AN EVENING IN THE DUTCH EAST INDIES.

BEING SOME NOTES ON MALAY MAHOMEDANISM AT THE FARTHEST END OF THE ISLAM FAMILY.

BY POULTNEY BIGELOW.

AT Banda you are near the eastern limit of Malay and Mahomedan influence—a little island of hardy seamen—eastward of Java—westward of New Guinea—at the ends of the earth.

One evening, November, 1904, as I was in the midst of a group of naked native fishermen near the eastern end of the island, a well-built native asked permission to get into my canoe *Caribee,* so of course I showed him how the double bladed paddle was to be feathered and he enjoyed the sensation of trying something new.

A large crowd gathered, for it was a holiday and much of the native population was on the beach airing their good clothes and enjoying the sea air.

He challenged me to a race, and I beat him handsomely; but there is nothing to brag of in this—no native canoe in these waters can for a moment compare in lightness and lines to the best of our Rob Roy canoes.

But my gentle savage was a good sportsman and we became good friends. He became my mentor for this section of the Dutch East Indies and with him I passed many instructive hours paddling about these delicious shores where the graceful nutmeg trees make grateful shade for the coasting canoeist. And in parenthesis do you know a book called *The Malay Archipelago* by the illustrious Alfred Russell Wallace? It is to-day as interesting, if not more so, than at the time he wrote, forty or more years ago—and he is still in literary harness, though eighty years old—and more. He is a naturalist pure and simple. His political and economic training was merely incidental and his observations outside of his particular hobby are to be taken cautiously.

For instance he strongly recommends the Dutch to maintain their monopoly of nutmegs in Banda. In Wallace's day as now, Banda nutmegs commanded a superior price by reason of a singularly propitious soil and rainfall. The Dutch therefore made it a monopoly, forbade the growth of nutmegs anywhere else in their East Indies and for a long while dominated the market.

Now the monopoly is abandoned—it did not pay.

The Dutch monopoly kept them at an artificially high price—this in turn caused other nations to experiment with them and the result was that the market was flooded and now their value is so little that Banda is in distress like the islands of the Caribeean Sea after the great fall in sugar which followed the introduction of beetroot coupled with the abolition of the slave trade.

And like so many delapidated ports, castles and individuals, Banda is immensely picturesque.

There is a lovely old fort down by the waterside fronting south—an old fort dating back to Portuguese times. To-day the north end of this fort is being torn away—though let us hope that the picturesque old gateway will be preserved. The name of this fort is the Belgica, though just why I have not discovered.

Of course my life in Banda was spent under the nutmeg trees—I felt as though waffles should have been the only diet—and the only drink mint julep.

Wallace thus describes the nutmeg trees:

"They are handsomely shaped and glossy leaved, growing to the height of thirty feet and bearing small yellowish flowers.

"The fruit is the size of a peach, but rather oval. It is of a tough fleshy consistence, but when ripe splits open and shows the dark brown nut within, covered with the crimson mace and is then a most beautiful object.

"Within the thin hard shell of the nut is the seed which is nutmeg of commerce."

These islands have all the natural beauty of the West Indies plus an infinitely more interesting complex of population—for here are Malay, Papuan, Japanese, Arabian, Chinese and Javanese—all blended to gether in blood—it is an ethnological experimental station and highly successful.

At Banda are a few tidy little streets with solidly built bungalows inhabited by the prosperous planters.

The whole town can be peripatetically exhausted in thirty minutes, for the total population of alleged whites is only 200—and throwing in the few Chinese merchants and a handful of Arab

Hadjees and a few fisher folk and native coolies, the sum total of this most interesting of Dutch colonies makes up less population than many a residential flat at home.

I strained my eyes to find a real white man—or woman.

I inspected the European school, a handsome bungalow, but white children were conspicuous by their absence.

