

## CHAPTER III.

LEAVING CALCUTTA — DIFFERENT ROUTES — GOALUNDO —  
FIRST IMPRESSIONS ON SEEING A RIVER STEAMER—JUTE  
SCENERY ON THE WAY—SAND-STORMS—DANGERS OF  
NAVIGATION — PILOTS — THE RAINS AND THE COLD  
WEATHER—SIGHTS—THE RIVER AS A HEALTH RESORT—  
GOALPARA AND GOWHATTY—BAZAARS—CHANGE OF MOS-  
QUITOES—FISHERMEN—THE JUNGLE.

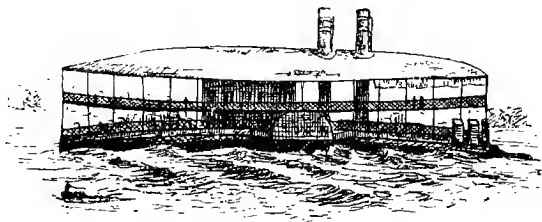
LEAVING Calcutta from the Sealdah Station, and travelling by the Eastern Bengal Railway, the distance to Goalundo is easily accomplished in eight or nine hours ; but the line is so badly laid, the rattle caused by the train passing over the shaky wooden bridges so terrible, and the cars so stuffy, that journeying by this line is an adventure not to be too lightly undertaken. It is, however, the best and ordinarily adopted route, though there is an alternative selection of two other ways : either to embark on board the steamer at Calcutta, and go down the Hoogly, round through the Sunderbunds, so into the river Brahmapootra ; or to travel by train right through to Dhubri, a long dusty journey, lasting forty hours, broken by many changes, with only the hazardous chance of, if lucky enough, just catching the steamer when arrived there. The route *via*

Goalundo saves about a week on board; the Dhubri route, ten or eleven days. But taking into consideration the trials and vexations of the long railway journey, the Goalundo route is by far the pleasanter and cheaper. If the intending visitor should happen to be in no hurry, the longer route from Calcutta by river would be most enjoyable; for though the scenery of the Sunderbunds has not a single interesting feature to recommend it—the whole district is as flat, sandy, jungly, inhospitable a spot as could well be imagined—yet there is a pleasurable excitement to be obtained in watching the skilful handling of the steamer through narrow twists and bends in the river, which in many places is shallow and difficult of navigation.

Goalundo itself is, considering its importance, an unpretentious enough place, made up of a collection of small huts stuck up on the banks at the point of junction between the rivers Ganges and Brahmapootra. Here is the terminus of the Eastern Bengal Railway; and seemingly, as one might think on arrival at the benighted place, the confines of the whole civilised world. The habitations are of the crudest description, and sparsely scattered over the district, there being but few men unfortunate enough to have their lives cast in such an undesirable locality. The important feature in the place is the *dâk*-bungalow, or hotel, as its proprietor prefers to style it. The inhabitants are frequently flooded out, a somewhat unhappy order of circumstances to which continual recurrence has reconciled them; and twice in the course of the

year they are obliged to shift their residences, according as it is the dry or rainy season, when the river falls or rises tremendously. Under these extraordinarily variable conditions no sane man thinks of building a good bungalow, for half the year it would be without a tenant. Trains run twice a day between Goalundo and Calcutta for passenger traffic. All first-class carriages on this line are fitted with sleeping bunks in double tiers, overhead and below, similar to a cabin on board-ship ; but the travelling is so rough that at night it is impossible to get to sleep, the noise and jar from the vibration banishing all thoughts of slumber, or rest in any way. Between Calcutta and Goalundo the whole stretch of country is flat and uninteresting, but at night the journey is made picturesque by the fireflies, which are more numerous in this one spot than I have seen them elsewhere in India. One could almost imagine this to be the residential headquarters of every firefly in the universe. Even during the cold season the width of the river at Goalundo is considerable, a huge volume of water flowing by at a rapid rate ; but the colour here near the junction of the streams, on account of the disturbing effect of their collision, is muddy, and the swirling current presents an oily, uninviting surface. Large hauls of fish are frequently taken off this spot or a little higher up, and this has created a trade between the natives and Calcutta ; besides fish, mud turtles, a filthy feeding animal, of no use for culinary purposes, are also found in prodigious quantities.

