

HINDRANCES.

1. *Power of Custom.*—And, first, let him advert to the power of custom among the Laos as a hindrance to the progress of Christianity. If the world were to be divided as we sometimes divide the churches in our own land, into conservatives and radicals, the Orient would be set against the Occident. Custom has power in the West, it is true; on the other hand, "old fashioned" is more often than not a term of reproach, and the love of novelty is so great that the mere fact that a thing has long been done in a certain way is counted by many a sufficient reason for beginning to do it in some other fashion. The temper of the Orient is the opposite; there the customary is the sacred; the thing that hath been is that which shall be, and also the thing that ought to be. And in this respect the Laos are true Orientals. It is some time before the missionary can realize the force which this matter of custom exerts among them. He goes into a wayside temple; he seeks out the head priest and courteously salutes him; he is invited to seat himself upon the mat that is spread for him, and a pillow for his elbow, a jar of cool water and a cup, and a tray of the inevitable betel-nut are provided for his comfort and refreshment. After a few commonplaces on either side the real business of the hour is taken up, and that all the more eagerly because the presence of the foreign teacher has drawn every member of the monastery, every casual loiterer in the temple grounds, perhaps even a score or more of persons from the village, into earshot of the conversation. "Your reverence," begins the missionary, "is a religious man; are you acquainted with that which is called the religion of the Lord Jesus?" The answer will probably be this: "Noble doctor, we have heard of this religion of the Lord Jesus, but we do not understand clearly what it is." This the missionary feels is the very opportunity for which he has prepared himself. He has thought out his statement of Christianity; he has chosen his illustrations with great care; not only the terms he will employ, but the very tone and manner he will use; as not in the way of harsh and initiating polemic, but in that of calm but earnest reasoned appeal to heart and conscience, he sets the new system from heaven before the minds of those who know only the old that is of men. There is much to encourage him as he proceeds; there is earnest attention; the head priest interrupts now and then to ask a well-chosen question; not infrequently an auditor ejaculates under his breath that what the teacher says is true. The missionary ceases speaking, and awaits the reply of his fellow-teacher in the yellow robe. What will he pitch upon as the weak point in the argument? What will be the line of his attack? Listen: "Noble doctor, what you say is good; truly you speak to our hearts; but, *baw pen heet paw, hoy maa*" (these are not the footsteps of our fathers and mothers). *Missa est!* The assembly is dismissed. The old priest's answer is conclusive to everybody except the missionary, and he departs wondering if it can really be that an argument so staunch has gone to pieces on a rock so small.