

"EHA"

Edward Hamilton Aitken, the author of the following sketches, was well known to the present generation of Anglo-Indians, by his pen-name of Eha, as an accurate and amusing writer on natural history subjects. Those who were privileged to know him intimately, as the writer of this sketch did, knew him as a Christian gentleman of singular simplicity and modesty and great charm of manner. He was always ready to help a fellow-worker in science or philanthropy if it were possible for him to do so. Thus, indeed, began the friendship between us. For when plague first invaded India in 1896, the writer was one of those sent to Bombay to work at the problem of its causation from the scientific side, thereby becoming interested in the life history of rats, which were shown to be intimately connected with the spread of this dire disease. Having for years admired Eha's books on natural history—*The Tribes on my Frontier*, *An Indian Naturalist's Foreign Policy*, and *The Naturalist on the Prowl*, I ventured to write to him on the subject of rats and their habits, and asked him whether he could not throw some light on the problem of plague and its spread, from the naturalist's point of view.

In response to this appeal he wrote a most informing and characteristic article for *The Times of India* (July 19, 1899), which threw a flood of light on the subject of the habits and characteristics of the Indian rat as found in town and country. He was the first to show that *Mus rattus*, the old English black rat, which is the common house rat of India outside the large seaports, has become, through centuries of contact with the Indian people, a domestic animal like the cat in Britain. When one realises the fact that this same rat is responsible for the spread of plague in India, and that every house is full of them, the value of this naturalist's observation is plain. Thus began an intimacy which lasted till Eha's death in 1909.

The first time I met Mr. Aitken was at a meeting of the Free Church of Scotland Literary Society in 1899, when he read a paper on the early experiences, of the English in Bombay. The minute he entered the room I recognised him from the caricatures of himself in the *Tribes*. The long, thin, erect, bearded man was unmistakable, with a typically Scots face lit up with the humorous twinkle one came to know so well. Many a time in after-years has that look been seen as he discoursed, as only he could, on the ways of man and beast, bird or insect, as one tramped with him through the jungles on the hills around Bombay during week-ends spent with him at Vehar or elsewhere. He was an ideal companion on such occasions, always at his best when acting the part of *The Naturalist on the Prowl*.

Mr. Aitken was born at Satara in the Bombay Presidency on August 16, 1851. His father was the Rev. James Aitken, missionary of the Free Church of Scotland. His mother was a sister of the Rev. Daniel Edward, missionary to the Jews at Breslau for some fifty years. He was educated by his father in India, and one can well realise the sort of education he got from such parents from the many allusions to the Bible and its old Testament characters that one constantly finds used with such effect in his books. His farther education was obtained at Bombay and Poona. He passed M.A. and B.A. of Bombay University first on the list, and won the Homejee Cursetjee prize with a poem in 1880. From 1870 to 1876 he was Latin Reader in the Deccan College at Poona, which accounts for the extensive acquaintance with the Latin classics so charmingly manifest in his writings. That he was well grounded in Greek is also certain, for the writer, while living in a chummary with him in Bombay in 1902, saw him constantly reading the Greek Testament in the mornings without the aid of a dictionary.

He entered the Customs and Salt Department of the Government of Bombay in April 1876, and served in Kharaghoda (the Dustypore of the *Tribes*), Uran, North Kanara and Goa Frontier, Ratnagiri, and Bombay itself. In May, 1903, he was appointed Chief Collector of Customs and Salt Revenue at Karachi, and in

November, 1905, was made Superintendent in charge of the District Gazetteer of Sind. He retired from the service in August 1906.

He married in 1883 the daughter of the Rev. J. Chalmers Blake, and left a family of two sons and three daughters.

In 1902 he was deputed, on special duty, to investigate the prevalence of malaria at the Customs stations along the frontier of Goa, and to devise means for removing the Salt Peons at these posts, from the neighbourhood of the anopheles mosquito, by that time recognised as the cause of the deadly malaria, which made service on that frontier dreaded by all.

