a writer, and when I told him that I was mainly concerned with Buddhism and Buddhist architecture, he had put me on my honour not to write any political criticism; if I did he would suffer the consequences. Even then he only consented to allow us ten days, long enough for a quick trip to Pegu and Mandalay, then to the ancient capital of Pagan, and back to Rangoon.

'They cancelled all visas yesterday,' said the girl. I was incredulous. We hired another rickshaw and set off for the Burmese Consulate, a deserted villa in which we found the consul reading a newspaper at his desk. Clearly, this was not a busy frontier at the best of times. 'But you have your visas,' he said. 'You can go.' He casually handed back our passports. The very lassitude of his manner made me suspicious and I asked him to make sure there had been no change in the instructions. He gave the long sigh of a bored man and reached over silently for a bundle of unopened letters. He extracted one, tore it open, and read it slowly. 'I am afraid ...' He sighed again and paused to light a cigarette. 'I am afraid your visas are no good after all. And we are forbidden to issue new ones. Some people have been doing what they should not do on their transit visas. What a pity you did not go last week! So sorry . . . .' To the day of writing, a year afterwards, Burma has still not opened again the door it closed to travellers in January 1964.

'Why don't you go straight to Thailand?' said the girl in the airlines office when we returned. 'You won't see anything in Rangoon between planes. They probably won't let you off the airport.' She explained that there was a plane in just over two hours to Calcutta, which connected with the Qantas jet direct to Bangkok. It seemed like a miraculous prospect of escape from
the dismalness of Chittagong. Our depression lifted as we hurried about the town, to the bank to change travellers’ cheques, back to the airlines office for our tickets, and then to the hotel to pack our bags and check out.

‘I thought you’d go,’ said the manager. ‘Next year I’ll be going,’ he added without conviction. He sent a boy off in a rickshaw to find a taxi. For even cabs are rare in Chittagong and can only be found with difficulty. The minutes ebbed away and no taxi arrived. After twenty minutes, we sent another boy out. As the time crept on we began to fear that, after all our effort, we would not escape from Chittagong. Finally, the first boy came back with a rusty, broken-springed Chevrolet which looked as though it could never reach the airport. It chugged slowly out, through the endless slum which seemed to spread over Chittagong in whatever direction one followed. But there was at least a negative satisfaction in that last trip through its streets; we knew that we were missing nothing by running away. Only for a few moments, alongside the wide river which is the real port of Chittagong, was there an unexpected beauty in the billowing sails of the sampans tacking upstream through the sun-silvered water.

Even the Pakistani customs officers at Chittagong were unpleasant and officious, poking into the corners of all our bags and questioning us insolently on what we intended to do in India. We were happy when the plane rose up over the shoreline and steered to the north-east, over the flat islands in the Bay of Bengal and once again over the many-streamed mouths of the Ganges.

In Calcutta we gained a sudden, tragic insight into the country that had just closed its doors against us. As we were waiting for the Bangkok flight to arrive from Delhi, a Thai Airlines plane landed. After a quarter of an hour the passengers began to trail in a disorganized procession across the runway towards the airport building. They were all Indians: old men in dhotis and young men in cheap suits, women in the gaudy saris of South India, and children of all ages. Each of the adults carried a bundle of umbrellas, and the trolleys that followed them were
loaded with bedrolls and bundles of blankets, some of them
gaping open so that the clothes fell out on the asphalt. There was
no doubt of their status; they had the peculiar numb look of
refugees the world over.

The Thai pilot came over and stood for a moment talking to
an Indian airport official. ‘You’ll have another lot today—forty-five
of them,’ he said. After the Indian had gone, I went up to
the pilot. He explained that the passengers were all Indians from
Burma. The Burmese had confiscated their lands and their
businesses, and were expelling them from the country. Most of
them had been born there, and the old men had gone when they
were boys. ‘They don’t intend to leave a single Indian in Burma.
Burma for the Burmese, you know!’ The Thai obviously did
not approve. ‘These newly independent peoples,’ he remarked,
with the superiority of a race that had adroitly evaded colonialism,
‘they get very narrow-minded. It seems to go to their heads.’

The closing of the Burmese frontiers coincided with the expul-
sion of the Indians, as if the Burmese wished to keep this act
of political inhumanity from the eyes of the world. Yet the
sight of the refugees depressed us most of all for its familiarity.
Ever since we had landed in Karachi there was hardly a day
when we were not in some way reminded of the great new evil
which the end of the colonial empires has brought to the conti-
nent of Asia, the uprooting of countless people from familiar
ways of life because of prejudices of race or religion—Moslems
fleeing from India, Hindus from Pakistan, Buddhists from Tibet,
and now the Indians from Burma. It seemed as if history were
circling back upon itself, as if the end of the Pax Britannica were
being followed, like that of the Pax Romana, by a new Dark Age
of fear and intolerance, out of which, only in the long passage
of generations, could stable and civilized communities arise.
The old countries of the West invented nationalism and seem
on the verge of abandoning it; the new countries of the East
are applying it with the zeal of converts, and until that phase
has ended there can be no hope in Asia of political tranquillity
and even of the unity without which the continent’s basic
problems can never be overcome.
9  Shrine on the road to Kalimpong

10  Bangkok: the Tombs of the Princes
PART TWO

Oriental Rococo
At half-past four we boarded the jet for Bangkok and flew out over the Bay of Bengal above a cloudy sky that stretched beneath us like the ice floes of an Arctic sea. Night fell at double speed as we raced towards the darkness, and when the clouds cleared on the verge of land, Burma lay in shadow beneath us, deep blue outlines against the lighter sea, while the sky was still intensely luminous. We saw the great rivers in streaks of pallor running through the obscurity of the jungles, and the spreading circles of fire as the peasants burnt off their paddies. The sun dropped suddenly out of the western sky like a light going out, and the colours of the horizon changed quickly from orange, through lemon and lime to a lucid aquamarine, and then, by a curious lapse in the prismatic succession, shifted to violet and through indigo into the dark blue of night. Through that night we flew over the borders of the land that had been forbidden to us and descended at Bangkok into the dense, caressing darkness of Siam.

There is no more dramatic way of experiencing the contrasts of Asia than the journey we had just completed. As we walked out through the immigration barrier into the hall of the modern airport of Don Maung, it was hard to believe that only seven hours before we had been driving through the squalid environs of Chittagong. We knew already that Thailand was the most prosperous country of southern Asia, next only to Malaya, but it was still extraordinary to find ourselves all at once among these comely, ivory-skinned people, dressed in clean, crisply ironed cotton dresses and in neat shirts and trousers. There was not a single ragged or ill-fed person to be seen and the desperate, bottomless poverty of East Pakistan seemed to belong to another world.
On the long drive of twenty miles into the heart of Bangkok, the impression of prosperity continued, as we sped along the modern four-lane highway, among the heavy traffic of new American and Japanese cars, and passed the open shops along the way. They were real shops, with windows, not the makeshift booths of the Pakistani bazaars; they blazed with light and were piled with goods. But it was not merely the look of well-being, of a kind of Asian gemütlichkeit, that lifted our spirits. It was also the recognition, even as we looked out of the windows of the bus, of a kind of life which showed by contrast how tense and how restricted had been the existence in East Pakistan. I realized all at once that in the whole of Pakistan we had never seen such a thing as a family enjoying themselves together out of doors, or a covey of adolescent girls walking arm-in-arm along a pavement, or a young man talking teasingly to a young woman. All of these things became normal sights again as soon as we entered the Buddhist world of Thailand.

The centre of Bangkok dates from the first days of western influence under the famous King Chulalongkorn, a long-living contemporary of Queen Victoria and King Edward, and it still preserves a kind of obstinate decrepitude in contrast to the broad sweeping avenues and pretentious buildings which modernization is bringing to the outskirts of the city. After a night in one of the uncomfortable and frenetic hostelries in Suriwongse Road which cater to the thousands of transient air passengers who pass through Thailand on the way from Hong Kong to Delhi, we moved into the Princess, a relaxed, old-fashioned hotel kept by Chinese and built around a courtyard off the New Road. There was a swimming pool in the courtyard where we could share the amusement of the Chinese houseboys at the German tourists roasting themselves in the noonday sun, and a coffee shop where soft-mannered Thai girls, their skins as pale as fading wild primroses, would serve our breakfasts of toast and red-fleshed Siamese papaya, always presenting a dish with the courteous Thai gesture of supporting with the left hand the wrist of the offering right hand. We kept returning to the Princess after our several trips out of Bangkok, for the staff were friendly and
helpful, and the hotel was in the central stream of Bangkok life. The New Road is the main artery of Bangkok, cutting through the old European quarter and the Chinese district towards the Thai region of palaces and temples in the north of the city. It is a noisy, crowded thoroughfare, much too narrow for the thousands of cars in modern Bangkok. At certain times of the day the traffic congeals into hooting, slow-moving jams, and when there is no jam one may have to wait ten minutes for a safe moment to run across the road, for the Thai taxi-drivers have a total contempt for pedestrians. The stench of badly refined petrol becomes almost intolerable by mid-afternoon; as it clears towards evening, one becomes aware of the competing stink of sewage seeping up through the cracked concrete manhole covers in the broken pavements. All these discomforts stem from the fact that the New Road is really the oldest road in Bangkok. Until 1864 Bangkok was a water city like Venice, where almost all communications were carried on by boat; either up the wide Chao Phya River or through the thousands of klongs or canals that interlaced the city in every direction and connected it with the rice lands of the great alluvial plain of southern Siam. Such a system was quite sufficient for the Thais, who had founded the city as a new capital in 1768, and for the Chinese merchants who quickly flocked there. Early in the nineteenth century the trade with Europe began, and then the merchants and consular officials who built their houses and warehouses along the banks of the river regarded a road as an indispensable attribute of civilized existence. Just about a hundred years ago an old elephant track was converted for their use, following the meanders of the river as it does to this day; ever since, though it is in fact the oldest road in Bangkok, it has been called the New Road. At first it was used only by the Europeans for driving their carriages on visits and for taking the stern Victorian constitutionals which even the Bangkok climate did not deter. Later it became, as it still is, the main business street of Bangkok.

Day or night one sweltered in the New Road, for even in February Bangkok is a hot and humid town, which in the past
was cooled by the klongs and the trees that grow beside them. Up to ten years ago the klongs were still all-important to the city’s life, its veins of commerce and arteries of transport, and people who had lived so long ago in Bangkok would tell us nostalgically of the flowery, watery, village-like feeling of the place even in the late 1940’s. Today the revolution of the automobile has completely changed the city’s life. The new streets, lined with antiseptically modern hotels and office blocks, are spreading out where once the canals threaded their way through gardens, palm groves and rice paddies. Nearer the centre the klongs themselves are slowly being filled up, and as the water surfaces are replaced by asphalt, Bangkok breathes less easily.

The brittle, clanging surface of modern life is what impresses one for the first two days in Bangkok. The situation has its obvious advantages. The hotels are comfortable, the food is good, the shops are filled with imported goods of every kind at reasonable prices, and there are no beggars to grind on one’s conscience. But at the same time one notices the television antennae on the roofs of most of the houses; one observes with mingled pleasure and regret that the neat-figured Bangkok girls prefer skin-tight American dresses and pencil-heeled sandals to their traditional panung; and one laments inwardly that another graceful old culture has gone the galloping way to westernized uniformity.

On the third day one begins to suspect that Thailand may after all be an object lesson in the persistence of ancient habits and traditions under what appears at first sight a complete surrender to an alien culture. There are, for instance, traditional institutions which still flourish, like the early morning market on the canals. Tens of thousands of people get up before dawn to do their shopping by canoe in the fresh early hours rather than succumb to the routine of the supermarket; indeed, the poorer classes of Bangkok still carry on a largely amphibious life in houses by the canal-sides where the only form of transport is by boat.

Even along the New Road, westernized though it was, we often encountered a conservative reliance on tried and traditional
methods. We soon found that the Chinese money-changers, whose establishments abound in this part of Bangkok, would give us a considerably better rate of exchange than the banks, and every time we had to change money we would go down the road to Mr. Chin, a goldsmith who, like his kind in medieval Europe, traded in money besides selling the beautiful Thai rings decorated with ziggurats of tiny sapphires. Mr. Chin’s adding machine was prominently displayed on his counter, an object of prestige, but I never saw him complete a transaction without a final flickering of fingers over the clicking beads of his abacus.

And when we took a short cut through the lanes immediately behind our hotel, we would enter a labyrinth of alleys in which the neat western dress of the people was almost the only modern element. The alleys twisted irrationally between shabby teakwood houses built on piles. They were so narrow that we had to manoeuvre carefully whenever a Chinese street merchant came along with his baskets jogging at the end of his carrying pole; a step to the side and one might plunge knee-deep into a ditch filled with garbage and waste paper floating on filthy water, for, despite its fine new roads and buildings, Bangkok has still no proper sewage system. The alleys finally opened into a tiny market, hidden from the main streets. Here the fruit sellers had built their coloured pyramids, and old women sat over charcoal braziers roasting corn and plantains. A Chinese scribe carefully painted gold characters on red paper, and a drink-seller was shaving thin slivers of ice to mix in his glasses filled with some unidentifiable mauve concoction. Dirty-faced girls in black blouses and trousers were selling charcoal packed in egg-shaped baskets made of thin slivers of bamboo. There were stalls piled with little dried fish and others hung with bundles of Chinese sausages and with kippered ducks, split open, pressed flat and smoked deep brown. It was an epitome of the traditional home life which the Thais and the Chinese in the back lanes and the back canals still carry on no matter how many cars may crowd the wide new streets. In this great peninsula of South-east Asia, where civilizations and peoples have come and gone, where the alien cultures of India and China and Europe have all spread
their influence before the coming of the Americans, the process of change is by accretion, not elimination. The people accept what attracts them in new cultures without abandoning what is essential to the old.

Most striking of all in Thailand is the persistence of Buddhism as an influence on personal behaviour which makes even the most trivial relationship with a Thai a source of pleasure. In Thailand the Buddhist temples are important, not merely as highly decorative places of worship, but also as sources of education in the moral life. It is still the custom for a young Thai to devote at least one period of three months in his life to serving as a novice in the Buddhist order. Donning the orange robe, going out every morning to beg food for his fellow monks, and accepting the most menial tasks without complaint, the young Thai learns in his own way that the meek shall inherit the earth and the peacemaker shall be blessed. The lesson is rarely entirely lost.

The Thais are Theravada Buddhists who follow the simple Buddhism of the Hinayana, or the lesser Vehicle, but the Chinese temples carry on variations of the much richer Mahayanist doctrines so that every kind of Buddhism is in fact represented in Siam. We even met a distinguishing English Buddhist, John Blofeld, who was working as a translator in the United Nations offices in Bangkok. Blofeld liked the Thais, but disagreed with their doctrines. He was a Vajrayanist, a follower of the Diamond Vehicle, the extreme Tantrist wing of Mahayanism, so that the praise which he lavished on the actual life of the Thai Theravadins was certainly not stirred by any partisan motives. Indeed, he declared as soon as he began to discuss it that the actual doctrine of Buddhism in Thailand was 'arid and uninspiring'. He surprised me by attributing this quality to an almost forgotten phase of east-west relationships during the nineteenth century. In the 1890's the militant rationalists of Europe imagined that they detected in Buddhism doctrines which closely resembled their own, and they presented the teachings of Buddha to the world as a pessimistic and largely materialist faith. When Thai scholars reached the West in the
early twentieth century, they were flattered to find their Buddhist beliefs taken seriously by European scholars, even in such a perverted form, and they enthusiastically accepted the revised version. They came home and converted the local Buddhist intellectuals to their dehydrated and virtually atheistic doctrine of selfish pessimism.

Such, according to Blofeld, was the orthodox, intellectual Buddhism of Thailand, but it was not the Buddhism of the Thai people. 'It is astonishing', he remarked reflectively, 'how often, when the Buddhist philosophy is at its worst, the effect of Buddhism on the actions of men is still good. The ordinary people of Thailand know nothing of Buddhist metaphysics or of Buddha as a man. They regard him much as the Christian peasant regards God. But they draw from Buddhism the simple ethics which make them kind to their neighbours, gentle, tolerant, friendly, and on the whole as good people as you will meet anywhere.'

There is a political as well as a religious reason why the foreigner finds the Thais so pleasant to meet. They have never been subjected to colonial rule, and they have none of the xenophobic rancour against the white man which one finds lingering in so many eastern countries; they do not even dislike Americans, which is nowadays a rare thing in Asia. Their good fortune as a nation has, in fact, been largely due to their ability to turn their easy-going nature into a political weapon and to exploit on a grand scale the answer that turns away wrath. Not only did they continue by adroit diplomacy to keep their country independent as a buffer state between the French and the English when all other South-east Asian countries fell under foreign rule; they also succeeded, in the most masterly way, in switching their allegiance from Japan at the psychologically correct moment during the Second World War, so that they made a peace with the West which enabled them to come out of the war not merely unscathed, but even a great deal better off materially than they had been before. Nowadays the Thais live under a military dictatorship. But it is a benevolent dictatorship which has given them a peaceful life and a steadily improving
standard of living, and they seem to be quite willing to leave to their rulers the tedious task of governing. Meanwhile, those rulers have manoeuvred Thailand into the position where Bangkok is one of the key capitals of Asia. An Indian U.N. official in Bangkok told me, with the admiration of a man who knew the shrewd intricacies of traditional oriental diplomacy, ‘Never underestimate the Thais. Whatever happens in the world, they will come out on top.’
If Buddhism plays a great part in the life of modern Thailand, it completely dominates one's impression of the country's past, for the simple reason that the only buildings ever constructed on a permanent scale were those connected with religion. During the historical period a number of peoples have succeeded each other in control of Siam, the country we now call Thailand: the Mons, who are now a primitive remnant in the remoter jungles of South-east Asia; the Khmers from Cambodia, and finally the Thais, who began to migrate southward about fourteen hundred years ago and arrived in large numbers during the thirteenth century when Kublai Khan invaded their native region in southern China. Each of these peoples was at least partly converted to Buddhism, and each left its heritage of temples, of pagodas, which the Thais call cheddís, and of the peculiar phallic towers called prangs which stand in the courtyards of many Thai temple complexes in honour, not of Buddha, but of Siva and the other great Hindu gods, who are still regarded as patron deities of the Royal Family of Thailand. The other Buddhist people who played a great part in the history of Thailand, the Burmese, came as conquerors rather than settlers, and are remembered not for the monuments they constructed, but for those they destroyed.

Two of the great Buddhist sites of Thailand lie in the southern alluvial plains relatively near to Bangkok. Nakon Pathom, thirty miles to the west, is an ancient city of the Mons where the first Buddhist missionaries in the country are said to have preached the doctrine during the fifth century A.D. Ayudhya, fifty miles to the north, was the Thai capital for more than four hundred years, from 1350 to 1767, when it was burned and sacked by the
Burmese and abandoned in favour of the new capital at Bangkok. We decided to visit these earlier sites before paying any attention to the much later temples of Bangkok, most of which date from the nineteenth century.

Taxis are cheap enough in Bangkok to be used for relatively long trips, provided one bargains with the drivers in the streets rather than going to the travel agents. The negotiations were complicated, since in Bangkok, where all the office workers and many of the shopkeepers and waitresses speak serviceable English, the cab-drivers can rarely go beyond the chorus of 'Taxi, boss?' which rises from the ranks outside the hotels as a foreigner walks by; whenever we wanted to go to a specific address we would get the hotel clerk to write it out on a slip of paper in the Thai script, which is rather remotely derived from Sanskrit and is one of the surviving relics of past Indian influence.

The driver who took us to Nakon Pathom did not appear to know even 'Taxi, boss?' On our side we were impeded rather than helped by the eccentricities of the phrase-book in 'True Sound Phonetic Thai' prepared for unwary visitors by a gentleman of somewhat eccentric English who masqueraded under a Scottish name. The author compiled elaborate lists of verbs on such subjects as 'The movement of the body' ending with 'to urine... to purge... to cohabit'. He constructed excellent fragments of dialogue on the most unlikely subjects. 'Would you like a game of bridge?' he would ask, and modestly answer, 'No, I am not a good hand at it.' But on any subject one was really likely to need, the author's habit was to leave one hanging in suspense with a question asked and no clue to the possible meaning of the answer.

Inge, who can imitate accents convincingly—I have no ear at all for such things—looked in the phrase-book and, after leafing many pages, found 'How much is the fare to...?' Brightly she said, in True Sound Phonetic Thai, 'Bpai tee Nakon Pathom kit kah doe-ie sarn tow rai?' It would sound convincing enough for the driver to let loose a long, eloquent and incomprensible reply. Inge looked back into the book for a clue to what he might be saying, but, finding none, went on with the next
phrase, saying sternly, 'Tan ree-ak paang mark kern bpai!' 'You are asking too much!' The driver's eloquence was redoubled and then we all shrugged our shoulders and, in the manner of Thailand, treated the whole thing as a joke, resorting to an improvised sign language which turned out to be much more conducive to mutual understanding than all our efforts at True Sound Phonetic Thai. As we abandoned our phrase-book, I noticed the last ominous phrase. 'Is there an English lawyer in Bangkok?' For our sixty-mile journey to Nakon Pathom and back we finally agreed on a price of 115 baht, which is less than £2.

It was a Sunday morning when we set off, driving through the Chinese quarter of Bangkok and over the bridge to Donburi, which was briefly the capital before the founding of Bangkok. Throughout the East, no matter what the local religion, Sunday is observed as a holiday; in Colombo it has a dour bleakness of closed shops and empty streets which commemorates a past of English rule, but in Bangkok it is celebrated with a liveliness that reminds one of a Sunday morning in Paris: all the shops and markets open, the stalls loaded with bolts of cloth and piles of tropical fruit gleaming garishly in the hot sunlight, the pavements crowded with Chinese women in black silk trousers, and the noisy antiquated trams packed to the doors and festooned with boys stealing free rides.

Across the river in Donburi the city blended with the half-rural suburbs. This was Thai-inhabited territory; unlike the Chinese, who possess the urban genius and take readily to the life of crowded streets, the Thais are not happy far away from water, greenness, and flowers. These outer verges of Bangkok reflected their preferences; in gardens shaded by mango and bread-fruit trees, where long-stemmed pink and mauve orchids grew in rows like sweet-peas in England, the neat airy houses of dull-brown teakwood stood perched on their high stilts, and in the spaces beneath them lay long dugout canoes, bulbous olive-glazed storage jars more than half the height of a man, and globular cages of split bamboo inhabited by white chickens. In every garden the tutelary spirit lived in a little house of painted wood like a nesting-box on a pole; though they have long been
converted to Buddhism, the Thais remain animists at heart, and every day they placate the local deities with offerings of food. Wherever a canal crossed the road a little nucleus of communal life was formed; the farmers’ boats moored for the morning market, stacked high with green coconuts, papayas, Chinese cabbage, and the people sitting in the open-air teahouses overlooking the water. The women, small, fragile-boned, with high-cheeked faces the colour of winter sunlight, dressed in the traditional Thai manner, with loose blouses, wrap-over skirts called panungs made of pieces of bright silk, and bamboo sun hats shaped like lampshades.

The countryside of southern Thailand is surprisingly dull and featureless, particularly in the dry season: rough grass and the winter stubble of rice-fields, low scrubby copses and farmhouses built of split bamboo with yards of tramped earth crowded with geese and black pigs. It was the opposite of all one’s preconceptions of a tropical landscape, as colourless as an East Anglian January; there were not even the birds, egrets and winter swallows and little rose-breasted hawks, whose presence usually enlivens the monotony of a land of rice paddies. An hour after leaving Bangkok the conical spire of the pagoda of Nakon Pathom pierced upwards and the enormous bell-shaped base slowly swelled above the horizon towards a sky where kites strained on their strings like captive birds.

Nakon Pathom is one of the principal pilgrimage cities of Thailand. One sees Buddhism there in its most ambiguous forms, mingling a genuine, simple devotion with a great deal of superstition and an element of material calculation that infects both the worshippers and the place of worship. The pagoda stands in a rectangular garden in the middle of a rectangular town, and the original shrine has long vanished, not by destruction, but because its ruined structure was completely covered by the vast tiled shell which King Mongkut built above it in the early nineteenth century. In competition with the hated Burmese, he made the structure just a little larger than the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon, so that the cheddi at Nakon Pathom, though it is only half as tall as Kanishka’s famous structure, is still the largest exist-
ing Buddhist place of worship. Its size is almost its only merit, for the curves of the dome are ugly, and although the Thais boast of the golden-glazed tiles—at best a poor substitute for the actual gold covering of its competitor in Rangoon—the gilding has long weathered away and the colour of the dome is actually a dull and rather repellent copper brown.

It was not a festival day, but many people had come on a Sunday outing to make their tour around the shrine and pay their respects to the various Buddhas in the temples along the circumambulation route around the pagoda. We followed them through the iron gates of the sacred enclosure, where a dense, sweet fragrance arose from the piles of flower offerings which the women of Nakon Pathom were selling. We left our shoes at the base of the steps leading up the main platform, and went into the first of the small temples. In the centre of the altar sat a massive Buddha of dark bronze; a curious illusion of movement was given to its heavy face by the loose fluttering edges of the tiny squares of gold leaf which had been glued on to it by devotees.

The worshippers queued up at a line of stalls where white-shirted laymen were selling joss-sticks, yellow wax tapers and small paper flags, dropping the money they received into aquarium-shaped glass boxes, where the wealth of the temple increased for all to see. The devotees clearly expected value for their money. They lit their joss-sticks and tapers, stuck their flags into curious little pagoda-like structures of dried flowers placed before the image, and then, after the appropriate number of prostrations, each of them picked up two horseshoe-shaped pieces of red-lacquered wood that lay in front of the altar, threw them into the air, and observed how they fell on the tiled floor. Then they took a wooden cylindrical box containing a number of spill-like sticks, shook it vigorously, and pulled out one of the sticks, each of which had a number inscribed on its tip. An attendant standing beside a cabinet near to the altar pulled out a drawer corresponding to the number on the stick and handed a printed sheet to the supplicant. It contained the answer to the particular question about his fortune which he had come to ask.
This ceremony was by far the most popular at Nakon Pathom, and indeed in every Buddhist temple we entered in Thailand. Afterwards the devotees made their circumambulation, kneeling perfunctorily to the various other images, and perhaps pausing to lay a frangipani blossom before the colossal gilded figure of the dying Buddha that lay in the largest of the temples. But their main purpose had clearly been to test their fortune. In recent generations popular Thai Buddhism has been corrupted by many extraneous influences, and particularly that of the Chinese immigrants, who brought with them the various ceremonials for fortune-telling which over the centuries have been incorporated into popular Mahayanist Buddhism in both China and Japan. The Thais rejected the basic doctrines of Mahayanist Buddhism, its vast pantheon of Bodhisattvas, its belief in universal redemption, but accepted these corrupt accretions, which the temple authorities found profitable and which appealed to the easy-going nature of the Thais, who are usually content to have their decisions made for them, either by the benevolent acts of earthly despots or by the chance fall of fortune-telling sticks which tell the will of destiny. The problem of choice which stirs the anguish of modern western man and which takes its place in the higher teachings of Buddhism, has little meaning for these disguised animists.

We carried out our circumambulation like the rest of the visitors, watching them at their devotions, and impressed by the curious solitude which any kind of Buddhist worship seems to incur for the layman. No priest acted as an intermediary and the few monks we saw around the precincts of the shrine seemed intent on avoiding rather than seeking contact with the devotees, each of whom made his offering and his pleas as an individual and not as a member of any congregation. Indeed, the only congregation in Hinayanist Buddhism seems to be that of the Sangha, the order of monks who have made the great renunciation: the rest of men live in the darkness of desire and, according to the more extreme Theravada doctrines, are ineligible for nirvana. I am sure this causes little trouble to the average Thai, who appears to live on a level of simple enjoyment of life, con-
13 Bangkok: the Temple of the Dawn
14 Temple doors in Bangkok
15 Ayudhya: a temple garden

16 Ayudhya: the temple over the canal
tent to placate the spirits in this existence and to hope that by virtuous actions he may ensure after death an incarnation no worse than the present. For it is characteristic of the mildness of popular Buddhism that the alternatives it offers are less violent than those of Christianity; there is no permanent damnation, and an infinite series of second chances is offered in the lives that lie before one, so that there is no need for an easy-going man to hurry on his way to heaven or its equivalent. Enough kind actions, enough captive birds bought to release to the air, as we saw the worshippers doing at one of the temples in Bangkok, and the next life will be just a little better than the last as one makes one's discreet way onward towards enlightenment.

The joy of all the birds set free so that men might escape eventually from the wheel of suffering seemed to echo in the air above the shrine of Nakon Pathom as we strolled on the paved platform behind the temple, where the children wandered under the mauve-flowered orchid trees ringing harsh-toned little handbells and selling pannikins of water from wooden buckets. The great dome of the pagoda was splashed with the bright green of plants growing out of the cracks of the masonry, and among them fluttered swallows, mynahs and magpie robins in an abundance which was astonishing and delightful after passing over the great birdless plain. The magpie robins were the most demonstrative of all, madly exhibitionist little birds which resembled neither robins nor magpies, but made a great show of spreading like miniature peacocks their black and white fans of tails and accompanying the performance with light trilling warbles which at times rose into almost deafening choruses as hundreds of fantails flashed in the sunlight.

There is an international aura which hangs over pilgrimage shrines, no matter what the religion they celebrate or the country to which they belong, and Nakon Pathom, with its glass cash-boxes and the merchants on its steps and the anonymous suppliants in their holiday clothes, seemed like a mild Thai version of what one might see in the off season at places like Benares or Lourdes. Whether the mediator was a gilded Buddha or a fluting Krishna, or a star-crowned Virgin, did not seem to matter
greatly; the function of the shrine was to dispense its particular mana and to offer its own form of consolation or reassurance to the bewildered or the suffering. In this way the pagoda of Nakon Pathom was as untypical of Thai temples as the great pilgrimage shrines of France or Spain are of European churches.

Most of the rural temples of South-east Asia in fact perform functions very similar to the churches of the medieval West, and show the same combination of the religious and the secular. They are places of worship, but they also play an important part in the ordinary mundane life of the people, acting as the village meeting-places where local festivities which often seem to have an earthy, pagan origin may be carried on.

On our way back from Nakon Pathom to Bangkok we came on one of these festivals in progress outside a rather shabby temple which stood next to an ancient and crumbling brick pagoda. The green outside the temple was surrounded by a square of stalls, selling fruit, dried fish and mineral waters, pottery and gaudy paper windmills, and in the centre, suspended between the tall peepul trees on either side of the green, hung a cluster of three palm-leaf wreaths, united by a net. Half a dozen young men in shorts, with handkerchiefs tied like bandeaux around their heads, were playing a complicated game with a hollow ball of basketwork. It kept bounding high in the air, like a ball in the jet of a fountain, as the boys knocked it with sharp movements of their shoulders, knees, feet, but never with their hands, until one of them, turning away, gave a skilful backward kick with his heel which landed the ball in the net twenty feet above his head. It was obviously a game that required great practice and skill, and I was reminded of the ancient ritual games played in the sacred ball courts of the Aztec temples in Mexico. There was an old monk standing beside us, with a maze of faint blue tattooing covering the shoulder left bare by his yellow robe; he spoke a little English and told us that the game was called takraw, but he knew nothing about its origin, nor did we find anyone else who could tell us, though I suspect that, like many similar ancient games, it had some kind of magical significance in the pre-Buddhist past.
Ayudhya, the old Siamese capital whose glory was brought to an end by the particular ferocity of the Burmese invaders in the eighteenth century, lies due north of Bangkok, about fifty miles away by the new highway that is being constructed into the upper provinces of the country. We went again by taxi, with a driver we had the luck to encounter the day before on a trip in the city; he not only spoke a little English but carried a serviceable dictionary in his pocket, and his family had come from Ayudhya, so that he knew the city as well as any guide might have done. He was one of those young, slightly-built, pale-skinned Thais, dressed in cotton shirt and trousers, whose faces merge in one’s memory into a composite image of bland intelligence; the mask lifted only two or three times during the day, when his feelings were particularly stirred.

The way to Ayudhya traversed a plain as flat as that which led to Nakon Pathom, but the harvest was later in this region, and the whole landscape was irradiated by the pale golden colour of the rice straw, slashed by the blue lines of the klongs and dotted by ponds spattered white and pink with the flowers of lotus and other water plants. The threshing-floors were the centres of harvest activity. Some of the more prosperous peasants had little gasoline threshing machines, but most of them still drove their buffalo around in slow circles, stepping knee-deep among the straw and tramping out the grain. The women in their long red and purple panungs raked the straw together in long stacks which were decorated with red and yellow paper flags, and the men shovelled the grain into pyramids. Over the dry paddies other peasants were driving buffaloes which had been harnessed to sleighs that resembled the travois of the North
American Indians; they were made of two long bamboo poles joined by a framework, with a platform on which the sheaves of rice were loaded, and they were obviously much more efficient than wheeled wagons for crossing the rough surfaces of the paddies, broken by their shallow walls of mud.

In this region the canals still remained the arteries of rural life. The great road on which we travelled seemed to play almost no part in the economy of the countryside. The loose villages of stilted houses were all grouped along the klongs, the traditional highways, and on all the little canals between the paddies a great harvest traffic was going on; the long Thai boats of teakwood, with their upturned prows and sterns, were turned into barges, loaded almost to the gunwales with bales of straw, and poled or towed along the shallow waterways and under the little footbridges of bamboo poles that joined the fields. And, since fish is the universal companion of rice in the Thai diet, as it is in that of the Bengalis, the people who were not engaged in the harvest seemed to spend their time fishing with seines and with scoops which varied from hand nets to great bag-like contraptions lowered into the larger canals by primitive bamboo cranes.

The great sweeps of paddy flatness flowed to every horizon, broken only by the feathery clumps of bamboos and the small groves of bananas and sugar palms which grew near the villages. Occasionally, above the houses, there would tower the gaunt angular forms of kapok trees, looking like trees drawn by children, with the green pods hanging down from leafless branches like enormous suspended cocoons. From the little temples in the larger villages the smell of sandalwood incense would sometimes blow into the car, and once, when we stopped near one of them to look at the golden carp that floated in the tanks of a live-fish merchant’s stall, the wind carried the soft tinkle of the bells of the temple eaves as it stirred their leaf-shaped clappers.

Not a single acre of land in the whole plain fifty miles northward from Bangkok seemed to have been left to wild nature, and this made all the more dramatic the upsurging outline of trees on the horizon, like the edge of a great forest, that an-
nounced our approach to Ayudhya, and the abrupt transition from paddy to jungle which began as soon as we entered the purlieus of the old city and saw the first of its ruined pagodas, their pinnacles of dark brick crumbling away, furred over with bushes and often clasped in the destroying grip of the grey octopus-like roots of ficus trees that grew up from their summits. It seemed as if the peasants, for all their land hunger, had been prevented by some superstitious respect from seizing on the rich land which lay under its forest growth in the precincts of their ancient capital.

Ayudhya was contemporary with the great medieval cities of Europe, founded in 1350, when Petrarch lived, by King U-Thong who came down from the Thai kingdoms of the north and established his reign in the southern plains. For more than four centuries the city remained one of the great centres of Buddhism in South-east Asia, a city of temples and pagodas, of palaces and colossal statues constructed by resourceful bronze-casters. In 1767, the Burmese ravaged it completely, turned its canals red with the blood of the slaughtered citizens and destroyed the dynasty founded by U-Thong. It was then, after the Thais had risen against their invaders under new lines of kings, that the capital was moved down the River Chao Phya to Donburi and eventually to Bangkok.

Ancient Ayudhya was a city encircled and defended by water, by the great curve of the Chao Phya and the wide canals which were dug to form an island shaped like the imprint of a gigantic foot; an island which in the end became a prison of death rather than a fortress for its defenders. The modern town occupies only part of this island; over the rest the jungle which swept over the ancient city in the wake of the invaders still holds sway. Yet, as we drove over the modern iron bridge across the green, slow river, and looked down on the palm-thatched warehouses on the water’s edge, with sampans and launches moored before them, it was still possible to imagine Ayudhya as the trading city to which the junks of China and the dhows of the Red Sea came sailing up from the Gulf of Siam, bearing Japanese porcelain and Venetian glass to the palaces of its kings.
We went first into the curving, arced main street of the modern town. The noon air was hot and heavy, for the farther one goes inland, the muggier becomes the atmosphere in the absence of the sea breezes which still stir faintly as far inland as Bangkok. Under that sultry sun Ayudhya seemed, like most of the small Thai towns, a good deal cleaner than Bangkok and almost as westernized. In the very modest Chinese hotel where we ate our lunch the national tendency to seek the best of both oriental and occidental worlds was admirably demonstrated; the woman proprietor in her black silk trousers brought us first a large bowl of glutinous shark's fin and crab soup, and then a dish of shrimp foo-yong with, instead of rice, the best white bread we had yet tasted anywhere in Asia, and a bottle of Singha, the good German-style beer that is brewed in Bangkok.

Our driver insisted on taking us first to the Chandra Kasem Palace, which lies within a tall battlemented wall of reddish stone on the banks of the river. We found it quite charming in a melancholy nineteenth-century romantic manner. The old palace had been destroyed by the Burmese in 1767, but a century later King Mongkut, the first of the Siamese kings to encourage friendship with the West, had ordered it to be reconstructed in the original manner, and we walked through quiet courtyards with dry brown lawns and flowering frangipanis into the small, graceful wooden pavilions, with their softly faded paintwork, which were maintained as a kind of royal museum.

We took off our shoes as we stepped from the wide verandah on to the creaking floors of polished planks within the pavilion. There was a curious mingled smell of mould and joss-sticks. A young man in a Hawaiian shirt sold us tickets and began to walk around with us as an uncommissioned guide. 'What country you come from?' he asked. It was a customary question, for the Thais are always either too tactful or too perceptive to take it immediately for granted that one is an American. To avoid what I knew from experience would be the complicated task of explaining the geographical position and political status of Canada, I contented myself with saying that we were English which would certainly have been sufficient explanation in Thailand
before 1939, for at the time the British were the most familiar of all foreigners. I soon realized that the only white foreigners with whom this young Thai of the 1960’s was familiar were the Americans, and that Britain now needed as much explanation as Canada would have done. ‘Are the people of your country Buddhists?’ was his next question, and I found myself floundering in elementary comparative theology. The young man in the Hawaiian shirt listened very politely as I explained that most British people knew nothing about Buddhism, but that Inge and I were in the nature of Buddhist fellow-travellers. Long before I had finished I began to realize that he understood nothing I had been saying. ‘Yes, please. Have you any British moneys?’ he asked, as soon as I had finished my explanation. ‘I am collecting moneys.’ I could see that I fell immeasurably in his esteem when the only foreign coin I produced was a four-anna piece from Pakistan.

There was no more than a pathetic historical interest about the objects which he showed us on our way through the palace. The important antiquities it once contained had been transferred to the new museum elsewhere in the town, and what remained were the personal possessions of King Mongkut himself, the hero of Anna and the King of Siam, which is regarded in Thailand as a grossly libellous book. Looking at these relics, one realized how, already in the 1850’s, the glamour of the West’s strange ugliness had begun to seduce the Thais away from the graceful, light-hearted splendour of their native existence. For, alongside the rooms filled with gold-threaded native garments and elegant gilded Siamese furniture, there were others furnished in an appalling Victorian Spartanism, with Burslem ewers and wash-basins and chamber-pots decorated with patterns of blue roses, with French marble-topped dressing-tables, and with portraits of the King himself, trussed up in European military garb and hung with the stars of foreign orders; they were portraits of tragic clumsiness, painted by wandering European incompetents for whom a niche as portrait painter in the court of a Siamese king must have been the last desperate expedient before suicide. It was a little astonishing to realize that in this awkward way
began that acceptance of western ways of living which has carried the Thais farther towards occidentalization, at least in the external aspects of their existence, than any other nation in Asia, except the Japanese.

Beyond the palace, in the road-threaded woodland that covered the rest of the island, it was the ancient Siam of the centuries before the advent of Europeans that was still dominant, even in its manifest decay, for the very abundance of the ruins testified to the power and wealth of the past Ayudhya, while those people who continued to live among them existed in makeshift jungle fashion.

We stopped in a clearing which lay in the middle of a dense patch of creeper-entwined forest. Two crumbling brick pagodas stood together, each about thirty feet high; their sides were lacerated with oven-like holes where robbers had sought for treasure, and they were covered almost completely with a network of leafy vines. Beyond them, under the trees, gleamed a whole company of small whitewashed cheddiss, each as high as a man, regimented in long lines, like tombs in a cemetery, except that they did not mark the resting-places of dead men, but rather stated the hopes of men who had been alive and had built these bell-shaped little structures to gain for themselves better futures after death.

On one side of this garden of miniature pagodas stood a little hut of bamboo and palm-leaf and here two women, dressed only in silk panungs wrapped low over their breasts, were pounding in great wooden mortars. On the other side, on the verandah of a shabby stuccoed building which evidently served them as a vihara, two monks were preparing food in basins. The temple building itself had long vanished; there was only a shed roof, supported on bamboo poles, over the dozen seated Buddhas, all of them mutilated and most of them headless, but with flowers and tins stuffed with the burnt-out ends of joss-sticks at their feet.

The driver pointed to the statues. He suddenly gritted his teeth, made a violent breaking motion with his hands, and said bitterly, 'Burmese did that!' His bland features came alive with
the look of vindictiveness that so often appears on Thai faces when they mention these traditional foes, from whom they have suffered again and again. I am always astonished by the tenacity with which ancient resentments are maintained in Asia, even among people whose religion would seem to preach indifference to earthly injuries. I suspect that it is due to a different attitude towards time than ours, to a much less acute historical sense, so that events which to us would seem buried in an irrecoverable past appear to many Asians as close as what happened a decade ago. This is the only explanation for the strange resurgence, since the end of the colonial empires in South-east Asia, of resentments and rivalries which existed in the distant past and are now taken up again as if there had been no interruption, so that Thais once again hate Burmese for the destruction of Ayudhya two centuries ago and Cambodians regard both Thais and Vietnamese with irrational hostility for the remote dismemberment of the great empire of Angkor.

We went on by the narrow roads from ruin to ruin, stumbling through sharp grasses that tortured the ankles, to reach the upright statues, their bodies framed by square-cut draperies, that stood in the niches of isolated monuments; wondering at the crooked, whimsical smile of the Buddha, a hundred feet long, who reclined in a green meadow—his temple had long vanished—while children imitating monks came silently to hold little metal bowls before us; walking between the magnificent orange cascades of golden cassia trees into the new temple built around the famous old statue, the Phra Mokgkol Bopit, which the Thais—with a love of magnitude which may well have been stimulated by their recent contact with Americans—claim is the largest bronze statue in the world. It was indeed an impressive, awesome sight—the towering black figure with its head under the shadows of the temple roof, its great white eyes gleaming down out of the darkness, and its enormous torso given an illusion of breathing life by the wind which gently ruffled a scarf of yellow silk looped over the chest and the right shoulder. The face had a massive, unsmiling aloofness, and the whole figure projected a feeling of brooding power which seemed as
remote from the pleasant trivialities of modern Thai religious art as the statues of Michelangelo from the cherubs of Austrian rococo wood-carvers. One felt that there must have been a vast change in the character and spirit of the civilization of Siam from the powerful days of the Ayudhya kingdom to the modern age of the Thailand whose statesmen are the world's most adept experts in the subtleties of small-power diplomacy.

Our driver prostrated himself before the great image until his brow almost touched the ground, rattled the fortune-telling sticks, and paid out his baht to the old Thai woman guarding the shrine for the piece of paper that would give him guidance. Immediately he had looked at it he began to urge us to visit a temple which he claimed was much more interesting than any of the sites we had yet seen. It had been built by King U-Thong just after the foundation of Ayudhya, and was actually still in use. It was, moreover, a place which visitors rarely saw, since it lay beyond the island, on the far side of the northern canal.

We drove along a deserted road on the far side of the island, locked the car, and walked down a narrow path beside the bamboo fence of a banana grove. There was sharp rustlings in the dry grass as some creature burrowed away from us, and the driver raised a warning finger. 'Snakee,' he said. We stepped nervously, for Ayudhya, like all the old sites of this region, offers a refuge among the warm stones and bricks of its ruins to a multitude of serpents of many kinds, including the dreaded krait, which is reputed to be not only highly poisonous but also wantonly aggressive.

The path ended between some rough bamboo shacks on the banks of slippery mud that ran down to the opaque water of the wide canal. On the far side, through a screen of palms and heavy-foliaged mango trees, we saw dragon-peaked temple roofs, and behind them the high tower of the prang.

We slithered down precariously to a fragile floating stage made of sections of bamboo, which quaked and half-submerged themselves under our weight so that it was hard to prevent the water sloshing into our shoes. The ferryman was coming back over the river, standing like a gondolier and rowing his long
narrow boat of teakwood planks with a single oar propped in a high wooden crotch. He wore a white straw hat and blue baggy trousers, with a yellow sash around his waist; his torso was bare and dark brown.

On the other side of the canal, inside the concealing barrier of tall trees, we found an extensive temple complex, in every stage of preservation and decay, from worship halls which had obviously been rebuilt in recent years, to lichen-rusted votive pagodas which looked as if they had been slowly rotting away for centuries. But here at least the jungle had been kept at bay and we walked over a stone-flagged path through a garden where dwarf-palms had been rather capriciously planted among creeping mauve-flowered weeds; above them dozens of small butterflies with wings of blue mosaic danced and glittered in the sunlight.

In among the pagodas there was a flash of orange robes as a young novice with shaven head excitedly played tag with a boy whose only dress was a pair of extraordinarily ragged shorts. Neither of them was more than ten. As soon as they saw us, the novice assumed an appropriately demure air and the other boy came up and began talking seriously to the driver in the soft liquid Thai of Ayudhya. It was a sign of the prosperity of Thailand, as compared with India and Pakistan, that we were surprised and concerned to see a child so poorly dressed. The driver turned and asked us to let the boy be our guide. He was the son of a widow.

The older part of the temple was enclosed by a half-ruined brick cloister. Around it, partly protected by a broken tile roof, sat long guardian ranks of flame-crested, life-sized stone Buddhas there were 108 of them, the traditional number of images for a Thai cloister. They were of various styles and had obviously come from different places, but all of them dated from the days before the Burmese invasion, and many had been mutilated and afterwards crudely mended with cement. The gold leaf of worship still fluttered on their faces and ragged scarves of gold silk hung over their chests.

From the centre of the weed-choked courtyard rose the massive structure of the prang. Despite its Hindu form and the gilded
trident symbol of Siva that glittered on its peak, this prang had been turned completely to the service of Buddhism. Once it had served a double function as a campanile and a treasury for the temple's most sacred relics, and it was still regarded as especially holy ground; before we climbed the broken staircase up to the platform a third of the way up, we took off our shoes, left them in charge of the little novice, and continued barefoot. Thorny plants grew in the crevices of the steps and we had to keep brushing large black ants off our legs, which the driver did with the singular gentleness of a Buddhist brought up to respect all the lower forms of life. As I always do in such places, I felt apprehensive of snakes and scorpions, but I saw none.

Almost at the top of the steps, in a long narrow niche, stood a tall, elongated Buddha, his gilded robes rigidly projecting on each side of his body like half-open wings, and the gentle enigmatic smile of the Khmer statues illuminating his finely cut features. It was the most beautiful piece of sculpture I had yet seen in Thailand, and I suspect that it had been one of the prizes of conquest from Angkor; a bunch of limp lotus flowers lay in tribute at its feet.

The outside of the prang was still covered with its original ribbed facing of reddish sandstone; inside, as we went under the nimbus-crowned lintel, the walls were coated with stucco, on which we could still see the vestiges of painted murals. High up, in the long inner funnel of the prang, there were smoke marks and charred beams. 'No bell!' the driver interpreted. 'Burmes!' It was those relentless enemies who had also robbed the reliquary, a pagoda-like structure, still gilded and elaborately inset with mother-of-pearl, which stood in the centre of the prang. The vandals had cut a long deep hole in its base and taken the relic in its precious casket to give added holiness to one of their own temples. Images and relics were valued loot in the medieval wars of South-east Asia, and the peregrinations of the famous Emerald Buddha through the various countries of the peninsula before it finally came to rest in the temple of the royal palace at Bangkok are themselves enough to furnish material for a minor epic.
The boy led us over the courtyard, showing the lotus-shaped holy well, and thrusting the weeds aside to reveal a great footmark carved in stone, the ancient Buddha symbol of the days when it was still forbidden to show the human form of the Enlightened One. As we were looking at it two old monks came into the cloister, barefooted, with iron pots of water in their hands, and stood watching us. They had worn, earnest faces, the simple faces of peasants. One of them smiled. 'Good night,' he said, articulating the unfamiliar words with difficulty. And then they turned and glided away shyly, their bare feet scuffing faintly on the tramped mud of the cloister floor. I paid the boy a little more than he asked, but as we were leaving I saw the driver motion to him and hand him an extra baht. It was a typical example of Thai kindness. Whether such acts are motivated by the hope of gaining merit seems to me in the long run unimportant, provided they induce a gentleness and generosity in ordinary human intercourse, which, in the case of the Thais, I am convinced they do.

We went back over the canal. The ferryman, who asked five times the usual fee, settled for double, and walked off happily to join his wife and children who were lounging the hot afternoon away on a palm-leaf shaded platform overlooking the canal, from which they waved and shouted at us as we walked up the path towards the road. Suddenly there was another wild burrowing through the dry grass, and a long snake, thin as a whip lash and bright emerald green, flashed like a beautiful arrow across the ground before us and vanished into the banana grove.

Monument viewing on a Siamese afternoon, even in comparatively cool February, is immensely exhausting, and by now we were drenched with perspiration and too tired to think of anything more than going back to drink beer at the Chinese hotel and then driving towards Bangkok with the car windows wide open and the warm air blowing in the peculiar dry scent of rice stubble and the occasional overpowering stench of manure. It was the hot still end of the afternoon. The buffaloes were wallowing up to their nostrils, the women squatted on
landing-stages by the canals, pouring water over themselves out of gourds, and in a deep pool two fishermen stood immersed to their necks, with white solar topees upon their heads. We stared at them with astonishment and envy.
It was after we returned from Ayudhya, with its dark austere Buddhas and its softly decaying cheddies and prangs whose muted tints of fading brick and green-grey lichen merged so softly into the lush green of the surrounding jungles, that the temples of Bangkok—or as many of the 300 as we felt inclined to visit in the heat which each day became more close and enervating—most impressed us with the peculiar gaiety of their art.

After the fall of Ayudhya the Thais produced nothing that one could in any way call high art; Siam shared the decline in grandeur of concept and intensity of vision that characterizes almost all Asian art from the early eighteenth century onwards. The great age of Buddhism had passed, while the political and social systems of all these countries had reached a point of decadence which in the long run made them unable to resist the impact of the invading western cultures. But ages of decadence, when pure delight in colour and form is usually more prevalent than at other times, produce their own forms of art which cannot be despised. And the Thai art of the Chakri dynasty, par excellence the art of Bangkok, while it is not in any sense great, is still minor art at its best, expressing with extraordinary felicity the gracefulness and gaiety which are the most obvious personal characteristics of the people who created it. It is, like all rococo art, by its nature superficial, an art of the surface, of spun sugar fantasy in eloquent, brilliant combinations. Perhaps the most astonishing feature of this bright, whimsical Bangkok art is that, having invented it in the eighteenth century, the Thais seemed capable of carrying it on indefinitely without loss of grace, so that temples put up within the present century still have a fresh-
ness of fancy which makes them agreeable and amusing. The deliberate intent of amusement is always obvious, and at first sight it seems somewhat inconsistent with the doctrinal austerity of Thai Buddhism. But, as Browning showed so poignantly in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, there has always been a conflict between theologians who are obsessed with God's terrible verdict of death, and the artists who are inspired by God's ineffable gift of beauty, and in religious art it is usually the artist's view which has triumphed, so that even the martyrdoms of the saints in Christian paintings become incidental to the fascinating form and colour of the world in which they die. Religious artists throughout the ages have echoed in their own way the saying attributed to General Booth—'Why should the Devil have all the best tunes?'—and nowhere more strongly than in Thailand, where the Buddhists in theory recognize the beauty and gaiety of existence as illusions, and in practice perpetuate them.

