

## SKETCHES OF BURMAH,

BY A SUBALTERN.

OUR recent war with this extensive empire, and the consequent acquisitions of territory, have opened a large and interesting field to those who take delight in observing the habits and tempers peculiar to different races of mankind. Many little traits and local customs are remarked by residents among a nation, which could scarcely fall within the observation of those who pay transient and temporary visits. To give a sketch, though it may be a faint one, of the state of the Burmese provinces, is the motive which now induces me to take up the pen; the facts I shall narrate are such as either fell under my own notice, or were related to me by highly credible witnesses.

Rangoon, although not subject to our sway, is well worthy of a few passing remarks, as being the grand export and import mart of Ava. I chanced to visit it a few months back, and was struck by the contrast it then presented to my recollections of it when it was occupied by us during the war. Yet the changes in the town itself were not very numerous; the most material one, perhaps, was to be found in the blackened and ruinous appearance of the King's, or Scandal Wharf, as we used to term it; for there, during the latter part of the war, such of us as were stationed at Rangoon were wont to assemble in considerable numbers every evening, and while away an hour in mirthful anecdote and good-humoured repartee, ere we dispersed by threes and fours to smoke a friendly cigar.

This building, under which many a light-hearted jest had resounded, had suffered materially in the wars between the Burmese and Taliens after our departure. Indeed, for some time previous to our evacuation of Rangoon, desultory warfare had partially commenced between the two contending nations. Weakened and disheartened, even to gross pusillanimity, by their long and ineffectual struggle with the British, the Burmese evinced the most contemptible cowardice, and as the Peguers were not a whit behind them in this respect, the noble art of war degenerated in their hands into childish attacks, which seldom extended beyond the successful firing of villages; this exploit being generally accomplished at the expense of a few reciprocal cuts and bruises.

In these operations Rangoon had been once or twice in flames, as the few remaining rafters with the scorched and half-consumed posts and flooring of the wharf, bore ample testimony. The suburbs had been frequently burnt and rebuilt alternately, and here it was that the alterations were most marked. I rode out to view the house that I had occupied during the war—mess-house, my own, and my brother officers' houses, had disappeared so completely as to leave no vestige behind.

No attempts had been made to restore or beautify any of the numerous pagodas that were defaced and partially destroyed by the British army in fruitless searches after hidden treasures. War had been too recent for any of these more durable tokens of its devastating presence to be so speedily effaced, even had not the iron pressure of extraordinary taxation, to produce the fine levied by the conqueror, prevented such expenditure.

Whatever advantage the Burmese may have derived from their late contact with a civilized nation, it has not produced a change in the spirit of their laws, the administration of which still retains all those arbitrary and ferocious characteristics peculiar to countries where the will of the sovereign is para-

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run in and out in the manner of a pin: they repeat this with other leaves till the whole stick is covered. The leaves thus prepared are sold for from one to three rupees per hundred, and laid in rows along the roofing frame, to which they are tied by the sticks, the ends of the leaves pointing downwards. The roofing, of course, commences from the bottom, each succeeding row covering seven-eighths of the one beneath it. A light frame-work of split bamboo of the lattice kind is frequently tied down over the leaves, to prevent the wind blowing up their points.

Many of these houses, as I have mentioned, are delightfully situated on the top of the eastern bund of the ancient town, which, judging from its remains, must have been thrown up at an amazing expense of time and labour. Hence you have a commanding view to the west and north of the cantonment and the rivers, your vision being finally bounded by the Martaban hills and the towering rocks formerly mentioned, whilst the east and south present one mass of jungle to the eye.

