

TEA-GROWING IN INDIA.



NOT very much more than 200 years ago, Pepys, writing in his Diary under date September 25, 1661, says: "I sent for a cup of tea (a Chinese drink), of which I had never drank before;" but, unfortunately, the worthy gentleman fails to express his opinion on the new beverage, ready as he was, as a general rule, to note down for the edification of future generations the smallest particulars of his sensations and opinions. Though Mr. Pepys did not taste his first cup of tea until the year 1661, it had been introduced into England before that time, and in 1660 an Act of Parliament was passed, fixing a duty of 8d. per gallon on all tea, coffee, and chocolate sold in places of public resort; but, judging from the quantity of tea imported into the country, the revenue obtained from this source must have been very trifling indeed.

It was not until the year 1678 that attention was paid to the importation of tea as a commercial speculation, for though in 1669 the East India Company wrote to their employés in the East to "send home by their ships 100 pounds weight of the best tey they could get," which probably was distributed by the Directors as to them seemed fit, the first large consignment, consisting of 4,713 pounds, was received by the Company in the year first mentioned; but this supply seems to have been very much in excess of the demand, for during the six ensuing years from 1679 to 1684, only 410 pounds were imported by the Honourable John Company. From this time, however, the consumption continued gradually to increase, until in the year 1711 no less than 141,995 pounds of tea paid duty to the Customs and Excise. It was not until 1834 that the excise duty was permanently repealed, and in 1836 a fixed customs due of 2s. 1d. was paid, to which in the year 1840 an additional 5 per cent. was imposed, in which year the imports had reached to upwards of 30,000,000 pounds.

These remarks on the rapid increase in the consumption of tea in the United Kingdom are necessary, as showing to what importance the trade had reached, tea having in fact become, within this short space of time, the almost universal beverage of the inhabitants of these islands. When, then, political complications arose between this country and China, it was not extraordinary that people should look with some anxiety for a possible tea supply, should that of China be withdrawn from us, and no place appeared to hold out such prospects of success as our Indian Empire. The existence of an indigenous tea-plant in India had been reported by a Mr. David Scott as early as the year 1825, but little or no notice was taken of his discovery, and it was not until nearly ten years later, in 1834, when Captains Jenkins and Charlton again drew people's attention to its existence in Assam, that a Commission was appointed by the East India Company to inquire into the prospects of cultivating tea with

success in India. That tea could be satisfactorily grown and manufactured in our Indian Empire having by its enquiries been proved, tea-plants and tea-seed were largely imported from China, and the Government held out many inducements to capitalists to enter into the enterprise. A sort of mania arose in favour of Indian teas, which in the year 1839 were sold at from 16s. to 34s. a pound; and in the following year, when the mania may be supposed to have abated, these teas still brought from 6s. 6d. to 10s. 10d. a pound, exclusive of the duty. Then began an utterly reckless course of speculation, no sums of money being considered too great to invest in an enterprise which appeared to hold out such promise to the capitalist. Under any circumstances it would have been extremely difficult to get men qualified for the post of manager of these plantations, as the most complete ignorance seems to have existed both as to the agricultural requirements of the tea-plant and the mode of manufacture; but with the unthinking haste with which people then rushed into the enterprise, it was absolutely impossible to procure a sufficient number of qualified men, and therefore any European was considered competent to take charge of a tea-garden, many of them being the "black sheep" of other trades and professions. What wonder, with such as these to conduct it, that the growth and manufacture of tea in India should have proved a failure? That it should fail was only to be expected, and unfortunately it did, for a time, fail most completely. About the years 1865-66, what is still remembered by planters as "the crisis" came, and Indian tea property became to all intents and purposes absolutely worthless. It was after this great crisis in the affairs of tea, when most of the tea-gardens had changed hands, and when some few, at least, of the planters had purchased experience at a fearful cost, that the industry emerged from its mystical golden envelope, and took its stand merely as a sound and profitable investment, holding forth, not indeed fabulous prospects of wealth, but a fair—nay, liberal—return for the capital invested in it.

And now, as very few persons in England have any idea of the manner in which their common beverage is produced, a short account of the growth and manufacture of tea may be presented to the reader.

In the early days of Indian tea cultivation, it was unfortunately, though perhaps naturally, supposed that the China plant must of necessity produce the best quality of tea, and consequently large consignments of Chinese seed were imported into India and deposited in the Government nurseries. Later it was, however, found that the long, soft, golden leaf of the indigenous plant produced a tea in every way superior to that derived from the exotic bush, and now indigenous seed fetches as much as 100 to 120 rupees a maund, or something like half-a-crown a pound, which, considering that each seed is about the size of a good large marble, must be admitted to be rather a high

price to pay for an article which is used in such large quantities.

