

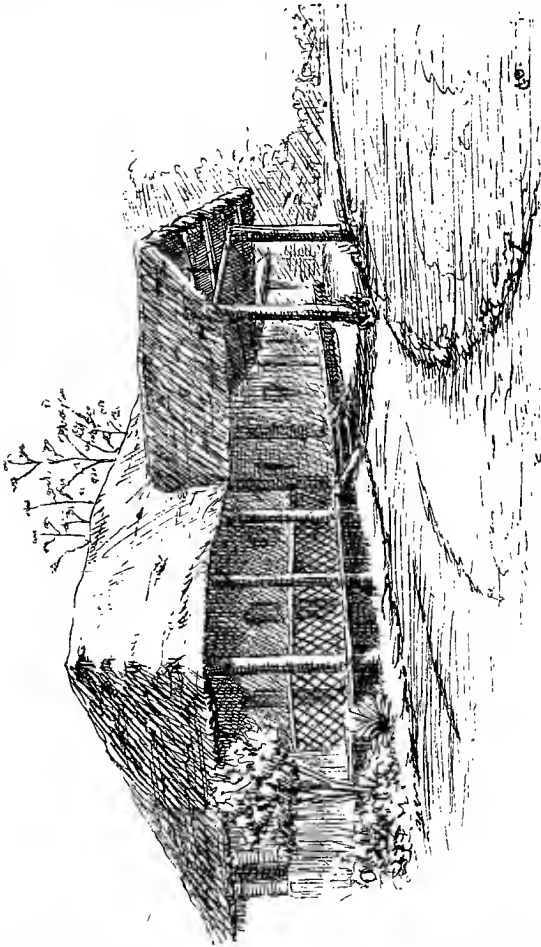
## CHAPTER V.

THE BUNGALOW—HOW IT IS CONSTRUCTED—A WET NIGHT—  
THE BAWURCHEE KHANA—HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS—  
NUMBER OF SERVANTS NECESSARY—DIFFICULTIES OF  
CATERING—THE EYER-PRESENT CHICKEN—FISH AND  
FISHERMEN—TASTY VIANDS—INSECTS—BEDTIME AND ITS  
TROUBLES—FANATICISM—EARTHQUAKES AND STORMS.

**A**N Assamese bungalow is a lightly-constructed habitation, put together as quickly and inexpensively as possible—unlike anything else built—and differs entirely from the buildings of Western civilisation. It disdains the prim correctness of outline, the perpendicular, and the more offensive (to the eye) rectangular regularity of bricks and mortar, and is, without an attempt at disguise, merely a gigantic pigeon-roost, standing forth an unsurpassed marvel of ugliness. No efforts at ornamentation could make it rank amongst things sightly, the top-heavy look of the heavily-thatched roof condemns it at once to the admirer of the well-proportioned; besides, ornamentation is expensive and unnecessary—sufficiently good reasons for dispensing with it.

For the most part, planters' bungalows are built entirely of wood, thatch and mud, bricks being very difficult to procure, on account of the unsuitable

character of the earth, which is too friable for brick-making. The tendency of any building made of



ASSAM BUNGALOW.

country bricks (or "puckha," the ordinary Indian term) is to rapidly crumble away. Fortunately there are no

frosts, or the bricks would not last through the first winter. Taking into account the horrible fact that Assam is a land not entirely guiltless of earthquakes, a wooden-built bungalow is, after all, not such a bad place to live in, and a much safer residence when the surrounding locality is bumping up and down than an un-yielding habitation made of bricks. The main portion of a bungalow is built with large uprights, sunk deep down into the ground, generally trunks of good-sized trees with the bark peeled off; about five to twelve feet up, a deep notch is made in each of the uprights, in which to place the beams for the flooring to rest on. The height of this flooring varies according to the height of the uprights obtainable, but the higher the better. The idea of this raised "chung," as it is locally designated, is to prevent close proximity to the ground which exhales malaria, and to keep the habitable quarter of the bungalow as clear as possible from the pestiferous earth. Every authority maintains that this precaution is most essential for the preservation of health. Steps lead up to the chung, the space underneath being devoted to the storage of lumber, old boxes, packing-cases, etc. About eight or ten feet round the outside edge of the chung is utilised as a verandah; then come the walls of the bungalow. These are made of coarse jungle-grass twisted together, covered over on both sides with a composition of mud, sometimes lime-washed, or left its own colour, a greyish yellow, according to the artistic taste of the occupant, and fixed into squares made by

