ELLIS BETH

AN ENGLISH GIRL'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF BURMAH

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Содержание

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Introduction

Towards the close of my visit to Burmah I was dining one night at a friend's house in Rangoon, when my neighbour, a noted member of the I. C. S. suddenly turned to me and asked me if it was my intention to write a book. At my prompt reply in the negative he seemed astonished, and asked, what then did I intend to do with my life? I had never looked at the matter in that light before, and felt depressed. It has always been my ambition to do at Rome as the Romans do, and if, as my questioner clearly intimated, it was the custom for every casual visitor to the Land of Pagodas either to write a book or to "do something with his life," my duty seemed clear. I had no desire at all to undertake either of the tasks, but as there was apparently no third course open to me, I decided to choose the safer of the two, and write a book. So far so good, but what to write about? I have considered the merits of innumerable subjects, from the exploits of the old Greek heroes to green Carnations, but each appears to have been appropriated by some earlier author. The only subject which, so far as I can discover, has never hitherto formed the theme of song or story, is Myself, and as that is a subject about which I ought to know more than most folks and which has always appeared to me to be intensely interesting, I have adopted it as the theme of this, my first plunge into Literature.

Chapter I
–
THE VOYAGE
–

"Who spoke of things beyond my knowledge and showed me many things I had never seen before."

"For to admire, and for to see, and for to behold the world so wide." – (Rudyard Kipling.)

—

"I am not naturally a coward, except when I am afraid; at other times I am as brave as a lion."

It is an unfortunate state of existence, but such it is. From my babyhood I have been known to my friends and relations as one who might be confidently expected to behave in a most terror-stricken manner on all occasions when no real danger threatened; but for myself, I have always felt convinced that should I ever be brought face to face with real danger, I should behave with a coolness and courage calculated to win the unbounded admiration of all beholders. I say advisedly "of all beholders," because, possibly, were no witnesses present, I might not feel disposed to show so resolute a front to the danger!

For example, in the case of a shipwreck, I can picture myself presenting my life-belt to any one in distress, in the most self-sacrificing manner, with the neatest little speech, quite worthy of "Sir Philip Sidney" himself, and from some commanding post of vantage in the rigging, haranguing the terrified passengers on the advisability of keeping their heads. I feel sure that no power on earth would prevent me from diving into the raging sea to rescue inexpert swimmers from a watery death, were such an opportunity to present itself to me.

And yet, if I am taken out of my depth, during a morning bathe, I am paralysed with fear. Though a brave and expert swimmer in shallow water, no sooner do I find myself out of reach of dry land, than all my powers forsake me. I swim with short, irregular, and utterly ineffective strokes, I pant, gasp and struggle, and unless promptly rescued, I sink.

Or again, I can in imagination picture myself snatching little children from under the hoofs of maddened horses, or with a plunge at the reins, stopping them in the full force of their desperate career.

But in reality I have never yet had sufficient courage to enter into close intimacy with any horse, maddened or otherwise. Once, when I wished to ingratiate myself in the eyes of the owner, I did venture to pat a horse gingerly on the neck, well out of reach of mouth or heels, but the animal shied away promptly, and I have never repeated the experiment.

Twice indeed, when a small girl, I was induced to mount to the saddle, and then my expectations were not disappointed. Real danger stared me in the face, and I was brave. When the horse, for some unaccountable reason, pricked its ears, tossed its head, and began to trot, I did not scream, I did not call for help, I merely grasped the pummel with one hand, the saddle with the other, shut my eyes and waited for the end. The end was sudden and somewhat painful.

But in this matter-of-fact little England of ours there are few opportunities, outside the yellow backed novel, of meeting with real adventures. Picture then my delight when I received an invitation to spend the winter in Burmah. I knew where Burmah was; that it was bounded by Siam, China, and Tibet; anything was possible in a country with such surroundings. I was charmed to go.

Accordingly, I bought a great many unnecessary things, as is ever the custom with inexperienced travellers, and started from Liverpool early in November, my mind filled with dreams of tiger shooting, cobra killing, dacoit hunting, and other venturesome deeds.

After I had recovered from the effects of homesickness, brought on by my first venture into the unknown world, and sea sickness brought on by the Bay of Biscay, I found the ship a world of hitherto undreamt of delights. I suppose the voyage was much the same as all other voyages, but to me, naturally, it was full of enjoyments, wonders, and new experiences. Everything was delightful, including the "Amusement Committee" and "Baggage Days"; even coaling, I think, for the first five minutes was full of interest.

I have since been told that my fellow passengers were not uncommon types, but to me they appeared the most wonderful and interesting beings who ever lived in this work-a-day world. Certainly, none could have been kinder to a lone, lorn female than were they. There were, of course, on board several other passengers making their first voyage, young Indian Civilians much advised and patronised by seniors of two years standing, but these were of interest only as partners in games and dances. It was in the real seasoned article, the self-satisfied, and immensely kind-hearted Anglo-Indian, in whom I found my real interest.

And they were all very good to me. Finding me young, ignorant, and eager for information, they undertook my education, and taught me many things which I did not know before, shedding new light on all subjects, from "the only way to eat a banana," to the object of creation.

I learned that India was created that the Indian Civilian might dwell therein; the rest of mankind was created in order to admire the Indian Civilian. Something of this sort I had already heard from my brother-in-law, a member of that service, but one does not pay much attention to what brothers-in-law say.

Burmah, I discovered, is a land where teak grows, in order that the "Bombay Burman" may go there and collect it. I have no very clear idea as to what this "Bombay Burman" may be, but suppose him to be a member of a society of men who uphold the principles of a late Prime Minister; not political, but woodcraft.

There are other dwellers in India and Burmah; indeed, one man proved to me that the welfare of the British Constitution was solely dependent upon the efficient condition of the Burmese police force, of which he was an important member, but his arguments seemed to me a trifle involved. On the whole, the other inhabitants of these countries seem to be of little use or importance, unless perhaps it be to amuse and entertain the Indian Civilian and the "Bombay Burman" in his leisure hours.

