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978-1-108-06138-4 - The Closing Events of the Campaign in China: The Operations in the Yang-Tze-Kiang, and Treaty of Nanking

Granville Gower Loch

Excerpt

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THE CLOSING EVENTS
OF THE
CAMPAIGN IN CHINA,
&c.

CHAPTER I.

STRAITS OF SUNDA. — EQUATORIAL CHANGES. — THE MONSOONS. — BANCA AND SUMATRA. — THE DUGONG. — MALAY SUPERSTITIONS. — SINGAPORE. — POPULATION AND TRADE OF THE ISLAND. — CHINESE ETIQUETTE. — VISIT TO THE JOS-HOUSE.

LATE on the evening of the 26th of April, 1842, we rounded Java Head and entered the Straits of Sunda, the great western entrance to the China Sea.

Our passage so far had been prosperous; we sailed from Plymouth Sound on the 23d of January, and anchored in Simon's Bay on the 21st of March. To our surprise, we there found Lord Saltoun and his troops. They had left England five weeks before us, and we may attribute our good fortune in overtaking them to the light and variable winds they experienced between

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Rio de Janeiro and the Cape. They sailed the forenoon after our arrival, and four days before us: it remains to be seen whether we have gained stronger and better winds since leaving the Cape by steering a parallel latitude farther south, and continuing it farther to the eastward than the usual track vessels follow, or Horsburgh recommends. Hitherto our daily runs have been particularly good, having accomplished a distance of 5752 miles in 31 days.

Wednesday, 27th of April.—I rose before sunrise to enjoy a sight that is seen to greater advantage in this climate than in any other, and to appreciate fully the satisfactory sensation of a ship sailing in smooth seas after an antarctic passage.

The water was as little disturbed as an inland lake,—only slightly rippled by a six-knot breeze, wafting “the spicy gales of the sweet South” to our up-turned noses. No pack of fox-hounds were ever more anxious to sniff Reynard’s tail than we were to inhale the smell of the land.

For the last few days the winds have been light and variable, and the temperature extremely oppressive; to us particularly so, who only a week before had snow upon our decks.

This is the month of change, the month in which the easterly winds and fair weather are

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ushered in by lightning and tempests, violent tornadoes, and deluges of rain. After a short period the heavy clouds disappear; the atmosphere expands; the air becomes pure and refreshing; nature revives, and the earth is once more clad with beautiful verdure. In September, nature begins to droop; the breezes become light and fitful; the strongest are oppressed with languor; clouds assemble in huge masses, which, in October, burst forth in thunder, lightning, and heavy squalls. These squalls frequently ripen into gales; and thus the rainy S. W. monsoon sets in, continuing until the sun is again within the tropic of Cancer.

This is the climate of the islands to the south and upon the equator. The great continent of Asia alters the direction of these winds. The summer monsoon of Java and Sumatra is N. E.; it is N. W. over China and Hindostan; in like manner the S. W. monsoon of the Archipelago is the S. E. of the mainland.

During the day three canoes came off with some unripe fruit, fowls, and paroquets; they were manned by Malays, all ready and anxious to take every advantage in disposing of their commodities. The canoes are scooped from single trees and finished in the rudest manner. It is strange how much the natives of the South Sea

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Islands excel in neatness and ingenuity these people, who, in some of the useful arts, are their superiors.

We skirted the verdant shores, which were every where beautiful, exhibiting all the rich variety of tropical vegetation;—the teak, owing a borrowed fragrance and bloom to the parasitical plants that clung to it; the gigantic suren, dying within the embrace of a creeper larger than itself; the palm and the valued cocoa nut; the bamboo and the betel nut; the sago palm of Amboyna, and its sister in produce the *Sagurus rumpnii*; the wax and the cotton tree, and other plants supplying every want to a lazy race; and in the arid spots, we learned, that the pitcher plant, *Nepenthes distillatoria*, is found, with its beautiful provision for securing and retaining sufficient moisture for its support under an equatorial sun.

The famous upas, or poison tree, also flourishes here, distinguished by its straight and stately stem rising to the height of seventy or eighty feet; too noble a vegetable, one would suppose, to have ever obtained so bad a reputation.

We were also told of that fearful valley within which no living creature can exist; and a story of a poor convict, who, having escaped from Batavia, had, in his anxiety to elude pursuit,

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CHAP. I. BANCA AND SUMATRA. 5

overlooked the dangerous vicinity, and perished within its fatal precincts.

At sunset we shaped our course to the northward. The "Button" and the "Cap" (two small round islands) were far astern, and Batavia, the old queen of the East, where Chinamen pay a tax to wear their pig-tails, far on our starboard quarter.

30th of April.—This morning we sighted the island of Banca, and are now running between its shores and those of Sumatra. Pirates and a colony of Chinese tin miners are, I believe, the only inhabitants of the former island, and have, from long practice and industry, arrived at great proficiency in their separate pursuits. Stretching from north to south, we saw on our left the low coast of Sumatra, covered by a continuous forest to the water's edge, which affords shelter to a greater variety of savage animals than perhaps exists in any other country. The single and double horned rhinoceros, the elephant, and a tiger whose strength and ferocity are said to be superior to those of the better known native of Bengal, are amongst the largest. Numbers of people are annually carried off by the latter animal; but still the simple natives as frequently endeavour to propitiate them by offerings of fruit and flowers as they do to destroy them by energetic means.

