

CHAPTER X.

ASSAM AS IT IS, AND WHAT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN—SHORT-SIGHTED POLICY OF THE GOVERNMENT—EXPENSE OF LABOUR—BAD STATE OF THE TEA MARKET—BROKERS' CHARGES—CAN TEA PAY?—EXPENSIVE BUILDINGS AND LUXURIOUS SURROUNDINGS—AMERICAN COMPETITION—FUTURE OF INDIAN TEAS—FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS—SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES—SUMMARY—AN APPEAL.

YEARS have passed by since the first discovery of tea in Assam, during which the planters have had but little recognition of the great work that they were performing for the State : but it is now high time that the Indian Government took to heart the fact that they should do everything in their power to assist planters in their undertaking, instead of, as at present, hindering by many absurdly vexatious regulations their enterprise, or taking no notice of their repeated efforts to obtain redress for existing grievances. Consider for an instant what Assam would have been without this industry. A sufficiently uninteresting country, sparsely populated, and without a trade or means of locomotion, into which no European would have had any inclination to penetrate, because no inducement could have been held out for such an

objectless journey, except for those foolhardy adventurous spirits, who seem to have no better aim in existence than to risk their lives on exploring expeditions. On the other hand, let us contemplate, with every feeling of satisfaction, the magnificent results, in which the whole of India has shared, by the opening up of a formerly unproductive country.

Planters might, so far as the maintenance of English interests in India, and the intrinsic value of jungle ground are concerned, have had the small plot for a tea garden given to them, in order to encourage populating and making productive a country which else would have been little better than a wilderness ; but governments are proverbially short-sighted to all future interests that may accrue. An enormous capital is sunk here, sufficient in itself to command the respect of any ordinary body of men, but the pioneer-like work with its hardships and dangers that have had to be surmounted, resulting in turning an almost useless tract of land into one of the largest tea-producing quarters of the East, cannot be expected to have any weight with officials who are dazzled by nothing but the magnificence of their own importance.

Year by year, notwithstanding all difficulties in the way, the capital invested has been steadily increasing ; new gardens are laid out requiring more labour and machinery, new roads have to be laid down, steamboats are building for the enlarged traffic in the

river services, railways even are talked of, and everything points to a still larger addition to the stake that is already enormous: and all this has been built up by private individuals, who have had sufficient pluck go out and battle against a terrible climate, and every form of captious opposition, thwarted rather than assisted by the State.

The labour question is the one of most interest to the planting fraternity, and the one which can only be answered by the authorities. Much anxiety has been expressed for the more speedy and cheaper transit of coolies from Calcutta, for while labour continues at its present exorbitant rate, the poorer gardens will have to work undermanned. Calculating that a garden employing three hundred labourers is not considered a very extensive concern (there are several private gardens with four hundred), and that when about to make a start, everyone of these men will have, if secured through the Government agent, to be brought up at an average expenditure of between ninety and a hundred rupees per head, close on £3,000 is sunk with absolutely no benefit to the planter's before a sod has been turned on his property. This is a large slice out of a limited capital so early in the proceedings, especially as the additional expenses for seed, tools, buildings, &c., are heavy, as they must be at the commencement of opening out. If the authorities really feel that concern for the welfare of the native which they profess, surely here is a splendid opportunity put in their way for manifesting it. Let

them forego part of their own profits on his migratory expenses, and provide him with, or put in his way, the means of earning his own livelihood, thus doing their best to stamp out the periodical starvation of millions of the poor wretches, whenever a rice famine possesses the land. The sums of money that have been bountifully supplied by the English, on the occasion of the last two or three famines, if applied to emigration expenses would have gone far to thinning out the population at its most congested points, and rendered future famines on such a scale impossible.

This is the position of affairs : a country crying out for labour, while all around its borders the earth teems with millions of unemployed men. Surely this could be rectified at a trifling outlay, and with immense advantage to both planters, natives, and the authorities. If the latter were to show an inclination of approaching the planter in such a way that their mutual advantages could be discussed on a give-and-take footing, the first blow would be struck at all existing difficulties ; but whenever the planter and official are brought into contact, there is too much of the *noli me tangere* style displayed on one side to make the proceedings agreeable.