Further, I was instructed that Ceylon is a country in which dwell the best (and the noisiest!) fellows in the world. They have innumerable horse races, eat prawn curry, are prodigiously hospitable, and in odd hours grow tea.

My fellow passengers also filled my eager mind with stories of wonderful adventure. Burmah, apparently, is crowded with tigers and wild elephants, of a size and ferocity which filled me with fear. But as every man on board appeared to have slain tigers and captured elephants innumerable, and that under the most surprisingly dangerous circumstances, I felt I should be well protected.

I was also taught how to overcome a wild beast, should I chance to meet with one when weaponless.

A bear should cause but little anxiety; it is only necessary to hit him violently over the nose; he will then stop and cry, and his victim will escape. But beware! one man was so much amused at the bear's strange cry that he laughed and forgot to run away. The bear killed him.

When chased by an elephant the pursued should, I believe, climb up a clump of feathery bamboos, where the beast cannot reach him. When I saw a clump of feathery bamboos I rather wondered how anyone could climb it; but all things are possible to one pursued.

A tiger presents greater difficulties. If he doesn't run away when you wave your arms and shout, you should poke your stick through his eye into his brain, or get on his back, out of reach of his claws, and throttle him. If that fails, pretend to be dead; if that even fails, you must die.

All this information I accepted gratefully and stored in my memory for use when opportunity should arise. In the meantime I continued to enjoy my voyage, and turned all my energies to mastering the science of board-ship games.

The one game which I never could play was "Bull." To me it seemed the most foolish game ever invented. It is played by means of six flat pads, about two inches in diameter, and a large sloping black board, divided by thick white lines into twelve squares. Ten of these squares are marked with numbers, the remaining two with "Bs." The object of the player is to throw the pads on to the centre of the squares, avoiding the lines, which count nothing, and above all avoiding the "Bs," which count "minus ten." At the end of each turn the total of the numbers scored is reckoned, and the highest score wins.

In the "Bull" tournament I was drawn to play with a Mr. Rod, whom I did not know, but who enjoyed the reputation of being an excellent player, and very keen to win. One morning I was practising, and playing, if possible, worse than usual, when I noticed a melancholy-looking man, seated on a camp stool, watching my performance. I was struck by his ever increasing sadness of expression, and enquired his name.

He was Mr. Rod.

In the tournament my score was minus twenty; I did not see him any more during the voyage!

I learned that one or two people had seen a worse "Bull" player than myself. Her first three throws went overboard, the fourth went down an air funnel, and the fifth upset an ink-stand, showering the contents over an innocent spectator of the game. She never attempted to play "Bull" again; it had made her so unpopular.

Great indeed are the attractions of board-ship life on a first voyage. The congenial companionship, the exhilarating outdoor life, the constant succession of games, gaieties, and amusements, the novelty of every thing, all tend to shed a halo over what, to the seasoned traveller, is merely a period of utter boredom, to be dragged through with as little ennui as possible. But the chief charm to me lay in the glimpse, though only distant, of new lands, lands which had hitherto been merely geographical or historical names, but which now acquired a new reality and interest.

The first few days we saw little of the land, but after the Bay was passed, our course lay more inland, and we saw the coast of Spain and Portugal, beautiful in the sunlight, red rocks and green slopes rising up from a sea of deepest blue.

Then appeared on the horizon a vague shadowy cloud, which we learned was Africa. The first glimpse of a new continent, and a continent fraught with such endless possibilities is impressive; and as we drew nearer, and gazed on that dark range of wild, bare hills, I sympathised thoroughly with a wee fellow-passenger who was discovered, full of mingled hope and terror, looking eagerly at the dreary waste of land in search of lions!

Soon again we forgot all else, when, shaping our course round the south of Spain, Gibraltar broke upon our view. What a wonder it is! that great rugged rock, shaped on the northwest like a crouching lion, rising dark, cold and solitary, amid the alien lands around it. Unmoved by the raging seas beneath, it stands calm and defiant, a fit emblem of the nation to which it belongs. Surely no Englishman can behold Gibraltar without feeling proud of his nationality.

We passed close to the north of Corsica, where the hills were covered with snow, though it was still early winter. A dreary inhospitable looking country is this: a fit birthplace for that iron-heart the First Napoleon.

We passed through the Straits of Messina by full moonlight, and never have I beheld a scene of more fairylike beauty. The Sicilian coast seemed (for all was vague and shadowy) to rise in gentle slopes from the dark water, the land looked thickly wooded and well cultivated, and here and there appeared the little white towns, nestling among trees and vineyards, or perched beneath sheltering rocks, a peaceful and beautiful paradise. On the Italian coast the scenery was a complete contrast, the high, fierce hills stood up black and frowning against the clear sky, the country was wild, dreary and desolate. This mingling of peaceful homelike landscape, and weird rugged scenery, with the tender romance of the moon shining on the still dark water, reminded me, somehow, of Wagner's music; nothing else can so fitly represent the scene.

Our course did not carry us very near to Crete, but we saw Mount Ida rising beautiful and snow-crowned in the centre of a tumultuous land. What scorn and pity this fair Mother Ida must feel for the miserable dwellers at her feet!

We stopped at Port Said for four hours. During the first two hours I was charmed with the place; it seemed just like a big exhibition, everything was so strange and unreal. The donkeys were delightful, the Turkish traders so amusing, and shopping, when one has to bargain twenty minutes over every article, and then toss up about the price, is certainly a new experience.

During the third hour I found that the heat, dust, and endless noise and chatter were far from unreal. I had bought every conceivable thing that I could not possibly want, and paid three times the proper price for it. The Arabs ceased to be amusing; I was bored to tears.

During the fourth hour I grew to hate the place and its inhabitants with a deadly hatred, and could have kissed the ship in my delight at returning to her, had she not been covered with coal dust.

My first experience of the natives of Port Said was a long brown arm coming through my porthole, feeling about for whatsoever valuable it might find; a hearty smack with a hair brush caused it to retire abruptly. The last I saw of them was a pompous trader thrown overboard with all his wares, because he would not leave the ship when ordered. His companions in their boat, I noticed, busily rescued the wares, but seemed quite indifferent to the safety of the poor owner, whom they left to struggle to shore as best he could.