the uprights and cross-beams. Mud and grass form, when dry, a sufficiently good wall, but are not strong enough to offer resistance to the well-intentioned kick of any person who has a mind to enter.

The interior, according to custom, is divided into three rooms, partitioned off by walls made of the same material as the outside walls; but if the bungalow is not large enough, there are only two rooms. Sixty feet by forty make a fair-sized place and allow plenty of accommodation. The central of the three rooms is used as sitting, dining, and general reception room; the two others serve as the owners' and friends' bedchambers. To each is attached, on the outside, a gosol-khana (bath-room), which ought to be some short distance from the main portion of the dwelling-place, in order to do away with an accumulation of stagnant water under the chung. To add to the unpicturesqueness of the structure, a huge porch is to be seen in many bungalows, overhanging the steps that form the only approach. The whole of the roof is made of short, straight trees for the main beams, with bamboo rafters; on the top is laid thatch, a coarse species of jungle-grass bound up in bundles. The roof is lashed together with *bêt*, a kind of rattan cane, thinly split up, pliable and very strong. Everything in Assam that requires tying up firmly is done with *bêt* in lieu of string, being much readier to hand and less liable to give way.

The fearful downpours of rain here necessitate an enormous thickness of thatch to keep the place

water-tight ; yet, notwithstanding the trouble that is taken, it is the exception to find a bungalow perfectly thatched ; the wind drives the rain under, and forms a combination that no human ingenuity can stand against. As it is no uncommon occurrence to have two or three inches of rain in a night, roofs are frequently put to a severe test, and it is after



MOSQUITOES.

these downpours that roofs, bridges, and roads have to be overhauled.

There are few more complete agonies than, in the middle of the night, to be rudely awakened by a sudden splash of water on the face, and jumping up to find that your bed is already wet through. Nothing for it but to light up, if the matches can be found and are not too wet to ignite, hunt out some more clothes,

make up the bed in another corner, and wait until, as too often happens, the rain comes in there, and drives you to seek a new site for your disturbed slumbers. It is amusing enough, if dry yourself, to lie and watch another man, half asleep, pulling his bed sadly after him, seeking rest and not finding a single dry place that measures six feet by three on which to put his mattress. But directly it becomes a personal matter, the amusement ceases and becomes a nuisance.

In front of the bungalow is the verandah, on which the planter, when he is not out and about the garden, spends the chief portion of his time. Here he writes letters, makes up accounts, receives the visits of, and interviews his mohurirs (head men on the estate), gets all the cool air that he possibly can, sleeps after tiffin, if he feels so inclined, and when he retires for the night his place is taken by chowkeydars (watchmen),



HEAD MOHURIR.

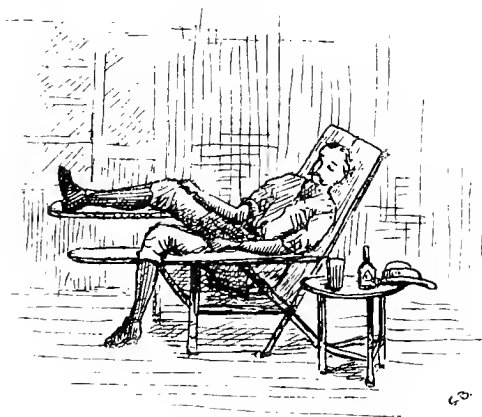
and a good many of the rabble of the garden, vagrant restless spirits who come up to share the watch, or have a chat over the events of the day with the chowkeydar and pani-wallah (water-carrier). The former of these patronisingly gives much interesting information concerning the latest doings of the sahib (is he not cognisant of his smallest action?), all that is worth detailing and reflecting his own

glory. These people make themselves comfortable, notwithstanding the crowds of mosquitoes, and contrive to sleep soundly in the most uncouth positions and surrounded by deafening noises.

