



BETEL NUT ISLAND

ADVENTURES

IN THE

EASTERN

TROPICS





BETEL-NUT ISLAND

Personal Experiences and Adventures
in the Eastern Tropics

BY

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'The arrowy betel-palm with its golden egg-like nuts.'
Cruise of the Marchesa

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BETEL-NUT ISLAND.

CHAPTER I.

The Diamond Ring.

ABOUT one hundred years ago (1785) Francis Light, the master of an East Indiaman, who had become acquainted with the then Rajah of Kédak,¹ and married his daughter, received from him, as a marriage portion, Púlo Penang, in the Straits of Malacca. These words mean the 'island of betel-nuts' (areca palm); but it should be observed that the word *púlo* is only applied to islands the insularity of which can be traced by the eye from some one point of the island. At that time the island was covered with dense forests and occupied chiefly by elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses and snakes, and on its shores stood a few miserable huts for

¹ In this and such words as Pérak, Báttak, and Saráwak, the accent is on the last syllable but one, and the final *k* is only breathed. It is hence common to substitute *h* for *k*.

fishermen. Under the new governor it soon began to prosper, and it has now a population, including Province Wellesley, of 190,597 (1881), and has become an emporium of important trade.

Of its beauty I can hardly trust myself to write. A physician ¹ who had travelled far and long begins his chapter on it thus—"See Naples and die!" says the Italian poet, in his wild enthusiasm for that city—what would he say of this island—the Eden of the world? On this lovely spot of earth the dream of endless spring is realised. I have never met with any one who after spending a few days in this beautiful oasis did not wish to spend the rest of his life in the delicious tranquillity and repose which this climate affords. Here is the calm loving face of Nature presenting the image of tranquil happiness—the sky always without a cloud, the sea never agitated, but smiling and basking in a continual calm.'

There it lies before my mind's eye, this beautiful home in which I was born and spent my boyhood, with its silvery sea, its snowy beach, its stately palm-groves, its towering-hills, its umbrageous dales, its thousand hues of green and gold glistening beneath a cloudless sky. Who that has seen its waterfall can ever forget it? Combine black

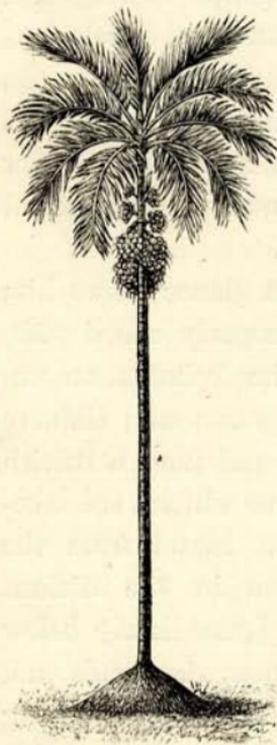
¹ Dr. Yvan, *Six Months among the Malays*.

rock with the whitest spray, the gayest flowers with the deepest green, bright sunshine with dark shadows, the noisy rush and resistless downpour of turbulent waters with the gentle flowing of a clear and cold stream, and put them all in relations of matchless picturesqueness, and the reader can imagine the scene. Retracing his steps, he reaches the foot of 'the great hill,' and, ascending it, after a climb of nearly three thousand feet he arrives at the summit.¹

Now let him look around. A glance shows him that this is an island, and properly called *pulo*. Turning to the north-west, he beholds an unbounded sea, dotted by Malay *prahus* and Chinese junks, and it may be with here and there a British ship or steamer. To his right he will see the lake-like channel which divides the island from the Malayan mainland, and there in the distant horizon are lofty mountains. Immediately below are the eastern plains, with their rice fields and wondrous fruit-trees, and verandahed villas, ending in the town with its miniature fort, and beyond it the deep and glassy roadstead, with sloops at anchor. On the eastern plain are the plantations of coffee and sugar, and nearer, on the hill slopes, of nutmegs (now, I fear, all dead) and cloves, the

