

AN ACCOUNT OF A JOURNEY ACROSS THE MALAY PENINSULA FROM KOH LAK TO MERGUI.

BY

ARTHUR KEITH, M. B., C. M.



ULLY a century ago much of the traffic between Siam and the West passed over the Malay Peninsula between Mergui and Koh Lak, and in the month of June of this year, having occasion to visit Mergui, I chose this old route. In those olden days carriages with ladies riding in them and driven by cockaded coachmen were wont to pass to and fro by this route, but the remains of the old road that can be seen to-day lead one to suspect that such a statement was the gloss some old writer put upon the rustic, squeaking bullock-carts with their native drivers that wore their hair cut in a shoe-brush fashion by way of a cockade. In those days Tenasserim stood at the terminus on the Burmese side, then the capital of a kingdom and often spoken of as a Venice of the East, for she possessed a large fleet of vessels that carried her commerce all over the Bay of Bengal, while at the Siamese terminus, Koh Lak sheltered many junks and big boats that carried the overland traffic to Ayuthia or to Bangkok and further if necessary. But the rapid transit brought about by steam has killed this trade, Tenasserim is little better than a memory, a white man is a rare sight in Koh Lak, and the jungle has seized and made much of the road its own again.

Koh Lak itself is a small island rising from the sea like a rudely splintered church tower, but on the adjacent mainland is a small town bearing the same name. Along the sea-board here, are numerous small patches of paddy fields with rude bamboo houses, raised high above the ground, scattered amongst them, and numerous water-buffaloes feeding in the deserted clearings. Looking westwards, some ten miles distant, one can see Khow Maun (known on the Burmese side as Khow Mordaun) rising from the ridge that divides Siam from Burma, over the shoulder of which the path we were to take turned. It was then the 7th of June, and the South-West Monsoon had set in, and although upon the East side of the Peninsula not a drop of rain was falling, we could see heavy masses of vapour lying upon the West side of the hills, and evidently rain falling plentifully on there.

My guide, who had been known to me for over two years as a miner and hunter at Bangtaphan, was a Siamese with a dash of Burmese blood in him and had relations living on both sides of the Peninsula whom he visited frequently, and known to those of the Siamese side as *Nai Yeet*, to those in Burma as *Moung See*. He would assent gravely to the most improbable statements, and the real state of matters never stood a moment in his way from putting them as he thought they were wanted to be. He had announced this road as eminently suited for elephants, and that a pony might go along, so that I was tempted to travel at ease. Luckily I had with me another man, NUAN by name, a most faithful Siamese and quite an ornament to the skin he wears.

Having followed the coast line from Bangtaphan northwards to Koh Lak, we there turned inland and made for the pass across the hills at Khow Maun. For the first four miles, a rough dray-path led us over a shallow, level, damp soil carrying a stunted jungle clear overhead, so that we made a swinging pace. But at the end of the four miles the path ended in a clearing in the jungle covered with tall lalang grass and full of shallow pools, and for the following five miles we followed an irregular footpath that wound through the jungle. The soil was here deeper and drier, and the trees grew larger and

offered great obstruction to our passage. Before entering this footpath we noticed by the wayside a small clearing covered with green grass and where probably had stood a rest-house for travellers. After leaving the houses on the coast we passed but one human habitation, some six miles inland—the house of one of those men that live by the produce of the jungle. Darkness was beginning to fall when we emerged from the ill-marked footpath on to a deeply rutted dray-path that wound up the slopes of Khow Maun, and by the side of this path we spread our *kajangs*, and spent the night.

MOUNG SEE said the path before us was now free from all obstruction, but as he had made the same statement every morning for the last four days, and as we had found it utterly false—for it had cost us an immense amount of labour to bring the elephant that distance, owing to the obstruction offered by the numerous low branches across the road—I went in front to inspect the path, and at the shoulder of the hill found that it was completely obliterated by the jungle. On the slope of the hill the rains kept the road scoured, so that vegetation could not spring up on it, but on the shoulder of the hill, the soil being left at peace, was soon seized and grown over. Sending the elephant and all superfluous baggage back, and taking a waterproof coat, a blanket, a gun, rice and fish for five days, as well as other things necessary for my business at Mergui, NUAN, MOUNG SEE and I set out together.