This jungle, by attracting the heavy night-dews, which at certain seasons float above it till ten in the morning, generally induces fever to the party imprudent enough to expose himself to its influence, and is, moreover, a covert for tigers. I recollect an instance of an officer who, having to build his house on a part of this bund where the summit was too narrow to admit of the whole breadth of the edifice, was obliged, by driving posts into the interior slope, to carry it on a little way over the declivity: the consequent space between the ground and the floor laid upon the posts was sufficiently great to enable him to occupy it as a pony-stable. He was awakened one night by a tremendous roar, and an immediately ensuing struggle beneath the house, and running out to ascertain the cause, he beheld a tiger springing back into the jungle. On proceeding to the stable, whence the noise had originated, he found one of his ponies lying dead, the tiger having killed it by a blow on the neck.

Rightly judging that, though balked of his supper this night, his unbidden guest would return the following one, he determined to receive him warmly: the carcass of the pony was accordingly fastened to a bush in the tiger's track, a short way in the jungle, and a little house of bamboos and leaves run up at a few yards' distance. Here the bereaved officer with four or five friends sate from night-fall with their fowling-pieces; but after waiting for some hours were about quitting the hut in despair, when the moon, rising full-orbed above the trees, revealed their expected visitor crouching under a bush close by them, with his head turned to the body which, in a few moments more, he intended making his own. A volley was instantly given him, which was fired with such deadly precision that the animal never perceptibly altered his position: in fact, so completely did he retain it, that, half conceiving he must have been so soundly asleep as not to have been aroused by the report, they fired again previous to salying out. On inspection they found his head and chest penetrated with balls, one of which had entered at the eye. Stripping him of his skin, they brought it, along with his head, in triumph to the cantonment.

Tigers are plentiful; both at Moelmyne and Rangoon, especially in the vicinity of the latter, whither they resorted in great numbers towards the termination of the war, when the din of battle which had frightened them away on our arrival, was only to be heard in the remote districts of Prome and Pegu. Three or four months prior to the conclusion of peace, they were repeatedly met at night in the roads leading from Rangoon to the great pagoda; and often have I and my comrades been aroused from our sleep by the growl of a tiger as he prowled near our quarters. The cry of a tiger in quest of his

prey is the most peculiar sound I ever heard: the low, yet shrill, complaining tone, it is impossible by description to give an adequate idea of; unlike every other sound that the ear has been accustomed to, it is nevertheless no sooner heard than the apprehension of danger is intimately associated with it, whilst every nerve is thrillingly alive; and, although a person may hear it but once in his life, every modulation of it will remain so distinctly and vividly impressed upon the memory that time and change of scene will have no effect in obliterating it, or even confounding it with any other sound.

It is remarkable that, although the tiger, unless pressed by extreme hunger, will always avoid mankind, he will yet, after having once tasted human blood, pursue it with avidity in preference to any other. I have, myself, passed and re-passed close by a tiger's lair without eliciting any thing beyond an angry growl each time. This superior flavour of human flesh may furnish us with a clue to that strong predilection of cannibal nations, which renders it a task of such difficulty to win them from their horrible and most unnatural propensities.

The other animals in a wild state at Moelmyne are red deer in abundance (these and peacocks will be found in general in places frequented by tigers); buffaloes, elephants, and wild hogs. A rhinoceros was seen and pursued; but, although several officers and a party of H.M.'s 45th regt. fired on him, he tore through the jungle, crushing boughs and young trees before him, and made his escape. He however gave proof of some balls having taken effect, as his track was profusely marked with blood. It is asserted, I believe, that the hide of this animal will repel a musket ball unless it chance to hit him on the belly. Where this animal was struck I cannot possibly tell, the extreme rapidity of his movements, combined with the intense interest of the moment, rendered it impossible to decide this point; but from the circumstance of the animal's occupying the same level with his opponents, it is fair to conclude that the wounds were inflicted elsewhere.

Of buffaloes in an actually wild state few, if any, are to be met with, those in the vicinity of the cantonment being the property of various Burmese. These, however, being allowed in general to stray *ad libitum* in unfrequented places, have lost so little of their pristine ferocity, as to warrant their being classed with animals *feræ naturæ*. The flesh of the Moelmyne buffalo-calf is by no means bad beef (for veal it is *not*), being tolerably juicy, tender, and fat; whilst that of Tavoy is so coarse-grained, hard, dry, and lean, as to defy the masticatory powers, unless it be stewed or minced.

