

THE SERPENT'S TOUCH



Tales of the Wild and the Unknown

I have heard and believe, that the bite of every serpent is accompanied, more or less, by a sensation similar to an electrical shock, as the poison seems almost instantaneously to affect the whole mass of blood. We considered also the name of split-snake given to this animal, not so much as descriptive of its split appearance, as of the singular sensation its bite occasions, and which I then experienced. Of other remarkable serpents I will only quote, the Whip-snake, which is green, from four to six feet long, slender, and springs horizontally, from tree to tree, whence it is also called the Flying-snake. The species, known by the name of the Double-headed-snake, has not two heads, but is equally thick before and behind; and, like some caterpillars, furnished with a kind of protuberance at its tail, which, to a superficial observer, may pass for another head.

They are of a red colour, sluggish, and resemble a long sausage. The Wall-snake climbs a wall with great agility, and is small and spotted. The bite of all these serpents is attended with great danger; indeed I believe there is not one of this class of animals that is not more or less venomous, though some in a very slight, and almost imperceptible degree. Their poison principally affects the blood, and is not hurtful to a sound skin. Yet I hardly ever cased one of the larger serpents for stuffing, but I turned sick with the extraordinary, musky, and loathsome smell of their flesh, though ever so fresh. But I have detained you already too long with this unsavoury subject, and will, in my next, proceed to answer your inquiries concerning the habits and customs of the natives of the Nicobar islands.

LETTER V.

The natives of these islands are a free people, perfectly independent, but have a captain in every village. There are, indeed, several who claim the rank of captain, as being more sensible and clever than their neighbours, but only one of the number is considered as the Omjah karu, or the great master of the house. Yet no one is bound to obey him, for all of them, male and female, consider themselves under no control whatever; and the captain must take care, that he does not offend, by pretending to command. He is sure to be disobeyed, unless they are pleased to listen to friendly representation. All the preference given him, consists in this; that when a ship arrives, he is allowed to go first on board, and to make the bargain, if they have any thing to barter. They are commonly goodnatured men, disposed to make and preserve peace among the common people. In every other respect they live and act like the rest, get drunk, commit fornication, and, when there is, as they say, a necessity for it, murder; and are equally lazy and unclean. But they can use their tongues more glibly than their neighbours.

Their houses are generally spacious, and built upon pillars, six or more feet from the ground, resembling those of the Malays, but round, not square, like the latter. The inhabitants ascend by a ladder, which they can draw up after them. The house has only one room, but generally contains more than one family. Parents and children, guests, young and old of every description, pig here together, lying naked on the floor, with nothing but a hetfat, the leaf of a species of palm, under them, in lieu of a mattress, and very few have any covering. The furniture of such a house consists in a few pots, made by the women, some highly polished cocoa-nut dishes, to hold water, some hatchets, a sabre or two, a few sailor's knives, and a good many spears.

A family generally possesses two or three palongs, or boats. Their chief food is melory bread, made of the fruit of a kind of palm-tree, which is very palatable; yams, several other good roots, and great plenty of fruit from various trees and shrubs; all which grow in great abundance. Of pigs and common fowls they have a vast profusion. These are fed with cocoa-nuts, and their flesh is remarkably good. The sea furnishes them with various kinds of fishes, and an abundance of crabs and other shell-fish, so that they may easily enough serve their god, which is their belly. The clothing of the men consists of a narrow piece of cloth, about three yards long. This they wrap twice round their waist, then passing it between their legs, and through the girth behind, leave the end of it to drag after them⁶. The women wear a piece of cloth, commonly of a blue colour, about a foot wide, fastened round their waist, so as to hang down like an apron, reaching not quite to their knees. They pride themselves upon their fine skin, which indeed they keep very clean, and do not in general use any paint.

Both sexes live from their infancy without any restraint, and commit every kind of abomination, often to the utter ruin of their health and constitutions, in very early life. In general they do not live regularly in the married state, till they are past their prime; though I have known some who had married early, remain faithful to each other, and keep their families in good order. As savages, they may be justly esteemed a good-natured race, being always ready to do a kind action, to their friends; of which I will relate one instance. We used to buy of them what we wanted, and pay with tobacco, the current medium. Even when they had nothing to sell, they would come and fetch their portion of tobacco, which we never refused them, as long as we had any, till, by the nonarrival of the ship, we were left entirely without it. We therefore told the captain of the village, that, as we had no more tobacco, the people need not bring us any more provisions, for we had nothing to give in exchange.