At a distance of twenty or thirty yards stands the bawurchee-khana (cook-house); here the servants, when not at work, are generally to be found indulging in the stupefying hubble-bubble. Perhaps the less said concerning the interior arrangements of most Indian kitchens the better. An Englishwoman on her arrival, full of recollections of bright copper pans and well-scrubbed floors, at first puts forth all her energies in trying to establish order and cleanliness, but has finally to give in, beaten by the natural affection for dirt inherent in all Easterns, and the outlandish change in all things connected with the culinary department. It is astonishing how a native with his limited supply of cooking utensils will contrive to turn out five or six courses for dinner: given three bricks, a pot, and fire, and an Indian will do wonders.

A bungalow can hardly be designated by the proud title of its owner's castle, seeing that at no time is he safe from the interruption of passers-by. The distance from each other of the dāk-bungalows (Government rest-houses) and the absence of anything in the character of an inn or hotel, make it indispensable that every bungalow should be an asylum for the traveller. Here let me say that a more hospitable set of men than Assam planters does not exist: it is

no half-hearted welcome that is extended to the visitor ; he is made to feel at home immediately on his arrival. In exchange for food and shelter he brings news of what is going on round about, and all the "gup" of the country through which he has just passed. Should he arrive wet, not having sent on his things, or through the stupid vagaries of his coolies his traps are taken elsewhere, a change of



REPOSE.

clothes is given to him, together with a something to keep off fever. So he sits at table, and his host produces his best for his edification, shares his mosquito curtain with him at night, and does all in his power to make the guest comfortable. Although an utter stranger, is he not a white man? and is it not probable that your present guest will at some future date act in the capacity of your host? Not



that this calculation has any effect on the extent of the cordiality of his reception. It is considered a serious breach of etiquette to pass a man's bungalow, even though he be the veriest stranger, without calling in to exchange civilities. The distance from everywhere and the paucity of bungalows makes it equally agreeable to the dispenser of hospitality and the recipient, to meet and exchange views on matters touching the tea world. Communication between Assam and the outer world is so bad that no news can arrive earlier than seven or eight days after it has left Calcutta, even if it starts in newspaper form; thus conversation becomes strictly local, and as each locality is interested in tea, the outcome of all conversation is an argument on the different modes adopted for its manufacture, a most engrossing subject to the planter, but not quite so interesting to a casual visitor (*rara avis*) to the district, or any unfortunate lady who may be present, to whom it becomes fearfully monotonous.

The ordinary routine of a day is, up at five, chota hazree (small breakfast) at five-thirty, work until eleven, when hazree is served, afterwards rest until two o'clock, followed by work until five-thirty or six, bath and dinner and a final adjournment to the verandah, where reading, smoking, a chat, if there is any one to talk with, over the result of the day's work, until nine-thirty, bed time, brings the day to a close.

In consequence of the frequency of stray visitors alighting unexpectedly at the bungalow, a capital

plan is adopted throughout Assam of having meals at the same time, so that the traveller shall be able to time his arrival or departure comfortably, and his host shall not have all his domestic arrangements upset by his servants having to serve various meals at odd times. It is a great saving of trouble and expense, and is pretty nearly universally recognised through the province.

