

A
GENERAL COLLECTION
OF THE
BEST AND MOST INTERESTING
VOYAGES AND TRAVELS
IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD;
MANY OF WHICH ARE NOW FIRST TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH.

DIGESTED ON A NEW PLAN.

BY JOHN PINKERTON,
AUTHOR OF MODERN GEOGRAPHY, &c. &c.

ILLUSTRATED WITH PLATES.

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EMBASSY TO AVA;
SENT BY THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF INDIA IN THE YEAR 1795.

BY MICHAEL SYMES, ESQ.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL IN HIS MAJESTY'S 76TH REGIMENT*.

CHAP. I. — *Consent to go to Pegue before the Return of Mr. Wood. — Suspensions of the Birmans awakened by designing Persons. — Hospitable Reception experienced by foreign Merchants at Rangoon. — Characters of Men in Office : — Arts used to counteract the English Deputation. — Mr. Wood departs from Rangoon : — Politeness of the Raywoon. — Embark for Pegue : — bring-to during the Ebb of Tide : — Appearance of the Country : — find the Remains of two Deer, half devoured by Tigers. — Rich Soil : — Country destitute of Population, and infested by wild Beasts.*

AT the earnest solicitation of Baba-Sheen, I consented to embark for Pegue on the 31st of March, and not wait the return of Mr. Wood, as I had at first intended. The annual festival at the great temple of Pegue was about to be celebrated with sumptuous magnificence; and the Viceroy had expressed a particular desire that the English gentlemen should witness the rejoicings. I told Baba-Sheen that I would relinquish my original determination on this point, as a mark of my confidence in him, and perfect conviction of the friendly inclinations of the Viceroy.

Previous to this amicable termination of a disagreement which at first bore an inauspicious appearance, I had conjectured what were the real motives of their distrust, and my conclusions afterwards proved to be rightly founded. Pride, the natural characteristic of the Birmans, was inflamed by the arts of designing men, and suspicion was awakened by misrepresentation. The Birmans, sensible of the advantages of commerce, but inexpert in the practice, desirous to improve, but unacquainted with the principles of trade, had of late years given toleration to all sects, and invited strangers of every nation to resort to their ports; and being themselves free from those prejudices of cast, which shackle their Indian neighbours, they permitted foreigners to intermarry and settle amongst them. But their country had been so much harassed by wars with neighbouring nations, and torn by revolts and domestic dissensions, that trade was frequently interrupted, and sometimes entirely stopped; property was rendered insecure, and even the personal safety of settlers endangered. During the short intervals of tranquillity, obscure adventurers, and outcasts from all countries of the east, had flocked to Rangoon, where they were received with hospitality by a liberal nation: among these the industrious few soon acquired wealth by means of their superior knowledge. The Parrees, the Armenians, and a small proportion of Mussulmen, engrossed the largest share of the trade of Rangoon; and individuals, from their number, were frequently selected by government to fill employments of trust that related to trade and transactions with foreigners, the duties of which the Birmans supposed that such per-

* London, 1800. Some chapters are omitted, and the others presented in successive order.

sons could perform better than themselves. Baba-Sheen, born in the Birman country, of Armenian parents, had obtained the high office he held by his skill in business and his general knowledge. The descendant of a Portuguese family, named Jaunsee, whose origin was very low, and who in the early part of his life had been accused as accessory to the piratical seizure of an English vessel, was invested with the important office of shawbunder, or intendant of the port, and receiver of the port customs. This man appeared to perform the duties of his station with diligence. The town of Rangoon was indebted to his activity for the pavement of its streets, for several well-built wooden bridges, and a wharf, which, extending into the river, and raised on posts, enabled the ships to deliver and receive cargoes without the assistance of river craft: under his direction also, a spacious custom-house had lately been erected. This is the only lay building in Rangoon, that is not constructed of wood; it is composed of brick and mortar, and the roof covered with tiles; within, there are a number of wooden stages for the reception of bale goods. Notwithstanding the respect which the energy of Jaunsee's character had obtained, the Birmans were by no means insensible of the meanness of his extraction: his want of education was a matter of derision among them: although an inhabitant of the Birman country near forty years, and a great part of the time an officer of government, he could neither read nor write, and even spoke their language imperfectly. We were unfortunate in his happening to be at Ava at the time of our arrival, whither he had gone to render up his annual accounts: had he been on the spot, it is probable he would have obviated several of the inconvenient circumstances attending our first introduction.

The character of Baba-Sheen was strikingly contrasted with that of the shawbunder: he was a man of general knowledge, and deemed by the Birmans an accomplished scholar; he was better acquainted with the history, politics, and geography of Europe, than any Asiatic I ever conversed with: his learning was universal, being slightly versed in almost every science; but his information, extensive as it was, although it gained him employment, could not procure him confidence: he was said to be deficient in other essential requisites.