¹ The highest point is, I believe, something over 2,700 feet.

last being the finest in the world. The intervals on all sides are filled with masses of foliage of every hue of green. And as rain on the average



THE BETEL-NUT PALM.

falls on every other day,¹ let him understand that the brighter the sunshine, the penetrating light only the more distinctly discloses the richness of these hues. Nothing in the world can exceed the verdure of the foliage in the scene before him. But this is not all. Dr. Yvan is right when he speaks of tranquillity and security. There are many beautiful scenes marred by the possibilities of desolation and death. But here there are no perils of tornado or earthquake, no withering hot winds, and scarcely ever a destructive storm. A resident of twenty-

five years says he never saw a vessel driven on the shore or a large tree blown down. It

¹ The annual rainfall is from 100 to 120 inches ; in London it is 35.

is the chosen home of smiling and perennial peace.

On yonder mainland, immediately opposite the harbour, and divided from the island by the channel about two miles in width, is Province Wellesley, also ceded to Britain by the Rajah of Kéddak, and for this and the island England was to pay an annual income of about £2,000. Adjoining it on the north is his ancient kingdom—consisting now of a territory 150 miles long, and about 25 broad, backed by granite mountains (abounding with tin, and in which gold is found), rising to some 6,000 feet. The present dynasty has occupied the throne for nearly three hundred years. When the treaty by which Penang was ceded was made with the Rajah, it was stipulated that England should stand by him and his successors against Siam, the hereditary foe of Kéddak. The Siamese had on several occasions overrun the country, and there had been an agreement made that the Rajah of Kéddak should every three years acknowledge his subjection, by forwarding to the King of Siam the *bunga mas*, or flower of gold. This sign of submission became very galling to the proud prince and his people, and was constantly being refused, and thus gave occasion for raids by the troops of Siam.

The animosity was intensified by the antagonisms

of religion. The people of Kéddak were originally pagans, and pagans of the lowest type—fetish-worshippers, with whom religion is simply a gloomy and miserable superstition. But when the wave of Mohammedan conquest reached, in the twelfth century, the Eastern Archipelago, the Malayan tribes were universally overwhelmed by it, and thus Kéddak has become devoted to Islam. But the men of Siam are Buddhists, and Buddhism with its definite beliefs and humane precepts has almost always successfully maintained its ground against the assaults of Mohammedanism; and thus war with Siam meant with the men of Kéddak war with the accursed enemies of God and the prophet.

The following translation of a letter from the brother of the general commanding the Kéddak army in one of these campaigns, addressed to his mother, sheltered at Penang, is interesting as indicating this feeling, strong even to fanaticism, and also as curious evidence of the continued existence among Malay Moslems of the powerful elements of their original superstition.

‘I, Mohammed Snarnee, make known at the feet of my beloved mother, that her letter came to hand, and I understood the whole of its contents. At present our circumstances are cheering, and we are all well in Kéddak, and my only anxiety is on

your account, my mother. By the assistance of God and the Apostle, we have gained a victory over the infidels under the curse of God. While we were attacking a stockade of the accursed infidels, and going backwards and forwards, unexpectedly was seen walking in the air a beautiful green horse. Then all the generals exclaimed with a loud voice, saying, "Behold, all ye people of Islam, the green horse come to assist us." The green horse then soared over the camp of the Siamese (accursed infidels), but no man was upon him. Then, by the almighty power of God, the horse suddenly vanished from the eyes of all, and there appeared thousands of soldiers attacking the camp of the infidels. Then all the people of Islam shouted with a great shout and rushed into the camp. The infidels fled, and by the assistance of God and the Apostle we gained a triumph, and now all is at rest. This I make known to you on the 11th day of the month. I wish to send you some rice, but the white people will not allow it to pass.'

In one of the frequent conflicts with Siam, the then reigning Rajah was so hard pressed that he was compelled to find refuge under the British flag. I have named the miniature fort on the island. It lies at its eastern extremity, with its green slopes, its broad ditch, its pierced ramparts, and a few