During the past two or three years, a period of great depression both in the home and foreign markets, tea, like everything else, has felt the pressure of bad times, and the question that the planter has had to face has been, whether it was possible to cover work-

ing expenses. All hope of making the smallest profit during this time must be counted a wild attempt to tinge an unfortunate state of affairs with a too hopeful view of the future, and calculated to seriously mislead an owner, when he came to balance his accounts. Now, as I write, the tons of Indian teas, which were last year lying in bond, awaiting a purchaser, have been disposed of, and prices are recovering. The glutted market had (and will continue to exercise until a steady demand springs up again) a bad effect upon the industry, in which, of course, the producer is the chief sufferer. Until a thorough revival in trade comes, and the old supply of tea is swept away, there can be no reliable market for Indian teas: everything must be speculation. I do not suppose that we shall ever again see the prices quoted that used to be obtained, unless the liking for strong pungent teas increases rapidly, and they are taken unmixed with the China produce. In this event, competition between the two countries would be at an end, for no one who has once tasted good Indian tea could go back to the thin vapid China stuff. It will take some time before people will understand that the difference in price between the two countries' teas is not nearly so marked as the relative value given for the money. One pound of Indian tea, granted that the flavour is acceptable to the purchaser, at three shillings, is a much more economical outlay than one pound and a half of China at two shillings. Let those that do not believe this statement make the

experiment and see the result. There is no use disguising the disagreeable fact, that the old China plant in Assam cumpers the ground ; its day has gone by, and it must give way before the indigenous and hybrid. To save cultivation and expense, it would be better if many acres of the old tea were allowed to go to jungle.

A year or so ago there was in the *Englishman*, the leading Calcutta newspaper, a long correspondence concerning brokers' charges, and statements were then made, which if substantiated, go to show that the broker gets more than his fair share of the good things in the transaction. There are, of course, brokers and brokers. The time is not far off when the brokers' position will have to be reconsidered, for the high charges made by them, and the low prices that the tea realises, do not reconcile the planter to his part of doing all the hard work and getting a scanty share of the pickings. It is the same middle man that has provoked such a storm in England, where people have, by the co-operative system, defended themselves against paying two or more profits on every purchase. I should be glad to see something of the sort started to assist the Assam planters out of their ever-increasing difficulties.

Mincing Lane, the thermometer by which the state of the tea market is gauged, has been in a state of commotion for some period ; failure has succeeded failure without creating much surprise ; nor could it be expected that the extensive speculations for the

rise and fall of prices should be entered upon without there being burnt fingers somewhere.

Can tea pay under present circumstances?—a query that is very difficult to answer; in fact, there can only be a qualified answer, yes: but much depends upon the planter. That tea has paid handsomely is a fact that has been demonstrated quite recently, men of even five or six years' experience can remember the last of the good times, that glorious, but, alas! short-lived period, when every hundred of acres of tea meant a fair-sized fortune, and when competition being less severe, the market, instead of being overstocked, was in a healthy state of supply and demand. The records of dividends returned by two or three of the large companies whose headquarters are in London, have only to be referred to in order that a good insight may be obtained into the paying capabilities of tea a few years ago.

Up to the present time planters have wasted very little money on luxurious dwelling-places, pukka tea-houses, and the rest. But just before I left the country there were men coming out with grand ideas of having buildings and their surroundings lavishly got up. If this sort of thing spreads, planters, unless enjoying private fortunes which they can afford to spend on the gratification of their taste, will find themselves in the same dilemma as the present English farmer—a man who expects three or four hundred acres to keep him in idleness, and with all the choicest products of the land at his command. I cannot

