

# KARIKAL MAHAL

## The Lost Palace of A Fallen Cattle King

**William L. Gibson** uncovers the story behind the pair of grand buildings along Still Road South and their transformation over the last century.

A stately, two-storey mansion stretches impressively along Still Road South in the eastern part of Singapore. On the opposite side of the busy, arterial road lies a no less spectacular building.

Now occupied by two preschools, these impeccably maintained structures are located on generous, manicured plots of land that were once just steps away from the sea. Some residents of the neighbourhood, however, will remember a time before land reclamation when these buildings looked very different.

Older residents will recall the presence of a third building on this massive plot of land, sitting between these two structures, that was bulldozed to make way for the construction of Still Road South when the

government acquired part of the land in the early 1970s. The three buildings were collectively known as The Grand Hotel for a time.

The two remaining buildings on opposite sides of Still Road South was left derelict for more than a decade until the preschools took over the premises in 2016. For years rumours swirled about these abandoned buildings, and few knew that they were originally built as a private residence before becoming a hotel. Named Karikal Mahal, the buildings have played hosts to both high-society garden parties and illicit bedroom trysts for over a century. Karikal Mahal's fascinating history is intertwined with stories of unimaginable wealth, allegations of murder and even feats of magic.

### The Cattle King

Towards the close of World War I, successful Tamil Muslim businessman Moona Kader Sultan acquired a large plot of land not far from Telok Kurau.<sup>1</sup> Formerly verdant coconut estates, the area was becoming a popular destination for seaside living, with bungalows and luxurious houses sprouting up among the palm trees as old plantation lands were sold off in small allotments in the area we now know as Katong. Although Kader Sultan owned many properties in Singapore, he chose this breezy seafront land to build a personal Shangri-La – which he named Karikal Mahal – a testament to his wealth and status as much as a monument to his business acumen or, as some would say, his folly.

Kader Sultan did not start out wealthy. Born in Karikal, part of France's colonial possessions in India, he arrived in Singapore as a teenager in 1879 and started out as a moneychanger near the docks.<sup>2</sup> He later claimed that at the time, the remuneration for his hard work was his "food and three dollars a month".<sup>3</sup>

Witnessing the wealth being made by other Tamil Muslims in the cattle and sheep importation business, Kader Sultan turned his hand to the trade. Over the ensuing decades, he bought, bullied and buried rivals to his Straits Cattle Trading Company, which he had established with a handful of partners until he acquired the firm in 1914 to become the dominant cattle trader in Singapore.<sup>4</sup> The press dubbed him the "Cattle King", a title he held for the next 20 years. He was also one of the wealthiest men in Singapore then.

Kader Sultan soon became a prominent member of the Indian community

in Singapore. He was one of the first members of the Mohammedan Advisory Board, created in 1915 to represent Muslim community interests to the colonial authorities. Four years later, he was named a Justice of the Peace.<sup>5</sup>

Kader Sultan was an avid football fan and established a football team for his company. For many years, he was President of the Malaya Football Association and launched the "Kader Sultan Cup".<sup>6</sup>

Not forgetting his humble beginnings, Kader Sultan donated \$10,000 to the Red Cross during World War I and a large amount to the Raffles College endowment fund, possibly over \$20,000, during Singapore's centenary in 1919.

He was loyal to his adopted home, noting in his speech to Muslim community leaders during the centenary that "living in a country which protects our persons, homes and hearths, and allows us privileges to practice our religion and customs as no other Government would do, we should contribute – the rich his thousands and the poor his mite – to make the Centenary a great success".<sup>7</sup>

In 1923, Kader Sultan was issued with a Certificate of Naturalisation to honour his 45 years in the Straits Settlements.<sup>8</sup> The highest accolade came in 1925 when he was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. French Consul Andre Danjou presented Kader Sultan with the award at a garden party held on the grounds of his seaside Karikal Mahal home, an event covered not only in the local press but also in Paris by the weekly French newspaper *L'Illustration*.<sup>9</sup> Singapore's Cattle King had achieved international recognition.

