

## MR. THOMSON'S STRAITS OF MALACCA, INDO-CHINA AND CHINA.

*The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China, or Ten Years' Travels, Adventures and Residence Abroad.* By J. Thomson, F.R.G.S., Author of 'Illustrations of China and its People.' Sampson Low, and Co.

In the present volume, Mr. Thomson takes us to the British Settlements in South-Eastern Asia, to the remains of ancient civilisation in Cambodia, and to the banks of the Mekong in French Cochin China, before he reaches his old ground of China Proper. The contents are therefore more varied, and on the whole even more interesting, than those of his former valuable and elaborate work. The lively and graphic descriptions here given of the Malay Peninsula and its islands, illustrated from the author's masterly photographs, leave little or nothing to be desired. The small but important British possession of Penang, to which he first draws our attention, would seem to be a paradise as to the salubrity of its climate and the picturesque beauty of its scenery, "its belt of bright yellow sand and its crown of luxuriant tropical vegetation." "The shaded paths on the wooded hills, which rise over 2,000 feet above the sea, lead to the most charming retreats in the world; to bungalows nestling among rocks and foliage, and to cascades where clear cool water falls into natural basins of granite beneath." To enjoy this paradise, however, it would be well to share the tastes of the entomologist, insect life being superabundant. "Soon after sunrise, the noise of awakening beetles and tree-loving insects is so great as to drown the bellowing of a bull or the roar of a tiger a few paces off. The sound resembles most nearly the metallic whirr of a hundred Bradford looms. One beetle in particular, known to the natives as the 'trumpeter,' busies himself all day long in producing a booming noise with his wings." Twig and leaf insects are plentiful, and so, of course, are moths and butterflies, surpassing the flowers in the brilliancy of their hues; and some of them attaining the enormous size of twelve inches across the wings.

Among the various races which inhabit this beautiful and fertile island, the most successful is the irrepressible Chinaman, who "out of his own country, enjoying the security and prosperity which a more liberal administration confers, seems to develop into somewhat like a new being." A settler in Penang is immediately introduced to a Chinese contractor who is ready to supply him with all the comforts of life. "It is to Chinamen that the foreign resident is indebted for almost all his comforts, and for the profusion of luxuries which surround his wonderfully European-looking home on this distant island." But there is another and a less pleasant side to the picture. Guilds and secret societies abound among the Chinese, which too often succeed in shielding offenders from justice, and it is to these societies that the disturbances at Singapore in 1872 are to be attributed. Mr. Thomson describes at length the "Sam-sings" or fighting men, some of whom are held in pay by each guild, and who were concerned on that occasion. He adds that in China the reverence for parents operates in maintaining order, as they are liable to be punished for the misconduct of their children. The absence of family ties amongst the immigrants consequently makes it difficult to deal with them. If the coolies were accompanied by their families and the free immigration of Chinese women encouraged, Mr. Thomson thinks it would have a good effect. He adds that the latter make excellent domestic servants.

Singapore, which not many years ago was a mere desolate, jungle-clad island, is now a place of advancing trade and luxurious living. Here wealthy and orderly Chinese are numerous, but so are Chinese thieves and robbers. These are said to use narcotics known only to themselves to stupefy their victims. Mr. Thomson tells several amusing stories of the dexterity with which these burglars conduct their enterprises. From Singapore, our traveller proceeded to Bangkok, and he describes his first view of the city in these words:—

My first ideas as to the splendour of this oriental city were gathered at dawn, when I was gazing on the towers and roofs of more than half-a-hundred temples, standing each of them in its own consecrated ground. I inquired of what material these strange edifices were made, for their towers seemed ablaze as with jewels and sparkled like refined gold. The thought (I confess) crossed my mind, how great a profit some powerful Christian government might secure by despoiling these beathen idols and pulling down these summer-palace looking shrines! But the reply to my inquiry somewhat modified my views, and I learnt to my disappointment that these temples are nothing more than brick and mortar embellished with gilding, foreign soup-plates, and bits of coloured glass.