understand why men, knowing that they will be only temporarily located in the country (I came across but one man who expressed a determination to finish his days in Assam), can go to the expense of building splendid bungalows, etc. They must be aware that there will be a large loss on their retirement, for men are not always forthcoming to buy another man's follies at the same price that he lavished upon them. So long as expenses are kept down, and the garden is worked economically, tea will pay well ; but it is expecting too much that it should be able to afford palatial houses, unnecessary machinery, and English provisions sent up from Calcutta. The old planter was content to live on what the country produced, and thought himself a great man if he possessed one pukka building. His self-denial was the foundation of his success, and he accumulated wealth rapidly. Now, I fear, extensive innovations will be adopted to the detriment of the industry. Economy, even in the smallest details of working, must be rigidly practised in order to make a garden pay sufficiently well to enable a planter on his return home to say that his time in the East was not passed unprofitably.

Managers and assistants, whose incomes are not large, can scarcely hope to save money for the first three or four years ; and even after this period it is a rare thing to find a man who has been thrifty enough to be able to pay his passage home to England in the event of sickness. There are many men who

have passed ten or twelve of the best years of their lives in this terrible climate not one penny richer at this moment than when they left England. What will become of these when health fails them, as it inevitably must, it is hard to think about.

A craze has set in lately for machinery, a most expensive taste, by the way. Machinery that is needful repays the money that is laid out on it in a very short time ; but there are so many experimental machines, full of faults, sent into the country, most of which have to be re-modelled before they will work. Wherever machinery can be employed the amount of labour is materially reduced ; but for the work that entails keeping a large number of coolies, viz., hoeing and plucking, no attempt has been made to substitute other than the work of men's hands. A hoeing machine is most needed, but is as far off as ever, and would be, I am afraid, impossible to construct, on account of the damage that would be done to the tender roots of the plant.

Again, as if there were not enough difficulties surrounding tea planters, India is threatened with American competition ; not that there will be much to fear from that quarter for years to come. Our go-ahead cousins have found what they consider suitable soil and climate, and their Government is making the experiment with a few acres at first, laid out under the direction of a practical planter. India will watch the result with keen interest, as it is to the American market that our planters' attention has

been directed for the disposal of a large quantity of their future produce. Australia has recently come forward as a large consumer; New Zealand will probably follow suit; and with America taking her share, Indian teas would soon be on a firm footing. Great efforts have been made to extend the appreciation for a tea so differing from the ordinary and generally known China article; but the taste was not understood at first, and there was much inequality in the strength on account of the varying modes of manufacture adopted by each garden. London seems sadly behindhand in taking her full share; and I only know of two or three places where pure Assam tea is retailed, and chests with well-known marks can be seen. What becomes of the large quantity imported the fates alone know. There may be other places in the metropolis, but I have never come across them. Any rubbish is collected for the London market from native gardens, or the rough leaf of other gardens—the cheaper the better—and sold as pure Indian tea; but it is unfair to confound this refuse with the ordinary production. The better class of China teas are doctored up with Indian tea to increase their strength, and sold at a higher price—a paying business for the tradesman.

The future of Assam tea is fully assured, and I hope very shortly to see it sold unadulterated at a price that will place it within reach of everyone; but that, under existing circumstances, the planter should be the worst paid of all those that have any-

thing to do with placing the article in the market is an unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Banking arrangements had best be entered into with one of the many Calcutta agents or bankers, all of whom are represented by some English house, and through whom difficulties in getting supplies out from England or remitting home are reduced to a minimum. All large agents act as bankers, and are of especial service to any person arriving in the country for the first time in clearing the baggage, securing rooms and servants, and saving much trouble generally.

The banking charges are very fair, but of their agency commission when acting for a garden I cannot speak so satisfactorily. Agencies of good gardens are valuable businesses, as all the tea is shipped through them, the monetary transactions are conducted by them; they purchase machinery, lead, tea chests, and other requisites of the garden, on every one of which transactions a heavy commission is charged, besides such additional profits—and they must be considerable—as can be made out of an advantageous purchase.