The captain did as we desired, yet, on the very next day, we were supplied more plentifully than ever, with the things we wanted. They would not even wait for pay, but hung up their fruit and meat about the house, and went away. We called after them and told them how we were situated. Their answer was: "When you had plenty of tobacco, you gave us as much as you could spare; now, though you have got no more of it, we have provisions enough, and you shall have as much as you want, as long as we have any, till you get more tobacco." This promise they most faithfully performed. Such kindness we did not expect from such people; but they always showed great affection for us. As to religion, they are in a state of deplorable ignorance. Their notions of a Divine Being seem most oddly perplexed, insomuch that it is difficult to make out any thing among them like a fixed opinion of His existence and attributes, nor do they seem to possess any curiosity to know more about Him. But they are not professed idolaters, like most of the other oriental nations.

They have not even a word in their language to express their idea of God. They use the word Knallen when they speak of Him, but it only signifies, "above, on high:" for instance, they say, Knallen maade, "on the hill;" Knallen uniga, "on the top of the tree;" Knallen gamalee, "on the surface of the sea;" speaking of something swimming. However, they believe that this "unknown God" is good, and will not hurt them; but wherein His goodness consists, they neither have, nor seem to wish to have, any understanding, nor ever trouble themselves about Him. Therefore, when we endeavoured, as well as we could, to explain to them the goodness of God, in pitying the lost condition of man, and providing the means of our redemption; and spoke to them of Jesus Christ our Saviour, and of what He has done and suffered to purchase for us salvation, they heard us indeed with astonishment and silent submission; but that they should be at all interested in it, and become virtuous and happy if they believed and turned to Him, and after this life enter into everlasting bliss by His merits, was more than they could possibly comprehend.

When we told them, that we were come hither for no other purpose, but to make them acquainted with their Creator and Redeemer, and to bring them the glad tidings of salvation; and begged them only to take it to heart, and reflect upon what we thus made known to them in the name of God, they laughed at us. They observed, that they could not believe that the sufferings of one man could atone for the sins of another; and that therefore, if they were wicked, what we told them of a crucified Saviour would not help them: but they insisted, that they were good by nature, and never did any thing wrong, as we well knew. When we replied, that we knew, that they had but lately murdered some people, and afterwards abused the dead bodies, each thrusting his spear into them, mutilating them in the most wanton manner, and at last cutting them to pieces, and asked them, whether this was a proof of their natural goodness, their answer was: "That you do not understand, those were people not fit to live, they were Gomoy, cannibals!"

LETTER VI.

The inhabitants of the Nicobar islands believe, that all dangerous diseases proceed from the devil, who is nevertheless under the controul of their sorcerers, or Paters . If, therefore, these men cannot cure a disorder by their tricks and enchantments, by which they pretend to catch the devil and drive him off the place, then they are sure, that he has entered into some man or woman, sitting in his or her house, and by witchcraft,

sucking all the power of healing out of the patient's body.

The sorcerer then proceeds to discover the witch, and finds no difficulty in fixing upon some one he hates. The word of such a wise man is, of course, taken by all for the voice of truth, and the poor person accused is murdered without further inquiry. Murders of this kind occurred but seldom in our neighbourhood, but were said to be more frequent in some of the other islands. We told them, that the devil everywhere proved himself the father of lies, and a murderer from the beginning; and, till they turned to the true God, they were Satan's slaves, and his works they must do. They seem indeed to be continually engaged with him, whenever they profess to perform any religious rite. They even ascribe the creation of the world to the Eewee, or wicked agent. If they do any thing wrong, or commit any atrocious crime, and are reproved for it, they immediately answer: "It was not me, it was the devil that did it."

If you convince them, that they did it themselves, and with their own hands, their usual phrase is, "The Eewee did not make me perfect, or better;" and therefore they cannot help some times doing what is wrong. They speak of a great many sorts of devils, but all malicious, and disposed to hurt them, if they had not such great and powerful paters among them, who had a superior power, and could catch, and bring them into subjection. It is not difficult for the sorcerers thus to impose upon the poor ignorant people, for they really do possess superior cunning, and astonishing dexterity, being the most expert jugglers on earth. Every one who has visited the East Indies, well knows, with what unaccountable exhibitions and slight of hand tricks the jugglers endeavour to amuse the people; but in the Nicobar islands, these arts being applied to what they consider as religious exercises, the deception is so great, that I have myself often stood astonished, being unable to account for what I saw.

I went once purposely into a house, where a sorcerer was about to perform as doctor, and to cure a woman, who lay very ill. I was determined to watch him as narrowly as possible. Both doctor and patient were stark naked. After a series of most horrible grimaces, the sorcerer produced a very large yam, which he held up, pretending that he had limpt it, (for thus they call this species of legerdemain), out of the body of the woman, and that it had been, by witchcraft, the cause of her disorder. When he entered, I particularly noticed that he had nothing in his hands, or about him, nor did there appear any possibility of a substance of that size being concealed in the empty room. At another time, I saw a sorcerer under similar circumstances, on a sudden exhibit three large stones, which he pretended to have extracted from the patient's body.

