

## XXI

### PAKOE ALAM: THE "AXIS OF THE UNIVERSE"

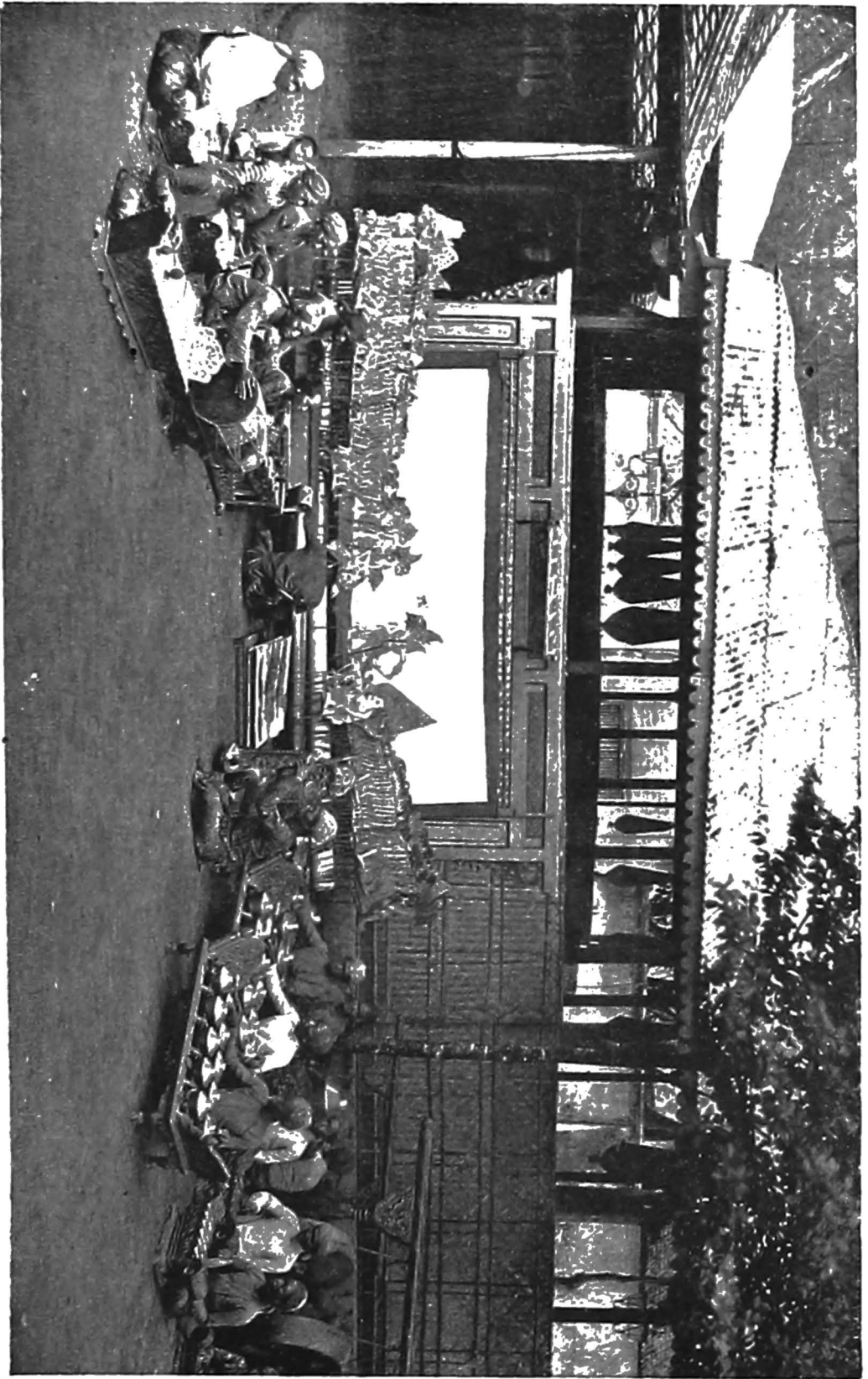


AS the lines of the topeng-players are always delivered in the ancient Kawi, or classic language of Java, one has need to brush up beforehand, and to wish for a libretto, a book of the opera, to keep in hand as the lyric drama progresses. Sir Stamford Raffles's "History of Java" furnishes one a general glimpse of the ancient literature of the island, and by many translations acquaints one with the great epics. This old literature is Hindu in form and origin; and Kawi, the classic or literary language of the past, in which all the history, early records, epic and legendary poems, and the books of religion and the law are written, is closely related to Sanskrit and Pali. The famous myths and legends of India are included in this literature, and the Ramayan and Mahabharata appear, incomplete but unaltered, in the Javanese epics known as the Kandas and the Parvas. Besides these two great works, there is the "Arjuna Vivaya," giving an account of the exploits of the Indian Arjuna, the real hero of the Mahabharata; and