I saw but three pure whites—one was the assistent Resident—there may have been half a dozen in all—nothing worth mentioning. If my American fellow citizens should look in on Banda and say to themselves, this is the fate of me and mine if we settle permanently in the Philippines—! Would we cling to those islands?

I can readily imagine that three hundred years of lusty American settlement in the Philippines would bring about social complications infinitely more embarrasing than anything which Holland has so far had to meet in the far East.

There is a little Protestant church on Banda—it might hold about fifty people—no great tribute to the Christian zeal of this once white population.

On the wall is a slab to say that the stone foundation was laid in 1875—but whether there was one before this and what became of it was not related. In general piety oozes away as we steer eastward of Suez or the Cape of Good Hope—and I can imagine a big ship load of strict Lutherans something like a cargo of ice dwindling away rapidly in power between the time of embarking in northern Europe and being finally unloaded in a spice island within sight of the Equator.

This is no slur on the Dutch—it is a general proposition that may be applied freely to all Christian men who leave the temperate zones and the atmosphere of home for sunny countries where native women wear only just enough to be comfortable in fly time.

But if Christians make but a trifling show in Banda, so much more do the servants of Allah and Buddha shine by contrast. One evening I rested my paddle in order to enjoy a service along with a hundred or so Mahomedans whose dress marked them as Hadjees and traders of a higher class than the natives generally. Most wore turbans, many the fez, and all were dressed in a manner to suggest Arab rather than Malay fashion.

These people of Banda have a vast admiration for the Turk in general, as the people who are identified with the guardianship of the holy places of the Moslem faith.

In the entertaining work on this part of the world by Wallace, I recall a passage written with respect to Ceram and the islands in

this immediate vicinity in which he spoke of the natives as entertaining the most extravagant faith in the size, ferocity and prowess of the Turk—as having conquered the Russian in the Crimean War.

The natives of course did not know England and France had also taken a hand in that war—their notions had come to them from Hadjees and Arabs who naturally magnified themselves indirectly by associating their power with that of the far away power of all-conquering Islam.

History consists quite as much in the record of popular delusion as in that of actual happenings, and who can say how far the faith of Islam in these waters has prospered through the fanciful fabrications of pilgrims returning from Meccah and repeating what their Arabian hosts and high priests have brought with them from the ends of the great Moslem Empire.

It must indeed have seemed to the simple and gentle Malay fisherman or peasant the opening of an immense and all-powerful world, this trip to Meccah—the meeting there of the big warlike and comparatively well equipped children of Islam. How poor and helpless he must have felt as he gazed upon a tall proud Moorish chief from over the Atlas mountain, with costly rifle and scimitar—magnificent burnoose and high boots—all the trappings of a great warrior.

Then how much smaller must the little Malay faithful one have felt when he met for the first time the fighters of Afghanistan, and what must have been his feelings when finally admitted into the presence of gorgeous grandees from the court circles of Constantinople, or Teheran—men brilliant with decorations, gold lace—with just the sort of barbaric display calculated to stir the cravings of our little Malay, coming from a home where he and his, have, for generations been treated as the slaves of the white man, forbidden to bear arms—regarded as inferior creatures.

No wonder then that the returning pilgrims with their new rank of Hadjee should do much to inflame the native zeal for the religion of Mahomed—should fill their hungry souls with the picture of an empire reaching from the Pillars of Hercules to the heart of British India and covering the islands of the Eastern world from New Guinea to Singapore with a misty veil of Theological belief, not very fanatical, not very sharply defined but clearly enough outlined to indicate a certain aspiration animating all Malays—a vague belief in ultimate deliverance from the white man's rule, and on its ruins a great Malay empire that should revive for this people the golden age suggested by the magnificent ruins still to be found

in the interior of Java—ruins rivaling if not eclipsing the grandest efforts of India and Egypt in the days of their greatest power.

For a long time I sat and watched and listened. The temple was merely an upper chamber open to the soft air laden with the nutmeg vapor—the soft little waves plashed on the stones and I rocked up and down in my canoe at this sight not often vouchsafed to a white man.