It is said that one would meet everyone sometime at Port Said if one waited long enough; I would rather forego the meeting.

The Canal, I believe, is generally regarded as an unmitigated nuisance, and indeed, the slow progress and constant stoppages make the passage through it a little wearisome, but on a first voyage its shores are most interesting. On one side are several inland seas, and small collections of the most wretched and impossible looking habitations that human beings ever inhabited, with an occasional oasis of tall green palm trees. From the east bank the desert stretches away apparently into infinity.

I was disappointed in the desert, though I hardly know what I expected; I suppose the very emptiness and immensity detract from its impressiveness; the human eye and mind cannot grasp them. We saw several mirages and felt quite pleased with ourselves, though unconvinced that they were not really oases in the desert; they were so very distinct.

Some of the glimpses of native life on the banks were very amusing. At one spot we met a camel, smiling the foolish irritating smile which is a camel's characteristic, speeding away at an inelegant trot, and distantly pursued by the owner and his friends; alas! we could not see the end of the race. Camels, I was told, are unwearying beasts, so perhaps, like "Charley's Aunt" this one is still running.

We were greatly excited by one incident. A Dutch steamer passed us, and we noticed on the deck a very pretty girl, evidently very much admired by all the crew, and especially by one tall fine looking fellow who seemed on very good terms with her. Shortly after the boat had passed, a small steam launch hove into sight, on board of which were several men, mostly Turkish officials. As they passed, the skipper of the launch shouted various questions, and we gathered that "Mademoiselle" had run away and they were in pursuit. Whether it was an elopement or merely an escape from justice

we never learned, but most of us adopted the former view, and hoped that the guilty steamer would be out of the canal and safe from pursuit, before the fussy little launch overtook it.

We had a gorgeous sunset that night in the canal. The sky, every conceivable shade of yellow, violet and crimson, was reflected in the still waters of the canal and inland seas. The tall palm trees rose darkest green against the brilliant sky, while the sand of the desert glowed golden and salmon pink, fading in the distance to the palest green; and all the colours were softened by a shadowy blue haze. I have never seen more wonderful colouring.

After passing Aden we steamed uninterruptedly for ten days with but occasional glimpses of land; we had perfect weather, and the beauty of everything was almost overpowering.

I know not which hour of the day was the most exquisite: the early morning, with the sun rising, a ball of fire, out of the sea, making golden paths across the water, and the distant land blushing rosy red, as it peered through the hazy blue curtains which o'erhung it; or the full noonday, with the deep blue sky and the deep blue sea fading together in a pale blue mist, till the world seems changed to a blue ball, and we the only living things within it; or the evening, when the western sky turned crimson and violet, and the sun, looking strangely oval, went down into the sea behind a transparent green haze, while in the east the crescent moon sailed silver in the blue-black sky; or the night, when one lay alone on the upper deck, fanned by the soft night breeze, soothed by the monotonous swish of the water, looking into the unmeasured heights of the star-bespangled heavens or the impenetrable depths of the waters beneath, where "there is neither speech nor language: but their voices are heard among them," and the glory of God is shown forth night and day.

We had a fancy dress ball in the Red Sea: I suppose this is usual. Ours was noted for the number of Japanese present. At least, I believe they were intended to represent Japanese (the costumes had been bought at Port Said as such), but as they were dressed chiefly in European evening dress, partially covered by a flimsy Japanese dressing-gown, their appearance was unique.

I suffered a great deal on that occasion. I was a peasant, and as is the custom of fancy dress peasants all the world over, I wore my hair in a long plait down my back.

When my first partner approached I looked up at him in the usual polite and pleasing manner; he then seized my waist, plait included, in a firm grip and we danced off together, I with my head forcibly fixed at an angle such as is usually adopted by pictured good choir boys or "Souls awakening." I endured it for a short time; but then I began to get a stiff neck, and was obliged at last to ask my partner not to pull my hair. Alas! he was a sensitively shy youth, and was so embarrassed at my request that I felt I had committed an unpardonable fault.

But I did not learn by experience: the same thing occurred with all my partners, and as, after the first unfortunate attempt I did not like to complain again, the agonies I suffered from the crick in my neck next day can better be imagined than described.

We stayed two days in Ceylon, but all attempts to describe this "Garden of Eden" are futile. No one, who has not seen it, can hope to realise the wonderful colouring of the place; the red roads, the red and white houses, deep blue sky, and deep blue lakes; the brilliant dresses of the natives, the large flaming red and blue flowers, the wonderful green of the palms and other tropical plants, and above all, the beauty of that long line of open coast, the great breakers glittering with a thousand opal tints in the sunlight, and beyond them the dark blue ocean, delicately flecked with shimmering white spray, stretching away into the shadowy distance, "farther than sight can follow, farther than soul can reach."

We drove through the Cinnamon gardens, where the still air was heavy with the delicious scent, and out to Mount Lavinia, where, of course, we ate prawn curry. Honestly, I must confess that never before have I tasted anything so truly horrible; but I pretended to like it immensely. I suppose everybody does the same when first introduced to this celebrated dish: it is what might be called "an accrued taste."

I don't think the author of "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" can ever have touched at Ceylon, or how could he have declared that "man is vile"? The Singalese are the most beautiful people I have ever beheld, while the European inhabitants are surely the most hospitable and delightful in the world.

Perhaps, when the poet wrote those lines, he had the Turkish traders in his mind: they certainly are vile. One of them sold me a sixpenny bracelet for ten shillings. They are exactly like the spider of noted memory; they stand at the doors of their fascinating, dark, poky little shops, persuading innocent passers by to enter, "only to look round;" but if the poor victim once venture to "walk into their parlour," he will be indeed clever if he escape without emptying his purse.