It was during this expedition that he discovered a new species of anopheline mosquito, which after identification by Major James, I.M.S., was named after him *Anopheles aitkeni*. During his long service there are to be found in the Annual Reports of the Customs Department frequent mention of Mr. Aitken's good work, but it is doubtful whether the Government ever fully realised what an able literary man they had in their service, wasting his talent in the Salt Department. On two occasions only did congenial work come to him in the course of his public duty—namely, when he was sent to study, from the naturalist's point of view, the malarial conditions prevailing on the frontier of Goa; and when during the last two years of his service he was put in literary charge of *The Sind Gazetteer*. In this book one can see the light and graceful literary touch of Eha frequently cropping up amidst the dry bones of public health and commercial statistics, and the book is enlivened by innumerable witty and philosophic touches appearing in the most unlikely places, such as he alone could enliven a dull subject with. Would that all Government gazetteers were similarly adorned! But there are not many "Ehas" in Government employ in India.

On completion of this work he retired to Edinburgh, where most of the sketches contained in this volume were written. He was very happy with his family in his home at Morningside, and was beginning to surround himself with pets and flowers, as was his wont all his life, and to get a good connection with the home newspapers and magazines, when, alas! death stepped in, and he died after a short illness on April 25, 1909.

He was interested in the home birds and beasts as he had been with those in India, and the last time the writer met him he was taking home some gold-fish for his aquarium. A few days before his death he had found his way down to the Morningside cemetery, where he had been enjoying the sunshine and flowers of Spring, and he remarked to his wife that he would often go there in future to watch the birds building their nests.

Before that time came, he was himself laid to rest in that very spot in sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection.

The above imperfect sketch fails to give the charm and magnetic attraction of the man, and for this one must go to his works, which for those who knew him are very illuminating in this respect. In them one catches a glimpse of his plan for keeping young and cheerful in "the land of regrets," for one of his charms was his youthfulness and interest in life. He refused to be depressed by his lonely life. "I am only an exile," he remarks, "endeavouring to work a successful existence in Dustypore, and not to let my environment shape me as a pudding takes the shape of its mould, but to make it tributary to my own happiness." He therefore urges his readers to cultivate a hobby.

"It is strange," he says, "that Europeans in India know so little, see so little, care so little, about all the intense life that surrounds them. The boy who was the most ardent of bug-hunters, or the most enthusiastic of bird-nesters in England, where one shilling will buy nearly all that is known, or can be known, about birds or butterflies, maintains in this country, aided by Messrs. B. & S., an unequal strife with the insupportableness of an *ennui*-smitten life. Why, if he would stir up for one day the embers of the old flame, he could not quench it again with such a prairie of fuel around him. I am not speaking of Bombay people, with their clubs and gymkhanas and other devices for oiling the wheels of existence, but of the dreary up-country exile, whose life is a blank, a moral Sahara, a catechism of the Nihilist creed. What such a one needs is a hobby. Every hobby is good—a sign of good and an influence for good. Any hobby will draw out the mind, but the one I plead for touches the soul too, keeps the milk of human kindness from souring, puts a gentle poetry into the prosiest life. That all my own finer feelings have not long since withered in this land of separation from 'old familiar faces,' I attribute partly to a pair of rabbits. All rabbits are idiotic things, but these come in and sit up meekly and beg a crust of bread, and even a perennial fare of village *moorjee* cannot induce me to issue the order for their execution and conversion into pie. But if such considerations cannot lead, the struggle for existence should drive a man in this country to learn the ways of his border tribes. For no one, I take it, who reflects for an instant will deny that a small mosquito, with black rings upon a white ground, or a sparrow that has finally made up its mind to rear a family in your ceiling, exercises an influence on your personal happiness far beyond the Czar of the Russias. It is not a question of scientific frontiers—the enemy invades us on all sides. We are plundered, insulted, phlebotomised under our own vine and fig-tree. We might make head against the foe if we laid to heart the lesson our national history in India teaches—namely, that the way to fight uncivilised enemies is to encourage them to cut one another's throats, and then step in and inherit the spoil. But we murder our friends, exterminate our allies, and then groan under the oppression of the enemy. I might illustrate this by the case of the meek and long-suffering musk-rat, by spiders or ants, but these must wait another day."