To the first of these patients, he afterwards administered a decoction of herbs, and she recovered. The cure was probably owing to his skill in preparing the potion, but was of course ascribed to the incantation, and the seizure of the enchanted yam. After I had resided five years in the island, my legs began to inflame and swell to a prodigious size. A suppuration took place, and till the discharge commenced, I suffered excruciating pain. During this dreadful illness, several paters called upon me, and in the most friendly manner, expressed their pity, offering me their assistance, and assuring me, that if I would submit to their mode of cure, I should soon recover. At last I thought, that as their skill in various medicinal arts, and their knowledge of drugs was very great, I would suffer one of them, called Philip, who always attended us as language-master, to try what he could do for me, on condition, that he should omit all superstitious ceremonies.

He agreed, and immediately putting on the most solemn and significant expression of face, worthy of so eminent a practitioner, began to paw me all over, varying his features with every motion of his hand, so that, notwithstanding the pain I felt, I could not refrain from bursting into laughter at his grimaces, which he could not possibly avoid, though bargained to be omitted. At length, the preamble concluded, he began his work, first by stroking my legs, from the knees downwards, with the palm of his hand, muttering all the while, and then by applying his mouth, and sucking the parts affected, accompanying the operation by a most strange kind of purring or grunting. Thus far his practice seemed to do good, and I felt relief, when, rising on a sudden, he produced a potsherd, which he exhibited to the company, as having limpt it out of my leg, saying that he should soon bring forth more pieces.

I cried out, "Stop there, you deceiver, do you pretend that my body is full of potsherds; that broken piece in your hand, you drew out of your own mouth. Open it directly, and let us have the rest." He stood confounded, and soon sneaked out of the house, laughed at by all his former admirers, nor did he call upon me again, till about a fortnight after. As it sometimes happened, that when the skill of the sorcerers proved ineffective, a missionary had administered some simple medicine, which, by God's blessing, had the desired effect, they looked upon us, as the first of paters, though our medicines consisted in nothing but a little magnesia, spirits of nitre, and a few simples.

But what astonished them most, was this, that we could inform them before-hand, by means of a perpetual almanack, that an eclipse of the sun or moon would take place on the very day when it happened. Their notion of the cause of an eclipse is the most preposterous and ridiculous, that ever entered into the head, even of an heathen. They say, that the devil is come to devour the sun or moon, and falls to work to gnaw off the edge; that therefore it is necessary he should be driven away; consequently all the sorcerers or paters assemble, and amidst singular and hideous grimaces, throw up their spears towards the luminary attacked, all the villagers sounding their gonggongs with the greatest violence, to frighten away the voracious invader. After some time, their efforts succeed, and he must betake himself to flight, without effecting his purpose.

Though we endeavoured, in every possible way, to explain to them how an eclipse was occasioned, and they seemed in some degree to comprehend it, they only declared us to be the greatest paters that had ever been on the island, but ascribed the deliverance of the sun or moon from the fangs of the devil, solely to the skill and power of their sorcerers, and all we could say to prevail upon them, for once to be quiet, and observe how the luminary would regain its former appearance, by those means which God the Creator Himself had ordained, was in vain. The expulsion of the devil from a sick person or family, is a ceremony as singular as it is silly, but as I have frequently been a spectator of this farcical performance, a description of it may not be uninteresting to you. I have before observed, that if their medicines, (many of which are very powerful), or, as they will have it, their incantations, are of no avail, they then ascribe the illness to the immediate agency of the infernal spirit, who must be subdued and caught.

The pater, previous to the commencement of his operations, summons all the young men in the village, to assist him in constructing a small raft, of light wood. Three poles are fixed upon it, to represent masts, and some bamboos laid across like oars. The masts are hung with young white cocoa-leaves. This toy, which they call Hanmai, they place between two palongs, each rowed by a crew of stout young men, with a piece of rattan, as a towing-rope, fixed to it. Every rower carries five spears, besides his oar. They now wait with great eagerness for the pater's further orders. He has meanwhile begun his work, which he finds either hard or easy of performance, according as the patients are rich or poor.