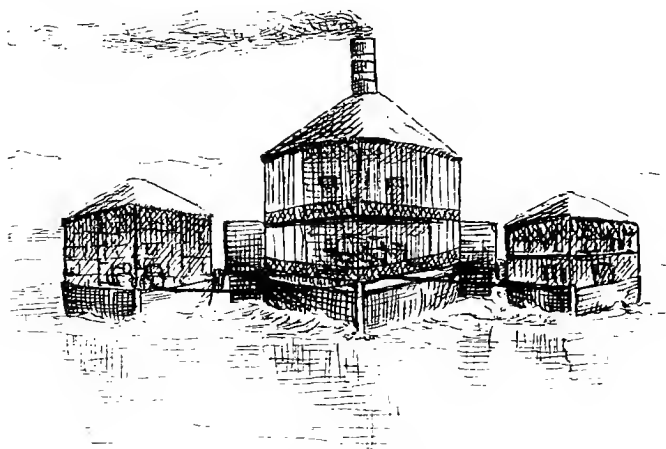
An army of coolies ply round the railway station as light porters, and facilitate, by their roughly proffered assistance, speedy disembarkation from the train and transhipment of luggage to the steamer. What an odd ill-shaped looking affair a river steamer-boat is when first viewed from the banks! A huge black and white mass of floating wood and iron work, she looks all top saloon deck and chimney stacks. The first idea that uncomfortably creeps over one is how easy it would be for her to turn upside down, there is such a vast amount of material above water.



RIVER STEAMER.

All the vessels are constructed with paddle engines, in order to draw as little water as possible. In consequence of their great length and shallow proportions, the deck is built slightly convex, sloping up from the head and stern towards the centre, a formation that does not add to their personal attractiveness, but strengthens them in the weakest point, for the purposes of cargo carrying. The upper saloon deck (forward) of the vessel, reserved for first class-passengers, is comfortably fitted up with cabins and dining-

saloon, the after part of the upper deck being set apart for coolies or other native passengers. A thick roof consisting of either corrugated iron, or bamboos thatched over, runs the whole length of the upper deck, for a protection against sun or bad weather. Cargo, coal, stores, cook-house, pens for sheep, fowls, etc., to be used on the journey, are accommodated on the lower deck, a part seldom visited by the dwellers



RIVER STEAMER WITH FLATS.

above, on account of the general dirt and disorder that prevail.

Each steamer tows up one or two flats (the number depending on the amount of cargo expected), lashed to her sides by strong hawsers and wire cables. The flats are built somewhat like the steamer, without chimney stacks, are rather more bluff in the bows,

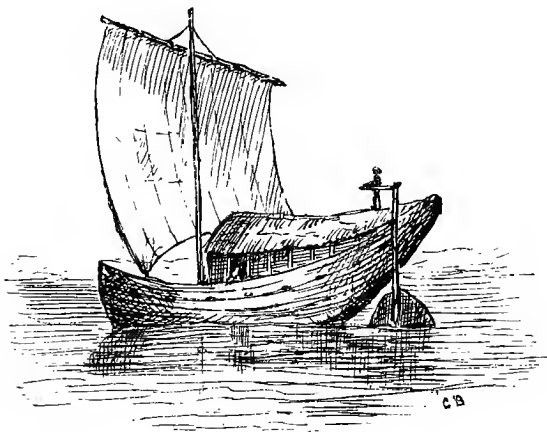
and if possible more ugly and unwieldly. The appearance presented and the amount of room taken up by a river steamer with her accompanying flats is stupendous.

