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From
—
Southampton to Calcutta.

By

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(Pseud.)



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CHAPTER IX.

Calcutta Sundays—Native disregard of them—Punkahs and fans—Spiritual shortcomings—Sunday resorts—Botanical garden—Banyan tree—A dream and a song—Best way to reach the gardens—Sath Talab—Sentries and ginger-pop—Tame fishes—Sham Churn's upholstery—An unique—Pictures—Garden conveniences—A rhinoceros and a monkey—Concluding remarks.

SUNDAYS in Calcutta resemble English Sundays in *dulness*, but there all parallel ceases. The Sabbath of the Christian is neither a sacred day nor a holiday with the Hindu community, and though European offices are closed, the native population pursue, uninterruptedly, their mercantile avocations.

Lumbering hackeries, drawn by buffaloes, whose tails serve for reins, traverse the streets

dinghees carry their names on a board hung in front of the cabin entrances (if such the little convex sheds over the stern sheets may be designated), and very eccentric names many of them are, the majority possessing lordly titles not usually to be found in alliance with such droll patronymics.

“The Seven Tanks,” or in native parlance “Sath Talab,” is a term for the show residence of a wealthy babboo, possessed of more money than brains, for the house on which he so plumes himself, and on which so much coin has been expended, is nothing more than an offering at the shrine of vanity, and a display in excessively bad taste. It stands on the Barrackpore Road, about three miles from Calcutta, and is entered by two arched gateways, situated one at each extremity of the grounds. These gates are surmounted by stucco animals intended to represent lions, but which look very like a breed between that species and the race of tiger cats.

Two very important gentlemen of the Brah-

miny Caste, furnished with most vicious-looking tulwars, and shouldering muskets of the Brown-bess school, strut under the arches of these gates, and may be pronounced part of the household guard of Sham Churn Mullick, Lord of the Manor and two crores of rupees made the Lord knows how. Ginger pop, and matches wherewith to light one's cigars, are proffered by screaming, naked little boys, on alighting at the portals, the said boys, however, not venturing to penetrate the guarded way, so that once in rear of the sentries visitors are freed from their persecutions. The first tank approached is the only thing really worth inspecting on the premises, it being stocked with tame fishes, that swim up and eat out of any one's hand (be he Heathen or Christian) who has the charity to offer them a crumb, or a bolus of what looks very like putty, the latter delicacy seeming to be most esteemed by them. As they have never been molested by the disciples of Isaac Walton, or tortured in the toils of a net, their

nerve is not surprising, but to have sufficient confidence in man's humanity to place their fins in his palm, is so suggestive of innocence before the fall, that I began to think Sham Churn and his possessions were under a peculiar dispensation. On reaching the house entrance, however, I was undeceived, as in defiance of a printed prohibition to the effect that nothing was to be received by the attendants, some cunning attempts were made to extort "buckshees" before Sham's upholstery bared itself to our wondering visions, but we declined being *particeps criminis* in the distribution of forbidden fruit, and proceeded on our inspection.

Not a bad statue that of Venus, at the extremity of the entrance hall, though it *had* struck me before I saw Sham's property, that the protruding arm and sheltering hand are very suggestive: then that painting of Mrs. Siddons and the Johnsonian party would look better in a better light. While endeavouring to make out the different figures of the group

by aid of a wretched pen and ink sketch, with names appended, a dusky guide, in a very stunning turban, called our attention to what he considered a unique, which he patted approvingly several times, grinning from ear to ear the while. It was a Honduras mahogany hatstand. Thinks I to myself, that fellow may be sharper than we wot of, and seeing our heads covered adopts this method of hinting at the proper implement on which to deposit out of door habiliments.

Marble floors and staircases are common to most Calcutta houses of the better class, so trampling that stone unconcernedly, we mounted upwards, and paraded leisurely through long rooms filled with all imaginable furniture—very expensive, no doubt, but stiff-looking as soldiers on drill—or the life-sized portraits of Sham Churn Mullick and his brothers, pertinaciously obtruded on the notice of visitors. The only room I *did* admire was one Oriental throughout, its furniture consisting solely of

cushions ranged against its four walls, and on the flooring adjacent to them, and of little tables, scarce higher than footstools, that could be wheeled to and fro at pleasure.

The pictures are for the most part a medley that second-hand dealers would be cautious of investing in, and the mirrors more remarkable for their size than elegance, as Sham Churn never uses this tawdry dwelling save when he gives a ball or nautch, living in an unpretending bungalow at the bottom of his garden. The money it cost would have been better expended in founding some institution for the improvement of his countrymen; but Hindoos are fonder of display than peacocks, or Sally the house-maid in her Sunday finery, and have no idea that exaltation consists in noble deeds—how should they, poor devils, enslaved by a faith more beastly than a leper's sores?

The chief recommendation of Sham Churn's garden, consists in its convenience as a smoking lounge, and the opportunities it affords amorous

Eurasians of making love in bench-furnished outhouses; while children may reap amusement from the grimaces of a monster monkey, who is trained to howl three separate times with banshee mournfulness, on his keeper pronouncing the word "*bolo*," a vocal accomplishment that not unfrequently procures him a harvest of two anna pieces, which he dutifully hands over to his superior, who deposits them in a small canvass bag at his girdle, with evident satisfaction.

A rhinoceros, too, helps out the cockney diversions of this establishment— mischievous sailors and others much delighting in goading him till he takes to a sheet of water beside which he is tethered, and in which he flounders about with a very sulky expression of countenance, and many longing turns towards the mud bank, from whose congenial colour a variety of unchristian and cunningly devised pokes had driven him.

