

LITERATURE.

KEPPEL'S VISIT TO THE INDIAN ARCHIPELAGO.*

Captain Keppel enriches our store of voyages and travels with two delightful volumes. A thorough sailor, he is also a man of varied accomplishments, and of poetic taste. His book embraces a large sweep of sea—a large extent of ground. He gives us, perhaps, the very best account of Labuan, and earnestly defends the ruler of Sarawak. The voyager, leaving the coast of New Guinea, reaches New Ireland. Truly, there does not seem to us much in common with the New and the Old: but let the reader judge:—

We were visited along the whole length of the coast by a constant succession of canoes, with natives very similar to those of the Feejee islands. Although they came alongside, none of them could be induced to come on board. They had a vast quantity of hair, frizzed out, and coloured white, black, or red. A man, having his hair carefully divided down the middle, would present one side covered with a jet-black mixture, while the other half would be of a bright red, or perhaps white. The men, five or six in number, belonging to the same canoe, were generally coloured uniformly. Suppose a canoe with a black crew to have paddled up to one side of the ship, presently, while your attention was occupied elsewhere, they would shift round to the other side; but, lo! now the crew were white. It is not easy to believe that black is white, yet here it was so: one and the same crew were black on the port and white on the star-board side. Others with their hair cut short, and covered over with some dirty thick glaucous substance, would paint a white ring round the head just above the eyes and ears, with a line under the chin. It was difficult to believe that the head was not confined in a close-fitting skull-cap. The symmetry of their shape was in no way hidden by clothes, as paint was the only covering they condescended to wear. One and all were clamorous for barter: empty bottles, buttons, and bits of iron hoop, were most in demand. Clothes, or the material for making them, were treated with great contempt. Their canoes were carved out of one tree, and generally from thirty to fifty feet in length: they have outriggers, to give them stability, which were very inconvenient for coming alongside. We were puzzled at one time to make out the use of a curiously-formed piece of wood, about four feet long and in shape very like a whale boat, but solid: from a hole in the centre descended a strong cord of twisted rattan, forming a running noose, like a hangman's knot. The mystery was solved shortly after. As I was leaning out of the cabin windows, when there was just sufficient wind to give the ship steerage-way, I observed a shark swimming leisurely along some twenty fathoms below the surface. The natives, from their canoes, observed the monster about the same time. In a few minutes, several of these oddly-shaped buoys were dropped into the water. Some of our people fancy they saw them sprinkle a powder in a sort of magic circle round the buoys; I did not observe them use any bait; what charm they used, if any, we did not ascertain; but certain it is that the shark shortly after rose, and was fool enough to shove his head into the fatal noose, when he was as completely hanged in his own element as ever rogue was from the gallows-tree. The buoyancy of the float prevented his diving with it. Having flourished his tail about for twenty minutes, he was drawn up by his head on a level with the water, and there belaboured with the heavy end of their paddles until he seemed satisfied that further resistance was useless; they then tumbled him bodily into the canoe, and hurried on shore amidst the yelling of the whole flotilla; where, no doubt, he underwent the further process of dissection.

There can be no doubt that the parties visited were cannibals; but then when they kill an enemy they only eat "the palm of his hand, or some such dainty bit."

Having pulled along the beach to the northward for a short distance, outside the harbour, we landed opposite to some fishing huts; and, striking into the forest, followed a jungle-path for about a mile: this brought us to a collection of perhaps two hundred huts; they scarcely, however, deserved that name, each dwelling being nothing more than a circular hole, three feet deep, over which a thatch was thrown, and into which we were obliged to creep on all fours. The women were certainly not shy; both sexes were "dressed" alike in a small apron made from the bark of a tree. Furniture they had none, and little to tempt us to prolong our visit; while myriads of ravenous mosquitos made the usual attack on the pale-skins. Not seeing any gardens, and knowing the natives to have supplied the ship well with vegetables, we made them to understand our curiosity on the subject: they explained that their cultivated ground was further off, and offered to show us the way. They led us by a pleasant walk through the jungle; we met on our way several detached parties of men, women, and children, carrying on their heads to the village the daily supply of vegetables, consisting of yams, cassava root, and plantains. Half an hour brought us to the banks of a broad and rapid stream, tumbling and roaring over rocks and large stones. The water through which we had to wade was about three feet deep. On the opposite side were the gardens. We were astonished, not only at the neatness and pretty appearance of the ground, but at the order that prevailed where no one appeared to rule. Each section of the village seemed to have its allotted portion. Parties arrived, out and carried their vegetables away in perfect quiet. Our party roamed about in twos and threes, while the savages were in tens and twenties: this, however, was scarcely prudent, as they might, had they been in the humour, have easily disposed of the white men. All accounts describe the natives about Carteret harbour as not only grasping and avaricious, but treacherous and cunning cannibals. One man, who spoke a little English, denied to me that they ever ate men: he, however, admitted that when they killed an enemy they occasionally eat the palm of his hand, or some such dainty bit. We got away from these dreadful characters without having been molested in any way; although on the afternoon previous to our visit to the village one of the officers had found it necessary to protect himself from robbery in a summary manner. He had been shooting, but had discharged his gun just before getting into a canoe with two natives, who offered to convey him on board. An attempt was made by them to take forcible possession of his watch; but, being a very powerful young man, he threw one of the savages into the water, and, standing over the other prepared to break his head with the butt-end of his gun, compelled him to paddle alongside.