Two companies run a regular line of steamers up and down the river, between Dibrooghur (the farthest point up the river to which the service extends) and Calcutta. This rivalry is very necessary and of great convenience to the planters, ensuring as it does regularity—so far as the river itself allows—speedier transit, and a fixed price for cargo, the rates being much lower now than in the former days of monopoly. The India General Steam Navigation Company and the River Steam Navigation Company are as regular in their services as circumstances will permit ; but the last-mentioned company boasts larger, more powerful and better appointed vessels for the passenger traffic (this in 1881), and will finally (at present there are many difficulties to be surmounted) be in as good a position as their rivals—a position, let me add, to which they are justly entitled. A general assortment of the *necessariæ vitæ* for the use of planters or civilians at the stations, goods sent up from Calcutta or direct from England, compose the usual cargo on the way up river. On the journey down the vessels are heavily laden with tea, but if it does not happen to be the season for shipping, the complement is made up with seeds and jute. Trade in jute between Serajung and Goalundo has assumed enormous proportions, and is every year increasing. Large

round bales of this most bulky commodity, tightly compressed, are carefully stowed on the flat, when there is accommodation for them, and taken down to Goalundo, where the railway people receive and place them in specially constructed iron vans, provided by the company for the conveyance of the curiously shaped drums. Great precautions have to be adopted to prevent jute catching fire, as it is a terribly dry, inflammable material, and once in a blaze, no effort could save the flat on which it happened from utter destruction. Every care is exercised when handling it, and few captains of flats, ardent admirers of the nicotian weed though they may be, indulge in a pipe while there is any jute above hatches, the knowledge of the risk that they run being a pretty certain preventive.

Between Goalundo and Dhubri the scenery is terribly monotonous. Nothing breaks the line of the long low-lying banks of sand that confine the Brahmapootra, only here and there an occasional patch of vegetation crops up, a beauty spot on the interminable flatness of the landscape, and around these oases are collected a few wooden huts, occupied by fishermen. This portion of the journey takes between four and five days, and for intense monotony could only be equalled by an expedition into the great Sahara. At rare intervals a native trading boat, built with enormously high poop, but very much down by the head, floats lazily by, her sails flapping against the mast in very weariness from waiting for a breeze. The sailing

powers of these crafts, when wind and current are in their favour, is astonishingly good ; for seeing the enormous display of hull that appears above water, and the general clumsiness of the build, one would certainly expect to see them heel right over at the suggestion of a breeze. Some of them are rudely decorated over the stern boards and round the prow with wood carvings, executed by the Burmese,



TRADING BOAT.

along whose shores these vessels do most of their trading ; but the usual type of native boat is roughly though effectively put together, not one *piece* wasted anywhere in needless decorative trumperies. The poop, which extends almost as far as the mainmast, is roofed over with twisted jungle grass. On this stands the steersman, guiding the vessel by means of a



high rudder, lashed on to one side of the vessel, looking more like a lee-board than a rudder. The gigantic size of this, absurd as it may appear, is absolutely requisite, otherwise no steerage way could be got on a tubby unballasted boat floating down with the stream.

Hereabouts it is no unusual event, when a strong wind springs up, to be caught in a sand-storm ; but there is, under ordinary circumstances, sufficient warning given to make all ready for the reception of this most unpleasant of Eastern nuisances. The cloud of whirling sand can be seen careering along at a distance of three or four miles, but it approaches at such a tremendous pace that it is as well to have the cabin doors shut and everything covered up as soon as possible after first catching sight of it. The sand is so comminuted that it penetrates into the hair, up the nose, down the collar of the neck, fills one's mouth, hairbrushes, the very key-holes of port-manteau locks, and will even insinuate itself under the lid of a tightly shut-up dressing-case. During the storm the greatest personal inconvenience is felt in breathing ; eyes smart, inflamed by the incessant peppering that they undergo. Happily it seldom lasts long. Some time has to be spent after the storm has passed over in getting quit of accumulations of sand left by the visitor in corners of cabins and all over the vessel.

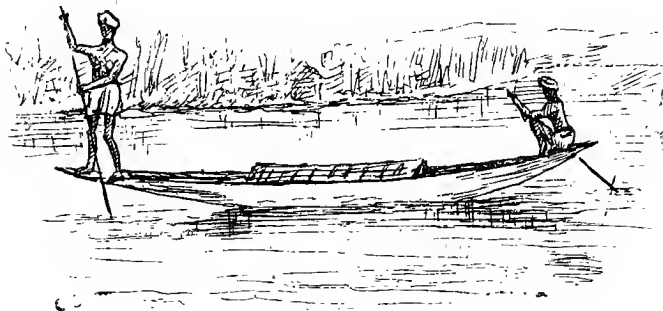
Above Dhubri the scenery rapidly assumes a pleasant change : the banks are no longer of grey