Bangkok religion and its art are marvellously varied, in their objects of worship, in their choice of materials, and in their extravagant blending of styles. There are temples devoted to chiromancy, to astrology, to providing oracular declarations for the benefit of gamblers. There are shrines where ancient Hindu ceremonies are carried on and shrines where animals are worshipped. On a canal bank near the royal palace we came upon a Gothic rockery on top of which stood the figure of a pig. The pig was plastered over, like a revered Buddha image, with squares of gold-leaf, red paper garlands hung thickly around his neck, the smoke of joss-sticks curled around his stony snout, and the boatmen who poled past with cargoes of flowering plants bowed low before his porcine holiness.

The peculiar jewelled brilliance which the largest of the Bangkok temples display when one approaches them along the river or comes suddenly upon them, as one does on great buildings in Venice, out of a maze of canals and lanes, is due to the original way of using different materials in order to produce patterns of encrusted and glittering colour on which the changing light, from the misty pearliness of morning to the hot glare of afternoon, can produce a series of varying effects. For Bangkok art
is not merely an art of the surface; it is also as atmospheric an art as stained glass.

The most extravagantly splendid in this respect is the Temple of the Dawn, Wat Arun, which stands in the old capital of Donburi, almost exactly across the river from the royal palace in Bangkok itself. We drove through the congested narrow streets, obstructed by fish stalls and tricycle kitchens pedalled slowly along by sellers of soup and dumplings and hot noodles. Whenever the tiled roofs parted at a crossroads we would see the towers of Wat Arun rising up, a little higher and nearer, and always a little darker because we saw them against the sun. Finally we had to leave the taxi, walking through an alley beside one of those ultra-modern schools which one sees everywhere in Thailand; girls in white middy blouses sat at desks of tubular steel and chanted their lesson in a high-pitched monotonous chorus. We slipped through an almost furtive side entry where two of the rare secular beggars of Bangkok sat with their iron bowls, and immediately, within the great walled enclosure of Wat Arun, we were in a new world, a world as dominated by the capricious melodies of colour as the mind of Paul Klee.

In a dazzle of brilliant reflected light, we wandered through groves of bell-shaped pagodas, their stuccoed surfaces encrusted thickly with glass mosaic of blues and greens and reds as vibrant as those of the great rose windows of Notre Dame, or with broken pottery arranged in subtly modulated patterns whose lightness suggested that the whole pagoda was built of fragile porcelain, from its stepped base to its many-ringed spire piercing up towards the intense blue sky. Then we came out into the central square of the temple, where the great prang, the tallest sacred tower of Siam, rose out of its cluster of small attendant towers, three hundred feet into the sky. It was the soaring shape that first impressed itself upon our vision, the ultimate gigantic emblem of fertility standing perpendicularly out of its mountain base of supporting terraces, asserting the claim of life against the indifferent spaces of the sky. There was something menacingly rocket-like about the first momentary illusion of upward movement, and then, as we approached its base, came the more
familiar illusion of the tower swaying downwards toward the earth.

To approach the prang we had to pass through an arcade of money-changers and traders in brass Buddhas and rubbings from the temple carvings. A gang of small boys closed in on us. ‘Cigarette, mister! You give!’ They leapt and shouted around us, full of laughter. A young man looked at me with devastatingly appraising eye. ‘Good afternoon, Professor,’ he enunciated carefully. ‘Allow me to guide for benefit of speaking English!’ I felt appalled that the shades of the academic prison-house had pursued me so far, and hurriedly urged Inge forward to the gateway where a monk exacted two bahts for the privilege of going into the enclosure around the prang.

Here the focus of our vision shifted immediately, attracted by the richly decorated base of the prang, which was the architectural representation of the holy Mount Meru, the mythological centre of the world for all South-east Asian as well as Indian peoples. Each terrace was upheld by a circle of grimacing caryatid demons, and in the niches stood figures of the Hindu gods, of Indra, ruler of the Heavens, seated on his three-headed elephant Erawan, and of the moon-god mounted on his white horse. Every surface where a figure did not stand was encrusted with small porcelain dishes embedded in the stucco and with flowers constructed out of fragments of broken pottery. The textural effect was extraordinarily rich, and the whole structure, seen at close quarters, had an extravagance of mood such as I have experienced nowhere else except in the later Dravidian temples of South India. It was completely un-Buddhist in feeling as well as iconography, but the Asian mind is far more inclined to pluralism than ours, and the monks who serve in Siamese temples are evidently able to reconcile the symbols of Hindu vitalism with a variant of Buddhism which theologically is more anti-vitalist than any other religion in the world.

When we climbed the high steps, built narrow for small Thai feet, to the walk around the upper terrace, the grounds of Wat Arun spread out beneath us in gay confusion as if plans for a Buddhist paradise had somehow been confused with those for a
Chinese fun fair; fierce monkey-faced giants stood guard over glittering pinnacled pavilions, menageries of strange stone animals leered out of nightmares, miniature Gothic chapels stood beside Chinese grotto gardens watched over by Victorian soldiers cast out of concrete, and winged demons stared menacingly from the temple quays across the wind-slapped river to the gilded spires and towers of the rival temples clustered around the royal palace.

Some of these temples near the palace were even more extraordinary in their attempts to introduce new elements into the theatrical Bangkok style. There was Wat Bechambopit, its walls of white marble imported from Carrara and its roof of golden tiles from China, and Wat Rajabopit, its interior decorated in French rococo style, green and gold panelling, with two immense grandfather clocks ticking heavily into the silence on each side of Buddha on the altar. In a private garden behind Wat Rajabopit, a strange anthology of all the cultures that have ever influenced Thailand was presented by the architectural styles chosen for the mausolea of royal princes whose ashes are buried here; there were tombs like miniature Chinese Mahayanist temples, like Burmese gilded pagodas, like the Cambodian towers of Angkor; a Decorated Gothic chapel with fragile flying buttresses stood between a tridented Siva shrine and the model of a neo-classic church with a tiled Portuguese bell-tower. The only authentically Thai building in this extraordinary garden of death was the caretaker’s cottage. His children were drenching themselves under a running tap, and a little naked boy picked up a white cockerel and, embracing the bird in his arms, came dancing towards us, shouting with laughter.
Chieng Mai, to which we travelled after our first week in Bangkok, is the second city of Thailand, with an ancient history; it was the centre of a Thai kingdom before even Ayudhya was founded, and Lampoon, which lies a few miles away from it, was a capital of the Mon civilization long before the Thais came down from southern China into the South-east Asian peninsula. The two cities lie about three hundred miles from Bangkok in the Ping valley, among the foothills of the mountains that divide Thailand from the Shan States of Burma, whose people belong to the same racial group as the Thais. Until the end of the eighteenth century Chieng Mai was still a separate kingdom, a vassal of the Siamese kings in the south. Still, for the people of Bangkok, who are not great travellers, it has an aura of remoteness and mystery. They see it as the capital of the North, an ancient city among strange and primitive tribes, bordering on the wild hinterlands of Asia. 'Up there in Chieng Mai they live as our grandfathers used to live,' said Miss Ayuthia, in her slow, plummy private-school English. Miss Ayuthia was the clerk in the travel office where we bought our railway tickets for Chieng Mai; she, of course, had never been there.

We were inclined to accept all these Bangkok theories about Chieng Mai because they fitted the mental picture created by the ringing sound of its double syllables, which are only part of the much longer name King Mengrai gave the city when he founded it in 1296 and called it Ninth Beautiful New City on the Ping River. Thus, it was to an old walled city full of temples and exotically dressed indigenes that we set out in our imaginations when we began our journey to Chieng Mai.

If we had been sensible, as romantic travellers never are, we
would have begun to revise our expectations of a golden journey as soon as we reached the station at Bangkok. The railways in Thailand are among the best in Asia, and the new concrete station had a positively Swiss air of neatness and efficiency. Here there were no ragged coolies strutting under great head burdens of luggage; instead, a smartly uniformed young man wheeled our suitcases to the train, which had clean, comfortable sleeping compartments with enormous plate windows. There were even tiled shower compartments, for the Thais, even when travelling, are extremely unhappy if they are unable to drench themselves with water at least twice a day. It was definitely not the kind of train that would lead one back into the Middle Ages.

Having established ourselves, we went out to look at the barrows which green-uniformed Chinese girls were wheeling up and down the platform, abundantly loaded with English biscuits, American cigarettes, Dutch cigars, gaudily coloured bamboo fans. The fruit barrows were the most attractive, piled with the first green mangoes of the season, with rose-apples like pink translucent pears, and dragons’ eyes like large lichees, with pine-apples, tangerines and green-skinned oranges, and with bananas of all sizes and colours, red and yellow and green. Since the food on the Chiang Mai train was reputed to be inferior, we had already provided ourselves with sandwiches and cakes. To supplement these we bought a large bunch of the tiny yellow bananas, not much larger than a finger, which are the sweetest in Asia. I also bought a pomelo, the yellow-green pear-shaped grapefruit of China which, when it is ripe and fresh, is far superior to the familiar round grapefruit of the West. I picked the biggest I could see; it was as large as a small football.

The train left just after five, at the hour when the tropical light is richest and the shadows are longest before the quick twilight which in these latitudes always begins within a few minutes of six in the evening. Our route lay over the southern plains with whose daytime aspect we were already familiar. But the change from day to evening is always dramatic in the tropics. The kites which boys were flying on the edge of Bangkok were transformed by the light of the lowering sun into fiery leaping
phoenixes, and the brick ruins of Ayudhaya were transfigured almost unrecognizably by the vermillion glow with which they burnt above the grey swathes of mist that gathered in the hollows of the jungle where the sun no longer penetrated. In the last light of day, as the peasants recovered from their afternoon lassitude, the canals suddenly became alive with swarms of light narrow canoes, and then, as if by a preconcerted signal at the moment when we saw the last crimson segment of the sun drop with surprising abruptness below the western horizon, a chorus of frogs and insects rose up from the fields and waterways in such volume that it echoed above the rhythmic beat of the wheels and became so loud when the train stopped that we had to shout in order to understand each other. As the night wind rose, the peasants began to set fire to the rice stubble; the flames leapt high and clear over the paddies, silhouetting trees and men, and luridly illuminating the dense white clouds of smoke which swept low over the ground. For hours after sunset the smell of smoke was borne in through the open windows.

The train settled down restlessly for the night. A group of white-turbaned Sikhs wandered up and down the corridor, arguing loudly in Punjabi, and Thai women, dressed in tight kimonos which made them look asexually doll-like, hurried with their towels to the shower compartments. I took my turn at roaming the train and saw the Sikh patriarch with his long white beard sitting cross-legged in his compartment, surrounded by white-shawled women, and a fat, frog-faced Thai general, his khaki uniform splendidly gold-braided, holding court with his young officers and keeping the white-coated waiters running backwards and forwards with trays of food and baskets of mineral waters. There were several other officers on the train; when he came in to make up our bunks, the porter explained that they were going to Chiang Mai because the King of Thailand was entertaining the King of the Belgians at his summer palace in the hills above the city.

We ate our sandwiches and our bananas, and then set to work on the great pomelo. Its skin was thick and hard; I hacked away with a blunt penknife, which barely penetrated the leathery sur-
face, and when I had finally peeled the fruit I discovered that the pale yellow flesh was dry and strawy. I had made the mistake of confusing size with excellence. Ingo threw her half away in disgust. I chewed on obstinately, refusing to admit my mistake. Already, before we left, I had felt a slight toothache. Now, as I tore at the tough fibres, each bite sent the pain running more sharply into my upper jaw. As soon as I stopped the pain subsided somewhat, but in the middle of the night I woke with renewed spasms, and a sensation of stiffening in the upper lip and the cheek around it. I took an aspirin and closed the window; the air was becoming cooler and the train was beginning to climb slowly out of the plains.

When I awoke again it was dawn and the tops of trees were floating on a pale mauve mist outside the windows. Soon the mist cleared and the sun shone down a country of low sandhills, covered with a thin, scrubby jungle. We were ascending the valley of the Maw Wang into a range of hills that stretched away on either horizon into the blue distance. The sandhills ceased; the jungle became thicker and greener, dense with bamboo undergrowth, above which the palas trees spread their umbrellas of brilliant crimson bloom. From the high branches of other trees the kangea vines hung down like veils, jewelled with purple star flowers, and in the darker recesses of the jungle, where brown streams ran between banks of high ferns, we would sometimes see a tall tree covered with large white blossoms which in the shadows seemed to be of ethereal translucency.

In this jungle there was no visible movement of life. Not a bird or even a butterfly rose from the dense vegetation into the sunlight, and one sensed, even watching from the train, the oppressive quiet of the forest. Only once, when we stopped at a small deserted halt surrounded by walls of cut logs for the woodburning locomotives which drew the local trains, did we hear a bird call, the four cadenced notes of the Indian cuckoo; even then the bird never showed himself. I kept thinking of Malraux’s accounts of the South-east Asian forests, with their descriptions of a malevolently pullulating life besieging one on every side, and I wondered whether the jungle was not in fact a kind of
tabula rasa of unorganized nature on which every man could write the interpretation that suited his own state of mind.

Very rarely we saw clearings in the forest; sometimes they were merely filled with tall feathery grasses, but occasionally there were jungle villages: rice paddies and sugar-cane plots, houses of palm-leaf raised on piles of squared teak among tufted groves of papaya, and bamboo fish weirs crossing the shallows in the river. Buffalo carts laboured along the miry roads. The civilization of Bangkok seemed very far away.

The railway began to climb more steeply, through groves of tall, thin teak trees with enormous heart-shaped leaves, and again into the thick jungle, where the air was now cool and dank, smelling of rot and vegetation, until we reached the crest of the range and the long tunnel of Khun Tan where the coolies died of malaria by the hundreds when the railway was built forty years ago.

Beyond the tunnel we were in the old northern kingdom of Lanna Thai, and the air seemed that of a different country, clear and sharp, so that one immediately breathed with far less effort than in the humid plains. Khun Tan itself was a typical village of the northern hills of Thailand, its houses built in a way peculiar to this region, of a framework of teak roofed and walled with layers of the large oval leaves of a jungle tree which a hunter we later met in Chiang Mai referred to as ‘t’ung’. One of the houses was actually being constructed; the frame was up and men on the ground were attaching the leaves in overlapping lines to lengths of split cane, which they then lifted up on the end of a pole so that a man inside the house could reach through the rafters, take the line of leaves, and attach it to the outside of the roof frame as one of the many layers in the eventual roof. Afterwards the walls would be leafed, a floor of split cane would be added, and the house would be complete. Our hunter acquaintance assured us that houses roofed in this way were much cooler than houses roofed with tiles, and that the overlapping leaves would not leak even under the worst of monsoon rains; their only disadvantage appeared to be that they needed renewing every two years.
To the people of this village of leaves the daily arrival of the train from Bangkok was obviously an event of importance in their precarious mountain economy; they were already waiting in force on the platform as it drew in, and as soon as it stopped the first wave of the invasion began, wild-haired shouting women who looked like dark-skinned maenads of the jungle, thrusting up at the windows trays of split bamboo filled with chili-red chickens' legs, pineapples cut in fantastic decorative forms (a peculiar Thai art), long brown pods of carob nuts, and unidentifiable bits of food wrapped in leaves. The second wave comprised the boys of the village, and they offered the dagger-leaved orchid plants which grow freely in the damp high forests around Khun Tan. There was so much competition that none of the vendors could have got very prosperous, but this was obviously one of those regions of marginal existence, rather rare in Thailand, where even a few extra bahts are worth the struggle.

From Khun Tan the railway descended swiftly between jagged dolomitic combs and strange wall-like formations worn out of the soft rock and islanded by a surf of rippling soft green bamboo. Then jungle-dense hillsides ignited by the fiery blossoming of the golden cassia, until at last, beyond the village of Ta Chompu, we ran into a narrow vividly green valley fed by a shallow crystalline river; the tobacco grew tall in the fields, already covered with white flowers, and the water was carried from the slopes, as in the alpine meadows of the Valais, by water-courses made of hollowed tree trunks. The peasants were hoeing between the rows of tobacco; the men had wrapped coloured scarves around their heads, which made them look like Burmese, and the women wore flat, tray-like sunhats of splintered bamboo, at least two feet in diameter, so that a row of them squatting in a field looked like gigantic animated mushrooms.

Towards Lampoon the valley widened, the houses became large and prosperous, made of teakwood, often elaborately carved and almost submerged in the lush growth of the groves and orchards that surrounded them. The grass in the meadows was deep and brilliant, and herds of well-kept Brahmin cattle were grazing there, the first we had seen in Thailand. The whole
of the Chieng Mai area is cattle country, as distinct from the
southern plains around Bangkok, where the peasants keep only
buffaloes and tinned milk is the rule in restaurants and hotels.
Lampoon itself was a town so embowered in trees that from the
train we saw only the gilded tips of its pagodas flashing in the
morning light; and beyond it the valley opened into the dullness
of a wide plain with the hills low on the distant horizon; great
orchards, and long narrow market gardens stretching in im-
mensely long ribbons over the flat ground, along which the
farmers tramped laboriously backwards and forwards, each with
two enormous square watering cans borne by a wooden yoke
across his shoulders.

Chieng Mai was the terminus of the railway into northern
Thailand—another new, clean, efficient station. The platform
was crowded with officers and bland-faced men in neat tropical
jackets who crowded around the carriage from which the frog-
faced general stepped in his gold-braided dignity, followed by a
slender young captain delicately holding a bottle of Johnny
Walker decorated with a pink bow. A man in a white silk suit,
with a purple armlet, detached himself from the group sur-
rrounding the general and came bustling towards us. He was a
giant among Thais, almost six feet tall and more than propor-
tionately wide, with a pale yellow, thin-moustached face riding
like a moon above his cream nylon shirt and loud, zigzag-
patterned tie. He extended a large, damp hand. ‘Mistah John,’
he introduced himself. ‘Lanna Thai Toulist Agency.’ Like many
Thais, Mr. John had difficulty with his R’s. He thrust into my
reluctant fingers an expensive-looking folder, and explained
that he was the local representative of the agency which had
booked our tickets from Bangkok. He would take us to our
hotel, we could rest for the remainder of the day while he
arranged an elephant-viewing expedition for the visiting
royalty, and in the evening he would rejoin us to plan our stay
in Chieng Mai. To our murmurs of independence he seemed
benignly deaf; we would find all his tours in the folder. ‘Velly
intelleesting, velly oliginal!’
The Railway Hotel looked more promising from the outside than its name suggested. It consisted of a group of bungalows, built on stilts in the Thai manner, in a garden vivid with blossoming hibiscus and other brilliant and less familiar shrubs. As we went in, climbing the steps to the main building, its promise dwindled progressively. Before our room there was a partitioned section of verandah, furnished with rattan chairs and looking out over the gardens, but once we went through the swinging half-doors, like those of a saloon bar, into the bedroom itself, it was like any country hotel run by Chinese in South-east Asia. A bed of board-like hardness stood isolated in the middle of a floor of bare, creaking planks, with two wooden chairs and a kitchen table. The bathroom contained an immense stoneware jar with a metal dipper. ‘Thai shower’, explained Mister John, ‘velly lefleshing.’ Outside, on the verandah, as the elderly Chinese boy brought us a pot of coffee, Mister John assured us that this was the best hotel in Chiang Mai. ‘There are other hotels, then?’ said Inge tentatively. ‘Oh, yes, Indian hotels, ma’am. No comfort. Nothing. Just one bed in lom, and twice as costly.’ The mounting noonday heat and the nagging pain in my steadily swelling cheek made me inclined towards resignation; we could have done a great deal worse, as it turned out, for the boys in the Railway Hotel were friendly and attentive, and the chef, who had been trained in Saigon, produced some very pleasant meals in the French style, with delicious local fish, vegetables cooked in butter, and succulent crêpes.

Mister John lingered over his coffee, dwelling on the duties of those who fulfil the demands of kings. Today Their Majesties would be looking at elephants; this evening there would be a
Thai feast, sitting on cushions at low tables, with the women in gold-threaded panungs, and the girls of Chieng Mai, with long golden nails attached to their fingers, dancing the native dances of the North.

Over his second coffee Mister John turned autobiographical. He was a true Thai, he assured us. His name was merely the residue of a long period of religious experimentation. The missionaries have been active for generations in Chieng Mai, and Mister John’s record was a tribute both to the competitive proselytizing of the Christians and to the ultimate obstinacy of traditional Thai beliefs. ‘I first Seventh Day Adventist. They baptize me Mistah John. Then I Plesbytelian. After that I tly Loman Catholic. Now I Buddhist again.’

He explained that, despite his re-conversion, he had kept his baptismal name; it was much better for business, since the American tourists found it easy to understand. He went on to expound a commercial philosophy of Buddhism that would hardly have been bettered by any of the business men’s theologians who seek to sell Christianity in North America. ‘You do everything well. You get on all light. You save money. One day you millionaire. All up to you. No good asking Buddha. He only tell you that himself. All up to you.’ There was obviously a very clear division in his mind between the man dedicated to religion and the man dedicated to business. According to his version of Buddhism, each of the two had his appropriate way to follow, and once the latter had made his choice he must follow his rôle of making money to the end, but with diligence and honesty, which bring their own gratifying results. All Thais, according to Mister John, understood this fact, and that was why they did not envy or hate each other, and why Communism made no appeal to them. ‘Perhaps I think you got plenty of money,’ he went on, the amiable Thai smile irradiating his great round face. ‘Perhaps I think you got more than me. But I no get angrily with you. I know if I work hard, I get money too. It my choice what to do. I choose whether I poor or lich!’ It was a positively Victorian philosophy of self-reliance—the poor are poor because they choose to be so and the rich are rich because
they deserve it—but somehow Mister John had managed to infuse it with enough Thai geniality to make it sound very innocuous by the time his duties to royalty called him away.

When we looked inside Mister John’s folder we were left with no doubt of his intent to become a millionaire as quickly as possible. Merely to hire a car and a driver for the day he wanted 400 bahts, about seven guineas, double the rate we had been paying to taxi-drivers hired on the street in Bangkok. We intended to make at least three trips from Chieng Mai—one into the northern hills to the cave temple of Chiang Dao, another southward to Lampoon, and a third to the great pilgrimage temple on the mountain of Doi Sutep a few miles north-west of Chieng Mai—and we decided to go into the town to find cheaper transport.

As we tramped in the dusty afternoon sunlight down the long mile of agricultural warehouses, garages and Chinese drugstores from the Railway Hotel to the bridge over the River Ping, our romantic vision of Chieng Mai began to fade very quickly, and when we crossed the shallow river, with its clear mountain water, into the town itself, it dimmed to a faint historical ghost. Obviously westernization was making as galloping progress in Chieng Mai as in Bangkok. The street beyond the bridge was lined with shops which displayed in their plate-glass windows the kind of mass-produced goods one might find in any modern European town, and in an abundance which showed that Thailand, unlike many other Asian countries, was suffering from no foreign exchange problem; the only peculiarity was that chemists and photographers were extremely numerous, a fact which might suggest that even the easy-going Thais are prone to such mental oddities as hypochondria and narcissism.

We crossed the shallow moat where the wall of Chieng Mai had once stood, and entered the perfect square of the old city, laid out in its final form by Chao Kawila, the Prince of Chieng Mai, at the end of the eighteenth century. This was the most attractive part of Chieng Mai, with gardens and temples, narrow streets and many trees, and fat old women squatting under the walls of banks, selling fruit and cigarettes and long pale green
cheroots made from the tobacco grown locally in the valley. But it was all rather like the old streets of Berne or Munich, a theatrical backdrop in traditional form to the drama of modern life, for the colourful primitives we had expected to see in Chieng Mai were obviously keeping to their native hills, and all the men and most of the women wore the same western dress as their compatriots in Bangkok. Perhaps even more than that of Bangkok, the modernization of Chieng Mai, which half a century ago was a remote Asian town without even a railway, emphasizes how rapidly Thailand has moved within the last century into the westernized world.

The temples were gay and colourful, as Thai temples always are, but all of them had been restored so recently that their relative antiquity was not very evident. We went into their deserted yards and ambled around the pagodas, but neither on this occasion nor on any other did we succeed in getting into the buildings, which were always locked and unattended, so that in the end we began to suspect that, except at festival times, the people of Chieng Mai were not very much addicted to religious practices. I suspect that part of the responsibility for this lies with the missionaries who, in proportion to their success in gaining conversions, always seem, paradoxically, to lower the general level of religious dedication in the regions where they operate. For the past generation at least it has been the ironic fate of Christians to represent an alien culture whose materialistic aspects make an irresistible appeal to the peoples of Asia and Africa (so that the most nationalist among them are in practical terms the most western-minded) while its spiritual values remain largely incomprehensible, so that the result of their proselytizing is often the progressive secularization of a formerly religious society. Missionary education certainly played a very important part in the softening-up of China for Communism.

We had no success at all in our efforts to find cheap transport in Chieng Mai. There was no bus to Chieng Dao, and there were no taxis of any kind. Only the travel agents had cars for hire, and the regular transport within the city was provided by the sam laws, large motor rickshaws with hard benches which
could carry as many as six people. The sam laws plied like mini-
ture buses, and on our way back to the Railway Hotel we got on
one going in an easterly direction; it picked up other passengers
who waved from the pavements, and went darting off into side
streets and careering round the corners of tortuous alleys to
deliver them to their homes among the suburban gardens,
eventually reaching the hotel after a long zigzag route which
cost us the equivalent of threepence. We tried to persuade the
driver to take us up Doi Sutep, but, like almost everyone else
we met in Chieng Mai, he understood no English, and even our
attempts at sign language supported by a map were useless, since
he could not read maps.

Back in the hotel we found two men sitting in the lounge who
described themselves as travel agents. In fact they were little
more than guides who operated their own cars and worked with
the tourist agencies in Bangkok. We joined them over a bottle
of beer and tried to bargain with them. They were not enthuasi-
stic, and it soon transpired that they already knew that Mister
John had brought us to the hotel and therefore regarded us as
as his property. Neither of them was willing to undercut him,
and so, when he returned that evening, we had to reconcile our-
selves to accepting his price.

After dinner one of the other men rejoined us on the verandah
and we sat under the punkahs, drinking more beer. The big bats
swooped around the lights and the tree frogs croaked shrilly in
the hotel garden. Our companion was a hunter from one of the
villages in the hills a hundred miles north of Chieng Mai beyond
the old city of Fang, and he talked of the hunter’s life, following
the jungle trails in pursuit of tiger and deer, and of the antelope
that lived in the high grass of the clearings. Even in that remote
region the game was getting scarce, and the hunters would
sometimes have to travel for days before they came upon a
worth-while quarry; living on the highly nutritious glutinous rice
which they carried with them, sleeping in shelters made
from t’ung leaves, and watching carefully for the small poison-
ous snakes that loved to lie coiled beneath the dried leaves of the
tea groves. The people of his village ate snakes, but always
avoided taking anything sour with their flesh, and when meat was scarce they would eat eels which were so abundant that sometimes ten or fifteen would be caught at once in the basket traps they used. They worshipped the spirits of the forest and the rivers, and also Buddha, whom they regarded as another spirit, very powerful. And whenever they got any money they were inordinate gamblers, betting whatever they had on their favourite sport, which was cricket-fighting. The crickets were chosen carefully, and fed on sugar-cane. In every fight there had to be three of the insects, two males, and a female to give a reason for the struggle, which in our companion’s view was much better than cock-fighting, because it lasted longer. A good pair of male crickets could carry on for as long as two hours.

Afterwards he walked with us through the cooling darkness down to the bridge to show us the night fishing, the low dark boats moving slowly through the shadows with powerful electric lamps hanging from their prows, casting a cloth-of-silver brilliance over the water and attracting the fish towards the nets. In his village, he said, the people were still very old-fashioned; they preferred to use torches of resinous wood as their ancestors had done, for fear the spirits which looked after the fish would be offended by new-fangled devices.
A Thai canal

Chieng Dao: a village house
The night was sharp and cold, for in the hill regions of Thailand during January there is a difference of as much as fifty degrees between the temperature at three in the morning and that at three in the afternoon. We were chilled under the worn-out blankets on our bed, but we might have slept longer if the pain in my cheek had not built up suddenly into an agony that sent waves of dizziness through my head. I could feel my face and lip steadily swelling. The germs were rampaging in the tropical climate, and, though I swallowed enough aspirins to blunt the pain and enough milk of magnesia to save my stomach from ruin, I faced the morning like a man who had thrust his head in a beehive, with the inflammation of my bulging cheek almost closing my left eye, and with my lips so swollen that I could neither articulate properly, nor eat anything solid, nor drink anything without slobbering.

I obviously needed a dentist or a doctor immediately, but it was a Sunday morning, and we were 300 miles away from Bangkok. At the moment when I felt most dejected, shovelling lumps of papaya clumsily into my mouth and trying to drink coffee without spoiling the morning’s fresh shirt, while Inge attempted to explain our problems to the room boy, whose English was limited to six eccentrically pronounced words, Mister John appeared and looked at my face with speculative concern. ‘Better you lose no time,’ he remarked, and immediately he told one of his drivers to take us to the Seventh Day Adventist clinic. The clinic, which lay in the quarter of Chieng Mai where the old medieval walls still stood, mirrored in the smooth waters of the moat, was closed—the Adventists evidently enjoyed the best of two worlds by observing Sunday as well as Saturday as a day of
rest—and we had to go off into the town in search of a Thai
dentist whom Mister John had mentioned as an alternative. I
conjured up visions of oriental unhygiene, of orgies of dental
brutality, teeth torn out, blood flowing, mounting infection. I
brooded over these possibilities as we waited for almost an hour
in the Chinese second-hand furniture shop next to the dentist’s
office. Then a petite, soft-faced Thai girl in blue jeans came and
unlocked the door to the surgery. ‘When will Dr. Thaworn
arrive?’ I asked. ‘I am Dr. Thaworn,’ she replied. She apologized
for her Sunday disarray and explained that she had only recently
returned from a dental school in the United States. She was
expert in diagnosis, prescribed a shock course of Terramycin,
and gave me pills to dull the pain. Immediately my morale
lifted; by the end of three days my face had returned to some-
thing approaching its normal shape. Dr. Thaworn refused to
take more than a minute fee of about two shillings, and when we
came to settle our final accounts with Mister John, he insisted
on making a gift of the two hours of car hire we had con-
sumed in finding a dentist. For a short time I had been
metamorphosed in his mind from a moneyed North American
into a stranger in distress, and therefore a deserving candidate
for the acts of kindness which are enjoined on all good Thai
Buddhists.

Our search for a dentist had consumed the fresh early morning
hours and Inge urged me to rest for the remainder of the day so
that the antibiotics could have their maximum effect. But I
grudgingly even the two lost hours, and we finally set off on the
road to Chieng Dao. The village and its caves lay about fifty
miles north of Chieng Mai, and the road led us through some of
the finest country in Thailand. Grandiosity is not a characteristic
of Thai scenery any more than it is of the Thai character, but
there was a golden richness about the undulating country
through which we drove toward the low, rolling ranges that
march along the Burmese border. The deep green pastures were
dotted with trees blazing with blossom—yellow and orange,
vermilion and crimson, and over the groves of teak and bamboo
rose low, breast-shaped hills, shaggy with forest and crowned
with temples and white pagodas gleaming under the benign 
northern sunlight.

The royal procession had gone this way the day before to see 
the elephants working in the teak forests, and the villages still 
had an appearance of festival; magnificent many-tiered um- 
brellas, white and gold, stood beside the road like tall paper 
pagodas, and strings of Thai and Belgian flags hung between the 
houses and the trees. But the special decorations only enhanced 
the general colourfulness of these northern upland villages—the 
pale gold of the split bamboo houses with their verandahs hung 
with flowering orchids, the ox-carts painted with bright floral 
arabesques, inlaid with tiny mirrors, the arbours of orange-
flowered trumpet vines outside the village teahouses, where men 
and women sat drinking in the open air and smoking their long 
pale green cheroots. The temples were large and much gilded, 
their eaves musical with many wind bells, and often they had 
large monastic buildings attached to them where the young men 
of the region go through their customary monkish novitiates in 
much the same way as young men in other countries might go 
through military service. Outside these buildings there were 
always lines of orange-yellow robes hanging to air in the sun-
light, and forming brilliant chequer patterns against the new 
whitewash on the walls of the temple courtyards.

Even death, that opening of the door to further stages in the 
wheel of existence, seemed to lack shadows in the minds of these 
people. In one village a man had died and his plain teak coffin 
stood outside his house, mounted on a wheeled bier of black and 
white painted wood, and shaded by a gilded canopy with orange 
curtains. There were vases of flowers on the coffin and offerings of 
folded paper had been piled in large enamel basins on the ground 
before the bier. The coffin stood unwatched and unattended, 
though the long rope was already laid out on the ground so 
that the dead man’s friends could drag him to the cremation 
ground.

The country broke at last into hills of ravaged limestone, often 
sugar-loaf steep, like great decaying ant hills, pitted with caves, 
and furred with dense vegetation so that even the most crum-
bling and precarious ridges gave footholds to twisted trees and bushes. The jade-clear rivers cut their way through deep wooded gorges. The whole landscape seemed like a miniature replica of those curiously vertical mountain ranges—homes of the ancestral Thais—which the classic painters of southern China loved to represent.

From these hills the road descended into the narrowed valley of the upper reaches of the Ping. Here, in the village of Chien Dao, the market was still going on, the main street crowded with Thai peasants in short trousers reaching only just below the knee and Karen tribesmen from the hills, who wore blue kilts and felt leggings reaching from the knees to the ankles, as a protection against the spines and the sharp grasses of the jungle. Chinese in blue cotton tunics and trousers bargained over chickens, black pigs and aubergines; the village women bought dried fish and rice and green bananas. What struck me most was the extent to which, even in this remote area, factory products had replaced those of the old native craftsmen. The only crafts that still seemed to flourish in Chien Dao were basket-work and red earthenware pottery, and at least 90 per cent of the goods sold by the stallkeepers were mass-produced—textiles, gaudy plastics and enamelware. Yet I doubt if any market indicates truly how far the Thai peasant has become dominated by machine civilization, since the farmers make for themselves many of the tools they use, and a great deal of skill survives in the domestic use of bamboo for utensils and for many other purposes. Around Chien Dao, for example, there were light and elegant bamboo water-wheels of great functional beauty which the peasants had erected in some of the smaller streams.

At Chien Dao the main road went northward to Fang and Chien Rai and the marches of Laos. We turned aside on to a lane of rock and earth which ran westward towards the Mountain of the Abode of the Stars, whose great tooth-like summit rises to a height of 7,000 feet above sea level a few miles from Chien Dao. The sacred cave lies in the cliffs of this mountain. We jolted between banana groves and tobacco fields; there were primitive watchmen's huts among the plantations, and the cattle
which grazed beside the road clanked the hardwood clappers of bamboo bells hung around their necks. Soon we reached the forest, a grove of tall, elephant-skinned trees whose trunks rose branchless until they opened at the top into an interlacing roof, casting a green light which was still strong enough to breed a dense undergrowth of dwarf bamboos and ferns with fronds like ostrich plumes. Finally we bumped through a little forest hamlet of bamboo houses beside a shallow stream dammed into a pool where three girls were bathing. When they saw us watching them, they giggled and ran away into one of the compounds; their drenched panungs clung to their thin bodies like wet seal-skin.

The jungle finally opened out into a wide grassy clearing above which towered the broken lower cliffs of the Abode of the Stars; the trees on the cliff tops masked the higher slopes of the mountain, and lianas dense with big trumpet blossoms flowed in blue cascades down the rock faces. The driver, a taciturn man who had not spoken since we left Chieng Mai, pointed towards a roofed stairway climbing about a third of the way up the cliff, and then clambered into the back of the car to take a midday nap while we were visiting the cave.

We strolled past an empty temple and a leaf-thatched hermitage outside which an old monk was praying in an open shed before a black stone Buddha. Up the mountainside the golden tips of little pagodas glittered among the bosky growth. At festival seasons the Abode of the Stars is a crowded pilgrimage place, but today the stalls under the spreading rain tree in the middle of the green were unattended, and the only visitors other than ourselves were three Thai Teddy-boys with long oily hair, narrow cotton trousers and Cuban-heeled shoes, uptilting bottles of Coca-Cola beside the sacred pool at the bottom of the stairway—a pool of immaculately clear water in which a shoal of fat green carp swam round and round the statue of a crested phoenix with feathers of gold and blue mosaic who sat ready for flight on a rock in their midst. The Teddies followed us up the steps to the entrance to the cave. We understood why when a bare-footed old man in khaki drill trousers performed an act of pious
extortion by exacting twenty bahts to turn on the electric lights inside the cave and to act as our guide.

The narrow entrance of the cave quickly opened into a high vault filled with the squeaking of restless bats, and soon we reached a point where the daylight streamed in through a wide rock funnel which opened upwards to the sky. On every ledge and in every crevice of the large luminous grotto votive Buddhas crowded by the hundred, in every posture and of every size and substance, from small terracotta figurines less than a foot high to the massive statues of black bronze and alabaster, brought by legendary hermits from places as far away as Mandalay and Luang Prabang, which sat on the wide stone platform beside the path into the cave, all combining in the gaudy, shoddy chaos of rustic piety.

The wind blowing down through the funnel flickered the gold leaf on the images, and a shrivelled, bald-headed dwarf chattered at us as shrilly as a monkey. She wore the white robe of a nun and a bowl in front of her contained a few small coins and some withered flowers. ‘She telling what happen Sunday!’ said the guide. ‘Very happy!’ By Sunday we interpreted him to mean the future in a general sense, but it was obvious that his translation would only have compounded the obscurity of any oracle this extraordinary pythoness might choose to utter. I contented myself with adding to her store of coins in the hope that I might acquire enough merit to blunt my toothache, which was starting up again in the chill of the cave. The guide stopped to give a sonorous bang to a large Chinese bell hung on a pole supported on the shoulders of two squat human figures in bowler hats, carved with a bold, slashing crudeness that suggested pagan tribal art. The sound of the bell reverberated down the long tunnel of the cave. ‘Telling snakes,’ said the guide, as he led us into the passage that probed away from the daylight and into the heart of the mountain.

We had already gathered, from Mister John and the hunter with whom we had spent the previous evening, something of the lore of the Chieng Dao cave. Not only was it a sacred spot, with a long animist past even before the Buddhist hermits took
it over. It was also said to have played a part in Thai history when a prince and the remnant of his army hid here from the Burmese until finally he was able to emerge, recruit a new army, and defeat his enemies. Mister John believed that it was this prince who had placed the first images in the cave, after which it became a place of pilgrimage, but the hunter was convinced that Buddha himself had once been here and that if you went far enough into the mountain you would find his footprints.

Judging by the time we took, we must have walked well over a mile, striding quickly over a smooth sand floor, slithering precariously over surfaces of smooth mud, and every now and again crossing a plank bridge over the dry bed of an underground stream. At one of the bridges the guide stopped and exclaimed. A long grey snake, with cream-coloured stripes down its sides, was languidly crawling out of our path. One of the Teddies grinned at us, pointing at the snake. ‘Not kill man,’ he said, and then he and his friends went off into the tittering laughter of Thai adolescents. We saw no more snakes and, having passed the gold-plastered and incense-smelling boulders which suggested that animists as well as Buddhists still frequented the cave, we came to the inner temple, a lion-guarded stairway going up to a recess where the Buddha, his face covered with gold and his body with a rotting orange robe, lay in the posture of death, the hero sleeping in the heart of the mountain. One wondered how many of the devotees who stuck joss-sticks and little paper flags into the crevices around him believed, against all Buddhist orthodoxy, that one day, like all the sleeping heroes of legend, he would awaken and return.

The guide waved his hand into the darkness with an expansive gesture which suggested infinite distance. Nobody, it appears, has ever reached the end of the Chieng Dao cave, possibly because the Thais are not the kind of energetic race out of whom good speleologists are made. Mister John claimed that he himself had walked for three hours and had returned utterly exhausted, but the cave still went on. The hunter believed that if you went far enough you would come out into the daylight on a mountain side in Burma. But even he did not believe the story that is
current among the villagers who live around the Abode of the Stars—that one may walk on for thirty days in the cave of Chieng Dao and come at last after many perils to the land of the gods.

As we drove back over the rough road from the caves, one of the back tyres blew out with a dull bang and the car lurched to the side of the road. The driver refused my help in changing the wheel. As we sat down and waited, three Buddhist monks came down the road, each carrying a black umbrella and a briefcase, and lined up to watch the driver at work. To break the ice of silence, I offered them cigarettes. They all accepted, and one of them said politely, 'Very nice day!' It was probably his only English phrase, for he did not seem to understand anything we said, and we stood grinning amiably at each other until the wheel was changed and we gave the monks a lift down to the main road. They were so thin that it was easy to find room for them all. In Thailand we saw none of the plump, well-fed monks one often encounters in the Buddhist temples of Ceylon; here the ascetic rules of the Buddhist order seemed to be taken very seriously.
Although the Thais are now largely a people of the plains, mountains still play a great part in their mythology, and are still objects of animistic devotion. Like the Abode of the Stars, the mountain of Doi Sutep which overlooks Chiang Mai was regarded as auspicious even when no great temple stood on its slopes, and in its shadow King Mengrai came to search for a suitable place in which to build his capital. According to the legend, he only decided on the exact site when word was brought by his hunters of a glade in the forest beside the River Ping where two white deer were grazing and a white mouse had just given birth to a white litter. White animals are always considered fortunate omens in South-east Asia (the white elephant the most fortunate of all) and the combination of this propitious augury with the beneficent presence of the mountain decided the King to set about building his city on this spot; within four months an army of 90,000 workers had created a capital a mile square, modelled on the regular plan of the ancient T’ang cities of southern China.

Another story showing the importance attached by the early Thais to the actions of animals is told in connection with the building of Wat Sutep, which was not begun until seventy years after the foundation of Chiang Mai. King Guena had been given a relic of the Buddha and, being unable to decide where it should be deposited, he placed it on an elephant’s back, and turned the beast out to wander at will, vowing that he would build a temple wherever it rested. The elephant wandered over the valley and climbed up Doi Sutep until he finally stopped on the spot where the temple now stands. Having by this act built up a formidable accumulation of merit, he was regarded as an animal saint, and when he died a pagoda was built upon his grave.
The palace where King Phumipon was entertaining King Beaudoin lies on the slopes above Wat Sutep, and we drove from Chieng Mai to the foot of the mountain along an avenue hung with hundreds of fluttering flags. The mountain road, built thirty years ago by the voluntary labour of devout Buddhists, was a charming highway, serpentine sharply through a high jungle interlaced by cascading streams and full of the scent of tropical flowers which, whenever we slowed for a turn, came drifting in through the car windows. We stopped at a shabby, deserted little pilgrim’s bazaar, wooden shops selling joss-sticks, and Chinese open-air restaurants, and began the long ascent of the 300 steps of the great Naga staircase, whose undulating balustrades were shaped in the form of colossal seven-headed serpents, scaled with tiles of green and gold. The cicadas sang loudly among the pine trees as we climbed. At the top of the stairs sat a young soldier, his rifle across his knees. He stopped us. ‘Do you know Thai?’ he asked, and burst into laughter at our embarrased admissions.

Wat Sutep, the most magnificent temple of northern Thailand, and one of the finest in the whole country, focused on the slimly outlined central pagoda, 150 feet high, its coating of smooth gold shining in the sunlight as if it had been bathed in oil. Golden emblems surrounded the pagoda in a metallic forest—the flowering trees at its base which reminded one of the golden gardens of the Incas, and the great umbrellas at the corners of the enclosure made of a kind of gold lacework which is peculiar to northern Thailand. Around the pagoda was built a great square cloister containing the traditional 108 Buddhas and punctuated by richly adorned chapels; the cloister walls themselves were decorated with harsh-coloured modern murals showing the incidents of the Buddha’s life which, like the early Italian religious painters, the artist had portrayed taking place in his own native countryside.

A few young people had come from Chieng Mai to make their devotions at the temple; they converged on one of the chapels in which an old monk sat softly talking beside the altar. It was to him that each visitor bowed three times before prostrating
himself to the Buddha. Then the devotee would rattle the customary vase of sticks, and hand the one he had picked out to the monk, who discoursed with a soft, flickering smile on what it revealed. Divination was one of the most important parts of the proceedings at Wat Sutep. I even saw there a gilded wheel of life which had been turned into a kind of Buddhist roulette; it was divided into twenty-eight sections, and, after spinning it, one took a slip of paper from one of the twenty-eight drawers in the little cabinet beneath. Yet the people who came to the temple were not entirely concerned with their luck in this life. The courtyard was scattered with dead brown butterflies, their wings as broad as the span of my hands, which had beat out their lives at night against the illuminated pagoda, and some of them had been placed by devotees in the hands of the seated Buddhas round the cloister, to help these insects, who in their own way had died in the cause of religion, to a better karma.

There is a close link in the half-historical, half-legendary records of the Ping Valley between Doi Sutep and the city of Lampoon, fifteen miles down river from Chiang Mai, which we visited on the same day. Doi Sutep took its name from a Buddhist monk, Sutepa, who retired to a hermitage there in the seventh century after he and another holy man had inspired the original Lawa people of the valley to build a city, laid out in the form of a conch-shell, which he called Haripoonchaito. When the city was completed, Sutepa invited a princess of the Mons from Lopburi, a vanished city north of Ayudhya, to become its queen. She began to rule in Haripoonchaito, according to the chronicles, in 654 A.D., and for more than 600 years, until the Thais began to flee southward into this region before the Mongol threat, Haripoonchaito remained a Mon capital.

King Mengrai, the Thai founder of Chiang Mai, destroyed the Mon rule, capturing Haripoonchaito by treachery and destroying it so completely by fire that only the brick-cored pagodas were left standing. Later, when the city arose from its ashes under Thai rule, it was renamed Lampoon. I entertained myself after our return from Asia by trying to establish a theory that the disreputable form of literature which bears the same name actually
originated here, but I found no evidence to support it. It was a case of amusing but purely accidental homonymy.

The road from Chieng Mai to Lampoon was a long ribbon of settlement, village merging into village, all bright with red and purple bougainvillaeas and yellow-flowered vines spilling down the bamboo garden fences. At times we ran beside the River Ping, whose mudbanks were green with catchcrops of lettuce which the Chinese grew there in seasons of low water; at other times through fields of soya beans grown for making the transparent noodles which, by another verbal coincidence, the Chinese call ping.

Motor-cycle policemen were speeding backwards and forwards along the road to Lampoon, and at the first village centre a fat army captain was lining up the schoolchildren beside the road. One of the policemen flagged us down and warned us that the royal party was in Lampoon, and soon would be returning. In each village the same preparations were going on—the lines of carefully dragooned children with the red, white and blue striped Thai flags at the ready, tables loaded with blowsy bouquets of big Chieng Mai roses and silver bowls of fruit, and handsome girls waiting to present them, dressed in brilliant silk panungs in the Lampoon weave, with heavy gold borders at the ankles.

We reached Lampoon and turned into the side streets to avoid the royal procession. First we went to the principal temple of the city, Wat Phradat Haripoonchai, one of the oldest surviving temples in this part of Thailand, built originally at the end of the ninth century when the Khmer kings were beginning the great temples of Angkor. At the entrance stood two ancient stone lions which looked like large dejected dogs; there have never been lions in South-east Asia, and both the Cambodians and the Thais have always represented them very unnaturallyistically. The temple grounds which they guarded were crowded with halls and pavilions; there was a beautiful library on stilts with gold-leaf designs on its red-painted outer walls; there were gold-lace umbrellas even finer than those of Wat Sutep, and a magnificent bronze gong more than six feet in diameter, said to date from the
founding of Lampoon in the seventh century, and flagstaffs with sacred flags up which the spirits of the dead were supposed to make their way to Heaven.

It was already late afternoon; the courtyard was filled with women in bright red and gold panungs and white blouses who had come to make their devotions, and with novice monks. One of the novices came up to us, with the question we had now come to regard almost as a greeting in Thailand. 'You are from what country?' I told him, hoping that he might be willing to show us some of the interesting features of the temple. He shook his head in a puzzled way. 'I not understand,' he said haltingly. 'I know English only from writing.' But he went back to his companions with a look of great satisfaction; even such a rudimentary conversation with a foreigner was obviously an achievement in Lampoon.

We followed a group of young women into the main temple building; the doors were completely gilded, the pillars gold and black lacquer, the ceiling red and gold, all richly glowing in the mellow afternoon light like the scenery for a Diaghilev ballet on an oriental story. The women prostrated themselves before the Buddhas which literally crowded on the main altar, and then settled down on their haunches for a long session of giggling chatter in the flickering light of the oil lamps. Their worship was perfunctory, and they obviously regarded the temple—as any medieval Englishwoman regarded her church—as a place of relaxed social intercourse as well as devotion. Asians in fact rarely make the same sharp division as we are inclined to do between the sacrednesses and the profanities of life, and this is perhaps why the ethics of Buddhism seem to flow so easily into the daily life of the Thais.

Like Chieng Mai, Lampoon has many temples, and most of them reputedly of great antiquity. I was particularly anxious to see Wat Chematewi, built by the son of Lampoon's first queen to hold his mother's ashes, but it lay beyond the western walls and to the other side of the main street, which we approached just as the police had closed it off to allow the royal procession to pass.
We got out of the car and mingled with the thin line of spectators on the pavement. The most striking feature of the cavalcade that passed slowly before us was the preponderance of the army. Not only were the royal limousines preceded and followed by armoured cars and weapon carriers packed with helmeted assault guards armed with Sten guns, but the cars of the generals took precedence in the procession over those of the frock-coated civilians. If we had not known that Thailand was a military dictatorship, that procession would have been enough to enlighten us. The two serious, intelligent-looking young kings, and the fragilely beautiful Queen Sirikit, seemed like the prisoners of their guards as they drove past the silent onlookers; only the children, carefully drilled, cheered shrilly and frantically agitated their flags in a vibration of colour which rippled down the roadside ahead of the royal cars.

Once the procession had gone by we drove past the wooden stockaded prison which stands in the very centre of Lampoon, with the guards sitting beside their machine-guns on its towers, and went out through the west gate of the town. Wat Chematewi lay on the edge of the fields. Its actual buildings were new, but the two pagodas were magnificent examples of the earliest Buddhist art of South-east Asia. The older and larger of the two, which covered the ashes of the Queen Chematewi, consisted of a high, five-stepped pyramid of red laterite; in the twelve niches of each of the five layers stood a Buddha carved in the early Khmer manner, with exquisitely rendered draperies moulded fluently to the torso and legs, but freezing at the sides into rigid wind-like flaps that framed the body. The smaller hexagonal pagoda, dating from the same period, held twelve such figures. The Thais have little sense of the links between sculpture and architecture, and their statues are rarely designed to suit an appropriate setting, but these structures, dating from the earlier Mon period, showed the same instinct for combining the two arts as one sees in the temples of the Khmers; indeed, it is possible that at this period, before the Thai invasion, the artisans from Cambodia actually travelled as far as the Ping valley.