Elephants, I believe, are not very numerous; those to be met with are in general fierce. A brother-officer of mine, whilst out snipe-shooting, had an encounter with one which might have terminated fatally. He was in the act of emerging from a jungle into the paddy fields in pursuit of his game, when he heard a violent displacing of the boughs behind him, and turning suddenly round, he saw a wild elephant with uplifted trunk close upon him. There was no time for consideration, and seizing his fowling-piece by the muzzle, he struck the animal forcibly with the butt across the tusks, and then wheeling rapidly round the trunk of a tree, was fortunately enabled to gain a sufficiently intervening space in the recesses of the forest to elude the pursuit of his formidable adversary, who remained for some time stunned and surprised by the violence of the blow.

It is a remarkable circumstance that neither foxes nor hares are to be met with at any distance below Prome, whilst above it they are very abundant; neither is there a single jackal throughout the whole of Burmah.

Snipes at Moelmyne are very plentiful, and afford ample employment to such sportsmen as are fond of the diversion of snipe-shooting. It is here, however, a more than ordinary wet and fatiguing amusement, as the quantity of rain that falls constantly for several months, so thoroughly saturates the ground, that the sportsman toils along generally up to the knees in mud and water.

Deer-shooting is pursued only by the Burmese, and occasionally by the licensed residents, British, and others: not that it is by any means an uninteresting sport, or that the game is scarce, but that as, to ensure success, it is necessary to wait in their tracks at night, in order to intercept them as they move down to different tanks for the purpose of slaking their thirst, few officers are such lovers of moonlight rambles as to abandon the refreshment of sleep, so peculiarly renovating in a tropical climate, for the gratification to be derived from the fowling-piece.

Although wild hogs are to be met with, they are not so abundant as to constitute a separate amusement. It may so chance that one will cross the sportsman's path so deliberately as to afford him time to slip a ball into his barrel, and for such cases he will generally make provision, but no one would think of traversing a large tract of country in quest of them.

These are all the sporting diversions that Moelmyne yields; for of course, in a country where there is only a patch here and there cleared for the purpose of cultivation, and those spots, few as they are, devoted solely to the raising of rice, hunting is entirely out of the question, even were there any foxes or hares, which animals must always be the most generally pursued by sportsmen in the east.

I shall now speak of the climate of Moelmyne, its effects upon the European constitution, the articles it yields for the subsistence of the troops, the public buildings provided for their comfort, and finally, matters relating to its police.

The south-west or rainy monsoon sets in on this coast in the month of May, and terminates generally about the latter end of October, although showers at intervals may be expected for a considerable portion of the next month; indeed I have known a season at Tavoy in which the rains commenced early in April and did not entirely cease till the middle of the following December. Such continued rain is however rare. This time of the year is decidedly the most healthy, the temperament of the atmosphere being more equable, and the thermometer ranging about 77°. It is true that cases of dysentery will occur amongst the troops, but these may nearly all be traced to imprudent exposure on the part of the sufferer to damp, and sitting in wet habiliments, in the first instance, and cannot therefore be charged to the climate.

The most unhealthy season is immediately after the cessation of the rains, when the night air is comparatively intensely cold, owing to a clear and unclouded atmosphere, and the damps which now arise from the surcharged earth. When these vapours, in themselves highly pestilential, roll off, the sun, blazing with fierce brilliancy, distresses the frame with a scorching reverse, and the system, alternately chilled by night and heated by day, is liable to imbibe any of those numerous diseases which so mournfully thin our ranks in India.

I am aware that it has been asserted that the monsoon is the period most destructive to health, and I acknowledge that during, and particularly at the commencement of the war, when the wet ground was often the soldier's bed, and a cloak his only covering, disease stalked amongst us in every form; but

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