On the side of Khow Maun, along this dray-path, are many shallow trenches running round the hill as if at one time an army had encamped there. Just on the shoulder of the hill, a few large spreading trees shelter a considerable expanse of sward, whereon at one time stood a temple—a rest-house for the overland travellers. Near by, in a ravine a little lower down, is a well with excellent clear water, for all the streams were dry, and we had been drinking from the buffalo pools, which the natives held drinkable if there was no marked odour, so that this water was very welcome. The country here is granitic, full of deep narrow ravines, and here and there we saw the deep cuttings that had been made to carry the old road through them.

There is a steep ascent for the last two or three hundred yards before gaining the top of the pass, which is about 750 feet above the sea level, and where there is a mound covered with all sorts of idols, but the prevailing type was a small, very fat clay elephant set upon exceedingly stunted limbs. This was an altar to the spirit of the hills, and NUAN and MOUNG SEE coming up, stooped down and made their obeisance, and NUAN in a prayer informed the spirit of my state and station, and begged he would not think hardly of me for having but two followers, and told him of the more numerous retinue I had brought away with me, and finally concluded his prayer with this promise "and now if you will give us a safe conduct to Muang Meerit (Mergui), and keep us from robbers, tigers and "all the other ills that beset travellers, we will make a great "deal of *merit* when we safely reach our journey's end."

On the Burmese side everything was wet with the constant drizzle. The rain clouds must hang very low, for the range of hills here are very little over one thousand feet in height, yet they are high enough to determine the rainy season on either side. From a glimpse through the trees, which we got descending from the pass, we could see that the country in front of us was entirely covered with forest jungle, with hills in the distance. The foot-path leads down a gentle descent, and at the foot of the hills we found the country uneven, cut up by ravines, with a deep alluvial soil covered by a lofty evergreen forest. We reached a stream about seven miles from the pass, and, beneath a large tree with very thick foliage, upon its bank we spent the night.

About ten o'clock a downpour of rain commenced. I drew my water-proof coat over my blanket, while NUAN and MOUNG SEE crouched over the fire; but the wet began to steal in all round and the rain drowned the fire, so that we waited anxiously for morning to break. As soon as we could see, we packed up our things and set out, the rain coming heavier than ever. For five miles we went through a luxuriant bamboo jungle, where we started a herd of wild buffaloes, and jungle fowl were abundant, but as we had only a Colt's repeating rifle with us we were unable to procure any for our pot. By the

side of the path were the ruins of a brick temple, which at one time must have been rather an elaborate structure, and there the men again made their obeisance.

When we emerged from the bamboo jungle we struck a stream coming from the S. E., shallow and about thirty feet wide. On its left bank were three dilapidated huts, where probably Chinamen or natives had resided while prospecting the stream which is reported to carry gold. We followed this stream—the *Klong Pan Peng*—for some distance, then crossed and recrossed it several times, until we reached an open space in which there was a rude hut called by MOUNG SEE “the house of the father of the buffaloes.” The rain cleared away, and we had time to dry our clothes and cook some food before it set in again, and continued all night.

The soil here is deep and carries lofty trees with a rich and thick undergrowth of trailing and twining plants. Ever since leaving the bamboo jungle leeches lay thickly in wait for us, but next day they surrounded us like besetting sins. On the path in front one could see a perfect little forest of miniature elephant trunks nodding on the ground, and no railway guard catches the moving foot-board so cleverly as they catch the traveller. In a clearing an attempt was made to rid ourselves of the enemy, but they boarded us quite as quickly as we could throw them over. Few travellers pass this way, and how these crowds get a living I do not know.

Here and there, through this part of the jungle we came on small pieces of green sward surrounded by large trees, and sometimes we passed larger clearings. Evidently people had at one time a habitation here, and even now, during the dry season, herdsmen drive their cattle up from the lowland flats of Burma to graze in these patches and in the bamboo jungle.

About seven miles from the field of the father of the buffaloes, this stream from the S. E., which we had followed and crossed, joins a large stream from the N. E., and just at the junction of the streams our path ran into the river. After half a day's fruitless search for it on the further side of the river amidst a constant downpour, we recrossed to a sand bank, on which we threw up a hut. We were fortunate enough, during

our search for the path, to find a turtle weighing some 45 lbs. feeding in a marsh by the river. He seemed sadly astonished when the two men started to remove his breast plate, but he ought to have congratulated himself on escaping the sad fate of the small land tortoise which is invariably cooked by being hung over a fire and roasted alive.