We returned to Chieng Mai in a shower of unearned acclama-
tion. The royal cavalcade had been delayed by the village welcoming committees, and we caught it up about three miles outside Lampoon. For the rest of the way into Chieng Mai we stopped every half a mile as the long caterpillar of traffic slowed to a halt, and the helmeted guards piled the tributes of flowers and fruit into their weapon carriers. The villagers obviously found it hard to distinguish between the official and unofficial parts of a cavalcade which, by accretion, had become at least a mile long, and each time that our car, containing two more Europeans, passed through a village, the flags would start vibrating again and the children would cheer. But the beautiful young maidens, who had already made their offerings, would look at us with knowing smiles.
Because of the intense daytime heat during most of the year, the long-distance trains in Thailand are all timed so that the greater part of the journey takes place during the hours of darkness, and it was in the late afternoon that we started back to Bangkok, having spent the morning in the big covered market of Chiang Mai and the streets of silversmiths that run beside it. This was the least westernized part of the city, with large areas where women in native dress sold the many kinds of fruit grown in the great valley and an extraordinary variety of dried fish. The small fish were arranged decoratively in fan-shaped patterns on slivers of bamboo; and the fermented paste made from the mashed bodies of minute minnow-like fish was moulded in enormous brown lingam-shaped masses. The potters sold celadon ware in soft dull greens, and the Sikh drapers had brightly patterned bags and jackets woven in the Karen villages. We bought hand-carved teak spoons and a bag of langsarts, small, furry fruit containing segments filled with a greyish jelly excellent for quenching the thirst. We also found, in one of the silver shops, some curious primitive bronze statues which are dug up in one of the hill villages; the figure we bought was particularly interesting because its four hands carried the emblems of Vishnu and suggested that Hinduism, which preceded Buddhism in South-east Asia, had maintained a long-lingering influence in these rural areas of Thailand as it does in the Moslem villages of Malaya.

It was the custom to return from Chiang Mai to Bangkok loaded with produce from the market, and the passengers arrived at the station each with several large split-bamboo hampers of fruit and vegetables, which were piled high in the middle of the compartments, so that the whole train was pervaded with
Cambo-dia: people of the jungle

Cambo-dia: workers on the Me-kong Project
23 A floating village on the Tonle Sap
24 The lagoon at Chnnang
the perfume of ripe fruit. Many officers were travelling back to the capital after the royal visit, which had terminated that morning with the departure of the two kings by air, and after the train had started we stood in the corridor talking to a young captain who looked no more than twenty, though he was probably nearer thirty; the Thais always seem to westerners a good deal more youthful than their actual age. He was very much concerned over the social problems of his country, an interest encouraged in Thailand by the nature of the military government, which—though to a less extent than in Burma—often places officers in what would normally be Civil Service positions. He was monarchist in sentiment, but when we talked about the politics of South-east Asia he agreed that peasant poverty was a stronger aid to Communism than underground propaganda. For this reason he thought that, provided the Chinese army did not invade, Thailand was less in danger of going Communist than any other country in Asia, just because there was no really extensive problem of basic hunger.

‘Nobody starves in Thailand,’ he said. ‘If a man has no money he is fed by his family. Our family loyalties are very strong. And if he has no family, the temple will feed him. That is why we do not have many beggars. Of course there are the monks, but they beg for the sake of religion, and that is different.’

We had passed Lampoon and were entering the forest at the base of the mountains. Tall columns of smoke rose up in the distance. The captain pointed towards them. ‘They are clearing jungle. It’s good soil there. When the rain comes they will grow their first crops. That is one thing we have, plenty of land. Not like Japan or India. Any man who is willing to work can get land and become his own master. When a Thai is poor it is because he is lazy. It has been the great vice of our people.’

He had the rather puritanical respect for efficiency and industry which often characterizes members of the officer caste in Asian countries, who tend to be influenced by the ascetic samurai cult which they remember from the days of Japanese occupation. He explained that the Thai Government controlled large stretches of uncultivated jungle and had set on foot co-operative projects...
in which land was given to men who were willing to farm it; equipment was provided which could be paid off in ten years. Given enough water, a man could grow in the wet season the rice to feed his family and in the dry season cash crops like tobacco. ‘Our real problem is not land. It is water.’ We were to hear that refrain many times repeated before we left South-east Asia.

The train climbed up the northern slope of the mountains and through the long tunnel at Khun Tan. On the farther side, as we began to descend towards the plains, the air became oppressively dense and humid, and when we reached Bangkok next morning we found that, in the few days we had been away, the relatively cool weather of the winter months had come to an end. The temperature had already climbed above ninety, and the humidity had palpably increased. ‘Now I know there’s nothing wrong with my sweat glands,’ I heard one American woman cry raucously to another as we went back into the Princess Hotel. Even the air-conditioning units failed to cool the rooms properly; we found it hard to sleep at nights and spent the days fighting against an overpowering feeling of damp lassitude. Residents of Bangkok were amused at our complaints. ‘Visit us in summer,’ giggled the Chinese girl in the hotel desk. ‘Temperature 102 degrees! Humidity 85 per cent!’

Next afternoon the monsoon clouds built dark castles in the sky and the first of the rains came, raising mists of spray as they beat heavily down into the streets, which immediately became half flooded and slimy with mud when the water drained away. The smell of the sewers in the New Road was greatly enriched and the shop awnings dripped unpleasantly on our heads as we walked along between the showers.

By the next morning a plague of insects, flushed out by the rains, had invaded the streets and buildings; giant black crickets, big flying bugs which crashed into the street lamps like suicide planes, and swarms of white ants. Everybody in Bangkok seemed to regard the invasion with equanimity; they certainly dealt with it in a spirit of true Buddhist patience. I watched the waiter in the Little Home Bakery gently edging an enormous
beetle through the door with his foot. And when, in some incomprehensible way, a hundred or so white ants managed to get into our air-conditioned room and fluttered dementedly around the lamp, the room-boy picked them gently off the shade and kept them alive in his folded hand, running out every few minutes to release them from the balcony; when I suggested spraying them he looked at me with pained reproach. The little greenish-yellow gecko lizards who lived in the hotel showed no such Buddhist scruples; on the balconies we listened to their shrill little chirping calls as they hunted down the insects, and inside our room we could watch their spread-eagled shapes moving on the frosted glass of the windows as they snapped up the white ants in sharp sudden scurries.
PART THREE

The Woman on the Treadwheel
After our return from Chieng Mai we spent a great deal of time making arrangements for our visit to Cambodia. It was typical of the international politics of South-east Asia that Thailand and Cambodia, reviving ancient grudges that dated back to the days before the European empires spread to the China Sea, should have closed their common frontier, severed diplomatic relations, and cancelled all flights of their respective airlines into each other's territories. It was equally typical that travel between the two countries should still be relatively easy to arrange. The Indonesians were acting on behalf of the Cambodians and, although they were mildly obstructive, forcing us to make three visits to their embassy, we eventually received our visas after a small sit-in strike which attracted the personal attention of the consul and revealed that the staff had been telling lies about his absence. As for transport, Miss Ayuthia, with a wry prophecy that we might not find the Cambodians as congenial as the Thais, got us seats on the Air Viet Nam plane for Saigon, which was conveniently putting down at Phnom Penh while the local services between Thailand and Cambodia were suspended. She even arranged, by devious negotiations through Air France, our flights within Cambodia from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap, the nearest town to Angkor Wat, and booked our rooms at the Grand Hotel in Angkor, though she also remarked, with what we took to be patriotic prejudice, 'Do not be surprised if you find yourselves sleeping in the jungle!'

Apart from the indispensable trip to Angkor, we had also made arrangements to see some of the sites where work was beginning on the Mekong Project, which I regarded then and still regard as the most important international development in South-east Asia.
The Mekong is one of the ten largest rivers of the world; the upper river in Tibet, China and Burma, runs through steep gorges which make it virtually useless, but when it enters Laos it becomes a manageable stream for the 1,900 miles of its winding course through the four South-east Asian countries of Laos, Thailand, Cambodiá and Viet Nam down to the China Sea. Yet, nowadays, in the whole basin of the Lower Mekong—some 240,000 square miles in extent—only 600 square miles of land are irrigated in any way whatsoever. Except when the Mekong is in flood, its abundant waters flow down unused to waste themselves in the China Sea. Yet adequate irrigation could change the whole nature of life in South-east Asia; it would mean an end to the one-crop-a-year system, and an end to the seasonal unemployment of the rice farmers. This, of course, is an ideal goal; it presupposes an industrial development that will utilize the great sources of power provided by damming the river; it presupposes also that some two billion dollars will be put up by the wealthier nations of the world for an unmilitary plan that will take a quarter of a century to complete.

It is precisely on these idealistic assumptions that a group of very realistic U.N. administrators and experienced engineers from many countries have been proceeding for the past seven years under the aegis of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East.

Our Indian friend, Roman Basu, with whom we had spent much of our Christmas interlude in Delhi, was a member of the secretariat, and as he had now returned to Bangkok he introduced us to some of the men who have been carrying through the preliminary investigation and planning which were necessary before the Mekong Project could even begin to take shape on the drawing-board as a network of dams and barrages. Among those we met were Hart Schaaf, the bluff, hard-driving American head of the secretariat, Kanwar Sain, the Indian chief consulting engineer, and Boonrod Binson, a Thai engineer who at that time was actually chairman of the Mekong Committee.

At times these highly practical men sounded like the most idealistic of Utopians. Harness the waters of the Mekong, they
would preach to us, and the hardships and perils of a one-crop-a-
year rice economy, which is general now in the whole of South-
east Asia, would come to an end. A prosperity unknown since
the great days of Angkor would return to large areas of Cam-
bodia, Laos, Viet Nam and Thailand. Rural discontent would
lose its power and Communism its appeal.

Kanwar Sain, who had worked on more than four hundred
Indian projects and had been Chairman of the Central Water
and Power Commission, told me that he was persuaded by
Nehru to leave the great Rajasthan Canal Project and to come as
‘technical ambassador’ to the countries of South-east Asia. ‘How
could I refuse?’ he said, in his soft Cambridge-Indian accent.
‘Nehru had asked me.’ And besides, for the engineer the Mekong
had the attraction of the big game for the hunter. ‘What better
end could I give to my career?’

Kanwar Sain was almost seventy, but he spoke with the en-
thusiasm of a young man on the ramifications of the vast project,
which would involve the construction of thirteen great dams on
the main river alone, and would not only irrigate enormous
areas, but would also mitigate the floods which now periodically
ravage the Mekong Delta in Viet Nam, would provide vast
potential power resources for the region and make industry for
the first time possible in the Mekong Basin, and would open the
river for navigation by large ships as far as Luang Prabang in the
remote north of Laos.

What attracted Kanwar Sain as much as the tangible physical
benefits of the Mekong scheme were its political implications.
Already, the peoples of South-east Asia were becoming aware
of what the harnessing of the Mekong might mean to them, and,
whatever the political weather, at least up to the beginning of
1964, the survey teams of the Mekong Project had been able to
move freely over theoretically closed frontiers, such as that be-
tween Thailand and Cambodia, and even into areas more or less
controlled by Communist guerrillas. Kanwar Sain himself had
been stopped by a Pathet Lao patrol and released when he told
them what he and his party were doing. ‘Of course, we were
unarmed,’ he commented, ‘and that made all the difference. I
have never travelled anywhere in the whole of the Mekong region with an armed escort. I believe, like Gandhi, that the methods of peace are better than the methods of war, and that the sooner those who are dealing with South-east Asia realize this, the better. The people of the countries don’t want war, and especially when they talk most loudly about it. Look at the princes of Laos. One is Communist, one is right wing, one is neutral. They fight and they don’t fight. One is always hearing reports of battles in Laos, but as soon as you find out what is really happening you realize that not many people are ever killed when they just fight among themselves. It is only when outsiders begin to interfere that real war starts up. Give the people themselves something better to do and they’ll soon forget about running around with rifles in their hands."

The secretariat of the Mekong Project, where we met Kanwar Sain, was situated in the big United Nations building on Raja-damnoen Avenue, a broad new parade street down which, on the day of our first visit, the lancers of the Royal Guard, in blue-grey uniforms, with bright azure plumes on their white tropical helmets, came riding in perfect order on the only horses we ever saw in Thailand; it was like a tropical parody of the Paris of Napoléon le Petit. But I met Boonrod Binson, the Chairman of the Mekong Committee, in a beautiful old Thai mansion of polished teakwood which had somehow survived in its canal-side garden in a part of Bangkok that was being submerged by new cinemas and office buildings.

Binson was an American-educated Thai intellectual, more self-assured and aggressive in his manner than most of his countrymen. As he talked, on the day I visited him, about the actual working of the Mekong Committee, it was obvious that merely as a practical example of international organization it represented an innovation of great importance in South-east Asia. It was the one body in which the four countries involved had continued to work amicably. The engineers who formed the Mekong Committee had never ceased to meet, they had never let their discussions be affected by the differences of their governments, and their decisions had been unanimous, based
on common economic interests rather than on rival political demands. All this indicated a great deal more unity of interest in South-east Asia than appeared on the political surface; it suggested that the more the various countries become involved in actual tasks of harnessing the Mekong River, the less chance there may be for outside powers, either Communist or non-Communist, to make political capital out of the economic troubles of the region.

Thus, in Bangkok, we learnt from its most passionate advocates the rationale of the Mekong Project. In Cambodia we hoped, through the arrangements Dr. Hart Schaaf had made for our reception, to see the first construction works in progress and to get some idea how far the attitude of Cambodia towards the Mekong Project might modify the rather intrasigent international stand which already, even before 1964, Prince Sihanouk had begun to take.
The Saigon plane was due to leave at 10.45 in the morning; in fact it did not get into the air until 3.30 in the afternoon, and only then did we learn from the ivory-skinned Annamite hostess the real reason for the delay. In this high season of travel among heads of state, Prince Sihanouk had been entertaining the President of the Philippines, and he had sped his departure with a performance by the royal dancers, held at the airport itself, so that his guest might leave with the impression of Cambodian magnificence still fresh in his mind. All plane traffic in and out of the country had been cancelled arbitrarily for almost the whole day, while the delicate girls of the palace ballet, in their gilded tiaras and heavy cloth-of-gold garments, danced in the humid noon-hour heat across the asphalt of the runways.

The gesture was typical of Prince Sihanouk and of his determination to deal with the world on his own terms—terms aimed at increasing both the importance and the prickly neutrality of his country. Just over a decade ago, at the treaty of Geneva, Cambodia became once again an independent nation. For generations it had been a French protectorate, and for centuries before that it was a tiny powerless state in the interior of Southeast Asia, a state whose frontiers were chewed away by its neighbours until it seemed on the verge of extinction. Now, after such long obscurity, Cambodia is in the centre of world attention, one of the key points of that peninsula where the Chinese and the Americans are striving, by every means short of absolute war, for the mastery of the Asian seaboard. Nobody has taken more delight in this situation than Prince Sihanouk, who rejoices at the thought that his tiny country, with about five million inhabitants, should be wooed by massive China and
have the power to strike consternation in the heart of Washington. There is no doubt that he remembers the days when his ancestors, the Khmer kings of Angkor, ruled the whole Lower Mekong Basin, and perhaps he believes that, if he plays his political cards carefully enough, this may happen again. He has neighbouring Thailand as an example of an insignificant Asian land that has made extraordinary capital out of the quarrels of the great powers.

The Vietnamese plane, a decrepit D.C.3, bumped reluctantly off the runway and swayed and tottered in the eccentric currents of air that rose up from the paddies of eastern Thailand. Already we sensed the flavour of a different life, the special tang which generations of French occupation had given to Indo-China. French speech wove itself into a quick pattern over the sound of the engines, the sharp tinny French of the Vietnamese, the coarse, almost Provençal accent of French colonials returning to Pnom Penh and Saigon. The very beer we drank with our sandwiches had a thin pissy flavour that evoked the cheap bistros of the Paris suburbs.

The shadowy Cardomom Hills, muffled in rain clouds, marked the far edge of Thailand. Beyond them, the flat alluvial plain of central Cambodia stretched in orange-brown monotony, dotted with dark green clumps of sugar palm; the brown was the colour of the old rice stubble clothing the cracked earth that waited for the first rains of the monsoon, four months away, to bring it back to life. We reached Pnom Penh in just over an hour and stepped from the air-conditioned chrysalis of the plane into a heat as intense and humid as that of Bangkok.

An international airport in neutral modern style, rather bare, because Cambodia is short of foreign exchange; the notices in French and the customs officers friendlier than we had expected. A Japanese queuing in front of us was caught with 3,000 illegal riel (the riel is worth about 2½d.), and was not only let off with a caution but even allowed to keep the money on his promise that he would not spend it in Cambodia; I wondered whether a westerner would be treated so easily, and then felt rather ashamed of my thoughts when we were not even asked about
our money. Immediately we noticed the difference between Cambodians and Thais. Most of the Cambodians—the Khmers who form the great majority—are dark, stocky people, whose broad features have often a coarse Negroid look; anthropologists speculate that they are descended partly from an early Melanesian stock. The hostesses of Royal Air Cambodge looked squat and lumpy in their ill-fitting blouses and skirts compared with the slender, perfectly tailored Vietnamese girls, in Annamite dress of white pantaloons and blue high-collared silk tunics reaching to the knees but split at the sides as far as the waist.

After Bangkok it all seemed rustic and provincial; by the time we got through the customs there were not even any taxis, and we were relieved when a dark slender young man stepped up to us, speaking precise harsh French. His name was Nath and he led us over to a Land-Rover, with MEKONG stencilled on its sides. We drove into the city past uncompleted buildings, colleges and government offices, and were full of admiration at such obvious progress; only afterwards did we learn that the buildings had been standing uncompleted for months owing to lack of money to pay the workers. Nath left us at the Monorom Hotel. This evening the head of his department would visit us. So far, the arrangements of the Mekong Committee seemed to be working out admirably.

The Monorom was a neat, new hotel; air conditioning, bathrooms with bidets, and candlesticks on all the tables. As we quickly washed and changed to go out into the town before darkness fell, there was a knock on the door and two young men in chef’s whites came giggling in. They were collecting for a workers’ orphanage, and I stuffed a note bearing a picture of Angkor Wat into their box before we hurried down into the street.

Pnom Penh still strikes one as a French colonial city. Broad boulevards with jalousied and mansard-roofed houses; terraced cafés with portable privet hedges; avenues of pollarded, pale-trunked ficus trees; public gardens with meticulously patterned flower-beds and raked gravel paths; kiosks and fountains: it has the flavour of an exiled city of the Midi, lanquishing in the dank
tropical heat. But only occasionally did we see a French face among the crowds of many races which drifted in the last light of day along the wide main avenue. The Khmer women wore a long narrow skirt of batik called a sampot, reaching almost to the ground, and a blouse tight over the waist and hips; the dress gave a sinuous, almost serpentine quality to their rather sturdy figures. There were a few Annamese in their pantaloons and tunics, and women from South India in saris of brilliant pink and lime green.

But most of the people in this central part of Phnom Penh were the Chinese who control the city’s business. And, as it was the Chinese New Year, all the shops in the city, except for a few Hindu haberdasheries, were closed and shuttered for the feast, with gold-lettered decorations of crimson paper hung on their windows and joss-sticks smoking before their doors. The Chinese themselves idled in white-shirted crowds outside the picture-houses, which were masked with gaudy cardboard colossi, mythical lords and princesses in jewelled robes, or drove up and down the boulevards in the swarming little tricycles which ply instead of taxis in Cambodia. In Phnom Penh the tricycles are called cyclo-pousses, because one sits in front of the driver in a kind of hooded bathchair; the arrangement is convenient for those of tender conscience because they need not watch the straining bodies of the baseball-capped drivers as they pedal furiously in a temperature which exhausts the stranger before he has walked more than a quarter of a mile.

We returned to the hotel for dinner. One glance at the menu was enough to confirm all the reports we had heard in Bangkok of the inflation which had hit Cambodia more devastatingly than any of the other countries of South-east Asia. A bowl of soup was priced at 70 riel, about 14 shillings, and the *plat du jour*, *Boeuf bourgignon*, was 150 riel, approximately 30 shillings. We left stealthily while the head waiter’s attention was distracted by the shrill voices of a trio of golden-haired American rich girls, and went down the avenue to a restaurant with marble-topped tables which reminded us of the cheap *prix fixe* eating-houses one finds in the environs of the Boulevard St. Michel.
As we crossed the street, I laid a joking bet with Inge that the *plat du jour* would be *Tripe à la mode de Caen*. To my astonishment, as much as hers, I won; the rest of the menu read like a nostalgic French colonials’ dream of the last meals he had eaten in Marseilles on the eve of his departure for Indo China. Even the Chinese waiter spoke meticulously correct French which put mine to shame, except when he broke into a demotic American whisper, ‘Hey, boss! You got any greenback? I give you O.K. super price!’ I had no dollars and the meal still cost the equivalent of three guineas for Inge’s leathery omelet, my stringy parody of *Poulet à la crème*, and French bread which, when we broke it open, was running with red ants. By the next evening we found our way to that refuge of impeccunious Europeans in Phnom Penh, the Chinese restaurant of the Hotel Mondial, and there, for 100 riel, we were given a delicious crab and noodle soup, beignets of prawns (a Vietnamese dish), a kind of meat-filled dumpling called *jao tze*, and a dessert of ice-cream flavoured with the odd musty tang of coconut milk. For the rest of our days in Phnom Penh we continued to explore the Mondial’s long and varied menu of Chinese and Vietnamese dishes. We never discovered a restaurant that offered native Cambodian dishes, which was one of the many ways in which Phnom Penh struck one as a city almost entirely alien to the country of which it is the capital.

When we went back to the Monorom on our first evening, Monsieur B., the Mekong Committee’s representative, was already there, an hour early; time is never observed very accurately in Cambodia, and people are likely to arrive for appointments either early, or late, or not at all, but rarely with anything approaching exact punctuality. Monsieur B. was a round, smooth-faced man who must have been very much older than his look of an intelligent sophomore suggested. His wife had come to meet us; she was a charming girl in dark red silk sampot and black lace bodice which admirably suited her dark, delicate features, but she was extraordinarily shy, and all the evening as the rest of us talked she sat in silence, rather like a serious child, watching us with large dark eyes over her glass of orangeade.
B. himself, like all the small intellectual élite who administer the affairs of Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk’s capricious guidance, was completely bicultural, and it was his Gallic side which he showed to foreigners, though, unlike most Cambodian officials, he also spoke fluent English.

Our conversation concerned the Mekong, which meant that it concerned water; like Egypt, Cambodia has always been a land obsessed by water. Religion and water-conservation were closely inter-related in the civilization of the Khmers; the broad moats that surrounded Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom were part of the irrigation system which the kings served as hierophants when, on the high platform of their temples, they interceded with the deities whose stone faces stared into eternity from the clustering sandstone towers.

‘It is a pity you have come here in February,’ said Monsieur B. ‘The time for visiting Pnom Penh is in the autumn. That is when we hold our great feast, the festival of the waters.’ He described the Khmer villagers coming into Pnom Penh at the end of the rains from all parts of Cambodia to watch the ceremonials which were presided over by Prince Sihanouk, as successor to the Kings of Angkor, from his royal barge. At the high point of the festival the young men race in long dugout canoes at the junction of the Mekong and its principal tributary, the Tonle Sap. They are celebrating, as their ancestors have done since historical records began, the extraordinary natural drama of which the River Tonle Sap is the hero.

When the rains come to Cambodia in July, and the snows melt in the mountains of Tibet where the Mekong has its source, the flood waters build up, running down through Burma, Laos and northern Thailand, until they reach the lowlands of Cambodia. The Mekong delta, where the river runs out to the China Sea in Viet Nam, cannot cope with the rising waters, and slowly they are forced back up the Tonle Sap towards the Great Lake of Cambodia which lies at its head. For four months—sometimes even longer—the flow of the Tonle Sap is reversed; it runs back towards its own source in the Great Lake and floods the immense jungles almost up to the temples of Angkor. By November the
rains have ceased and the frosts have come again in the distant mountains. The floods recede in the valley of the lower Mekong and the Tonle Sap reverses its course.

This is the time of abundance and rejoicing. The peasants reap their rice crop and the waters of the Tonle Sap, now flowing back to the Mekong, are crowded with fish that have bred in the Great Lake and the flooded jungles beside it. All night long the fishermen ply their nets by the light of lanterns, and during the day the catches are dried on racks along the banks of the river. Like the Thais, the Cambodians live mainly on a rather monotonous diet of rice and fish, and so the weeks during which the Tonle Sap reverses its direction and flows down again towards the sea are vital to their very existence.

To an even greater extent than their ancestors under the kings of Angkor, the modern Cambodians rely on the annual floods to give them moisture for their crops. During the rest of the year the Mekong and the Tonle Sap flow down almost unused to spend their waters in the China Sea and the land relentlessly dries out under the tropical sun. This, Monsieur B. explained, was why the Cambodians had agreed to take part in the Mekong Project. It would give them back some of the prosperity they had enjoyed in the distant past, when the land irrigated by the kings of Angkor raised three and four crops of rice a year as against the single crop which the capricious river now provides. The irrigation works of the old kingdom fell into disuse and the French never carried out any large irrigation projects in Cambodia, which was always a neglected part of Indo-China.

We arranged with Monsieur B. for Nath and another of his assistants to take us next morning to a dam site on the Prek-thnot River, one of the tributaries of the Mekong. He wanted us to leave at dawn, but I suggested leaving at nine, since we had to change travellers’ cheques at the bank. Monsieur B. showed as much disapproval as his politeness would allow. ‘À midi on repose,’ he remarked, somewhat sternly; the Cambodians, who get up early, go to bed late and hate the midday sun, are addicts of the long siesta. ‘To travel in our country when the sun is high ... it is very bad for people of your age!’ To him—with
my prematurely white hair and my three chins and the sallow bags under my eyes—I must have looked positively antique. When I insisted, he retreated into the giggle of embarrassment with which educated Cambodians deal with situations that depart from their preconceived notions of propriety.

Early next morning, after a breakfast of toast and coffee with tinned milk which cost us the equivalent of twenty-five shillings, we walked in the fresh seven o'clock air to the central market, a star-shaped group of vaulted glass halls like an eccentrically planned railway station, surrounded by a square of arcades occupied by Tamil cloth merchants and goldsmiths, and by warehouses piled to the ceiling with the harvest of the Great Lake, brown rigid slabs of split-open dried fish, arranged neatly according to length, from herring-size to salmon-size. In the high meaty stench of the covered market the Moslem Malay butchers in black velvet caps were selling buffalo masquerading as beef; the Chinese butchers were selling whole roast pigs hung up by the heels; and live ducks, looking at one with their bright intelligent eyes, waited for slaughter in the big pear-shaped cages of thinly split bamboo on the poulterer's stalls. In the open part of the market, under improvised awnings and black umbrellas, dark-featured peasant women, in sampots and untidy turban-like headdresses, sat among their piles of fruit and bargained in the Khmer language, which sounded extraordinarily harsh after one had been accustomed to the soft liquid tones of the Thais. When we went into the countryside later in the day it was this Khmer speech that we always heard; the French culture in South-east Asia, where it survives, is entirely urban, lapsing abruptly in the suburbs of Pnom Penh, of Saigon, of Vientiane.

The market women of Pnom Penh were hard and ungracious traders, though I suspect that their attitude towards us was motivated in part by Khmer xenophobia, which is the almost inevitable product of centuries of ill-treatment by foreigners, from the Thais and the Annamites to the French in more recent years, and which has been encouraged by Prince Sihanouk's attempts to enhance the glory of his own rule by defying the
Anglo-Saxon races who, ironically, have never been among Cambodia’s exploiters. We soon found that the fruit-sellers habitually asked us three times as much for their bananas and green-skinned oranges as they asked the local people, and we had to haggle step by step to bring the price of a bunch of bananas down from ten riell until the woman would cry in her harsh accent, ‘Bien, quat!’ and scowlingly throw the four little green notes into her bowl. We never raised a smile from the Phnom Penh market women; the Indian view of bargaining as a kind of sport in which the seller almost rejoices in the buyers’ skill at securing a good price was certainly absent among them.

A little later in the morning, at the Royal Bank of Cambodia, heavily guarded by armed soldiers and almost empty of customers, we became involved in a time-consuming combination of form-filling bureaucracy, inherited from the French, and of sheer Asian leisureliness, so that we spent almost an hour changing a traveller’s cheque for fifty dollars, and it was well after nine, with the heat stoking up above eighty degrees, when we returned to the hotel to find Nath waiting for us with the Mekong Land-Rover and another young man. His name was Siem; his pale skin as well as his name showed his partly Vietnamese ancestry.

‘How many children?’ said Siem, as we set off past the airport in the direction of the Prek-thnot project. When I told him that we had none, he merely nodded. ‘I not married,’ he said. That was the extent of his interest in us. Indeed, we rarely encountered anywhere in South-east Asia that warm inquisitiveness about the stranger which is habitual in India and Pakistan. In turn, perhaps because they revealed only the most superficial of their own thoughts, I found our two companions so lacking in the individuality that fixes a personality in one’s memory that I have always to look at the photograph which Inge took of them standing against the Mekong Land-Rover when I try to re-create their physical images in my mind. Memory only records their disembodied smiles, their politeness, their philatelic enthusiasms—Nath had already filled a hundred albums with stamps at the age of twenty-two—and their terror of their
superiors. The next day they were horrified when I suggested calling on Monsieur B. in the afternoon. It would interrupt his siesta, and that was positively unthinkable. They stand in my recollection as amiable, blandly anonymous and slightly obstructive twins, rather like K.'s assistants in The Castle.

Phnom Penh is a small and compact city, and we were soon out in the country, travelling along a wide and almost trafficless highway. It was still possible in those days for our companions to mention that this had been a gift of America; a month after our visit the change in the political climate of Cambodia had already made such admissions impossible.

The plain through which we now drove lay idle and empty. For an Asian country, Cambodia is comfortably populated; its five million people live scattered over 70,000 square miles. During the seasons of cultivation and harvest the fields are full of workers. But now, in the dryness that takes the place of cold as the scourge of the Cambodian winter, there were long stretches of country in which we saw no one but the children tending the water buffalo that wallowed in the last muddy pools left over from the rains.

The landscape was agreeably varied, with ranges of low smoky-looking hills in the middle distance, clumps of palmyra palms scattered among the brown paddies, and tongues of dark green forest probing into the cultivated land. The houses, with their silky-grey roofs of old palm leaves, were built up on piles like those of Siam, but they were plainer and drabber, and the Khmers seemed to lack the Thai passion for being surrounded by flowers, though their gardens were quite often pleasantly shaded by groves of mangoes and papayas, among which reared up the gawky shapes of the kapok trees and the thin, spear-straight stems of the areca palms. The villages seemed poor and neglected rather than actually poverty-stricken. The temples, with their peaked and dragon-crested roofs and their tinkling wind-bells, looked like shabby, ungilded versions of their counterparts in Thailand, and the monks, who also belonged to the Theravada cult, dressed in the same yellow robes. Each village had one or two primitive stores, built often of rough planks, and these,
unlike the houses, were placed flat on the ground, beside the road. They were decorated with red paper for the New Year, and each of them had a sign over the door—gold characters on black wood—which showed that its proprietors were Chinese; the Chinese are a mere 10 per cent of the population of Cambodia, but even in the countryside they control most of the retail trade.

The Prek-thnot project lay in the jungle, away from the cultivated plain, and we finally turned off the main highway on to a sandy dirt road which the Mekong engineers had constructed through a wilderness hitherto traversed only by primitive foot trails. It was a region beyond the reach of even the highest flood, and the arid ground was covered by a thin scrub of thorny and almost leafless trees with deep, thirsty roots and scanty foliage, except in the rare places where a shallow stream created a belt of green bushes. Occasionally, in some hollow among the bushes, we would see a thin down of old stubble, the meagre remnant of a stunted rice crop.

But even here there were wretched little hamlets of three or four palm-leaf huts scattered over the dusty ground on which the sun beat down without relief because there were no trees large enough to provide any shade. They were inhabited only by women and children. The women in their ragged, black sampots, which seemed to reflect their dejected expressions, tramped barefooted with their petrol cans to distant and shrunked watercourses, and carried bundles of thin firewood out of the jungle, balanced on ragged bits of cloth which they had wound into cushion-like headdresses. They were dark people, with thick lips and wide noses, more Negroid in appearance than most of the Khmers; some of the half-naked children were as brown as if they had been dyed with walnut stain. We never saw the men; they were out searching for forest products to sell or use as they waited until it was time to cultivate those plots where moisture lay long enough during the rainy season to grow a little rice. In marginal areas of this kind a lower-than-usual rainfall means the difference between mere shortage and starvation. And there are many such areas in South-east Asia, areas where hope of anything better is so rarely fulfilled that they are ripe for the mes-
sianic promises of any wandering Communist agitator who finds his way among them.

Ten miles onward we reached the construction site. A drill was chunking its way down into hard ground, a few palm-leaf huts were already built, and over one of them hung a sign bearing the words ‘Notre Co-opérative’ and their equivalent in the thick serpentine curves of Khmer script. A tall, lanky Australian in shorts and bush-shirt was talking in flat, cockney French to a Khmer foreman, and a gang of workers stood waiting for their orders. They included men, women, and boys no more than twelve years old. Some of the men wore loose shirts and baggy trousers of black cotton, others coloured sarongs, and yet others tee-shirts and shorts exposing their thin, knob-kneed legs. Almost all of them went barefooted, and those who did not wear the cheap two-thonged Japanese plastic sandals which have become a boon to the poor throughout Asia. Two of the women were quite beautiful in a primitive static way, their faces moulded with the broad, serene massiveness one sees in some Negresses, and their walk erect and graceful from having carried pots and baskets on their heads ever since childhood. One of them posed for Inge, proud of the new outfit of sampot and blouse which she had bought from the proceeds of her work carrying baskets of earth backwards and forwards at the dam site; sampot and blouse were made of black bombazine, and in that temperature of ninety degrees the shiny folds seemed ponderous with heat.

‘This isn’t really a dam,’ explained the Australian as he led us down the jungle road towards the site. ‘It’s more of a long earth barrage.’ We soon reached the point where the meagre trees had been slashed and piled in long swathes, leaving a wide cut through the jungle which curved out of sight in both directions. A line of tall bamboo poles had already been set up, to mark the top of the barrage, and a bank about six feet high had been built up. ‘Five miles long and eighty feet high when it’s finished,’ explained the Australian. ‘And all done by hand, or almost all. We’ll have to use machinery for the power-house, but all the earth-moving we’re doing by manual labour. I say
we...’ he went on with diplomatic caution, ‘but I really mean they—the Cambodian Government. It’s their project. We’re just here as advisers, loaned by Australia and operating through U.N. Nothing political and no strings attached.’

Today manual labour projects have become standard policy in many Asian countries, for the very good reason that they relieve rural underemployment even before irrigation can be brought into operation. Many a prophet acquires a following long after his death, and King Lud is at last finding his vindication in the underdeveloped countries of the world, where the use of machinery is often deliberately curtailed because the effect of its rapid introduction in a subsistence economy would be disastrous.

‘Even that is not so easy as it seems,’ the Australian explained. ‘Even these poor rice-farmers are so conservative that they don’t want to work away from their own villages. But they’re beginning to get interested now. Sometimes if a man isn’t quite sure about it all, he sends us his wife. And that suits us. The women here are much less lazy than the men.’

He waved his hand vaguely over the jungle on the far side of the bank. ‘All that will be drowned!’ he said. ‘On this side, thousands of acres that have never grown a blade of grass... they’ll be bearing year-round crops. Rice and other things. We want them to diversify. Cotton... tobacco perhaps. And when the power station’s built we’ll give them enough electricity down in Pnom Penh to last the next ten years out.’

His slow, even, unexcited voice gave a kind of solid outline to the vision of a countryside transformed that lodged in his mind. ‘You should see the Prek-thnot itself before you go. Pretty little stream.’ He got into the Land-Rover with us and drove along a lateral road into a part of the jungle where there not even any squatters’ huts. All at once the forest began to grow higher and more verdant. We walked along a newly cut path, under trees with large oval translucent leaves, and then down through rocks and willow-like bushes to the sandy bed where the shallow river, no more than twenty feet wide and less than knee deep in the centre, curved round a sandy point and swished softly between slabs of rock over which bamboos had
been laid to form a rough bridge. Shoals of small fish were swimming among the rocks, their sides flashing like knife blades as they turned towards the sun. The doves were cooing away in the trees, an Indian cuckoo kept calling on the other bank and there were other birds which gave liquid bell-like calls. A black-billed roller, perching dull brown and inconspicuous on a branch over the water, took off with a squawk and a magnificent flashing of deep blue wings. The hill water ran smooth and so transparent that we could see the markings on pebbles a foot below the surface. In spite of the heat, there was a wonderful feeling of freshness about the place. We sat on the rocks and bathed our feet.

‘All running to waste,’ said the Australian. ‘The rains will flood it right over that sandbank, but it won’t do much good even then until we’ve got it piling up behind that barrage of ours. Amazing what you can get out of a bit of water when you put it to use.’

I felt an atavistically romantic twinge of regret for the tranquil little jungle river, the oasis of wild birds and animals. But at the same time I realized that the Australian and his kind, with their thumping drills and their theodolites and their laconically expressed visions, represented the only tolerable future for the human race in this part of the world.

By the time we returned to Phnom Penh the hot peak of the day was over and the sleepy villages had awakened into activity. Tiny roadside markets had sprung up in the lengthening shade, the women selling enormous yellow-green jak fruit and brown spiny faecal-smelling durians, and the men locally made cigarettes which looked like Gauloises, tied up with raffia in great round bundles of a hundred. Around the wells of their houses the villagers were bathing away the day’s sweat, pouring water over themselves from pots and gourds, and drenching the tight sampots and sarongs which they still wore. The older men sat talking and smoking outside the temples, and the boys, clad only in kilted sarongs, played vigorous games of handball in the temple yards; some of the more tomboyish girls actually joined in, for in Buddhist Cambodia the relationship between the sexes seems to be relatively free. The contrast between the noon-hour lethargy and the evening activity of these drought-idle villages
was quite striking. It left one with the impression of a great deal of unused energy being wasted in the long season of under-employment which the rice-farmers of the Mekong Basin all experience in the interval between their single harvest and the next coming of the rains.

That night in Pnom Penh we were standing outside one of the cinemas watching the boys playing roulette for cigarettes at the little stalls which old Chinese had set up beside the pavement. Suddenly the lights went out in all the cafés up the streets and as we walked past them we could see the waiters going round and lighting oil lamps. Back in the hotel, where the lifts had stopped and the boys were leading the guests up the stairs with flashlights, we realized at last why there were candlesticks in the rooms. ‘On s’accoutume,’ remarked the room clerk. Three evenings in every week the power was cut in this half of the town, three evenings in the other half, and Sunday was a lucky day for everyone. For more than two hours we sat by candle-light in our sweltering room where neither the air-conditioning nor the fans would work, afraid to open the windows because Pnom Penh is infested with mosquitoes which are non-malarial but still bite sharply. The city, we discovered, had only a small power station, operated by diesel oil which must be bought with scanty foreign exchange. The power from the jungle river of Prek-thnot was obviously needed urgently.

The country west of Pnom Penh, along the Tonle Sap, where we travelled the next day, revealed quite a different aspect of the Cambodian landscape. Now, in the dry season, the Tonle Sap was flowing down towards the sea like any other river, a slow, coffee-brown stream as wide as the Thames at London Bridge. Its banks were high and steep, but by means of primitive dykes the peasants who lived along them had managed to trap at least some of the flood-waters from the rainy season, so that on each side of the river stretched a lush ribbon of marshy pasture, where cattle and buffalo grazed, and of rice paddies where the winter crop was growing up, brightly green. Beyond this narrow zone of dampness the paddies were as brown and bare as anywhere else in the Cambodian plain. But the green margin was enough
to change the life of the river banks, and the village houses, raised up on particularly high piles of mangrove wood because of the unpredictable levels of the river in flood-time, were much larger than those in the plain and had the luxury of verandahs where the old men rocked themselves in rope hammocks, smoking their long green cigars. Some of the villages were inhabited by Malays, darker and more slender than the Khmers. They had one large central mosque which was bigger than any of the Buddhist temples I saw in Cambodia.

In between the villages, scattered along the top of the river banks, stood the drying-racks and the bamboo huts, mere roofs on poles, used by the fishermen of the Tonle Sap. It was at the end of the rainy season that the great fishing took place. 'Then all our people in Pnom Penh who have no work come out and live by the river,' Siem explained. 'At night they are fishing with lamps, and they pull in the nets with many kilos of fish. The women cut them open and lay them out on the racks to dry, and all day long while the people are sleeping the sun is drying out the fish.'

Soon the hills began to appear, the first of them small and isolated, lying beyond the marshes, with the spires of tall, sombre pagodas rising against the skyline out of the forest covering. 'Les ruines d'Udong,' said Nath. Udong was the capital of the shrunken kingdom of Cambodia from the early seventeenth century until finally, in 1867, the French transferred the seat of government to Pnom Penh (easily reached by gunboats sailing up the Mekong). 'If you are going to Angkor,' said Siem, 'it is better not to see Udong. It will only suffer by comparison.' In fact we intended to visit Udong, but we never got there.

Later a series of low, conical and volcanic-looking hills began to appear on either side of the valley and the country became geologically interesting, for great squarish boulders lay close to the river among the groves of coconut palms which began at this point. At some spots these rocks were piled in heaps sixty or seventy feet high, and since no human machinery that has ever existed in Cambodia could have raised them up, we could only assume that in some distant age the glaciers had worn their
chilling way down this torrid valley. The ranges of low hills which separated the valley of the Mekong from the basin of the Great Lake of Cambodia succeeded each other into the distance, each clearly defined from its predecessor by its paler atmospheric blue.

Where the hills narrowed together we reached the little town of Chnnang, which was the end of our journey. It was partly hemmed in by lagoons connected with the river, and many of the houses on the outskirts were true lake dwellings, standing on stilts in the water, or were perched on precarious rafts, reached by spidery catwalks of bamboo. The main town was concentrated along an esplanade overlooking the Tonle Sap, and we went into a nostalgically French-looking little public garden with stone benches and date palms on the edge of the high bank. Two floating villages of houseboats were clustered against the shore, one beneath us and the other on the far side of the river. Many of the houseboats were painted in gay colours and decorated with hanging baskets of flowers. These were the habitations of the people who gained their living from the river, traders whose covered sampans were tied up against the houseboats, and the regular fishermen who were plying their trade in long narrow boats out in the main stream. The Tonle Sap is still used as a regular highway and two white-painted stern-wheel steamers were berthed beside the floating village below us.

There was nothing going on at Chnnang in connection with the Mekong Project, but an Indian survey team had just completed work here, and already the imagination of the engineers had made its ideal constructions. Nath pointed to the two ranges of hills. These were the limits of what, if it were ever completed, would be an engineering project unique like the river itself. A great barrage would cross the valley from one range to the other, and in the middle, where the river now ran, a dam would be constructed with specially designed two-way gates; when the waters pressed upwards in the autumn they could flow in and fill the great area flooded each year by the Great Lake, which normally increases its area from 3,000 to 10,000 square kilometres, and then, when the reverse flow began, the gates would hold back
the waters and control their release, so that flooding in the Mekong Delta in Viet Nam could be prevented and at the same time the Great Lake could be turned into a vast reservoir whose contents would irrigate the whole of central Cambodia.

For the hottest hour of the afternoon we stayed in Chnnang, sitting on the terrace of a Chinese café, with the view of the river still before us. We ate fish soup and noodles, which made us so thirsty that afterwards we drank bottle after bottle of gassy orangeade; Nath and Siem also ate with relish a plateful of venomous-looking little cakes topped with purple and arsenic-green icing. ‘Do you know what the name of this town means?’ said Siem, as he sat replete and fanning himself with the fly-spotted menu. ‘Chnnang! It is the word for a little clay oven which our people put among the embers when they want to roast something.’ At that time of the day it seemed very appropriate.

On the way back we stopped outside the town and tried to get into the Buddhist temple, a large and rather impressive structure with many little roofs tipped with elaborate horn-like finials. But the gate to the enclosure was closed, and while Nath went vainly in search of a caretaker to open them we stood looking out over the lagoon. The colours were intense, Reckitt’s Blue water hemmed by verges of shrill emerald reeds. A peasant woman was working at her paddy, dressed in a crimson sampot and a lampshade sunhat. She was operating a treadwheel which raised the water from the lagoon to her land a yard above the water level. Mechanically she tramped on and on, and the little scoops on the wheel released their trickles of water one after the other. She was one of the fortunate Cambodians in that she had any water at all for her field in the dry season; her family could rear a second crop and live in relative prosperity. The memory of that thin tramping figure on the treadwheel at a temperature of well over eighty degrees stays with me as an image of Southeast Asia and its most elemental need. The great past of the engineers of Angkor is dead; the future which the modern engineers of the Mekong Project have promised is threatened as this book is being written by military and political folly; for the present the treadwheel raising its trickle of water is all that history gives.
From the day of its final abandonment, some time in the fifteenth century, to the middle of the nineteenth century, the great city of Angkor was a place forgotten even by most of the Cambodians, a dense jungle where the ancient temples served as the lairs for tigers and wild pigs. But conditions have changed a great deal since the French naturalist, Henri Mouhot, visited Angkor just over a century ago, in 1863, and brought back to the western world the first fascinating accounts of dead cities and temples enveloped in the Cambodian rain forests. As recently as the 1920’s, when Malraux wrote The Royal Way, he showed his heroes travelling up into the Great Lake by one of the white river steamers whose successors we had seen at Chhnang, and landing on the very edge of civilization in what was still the primitive jungle village of Siem Reap. Today there are hotels at Angkor, and almost every day the plane flies in less than an hour from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap.

But in Cambodia nothing is ever as simple as it sounds. The airport bus, which was due to collect us at the hotel at 11.30 for a flight leaving at 12.30, did not arrive until we had champed almost an hour away in waiting. But when we reached the airport with five minutes to spare it was evident that nobody there was concerned about keeping to time. First we endured the long, slow queue while the police checked over our passports; there are rigorous ‘Contrôle de Circulation’ regulations governing the movement of foreigners in Cambodia, and we had to go through the same procedure once again when we reached Siem Reap. From the police post we finally emerged into a milling chaos in the passenger lounge. Three planes were waiting out on the runway, the Air France jet to Hong Kong, the United Burmese
Airways plane to Bangkok and Rangoon, and the Cambodian plane to Siem Reap, and all of them, by some extraordinary confusion of timing, had been scheduled to depart at 12.30. Of course, none of them left on time, and the plane for Siem Reap, which was the last to go, did not take to the air until 2 p.m. It was packed to the last seat, owing to the arrival in Cambodia of a large party of camera-garlanded Japanese tourists, and as soon as the doors were closed the air-conditioning apparatus went out of order. Riding under the afternoon sun, the plane became like a flying oven, and we felt as if we were melting slowly into our drenched clothes like the wax victims of warlocks as we flew over the brown-parched paddies, and then above the reddish muddy waters of the Great Lake, over which the fishing boats were scattered like toothpicks, until the green roof of the jungle lay beneath us. It was relief as well as anticipation that we felt as the plane at last circled low over the vast glistening square of the moat surrounding Angkor Wat, and the towers of the great temple pierced up towards us in their pinnacled man-made mountain of purple-red stone.

But even now the complexities of modern travel to Angkor were not ended. When we arrived by the airport bus at the old-fashioned French provincial hotel called the Grand which stands on the edge of Siem Reap nearest to the ruined city, we found that nobody knew anything about our reservations, which the office of Royal Air Cambodge in Phnom Penh assured us had been made. Six other people were in the same position. The manager, a tall, acerb Frenchman, seemed to enjoy our predicament. The airlines were doing it always, he said. And now, he gloated, they had got us into a real scrape. In normal times there was the Auberge opposite Angkor Wat. But the company filming Lord Jim had taken it over entirely. And then there were the miserable hovels of Chinese hotels down in Siem Reap which he supposed were better than sleeping in the jungle. But now, at the height of Chinese New Year, every one of them was packed to its bug-infested ceiling. Oh, yes, he had to admit, we were in a real scrape.

Inge’s ire rose steadily at every phrase he uttered. ‘It isn’t our
fault that we’re in a scrape. It’s your people who are responsible.
Aren’t you going to do something to help us?’

‘And what do you expect me to do, madame? To ask the
Governor to put up a tent for you on his lawn, which is the only
vacant place in the whole town? Nom de Dieu, je ne suis pas une
agence de logis!’

With the rest of the disappointed guests we proclaimed our
intention of camping out in the lounge if nothing were found
for us, and proceeded to occupy the most prominently placed
armchairs. As we awaited developments, one of those indomi-
able elderly American spinsters whom one encounters in the
remotest corners of the world came up to us breathlessly. ‘If they
don’t give you a room,’ she said, ‘don’t worry. There are two
beds in mine, and you shall come in with me. I’d like to see them
try to keep you out!’ We were moved by her kindness. ‘Only
an American could have said that,’ Inge remarked, and it was
true. But we did not have to accept her offer. Three-quarters of
an hour later, with the manner of a magnanimous despot, the
manager announced that after all there were just enough rooms
for us all.

Like everyone who first arrives at Angkor, we were impatient
to see the spectacle of the western face of Angkor Wat as the
sun falls through the afternoon sky to the west, and as soon as
we had moved into our room we set out for the temple. The
descendants of the builders of Angkor have invested in rickety
three-wheeled vehicles—a double basket seat propelled from
behind by a motor-driven bicycle—in which they drive one
jolting over the forest roads to the outer gates in the walls that
surround the ruins, and we hired one of these at the entrance to
the hotel.

The forest rang with the metallic chorus of thousands of
cicadas as we drove down the long avenue through the jungle
from Siem Reap and then around the wide moat, starred with
red lotus, that encircles Angkor Wat. Boys and buffaloes bathed
in water silvered by the falling afternoon sun; a company of
elephants—extras in the filming of Lord Jim—slowly descended
the opposite bank for their daily dip; and water birds flew
25 Angkor Thom: faces of the gods
26 Angkor Thom: the causeway
27 Angkor: the Temple of Banteay Kdei
28 Angkor Thom: celestial dancers
nervously, with high-pitched cries, among the clumps of water weed. A little village of lake dwellings stood on high legs above the reed-bed, and beyond it a long high wall of reddish-purple stone enclosed the temple precinct. Above the wall, among the mop-heads of palms, the clustering conical towers reared up, touched with luminous gold by the strong sunlight.

All the Khmer temples, no matter how small, are built on a simple and symbolic pattern of concentric squares: the moat, representing the ocean that encircles the world, the outer wall, the inner terraces surrounding the temple proper, whose steep stairways rise, like those of Mexican pyramids, to the colonnaded upper platforms, and, finally, to the cluster of towers on the summit of the whole complex construction, the highest of which contains the sanctuary of the presiding god. This group of towers represents Mount Meru, the sacred mountain which lies at the centre of the Hindu world picture, and the whole temple is a microcosm of the world itself. In this way it is not merely a building, but a massive work of representational sculpture as well.

The effect of this regularity of design put to the service of Khmer symbolism is a harmonious grandeur which became evident as soon as we stepped on to the wide-flagged causeway that crossed the moat from the western side towards the outer gate of Angkor Wat. This, with its triple towers, was a foreshortened replica in miniature of the temple itself. The original stood fully revealed as we passed through the gate on to the second causeway. This was undoubtedly the finest vista in all Angkor. Between its seven-headed serpent balustrades, which commemorate the snake-god ancestors of the Khmer kings, the wide grey causeway flowed almost two hundred yards over a grassy space to the magnificent façade of the temple, where the long wings of the first terrace, sweeping out laterally for a hundred yards on either side of the entrance portico, formed a wide base above which the inner terraces rose in successive flights, linked on every side by broad, steep stairways. The third terrace served as foundation for the five towers, of which the central and highest rose to more than two hundred feet, the height of Notre
Dame. The effect, massive, yet irresistibly soaring, was precisely that of the mountain peaks which Angkor Wat was meant to represent.

