



NATIVE CAVALRY GAMES IN UPPER INDIA.

BY A LATE RESIDENT.



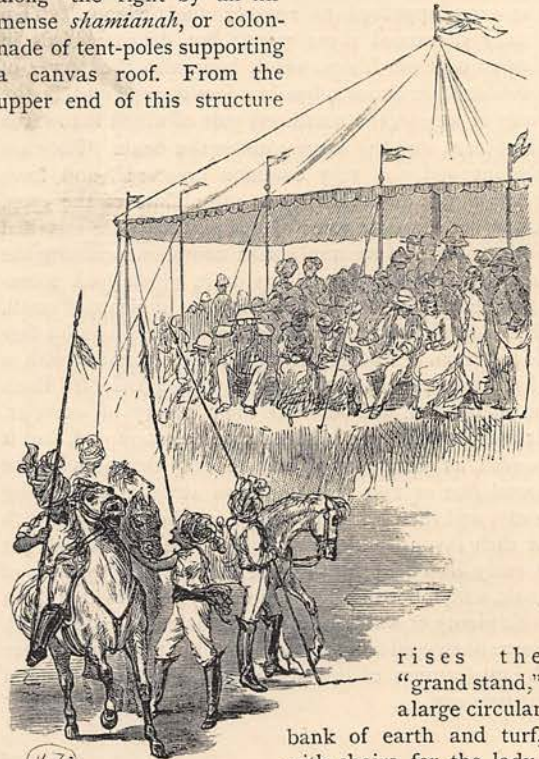
IN Upper India the months of splendid weather which correspond to our English winter—say from the beginning of November to the middle of March—are the season of out-door games and great religious festivals. On some wide space by every town and village the Hindoos hold their open-air perform-

ances of episodes from the Ramayana—"The Iliad of the East;" and the extraordinary spectacle presented by the worship of the Ganges, at the sacred spot of its junction with the Jumna, is the representation, on a vast scale, of like observances elsewhere. Among the Mahommedans the din of *tom-toms* introduces the most impressive of all religious shows, the Mohurrum; and the *sahib-log*, or "ruling people"—the English—also celebrate their national festival, the local "Derby." But though Hindoos, even, assist at the mourning for the Prophet's grandsons, and Mahommedan youths occasionally figure as the companions of Rama, these great shows are, in the main, of an exclusive character, and the up-country "Derby" is the most exclusive of them all. The natives of the place may present themselves, but in a shy way, standing aloof in groups, or sitting on their heels, with their knees in their arms, on some elevated but respectfully distant coign of vantage.

But in an English Station at which a native cavalry regiment is quartered, an exception to this rule of isolation is usually furnished by the military sports, the prettiest of native games to be witnessed between the mountains and the sea. They are the only occasion, from one year to another, on which natives and English assemble, on something like equal terms, for the common object of being amused, and with such a

common interest in the proceedings as they would have shown had they been gathered within the four walls of a theatre in the Strand, and not, as in the instance of the particular scene to be described, on a sandy plain by the Ganges. The military games are extremely popular among the bazaar inhabitants, who crowd the spot on the morning of the feat-day. The English quarter contributes almost its entire population; and even the Station chaplain may be seen stepping out of his buggy at the entrance to the ground, in his white cricket-shoes, and pith helmet like an inverted soup-tureen.

The scene is wholly characteristic of Upper India. Two lines of bright pennons mark off the sides of a large oblong arena, measuring about two hundred yards by forty or fifty, and bounded for some distance along the right by an immense *shamianah*, or colonnade of tent-poles supporting a canvas roof. From the upper end of this structure



risers the "grand stand," a large circular bank of earth and turf, with chairs for the lady-visitors, and an awning between them and the sun. On the stand are assembled some hundred visitors, including all the ladies of the station, from the *burra mem-sahib*, or official queen of the English community, to the last young lady exile from England,