Mode of life is the same over all the tea districts, and life in one bungalow is a fair sample of life in all. Servants are either Mussulmans or Hindus: the former must be secured in Calcutta and taken up country; the latter are recruited from the better class of coolies on the garden, and promoted to bungalow work. It is no easy matter to persuade Mussulman servants to leave the delights of Calcutta life to dare the wilds of Assam, for every non-inhabitant of that delightful country has been taught from his youth that the place is peopled with devils; and the only means of procuring their services is to double or even treble their ordinary wages: without this inducement they will flatly refuse to enter a service. Caste prejudices step in directly the native is brought into contact with the European. The Mussulman's particular line of service is waiting at table and cooking, at which he excels, while the Hindu takes the place of house and parlour-maid, making the beds and doing the dirty work. A Hindu, unless he should be of very low caste, or as he is generally called, a jungle-wallah, no caste at all, will not kill a chicken or cook

any form of food for the white man. Here the necessity for the Mussulman's services arises. To him it is a pleasure to kill anything ; he revels in blood, and is never so happy as when he has some wretched animal's throat to cut.

The number of servants required in India is at first sight appalling. To begin with, each person has a kitmutgar, or waiter, to attend to his wants at dinner, a species of butler in fact ; next there is a bearer to look after the bedroom and act as valet, then the khansama (cook) and his assistant, two or

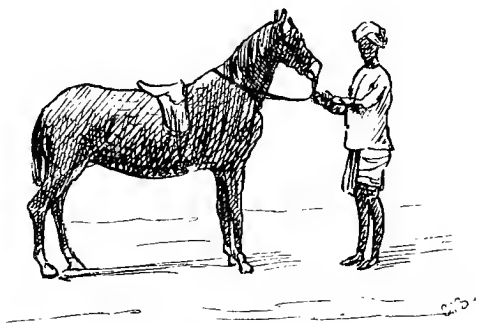


THE MATER (SWEEPER).

three pani-wallahs (water-carriers), the mater (sweeper), two chowkeydars (watchmen,) one for night, the other for day duty, punkah-wallahs (two or three for pulling the punkah during the hot weather), syces (one for each horse), malee (gardeners, according to size of garden, moorgie-wallah (to look after the chickens), gorukhiya (cow-herd), and a few others. These make up a considerable establishment in point of numbers. There is no bell in a bungalow, so servants are summoned by a call : the chowkeydar on duty being at hand, takes up the sahib's summons for the servant in question ; the other servants, hearing the shouting, lend their inharmonious voices to the disturbed state of things, and the whole air echoes back the name of the man in request. He is, in all

probability, rolled up in some out-of-the-way corner, fast asleep, dreaming sweetly of his country, where the wife that he ran away from on account of their poverty, when the land was threatened with a drought, awaits his return, and may continue in this unenviable state of suspense so far as he is concerned, for has he not, since his arrival in this country, again tempted Hymen, and taken unto himself another dusky maiden?

One insurmountable difficulty is constantly present



SYCE (GROOM).

before the bungalow caterer which it is impossible to get over, namely, how to vary the diet. Day succeeds day, and the monotony of chicken meat remains unchanged: chicken in every form, chicken cutlets, steaks, minced, spatchcocked, rissoled, roasted, boiled, curried, in soup, on toast, fried, devilled, and many other ways. No man exists who has been in India and has not been compelled to sit down every day of his life to at least one meal in

which chicken figured conspicuously in some form or another. These miserable fowls, a weak burlesque on their English prototypes, are procured by the moorgie-wallah, whose duty it is to start off every morning and scour the surrounding villages for the purpose of buying up all available chickens, ducks and eggs. The birds are brought back on a bamboo stick, strung up by the legs, head downwards. Such treatment in a hot country would give any bird but a



MOORGIE WALLAH (CHICKEN CARRIER).

