We have chosen Sir James Brooke for the first portrait in our “gallery,” because his life is probably less familiar to our readers than that of any person whose portrait figures on any postage stamp.

Sir James Brooke was born in London, on the 29th of April, 1803. He was educated at the Norwich Grammar School. He entered the army of the East India Company, as a cadet, in 1817, and served with distinction in the Burmese war; but, being severely wounded, was compelled to return home. But a person of such a temperament as our hero could not remain long idle. Scarcely had his wound healed than he re-entered he army, but was compelled to resign shortly after on account of his health.

Mr. Brooke had long been contemplating the civilization of the Malay races; and, on the death of his father, inheriting sufficient to put his ideas into execution, he at once proceeded to fit himself for the great work he had laid out for himself. He spent about three years cruising about in his yacht, the “Royalist,” visiting China and the Indian Archipelago. In July, 1839, he landed on the coast of Borneo, and at once made arrangements with the Malay Rajah of Sarawak for permission to visit the island; which being granted, he made an extended journey through every part, and gained a great deal of information that was of immense service to him afterward.

In 1841 he was appointed Rajah of Sarawak, by the Sultan, but had to pay an annual tribute of about $2,500. But, in consideration of this, he had the monopoly of dealing in some of the most valuable products of the country. Under his able management, the country steadily increased in everything pertaining to civilization. In 1844 he was appointed agent for the English Government in Borneo. In 1847 Mr. Brooke returned to England, and was then created a Knight of the Bath, by Her Majesty. He returned to Sarawak the next year. In 1857, the Chinese residing in Sarawak revolted, and were soon put down.

Of Sir James Brooke’s personal courage it is not necessary to speak; but to this quality he added a skill in the use of all weapons, and a quickness of eye and limb which were quite extraordinary. To the moment when paralysis struck him down for the first time, the Rajah had few equals in that rapid and vigorous fence which is really of service in a struggle, nor in real pistol play. There are many men, it is likely, who could cut the pips of a card more accurately, but I never saw one who was the Rajah’s match in firing all round, in front, in rear, running, or wheeling about. That most treacherous weapon, the revolver, was sure as a duelling pistol in his hands. When the Chinese rebels came down to Kutching on the night of February 18, 1867, their first object was to surround the Government House, with the intention of killing the sovereign. They knew that he and his body-servant were alone in the building, for it was not customary before this event to post any sentinels either by night or day. The Chinese force was over three thousand, and the half of this number marched in silence through the darkness to the attack.
They fired the building, and stood in wait for their victim, yelling and wasting their powder after the usual Chinese manner.

Half of them were drunk: all were thirsting for the Rajah’s blood. But so terrible was the prestige surrounding him, so deeply founded the belief in his miraculous skill, that when the object of their hatred sprang through a window from the blazing house, with a pistol in each hand and a sabre between his teeth, the fifteen hundred burly Chinamen sprang from his desperate path, and, without a wound, he dashed through a living lane of intended murderers. He reached the stream that fenced the Residence gardens, pursued by the cowardly host, plunged in, dived beneath the sampans lying there, and rose among the bushes on the farther bank. But as he arose, another peril loomed over him, for a dark figure stooped above his hiding-place, and eager eyes were examining the water. One hasty glance assured the Rajah that this new foe was all alone; he sprang in one tremendous bound at the bent throat, and shortened his sabre to finish the work.

But a strangled voice gurgled forth – “It’s I, sir – Penty, sir! O, for God’s sake, Sir James!” The Rajah was fond of telling this story, and Penty, his steward, a stalwart west countryman, always grinned from ear to ear in listening to it, and invariably wound up in the finale with an inconsequential “Yes, sir!” The Dyaks also, among whom wrestling is a favorite pastime, had a notion that their Rajah was more than a match for their most skillful champions. Whether there was any ground for this idea, or how it came to be accredited, I can not tell; most surely Sir James Brooke had never entered the lists with their naked warriors. It may be that in some early struggle, when the leader of the Sarawak forces had to take hand-to-hand part in every action, the Dyaks saw him successfully disarm an antagonist by this means, thence the opinion spread. One evening, shortly after the Kyan war, Mr. Stuart Johnson, third and youngest of the Rajah’s nephews, brought down a guest to Government House, in the person of “Joke,” a Kennowit chieftain of great importance somewhere on the Rejang river, and a noted champion of all weapons and games. Messrs. Johnson and Cruikshank, residents of Kennowit, each tried to fall with him, but he threw them easily. The Rajah happened to enter the room just as I asked Joke whether any Englishman in the country could match him. “No one but the Rajah,” he said, looking at his sovereign with a curious expression of mingled worship and curiosity in his eyes. “Why, I am old and very thin, Joke!” said Sir James, smiling. “So is the rattan, Rajah!” replied the Kennowit, quick as thought.

In 1863 he left Sarawak for the last time, and settled on his estate in Devonshire, where he died from the effects of a paralytic attack, on the 11th of June, 1868, at the age of 65 years.

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