"Rickshaws" are charming; I spent every spare minute riding about in one. It is almost as adventurous and exciting as driving in a Marseilles Fiacre, and far more comfortable. I feared I had met with an adventure one day, for my "puller" (I don't know what else to call him) ran away with me, and stopping in a lonely road, began to assure me that I was a "handsome lady." I wondered what would happen next, but soon discovered that he only wanted "Backsheesh," and assuming my very sternest demeanour I repeated "don't bus" ("bus" to stop, being the only word of the language I could remember) several times, and at last induced him to take me back to my companions. What a valuable thing is presence of mind on such an occasion!

It was shortly after leaving Ceylon that our first real adventure befell us. We had all retired early to bed, being weary with the long day on shore; the clatter of tongues and tramp of feet on deck had ceased, and all was silent save for the throbbing of the engines, and the quiet movements of the men on watch.

Suddenly I was awakened by a hurried murmur of voices in the next cabin, then an electric bell rang and I was terrified to hear the cry: "Fire! Fire!"

I sprang up, flung on a cloak, and rushed out into the "Alley Way," which speedily became the scene of the wildest confusion.

All the cabin doors opened, and the occupants hurried confusedly out, arrayed in the first garments that came to hand, asking eager questions, and giving wild explanations.

Brave men, anxious to be of use, snatched children from their mothers' arms, while the distracted mothers, having but a vague notion as to what was happening, supposed the boat to have been boarded by pirates or kidnappers, and fought fiercely to regain possession of their infants.

Those who prided themselves on their presence of mind, ran up and down with small water bottles to fling on the flames, or tried to organise a bucket line. Others endeavoured to tie as many life-belts as possible to themselves and their friends, fastening them to any part of their persons most easily convenient.

One matter-of-fact old lady began to collect cloaks, biscuits, and valuables from her trunk, preparatory to being cast ashore on a desert island, while another proceeded to wrap herself from head to foot in blankets, having heard that these offer a good resistance to the spread of the flames. Some were too terrified to do aught but scream, but the majority were full of self-sacrifice and bravery, and fell over, and interfered with one another woefully, in their endeavour to be of assistance to whomsoever might require their services.

Meanwhile the original causes of the alarm – two girls who shared the cabin next to mine – did not for an instant cease their efforts. One, with a fortitude worthy of Casabianca himself, stood firmly with a finger pressed upon the button of the electric bell, determined to die rather than leave her post, while the other fought her way wildly up the passage, turning a deaf ear to all questions, and merely continuing to reiterate her cry of: "Fire! Steward! Fire!"

At length (I suppose, in reality, in about three minutes after the first alarm, but it seemed a far longer time) a sleepy and much astonished steward appeared, and as soon as he could make himself heard, demanded the cause of the uproar. When eagerly assured that the deck was on fire over our heads, that in five minutes we should all be cinders unless we instantly took to the boats, and that the whole affair was a disgrace to the Company, and the "Times" should be written to if the speaker

(an irascible "Globe trotter") survived the disaster, the steward stolidly denied the existence of any fire at all and explanations ensued.

It was then discovered that signal rockets had been sent up from the deck to a signal station we were passing, and some of the sparks having blown into the porthole of the girls' cabin, the occupants had concluded that the deck was on fire, and had given the alarm.

It took some time to make the fact of the mistake clear to everyone, but the steward at last succeeded in allaying all fears, and we returned to our cabins, feeling indignant and somewhat foolish, and perhaps a little disappointed (now that the danger was over) that our adventure had turned out so tamely.

On the following morning the Captain organised an imposing ceremony on the upper deck, and solemnly presented two sham medals to the heroines of the preceding night's adventure, thanking them for their presence of mind, and noble efforts to save the burning ship!

The remainder of the voyage passed without incident, and we arrived safely at our destination about six o'clock one lovely Friday morning. The sun was just rising as we sailed up the river, tinting the brown water and the green banks of the Irrawaddy with a rosy light. Rangoon, a vast collection of brown and white houses, mills, towers, chimneys, and cupolas, in a nest of green, showed faintly through the blue haze; and rising high above a grove of waving dark green palm trees, glittered the golden dome of a pagoda, the first object clearly distinguishable on shore, to welcome us to this country so rightly termed "The Land of Pagodas."

Chapter II
–
RANGOON
–

"Oh! the Land of Pagodas and Paddy fields green,
Is Burmah, dear Burmah you know."

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This is not a book on "Burmah," but an account of my impressions of Burmah; therefore, for all matters concerning which I had no original impressions, such as its history, its public buildings, the scenery, the life and condition of the natives, its resources, and its future, I refer both the gentle and ungentle reader to the many books on the subject which have appeared during the past few years.

My first and last impression of Rangoon was heat. Not ordinary honest, hot, heat, such as one meets with at Marseilles or in the heart of the desert, wherever that may be; not even a stuffy heat, such as one encounters in church, but a damp, clinging, unstable sort of heat, which makes one long for a bath, if it were not too much trouble to get into it.

I remember in my youth placing one of my sister's wax dolls (mine were all wooden, as I was of a destructive nature) to sit before the fire one cold winter's day; I remember dollie was somewhat disfigured ever afterwards.

The remembrance of that doll haunted me during my stay in Rangoon; I felt I could deeply sympathise with, and thoroughly understand her feelings on that occasion; and for the first two or three hours, remembering the effect the heat had upon her appearance, I found myself frequently feeling my features to discover whether they still retained their original form and beauty. But after a few hours I became resigned; all I desired was to melt away quickly and quietly, and have done with it.

At first I looked upon the "Punkah" as a nuisance, its unceasing movement irritated me, it ruffled my hair, and I invariably bumped my head against it on rising. But after enduring one long Punkahless half-hour, I came to look on it as the one thing that made life bearable, and the "Punkah-wallah" as the greatest benefactor of mankind.

In the early mornings and evenings I became, hardly cooler, but what might be described as firmer, and it was at these times that the wonderful sights of Rangoon were displayed to my admiring gaze.

