

## XI

### PLANTATION LIFE



**A**FTER the sunrise cup of coffee at Sinagar—such coffee as we had dreamed of and confidently expected to enjoy, but never did encounter anywhere else in Java—all the men of the household appeared in riding-gear, and were off to inspect and direct work in the many gardens and sections of the estate. The ladies took us for a walk across the tea-fields to the great landmark of a Sinagar palm, which gave the name to the estate, and from which lookout we could view the miles of luxuriant fields between it and Parakan Salak's group of white houses, and also, chief feature in every view, the splendid blue slopes and summit of Salak clear cut against a sky of the palest, most heavenly turquoise. It was a very dream of a tropic morning, and a Java tea-garden seemed more than ever an earthly paradise.

Tea-bushes covered thousands of acres around and below us, as the ground dropped away from that commanding ridge, their formal rows decreasing in perspective until they shaded the landscape like a fine

line-engraving. For mile after mile one could walk in direct line between soldierly files of tea-bushes—Chinese, Assam, and hybrids. The Chinese plant, descended by generations from that same wild bush discovered in Assam near the Yunnan frontier by English botanists in 1834, has, by centuries of cultivation, been brought to grow in low, compact little mats, or mere rosettes of bushes. It has a thick, woody stem, gnarled and twisted like any dwarf tree, and some of the Chinese tea-bushes at Sinagar are fifty or sixty years of age, the pioneers and patriarchs of their kind in Java, original seedlings and first importations from China. The Assam or wild Himalayan tea-plant is a tall spindling bush with large, thin leaves, and grafted on Chinese stock produces the tall hybrid commonly grown in the tea-gardens of Java. The red soil of these gardens is always being raked loose around the tea-plants, and at every dozen or twenty feet a deep hole, or trench, is dug to admit air and water more freely to the roots. Constant care is given lest these little open graves, or air-holes, fill up after heavy rains, and not a weed nor a stray blade of grass is allowed to invade these prim, orderly gardens and rob the soil of any of its virtues. Each particular bush is tended and guarded as if it were the rarest ornamental exotic, and the tea-gardens, with their broad stripings of green upon the red ground, and skeleton lines of palms outlining the footpaths and the divisional limits of each garden, are like a formal exhibit of tea-growing, an exposition model on gigantic scale, a fancy farmer's experimental show-place.

In the unending summer of the hill-country there

is no "tea season," no "spring leaf," "first pickings," or "fire-fly crop," as in China and Japan. Two years after the young seedling has been transplanted to the formal garden rows its leaves may be gathered; and there are new leaves every day, so that picking, curing, firing, and packing continue the year round. The tea-pickers, mostly women, gather the leaves only when the plants are free from dew or rain. They pick with the lightest touch of thumb and finger, heaping the leaves on a square cloth spread on the ground, and then tying up the bundle and "toting" it off on their heads, for all the world like the colored aunties of our southern states. The bright colors of their jackets and sarongs, and of their bundles, that look like exaggerated bandana turbans, give gay and picturesque relief to the green-striped gardens, whose exact lines converge in long, monotonous perspective whichever way one looks. There is great fascination in watching these bobbing figures among the bushes gradually converge to single lines, and the procession of lank, slender sarongs file through the gardens, down the avenues of palm and tamarind, to the fabrik.

The long, red-tiled buildings of the fabrik, in their order and speckless neatness, with the array of ingenious and intelligent machines, seem yet more like part of an exposition exhibit—a small machinery hall of some great international industrial aggregation. The picking and the processes of converting the tea-leaves into the green, oolong, and black teas of commerce, and of packing them into large and small, air-tight, leaded packages for export, occupy, at the most, but



JAPANESE DANCING-GIRL.



two days in ordinary working seasons. Less green tea is sold each year, and soon the entire Java crop of tea will be cured to the half black, or oolong, and the standard black tea, which alone can find sale in England or in Russia, the largest and most critical tea-consuming countries of Europe. An especially fine black tea is made at these Preanger tea-fabriks, and for this the green leaves are first exposed to the sun in wicker trays for wilting, then rolled by machinery to free the juices in the leaf-cells, and fermented in heaps for four or eight hours, until by their turning a dark reddish brown there is evidence that the rank theine, the active principle or stimulating alkaloid in the leaves, has been oxidized, and so modified into something less injurious to human nerves and the digestive system. The bruised red leaves are dried in a machine where hot blasts and revolving fans make quick, clean work of the "firing," that perspiring coolies do by hand over charcoal pans in China and Japan. All the sifting, sorting, packing, and labeling, the pressing of the broken leaves and dust into bricks, go on as neatly, swiftly, and surely; and the cases are hauled away to the railway-station and shipped from Batavia to their special markets. The leaves to be made into green teas are given a first toasting, almost as they come in from the bushes, are rolled on great trays ranged on tables in an open-court, and fired again, and more thoroughly, before packing. As the taste of the world's tea-drinkers becomes more cultivated, green tea will lose favor, and the Java tea-fabriks will be employed in directly competing with the factories of India and Ceylon, from whose culture experiments

they have profited, and whose ingenious machines they have so generally adopted for curing and preparing black teas. Often the profuse "flushing" of the tea-bushes forces the fabrik to run all night to dispose of the quantity of fresh leaves; and one gets an idea of the world's increasing consumption of tea in this quarter of a century since Java, India, and Ceylon entered into competition in the tea-trade with China and Japan. Parakan Salak teas are advertised and sold in Shanghai and Yokohama, and the appeal to those great tea-marts is significant of a progressive spirit in Java trade, that is matched by the threat that petroleum from Java's oil-wells will soon compete seriously with American and Russian oil.