Again he says, "The 'poor dumb animals' can give each other a bit of their minds like their betters, and to me their fierce and tender little passions, their loves and hates, their envies and jealousies, and their small vanities beget a sense of fellow-feeling which makes their presence society. The touch of Nature which makes the whole world kin is infirmity. A man without a weakness is insupportable company, and so is a man who does not feel the heat. There is a large grey ring-dove that sits in the blazing sun all through the hottest hours of the day, and says coo-coo, coo, coo-coo, coo until the melancholy sweet monotony of that sound is as thoroughly mixed up in my brain with 110° in the shade as physic in my infantile memories with the peppermint lozenges which used to 'put away the taste,' But as for these creatures, which confess the heat and come into the house and gasp, I feel drawn to them. I should like to offer them cooling drinks. Not that all my midday guests are equally welcome: I could dispense, for instance, with the grey-ringed bee which has just reconnoitred my ear for the third time, and guesses it is a key-hole—she is away just now, but only, I fancy, for clay to stop it up with. There are others also to which I would give their *congé* if they would take it. But good, bad, or indifferent they give us their company whether we want it or not."

Eha certainly found company in beasts all his life, and kept the charm of youth about him in consequence to the end. If his lot were cast, as it often was, in lonely places, he kept pets, and made friends besides of many of the members of the tribes on his frontier; if in Bombay city he consoled himself with his aquarium and the museum of the Bombay Natural History Society. When the present writer chummed with him in a flat on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, he remembers well that aquarium and the Sunday-morning expeditions to the malarious ravines at the back of Malabar Hill to search for mosquito larvae to feed its inmates. For at that time Mr. Aitken was investigating the capabilities for the destruction of larvae, of a small surface-feeding fish with an ivory-white spot on the top of its head, which he had found at Vihar in the stream below the bund. It took him some time to identify these particular fishes (*Haplochilus lineatus*),

and in the meantime he dubbed them "Scooties" from the lightning rapidity of their movements, and in his own admirable manner made himself a sharer of their joys and sorrows, their cares and interests. With these he stocked the ornamental fountains of Bombay to keep them from becoming breeding-grounds for mosquitoes, and they are now largely used throughout India for this very purpose. It will be recognised, therefore, that Mr. Aitken studied natural history not only for its own sake, but as a means of benefiting the people of India, whom he had learned to love, as is so plainly shown in *Behind the Bungalow*.

He was an indefatigable worker in the museum of the Bombay Natural History Society, which he helped to found, and many of his papers and notes are preserved for us in the pages of its excellent *Journal*, of which he was an original joint-editor. He was for long secretary of the Insect Section, and then president. Before his retirement he was elected one of the Vice-Presidents of the Society.

Mr. Aitken was a deeply religious man, and was for some twenty years an elder in the congregation of the United Free Church of Scotland in Bombay. He was for some years Superintendent of the Sunday School in connection with this congregation, and a member of the Committee of the Bombay Scottish Orphanage and the Scottish High Schools. His former minister says of him, "He was deeply interested in theology, and remained wonderfully orthodox in spite of" (or, as the present writer would prefer to say, *because of*) "his scientific knowledge. He always thought that the evidence for the doctrine of evolution had been pressed for more than it was worth, and he had many criticisms to make upon the Higher Critics of the Bible. Many a discussion we had, in which, against me, he took the conservative side."

He lets one see very clearly into the workings of his mind in this direction in what is perhaps the finest, although the least well known of his books, *The Five Windows of the Soul* (John Murray), in which he discourses in his own inimitable way of the five senses, and how they bring man and beast into contact with their surroundings. It is a book on perceiving, and shows how according as this faculty is exercised it makes each man such as he is. The following extract from the book shows Mr. Aitken's style, and may perhaps induce some to go to the book itself for more from the same source. He is speaking of the moral sense. "And it is almost a truism to say that, if a man has any taste, it will show itself in his dress and in his dwelling. No doubt, through indolence and slovenly habits, a man may allow his surroundings to fall far below what he is capable of approving; but every one who does so pays the penalty in the gradual deterioration of his perceptions.