I saw the celebrated "Schwee Dagon Pagoda" with its magnificent towering golden dome, surmounted by the beautiful gold and jewelled "Htee;" the innumerable shrines, images, cupolas, and pagodas at its base, the curious mixture of tawdry decorations and wonderful wood carvings everywhere visible, and the exquisite blending and intermingling of colours in the bright dresses of the natives, who crowd daily to offer their gifts at this most holy shrine. It is quite futile to attempt description of such a place; words cannot depict form and colour satisfactorily, least of all convey to those who have not themselves beheld it, a conception of the imposing beauty of this world famed Pagoda.

The Burmese are a most devout people; the great flight of steps leading to the Pagoda is worn by the tread of many feet, and every day the place is crowded with worshippers.

They begin young. I saw one wee baby, scarcely more than a year old, brought by his father to learn to make his offering at the shrine of Buddha. The father with difficulty balanced the little fellow

in a kneeling position before a shrine, with the tiny brown hands raised in a supplicating attitude, and then retired a few steps to watch. Instantly the baby overbalanced and toppled forward on its face. He was picked up and placed in his former position, only to tumble down again when left. This performance was repeated about five times; the father never seemed to notice the humour of the situation – the baby certainly did not.

One of the most interesting sights of Rangoon is that of the elephants. Ostensibly their work is to pile timber ready for embarkation on the river, but evidently they consider that they exist and work in order to be admired by all who pay them a visit.

And well they deserve admiration! They go about their duties in a stately, leisurely manner, lifting the logs with trunk, tusks, and forefeet; piling them up with a push here, a pull there, and then marching to the end of the pile and contemplating the result with their heads on one side, to see if all are straight and firm. And they do all in such a stately, royal manner, that they give an air of dignity to the menial work, and one comes away with the feeling that to pile teak side by side with an elephant would be an honour worth living for.

During my peregrinations round the town I was taken to see the home of the Indian Civilian, a huge imposing building, with such an air of awe-inspiring importance about every stick and stone, that none save those initiated into the secrets of the place, may enter without feeling deeply honoured by the permission to do so. Even a "Bombay Burman" could hardly approach, without losing some of his natural hardihood.

It may have been the awe with which this building inspired me, it may have been my visit to the Pagoda, with its air of mysticism and unknown possibilities, but when I retired to my large dimly lighted bed-room after my first day's wanderings in Rangoon, my natural courage forsook me, and I became the prey to a fit of appalling terrors.

All the ghostly stories I had ever read of the spiritualism of the East, of the mystic powers of "Thugs," "Vampires" and other unpleasant beings, returned to my mind.

For some time I could not sleep, and when at last I did sink into an uneasy doze I was haunted by nightmares of ghostly apparitions, and powerful and revengeful images of Gaudama.

Suddenly I awoke with the feeling that something, I knew not what, had roused me from my uneasy slumber. And then, as I lay trembling and listening, out of darkness came a Voice, weird, uncanny, which exclaimed in solemn tones the mystic word "Tuctoo."

What could it be? Was I one destined to learn deep secrets of the mystic world? Had the spirit, if spirit it were, some great truth to make known to me? if so, what a pity it did not speak English!

"Tuctoo" remarked the voice again, this time rather impatiently.

I racked my brains to think of a possible meaning for this mysterious word, but all in vain, I could understand nothing.

"Tuctoo, tuctoo, tuctoo," it continued.

And then, out of the darkness came another voice, an angry English voice, loud in its righteous indignation, the voice of my host.

"Shut up you beast," he cried, and perhaps he added one or two more words suited to the occasion. I lay down and tried to pretend that I had not been frightened, and in doing so, fell asleep. I was introduced to the "Tuctoo" next day, but did not consider him a pleasant acquaintance. He is a lizard about a foot long, with a large red mouth, and a long wriggling tail; he reminded me of a baby alligator. He dwells on the inner walls of houses, and his presence in a house is supposed to bring good luck, but his tiresome habit of "tuctooing" in a most human voice at all hours of the day or night make him rather unpopular. We chased him down the wall with a long "Shan" spear and caught him in a towel, but he looked so very pugnacious that we did not detain him from his business.

Of course the most important element of life in Rangoon, in fact in all Burmah, is the Gymkhana.

Apparently, the European population in Rangoon exists solely in order to go to the Gymkhana. It attracts like a magnet. People may not intend to go there when they set out, but no matter how far afield they go, sooner or later in the evening they are bound to appear at the Gymkhana. If they did not go there in the daytime they would inevitably walk there in their sleep.

This renowned Gymkhana is situate in the Halpin Road (pronounced "Hairpin," which is confusing to the uninitiated) and is a large, open, much verandaed, wooden building. Of the lower story, sacred to the male sex, I caught only a hurried glimpse in passing, and the impression left on my mind was a confusion of long men, reclining in long chairs, with long drinks.

On my first visit to the upper regions, I fancied myself in a private lunatic asylum, for there, in a large room built for the purpose, were numbers of men and women, to all other appearances perfectly sane, waltzing round and round to the inspiriting music of the military band; dancing, in ordinary afternoon attire, not languidly, but vigorously and enthusiastically, and that in a temperature such as Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego never dreamed of.

But I soon discovered that there was method in this madness, for the heat, when dancing, was so unspeakably awful that to sit still seemed quite cool in contrast, and it was worth the sufferings of the dance to feel cool afterwards, if only in imagination.

In another room of the Gymkhana the ladies assemble to read their favourite magazines, or to glower from afar upon the early birds who have already appropriated them.

And here I must pause to say a word in deprecation of the accusations of gossip and scandal, which are so frequently launched against the Anglo-Indian ladies. Not that I would for the world deny the existence of scandal, but what I wish to emphasise is, that the Anglo-Indians (at least those of the female sex) do not invent or repeat scandalous stories from pure love of the thing, nor from any desire to injure the characters of their neighbours. They are forced to do so by circumstances.

For example, Mrs. A. arrives early at the Gymkhana, appropriates the newly arrived number of the "Gentlewoman," and seating herself comfortably in a good light, sets to work to read the paper from beginning to end.