sand, but green grass ; the Himalayas, forming a grand background to the vast expanse of level territory lying between the river and the foot of the first outlying spur of hills, are seen in the distance, towering range beyond range, with countless magnificent peaks clad in perpetual snow. Dhubri is now regarded as the boundary point to the province of Assam. The station is one of rapidly-increasing importance, that will every day be augmented by the new railway route opened between Calcutta and Dhubri; and the superior facilities afforded for getting rapidly backwards and forwards must have before long a marked influence on the prosperity of both the little town and the whole province. Life on board the river steamer, after passing this station, continues monotonous ; the scenery improves a little, and is better than that which we have had to look upon since the start ; but there is nothing attractively striking, and one is again driven back to a never-failing source of interest and amusement—viz., studying the manners and customs of the natives.

During the cold season dense fogs hang close down over the surface of the river, thereby adding greatly to the trouble of the already difficult navigation. Sometimes these fogs are so heavy that the steamer cannot proceed on her way until twelve or one o'clock, by which time the sun has generally asserted his supremacy and dispersed the enemy. On a dark night it is impossible to make any way ; and even with a bright moonlight to illuminate the channel, the

risk is extremely great; so each evening at sundown the anchor is let go, the fires are lowered, and the vessel is made all comfortable for the night. At first peep of daylight the anchor is heaved up, amidst a fearful din caused by escaping steam, rattling cables, and yelling Lascars, and a start is made. The chief difficulty in navigating the Brahmapootra arises from the shifting nature of its bed. Month by month perpetual changes are being worked out; huge banks of sand in the centre of the river are submerged and disappear, only to reappear in a totally unlooked-for locality. The process of silting up or wearing away proceeds rapidly in this sandy soil, and a channel that is navigable to-day will in two or three days' time be utterly impassable. With all these difficulties to contend against, the fact can be readily appreciated that the navigation of a large steamer and two flats, notwithstanding that the extreme draft of water is rarely more than five feet, is not one of the easiest businesses. The river is divided into various sections or lengths, each of which has to furnish a supply of pilots for the steamer service. These men (Assamese) come off to the steamers, whose arrival they await on some dreary sand-bank, in their small dug-outs, and are taken up to the end of their allotted district, where they are landed, and remain for the next returning steamboat. Even under these conditions, with everyday practical experience and constant renewal of the bearings, it is difficult for them to keep thoroughly posted up in the rise, fall, and sudden shifts of the river.

A pilot's life is not one of unmixed blessing, full of pleasure and without a care. Frequently kept waiting on the banks of the river, for two or three days at a time when the steamer is late, exposed to all kinds of weather, uncertain of the date when he may see his home again—the chief excitement in his life is the jump from vessel to shore when his piloting has been concluded. Often to avoid delay through stopping the engines, or when the river is running



A DUG-OUT.

rapidly, the vessel is put as close in to the banks as allowable, on to which he scrambles with all that he possesses in the shape of wardrobe tied up in a handkerchief. Sometimes missing his footing, he has to put up with a good ducking; or, as occasionally happens, sucked under by the treacherous back currents, he disappears altogether, and the district is one pilot the poorer. By such an one life cannot be esteemed thoroughly enjoyable, and it is no wonder that the teaching of fearlessness

of death must be the chief source of consolation in their religion. Should they happen, through bad piloting, to run the vessel on a sand-bank, a *mauvais quart-d'heure* will assuredly ensue. A leadsman is constantly stationed forward at the stem of the vessel, where he stands on a board, let down over the side to form a small platform, to call out at intervals of about a minute the depth of water. The regularity of his voice is excessively monotonous to the passengers on board, and has a distinctly somnific effect. When the water begins to get shoal, and the leadsman's cry comes back as rapidly as he can ply the lead, the pilot's face is a marvellous study of kaleidoscopic changes ; each record of shallower water finds a reflection in his lengthened visage, and his eyes wander furtively round in the captain's direction. Meanwhile faster goes the lead : suddenly a silence ; no depth is called ; then a bump, a creaking straining noise, a sharp crack, a rebound, and away floats the flat down stream, having parted company with the steamer. At the same moment that these events are taking place, the pilot argues, out of considerable practical experience, that he had better not remain in the immediate vicinity of the captain, so retires speedily, until the storm has blown over ; for the average river captain is very mortal, of quick impulses, and fails to realise the enjoyment of being stuck high and dry on a sand-bank. It must take these men many years of careful observation to be

able to calculate, as they generally can, the possibility of working the steamer through certain passages at different periods of the year.

