

A TEA PLANTER'S LIFE IN ASSAM.

CHAPTER I.

GENERAL—GOING OUT ON SPECULATION—SALARY—COST OF
LIVING—DRAWBACKS OF THE LIFE—ABSTEMIOUSNESS
NECESSARY—THE JOURNEY OUT—AMUSEMENTS ON THE
VOYAGE—SELECTION OF STEAMER—PLACES TO BE SEEN
—CALCUTTA.

IN the present days of overcrowding and consequent severe competition for any appointment worth having, a mania has developed for emigration. No matter what his present position or prospects in life may be, every young man imagines that there is a more than probable glorious future, that his social status will be ultimately bettered, if he can only get away from England, and either convert the hundreds that he possesses into a few thousands, or, unaided by capital, carve his way to a competency. These hopes are but occasionally

realised: the difficulties of making rapid fortunes in the Colonies are daily multiplying. Young men emigrate to our several dependencies year after year, full of hope, energy, and health; but too frequently return again, after a sojourn of a few years, penniless and broken in health, their life having been a continued struggle to earn a bare subsistence to keep body and soul together.

To any man thinking of emigrating on the speculative chance of finding something to do, with no certain situation to step into on arriving at his journey's end, my advice is, let him exhaust all his available interests to obtain something to do at home, even though it be but a poorly paid office; then, if everything fail, as a very last resource, leave England. This is my most earnest advice to anyone turning his thoughts towards Assam, especially as a land of promise. It is worse than useless to start off on the chance of finding an occupation; for there is already a surplus of competent men waiting for berths, and all subordinate positions, or nearly all, are filled up by young men, carefully selected on physical grounds, at home, so that there is no chance for men who go out speculatively. Journeying out to Assam to have a look round—a proceeding that can only be resorted to by the capitalist in search of an investment—is not of much use either, unless the intending investor is a man of sound judgment and already knows something about tea. There are few con

cerns that require so much investigation before investing money in, whose figures are more puzzling and difficult to get at, than a going tea plantation.

A *mens sana in corpore sano* is absolutely necessary to resist this dreadful climate: the work is very hard, the sun a terrible enemy; there are many comforts wanting, scarcely any society, and in his daily habits a man has to exercise an enormous amount of self-denial and discretion if he wishes to retain good health. Unfortunately, many in England on the look out for work are carried away by what seems to be a large salary. Tempting offers of billets are occasionally to be seen advertised in the daily papers: one hundred and fifty rupees a month (equivalent, at the present rate of exchange, to about £150 per annum) to commence with, and the additional prospect of a steady increase at the rate of five hundred rupees a year for the first three years. This sounds well, but nothing can be more misleading than these figures. One hundred and fifty a year to a London clerk seems to be abundant wealth, though among them are many whose yearly bills for education used to exceed that amount, now content to accept far less, and contrive—Providence alone knows how—to marry upon it. In Assam, this amount of pay just enables a man to exist, but that is all. Luxuries, which at home would be classed amongst necessities, are not for him. Famine prices are paid for all English and American tinned pro-

visions. The expenses of shipping to Calcutta, agents' fees for clearing, the additional journey up the river, and conveyance across country, all help to put prohibitive prices on goods. Of course, this is on the supposition that the goods are shipped out direct from home: if ordered through shopkeepers in Calcutta they are from twenty-five to fifty per cent. more expensive. So far as yearly salary goes, Assam is indeed a land of promise; but when a rupee is counted as a shilling, and that shilling has to pay for provisions brought out eight or nine thousand miles, with many intermediate charges *en route*, a shilling does not go very far, and one hundred and fifty rupees a month dwindle down into a very modest income indeed. Good living is absolutely necessary, poor diet being very reducing, and rendering a man more susceptible to the insidious fevers and other illnesses too numerous to mention. In Assam, poor living cannot be too strongly condemned: it is false economy, and thoroughly unfits a man, in his struggle against the treacherous climate, for the trying work that he is called upon to perform. Hence the necessity for these large salaries (apparently, on paper) to commence with, given to men who have to learn their business from its very commencement, and whose services, until they are fairly proficient in the language, are absolutely useless. The life is a much harder one, and the work requires more personal supervision, than would be, on the average, exacted by any of the regular professions or trades of England; the