there is still another romantic legendary poem, the "Bharata Yuddha," in which many of the incidents and the heroes of the Mahabharata are presented in Javanese settings with Javanese names. All these Kawi books are known to the people by translations in modern Javanese, and by their frequent presentation in the common dramatic entertainments, the wayang-wayang, or shadow-plays, of even the smallest villages.

Many "Books of Wisdom" and of exhortation to pious and righteous living survive in Kawi literature; but with all that Hindu civilization brought, it bequeathed nothing that could be called Buddhist literature, and the bulk of ancient Javanese literature is decidedly secular and profane—sentimental and romantic poems, love-tales in verse, that continue to extreme lengths. The Arab conquest has left almost no impress upon the language. Although schools were established, and a considerable body of Arabic literature came with the Mohammedan conquerors, but little save *bababs*, romantic chronicles of the loves of imaginary princes and heroes, have been added to Javanese literature in the four centuries since Islam's conquest. The spoken language of the Javanese shows few traces of Arabic, and the written language is also unchanged—a neater, more beautiful and graceful system of ornamental characters than either Arabic or Persian.

The old Kawi epics are popularized by the theater, the topeng, and the common wayang-wayang, or shadow-dance of puppets, where a manager delivers the well-known lines. Of these three dramatic forms



WAYANG-WAYANG.



the topeng is the highest, the most classic and refined presentation, a lyric drama very like the No dance of Japan, and doubtless, like the No dance, had a religious origin. A topeng troupe has its *dalang*, or manager, who prompts, sometimes explains, and often delivers all the lines for the masked actors; and there is a gamelan, or orchestra, of four or more musicians, and a chorus which chants accompanying and explanatory verses as the action proceeds. Great princes maintain their own private topeng troupes, and in their palace presentations, and always in the presence of native royalties, the actors go without masks. The topeng's gamelan consists of two sets of the circles of tiny gongs (*gong* or *agong*, a pure Javanese word and instrument), that are struck with wooden sticks, and two wood and two metal *gambang kayu* (wood and metal bars of different length and thickness mounted on a boat-shaped frame), or native xylophones, to which single instrument the name "gamelan" is so often given in the West.

The common wayang-wayang of the people is a modification of the same masked or puppet drama that was in vogue long before the Mohammedan conquest. As the religion of Islam forbade the representation of the human figure, the *susunhan* ordered the puppets to be so distorted that the priests could not call them images of human beings, and that even then only their shadows, thrown on a curtain, should be seen. Hence the exaggerated heads, the beaks and noses, of the cardboard jumping-jacks which, pulled by unseen strings, serve to maintain an interest in the national history and legends, and by preludes and lines, chanted

in classic Kawi, preserve acquaintance with the literary language among the common people. There is a form of wayang-wayang half-way between this puppet-show and the real drama, in which the actors themselves are visible, wearing distorted masks; but the plays are of modern times, in the common dialect, and the manager often improvises his lines and scenes as the play progresses. With these popular dramas there rank the performances of the graceful *bedaya*, or dancing-girl, whose tightly folded sarong, floating scarf-ends, measured steps, outward sweep of the hand, and charming play of arm and wrist recall the Japanese *maiko*. Although the winsome *bedaya* is sculptured on Boro Boedor's recording walls, there is nothing there to indicate the puppet-play, nor anything from which it might have evolved, although from other records ethnologists claim that the Javanese possessed this dramatic art when the Hindus came. A love of the drama in the form of the *topeng* and the wayang-wagang was so ingrained in the tastes and fixed in the customs of the people that the Mohammedan conquerors could not suppress those popular amusements, and were finally content to modify them in trifling points. The Dutch were also wise enough never to interfere with these harmless pleasures of the people, the greatest distraction and delight of these sensitive, emotional, innately esthetic and refined Javanese, who will sit through shadow-plays for half the night, and are moved to frenzy and tears by the martial and romantic exploits of their national heroes.