Indeed in most Mahomedan countries with which I am acquainted, Morocco, Northern Africa, the old Turkish provinces on the Danube, it is not well for the white man to show much curiosity regarding a mosque. Here in Banda there are no white men to speak of, and amongst themselves the people of the East seem perfectly tolerant, not to say indifferent, regarding the religious practices of their neighbors.

On the forehatch of various ships on which I have been out here, I have seen the good Mahomedan pull out his mat towards sunset and go through his long prayers and prostrations while Chinese and Hindus, to say nothing of heathen, went on with the work about them, gambling, chatting, scrubbing—doing everything as usual, but under no circumstances meddling with his private affairs—no not even staring at him as we of the superior race are in the way of doing.

Mahomedanism in Banda appeared to have about it nothing of the exclusiveness which characterizes it nearer the Mediterranean —maybe the climate made it wise to have fewer walls, maybe the worshipers gained confidence by discovering that the Dutch had either no religious zeal of their own or at least concealed it successfully.

There was one man, a Hadjee, who seemed the most sacred of the party and who apparently set the pace for the rest. They all faced towards Meccah and repeated in unison lines of the Koran and this vocalizing was interrupted at very short intervals by many genuflexions, and rising again—then many complete prostrations, to accomplish which evolved first slipping with one motion from erect posture to the one habitually used by the Japanese when squatting, seated upon their heels. Then a rapid forward movement of the whole body from the hips up and holding the forehead to the floor for an appreciable number of seconds—then swinging the body up again to the squatting position and then by another movement coming upon their feet bolt upright.

This I take to be a gymnastic movement in the highest degree

wholesome for our internal economy—a religious act savoring immensely of hygienic forethought.

There were several Amens heard in the course of this performance—at which indeed we need not be surprised, for, after all, Mahomed had been a student of the Old Testament and Biblical influence is apparent in every step of his system.

Some of the movements of these faithful ones involved only bowing the upper body forward to a right angle and then after holding it there for a few seconds returning it to its normal position.

My canoe mentor thought that the natives proper, especially the soldiers, took their theology very lightly. In general, the Mahomedan may not eat pork, but in campaigning where wild boar is the only meat to be had the natives eat it freely—but so soon as they return to civil life they resume their strictness in this respect.

The Malay out here has no fighting and conquering traditions such as those which stir the Moor and the Turk. He received his present religion very much diluted and grafted it upon the remains of Hindu worship which he has never wholly discarded. Indeed the Malay does not seem to be a man who would take from religion more than was in accordance with his habitual gentleness and courtesy. He has no objection to a ritual which combines certain well approved gymnastic movements with moral elevation, a spiritual attitude suited to his general mode of life. But further than this he does not care to go at present. He treats the faith of Islam much as we do our Sermon on the Mount. We read it and we sometimes have it framed and hung in our front parlor in the hope that it may do good—to our neighbors. Meanwhile we apply to ourselves just so much of it as we can reconcile with success in business.

Personally I should like to see the Mahomedan form of showing respect to the Almighty introduced into our own places of worship. Our present conventional form of worship might be made more stimulating.

Not that a nap in church is worse than anywhere else—indeed it may be that this same nap be the means of drawing our mind away from a worldly train of thought and of bringing us into converse with the angels. But if it is the purpose of a clergyman to keep his audience awake I strongly recommend the introduction of some simple course of prayers involving frequent movements of a calisthenic nature. This might be the beginning of a most precious reform—for no good woman could wear stays and remain a church

member—nor could she hold her forehead to the ground and yet wear monstrous hats cruelly adorned with the plumage of beautiful birds. This scheme involves the abolition of all the horrible pews which to-day make our temples seem like the playhouses of a self-indulgent race. We come to the house of God dressed as for a concert and we demand that the word of God be made pleasant to us—else we strike—refuse to hire pews—take our money and cushions to some more easy church.

But that is another story!