hours are severe and irregular, and the variations of temperature caused by running in and out of the hot tea-houses are very trying. To these discomforts add one more—an unquenchable thirst that is ever present, but is particularly noticeable after severe exertion, when the desire to drink some form of stimulant, so as to re-invigorate an exhausted system, is painful to a degree. This insatiable thirst is the great curse of the climate, and has accounted for many good men who have gone under the *matti* (earth), unable, through a deficiency of self-restraint, to resist its fascination. Such things render the life to an Englishman a strained, unnatural kind of existence. I noticed that many really temperate men found—although on first coming out they had drunk nothing but water—the necessity, after a short experience, of taking regularly some form of stimulant—generally beer. If a man can get on without stimulants it is very much better for him to do so, both as regards his pocket—for thereby he saves an enormously expensive luxury—and his health.

And now a few remarks about the journey out. The best time to start, unless there is any immediate cause for hurry, would be at the commencement of November. The terrific heat of the Red Sea during the summer months is thus avoided, while the landing in Assam occurs at, or rather just before, the end of the cold weather. It is advisable to remember that the heat of the Red Sea during June, July, and August is a very severe

trial to the novice making his initiatory trip, and it is as well, if circumstances permit, to avoid it. Landing in India during the cold season gradually prepares the new arrival for the coming hot weather, and lets him down gently.

The much dreaded and talked-of voyage is after all a miserably prosaic affair; uneventful, with scarcely an incident to break the monotony, except an occasional run on shore at one or other of the places of call. To break the humdrum uniformity of the journey—a sufficiently excusable reason—it is much pleasanter on the first voyage to embark on a ship touching at the various ports *en route*. The expeditions on shore not only give a pretty clear insight into the habits of the people, differences of costume, curious surroundings, and other interesting matters; but after the irksome confinement on ship-board, few but those who have felt the glorious sense of freedom on getting away from such restricted surroundings, even though but for a few hours, can thoroughly understand the sensation. Conversation for the ensuing few days, after a run on shore, is more varied and less wearisome; the doings of each party are recounted for the benefit of those who stayed on board: altogether it makes a very appreciable difference to the liveliness of the passengers. These days of the Suez Canal have discounted travellers' adventures, and reduced the possibility of risk and accident to a minimum. The average old Anglo-Indian, with memories still clinging to him of the

voyage round the Cape, lasting over a period of one hundred days, thinks no more of journeying backwards and forwards between England and India than any ordinary Londoner would of an excursion to Margate by river steamer. The leading companies possess magnificent vessels, beautifully decorated, and fitted up with every imaginable comfort; their engines are enormous, and as there is a very keen competition just now among the rival companies for the passenger traffic on the Indian and Australian lines, a very high rate of speed has to be maintained, in order to meet the requirements of a quick passage. The average passage lasts from thirty to thirty-five days; but out of this period some three or four days are consumed in coaling or taking in cargo at the various points of stoppage. The British India Steam Navigation Company possess a splendid fleet of vessels, calling at Malta, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Colombo, Madras, and Calcutta, thus affording an opportunity of seeing a good many places of interest along the route. I went out in one of their vessels, and have seen no cause to regret my choice: everything was thoroughly comfortable and well ordered, the table lavishly kept—no mean auxiliary in helping to break through the dreadful *ennui* of a voyage, when the great point under discussion is how to kill time. The attendance was good, passengers a very pleasant set, and the captain, with whom always rests the power to make a voyage a success, one of the pleasantest and most sociable men that



EGYPTIAN WOMAN.

where the ship touches a fleet of small boats rush out and surround her directly the anchor is let go,



FEATHER MERCHANT.

it has ever been my good fortune to run across. If it is my fate to go back again, may I find Captain Cosens sitting at the head of his table, spinning yarn after yarn in his old style; then, indeed, will the journey be pleasant. But let us get to the end of our voyage quickly. At all ports

each boat bearing its complement of shell merchants, feather merchants, vendors of fruit, jewellery, lace, cigarettes, oranges, dates, photographs, curiosities of natural history, coral, and the thousand and one things produced by each country *en route*. There is a temptation

to buy up a collection of these novelties, solely because they are cheap, but they take up an unfair proportion of the already all-too-circumscribed space in a small cabin, and are perpetually getting in the way. Whenever there is the slightest motion on the ship the carefully-stored-away incumbrances will unexpectedly leave