All of society,—the two hundred of Djokja's superior circle,—European and native together, gathered at

the Societeit's marble hall on the night of the topeng. That exalted being, the resident, entered in his modestly gilded uniform; and all the company rose, and stood until he and Prince Pakoe Alam had advanced and seated themselves in the two arm-chairs placed in front of the chairs of the rest of the audience. "Our best people are all here to-night," said our amiable table d'hôte acquaintance of the Hotel Toegoe; and we looked around the lofty white hall, where row upon row of robust, prosperous-looking Europeans sat in state attire. All the men wore heavy cloth coats, either richly frogged military jackets or the civilian's frock or cutaway, only a few wearing conventional black dress-coats, and none the rational white duck clothes of the tropics. The Dutch ladies were dressed in rich silks, brocades, and even velvets, and fanned vigorously as a natural consequence, while more of mildew fumes than of sachet odors came from these heavy cloth and silk garments, whose care and preservation are so difficult in the tropics. One was reminded of those tropical burghers in crimson velvet coats who received Lord Macartney and Staunton in a red velvet council-room at Batavia just one century before. The native officers and their families were naturally more interesting to a stranger—splendid-looking Javanese men, who stood and walked like kings, all wearing the battek kerchief or turban folded in myriad fine plaitings, richly patterned sarongs, and the boat-handled kris showing at the back of the short black military jacket. Many of these native officials had constellations of stars and decorations pinned to their breasts, and their finely cut features, noble mien,

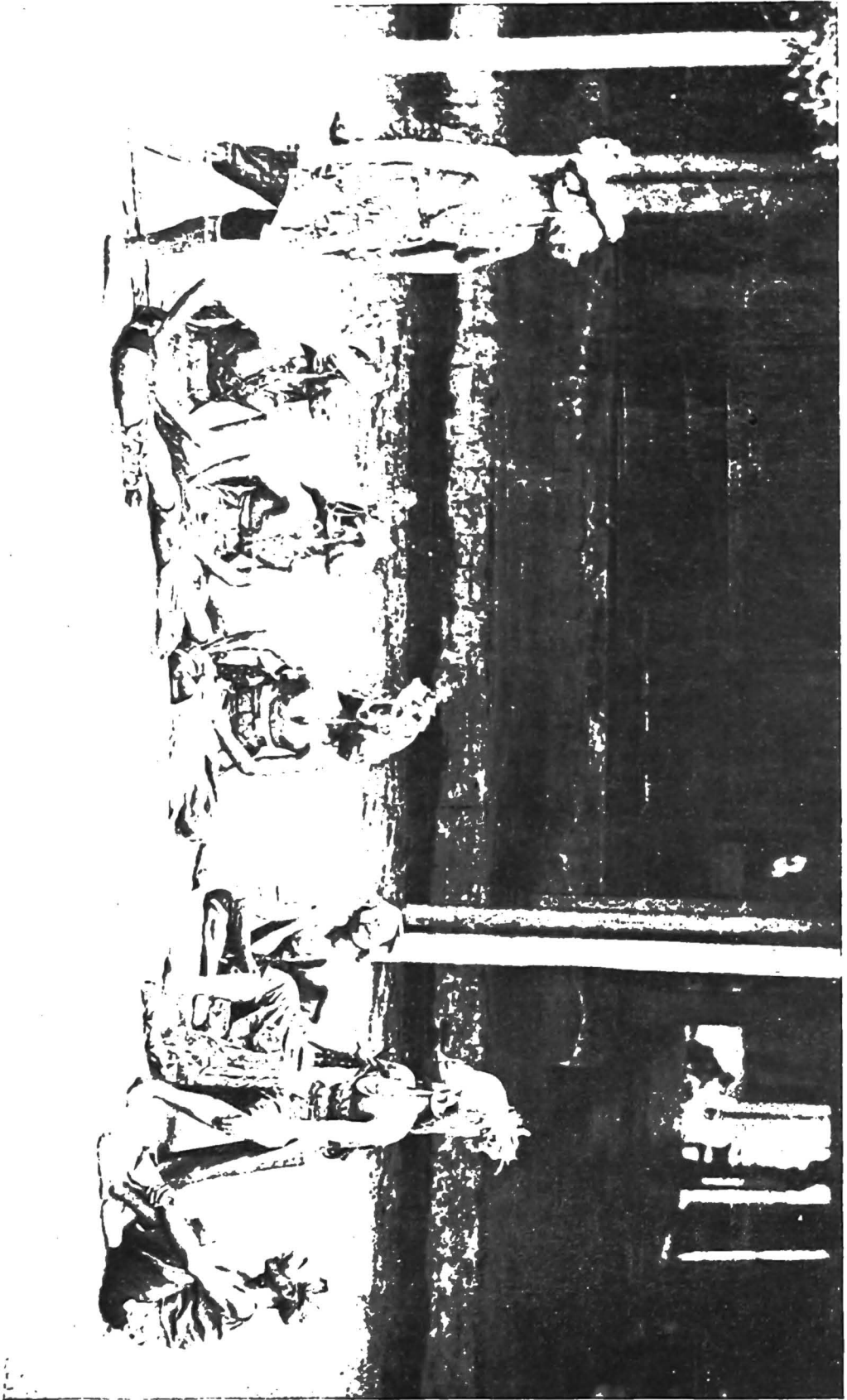
and graceful manners declared them aristocrats and the fine flower of an old race. Their wives, shy, slender, graceful women in clinging sarongs and the disfiguring Dutch jacket, wore many clasps and buckles and jeweled knobs of ear-rings. They seemed to have inherited all the Hindu love of glittering, glowing jewels, and the Buddhist love of flowers and perfumes, each little starry-eyed, flower-like woman redolent of rose or jasmine attar, and wearing some brilliant blossom in the knot of satin-black hair. The women had thrust their pretty brown feet into gold-heeled mule slippers, that clicked musically on the tiles as they walked, while the children comfortably rubbed their bare feet on the cool white floor.

