

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

QUEDAH; OR, STRAY LEAVES FROM A JOURNAL IN MALAYAN WATERS. By Captain OSBORN, R.N. *Loungman, & Paternoster-row.*—This is a very amusing narrative of a midshipman's exploits twenty years ago, in the Eastern Archipelago. The country of Quedah was laid claim to by the Siamese, and their claim being duly recognised by England, some ships of war were appointed to enforce it. Captain Osborn, then a midshipman, was placed in command of a gun-boat, which he seems to have handled with expertness. His style of writing is agreeable, and the volume may be pronounced entertaining and lively.

ALLIGATORS.

The alligators were not to be frightened, although they took uncommonly good care not to enter into any of the personal combats upon the mud which the Malays, and after them the English sailors, were constantly trying to entrap them into. The numbers of these loathsome brutes to be seen at a time was extraordinary; but whatever might be the danger of falling in with them, if wading or swimming alone through these waters, there was no doubt of their being arrant cowards when fallen in with on shore. With the rising tide, the alligators generally found their way up to the edge of the jungle, and there lay among the roots of the trees (which they strongly resembled), as if waiting for cattle, or wild animals, that might come down to drink: we, however, never saw them catch anything during a period of several months. The ebbing tide would often thus leave the brutes several hundred yards from the edge of the water, and very much they seemed to enjoy themselves when so left, with an Indian sun pouring down upon their tough hides; and, as if in the very height of the *dolce far niente*, they would open back their hideous jaws, and remain in that position for more than an hour at a time. As to trying to shoot them, we soon found it mere waste of time, as well as of powder and ball; for, mortally wounded or not, they invariably carried themselves far beyond our reach. The Malay sailors showed us how, at any rate, we could frighten the alligators exceedingly, even if we could not capture them—by landing lightly equipped with a sharp spear or boarding-pike, and thus obliging the reptile to make a long *detour* to escape being assailed. Occasionally I have seen the men, by dint of great activity, get near enough to fling their weapons and strike the alligators: but as in such cases they invariably struck the upper part of the back, they might as well have tried to spear a rock. The natives showed the utmost indifference to the presence of alligators in their neighbourhood, and, when questioned upon the subject, asserted that in salt or brackish water, at the mouths of rivers, the alligator was never dangerous to man; and that it was only up rivers, and in marshy places, where they lived, as it were, amongst human beings, that they screwed up their courage to indulge in such a dangerous luxury as eating men or women. Of the enormous strength and extraordinary vitality of these reptiles, we had a pretty good proof; for one evening, when the pinnace, as usual, dropped alongside the weir to take out fish for the evening meal, the men who went into the "pocket" to see what had been caught, were obliged to move their legs nimbly to escape the gin-like jaws of a good-sized alligator which had got into the weir after the fish, and, having devoured them, could not escape. The pinnace-men cheered with delight, and proceeded at once to capture the prisoner. It was, however, a good tough job: the brute, some ten or twelve feet long, lay in the bottom of an enclosed space of about equal diameter; the water was about three feet deep, and extremely muddy, rendered more so by the splashings and convulsions of the animal. Attempts were at first made to thrust sharp boarding-pikes down through his hide; and from the height the seamen stood over the creature, and the weight they were able to bring to bear upon the pikes, it appeared probable that some weak spot would be found. But, no; although sometimes eight or nine powerful men pressed down with as many pikes, the brute did not suffer a scratch; and, incredible as it may appear, more than one of our boarding-pikes, strong as they are, were bent in the neck. It was evident that a soft spot must be sought for under his "calipash," as, in imitation of turtle, the men called his upper coat of armour. Every man armed himself with some weapon or other, and stirred up the alligator with a vengeance. He became perfectly furious; and lashed about his tail and snapped his jaws in a very spiteful manner: the fun waxed warm; the "click" of the teeth as the mouth closed, sounding uncommonly unpleasant, apart from the cracking of boat-hook staffs, and other articles, as if they were mere twigs. At last a good noose was slipped over the creature's head and hauled tight round his neck; this enabled the seamen to administer a multitude of wounds which would have let its life out had it had more than the usual number. But it was a long time before it was deemed sufficiently safe to be hauled out of the weir, and towed to one of the gun-boats to be dissected and skinned; and even then the muscular action of portions of the body, the tail especially, whilst being cut into pieces, was something extraordinary; and denoted how strong is the vitality of all this reptile tribe. I, and others, tasted a cutlet of alligator's flesh, and although it was not particularly nice, still there was nothing about it disagreeable: some compared it to very bad veal cutlets; for my part, it tasted very much as turtle-collops would, which is not saying much in its favour.

HORRID TORTURE.