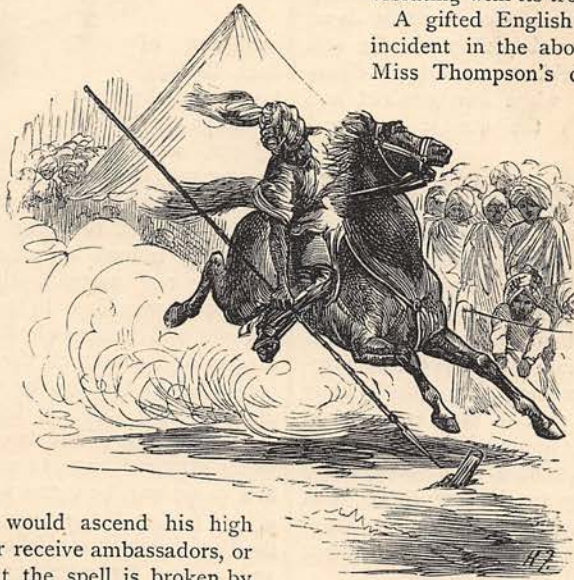
the rose-bloom still fresh on her face. Looking down from this position, one discovers, behind the crowds of other English folk, who lounge, smoke, and chat beneath the canvas roof, a long line of tables laid out for tiffin, with all the profusion of Anglo-Indian hospitality; and, bustling about among them, a strong force of *kitmutgars*, or waiters. On the opposite side of the oblong are congregated the bazaar people, arrayed in every colour and fashion of turban and flowing tunic.

To one watching the spectacle as the *sowars* are quietly clearing the intermediate space of its promiscuous crowds, it seems like the shifting colours and positions of a kaleidoscope. The chaos of many-tinted masses and atoms gradually settles into order and fixity behind the long lines of tiny bright pennons, and closes at right angles the far end of the arena. The rear ranks of spectators stand silently, with all the order of disciplined troops. How they remind one of the cross-legged Buddhas whom one sees in pictures, those front rows, sitting down on the brown grass! Or the fancy may wander back to the India of the Moguls, and picture for itself some Emperor of Hindustan come to give audience to his subjects. So must the people have appeared in the *Dewan-i-am*, that vast square of the citadel at

Futhepore, when Akbar would ascend his high throne, to hear petitions, or receive ambassadors, or watch athletic games. But the spell is broken by the voice of the Commandant, who stands gesticulating, the solitary figure on the course, which is level as a billiard-table, and at the closed end of which are grouped the *sowars*, motionless in their saddles, the points of their tall, thin spears glimmering. Observing the still group, one becomes conscious of a vague suspicion that one would not feel violently shocked if the points carried human heads. Sketches in travellers' books on Khiva and Bokhara represent the nomads standing so before the Ameer, in the courtyard of his palace, with their lances ornamented in the above fashion, in token of successful raiding against some hostile tribe; and it is, to say the least, more than probable that the not very remote ancestors of the present champions often bore away on their spears trophies more eloquent than the tent-pegs of an hereditary enemy. Even the style of the *sowars'* dress is suggestive of nomadic freedom. The regimental uniform has been discarded for the occasion, and the riders show as great variety of colour as their steeds, some being arrayed in white, others in scarlet, or purple, or the Prophet's colour, green.

Suddenly darts forth from the group a horseman in snow-white turban and tunic, sitting erect as before, his lance still pointing upwards. Already past half-distance, he slowly bends forward, lowering his spear-head, the hilt-end trailing in the floating wake of dust that follows the rider's path. The shining point sinks as the rider bends still lower, his spear-arm straightened downwards, his left hand resting high up on the neck of the horse, that approaches at full speed, with head thrown back, and tossing mane. With what ease and grace the rider maintains his intense attitude, seemingly still as a statue, but for the flutter of robe and turban-end! His cry of "All-ah!" grows clearer and shriller above the muffled hoof-beats; and as he flashes past, his lance pierces the tough stake, wrenching it out of the hard earth; and rising in his saddle, the rider swings to his shoulder the weapon vibrating with its trophy.