Several private merchants had also acquired influence in Rangoon. Bawangee, a Parsee of considerable credit, had interest to procure a partial mitigation of duties on his merchandize, in consideration of supplying annually a certain number of firelocks for the royal arsenal. Jacob Aguizar, an Armenian, to whom I had letters of credit, dealt largely in foreign commodities. These people naturally behold with a jealous eye, any advance of a commercial nature, that may tend to diminish their influence, and deprive them of that dictatorial power, which they assume and exercise over all merchants and mariners that resort to Rangoon: but of none are they so apprehensive as of the English; a connection with whom might teach the Birmans to transact foreign business without their assistance, and give them a more adequate sense of their own interests. Under these fears they had long been disseminating the seeds of suspicion, and warning the Birmans to be on their guard against British fraud, as well as British force; but no sooner did they hear of the present deputation, than the alarm-bell was sounded from all quarters. They represented (as I was credibly informed) our designs to be of the most mischievous tendency; and even endeavoured to work on the superstition of the people, by the solemn promulgation of a prophecy, that in less than twelve months the English colours would fly on the Rangoon flag-staff. These artifices, were not now practised for the first time, although they could not deceive the Birmans, it is probable were not altogether void of effect; nor is it to be wondered at, that our reception, though respectful from the deputation that came down to meet

timbers in the yard, and overlooked the workmen for some hours, after which she returned home, and seldom missed coming back in the evening, to see that the day's task had been completed. The slip on which the ship was built happened to be contiguous to our first habitation, a circumstance that caused us to remark her constant visits: curiosity, however, did not prompt her, or any of her attendants, to come within our precincts, whilst decorum deterred us from making advances towards an acquaintance. Her husband never accompanied her, and she did not seem to require his aid. Women in the Birman country are not only good housewives, but likewise manage the more important mercantile concerns of their husbands, and attend to their interests in all out-door transactions: they are industrious to the greatest degree, and are said to be good mothers, and seldom from inclination unfaithful wives. If this be a true character, they meet with a most ungenerous return, for, as was before observed, the men treat them as beings of a very subordinate order.

Whilst we admired the structure and materials of these ships, we could not overlook the mode in which the work was executed, and the obvious merit of the artificers. In Bengal, a native carpenter, though his business is commonly well done, yet, in his manner of performing it, excites the surprise and ridicule of Europeans; he cuts his wood with a diminutive adze, in a feeble and slow manner; and when he wants to turn a piece of timber, has recourse to a coolie, or labourer, that attends him; numbers there compensate for the want of individual energy; notwithstanding this, they finish what they undertake in a masterly manner. The Birman shipwrights are athletic men, and possess, in an eminent degree, that vigour which distinguishes Europeans, and gives them pre-eminence over the enervated natives of the east; nor do I imagine that the inhabitants of any country are capable of greater bodily exertion than the Birmans.

The month of May was now far advanced, and we became a little impatient at remaining so long in a state of uncertainty, especially as the officers of government did not at all relax in the formality and coldness of their deportment, nor were we yet assured what might be the nature of our reception at court. From this unpleasant state of suspense we were at length agreeably relieved by the arrival of a letter from the Raywoon of Pegue to the council of Rangoon, acquainting them that he had received the imperial mandate to make preparations for our conveyance by water to the capital; and that it was His Majesty's farther pleasure that he should accompany the deputation in person. Baba-Sheen lost no time in imparting to me the intelligence, which was soon after communicated by an official message from the Raywoon, inviting me to the Rhoom, or public hall, to hear the order formally announced in council. This was a ceremony which I begged leave to decline; but I sent my moonshee, or Persian secretary, to attend the meeting.

Our visit to Ummerapoora being now a measure decided on by the highest authority, it became requisite to make some inquiries respecting our accommodations for the voyage. Being well aware that no steps could be taken except through the regular channels of authority, I applied to the Raywoon to obtain permission to purchase suitable boats for the use of the deputation: an inferior officer waited on me, to represent, on the part of the Raywoon, that it was inconsistent with the usage of their government to admit of a public minister being at any expence for his conveyance: and that the superintendant of the port had received instructions to prepare as many boats as I thought necessary. This, I understood, was an established point of etiquette, from which they could not possibly recede. I expressed regret at putting the government to so great an expence; but requested, as the season was boisterous, and the voyage not a short one,

one, that the vessels might be examined by an English shipwright, and such alterations made as would render them commodious to Europeans, which the boats of the natives, both from their structure and insufficient covering, are far from being. My desire met a cheerful compliance.

Conformably to the imperial mandate, the Maywoon left Pegue, and arrived at Rangoon on the 25th of May: his retinue was numerous; and as no person of high official consequence, when summoned to attend the Golden-Foot can assure himself of returning to his government, or office, in order to be prepared for whatever might occur, he brought with him his wife and family as the companions of his voyage. On the day after his arrival I paid him a visit; he was extremely civil, and assured me of his ready services on every occasion.

