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# A NOTE ON RENGAS POISONING.

BY

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THE commonest of the various species of Rengas is *Melanorrhœa Curtisii Oliv*, a tall and handsomely foliated jungle tree which flourishes luxuriantly on many of the hill slopes of the Malay Peninsula, and extends northwards as far as the Southern Provinces of Burma. All the trees of this family contain in abundance an acrid sap, which is well known to native woodmen as a substance that, coming in contact with the skin, produces disagreeable and even dangerous results.

If the healthy skin is rubbed lightly with the juice from a freshly cut twig, violent inflammation, with smarting and burning pain, follows within twenty-four hours, and results in a characteristic pustular eruption—an eruption of blebs filled with matter. If the injured surface be of any extent, fever and other constitutional disturbances follow the local injury. When a large extent of skin has been affected, as happens when a native with unprotected body struggles through broken branches, this fever is said to be so irritant and septic that it not infrequently ends fatally. I have not, however, seen a case of such gravity, but from the peculiarly severe symptoms produced by the sap on a small surface there can be little doubt but that where a large extent of skin is involved, the consequences might be most serious. An extract or tincture of the twigs made by soaking them in proof spirit has active blistering properties, and might be of value in medicine as a counter-irritant, did we not possess in croton oil and tartarated antimony remedies

whose action in producing a pustular eruption is identical with Rengas sap, and which have the additional advantage that their constitutional action is never dangerous. Internally, the juice acts as a violent irritant, causing vomiting and purging, and its administration is in the highest degree dangerous.

Malays assert that simple contact with the leaves or unbroken branches is sufficient to give rise to equally evil effects, but experiment points to the fact that it is the sap of the tree that possesses the noxious qualities, and that simple contact with unbroken twigs is not usually hurtful. It is a matter of some importance, however, to note that the wood of the Rengas tree, which, being closely grained and capable of taking a high polish, would otherwise be of great value for cabinet-making, retains its irritant properties long after the sap has apparently dried. I am informed by Messrs. KNIGHT & Co. of Singapore that, after years of seasoning, when the wood is cut up it gives rise to painful and intractable eruptions on the hands and bodies of the workmen, and that, for this reason alone, its value as an economic wood is seriously impaired.

The immediate treatment of the poison is generally successful; it should be to wrap the injured part in bandages with some dry alkaline powder, such as bicarbonate of soda, the object being to counteract the acid of the poison, and to absorb the exuded secretion from the skin. Vaseline or lard smeared on the hands and bodies of the woodcutters prevents the sap from setting up inflammation by affording a protective covering to the skin. Many cases, however, especially those that have been neglected, are refractory to treatment of any sort, and the ulcers that form between the fingers and toes as a result of Rengas poison are extremely untractable and sluggish in taking on a healthy and healing action; the eruption in emaciated and unhealthy subjects being very apt to develop into a condition of chronic ulceration.

If we pass from the region of observed fact to the more dubious realm of Malay belief and narrative, we are told that when a Rengas tree is felled, the exhalations from the cut

stem are so noxious that on the woodmen inhaling them, their faces become swollen as if they had been stung by hornets, and that, although none of the sap has touched the skin, fever and blindness are usual consequences. It is impossible to accept these statements, but it is quite possible that some inflammation of the outer membrane of the eyes might be caused by the irritating vapour of Rengas sap.

With such distinctive characteristics as these, it is not surprising to find that Malays have invested the Rengas tree with supernatural properties. Before they venture to fell the tree to obtain the highly prized *tiangs* of this wood, elaborate exorcisms have to be undertaken to counteract the influences of evil-disposed *djins* and *langsuyar*. It is a matter of popular belief that, if the incantations are efficiently performed, the woodcutter is rendered proof against the poison of the sap; and three Malays living at Ayer Etam in Penang are believed to be such adepts in the art that their bodies have become impervious to the influence of the juice. I have experienced great difficulty in getting other natives to collect branches, as they insist that it is essential to have some one to do it who thoroughly understands the spells proper for the occasion. On investigation, it was found that all that these Malays claimed to achieve by their incantations was to attain exemption from the effects of the noxious vapour of the cut trees, and that they are careful to augment the protective powers of their spells by rubbing their hands and bodies with coco-nut oil.

The various species of the Rengas family must be frequently met with in the Peninsula in clearing jungle for plantations or railways, and it is obviously a matter of importance to be able to identify trees that may expose workmen to serious danger.

*Penang, 29th October, 1891.*

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