A gifted English artist has transferred an incident in the above feat to her canvas; but Miss Thompson's clever picture conveys an inadequate idea of the reality. To one familiar with the scene, the title of her picture—"Missed"—would of itself have suggested the suspicion that the painter had chosen the moment of exhausted interest. To the spectator, at least, the *sowar*, once past his mark, is an object of little or no concern. The moment of chief interest is when the rider, in full career, has approached to within a few yards of the spot, and when eager expectation,

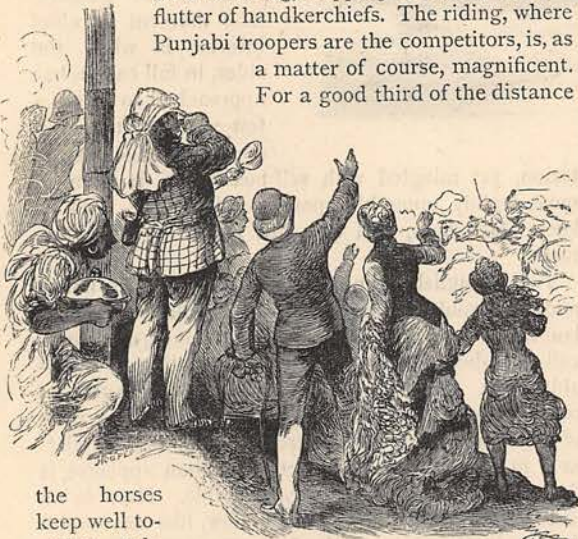


yet mingled with self-possession, is stamped most legibly upon his spare, aquiline face, with its keen, dark eyes, and thin lips disclosing the white teeth.

To an English stranger the behaviour of the native audience would appear somewhat singular. Cheering, laudatory or ironical, is unknown amongst natives, college baboos excepted, and their imitation is miserably poor. Only a *sowar* who lets go his spear, or commits some other mistake punishable, by the rules of the game, with a fine, screams forth an "All-ah!" as if in self-derision. In fact, an Indian applause is the most sepulchral affair conceivable. Here is an instance in point. In a great hollow, like an amphitheatre, in the steep bank of the Ganges at Benares, there sat, long and patiently, a vast crowd, waiting to see the Prince of Wales cross the river to the Castle of Ramnuggur. Had the throng been English, the roar of its rejoicings, as the illustrious traveller at last appeared, would have shaken the welkin. But the people of Benares simply rose respectfully to their

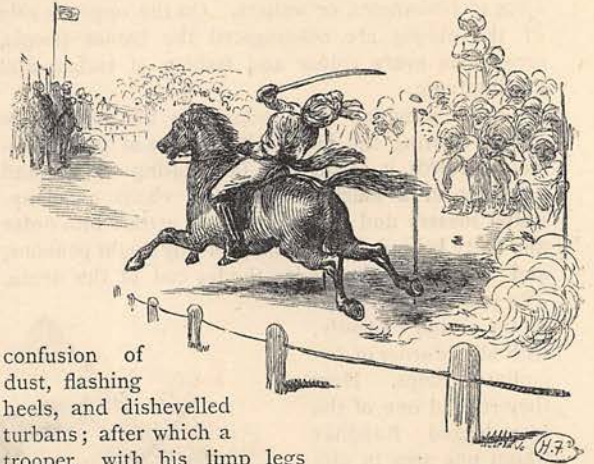
feet, with their hands folded in front, and with a subdued noise of rustling and whispering. And on this far less picturesque spot in the flat, sandy Doab, the bazaar folk give vent to their emotions in a like suppressed manner. They neither cheer nor clap hands when a horseman snatches away the tent-peg on the point of his weapon. Their substitute for the Anglican applause is a monotone which, though scarcely above breath, reaches the ear in a vast volume of sound. "Aw-aw!" it seems to be, but the real exclamation is, "*Sha-bash!*"—wonderful, prodigious, miraculous—"*Sha-bash!*" from those long, closely-packed rows of turbaned figures, squatting on their heels, with their chins on their knees. The tunereal expletive perhaps waxes louder when a rider, at full speed, cuts with his sabre each of three lemons placed on pegs, separated from one another only by an interval of two or three yards—often slicing them so neatly that the halves drop straight down to the foot of the stake; and perhaps louder still when the horseman, in mid-career, swoops down, picks up from the sand a white handkerchief, and then regains his seat with the utmost ease and agility.

