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Impressions of a Planters' Padre.

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ROME used to be called, it is said, the *sentina gentium*. I was sometimes inclined to think that Ceylon could be termed the "sink of religions," so many and various are the forms of belief which are compressed into that little island, and which are held so fanatically as almost to preclude any possibility of proselytism, so much so as to produce a species of grudging respect for each other that springs from the knowledge of total independence for each. Many causes have contributed to this state of things. The Church of England is disestablished in Ceylon, though it is not in India. The fanatical propagandism of the Portuguese, the earliest European settlers, has left an abiding trace in the flourishing condition of the Roman Church, while, on the contrary, the Dutch Reformed Church has made no impression. Into the island, formerly the home of the Sinhalese and Veddas, have come Tamils, once for conquest, now for cultivation; Arabs, or so-called Moormen; Malays, who make such good police; Afghans, those peripatetic money-lenders; and living among all these, but not mixing with them, the Burghers, as Eurasians are styled in Ceylon, whether of Portuguese, Dutch, or English descent. So far, Chinese and Japanese are unknown; but who can say what may not come to pass, if labour troubles continue, and the all-important tea and rubber require fresh hands to tend their sacred stalks?

Hence it follows that amid this clash of rival tongues and the ever-moving, fugitive impression of different countenances and costumes, the English visitor is constantly stimulated by the sight of some religious ceremony.

Ceylon is the Italy of Buddhism, and Kandy its Rome. So perhaps a visit will be paid to the capital of the hill-country to see the "perahera," that moving picture of chiefs, priests, and elephants. Or even when one is not bent on any particular

excursion, but merely on the road, how often the sound of weird percussion instruments in the distance gradually ushers into view the banners and band of a Buddhist procession, with its two or three monks in the midst, clothed in yellow, carrying the fan to ward off evil spirits, and having faces, some benign and intellectual, others heavy and depraved in appearance.

Then, again, up-country, where the Tamil coolies bury their dead, sometimes in the evening, and the funeral cortège, with torches, garlands, and tomtoms, winds slowly down the hill-sides, to gather round the grave amid the tea-bushes; or when, to exorcise the devil from some brawling stream, the ceaseless roll of the tomtoms mingles with the yells of mouthing coolies; or when the passer-by sees the chicken sacrificed before one of the innumerable white cones that speck the country-side; then one reflects on the degeneration of religions as exemplified in the Hinduism of the tea districts.

And every visitor to Colombo has seen the long line of mats, at the right season, spread along the Galle Face sea-front, each with its swaying tenant, bending and genuflecting, persistent and untiring, as the Afghan Mohammedans worship their God. What was it Mahbub Ali, the red-bearded Afghan horse-coper, said in "Kim"—"unbelievers and idolaters will end their meditations upon the sultry side of Hell." How little the globe-trotter knows of the thoughts of these men whom he watches with such patronizing interest!

But let us also visit a Roman Catholic festival, say that of Palm Sunday, at Hatton, or some other up-country centre, and notice the hundreds of coolie men and women, many of them Hindus—for the Tamil believes in being on good terms with all religions—swarming into the church, hung about with pictures far more tawdry than even those of any Italian village. Presently they will issue forth in streams, each one carrying the little cross of palm-leaves to be fixed over the door of the hut for the coming year. Many burghers you will see, too, some scarcely distinguishable from the natives, but remote and alien from both white and black. My motor-boy's grandfather was

an English soldier, his grandmother a Sinhalese woman. Their offspring married a burgher of remote Portuguese descent, and their son, my servant, undersized, unprepossessing, and of vague morality, could speak Sinhalese, Tamil, English, and that debased Portuguese which even now is a patois of many lower-class burghers. Like all of his particular class, he was a devout Roman Catholic, and would not for worlds have missed attending at any festival.

What of the Anglican Church? Come and see a Confirmation for natives in a little church up-country. It is packed with candidates and their friends, all very reverent and quiet, neatly dressed and proper. Better caste Tamils these, evidently. The native clergyman, an Indian from Tinnevelly, his broad, honest face aglow with expectation, marshals his flock and makes his final arrangements for the arrival of the "Peria Padre," the big clergyman. And when the Bishop gives his addresses, the native padre translates them sentence by sentence —the Bishop is not an expert at Tamil, though very ready in Sinhalese. Everything is, with that exception, almost startlingly like a service at home—a bit of the *Via Media* set down in the country of extremes.

I have no space to record impressions of other things—of Wesleyan services, of fights by the Salvation Army against powers of darkness in Colombo, of devil-dancing and Pleasant Sunday Afternoons, or of the little schools where fifty native children may have among them half a dozen languages, as many religions, and goodness knows how many nationalities. "Have at thee, Legion!" says the native Catechist, in deeds, if not in words.