Boats sent away from the steamer to embark cargo



BOAT SWAMPED.

are careful not to row too closely to the banks, which have a disagreeable knack of tumbling into the river at unexpected moments, and swamping everything

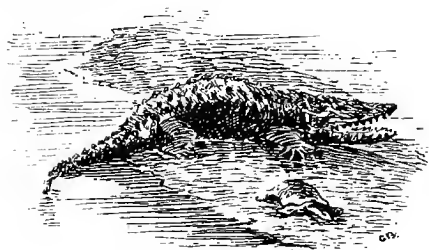
within reach of their fall. This is especially observable at the end of the rainy season, when the river is getting lower ; large slabs weighing many tons suddenly slide down without any previous warning. The difference in appearance of the banks during the rains and cold weather is so marked that no person travelling at the two seasons would imagine it to be the same river. During the cold season the river settles down into one channel, up which all steamers must go ; during the rains, according to the amount of water that has fallen, and the advanced state of the season, the surrounding country is submerged, the river at some places stretching away to a breadth of four or five miles. Stations that, during the cold weather, cannot be reached after landing without a three or four mile drive, are suddenly brought into a prominent position on the banks of the river, and find themselves easy of access, quite in the world. The rapidity of the rise and fall is remarkable after a heavy downpour. It has been known during one night to cause the river to rise nine feet. I am not at all certain whether this has not been exceeded by a still larger record. During the period when the river is falling, just after the rains and before the cold weather has set in, is a very dangerous time for those living near the banks : the jungle and herbage that have been under water for four or five months commence drying up, throwing off during the process a terrible effluvium that begets the worst form of jungle fever. Besides the decayed vegetation, fish

are left high and dry on the land; dead bodies of buffalo and animals that have been drowned during the floods and carried away by the stream are left to rot. The revolting custom that exists amongst the Hindus of disposing of their dead by throwing them into the river, has only its simplicity to recommend it; nor is it a pleasing sight, while looking over the side of a steamer, watching the oily surface of the Brahmapootra as it whirls by in large eddying rings, to see a corpse slowly spinning round and round on its way down the stream. The first shock of this kind that we experienced was at Gowhatty, where the thing had grounded and was in possession of a crowd of vultures and pariah dogs, fighting over the choice morsel. Surely if the relatives of the late lamented had seen this hideous spectacle, they would have made up their minds to atone for any want of respect that there had been in this instance, and that the next of their party that went over to the great majority should receive better treatment at their hands. I don't know whether it is an immutable caste law that orders the depositing of their dead in the river, but it is a practice which ought to receive some attention at the hands of those concerned in the sanitary condition of all sacred rivers, and the well-being of the general community in India.

The innumerable sand-banks that just peep up out of the water are, during the heat of the day, tenanted by alligators and turtles, two phlegmatically constituted animals, that repose amicably side by side.



The former offer an irresistibly tempting shot from a passing steamer; but every year they are growing more wary and keep a sharper look-out. Lying stretched along the sand, they look so exactly like the trunk of a tree, that it is not until a bullet has been put in their vicinity that the question of their identity is solved, as, with a sudden switch round of their long tails, they glide off into the water. Bullets do not seem to do them any injury; and one will carry away in his carcase as much lead as would make a fair-



ALLIGATOR AND TURTLE.

sized cannon ball. Under such conditions, killing an alligator is an accomplishment to be proud of. To take, when the opportunity presents itself, a passing shot at wild buffalo as they come down in herds to drink is another way on the tedious journey up river of testing the steadiness of hand and eye. Do not let my reader imagine that these are indiscriminate, unmeaning attempts to murder for the love of killing. Not at all: the flesh of the buffalo makes a capital addition to the table. There is a great danger,

however, of shooting a tame buffalo. The distinction between wild and tame at a distance is in no way marked, and the latter animal being a valuable beast of burden, a fine of eighty rupees is inflicted on the would-be sportsman who is unlucky enough to make such a mistake.