But soon Mrs. B. appears upon the scene, and alas! Mrs. B. has also come to the Gymkhana with the intention of reading from beginning to end the newly arrived number of the "Gentlewoman"; and, being human, Mrs. B., on finding her favourite paper already appropriated, is filled with a distaste for all other papers, and a consuming desire to read "The Gentlewoman," and "The Gentlewoman" only. If she cannot procure the paper right speedily, life holds no more happiness for her.

But alas, Mrs. A. shows no intention of relinquishing her possession of the paper for many hours. In vain does Mrs. B. spread "Punch," "Graphic," or "Sketch," temptingly before Mrs. A's abstracted eyes, she is not to be influenced by honest means. Then Mrs. B. has only one course left to her, and adopts it.

First she seeks and obtains an assistant to the scheme, Mrs. C. The two ladies then draw near Mrs. A. (who tightens her hold on the paper as they approach) and seat themselves on either side of their victim.

Mrs. C., assuming an expression of sweet innocence, entirely disguising the craft of her intentions, pretends to be deeply interested in last week's "Gazette," hoping thereby to demonstrate her lack of interest in fashion papers; Mrs. B. entices Mrs. A. into conversation.

After a few desultory remarks, during which the aggressor still clings to her prey, Mrs. B., throwing a warning glance at Mrs. C. to prepare her, says in a voice fraught with deep mystery:

"Were you not astonished to hear of so and so's engagement last week?"

No, Mrs. A. was not particularly astonished.

But surely Mrs. A. had heard that strange story about so and so's behaviour towards somebody else?

Curious, Mrs. A. had not heard of it.

Of course Mrs. B. would not mention it to anyone else, but Mrs. A., as every one knows, can be trusted, and really it was so strange.

Then calling to her aid all her powers of imagination, Mrs. B. proceeds to relate some astounding invention concerning so and so. Gradually, as she becomes more interested in the recital, Mrs. A's. fingers relax their hold on the precious paper, and at last it is dropped, forgotten, upon the table.

Now it is Mrs. C's. turn. In the most careless manner she draws the "Gentlewoman" slowly towards her, until it is out of reach of Mrs. A., when she snatches it up eagerly, and retires to another table, where she is soon joined by the triumphant Mrs. B.

Then poor Mrs. A., deprived of her newspaper must needs seek another one, but alas? they are all in use. Nothing remains for her to do but to imitate Mrs. B's conduct, and attract Mrs. D's attention from the paper she is reading, by repeating to her the story she has just heard, adding whatever new details may appear to her as most likely to arouse Mrs. D's. interest. And so the snowball grows.

Thus it will be clear to all that the accusations are unfair, seeing that the gossip indulged in by the ladies at the Gymkhana is merely the outcome of circumstances, inventions being notoriously the children of necessity. It is obvious that were each lady in Burmah provided with every magazine and paper that her heart could desire, gossip would speedily cease to exist, – in the Ladies' Clubs.

The most extraordinary vehicle that ever existed is the Rangoon "ticca gharry." For inconvenience, discomfort, and danger, it has never been surpassed. It has been excellently described as "a wooden packing case on wheels." I suppose it is a distant and unfashionable relation of the modern four wheeler, with wooden shutters in place of windows; very narrow, noisy, and uncomfortable. It is usually drawn by a long-tailed, ungroomed and brainless Burman pony, and is driven by one of the most extraordinary race of men that ever existed.

The "Gharry Wallah's" appearance – but it is scarce meet to describe his appearance to the gentle reader; we will say his appearance is unusual. His mind and character have gained him his well earned right to be counted among the eccentricities of the age. He is sublime in his utter indifference to the world at large, in the cheerful manner in which he will drive, through, into, or over anything he happens to meet.

But his most noted characteristic is utter indifference to the wishes of his "fare."

I have often wondered what are the secret workings of the "Gharry Wallah's" mind. He cannot imagine, (no man, intelligent or otherwise, could imagine) that a human being drives in a "gharry" for the pure enjoyment of the thing; and yet he never seems to consider that his "fare" may desire to go to any particular destination. 'Tis vain to explain at great length, and with many forcible gestures, where one wishes to go; "he hears but heeds it not." The instant one enters the vehicle he begins to drive at a great rate in whatever direction first comes into his mind. He continues to drive in that direction until stopped, when he cheerfully turns round and drives another way, any way but the right one.

No one has yet discovered where he would eventually drive to; many have had the curiosity but none the fortitude to undertake original research into the matter.

It is presumed that, unless stopped, he would drive straight on till he died of starvation.

Occasionally, by a judicious waving of umbrellas it may be possible to direct his course, but that only in the case of a very young driver. I have sometimes wondered whether perchance the pony may be the sinner, and the driver merely an innocent and unwilling accomplice. I cannot tell.

But this I can say, if you crave for danger, if you seek penance, drive in a "ticca gharry," but if you desire to reach any particular destination in this century, don't.

With the exception of a few leisure hours spent at the Gymkhana, the ladies of Rangoon devote their time and energy to writing "Chits."

At first I was filled with a great wonder as to what might be the nature of these mysterious "Chits." I would be sitting peacefully talking with my hostess in the morning, when suddenly, a look

of supreme unrest and anxiety comes over her face: "Excuse me, a moment" she exclaims, "I must just go and write a chit."

She then hastens to her writing table, rapidly scribbles a few words, gives the paper to a servant, and then returns to me with an expression of relief and contentment.

But scarce five minutes have elapsed, ere the look of anxiety again returns; again she writes a "chit," and again becomes relieved and cheerful, and so on throughout the day.

And this, I discovered was the case with nearly every European lady in the country. I suppose it must be some malady engendered by the climate, only to be relieved by the incessant inditing of "chits." I myself never suffered from the ailment, but should doubtless have fallen a victim had I remained longer in the country.

The contents and destination of these "chits" seem to be of little or no importance; so long as notes be written and despatched at intervals of ten minutes or so during the day, that is sufficient. What finally becomes of these "chits" I cannot pretend to say; whether they are merely taken away and burnt, or whether they have some place in the scheme of creation, I never discovered.