The coffee harvest is a fixed event in the plantation's calendar, and occurs regularly in April and May, at the close of the rainy season. Now that the finer Arabian shrub has been so largely replaced by the hardy Liberian tree, coffee-culture is a little less arduous than before. The berries are brought to the mill, husked by machinery, washed, dried on concrete platforms in the sun, sacked, and shipped to Batavia, and nothing more is heard of that crop until the next spring comes around. The trees are carefully tended and watched, of course, throughout the year, and scrutinized closely for any sign of scale or worm, bug or blight. The glowing red volcanic soil is always being weeded and raked and loosened, the trees trimmed, young plants from the great nursery of seedlings set out in place of the old trees, and the coffee area extended annually by clearings.

The Sundanese who live in their ornamental little

fancy baskets of houses beneath Sinagar's tall tamarinds and kanari-trees are much to be envied by their people. The great estate is a world of its own, an agricultural Arcadia, where life goes on so happily that it is most appropriate that they should have presented model Javanese village life at the Chicago Exposition in 1893. These little Sinagar villagers have their frequent passers on one side or the other of the demesne by turn, with theater and *wayang-wayang*, or puppet-shows, lasting far into the night. Professional raconteurs thrill them with classic tales of their glorious past, while musicians make sweet, sad melodies to rise from *gamelan*, or *gambang kayu*, from fiddle, drum, bowls, bells, and the sonorous *alang-alang*—a rude instrument of most ancient origin, made of five or eight graduated bamboo tubes, cut like organ-pipes, and hung loosely in a frame, which, shaken by a master hand, or swinging in the breeze from some tree-branch, produces the strangest, most weird and fascinating melodies in all the East.

The play of village life about Sinagar is so prettily picturesque, so well presented and carried out, that it seems only a theatrical representation—a Petit Trianon sort of affair at the least. The smiling little women, who rub and toss tea-leaves over the wilting-trays at the fabrik, seem only to be playing with the loose leaves like a larger sort of intelligent, careful children. In the same way the plucking in the tea-gardens and the march to the fabrik in long, single file, with bundles balanced on their heads, are mere kindergarten exercises to develop the muscles of the back and secure an erect and graceful carriage—the



secret, perhaps, of their splendid bearing, although all Javanese walk as kings and queens are supposed to walk, as the result of not being hampered by useless garments, and thus having control of every member and muscle of the body from earliest years. The same supple ease and grace distinguish their manners too, and one young planter said: "After living a few years among these gentle, graceful, winning natives, you cannot know how Europe jarred upon me. All the hard, sad, scowling faces and the harsh, angry voices oppressed me and made me so homesick for Java that I was really glad to turn away from it. I never before was so aware of the poverty, misery, distress, and vice of Europe."

Visitors to the Paris Exposition of 1889 and the Chicago Exposition of 1893 had a typical model Javanese village set before them, and all were unstinted in their praises of the *mise en scène* and the human features of the exhibit. The Chicago village was peopled by families from the Sinagar and Parakan Salak estates, and, as a purely ethnological exhibit, was the one success of that kind among the many trifling side-shows that detracted from the character of the Midway Plaisance. The trip to America was the prize and reward allotted to the most industrious and deserving villagers, who with their properties and industrial accessories filled two sailing-ships from Batavia to Hong Kong, whence they took steamer to San Francisco and railway across the continent to Chicago. There was a large outlay required at the start, and the best workmen were away from the estates for a year; and between a dishonest shipping-

agent at Batavia and the heavy commissions upon all receipts levied by the exposition's managers at Chicago, and the free admissions which those same generous American managers bestowed so widely, the village did not nearly pay its current expenses, and the venture stands as an entire loss, or a gift to the American people from the two public-spirited Preanger planters who paid for it.

The good little Javanese who went to Chicago returned from their great outing as simple and unspoiled as before, settled down contentedly under their kanari-trees, and resumed their routine life in field and fabrik. And what tales they had to tell to open-mouthed villagers and neighbors, who sat around the traveled ones, to the neglect of wayang-wayang and provincial professional story-tellers, listening to their accounts of the very remarkable things on that other side of the world! For the first time ever in their lives these Javanese saw white men at work in the fields, drudging in city streets, and doing every kind of menial, coolie labor. They saw a few black men, blacker than Moormen, but they were great personages, wearing fine uniforms and having command of the railway-trains, and riding in the most magnificently gilded cars—individuals treated always with great respect, who came to the Midway Plaisance in rich clothing, with gold watch-chains, jeweled scarf-pins, and much loose money in their pockets—a superior and a moneyed, if not the ruling class, in that topsy-turvy country, America.

A striped cat of the common roof-and-fence variety was given to one of the village managers, and made

the journey back to Java with the party. Everything else in Chicago had been paid for so dearly that this tabby could be fairly said to represent the entire profit and result of the Chicago village venture. The cat was named "Chicago," and soon became the pet of the whole plantation, roaming freely everywhere, and feasting on small rice-mice and tropical birds. "Chicago" came to us on our arrival, rubbed in friendly fashion against one and another American knee, and purred loudly, as if recognizing us for compatriots. The morning we left Sinagar there was hubbub and running to and fro in the great quadrangle of the residence. "Chicago," while walking the well-curb with gesticulating tail, had lost her balance, and with frightful cries and a splash ended her existence—by unpleasant coincidence, just as we were making our farewells to our kindly host. "In despair at being unable to return to America with you," said one mourner, "she has thrown herself in the well. It is plainly suicide." And this domestic tragedy saddened our leave-taking from those charming people, the fine flavor of whose hospitality, courtesy and kindness took the edge from many of our disagreeable experiences in Java, and gave us pleasant memories with which to offset those of the other kind.