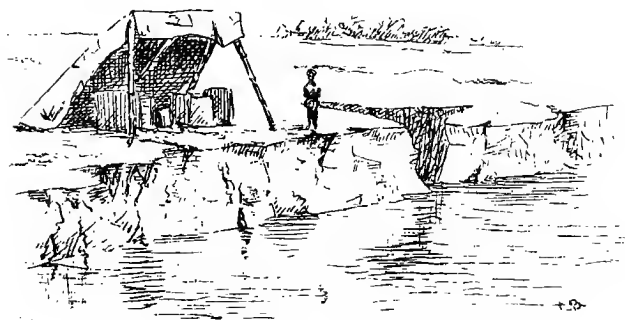
Tame buffalo conceal a very intelligent nature under their rough and somewhat mangy exterior. Once, while our party were awaiting the arrival of a steamer coming down the river, wanting something wherewith to occupy our minds, we became interested in watching the behaviour of a herd of buffalo belonging to a neighbouring village, and remarked that each morning, at about six o'clock, the whole herd swam across the river from the opposite side, the bull considerably in advance leading the way, followed by the matrons, with their calves by their sides. Entering the water about half a mile farther up on the opposite bank, the strong current washed them down to the village where they wished to land—as judicious a calculation of distance and power of the current as could have been made by the most able mathematician. The river at this point was fully half a mile broad, but as there was better feeding ground on the other bank, the animals preferred the swim. After they had reached the bank safely there was a halt for a few minutes to rest and recover breath. Afterwards they proceeded to the village, where they were milked, and again left to follow the bent of their inclinations, an opportunity of which they availed

themselves to proceed slowly up the bank of the river, grazing as they went, for a mile or so; then again taking to the river, re-crossed to their old ground. It was a pleasing sight to watch the natural anxiety of each matron for her *batcha* (young one) towards the end of the swim, when they were beginning to tire; the repeated turn of the head to see how the youngster was getting on, and the satisfaction when at length, wearied with the long journey, the little one rested its head on its mother's broad hind-quarters for support.

The river is much frequented as a health resort. No better remedy can be prescribed for an invalid just recovering from an attack of fever, or who has been laid on his back by any of the many ills to which flesh is heir in this country, than a few days spent in this way. The air is bracing, and an occasional breeze springs up (an event almost unknown on shore) after the sun has disappeared below the horizon. Besides, there is perfect rest and absolute cessation from worldly cares: nothing to do except eat and drowse; not too severe tasks even for an over-worked planter.

In the line of country between Goalpara and Gowhatty the scenery begins to improve on both sides of the river: beautiful masses of foliage line the shores and come right down to the water's edge; the flatness is relieved by frequent hills; and how delightful it is for the eye, after the perpetual hard line of sandy levels below Dhubri, to rest on an unevenness on the earth's surface clothed with beautiful bright green vegetation!

During the cold season, the points of call for the stations below Dhubri are scarcely discernible, all that is visible on the banks being a few bamboos stuck in the ground, with an apology for thatch, or a worthless worn-out old tarpaulin thrown over to form a roof, the whole rigged up roughly, as a point where cargo must be stowed after it is landed. This is rolled down planks over the ship's side, and deposited there. Sometimes an official is on the spot to re-



LANDING-PLACE FOR CARGO—DRY SEASON.

ceive the goods ; at other times they have to look after themselves : but as jackals and vultures are the only inhabitants of the district, there is not much fear of their being missing. A sand-storm will upset all previous calculations, and render the chance of recovering the goods rather remote by blowing the bamboo arrangement into the river, and covering over the cargo with a layer of sand two or three feet deep, so that when the owners come to claim their pro-

perty there is some considerable difficulty in finding out the place where the go-down was formerly located.

Goalpara is beautifully situated on the side of a low hill facing towards the Himalayas. The character of the scenery is somewhat similar to the lowlands of Scotland. At a point between Goalpara and Gowhatty, the traditional boundary of Assam used to be marked in the river by two rocky islands suddenly rising in mid-stream. These were euphoniouly called the Gates of Hell. It can only be accepted suppositionally, there being no authority who substantiates the idea that this opprobrious appellation was given by a people who knew their own country best, and were not afraid to call a spade a spade.