There are few business men, in the true acceptation of the term, in Calcutta. Dilatoriness reigns supreme, and their clients once away up country are cared for by the Calcutta agents in a very off-hand manner. A little more competition introduced into this business would be of much service in compelling the two or three large firms, who monopolise all the principal agencies, to reduce their scale of charges.

Business of every kind is conducted on the loosest principles. Everywhere the pernicious system of credit prevails, and ready money is unheard of. On my first visit to a shop, after selecting what I required, a small slip of paper was placed in front of me, and I was requested to sign for my purchases. My representation that I would rather pay cash called forth an expression of surprise, that stole over the assistant's countenance. This was followed by a species of temporary paralysis, the result of a severe shock to the system, from which he slowly recovered, when he hastened to collect his scattered ideas and complete the receipt for payment, deducting a liberal discount from the price that I should have been charged if I had signed. If it is a carriage that is ordered, or an ice at the hotel, jewellery at Hamilton's, or a book at Thacker, Spink & Co.'s, it is always the same—the inevitable chit is signed, and procures anything. I have often since wondered why some prominent *chevalier d'industrie*, on a large scale, has not turned his attentions to this city, for there is nothing to prevent his living free of expense, and leaving the country, rich in everything that is worth the trouble of signing for.*

Rupees, each about the weight of a two-shilling piece, are heavy to carry about the person; but the crafty natives up country are shy of paper notes. When moving about a long distance from a large town, considerable inconvenience is experienced in

* Several have tried the experiment and do not find it so profitable or safe as the writer imagines.—*Publisher*.

getting the notes cashed for silver, and in the bazaar of a station the money-changers charge an exorbitant commission for the accommodation. Some men, to save trouble, entrust the purse to their bearer or kitmutgar; but at all times this is a most risky proceeding, and results sometimes in the loss of a good servant and a few hundred rupees simultaneously.

Before concluding, I must not entirely ignore the few pleasures of a life in Assam. Society here is so limited that social gatherings are events that can but seldom be brought about. Of course there is too much work to be got through to leave much time for vain regrets at the paucity of sociable meetings; and after a hard day's work a man feels much more inclined to go to bed than to give a dinner party and lay himself out to entertain his guests. Yet a man must be curiously constituted that can for ever rest contented with his own thoughts: there is a desire present in most men's hearts to see a little of their fellow-creatures. In this thinly-stocked country it is indispensable to rub against others, if only to get out of bad habits that are contracted by being left too much alone, and to find out what is doing in the tea world. I knew one man—he was very much shut off in the jungle—who had such a wholesome dread of getting boorish, that it was his custom to put on a black coat for dinner during the cold season, even though he dined alone.

Ladies in Assam have the best time of it, and,

being so few in number, are immensely sought after, especially for theatrical entertainments and lawn-tennis parties. This game has established itself firmly all over India. Dinners and parties are usually given when the moon is full, to enable people to drive away afterwards along a well-lighted road. There are many more disagreeable moments in life than a pleasant drive, under a splendid moon, after the heat of a crowded bungalow; but there is a reservation even to this pleasant state of things—the driver must be a steady hand who knows his road thoroughly, or the pleasure is turned into a series of rough shocks as the wheels plunge into deep holes that lie hidden in the shadow of a rut.

Clergymen, except at the stations, are few and far between in this benighted country. Doubtless the necessity of working on the Sabbath has convinced those workers in the cause of religion, outside Assam, that it would be a useless task to erect churches for the good of planters. It is an unfortunate fact that tea firing must be conducted on Sunday as well as any other day, and men with conscientious scruples concerning the strict observance of the day of rest have either to work or throw up their billets. Tea plucked on Saturday would not keep over until Monday, and must be fired on Sunday. If there was no plucking on Saturday, two days out of seven would be lost; and no industry can exist under such conditions. We were one hundred and twenty miles from Dibrooghur, and saw the padre, on an average, about

twice a year; and even then the times for Divine service were badly appointed—generally in the afternoon, when it was madness to think of riding over seven miles under a blazing sun. So I am afraid that the attendances were decidedly limited.

