

A MALAY AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

Translations from the Hakayit Abdulla (bin Abdulkadar), Munshee.
With Comments. By J. T. Thomson, F.R.G.S. King and Co.

Although "good wine needs no bush," a good book may be the better for an intelligible title-page. Mr Thomson's readers would not have been discouraged by being told that "Hakayit" means autobiography, and that the autobiographer is neither a Turk nor a Persian, but a Malay. "The Straits of Malacca," indeed, did not prove altogether such a phrase to conjure with as Mr Disraeli hoped to make it during last general election. There is, nevertheless, quite sufficient to stimulate an enlightened curiosity respecting them, if only from the magnitude of British commercial interests concerned, and the very serious interest attaching to the struggle which is testing the mettle of the Dutch in Sumatra. It was a grievous error on our part to allow a religious war to be stirred up which may any day extend to our own dominions. The Mohammedan element throughout our Eastern empire is evidently in a most combustible state, and it will be our undeserved good fortune if no spark is communicated from the focus of fiery fanaticism which we have permitted to be kindled in Atchin. In the prospect of such a contingency it is interesting to learn how our rule stands in the estimation of an intelligent native, not too civilised to pass as a fair approximate type of his countrymen. Abdulla bin Abdulkadar, Munshee, is not indeed quite so much of a representative Malay as could have been desired. He is of Arab extraction, and by blood as well as by education above the level of the pure aborigines. He has associated largely with Europeans of station, and though no sycophant, but remaining true to his class and creed, he has imbibed a liberality of sentiment foreign to his countrymen in general. A more thoroughly typical specimen, however, could not have written anything, for the best of reasons; and even in Abdulla's pages there

is quite enough to convince a thoughtful reader of the width of the chasm intervening between European and native, and at the same time to indicate the way to bridge it over. "The translation will show," remarks the translator, "how unflinching esteem may be generated in the native mind by just conduct and refined manners." Every page bears testimony to the truth of this observation. It is impossible to note Abdulla's profound respect for Sir Stamford Raffles and Colonel Farquhar, or to peruse his naïve and grateful account of his cure by the English surgeon, without acknowledging that justice, integrity, and humanity will no more fail of their legitimate effect in Malacca than in England. It is also agreeable to feel justified in the conclusion that our countrymen have not, as a body, fallen short in these qualities. Every Englishman known to Abdulla was not a Raffles, but his estimate of the national character, taken as a whole, is obviously a high one. The benefits of English administration are also by no means thrown away upon him; he would have returned a very brief and decisive answer to the interrogatories on the comparative advantages of English and native rule, recently propounded for official discussion in India. It is certainly apparent that the native system is not so black as he paints it. His own indictment of the aboriginal chiefs contains incidental evidence of the existence of good rulers among them, and of the prosperity attainable under such. It is, however, equally illustrative of the cardinal defect of Asiatic despotisms, the absence of any continuity in the maxims of administration, and the consequent dependence of the people upon the character of the reigning ruler. When this is bad, as is generally the case, "the slaves of God have no redress but to the Lord, who sees and hears the howlings and lamentations of mankind." It is otherwise with a Government proceeding on settled principles. Raffles's successors, Mr Thomson assures us, have been eminent for nothing but their champagne, but there has been no more "howling and lamentation" in their day than in his. Mr Thomson, it is fair to point out, has inherited the ancient feud of the "interlopers" with the East India Company, and writes under strong prepossessions against the Civil Service. He clearly would not have appreciated Raffles if he had lived under his authority. As it is, we are exceedingly indebted to him for rendering accessible Abdulla's graphic portrait of this illustrious Englishman, and for recording his obligations to his first wife, unhand-somely suppressed by her successor. Excluded, it appears, by some misunderstandings from the official society of the Straits Settlements, Mrs Raffles turned the mortification to the noblest account by devoting herself to her husband, whose education had been somewhat neglected; until, as Abdulla prettily says, "they matched as a ring and its jewels."