It was the time of day when the sun fell with its fullest brilliance on the great bas-reliefs—12,000 square yards of elaborate carving—which cover the reddish inner walls of the galleries along the first terrace of Angkor Wat. The subjects of the great panels are either legendary or sacerdotal, telling the stories of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, or celebrating the greatness of King Suryavarman, who built the temple in the twelfth century to his own godly glory. In many cases these reliefs resemble South Indian mural paintings of sacred subjects; there is the same crowding of the space with hundreds of figures in vigorous action, and the dynamic movement of fighting masses from side to side or diagonally is punctuated by individual combats which cause the eye to pause as they focus the pattern momentarily upon themselves. When they were new these magnificent representations of mythical actions were gilded and coloured, and now they are given an extraordinary tonal quality by the glossy blackish patina laid on the raised surfaces by the Cambodian habit of running the hand affectionately over the familiar scenes of the great epics.

But the sweeping panels of the Hindu myths were not the only remarkable bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat. Entirely different in the softness of their feminine lines, as compared to the hard masculine lines, curves and rigidities of the warring figures of the Ramayana, were the representations of the apsaras, the divine dancing maidens, which stood out as clear vignettes from the mass of low-cut floral or leafy decoration on the surfaces of pillars and small panels. In one type the figures were active, halted in the cosmic gestures of holy dance, one leg raised and the other resting on the lotus, the fingers of both hands curved back in the classic mudras of Hindu choreography; under the tall, pinnacled crowns their faces smiled in mounting ecstasy. The other type was passive, emphasizing the horizontality of the unmoving feminine body, elongated by the spires of the tall, richly ornamented headdresses; the skirt was no longer swept
back in mobile curves by the motion of the dance, but hung down with almost metallic rigidity from the firmly moulded naked torso; the hands were poised, holding lotus stems at shoulder-height or small round jewels above the navel, and the still faces looked gravely into an immeasurable distance.

At last, accompanied by two persistent little Khmer boys who made a great pantomime of holding our hands and pretending to haul us up the steep stairways, we climbed to the highest gallery and looked out over the whole great cosmic pattern—the ridged roofs of the pagan cloisters which the grey mottling of lichen gave an air of immeasurable age, and the conical minor pinnacles at the corners of the lower galleries rising level with the eye. Beyond the green moat there was a village of palm-leaf huts embowered in a grove of jagged-leafed breadfruit trees and surrounded by gardens of eggplants and yams; a gong was sounding inside its little modern temple and the parakeets screeched harshly as they flew between the trees like green arrows. Below us, the inner courts of Angkor Wat were already becoming tanks of gathering darkness in which the yellow robes of the Buddhist monks floated like glowing flowers.

Yet in spite of the transient beauty of the scene, it was when we looked down in this way on the stone-and-water microcosm laid out below us that we began to realize the limitations of Khmer architecture. As a representational type of architecture, in which the viewer was expected to see the holy mountain and its surrounding world in conventionalized form, it gradually took on the attributes of sculpture, and this was encouraged by the nature of Khmer religion. The recesses of the temple existed for the initiates only, and since there was no indoor congregational worship the Khmer architects never developed any constructional form more advanced than the corbelled roof. This meant that the temples abounded in narrow passages and galleries, in small chambers, but had no large halls like the great mandapams of Dravidian India. The effect of space was created by opening one side so as to produce a cloister-like gallery, or by the linear use of extended passages with repeated doorways seen in recessional perspective. The lofty soaring of the towers was
evident only from outside; within them we looked upward from the cave-like sanctuary into a conical darkness where the bats fluttered and squeaked. In the past the most holy statues of the deities stood in these hidden sanctuaries, but the best of them have been taken to the national museum in Pnom Penh, and only broken and defaced images remained. This poverty of the interior forced our attention back more than ever to the exterior of the temple, with its symbolic shape and the rich sculptor's work which covered its vast surfaces.

Angkor Wat, though the most celebrated of the Cambodian monuments, is only one of at least a hundred sacred buildings which lie scattered in the deep jungles around Siem Reap, representing more than four centuries of high artistic and architectural activity. The Khmer kingdom first began to take shape during the latter part of the sixth century, but it was not until the early ninth century, when King Jayavarman settled near the north shore of the Great Lake, that it became associated with Angkor and its real ascendancy in South-east Asia commenced. From that time Khmer art emerged as a clearly defined tradition, developing during the successive abandonments and reoccupations of Angkor, until it reached an apogee in the reigns of Suryavarman II, who built Angkor Wat in the late twelfth century, and of Jayavarman VII, who reigned from 1181 into the second decade of the thirteenth century, and built the great city of Angkor Thom. Jayavarman was the most active of all the Khmer builders, and the effort he exacted of his people seemed to exhaust their artistic powers, for after his death only a few temples were built, of inferior conception and workmanship, and today the Khmers have no surviving high art, nor even an interesting tradition of peasant folk art.

The Khmer temples were linked intimately with the king's person and with his symbolic rôle as an intermediary between his people and the forces of the phenomenal and spiritual worlds. Essentially, Khmer culture was an extension of the medieval culture of South India, grafted on to an indigenous tribal life and modified by influences from China and Central Asia that percolated through neighbouring Annam. There was no Indian con-
quest, so far as we know, but the beliefs and iconography of the Brahmins and the forms of Dravidian art were transported to the South-east Asian peninsula by Indian traders and perhaps even by Indian princes in exile. Yet the culture that emerged under the Khmers was no mere colonial imitation of its Indian original. The indigenous social structure, based on clan, remained and was never modified in the direction of a caste society. The ancient animist cults continued and were embodied in state religion through the worship of nagas, or snake gods. Hinduism became the official cult, and the Brahmins were powerful at the court, as they are influential in the courts of Thailand and Cambodia even today. But the Khmers seem to have maintained a tradition of religious tolerance, and very soon Buddhism appeared, first as a popular cult, and then, under Jayavarman VII, himself a devout Mahayanist, as an added element in the official religion; since the Mahayanist cult, with its expansive redemptorist viewpoint, embraced the gods and demons of the Hindus, there was no difficulty in this marriage of two great Indian creeds on Cambodian soil. It was only later, in the meagre days of declining Khmer power, that the Cambodians turned to the austere Hinayanist Buddhism they now sustain.

Whatever the dominant creed, the King of Angkor enjoyed in life and death a quasi-divine status. When Hinduism was in favour he might consider himself an avatar of Vishnu; when Buddhism was ascendant he might be regarded, like the Dalai Lamas of Tibet in later centuries, as an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the Compassionate One. Essentially, the king-god was—like similar sacerdotal monarchs in Egypt, Mexico and other countries where the life of the community depended on some cyclic natural event like the coming of rain or the flooding of a river—a combination of the absolute ruler and the fertility god, mediating between his people and the capricious powers of nature. The splendour in which he lived, the grandeur with which he built, enhanced the fortunes of his land as surely as the wide moats around his temples, which served also as transport canals and as important elements in the irrigation systems. When the king died the temple he built
would remain sacred to him; his successor must construct new monuments to enshrine his own fame and symbolize the passing of spiritual and temporal power into a new body.

Jayavarman’s Angkor Thom—Ankor the Great—was the most splendid capital that ever existed in South-east Asia, still surrounded by ten miles of moated walls, and once filled with great palaces, temples, mansions and thousands of small houses. To its ruins the Grand Hotel ran a daily bus with a guide, leaving in the early morning. It was the only occasion during our whole journey when we departed from our usual custom of finding our own means of reaching the places we visited, but it was worth making the exception to meet the special kind of tourists who were willing to make the effort to visit Angkor Wat. Ours was a particularly international group; there was the Peruvian painter who climbed on and off the bus with easel, paint-boxes, folding stool and parasol, and then sat for two hours before his canvas in front of the great temple of Bayon and did not paint a single stroke; there was the bearded Portuguese photographer with his willowy Japanese companion, and the smug Californian professor collecting material for a masterwork on the relationship over the past 2,000 years between the attitudes towards landscape and the moral patterns of cultures, and the aged, birdlike Englishman lost under an Edward Lear panama, late I.C.S., with hearing-aid and young wife and furiously chattering movie camera, and the frayed American newspaper correspondent, getting away from it all, which meant escaping from the nightmare of Tokyo, and the New York business man who was running out of ruined cities (‘Next year to Zimbabwe, and that’s about it till the Burmese open up on Pagan’).

We drove out past Angkor Wat and up the avenue to the triple-towered gate of Angkor Thom. Each tower bore the vast face of Jayavarman himself, the incarnation of the Compassionate Bodhisattva. The balustrades of the causeway across the lily-choked moat were no longer the mere bodies of the seven-headed serpents, as at Angkor Wat; they were now upheld by lines of squatting stone colossi, on the right the beatifically smiling gods, and on the left the grimacing demons, pulling the
gigantic snakes in the symbolic act of Churning the Sea of Milk to produce the divine essence of amrita or abundance.

The bus edged its way through the narrow arch of the gateway with only inches to spare on either side, and entered the jungle within the high red walls. In Angkor Thom only the temples and the stone terraces remained of the once great city. The wooden palaces decayed long ago; where houses once stood the tall trees sent their straight bare trunks shooting upwards to unite in a leafy roof, creating a soft greenly luminous gloom. The lianas looped down in tangled hanks, and everywhere the roots of the bombax trees ran over the jungle floor like pythons—for which an impressionable French naval mission once mistook them. There were many other kinds of trees, but whenever I pointed out a different one to the guide and asked him its name, he always replied either 'Teak' or 'Banyan'. One of the trees was covered with orange-coloured fruit whose brittle shells the green parrots were cracking to get at the dark mass of jelly and seeds which they contained; it was a 'banyan'. We drove more than a mile through this tangled forest to the Bayon, where the jungle had been felled around the temple itself; the cleared area was covered with prickly sensitive plants which cringed as our feet touched them, and infested with red ants.

The Bayon, the great temple to Avalokiteshvara on which the life of Angkor Thom had centred, was an even more ambitious structure than Angkor Wat, which it resembled in its general plan—a pyramidal structure forming the pedestal for the stone peaks that represent Mount Meru. Jayavarman's desire to commemorate his beliefs caused him to rear on the terraces of Bayon more than fifty towers, from which two hundred immense faces like those on the great gateway turned towards eternity their bland smiles suggesting a secret and boundless knowledge. The mountain image had changed to that of a complex range and each peak in that range had become identified with the deity that inhabited it.

The tawny sandstone towers of Bayon are veined with silver and viridian lichens, and in the pearly light of the jungle morning the whole structure had the insubstantial beauty of
a mythical temple materializing out of light. The great faces, eroded by five centuries of monsoons and destructive vegetation, did not seem to be disintegrating so much as emerging from the stone in enigmatic mutability. Later, when we returned in the hard light of noon, these atmospheric illusions had vanished and the artistic defects of the Bayon became manifest. In particular we became aware of the chaotic planning that gave no view in which towers are not obstructing each other, which destroyed by repetition the effect of the great stone faces, and which completely failed to achieve the masterly balancing of masses that makes Angkor Wat the greatest of the Khmer monuments. The very superabundance of the structure presaged a decay of Khmer art that came with surprising rapidity. Most traditions die slowly; that of the Khmers died as soon as Jayavarman departed from the scene. It passed without any long transition from the over-ripe fantasy of Bayon into a non-existence so complete that even the Cambodians forgot their great city of Angkor Thom.

But though, as a whole structure, the Bayon was less impressive than Angkor Wat, in detail we found it fascinating as we scrambled up the stairways and along the narrow passages and the open sunlit colonnades of the building. The introduction of Mahayanist Buddhism under Jayavarman not merely broadened the iconography of his artists, but also changed the subjects of their sculpture in a quite radical manner. The great bas-reliefs of Bayon subordinate the early themes of the ancient epics to the recording of contemporary history, of the land and lake battles between Khmers and Thais, and of the life of ordinary people in their gardens and houses. When I looked at them I was reminded of the genre carvings of the Indian sculptors of Bharhut in the early days of Buddhist art; there was the same sharp intimacy of observation and the same apparent spontaneity of reaction. In Angkor Thom, as in every other place where Buddhism first makes its appearance, the condition of man had become as important a subject as the dances of the cosmos.

From the Bayon we walked through the jungle echoing with an almost deafening morning chorus of birds to the terraces where the great wooden palaces of Angkor had once stood. As
we walked, the guide chattered incessantly, and I noticed that there had been a change in the standard patter, even in remote Cambodia. No longer was the emphasis on a mass of romantic information; instead, the guide at Angkor was constantly pointing out the right angles for photographs. His audience energetically responded, and we among them, kneeling and squatting in all kinds of distorted poses, to the delight of the small boys who had followed us round the temple and now closed in, chanting, ‘Smoke, papa!’ and ‘Gimme, papa!’, and trying to sell us bows and arrows, bamboo flutes, little bells of deer bone, and melodious Jews’ harps made of some springy and resonant wood.

Of the palaces of Angkor the only account is that of a Chinese ambassador, Chou Ta-kuan, who visited the city in the thirteenth century, and even Chou saw only what he regarded as the daringly irregular architecture of the outer verandahs, and the great audience chamber, with gold-framed windows and mirror-hung walls, where the king showed himself to his people and received petitions, attended, like ancient Indian kings, by a bodyguard of armed women and bearing his golden sword of state. ‘I have heard said that inside the palace are many marvellous things,’ recorded Chou, ‘but it is strictly guarded and one cannot enter.’ All those marvellous things within the palaces were either taken away by the Thai armies which sacked Angkor or perished of the rot that quickly destroys anything less durable than stone in the humid climate of the Cambodian jungle. Only a few statues remained, and the great sandstone terraces on which the buildings stood; these are tokens to the magnificence that was lost, for the Elephant Terrace, with its fine reliefs of animals in action, and the Terrace of the Leper King, with its lines of voluptuous divine maidens, are among the finest examples of the art of Jayavarman’s renaissance.

Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom are the tidy, well-visited monuments which have been kept clear of jungle for almost half a century, and to them most of the tourists confine their visits. It is the remoter, less familiar temples that preserve the atmosphere of a city buried under the jungle which the first explorers experienced when they came upon the lost Khmer ruins. To
these places we were taken by a haggard toothless driver with Negroid features and ragged clothes whom we engaged in the village of Siem Reap in preference to the brash youths who waited outside the Grand. Unlike them, he spoke no French, but we got along with names and maps. He would take us to the site, as far as he could go along the narrow roads by tricycle, and then we would walk in along a jungle path and enter, through the tall gate in the outer wall, a dense enclosure of thick forest, where the air would be sullen, breathless, but full of restless sound. The insects hummed and trilled, the coppersmith birds tapped with their little hammers, the dry leaves rustled crisply. Sometimes the rustle would take on a pattern and we would feel we were being followed by an animal who never revealed himself.

These more distant ruins were almost always deserted. Occasionally we met peasant women gathering gum in bamboo containers, and once a half-naked old man with a broom, whose task was to keep the temple paths swept clean of leaves as a precaution against lurking snakes, followed us at a distance out of curiosity. But usually we were alone as we crossed the moats choked with blue water-lilies, passed the guardian figures of lions and cobras, half covered with undergrowth, and entered the recesses of the temple. We would go on and on through mazes of narrow passages and small chambers, separated by little open courtyards beyond which the doorways receded like mirror images until they were lost in the green gloom. The bombax roots clasped the roofs in their crushing grip, flowing in thick tentacles over the walls and scattering the great stone blocks into untidy moss-covered piles of rubble. In the chambers under these destroying trees stood great Siva lingams, and mutilated Buddhas; the fragments of joss-sticks and withered flowers showed that these headless images still had worshippers. Sometimes the civet smell of a wild animal would linger strongly in a courtyard, or the dried skin of a cobra would stir like limp cellophane as we walked by, and more than once, in the dank inner chambers, with the restless bats twittering overhead, we felt solitude suddenly magnifying into terror.
I think we were the only people in the hotel to spend long sweltering days from morning to late afternoon out among the ruins. But it was worth all the heat and the mad-dog-English effort when we drove back, reclining in the basket seat of the rickshaw with the breeze drying the sweat on our faces and clothes, over the flat expanse of reed and paddy land which once formed the great reservoir of Angkor, past the shining artificial lake of Sras Srang and the moat of Angkor Wat, and slouched into the bar of the Grand Hotel to eat long sandwichies of French bread and Gruyère cheese and drink pots of iced tea.

Then we would go down in the hour before twilight along the river bank into Siem Reap. The tall water-wheels turned slowly in the weak current, bringing up cylinders of bamboo which were fixed so that they filled with water at the bottom of the turn and spilt at the top into a long wooden trough that led to a channel on the shore. The boys fished and swam in the shallow water; they supported themselves by straddling round bundles of reeds exactly like the cabellitos de totores—the little horses of reeds, on which we had seen the Indians riding into the surf on the beaches of Peru. Here was another in the fascinating pattern of correspondences which has been built up in recent years between the native life of the Pacific coast of South America and that of Polynesia and South-east Asia.

Siem Reap was a typical jungle town of South-east Asia, mingling several worlds and times. The palm-leaf houses beside the river might have dated from the days of Angkor, but the villas with jalousied windows were nineteenth-century provincial French, and the market was a cleanly designed structure in the most international modern style, obviously financed by the municipality’s share of the profits of tourism. Whenever we saw the town, in the late afternoon, its activity had died down into an easy idleness. Poor people wandered among the depleted stalls, buying wilted vegetables and little strings of fish, cheap at the end of the day. The potters in the arcades around the market drowsed among their piles of olive-green bowls and jars, and the cloth merchants yawned under the rich geometrical banners of sarongs and sampots hanging over their heads. Once, when we
looked into the dark cave of a basket-maker's shop, a completely naked little girl of about three ran out, shook our hands very solemnly, and ran back to her father, who smiled with benign pride over her exploit. She was the friendliest person we met in Siem Reap. At twilight, as the nighthawks began to screech over the river, we would sit in the garden of a Chinese restaurant, drink beer, and watch the lights go on at the cinema across the square. That week they were showing a film from Communist China, with posters of hard-faced partisans fighting against white colonialists.
Back in Pnom Penh we found that the political atmosphere was already changing. Monsieur B., who had been so confident about arranging interviews with high officials when we left, now began to produce bland excuses. The Minister sent us a personal message, regretting that his engagements were too heavy; he was instructing the deputy Minister to see us. But the deputy Minister had left that very morning to celebrate Chinese New Year with his Chinese wife. The next official on the line was—as we might have expected—taking a long siesta when we tried to see him, and could not be disturbed. Monsieur B. felt that he was not important enough to speak for his country. As we went on from official to official, I began to admire their versatility in inventing excuses; no two were the same. At last, one of the U.N. representatives telephoned to say that he had finally trapped a responsible official in his office, but by the time I had arrived by cyclo-pousse with my tape-recorder, the man had already escaped. After we had left Pnom Penh we realized the reasons for these elaborate evasions; a few days later Prince Sihanouk let off one of his famous anti-Anglo-Saxon blasts, and an inspired mob sacked the British and American embassies. With admirable foresight all the officials I tried to contact had decided that it would be impolitic to be caught making official statements even to a wandering Canadian writer.

In one of the intervals between our efforts to make contact with the elusive sources of authoritative opinion, we paid a visit to the royal palace, where a white-uniformed servant showed us round the great enclosure dotted with temples, pagodas, audience halls and royal residences. The palace, which lacked the iridescent glitter of its counterpart in Bangkok, had been de-
signed by a French architect in the nineteenth century, and, though the buildings were authentically Cambodian in style, they owed their dramatic effect to a bold arrangement around great parade grounds which was reminiscent of Versailles.

In one of the halls the gongs and bells of a Cambodian orchestra were sounding. ‘The royal dancers are practising,’ explained the guide. Since the Cambodian dancers rarely perform in public, this seemed an excellent opportunity to watch them discreetly. ‘Impossible, Monsieur! Her Majesty is there!’ Her Majesty was the Queen Mother of Cambodia, who still retains the royal title, though her son Prince Sihanouk has abandoned it, choosing merely to be regarded as an unkingly but all-powerful Head of State. We had to content ourselves with looking at the crown jewels and the strange gold garments and implements used in the ceremonies of lustration and anointing that accompany a Cambodian coronation. The object that caught my eye as curiously symbolic of this little kingdom, with its aspirations to blend an ancient oriental grandeur with a place in a modern westernized world, was a black chapeau melon, belonging to a departed king who had caused it to be decorated with a large cockade-shaped ornament of diamonds.

‘Now you will understand why we Thais feel as we do about the Cambodians,’ said Miss Ayuthia in Bangkok, when we told her about our experiences in Phnom Penh. ‘We may look very much like them, but we are completely different people.’ Yet I did not feel that the affection we had developed for the Thais was incompatible with the rather frustrated admiration we felt for Cambodia, as a noisy pygmy among nations striving to make itself heard in the clamour of a struggle between giants.
PART FOUR

Passing through Babel
31 Penang: a Malay kampong
32 Singapore: a street in Chinatown
Malaya, the Golden Peninsula of the ancients, reaches down in a great club-shaped projection from the body of South-east Asia towards the equator, dividing the Indian Ocean from the China Seas. The broad head of the club is the mainland of Malaysia; the long narrow stem of the Kra isthmus still belongs to Thailand, whose kings once maintained suzerainty over all the little sultanates down to Singapore and the southern tip of Sumatra. A ragged system of roads, parts of them passable only in the dry season, runs down the isthmus, but the only practicable way to travel from Thailand to Malaya, and to see the country at the same time, is to go by railway.

Once again the train left in the late afternoon, travelling westward through Nakon Pathom to Rajburi, and turning southward for the long night’s journey down the isthmus toward Penang. It was a journey so dense with impressions that I still find the notes I jotted down as we travelled down the isthmus more evocative than a rewritten narrative might be. So I reproduce them almost as they appear in my diary.

Bangkok. We board the Malayan coach. Mahogany-panelled compartment. Victorian comfort, but only small fans that ineffectually stir the hot dense air. The attendants Malays, Mongoloid-featured, coarser and darker than the Thais. Leave at 4 p.m. Beyond Donburi, coconut groves, dense-shadowed, dotted with breadfruit, kapok (Klee would have liked this angular tree to perch his birds on), red-flowered tree hibiscus. Chinese market gardens, houses splashed with red paper scrolls, long beds piled between ditches where men walk with scoops, splashing water on to the young plants. An old Chinese herds hundreds of ducks over a dry paddy, flapping them on with a rag on the end of a
bamboo. There are many duck farms, with small huts for keepers, along the canals.

_Nakon Pathom_. The great pagoda rises like a golden hill above the station roofs. Beyond N. P. grazing land, the cattle frisky at evening, racing from the train. Small, industrious towns, with rustic shabby temples; in one a modern meat-processing plant, surrounded by grey-painted wooden company houses, American style; in another enormous logs, five feet in diameter, floated down from the western forests, lie beside the railway, and two work elephants pad along, dragging chains, dropping cannonball turds.

_Valley of Kwai_. Tangled sweeps of jungle, small plantations hacked out and little red cooking fires flickering between dense trees, alternating with paddy land, palm-dotted, reminiscent of Cambodia. Among the paddies a goose farm, the brown-watered canal neatly fenced off into enclosures; the great flock, several hundred waddling strong, is being driven by Chinese boys to be kept for the night in bamboo pens on land.

Southward, hills begin to rise beyond the river, against the sunset; dark clouds build above them into celestial mountain ranges, lurid and sweeping, El Greco cloudscapes. Night falls as we stop at Rajburi, crossing the Kwai, the turmoil of reddened clouds dramatically reflected in the wide, luminous river. Weak electric lights glimmer through cracks in the walls of bamboo houses, a sweet smell like English midsummer floats in the air, frogs and cicadas strike up a deafening music.

Beyond Rajburi, on the dinosaur’s neck of the isthmus, sheet lightning flashes around the horizon, red flames sweep over the paddies. Dim fires and sudden smells of spiced cooking announce the villages. We reach the sea coast. The bright moon, and clear equatorial constellations, illuminated mangrove swamps, fireflies flitting green among the gaunt bushes set in water. Shaggy islands offshore, a flashing lighthouse, fishing boats move with strong lights through the swamps. At last the open silver beach, the surf beating up, the empty dark sea rolling beyond.

A cool night. We awaken to dense jungle, lianas, palms, bamboos, fresh green and dewy with morning, and on each side of
the valley densely wooded hills, on which mist and cloud hang low. The sky is patterned with clouds. Villages in paddy clear-  
ings, grey, depressed-looking houses, little plazas with markets in full swing under palm-leaf shelters. Rubber plantations and areca palm groves; the geometry of straight trees in straight lines  
affronting the chaos of jungle.

**Thung Song Junction.** A narrow valley between green hills. The streams run clear and slight; we are crossing a watershed. The railway banks are brilliant with unfamiliar flowers, clumps of sapphire blue, orange, purple, passion vines with purple-cream blossoms, and immense beds of ground orchids with large,  
delicately coloured flowers, rose-suffused white with heavy purple lips. Great flowering trees in jungle, tall shuttlecock palms, wild breadfruit; the most beautiful part of Thailand, the verdant, abundant, flowering jungle of one's childhood imagination.

The land varies throughout the morning. Jungle gives way to heathy wastes of silver sand, broken by pineapple gardens, grey-green, angular Van Gogh. Heath gives way to paddy-cum-  
pasture, ugly villages of graceless plank boxes. A primitive, un-  
typical part of Thailand. Men wear sarongs, carry sheaves of cut rice on yokes; boys run naked over close-bitten pastures,  
flying their kites. Rivers and canals are crossed by bridges of single coconut trunks or double bamboos.

**Haadyai Junction.** The last town of Thailand. Beyond, thick jungle, frontier forest, no border visible.

But—I interrupt the diary—if no border was visible in that dense wilderness, on the other side of it we were quite obviously in a different land, a different culture. The very name of the first station, where we walked down the platform to the immigra-  
tion office and joined the queue of Nepali pedlars, with their hair in plaits around their bullet heads and their legs in dirty striped pyjamas, was characteristic: Padang Besar—a native word com-  
bined with a modern Malay re-spelling of bazaar, imported by the British from India. There were no more neat little primrose-  
yellow Thais; the people on the platform were sepia dark, with flattish and rather wide noses, for this was a region where
Negroid strains were strong, and the men dressed in sarongs with sashes tied in elaborate knots and on their heads wore the songkok, the oval hat of black velvet which corresponds to the fez among Malay Moslems. Even the buildings in Padang Besar reflected a difference in traditions; there was a Dutch look about some of the houses with their wide-eaved and heavily tiled roofs, and the verandahed wooden bungalows beside the station were nothing else than Colonial Edwardian. The place had a stale, Sunday atmosphere, which one often senses in small Malay towns.

The little border state of Perlis, through which we travelled southward, is the smallest and poorest of the sultanates of Malaysia. Its hereditary ruler is the present Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the so-called king of Malaysia, elected by his fellow native rulers as the chief among equals; rumour has it that he was picked by default, because none of the more powerful and prosperous sultans could bear to see one of his real rivals at the head of the state.

The realm of Perlis was a patchwork of jungle and paddy land; out of its plains rose isolated sugarloaf hills of limestone, with great dark caves, half-screened by massive curtains of stalactites, gaping in their precipitous sides. These were the habitations of the first men who lived in Malaya.

The present inhabitants of Perlis were rice farmers, living in little kampongs or tree-shaded villages of houses on piles, roofed with thick rice thatch or corrugated iron. The women were working beside the men, cutting the rice with small knives instead of sickles which are regarded in Malaya as being offensive to the rice spirits; animistic beliefs linger here, as they do in Thailand, in spite of the fact that the Malays have all been Moslems for centuries. In the same way the Malay women, who enjoy many rights and liberties in their traditional social system, have always refused to accept the Moslem custom of purdah, and they worked unveiled in the fields, dressed only in sarongs draped over their breasts, and wearing head-scarves as a protection against the sun. I was fascinated by the curious method of threshing which they used; the sheaves of rice were beaten out
by hand against a small ladder-shaped rack placed over a wide wooden tub, which was protected by a screen of matting to prevent the grains from scattering on the ground. It was an extremely laborious process, but obviously less offensive to the rice spirits than trampling by buffalo.

Farther south, in the larger state of Kedah, the land was tamed and regimented by vast forest-like plantations of rubber trees, whose grey trunks, red-patterned by the knives of the latex collectors, marched in great brigades over the undulating land. The rubber trade was prospering; for many of the older groves had been felled and young trees of the new heavy-bearing strains of rubber recently developed in Malaya had been planted among the stumps of the old. Through the rubber plantations fine new asphalt roads, shining with recent rain, ran down towards the coast.

The light was already failing when we reached Butterworth, the station in the Malayan mainland opposite the island of Penang, whose tall, forest-covered hills were darkly outlined against the last brightness of the western sky. We transferred to the ferry, and as the boat got under way and slowly chugged across the sound the night gathered and Georgetown was outlined along the foot of the hills by the long curving rim of its lights.

A sweating, heavy-bottomed Englishman in Bermuda shorts sat beside us on the ferry. ‘Don’t expect much of Penang,’ he jundered. ‘Fine-looking place, Pearl of the damned Orient, all that sort of thing. But it’s been going downhill ever since we gave it up. The trade’s finished. Just a damned backwater.’ He looked round at me with mildly fanatical eyes. ‘Bloody clip joint, too,’ he muttered, for my hearing only.

On the island shore we walked through the sheds where customs officers were fumbling in the shopping bags of old Chinese women, for Penang, as in the British days, still maintains its own little fiscal enclave. Outside we hired a taxi to the Eastern and Oriental Hotel, and on the way we received an object lesson in the difference between manners in Thailand and manners in Malaya. The Chinese driver did not turn on the meter and Inge
remarked on this. 'Meter broken,' he explained. Having heard
the story so often in Asia, we laughed cynically. He immediately
pulled up. 'I charge you only two dollars. Better than meter price.
You no like, you get out! Walk!' In fact, he was charging us
double the going price, but we were so taken aback by the
pepperiness of his manner, after the soft answers with which
Bangkok drivers will turn away criticism, that we accepted
without protest as he drove us through the damp streets, noisy
with exploding fireworks.

The E. and O. is one of the most charming of the hotels which
the British left scattered over their former Asian possessions. It
is built right on the seashore, looking out over the sound, and
our suite opened on to the lawn which ran down to the sea wall.
The evenings were cooler than any we had experienced since
Chieng Mai, because of the sea breeze which blew in after dusk
and set up a night-long rustling in the palm-trees outside our
windows. In the daytime the view was superb, with the sound
opening out northward past the wooded headlands into the
Malacca Sea, the distant mountains of Kedah rising up beyond
Butterworth on the farther shore, and the Malay praus, with
their strange rectangular wooden sails, riding before the wind
across the channel.
Early on our first morning we set off on foot for the centre of Georgetown, dogged by a lean Chinese trishaw driver who could not believe that we would keep it up. The suburban roads along which we walked were luxuriant in their tropical variety of colour, dazzling white walls and roofs of soft pink tiles, frothing abundances of magenta and orange and crimson flowers clotting the trees and falling in carpets on the pavements, and everywhere the luminous green of palms and bananas. By contrast the centre of the city was treeless and severe, a pattern of wide streets laid out by the British, but Mediterranean in feeling because of the broad-arched arcades, jammed with parked bicycles, which sheltered the pavements. Beside the pavements ran gutters at least a yard deep—the monsoon drains, characteristic of Malayan towns, which are designed to prevent flooding during the rainy season and which are major hazards for unwary pedestrians.

Georgetown is the oldest British town in Malaya, founded in 1785 as part of the effort of the East India Company to destroy the Dutch hold over the trade between the China Seas and the Indian Ocean. But what our first experience of the town impressed upon us, like our first experience of every city of the peninsula, was the extraordinarily cosmopolitan nature of Malayan life. As the barrier between the two great oceans, the point where monsoons meet, the Malay peninsula has since the beginning of history been the gathering-place of traders and adventurers, and the records of Malacca show that even before the first Europeans arrived it was already the haunt of Chinese and Bengalis, of Burmese and Gujeratis, and Arabs from the Red Sea, not to mention all the peoples of the great Indonesian
Archipelago. But with the advent of the Europeans, and particularly of the British, who came to trade and stayed to plant rubber and mine tin, the transient groups of foreigners who inhabited the merchants' barrios of Malacca were transformed into permanent settlers. Chinese and Indians—Sikhs and Tamils—came in tens of thousands to work as tin miners and rubber tappers, traders and policemen, and many of them stayed. Even the Malays, particularly on the west coast, are largely the descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants from Sumatra, Java and the Celebes, a fact which has an important bearing on the current dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia. In fact, the only races which are entirely indigenous to Malaya, in the sense of having been in residence since before the beginning of recorded history, are the aboriginal tribes, like the Semangs and the Senois, who still survive precariously in the mountain jungles that run down the spine of the peninsula.

With the exception of the aborigines, almost all the races of Malaya were prominently in evidence when we took our first morning's stroll through the streets of Georgetown. The twenty-four hour tailors who abounded in the streets near the port, and the proprietors of the emporiums which sold cheap, duty-free European goods, were all Chinese. The clerks in the bank were also Chinese, but the guards armed with shotguns who stood beside the doors were turbaned Sikhs, and the bank's competitors were the Hindu money-changers who sat cross-legged on the platforms of their little booths and sent their children touting for custom.

Compared with the numerous Chinese there are not many resident Malays in Penang. By tradition the Malay is a farmer, who considers tilling the land the best of all occupations, and prefers to work his own plot, however small, and to live in his native kampong. He has little of the urban genius, the power or inclination to build cities and live successfully in large communities. Apart from Malacca, there were no cities on the Malayan peninsula until the Europeans came in the sixteenth century, and even today comparatively few Malays have become absorbed into the life of the towns, which, in terms of majorities, are
mainly Chinese. Those Malays who do drift to the cities are usually landless men who take up fairly humble tasks, though certain types of official occupation are reserved for them by the Malayan Government, which seeks in this way to redress the imbalance created by the mercantile preponderance of the Chinese. In Penang, for example, all the police were Malays.

Yet that morning the streets of Georgetown were filled with Malays from the country—peasants from Kedah who walked through the streets in their best clothes, the men in sarongs and high-collared shirts, with purple songkoks on their heads, and the women in long flowered tunics called kebayas, with muslin scarves over their abundant black hair. The women walked always a little behind the men. They were all going in the direction of the docks, and when we followed them we found hundreds of Malays squatting patiently in a big open-sided shed, in front of a barrier of coiled barbed wire which closed off the entrance to the piers. Inge went up to one of the policewomen on guard, a buxom, sulky-faced Malay girl in a grey uniform, and asked her what was happening. At first she hesitated, looking hostile, as if the question were in some way offensive. Then she abruptly said, 'They are going on Hajj,' and turned away. Later, from the newspapers, we found that the Moslem Malays were setting off on the pilgrim ships for Penang to Jeddah at the rate of nearly two thousand a day.

In Malaya one immediately becomes aware of the extent to which the various races of the country continue to live apart from each other, inhabiting their own quarters, following their own customs and maintaining their own religions as if, in the case of the immigrant communities, they had brought a piece of their own country with them. This applies equally to the Chinese, the Tamils and the Sikhs, and it is one of the reasons why, until comparatively recently, the various communities have lived beside the Malays with relatively little open strife; each race has merely minded its own affairs and ignored the other as far as possible.

One curious feature of the situation, which we first noticed in Penang, is the fact that the British, who for commercial and
military reasons remain very much of a presence in Malaysia, still form a sharply defined community in a way which those who remain in countries like India no longer do. For the Indians it was imperative to occupy every symbolic fortress of British influence, and they now fill the former English clubs, patronize the hotels and shops which were founded for the convenience of the sahibs, and in general seem to gain a great deal of satisfaction from behaving like imitation Englishmen. Neither the Malays nor the Chinese have similar ambitions. They are much too content with being what they are to wish to change themselves. And so the E. and O., without trying to exclude anyone from its doors, remained a place of blond hairy knees, bottled beer, hearty female voices asking for pink gin, with a dining-room full of Englishmen and women eating brown Windsor soup every night, and not even an American voice to break the concord. The English community was even stratified within itself, as we discovered at Whiteway Laidlaws, where elderly Englishmen were still standing behind the counters, selling tropical suitings to rubber planters. It was noon when we entered the store, and we went up to the restaurant on the top floor, to eat our lunch of nasi goreng, a mild and pleasant Malayan hotchpotch of chopped meat, vegetables and fried rice. Here, too, there were only English customers, but it was the London whine and the burr of North Country accents that sounded on every side of us as the wives of soldiers from the British regiments still stationed on the island settled down to their plates of fish and chips and their nice big pots of tea.

Yet, despite this lingering of the British, sahibs and other ranks alike, in a kind of afterglow of empire, it was obviously the Chinese merchants who had emerged as the dominant class in Penang. The evidence of their wealth and pride was everywhere. The doors of their houses were magnificently carved and gilded, and outside them stood immense joss-sticks, six feet tall and two inches thick, burning in continued celebration of the New Year and in discreetly ostentatious display of the householders’ wealth. Riding back to the E. and O. in the early afternoon—we had at last succumbed to the trishaw driver’s per-
sistence—we passed a large convent school. The girls, dressed in pale blue uniforms, were just coming out, and a mêlée of black-trousered Chinese amahs waited on the pavement, while the street itself was jammed with chauffeur-driven American and German cars. It was the Chinese girls who drove away in the rich cars, while the English girls were bundled by their amahs into waiting trishaws and propelled by the straining calves of ragged coolies.

After the still heat of the day the wind veered an hour before sunset, the water of the sound became choppy, and the temperature fell abruptly. All at once, as we walked out on to the lawn from our room, there was an extraordinary awakening of life along the seashore. A white-headed, rusty-backed eagle cruised backwards and forwards over the water from his perch in a dead tree at the end of the sea wall, and a young Australian with a stubby fishing-rod competed rather successfully with him, drawing in a number of spiny little pink and silver fish which a little Malay boy threaded carefully on a string. The angular, bob-tailed hotel cats ran hunting over the lawn, and mewed enviously at the boy. And then the swifts came darting frantically through the air, squealing loudly as they swerved around each other and almost miraculously avoided collisions with the big bats that began to emerge, still blundering and half awake, into the fading light.
Penang Island consists mostly of high hills covered with thick rain forest. Across the central ridge there are still only footpaths through the jungle, but around the coast runs a circular road, one of those excellent roads one finds almost everywhere in western Malaya, which enables one to see almost all the villages of this island, where life is essentially peripheral. For twenty dollars, about fifty shillings, we hired a car to take us on the fifty-mile trip. The driver was an old, desiccated man of indeterminate race, with skin as charcoal black as a Negro, but sharply cut features which suggested Indian blood; his English certainly had the singsong accent of India.

In the suburbs of Georgetown the white villas set in their flowery gardens exuded an Anglo-Asian gemütlichkeit. Then, as the hills closed in on the coast, the road became a kind of corniche, twisting around the repeated headlands and skirting the beaches where the palm trees leant over the breaking edge of the surf and the rocks ran out in natural breakwaters, thrusting their smooth backs above the water like marine beasts; off the shore were tiny islands with dense crowns of verdure spilling over the tops of their miniature cliffs.

For a few miles beyond Georgetown hotels and clubs nestled over the beaches in the little coves where the hills receded, but after that we came to the Malay kampongs, where the houses were scattered in an open pattern, away from the road, and almost always in the green dusk under the shadow of the coconut palms. One had the feeling, while passing through these villages, that the Malays deliberately attempted to retire into an obscurity reproducing that of the ancestral jungle; even their taste in colours seemed to reflect the warm twilight world of the forest,
for the batiks from which the Malay women make their sarongs are almost always in browns and sombre greens, the colours of earth and vegetation. The houses in the kampongs were light, airy structures, of split bamboo interwoven in herring-bone patterns, or of teakwood with whimsical fretwork decorations and wooden fanlights carved in elaborate lacy patterns. Often the whole wall of a house would consist of slatted shutters which could be opened wide during the cool of the morning and closed during the heat of midday.

In contrast to these elegant and highly functional little buildings, almost always surrounded by orchids and other flowering plants, the grimly plain stucco houses of the local Chinese stood beside the road, the avenue of trade. For even in the villages of Malaya, as in those of Cambodia, all the business seems to be in the hands of the Chinese, and all the Chinese seem to be engaged in business.

The Malays despise trading and most of those who live along the shores of Penang Island are fishermen. Dark men in loincloths, they were wading far out from the beaches into the shallow waters, dragging their nets into place, and paddling in long boats with high, sharp-pointed prows to tend the fish traps, whose posts projected in jagged clusters above the surface of the deeper water. Along the beach, on the edge of each village, there were tall racks of bamboo over which the black nets were draped to dry.

Beyond the largest fishing settlement of Telok Bahang the road turned inland, twisting up into the winding pass among the hills on the north-western side of the island. At first we drove through wild jungle, where the blade-shaped leaves of epiphytic orchids formed dense collars around the trunks of the trees. A little higher, where the peaks gave shelter from the sea winds, the slopes had been cleared and terraced for plantations of young rubber and of sugarloaf-shaped clove trees. The driver stopped and clambered up on to the terraces. He came back with a handful of twigs covered with bunches of immature clove blossoms. They were already shaped like the cloves of commerce, but they were waxily translucent, as if they had been carved out
of pale green jade; when we broke them apart, they gave off only a faint trace of the familiar odour. From another tree the driver picked a handful of fruit which looked like hard green apricots. 'Nutmegs,' he explained, and he picked up one fruit which was lying brown and half rotten on the ground, and broke it open to reveal the ripe nut inside.

When the road eventually emerged from the pass, we looked out, through the open screen of a great grove of areca palms, over the narrow plain that runs along the western coast of Penang Island—rice fields and coconut groves, stretching away to the yellow beaches and the sea beyond, its aquamarine changing to blue as the water deepened. We drove on through kampons surrounded by orchards of mangosteen and rambutan, over another spur of hills where a brass-tridented shrine to Siva stood in the shelter of the high jungle hills, and round past the airport to the village of Sungei Kluang.

Here, on the top of a rock outcrop beside the road, stood a small Chinese temple, with dragon-crowned roof, red wooden pillars, and a faint glow of gilded lacquer in the darkness of its open sanctuary. It was the Snake Temple, one of the most important Chinese shrines in Penang. In most of the Chinese temples of South-east Asia, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism mingle together with great mutual tolerance, so that it is usually hard to tell which is the dominant cult at any particular shrine, but the Snake Temple, dedicated to a deity called Chor Soo Kong, reeked with ancient animism.

Stepping cautiously up the rocky path, since we had no idea where the revered occupants of the shrine might wander, we were intercepted by a little white-shirted Chinese who guided us into the sanctuary in which gilded black-faced deities presided over the Divine Ones, as the Chinese worshippers call the temple snakes. The Divine Ones were there in abundance, draped in barely stirring torpor over the water pipes and the rafters, on odd shelves, on the massive stone incense-burners, and hanging in clotted loops on dried branches which had been thrust into a series of big Ming vases standing on a table before the altar. They were ugly creatures, with mottled green-grey
skins, short thick bodies and villainous-looking triangular heads. I found later that they were a kind of pit viper whose bite, like that of the English adder, is painful though rarely fatal, but we did not know this at the time, and they certainly looked extremely dangerous.

As we were watching them distrustfully, two old Chinese women came into the temple, lit joss-sticks to add to the already heavy stench of incense, and then, bowing to the gods on the altar, and to the snakes, carefully placed eggs before each of the vases. The snakes took no notice, nor did they react when the guide began to rearrange their folds. He then picked one of the young ones gently off a branch and held it in the palm of his hands. Unlike the older snakes, it was a bright and uniform apple green. Its thin red tongue flickered, but it reacted in no hostile way. 'They not mind being touched. Only if anyone squeeze them, then they get angly.' The guide nonchalantly took down a mature snake which merely writhed limply in his hand. 'That one plegend. Soon she go to snake maternity home.' He pointed out an old blackened incense-burner in the corner of the temple where he claimed that all the snakes went for their viviparous accouchements.

His explanation for the harmless torpor of the snakes was that they were perpetually doped by the fumes of incense which was being burned all day in the temple. 'Night-time we close doors. Then snake come down, play around floor, eat eggies.' Once, he told us, there had been even more of the Divine Ones, but during the war the Japanese had irreverently eaten most of them. 'Chinese also eat snake,' he admitted. 'But they eat python!' And chuckling at that magnificent piece of one-upmanship, he led us off to see the temple pythons, kept in a cage behind the altar, a dozen large, sluggish creatures, with magnificent diamond markings. 'Little snake eat eggies, big snake eat chicken,' he remarked. I felt like a chicken among the pythons a moment later when three of the temple officials bore down on me with a large visitors' book, which they politely requested that I should sign. Perhaps, one of them blandly suggested, I would also make a contribution to the temple funds. I looked in the book. A
professor from Texas had just put himself down for five dollars. Surrounded by those bland presences, I was seized with a positively Asian fear of losing face, and, instead of giving the dollar I had intended, I inwardly cursed my fellow academic and wrote down six dollars, to the satisfaction of the temple officials and to Inge’s pungently expressed disgust. The other day, reading James Kirkup’s Tropic Temper, I was amused to see that he had been bamboozled in exactly the same way in another Chinese temple of Penang.

In a degenerate form the rites of the Snake Temple were evidently a survival of that primeval animistic cult of the Nagas, the snake spirits of the earth, which one finds throughout the East, commemorated not only in the great snake balustrades of Angkor and Chieng Mai, but also in the cult of the cobra which occurs in every form of Buddhism, and in the primitive snake stones of Indian villages which mark the dim border-line between Brahminism and the thousands of local spirit cults that have been incorporated into the amorphous pantheon of the Hindu religion. It is rarely, indeed, that live serpents are still the object of public worship, but in many parts of India, and even as far west as Egypt, snakes like the cobra are still reverenced by the ordinary people and treated as incarnations of supernatural beings who must be placated by gifts of food. How far the Greek cult of the serpent which formed part of the worship of Aesculapius at Epidaurus is linked with these Asian snake cults it is fascinating to speculate. Aesculapius has been convincingly identified by W. K. C. Guthrie, in The Greeks and their Gods, as one of the chthonian deities, who were earth-dwelling Gods, as the Nagas were. Certainly the priests who officiate at the Snake Temple in Penang are regarded as healers, like Aesculapius; there is a story that the land on which the temple stands was donated in the 1850’s by an Englishman whom a priest of Chor Soo Kong had cured of some sickness which had proved intractable to the European doctors.

It was Saturday, and in all the towns which the British founded through the East, from Bombay to Hong Kong, Saturday night has the same mildly festive connotations as it does in England.
After returning from the Snake Temple, we drank our gin slings before nightfall, sitting on the lawn of the E. and O. and watch-
ing the big junk-sailed boats putting out from the George-
town harbour and sailing northward in a long stately line
towards the open sea and the night fishing-grounds off the
coast of Kedah. Then we set off, walking through the cool
evening, to dine in one of the Chinese hotels up the Penang
Road.

The Penang Road was a kind of gaudy Edgware Road of the
Orient. There were supermarkets and ice-cream parlours;
cinemas glittering with neon and covered with crudely painted
roof-high placards of American, Chinese and Indian films;
Chinese eating-houses with televisions blaring, fluorescent tubes
dispensing a hard light on the white lavatory tiles of the walls,
and oilcloth tables packed with youths and girls shovelling in
great bowls of noodles with a quick flicker of chopsticks; and
bars crowded with British soldiers in white shirts and flannels
(uniforms are no longer worn on the street for fear of offending
nationalist sentiments) drinking Singapore beer and getting off
with the Malay prostitutes, simple peasant girls thrown on the
streets by the Moslem custom of easy divorce, which is still legal
in Malaya.

We strolled along, admiring the narrow vertical signs which
hung outside the Chinese shops, each with its single column of
beautifully hand-drawn red or black ideograms, and noting the
curious transformations that came over English words when they
appeared in Malay advertisements or notices: Polis, Pos and
Kastam were obvious, and even Baisikel was easy, but Talipon
and Talivishen took a moment’s thought before one recognized
them as telephone and television, and bomba led me far astray until
I eventually discovered that it was a Malay corruption of pump
and meant the fire brigade.

The Chinese and Indian shops were all open; the Jews had
hurried out at the moment when sunset announced the end of
Sabbath to take down their shutters and join in the week-end
harvest; and under the arcades a variety of pedlars had set up
their stalls. The Tamils were selling cheap shirts and shoddy
cotton print sarongs, the Nepalis squatted on the ground with bits of carpet to display their semi-precious stones which looked like variegated fruit drops, the Bengalis went in for Penguin books and grubby-looking editions of Dale Carnegie and of the *Kama-sutra*, and the Malay fruit sellers were cutting up pineapples with great artistry into carefully trimmed slices which they sold for a few cents each.

In the channel of the street, between the raised pavements, Chinese youths roared by in tightly packed squads of ten or even twenty motor bikes at a time, providing a roaring obbligato to the cacophony of radios, televisions, firecrackers and sheer human noise which is the inevitable accompaniment of any gathering in which the Chinese are a majority. And along the narrow footway which the encroachments of pedlars had left under the arcades, crowded a representative selection of the population of Penang. Whatever their race, the men were fairly simply dressed in some adaptation of western garb; all of them wore white shirts, and, with the exception of the turbaned Sikhs, it was by their nether garments that one distinguished them. A coloured sarong meant a Malay, a white dhoti meant a Tamil, and trousers or shorts meant a Chinese. But the women showed their variations of tradition clearly and splendidly in the costumes that they wore. The Chinese chose either the samfu, a two-piece pyjama-like outfit with the tunic tightly fitting the waist, or the cheongsam, the tight frock with high collar and skirt split at the side to reveal a glimpse—sometimes more than a glimpse—of pale ivory thigh. The Malay girls, darker, plumper, more voluptuous, wore their richest-coloured sarongs with tight-fitting lace jackets which emphasized their rounded bosoms; the more elegant of them had draped the fronts of their sarongs in such a way that their ankles showed enticingly as they walked. These Malay girls had a pleasantly animal look, a kind of musky naturalness, in comparison with the porcelain-doll quality of the more beautiful Chinese girls. But the most splendid of all were the Tamils, with their almost black velvety skins, great kohl-ed eyes, dark oiled hair interwoven with jasmine garlands, noses and ears glittering with diamond-studded gold jewels, and saris of clear
magenta, emerald green or carmine pink outcrying in intensity of colour every other costume around them.

Colour and vitality, noise and—above all—prosperity: these were the qualities that impressed one most about Saturday night on the Penang Road. Everyone looked neat, well-laundered, sufficiently fed; everyone had enough money to put on his best clothes and enjoy himself at least once a week. A few old men and women were begging, but the absence of real destitution on a large scale was quite astonishing. I am not merely making a comparison with India and Pakistan, with what I had seen in Bihar two years before and what I had seen in Chittagong little more than a month ago. What I remembered as I walked along the Penang Road was the Europe of the 'thirties; a walk down the Whitechapel High Road or the Faubourg St. Antoine or through the straggling villages of the Rhondda in those days gave far more evidence of dramatic poverty than we were to see in any of the cities of Malaysia.
After two days in Penang we set off for Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, 250 miles to the south-east. We tried to get seats on one of the taxis which ply regularly between the markets of the two cities and which take individual passengers, but we found it impossible because the Chinese drivers objected to the luggage we carried. Five suitcases, and all the other impedimenta! ‘What if everyone else came with as much as that?’ they argued with absurd logic, forgetting that in Malaya, where heavy clothes are unnecessary, almost everyone travels light. In the end we had to hire a separate car, and we started off at seven in the morning, with a Chinese driver who claimed to know no English, and who took a poker-faced delight in showing his skill in risky situations.

We began sedately enough, driving on to the Butterworth ferry, which slowly threaded its way between little barges with eyes painted on their bows and the blunt-stered coasting steamers which trade up and down the Strait of Malacca and in more tranquil times used to pick their way through the Indonesian Archipelago. The ferry was packed with motor cyclists, and as soon as the ramp was down at Butterworth they drove off with a great surge of sound and raced in a noisy phalanx—at least a hundred of them—through the quiet dull streets of the town.