It is very interesting, too, to watch the varying demeanour of the English spectators. So long as the feats are purely Oriental, the latter are even less demonstrative than the bazaar folk opposite, though this by no means implies non-appreciation of the real grace and beauty of these games. It is only when a horse-race, on the familiar home model, is substituted for the Asiatic spear and sabre feats that our countrymen and countrywomen become enthusiastically alive to the situation, and give vent to their emotions in loud cheering, clapping of hands, and the flutter of handkerchiefs. The riding, where Punjabi troopers are the competitors, is, as a matter of course, magnificent. For a good third of the distance



the horses keep well together, taking their long and high leaps with cat-like ease; and they present a pretty appearance as they glide round the rim of the *maidan*, past the dark mango-groves. At last the excitement finds vent in a genuine English cheer, as the one or two *sowars* who have gradually crept ahead of their

fellows clear the last hurdle, and speed almost neck-and-neck up the arena, with the English officers of the regiment waving their *toppees*, and galloping alongside of them. The riding, however, is apt to grow reckless. At the final leap a "spill" sometimes occurs, and a



confusion of dust, flashing heels, and dishevelled turbans; after which a trooper, with his limp legs trailing, may be seen borne off, like an armful of clothes for the *dhobie* (washerman).

It is difficult to recognise in these picturesque, splendidly trained horsemen, the refined product of the very raw material—the long-haired, unkempt, athletic ragamuffins, in grimy white, baggy cotton drawers and tunics, whom one sees under drill at sunrise and sunset, all the year round, on the broad *maidan*. As the cavalry tournament is one of the most pleasant sights in India, so the recruit at drill is decidedly one of the most depressing. He usually wears a morose aspect; and as he goes on stamping in a vague way, he seems weighted with a bitter sense of the futility of the proceeding. By race, however, the Punjab *sowar* is a fellow with a sense of humour and a turn for merriment; and as he progresses through his preparatory stages he offers a good illustration of Mr. Carlyle's philosophy of laughter. As treason lurks in the "everlasting simper," the "snigger from the throat outwards," the "whiffling cackinnation, as if through wool," so the man who has "once laughed wholly cannot be irreclaimably bad." Teufelsdröckh himself, it will be remembered, only laughed once. The good-humoured banter, the retort equally good-humoured, and the boisterous mirth to which, during ordinary practice, exhibitions of awkwardness may give occasion, are signs of a temperament with which northern races are supposed to be specially sympathetic. In a like position, Hindoos would probably smile like mutes at a funeral. But let a final scene exemplify the *sowar's* turn for frolic, and his transition from the graceful to the grotesque. It is a camel-race, and the huge beasts, each with a trooper jolting on its unsteady hump, stampede confusedly along the arena, shovelling up clouds of dust with their flat pads of feet. The pendulous swing of their immense splay legs suggests the idea of a parody on the art of skating.