Inchi Laa paid us a long visit one evening, and, unsought by us, proceeded to detail fearful stories of the cruelties exercised by the Siamese. At the time, I gave him credit for magnifying facts; but from other sources, such as Jamboe, who knew a good deal of the Siamese habits, and a Malay man in my crew, who had served in a Siamese naval force equipped at Bangkok, I heard sufficient to verify some of the horrid atrocities committed. Many of their cruelties will not bear repetition; but two refined modes of torture I will venture to describe; and the Inchi assured me that some of their unhappy countrymen and women had been subjected to them. One was cooking a human being alive: a hollow tree, either naturally so, or

scooped out by manual labour, was left with merely its bare stem standing; into it a prisoner was put naked, his hands tied behind his back, and a large piece of fat lashed on his head; the tree was then carefully coated with an unctuous mud, to prevent its ignition, or, if it did ignite, that it might merely smoulder, and then a slow steady fire was maintained round it, the unfortunate victim's sufferings being by these means terribly prolonged, his shrieks and exclamations being responded to by the exultant shouts of his executioners. Another torture was that of carrying the pirate or rebel down to the banks of a river where a peculiar species of palm-tree grows, and choosing a spot in the mud where the sprout of a young plant was just found shooting upwards, which it does at the rate of several inches in twenty-four hours, they would construct a platform around it, and lash their miserable victim in a sitting posture over the young tree, so that its lance-like point should enter his body, and bring on mortification and death by piercing the intestines—in short, a slow mode of impaling. Of the possibility of this last torture being performed I can almost vouch for, although not botanist enough to name the peculiar species of palm-tree which is used, I have often seen it growing both on the banks of the Setoue and Parlis rivers.

Captain Osborn gives the following amusing tale, as told by the coxswain:—

THE GREAT SNAKE.

Crossing his legs, renewing his quid, and shouting to his men to "give way!" and beat No. 2 gun-boat, he then proceeded to relate how, in former days, the rajahs of Quedah were bound by a law, whenever a new king ascended the throne, or when war was declared with another state, to sacrifice a virgin daughter of the royal family to an enormous boa-constrictor, or *oular-besar*, that dwelt on the Lancavas, though it would occasionally visit the Malay continent. In return for this delicate tribute, the *oular-besar* abstained from feeding largely on the Quedah folk, confining its attention to Siamese, or people of Merqui, and such-like *canaille*; and it even extended its good offices to watching over the homes and wives of its Malay friends, who were absent upon little innocent cruises at sea. Indeed, so far had they succeeded in propitiating its goodwill, that on a hostile fleet of prahus appearing suddenly off this very bay, the generous boa-constrictor stretched itself across from one point of it to the other as a boom, and defied all the efforts of the enemy to enter. Jades pointed first to one horn of Malacca Bay and then the other, and though they were a couple of miles apart, I'm bound to say Jades did not blush, as he added, "and that will give you, oh! my officer, some idea of its length." I coughed, and said I should like to have seen that snake's mother. My coxswain's feelings were hurt, he was silent, until I gently smoothed down his feathers by asking what might have been the end of this very amiable monster. He continued, "When Mahomet, may his tomb exhale unceasingly the odour of holiness!—sent holy men to show the poor Malays the road to Paradise, the Haggis said it was wrong to sacrifice, even to such a big snake, and the king's daughters were not sent to feed the *oular-besar*. The creature became very annoyed, and the consequence was he almost cleared the Island of Lancavas of its population and cattle. All schemes failed to check its wrath, prayers were offered up in all the mosques, but for our previous sins the *oular-besar* still lived, and still kept swallowing up Malays, until the fields were left untilled, and the country was fast becoming one great forest. At last Allah sent relief, as he always does to the faithful. One day, a most holy man, an Arab Sheik, famous for his piety and knowledge of the word of God, arrived at Quedah; he exhorted all the people to remain firm in their new faith, for some of them were backsliders, and thought of the good old times. He pointed out to them that the wrath of the *oular-besar* was only a means to test their faith; but that now Allah was satisfied, and had sent him to put a stop to their sorrows. The holy man now prayed, and all the people with him; and then he took ship, and proceeded to the Lancavas, anchoring near the place where we destroyed the prahu. The holy man performed his ablutions, said his prayers, put on his green turban, and balancing the Koran on his head, landed at once either to drive the *oular-besar* away or to die. Down came the snake from those distant valleys, and looked wistfully at the high-dried, tough old Arab; and the poor boa-constrictor no doubt sighed at the remembrance of bygone tit-bits. The holy man spread his carpet, and began to pray; the *oular-besar* wrapt him in one fold of its deadly grasp, and a shriek of "God is great!" rang in the ears of his shipmates, as he disappeared down the throat of the monster—turban, Koran, and all. Instead of the *oular-besar* reposing, as was to be expected, while it digested the venerable Haggi, a violent fury seemed to seize it; its whole body writhed in a perfect frenzy, it raised its head high above the loftiest trees, its eyes flashed lightning, and for a few minutes the creature seemed upon the point of dashing into the sea; then, with a hiss that made the beholders' blood curdle in their veins, it shot swiftly away in the direction of the mountains, and since that day the *oular-besar* has never been seen, and its brethren generally prefer pigs, poultry, and game to true believers!"—"Wonderful!" I exclaimed; "and so no one has ever seen the big snake since?"—"No one, Tuhan. The words of the holy man came true; for when did a Haggi tell a lie?—but some of the gold-seekers who scale those mountains you see in the direction of Patani, report that in a deep and narrow valley, there is to be seen the vast bones of a big snake around a long green stone, which doubtless, as Allah is great, are the remains of the *oular-besar*, and that most virtuous priest."