The Malayan countryside is rather like a rich feast, with a little too much of everything good. To begin with, we drove once again through paddy and palm grove, the commonplaces of Asian landscape, but much more constant in their visual appeal than the repeated mention of them in travel books might suggest. The low hills rise up on the edge of the plain, and merge
into the mist-grey ranges of the centre of the island. Soon, inevitably, we are in the dappled shade of the rubber groves. Chinese women with wide palm-leaf hats go down the long rows of trees with metal containers strapped to the backs of their bicycles, collecting the rubber that falls in glistening drops into the cups attached to the trunks; occasionally the collectors are Tamil girls, and then, in contrast to the sober blue samfu of the Chinese plantation workers, their brilliant saris gleam like cries of colour in the shadow of the plantations.

It was on the long straight roads through the rubber plantations that our driver first began to show his love of speed; like us, he seemed to feel oppressed by the hypnotic monotony of those apparently endless rows of scarred trunks, and we rather welcomed his haste, until the first hairbreadth escape, when for one appalling moment I thought we could not avoid overturning a bullock cart drawn by two white oxen and driven by a venerable Indian farmer in white turban who looked as if he had been magically transported from some village road far away among the hills of the Deccan.

But the Indian survived, and I hope he duly performed a puja of thanks at one of the many small temples surmounted by the bulls of Siva which we passed as we travelled through the plantation country. Some of them were beautiful little buildings, full of nostalgic echoes of the South Indian fatherland of so many plantation workers in Malaya. I remember quite vividly one which stood in a garden of blossoming frangipani trees on the edge of a rubber plantation, with a mirror-smooth tank beside it, in the middle of which stood a wooden pavilion of charming proportions. And there was another, a Vishnu temple, whose façade and spire were completely covered with gaudily painted stucco figures of deities and celestial maidens, among whom I saw, not only recognizable deities like Krishna and Radha, but also two blond European children coyly holding up the edges of their shirts as if they were about to curtsy to the Hindu gods. Had Shirley Temple joined the vast chaotic pantheon of South Indian Hinduism? Or were the children those of some English plantation manager who had been involved in one of the
spectacular tragedies which have more than once impressed the imagination of the simple labourers of Malaya and inspired them to incorporate dead Englishmen into the ever-growing company of the gods?

In comparison with the bright colours and proliferating ornaments of both the Indian and Chinese temples, there was a discreet retirement about the religion of the Malays themselves. At first, as we went through their villages, often so deeply embowered that it was difficult to see the houses as we looked into the sunlight filtering down among the trees, we could not identify the mosques, but later we realized that they were the plain wooden buildings, with low pyramidal roofs, which stood approximately in the middle of each settlement. These untypical mosques symbolized the austerity with which the Moslem religion is observed among the Malays, who reserve their more exotic practices for the surviving paganism centred on the activities of the pawangs, the medicine-men who operate discreetly in the shadows of Malay life and are custodians of magic lore, often practising necromancy, just as the narrators of the Malay shadow plays are the custodians of the traditions of Hinduism, which preceded Islam as the accepted religion of large parts of Malaya.

The mosaic picture of Malay life built up, fragment by fragment, as we travelled on into the Sultanate of Perak. On the edge of a small town the bells rang for Sunday mass as a straggling line of Malay women in their best sarongs and kebayas filed into a Catholic church. On the floor of an open-walled gurudwara, a crowd of white-turbaned Sikhs sat listening to the reading of the Granth, while their women, dressed in the shalwar and kamiz of the Punjab, gossiped in the green garden outside. And a procession of Malay villagers, the women first and the men behind them, singing and beating on little hand drums, marched along the side of the road in front of a car filled with smug, fat men who looked like politicians.

Following the long curving valleys in the foothills of the central mountain chain of Malaya, the road became an erratic undulating lane, with wide, well-trimmed grass verges, and the
jungle flowing in a green surf up to their edges, as if we were travelling through a magnificent forest park. This was the Malay jungle at its most beautiful and romantic, lush, dense, abundant, mingling every kind of vegetation—the deciduous and the evergreen, palms, bamboos, tree-ferns, lianas, climbing orchids, wild bananas, wild breadfruit, in an extraordinary riot of greenery, out of which, like rocks out of a turbulent green sea, emerged the vegetation-pelted bulks of limestone cliffs. Perhaps part of its charm was the feeling that it was a civilized jungle, kept within bounds. One was never long out of sight of human activity. The Malay farmers had cleared patches of ground for small plantations, and outside their cottages sheets of greyish-white rubber hung hardening on the fences, and ivory-coloured flakes of tapioca dried on the ground.

At one point in the jungle a rough barrier of boughs had been dragged across the road, and a squad of armed policemen were stopping all the cars. A young moustached officer talked urgently to our driver in Malay. 'We are looking for bandits,' he explained to us in English. 'They have been robbing goldsmiths' shops—Ipoh and K.L. I have told your driver not to stop except for the police. They are dangerous men.' But, though we passed through several more police barriers before we reached Kuala Lumpur, we heard no more news of the bandits, who seemed to have vanished completely after their series of audacious raids.

Ipoh, which is probably best known as a great centre of horse racing, much frequented by the British in colonial days, was a charming country town with garden suburbs and attractive bungalows, the kind of little upland paradise which the sahibs so often managed to create as a consolation for the loss of home, and which many of them are reluctant to leave, since they realize that home will never again seem so paradisial as its Malayan substitute. But Ipoh is also a great Malayan Buddhist centre. In the bases of the sheer-sided limestone bluffs in the outskirts of the city open-sided galleries have been worn away by the action of water and transformed into natural colonnades by the creation of stalactites, while tunnel-like caves probe deep into the cliff-sides. The Chinese Buddhists have taken over the caves, built
steps and gaudy porticos, and covered the walls inside with paintings illustrating the myths of Mahayanist Buddhism. The gardens outside the temple were full of Chinese youths and girls, who had come out for a Sunday outing and were enthusiastically taking snapshots of each other posed against rocks and shrubs or posturing on the steps leading into the cave. I wanted the driver to stop so that we could go into the caves, but he was anxious to reach Kuala Lumpur as quickly as possible so as to pick up a fare back to Penang the next day, and he played to the extremity his game of 'No speak English', ignoring even my grotesquely obvious manual signs, and stopped instead a mile down the road at the Meh Prasit Temple, a square cloister inhabited by modern plaster versions of the 108 seated Buddhas of Thai tradition and by a reclining Sakyamuni, built of concrete and more than seventy feet long, with a monstrously vulgar smirk on his repainted lips. The only interesting feature of the place, which had much less charm than the temples of Bangkok, was the fact that it represented yet another component in the cosmopolitan mosaic of Malayan life. There are many Thais in northern Malaya, and the Siamese Government retains a strong traditional interest in the country; in fact, it annexed the border sultanates for a brief period during the 1940's when Thailand, following its carefully developed Realpolitik of the powerless, was collaborating, in all apparent enthusiasm, with Japan.

Beyond Ipoh the alternating pattern of rubber plantations and green jungle was broken by the only kind of desert one ever encounters on the rain-drenched Golden Peninsula—the deserts made by man. Vast areas in this region were scarred by the great open workings of tin mines, and traversed by huge spidery networks of pipes supported on bamboo scaffolds. Where the miners had departed, great stretches of upland, many square miles in extent, had been left completely flayed, and were now eroded wildernesses, where only thin grass and low meagre bushes grew among the dead-white piles of tailings.

But nature is nothing if not abundant in Malaya, and these areas of ruined land were more than counterbalanced by the interludes of scenery which, in its own verdant, unaustere
style, was as beautiful as I have seen anywhere in the tropics. There were magnificent glimpses of the mist-covered crests of the Cameron Highlands, with the clouds nestling down in their thickly forested clefts and valleys. There were shadowy intimate valleys filled with tree ferns and coconut palms, and watered by clear pebbly streams in which the Malay women sat immersed to the waist as they washed their clothes. And about ten miles out of Kuala Lumpur we drove through a stretch of fine parkland, dotted with enormous rain trees whose green foliage was suffused by the soft pink of newly opening blossoms; in the shade of these trees sat parties of English people who had driven out from the capital to picnic and to exercise their dogs.
It was this surfeit of fine scenery that by contrast made the first impact of Kuala Lumpur so depressing, as we drove through the miles of palm-leaf slums into the centre of this sprawling city, where building had not even begun to keep pace with the influx of people since it was metamorphosed from a rubber-opulent provincial town into the capital of one of the busiest countries of Asia. A successful metropolis needs either a dramatically planned centre or a historical tradition made manifest in its buildings. But in Malaya it is Singapore that has the dramatic planning and Malacca that has the historical tradition. Kuala Lumpur, like the makeshift capitals of so many of the new countries, has neither; it grew so rapidly with the events of the last decade that before anyone had decided what a capital city should be like it had already become too large for effective planning to be feasible.

We found a room in a new and coldly efficient Chinese hotel patronized mostly by Asian diplomats and by rich Malay rustics who come to the capital to win governmental favours; a vase of grotesque brown and yellow spider orchids bearing our name was put in our room as part of the ‘personalized’ service, but the clerks and the boys were indifferent and negligent. Later we toured the city, driving in a taxi through the bazaar, asleep for Sunday, and making our pilgrimage to the railway station and the national museum.

The railway station is the most interesting building in Kuala Lumpur, an extraordinary Moresque extravaganza of domes, cupolas, pavilions and winding staircases whose forgotten British architect handled the conventional Moslem styles of local mosques and sultans’ palaces with the same originality as Gaudi
used in transmuting the Gothic style in Barcelona. The Malays, who seem to appreciate the building, have kept it freshly painted in dazzling white and Cambridge blue, so that the extraordinary curves and multiple planes retain their pristine clarity of outline. It is one of those rare instances—like St. Pancras Station—where the incongruous meeting of a traditional style and a modern function has produced an eccentrically satisfying synthesis.

The National Museum was a rather grandiloquent new building with none of the railway station’s idiosyncratic charm, in which the meagre harvest of Malay archaeology and art was arranged with a masterly museumship that made everything appear far more important and more attractive than it really was, a necessary accomplishment in view of the extraordinary scarcity of the kind of relics which appeal to those who prefer to see their history in visual terms.

In most of South-east Asia, history has a very concrete image, as we had seen among the dead cities of Thailand and Cambodia, and the past, set in enduring stone which time and the jungle can never wholly destroy, is still very much alive to the people of such countries. But when one reaches Malaya this sense of living in history in a physical way, with the debris of dead empires always around one, immediately vanishes. The beautiful jungles of Malaya harbour no great ruined cities, no vast statues of gods looking impassively out of the green shadows. The Malays have a history, of course; kingdoms rose and fell, wars were fought over the peninsula for as long past as we can trace, and there were great waves of religious conversion, first to Hinduism and then to Islam. Yet the people of the peninsula never felt the impulse to commemorate their life in enduring form. They left no architectural monuments, no great statues of lasting stone, and very little in the way of even minor artifacts that have survived the centuries. The sense of history has not been in their blood, mainly because in the Malayan kampongs the timeless traditions of the countryside, the rule of custom, count far more than history, with its process of everlasting change.

As for art, even the Buddhist empire of Sri Vijaya, which
included most of Malaya and which was in touch with India during the last period of the great Gupta school of Buddhist sculpture, left tantalizingly little of any interest or quality, while the arrival of Islam so effectively killed whatever the Malays may once have had in the way of a native art that only a few folk crafts remained, of extraordinarily pedestrian quality. If one can judge from the islands of Indonesia like Nyas and Borneo that have remained pagan, there must once have existed throughout this region a vigorous primitive art linked with animistic observances. But such arts are usually manifested in perishable materials, like the woods that rot so quickly in tropical climates, while one suspects that the Moslem missionaries at the time of the conversion of Malaya in the fifteenth century were just as assiduous in their smelling out and burning of fetiches and masks as the Christian missionaries who followed them. So the Malays became a people not merely without history but also, except on the most trivial level, without art. Now, a nation for the first time, they are being urged to develop a consciousness of history which they never possessed before, and I was interested to see that it was the Malays themselves, rather than the Chinese or the Indians, who came in numbers to spend their Sunday afternoon at the National Museum; many of them wore the dress that is normally used only on ceremonial occasions, the baju or high-collared shirt, with a silver-threaded sarong worn like a kilt over the trousers.

But, compared with the hundreds of people we saw absorbing education at the National Museum, there were thousands enjoying the Sunday evening pleasures of the great amusement park in Bukit Bintang Road. The amusement parks, the ‘Worlds’ as they are usually called (Great World, Happy World, New World, and so on), originated in China as great centres where one could find any conceivable form of entertainment. In China itself, from all one can gather, they have now taken on an earnest, educational quality, but wherever the Overseas Chinese live they carry on in their old unregenerate way, devoted simply to the pursuit of pleasure.

We paid out fifty cents each at the entrance wicket, guarded by gigantic Sikhs, and joined the stream of Chinese and Malays
of all ages who wandered in the labyrinth of gaudily lit alleys. It was an enormous oriental combination of a fairground, a bazaar, and a miniature Broadway. There were switchbacks and roundabouts, dodgem cars and roller-skating rinks; shops of all kinds, shooting galleries, and games of chance appealing to the Chinese love of gambling; cinemas, strip-tease booths, and peep-shows with Malayan versions of ‘What the Butler Saw’; great open-air restaurants and little odorous booths selling satay, a Malayan shish-kebab of small fragments of meat grilled on bamboo skewers. One of the dancing halls advertised the joget, the traditional Malayan dance, but it was still early in the evening, and only two girls gyrated on the platform, listlessly stamping out to each other this curious dance, with its erotic postures and its taboos on physical contact. In the next hall, which was western-style, the hostesses in their sheer cheongsams sat demurely on a row of chairs facing the door, while the band played softly and a crowd of Chinese youths bashfully hovered in the entrance. It seemed as if everyone were waiting in a paralysis of initiative for something to happen, a signal from the gods to propel them into action. It came when a couple of young Australian sailors, tall and blond, walked into the hall, bought their dance tickets, and immediately whirled two minute Chinese girls in a frenzied caper across the floor. Five minutes later not a single wallflower hostess was left without a partner, and the whole hall was filled with wildly twisting couples.

But except the joget dancers there was nothing that one might not have seen at Blackpool or Coney Island until we came to the Chinese opera house, an indispensable feature of every Malay and Hong Kong amusement park. A company had just arrived from Taiwan, and the great shed was plastered with placards showing the magnified and splendidly jewelled heads of the stars, all of whom looked alike under their highly conventionalized make-up. Already, at nine o’clock, we could hear the cymbals banging through the cracks in the wooden walls; the opera had begun its long course, which would continue until well after one in the morning. What first impressed us as we entered the hall, was the contrast between the splendour on the stage,
the magnificent and brilliant costumes of sequined silk, scintillating with every movement of an actor's hand, and the grimy shabbiness of the undecorated hall with its long rows of hard wooden seats, already crowded with Chinese, mainly women and children. But as the play continued we found that this contrast was perpetual; it was the contrast between the splendid world of theatrical illusion, highly formalized in every respect, and the untidy, informal ordinary world which the actors merely ignored.

As the story went its course, developed in falsetto song, in rhythmic speech, in the controlled gestures of the hands, and in the sweeping of the actors' long white sleeves, the audience sat passively, never applauding, often talking loudly and making no attempt to subdue their children, who ran yelling up and down the gangways. An old woman pasted our tickets on our chairs, which were then reserved for the whole performance; people came and went in a completely erratic manner, popping out for a snack, returning half an hour or even an hour later, apparently unconcerned that they had missed a long stretch of the play, which in any case they seemed to know thoroughly. Every now and again a shrill cry would go up from one of the seats, and a dirty little man in khaki shorts would hurry in with a bowl of tea.

As in the Restoration theatre, this perpetual noise and movement in the hall was countered by an exceptionally loud style of acting. On gramophone records traditional Chinese singing sounds thin and tinny, but in a large hall it has a surprising resonance, and the high-pitched plangent voice of the prima donna was extraordinarily penetrating, though there were times when even the loudest singing was drowned by the crescendo of noise that came from the orchestra as Chinese violins, shrill wooden trumpets, a battery of gongs and a couple of saxophones blared out fortissimo to emphasize the dramatic entry of a leading character.

Even without knowing Chinese it was easy to follow the general lines of the opera, a tale of family intrigue and the perils of getting married for money, brought to a happy conclusion
by the benign intervention of divine beings. As for the music, once we had got over our initial bewilderment, we began to follow its intricacies, and to distinguish the way in which its various moods were attuned to the characters who sang and to the changing intentions of the scenes. Some of the heroine’s arias were very moving, and in the gayer tunes one felt that Mozart would—or should—have been interested. The mood of the opera varied from pathos to slapstick comedy, and there were marked differences of treatment which corresponded in their own way to Shakespeare’s convention of verse for the high scenes and prose for the low. The leading characters wore an elaborate mask-like make-up of dead-white and carmine, used conventional hand and finger movements resembling the mudras of the Indian dance, and instead of natural changes of expression, which would have ruined the make-up, they moved their eyes with great skill and expressiveness. The comic characters, on the other hand, relied largely on exaggerated actions and facial movements. An adventitious naturalness was given to the whole performance by the frequent appearance, sometimes in the middle of the most dramatic action, of the little stage hand in a ragged singlet, with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth; once, when a pair of splendid celestial beings, flourishing swords and clad in cloth-of-silver robes, needed a mountain from which to make their orations, he hurried in with a battered kitchen table and squatted to hold its rickety legs as they spoke from its eminence in rhythmic tones. Nobody, either on the stage or in the hall, took any notice of his untidy presence. Indeed, after more than two hours, we ourselves had begun to accept the conventions as no stranger than those of our own grand opera. In other words, we were converted, and afterwards, in Singapore and Hong Kong, we made sure not to miss the local performances of the Chinese opera. But in none of them was the singing so fine or the acting so perfected as in that first performance at Kuala Lumpur. In Taiwan the tradition had been more purely preserved than among the local groups of Overseas Chinese, and this doubtless applies to traditions other than the opera.
When we left the opera it was almost midnight and the 'World' was more active than ever. The platform in the joget pavilion was crowded with stamping figures circling sinuously around each other, and gangs of youths in tight trousers hung around the shooting galleries and drifted along the alleys. Yet there was not the least suggestion of rowdiness and this absence of hooliganism we noticed repeatedly on our visits to the amusement parks in both Malaya and Hong Kong. The Chinese have a natural reticence and dignity which even the adolescents seem to maintain, and while they love noise, at the right time and place, they seem to have little stomach for public violence. How this fits in with the stories one hears in Malaya of Chinese Communist atrocities or of the outrages committed by the Secret Societies I cannot say, but the case of the Japanese is probably an instructive parallel.
33 Malacca: rain in a Chinese temple
34 Malacca: a buffalo bathes in the harbour
35 Macao Harbour and the hills of China

36 The quiet streets of Macao
We left Kuala Lumpur the morning after our arrival, partly because we did not like the city, but mainly because we were impatient to reach Malacca, which lay only two hours away by road.

‘Whoever is Lord of Malacca’, said Tomé Pires in the sixteenth century, ‘has his hand on the throat of Venice.’ Then, and for long afterwards, Malacca was the most important seaport in the whole of the East, owing to its peculiar position at the junction of two climatic zones. ‘This port of Malacca’, said another Portuguese chronicler, ‘forms a point where some monsoons commence and others end, so that the inhabitants of Malacca call those of India people of the West, and the Javanese, Chinese and all other of those Islanders, people of the East; and Malacca is in the middle of all this. And those which come from the East to the West find here western merchandise and carry it away with them, leaving that which they bring of their own here instead, and in like manner do they who come here from the West.’

Today Malacca is one of the minor cities of Malaya. Its harbour was already silting up during the Dutch occupation in the eighteenth century, and the foundation of Singapore in 1819 greatly diminished its trade, while the introduction of steamships robbed it of the advantages of standing at the meeting-point of the two monsoons. It declined into a coasting port, enjoying brief flurries of prosperity during the rubber booms; the railway never reached it and the main highways avoided it. Yet when the Malaysian Federation was created this decayed seaport became one of the constituent states, not because of its present importance, but because of the part it has played, since the end of the fourteenth century, in the history of every race, including
the Malays themselves, which has struggled to control the destiny of the Golden Peninsula.

Late in the fourteenth century, when the great Indonesian Empire of Majapahit collapsed in dynastic strife, a chieftain bearing the title of Parameswara, the Prince Consort, escaped to the Malay Peninsula, where he found refuge in an obscure estuary village called Five Islets, the haunt of fishermen and petty pirates. Soon he realized that trade paid better than piracy, and by adroitly accepting the suzerainty of the Emperor of China and at the same time becoming converted to Islam under the name of Iskander Shah (claiming direct descent from Alexander the Great), he contrived to make his tiny capital into the meeting-place of the traders from China and Java in the east and Arabia and India in the west. Malacca developed into a city state, the first real city of Malaya; ‘this city of Malacca’, Duarte Barbosa recorded, ‘is the richest trading port and possesses the most valuable merchandise, and most numerous shipping and extensive traffic that is known in all the world.’ It was so rich, indeed, that the great trading magnates of the city reckoned their wealth in bahars of gold—a bahar being the equivalent of approximately 400 lb.—and one of the last Malay rulers of Malacca possessed a fortune, accumulated out of taxes on trade, which was estimated at 140 quintals or 7 tons of gold, beside large quantities of precious stones.

Inevitably, this great port excited the attention and cupidity of the Portuguese when they sailed eastward after their capture of Goa to secure control over the Spice Islands of the Indonesian Archipelago, and in 1510 Afonso de Albuquerque captured it after a dramatic stage, and built his great fortress A Famosa, in the protection of whose walls there arose a Eurasian city with 14 churches, 4 monasteries, and 7,000 Christian converts. For a single rich and splendid century, with Malacca, Goa and later Macao on the China coast as the three strong points of a great triangle of shipping routes, the Portuguese virtually controlled the flow of European goods to the East, and of Chinese, Indonesian and Indian goods to the West.

Subsequently Malacca’s fate fluctuated with those of the empires
which controlled the trade of the East. In 1649, after decades of struggle, it fell to the Dutch, who transferred the main centre of Far Eastern trade to Batavia, but retained Malacca as a fortress to police the shipping that used the vital strait between Malaya and Sumatra. By the end of the eighteenth century the balance of power in Asian waters was already shifting once again. Having settled accounts with the French in India, the East India Company was pushing its interests eastward; the foundation of Georgetown in 1785 already threatened the Dutch control over the Strait, and during the Napoleonic wars the British seized and held Malacca, dismantling the great walls of A Famosa and using the port as the base for the invasion of Java in 1808. When the Dutch reoccupied Malacca in 1818, the British founded Singapore, which finally choked by rivalry the commerce of the older city; by 1825 its trade was already eight times that of Malacca, which the Dutch were glad to abandon in 1824 in exchange for Bencoolen. For the century and more of British rule Malacca was the least important of the three Straits Settlements, but the vestiges of its great tradition still distinguish it from all the other cities of Malaya.

We drove to Malacca through the pleasant hilly country of Negri Sembilam, called the Nine Countries because it was formerly a confederation of nine small native principalities. It presented the typical Malayan combination of jungle, rubber plantation, coconut grove and primitive rice cultivation, but the landscape had its own distinctive character, for the hills were small, smooth, gently undulating, and at times the jungle would loosen its hold on them; there were stretches of gently rolling downs, velvety with natural grassland, while the valleys were broad and serpentine, and the paddies flowed down them in wide, smooth jade-green rivers, broken by weir-like terraces. Negri Sembilam has a name for good Malay architecture, and the kampongs in this state were certainly the most attractive we saw anywhere in the country, scattered among orchards and gardens in a way that suggested cohesion without undue formal regularity, and unusually well-kept, with their trimmed flower-beds and clean-raked earth which contrasted with the junk-cluttered environs
of the Chinese houses. One felt that, with their one stroke of communal genius, the Malays had come very near to achieving the ideal form of the open village. The main town of Negri Sembilam, Seremban, had none of this inspired organization; it was a big market town with arcaded streets, churches and schools, and its complement of those establishments, with names like Salome Massage and Bath, and Merlin Massage Parlour, which play a most ambiguous part in the town life of Malaya.

Parameswara, the first ruler of Malacca, once petitioned a Ming emperor that ‘his mountains be made the guardians of his country’, and the emperor agreed, sending ‘a commission, a seal, a suit of silk clothes, and a yellow umbrella’. Even now it is when one at last goes down from the hills into the narrow coastal plain that one enters the real Malacca country, where the women in the fields wear beautiful conical hats of split bamboo and the bullock carts have awnings like the roofs of miniature Chinese temples.

After Kuala Lumpur, with its impersonal hotels and its raw air of the new metropolis, Malacca was gratifyingly old-fashioned. We went to the Majestic Hotel in the old Tanjong Bunga quarter of the city. The muddy Malacca river curved along by the roadside, with barges and sampans moored to its banks and a little humpbacked bridge crossing to the Malay houses built up on stilts along the opposite bank. The hotel stood back in a courtyard, with sunflowers blooming in the beds before its door. It had certainly seen better days in some Victorian past; there was even a banquet room, with elaborately carved high-backed chairs around a long deserted table on which the night porter would climb to take his evening naps. But now the Majestic was a small-town Chinese hotel, with very few guests, because the tourists rarely go off the main road between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and with rough blankets instead of topsheets on the beds. But the cost of room and meals was minute compared with that of the hotels in the westernized cities, the barman was an expert who had served in a vanished English club, and the boys were extraordinarily kind and helpful, as they usually are in these small Chinese establishments.
Modern Malacca falls into three main districts—the nineteenth-century town with the main shopping streets, which roughly covers the area of the native suburbs of the historic city, the old European town of the Portuguese and the Dutch on the seacoast south of the river, and on the bank opposite to it the quarter where the Chinese merchants have lived since they came to the town in the days of the first Malay sultans, more than five hundred years ago.

The newer quarters, which we explored on our first day, were typical of the smaller towns of Malaya. Under the wide arcades the shops were open to the street, except for the beauty parlours and photographers, which went in for display windows and an atmosphere of discretion. The pavements were cluttered with baskets and counters projecting from the shopfronts, so that one often had to walk in the street, which was muddy from the rains that were still falling daily in Malacca; the stench from the rubbish-cluttered monsoon drains was formidable.

Most of the shops were Chinese—the grocers', with their bins of many-scented spices and dried fruits, the herbalists' and the fishmongers', the fruit stalls piled with locally grown papayas, pineapples and starfruit, but also with apples, oranges and grapes imported from Australia. But the drapery stores and the jewelers' shops were the monopoly of the Indians.

Inge was trying to buy some of the old-fashioned batik sarongs, with their geometrical patterns. But there were none to be found in Malacca, where the sarongs were all English machine-made prints in baroque patterns of leaves, birds and sombre-coloured flowers. 'Very sorry! Political situation to blame,' remarked one of the merchants. The best of the batiks, he explained, were made in Indonesia, and the interruption of trade with the Sumatran ports on the other side of the Straits meant that no more of them were reaching Malaya. In any case, we were asking for the 'classic' patterns. 'Nobody wearing classic no more memsahib. Is fashions in sarongs too. Is very difficult keeping up.' Indeed, it was only in an antique shop in Singapore that we did finally buy batik sarongs of the old type.

At the end of the bazaar we went into one of the jewellery
shops to look at the display of hollow gold necklaces and heavy silver anklets. The jeweller was leaning on the counter, in absorbed conversation with a little dark man. The little man pulled out a screw of newspaper and opened it; a heap of translucent crystals glittered. 'Diamonds!' said Inge, on an irrepressible impulse. The little man looked scared and put his hands over the stones. The jeweller hesitated. 'Artificial, of course, madam,' he then said with glib aplomb. But as we went out they looked at us anxiously and even came to the door to watch us going down the street, out of sight and out of harm. Malacca was living up to its reputation as a minor and somewhat illicit oriental Amsterdam.

The next day, when we visited the older parts of the town, the clouds were gathering and the air was dense with the promise of storm. I asked the hotel clerk whether it would clear up. He smiled amiably. 'Maybe, maybe not.' And he reached behind the desk and produced two oiled paper umbrellas. The weather in February was still unpredictable. Taxis seem to be non-existent in Malacca, and the trishaws are of a particularly small type, just about large enough to hold two children or one moderate-sized adult. But there was only one in sight, so Inge squeezed into the basket seat, and I perched myself with my rump poised on an armrest and the remainder of my body balanced uncomfortably above the road. In this manner we lumbered the two miles to the first cobbled street of the old town. Then we walked between rows of red-painted houses, with heavily tiled Dutch roofs rather like those of the old houses of Colombo, into the beautiful little square with its clock tower and its green lawns, and the old buildings around it that represent the whole historic past of Malaya, at least since the coming of the Portuguese.

The great wide-gabled church was built by the Dutch and so was the long, red-painted building—the Stadthuys—which filled a whole side of the square. It had been the centre of government in Dutch and British days alike, and still it was being used, by an independent Malaya, as the administration building for the new state of Malacca. We slipped through the busy offices
on the ground floor, past the old Chinese and Malays waiting patiently on the pleasure of the bureaucrats—just as they must have waited when the foreigners ruled in the Stadthuys. In the centre of the building we found a little sunken courtyard with an elegant renaissance staircase, ending at a blank wall, that might have come out of some old Iberian mansion. It was the last relic of the Portuguese Governor's Palace which had stood there before the Stadthuys, and it formed a tangible image of the continuity of European rule in Malacca for more than four and a half centuries.

Nothing was left of Albuquerque's great fortress, A Famosa, and very little else of the Portuguese days, but high above the square, on the fortress hill that juts out as a kind of topographical freak on this flat seacoast, we climbed up past a little white lighthouse to the baroque façade of St. Paul's Church, the former Church of the Annunciation, the oldest Portuguese monument east of Goa, which was built in 1521. For a while, before it was removed to its final resting-place in Goa, the body of St. Francis Xavier lay behind that façade through the open eyes of whose windows the sky now looked down on us. The Saint, who visited Malacca on many occasions, was not convinced of the sincerity of its Christianity. 'There is a very rich merchandise which the traders here regard of little account,' he once said. 'It is called a man's conscience, and so little esteemed is it in these parts, that all the merchants believe they would go bankrupt if they invested in it.' On another occasion he went so far as to shake the dust of Malacca from the soles of his sandals as he left the city. Yet so great was his name as a holy man that when he died the whole population of Malacca, Christian and Buddhist, Moslem and pagan, walked in the vast procession of mourners that took his body from the ship and through the gates of A Famosa to the church on the hilltop.

On the other side of the hill, beyond the very English-looking police headquarters, a large park, dotted with rain trees and tamarinds, stretched out to the sea wall. The Chinese amahs had brought their charges down to play in the modern little children's playground in the corner of the park—it bore a notice
‘Adults forbidden’—and were sitting on the benches clicking away in their Hokkien Chinese. Two Malacca Portuguese girls were walking along one of the paths in long yellow silk garments with tortoise-shell combs in their hair and dangling earrings of red gold. We walked on to the sea wall and looked out to the little islets that dotted the harbour, so low in the water that it seemed as if the trees were actually floating on the tide. Two freighters were moored beyond the breakwaters that protected the estuary, and sampans clustered around them like ducklings; there are no deep-water quays at Malacca, and everything has to be laboriously transhipped to small craft before it can reach the warehouses on the river. But what fascinated us most was the muddy foreshore at the bottom of the sea wall.

It was alive with mud-skippers and crabs. The mud-skippers are those extraordinary fish that have long preoccupied zoologists as links in the ladder of evolution. They are stubby, big-headed, goggle-eyed little creatures which appear to be completely amphibious. Down in the Malacca mud they were using their fore-fins as seals use flippers to skitter over the slimy surface and climb on to the low rocks, where they remained for long periods, staring fixedly and puffing out their cheeks and necks, before they found it necessary to skip back, with a flashing of their bright orange dorsal fins, and dampen their gills. They were ferocious little carnivores. Two blue fish, somewhat larger than the mud-skippers themselves, came swimming into the shallows, and immediately vanished in a turmoil of muddy water.

In their own way the crabs were just as exotic as the mud-skippers, for in colour they ranged from bright yellow, through orange, and crimson, to a turquoise blue, so that they looked like little fragments of mosaic propelling themselves across the grey mud. The relations between the crabs and the mud-skippers were obviously strained. The larger crabs would rear up and waggle their front claws menacingly whenever one of the mud-skippers approached, and the fish would brake to a goggling halt. But the smaller crabs retreated hurriedly to their homes in the slime and closed them by pulling in plugs of mud which they had already prepared for an emergency.
While the conquerors changed guard in the little square with
the look of Europe beside the harbour of Malacca, across the
river always lived the people who did the real work of the port,
the merchants, craftsmen and coolies. They were the Chinese,
for whom Malacca became over the centuries a kind of Malayan
Mecca, a distant enclave of Imperial China. The Chinese of
Malacca, who came mainly from the southern provinces of
Hokkien and Amoy, rarely agreed with the rulers in Peking;
many of them were refugees from the Manchus, and since they
could not return to China to die, they would come to Malacca
instead, as the site of the oldest Chinese settlement in Malaya. To
this day Malacca is the retiring-place for rich merchants from
all over the peninsula, which is one of the reasons why the city,
even though its trade has vanished, still maintains an air of
prosperity. When the old Chinese die they are taken to the great
hill cemetery of Bukit China, which is said to date from pre-
Portuguese times; there, on our way out of Malacca, we saw
their curious semicircular graves, the ‘armchair graves’, looking
out over the sea towards the Western Paradise.

Yet, although during the Manchu period the Chinese of
Malacca were detached from their fatherland for generations, so
that a majority of them were eventually born abroad, their racial
pride remained, and they considered themselves Chinese first
and inhabitants of Malaya afterwards. I suspect that they do so
even today. Certainly the district we entered after we had crossed
the river and passed the riparian warehouses was nearer than any
other Chinatown I had seen to a traditional Chinese city of a
kind that probably no longer exists even in China.

We walked first through the streets where the rich merchants
lived in their high, narrow mansions. Enormous bulbous lan-
terns of waxed paper decorated with black ideograms hung be-
side the richly carved and gilded doors, massive signs announcing
names in great gold characters stood on each side of the porticos,
and sometimes, when we could look into the outer rooms, we
saw the scroll paintings of sages on the walls, and heavily carved
ebony furniture inlaid with the soft gleam of mother-of-pearl
mosaics. These streets had an extraordinary stillness, as if all the
life in them was hidden in the privacy behind the richly coloured façades.

But when we walked on through the narrow lanes of craftsmen's workshops into Temple Street, which is the centre of Chinese Malacca, the whole tempo of life changed. The pavements were crowded with coolies carrying burdens and with women in samfu costume; the vendors of cooked foods pushed their painted barrows, selling fritters and dumplings, and shops and stalls of every kind were open and busy. We passed the local mosque with its curious stubby minaret peppered with pigeonholes inhabited by white doves; the roofs of the building showed a perceptible Chinese influence, for they were built in pagoda fashion and their ridges were decorated with ornaments which were clearly Chinese dragons conventionalized into semi-geometrical forms to fit the Moslem ban on images of living beings. There were several other places of worship, small Indian and Chinese shrines. But the building after which Temple Street takes its name is the great Chen Hoon Teng, the Abode of the Merciful Clouds, founded in the mid-seventeenth century by Li Kup, a fugitive from the Manchus, who held the rank of Kapitan China, or Chief of the Chinese Community, under the Dutch rulers of Malacca.

As we drew near the Chen Hoon Teng we passed the workshops where carpenters were adze-hewing and polishing the halved logs out of which the massive Chinese coffins are made, and, just before the walls of the temple, we came to the bright little shops selling all kinds of objects connected with religious rituals: red candles hung in dense clusters from their ceilings, joss-sticks in gaudy packets were piled high around the walls, and there were bundles of fake paper money to offer to the gods, and cardboard treasure chests with padlocks of gilded paper to be burnt at funerals, so that the dead might carry over into the spirit world the shadow of their wealth while the living could still enjoy its substance, a thoroughly Chinese compromise.

The Cheng Hoon Teng Temple was certainly the most beautiful building in Malacca, with its elaborate dragon gateway and the ox-blood-red pillars and beams that supported the heavy
green-tiled roofs of the main buildings. The altars were crowded with golden dark-faced deities, before which stood long racks of flickering candles, and massive stone incense-burners. Interminable corridors of repeated doorways opened from chapel to chapel, each with its subsidiary deities, human or animal, and round the courtyards crowded the ancestral shrines with their stone slabs covered with gilded calligraphy. It would have been magnificent at any time, but no sooner had we arrived than the great cloudburst we had been expecting all day broke upon us.

The women who were worshipping ran out with little cries of concern to lead us into the shelter of the temple, and then returned to their prostrations before Kwan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, while we stood under the great eaves, and watched the rain lashing across the courtyards and turning the flagstones into restless mirrors in which the buildings were reflected in a confusion of colour. The red candles guttered and flared, the joss-sticks glowed and flashed like sparklers in the wind, and the smoke blew in sweeping gusts out of the stone incense-burners. As the thunder crashed and the water spewed out in streams from the dragon mouths of the gutters, the scene was complete, the temple brought to dramatic life in its dialogue with the violence of nature. And then, when the rain ceased, in the moment before people began hurrying over the courtyards once again, there was a fleeting transfiguration as the reflections became still and the buildings, in all their brilliant detail, were momentarily stabilized on the wet flagstones, worn smooth by generations of shuffling feet; the stones began to dry and the image dulled and vanished.
The day we left Malacca was the day the great Singapore drought came to a sudden and torrential end. The rain had been drumming all night long on the corrugated-iron roofs, and it was still falling heavily when the car came for us in the early morning. The driver was a friendly, broad-faced young baba, one of the half-caste Chinese of ancient Malaccan descent who have become almost a race apart from the other Chinese of the great nineteenth-century migrations. His name, for European employers, was Fred.

As we drove out on the road towards Singapore the Malaccans were going to work and to market cocooned in the tarpaulin coverings of trishaws or sheltered by glistening paper umbrellas. The rain continued for many miles, beating down on the yellow stone mosques of the Malacca kamponds, streaming off the eaves of palm-leaf huts in the little peasant rubber groves of the region. It ended abruptly, as if a curtain had been withdrawn; the clouds opened, and the landscape shone with a green scintillating brilliance as the millions of waterdrops caught on the waxy leaves of tropical plants flashed back in iridescent coruscation.

A wide, slow river divided Malacca from Johore. On the opposite bank lay the little town of Muar, and as we ferried over on a small scow pushed by a motor launch, we looked out at its long arcades and princely white mansions with their lawns running to the water’s edge, and then down the full, green river, with the swallows looping over its surface, to the opening estuary where a covey of small coastal freighters was moored. On that bright, glittering morning, it seemed the most attractive of all the small towns we had seen in Malaya.

In Johore the sweeping jungles of the central peninsula came
to an end; the forest was broken by long stretches of stark, infertile country covered with ragged, goat-grazed scrub. The cultivation was much more varied than in the rubber-growing regions, and Fred, who seemed to understand our curiosity more than most of his compatriots, pointed out the plantations of stubby oil palms, their rough trunks green with the fronds of tiny parasitic ferns, and the pepper gardens with the vines rising like a forest of green towers around their supporting poles. It seemed a poor and primitive region; the people lived in rural slums of rough, palm-leaf shacks, and they made no attempt to create gardens or in any other way to beautify their surroundings. But Fred maintained that it had nothing to do with poverty. It was the way of living of the native Malays. 'Very lazy fellows,' he remarked with benign disapproval. The beautiful villages of Penang Island and Negri Sembilam were the creations of immigrants who had brought their own styles of building from the Archipelago.

Half-way to Singapore the clouds swept in and the rain started again, so heavily that the woods beside the road were filled with a dense mist from the splashing of the raindrops against the trunks and branches. The windshield-wipers completely failed to cope with the deluge that beat on the front of the car, and eventually they gave up the attempt and went out of action, flapping feebly and loosely, like the wings of dying birds, all the way into Johore Bahru. At times it was impossible to see more than a yard in front of the car, and as Fred drove at barely more than walking pace, peering into the obscurity ahead and skirting the shallowest edges of the floods that were already forming, he talked with staccato eloquence about the 'American Bomba', which, having caused the Singapore drought, was now bringing on rains such as had never before been heard of in the moon of the New Year. But while we stared gloomily at the drenched landscape and worried about the car stalling or running into one of the lorries that periodically emerged out of the downpour, the children from the roadside shacks jumped and danced with delight as the water pelted down on their cropped heads and rinsed over their glistening bodies.
The storm had blown itself out by the time we reached the Strait of Johore, but the sky was still low and leaden over the whitish-grey water, out of which the gaunt outlines of the fishtraps rose in mid-channel, crowned by bamboo huts; the low, wooded hills on the far shore were the thinly inhabited northern side of Singapore Island.

Though it is now part of the Malaysian Federation, Singapore still preserves its autonomy in many curious ways. One of these is the retention of the ban on hired cars from the peninsula crossing to the island. When we reached Johore Bahru, we had to drive round the town until we found a taxi with a Singapore registration plate, and then get out in the rain, which was falling heavily again, and transfer our luggage. We drove slowly over the long causeway, through the ten miles of industrial suburbs where English, Swiss and German firms have set up their branch factories, and finally entered the curving driveway, past the wide fans of the travellers' palms, that led to the neo-classical façade of Raffles Hotel.

We stayed for a whole week in the antique splendour of Raffles, waiting for the Dutch freighter on which we booked our passages to Hong Kong. The ghosts out of Conrad and Maugham which the very name of the old hotel used to stir in my mind were dispelled for ever on the first afternoon, when we watched a Chinese Christian wedding party which was being held in the big lounge; as the band played in the bridal couple to the tune of 'Yes, Sir, that's my Baby!', the four hundred guests stood up and solemnly downed their glasses of orange juice. Raffles had gone respectable. The only sea captain I saw there was drinking himself into a stupor, not from conviviality, but from loneliness. Yet in a physical sense one still inhabited the airy, ample world of a past when the hotels of the Orient were built on the scale of palaces. There was nothing so plebeian as a mere room. One was automatically given a suite with bedroom

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1 A month after this book was completed Singapore seceded from the Malaysian Federation, but I have left references of this kind unchanged, since it was as part of the Malaysian Federation that I saw and remembered Singapore.
and sitting-room, bathroom and balcony; ours, in the old wing, was broad and lofty enough to contain a respectable-sized house, and we felt like the victims of an Alice in Wonderland transformation when we looked up at its tall ceilings twenty feet above our heads.

The rain continued for four days. The monsoon drains in every street ran like mountain brooks in spate, washing away the impurities of a year of dryness; there were sudden floods, driving the people out of the slums of palm-leaf huts in the low-lying areas; children and pigs were drowned; and in those four days the reservoirs were replenished. Nothing like it had happened in living memory, said the old Singapore hands whom we met up at the Tanglin Club; the normal pattern of rain on the island was one of afternoon showers so short and predictable that in ordinary years one did not even have to worry about carrying an umbrella.

We found these the most uncomfortable days of our whole journey. Our damp shoes bearded with mould in a single night, and as soon as the rain ceased the evaporating vapours would build up the humidity in the still air until the atmosphere became thick and palpable, almost liquid. For the first two days we spent hours lying exhausted on our beds, our minds as numb as our bodies, while the fans threshed vainly at top speed, producing fantasies of decapitation by loosened blades. When this became unendurable we would pick up our plastic capes and hire a taxi to take us past the great lawns of the Padang, and the bombastically classical government buildings, and over the sampan-crowded Singapore river, with its Venetian stenches, to Raffles Place. There we walked in the arcades as the Indian money-changers chattered in our ears and Chinese boys plucked at our clothes, trying to draw us into the little shops and booths piled with duty-free goods from Switzerland and Japan; always we would end in the air-conditioned refuge of the restaurant at Robinson’s department store.

But even the rains did not diminish the energy with which, on the third day, the Chinese of Singapore celebrated the end of the New Year season and finally drove away the evil spirits of
the past. From early morning the explosion of fireworks echoed through the city, and when we went along the streets of Chinese shops behind Raffles hotel we saw men and women, as well as children, hanging out on bamboo poles clusters of crackers like bunches of bananas, which went off with racketing machine-gun bursts; they were even throwing heaps of fireworks into improvised braziers made of old tins, and these went off with formidable crashes. By nightfall the streets were littered with a snow of torn red paper.

These were only the preliminary skirmishes with the powers of darkness. After dusk, when the day's work had ended, the real onslaught began. Lorries full of young men and boys drove through the streets with drums beating and crackling fireworks showering out on to the pavements, and in every Chinese street of the city the people came out of their houses to take part in the miniature Armageddon. From our room in the hotel, which looked out over the tiled roofs and little Georgian church-towers of central Singapore, it seemed as though a civil war were in progress as the thousands of explosions blended into a continuous rolling thunder that converged on one from every direction; lurid flashes lit up the faces of the buildings and the clouds of smoke that hung above them, and all night long the air reeked of gunpowder. The battle lasted for more than five hours, from six o'clock until almost midnight, when the ammunition ran out and the demons had finally been put to flight. In that great orgy of noise almost a million Malay dollars were spent, in an access of enthusiasm which, apart from its possible effect on the supernatural world, can probably be best interpreted as a grand emotional release for a people excessively inclined towards personal reticence and reverence for familial authority.

Superficially, as we explored it more widely, Singapore looked like a large and more prosperous Georgetown, with the colonial architecture of the British centre, the garden suburbs spreading out over the downs towards the centre of the island, the narrow crowded streets of the older Chinese quarter, and the Hindu and Buddhist temples scattered throughout the city. But the very size of Singapore and the peculiar factors of its history—particu-
37 Hong Kong: fish at Aberdeen
38 A village in the New Territories
A woman gardener at Katsura

Nara: trippers at Horyuji
larly its existence for several years as an independent city state—differentiate it from all the other towns of Malaysia. Six out of every seven of its inhabitants are now Chinese—more than a million and a half, in fact—which gives it one of the greatest concentrations of Chinese outside China itself. With the withdrawal of the British, gradual though it is, the Chinese strength in Singapore has become steadily more evident. They not only control all the small-scale trade and industry, but they are now moving into fields like banking, and steadily taking over the positions vacated by the departing British. Inevitably, they control local politics. In Singapore the Malays are both economically depressed and politically a permanent minority.

We came by much of our knowledge of the peculiar problems which this situation produced in Singapore through meeting M., a merchant of Dutch-Italian descent who had spent many years in Java before political circumstances forced him to withdraw to Malaya; like many other Europeans who feel that their true home is around the China Seas and that Europe would be the real exile, M. was clinging on in Singapore as long as history would allow him, and clinging on very comfortably.

He was a short, blond Taurian whom his Chinese clients described as 'the red-haired foreign devil'; a speaker of Hokkien, Mandarin and Malay, familiar with every town and almost every village in Malaya, and a dedicated jester and one-up man. M. entertained us first in the private air-conditioned bar which he had installed in his bungalow, dismissing his Chinese houseboy whom he described as 'a Communist and therefore a Calvinist'. He mixed astringent and powerful Negronis, and then the one-up-manship began. M. whipped out a Colt revolver and fired it at the window; a furiously spinning swizzle stick popped out. 'Cut a card,' he said to me, and roared with laughter as I yelped from the shock. 'Pick the four radios in the room,' he commanded loudly, lashing up another Negroni. He was mildly annoyed when Inge pointed to the landscape of Fujiyama, and furious when I detected the baseball standing incongruously among the bottles. We were two-up on him, and he had to prove his worth by mixing a final double-strength Negroni be-
fore we walked unsteadily out to the car and were driven by his Malay driver (a Moslem, and therefore a Calvinist also) to one of the White Russian restaurants of Singapore.

But away from his private bar and his novelty jokes, M. was a shrewd and serious student of Malay affairs, full of knowledge about the remote provinces where sultans still rule according to strict Koranic law, and extremely well informed about conditions in Singapore. In his company we visited some of the densely packed slums of palm-leaf huts where the poor of Singapore had lived for generations. Palm-leaf huts—or attap huts as everyone in Malaya calls them—are perfectly healthy and functional dwellings in their proper place, the Malayan jungle. Crowded together in the swampy areas of the city, with no sanitary facilities, they become breeding-places for epidemics and dangerous fire traps. But the attap settlements make money, operated by speculate landlords on a rental basis. The hutholder pays five Malayan dollars a month to the landowner, and either builds his own shack or buys one from a departing tenant. It is the world’s most foolproof system of slum landlordism, since the landlord has no property to deteriorate. If a fire destroys an attap settlement, he still has the land, the shacks are rebuilt by others, and the old perils return.

Nowadays, however, they return less often, for the Singapore Government has interpreted its avowed socialism, in a Fabian manner, to mean first of all the provision of adequate social services. During the past few years the Government has been systematically expropriating land, particularly where slum settlements have been burnt down, in order to carry out a vigorous rehousing programme. M. took us to some of the new estates. Vast areas had been cleared and covered with long, high, rectangular blocks, simply designed, pleasantly coloured, amply beflagged with bamboo poles full of washing. The largest of the estates we saw contained 10,000 apartments, housing 50,000 people, a whole satellite city with its own schools and markets, playing fields and shops. We were impressed by the neatness with which the tenants, all of them former inhabitants of miserable windowless attap huts, kept their apartments, with clean
curtains at the windows, flowering plants on the balconies, and usually a singing bird or two in a bamboo cage. The rents of the apartments were graded according to income; a family with 200 dollars or less a month would pay 25 dollars. Such rates were themselves an indication of the standard of living which Malaya has attained in comparison with the poorer countries of Asia. M. paid his chauffeur 170 dollars a month, his houseboy 150 dollars. Servants of the same status in India would receive a third of that amount. It was true that the chauffeur kept two wives, and the houseboy sent money to his relatives in China, but they were still far better off than working people almost anywhere else in Asia.

But despite its high standard of living Singapore existed precariously during its brief period as the sole independent city state of Asia. Its military impregnability had been disproved by the Japanese invasion of the 1940's. Its economic impregnability began to dissolve as soon as the British started to leave, but the problem was postponed when the Dutch left Indonesia and Singapore became the clearing-house for the trade of the Archipelago. Now that also has come to an end; whenever we drove beside the harbour in Singapore we would see the dozens of idle coasting vessels which used to trade across the Strait of Malacca to Sumatra. Conscious of the perils of trying to remain a commercial entrepot, the Government of Singapore tried to encourage foreign industrialists to put their capital into branch factories in Singapore, but by the time we reached the city the possibility of war between Malaysia and Indonesia had frozen the interest. The effort to maintain some degree of independence even within the Malaysian Federation has obviously failed, and Singapore seems now to have reconciled itself to becoming the industrial centre of the peninsula rather than trying to remain, as its proud name implies, the self-sufficient City of the Lion.

Yet even if the economic realities are accepted, Singapore still poses the greatest political enigma in Malaysia. As an independent city state it would in the course of time have become a Chinese nation abroad. Now, in entering Malaysia, the Chinese of Singapore have had to accept a political situation deliberately
contrived, by giving a disproportionately large parliamentary representation to Sarawak, to ensure that the Malays will retain permanent control. Since we left Singapore the resentment bred by such a situation has erupted in rioting between Chinese and Malays, and even then those who knew the Singapore Chinese believed that their loyalty to Malaysia could not be relied upon in every crisis. M. summed up admirably the general opinion. 'If it's to be war with Indonesia,' he said, 'the Chinese will fight, and hard. They haven't forgotten what Soekarno did to the Chinese in his country. But if the Communists ever come down from China, I wouldn't be so sure. These people are Chinese after all. That's still their first loyalty. The rich will try to go while the going's good, as they did from Shanghai. The rest of them will not exactly welcome their Red brothers. But I don't think they will ever fight them.'