The first duty of a planter making a new garden is, of course, to procure good seed and place it in nurseries. When a large garden is to be made, these nurseries cover several acres, the seed being planted by hand in furrows or in separate "dibbled" holes, usually about three inches apart, in beds four feet broad, and of whatever length the lay of the land may render most convenient. As these nurseries have to be made in the cold weather, when consequently there is little or no chance of rain, they have to be watered by hand occasionally, and further to be covered thinly over with coarse grass, both to keep in the moisture and to prevent the heat of the mid-day sun from scorching the tender shoots when first they appear above ground. The nurseries being made usually in November and December, though sometimes even later than this, the young plants, about four inches high, are ready to be planted out into the permanent garden as soon as the rainy season sets in, by which time the land has to be cleared of all the jungle, not even a tree being left standing. And not only has the jungle to be cut and burnt, making such a glorious blaze of fire as the good folks in England can form no adequate idea of, but the ground has then to be marked out at regular distances with little bamboo stakes, usually three or four feet apart, at each of which a plant is carefully planted. When this "staking out" is well and properly done, the rows of stakes, and later of young tea-bushes, have a very pretty effect; and look in what direction you will, nothing but parallel rows, almost geometrically straight, meet the eye. On steep hillsides, however, where planters are sometimes forced to make their gardens, and where indeed it was formerly erroneously supposed the tea-plant flourished best, a still more charming effect is produced by the habit, now much in vogue, of "terracing"—that is, of cutting steps all up the steep sides of a hill, so that the plants are placed on horizontal flats, each flat being some eighteen inches above the one below it, and about eighteen inches broad. Of course, constant care is necessary, after the young tea-plants are planted, to keep down the rank, luxuriant tropical vegetation, which otherwise would soon choke up the whole garden, and either kill the plants by shutting out the necessary light and air, or by hiding them from the careless eyes of the coolies, leave them at the mercy of the hoe when at length attention was again bestowed upon them. Besides jungle, however, and the carelessly wielded hoe of the Bengali coolie, there is yet another, and perhaps even a worse enemy to the young tea-plant, in a large species of cricket, which cuts off the green tops, or sometimes even eats through the main stem of the plant, and carries away his spoils to his burrow, consuming indeed but a very small portion of what he steals, but leaving the unfortunate plant in a state from which it is almost impossible for it ever to recover. When a couple of years old, however, it has got beyond the reach of all youthful troubles, and then begins to give some, though trifling, return for the care which has been bestowed upon it,

and the care of a different kind which it now begins to require. For after it has once reached a fair size, as the cold weather each year comes round, every bush has to be pruned, at first with a sparing hand, but as the plants get older, with an apparent recklessness, which would probably cause no little surprise to the cultivators of the allied camelia at home. Indeed, a pruned tea-garden presents an extraordinary sight to the novice in tea matters, and in fact has led some innocent travellers to suppose that the yearly crop had been cut from the bushes, until they observed all the missing branches lying neglected between the rows. So severe is this pruning, that plants which during the "plucking season" have run up to perhaps four or five feet in height, are frequently cut down to eighteen or twenty inches, and have not a leaf left on them; yet for this rough treatment they only seem to thrive the better, and certainly yield as much after a heavy as after a light pruning.

After the pruning—which, as has been already observed, takes place in the cold season, and is usually finished by February at latest—the plants have, of course, to be allowed time to send forth new shoots; but as the rains begin to fall the growth is very rapid, and by the month of May plucking is always commenced. The men being engaged in "cultivation" and "manufacture," this is performed by women and children, who are sent, with baskets made for the purpose, to gather all the young shoots; each shoot bearing but a "leaf-bud," and two, or sometimes, during the height of the season, three expanded leaves; and the extraordinary dexterity (and indeed *sinisterity* as well, for both hands are used at once) which the coolies gradually acquire in this task will be appreciated when it is stated that a good plucker will gather as much as 120 pounds in a single day, when there is a good "flush" on the bushes. These "flushes," or fresh growths of young shoots fit for manufacture, are thrown out and gathered once in every seven or eight days during the plucking season, though it is very frequently stated that there are only three "pluckings" in the year. This may be the case in China, though it certainly appears far from probable; but in India the planter might retire from the field at once, could he not depend upon his almost weekly "flush" during something like six months in the year, during which time manufacture goes on interruptedly, some part of the garden always, when properly managed, having a flush ready for the plucker's hands.

The leaf (as it is technically called) thus plucked is taken to the tea-house and weighed, each plucker being paid so much (usually a pice*) a pound for what she brings in, and it is then sent to the "withering-house," where it is spread on mat shelves to lose its crispness against the following morning, when it will be carried away to the "rolling-house." Weighing-time certainly affords the most picturesque sight to be met with on a tea-plantation: the women, many of them extremely handsome, when once the eye is accustomed to the black or swarthy skin, in their white or many-coloured

* A pice is three pies, or the fourth of an *anna*, and the *anna* is about equal to three-halfpence.

and becoming drapery, red being the favourite with those who indulge a taste for the gorgeous; the children running about to find what mischief they can commit with impunity; the constant chatter of the fluent, sometimes only too fluent, native tongues; the little disputes as to weight and payment, which do but raise a laugh in all except those immediately concerned; the brightness, life, and cheerfulness of the whole scene recall vividly to the mind those descriptions of Italian fête-days with which all are more or less familiar.