Abdulla was himself a conspicuous example of the advantages of education, owing his intercourse with the great to his standing as one of the only five persons qualified at the time to transcribe and compose Malay out of a population of 60,000 souls. This he owed to his father, a kind of Malay James Mill, whose methods of instruction, however, appealed more energetically to the physical sensibilities than would have been approved of by that philosopher. He was born in 1797, two years after the capture of Malacca by the English, and was employed by Government about 1808. The concentration of troops for the expedition against Java followed, and gave him the opportunity of making many interesting observations, especially upon what appeared to him the inexplicable manners and customs of the Sepoy contingent. He also became acquainted with an imposition practised upon Raffles by his native agents, of which he gives a most dramatic account. After the temporary restoration of Malacca to the Dutch he accompanied Raffles and Farquhar to Singapore, and gives some interesting particulars of the creation of that Alexandria of the Eastern seas. Succeeding governors seem to have made less use of him, but he discovered a new field for his talents in teaching Malay to the missionaries, and assisting them in their translations of the Scriptures. He does not appear to have found them in general very apt pupils, and complains that the first version printed, being nothing better than "a Bible

in Malay words but in English idioms," abounded with ungrammatical phrases, of which he got the credit. One source of error, he says, is the European student's confidence in his grammar, whose rules, accurate perhaps so far as they go, fail to cover a vast number of exceptions, only to be learned orally from the native teacher. Mr Thomson confirms this, and adds, "It is needless to conceal the fact that no one can critically understand Asiatic or any other languages without living with and mixing amongst the people, and I never saw an educated European that would do this, missionary or any one else." On his own showing however, an exception must be made in favour of the Catholic missionaries. The Protestants, Mr Thomson says, are rather schoolmasters than religious teachers, and his receipt for ensuring their success is that they should take unto themselves native wives. We think it probable that conversions would ensue, but whose? The effect of intercourse with the missionaries on Abdulla himself is precisely what might have been expected—he parts with his bigotry but retains his principles. Mr Thomson laboured to make the doctrine of the Trinity clear to his apprehension, but only succeeded in entangling himself in a labyrinth of heretical pravity. He told Abdulla that the Three Persons respectively denoted the Past, the Present, and the Future, totally oblivious of the Athanasian dictum that in this Trinity none is afore or after another. We fear that he is in a bad way; and, sensible as we are of our obligations to him, can only take example by the debtors and malefactors of Malacca, who, when Lord Minto had released them, and demolished their prison, and thrown the instruments of torture into the sea, in a transport of enthusiasm, joined in imploring Heaven that the infernal regions might be made as comfortable for their benefactor as possible.

This excellent story will serve to illustrate the gulf interposed between Europeans and Orientals, not so much by religious differences as by the paralysed condition of intellectual life among the latter. They think and feel precisely as Europeans did at the period of the Crusades, and we must endeavour to conceive ourselves in their present situation if we would fully apprehend the debt we owe to scientific knowledge and classical literature. The latter instrument of culture is not available for Orientals. The former is; and numerous instances might be cited from these pages to show that, even on a very restricted scale of application, it is by no means inefficient. Our friend Abdulla, unlike the former king of Siam, is ready to believe in railroads and steamboats without having seen them, and occupies a totally different intellectual status to those among his countrymen to whom it seems quite natural that the English Government should send out convicts to collect heads. The peculiar cast of his education and his social position have produced effects observable any day in England. In his self-complacency, his pride in his patrons, his eagerness to push and recommend himself, his somewhat fussy zeal for the purity of the language he teaches, he is a perfect type of the successful private schoolmaster. It should be added, that his linguistic accomplishments were considerable, including some knowledge of English and Arabic, and a pretty complete one of Hindustani and Tamil. The autobiography is brought down to 1843; the writer died about twenty years afterwards.

We have only been able to present a mere outline of this most entertaining and suggestive book. The diction is nervous and racy, duly sprinkled with Oriental metaphors, and in some parts as full of proverbs as a speech of Sancho Panza's. The translator's comments are not the least valuable portion. They are occasionally superfluous, and not seldom betray prejudice, but are in general highly pertinent, and their quaint, unconventional style is fully in keeping with the text.

R. G.