

# Travels of an Engineer

"I WAS THERE"—PART III

BY H. M. BURROWS



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**M**Y LUCK WAS out. I had to wait six weeks in Freetown under conditions worse, if anything, than in Gambia. Then an Australian cargo boat, which dropped into Freetown for coal, offered me her purser's cabin (he'd gone adrift in London, apparently). The crew were a pretty unwholesome gang of unfits, there was no smokeroom, and the food was crude. But when you've just done two years of sixty-hour seven-day weeks on short rations in a cage in a sweat bath, you can put up with pretty well anything. In war time with no relief staff available, an interchange of stations was the only leave most of us could expect and got. I borrowed a hammock, got permission to sling it at one end of the bridge and enjoyed myself reading books and watching the albatrosses or whales.

Fourteen days, it seemed much longer, and I was back at last in civilisation at Cape Town. I was thrilled to be on the threshold of that "Savage South Africa" which had fascinated my boyhood, and delighted to hear that the transport authorities couldn't get me a passage onwards for some while.

I loved the Cape—the famous firs of Wynberg, Kipling's "white sands at Muizenberg spun before the gale", the

vineyards of Constantia, the gracious old Dutch architecture of "Groote Schuur", and the impressive granite terraces, flanked with their bronze lions, of the Rhodes Memorial high up among the silent pinewoods of Table Mountain. Luckily, too, I was sent eventually overland to Durban, where I ran into Quick again. We had a ten-day reunion of race meetings and dinner parties which seemed dizzy indeed to us after so long in the bush. At the end of it I got a chance to push on to Colombo which was too good to be missed.

Ceylon delighted and impressed me with its brightness, colour and luxuriant vegetation. I found old friends, Fisher and Ladner, at the naval station at Matara in the extreme south of the island, and stayed some time with Fisher in his bungalow in the jungle. I remember taking a twelve mile walk through the jungle, which was dense, along a track heavily shaded by the interlaced branches of tall trees. Huge creepers drooped from the branches. Water dripped from the trees and in the slime of the ground lurked countless leeches. When at last we got through to open country we were forced to take off our trousers and burn the leeches off our legs with lighted cigarettes.



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*The island city of Hong Kong, where Mr. Burrows was stationed forty years ago*

Through the fault of a sleepy transport officer I got away from Colombo by a B.I. mail boat only by the skin of my teeth, chasing her out to sea in a steam-pinnace and clambering aboard by a rope-ladder—an awkward business with quite a bit of sea running and the ship going full ahead. I was greeted on deck by an irate skipper, but all I cared about at the time was my breakfast.

A few days later we were in Singapore where C. W. Boyle who had been in Newfoundland with Quick and myself entertained me at the naval station of Seletar, some miles from Singapore. Three or four days later I sailed again and I reached Hong Kong a little over four months after leaving Bathurst.

Hong Kong harbour enchanted me. Steep, thickly-wooded, soared the Peak behind Victoria. Scores of ships of every nationality lay at anchor. Launches, sampans, and clumsy looking junks gave it all an air of great activity.

My colleague, D. Homan Jones, met me and took me by launch to the naval station on small, hilly Stonecutter's

Island at the harbour's western end.

The long verandah of the bungalow, set on the hillside, overlooked a perfect bathing beach. Across the narrow water lay the mainland and distant mountains of China.

Hong Kong was known aptly as the Picnic Station. Efficient and reliable Chinese ratings carried out a good many of the duties, cheerfully doing a seven-day week on small pay and with only a few days' holiday every year. The Japs were our allies then so the war affected us little. The station staff of fourteen were games-minded—cricket, football, tennis, swimming, and running over the two-mile course of the footpath round the island. E. Green, the second engineer, used to start his day with P.T. on the verandah, then run round the island and finish up with a long swim. After a day's work he would play several sets of splendid tennis, followed by another run and another swim.

In the monsoon season both temperature and humidity ran high. The slightest exertion made one's clothes





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*New buildings have sprung up, but the island site of the old station looks just the same*

cling to one's skin. Visiting in the hilly district about the Peak, we went by chair with, for preference, a short coolie in front and a long one behind.

Under our control was a small 5kW ship-shore station at Cape D'Aguilar, a lovely rocky promontory at the extreme southern end of Hong Kong island. Either Green or I made periodic visits to it, by launch normally. In bad weather the launch had to anchor in a nearby bay and, having no dinghy, we used to go ashore on the shoulders of sturdy little Chinese girls who seemed to find it just as amusing as we did. The station itself was several miles from the nearest road. Sometimes we would walk it, using a track which skirted the island's eastern side. At one time, though, when hold-ups by bandits became frequent, we found it advisable to carry a Service revolver. Daylight hold-ups, even in the harbour itself, were by no means unknown—especially of firms' launches carrying weekly and monthly pay.

Using fast motor boats these pirates were often killers. As I was obliged

myself to fetch the money for the staff's monthly pay from the bank by boat, I always took an escort of two armed ratings and was thankful for them. Stonecutter's Island was a mile from the nearest point of the mainland, where a slum village of shanties and hovels housed the lowest scum of Kowloon, as witnessed by the sounds, punctuated by screams and shots, which floated across to us by night. To discourage pilferage of equipment I kept dogs and slept with a revolver under my pillow. If the dogs gave the alarm, a shot in the air was always effective in restoring peace.

The bungalow staff were wonderful—always immaculate in white, quick, punctual, silent, completely trustworthy. Bring in a friend or two unexpectedly—somehow, out of thin air, the cook and head boy would contrive a first class meal without a word. Your personal servant saw that you never ran out of cigarettes or toilet requisites. He looked after your laundry, laid out clean clothes every evening, stood by towel in hand while you took your bath.



H. M. Burrows

*The old M.W.T. radio station on Stonecutter's Island, Hong Kong. The promontory can be identified in the previous picture, taken from the other side since the war*

They were silent and impassive, those servants, on duty—their faces like masks. But they were full enough of chat and laughter when together off duty.

I remember one night when—passing their quarters—I heard a fine old hulla-baloo and, peeping in, saw an exciting gamble going on. My presence, as soon as it was detected, produced silence. A cloth was hurriedly thrown over the cards. Their faces were inscrutable.

"Ah Foo," I said to one who was fingering a small book, "what belong all this bobbery?" "No, sir," replied Ah Foo, "No bobbery." "Makee play card?" I asked "Gamble?" Ah Foo batted not an eyelid. "No, sir. No card. No gamble." Slowly I removed the cloth. They stared with superb amazement.

Thinking it as well to break the silence, Ah Foo informed me that he had been reading to the others aloud. "What belong book, Ah Foo?" Ah Foo's smile was seraphic. "Allee same Bible, velly nicee." "Good night", I said. There was nothing to do but go away and have my laugh out.

I was lucky, when the time came to hand the stations over to a Naval staff, to have a choice of route home—eastwards or westwards. I chose the east, to complete the circuit of the globe. So I went *via* Shanghai, Tokyo, Vancouver, across the Rockies, Toronto, Niagara, and Montreal, and thence to England and to my home in Kent.

Mr. Bangay is right. "Become a Marconi engineer and see the world." Yet I would add to it. "Then you'll appreciate what a good spot old England is."

"Scent of smoke in the evening  
Smell of rain in the night  
Under their feet in the grasses  
My clinging magic runs . . ."

Kipling, remember?

"Till I make plain the meaning  
Of all my thousand years,  
Till I fill their hearts with longing  
As I fill their eyes with tears."

For a long while I had been dreaming of walking down an English lane—calling at a timbered English "local"—ordering an English pint.

I was content.