A few Chinese families, nearly all of them Parakaks, or half-castes, to the island born, were there; the women in gay embroidered satins, jeweled and diamonded out of all reason, and the children gay as cockatoos and parrakeets in their bright little coats and caps and talismanic ornaments. Rows of shadowy, silent natives, opas, lantern- and pajong-bearers, and attendants of every kind, crouched in rows among the great columns of the portico—gallery gods who squatted spellbound, rapt, and freely tearful in their enjoyment of the splendid topeng produced that night.

Prince Pakoe Alam's artists rendered for the sake of military charities a four-act lyric drama, dealing with the adventures of mythical Panji, a hero of Hindu times, who is said to have introduced the kris to Java. The gamelan's music was all soft harmonies, tender, weird, sad melodies in plaintive minor key, that accompanied the action throughout. The high-pitched



LORENZ THEATRE WITH MASKS





nasal recitatives, the squeaks and squawks and stamps of fencing warriors, the slow posing, the stilted and automatic movements of all the actors, were enough like the No dance of Japan to confuse one greatly. All the actors were magnificently costumed and accoutred, their dresses, armor, and weapons being historic properties of the Pakoe Alam family, that had figured on festal occasions in the topengs of a century and more. In the first act four women in silk sarongs and velvet jackets did a regular Delsarte dance, with all those theatrical poses, sweeps, and gestures with the devitalized arm and wrist that the trainers of the would-be beautiful are teaching in America. Dark-robed attendants, identical with the mutes and invisible supers of the Japanese stage, crawled around behind the principals, arranging costumes, handing and carrying away weapons, as needed. Then deliberate mortal combat raged to slow music; and after it the harmless automatic dance was resumed. There was one tedious act where warriors in modern military jackets, worn with sarongs, indulged in long-drawn recitatives in Kawi; there were prolonged fan, spear, and bow drills; and one fine final act, where heroes, stripped to the waist in old style, with bodies powdered yellow, and half protected by gorgeously gilded breast-plates, fenced with fury and some earnest.