Meanwhile life in Singapore went on as if nobody gave a thought to the possibility of either war or racial conflict. It was a life becoming westernized at an astonishing rate, as the poor moved out of their attap slums into their modern apartments, as the Chinese took over piece by piece the structure of commerce and government. The process of westernization was also accelerated by the very youthfulness of the population. Half the people of Singapore are less than twenty-one, and the world they want, whether its image is set in the form of America or Communist China, is a world that turns away from tradition. But never, I suspect, completely away. It takes a rigorous, fanatical tyranny, operating over many years, like that of Mao Tse-tung, to break up the complex of ancient ceremonial, of daily custom, and of familial authority that still survives among the Overseas Chinese; as for those aspects of culture and thought which are determined by a language so distinctive as Chinese, I doubt very strongly whether even the Communists have been able to destroy them.

Yet the contrast between new and old ways of Overseas Chinese life is at times very dramatic. On our last day in the city we went to the Tiger Balm gardens, one of the most fascinating and revolting exhibitions of vulgarity I have ever seen; a whole
hilltop of concrete tableaux, in shrill and gaudy colours, mingle
bering ancient Chinese legend and Buddhist myth with the fan-
tasies of Walt Disney and science fiction, and carried out with
the kind of half-insane prodigality which the oriental mind can
achieve once it is released from the restraints imposed by tradi-
tion. The gardens were crowded with young Chinese, youths
and girls, taking each other’s photographs in elegant or heroic
poses against backgrounds of ravening dinosaurs or Buddhist
hells or bathing beauties emerging out of monstrous clam-shells.
Obviously these young people felt at home in the world of the
old herbalist’s fancy; it was related to the strange hybrid world
of violent fantasy with which the cinema has endowed them.

From this shrine of the diseased imagination we went on in the
same afternoon to the leading Buddhist temple of Singapore,
Siang Lim Sian Si, the Temple of the Twin Groves. This was a
fairly modern temple, built on the usual pleasant Chinese Bud-
dhist plan of a large central hall linked by a series of cloisters to
many small chapels. After the crowds of the Tiger Balm Gardens
it was astonishing to realize that literally nobody had come to
the temple to pay his devotions. The two priests of the temple
were intoning an office, but, apart from three children, we were
the only witnesses, and the children were there because they had
followed us out of curiosity.

The leading priest wore a yellow muslin robe over his black
monk’s habit; he chanted in a deep rumbling voice, like a
Tibetan lama, beating a wooden gong shaped like a skull, tap-
ing a cylindrical bronze gong, and tinkling a curious bell,
shaped like a wineglass, which he held upright and tapped deftly
with a metal rod held in the same hand. His companion kept
up a regular rhythm on a large flat drum and occasionally rang
a big bronze bell that hung on a carved wooden stand beside
him. The yellow-robed priest ended his chant prostrate before
the altar while the second monk continued the monotonous
beating of the drum. The whole ritual had a curiously autono-
mous quality, as if the lack of a congregation were unimportant.

When they walked away from the altar the temple was com-
pletely deserted except for an old woman in black trousers sitting
near the entrance in front of a goblet half full of golden brown oil in which floated a burning wick. As we walked past her she thrust a grubby exercise book towards me. I signed it, and then she gesticulated towards the lamp and poured some oil in a can, meanwhile pointing at me and cackling softly. I understood, but I had no intention of repeating my folly at the Snake Temple. I handed her fifty Malay cents, at which she nodded vigorously, and poured into the lamp another good squirt of oil for the benefit of our karmas.
The Straat Río lay far out in the harbour of Singapore, the lighters nuzzling around it like the chickens around a hen, and the coolies sitting on the deck below us, eating rice and bean sprouts and delicately picking fragments of meat from fish tails with their chopsticks. The unloading of the ship began again, bales of cotton, bags of grain and cement, piled on wooden platforms and hoisted by the derricks into the holds of the lighters. Far off the green and yellow lights came on in long lines, marking the coastal roads of Singapore. The lightning forked brutally down the sky above the city.

When we woke next morning the ship was already out in the South China Sea, sailing past the islands off the eastern coast of Malaya, rocks like great grey molars and humped islets with wooded hills and tiny huts on the foreshores. Small falcons came swooping down out of the sky, and the Chinese sailors on the after-deck hurriedly took into shelter their cages of birds which sang in the sunlight. For three whole days we sailed north-eastward over the smooth sea whose surface was barely ruffled by the rain squalls that came suddenly lashing across the ship. Frigate birds kept pace with the ship, and once a small school of porpoises came leaping and tumbling through the waves, but otherwise the sea was empty, the clouds metallically solid, the sunsets a pale pink flush in the western sky.

We slept long hours, played Shanghai with two doctors’ wives from Kentucky, and drank Bols gin and Amstel beer. Every mealtime we argued with the cat-faced Dutch engineer. He was a disgruntled exile from Java who, like M., felt that the China Seas were his real home and had settled in Hong Kong rather than returning to his home in Rotterdam. Like many others of
his kind, he was a hardened conservative who believed that the end of colonialism had been a tragedy for rulers and ruled alike. He lamented the decline of Java under Soekarno’s rule from a land of fertile sufficiency into a desert of want. And he defended South Africa, identifying himself with the Afrikaners, maintaining that in their country, where his ship put in on each voyage, everyone was happy, the Negroes better off than anywhere else in Africa; the misunderstanding between South Africa and the rest of the world was the work of a few trouble-makers and English sentimentalists. It was an example of the profound difference we encountered between the attitude of British ex-colonials, who tended to accept the changes that had taken place in the Far East with a philosophic good grace, and that of the Dutch who, with a few notable exceptions like M., still maintained the bitterly inflexible attitude which had made their departure from Indonesia so stormy.

On the afternoon of the fourth day the Straat Rio sailed in between the mist-crowned islands that protect Hong Kong from the ocean. High-pooped junkies scudded over the smooth water, their brown sails primeval wings on ribs of bamboo. On one of the beaches a little temple stood among smooth rocks like great sea-elephants, and towards it walked black-clothed people under black umbrellas. It was a soft, hazy scene, the romantic autumnal of so many Chinese paintings.

Soon we were entering the great harbour that lies between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. On the island shore, white skyscrapers, pitted with windows, climbed the steep slopes above Victoria and disappeared into the hanging clouds like some vast Tibetan monastery. We drew in towards the anchorage, past the long lines of moored freighters and through the traffic of ferries, launches and sampans which turned the harbour into a wide thoroughfare. The sampans were moving habitations, with wives manning the tillers, washed clothes flapping from the rigging like signal flags, pigs tied to the masts and chicken cages festooning the gunwales.

Already we were entering the ambiance of noisy activity which we rarely escaped while we were in Hong Kong. As soon
as the ship had moored, the wallah-wallah boats came chugging alongside, and the families of the seamen poured up the gangway on to the after-deck, trousered old women with wrinkled Somerset Maugham faces, and young women, children slung on their backs, chattering, chivvying, picking up bundles and suitcases, and herding their men back on to the boats in the hope that if they pushed hard enough they would distract the customs men who poked and probed and questioned with imperturbable Chinese thoroughness.

Then the agent’s launch arrived to take us ashore and with it the travel touts, brash, sharkskin-clad young Chinese with mock American accents, who tried to bamboozle us into going in their cars and letting them find us hotel rooms. ‘You gotta be careful when you go on land. Look out for them wharf coolies. Buncha thieves. We look after you okay.’

On the steps at Kowloon a band of ragged men raced up, shouting shrill Cantonese insults, and trying to tear our luggage out of the hands of the touts’ private coolies who had taken it off the boat. The aggressors were the wharf coolies, and the grabbing and pushing went on until I seized a suitcase from one aged contender who was making off with it, and started to shout in my best sahib voice. ‘You go to the car, sir,’ said the tout. ‘We fix okay.’ ‘We prefer to go by taxi,’ said Inge. The tout put on an air of injured dignity. ‘You trust nobody if you don’t trust me!’ His expression changed to slyness. ‘You won’t get no hotel room. I got all the reservations!’ And he smugly patted his pocket. ‘Taxi,’ I said loudly, and the wharf coolies took up the cry, pushed their discomfited rivals out of the way and went trotting off, with us in pursuit of them, and the tout in pursuit of us, to the taxi rank down the road. There the tout shouted for money to pay his coolies, beating on the window of the cab until the driver got out, gave him a push that sent him sprawling over a street-hawker’s basket of fish, and drove off at top speed, laughing to himself. When we reached the hotel in Nathan Road he refused to take a tip. ‘You must not think we are all thieves in Kowloon,’ he said. There was, of course, plenty of room in the hotel.
When Captain Charles Elliott occupied Hong Kong during the Opium War of the 1840’s, Lord Palmerston was not impressed by the acquisition of this ‘barren island with hardly a house upon it’. Today that barren island and its dependencies have a population of almost four million, the largest concentration of Chinese outside China with the exception of Taiwan, crammed into a tight 380 miles of land. Hong Kong is the paradox of a metropolis that prospers without a hinterland, and, though it is one of the last of the British colonies, one has no feeling there of an empire in decay.

This makes it one of the most interesting phenomena of modern Asian politics. The newly independent nations sway like insecurely rooted weeds in the tides of international struggle that ebb and flow around the China Seas, and in comparison the remaining fragments of the old colonial system seem as firmly set as limpets. Today the chance of Hong Kong remaining a generation more in British hands or of Macao surviving as a Portuguese province seems far greater than the chance of Laos or Cambodia remaining independent for even another decade. In fact, the security of Hong Kong, and its indispensability as an outlet to the Western world for Communist China, are now so taken for granted that it draws the investors like a magnet. ‘Even Malaya is threatened now,’ said one business man whom we met in Kowloon. ‘Nobody knows whether Singapore is safe for even a year. But we’re safe for thirty or forty years, until the lease on the New Territories comes to an end at least. We calculate that Peking will need us that long.’

In spite of its small area, Hong Kong contains more different worlds than many a large country. Almost every day we took
the cable car from the station behind the white and green cathedral, and were carried up the hillsides between the apartment blocks and the great villas on their isolated spurs of rock, until we reached the peak, the summit of the island, where almost deserted footpaths snaked among the maquis-like scrub on the barren hillsides 2,000 feet above the city. There, on a fine day, the eagles circled endlessly in the clear sky, the bushes echoed with the liquid calls of songbirds, and one could find pale violets blooming among the grass. One could also gain a complete eagle’s-eye view of the colony.

Below, on every side, the green slopes fell steeply away in precipitous bluffs and abrupt riverless valleys towards the rocky shorelines of the island. To the south the blue mirror of a shrunklen reservoir glittered among the gullies; the white villas of the taipans, the rich Chinese business men, stepped down the slopes to the coves and beaches of the island’s ocean side, and out to sea lay the whale-back farther islets of the little archipelago, with the mists of the Pacific closing in behind them. From the northern side of the peak the view was panoramically various—Victoria spilt on the hillsides far below us like a tumbling pyramid of child’s bricks; the boat-clustered wharves on their serpentine edge of reclaimed land from which the sharp clatter of riveting hammers surged up periodically to break the silence of the hilltops; the blue map of the harbour with the liners in their berths, the long tongue of the airport runway probing out into the water, the crowded junk harbours, and the hotels and factories of Kowloon rising out of the forest of buildings beyond them. Finally our eyes would shift from this great chart of human activity, and embrace the still background, the dark green hills of the New Territories, and, farthest of all, beyond the invisible border, the fuzzy grey outlines of the Chinese ranges.

Historically, geographically and even in the character of its life, Hong Kong falls into the three different zones we could see from the hilltops, the island itself, which was ceded to Britain in 1841, the peninsula of Kowloon across the harbour, which was acquired in 1860, and the New Territories, which are not
strictly part of the colony, since they were leased from China in 1898 for a period of ninety-nine years. In spite of its anti-colonial propaganda in other parts of the world, Communist China has made no attempt to revoke the lease, and the great question of Hong Kong’s future is what will happen when the lease expires in 1997, for if the New Territories are lost, Hong Kong itself will become untenable. The final, unacknowledged component of the curious complex of Hong Kong is Macao, forty miles away, which is politically ruled by Portugal, but which economically has long been a dependency of the British Colony.

More than three months before, on our way to Karachi, the ship had stopped for a day at Naples; we walked in the city and took the bus around the headland to Sorrento. By the time we left Singapore—it was already March—the impressions of that day had long been submerged under the weight of our experiences in Pakistan, India and South-east Asia; the island of Hong Kong unexpectedly resurrected them with a series of haunting resemblances. The sheltered bay with the city rising on the hills behind; the rough waterfront life, with cloth-capped Communist agitators haranguing the dock-workers; the crowded narrow streets probing steeply into the hillside slums with their stepped byways canopied with washing; the steep corniche roads running out along the rocky coasts to secretive coves and deep-watered fishing harbours, with opulent villas in gardens blazing with bougainvillaea, and steep valleys built up in terraces by the farmers.

But once one had recognized the likeness which at times, driving down some headland road towards the blazing mirror of the sea, would create something near to a sense of déjà vu, one realized that it was merely appearance, a Mediterranean illusion created by a conspiracy between topography and climate and the Italianate nostalgias of nineteenth-century Englishmen. The life of the island, as one saw it outside the tenement buildings where the people live a dozen to a room and overflow into the shacks built on the flat roofs, was a quite distinctive blend of its own.

We would cross from Kowloon, as everyone does, on the Star Ferry, whose boats run on a constant shuttle service between
the two cities. This must be the most class-conscious form of transport in the world; not only do the first-class passengers occupy a separate deck, but they enter the ferry building by a separate entrance and go along segregated corridors, so that the Chinese business people and clerks never have to rub shoulders with the coolies who are packed into the deck below.

The buildings along Connaught Road, facing the ferry, form the edge of the region occupied by the British merchants and shipping agents who are still the patricians of Hong Kong; some of the firms, like Jardine Matheson, where we booked our next freighter, to Yokohama, were founded more than a century ago. But the British presence in Hong Kong has now become relatively unobtrusive; the new colonialism is in operation, replacing the public, paternalistic image of the sahib by the quiet official working through his native subordinates. And we had only to go two or three streets up from the wharves, to Queen’s Road, which is the main thoroughfare of Victoria, for the Chinese influence to become dominant. Tall red-calligraphed signs stand like pillars outside the stores that sell impartially the manufactured goods of England, Canton and Kowloon. Crying their hoarse warnings, the coolies trot along the pavements, one man on each end of a thick pole, with the burden slung between, and in the traffic, among the English cars and the red double-decker buses, the rickshaw men run between the shafts, keeping pace with their steady, swinging lope. It is their fellow Chinese who patronize them and keep up this trade which to westerners has become a rather repellent symbol of the extreme exploitation of human poverty. ‘How else would they live?’ said a shopkeeper to me, with the totally unsentimental logic of the Chinese.

Up on the hillside behind Queen’s Road there were narrow roads too steep even for the rickshaw men, and steep stone stairways lined with shops and stalls—the ladder streets of Hong Kong. After the noise and bustle of the main streets their atmosphere was casual and leisurely in the extreme. The coolies sat eating bowls of rice and vegetables in the open-air cookshops, and the shopkeepers dozed on chairs outside their doors. Most of them sold traditionally Chinese products, and each lane and
stairway seemed to have its own speciality; in one worked the
embroiderers, their windows resplendent with sequined actors'
gowns and garments for weddings; in another we found the dark
teashops, mahogany brown, with lines of lacquered bins, and
tables to which the shopkeepers would bring little porcelain cups
of their most prized blends which one was expected to sip slowly,
with appreciation; and in the next lane stood stalls with pale
turquoise ducks' eggs and brown hens' eggs, with moderately
aged eggs, zebra-striped with some black powder, and really
ancient eggs, covered in sawdust, one of these cracked open on
top of the pile to reveal the shining blackness of the jelly into
which the white had turned.

Even the densely packed houses of this area and of the slums
through which we walked around North Point were not enough
to hold all the people of Hong Kong. Tens of thousands could
not even find room on land. When we took the buses that fol-
lowed the winding roads to the outlying settlements, we would
see the fleets of sampans which were houses and fishing boats
alike lying in the sheltered bays; owing to the round-bottomed
construction of almost all Chinese craft, they lurched and tossed
alarmingly in the slightest swell. This was probably why so
many of the local boat-dwellers had gathered in the sheltered
channel at Check Py Wan on the south-western coast of the
island, known officially as Aberdeen in memory of a British
Foreign Secretary who, ironically, did not approve of the
acquisition of Hong Kong.

One could not have found a greater contrast than that be-
tween the imitation castles and pseudo-Spanish haciendas of
merchants and film magnates which we had passed only half an
hour before at Repulse Bay, and the dense mass of little boats,
each with a rickety shed upon its deck, that filled the channel at
Aberdeen literally from shore to shore. They were so thickly
packed that one had difficulty in seeing the water between them.
In this dense amphibious slum tens of thousands of lives went on
in every phase from birth to death, and along the wharf, in the
narrow space between the water and the road, the inhabitants
were working industriously to earn their scanty living. The
women were cleaning and kippering fish, which the men carried on long bamboo racks to dry in the sun. Nets were woven and mended; sunhats, baskets and fish-traps were made out of slivers of bamboo; and many of the women and girls sat on the ground assembling sprays of plastic artificial flowers. These were the most destitute people of Hong Kong, and yet none of them had the expression of resigned, apathetic despair which one so often sees among the poor of Asia.

We walked on past the wharves where the junks were moored in a great forest of masts, past the shipyards with the pale yellow hulks of half-built boats lying on their slipways, past the grotesque Hollywood Chinese structures of the floating restaurants, to the market, with its piles of Chinese cabbage and sugar peas fresh from the gardens of the New Territories, and its half-fragrant, half-putrid stench. ‘The stink of Asia,’ cried Inge. ‘By now I can taste it in every mouthful I eat.’

Then we went back to Victoria in a bus filled with Chinese workmen returning to Kennedy Town, one of the big tenement areas on the west of the city. They were neatly dressed in western clothes, and their behaviour was quiet and restrained, yet one sensed an energy about them which characterized most of the Overseas Chinese, who are far more efficient and industrious than any other people I have encountered in Asia except the Sikhs and the Japanese. One could not help feeling that, if the Chinese who have remained on the mainland share their virtues, it is unrealistic to imagine that China can be prevented from establishing that complete domination over Asia at which the Japanese aimed but which they failed to achieve from lack of numbers. The only people who approach them in numbers, the Indians, set too little value on efficiency and industry ever to become the effective rivals of the Chinese. It is one of the most tragic and dangerous errors of our age that such a people should have been subjected to political ostracism by the West.
Kowloon is the more cosmopolitan of the two cities of Hong Kong; the international hotels cluster near the waterfront, and White Russian restaurants still prosper in narrow side streets which have a flavour of Montparnasse in the 1930’s. But it is also the city of the refugee shantytowns of bamboo and cardboard, and of the raw new concrete blocks in the resettlement projects, and of Nathan Road, that long thoroughfare which is the artery of Chinese life in the colony, running far out towards the hinterland of the New Territories. In Nathan Road the pulse of life never seemed to slow down. Even at midnight, coming back on the bus from the Amusement Park at Lai Chi Lok, we would still see its pavements crowded with people and its markets in full swing, as if trade were the very life blood of the Chinese to which they would willingly sacrifice rest and sleep.

The Chinese in Kowloon, like those on the island of Hong Kong, are almost all immigrants, whose ancestors came during the nineteenth century, or who came themselves in the waves of post-war refugees, first from Shanghai when the Red Armies seized the city in 1949, or later, in the 1960’s, in the great surges of starving peasants who poured over the border from the province of Canton. With the extraordinary adaptability of their race, they have taken easily to the life of the cities.

In the New Territories, however, many of the people are not immigrants. They belong to the Hakka tribe which has inhabited this region for many centuries, and they carry on a traditional rural life. Indeed, since the great collectivizations in China itself, the New Territories of Hong Kong are probably the only area where Chinese peasants still live very much as their ancestors did.
One morning we set out with a Swedish couple and two Australian business men from our hotel, who had hired a Volkswagen bus and a driver to make the tour of the New Territories. Far down Nathan Road, Kowloon loosened out along the water front into an area of yards and dye-works, where long skeins of red and yellow wool hung drying between posts on the roadside, and then we drove out into the open country of barren hills dotted with shack villages. We followed the coastal road through Tsuan Wan, a textile town where the red sandy hills were being sliced off with bulldozers and pushed into the harbour to provide more land for factories, and then westward towards Castle Peak, looking out towards the barren offshore islands and the fleets of sampans that were fishing in their shelter; according to the driver of the bus, they fished co-operatively, working together and sharing the catch. On the land side of the road the hills were dry and bare, but wherever there was water, near to the shallow rivers, ladders of terraces had been created, and the farmers were ploughing the narrow strips of land with buffaloes; on many of the terraces there were peach trees covered with pink blossoms, the first sign that we had reached the far edge of the tropics. We saw them with delight.

At Castle Peak, in the shadow of the wooded mountain, there was a floating village of sampans, and a primitive settlement on the land, shacks roofed with reeds, and a market smelling of boiling fish. The skull-capped monks from the monastery up on the hill walked solemnly by the seashore in their black robes, and here, for the first and only time in Hong Kong, children begged from us.

At this village the road turned inland into the wide valleys, between the ranges, which are the real home of the Hakka people. Out in the paddies and the bean-fields the Hakka women were working in their characteristic hats, shaped like flat trays of bamboo two feet across, with a fringe of black cloth that hangs down about four inches all round the rim of the hat, forming an excellent protection against sunburn. The men have no such distinctive headgear and usually wear cheap solar topees. Apart from the women’s hats and a general robustness of figure,
there is nothing to distinguish the Hakka, in appearance at least, from the ordinary Chinese.

When the British first assumed control of the New Territories, the Hakka had for centuries lived with the problem of dealing with marauders in a region far enough from any large city to be neglected by the authorities responsible for keeping the peace; they had solved it by turning their settlements into miniature walled cities, complete with high stone walls and moats. We saw three of these walled villages on our way through the Territories; they were elaborately constructed, each with four watch-towers and a single entrance gate—an eloquent testimony to the insecurity which has been the lot of the Chinese peasant through most of his recorded history. ‘All brothers and sisters,’ explained the driver. He meant that each village was inhabited by people belonging to a single clan and bearing the same name. Exogamous clan rules are still observed among the Hakka; the girls always marry into other villages.

Nowadays the custom of building walled villages has lapsed, but the habit of living together by clans in tightly packed settlements from which the workers go out each day to the fields still persists. We went into one such village. It was called Pingha Chuen, and, though it was unwalled, the regularity of pattern which the ramparts formerly imposed had persisted; the village was neatly rectangular and consisted of three narrow parallel streets lined with minute brick houses, each constructed with a shallow penthouse under its heavy roof of grey semi-cylindrical tiles. The only touch of colour was provided by the round green plaques which ended each row of tiles and formed a pattern along the edge of the eaves.

The attitude of the inhabitants of Pingha Chuen towards our incursion was very hard to gauge. They were curious and yet distrustful. First they gathered around us, the children, the young women with babies, the old women who wore black bandeaux around their heads, decorated with little gold plaques. The children jumped up and down, shouting ‘Hullo!’ and ‘Camella!’ But as soon as we tried to use our cameras all the women turned their backs and ran squealing off to their houses. Yet a moment
later they looked out, giggling and still curious. There was not a trace of hostility in their manner.

At some time on the journey—I believe it was before Pingha Cheun—we drove past the Gurkha encampment at Lok Ma Chau and up the pine-covered hill where the farthest police station of the colony overlooks the frontier, a good half-mile away. It is as near to China as the British allow anyone except the local people to go. Below us we could see the peasants going through the sentry post to their fields in no-man’s-land. The ponds of a big duck farm radiated like a fan from the base of a small hillock; one pond was full of white fully grown birds and another of yellow ducklings. Beyond the farm a high boundary fence marked the British bank of the narrow river which forms the border; beyond the river lay the mud flats of China, a white town called Samchung and the grey hills.

This apparently hermetically sealed frontier was a matter of face on both sides, as was the fact that through trains from Kowloon to Canton no longer ran on the single-line railway which we crossed shortly afterwards. Such obvious and clearly marked divisions were merely symbolic; reality was represented by the junks flying the Communist flag which we saw every day in Kowloon harbour, by the big emporium in Nathan Road where one could buy Chinese manufactured goods at fantastically low prices, above all by the water main, seven feet in diameter, which the Chinese had just completed to ease the drought of Hong Kong and keep in working order that vital valve in their relations with the western world.

We travelled on through the small valleys and the little Hakka villages of this extraordinarily condensed countryside, where carp ponds, duck farms, market gardens, flower farms, all in miniature, were tightly packed together so as to utilize every yard of arable land. The barren hillsides were kept for the cemeteries, which consisted mostly of long rough piles of rocks and earth with a few big jars standing among them. On this topic the driver became eloquent. ‘Belly coffin under lock,’ he explained. ‘After four year body lot. Dig up bones. Put in jar.’ Only the rich could afford to lie in an armchair tomb facing out
to the western paradise. And the Hakka rarely become rich.

Beyond the town of Tai Po, one of the raw new settlements which the Government is developing in an attempt to centralize the village-oriented life of the New Territories, we came to the sea again, the land-locked, island-strewn Tolo Harbour, and from the cliff-top road we could see a fleet of sampans manœuvring into a circle. We stopped the car. As the circle closed a hollow, rolling sound began to rise from the harbour. The fishermen were beating their wooden drums to scare the fish into the nets. Then, inland once more, we drove through Shatin, the last and most beautiful of all the valleys of the New Territories, its wide floor patterned by the tiny fields of many-coloured crops, and its wooded hillsides bearing strange outcrops of rock which the Hakka believe bear the shapes of long dead people involved in tragic fates.

The other trip I made into the New Territories left a very different impression. I had become interested in the recent growth of the film industry in Hong Kong, which, in the actual numbers of films produced, had outstripped Hollywood and now stood third only to India and Japan. More than three hundred films a year, in Mandarin and in various southern dialects, are produced in Hong Kong; they are shown mainly in Taiwan and among the Overseas Chinese communities in South-east Asia. I found that a combine called Shaw Enterprises was responsible for more than half of these films. One morning Shaw's production manager, Raymond Chow, called at the hotel to take me out to the studios in the eastern part of the New Territories; he was young, quiet, laconically incisive in his speech, a type one encounters rather frequently among the new managerial class which the recent boom has propelled to the surface among the Chinese of Hong Kong.

As we drove out past the airport I asked Raymond Chow what seemed to me the basic question—how, with a population of at most 20,000,000 Chinese outside Communist China, the Hong Kong studios had been able to produce so many films and still survive. 'The Chinese are the world's greatest film-goers,' said Chow. 'Luckily they have not yet been tempted by tele-
vision. As for ourselves, we cultivate three virtues—economy, improvisation, and versatility. We try to provide everything our audiences can possibly want. Chinese opera, melodrama, detective stories, Chinese musicals. We even do our own westerns. But the most popular of all our films are the historical spectaculairs. One of them—it was called *The Magnificent Concubine*—actually won an award at Cannes.

The studios were situated on a peninsula in the east of the New Territories, quite different in character from the cultivated valleys we had already visited. It was the last thing one would have expected to find in overcrowded Hong Kong, an almost completely uninhabited area, whose steep grass-covered hills swept down to magnificent beaches and seascapes broken by islands and wooden shores. When we drove up to the studios a medieval army of extras was assembling on one of the hillsides to enact a historic battle. ‘As you see,’ said Chow, when we stepped out of the car, ‘we have everything we need in the way of scenery. We make the best use of it. We never create a set unless it is absolutely necessary.’

For an enterprise that probably turns out more films than any of its rivals anywhere in the world, the Shaw studios were modest in the extreme—a laboratory building, a couple of large hangar-like sheds, some workshops, and a few acres of standard sets which could be simply adapted. ‘Often we need only a week to make a film,’ Chow explained. ‘Take a Chinese opera. You set your stage, get your lighting right, and let go. The actors are so well trained and the conventions are so well established that you don’t even need much rehearsal.’

We walked through the streets of a Chinese town, its stucco buildings made to look like old stone—a temple, a tea house, a canal with half-moon bridges, a city wall and a city gate. ‘Twelfth century,’ Chow explained, ‘and pretty authentic. We do put in a good deal of research on the historical films. But we still make them for an infinitesimal fraction of Hollywood’s costs. Look. Those are the people who make it possible.’ He pointed to a squad of Hakka women labourers who were hauling wooden frames over to the plasterers’ workshops. ‘We employ
five hundred of those women. They receive five Hong Kong dollars a day, which is about one American dollar. The carpenters and plasterers get ten dollars, the electricians a little more, and so on. Compare that with Hollywood wages.' Actors had been a problem, he admitted. In the beginning he had used professional Chinese actors with big names; they had been expensive, set in the conventions, and much too few for the ever-expanding list of productions. 'So we set up our own actors' school. We get young people and train them right here in the studio.' He took me in to a hall where twenty youths and pony-tailed girls were raggedly learning to co-ordinate their dance movements. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. 'Who knows? Some of them may become stars. But the biggest star in Hong Kong will never be paid as much as the smallest starlet in Hollywood.'

It did not seem surprising that Hollywood, with its high wages and restrictive unions, had slipped behind the Asian countries. For the methods followed in Hong Kong were those of most of the studios of India and Japan; they had generated, among a mass of popular dross, some of the finest of modern films. It was not impossible that, out of the very quantity of films produced in Hong Kong, some masterpiece might appear that would over-leap the frontiers of language to speak as universally as Pather Panchali or Ugetsu.
It was early in the morning when we went to the Hong Kong airport. The great waiting-hall was almost deserted and we began to wonder whether we had come at the right time for the plane to Macao. 'Sure. You will be called,' said the clerk, with a kind of secretive grin. In ten minutes he came over to us. 'Now I take you to the Macao plane.' His smile broadened into a grin. Two other people joined us, a retired American colonel and his wife. At first, as we stepped out on the hot asphalt, I could see no plane at all. 'Over there,' said the clerk. Far over the runway squatted a tiny hydroplane. 'The Macao plane,' said the clerk, bursting into laughter. It was evidently a recurring joke. The pilot was already in his seat, a burly Australian in a blue baseball cap. There was room for three of us in the back seat, and the Colonel sat beside the pilot. 'Oh, boy, Emma,' he said, as the plane began to move off. 'Another new experience!' The Macao plane buzzed down the runway and circled at a precarious angle over the skyscrapers of Kowloon and out across the harbour, slowly falling in altitude until we were flying a mere three hundred feet above the water. Our course wove through the green and brown islands that shield the harbour from the sea, and we looked right down on the junks and sampans, bounding on its waves as dumpily as ducks. We could see the people on the boats, even the children tethered to the masts, and the women in their cartwheel hats of yellow bamboo working the little green plots on the edges of the islands. 'Reds, over there,' said the pilot laconically. Three green tugs were dragging a long boom of logs into the harbour. 'Coming from the Pearl River,' he explained. We saw the Communist flags fluttering from the masts of the tugs and the ends of the
boom. And then, as we swung out past the last islands, the hills of the Chinese coast were the nearest visible land, and we were crossing the mud-brown estuary of the Pearl River itself. A green hilly peninsula enlarged in our view until the grey forts and church towers became visible on its summits. ‘Macao,’ said the pilot. The plane dipped down inside the breakwaters, scudded over the outer harbour, and climbed the concrete ramp to the minute field, no bigger than a vicarage lawn, which is the airport of Macao. ‘Exciting! Terrific!’ The Colonel spoke in capitals. ‘Wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Would we, Emma?’ And then he allowed himself to be coaxed off by one of the touting guides who were waiting by the tiny custom-house, while we wandered on our own down the tree-lined esplanade from the airport and into the streets of Macao.

Macao is the oldest, smallest and most durable colonial territory in the whole of Asia. It was ceded to the Portuguese in 1557 as a gift from the Chinese emperor in gratitude for ridding the China Sea of pirates. Since that time the Portuguese have never let it pass out of their hands, and today the tiny territory of eight square miles is officially regarded as an actual province of Portugal.

Sensational films and novels have portrayed Macao as a city of vice-dens, a home of international spy-rings. Even the more sober reports of political commentators suggest a city that lives in perpetual tension on the very brink of extinction by the colossus of Chinese Communism. No doubt there are spies in Macao, though Hong Kong would seem a more logical base for their operations. No doubt there are also discreet brothels and opium dens, and I am sure the few thousand Portuguese in the colony do occasionally look apprehensively towards the coasts of China that are uncomfortably visible from every vantage-point of their compact little province. But we saw nothing of this, and I doubt if any ordinary visitor does, unless he happens to be in Macao at a time when refugees are streaming in. The Macao we saw was one of the sleepiest, quietest places in the whole of Asia.

The Rua do Campo, the long street down which we walked
towards the edge of the city and the frontier with China, was almost deserted except for the cats and fat chows which dozed in the hot morning sunlight under the dingy windows of small shops. Occasionally a rather antique car drove slowly past or a rickshaw boy pedalled up and circled around in the hope that we might give him a fare. The most insistent sound was the clank of little iron gongs which the Chinese peddlars tapped as they walked in and out of the dark courtyards, each with two baskets of fruit or fish jogging on the ends of his carrying pole.

The architecture of the Rua do Campo was Portuguese, with arcades and porticos and heavy tiled roofs, but the decorative motifs were often Chinese, the dragon waterspouts, the good-luck signs, and this combination symbolized the double life of Macao, as did the hybrid names on the signs hanging over the tailors’ establishments and apothecaries’ shops: Antonio Wang, above the bolts of English cloth and the yellowing pages from a Lisbon fashion magazine; Cristofero Chow above the dried snakes and sea-horses and the narwhal’s spears. Macao is Portuguese in government and perhaps in a few other less visible ways, but most of its people are Chinese, and, while some have accepted the Christian religion and support the great churches and convents which survive from the Counter-Reformation days when Macao first became Portuguese, many of them remained devoted to the old traditions that have become submerged in China itself.

At the end of Rua do Campo, in the shadow of a hill on whose summit the old fortress of Mong Ha looked rather ineffectually towards the Chinese mainland, we reached the temple of Kum Iam Tong, which existed before the Portuguese came to Macao and later played an ambiguous part in modern history, for in its garden the first treaty between China and the United States was signed on neutral ground in 1884. Something must have gone wrong with the calculations of the geomancers who on this occasion decided that Macao was a propitious spot.

Past the painted plaster temple guardians, who glared with demoniac fury on each side of the gates to protect the deities within from the evil that might be loose in the streets of Macao,
we found a feast for the gods in progress. Before the high altar in the main hall of the temple a long table was loaded with offerings to Kwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion who apparently changed sex on entering China, becoming the omnipresent Goddess of Mercy. Kwan Yin’s tastes seemed to be surprisingly varied and material for so exalted a being; a large baked carp, a joint of roast pork and a well-garnished capon formed the pièces de résistance among the offerings. There was nothing so insubstantial here as the mere flowers which Thai and Ceylonese Buddhists offer. Even the lesser deities had not been forgotten, and a little lion god on one of the side altars had received special treatment: a rasher of fat bacon was tied like a bandage over his eyes, and an egg lay between his paws.

Everything went on in the most casual way imaginable. On a row of chairs beside the high altar women were chatting with their shopping baskets beside them. We sat down to rest our feet and to watch the steady flow of devotees coming in from the street. A poor-looking woman walked up humbly with two eggs cupped in her hands and prostrated herself to the goddess after she had laid them on the table. An old fruit merchant, with his blue tunic open over his bare washboard chest, offered some oranges out of his basket and then hurriedly rattled the fortune-telling sticks. Many of the people had brought fake paper money which they folded intricately and threw into a bronze brazier half filled with glowing charcoal; over the years the smoke from all these bogus dollars had blackened the ceilings and given the paintings on the walls a dusky look as if the scenes of saintly life which they represented were taking place in limbo.

It was a large temple, and after we had rested we wandered unmolested through the many small garden courtyards which were linked by a maze of covered walks and flanked by the ancestral chapels of the old clans of Macao. One room, as we entered it, had the crammed vivid splendour of an Egyptian tomb; it was filled with bamboo and coloured paper figures of demons and heroes, to be carried in religious pageants. In another room a young man was teaching a class of small boys sitting on the flagstone floor; they were ragged children from one
of the refugee camps. And at the end of the maze we came to a big hall surrounded by massive ebony settees inlaid with porcelain plaques; beautiful scrolls of lobsters and fish and Chinese tigers hung on the walls. We sat down beside the large table in the centre of the hall, and half rose a little guiltily when a black-robed monk came into the room. ‘Rest! Enjoy yourselves!’ he said. ‘Smoke if you wish.’ He rummaged in a cupboard, produced a Black Horse Whisky ashtray, and bowed out of the room.

The Kum Iam Tong was typical of the temples of Macao, casual, popular, integrated into the social life of its district and little concerned with the subtler or deeper aspects of religion. One Macao temple, in the centre of the city, actually canvassed for customers, displaying posters recommending the chiromantic virtues of its priests.

That was the old China, carrying on as it had done for centuries, perhaps millennia. Not far off we got at least a glimpse of the new. Passing a little harbour surrounded by a slum of refugee shacks, we reached the isthmus leading to the mainland. Down the centre ran a long avenue, with Coca-Cola and watermelon shacks on either side. Through the trees we caught glimpses of the opposite shore, with the squat Communist pill-boxes spaced at high-water mark along the beach. At the end of the avenue a massive wall closed off the neck of land; it was broken by a high arched gateway, the old city gate of Macao, and through the opening, a hundred yards away from us, a few seconds’ sprint, was China. We could even see a building of some kind, and a Chinese sentry in a dingy brown uniform. The stretch of road before us was empty and there were no Portuguese guards in sight. Inge’s camera finger itched and we continued to walk. All at once a tall mulatto policeman appeared from behind a bus shelter. He silently waved us back. The Portuguese were taking no chances on an international incident.

We returned through the streets of craftsmen who inhabit much of Macao, which, apart from a few textile factories, is still a centre of little hand workshops where the men crowd together carving camphor wood chests, making paper festival figures,
preparing joss-sticks or building boats in long narrow sheds going down to the water. Along the pavements sat lines of women with coloured paper and thin-shaved strips of wood, making matchboxes by hand.

It was when we reached the harbour on the western side of the peninsula that we realized how much Macao had declined from its great days when the galleons of the China trade made it their destination. Now there were only three freighters moored in the anchorage, among a swarm of junks, which carry on the coastal trade with Hong Kong and Canton, almost all that remains to Macao of the great commerce of the past.

We lunched in a little Portuguese restaurant on the tree-lined esplanade of the Praia Grande—a heavy, provincial meal of fish with onions, arroz gordo and a sparkling Faisca wine. The clients were mostly young Portuguese in fashionable European suits. Behind us a newspaper editor was talking in English to a Chinese woman about a case which the Government of Macao was bringing against him for exposing factory conditions. He sounded defiant, but scared. It was the only occasion on which we caught a hint of the governmental repression that is said to exist in all the Portuguese colonies.

There was a muted, decaying grandeur about the heart of Macao; the pompous neo-classical Portuguese buildings in the main plaza were relics of the high days when Macao was still a great seaport. We wandered into the old winding streets up the hillsides, stopping in little cafés frequented by the local Portuguese, and browsing in the curio shops, where dignified old Chinese, looking like mandarins in their brocade robes, offered us beautifully made fake antiques at prices which fell in a descending scale as we edged towards the door, and reached rock bottom—a third of the original asking price—when we actually stepped into the street.

Politically Macao may be Portuguese, but in other ways it has become a satellite of Hong Kong. Apart from the Portuguese wine and brandy shops, and a few Communist stores selling cut-rate tinned food and bottled beer from Tientsin, the imported goods which filled the show windows down the main Avenida
Almeida Ribeira were all British made. We found English to be a third language spoken almost as widely as Portuguese, and the Hong Kong dollar accepted everywhere as the equivalent of the local pataca. But the relationship of Macao to Hong Kong is obviously that of a poor man accepting the crumbs from the rich man’s table. While Hong Kong is on the crest of a phenomenal boom, there is no evidence of its parallel in Macao, or of the galloping westernization which has accompanied industrial growth in the British colony. In Macao most of the men still wear the loose blouse and trousers of dark blue cotton traditional among Chinese workers, and the women dress in samfu of dull utilitarian colours, the drab colours of poverty; for most of its inhabitants Macao is a much poorer place than Hong Kong is for any but the refugees.

Yet the Chinese in Macao seem to accept their lot as preferable to what it might be if the Communist armies marched in through that open gateway on the narrow isthmus. One of the virtues of the Portuguese is their lack of racial discrimination, and their presence in Macao is almost as unobtrusive as that of the British in Hong Kong. When we climbed up to the old central fortress of St. Paul, the traditional strongpoint of the peninsula, we found it virtually unguarded. The single sentry, dressed in his harlequin camouflage uniform, had left his post to flirt with a pretty Eurasian girl, and we walked unchallenged through the main gate, past the guardhouse, on to the deserted parade ground, and only beat a fast retreat when an enormous Alsatian watchdog confronted us with business-like ferocity. The Portuguese clearly realized that any military force they could muster would be about as effective against invasion from the mainland as the old brass culverins that were still in position along the walls of the fortress. They too were relying on the advantages of their position as brokers between China and the western world.

Under this fragile umbrella of trust in the fortunes of politics the streets of Macao vegetate in the daytime and the casinos bustle at night. Since the Communists imposed their puritanical regime in Shanghai, Macao has become the Monte Carlo of
East Asia. We found that the main casino was a kind of gigantic houseboat lying out in the harbour and approached only by a shaky catwalk over a line of pontoons. The outside was gaudy, but the inside dull and business-like. The clients were all Chinese, mainly young men with the remote faces of regular gamblers, playing ten- and twenty-dollar bills in a Chinese game called Big and Small. They stepped aside, almost with deference, when a tall, middle-aged woman in an elaborately embroidered silk cheongsam walked in, staked five hundred dollars on a single throw, lost it and walked out impassively. We were so awed by this play of magnificent extravagance that we did not even stake the few patacas we had saved from the expenses of the day for a brief flutter before we departed. It was a matter of face.

Our day in Macao drew to an end. We boarded the Hong Kong steamer with the big Union Jack painted on its side as a memento of the days when Chiang Kai-shek’s planes used to fly about these waters gunning unidentified craft. The light was fading as the boat pulled away from its moorings, and the junk, their dark sails spread like bats’ wings, were coming into harbour. The last glow of the sun shone golden on the baroque façades of the Portuguese churches, and then faded. As we swung around the point of Macao the wind whipped up and the ship ploughed and plunged through the restless night with the light-houses of China flashing to port.
Kyoto: a Shinto shrine

Two ladies of Kyoto
PART SIX

Looking Gods in their Faces
The *Glenartney* sailed at evening, as the steward rang the gong for dinner; by the time we were back on deck only the outlying lights on the dim headlands of Hong Kong were still visible. It was the last land we saw before Japan, nearly four days later. But as we sailed north through the Formosa Strait the clouds on the eastern horizon piled up over Taiwan, and a Chinese Nationalist plane circled over us twice and then swept back towards the island. In the bar the Welsh first officer told the story of the British freighter captain who had been wounded on his own bridge by a trigger-happy Nationalist gunner. ‘Shot in the backside he was, man. That was the hardest thing for him to explain.’ On the second night we saw lights far away to starboard. They marked one of the invisible Ryukyu Islands, the tail to the rocket of Japan through which we were passing on our way from the East China Sea into the open Pacific.

Each day the air grew cooler and we relaxed with a feeling of relief that the greenhouse climates were left behind. We slumped into inactivity, reading the novels of Mary McCarthy which we had found on the steward’s bookshelves and chatting in the bar with the Irish ship’s doctor and The Round Trip Passenger, our only companion. The Round Trip Passenger was a retired shopkeeper from Slough, a delightful, wryly philosophic old man who, at the age of seventy-nine, had decided to see the countries of which he had daydreamed in a life of reading travel books. He confessed that there had been a slight blurring of the romantic lens, but he intended to keep on going now he had started. I hope he is still reading travel books and keeping on going. He was an excellent companion.

On our fourth morning we awoke to the sight of the low
cliffs of Japan, the great main island of Honshu. The soft pearly light of the northern Pacific gave a strange dreaming look to the land of wooded hills receding to mist-draped mountains, but the shore sparkled on the edge of the blue water with breaking waves. Once the clouds lifted from the mountains and for a few moments we saw a pale ghostly cone, barely defining itself against the surrounding haze—Fujiyama. We passed between the Izu Peninsula and the island of Oshima, and after the seasonless jungles of Malaya it was strange to see their woods still brown from winter. From the summit of Oshima rose a hesitant plume of dark volcanic smoke.

As we sailed along the shipping lanes into Tokyo Bay the sea traffic became dense, a veritable queue of ships proceeding towards Yokohama—Dutch, Russian and British freighters, Japanese coasters, and the grey seafowl shapes of American destroyers. In the shallower parts of the bay, white fishing boats lay in shoals, kept straight by little triangular stern sails which made them look like birds riding the water; the fishermen trolled with long rods and the cormorants flew past them, black and low over the waves.

To this scene Yokohama formed a background of industrial ugliness which grew like a great smudge on our vision as we approached the city. Along the foreshore and on the tops of the cliffs there were chemical factories, one beside the other, pumping out brown smoke from their chimneys, and over the city the smog lay like a leaden hood. We passed through quarantine and moored at the dockside. The longshoremen came on board, stocky, silent men in tin hats and woollen coats, a far cry from the ragged, shouting coolies of Hong Kong. One of the ship’s boys went out and found us a taxi, and we drove out through the customs-house on our way to Toyko.

In the century since the rulers of Japan reluctantly agreed to allow the first European merchants to settle on the mudflats of Yokohama, the city has grown until it is almost continuous with the spreading mass of Tokyo. I find it impossible to think of a worse introduction to a new country than the road that links the two cities. Even allowing for the muted colours of Japan, which
require much adjustment of vision after one has been used to the lush greenness of the Malayan jungle and the colourfulness of cities like Hong Kong and Bangkok, the drab ugliness of that long road through the sub-industrial verges of Yokohama was memorably depressing. The prevalent colour was the dingy beige-grey of weathered concrete, mingling with the darker grey of dusty, unpainted wood and almost unrelieved by any trace of colour, even the vulgar colour of posters, which after a while one would have welcomed. The people fitted into their setting as if they had deliberately cultivated protective colouring, the men dressed in dingy western clothes, and the women, when they did wear Japanese dress, concealing themselves in murky grey kimono's and shapeless haoris, loose-fitting coats which, because of the bump caused by the obi underneath, gave them a peculiarly hunched-backed look.

Where the two cities merged there were a few old-fashioned Japanese houses of weathered, unpainted wood; the pollarded trees in their gardens were angular, bare and budless except for the snow-like scattering of plum blossom on dark boughs. And then we entered the chaos of Tokyo, with its low unvaried skyline dictated by the fear of earthquakes. The driver immediately got lost. He got lost four times in all, and for an hour we circled round, with the thousand-foot steel spire of the Tokyo Tower as our recurring landmark, before we eventually found our destination, International House.

We remained in Tokyo for five days, and during this first visit we were much concerned with the problems of adjustment to a town that might have been designed by a series of characters who had escaped from a novel by Kafka. Tokyo is at once the world's largest and its most unplanned city. Spreading out from the ancient and graceful Edo of the old colour prints, the flood of building has, over the past century, eaten up dozens of villages and small outlying towns, until a vast area is now covered with an undisciplined agglomeration which somehow houses ten million people. Twice Tokyo has risen like a dusty Phoenix from the ashes—after the great earthquake of 1923, and after the bombings of 1946 which razed 80 per cent of its buildings. Each
time the destruction might have been put to good use by the imposition of a carefully worked out plan for the rebuilding of the city, and each time the opportunity was lost. Tokyo was allowed to grow up again as it had been before, only larger and more unmanageable than ever.

To anyone going to Japan with the kind of romantic vision that many writers have tried to create, the first sight of Tokyo must be devastating; it was a shock even to us, who thought we knew what to expect. A typical Tokyo street is a noisy chaos of jammed, hooting cars and antiquated trams, with broken pavements underfoot and a tangled chaos of wires overhead. Roughly constructed concrete buildings, tasteless in design and usually decrepit, alternate with ragged waste lots and rows of one-story wooden buildings which house small shops, minute restaurants with four tables each, and innumerable tiny bars. By daytime it looks like a decaying frontier settlement; at night it is made lurid by the flashing of a myriad neon signs. From such a street the narrow, winding lanes may run off into slums or—just as unpredictably—into areas of old-fashioned wooden houses in neat, traditional gardens. Scattered in this maze of ugly main streets and tangling byways new hotels and apartment blocks rise haphazardly, the forerunners of a bright new city that never materializes.

To the ungracefulness of the scene is added the difficulty of finding one’s way through it all. Street names are rarely marked, and many streets have no names at all. Addresses are still given in the old-fashioned way, by district, and only the postman can be relied on to know where any particular house lies in its district. In the very centre of Tokyo, between Ginza and the Imperial Palace, the situation is slightly more comprehensible, since the streets are laid out in a regular gridiron pattern and the main avenues are marked, but even here it can take an hour to find an unfamiliar shop or restaurant in a side street. Only after two days of constant walking and careful observation did we begin to get our bearings even in this central core of Tokyo. Beyond it we never discovered more than the main routes through the vast jungle of anonymous houses.
The chaos of Tokyo illustrates the unevenness of Japan’s progress into modernity. Since 1945 the population of the city has trebled; every peasant’s son in Japan longs to reach the capital, and many of them get there. But municipally Tokyo is still organized to all intents and purposes, as it was fifty years ago. The American occupation authorities made a half-hearted attempt to name at least the main streets, but little has been done in this direction since they left, nor has much real progress been made in creating a master plan for effectively regulating new building or for reconstructing on a rational plan and aerating with new highways what is already there.

Meanwhile the traffic builds up, year after year, and workers in the city often spend four hours a day travelling between their suburban homes and their offices or shops. The smallness of Japanese homes means that the population of every square mile of Tokyo is exceptionally dense, and up to midnight the pavements are so packed that one soon learns the meaning of claustrophobia.

The famous Japanese code of manners is as ill-fitted as the antiquated plan of Tokyo to meet the stresses of modern metropolitan life. It is a code of ceremonial self-restraint which can work in favourable circumstances but which, given the highly emotional nature of the Japanese, is liable to break down under stress, as many violent incidents in history have shown. Nowadays one is liable to be astonished by the frequent absence in everyday life of the elaborate politeness that reigns on formal occasions when gentlemen in beetle-like cut-away coats still bow to each other from the waist. Getting on to an underground train in Tokyo can involve a free-for-all as wild as one ever endures on the Paris Métro in the rush hours; in self-preservation, one soon develops an energetic use of the elbows. In the streets one is liable to be jostled without either consideration or apology, and I have noticed that Japanese good manners are very literally a matter of ‘face’. If you look at a Japanese he cannot bear to be other than polite; if your face is not towards him, he does not see you as a person and courtesy becomes unnecessary. There is one exception even to this rule. Often we had only to
enter a shop for our appearance as 'hairy barbarians' to send the
girl assistants into uncontrollable fits of giggling. It is true that
they held their hands over their mouths to mitigate any apparent
rudeness, while the giggle to most Asians is a way of concealing
one's own embarrassment in dealing with an unfamiliar situ-
ation, but the experience was always disconcerting.

Tokyo is also the city where one encounters at its most in-
tense, its most vital and its most vulgar the kind of society that
has resulted from the double impact of industrialization and the
West. Japanese society is a kind of conglomerate, in which bor-
rowings from many places at many times are fossilized and
unitied by the cement of Japanese tradition. The writing and
much of the surviving religious and courtly ceremonial came
from China. The present political constitution is basically
British. The beer and the great beer halls which one finds in
every city are German. The uniform of the students is that of
Hapsburg Austria and the middy-blouses of the high-school
girls date from Victorian England. The cake shops, when they
are not Japanese, are most often French in style, the coffee bars
are Italian—innocent emanations of La Dolce Vita—and the
fashions in western dress are American. As for art, the styles run
all the way from the French impressionists to the most recent
schools of New York and Italy, and often we would be im-
pressed against our better judgements by the meticulous faithful-
ness with which Japanese painters had imitated such masters as
Monet, Matisse and Picasso.

