Travel.

A TOUR UP THE IRRAWADDY.

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Most well-informed people know that the Irrawaddy is a river of Burma. How many are there who realize its navigable length? That steamers of over 200 feet can proceed on their way, undeterred by shoals or rapids, is one of the many surprises that await the newcomer to this most distant province of our Indian Empire.

From Rangoon in the south to Bhamo in the north, the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company provides a service of ships which will bear favourable comparison with many of the world-famed liners of the open sea. This great distance of inland navigation is divided into two natural stages, the lower or deltaic, and the upper or mountainous. Mandalay, the former capital of Burma, is at the junction of the company’s two services. Here the traveller, if he has come by water, changes on to the steamer for Bhamo. As most of the lower reaches of the river traverse flat low-lying paddy fields, there is not much of interest to attract the tourist and most people go by train to Mandalay and embark there.

A conjunction of favourable circumstances recently allowed the writer to spend a short leave in this way.

Mandalay, as the old capital of the Burmese, is a place full of interest in many ways. The royal palace of King Thibaw, in the centre of the moated fort, is the only Burmese palace in existence at the present day, as the wooden buildings in this country have a lifetime of barely fifty years. Occupied for many years as an officers’ club and probably thereby preserved from vandalism, it was, under Lord Curzon’s regime, entrusted to the Government of India. Its chief feature is the vast number of circular columns of teak which support the various conventional roofs of Burmese architecture. The columns rise in their former gilt splendour to a great height, and many mighty trunks of the forest must have been felled to provide cover for the royal head.

On the south side of the palace stands a small obelisk commemorating the fact that here on this spot stood a pavilion in which, on a certain day in the year 1885, King Thibaw surrendered to the General Officer commanding the British Army, and Upper Burma became part of the Empire.

Mandalay was one of the many places which the Burmese had chosen for their capital. On the accession of each king the nats or spirits always decided where the seat of government should be. The king, being their
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interpreter, usually announced their decision in accordance with his own wishes; the result is that many a fair corner of Burma contains relics of an ancient capital.

As Mandalay does not possess any hotels we embarked overnight on the steamer. The tourist season had not commenced, and the only other passenger was an engineer from the oil-fields who, with a very keen and interesting captain, made pleasant company.

The s.s. "Shwemyo" is the bazaar steamer, that is to say, she has tied alongside her a large double-decked flat, which together with the ship itself carries about thirty native stallholders complete with their travelling shops. The entire trade of the riverine districts is done with this steamer, and the great event of each week is the arrival of the bazaar steamer, for there are no roads or railways on which these places can rely.

We started on our run of 320 miles to Bhamo on the Monday at 7 a.m. The comparative flatness of the Mandalay plain soon gave place to distant hills of pale blue, which on closer view proved to be mountains of no mean size. The river being in flood the current was rapid, and the usual landmarks being submerged navigation was a matter of some skill, necessitating the services of a local expert pilot at each stage.

Numerous small native villages were passed, quaint little settlements with a score or so of fishermen and their families, perched aloft in their bamboo huts which are invariably built on stilts. The Burmese being Buddhists are not allowed to take life. They catch their fish, where no killing is of course involved, and they then place them on the bank to rest. The fact that the fish are so foolish as to die does not disturb the Buddhist conscience. The trade in fish which have been so unfortunate as to succumb is widespread and lucrative.

It is easy to be captious at other people's manners and customs, but let this be said for the Burmese—they are a very charming race. It has been one's fortune at one time or another to have met nearly every nationality from the Balkans to Burma, and one can say without fear of contradiction that these people are cleaner, neater, better dressed and smell less than any others one has encountered in the Near or Middle East. They have their faults, of course; they are not fond of work, and one sees a typical picture any day one likes of an Indian cooly pulling a Burman about in a rickshaw in Rangoon. They are very fond of beautiful clothes in all colours of the rainbow, they are very emotional at times, and they are inveterate gamblers. On the other hand, they are always happy and cheerful, always smiling and full of fun, without a care in the world, and apparently nothing disturbs them in the even tenor of their way.

All along the river one sees the various races of Burma coming to buy their weekly supply of goods from England, America and Germany. They collect on the river bank with articles to barter or money to purchase, and engage in much animated conversation while the ship is tying up alongside. Four stalwart men of the crew, two Burmans and two Indians, are seen
to take up their position at the bows, and when the steamer is sufficiently near the side, one man takes a hawser between his teeth and all four jump into the water and swim ashore. A tree trunk is selected and the hawser fastened to it. With this and the anchor the ship is now secure. The dinghy is brought round and planks placed across it to the shore.