Such a small sacrifice to the fetish of civilisation as hair-cutting is performed by a recognised native barber, if there is a European population in the district; but in our case, being far away from a station, and having a strong objection to a native amateur practising his 'prentice hand on me, my wife took to the shears, and developed, after a little practice, into a first-rate hair cutter. It is curious how easily reconciled one becomes to all such minor inconveniences.

No hard-and-fast directions can be laid down for the outfit, such a great deal depends upon the length of purse and inclination of the emigrant. My advice is, do not take too many things, because of the difficulty and expense when moving about. Buy nothing that can be considered unnecessary. Lay in a large stock of thin vests, Oxford shirts, socks, stockings, and sturdy boots; but do not purchase white drill clothes in England—these can be obtained at one-third of the cost in the bazaar at Calcutta. A small supply of cloth clothes and thicker vests for the cold weather will complete the personal outfit; and beyond the things mentioned everything else is a matter of taste.

Furniture, dinner services, plate, etc., can be taken

out or picked up in Assam whenever a sale is held, an event that occurs on the departure of an old planter when leaving the country. The retiring member sends out a list of all the goods to be disposed of, with prices opposite each article, and a space left against this, where the name of the would-be purchaser can be inscribed. The lists are issued two or three months before a man intends to leave, and contain usually an extraordinary collection of things got together at various sales or sent out direct from home. Some of the goods have been in the country for generations of planters, and, although they have seen much service, are now fetching as big a price as when they were first introduced. A list goes right round the district until most of the things are disposed of. Some of the poor fellows, suddenly ordered to leave the country for the benefit of their health, depend entirely on this sale of their goods and chattels to enable them to get back to England, and live there until better times shall permit them to return, or they can find other work to do.

In conclusion, let me give a bit of earnest advice to all men thinking of visiting the East. Be abstemious, and beware of stimulants in any quantity. Many unfortunate planters live miles away from a white man, buried in the jungle and out of the line of the main road, and only see a white woman once in two or three years. These are not very refining circumstances; and it is no wonder that, when struck down by fever, solitary and sick, they take to "pegs"

to drown their cares and regrets for the old country and its comforts. An abuse of stimulants will speedily shatter a man's constitution in the tropics. Leading this solitary life, the thoughts are too apt to wander homewards ; and it is only by sticking close to work, by keeping the body and mind actively employed, that a man can rid himself of violent attacks of the blues. Home-sickness is not an incentive to health or hard work. I remember one instance of an unhappy fellow, who had entirely mistaken his vocation when he came out to plant tea, to whom life out of England was only made endurable by the arrival of the mail. His calculations were all based on the number of days before the next mail could arrive, or from the last mail that had come in—a wretched, wasted existence. If the mail brought nothing for him, he would retire into his bungalow, shut himself in, and brood over his disappointment.

Finally, I ask all those who have friends in the East to write much and write oft. An Englishman who has not moved out of his own country, with all its advantages of a penny post, does not know what the weekly mail means to the poor exile, ten thousand miles away from home. How eagerly the letters are opened and the news devoured ! and what pleasure is derived from the sight of a friend's handwriting !

Remember that writing in Assam is conducted under most trying circumstances, for the planter cannot have much news, except of his daily work, and that he does not consider of sufficient interest to

enter into in his regular correspondence on account of the monotonous similarity of one day to another. Two or three thicknesses of stout blotting paper are kept constantly between the hand and the thin foreign writing paper during the agonies of composition, otherwise the paper would speedily be in a state of pulp. Bear in mind these drawbacks to writing, you that sit at home at ease, and do not expect an exchange of letters ; but out of a thankfulness for the different conditions under which a letter is written in a comfortable English room, continue to send out letters, illustrated papers, and amusing publications ; and accept my word for it that they will be always acceptable.

If, unhappily, my headquarters had been less pleasantly surrounded, and instead of living in the same bungalow with my wife and the best friend that I possess, I had been located twenty miles from my nearest neighbour, with nobody to talk with except the coolies, Assam would have been a horrible nightmare, nor would it have had a single kindly word from me.