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WHEN THE RAINS COME DOWN IN BURMA

By J. V. McAREE

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AFTER the war there is likely to appear a whole library devoted to the influences of the weather upon the long struggle. No doubt, there will be writers setting out to prove that the real victory was given to the Allies by the weather, and that this constituted the intervention of God on the side of right and justice. We do not ourselves impute a moral quality to weather, believing that the rain falleth upon the just and the unjust alike, and that certain meteorological conditions in the past have been as helpful to the Germans as to us. Already it has been agreed that the rescue at Dunkirk would have been impossible had it not been that the weather for a couple of days smiled on that historic evacuation. Everybody knows to what an extent the success of the imminent landing on the Continent will be decided by winds and waves and clouds and sunlight. Everybody knows, finally, that in most theatres of war the weather has imposed handships as great on the contending armies and navies and airmen as the enemy's shellfire. Some of the recent moves in the Far East have been governed by the weather.

Anchored in Mud.

In Burma the monsoon will make any large mobility out of the question. It will tend to anchor both Japanese and Allied armies in the positions they held before the terrible rains came. It has been suggested that the monsoon may turn to our advantage by making it impossible for the invading Japs to maintain their long lines of communication. Even the war in the air must slacken. But, while the armies may swear terribly, like the army in Flanders, the monsoon is looked forward to as a blessing by the millions who must live off the land, and who without the rains would starve to death. For to the land the rains bring fertility along with discomfort. They rescue the parched earth. This phenomenon happens regularly year after year, some time in May, sometimes in the first week. The rains are caused by the monsoon winds, which blow with increasing intensity from the southwest. About this time they become fully charged with moisture. Then the rains burst.

Cause of the Rains.

In The New York Times Magazine Louise Drysdale explains that monsoon and rains are not synonyms. Monsoon derives from an Arabic word meaning season and is given to the seasonal winds which occur in tropic climates. In Burma, two or three light showers, called mango showers, fall in March; but for seven months of the year there is no rainfall except in the mountains. In the so-called winter months, the northeast monsoon winds tend to moderate the fierce heat of the sun, but these cease toward the end of February. The southeast monsoon is born following the rise of the hot air near the earth; the air from the sea then comes in and, when it has become fully saturated, the real rains break. From the beginning of March, when the hot weather starts, this writer says, there is no respite from the relentless heat. The earth cracks and becomes as hard as concrete. The jungles are steaming, the atmosphere humid as in a greenhouse. The humidity is overwhelming. The Burmans, who are at any time opposed to any strenuous effort, relapse into almost complete inertia. They sleep in the middle of the day and spend their nights in the open talking and gambling. When the sun rises they go home to bed.

Rain Falls Every Day.

There is no way to tell exactly the day the rains will come. The sun will rise as usual, the air will press on one's shoulders, and eyes will be raised beseechingly toward the heavens. In the late afternoon the clouds will darken; there may be a sudden wind or it may be quite still. Suddenly the sky opens and the water pours down in sheets. The temperature drops rapidly and the rain seems not so much to fall as to strike. Thereafter, as long as the monsoon lasts, there will be a rainfall for several hours every day. If the morning is sunny, rain will fall in the afternoon; if it falls before noon, the late afternoon and evening will be cool and dry. A new way of living is adopted. The chief problem is to get things dry and keep them dry. In the homes of foreigners and the well-to-do Burmans one room is set aside as a drying-room, and here charcoal fires burn continually. All leather articles must be kept there, or they acquire a thick, grey mould. The rains bring the insect pests to life. In every size and shape they rise from the earth in thick, dark swarms. The malarial mosquito, comparatively dormant during the heat, becomes active and dangerous. The damp chill awakens the fever in the bones of those who have previously suffered from an infection.

Plague of Insects.

If there are dogs in the household they must be freed of ticks at least twice a day. Every time the animals leave the house dozens of these small black insects attach themselves to the skin. Within a few hours, bloated with the blood they have sucked, they swell to 10 or 20 times their natural size. They must not be pulled off, but killed where they are; if their heads remain buried in the dog's skin an infection will follow. The chief chore of the servants is to keep moving goods from their normal positions to the drying room, then to the veranda for a glimpse of the sun, and then back again before they can be soaked by a sudden shower. In Burma the foreigners continue business as usual throughout the year except for their holidays, and in this respect the Japs are like them rather than like the natives, who will devote themselves mainly to sleep and gambling through the seven months of winter, and to fighting insects during the monsoon.

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