A united effort on the part of those on the boat trying to get ashore and those ashore trying to embark, all intent on their immediate business, leads to some confusion, perhaps a little wetting, and causes inevitable delay. Once one-way traffic has been established, the commerce of the country commences. The articles sold on the ship are manufactured ones, and it is possible to buy almost anything. One could procure a good quality silk scarf at two rupees, also a tin of talc powder and a packet of safety pins. Various articles of local produce, such as dried and, to be candid, rather evil-smelling fish, vegetables, fruits, silks and home-made pottery are often bartered with the stallholders on board.

Only one stop was made on the first day, and at a small and picturesque village we tied up for the night. Here, with about half an hour's daylight at our disposal, there was only time for a short swim in the comparatively quiet water close to the bank.

On waking the next morning the ship was already under way, and there were soon fresh scenes of interest to attract the eye. The wide expanse of water to which we had become accustomed now contracted down to just an ordinary-sized river such as one would have at home, and we approached the entrance to the third defile. The narrower stream now entered runs for forty-six miles in a series of straight stretches separated by jutting headlands. On each side the bank rises steeply; it is almost entirely covered with thick vegetation, and innumerable trees, shrubs, grasses or impenetrable undergrowth fight the age-long battle for supremacy. Very frequently the original tree is no longer living; it is merely an inert prop for some winding creeper which, commencing life as an insignificant parasite, has in its growth sapped the life-blood of its host and now assumed gigantic proportions, obliterating all traces of the former structure of the tree.

The current gradually becomes more rapid and renders navigation difficult, whirlpools are encountered, and as the paddles enter the revolving waters a weird crunching sound occurs. Driftwood and all the flotsam and jetsam of a great river pass on their way. Now and then enormous rafts of timber of one hundred yards in length, valuable trunks of teak from the forests of Upper Burma, drift slowly past on their leisurely two months' journey to Rangoon, to be sawn up and exported all over the world. On each raft is seen one or more bamboo huts in which live the man in charge and all his relations. At bows and stern are several canoe paddles with which such steering as is done can be carried out. A flag-pole with the timber company's flag by day and a light at night complete the equipment of these strange craft. Occasionally, if the crew is very pious, an improvised
A pagoda may be seen. This may be so, but one's personal experience was that piety had given place to somnolence, for more often than not only the loud and insistent hooting of the ship's syren saved ship and raft from head-on collision, sleep apparently claiming the crew for many hours of the working day.

Presently we stopped at a wayside settlement, which is the port of call for the ruby mines which were worked centuries ago by the Chinese and, judging by recent discoveries, at an even earlier date, by means of bronze implements. A party leaves for the mines and we resume our journey.

At the end of the defile whirlpools increase, and we zig-zag from side to side to avoid them. A halt is made at a small village set in attractive surroundings with a pagoda-covered headland projecting far into the tumbled waters of the stream, and set in its centre is the prosaic bungalow of a lonely Englishman. A short walk on shore while bazaar business is being done affords some exercise, and then the ship steams on.

We enter open country with views of distant mountains towering into the rain clouds on our right, which indicate the presence of a lofty tableland, whereon is situated a wild and primitive independent state. The change from the confined vista of a narrow stream is great.

A long wide channel takes us to one of the most charming of the Burmese villages, seen from a great distance to be nesting at the foot of small verdure-clad hills dotted with pagodas. On closer view a clean little hamlet is found close to the water's edge. The people who turned out to see us stood at first in the broiling sun, interested spectators of our mooring. Then, realizing the heat of the sun they raised their umbrellas or softly toned native sunshades, after which they squatted on their haunches, and when hot and bored they betook themselves to the shade of many a bungalow and there till sleep claimed them continued their languid interest in the steamer. One sees in Burma the most beautiful colour schemes in the loongyies or silk skirts that men and women equally affect, but here in this small out-of-the-way place the colours surpassed anything previously seen. A show window at Liberty's would not contain anything richer or more beautiful.

In spite of the heat an afternoon walk was taken as the surroundings of the village seemed attractive. A short way up stream there was a big headland, on the other side of which was a fishing station. It was rather intriguing to watch a small boy manoeuvring an enormous dug-out canoe in the waters of the numerous whirlpools. It seemed impossible to steer in any desired direction, yet this youth of but eight Burmese summers, after revelling in many twistings and turnings amid much laughter and obvious enjoyment, brought his ship safely to port.

The evening's walk took us to a large creek, obviously an ideal place for a swim, but we had reckoned without the geography of Burma, for the creek proved to be but an alternative channel to the one along which the
boat had come, and the current in the middle was rapid. However, a short swim alongside the bank was possible. Before we left, some men in a canoe crossed over to the other side and drove some cows into the water and it was interesting to watch the animals swim back to our side. The current did not appear to worry them much, in fact they seemed to allow for its carrying them where they or, at any rate, their master wished.