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I believe no sea within the tropics contains so large a family of *Cetacea* as the Eastern Archipelago. Perhaps the most peculiar is the *Dugong*. Its body is bulky, tapering to a broad horizontal tail; instead of fins, it has two webbed paws, armed with talons; its head in shape is very peculiar, and its mouth is furnished with browsing teeth. Its food consists entirely of herbage, which it crops at the bottom of the sea. In size it varies from ten to twenty feet in length, and the flesh resembles young beef, and is highly appreciated by the Malays. The females are strongly attached to their young, and allow themselves to be taken if their offspring are destroyed. They utter sharp and plaintive cries, and are said to shed tears, which are carefully preserved by these most unsophisticated cut-throats.

The Malays, pre-eminently superstitious, even amongst nations remarkable for such a tendency, have numerous legendary stories of the wonderful qualities of many of this tribe of fish; they have obtained a supernatural connection, in their simple imaginations, with many of the sounds and appearances that arise from natural causes amid the wild and beautiful scenery by which they are surrounded. While gliding in their swift *prohas* among their romantic islands, now through the bright moonlight, and now within the deep shadows

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CHAP. I.

SINGAPORE.

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cast by each wood and headland, every faint echo, the flutter of a startled bird, or growl of savage beast, even the fall of a distant paddle on the calm sea, are not unlikely at such a moment to acquire a mysterious import.

6th of May.—For the last few days we have been running between patches of beautiful islands covered with fine trees, literally embedded in dense and luxuriant underwood. Numerous roots of huge aloes and palms, long bamboos and branches, carried out by the currents from the rivers of Sumatra, have been daily drifting past. They will doubtless accumulate, as we have remarked, in these seas; ground in shoal water, and form a deposit around them; and from this nucleus Nature will cause vegetation to extend her territory.

Yesterday we saw for the first time two Malay *prohas* full of men: I suspect they disliked our appearance as much as a pickpocket does that of a police-officer.

To-day we are in sight of the flag-staff close to Singapore; and if the light air increases, shall hear from old England before nightfall, and also, I trust, a great deal about the Chinese war. A steamer and five or six large ships are in sight, and we are in a state of great expectation; it would not be easy to describe the mingled feelings

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of anxiety and hope that at such a moment assail a man.

Saturday, 7th of May.—Last night the wind fell, and we were obliged to anchor within a few miles of the port—a most tantalizing occurrence. The transports we saw in the morning had to do the same; so the Captain sent a boat to gain intelligence. These four vessels contain the last of the detachment of 5000 men despatched from India for China. We heard of Lord Auckland's return; of the Ning-po business, and of the increasing obstinacy of the Chinese; and Keppel learned what justly pleased him much—that the *Dido* was the first ship out of a batch of five men-of-war that left England five, and some even six, weeks before us.

We anchored in this fine harbour about noon in the centre of a fleet of merchant ships.

On the crest of a round hill topping the town, free from jungle and ornamented with nutmeg and other trees, and covered with a compact green sward, worthy of England, stands the governor's handsome bungalow. At the hill's base, on the flat and even ground in front and to the right, extend the houses of our luxurious Eastern merchants—spacious buildings, with fine Roman Doric porticoes, and separated from each other by inclosed gardens. Beyond these appear the

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humble dwellings of the Chinese colonists skirting the edge of the dense jungle, acres of which are annually cleared, making way for spice plantations, which richly repay the industrious proprietors.

The unvaried luxuriance of vegetation, although very pleasing at first, after some time becomes tiresome. The eye longs for a clear expanse, or the abrupt interruption of a rugged crag. Here there is merely a diversity of gentle hills and shallow dales, all alike clothed with the same thick foliage.

Well-made roads now intersect the island in different directions; and they, indeed, in conjunction with every other improvement, have been planned and executed through the indefatigable exertions of the clever and energetic Governor, Mr. Bonham.

When the British flag was first hoisted by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, the population did not exceed 200 souls. In 1820 the numbers had increased to 10,000, principally Chinese; and now the trade (as Lord Jocelyn has correctly stated) is equal to that of Bombay, and the population, consisting of Europeans, Chinese, Malays, Bengalees, Arabs, Buggis, and others, is nearly 30,000.

Singapore is a free port, which is a pity, for a light harbour due would not prevent vessels from coming to a place of such commercial importance, and would more effectually defray the expenses of the straits, and enable the Governor to prosecute

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many projected improvements, which, from a paucity of funds, he has been obliged to defer.

At day-dawn, when the sky receives its first bright tints from the rising sun, and the morning mist yet shrouds the marshes and hangs about the damp verdure, the harbour is alive with boats and resounding with the noisy hum of awakened crowds; — the long low canoe of the Malay, propelled by twenty or thirty paddles, each stroke accompanied by their peculiar cry; punts, the undoubted progeny of the mother junks, conveying to the shore the Chinese mariner with his fan and umbrella; the sanpans, with their clean matted seats and plantain-leaf awnings, waiting for passengers, and promiscuously manned by the Hindoo, the Moor, the Malay or the Arab, the wild native of Borneo or Amboyna, Madura or the more independent and manly inhabitant of Bali; the unwieldy junk herself, with painted eyes, which are presumed to guide it in safety clear of shoals and dangers, its large masts without rigging, mat sail, high-peaked stern (not unlike ours of the fifteenth century) bedaubed with flying dragons, painted devils, and proverbs, and the poop entirely occupied by the indispensable jos, disgorging scores of chattering Chinese; boats laden with fruit of every description, amongst which pine-apples predominate, arriving from distant creeks,