The legal decisions of the courts of Sarawak are remarkably interesting. We prefer, however, the description of a marriage ceremony:

The bride was a niece of my old acquaintance Mina, the Datu Patingue's wife; the bridegroom was young Kassan, who was residing with the Datu Bandar. The event created, from the rank of the parties, a great sensation at Sarawak. For a whole month previous to the actual ceremony, firing of cannon and display of flags, feasting and merry-making, had been going on at the houses of the respective parents. The ceremony took place at Mina's new residence. A large square space was fitted up in one corner of the room, and handsomely decorated: here were placed the bridal couches, the two last covered with handsome mats; and at the head of each there was a pile of pillows which nearly reached to the ceiling. The couches were surrounded by one or two sets of curtains, ready to be let down at pleasure; and the spaces between the latter and the couches were decorated in gorgeous style, with cloth of gold, artificial flowers, and numerous other ornaments. Chairs (an unsightly innovation) were placed in the centre of the room for the Europeans, on which we had to wait a considerable time. Gradually the room began to fill with the ladies of Sarawak and their children. They seated themselves in their more primitive posture, all squatting on the floor, while the men collected outside. In one corner we observed the bride seated on an ornamental mattress, and surrounded by a crowd of women, who were busy dressing and decorating the poor girl; she drooped her head and affected to be, or I dare say she was, very nervous, but did not say a word. However, the head-dress, covered all over with gold flowers and ornaments, having been completed to the satisfaction of the elderly ladies, she was led to the bridal couch, where she was seated. The men sit cross-legged; the posture of the women is more graceful, both feet being inclined on one side, and bent back. We noticed that each young lady closely scrutinised the bride, and pretended to detect something in the dress that required a snishing pinch: some fanned her, and all looked a little envious. Her dress was very handsome, and in good taste: the baju (jacket) was of shot silk, embroidered with gold, and was of native manufacture; the saluar (trousers) of rich silk; one sarong, likewise of silk, was fastened round the waist by a gold belt, and reached to the ankles: while a lighter one was worn over the right shoulder and across the breast: her arms were loaded with massive gold bracelets, and she wore on her left hand a profusion of rings; a handkerchief was held in her right hand, as is considered indispensable by Malays of rank. The young bride had a narrow escape of being very pretty; the upper part of her face really was so, but the lower jaw was a little too square and prominent. From the number in the room, we had an opportunity of forming an opinion as to the looks of Malay women, which were decidedly pleasing: a few of the damsels particularly so. Those of our party who had been living long enough to have got over their English prejudices, pointed out two or three whom they declared to be downright handsome. The women of the lower classes have, however, so much household drudgery to perform, that their good looks soon wear out. The men, although small, are strong-limbed and well-proportioned; but their features are hard and ugly. Our bride having been kept in proper suspense for some time, the approach of the bridegroom, who had been fitting out at his relation's (the Baudar's), was announced. Kassan, having landed from his barge (a new Siamese boat, lent for the occasion by the Rajah), was borne by four men on a kind of chair to the door of the room, preceded by men carrying ornaments of artificial flowers. On his alighting here, some Hadjis (men who have made a pilgrimage to Mecca) uttered a prayer, which was three times responded to by the whole assemblage. After this, Kassan struck the threshold of the room with his foot three times, and then walking up to the bridal couch between two men, he gently touched his wife over the head with a wand, and placed his right foot in her lap, and then retreating a couple of paces, he sat down on the adjoining couch. Kassan was dressed, as well as his bride, in cloth of gold. He wore silk trousers, and over them a sarong, short, like a kilt; another sarong, crossing over his right shoulder and under the left arm, and a crown of gold flowers on his head, completed his costume. As this was all the ceremony we were allowed to see, we left the room, in which I understand the wedded pair have to remain shut up for seven days.

The ceremony of suttee obtains, and Captain Keppel describes a self-sacrifice of the kind entered upon and suffered with terrible composure by the devoted victim. Truly the "family of man" numbers some strange members!

* A Visit to the Indian Archipelago, in H. M. ship *Mreander*. With portions of the Private Journal of Sir James Brooke, K.C.B. By Captain the Honourable Henry Keppel, R.N. With Illustrations by Oswald W. Brierley. In two volumes. Published by Bentley.