But it is wrong to quarrel with one's bread

and butter ; where great things are not attainable, one should be thankful for small favours, and Sham Churn so far may be considered a benefactor of his species. Diogenes did not envy Alexander, and Sham Churn no doubt considers his guarded portals and crammed chambers as regal, after a fashion, as the philosopher his tub, and would not change places with the Viceroy.

A drive of six miles, however (for one must go home again), in such gharrys as ply for hire in Calcutta—gharrys whose springs, like “The Last Rose of Summer,” seem faded and gone, and the eccentric motion of whose wheels reminds one of weak ankles in children—added to the charges attendant on such galvanic locomotion, is a set-off against the pleasure of these small favours, by no means gratifying to a reminiscent mind, and, as Franklin says, makes one pay very dear for his whistle. As sight-seers there will be, however, till Sham closes his establishment, I would suggest a plan by

billiards, regardless of law, ledgers, and bills of lading.

Being myself deficient in sporting paraphernalia, and having no wish to remain isolated when all the Calcutta world were on the wing, I acceded to the proposition of a friend to accompany him to Burdwan and started for that place immediately after.

Burdwan, by rail, is sixty-eight miles from Calcutta ; the scenery, all the way, was but a repetition of that seen between Calcutta and Serampore, and a dead level throughout. About two miles before reaching the place, a large swamp, intersected by watercourses, has to be crossed, and this is spanned by a viaduct of 280 arches. Neither jungle in its grandeur, nor spires oriental, or, in fact, anything worth looking at, greeted my vision during the journey ; a more uninteresting line, in a picturesque point of view, it would be difficult to discover, and right glad were we when the terminus was reached. Handling our carpet bags, we marched

away for the hotel, a light built, airy bungalow, verandahed before and behind and having all its rooms on one floor, a pleasant garden surrounding the whole building. An eccentric-looking individual, who, to judge by his thickness of speech and staggering gait, seemed strongly attached to his own cellar, greeted us on entering, and in reply to our request for bed-rooms, stated "we might have one between us if we liked, but he couldn't spare us separate ones," and then plunging his hands deep into his trowsers pockets, and making a capital A of his legs, added, "if that won't suit you, you may mizzle." The latter we were not inclined to do, there being no other house of accommodation, nor, barring mine host's impertinence of manner, was there any particular hardship in accepting his terms; but such Yankee offhandedness, in a country anything but republican, took me a little aback, I must confess, at the time, though a more intimate acquaintance with the European trading community in Bengal has since taught

me that mine host of Burdwan was not singular in his ideas of "equality and the rights of man," various of the shopocracy, who, in the same capacity at home, would never think of obtruding their republican notions on customers, imagining, by some incomprehensible hallucination, the so doing quite legitimate under Indian skies; probably from the fact that all manual labour devolves on natives, and, furthermore, because they (the trades), without exception, keep carriages, and a large staff of domestic servants, like their betters; forgetful that climate necessitates the latter, as it does mansions scarcely less spacious than Apsley House; but as living in a large house does not necessarily make a Duke of Wellington, neither will a shop in India transform a tailor into a gentleman.

Let it not be supposed for an instant that I wish to disparage the trading community: as a body, they are, in importance, intelligence, and enterprise, second to none of their expatriated countrymen; and when the mutiny broke out

the “gallant volunteers,” it is well known, mustered largely among its members the tradesmen of Calcutta; but, to “render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s” seems, with some of them, a very hard condition, an idea seeming to prevail that going to India resembles a trip to Cremorne Gardens, wherein all should be admitted on an equal footing.

The *lion* of Burdwan is its rajah; and the *sights* of that rural locality his palaces, in the largest of which he usually resides. The minor one is not ten minutes’ drive from the inn, and possesses that invariable appendage to eastern seats of pretension, a menagerie. Nothing, of course, is to be seen in the latter, that may not be viewed to better advantage in our Zoological Gardens at home, but there is, nevertheless, something very imposing in the idea of private individuals keeping a large collection of forest denizens, much as our aristocrats do packs of hounds and racing studs. The feeding part of the affair is in itself no trifle, and the space re-

his goat, could not be persuaded, by any amount of nudges, to uncoil himself for our amusement, but a wolf displayed his ravenous propensities to perfection, by bolting large junks of meat—bones and all—as fast as they came within reach of his paws, that kept up a running fight, for ten minutes or more, with the walking-stick of a German Jew, as the latter tantalisingly endeavoured, but in vain, to abstract with that weapon the tit bits from their rightful owner.

After making the tour of the court, which contained lions, tigers, leopards, monkeys, porcupines, a chameleon, and various other specimens of the undomesticated genus, our guide, a dropsical European, of the Daniel Lambert school, conducted us to open garden ground, which, among other addenda, contained two deep and extensive pits or tanks, walled round, and terraced about three feet from their tops: in one of these paced to and fro a couple of magnificent giraffes, their heads towering high above the parapet that encompassed them, and

every now and then stretching beyond it as approaching visitors excited their curiosity ; the other pit, half filled with muddy water, was tenanted by a rhinoceros and several alligators, who were dozing with their snouts just awash with the flood.

Leaving these, we came to an extensive aviary, and after feasting our eyes on all sorts of gaudy-plumaged birds, drew up in front of a circular tank or stone basin of water, for the purpose of seeing the pelicans fed. A man bearing a capacious basket filled with fish, the smaller ones entire and the larger sort cut into shreds, emptied them into this basin, and a sliding door, on the furthest margin of it, being opened at the same time, out rushed, like so many desperadoes, a crowd of wing-flapping pelicans, who, plunging into the water, dived and scrambled with greedy eagerness for their evening meal, each striving who could bag the greatest number of fish in the smallest space of time, without any regard to a fair division of the spoil : I fancied one or