The rain continued all night, and next morning the river was so flooded that we could not cross it. So a council was held and we determined to build a raft of bamboos with which to proceed down the river, although NUAN objected sadly to trust himself to the mercy of the river spirit. By four o'clock over forty bamboos had been cut, lashed together in three tiers, so that the raft had rather the appearance of a rather broad ladder. We were anxious to test its capabilities, and foolishly started that night. It went swiftly and smoothly along the flooded stream until a difference of opinion between NUAN and MOUNG SEE landed it broadside on a small island in the middle of the stream, and in a moment we were over and in the water. Luckily I had tied everything to the raft with the exception of my only pair of shoes, and when the raft was righted we found they were gone and everything soaking wet. Darkness came down, so we moored. The rain was constant; our clothes, blankets and matches wet; and the best piece of ground we could get was damp and marshy, so that we longed all night for the light of morning.

The country now became covered with jungle-clad ranges of hills, set closely together, separated only by the narrowest ravines, and rising up some 500 feet or more. These hills ran right across the course of the river, so that it seemed to dash against the first range, then eddying along its flanks burst through the first vulnerable point it reached and dashed against the next range, where it again searched for and found an exit, and so bounding and turning, rushing and eddying, it at last burst through this hilly country and sailed out on the flatter country beyond. It took us a day and an half to get through this tortuous channel, sixteen hours punting at $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles an hour, so that to reach a point some fifteen miles distant as the crow flies we had to cover about forty.

After spending such an uncomfortable night, we found ourselves just at the entrance to this hilly country. The river was now in big flood, and the rapids were full of great boulders, against which the river dashed itself. Below those rapids came great silent whirlpools in the shadow of the hills, so deep that our long bamboo punt poles failed to reach the bottom, and our raft rotated again and again. It required all our energies and wits to shoot those rapids, and often we bounced against the snags and jutting boulders, coming off as a rule with but slight damage to the raft, but more than once we were on the eve of complete disaster, when we got righted almost by miracle.

We had just shot a rapid, and were taking matters easily after our exertions, when our attention was suddenly attracted by a thundering tearing noise as of some large animal bursting through the narrow coppice between the hill and the river. Presently a great male banteng (*Bos frontalis*) appeared on the bank about fifty yards behind us, plunged into the flood and made swiftly for the other side. At one time he looked threateningly towards us, so we were glad to get rid of the brute, but just as we were turning the next bend we again heard the thunder of his hoofs, and he instantly appeared on the bank quite opposite us. As he plunged into the river the men threw their punt poles from them and cowered on the raft, while I hastily undid the fastenings of my gun and loaded it. But by that time the bull had thought better of it and had made across the river just in front of us and was ascending the opposite bank as I took a flying shot at him, but he disappeared evidently none the worse. The beast, I believe, had not the slightest intention of molesting us; but the hills threw their steep sides so close to the river, that he had to cross and recross to get along the narrow bank that was sometimes on one side sometimes on the other.

A little after midday the rain ceased, and in a blink of sunshine that followed, we dried our matches and shortly afterwards moored our raft and prepared to spend the night. We made a great fire, dried our clothes and blankets, cooked the

the last of our rice, and threw up a rude roof of leaves, so that when the rain fell with the darkness we were prepared for it.

It required some cajoling to get NUAN to again trust his life on the raft, for said he "Last night the river spirit came"—here NUAN held out his hands and shook his head quite despondently. But the river was the only way out of the hills; we knew dwellings could not be far off, and the river had abated somewhat; these and other inducements allowed us to again resume our journey in the morning. Early in the forenoon we came upon tracks of honey and gum-dammar collectors, and at midday we sailed out between two hills that stood as sentinels to a flat, jungle-covered country with small rounded hills scattered over it. The soil was deep and eminently suited for agricultural uses, but we saw no vestige of cultivation until the day was well spent, when we suddenly came upon a small settlement of houses. These bamboo houses were evidently of recent erection, and stood amongst plantains and maize, which grew amongst the fresh trunks of lately felled trees. The inhabitants were Siamese, most of whom had recently come over from the Provinces on the East coast, and many of them had worked as miners at Bangtaphan. Siamese priests had come up from Wat Kew, an old Siamese settlement a day's journey down the river, and had taken advantage of the flood which had made the river navigable for big boats to visit this outlying Colony of their parishioners and collect their tithes. All night long the old priest with his two young brethren were fêted, so that we were allowed to spend the night there in comparative peace.

