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**REPORT
FROM
MALAYA**

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THE FIRST ADVENTURERS

THE first British settlement in Malaya was on Penang Island—'Pinang' being Malay for the betel nut which reddens the chewer's teeth and causes him to bespatter the pavements with blood-red spittle.

In front of the Supreme Court in Georgetown, the island's one town, stands a statue to Captain Francis Light, and probably not one school-child or adult in a hundred in the British Isles or one in a thousand elsewhere could tell you anything about him. The Japanese threw this statue into a naval store during their occupation, and when it was recovered after the war its bronze sword was missing. Swords are uncommon weapons nowadays, so the British Military Administration had one made for him; to this day Captain Light's weapon is made of wood.

More than forty years before Sir Stamford Raffles bought Singapore Island on an indefinite lease for roughly £400 a year, Francis Light, also a servant of the Honourable East India Company, started this settlement on Penang. His story provides one more instance of the astonishing way in which the British Empire was built up almost without the knowledge, and sometimes against the wishes, of the British Government. In 1877 the Sultan of Zanzibar offered to concede sovereignty, with very minor reservations, over his own island and the coastal plain on the mainland to Sir William Mackinnon, chairman of the British India Line, but he had to refuse the offer, at least for some years, because he could get no official support. Official responsibility for the Protectorate of Uganda was accepted very reluctantly only

when the Imperial British East Africa Association had lost so much money there that it announced its intention to cut its losses and withdraw. In 1890 Rhodes acquired the Rhodesias without the help of a single soldier from the United Kingdom, and more than thirty years went by before the British Government accepted responsibility for these immensely wealthy territories. Malaya provides its own examples of this reluctant imperialism.

In 1771 the Sultan of Kedah offered to Francis Light, then working on behalf of a firm of merchants in Madras, a concession at the mouth of the Kedah river, in return for a promise of help against his enemies in Siam to the north and in Selangor to the south. 'Had I authority to act,' Light wrote at the time, 'neither Danes, Dutch, French or anyone else should drive me out. . . . Be assured that neither at Acheen' (at the north-western tip of Sumatra) 'or here or any other port to the east will you be able to make a settlement unless you act with spirit and authority.'

But he was not given the authority to match his spirit, although the Dutch were extending their control over the East Indies and although the Malay pirates were doing increasing damage to shipping passing through the Straits of Malacca—in comparison with them the famous pirates of the Barbary coast were genial and gentle. It was not for another fifteen years, in 1786, that Francis Light, acting on behalf of the East India Company, was able to conclude a treaty with the Sultan for the possession of Penang, not far south of the Kedah river.

It was then an almost uninhabited island covered with jungle. H. P. Clodd¹ records that Light became so impatient with the difficulties of clearing the ground—the timber was

¹ *Malay's First British Pioneer*, by H. P. Clodd (Luzac & Co., London).