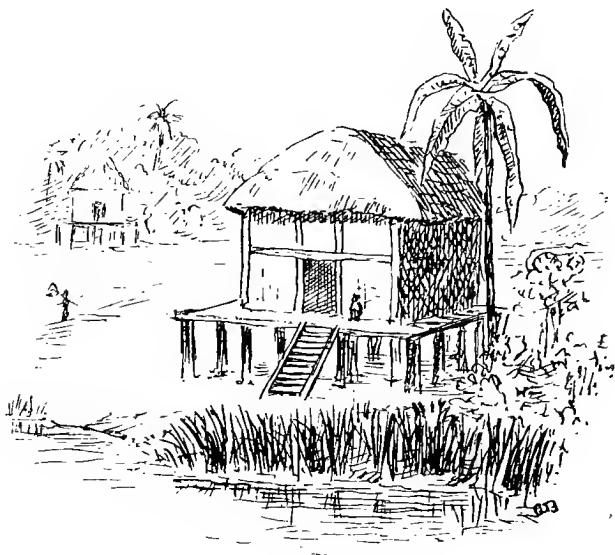
hen apoplexy ; they do not, however, in this country have a chance to so enrich their blood by overfeeding as to render them susceptible to an attack of this malady. An occasional glimmer of hope, a meteor of change shoots across the culinary horizon in the shape of a duck or a goose, while those who are fortunate enough to live in the vicinity of three or four other planters can form a sheep club, and kill once a month or once a fortnight, as requirement may happen. An ordinary man, with a good appetite and fair digestive organs, could make one square meal off an Assam sheep, the ovine ambition here seeming to be to vie with the greyhound in slenderness, rather than in devoting all its energies and reserve forces to developing that flesh in which man delights,

a perverseness that no amount of feeding up can overcome. Mutton, small as it is, is indeed a welcome variation, and although nearly always tough, its charms are great to the involuntary chicken eater. Kids well fattened (few know how hard it is to persuade a kid to put on fat in a climate where the thermometer averages about 88° in the shade, but those who have made the daring attempt to outrage nature) are quite as good as mutton; in truth, it is almost impossible to distinguish between them when cooked.

If near a river, the natives fish and sell the product, such as it is; the only taste that it possesses—and of that it need not be proud for it is not its own—being a powerful earthy flavouring of the mud in which it lives and moves, unpalatable enough when all the queer things found in the river are not quite banished from the recollection, but are associated with the feeding grounds of the said fish. Large rivers contain an animal which is highly extolled all over India, the hilsa, a very rich bony fish, during whose demolition the idea always crossed my mind whether the small pleasure of eating the flesh was not more than counterbalanced by the exquisite pain that I endured from the terribly sharp bones sticking into the roof of my mouth; for every mouthful contains more bones than flesh, and no care can make hilsa-eating anything but a very dangerous pastime.

Along the banks of the Brahmapootra are dotted, at considerable intervals, small collections of raised

huts, occupied by a fishing race of people called the Dhooms. These and another distinct people, the Kacharis, live entirely by their fishing, and are to be seen plying their trade with net and line at all hours of the day. Sometimes they catch mahseer, the Indian salmon, a gigantic fellow armed with large,



DHOOMS (RAISED HUTS).

tough scales, and weighing, when in good condition and full grown, sixty to eighty pounds. Many other kinds, not fit for an European's table, are caught; but mahseer and hilsa are the two principal products of the river that repay the fisherman's toil. So much for the chance of getting a little fish for dinner—at

the best of times a poor one, for the people are often too lazy to catch more than they require for their own immediate use, or, if fortune favours them, and there is a big haul, too indolent to carry it up to the nearest bungalow for disposal.

The only changes of food that can be depended upon are tinned provisions of all sorts, but they make large demands on a limited purse, the cost in Assam, after freight from England has been added, rendering them almost prohibitive to the poor assistant on one hundred and fifty rupees a month. American meat, jams, whole fruit preserved in bottles, sardines, and such things are luxuries even to the wealthy members of the planting fraternity. One disadvantage attaches to tinned provisions, wonderfully handy though they are in an emergency—that it is impossible when once opened to keep them for any length of time ; directly the air gets at the contents it speedily goes bad, unless meanwhile the ants or mice, anticipating delay, finish off the pot and leave nothing to spoil.