On the following day, owing to the uncertain depth of the channel, soundings were taken, as had been done less frequently all the time. A Burman stood on the far side of the flat and threw a plumb line into the water. With each observation he called out to the captain in a melodious sing-song way, reminiscent of the steersman in Wagner's "Flying Dutchman," "Yem, yar, yay," which indicated no precise depth, but stated "the ship has water." This was the sturdy lad who swam ashore with the hawser between his teeth. He became rather tired and weary, and after a while had a look across at the captain, who was engaged in filling in a return (such things apparently exist in civil life). A few more "Yem, yar, yays" and then he rested against a stanchion and, the captain being still engrossed, a bright idea struck the lad, not for the first time one imagines, and he hauled in his plumb line and continued his refrain, watching meanwhile what the captain was doing. The return must have been one of those brain twisters, and the skipper was able to think of nothing else. The youth leant over the rail, borrowed a big Burmese cigar from a friend and squatted down under cover of an awning and puffed away contentedly to a frequent repetition of "Yem, yar, yays," irrespective of our depth, his only anxiety being to evince an occasional interest in the captain, which he was able to do without much exertion by inclining his head and looking over the awning. After a time thus pleasantly spent his meditations were brought to a close by the solution of the captain's problem. The cigar was speedily returned to its former owner, the plumb line resumed its rightful function, the Wagnerian motive continued and the ship steamed on.

Katha, an important little place owing to its receiving a branch line of the railway, was our halt next evening. A long procession of natives in gala costume, headed by youths beating big drums and clanging cymbals, was viewed from the ship with interest. We heard that it was the Burmese equivalent of a flag-day and that money was being collected for a pwe or native play. No cinemas beguile the leisure hour of the Burmese lizard, or whatever word is in use when this is read, and the pwe or play, frequently of inordinate length, is performed in just the same manner as it was by the distant ancestors of the present villagers.

Early next morning we were on our way again, and the day passed pleasantly enough. At nightfall we had arrived at another village, and here fine views of distant hills gave some indication of the type of country we were to encounter on the morrow.

The last day on the upward trip took us through the interesting scenery
of the second or great defile. Here the river contracts from two miles to 300 yards in width. The stream is swift, the depth great, probably about 600 feet, there are many rapids and whirlpools, and navigation is extremely difficult. The bazaar flat had been left behind, and we continued on our way unhindered by the load and resistance offered by it. We approached the defile at dawn, a time of much beauty. Mists occluded the light on the upper heights, the sky was grey and the water a silver hue. Great jungle forests come close to the water's edge on either side, the course is snake-like, the hills increase in height and gradually is shown on the picture an enormous sandstone cliff rising 600 feet from the water. It is said that big game come to the defile in the early morning in order to drink. A careful watch revealed nothing more than a harmless monkey. Definite marks of elephants were seen on a sand-bank as we passed close by. One rather discounts elephants on the Irrawaddy. Once a tourist on this trip saw an elephant partly concealed behind some trees. He called the captain's attention and it was decided to stop and have a shot at the beast. The engines were stopped, the ship tied up alongside at the most suitable landing place, and the two shikharis started off. It was found that the current had carried them some little distance away, but the day was young and time of no consequence, and they scrambled through a good deal of rather dense jungle. Presently the elephant was in view, and in a short time they despatched him. They were rather mystified to observe a curious phenomenon—he had a chain tied round one of his legs. Investigation showed that the other end was firmly secured to a tree. Their delight was somewhat modified. Complete disillusionment came when the market price of a working elephant had to be paid to a well-known timber firm.

After leaving the defile we passed into open country again, and in the far distance were seen for the first time the hills of China. It is not easy to realize that we are so near that great country almost invariably associated with the Far East. Yet as we approach Bhamo, evidences of the Celestial Empire, or Republic, or whatever it is nowadays, become more marked. The people are more definitely of a Mongolian type, and some are pure Chinese.

Bhamo is seen long before one arrives, owing to its situation on a wide sweeping curve of the river. The distant view is attractive, the nearer one less so. Trees conceal its most interesting features.

We arrived at noon, our run from Mandalay being completed in six days, which is really rather a creditable performance when one remembers that the 320 miles has been done with a heavy flat alongside for the greater part of the way, and that the current against us has averaged anything from six to eight knots.

A population of about 7,000 people live in Bhamo, and many of these, apart from the Burmese, are Chinamen who have been here from time immemorial; in fact, it was doubtful for countless years prior to our annexation who was actually the sovereign power. Wars of a border type were frequent, and the Chinese have never quite made up their minds as to
whether they want the place at the present time or not. The reason for Bhamo being of international importance is that it is a river port within twenty-nine miles of China, and here the caravan route commences. The various animals composing the pack transport assemble beside the river and proceed, via China Street, on their way to the frontier, carrying a trade of considerable size.