My own work lay in none of these directions. It was to hold the English Church service for the superintendent planters, their wives, and their assistants, to visit them in their bungalows, and mingle with them in their social life.

At different times a great deal of hysterical nonsense has been written about the beauties of Ceylon, and the joy of living in such a paradise. The tourist who has been tossed about at

sea and liquefied in Colombo, runs up for a night or two to Nuwara Eliya, where he can wash in quite cold water, and get bitter beer on draught, and goes into ecstasies. He does not think, perhaps he does not know, of the discomforts that the planter has to encounter—the leeches, mosquitoes, and snakes; the months of almost incessant rain, when books, boots, and other belongings are mouldering in the bungalow; the enervating heat in the fine weather season; and the constant association with coolies of a degraded type. Moreover, the planter is not often free from labour and business worries. The old days of the proprietor-planter have almost disappeared. The superintendent is now generally working under a company, subject to periodical visits from an inspecting agent, and almost obliged to produce a certain dividend. In my opinion, he is often a greatly harassed individual, who deserves the greatest respect for the skill with which he accomplishes a difficult task. Now, Sunday is practically his only free day, and one has to make every allowance if, especially during the monsoon, churchgoing is not so regular as perhaps the padre would wish. I have often had to comfort myself in the wet season with some such reflection as this:

> "'Wicked weather for walking,'
> Said Eddi, of Manhood End.
> 'But I must go on with the service
> For such as care to attend.'"

But I may sum up my experience by stating that there are very few who never go at all, many who attend regularly, and that nearly all attend occasionally at least. The early morning in the fine weather is unspeakably delicious, the air is so fresh and cool; and when the padre has done his nine miles on the bicycle—that steed of the modern ecclesiastical knight-errant—through some of the loveliest scenery in the world, and has come to the little clean church set among the tea-bushes, he gives thanks to see the motor-cars, bicycles, rickshaws, and horses tearing up in different directions, and bringing the planters and their wives and the younger men, who will

presently be joining in those familiar words which express the worship of the Empire. The Anglican, the Presbyterian, and the Wesleyan, alike find comfort in the prayers of the English liturgy, and when soon they kneel down side by side, and I give them the Body and the Blood, who is there to say me nay?

> "He took the Wine and blessed it; He blessed and brake the Bread.
> With His own hands He served Them, and presently He said:
> 'Look! these Hands they pierced with nails outside My city wall
> Show Iron—Cold Iron—to be master of men all!'"

Easter and Christmas are of course *the* days. Then the churches are hung about with arum lilies and packed with people.

I cannot refrain from mentioning the great respect that planters have for missionary work. It is true they see its difficulties very clearly, and are often not so sanguine regarding its success, for they are well versed in the moral intricacies of the Tamil coolie; but they never fail, I think, to welcome the missionary, to give him opportunities for addressing their labourers. I believe that one of the most popular personages in the island is the venerable missionary, who, if he had lived in the Middle Ages, would doubtless have been called "St. William of Haputale"; and if he is now only familiarly known as "Old Padre R——," the title conveys as much respect, and probably far more affection.

Of course, a great deal, perhaps most, of the tea-chaplain's work is done outside his churches. He must take long bicycle rides, or walks, to outlying bungalows, where he will receive the warmest of welcomes. He must be prepared to be away from his own bungalow two or three days at a time, to spend the night on remote estates. Then confidences are made, difficulties discussed, and impressions shared. There is a comradeship amongst the few white people surrounded by seething swarms of Orientals that is quite impossible in England, whither, nevertheless, the thoughts of all turn, even if the white blood is only diluted; so that it is pathetic to hear

the burgher speak of "going home" when he plans his first visit to England. Even if our watches are not set by Greenwich time, our thoughts are. Then there are the matches, athletic sports, and tennis tournaments, which are such a welcome break in the monotony of estate life, and where the wholesome medicine of publicity and intercourse with one's equals is to be found. Everyone sends lunch, which everyone shares. The grinning coolies watch their incomprehensible white masters throw each other about. For the time the superintendent forgets his labour troubles, and his wife her bungalow preoccupations. A holiday sun shines over all.

I dare say the work is not so magnetic as that of the missionary. Yet it has its importance—to minister to this white fleck on the far-flung wave of Empire—and assuredly it has its difficulties. The Bishop knows them, he and his handful of English helpers who battle so strenuously. More men are needed for the planting districts, and there is good work to be done for his brothers by any man who is not too young to be without some knowledge of the world, and not too old to be unfit for the severe physical labour that is involved. It is a great thing to see to it that in that clash of discordant tongues God is worshipped in English also.