Nor do I know whether the male population suffers from the same malady. Does the Indian Civilian, seated in his luxurious chamber in that awe-inspiring building of his, does he too spend his life in writing "chits"? Does the "Bombay Burman," in some far off jungle, "alone with nature undisturbed," does he too sit down 'neath the shade of the feathery bamboo, or the all embracing Peepul tree, and write and despatch "chits" to imaginary people, in imaginary houses, in an imaginary town?

I know not, it is futile to speculate further upon the matter. The mystery of "chit" writing is too deep for me.

I would gladly have remained longer in Rangoon, but it might not be. Mine was no mere visit of pleasure; I had travelled to Burmah in search of adventure, such as is scarcely to be met with in the garden party, dinner party, and dance life of Rangoon. And so, one hot afternoon, with anxious beating heart, I said "Good bye" to security and civilisation, and set forth on my journey to Mandalay!

Chapter III
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THE ROAD TO MANDALAY
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"I travelled among unknown men,
In lands beyond the Sea." – (Wordsworth).

"Where the tints of the earth, and the hues of the sky,
In colour tho' varied, in beauty may vie." – (Byron).

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The distance by rail from Rangoon to Mandalay is 386 miles, and it takes twenty-two hours to accomplish the journey. Trains, like everything else in this leisurely country, are not given to hurrying themselves. "Hasti, hasti, always go hasti" is the motto for Burmah. As an example of the unintelligible nature of the language I may explain that "Hasti" means "slow!"

It is a pleasant journey however, for the carriages are most comfortable, and the scenery through which the rail passes affords plenty of interest to a new comer.

I enjoyed my journey, therefore, immensely. I left Rangoon about five o'clock in the afternoon, well provided with books, fruit and chocolates for the journey, and under the protection of a hideous Madrassee Ayah.

I believe she was in reality a worthy old creature, but she was so exceedingly ugly, so very unintelligible (though most persistent in her efforts at conversation) and so intolerably stupid, that I could not feel much affection for her, and I only consented to put up with her company as a protection against the thieves who haunt the various halting places along the line, ready to steal into carriages and carry away all the portable property of the traveller. I had heard such blood curdling stories of these train thieves that I should have felt quite nervous about undertaking the journey, had I not fortunately disbelieved them.

I do not for an instant believe my ayah would have been any real protection, for whenever we stopped she was seized with an overpowering hunger, and spent all her time bargaining with the vendors of bananas, huge red prawns, decayed fish, dried fruits, cakes, and other horrible articles, who swarmed upon the stations.

These delicacies, and others which she prevailed upon my tender heart to buy for her, she wrapped up in a large red pocket handkerchief, and hid under the seat; what was their final fate I cannot pretend to say, but for her sake I trust she didn't eat them.

She was a much travelled lady and had visited many of the towns along the route, and persisted in waking me up at all odd hours of the night, to point out the houses where her various Mem-Sahibs had lived, or the bungalows inhabited by the commissioners, matters in which I was not at all interested.

She kept me awake with long rambling stories about her many relations, stories which, as they were told in the most vague and unintelligible "pigeon English" I found it very difficult to understand, but the gist of all was that she was very old and very poor, and she was sure I was a very kind and generous "Missie," and would not fail to reward her handsomely for her services.

I failed to discover what these same services might be, for beyond fanning me vigorously when I did not require it, and at three o'clock in the morning procuring me from somewhere an unpleasant mixture she called coffee, and which I was obliged to throw secretly out of the window, she did nothing except talk. I suppose she was really no worse than the rest of her tribe, and cannot be blamed for getting as much as she could out of her exceedingly innocent and easily humbugged "missie."

At the first station at which we stopped, I was much astonished to see all the natives on the platform come and kneel down in the humblest manner round the door of my carriage, and remain there "shekkohing" and pouring forth polite speeches in Burmese, until our train left the station.

I have never been backward in my high opinion of my own importance, but I hardly expected the fame of my presence to have spread to this distant land, and felt considerably embarrassed, though, of course, highly gratified, by such unexpected tokens of respect.

I received these attentions at every station with the most royal bows and smiles, until at last, on dismounting from the train at the dining station, I discovered that the carriage next to mine was occupied by a noble Shan Chief and his retinue, and it was to him, not to my insignificant person, that all this homage was paid. I felt quite annoyed at the discovery. He was really such a hideous, yellow, dirty old man, and he sat at the window, surrounded by his wives and attendants, smoking grumpily, and paying not the least attention to the flattering speech of his admirers, who must have been far more gratified by my gracious condescension.

The chief stared at me a great deal when I passed his window to re-enter my carriage, and shortly after the train was again set in motion he sent one of his wives to inspect me, possibly with a view to offering me a position among the number of his dusky spouses. She opened the door, and stared at me for some time, taking not the slightest notice of my requests that she would withdraw, until she had sufficiently examined me, when she retired as abruptly as she had appeared, and I lost no time in securing the door behind her.

Evidently her report was not satisfactory, for I have heard no more of the episode. Possibly, she reported that I looked bad tempered; I certainly felt so!

What a fascinating journey that was. During the first part of the route the country is less interesting, consisting merely of flat stretches of Paddy fields and low jungle scrub. But all this I passed through by night, when the soft moonlight lent a witching beauty to the scene.

There is something so inexplicably beautiful about night in the east, so comparatively cool, so clear, so quiet, and yet so full of mysterious sound,

"A little noiseless noise among the leaves,
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves."

The cloudless heavens sparkle with a myriad stars, the moonlight seems brighter and more golden than elsewhere, and the noisy, weary, worn old earth hides away her tinsel shams and gaudiness, which the cruel sunlight so pitilessly exposes, and appears grander and nobler under night's kindly sway.

The scenery in Upper Burmah is exceedingly fine. The great rocky hills, each crowned with its pagoda, rise on all sides, stretching away into the distance till they become only blue shadows. Everywhere are groves of bananas and palm trees, forests of teak and bamboo, and vast tracks of jungle, attired in the gayest colours.