But there was another side to the man. The livestock trade was a rough-and-tumble business and as Kader Sultan consolidated his position, rumours swirled of his nefarious dealings. As early as 1897, the Straits Cattle Trading Company was investigated for illegally exporting livestock.<sup>10</sup> In 1906, in a case that dragged on for a year, the company was charged with supplying adulterated milk to hospitals.<sup>11</sup>

In 1920, the Commission on Profiteering launched investigations into profiteering and price-gouging by various cattle companies, including the Straits Trading Cattle Company.<sup>12</sup> That same year, Kader Sultan's name was prominently mentioned in relation to an attempted murder of a law clerk by mail bomb.<sup>13</sup> In each instance, the Cattle King managed to stay above the fray, but the cut-throat nature of the livestock trade would eventually prove to be his undoing.

### A Residence Fit for a (Cattle) King

On the land he bought in Katong, Kader Sultan developed a palatial estate for himself and his many wives, and one befitting his stature. He constructed three sprawling bungalows, one of which featured a three-storey tower, built in a mixture of late-Victorian, Italianate and Indian architectural styles, on adjoining plots of freehold land. Altogether, the land comprised a total 202,536 sq ft (roughly two-and-a-half football fields), not including adjacent lots he owned.<sup>14</sup> The bungalows were connected by a neat square of walkways cutting through a sprawling garden. A fountain and fishpond were situated in the centre, surrounded by a circular pavilion. Just beyond the ornate seawalls, the surf rolled onto the beach.

Kader Sultan claimed that it cost him \$500,000 to develop the site and build the bungalows (see text box on page 51). He named his lavish estate Karikal Mahal – Karikal (or Karaikal) being the town of his

birth in southern India and Mahal meaning "palace" in Hindi and, perhaps with a wry sense of humour, also the Malay word for "expensive".

In June 1930, the Singapore Municipal Commissioners approved the name Karikal Road for a private road between East Coast Road and Kader Sultan's home. Two months later, the commissioners gave the name Karikal Lane to another parallel road between East Coast Road and Kader Sultan's residence.<sup>15</sup> (Running west of Karikal Lane, Karikal Road subsequently became part of Still Road South after land reclamation works in the 1970s.<sup>16</sup>)

Kader Sultan also owned the adjacent plots of land and on one of the lots fronting East Coast Road, he erected a bandstand and maintained the land as a football pitch and park for the community. The site was even used to host a travelling circus in October 1935.<sup>17</sup>

It is not clear exactly when Karikal Mahal was completed, although two dates have been suggested – 1920 and 1922.<sup>18</sup> The earliest mention of it is found in newspaper reports from December 1922, when the "palatial residence" and grounds were used to host a farewell gathering for Captain A.R. Chancellor, the Inspector-General of Police, on his retirement and return to Europe.<sup>19</sup> It was not the last high-society event that Karikal Mahal would host for a local luminary.

In January 1930, the Muslim community threw a tea party in honour of Roland John Farrer, President of the Municipality – a position equivalent to Mayor of Singapore – on being made a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George. Farrer was highly regarded by the Muslim community for his work as Chairman of the Mohammedan Advisory Board and for lobbying to have Hari Raya Haji declared a public holiday. The band of the Johore Military Forces performed for over 1,000 guests and photographs of the event in the *Malayan Saturday Post* show long tables draped in white set in the garden of Karikal Mahal.<sup>20</sup>

Despite hobnobbing with high officials and the upper echelons of society, Kader Sultan's cattle business was slowly unravelling. In the late 1920s, the livestock trade suffered a debilitating blow due to an outbreak of rinderpest and foot-and-mouth disease that severely restricted the importation of sheep and cattle.<sup>21</sup>

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(Facing page) A rare colour photo of The Grand Hotel with its striking tower (building No. 26) taken by an unknown serviceman from RAF Changi before land reclamation works began, c. 1958. The round fountain pavilion where Moona Kader Sultan received his Legion d'Honneur is seen on the left. Courtesy of RAF Changi Association.