"How many times more true is all this in the case of the moral sense? When the heart is still young and tender, how spontaneously and sweetly and urgently does every vision of goodness and nobleness in the conduct of another awaken the impulse to go and do likewise! And if that impulse is not obeyed, how certainly does the first approving perception of the beauty of goodness become duller, until at last we may even come to hate it where we find it, for its discordance with the 'motions of sins in our members'!

"But not less certainly will every earnest effort to bring the life into unison with what we perceive to be right bring its own reward in a clearer and more joyful perception of what is right, and a keener sensitiveness to every discord in ourselves. How all such discord may be removed, how the chords of the heart may be tuned and the life become music,—these are questions of religion, which are quite beyond our scope. But I take it that every religion which has prevailed among the children of Adam is in itself an evidence that, however debased and perverted the moral sense may have become, the painful consciousness that his heart is 'like sweet bells jangled' still presses everywhere and always on the spirit of man; and it is also a conscious or unconscious admission that there is no blessedness for him until his life shall march in step with the music of the 'Eternal Righteousness.'"

Mr. Aitken's name will be kept green among Anglo-Indians by the well-known series of books published by Messrs. Thacker & Co., of London and Calcutta. They are *The Tribes on my Frontier*, *An Indian Naturalist's Foreign Policy*, which was published in 1883, and of which a seventh edition appeared in 1910. This book deals with the common birds, beasts, and insects in and around an Indian bungalow, and it should be put into the hands of every one whose lot is cast in India. It will open their eyes to the beauty and interests of their surroundings in a truly wonderful way, and may be read again and again with increasing pleasure as one's experience of Indian life increases.

This was followed in 1889 by *Behind the Bungalow*, which describes with charming insight the strange manners and customs of our Indian domestic servants. The witty and yet kindly way in which their excellencies and defects are touched off is delightful, and many a harassed *mem-sahib* must bless Eha for showing her the humorous and human side of her life surrounded as it is by those necessary but annoying inhabitants of the Godowns behind the bungalow. A tenth edition of this book was published in 1911.

The Naturalist on the Prowl was brought out in 1894, and a third edition was published in 1905. It contains sketches on the same lines as those in *The Tribes*, but deals more with the jungles, and not so much with the immediate surroundings of the bungalow. The very smell of the country is in these chapters, and will vividly recall memories to those who know the country along the West Coast of India southward of Bombay.

In 1900 was published *The Common Birds of Bombay*, which contains descriptions of the ordinary birds one sees about the bungalow or in the country. As is well said by the writer of the obituary notice in the *Journal* of the Bombay Natural History Society, Eha "had a special genius for seizing the striking and characteristic points in the appearance and behaviour of individual species and a happy knack of translating them into print so as to render his descriptions unmistakable. He looked upon all creatures in the proper way, as if each had a soul and character of its own. He loved them all, and was unwilling to hurt any of them." These characteristics are well shown in this book, for one is able to recognise the birds easily from some prominent feature described therein.^[1]

The Five Windows of the Soul, published by John Murray in 1898, is of quite another character from the above, and was regarded by its author with great affection as the best of his books. It is certainly a wonderfully self-revealing book, and full of the most beautiful thoughts. A second impression appeared in the following year, and a new and cheaper edition has just been published. The portrait of Eha is reproduced from one taken in 1902 in a flat on the Apollo Bunder, and shows the man as he was in workaday life in Bombay. The humorous and kindly look is, I think, well brought out, and will stir pleasant memories in all who knew Mr. Aitken.

W. B. B.

MADRAS, *January* 1914.

[Footnote 1: The illustrations are his own work, but the blocks having been produced in India, they do not do justice to the extreme delicacy of workmanship and fine perception of detail which characterise the originals, as all who have been privileged to see these will agree.]