At first we were bewildered at the very incongruity of this
mixture of the strange and the familiar, and then amazed at the
zest for having the best of all worlds which seems to be the most
outstanding characteristic of the modern Japanese. This made
the department stores of Tokyo unexpectedly interesting places.
The basement would be a kind of folk museum of all the
minutiae of the Japanese cuisine, the raw fish and seaweeds and
delicious insects and pickled vegetables. One ascended through floor
after floor loaded profusely with the whole gamut of western-
style Japanese manufactures, a convincing demonstration—if one
needed it—that there is no field of industry whose secrets the
Japanese cannot probe and adapt very efficiently to their own uses. There would be other floors devoted to the essentials of the traditional life—hand-made utensils for the tea ceremony, for example, or the elaborate and expensive combination of garments that goes to make up the kimono costume, which has now returned to fashion as a kind of status dress in Japan because only the well-to-do can afford to dress well in this way. Finally, on the highest floors, one would find the work of great living Japanese potters, men like Hamada and Kenzan, and always an art gallery. Some of the best exhibitions in Tokyo are held in the department stores; I saw a retrospective exhibition of Utamaro at the Shirokiya store which not only showed an exhaustive series of 350 of the artist’s colour prints from his beginnings to his final decay, but also presented the less familiar paintings of Utamaro, his masters and pupils, and even a workshop where modern craftsmen were engraving the fourteen plates that went to make a normal Utamaro design, and printing reproductions by hand so that the process should be perfectly comprehensible to the many people of all classes who were willing to pay their 100 yen to enter.

This leads to one of the paradoxes of contemporary Japanese life. The Japanese are taught to revere their artistic traditions and, as we discovered later to our cost, the regular pilgrimage to view famous works of art is a part of the education of every young Japanese. The cult is not xenophobic; we came upon parties of schoolchildren staring uncomprehendingly at the fine collection of Monets in the Museum of Western Art, and when the Venus de Milo arrived in Toyko the queues extended for hundreds of yards outside the special exhibition shed built in Ueno Park. At the same time the gaudy ugliness of many Japanese manufactured goods is unexampled and indescribable; a long walk down Ginza is enough to show that the exquisitely designed examples of craftsmanship by which intellectuals of other countries tend to judge Japan are carefully selected items which are quite unrepresentative of modern Japanese taste. More than that, one realizes that the impact of the West has overpowered the exquisite restraint which at the best periods charac-
terized Japanese art and craftsmanship, and has ensured the triumph of a taste for excess in form and colour that already appeared in the lush painting of the Muromachi period and in the gaudiness of such late colour print artists as Hokusai. Modern Japanese taste at its best is impeccable; at its worst it is on a level with the lowest anywhere. This, of course, calls into question the cult of art, and even the cult of natural beauty which is equally prevalent in Japan. I think both of these cults, which were developed in the highly rarefied atmosphere of the Heian court in medieval Kyoto, are now almost entirely a matter of convention so far as the majority of Japanese are concerned.

In fact the elements that still seem most alive in Japanese culture are the vigorous, popular ones which have nothing to do with the courtly traditions of medieval Kyoto, and comparatively little with the austere traditions of the authentic samurai (which is something different from the popular tradition of the samurai embodied in Japanese films and in the artistically disreputable but rather vigorous samurai plays). Now that the fine arts have become more or less westernized—part of the nebulous international movement which stretches, with regional variations, from Tokyo through Delhi and Venice and round the world to San Francisco and Vancouver—it is principally in mingei, the crafts of the villages, that a vigorous tradition of visual and tactile excellence still prevails; for a few shillings one can still buy exquisite tea-bowls and stoneware pots, and for a few pence simple bamboo utensils of great functional beauty. The other tradition which still maintains a surprising vitality in some directions is that of the merchant class which became influential during the seventeenth century in Osaka and Edo. The colour print was developed under the patronage of the merchants, and even today there are many traditionally minded Japanese, particularly in Kyoto, who refuse to recognize it as an authentic art. In recent years the colour print has been revived in the hope of giving it a new direction in keeping with the westernizing tendency of contemporary Japanese painting, but up to the present the results have not been impressive, and we must still regard this art, which men like Utamaro and Sharaku, with their engravers,
Looking Gods in Their Faces

raised to a remarkable height, as having been in rapid decline for the past century, in spite of the efforts of contemporary artists to reinvigorate it by the injection of fashionable modes. It is the arts of dramatic action that have really survived from the age of the great merchants: the Kabuki play and the Bunraku puppets.

We spent many hours watching various types of dramatic performance in Japan, and most of them passed what I imagine is the most extreme test of successful theatre: they held our attention even though at the beginning of our month in Japan we understood perhaps one word in a hundred and at the end perhaps one word in thirty.

In Tokyo during our first visit we saw performances of both Kabuki and Noh, the poetical drama patronized by the samurai and first developed in Kyoto during the fifteenth century. Kabuki was obviously a popular art in every sense. When we reached the Kabukiza theatre near Ginza at four in the afternoon, its entrance, richly decorated with branches of artificial pink cherry blossom, was crowded with an audience consisting mainly of women, almost all in kimono for the occasion and ranging from young girls in the bright flowery dress of the unmarried to rustic-looking old ladies who wore wooden geta, the Japanese form of patten which keeps the feet dry by elevating them three or four inches above the ground. The play was a simplified version of certain episodes from the greatest classic of Japanese literature, Lady Murasaki's eleventh-century Genji Monogatari, and the leading parts were played by two of the most important contemporary Kabuki actors, Danjuro XI, the most recent of a dynasty whose earlier members were immortalized by Sharaku and other colour-print artists, and Baiko, one of the leading players of female rôles.

As for our reactions to the performance, here are the notes which I made in the freshness of the first impression, immediately after our return from the theatre: 'In spite of an almost total incomprehension of what was being said (perhaps one word a minute might strike a note of familiarity in our minds) and of a very sketchy and not always exact 'story' in the English
programme, we were fascinated enough by the sheer virtuosity of the performance to remain the full four hours, always interested though often puzzled. This was partly due to the magnificent miming, partly to the rhythms of the speech, which we caught quickly, as in Chinese opera, and most of all to the sheer formal appeal of the spectacle, the processions over the broad stage filling the whole end of the great theatre, the magnificent gaudiness of the dress, the massive abstract forms created by the stiffly voluminous medieval garments worn by both men and women, and the unusual theatrical devices—the revolving stage, which sent a whole palace spinning while the women in long robes walked in procession around its balconies, the elevated gangway by which dramatic exits and entrances were made through the audience, the sliding-in of sets from the side to mark the changing of scenes, and the occasional furtive appearance of stagehands in black doublets, breeches and stockings, like Elizabethan Puritans. The initial shock (which we had expected to avoid by foreknowledge but still experienced) of seeing elderly men, with puffed white faces and falsetto voices, acting as young and seductive ladies; Baiko, playing the heroine, had the features of a female medium of sixty (already half converted into ectoplasm) and the voice of an ageing eunuch; he was courted in a series of despairing love-scenes by the 'young' (forty-five to fifty) Danjuro XI; yet so finely did he possess his part that in the end we too found ourselves entering into the whole magic pretence and forgetting the initial impact of this strange and at first repellent phenomenon. This, surely, is the true art of theatre at its best, to compel the willing suspension not only of disbelief, but also of our most irrational prejudices.'

Unlike Kabuki, Noh is definitely not a popular form of theatre. It uses an archaic speech which even many modern Japanese find hard to follow. The performance we attended took place in an outlying district near the university, and the audience consisted mainly of students and of people who looked both intellectual and conservative; the fact that many men came in kimono, which is rarely worn out of doors in Tokyo by anyone but women, suggested a strong traditional affiliation. Most of
the audience carried texts of the plays to follow the more difficult passages.

We were given English synopses of the three plays, all supernatural tales of encounters with spirits or demons, but even so we followed very little of the elaborate non-action. Noh is theatre in the half-round; the stage is surrounded on two sides by the audience, and the actors enter along a side gallery—only the principals masked—walking like blind men, with inhuman slowness, as if they were statues just emerging into life. The same prenatural slowness characterizes the whole performance, as the measured metrical speeches go on for minute after minute without the suggestion of action and the dances follow their deliberate courses. It was the music, however, that really determined our impressions of Noh. Again, I quote from the diary:

‘The instrumental music, played on a bamboo flute and two small pottery drums (one tuned to a hollow thud, the other to a high-pitched plonk), is subordinate to the vocal efforts of the musicians, strange crowing cries which sound like those of forest animals—rather, in fact, like those of the orang-outang. All the music strikes us as primeval, resembling the sounds at Northwest Pacific Indian secret society ceremonials, when the spirit whistles blow, the drums beat and the voices of the supernatural beings are supposed to be heard sounding from the depths of the forest. In fact, though we realize that Noh is regarded by the Japanese as a most sophisticated art, and that our own ignorance of the language has robbed us of much, the impression we gain from merely watching and listening to Noh as a pattern of sound is that of a calling from the most ancient heart of Man, full of the mystery of a world drenched in magic and animist adventures. The immeasurably slow, trance-like Noh dance seems like the solemn movement of half-human, half-reptilian beings, and its occasional abrupt stampings and blind dashes like those of a possessed shaman. We do not enjoy it, but we are hypnotized, and stay four hours without more than the dimmest glimmer of intellectual understanding.’

We saw something more intimate than the public visitor’s Tokyo when Keiichi Hirano invited us to his house in the
suburbs. Hirano, who teaches at the University of Tokyo, is the only Japanese expert on Canadian literature, and we had met him, with his wife and daughter, when they stayed in Vancouver during the preceding summer. Now, with the usual generosity of the Japanese, they were anxious to repay our modest hospitality several times over, and this was the first of a number of occasions on which we were indebted to their kindness. On the day of our visit, Hirano himself called for us at International House, and we set out in the bleak evening hour of a northern land at the very end of winter.

Almost immediately the taxi left the wide main streets, plunging along narrow lanes between walled gardens that enclosed old-fashioned wooden houses, heavily tiled or thatched with cypress bark. ‘This is the remnant of pre-war Tokyo,’ Hirano explained; he described the city as he had known it in the terrible final months of the war, with the streets in crumbled chaos, the burnt-out shells of houses, and the stench of gas rising from broken mains, sometimes strengthened by the reek of rotting human flesh.

We travelled on through the scattered villages which have been incorporated into Tokyo and which now form the nuclei of the inner suburbs. Like the quarters of Paris, they retained an individual character, and some of them had a pleasant half-rustic atmosphere as we drove through their winding streets, which were still part of the old narrow rural highways, brilliant with paper lanterns, swinging signs, brightly-lit shops, bars and eating-houses, and crowded with shoppers, the women with children slung on their backs inside loose harlequin-coloured coats.

Hirano’s house was a small wooden cottage on a tiny plot of land in a typical Tokyo maze of lanes which no stranger could have penetrated and into which even the taxi-driver had to be careful piloted. The rooms were minute, but the lack of heavy furniture made them seem uncrowded and sufficient. One lived at floor-level rather than chair-level, with the pale yellow tatami matting serving, with small cushions, as a seat and, with large cushions, as a bed. The arrangement of Japanese houses is still austerely simple, and also, once one has adapted oneself to un-
accustomed ways of sitting, as functional as simple things usually are, though, as the Japanese themselves have shown by their constant search for graceful embellishments and ceremonials, the purely simple and functional setting is too much like living by bread alone to be endurable for long.

There was nothing of bread alone about the meal which Mrs. Hirano had prepared with amazing resourcefulness in her tiny kitchen. It was a veritable anthology of the delicately balanced combinations of flavour, texture and colour which characterize Japanese food at its best, beginning with sashimi, the thin slices of raw tunny which are the favourite Japanese hors-d'oeuvre, and continuing with such delicacies as seabream garnished with black toadstools; breasts of chicken with bamboo hearts and mushrooms; an omelette made with shredded chicken; angelica stalks enclosed in egg-batter; carrots in cheese sauce; and bitter greens. All these dishes were served at the same time, so that we could combine them according to our taste, and to give further variation there were slices of shark's-flesh sausage and of cheese inlaid with pistachio nuts. The soup, which came, according to Japanese custom, towards the conclusion of the meal, contained clams in their shells, and a pickled vegetable, rather like chicory, gave a final astringent touch to the meal. We drank sake, carefully warmed, and at the end green tea.

It was one of the best meals we enjoyed in Asia—but it was also fascinating as an illustration of the extraordinary dietary experimentalism of the Japanese. Almost anything that can be eaten, among the products of the sea or the soil, is put to use, and often in a highly palatable way. No doubt the necessities of a rigorous climate were the beginning of this kind of improvisation in foods and flavours. Yet few races, even in cold countries, are so lacking in dietary prejudices as the Japanese. This is obviously another aspect of the national tendency, so vainly resisted for long periods of Japanese history, to try anything that is new and constantly to absorb the unfamiliar into the familiar pattern of living. Japanese food lacks the strong flavours and hot spices of most Asian forms of cooking, but once one's palate has become accustomed to its general blandness, the
subtle combinations become extraordinarily appealing in their endless permutations. I could easily resign myself to a lifetime of eating in the Japanese manner, while the thought of a lifetime of Indian curries, which I enjoy on occasion, is appalling.

Afterwards, sitting on the floor with ciderdowns over our legs to conserve the warmth of the submerged heater in the centre of the floor, we talked of Buddhism in Japan. Hirano told us that he came of a Buddhist sect which allowed marriage among its priests and regarded the vocation as hereditary. As a priest’s son, he was taught the rituals and duly ordained; though his way of life had now become almost entirely secular, he could wear the priest’s stole and perform the services.

‘I am still a Buddhist, of course. In fact, I think it means more to me than it does nowadays to most Japanese. Of course, if you ask any man in the street, he will tell you that he is a Buddhist, but all he means is that when he dies a Buddhist priest will say his funeral service.’

Buddhism, Hirano explained, had been losing its vigour and its influence for generations, but it was the war that seemed finally to deprive it of meaning for the people as a whole. ‘I think they began to blame the Buddhists for the war and everything that went with it—not for starting it, of course, but for acquiescing, for failing to say no. Now, of course, Buddhism has become a kind of scapegoat. Everyone says the Buddhist priests are grasping and materialistic. Unfortunately it is not entirely untrue. You will see when you go to Kyoto.’

I mentioned the reputation that Japanese Zen Buddhism enjoyed abroad ‘Zen has a reputation here, too,’ said Hirano. ‘It is the only form of Buddhism that is respected, but it is respected only by intellectuals.’ The ordinary Japanese, he explained, never understood Zen. They followed the big popular sects, which taught them simple ethics and promised them that with the grace of the Lord Amida they would be taken up into the Western Paradise. But all that had lost its appeal. If the people were interested in religion they either became Christians or joined one of the new revivalist cults which preach salvation by faith and mingle Christianity and Buddhism together.
45  Tokyo: ceremony at the Meiji Shrine

46  The streets of Tokyo
Nara: sacred deer at Todaiji

The Garden of the Dead
'Of course,' he concluded, 'Buddhism is still part of our history. It affects our lives in ways of which we are not always aware. But do not forget Shinto. We have all been Shintoists as well as Buddhists. Shinto and Buddhism in Japan are the two sides of the same coin. That also you will see in Kyoto.'
The milestones that mark off the history of Japan are the names of places. We talk of Nara and Heian periods, of Kamakura and Muromachi and Edo periods, and the descriptions are not merely convenient labels for historians. They point to the territorial associations of the eras of government, but also to the fact that most of the great Japanese cities did not grow up naturally but were the deliberate creations of an imperial dynasty or of the noble lines that usurped power under the institutions of Regency and Shogunate.

Nara, created in the seventh century on the plan of Chang’an in China, was the first capital of Japan. Its successor Kyoto—or Heian-kyo as it was first called—remained the seat of the imperial house for more than a thousand years, from its foundation in 794 to the day in 1869 when the Emperor Meiji, having finally shaken himself free of the Tokugawa Shogunate, departed to rule in the new capital of Edo, which he renamed Tokyo.

We travelled to these two cities, the very sources of Japanese historical tradition, by one of the special trains which are the pride of the Japanese railways, the only Asian equivalent to the Trans-Europe expresses, running on a time schedule so strict that the passengers can reclaim their fares if the train is particularly late reaching its destination.

The journey to Kyoto took almost six hours, most of it through the rather dull countryside typical of southern Honshu. The more inhabited parts of Japan are rarely distinguished by topographical beauty, and one soon begins to understand why the Japanese have become so expert at creating their own miniature garden landscapes, and why they place such emphasis on places which do have a particular charm. Before visiting the
country one tends to regard such scenes as those portrayed by
the sumi painters and the colour-print artists as typical of Japan;
in reality, their whole point lies in the fact that they are excep-
tional, the kind of scenes to which a Japanese goes as a pilgrim
because they do not form part of his daily experience.

Another feature of the inhabited regions of Japan which at
first surprises one is the great decentralization of industry. On
the outskirts of Tokyo the country percolated into the city, so
that among the factories and apartment blocks there were
stubble-covered paddies and market gardens with green rows of
crops growing under long caterpillar-like tents of transparent
plastic. But as we reached the open country the reverse process
took place, the factories continued, and for the first four hours
of our journey, as far as Nagoya, the great pottery-manufac-
turing centre of Japan, there were comparatively few stretches of
countryside in which we were out of sight of an industrial plant
of some kind.

It was still a winter-dead land, the fields and hedges, and vil-
lages of wood and tile, all blending into a pervading greyness,
but on the hills near Atami, where the spreading tops of the
Japanese pines created low, flowing contours, the dark green of
the conifers moved in sombre waves towards the snow-covered
mountain slopes where, once again, the clouds lifted briefly and
the passengers hastened over to the windows with their cameras
to catch the fleeting glimpse of Fujiyama. As Fuji dropped out
of sight the mountains receded and the train ran over flat alluvial
plains of rice paddies, and along coastlines terraced with orange
groves and blossoming orchards, where the fishing boats lay in
little shoals close to the rocky shore.

I found my attention constantly wandering away from the
modest landscape as I listened to the Japanese advertising man
in front of me, carefully briefing a colleague from New York
on the pitfalls of business relationships in his country.

‘The first thing to remember’, he instructed him, ‘is that our
language and our behaviour reflect each other. Japanese is not a
language made for direct speaking. It always hedges around a
point instead of striking at it. And so to us it is ill-mannered to
be too direct, and even when we are speaking English we are liable to misunderstand the intentions of someone who calls a spade a spade, or lays it down on the line, or what have you. That goes in business relations as well as anything else. We’re so devious in the way we go about things that it’s a miracle we’re as efficient as we really are.’

The habit of looking at themselves and their culture rather cynically and deprecatingly is cultivated by young westernized Japanese, and it often appears to the outsider an example of traditional oriental mock humility, but I am inclined to think that self-criticism is an important element in the complex mental make-up of the modern Japanese, and that its presence is one of the reasons for their ability to attain a proficiency in industrial organization which no other Asian people has even begun to rival. There was so much obvious sense in this young man’s remarks, that when he went on to analyse the right way for an advertising man to approach a potential client, I listened with attention to what turned out to be a very shrewd comment on some of the salient aspects of Japanese society.

He argued that Japanese businesses, like Japanese society in general, were based on strictly hierarchical forms of organization, and the wise man used the ladder which this provided to climb to the managing director’s office. Of course, if one did gain direct access to that dignitary, then a certain success was assured. The very fact of standing on his carpet or sitting on one of his chairs made one his guest, and so a token concession had to be made in order to save both sides from losing face. But only the man unversed in Japanese ways would believe he had conquered by winning one small skirmish. He might well find himself having gained merely a ‘one-shot deal’, where something more permanent might have come from beginning at the lowest subordinate, who would feel so flattered that his own honour would require a real effort to open the necessary doors, and so one could proceed from level to level, assiduously cultivating every person one encountered, until the face of so many people would be involved that one could not fail to achieve substantial victory.
Once again, I was reminded of Kafka, of those long passages in *The Castle* where K. is instructed in the devious processes by which one establishes contact with the sources of power. The advertising men got off in the many-chimneyed murk of Nagoya to try out their strategy on the Japanese Wedgwoods. Here the railway turned northward towards Gifu and then westward towards Lake Biwa, shaking off the factories as it entered this region of hills, mountains and small valleys through which it coiled its way to Kyoto. Here at last we were in the kind of countryside which we had always thought of as typically Japanese. Villages of black-and-white half-timbered houses, roofed with immense hoods of thatch, sat in the folds of the hills among terraced fields that climbed from the floors of the narrow valleys and emphasized the lower contours of the hills; above them the summits rose into long snow-covered hogs' backs. Under the leafless trees on the hillsides there were little cemeteries, clusters of square stone pillars, and the narrow rivers were crossed by wooden bridges of posts and beams exactly like those portrayed in the prints of Hiroshige. On the edge of every village stood the temple compound, with its pagoda like a wooden tree and its massive halls of time-darkened cypress.

At Otsu the train descended from the valleys to the mountain-edged shores of Lake Biwa, rimmed by sawmills and pleasure boats moored for the winter. As we left the lake the train stewardess came to us with green tea and a tray of steaming oshibori, the little hot towels which one is offered everywhere in Japan. A few moments later the train emerged from the last barrier of hills and began to run in through the dingy, unexpected industrial suburbs of Kyoto.
In comparison with Tokyo, Kyoto astonishes one by the apparent modernity of its wide avenues and its rectangular layout. But these features, which have made its transition to twentieth-century conditions relatively easy, were first established when the city was planned at the end of the eighth century by the Japanese Emperor Kwammu, who modelled his kingdom on the T'ang empire in China, and his capital on the T'ang city of Chang'an.

Nara was the first capital of Japan, founded at the end of the seventh century A.D. and abandoned in 783. A second capital was begun at Nagaoka, and, after years of work, abandoned because of a series of tragic happenings which convinced Kwammu that it did not enjoy the blessings of the gods. In the spring of 793 the geomancers and oracles set to work finding a propitious site for the third capital, and they discovered it at the place where the Kamo and Katsura rivers come together under the shadow of Mount Hiyei. The site was already protected by the Buddhist temple of Koryuji, and the ancient Shinto shrine of Gion, dedicated to the god Susa-no-we, while on Mount Hiyei the tantric priest Saicho, founder of the great Tendai sect of Buddhism, had recently built a small temple that gave protection in the ominous north-easterly direction, the Demon Entrance, from which malign influences might emanate.

Once again a decade of building began. The new city was called Heian-Kyo—Peaceful and Tranquil City—and was laid out in a great rectangle measuring three and a half miles from east to west, with the Daidari, or Great Palace Enclosure, almost a square mile in area, lying centrally within its own protecting wall at the north end. The rest of the city was divided into
squares by its wide avenue and these squares in turn were subdivided by narrow lanes. The central avenue, which ran south from the main gate of the palace enclosure, was a broad processional way, 280 feet wide. The other avenues, spaced about a third of a mile apart, varied from 80 to 170 feet wide. The whole of Heian-Kyo was surrounded by a moat, and canals of running water, beside each of the main avenues, brought coolness in the hot summer months.

Great fires, the medieval wars of the samurai, and the internecine struggles between the soldier monks of the great temples in Kyoto and Nara, led to the destruction of this original city of Heian-Kyo and of several of its successors, so that there are now no buildings in the city which date from the Heian era of the Fujiwara regents and the Lady Murasaki, and only a few, mostly on the outskirts, which belong to any century earlier than the seventeenth, when the Tokugawa Shoguns finally imposed their peace on Japan from the rival centre of Edo.

Yet the original plan of Kyoto still governs the shape of the present city, and fits it for the conditions of a modern world. This is very much in keeping with the double face which Kyoto presents. All that is traditional and conservative in Japanese culture is preserved and perpetuated there, yet the city returns two out of the three Communist deputies who sit in the Japanese parliament. In the Zen gardens the priests carefully rake the sand each morning—as they have done for centuries—in forms symbolizing the condition of man, yet Kyoto was the first city to introduce electric power and street lamps, and today the smoke rises from a forest of factory chimneys in the suburbs. There are almost two thousand Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines in Kyoto and in the wooded hills around it, but there are even more bars and cabarets. In the main streets of Kyoto the crowds are as thick and the noise as loud as in Tokyo itself, and it is the only place in Japan where I have seen a man going berserk, as I was often tempted to do, by the sheer pressure of human contact, suddenly shouting and jostling the people away from him as he ran down the pavement. Yet as soon as one steps into the side streets the sound and fury of modern life become remote,
and one moves in a world of unexpected quietness. It is then that one becomes aware of the real beauty of Kyoto, which at first escapes one as it must have escaped the earliest Portuguese visitors in the sixteenth century.

Japanese towns depend much on mood and atmosphere. They do not have the kind of monumental magnificence that takes the mind by storm in European cities; there is nothing even remotely resembling the Parthenon or St. Peter’s. Even the most celebrated temples of Japan make the muted intimate appeal of an architecture that merges into nature, of old weathered wood, of massive roofs covered with grey tiles or packed layers of dark cypress bark. As much as anything else, it is the subtleties of light and shadow that bring out the beauty latent in Japanese towns, and Kyoto’s most magic hour, like that of Paris, is the time when the light fades. The lanterns are lit in the temple closes, and in the narrow lanes of the old quarters beside the River Kamo the windows of tiny shops filled with dolls and sweetmeats and strange foods seem to offer a perpetual exotic Christasm, and the tap of clogs echoing between the wooden screens outside the discreet houses emphasizes the stillness of the air in that prolonged instant of luminous, nostalgic beauty.

But, to the stranger at least, everything in Japan seems to go by opposites, and so one steps out of these streets of quiet twilight into the colour and stir of the pleasure quarters. The most celebrated is the district known as Gion, which lies under the patronage of a Shinto shrine that was already old when Kyoto was founded twelve hundred years ago. The clogs one hears tapping in the streets of Gion are usually those of the young apprentice geishas, the maikos as they are called. In their gold-threaded brilliant garments, their tiny pert faces gleaming whitely under masses of black hair piled in traditional forms and decorated with jewelled combs, they are on their way to the teahouses where they will perform the entertainments of the geisha craft.

The more one explores Kyoto, leaving the wide main avenues of the original Confucian plan, the more one begins to see it
as an agglomeration of little worlds: the temples complete
within their enclosing walls, the houses secretive behind their
bamboo screens, the tiny gardens representing vast landscapes
and symbolizing whole philosophies of existence, and the de-
liberately rustic tea-houses in which the carefully observed par-
ticulars of ceremonial assume a universal significance. What the
seventeenth-century Zen Master Takuan said of the ideal tea
house and its special rites might apply to many aspects of the
Kyoto one still experiences.

'Let us then construct a small room in a bamboo grove or
under trees, arrange streams and rocks and plant trees and bushes
while (inside the room) let us pile up charcoal, set a kettle,
arrange flowers, and arrange in order the necessary tea utensils.
And let all this be carried out in accordance with the idea that
in this room we can enjoy the streams and rocks as we do the
rivers and mountains in Nature, and appreciate the various moods
and sentiments suggested by the snow, the moon, and the trees
and flowers, as they go through the transformation of seasons,
appearing and disappearing, blooming and withering. As visitors
are greeted here with due reverence, we listen quietly to the
boiling water in the kettle, which sounds like a breeze passing
through the pine needles, and become oblivious of all worldly
woes and worries; we then pour out a dipperful of water from
the kettle, reminding us of the mountain stream, and thereby
our mental dust is wiped out. This is truly a world of recluses,
saints on earth.'

It is among these many little worlds that one finds most of the
works of art that make Kyoto the greatest cultural repository of
Japan. It is estimated that the city contains more than a fourth
of the country's registered national treasures, but only a few of
these are to be found in the bleak little sham Louvre that was
built there as a National Museum at the end of the nineteenth
century. At first we had the illusion that this city where every
temple enshrined its own great works of art would be an ex-
emplification of Malraux's conception of the Museum Without
Walls. But as we travelled day by day over its great area, up into
the wooded hills and out into the villages scattered across the
valley, we realized that this was far from true. The walls were ever present, encapsulating each epitome of the world from the indiscipline of that world itself, encircling each unity in which garden and building and works of art flowed into and reflected each other.

For the character of the old Kyoto that has survived was created, not by the spacious peaceful days of the Heian era, when Prince Genji and his kind lived a courtly existence dominated by aesthetic pleasure, sentimental adventures, and elaborate ceremonial, but by the turbulent days of the great civil wars, when every man defended himself as best he could or sought a refuge from the perils of daily life where he might console himself by creating the symbols of an unchanging world of values.

The very character of the buildings and the works of art they contained were dominated by this period. Only a few buildings we saw in Kyoto reflected the spirit of an earlier broader age. One of these was the Koryuji temple out in the fields towards Arashiyama, where we found the kind of scattered conglomerations of simple wooden halls which marked the early age of Buddhism in Japan. These were not the original seventh-century buildings, but they were faithful medieval reproductions, and they still contained many of the wooden images which had characterized that first period of austere enthusiasm for a new creed, statues of a dense and almost abstract simplicity, clearly meant to embody, for the purposes of intense devotion, the qualities implicit in the great redeemer figures of Mahayanism—Kannon, the Japanese version of Avalokiteshvara, and Miroku, the Japanese version of Maitreya—and to express the spirit of an age of conversion, when Buddhism opened to Japan its fields of spiritual experience and its great ethical concepts.

There is very little of this kind of art in Kyoto; much more in keeping with the later periods is the strange Rengoo-in Temple, which lies in a gravel garden, full of trees decorated with twists of white paper, opposite the National Museum. The decorated trees are Shinto symbols, suggesting the close link which had developed over the two centuries between the twin religions of traditional Japan; the temple itself, popularly called Sanjusan-
Looking Gods in Their Faces

Sengdo, is Buddhist, but it shows that curious alliance between religion—even the pacific Buddhist religion—and a ceremonial concept of war which developed in Japan during the age of the Minamoto Shoguns, who tried to establish in Kamakura a régime of military spartanism, as opposed to the aesthetic effete
ess of the imperial court which was still allowed to function powerless in Kyoto throughout the Middle Ages, when the real power lay with the successive lines of Shoguns. Sanjusangendo is in fact an architectural freak, a building four hundred feet long and a mere thirty feet wide, with a wide verandah running the whole length of the building on which the samurai archers used to practise.

Nowadays Sanjusangendo is one of the real money-changers' temples of Japan, a place of cultural pilgrimage where worship of any kind has become virtually impossible. We paid our entrance fee, placed our shoes in a many-tiered rack at the entrance and tramped through in a long crocodile of uniformed students, country farmers and American tourists, while blue-uniformed girls carrying little flags lectured the visitors and dark-robed shaven priests called out for contributions to the temple funds.

But even these inauspicious circumstances hardly detracted from the unique impression of Sanjusangendo. Its peculiar elongated structure was dictated by the need for an altar of enormous breadth to hold the thousand many-armed statues of the Bodhisattva Kannon, each almost six feet high, which were ranged on either side of a large central figure, eight feet high, of the same deity.

In every Buddhist tradition, after the first stage of prosely-
tizing enthusiasm, the obsession with the repetition of images as an almost mathematical means of gaining salvation through merit seems to appear; perhaps it is an inevitable outcome of the mechanistic view of man and his karma which is implicit in the Buddha's teaching. In Japan it reaches its most extreme expres-
sion in the long gallery of Sanjusangendo. The effect, when one first walks before this battalion of gilded deities, is one of lavish nightmare; the dull light glows on the myriad gold surfaces, the crowns of the gods sprout with many lesser heads, and the
crowding hands, holding hundreds of different symbolic objects, which grow out from the sides of the figures, create the mood of a surrealist film. Individually, the multitudinous identical Kannonos are not remarkable sculptures, but the cumulative effect, intended to create religious awe, produces its own aesthetic excitement as one looks from various angles through this forest of shining and fantastic statues.

Japanese Buddhism is as sect-ridden and as varied in its expression as Christianity. Kyoto, with its two thousand temples, is certainly the Japanese Rome, but the simile holds good only if one imagines a completely œcuménical Rome in which all the creeds of Christianity are lavishly represented. After the thousand golden Bodhisattvas of Sanjusangendo, one gains a completely different impression from the Toji temple, which maintains a highly esoteric form of tantric Buddhism with an elaborate demonology, resembling that of Tibetan lamaism and expressed in remarkable statues and scroll paintings which combine a smouldering intensity of colour with a hieratic ferocity of expression. An even more extreme contrast is provided by the Zen temples, which iconoclastically reject both image-adoration and the magical elements in the various tantric cults, and substitute, at least in theory, an austere anti-mechanist view of man as the creation of his own choices which in some respects resembles existentialism.

The main concentration of Zen temples in Kyoto is the complex known as Daitokuji, which contains a total of twenty temples, linked by paved walks and bounded by one of those high walls of mud striped with layers of grey tiles which commonly surround the temple closes of Kyoto. We went there on a showery day, when paths and gardens were damp with rain, and a soft wind stirred the cypress trees around the temples, creating a calmly melancholy atmosphere.

Daitokuji was first founded in the fourteenth century, during the early days of the Zen cult in Japan, but its buildings suffered the usual incendiary fate of the Kyoto temples towards the end of the fifteenth century, and the present buildings mainly date from the Muromachi age of the sixteenth century, that vital period
when a series of important architectural changes resulted in the types of buildings which today we regard as traditionally Japanese. The palaces and temples of Heian Kyoto were loose conglomerations of buildings, each forming a single hall or room, but often connected by covered passageways. The custom of dividing a single large building into a number of adjustable rooms now appeared, and in connection with it the fusuma, or painted sliding screen, and the door-windows lined with translucent paper, while the practice of covering floors entirely with tatami matting also came into general use. The textures and tints of white paper and pale yellow matting, dark painted wood and white-washed stucco, became part of a calculated ensemble of effects in which the paintings of the time and also the gardens played their part.

The simple elements of this type of building could be used to produce a variety of effects. In the Ninomaru Palace of Nijo Castle in the centre of Kyoto the brilliant colouring and lavish gilding of the screens created by various members of the Kano dynasty of painters combined with the polychromatic woodwork of the ceilings and the elaborately carved transoms to suggest the almost vulgarian splendour of a Shogun’s court; the effect was loud and vigorous, like that of a Kabuki play. But in the Zen temples of Daitokuji the scale of the buildings was restrained, and the entire effect was one of deliberate understatement, extending from the gardens of moss and stone to every detail of the interiors of the temples—the tea-rooms built with crooked boughs to give an air of naturalness, the great rough stone jars on to whose pellucid mirrors the water falls drip by drip from spouts of green bamboo, the single statue of the founder, to be revered and not worshipped, and concealed in a niche before which one must kneel to see the figure clearly.

‘The simplicity of the temple reflects the simplicity of Zen,’ said the priest in the Oba-in temple of Daitokuji as he showed us the moss garden with the symbolic sea of sand before it. ‘Every morning I rake it myself, as my predecessors have done for four hundred years,’ he explained, and then he took us into the garden on the other side of the temple to show us the rock known as
Fudo-Ishi, the Unmovable Rock. 'There is a legend', he said, with a whimsical grin, 'which says that the rock weeps at night. I have never been up late enough to see. But I can tell you that this garden will be very beautiful in a month's time when the azaleas bloom. That seems to me much more important than a weeping rock.' And then, having shown us the temple's collection of painted screens, he left us on our own saying, 'Please take your time. What we have is meant for you to enjoy.'

Behind Oba-in we passed through an old cemetery, with curious phallic stones, and rows of tall wooden prayer slats rattling in the wind above the graves, where rice cakes and apples were laid out for the dead. We walked on along the stone paths down which the priests came riding on ladies' bicycles, and saw other stone gardens and other seas of sand, which in the end, far from creating serenity, began to irritate us by their immaculate smoothness, until Inge at last rebelled. 'How I'd like to take one of those priests' bicycles and ride all over their damned sand gardens!' A good Zen reaction, but I doubt if it would have been appreciated by the authorities of any of the temples, and least of all by those of the most celebrated, Daisen-in, whose priests had organized the cult of Zen into an efficient business undertaking. They charged for admission, and for guide-books, which the other temples gave away. They sold books, and photographs, and pottery. Two of them sat in a tea-room offering ceremonial tea and cakes for fifty yen a time. Recorded flute music played softly in all the rooms of the temple, and the young blue-robed priest delivered a lecture which we later found he had learnt word for word, including the mistakes in English, from the guide-book.

But Daisen-in was still worth the mild disillusionment of seeing the Zen priests, those idols of San Francisco intellectuals, acting with frank commercialism. The famous dry garden was incomparably the best example of its kind we saw in Japan, minute in its size, filling a narrow corridor between the entrance and the main hall of the temple, but enormous in its applied dimensions. Like most of the kare-sansui, it made its appeal on a number of levels. To begin with, one considered it as a repre-
sentation of the visible world, the tall rocks suggesting high,
sugarloaf mountains, the trimmed camellias behind them dis-
tant ranges, the low flat boulders standing for islands and cas-
cades, and the raked white grit for the waters of a flowing river.
Then one looked at the garden in terms of artistic parallelism;
the shapes of the boulders and their muted blue-grey colouring
echoed the ink-drawn landscapes of Zen-dominated painters
like Soami, the reputed designer of the garden. Finally, kneeling
on the polished floor of the verandah beside the garden, one con-
sidered the symbolic intent, irradiated by Zen philosophy, that
encompassed both the world of nature and the world of art, for
the river flowing from the mountains to the great sea of the
larger garden then became an image of life, flowing onward
with no return into the sea of nothingness which is composed
of the white sands of purity. Down that river passed the soul,
swirled in the eddies of doubt, gathering experience, shedding
attachments and maturing through work, study and meditation.
Unlike many other Buddhists, the Zen does not turn away from
life; he regards it as a challenge and a responsibility, as the setting
in which by his own efforts man must make himself and his
destiny, and rightly lived and understood, as a source of joy.

We are getting up to leave the garden when the young priest
stopped us. ‘Do not go yet,’ he said. ‘It is going to rain, and
when it rains the garden is most beautiful of all.’ Almost immedi-
ately there was a sharp sunshine shower. The rocks and moss in
the little garden came into glistening life, and the sands in the
great garden seemed as fluid as a real sea as we saw them through
the illuminated screen of the falling rain.

The Japanese set great store by atmospheric effects of this kind.
They are taken into account when gardens and even buildings
are constructed. The Katsura Palace on the outskirts of Kyoto,
which has aroused so much admiration among western archi-
teets, is an example of this, for the very simple building, con-
structed with a faultless precision of taste, is built in such a way
that when the screen walls are open the garden will extend and
deepen every room, while the painted screens within the palace
rooms reflect the microcosmic world of the gardens, and in this
way a continuum is established by which even within the palace one remains *en rapport* with the changing light and colour of days and seasons. Moreover, as one follows the paths through the miniature woodlands and around the symbolically shaped lakes of Katsura, one realizes that each of the modestly perfect tea houses is placed to take advantage of the particular beauty of some time of day or some time of the year.

But palaces like the Katsura Palace and the temples of Daitoku-ji are the products of a deliberate search on the part of aristocrats and scholars for reassuring symbols in an age of chaos, and though we admired their beauty, we began to feel in the end somewhat irked by the self-consciousness of that pattern of poise understatement. Art in Japan very easily passes over into artifice, as is shown by the exaggerated reverence paid to such activities as the tea ceremony and flower arrangement, and the deepest criticism of most of the Japanese gardens is that they are artificial in the sense of being anti-natural. Their enjoyment depends on a deliberately induced state of mind, an act of make-believe which says that the acre or so within the green bamboo fence of the Katsura Palace is the microcosmic world, that ten square yards of gravel and rock at Daisen-in is the epitome of life. One’s enjoyment of them depends on foreseen reactions to those atmospheric phenomena which cannot be kept out of the most restricted garden. And if the Japanese garden presupposes a restriction of the spontaneity of human reaction, it also presupposes a rejection of the undisciplined natural world by the very act of trying to epitomize it in that space within the walls or the fences over which one may confidently claim control.

I think it was because they formed a contrast to this kind of aristocratic artificiality that we took a particular pleasure in the Shinto shrines of Kyoto. In the West, particularly during the years when Japan was regarded as the enemy, Shinto was often represented as a cult of state-worship. But this element, while it does exist, is restricted mainly to places like the Heian shrine in Kyoto and the Meiji shrine in Tokyo which are tutelary shrines of the imperial family, where worship is paid to the spirits of past emperors. Basically, Shinto is a kind of sophisticated ani-
mism, a nature cult centring upon a few vaguely conceived deities; it enjoins reverence for the spirits of the dead, but it also worships the spirits within natural objects such as trees and stones. It presents no promise of immortality, and certainly no doctrine of Karma which keeps a credit and debit account of a man’s actions and shapes his later lives accordingly. To the Shintoist a good life is its own reward, which does not mean that while it lasts it cannot be improved by interceding with the powerful spirits who inhabit Shinto shrines. This is why ordinary Japanese people tend to be bi-religious. They go to the Shinto priests for the ceremonials connected with life—birth, puberty, marriage and so forth—and to the Buddhist priests for all matters connected with death.

Shinto shrines, unlike the famous Buddhist temples, are rarely overrun by tourists, for the simple reasons that they are not antiquities, and they contain no great art treasures. It is the holy site, pregnant with mana and inhabited by spirits that is important in Shinto. The building itself, theoretically at least, is pulled down every twenty years and rebuilt of new materials in exactly the same shape as before, so that some of the oldest Shinto shrines, like those of Ise and Atsuta, preserve forms of architecture which actually date from the prehistoric age before the introduction of Buddhism led to the keeping of records in Chinese and later in Japanese. The presence of Shinto deities is usually represented by symbols, such as the mirror which represents the Sun Goddess.

Some Shinto shrines we encountered were mere inscribed rocks, which one approached under the characteristic Shinto gateway called the torii, a vermillion-painted structure with double cross beams. Others stood in the grounds of Buddhist temples; one gains a fair idea of the extent of Japanese religious tolerance if one imagines the kind of outcry that would be aroused by the suggestion that a Baptist tabernacle might be installed in the Vatican. But the important Shinto shrines stand in groves of their own, always approached by the red torii.

The most popular, among the townspeople of Kyoto, was the Yasuga shrine on the edge of Gion, which was much more a
centre of local life than any of the Buddhist shrines. We went
there one evening when the white lanterns had been lit under
the trees, and the young people of Gion were beginning to stroll
through the sacred grove and linger at the booths of the little
fair in the grounds of the shrine, where one could try one’s hand
at archery, have one’s palm read, buy goldfish or plastic Noh
masks, or take a chance on quite a number of games which
seemed to have a rather dubious connection with religion. Just
outside the temple grounds there were sake booths where one
could finish the evening seated on a carpeted platform and
served by red-faced peasant girls in gaudy kimonos.

In the inner walks of the temple the white-robed Shinto priests
strolled among the rather untidy conglomeration of buildings
which formed the shrine. Some of these buildings were as large
as a Buddhist temple; others were tiny structures not much
bigger than a Thai spirit house, but every one of them contained
its own deity, great or small. They were odd deities, according
to our lights, sitting inviolate in little closed cupboards, often
guarded by china lions, and propitiated by gifts in jars. In great
open wooden sheds, piled to the ceiling, stood the offerings of the
faithful, straw-wrapped tubs of sake, and around the shrines
there were elaborate racks of split bamboo interwoven with
folded scraps of paper containing ritual prayers.

A young man came hurrying up to one of the halls and stood
at the barrier which kept everyone but the priests away from the
altar. He looked intently into the shrine, past the sacred rope
hung with shreds of straw and elaborately folded pieces of white
paper. Then he threw some coins into a large wooden chest,
pulled a cord which rattled a gong above his head, clapped his
hands twice to wake up the god, and made his silent prayer. It
was a serious, business-like operation, and one felt that some very
concrete results were expected. He was a workman. It was
always the poor people who made their petitions at the Shinto
shrines.
Japan is the one Asian country where one never feels conspicuous as a traveller. Its people are the world’s most assiduous tourists. All summer long they travel in droves over the country, visiting ancient temples and celebrated waterfalls, bathing in hot springs and mud springs, crowding on the ski slopes and the beaches. They travel in spring to see the cherry blossom and in autumn to see the red maple. And in late March and early April they were on the move merely because it was school and college vacation time. Trains were booked for days ahead, and hotel room was so scarce that on the first week-end after reaching Kyoto we had to move out of the city for several days, and decided to use the time visiting Nara and the Inland Sea.

Nara is only about thirty miles away from Kyoto, a quick journey by electric train over a countryside of uninteresting flatness until one reaches the hills in whose shadow the old city is built. In Nara we stayed in a big wooden hotel overlooking a double lake, dotted every day with white boats filled with holidaying schoolchildren.

Nara is the oldest of all Japanese cities. Until the beginning of the seventh century, Japan was still a completely rural country that had barely emerged from tribalism. The imperial household wandered from estate to estate, each emperor building a new palace on a new site to avoid the contamination which it was thought the death of his predecessors incurred. The traditional Shinto death cults were weakened by the influence of Buddhist thought, and the revered example of China made it seem necessary to establish a fixed capital to form the pivot of a régime that was at least theoretically centralized.

During the preceding century many Japanese had gone as
envoys, traders or scholars to the Chinese capital of Chang’an, and they had admired its fine layout and its fine buildings. When, in 710, the first capital of Japan was founded among the green hills of Nara, it was laid out on the model of Chang’an, and not only did it contain palaces and noble mansions, but also many fine temples supported by generous endowments of tax-free lands.

After less than eighty years, in 784, Nara was abandoned as the centre of government. The most common explanation for this abrupt and costly decision is that the reigning Emperor Kwammu decided that in Nara, which had become a religious as well as political capital, the Buddhist sects had grown too wealthy and worldly and were trying to dominate the policies of the state. There were certainly strong political ambitions at work among the Buddhist monks; only a few years before the abandonment of Nara the priest Dokyo had established such an influence over the Empress Shotoku that he was named Chancellor and plotted to become emperor himself, but was eventually foiled and banished by the Fujiwara clan. The memory of this incident doubtless played its part in the decision to leave Nara. The palace buildings were removed, the noblemen departed to follow the count, and during the Middle Ages the city slowly decayed, though the temples remained powerful enough to invade Kyoto and terrorize the emperors. Once they sent an army of twenty-four thousand ferocious soldier monks to the Enryakuji Temple on Mount Hiyei above Kyoto, where they burned the rival foundation to the ground and slaughtered as many as possible of its inhabitants.

Nara is now a quiet rural city, the most attractive city we saw in Japan. The modern town was relatively small, two main streets and a tangle of side lanes clustered around the two railway stations; where the hills and lakes began, at the grounds of the Kofukuji Temple, the built-up area ended and the great park of Nara swept away towards the pinewoods that came down out of the hills. The park was populated with tame deer which would follow us, snuffing in our pockets for food, as we walked along the paths from temple to temple; they were sacred animals
whose ancestors were said to have been the mounts of the spirits which live in the Shinto shrine of Kasuga at the foot of the mountain.

Most of the remaining temples of Nara were scattered in the park, the last survivors of the hundreds of shrines, palaces and mansions that filled the area when Nara was the capital, but the most important of them, the temple of Horyuji, lay seven miles away across the valley. It was the oldest Buddhist monastery in Japan, and on our first afternoon in Nara we hired a taxi to take us out to the dusty village that lies before its walls.

At Horyuji, more than anywhere else in Japan, one becomes aware of the essential elements of Japanese architecture in its most impressive forms. As we approached the temple up the lane from the village, we did not see it standing out against the natural scene, as European cathedrals and Islamic mosques do. The grey-tiled roofs toned harmoniously with the surrounding vegetation, and, though their volume and massiveness made them dominate their own buildings in a way no roof ever dominates a European church, their long natural curves, running toward an indefinitely delayed union with the earth, merged them into the landscape, so that they never seemed to overbear their setting. The Japanese temple roof, in fact, never soars upward; it always flows downward. Only the pagoda has the appearance of verticality, and that is deceptive, for each of the five roofs of the ancient pagoda at Horyuji has the same downward movement as other roofs, and the pagoda as a whole, while it symbolizes the supremacy of the Buddhist law, at the same time implies the unity of heaven and earth, so that it seems to be anchored as naturally as a tree in the earth that in its own way manifests the spiritual realm. Looking at the ancient buildings of Horyuji, one sensed immediately that pantheistic trend which recurs constantly in Japanese religion from Shinto through to Zen; these buildings seemed the very outgrowth of a soil that is felt to be permeated with divinity. Simplicity of construction (for even the great Golden Hall of Horyuji is basically no more than a rectangular platform on top of which twenty-eight plain wooden pillars support the heavy triple structure of the roof),
and a lack of the kind of external decoration which riots over
Gothic cathedrals and Hindu shrines, refine the appeal of the
early Japanese temples to a matter of harmonious lines and bal-
anced masses, subtly reinforced by the work of nature in weather-
ing the natural wood, in colouring the tile or cypress bark roofs
with lichen, and in fading the vermilion paint to a soft greyish
pink. The appearance of timelessness which these shrines acquire
is not entirely accidental, not merely a matter of weathering
down to universal tones; it comes even more from the fact that,
where the fires of civil war and accident have rendered recon-
struction necessary, the temples around Nara, from the thir-
teenth century down to the recent restoration of the Golden
Hall, have been built again with relative exactitude in their
original seventh-century forms.

Horyuji was really two temple complexes—a cloister to the
west which contained the buildings of the temple originally
dedicated by Prince Shotoku, and another cloister to the east,
where, on the site of the Prince’s former palace, an octagonal
hall of singularly beautiful lines called Yumedano, or the Hall
of Dreams, was built in the eighth century and still survives. The
pagoda in the western temple is the oldest building in Japan; its
timbers appear to be those originally fitted into place when it
was erected in 607. At first I felt very sceptical at the idea of a
wooden building surviving more than thirteen centuries in the
damp Japanese climate, but the possibility of such extraordinary
durability was shown in the case of the Golden Hall in the same
cloister. The present Golden Hall is a very new structure on
traditional lines, but its predecessor, which was burnt down in
1949, was also built, according to the records, in 607, and con-
tained unimpeachable evidence of its great antiquity in a remark-
able eighth-century series of mural paintings in the T’ang style
which, unfortunately, were destroyed in the fire.

Even when the temple buildings were destroyed during the
Middle Ages, great care was taken to preserve their images, and
the Nara temples contain an astonishing array of wooden,
bronze, lacquer and clay sculptures dating from the very begin-
nings of Japanese religious art in the seventh century, to about
the twelfth century, after which the importance of Nara even as a religious centre slowly declined. But we did not find it possible to view these works with an equanimity that would have matched their own serene detachment. No sooner did we arrive in Horyuji than we became entangled in the crowds of trippers, mostly schoolchildren and uniformed students, who obediently followed their guides around the temple halls and the museum. One wondered just why most of them set out on their lemming-like progresses to this and a hundred other sacred spots of Japan, since they tramped dully through their routine, and rarely paused to look at any object. But there they solidly were, jostling and crowding upon us whenever we lingered.

Nara was near enough to Osaka to be subject not only to the crowds who crammed into its own cheap dormitory inns, but also to the daytime trippers from the great seaport city, and my memory of the temples we saw after Horyuji, even of the vast hall of Todaiji with its colossal lumpish 70-foot high Buddha, is dominated by the recollection of the paths filled with people, the racket of transistor radios, and the trippers surging between the faded vermilion pillars of the temple gates into the great wooden buildings where perhaps one in fifty would pause to bow and say a prayer, in the midst of all those trampling figures, to the Buddha. Nothing could have shown more dramatically the decline of Buddhism in Japan as a meaningful religion.