He is stark naked, and painted all over with various colours, making as terrific an appearance as possible, to frighten the devil, and indeed it is enough to terrify any man, to see him brandishing a short clumsy bludgeon, which he holds up with both hands, and dancing in the most furious manner. He accompanies his gesticulations with the most horrible yells and howlings, and at length is fortunate enough to seize the enemy by a leg, an arm, or even by the hair of his head, which the poor deluded people believe, without seeing what he grasps. Now the whole company rush towards the water, and the pater deposits the supposed devil on board the raft, on which the palongs row off with the greatest possible expedition, dragging the captive out to sea, to a considerable distance, when, having turned him and his vehicle adrift, they row back with the utmost speed to shore.

For two days the enemy may survive this rough usage, and again land in safety, if driven on shore by the tide or wind, but on the third day he must die. Should he land at another village, he then does the mischief there, which he was prevented doing at the former place. The worst consequence of such an unfortunate conclusion of the business is, that the greatest enmity immediately takes place between the two villages, and nothing can atone for the aggression, but a formal combat.

The village invaded sends a challenge to the former, and a day is fixed for the battle. The captains of all the neighbouring villages having met to a consultation, the combatants are chosen, and as there are others who wish to take advantage of so just a mode of settling their disputes, they are summoned to appear. One has stolen something, another run off with his neighbour's wife, and the like. All these people now meet, both the injured and the guilty, and each being provided with a sufficient supply of long sticks, of the Mango tree, they proceed to the place of rendezvous.

There the captains examine the sticks, and those that are too thick are thrown away. This being done, two of the combatants step out, and lay about each other's back and head, till one of the party is obliged to give up. A second couple follow, and after them others, till in a proper space of time, the whole company has got a good drubbing. The most innocent among them are generally the worst handled; however, the business is now decided, and all are convinced, that whoever was first obliged to give up, was the offender. Peace is thus restored, both parties being perfectly satisfied with so wise and just a decision, nor could anything we said, convince them of the folly and wickedness of such superstitious and injurious practices.

LETTER VII.

You wish to know what were the chief external causes of the failure of our exertions; and ask, whether our residence on the island had been with the consent of the natives, or whether they considered us as intruders. The latter circumstance was guarded against by a regular treaty made in December between the Brethren, and the captain and inhabitants of the village Malacca, near to which they had made their settlement. They then obtained legal possession of that piece of land, which they occupied. Such presents as the natives required, were delivered, and the terms contained in the treaty fully explained, to them; after which the principal men signed their names, by drawing a pen with ink over the letters, as written with a pencil. The neighbouring village likewise received a proper consideration for a treaty of friendship with them, and now the Brethren were looked upon no longer as Kaleng, "foreigners;" but as Bajou Tripjet, "natives at Tripjet."

Objections were however started, when they began to build their dwelling-house; and some wicked people endeavoured to raise suspicions in the minds of their countrymen, as to the intentions of the Missionaries. The latter were, for some time after, in danger of their lives, from the fickle disposition of their new friends; but the Lord preserved them. Their upright intentions were at length acknowledged, and ever after all due respect and confidence shown to them by all the inhabitants of Nancauwery. The failure of the Mission was owing to other causes, of which I will mention some, according to my view of the subject. First, the extreme difficulty of learning the language. We had indeed an opportunity of speaking with some of the natives, in a kind of bastard Portuguese, but it would by no means answer the purpose of preaching the gospel to them in general. It was their own native language, of which we wished to acquire a sufficient knowledge, thereby to gain access to the whole nation.

To this end, a pater, called Philip, was engaged as language-master. A few of the Missionaries made some proficiency, notwithstanding the peculiar difficulties attending the study; for impediments arise even from the habits of the natives. Their language is in itself very poor in words and expressions, and they are of so indolent a turn, that even talking seems a trouble to them; and as long as they can express, by signs, what they mean, they are unwilling to open their mouths. If a stranger comes into their houses, they sit still and look at him, or perhaps, pointing to some food, motion to him to sit down and eat. There he may sit for hours, without hearing a syllable spoken, unless he can himself begin, when they will answer with friendliness.

Again, both men and women have always a huge quid of the betel, or areca-nut in their mouths, which renders their speech so indistinct, that if you ask them the names of the various objects before them, you can hardly distinguish between the sputtering sounds they make. Often were we obliged to tell pater Philip to take his quid out of his mouth, that we might hear what he attempted to articulate. As to books and vocabularies, we found none, nor could we make any, while our knowledge of the language was so imperfect. Secondly, the unhealthiness of the climate; by which most of the Missionaries were carried off before they could learn the language, or just when they had got so far, that they were able to speak to the natives. During the comparatively short period of the existence of the Mission, eleven worthy Missionaries found their graves in Nancauwery, and thirteen more, shortly after their return to Tranquebar, in consequence of the malignant fevers and obstructions in the liver, contracted in the island.