Next morning the priests set out for their 'Wat,' and we obtained permission to occupy part of the boat. A little further down we reached a larger village, also a Siamese Colony—for the Siamese occupy the valley of this river down to Tenasserim. There the priests stopped to take their midday meal. The headman told me he had been settled there for upwards of eight years, and that he came from the Province of Koowi. The soil, he also informed me, was much richer than any on the East Coast, and that they cultivate only a little rice, devoting their time more to the raising of

bananas and maize, which they sell down the river, and besides they keep a good few buffaloes. I have no doubt also they enjoy the security of property and freedom from oppression under British protection.

After they had finished their meal we set out again, the young priests '*chowing*' the boat while the old man reclined within. Round about him, built in great piles were the worthy man's presents from his parishioners, consisting of great heaps of half roasted fish, baskets full of sweetmeats and fancy cakes, bags of rice and bunches of bananas, betel-nuts and coco-nuts '*galore*,' in fact stores large enough to hold a great priesthood eating for weeks. In fact, so full was the boat of good things (and I believe the priests were quite as full) that, although the boat was a fairly large one, there was neither room to sit or stand, and it was quite a treat to see the old priest's little boy scrambling amongst those things to supply the betel-nut wants of his superior.

The river got wider, deeper and flowed more slowly, but the surrounding country was still of the same character—flat and jungle-covered, with rounded hills here and there. By landing some distance above Wat Keo and walking over a neck of land, we were able to cut a good few miles of the river and reach the '*Wat*' that night, where we slept. A beautiful park surrounds the abode of the priests, and the Wat is built after the Burmese design, but all the priests are Siamese, some of them coming from the Provinces on the East Coast. The village of Wat Keo (or Takay as it is called on the maps) has about 400 inhabitants, mostly Siamese, and is surrounded by large paddy fields and extensive pasture land. NUAN had now an opportunity of fulfilling his vow, for in his hour of danger he had promised the water spirit, at the first Wat he reached, to make merit to the extent of ten ticals, but now was quite convinced it was a rash promise and considered three ticals quite enough.

Next morning we left Wat Keo and proceeded further down the river. Only two house-boats were available, both belonging to local trading Chinamen, and these, practising their usual policy on the stranger, extracted three times the

customary amount, and no doubt divided the profits. Moreover the boat was small, one had to crawl into it, and when there lie on one's back. The Chinaman was an old Perak miner who had come up to Mergui, married a woman of the country, started trading on the river, and now had two daughters to assist him in 'chowing' the boat.

The following morning we arrived at Tenasserim, once the proud capital of a kingdom of that name. Its ruler, its power, its people and its fleet are all gone, and all that remains to mark its ancient claims of a Venice of the East is the dilapidated remains of a terrace leading up from the river. The inhabitants are mostly Burmese and do not number more than 600, and there seems to be no life in the place. Yet it occupies a situation surpassingly fine. The foot of the high bank on which it sits is swept by the smaller Tenasserim River, which a little below the town bends to meet the larger river coming circling from the North and enclosing between them an expansive 'haugh' of green sward. The 'haugh', the circling rivers and the town are enclosed in a circuit of forest-clad hills, so that Tenasserim sits on the South side of an amphitheatre.

Just as we were leaving Tenasserim, two little Burmese boys came running down to the boat and asked in good English "Where are you going, Sir?" They were wonderfully intelligent lads; they attended school in Mergui, but were then home for holidays, their father being a merchant in Tenasserim.

The river between Mergui and Tenasserim is broad and deep, in many parts it really looks like a series of lakes surrounded by hills; and here and there along its banks are fishing villages. During the rainy season steam launches, drawing four or five feet of water, can go to Tenasserim, and formerly one of the British India steamships used to pass up the river to within eight miles of Tenasserim, where her further passage was prevented by a bar of rocks that cross the river there.

The mouth of the river is surrounded by numerous swampy mangrove-covered islands, and sailing along these we came

in sight of Mergui next forenoon. The town contains about 15,000 inhabitants, and is the capital of the southern part of Lower Burma. The Government houses are situated on a small plateau that rises from the town with the native houses—mostly built of wood—round it reaching down to the water's edge. The inhabitants are mostly Burmese, but Chinamen are the active traders.

NUAN went ashore and procured me shoes and other necessities, and fitted me out more as a Chinaman than as a European, to face civilization. I was most hospitably entertained by Mr. BATTEN and Mr. HUGHES, and after a few days left on board the *S. S. Mergui* to return to Bangtaphan *via* the isthmus of Kra.



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