At the close of a hard day's work, returning exhausted and dizzy from exposure to the scorching sun, it requires a strong effort to eat even the most delicate luxuries, if attainable ; but as it is more often the inevitable chicken, the choice is strictly limited. At such a time curry is the only dish that can be taken with anything approaching to satisfaction. Everything else is too dry or too greasy, and generally uninviting, but curry can be made palatable by the addition of chutney, and we reluctantly eat



the former in order to indulge in the latter, on the same principle that people eat oysters—at least, this is my humble opinion—not because they appreciate the bivalve, but because it is a polite way of taking vinegar and pepper, for an oyster without these condiments is a dish not fit to be set before the humblest individual. Native curry is as unlike the abomination that in England passes by that name as it is possible to imagine. Instead of the fiery cayenne with which all cooks at home think it necessary to warm up the dish, there is a delicacy of flavour that can never be attained away from the East—a blending of good things that makes it what it is—uncommonly palatable.

The heat after dinner when the sun has gone down is fearfully trying ; no cool breeze springs up to make life more bearable for the exhausted planter, the atmosphere becomes heavy, damp, and sultry ; the air seems to stand quite still, and considerable difficulty is experienced in drawing breath. Dinner over, an adjournment is made to the verandah of the bungalow, for the benefit of all the air that can be obtained. Here quiet enjoyment is out of the question, and life is made wretched by thousands of mosquitos, whose appetites seem whetted by the state of things ; bats dart about overhead, rustling their great wings within an inch of your head, and multitudinous specimens of the insect world alight most unexpectedly on some part of your skin. This atmospheric condition continues until two or three o'clock in the

morning, when, just before daylight, a cool breeze sweeps along over the plain. Then is the time, the weary planter being happily unconscious and enjoying his well-earned rest, that danger to bodily health is to be apprehended. During the earlier hours of the night the intense heat puts sleep out of the question; turning over and over does not help to keep on the one sheet that is the only covering; pyjama's feel as thick as winter clothes, and yet, notwithstanding the awful discomfort, a certain amount of wrapping up is an absolutely necessary precaution. Round the waist, covering that portion of the body where the liver is situated, a large scarf, called a kummerbund, is wound many times. By wearing this protection, usually made of varicolored silks, and measuring three to four yards in length, the system is able to resist sudden chills and consequent fever. I have known men go through their first two or three years without wearing a kummerbund, but after their first bad chill, they will invariably be brought to confess that there is some use in it after all. If it were not for the cool wind springing up at a time when men are enjoying their first sleep, or a shock of earthquake—an occasion when it is desirable, if you consider your life worth the preserving, to effect as speedy an exit as possible from under the bungalow—there would be an excuse for everyone turning in, during the rains, clad only *in naturalibus*.

Beds are according to taste; the coolest and most comfortable for hot weather is a native-made frame

with broad tapes stretched tightly across, and a spring mattress for the cold season. If well in the jungle or near the Naga territory, it is advisable to sleep with a loaded revolver either under the pillow or near at hand, for use against tigers or panthers, which do not find the jump on to the chung any very great hindrance to their inquisitiveness, and may at any time stroll in through the open doors of your bedroom and look round. Again, there is the fear of a vindictive coolie, who perchance may think it a happy deliverance, so far as he is personally interested in your demise, to brain you. One planter, in Cachar, awoke on a morning, two years ago, to find a coolie standing over him with a naked dhau (half chopper, half knife) in his hand, and wearing anything but an amicable expression. But, objecting strongly to the turn the proceedings were about to take, he succeeded, after a brief struggle, in wresting the weapon out of this well-intentioned man's hands. The only reason that the planter ever afterwards obtained for his intended assassination was at the man's trial, when he stated that he had a dream, wherein, at the peril of offending his deities, he was ordered to kill the sahib. Thereupon he arose, thinking that there was no time like the present, and, armed with the dhau, promptly proceeded up to the bungalow to carry out his supposed mission, with the most business-like precision. The fortunate sudden awakening of the sahib rather reversed the position of affairs, and was the only thing upon which he had not calcu-

lated. When asked in court to give some explanation for his dastardly behaviour, and whether the sahib was cruel, he candidly confessed that the sahib was an exceptionally good master, treated all the coolies well, and they had no grounds for complaint in any way.