Gowhatty has a similar situation and like beautiful surroundings to Goalpara, on the south bank of the river. It is the most important station of Assam—the term capital is almost admissible—and is the nearest point of disembarkation for Shillong, the hill station. The last-named place is kept lively by the regiment quartered there, and is also the headquarters of the Chief Commissioner, and can be reached by “tonga” in a couple of days.

The scenery round Gowhatty is most charming. A large number of the hills are studded with the tea-bush, the bright green of whose leaves, covering the hills in regular lines, like a chess-board, forms a happy contrast to the naturally more sombre tones of the surrounding greens. There is a large bazaar, and

the visitor should not go away until he has seen the temples, built of red brick, with their wonderfully carved figures in alto-relievo, and quaintly-shaped gods chipped out of the face of the solid rock. Peacock Island, sacred to the bird whose name it bears—to whom it is a refuge from molestation (enforced by heavy fines)—possesses a well-preserved specimen of a Buddhist temple; but there are many such scattered over Assam. The island is in mid-stream opposite



PEACOCK ISLAND.

Gowhatty, and on it live a few old priests, who preserve the temple from desecration, collect all the backsheesh that they can cajole out of each visitor, and look after the one or two birds that are left; although, judging by the wild way in which they started up on our approach, I should think that they were well able to take care of themselves.

Another interesting object is the Hill of the

Thousand Virgins (a number that has recently been allowed to diminish), about two miles walk from Gowhatty, or Gauhati, as it is now ordained that it shall be spelt. The river winds about at the foot of the hills in a picturesque way, and this stage of the journey will be found decidedly the most pleasing. After this the flat country, with its unvarying monotony, again intervenes between the Himalayas

on one side and the Garrow and Naga Hills on the other.



A KYAH (BAZAAR MERCHANT).

Bazaars are a novelty to the European just arrived in India; but the bazaars of the stations are particularly amusing and cheerful. The stations being few and far between, all trade from the surrounding neighbourhood gravitates towards these centres. The

wealthiest portions of the bazaar population are the kyahs, most of them dealers in brass wares, or money-changers. They deserve their success, for they work hard, are very abstemious, do not touch any kind of meat, but live entirely on fish and vegetables. Their only failing—which they share with all people whose lot is cast in this quarter of the globe—is an inveterate liking for the hubble-bubble and opium, and over their consumption they will pass many unprofitable

hours. Steaming up river from Gowhatty the succeeding stations are similar, but on a considerably smaller scale. Perhaps the prettiest is Tezpore, with its accumulation of gigantic squares of carefully-cut stone, strewn all about the little place, beautiful relics of an ancient temple whose foundation-stone was never destined to be laid.

At Mungeldye, on the arrival of the steamer, the natives came down loaded up with geese, chickens, turkeys, eggs, pigeons (ten for a rupee), shaddocks, vegetables of all kinds, lemons, plantains, and other native fruits, and made quite an impromptu market along the edge of the banks. Prodigious noise over the bargaining (for without an excited altercation between buyer and seller that seems to be fast tending towards fisticuffs, a bargain would be but a poor business) was the chief characteristic of this entertainment.

When the vessel is near shore for a sufficient length of time to allow of it, the Hindus on board leave the ship, collect a few sticks, and boil sufficient rice and curry to last over two or three days, it being against the laws of their caste to prepare food for their own consumption on board.

As we get higher up the river, so does the mosquito begin to make his unwelcome presence felt. These brutes—a species entirely distinct from the Calcutta members of the fraternity, being fully twice their size, and possessed of a sting that must have, at the lowest computation, four times their penetrating powers—have earned a bad reputation for blood



thirstiness, and the amiable faculty of depriving the wretched traveller of many an hour's well-earned rest.

