

Charles Ritchie

San Francisco Conference—And Circus

■ Charles Ritchie was another of the senior officials from the Department of External Affairs who toiled through the weeks of committee work that produced the United Nations Charter at San Francisco. In the style that has made him famous as a diarist since his retirement from the foreign service, he adds a light touch to an account of those tense days. These extracts from his diary of the San Francisco Conference are taken from his book, *The Siren Years*.

"26 April 1945.

"San Francisco is as lively as a circus—the setting and the audience are much more amusing than the Conference performance. No one can resist the attraction of the town and the cheerfulness of its inhabitants.... The Bay is a beautiful background, the sun shines perpetually, and streets are thronged, there are American sailors everywhere with their girls and this somehow adds to the musical comedy atmosphere. You expect them at any moment to break into song and dance....

"The people are full of curiosity about the Conference delegates. They crowd around them like the friendly, innocent Indians who crowded around the Spanish adventurers when they came to America and gaped at their armour and took their strings of coloured beads for real. The delegates are less picturesque than they should be to justify so much curiosity. There are the inevitable Arabs and some Indians in turbans who are worth the price of admission, and the Saudi Arabian prince who gleams like Valentino, but in general the delegates are just so many men in business suits with circular Conference pins in their buttonholes making them look as if they were here for the Elks' Convention.

"The exceptions are the Russians—they have stolen the show. People are impressed, excited, mystified and nervous about the Russians. Groups of wooden-looking peasant Soviet officers sit isolated (by their own choice) at restaurant tables and are stared at as if they were wild animals. They are painfully self-conscious, quiet, dignified—determined not to take a step which might make people laugh at the beautiful Soviet Union.... The town is full of stories about the Russians—that they have a warship laden with caviar in the harbour, etc., etc.

"Meanwhile the local Hearst press conducts an unceasing campaign of anti-Russian mischief-making—doing their damndest to start a new world war before this one is finished.

"28 April 1945.

"Second meeting of the plenary session again in the Opera House with powerful klieg lights shining down from the balcony into the eyes of the delegates, dazzling and irritating them. The session is declared open by [Edward] Stettinius, American Secretary of State, who comes onto the dais chewing (whether gum or the remains of his lunch is a subject of speculation). His manner is one of misplaced assurance—unintentionally offensive.... He makes the worst impression on the delegates. He reads his speech in lay-preacher's voice husky with corny emotion....