

THE OVER-PRODUCTION OF FIBRE.

We are not in the secrets of Government and cannot say, therefore, what thought was in the official mind in causing some pages of information about "Mauritius Hemp Machines" to be reproduced in the *Gazette* of 28th Sept. from the "Kew Bulletin" of so old a date as May 1890. If we owe this to a desire to induce some fresh interest in the aloes and other fibrous plants which so freely grow in Ceylon, we are by no means inclined to find fault; for, indeed we had just been writing on the subject of Fibres, when the *Gazette* came to hand. But alas, our recent mail news from London was, to the effect, that the European market for nearly all kinds of fibres was clogged and overstocked! The fortunes that were to be made in "Sisal" and "Ramie" are likely to melt into the same thin air that received those of the Ceylon planters some years ago, when based on cinchona!

Recently we made remarks upon the large outturns by mechanical aids, as being one of the chief of the causes, that have led to the general over-stocking of the world's markets. Among the productions which seem to have suffered to a greater extent from this employment than almost any other, is this of fibre. Not very many years back, an urgent demand was made in innumerable quarters, for the designing of machinery whereby fibre might be obtained from some of the known sources of supply left almost entirely untouched because of the difficulty then experienced of economically treating them. This demand was more or less successfully met, and markets became a long crowded with fibres of many descriptions of a novel character in quantities that proved to be greatly in excess of the power of consumers to absorb. This glut has proved to have very unfavourable results even for Ceylon. Only within the past few years a demand had sprung up for the fibre of our palmyra palm, and we have only to examine the Customs returns to see how speedily this demand was met from Colombo. Quite a halcyon time then seemed to have commenced for those of our northern districts that had a plentiful growth of this partioular palm. Prices for the fibre ran up very speedily, and everything seemed to promise fairly for the continuance and for the permanence of this form of industry. But the result that has attended so many other forms of production soon became felt in this branch. The markets for disposal soon became overstocked, and prices fell even to below those quoted before the active demand had set in. As a consequence the hopeful anticipations that had been formed as to the outlook for palmyra gardens tumbled to the ground. The export fell off largely, and it must be a matter of extreme doubt if it can experience a satisfactory revival. We fear that this disappointing result must operate in producing discouragement with regard to our island fibre-yielding plants generally. So many tropical countries can compete with us in the supply of these, that it is difficult to see that our island can occupy any very active part in the competition. It is fortunate, perhaps, that, having so many other branches of industry to attend to, no large outlay was attempted in Ceylon to endeavour to meet the demand. Other countries have not had the same good fortune. The Bahamas—to quote a foremost instance among these—set to work on the first appearance of the demand to largely cultivate and manipulate the plant yielding the well-known and valued sisal fibre. What has been the result? It has been the same as has, for the last few years, attended so many items of production. In an incredibly

short space of time the prices of this celebrated fibre in the European markets seriously fell, and stocks of it so accumulated that they have now but little chance of becoming depleted to the extent that would cause prices once again to reach a remunerative level. A good many years must elapse, it is much to be feared, before we shall again be able to write hopefully as to the prospects before fibre collectors. At one time it seemed likely to be the case that the mana grass, that grows so luxuriantly throughout many localities in this island, might have a successful future for its treatment. This hope met with disappointment, and there would seem to be no present prospect before us, that advantage might be gained by the endeavour to experiment with any others of our indigenous fibre-yielding grasses or trees.

Whether in the good time that is always coming, the shadow that has now fallen upon the fibre-producing industries of the world may be removed, it is impossible to say. At all events at the present time the outlook with regard to them is as clouded as it well can be. References made to the London dealers are answered to the effect that there is a plethora of supplies of fibre of all kinds, and that it would be futile to encourage further increase of production. Metal has succeeded to fibre for all the standing rigging of ships, to supply which in times past, gave rise to much of the demand to which allusion has been made. Machinery has enabled the world to more than keep pace with requirements, and in no branch has that result been more forcibly exemplified than in the fibre trade. Unless some at present wholly unforeseen cause of demand should arise, it must be a very long time before we shall again be called upon to turn our attention to the numerous plants in Ceylon from which useful fibres may be obtained. We must be content to rest upon our oars until such time arrives—should it ever do so—at which demand may once more overtake supply.

PLANTING NOTES FROM TALAWAKELE, CEYLON.

Oct. 2.—I think that at last we have come to the most delightful season of the year, the interregnum between the S.-W. and N.-E. monsoons—at least, since the 27th, when the rain at last ceased, we have been enjoying warm breezes and sunshine and cloud effects at sunset on the Great Western, though there were a couple of showers on the 30th. The present heat, besides enabling us to get our household belongings dried, will give us nice flushes towards the end of the month.

Coolies are still displaying their hopeless incapacity to distinguish between verity and falsehood, between what is mine and what is thine. Regarding the latter, factory coolies think that the firewood heap for the driers is put there for their personal benefit, especially do they think so when departing from their scene of labor at 6 or 7 o'clock.

One coolie was found the other day seated on the cartroad enjoying the contents of a tin of raspberry wafers. Extravagance is perhaps one of the points of the *fin de siècle*, but coolies seem now-a-days to get whatever they like, and they are not bothered with the thought of payment. Posterity will do that.

"TIMBER!"

The Journal of the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society of British Guiana, for June (which has just reached us) has for contents:—

PAPERS.—The Guiana Orchids, by the Editor; Construction and Maintenance of Roads and Bridges in