This discovery must have caused some such revulsion of feeling as that described by Mr. Ruskin when he found that a resplendent object which excited his admiration, even amid the grandeur of Alpine scenery, was only the dome of a glass-roofed building. Temple spires in Siam are usually decorated with rich mosaics of glass, porcelain, and enamel, but a trader who had made an unprofitable venture in foreign crockery got it off his hands by persuading a nobleman who was just then engaged in completing a Buddhist shrine, that these wares were highly esteemed as ornaments in European places of worship. The trader lost his reputation by the deceit, but the crockery remains embedded in the mortar. Bangkok is a "floating city," the houses being mostly built on rafts made of bamboos, which are fastened at

each of the four corners to strong piles driven into the bed of the river. The houses built on these rafts are usually so ornamented as to form highly picturesque objects, and the interiors are comfortable and well arranged. In fact they furnish a cool and suitable dwelling even to the most fastidious tastes. They have one rather serious disadvantage, which is that they impede the navigation of the river.

Having applied for leave to photograph the first King's palace, Mr. Thomson was commanded to take his portrait as well. He completed the order successfully, but it would seem to have been a dangerous honour. His majesty first appeared in a robe of spotless white, and desired to be taken in the attitude of prayer, but when everything was ready he suddenly retired. The Prince who was in attendance replied, on being questioned as to the cause of this strange conduct, "The King does everything right, and if I were to accost him now he might conclude his morning's work by cutting off my head." This formidable potentate soon reappeared, clad in a French Field Marshal's uniform. The portrait was taken, and afterwards another in his court robes, in spite of a difficulty about posing him, Mr. Thomson having been warned not to touch his majesty, an etiquette which the monarch most graciously dispensed with. Since this visit, which was in 1865, Siam has greatly improved. The present King having been educated by an English governess, Mrs. Lenowens, and having had constant intercourse with Europeans, "his career is an exceptional one in the history of his country!"

We are given some interesting particulars as to the native music of these races. That of the Siamese is pleasing at times, but too vague. "One hears a few notes, and fancies them the prelude to some sweet soothing measure. The illusion lasts but for a moment; the effect is cut short by a tumult of sounds, and the sweet fragment of melody flies off the instruments like a nightingale startled by the howling of a menagerie let loose." On the contrary, the native airs of the Laotians are full of tenderness and pathos. The author is of opinion that these are a superior race to the Siamese although some thousands of them are held in bondage by the latter.

The chapter in which Mr. Thomson describes the ruined cities and temples of Cambodia will probably be found the most generally interesting. For this, and very much more which is well worth perusal, we must refer our readers to the book itself, only quoting the account of the wonderful grace and beauty of the sculptures. The author first supposes them to have been executed by slave labour, but adds:—

And yet there is a thoroughness about their edifices, and a genuine love of art evinced in all their sculptures—in the tender tracery lavished without stint upon the stones, in the uniform grace of every curving stem, in each delicately-chiselled lotus or lily—such as never could have come out of the lash of the slave, out of ill-requited, unwilling hands, or out of the crushed spirit of a bondsman. We see a love of art in every line of ornament, which speaks of the enthusiasm of a master sculptor glorying in his work, and straining every effort of his hand and head, that nothing might be lacking which could confer excellence on his toil.

The illustrations to this chapter are especially worthy of commendation. We must hasten over the remainder of the volume, though it is all full of curious and entertaining matter, only drawing attention to the numerous particulars relating to the island of Formosa, which its late invasion by the Japanese has brought prominently into notice. Some of the aboriginal tribes are clearly favourites with our author. He describes the Pepohoans as frank, hospitable and honest, but he thinks the Kalee tribes, as well as the Chinese villagers, were concerned in those outrages which caused the Japanese to invade the island.

The latter part of the volume is not altogether new, the writer having reproduced and amplified some passages of his former work for the purpose of making the present one more complete. Mr. Thomson possesses the chief qualities for giving us a first-rate book of travel. He writes in a vivid and picturesque style, though it is at times somewhat too ornate, and he shows great judgment in the selection of topics calculated not only to instruct but also to amuse and interest his readers.