The pagodas, mostly in a half-ruined condition, are far more numerous here than in Lower Burmah, and raise their white and golden heads from every towering cleft of rock, and every mossy grove. As we neared Mandalay we passed many groups of half-ruined shrines, images and pagodas, covered with moss and creeper, deserted by the human beings who erected them, and visited now only by the birds and other jungle folk, who build their nests and make their homes in the shade of

the once gorgeous buildings. They look very picturesque, rising above the tangled undergrowth that surrounds them, but pitifully lonely.

We stopped at a great number of stations en route. The platforms were always crowded with natives of every description, at all hours of the day and night, selling their wares, greeting their friends, or smoking contentedly, and viewing with complacency the busy scene.

The natives of India, with their fierce sullen faces, frightened me; the cunning Chinese, ever ready to drive a hard bargain, amused but did not attract me; but the merry, friendly little Burmese were a continual delight.

They swaggered up and down in their picturesque costumes, smoking their huge cheroots, the men regarding with self-satisfied and amused contempt the noisy chattering crowd of Madrassees and Chinese, the women coquetting in the most graceful and goodnatured way with everyone in turn. When they had paid their devoirs to the old chief, they would crowd round my carriage window offering their wares, taking either my consent or refusal to be a purchaser as the greatest joke, and laughing merrily at my vain attempts to understand them.

I fell in love with them on the spot, they are such jolly people and such thorough gentlefolk.

It was very interesting in the early morning to watch the signs of awakening life in the many Burmese villages through which we passed. To see the caravans of bullock carts or mules setting out on their journey to the neighbouring town, and the pretty little Burmese girls coquetting with their admirers as they carried water from the well, or chattering and whispering merrily together as they performed their toilet by the stream, decking their hair with flowers and ribbons, and donning their delicately coloured pink and green "tamehns."

Here we met a procession of yellow-robed "hpoongyis" and their followers, marching through the village with their begging bowls, to give the villagers an opportunity of performing the meritorious duty of feeding them. There a procession of men, women, and children walking sedately towards a pagoda, with offerings of fruit or flowers; to contemplate the image of the mighty Gaudama, to hear the reading of the Word, and to meditate upon the Holy Life. Now we passed a group of little hpoongyi pupils with their shaven crowns and yellow robes, sitting solemnly round their teacher in the open-sided kyaung. Anon we passed a jovial crew of merrymakers in their most brilliantly coloured costumes, jogging along gaily behind their ambling bullocks, to some Pwé or Pagoda Feast, which they are already enjoying in anticipation.

And the strange part of it all is that nowhere does one see sorrow, poverty, or suffering; outwardly at least, all is bright and happy. I suppose the Burman must have his troubles like other folk, but if so he hides them extremely well under a cheerful countenance. Surely in no other inhabited country could we travel so far without beholding some sign of misery.

I think the great charm of Burmah lies in the happiness and brightness of its people; their merriment is infectious, and they make others happy by the mere sight of their contentment.

We arrived at Mandalay about three o'clock in the afternoon. The last few hours of the journey were most unpleasantly hot, and I was very glad when we steamed into the station, and I saw my brother-in-law (who had descended from his "mountain heights" to meet me) waiting on the platform. The journey had been delightful in many ways, but after being twenty-two hours boxed up in a railway carriage with a chattering ayah, it was a great relief to reach one's destination at last.

When I arrived in Mandalay I was filled with an overwhelming gratitude towards Mr. Rudyard Kipling for his poem on the subject.

Rangoon, fascinating and interesting though it be, is yet chiefly an Anglo-Indian town, but Mandalay, though the Palace and Throne room have been converted into a club, though its Pagodas and shrines have been desecrated by the feet of the alien, and though its bazaar has become a warehouse for the sale of Birmingham and Manchester imitations, yet, spite of all, this former stronghold of the Kings of Burmah still retains its ancient charm.

When first I experienced the fascination of this wonderful town, my feelings were too deep for expression, and I suffered as a soda water bottle must suffer, until the removal of the cork brings relief. Suddenly there flashed into my mind three lines of Mr. Kipling's poem, and as I wandered amid "them spicy garlic smells, the sunshine and the palm trees and the tinkly temple bells," I relieved my feelings by repeating those wonderfully descriptive lines; I was once again happy, and I vowed an eternal gratitude to the author.

Before the end of my two days stay in Mandalay I began to look on him as my bitterest foe, and to regard the publication of that poem as a personal injury.

The Hotel in which we stayed was also occupied by a party of American "Globe Trotters." In all probability they were delightful people, as are most of their countrymen. They were immensely popular among the native hawkers, who swarmed upon the door steps and verandahs, and sold them Manchester silks and glass rubies at enormous prices. But we acquired a deeply rooted objection to them, springing from their desire to live up to their surroundings.

We should have forgiven them, had they confined themselves to eating Eastern fruits and curries, wearing flowing Burmese silken dressing gowns, and smattering their talk with Burmese and Hindustani words. But these things did not satisfy them. Evidently they believed that they could only satisfactorily demonstrate their complete association with their surroundings, by singing indefatigably, morning, noon, and night, that most un-Burmese song, "Mandalay."

They sang it hour after hour, during the whole of the two days we spent in the place.

In their bedrooms, and about the town they hummed and whistled it, during meals they quoted and recited it. At night, and when we took our afternoon siesta, they sang it boldly, accompanying one another on the cracked piano, and all joining in the chorus with a conscientious heartiness that did them credit.

We tossed sleepless on our couches, wearied to death of this endless refrain that echoed through the house: or, if in a pause between the verses we fell asleep for a few seconds, it was only to dream of a confused mixture of "Moulmein Pagodas," flying elephants, and fishes piling teak, till we were once again awakened by the uninteresting and eternally reiterated information that "the dawn comes up like thunder out of China 'cross the Bay."

The only relief we enjoyed, was that afforded by one member of the party who sang cheerfully: "On the Banks of Mandalay," thereby displaying a vagueness of detail regarding the geographical peculiarities of the place, which is so frequently (though no doubt wrongly) attributed to his nation.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.