At the end of the first act nearly every man in the audience rose and went out, each mopping his brows and whewing great breaths of air from his lungs. Some few returned with cups of coffee, glasses of pink lemonade, and tall beakers of soda-water for the perspiring ladies wedged in their chairs. These men

stayed outside after that act, declaring themselves only during intermissions, when they rushed cooling drinks to their partners at the front. At the end of three hours Panji triumphed over all his enemies, the performance ended, chairs scraped loudly as the audience stirred, the applause was long, and the sighs of relief profound.

After the resident had made the tour of the room and honored the most distinguished ones, and the European dancing was about to begin, the native ladies withdrew; and as we saw these most interesting figures leaving, we, who had risen at five o'clock that morning, and expected to repeat the act the next morning, followed the beauties in golden slippers out to the picturesque confusion of lantern- and pajong-bearers at the carriage entrance. Dancing as it is done in Djokja could not keep us longer awake that night, though we have regretted ever since that we did not wait to see how many of the broadcloth-coated men and their partners in winter gowns survived one vigorous continental waltz on a marble floor, or if an anteroom was converted into an emergency hospital for treating heat prostrations.

With the exemplary early rising the tropics enjoin, we had been up for hours—had enjoyed the dash of a dipper-bath, breakfasted, written letters, visited the passer, the pawnshops, and the photographer—before it was time to join the assistant resident's party and drive to the palace of Prince Pakoe Alam. The carriages went through several gateways, past a guard house and sentries, before they drew up in an inner court before an open pringitan, or audience-hall, eighty

feet square, whose great, low-spreading roof, resting only on heavy teak columns, was all open to the air. The prince, his crown prince, and his second son, who is the father's aide-de-camp, were waiting to receive us as we alighted, all three dressed in conventional European military uniforms, with many medals and orders illuminating their coat fronts, and only the native turban on the old prince's head suggesting anything Javanese in attire. The prince spoke Dutch, his sons English and French as well as Dutch; and each gave us cordial welcome and courteous greetings before they offered an arm to conduct us back to the cool inner part of the *pringitan*, where the young princesses were waiting. We went far in over the shining marble floor, away from all glare and reflection of the vast sanded court, to a region of tempered shadow, where the wife, a daughter-in-law, and a granddaughter of the prince stood beside a formal semicircle of chairs. The ladies spoke only Dutch and Malay, but they did the honors most gracefully, and with the two princes to interpret, conversation moved along smoothly. These princesses wore sarongs and jackets and gilded mule slippers, but their simple costumes were brightened by many jeweled clasps and brooches and great, glittering knobs of ear-rings, and both had coronals of pale-yellow flowers around the knot of black hair drawn low at the back of the head, in foreign style. Their complexions were the pure pale yellow of the true Javanese aristocracy, not the pasty greenish yellow of the higher-class women of China. They had very pretty manners, combining gentleness and dignity, and they put the conventional questions as to

our homes and journeys with great earnestness and seeming interest.

The old prince, whose high military rank makes him an offset and check upon the Sultan of Djokja, and who, by his lineage and connections with the imperial house of Solo, almost ranks the sultan, is very literally a serene highness, a most gracious and courtly host, whose dignity and charming address befit his rank and exalted name. His lands and mills and highly improved estates bring him a large private income; and progressive as he may be, I am sure his people speak of him admiringly as a gentleman of the old school—and that old school must have been an admirable one in Java, where the native manners are as fine as in Japan. Prince Pakoe Alam received a foreign military education in his youth, and his sons have enjoyed still greater advantages to fit them for the still newer order. They are the most charming, natural, and unaffected young men, unspoiled and with truly princely mien and manners. To be told hereafter that a young man has the manners of a prince will mean a great deal in simple courtesy, fine finish, and perfection, to those who remember these Javanese princes, the handsome young Pakoe Alams. The natural refinement and charm that one is sensible of in even the lowliest Javanese have their fullest and finest flowering in these princely ones; and that delightful hour spent in the vast shady white pringitan offset many misadventures in Java.