This and many other stories of the fanatical vagaries of coolies are in circulation throughout the country, and are at the outset rather terrifying to new comers.

To refer again to earthquakes, they have not been of frequent recurrence of late years; slight shocks make themselves felt from time to time, but have not been sufficiently violent to damage houses built puckah. It would be an unfortunate occurrence if, now that a large number of planters are building tea-houses and bungalows with bricks, there were to be a severe shock, such as visited Silhet a few years back—when bungalows built of bamboo came out of the ordeal much better than the more solidly-constructed buildings. For four or five hours preceding an earthquake the stillness of the air is most marked; there seems to be nothing to breathe; all Nature saves her strength and prepares to resist the tumultuous shock.

I do not know which is the most unpleasant—when the air is perfectly immovable, and the punkah wallah cannot create a suspicion of a breeze, pull he ever so lustily, or when the storm, that you have been watching rolling up the valley, bursts with its first crash on the roof of the bungalow. So far as the

eye can see, the advancing storm catches on its course the tops of trees, and bends them down towards mother earth. The bamboos, pliant of stem, are first to submit to the tyranny of the winds, bowing their heads, crowned with glorious feather-like foliage; then follow the larger trees, resisting to the last the rush of the tempest. Nearer and nearer rolls up the dark cloud, charged with discordant elements; until at a distance of two or three miles the hissing roar can



PUNKAH WALLAH.

be distinctly heard, as the wind shrieks and the rain pours down. Now is the moment to rush out on to the verandah and have a good refreshing blow. Oh, how delicious it is! No hot muggy vapour this, but a cold wind that penetrates straight into your lungs and makes you thank Providence for a premature glimpse of cool weather. No matter that the wind is playing sad havoc inside the bungalow, bursting open doors, ripping up the blue muslin that is substituted for glass windows, knocking over chairs, tearing up the matting under which it has managed to get, and sweeping everything movable before it. The compound is littered with papers, topis, and other light paraphernalia, girating round the bungalow; but the chowkeydar will have to collect these waifs at his leisure; meanwhile "*carpe diem.*"

Rain storms in Assam are remarkable on account of the enormous deluge; the noise made by the water falling on the roof often renders any attempts at conversation utterly futile. A night's rain will not unfrequently measure two and a half to three inches. Wind, thunder, and lightning accompany these tempests, and to convey by description an idea of the awful noise of a thunderstorm in the tropics requires a much more able pen than mine. My first impression of a good storm, occurring shortly after our arrival, was that nothing built by man could stand up against the furious charges. Lightning surrounded us on all sides; and so close was the storm that I fancied that I heard the hiss of the electric flash as it darted round the bungalow. The crashing roars of thunder were similar to what one may imagine the noise would be if, standing in a circle composed of eighty-ton guns, they were to be discharged together at intervals of half a minute.

By a fortunate dispensation the heavier portion of the rainfall occurs at night, which enables the planter to get out to his work without a ducking, and the probable resultant fever. The coolies dislike rain for the same reason, and wet leaf when plucked and brought into the withering-house is a source of much trouble and annoyance; so the time for rain is providentially arranged for the best. Extraordinary variations are recorded in the amount of rain falling in districts close to each other; frequently three or four miles will make a difference of half an inch in

three or four hours' fall. Taking an average throughout the valley of Assam, probably ninety inches would represent the fall over the total area for each year; but on this point I speak with hesitation. Hail reaches an enormous size, and this is a visitor that a planter does not care to see. A heavy hailstorm cuts the young shoots and leaves off tea bushes as cleanly as if they had been lopped with a pruning-knife, and from such a visitation a garden will not recover for a considerable period, the flush will be checked, and the plants thrown back for the rest of the season.