their corners on the rack over their owner's head and fly about, describing odd tangents off his head and back, rendering it additionally uncomfortable for their unfortunate possessor, whose cup of wretchedness is already full, for the demon *mal-de-mer* has entered into him. A great deal of money is wasted in the purchase of these nick-nacks,—for the most part useless on the way, and broken or spoiled before the return journey is thought of. The box-wallahs (pedlers) who board the vessels, are mostly unprincipled ruffians, men without a conscience, a deficiency that has, however, been made up by a double stock of unblushing effrontery. They will ask for their wares just four times as much as they expect to obtain ; arguing and bargaining may reduce their prices to something like a rational figure ; but even when, after a long period of wrangling, a bargain has been struck, an uncomfortable feeling will pervade the purchaser and affect him with a strong conviction that the wily native has undoubtedly had the best of the negotiation. The greatest insult that one can offer to any of these fellows is to give him, without demur, the price that he first asks. He feels that his common-sense has been outraged, that he has been much too moderate in his demands, and ought to have asked more. They are an unmitigated nuisance as they swarm over the decks, jostling each other and the passengers,—swearing, smelling, lying, bargaining at one and the same time. The novelty is at first intensely amusing, but this soon wears off. Of these

licensed marauders perhaps the best behaved are the native jugglers and snake-charmers, who come on board at Colombo or Madras, and perform most extraordinary feats with the smallest possible amount of accessories. The chief places of interest on the way are the Church of St. John at Valetta, the Monastery of the Capuchins at the same place, bazaar at Port Said, the tanks of Aden, temple of



SNAKE-CHARMER.

Buddha (containing the celebrated tooth of that divinity) at Kandy, near Colombo. These should certainly be visited if there is time. Those who prefer to remain on board, not caring to take part in such expeditions, will find quite sufficient amusement to occupy their attention in the pertinacity of the merchants, or watching the diving boys. A very considerable proportion of the younger inhabitants of Aden seem to lead an amphibious life, and live on

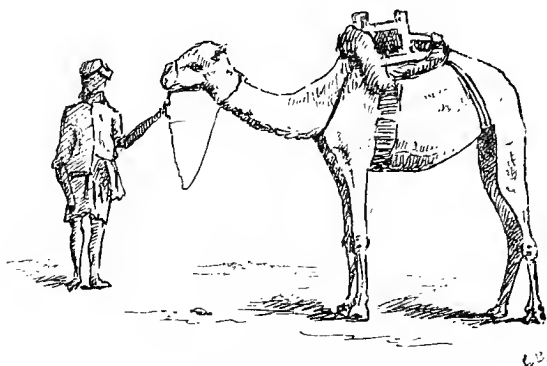
the money that they can secure from passengers on the passing steamers. These young fellows are always good-tempered, cheerful, bright, and full of mischief; their skin is very black, their teeth brilliantly white, hair thick and woolly. With the aid of *chunam* (lime) plastered thickly over the head and left to dry, the naturally black hair is dyed a golden yellow, a form of adornment much in vogue amongst the Somalis, and a sign of personal vanity: the



ADEN BOY.

yellower the hair becomes the better and nearer to the perfect standard of beauty. A black face surrounded by rough curly yellow hair suggests on first acquaintance a *lusus naturæ*, but the extraordinary combination is the only way that they have of showing that they too are susceptible to the dictates of fashion. Their knowledge of English is confined to one sentence: "Have a dive?" "Have a dive?" which they repeat over and over again in a sing-song chorus,

to the accompaniment of sundry well-directed thumps, made by the open hand applied sharply to the hollow of the side. Their little dug-out canoes, on which they dodge round the vessel, are of the most primitive construction, and have to be baled out every two or three minutes. For paddles, any piece of box lid is utilised.



BOY AND CAMEL.

But we must leave Aden, its boys and its camels, and push on to our destination, Calcutta, where our trials by sea are ended. However pleasant the voyage may have been, yet it is with a feeling of intense satisfaction that we go down the ship's side for the last time, carrying away pleasant reminiscences of many kindnesses received at the hands of fellow-passengers (with whom, during our last few minutes together, we have exchanged promises to keep up a correspondence), and to go out again into that great bustling world where one's ideas can expand more easily,

assisted by the congenial magnitude of one's surroundings. The peace, the entire cessation from brain worry, the splendid air, are very enjoyable for a time ; but the stir of life on shore is more suitable and agreeable to the restless activity which everywhere prevails during the present century.