Rows of red-coated and -cowled servitors sat around the edges of the pringitan's shining floor, holding the state pajongs and hooded spears of ceremony; and a

full gamelan and a group of singers, in the same bright court livery, squatted in rows facing us at the far front of the hall, awaiting the signal to begin. The artists of the previous night, all the singers and musicians of the full topeng troupe, lifted up their voices to the tinkling, softly booming, sonorous airs of the gamelan and delighted us with a succession of chants throughout our stay. The young princes led us "down front,"—for the whole strange scene in which we found ourselves was very like a theater,—and, in the strong glare of the footlights of daylight, explained the several instruments of the native orchestra. Then in from the wings—"enter right," as the play-books would say—came a procession of servants, swinging racks of decanters and glasses, and bearing bowls of ice, trays of fruits, wafers, and sweets. Abject minions sidled over the floor, and mutely offered us iced wines or aerated waters, moving awkwardly about in the ignominious attitude of the dodok, like so many land-crabs. "Light-boys" crouched and crawled behind each smoker, handing cigars, holding burning punk-sticks, or extending trays to receive the ashes, maintaining their abject position during all our stay. One never gets used to this abasement of the dodok, often as he may see it; and after the first absurdity and humor of it wears off, it is irritating and humiliating to see one human being thus belittle himself before another. One suspects that there was more of fear than reverence in its first observance, and that it comes from centuries of tyranny and oppression rather than from any spontaneous expressions of humility and admiration. This group of household retainers, sidling

and jerking over the floor with something between the gait of a toad and a crab, seemed to mar the perfect dignity and decorum of the occasion. These same attendants strode into the sunlit court with the free, splendid tread of Javanese men, only to crouch to their heels at the pringitan's edge, make the simbah's imploring obeisance with clasped hands to the forehead, repeating the simbah if they caught a princely eye, while they sidled grotesquely over the pringitan floor and crouched like dogs at the master's feet.

There was a carved screen behind us, closing off an inner space, where broad divans invited to informal ease, and many beautiful objects were disposed. We were taken there by the old prince to see the great gold-bound "Menac," or family record of the Pakoe Alam's — an immense volume with jeweled covers, resting on a yellow satin cushion. This family history was put in this splendid form a hundred years ago by Prince Pakoe Alam II, a literary highness who possessed considerable artistic talent, and maintained a staff of artists and writers in his palace, who were busied for years in tracing and illuminating, under his instructions, this one precious manuscript. Javanese calligraphy, which is even more decorative and ornamental than Arabic or Persian, makes beautiful pages; and each page, gracefully written in black, gold, or colors, is also bordered and illuminated more lavishly than any old Flemish missal. The beautiful ornamental letters, medallions, and miniatures, the tangle of graceful arabesques, and the glow of soft colors and gold, relieved with touches and dashes of black, make the Pakoe Alam's "Menac" a treasure of delight for a whole



morning's inspection; but we had only time to turn its leaves, see the more remarkable pages, and obtain a general dazzling idea of its quality. The "Axis of the Universe" is a bibliophile and collector by inheritance, and there were many precious manuscript books, unique éditions de luxe in jeweled bindings, that we could have given hours to inspecting. There is one particular book of Arabian tales, rivaling the family "Menac" in the beautiful lettering and rich illumination, that was sent to the Amsterdam Colonial Exposition some years ago, and naturally excited surprise and admiration among European book-collectors.

Conversation never lagged during this morning call, and the little second prince was regretful that we had given up a trip to the sweltering end of the island, where the Bromo smokes. "The Bromo is the only 'lake of fire' in the world, you know," said the prince, proudly. And soon after, in answer to a question, he said, "No, I have never been in Europe, but I have been all over Java"—this last with an emphasis that became one to the island born, and appreciative of all its wonderful beauties.

When we praised and extolled the scenery of Java, he asked naïvely, "Is America not beautiful, then? Have you no mountains, no beautiful scenery there?" And when we answered patriotically to the facts,—Niagara, the Yellowstone, the Yosemite, Mount Rainier, and Alaska,—he asked in amazement, "Then why do you travel to other countries?"

The old prince announced the approaching marriage of his granddaughter to the son of the Prince of Malang, and asked that we would attend the fêtes which

he would give in celebration of the affair a fortnight later; but with all of the other India beckoning, we could not prolong our stay in Java; and we took leave of our princely hosts then, to hasten to the train, promising, as one always does in every pleasant place, to come again when time would allow for a fuller enjoyment of this Javanese Djokja, that we had only begun to know as we were leaving.