It was in the evenings, when the crowds had left, that Nara became transformed. By now the spring was well on its way, the air was bland and clear at the same time, and we would set out on long tramps through the narrow roads of the village-like outskirts of Nara, past minute houses where the clipped double cherries were coming into bloom in little stone gardens, and into the hills, through the darkening woods, to descend at twilight into the great park, following the paths between the ponds, past the tea houses and garden restaurants—their paper windows glowing softly with light—through the grounds of Kofukuji where enormous moon-like lanterns hung outside the closed temple buildings, and down past the lake on the edge of the town into the streets where the shops and restaurants were
all open and the hot-potato women wheeled their shrilly whistling barrows through the crowds. There were dark shops filled with antiques at staggering prices; gay shops filled with fans and dolls; sober shops filled with brushes, ink blocks and all the impedimenta of scholarship and calligraphy; odorous shops filled with barrels of pickles which tickled the nostrils with their pungency; and gaudy shops filled with pink and green bean-flour cakes, and rice cakes in gaily coloured boxes, all of them, I found by experiment, insipid in the extreme. We would eat bowls of soba—noodles with meat—in a cheap restaurant, drink sake in a bar with the television flashing out fragments of Kabuki interspersed with appalling commercials, and end with coffee in a jive-joint filled with tight-trousered hipsters and their girls, while the juke-boxes almost blasted our ears out with the volume of sound, to which the Japanese seem singularly insensitive. Afterwards, as the swollen orange moon rose up behind the fringes of pines on the hilltops, we would walk back to the hotel through the dubious little quarter of inns and hostess-bars beside the lake. We never met anything more exciting there than the red-nosed sake drunkards who would take elaborate pains to bow to us without staggering. Even in his cups a Japanese is still obsessed with the fear of losing face.
The only Japanese dawn we ever saw was on the day we left Nara to cross the Inland Sea, driving away from the Nara hotel to catch the first train into Kyoto, where we would have to change for Kobe, the port of embarkation. Like all the other transitional hours in Japan, it was a good time to be abroad as we drove across the causeway between the two lakes below the hotel, and saw the pagoda of Kofukuji blackly outlined above the lucid grey waters on one side, and the wooded mountains reflected on the other. Dusk and moonlight, neon light and dawn are the hours when Japan is at its most elusively attractive, and this is how one remembers it with most nostalgia, as a country of infinite moods, in which beauty springs unheralded, at a certain moment of day, often out of ugliness.

It was the calm morning after a violent night storm. The hills were dusted with snow, and the air bit sharply for the end of March as we went to the restaurant in the Kyoto station. Afterwards, when we sat in the waiting-room, there was a sudden uncouth shouting, and a man jumped up, tore at his clothes and exhibited himself. He stood there, yelling, but not a single person among the hundred sitting in the hall made any effort to restrain him. They looked away, as if that would exorcize the incident. It was the same reaction as Kyoto people had shown on the other occasion when the young man went berserk in the street. There was certainly violence in the air half an hour later when we boarded the second-class train to Kobe and a wedge of newcomers tried to slice into the queue at the door of the carriage. We travelled to Kobe in a standing mass of commuters and saw nothing at all of the landscape, or of the sprawling townscape that links Osaka and Kobe as Japan’s second pair of twin cities.

On the steamer we had booked second class. The steward
looked at us dubiously, but he was too polite to comment as he led us down the flights of stairs into the steerage, a series of bare rooms without portholes, bunks or chairs, equipped merely with a series of low, linoleum-covered platforms on which the Japanese passengers were already spreading their blankets and stretching themselves out to sleep the voyage away. We had neither blankets nor the inclination to stay, and we allowed the steward to guide us to a neutral coffee bar, from which we found our way to the Special First Class saloon, and there we remained undisturbed for the rest of the voyage, mainly, I think, because a storm sprang up immediately we left the sheltered waters of Kobe. Already, in the channel between Honshu and Awaji Island, it was rougher than any sailing we had done since leaving Genoa in November, and for the forty miles of open sea between Awaji and the lee of Shodo Island the ship laboured through immense waves which beat with great shuddering blows across the bows and kept a perpetual cascade running down the windows of the saloon. There was not another craft to be seen in that usually busy sea. At last, in the shelter of Shodo, with the big island of Shikoku becoming visible to port, the wind began to fall and the seas gradually subsided. The eastern shores of Shodo were abrupt and savage, peaks of clear conical sharpness and jagged combs of ridges, with the rice terraces flowing below them like green glaciers between dark rock outcrops, and then the yellow cliffs falling down to the sea, broken by round coves with little golden beaches. But the southern slopes of the island, sheltered by Shikoku, were bland and green, with the fields lying in great slabs of emerald among the dark coniferous woods, and a kind of bloom hovering over the whole landscape as if spring were on the verge of breaking out. On Shikoku the fishing boats were still drawn high on the sheltered beaches. It was a kind of Asian Aegean, a land-locked sea filled with islands and plagued with unpredictable storms.

Beyond Shodo the ship threaded an eccentric and uneasy way through wooded islets and white-watered shoals until we saw the tall slab buildings of Takamatsu, our destination, rising above the foreshore.
Looking Gods in Their Faces

We lunched in a Takamatsu restaurant near the wharf and took a taxi to the ryokan—the native inn—where we intended to stay. The driver probed into tangled back streets, and finally stopped outside the bare concrete skeleton of a building in mid-construction, crowded with tin-helmeted workmen and noisy with the sound of hammers. We protested. This could not be the ryokan. The driver insisted, and eventually a workman led us through a protected passage under the raw beams to a glass door where a woman in an enormous white apron stood bowing to receive us into the little well of the rock garden before the inn. The ryokan was modernizing itself, building on an extension for the summer visitors, but this was considered no reason to turn away business.

A ryokan can be anything from a rough dormitory inn to a sophisticated hostelry deliberately preserving a traditional atmosphere. The ryokan in Takamatsu was in the latter category. We crossed a red-lacquered bridge over a pond where enormous aged carp swam among schools of goldfish. The hostess explained that the carp had been brought from a river in China fifty years ago. ‘They no die. They never die.’ There was television in our room and an alcove with a wash-basin, but otherwise it was the typical grass-matted room of the Japanese inn, with low tables, and cushions on the floor where the bed would be laid at night. A handsome maid in a magnificent brocade kimono bowed low at the door and brought us green tea, small sweet cakes and steaming oshibori. So it continued, with all the traditional ceremonial of the ryokan, the ritual of baths and slippers and special garments—the yukata and dotera—to wear inside the inn.

All this seemed like an elaborate make-believe as soon as we went into the streets of Takamatsu, a town with none of the flavour of antiquity in which one had lived at least part of the time in Kyoto and Nara. In fact, it seemed a very dull modern city, and as we dawdled through the glass-covered shopping arcades we began to wonder why we had decided to come here.

In this mood we were looking into a shop window filled with strange conventionalized birds and flowers, fabricated of gold
and silver thread. 'Can I help you?' said a young man who came and stood beside us. He explained that the ornaments in the window were given by a bridegroom to the bride's family at the time of a wedding. 'May I walk with you?' he asked. 'I would like to practise my English.' He had a broad, humorous face, hair cut en brosse, a vaguely American accent. 'My name is Hiroshi,' he said. As we started on a long tortuous wandering through streets and arcades, Hiroshi explained that he was a law student at the local provincial university. The limit of his world was Osaka, across the Inland Sea. He had never been as far as Tokyo, but his ambition was to study in the United States. That was why he had stopped us in the streets. He spoke to every foreigner he met in the hope of improving his English. For five years he had been learning the language, but still he could pick his way through newspapers with great difficulty and could not read an English book with understanding. It was a common predicament among the students we met in Japan, where, in spite of all the progress in other respects, efficient methods of teaching foreign languages do not yet seem to have been evolved. I found conversation with them particularly difficult, since they had no experience of an English as distinct from an American accent.

'Please come to my house,' said Hiroshi. 'I would like my brother to see that I can really speak English.' So we went into one of the narrow side streets, where Hiroshi led us into a large concrete-floored room, with a few bentwood chairs, a desk, some skis standing in the corner. It was evidently an anteroom for receiving casual visits, for a line of shoes stood outside an inner door, which led to the family quarters. We were not invited past that door, but Hiroshi's sister, a fat, red-faced girl in ski trousers, came out to bring us strong black tea, which it was evidently thought foreigners would prefer, and his younger brother came to listen to the speaking of English. After these necessary ceremonies, Hiroshi produced a guitar, and with a curious imitative virtuosity sang cowboy songs he had heard in Gary Cooper films. His mother and his aunt came in and we had to explain where we lived, and what we did, and how many children we had. The reaction to our answers was different from
that in other Asian countries, for everyone thought that it was very sensible to have no children and Hiroshi said, ‘Then you are frank!’ meaning that we were free.

With Hiroshi and his brother we set off for Ritsurin Park, which is the only attraction of Takamatsu, but a real one—a fine ‘tour’ garden, arranged on a deliberate plan of six little lakes and thirteen little pine-tufted hills, but landscaped with a naturalistic spaciousness in which, as Europeans, we felt much more at home than in the concentrated microcosms of Kyoto. By the time we left the garden, we had gathered three other students, and they took us to a café that specialized in recordings of European classical music, where, to the lugubrious tones of Mahler, we talked of American films, which interested them more than any other aspect of the West, and discussed philosophic attitudes. It was interesting to see how uniformly they fitted into the standard patterns of the Japanese intelligentsia. They admired cowboy films, but affected to despise samurai films. They rejected both Buddhism and Shinto, and considered Karl Marx the great prophet, yet there was not one of them who was not longing to go to America. They were in a state of irritable rebellion against the old traditions of family authority, though they expected family loyalties to see them through to good careers. They walked back with us to the hotel, trying to persuade us to join them at a sukiyaki dinner which Hiroshi was convinced his mother would provide. We were faced with a problem of conflicting courtesies, since we had already ordered our dinner at the ryokan, and we knew that the hostess would be offended if we arrived at the last minute and countermanded it. So we rather sadly decided that the ryokan had first claim.

From a gastronomic point of view we had no reason for regret. The ryokan served excellent tempura, which in Japan means a great deal more than it does in Japanese restaurants in the West. There were the expected prawns, gigantic in size and cooked in pale golden batter, but there were also raw sashimi, baked white fish with ginger, scallops, abalone, and a clear fish soup with shrimps and tiny brown toadstools. In the morning, we were awakened from our stiff-backed bed on the floor with
green tea and astringent pickled fruit like tiny rough-skinned plums, which provoked an excellent appetite for the large breakfast of rice, shark pâte with black Jew’s Ear mushrooms, cooked seaweed, and marinated vegetables, followed by bean soup and oranges. The bill was stiff; even the Japanese rarely go to such inns unless they are travelling on expense accounts. But at least our money was charmed out of us with impeccable grace. We were treated as guests in every sense of that ambiguous word, and that is becoming a rarer experience the longer one travels about the world.

We left Takamatsu by the ferry to Uno, which lies on the peninsula of Honshu that projects southward opposite Takamatsu; this time the sea trip took only an hour. We chose the route since it involved a long train journey through Okayama, Kakogawa and a great deal of unfamiliar countryside in western Honshu. It was a pleasant rather than a spectacular landscape, with no high mountains, but frequent ranges of low hills, and gentle pastoral valleys with handsome half-timbered farmhouses around which the first daffodils were beginning to bloom. On some of the southern hillsides there were vineyards clambering on terraces among the orchards; the twisted black branches were supported on trellises of bamboo, and seemed to be loaded with white blossoms because the farmers had tied twists of paper around the young shoots to protect them from the frost.

This region was too far away from Tokyo to be highly industrialized, but in one range of rusty scrub-covered hills ugly little mill towns nestled blackly in the valleys, the relics of Japan’s belated industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. It was late in the afternoon by the time we passed through the vaster and more hideous industrial complex of Kobe and Osaka and finally arrived back in Kyoto.
In our days of absence, spring had reached Kyoto. The delicate bronze leaves were beginning to open and take shape on the Japanese maples, and the plum blossom was rusty and almost over. We began to spend our time out of doors in the woods and the country. Sometimes we would walk up the steep potters' street to Kiyomizu, the temple built on trestles on a steep hillside overlooking the city. Behind the temple we would climb through the evergreen woods into the hills, where the pigeons crashed in the branches overhead, and the wild camellias were opening their large blossoms like cups of red garnet. Eventually we would look out over the city, the colourless Japanese roofscape of grey tiles and blackened cedar bark, broken by the many-tiered outlines of the pagodas and the square lifeless blocks of the modern hotels. The hills were deserted; we never met anyone else walking among them.

Twice we went on the electric train to Arishayama, which was once a country retreat for Kyoto aristocrats, surrounded by temples remote enough to be regarded as refuges, where the monks carefully tended their gardens and gave themselves up to poetry or contemplation. Now even these remote temples were invaded by tourists and commercialism. Among the moss gardens of Seihoji—the moss looked pale and ragged after the winter snows, like the pelt of moulting animal—the priests had installed vending machines; one inserted ten yen, pulled a lever, and out popped a slip of paper with the word of the oracle. At Tenryuji, where there was a tree and shrub garden which must have been extraordinarily beautiful when the weeping cherries and azaleas bloomed together, I became so exasperated with the beefy red-faced schoolgirls who kept crowding around us that I
inadvertently put my elbow through a paper screen and fled in mortification. It was only in the remotest of the temples, Daikakuji, two miles away along lanes through the rice-farms and over a rivulet smelling of sewage, that we eventually found the ideally quiet and deserted temple, where we could remain alone on a verandah looking out over the holy mirror of a pool and listen to the water falling into the silence. Sitting there I thought how the poet’s attitude to nature must change as the democratic populace descends on the famous solitudes. Could the Lakes inspire a Wordsworth ever again? Could Asia find a place for a great recluse poet in the tradition of the Tibetan Milarepa? The more I thought of it, the more I felt that I was not the person who could give the answer—an outdated man bred in a rural, largely pre-mechanical world and bound, like Orwell in Coming Up for Air, to judge the present by that past idealized. Perhaps significantly, Daikakuji in its desertion was the one temple in Japan where we witnessed serious religious activity; peering through cracks in the screens of the closed main hall, we saw four monks, with yellow shawls cast over their black habits, tapping wooden drums and chanting the sutras in deep soft voices.

Arashiyama itself was a little pleasure village of low wooden buildings occupied by souvenir shops and restaurants, where we would eat a stew of shrimps, eggs, onions and noodles, called nabe and served in earthenware crocks straight from the oven. The Katsura River emerges here from the deep gorge it has cut through the mountains and becomes a smooth, lazy river as crowded with pleasure skiffs as the Thames at Marlow on a summer Sunday.

When we walked up river past the last of the waterside eating-houses, we found that the path took to the hills, and here we could walk alone, up through a light woodland of dwarf bamboos and scattered pine trees. We passed thatched wooden cottages built on cliff tops, like the hermitages in Sung paintings, and boulders fenced off into shrines with miniature red torii. The wild cherries and sweet violets were just beginning to bloom; there were brimstone butterflies and green-grey lizards, blue jays and birds with voices like dropping water. The ridges of
the far side of the valley had combs of flat-topped pines, and far
down in the magnificent gorges, long boats, as small as pea-shells
in the distance, were being poled down through the winding
rapids from Kameoka. The slopes became precipitous, the paths
narrow and broken, and on the day when we went farthest I felt
suddenly paralysed with vertigo and Inge had to guide me back
into the woodland.

The very solitariness of these walks suggested that the Japanese
love of nature was as bound by convention as almost every other
aspect of their social life. One visited the celebrated spots, but
did not explore the untrodden paths. Even the coming of spring
was enclosed in a series of ceremonials, some of them very
pleasant, which had little necessary relation to the actual course
of natural phenomena. The blossoming of the Kyoto cherry
trees was later than usual, but the people were prepared, and the
streets were decorated with pink sprays of plastic blossom, while
the booths went up near the Yasuga Shrine for the celebration of
the vernal festival.

The most attractive of all these seasonal observances was
the Miyako Odori, the annual spring rite of the geishas of
Kyoto. Kyoto is one of the most active geisha centres in
Japan. It is hard to find in western traditions any recent equiva-
lent for this institution. The geisha is not really a courtesan, and
she is certainly not a prostitute. She usually takes a wealthy pro-
tector, and by the end of her career she may have had many
lovers, but promiscuous love-making is not a part of the enter-
tainment she normally provides. The geishas are servants of a
cult of graceful living far older than our own pallid version, and
every geisha must be an accomplished singer, dancer, musical
instrumentalist, an adept in light conversation and traditional
games, an expert in the ceremonial serving of food and drink.

In Kyoto the life of the geisha is ruled by craft traditions. A
girl at the age of twelve or thirteen is apprenticed to a retired
geisha who acts as a kind of trainer-manager; the rigorous train-
ing goes on for five or six years until the girl finally becomes a
full-fledged geisha, or geiko as she is called in Kyoto, and wears
a different kind of kimono and wig to indicate her new status.
The geishas have become happily incorporated into the modern affluent society of Japan; only business men with a need for discreetly conspicuous spending can now afford to give geisha parties.

The only chance which most people in Kyoto ever have of seeing the geishas performing their traditional arts comes once a year when the most accomplished of them stage the Miyako Odori. Miyako is one of the names of Kyoto. It means Old Flowery Capital. Approximately four hundred geishas take part in the Old Flowery Capital dances, working in four troupes and putting on four shows a day for a whole fortnight.

On the afternoon we went to the Miyako Odori we turned off the main street of Gion into a lane, gaudily bright with red paper lanterns, which led to the Kabuki theatre where the dances were being held. The theatre was crowded and the audience seemed drawn from every class of Kyoto except the rich. There were shopkeepers and students, families with children, and many old women in grey kimonos with wrinkled apple faces and a smell of wood fires. Friends and acquaintances stood performing the complex bows of Japanese courtesy, and people scuttled backwards and forwards to buy little wooden boxes of sushi—balls of rice topped with slices of raw fish, which they ate during the performance.

At last the curtains rose on the side galleries and the stage. On our right a line of elder geishas, statuesque in black kimonos, struck the cords of their samisens and sang unsmilingly the geisha music that sounds so grave and deep upon a western ear. Their faces would have delighted Toulouse-Lautrec. On our left, in brilliant red-flowered kimonos, the younger musicians played drums and flutes and occasionally emitted strange cries like those of the Noh musicians.

Then, down the gangway through the audience, the procession of maiko danced slowly past us until the great stage was full of the colour of their costumes. The dances that followed celebrated the seasons of the year, and each told a simple poetic story. Princesses caught fireflies on a summer evening. The love of a poet and a beautiful lady foundered in the snows of a winter
landscape. There was a touch of sentimentality to the tales just as there was a touch of gaudiness to the sets. But these flaws, if they were such, one forgot in watching the accomplishment with which each single part was performed. In the geisha tradition the dancing woman becomes one with her costume, using it as a kind of abstract projection of herself, and the moulding of the draperies into accepted and appealing forms is as important as the eloquent movements of hands and fingers. Again and again one recognized postures celebrated by the colour-print artists a century and a half ago. Nor was the miming less than the dancing. There is a curious bisexual strain in Japanese theatrical tradition. In the Kabuki theatre it is shown in the male actors who play feminine rôles; when the geishas came on the stage they were just as convincing in miming their masculine rôles. Finally, there was the music, song and strings; the best of it came from the oldest of the geishas, women with wrinkled fallen faces who sat in a corner of the stage and sang the tale of the winter scene in sombre classic tones as old women might have sung of the fall of Troy. As we walked out into the streets the lanterns glowed like garnets. We were full of admiration for the dedication to a traditional art which these women had shown, for the versatile accomplishment which made one understand why the geishas are proud of their craft and why they wish for no other way of life. Even the sight of the Cadillacs filled with over-fed men driving up to the stage door of the theatre did not diminish that feeling.

The last acquaintance we made in Kyoto was Mr. Ugawa. On the morning of our departure we went to see the Yoshikawa collection of colour prints, one of the great private collections which, next to the temples, contain most of the good examples of Japanese art and which their owners, with much public spirit, frequently put on exhibition. It was being shown at a suburban centre, and Mr. Ugawa, a schoolteacher who spoke English, became our voluntary guide. Mr. Ugawa was especially troubled by a group of drawings considered by the Japanese to be erotic. 'Perhaps your lady should not look at them too closely,' he murmured to me. 'They are rather wicked.' In fact, all they showed...
were feminine shoulders, revealed as the kimono slipped off in a tender embrace. Mr. Ugawa was certainly knowledgeable about his countrymen’s tastes in women; he pointed out the shift from the pear face of the Heian era, celebrated in the picture scrolls of the adventures of Prince Genji, to the long face which accompanied the sinuous, linear figure of the Edo period, celebrated by Utamaro and perpetuated in modern life by the geishas of Kyoto.

It was a little surprising, after all this, when Mr. Ugawa turned to us and said, in ringing tones, ‘Salvation is in Christ alone!’ ‘I prefer Buddhism,’ Inge replied. Mr. Ugawa’s ingrown politeness overcame his astonishment. ‘Interest in other men’s idea will help to make mankind one!’ he answered. ‘That is what all Japanese want!’
It was the 4th April when we returned to Tokyo. The stream of American tourists had begun and the Japanese were still in the spring fever of travel. With our disinclination to commit ourselves far ahead, we had failed to secure a room, and we found that almost all the many hotels in the city were full. We had to retreat first to a new hotel in the southern suburb of Shinagawa, and then, after four days, to that last choice of all travellers in the capital, the old hotel, with its cockroaches and its all-permeating stench of coal smoke, which forms part of the Tokyo station. The hotel in Shinagawa, designed for young westernized Japanese, was far more lively and the Tokyo station far more moribund than we could have wished, but each helped in its own way to enlarge our view of Tokyo. At Shinagawa in the evenings we would go to eat in one of the Chinese restaurants of the quarter, which served good Peking food, and then would walk through the miles of dark dead streets to the next nucleus of light in whatever direction we had taken, using the brightly lit column of the Tokyo Tower as our beacon. In these areas it was the great deserts of urban solitude that impressed us, so that every cluster of bars and shops became an oasis towards which we hastened, and the clatter of steel balls in the suburban pachinko parlours became the music of human companionship.

When we lived in Tokyo station, on the other hand, we were in the very magnetic centre of the city, on which the crowds converged every night by every underground line. Sometimes we would avoid them, walking in the dim gardens under the walls of the Imperial Palace, where lovers embraced under the willow trees beside the wide moats. But usually we found ourselves drawn eastward towards the maze of streets between Tokyo station and Ginza. We would eat at one of the German restaur-
ants, or in a beer hall, and then join the crowds of young people drifting along the pavements; fascinated and disgusted by the feeling of mass futility, jostled and jostling until we felt the desire to hit out and shout obscenities. At such times it was easy to understand why there were so many reports of stabblings, shootings and stranglings in every morning paper.

The cold weather had finally ended and the cherry trees around the museums in Ueno Park were white with blossom, but almost every day there was rain. As often as the weather allowed we got out of the city. To Kamakura, the old capital of the Minamoto Shoguns, now a dormitory town for Tokyo, we went to see the celebrated colossal Buddha, sitting solidly in the spot from which his temple was washed away by a tidal wave centuries ago, and the Zen temples of the samurai age in their dark groves of cedar. None of these was so impressive as the Hachiman Shrine, the Shinto centre of Kamakura, which has a quality of architectural massiveness rare in Japan except in the castles built under the later Shoguns. We approached it at twilight down a long processional way lined with stone lanterns, at the end of which rose the hill of the shrine, faced with great masonry walls up which the wide stone staircase climbed past the thousand-year-old gingko tree, inhabited by the spirit of a murdered poet, to the complex of buildings forming the holy compound; the effect was as powerful as that of a Mexican pyramid. The shrine itself was guarded by wooden figures of samurai, and as we walked between them, two girls, shrine attendants, in long red skirts of ancient cut hurried across the courtyard. Afterwards, in the narrow lanes of the town, we met young men in red lion masks dancing to the sound of a drum and collecting money from the shopkeepers.

We were attracted by the thought of the mountains of Japan, which we had only seen from a distance, and on another day we decided to set out by bus to Karuiizawa in the Japanese Alps, a hundred miles to the north-west of Tokyo. In an early drizzling darkness we reached the suburban station of Shinjuku. It was several miles from the centre of Tokyo, but we still seemed in the midst of the vast spreading jungle of the city. The bus was
filled with schoolgirls of sixteen, all dressed in navy-blue middy blouses which gave them a look of St. Trinian's in 1910, and we imagined that we had become involved in one of the disciplined tours of adolescent trippers whom we had encountered so often before, led by trimly dressed little feminine guides like the blue-uniformed girl who stood by the door of the bus. But there were two seats for us, right at the front.

The bus started off. There was a long weary prelude, crawling through streets of miniature houses, tiled roofs dark and glistening from the rain and the first azaleas blooming behind brown fences of cypress wood. Field of tawny rice stubble began to appear, still jammed in among the suburban factories, and then the road shook itself free of the city. Somewhere in those interminable outskirts the bus stopped and a young woman in a black ski-suit got on, a leather jacket draped over her shoulders. A shout of greeting went up from the schoolgirls as she stood there in the well of the bus, bowing to us with meticulous politeness. The bus guide whispered beside us. She had a fragment of English which somehow mingled with our own scrap of Japanese into a workable lingua franca. She explained that the young woman was an instructress. The schoolgirls were being taught to become bus guides like herself. This particular bus had been chosen, she added, because it was usually empty at this season. Nobody ever thought of going to the Japanese Alps in April.

As we were absorbing the implications of that statement, the instructress began to speak into a tiny white microphone held against her lips, in that curiously effortless flow, without a single pause or a second of hesitation, with which Japanese often talk on subjects they know by heart. As she talked we ran into the real countryside. The winter wheat stood green in the fields and the level land was dotted with massive farmhouses.

The instructress talked on. She talked about the farmhouses, about the long-shotted mulberry bushes beside the rice paddies, and about the silkworms fed from their leaves which meant for the local farmers the difference between subsistence and a comfortable standard of living. Passing through one town she explained the peculiar local forms of tiles, and in another she
pointed out waterspouts made from hollowed petrified logs. We began to get an inkling that being a bus guide in Japan was something rather more complicated than guiding the scenic tour of a Canadian city.

Soon the road began to go through wilder villages which might have stood in a traditional landscape by Hiroshige, the houses mud-walled, the black thatch ragged and patched with golden splashes of new rice straw, and, to complete the resemblance, women walking in single file along the narrow dams between the paddies, with babies carried on their backs inside voluminous coats. At this point the instructress began to sing Japanese folk-songs in peculiar voice-catching rhythms, and the girls joined in with sweet thin voices. At last the hills appeared and, on the first ridge, half enveloped in shifting mist, a gigantic modern statue of Kannon looked out with impassive concrete features across the plains. Here the schoolgirls began to show their versatility by singing 'Coming Through the Rye', and when the rain turned to snow in the narrow rising valleys where the brown mountain streams ran, they turned rather appropriately to 'Heilige Nacht'. The lower slopes of Mount Myogi came into view, with the high peaks obscured by the driving snow, and by this point we had become sufficiently accepted for the instructress to be pressing the microphone into Inge's hand. She finally sang some Tyrolean mountain songs; almost immediately the Japanese girls had caught the rhythms and were wordlessly singing the tunes.

The higher we climbed the wilder grew that winter landscape. The mountains rose in conical spurs with the thickets of bamboo clustering at their bases, purple leafless woods sweeping over their lower slopes, and clouds caught in the clefts between them. In a sheltered valley a plum orchard bloomed in the snow around its drifted-up village, and higher there were malachite green lakes among the slopes against whose whiteness the bare trees traced their skeletal patterns. It was a Zen landscape, austere and haunting, and as we travelled through it our fellow passengers seemed to catch its heroic spirit, for now they turned to another part of their repertoire, and one by one came up to
the front to take the microphone and recite the traditional tales of Japan, the tales of the combats of the samurai, of the honourable deaths of the forty-seven ronin, and, to cap it all, a perfect rendering, by the guide who travelled on the bus, of a whole tale from the great classic of Japanese literature, the eleventh-century romance by the Lady Murasaki of the adventures of the Prince Genji.

At last the serpentine roads climbed along the edges of mist-filled gorges to the rolling plateau where Karuizawa is situated. It was a closed, empty town of wooden shops and houses, with the snowy sidewalks unswept and hardly trodden. There was not even a restaurant open, but by now everyone on the bus had become interested in our Quixotic attempt to visit the Japanese Alps in April, and the bus driver gallantly took us two miles beyond our destination to the one hotel that was open. There were four other guests in the vast building which looked far more Swiss than Japanese. But we were welcomed, and soon we were eating a Japanese meal in the mountain style—baked trout, and fern shoots, and other curious vegetables, and finally a clear soup with quails’ eggs floating on top. As we sat at the dining-room window, the mists and snow finally cleared, and we looked out over great sweeps of white meadow and brown deciduous forests on which a first golden bloom of buds was appearing, and above them all the mountain peaks suddenly began to emerge, conical and clear in the sunlight.

The season was much too early for the high mountains of Japan, but we caught a more intimate glimpse of the lower ranges when we made our last trip out of Tokyo, going on the main line to Odawara and changing on to the mountain railway which penetrates the foothill country between Fujiyama and the coast. It was really a glorified rural tram, crowded with village people who had been shopping early in Odawara and were now returning with their purchases wrapped in kuroshiki, brightly coloured carrying-cloths, which the older women, like Mexican peasants, turned into improvised rucksacks by knotting the ends across their chests.

Since we had returned from Kyoto the quick progress of
spring had completely changed the look of southern Honshu. In the lower parts of the Hayakawa Valley the bean-fields were blossoming and the outlines of the hills were brightened and softened by the young foliage on the deciduous trees. As far as Yumato the valley was wide and gentle, filled with farm-houses, the river broken by weirs from which men and boys were fishing. Afterwards the railway climbed steeply up the valley side, switchbacking between banks mauve with wild irises, red with crane’s-bill, yellow with dandelions, until it entered the higher woodland valleys, towards the blunt, cloud-tipped summits of the range, threading through deep mossy gorges where the torrents of snow water ran white and jade, and through dank glades where purple azaleas were beginning to bloom. Where the hills opened out into wider valleys, the wild cherries flowered in clotted white clumps hanging on the edges of the pine woods and mirrored in the orchards that frothed among the deep thatched roofs of the mountain villages. Gora, the end of the railway, was at first a strawberry pink splash on the mountainside, so thickly did the coloured flowering cherries grow in the gardens of its villages and hotels.

There was very little in Gora except the long blossoming avenues and the gift shops standing side by side in the single street. The conventions of present-giving are strict in Japan. One cannot return even from a small trip without a complete set of presents for all one’s family, carefully graded according to the closeness of the relationship. One cannot pay a visit without carrying a present, and here its value becomes an extremely delicate matter, since too trivial a present may cause offence by suggesting that you undervalue your host, and too expensive a present may breed resentment because the recipient is obliged to give you at some later date a present of at least equal value; if he cannot afford to do this he will lose face. Because of these customs the gift industry flourishes more extravagantly in Japan than anywhere else in the world. The ingenuity for producing gaudy knicknacks which it nurtures gives the coup de grâce to any lingering illusions one may have that popular taste in Japan is better than it is anywhere in the world.
Gora had been largely taken over by the United States occupation forces as a family rest resort, and it was impossible to escape the whining voices of American young mothers and their yelling offspring. Perhaps our reactions were extreme, but in a few months among Asian peoples, with their attractive colouring and their graceful movements, we had become rather like Gulliver among the Houyhnhnms, and bristled at very sight of the pale skins and uncouth actions of our fellow Yahoos.

From Gora we took the funicular up the mountainside to Sounzan. Sounzan was more primitive than Gora, a hot-springs resort with muddy roads, great bare-looking ryokans, and rough cafés looking out across the village rubbish heaps to the magnificent view of the valley beyond. Above Sounzan there was a great barren cleft in the mountainside, out of which tall columns of steam billowed up. The heavy pulse of the pumps echoed through the village from the little houses behind the inns, each of which provided the hot baths for its own guests. To us it seemed a depressing place, but hot-spring resorts of this kind are highly esteemed by the Japanese, and in season apparently develop a Rabelaisian gaiety.

We could find no transport from Sounzan to the lake on top of the mountains, so we went down again in the funicular with a group of young men chanting choruses from a Noh play, and found a bus to Odawara waiting in the village square. The journey by bus was more exciting, if not more spectacular, than that by the mountain railway, for the road plunged steeply down the mountainside in curves so sharp that the conductress had to get out periodically and make sure that the driver did not manoeuvre the bus backwards on to the precipitous slopes below us. The road was overhung with wild cherries which had the attractive angular shapes that trees in Japanese paintings so often assume, and the driver had to keep a sharp lookout for the wandering blossom viewers, some of whom had sharpened their perceptive powers by liberal potations of sake. A few of the drunkards tried to board the bus, but the conductress, a red-faced muscular peasant girl, pushed them off into the road with ruthless vigour.
Our last day in Japan arrived—14th April; that night we would be taking the plane out of Asia to Vancouver on the far side of the Pacific. In the morning our friend Hirano rang up rather anxiously to remind us that there was one thing we had omitted. We had never visited the Meiji shrine, the great centre in Tokyo of the cult of the nineteenth-century emperor who ended the rule of the Shoguns and presided over the rapid opening of Japan, then a medieval country, to the modern world. ‘It is not merely a Shinto shrine,’ said Hirano. ‘It is a national shrine, for everyone.’ In the afternoon he and his wife came to take us there.

As we walked under the great torii and along the processional way through the high groves towards the shrine, Hirano told us how every New Year his father-in-law came down from his village in the northern province of Tohoku, and the whole family joined in the great throngs of Tokyo people who came to pay their respects at the shrine. The buildings of the shrine were of soft-coloured cypress wood, touched at the ends of the beams with white paint, but otherwise there was no colour except for the gilded hinges and hasps, and the bright nimbus emblems on the closed doors of the sanctum. A procession of novices, bare-headed youths and girls in white robes, marched across the broad plaza. There was a tank of clear running water at the entrance, and we took bamboo dippers and ritually washed our hands and lips, letting the water fall into a trough filled with pebbles at our feet. We stood at the bar before the sanctum, threw coins into the box, clapped our hands to arouse the deity, and then consulted the oracle by shaking the box of sticks. A young priestess gave us slips of paper containing lines from the works of Meiji’s poet-empress. Mine, the most impressive, told me: ‘Reflect upon yourself three times a day, as the ancients did!’

At one side of the shrine a middle-class couple in western clothes were, according to pious custom, presenting their hundred-days’-old baby and their daughter of three, both dressed in red and white kimonos. They were just inside the barrier, and before them, facing the altar, stood the priest, dressed in a garb dating from the eleventh century, a long white
robe split at the sides to reveal blue ballooning pantaloons, and
a mitre-like headdress of black gauze. Standing at a table facing
the sanctum, he chanted lengthily and clapped his hands. Then
he gave the father a twig of a laurel-like everygreen called sakaki,
intertwined with white paper to symbolize the idea of purifica-
tion which underlies most Shinto ceremonials. The father bowed
twice, clapped twice, and, after the priest had given a further
invocation, bowed again. We walked through the woodlands
and the grassy glades of the park behind the shrine. Hirano
remarked that it was one of the few green places left in Tokyo.
‘But fewer people come here every year. They are getting lazy.
The beatniks never come, for which one must be thankful.’

On the far side of the park stood the heavy, granite-faced
treasure-house of the Meiji cult. It contained the relics of Meiji’s
life, of that dramatic career which marked the greatest transition
in Japanese history. In the plain wooden furniture was reflected
the dedicated frugality of the emperor’s personal life, in the
books and the emperor’s calligraphy and the empress’s poems
the traditional artistic interests they had shared, and in the gar-
ments their divided loyalties, for Meiji’s Prussian-style uniforms
and his wife’s Victorian tiara stood beside six-fold ceremonial
kimonos and the black imperial headdresses that had remained
unchanged since the days of the Lady Murasaki and her hero
Prince Genji. We looked at the portraits last of all, the emperor’s
youthful and rather handsome face, the empress’s massive, deter-
mained Fujiwara jaw. ‘Before the war we were not supposed to
stare at their pictures,’ said Hirano. ‘They were supposed to have
become gods. Now that is all ended. For the young it is already
a forgotten age.’

We said good-bye to the Hiranos. Later, at the airport, with
the last formalities ended, we sat waiting to be called to the plane.
Along the side of the lounge ran a wall of glass, and the passengers
stood inside it, talking to their friends on the other side through
round panes of pierced perspex. At that moment, within the
glass curtain, we knew that Asia, that bewildering continent
where men at last looked in the faces of the Gods, was in the past.
## Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aden</td>
<td>11–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesculapius</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>27, 33, 39–44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afridis</td>
<td>38, 40–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agathocles</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agesilas</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agra</td>
<td>17, 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed, Sophia</td>
<td>20–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akbar</td>
<td>36, 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albuquerque, Afonso de</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander the Great</td>
<td>25, 28, 32, 35–6, 40, 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali, Altaf</td>
<td>17, 20–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambhi</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amida</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amoy</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anand, Mulk Raj</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andes</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andorra</td>
<td>13, 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animism</td>
<td>94, 96, 128, 134–5, 181, 196, 206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anna and the King of Siam</em>, 103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annam and Annamese</td>
<td>159, 163, 180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollonius of Tyana</td>
<td>32–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabia</td>
<td>11–12, 21, 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabian Sea</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs</td>
<td>17, 20, 199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arishayama</td>
<td>298, 319–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art of Cambodia</td>
<td>177–86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art of Japan</td>
<td>280–3, 297–304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art of Malaysia</td>
<td>219–20, 234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art of Thailand</td>
<td>111–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atami</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attock</td>
<td>36–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avalokiteshvara</td>
<td>181, 183, 298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayub Khan</td>
<td>63–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayudhya</td>
<td>91–3, 99–111, 116, 118, 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bab-el-Mandeb</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babur</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bactrian Greeks. See Greeks in India</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagdogra</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baiko</td>
<td>283–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahawalpur</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baluchistan</td>
<td>15, 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>29, 49, 77–8, 83–94, 98–9, 108–17, 120, 125, 127, 129, 144, 146–59, 175, 189–90, 193, 216, 277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbosa, Duarte</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basu, Roman</td>
<td>49, 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benares</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengal and Bengalis</td>
<td>17, 56–9, 61, 63–4, 68–72, 78, 83, 100, 199, 210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhamore</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhir Mound</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binson, Boonrod</td>
<td>152, 154–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biwa, Lake</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blofeld, John</td>
<td>88–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booth, General</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borneo</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Browning, Robert</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The page numbers may vary depending on the specific book or source.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDEX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burma, 59, 68, 70, 72-3, 77-9, 83, 94, 101-2, 104-5, 107-8, 116, 121, 130, 135, 152, 161, 199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buruganga, River, 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterworth, 197-8, 212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buxa, 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byzantium, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo, 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta, 52, 56-7, 62, 77-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia, 91, 105, 140, 142, 151-90, 194, 219, 252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada, 60, 102-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton, 255, 258, 261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrara, 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casablanca, 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle, The, 165, 293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang’an, 290, 294, 308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chao Phya, River, 84, 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chematwei, Queen, 141-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chieng Dao, 125-6, 130-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chieng Mai, 116-44, 198, 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chieng Rai, 132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China, 20, 29, 38, 53-4, 87, 96, 101, 115, 126, 152, 156, 180, 188, 199, 226, 244, 252, 253, 261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese influence in Japan, 280, 290, 294, 307-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in Hong Kong and Macao, 250-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in South-east Asia, 87, 96, 102, 123, 158, 165, 193-4, 200-3, 205-10, 211-13, 215-16, 220-5, 228-9, 232-6, 238-46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong, 68-78, 83, 211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinhang, 172-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chou Ta-kuan, 185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chow, Raymond, 262-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chulalongkorn, King, 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chumbi Valley, 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clove plantations, 205-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochin, 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombo, 93, 230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus, Christopher, 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communism, 124, 126, 145, 153, 155, 166, 244, 254 |
Confucianism, 206 |
Conrad, Joseph, 238 |
Dacca, 66-68, 71, 73 |
Daitokuji Temples, Kyoto, 300-4 |
Dalai Lama, 13th, 51 |
Dalai Lama, 14th, 50-3, 67, 69 |
Danjuro XI, 283-4 |
Darius, 36 |
Darjeeling, 54-6 |
Delhi, 17, 36, 44, 48-9, 53-5, 77-8, 84, 152, 282 |
Dharamsala, 50-3, 67 |
Daghilev, Sergei, 141 |
Dolma, Tsering, 52-3 |
Donburi, 93, 101, 113, 193 |
Dostoevsky, Fedor, 31 |
Dutch in Asia, 199, 225, 227, 229-30, 234, 238, 243, 249-50 |
East India Company, 61, 199, 227 |
Edo, 277, 282, 290, 295, 324 |
Education, 19-20 |
Egypt, 20, 65, 161, 181, 208 |
El Greco, 194 |
Elliott, Captain Charles, 252 |
Epidaurus, 208 |
Ethiopia, 11 |
Faces of India, 49 |
Fang, 127, 132 |
Fatelpur Sikri, 44 |
Fatima, 21 |
Feminism, 19-20 |
Film Industry in Hong Kong, 262-4 |
Fra Lippo Lippi, 112 |
French in Asia, 157, 159-60, 163, 227 |
Fujiiwara clan, 295, 308, 333 |
Fujiyama, 241, 276, 291, 329 |
Gandhara, 38, 43, 49 |
Gandhi, M. K., 66, 154 |
Ganges, 29, 55, 57, 63, 78 |
Geishas, 296, 321-4 |
Genji Monogatari, 283 |
Georgetown, 197, 199-203, 209, 227, 240 |
INDEX

Gifu, 293
Gilgit, 36
Gion, 294, 296, 306–7, 322
Goa, 226, 231
Gondophares, 33
Gora, 330–1
Great Expectations, 22
Greeks and their Gods, The, 208
Greeks in India, 25, 27–34, 37
Guena, King, 137
Gujerat, 25
Guthrie, W. K. C., 208

Hadramaut, 13
Hajj, 12, 20, 201
Hakkas, 258–64
Hamada, 280
Haripoonch, See Lampon
Hashim, Abul, 66–7
Herodotus, 37
Himalayas, 39
Hinayanist Buddhism, 88–9, 96, 181
Hinduism, 91, 107–8, 144, 177–8, 181, 213–14, 219
Hindu Kush, 27, 35–6, 38
Hirano, Keiichi, 285–89, 332–3
Hiroshige, 293, 328
Hiyei, Mount, 294, 308
Hokkien, 232–3, 241
Hokusai, 282
Hong Kong, 84, 175, 208, 221, 223–4, 238, 249–72, 276–7
Honolulu, 73
Honshu, 276, 314, 318, 330
Horyuji Temple, Nara, 309–11
Hyderabad, Pakistan, 24

India, 12, 44, 48–57, 59, 61–2, 70, 78–9, 87, 145, 153, 164, 172, 180–1, 184–5, 202, 204, 208, 211, 226, 254, 257, 264
Indians in Malaya, 200–1, 204, 209–10, 213–14
Indonesia, 151, 199, 220, 229, 243–4
Indra, 114
Indu, 24, 27, 36–7
Ipoh, 215–16
Islam, 12, 18–19, 58–9, 65–7, 214, 219–20, 226
Jamrud, 39
Jandial, 32
Japan, 89, 96, 145, 166, 207, 224, 257, 264, 275–333
Jaulian, 29–32
Java, 200, 225–7, 249–50
Jayavarman VII, 180, 182–5
Jehanji, 44
Jhelum, 25
Jinnah, M. A., 60
Joget, 221, 224
Johore, 236–8
Johore Bahru, 237–8

Kabuki Drama, 283–4, 301, 312, 322–3
Kabul, 41, 43
Kabul River, 37
Kafirs, 38
Kafka, Franz, 165, 277, 293
Kaghan, 30
Kali, 56
Kalimpong, 54–5
Kamakura, 290, 326
Kamo River, 294, 296
Kampong, Malay, 204–5, 227–8, 237
Kanchenjunga, 55
Kangra, 53
Kanishka, 38, 94
Kannon, 298–9, 328
Karachi, 14–24, 45–6, 59–60, 79, 254
Karakorum Mountains, 27
Karens, 132, 144
Karuiizawa, 326–9
Kashmir, 18, 21, 25, 36, 37, 56, 62
Katsura Palace, 303–4
Katsura River, 294, 320
Kedah, 197–8, 201, 209
Kenzan, 280
Khairpur, 24
Khmers, 91, 108, 140, 142, 157–9, 161, 163, 165–6, 177, 179–81, 184–5
Khun Tan, 120–1, 146
Khyber Pass, 35, 38–44
Kirkup, James, 208
Klee, Paul, 113, 193
Kobe, 313–14, 318
Kofukuji Temple, Nara, 308, 311, 313
Koran, The, 65–7
Koryuji Temple, Kyoto, 294, 298
Kowloon, 250–5, 258, 261
Krishna, 97, 213
Kuala Lumpur, 212, 216–25, 228
Kublai Khan, 91
Kushanas, 28, 33
Kwai, River, 194
Kwamumu, Emperor, 294, 308
Kyoto, 282–3, 288–308, 313, 315, 318–24, 329

Lahore, 24, 44–8, 59
Lampoon, 116, 121–2, 125, 139–43, 145
Lanti Kotal, 40–2
Laos, 132, 152–3, 161, 253
Lok Ma Chai, 261
Lopburi, 139
Lord Jim, 175
Lourdes, 97
Luang Prabang, 134, 153
Lucknow, 17, 44

Macao, 226, 252, 254, 265–72
Mahabharata, 178
Mahayanaist Buddhism, 30–1, 54, 88, 96, 115, 181, 184, 215–16, 298–9
Majapahit, 225
Malabar, 17
Malacca, 199–200, 212, 218, 225–36, 243
Malaya and Malays, 83, 144, 163, 171, 193–246, 277
Malraux, André, 119, 174, 297
Manchus, 233–4
Mandalay, 77, 134
Mao Tse-tung, 244
Marx, Karl, 317
Matisse, Henri, 280
Maugham, Somerset, 238, 251
Mecca, 12, 20–1
Meiji, Emperor, 290, 304, 332–3
Menander, 25, 29, 33
Mengrai, King, 116, 137, 139
Meru, Mount, 114, 177, 183
Mexico, 98, 177, 326, 329
Michelangelo, 106
Milarepa, 320
Minamot Shogunate, 299, 326
Missionaries, activities of, 124, 126, 220, 226, 231
Miyako Odori, 321–3
Moghuls, 44, 59
Monet, Claude, 280–1
Mongkut, King, 94, 102–3
Mons, 91, 116, 139, 142
Moplahs, 17
Moslem League, 60
Moslem region. See Islam
Mouhot, Henri, 174
Mozart, W. A., 223
Muar, 236
Multan, 24
Murasaki, Lady, 283, 295, 329, 333
Murrue Hills, 27, 32
Mussoorie, 49–50

Nagaoka, 294
Nagoya, 291, 293
Nakon Pathom, 91–9, 193–4
Naples, 254
Nara, 290, 294–5, 307–13, 315
Narayanganj, 62
Negri Sembilan, 227, 237
Nehru, J., 18, 53, 61, 153
Nepal, 50, 52, 54, 55, 195, 210
Nepalis in Malaya, 195, 210
New Territories, Hong Kong, 253–4, 258–64
Noh drama, 283–5, 306, 322
Nyas Island, 220

Opera, Chinese, 221–3, 284
Orwell, George, 49, 320
Osaka, 282, 311, 313, 316, 318
Otsu, 293

Pagan, 77, 182
Pakistan, 14–48, 55–79, 83–4, 103, 164, 211
Palmerston, Lord, 252
Parameswara, 226, 228
Paris, 93, 279, 296
Parthians, 28, 32–4
Pathankot, 50
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index Entry</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pathans</td>
<td>17, 36-7, 39-43, 63, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathet Lao</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patna</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paz, Ottavio</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penang</td>
<td>194, 197-212, 237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perim</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persia and Persians</td>
<td>27-8, 44, 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peshawar</td>
<td>29, 33, 35, 37-9, 42-3, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petrarch</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picasso, Pablo</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping, River</td>
<td>116, 130, 137, 139-40, 142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pires, Tomé</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phnom Penh</td>
<td>151, 157-65, 168, 170-1, 174-5, 180, 189-90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese in Asia</td>
<td>225-7, 229-32, 252, 254, 265-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porus</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prek-thnot</td>
<td>162, 164-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab and Punjabis</td>
<td>17, 24-5, 44-5, 48, 59, 63-4, 118, 214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purdah</td>
<td>19-22, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrenees</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajburi</td>
<td>193-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan</td>
<td>57-8, 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramayana</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangoon</td>
<td>68, 77, 94-5, 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranjit Singh</td>
<td>39, 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rawal Pindi</td>
<td>23, 26-7, 33-4, 36, 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Sea</td>
<td>11, 102, 199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Way, The</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubber Growing</td>
<td>197, 213, 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell, Bertrand</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saigon</td>
<td>123, 151, 157, 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sain, Kanwar</td>
<td>152-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakala</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakas</td>
<td>28, 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Gemignano</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanjuusangendo Temple, Kyoto</td>
<td>298-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saraswati</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarawak</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaaf, Hart</td>
<td>152, 155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scythians. See Sakas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seremban</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shah Jehan</td>
<td>44, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharaku</td>
<td>282-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shias</td>
<td>20-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shikoku Island</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinto</td>
<td>289, 295-6, 298, 304-7, 309, 317, 318-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shotoku, Prince</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siam. See Thailand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siem Reap</td>
<td>151, 174-6, 180, 186-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sihanouk, Prince</td>
<td>155-7, 161, 163-4, 18-990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>24, 39, 44, 48, 118, 144, 200-1, 210, 214, 220, 257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikkim</td>
<td>54-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sind</td>
<td>15, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>193, 218, 223, 225, 227-9, 236-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singh, Patwant</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirikit, Queen</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirkap</td>
<td>28-9, 32-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirkush</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siva, 91, 108, 115, 186, 206, 213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skylax</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake Temple, Penang</td>
<td>206-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soami</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorrento</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srinagar</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Vijaya</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suez</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufis</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suleiman mountains</td>
<td>37-8, 40, 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumatra</td>
<td>260, 279, 289, 243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sungci Kluang</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suryavarman II, King</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutepa</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swat</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>221, 223, 252, 275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takamatsu</td>
<td>314-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamerlane</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil, 163, 200-1, 209-11, 213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoism</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taring, Rinchen Dolma</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxila</td>
<td>27-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teesta Valley, 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telok Bahang, 205</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism, 13-14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand, 77, 83-157, 161, 181, 193-5, 197-8, 216, 219</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theravada Buddhism, 88-9, 96, 165</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas, Saint, 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibet and Tibetans, 36, 49-54, 79, 152, 161, 181, 250, 320</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tin mining, 216</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokugawa Shogunate, 290, 295</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo, 182, 276-90, 295, 316, 318, 325-33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolstoy, Leo, 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonle Sap, 161-2, 170-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torkham, 39, 42-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri de, 322</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura, 70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropic Temper, 208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsong Khapa, 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U-Thong, 101, 106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vajrayanist Buddhism, 88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Gogh, Vincent, 195</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venice, 85, 112, 225, 282</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria, Hong Kong, 250, 253, 255, 257</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane, 163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam, 105, 151-3, 157-8, 160-1, 173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vishnu, 144, 181</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wat Sutep, 125, 137-40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Huns, 28, 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth, William, 320</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier, St. Francis, 231</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen, 11, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yokohama, 255, 276-7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yussuf, 27-42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zen Buddhism, 288, 295, 297, 300-3, 309, 326, 328</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>