When, then, the leaf is sufficiently soft from withering, which except in very cold wet weather is generally on the morning after the day on which it was plucked, it is carried to the "rolling-house," a description of one of which will serve for all, though, of course, in each there is some difference in size, arrangement, or other detail. Running almost along the whole length of a house, sixty, eighty, and sometimes even 100 feet long, is a table about four feet broad, or something less, formed of rough planks, but not unfrequently covered by fine rush matting, on each side of which are ranged rows of natives, whose duty it is to roll the leaf until it attains that curled and twisted form with which every one is so well acquainted, and yet to produce which would tax the ingenuity of most tea-drinkers at home. The process is, however, very simple: a large handful of leaf is placed upon the table in front of the roller, who, putting one hand above and one behind the little heap, pushes and rolls it from the edge towards the middle of the table (the relative position of the hands frequently changing), at the same time applying no little pressure with the upper hand. When pushed forward to arm's-length, the pressure is removed, and the leaf pulled lightly back to the edge of the table, and so it continues to be treated until before very long every leaf is tightly twisted, and a great quantity of juice has been expressed. The handful of rolled leaf is then tightly compressed into a ball, so that none but the outermost leaves can come again untwisted, and in this state it is put aside for two hours or more to ferment, the colour gradually changing during this process from a dark green to a bright *coppery* salmon-colour. When the proper colour is arrived at, the balls are broken up, and the leaf shaken and tossed until all the knots and lumps are thoroughly reduced, and it is then again rolled to "fix" the "twist," again shaken out, and then sent to the firing or *battee* house to be dried. Various rolling machines have lately been invented, and probably before very long hand-rolling will be discarded in all the larger gardens at least, and the labour thus set at liberty will be more advantageously applied to the better cultivation of the plantation.

The drying or, as it is called, firing of the tea is done in trays, made either of iron-wire or of bamboo gauze, placed over charcoal fires; and it is not until

this time that the tea attains the bright black colour, with which alone people in Europe are familiar in black teas. Green tea differs from black, not in the leaf from which it is made, but only in the mode of manufacture. Instead of being rolled on wooden tables, and then fired in trays, the leaf which is intended to turn out green tea is, after a slight withering, placed in a shallow iron pan, which is built into a brick support, much the same as a laundry copper, under which a brisk charcoal fire is kept burning. In this pan (or *korai*, as the natives call it) the leaf is gently rolled at first, and afterwards, when nearly dry, only stirred sufficiently to keep it from burning. By this means the green colour of the leaf is preserved, and as soon as it is thoroughly dry is ready for packing, with little previous assortment.

Black tea, on the other hand, requires a careful sorting after the "firing." This is done by women and children, who slightly break up the coarse unassorted tea by gentle pressure between the hands, and pass it through sieves of various sizes. The tea which passes through the first and finest sieve consists of the yellow or golden "leaf-buds" and the very small tender leaves, and this, according to its size and the quantity of leaf-buds present, is called Pekoe, Broken Pekoe, or Orange or Flowery Pekoe. When, however, the leaf-buds or "Pekoe-tips" are separately plucked, and fired after a very slight rolling, and are then added to the fine black Pekoe leaf, they appear of a beautiful glistening silver colour, and the tea is then known as Silvery Pekoe. When the Pekoe has all been sorted out, the coarse tea is passed through another sieve, which gives a somewhat large but well-twisted tea known as Souchong; while the tea which remains in the sieve is coarse and *lumpy*, and also of a bad colour from the handling it has undergone; this is called Congou, and is the coarsest description of tea usually manufactured in India, though occasionally what is called by some planters Bohea, by others Red Leaf, is manufactured from the refuse of the rolling-table and the unrolled pickings from the finer teas.

And now nothing remains but to pack our tea and send it away as quickly as possible to the market. Before packing, however, in the boxes lined with lead, and holding from 80 to 120 pounds, according to the quality and consequent closeness, the tea has all to be re-fired or *pukka-battied*, as the planters call it; when as hot as fire can make it without burning, it is weighed, either shaken or trodden down into the chests, immediately soldered down, and sometimes within two or three hours the chests are fastened, the garden-mark and the weight are stencilled on, and the tea is on its way to Calcutta, thence to be dispatched to England; so that within two months of the time that the leaf was growing on the bushes thousands of miles away, the people in Europe may be drinking pure Indian tea.

J. D.