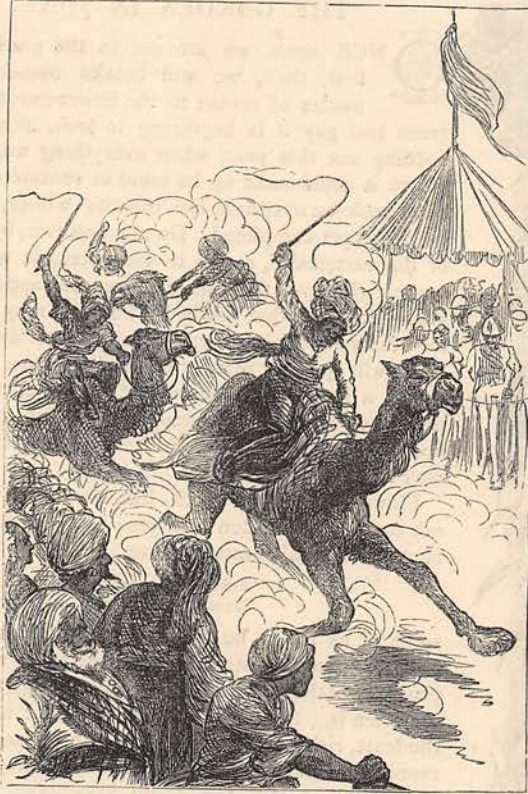
With his long, half-closed eyes, Roman nose, underlip out-thrust, and upraised countenance, a camel looks the embodiment of infinite conceit, hopeless cynicism, and sour disdain; and the expression seems ludicrously emphasised by contrast with the uproarious merriment, in which none join with keener zest than the riders.

It is well worth while to mingle in the crowd after the sports are over, and join in friendly conversation with the men. Their manner is the very reverse of the Bengalee or up-country Hindoo's obsequious deference. Not that they lack politeness; far from it. Every Oriental—whether rajah or scavenger—is polite; and those Mahommedan troopers from the wild border-land of the Khyberes, Afreedees, Wazerees, and the rest, form no exception to the rule. But their politeness—different from that of the ordinary Hindoo—is distinguished by an air of easy dignity, and suggestion of independence. They are usually frank and communicative, and often, too, ready with many a border anecdote of daring and adventure. In a "crack" regiment such as the particular one which the present writer has in view, and which is a fair specimen of many another force

that might be named, the men—as would speedily be discovered on an occasion like that which we are describing—are possessed by a strong *esprit de corps*, and love for the service. If their English officers—as is usually the case in these regiments—be men of sympathetic as well as firm and just character, fond of sport, brave and energetic—soldiers, in short, who reveal the comrade in

the man of authority—they are sure to be regarded with admiration and attachment. And the feeling is as often reciprocated. As the Commandant of this particular regiment once remarked to the writer, at one of these military entertainments—"I can go anywhere and do anything with these men." It may be guessed that such regiments need never lack recruits. In this instance, the list of applicants has

often contained, for months at a time, the names of as many as sixty or seventy young, strapping fellows, who have travelled all the way from the Punjab frontier districts, hundreds of miles down-country, on the strength of the reputation of the regiment, in which probably some of their kinsmen were serving. The Mahommedan race to which they belong is the bravest and most warlike in the East. The "Irregular" system, as it is termed, is in many respects suited to the tastes of these soldiers—combining, as it does, a certain amount of individual freedom and concession to individual tastes, with the necessary discipline. For example, they select, purchase, and maintain their own horses, receiving a lump sum in pay per month. In this way, the horses never show the uniformity of style observed in English regiments. The



regimental uniform is, of course, of one pattern and colour—in the present instance consisting of yellow pantaloons, long boots, red jackets, and blue and white turbans—but during off-hours, and on the great gala-days, the men dress as they like; and the pretty, tasteful variety contributes much to the interest of a scene which one who has beheld it is likely to remember.

REVENGE.

AS a fierce tiger, ravished of its young,
 Defiant, bold, stands savagely at bay,
 Heedless of danger, and marks down the prey
 Most meet for its revenge its foes among,
 So too does man, in his worst nature, stung
 By some foul insult or some grievous wrong,
 Relentless watch, counting the minutes long,
 Till the fell mine of his revenge be sprung.

But as the tiger's cub, that yet remains
 To gambol by its parent's side in play,
 Has wondrous power to drive fierce thoughts
 away,
 So too may child or wife, with loving pains,
 Make man forget his anger, and resign
 His wrongs to Him who claims, "Revenge is
 mine."

G. WEATHERLY.