In the town there is the usual native quarter with bazaars, and on the outskirts the cantonnement where a small English community lives.

One shop in the bazaar is famed for its interesting curios and for the prices charged for them. Jade in many forms, dahs or native daggers, rubies, gold and silver ware, Chinese mandarins, uniforms, Shan costumes and bags, are all to be had—at a price.

Probably the most interesting sight in Bhamo is the Chinese joss house or temple, one of the very few outside China. It is conceived in typical Oriental style with the usual conventional upturned eaves. The entrance is through a circular doorway into a square courtyard, bounded by a quaintly decorated colonnade. Further in is a series of shrines or altars with many strange-looking gods sitting round the walls. Some are benign, others are obviously not so. A priest or some such functionary appeared on the scene, and amid many salaams and expressions of pleasure proceeded to explain the merits or otherwise of the various deities. It would have been more interesting and instructive had we been able to understand him, but the linguistic powers of the Englishman do not usually include Chinese. However, for our benefit or for his remuneration, we never quite decided which, he kindled at the sacred fire burning before the altar of a grotesque god a scented joss-stick which was presented with much ceremony. What to do with the wretched thing once we had got outside we had no idea, for we were obviously being watched and we had no wish to give offence. The proximity of the Flotilla Company's compound, however, solved the problem, for we entered and, when no one was looking, deposited the joss-stick on a convenient refuse heap.

At Bhamo one heard a good deal of the early history of the steamship company. Much is actual history, and the part the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company played in the annexation of Upper Burma is worthy to be told.

In 1885 events were gradually shaping towards a war between Britain and Burma. We were in possession of the lower part of the country with Rangoon as our principal place. King Mindon Min, the founder of Mandalay and an enlightened ruler, had died and had been succeeded by Thibaw and his versatile but scheming wife. Considerable friction occurred, our representatives were insulted, and finally matters reached a head when the Burmese Court imposed a fine of 2,300,000 rupees on the Bombay-Burma Trading Corporation and refused to allow arbitration. An ultimatum was sent to the king, and an expeditionary force assembled at Rangoon.

The present Commodore of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, a veteran of forty-seven years' service, who is still in command of one of the big mail steamers, was as a young and daring officer sent on this mission to
Thibaw. Arrangements were made that if he had not returned within a certain time, or complete acquiescence in the terms had not been received, the force would sail. The captain reached Mandalay without incident and there presented the ultimatum. The inevitable delay occurred and no reply was forthcoming. He remained in Mandalay. One day news reached him that it would be advisable for him to be on his guard, as the queen was rumoured to be arranging for his "disposal." Then he received definite information that his life was in danger. He returned to his ship, but only to be confronted with the fact that he stood no chance of reaching Rangoon, as a fort a short way down the river was ready for him with guns trained on the waterway, and below this, should he get so far, were two Burmese gunboats waiting with orders to intercept him. Now a curious thing happened; often in the East it is religion which shapes the destinies of nations, and so it was here. The fort was situated in a sort of cave overlooking the river, and by some remarkable chance it had been given out only the day before that an evil nat had taken up his abode in the cave, and nothing would induce the Burmese gunners to enter. When the captain arrived here all opposition had vanished, and he had only the "navy" of King Thibaw to deal with. He dressed himself and his crew in Burmese costume, and, availing himself of the saloon table cloth with the company's arms of a peacock (and incidentally those of Burma), he hoisted this at the masthead. He was now as good a Burman as ever sailed the Irrawaddy and, proceeding on his way, he met in due course the full strength of the Burmese navy. As he approached he disconnected the anchor from the cable and, drawing alongside the gunboats, he appeared to be making a friendly call. Terrific noises from the winch playing out the anchor, apparently, confirmed the belief that he was about to stop and pass the time of day with the Burmese officers. However, the water was very deep, and it took a long time to anchor; meanwhile the ship had drifted badly with the current and he was considered to be rather bungling it, when all of a sudden full speed ahead was ordered, and he went hell for leather down stream for Rangoon. Successful pursuit was impossible, and the attempt was not made, nor were the guns brought into action until he was well out of range. Speed was maintained for many hours, and by evening he was free from all anxiety. In two days he met the expeditionary force on its way up.

It is of interest to recall that the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company transported the entire army of 20,000 men, complete with stores and equipment, against a strong current the great distance of 708 miles to Mandalay, in eighteen days. The assistance that the company gave to the Government and the part played by the present commodore of the line indicate the spirit that encouraged the early settlers in this country.

The return trip was done in the express steamer. Helped by the current and unhampered by the flat, we reached Mandalay on the evening of the second day and disembarked the next morning, and so ended a leave full of interest and enjoyment.