About this time an order came from court to the provincial government of Pegue, which furnished a subject of much conversation. I was told that the Emperor of China, having never seen a rhinoceros, or an alligator, entertained an ardent desire to view those formidable animals before his death, and had intimated his wish, through a provincial legate from Yunan, who had lately arrived at Ummerapooa for the purpose of settling some mercantile arrangements. The King of Ava, solicitous to gratify his august brother of China, had signified his pleasure to his chief minister, who sent the order before-mentioned, the purport of which, I understood, was to catch twenty alligators, and as many of the rhinoceros tribe, and convey them to the metropolis, whence they were to be transported to the imperial city of Pee-Kien. Those who made elephant-hunting their profession, were dispatched to the forests, and strong nets were thrown across the Pegue river, on the sands of which when the tide ebbed, I had seen in the course of my journey to Pegue, a much greater number than His Majesty required. The fishermen began successfully; several alligators were taken in two or three days, and put into boats, in the bottoms of which wells were constructed. The crocodile and alligator, although they are accounted amphibious animals, cannot long support life out of the water. The rhinoceros hunters, I afterwards learned, were not equally fortunate.

In a former part of this work it has been mentioned, that the Birmans, notwithstanding they are Hindoos of the sect of Boodh, and not disciples of Brahma, nevertheless reverence the Brahmins, and acknowledge their superiority in science over their own priests or Rhahaans. The partiality which the King, who is guided in every movement by astrological advice, manifests in their favour, has given celebrity to their predictions, and brought them so much into fashion, that there is not a Viceroy or Maywoon who has not in his household some of these domestic sages, whom he consults on all important occasions, and sometimes on occasions of no importance whatever. The Maywoon of Pegue, whose viceroyalty, though not the most extensive, is the most lucrative in the empire, maintains a number of Brahmins, whose counsel he desired as to the most fortunate day and hour to commence the journey. After due deliberation, the 28th of May, at eight o'clock in the morning, was pronounced the most propitious for departure, and that time was accordingly appointed. Unluckily our boats could not be got in readiness quite so soon; but as there was no resisting the stars, the Maywoon declared his regret at the supernatural necessity that compelled him to precede us, promising, however, to wait at the head of the Rangoon river, where it branched from the great stream of the Irrawaddy, until we should join him, the distance being not more than two days' journey. I acquiesced in the propriety of submitting every temporal concern to the disposal of fate, and hoped that he would not suffer any consideration for us to interfere with his own arrangements. On the day fixed, at seven in the morning

morning, he passed our habitation, and proceeded with much pomp to the water-side, himself on horseback, his lady in a palanquin, and his children carried astride on men's shoulders. His own barge was very handsome, and of the structure appertaining to nobility; it was attended by several war-boats ready manned, with a number of common vessels; some belonging to his retinue, others to merchants, who took the opportunity of his protection to transport their merchandize duty-free. The Maynoon reposed for a short time in the house that is used as an exchange; and when the great drum that proclaimed the hour struck the first stroke, he stepped on board, and was followed by his family: in an instant every boat pushed from the shore with a loud shout; the oars were vigorously plied, and, the flood tide setting strong, the fleet was soon carried to the northward of the city.

The boats, six in number, that had been provided for our accommodation, were now ready to receive us; Dr. Buchanan, Mr. Wood, and myself, had each a separate vessel; the Hindoo Pundit, whose religious prejudices rendered it irksome to him to mingle with Mussulmen, had likewise a small boat to himself. The guard, and such attendants as we did not immediately require, occupied another of a larger size, in which our heavy baggage, field equipage, &c. were stowed: a kind of cutter was equipped as a kitchen, which was seldom wanted, as our own barges were sufficiently spacious to admit of all culinary purposes, without inconvenience to the inhabitants. These barges were of a very different construction from the flat-bottomed vessels called budgerows, that are used on the Ganges; ours were long and narrow, and required a good deal of ballast to keep them steady; even with ballast, they would have been in constant danger of oversetting, had they not been provided with outriggers, which composed of thin boards, or oftener of buoyant bamboos, make a platform that extends horizontally six or seven feet on the outside of the boat, from stem to stern. Thus secured, the vessel can incline no farther than until the platform touches the surface of the water, when she immediately rights; on this stage the boatmen ply their oars, or impel the boat forward by poles; such an addition affords a convenience unknown to the navigation of the Ganges; it is the place exclusively appropriated to the crew, who sleep on it at night, and, by putting up mats, or spreading a sail from the roof of the boat to the outside edge, shelter themselves from the weather. My barge was sixty feet in length, and not more than twelve in the widest part; by taking away one thwart beam near the stern, laying a floor two feet below the gunwale, and raising an arched roof about seven feet above the floor, a commodious room was formed, fourteen feet long, and ten wide, with a closet behind it; at the stern there was a stage, on which the leedegee, or steerfman, stood, and a vacant space of seven or eight feet, where a kettle might be boiled, or dinner provided. On each side of the cabin a small door opened on the platform, and there were three windows, which, when raised, admitted a free circulation of air. The roof was made of bamboos covered with mats, and over all was extended a painted canvas, that effectually secured us from the heaviest rain. The inside was neatly lined with matting. The conveyances of the other gentlemen were nearly of the same size and construction. Twenty-six boatmen composed the crew of my vessel, exclusive of the leedegee, who is the chief or captain.

CHAP.