The mookhs (a name bestowed on the mouths of rivers at the point where they empty themselves into the Brahmapootra) are the favourite positions for stationing the floating flats that are used as landing points, and here the mosquito rejoices and grows fat. Old travellers on the river dread a long stay at Dunserai mookh, for of this place they relate how the mosquitos are so eager for blood and full of low cunning, that they can be seen, by the ordinary observer, pushing each other through the holes of the mosquito curtains. This may be only a libel, and I cannot vouch for its accuracy; but it is an easily demonstrated fact, and one that is, unhappily, for ever too palpable, that if there should, by some dire chance, happen to be the smallest tear in the muslin, these villains will find their way in. Well out in mid-stream is the only place of refuge: there the pest seldom ventures, fearful of losing his valuable life by drowning. It is a happy night when the anchor is let go right away from the shore, for thereby the possibilities of a good night's rest are much increased. A crafty few that have been hiding down in the engine-room or among the cargo, biding their time, will come up, and frantically hurl themselves against the curtain, buzzing imprecations of a terribly sanguinary character, and woe betide the luckless sleeper who, unconsciously stretching out an arm during the night, leaves it close to the curtain!

A large proportion of the population of Assam live close to the river, and support themselves and their families by fishing. This they do in a very primitive way. Two men will start off in a dug-out (native boat cut out of the trunk of one tree), and paddle along close to the banks, meanwhile keeping a sharp lookout for fish. One man, with a long paddle, stands and steers at the extreme end, balancing himself on a small piece of wood, some two or three inches in width, that tapers off the ends of the boat (for stem and stern are made alike); the other, the fisherman, catches up the net in folds, arranged so that it will, when thrown, spread quickly open without kinking. Directly there is a chance of catching two or three fish at a haul, round whirls the net, and leaving the thrower's hand, opens out as it falls, without a splash, flat on the water; a wonderful knack that must be difficult of accomplishment.

Probably the most curious representatives of the fishing class are the old women, who are to be seen near every station, standing up to their waists in water, armed with a weapon very much like an ordinary small-sized shrimping net. This they put down into the water in front of them, retaining hold of the pole with both hands. Thus they stand perfectly motionless, and hopelessly suggestive of nothing better to do. At intervals of five or ten minutes, or when they feel actively disposed, the net is brought up to the surface with varying success, but they rarely succeed in ensnaring anything bigger than two

inches long. We were immensely amused at first, watching one of the ancient parties; for it is always some dirty, ugly, wrinkled old hag, fit for no better occupation; but at length her boundless patience wore out our own, and we left her, thinking that any one who could frivol away her time in such an industrious fashion, and with such astonishingly meagre results deserved, well deserved, all the fish that she caught—



AN OLD WOMAN FISHING.

any way not too bountiful a reward. Doubtlessly these people pass through life enjoying a mere existence: perhaps the poorness of their food, rice and fish, or vegetable curry, would not sustain any such strain as would result to their constitutions from the effect of a little mild excitement.

The vastness of the jungle thoroughly imbues itself on the mind of a traveller going up the river for the first time, and I doubt whether any other place could

be selected which affords such opportunities for reflection and for realising the terrible wildness and desolation of this boundless wilderness. Above Tezpore mile succeeds mile without sign of human habitation, or even an occasional fisherman's hut, to show that life is capable of being sustained here. As far as the eye can reach a low fringe of jungle skirts the top of the banks ; this, on closer inspection,



JUNGLE ON FIRE.

is seen to rise a height of fifteen to twenty feet, dense and impenetrable, except to the wild beasts that make it their abode. "Inhospitable" is a word lacking sufficient strength to convey the awful dreariness and loneliness of this gigantic waste. When on fire, viewed from the river, the jungle presents a wondrous sight never to be forgotten ; the sound at a

distance, as of a strong wind blowing through the trees, heralds the approaching conflagration: it is the noise of huge sheets of flame as they roar and crackle along, consuming the dried undergrowth. Over all hangs a long low-lying cloud of smoke, moving away slowly in the same direction as the advancing fire, and growing denser with the ever-increasing volume of flame. Jungle-burning arises sometimes, from spontaneous combustion, or some other unaccountable cause, and is also practised by planters or natives when they wish to make a clearance for a plantation, this being the most expeditious method of removing the tangled vegetation; at the same time the burnt grass proves a useful, if not over-powerful, substitute for manure. Unquestionably it is well worth while to leave England with all its comforts if only to catch one sight of the jungle, in order to realise the meaning of this otherwise vague term—to see it in all its magnificent vastness, and so to form some slight conception of the immensity of Nature's handiwork.