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AUCKLAND BOTANICAL SOCIETY

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In spite of the difficulties and often dangers under which she lives, Mrs. Allen (nee Molesworth) still finds time to remember her old friends of the Botanical Society, and share some of her outstanding botanical experiences with them. In reading her delightful article, readers cannot fail to be struck by the number of familiar names encountered. Our hearty thanks to Mrs. Allen.

A TRIP TO KEDAH PEAK IN MALAYA

Recently I was fortunate enough to be able to visit a mountain on the mainland only about 40 miles from the island of Penang, where I have been living. Although the vegetation is essentially tropical there were so many familiar-looking plants that for a brief moment I could pretend I was on the top of Te Aroha mountain!

Kedah Peak is 3,967 feet high, and like Mt. Egmont rises out of flat land near the sea in the state of Kedah about 600 miles north of the Equator. (This state is one of the main rice growing areas in Malaya, and much of the land is flat, but there are some lovely limestone outcrops in the north, some of which rise sheer to about 1,000 feet, shaped like eye-teeth.) The peak is merely the highest point of a short isolated range of hills which is jungle-clad with exciting looking, and vast rock-faces of granite breaking through the green.

There is a steep road which runs through tropical lowland jungle of tall trees and palms, and as one climbed, the Dipterocarps - a tropical family (Dipterocarpaceae) of tall and important timber trees - became common. These became mixed with "Kauri" forest which in its turn became common at about 1,800 feet. There were fine specimens of this, Agathis alba, and higher we saw Dacrydium elatum and Podocarpus imbricatus looking a little like a Kahikatea, but smaller.

Just below 3,000 feet a curious stunted mossy forest commenced and this continued to the summit. This is what makes Kedah Peak so interesting, for apart from one, or perhaps two other isolated peaks, the plants found here are seldom seen in Malaya under 5 or 6,000 feet.

(In Sumatra I have seen similar at 3,000 feet but the climate differs there.) There appears to be much quartzite and poor soil and the frequent mists causing high humidity produce something like the "goblin" forest of Stewart Island.

We left the jeep at the bungalow which is about 700 feet below the summit and walked from there.

Here and there patches of Sphagnum occurred in open places, which were made gay by the purple and white flowers of the common slipper orchid (Paphiopedilum barbatum, or Cypripedium as it used to be called.) Here also was a pretty little yellow-flowered Bladderwort, Utricularia involvens. Leptospernum flavescens our only species of "manuka" is the predominant small tree on the way up. This is one of the plants usually seen at much higher altitudes or cultivated at hill stations. It is more robust than L.scoparium generally is, and the leaves are coarser. Flowers are alike, but not, I think produced in such abundance. I spotted a familiar looking plant; it was Leucopogon malayans, like a very prickly Mingimingi. Just here with the moss on the ground, I thought of the gumlands, and a little Lindsaya was even present. Mistletoes were frequent, but in this place the common one was a rare species which rather resembled Korthalsella lindsayi. It is actually a Viscum and is almost confined to this area.

The spell was soon over, however, as my eye fell on the Pitcher plants which thrive on this sour soil, the pitchers being blood-red. A small tree, Podocarpus neriifolius was common. The leaves were like those of "Illawarra Plum" and over this and other shrubs a curious Lycopodium draped itself. It was L.casuarinioides, so named because of its resemblance to the Casuarina one occasionally sees cultivated in Auckland. A species of the Australian genus, Baeckia was present, but not commonly.

Everywhere orchids abounded, mostly epiphytic but few of these were in flower. Bulbophyllum, large and medium ones were very common as well as some Dendrobium. (For the orchid-minded I would say that the only terrestial orchid that I noted as common in this area was the yellow-flowered Spathoglottis, from which many hybrids have been cultivated. Slipper orchids being confined to the wetter places.)

From the bungalow to just about 50 feet from the summit, Gleichenia microphylla formed thickets on the edges of the heath forest and on the path sides. Here it is the var. semivestita.

Near the windswept summit, the predominant tree is, appropriately enough, a Weinmannia (W.blumei), whose creamy flowers and pink new leaves look quite like the N.Z. mountain species. On the very top, as if to welcome me, were two old friends, Histiopteris incisa and Pteridium esculentum (P.esculentum is usually found in the lowlands and P.aquilinum in the mountains, but the former seems to be on the upward move and appears where areas have been cleared.)

I found one lovely white Rhododendron whose exquisite flowers I photographed in colour. There were many different species of Hymenophyllum and Trichomanes but none identical with N.Z. species; occasionally I found a little Grammitis but on the whole this genus is poorly represented in Malaya and the plants are rare when they do occur.

On the way down, below the bungalow were several species of Cyathea and masses of Gleichenia (Hicriopteris group), and as we descended further, different varieties of the abundant G. linearis became doninant.

Last year a road was started and is still being made, ploughed out of the almost sheer sides of the sharp summit peak, from the bungalow upwards. This is to allow jeeps to travel to the top which is now converted to a wireless station. I say converted, because it is such a small area that the unique vegetation which was there has completely vanished under tidy concrete floors and link wire fences (it was from here that the Bracken and Histiopteris bravely peeped out.) This, incidentally, is one of the many stations now established, because of the emergency, throughout Malaya on the highest or isolated peaks thus connecting the country with a vast wireless system.

Imagine our dismay, when walking along the old mossy path which I knew in 1949, to come to the road and have to walk up this terrible scar, as the rest of the path (and so many slipper orchids) have disappeared. Probably an immense feat of engineering but the peak seems too narrow and steep to hold a road winding round it and one thinks of erosion and the loss of the interesting plants.

From the bungalow down, one does not stop these days, for the communists living in the dense jungle below realized that what went up had to come down, and in the past there were some bad ambushes, and so now, although probably perfectly safe, the police maintain strict control. Application made and permission granted beforehand, and the exact hour of return stated. This is irksome to a botanist, but a patrol is sent out if one does not arrive on time, and imagine one's feelings if caught idling in a particularly rich area with a handful of specimens!

My main object in returning to Kedah Peak was to make some notes on a small Schizaea which grew in Sphagnum in a more or less flat area at the base of the steep peak. Alas, the Sphagnum had died and no sign of the fern. The whole area had dried out, nothing living being there. I wondered if it were coincidence that the winding road was above. Would it act as a drain to the water which previously poured down the steep sides, causing an artificial dryness? If so a new vegetation may eventually arise, but a little Schizaea may be lost in the march of "progress".

I had planned to go again to look for it on other slopes, but we were whisked away to Sarawak---the land of white rajahs, rhinoceros and orang utan, of which the former two are now extinct---so here we are, no emergency, no wireless stations on the peaks and plenty of mountains.

Betty Allen.
