J. A. le Doux

Jacques Alphonse le Doux, friend and correspondent of members of the staff of the Botanic Gardens, Singapore, for more than fifty years, died in the Johore General Hospital on 1st April, 1961, at the age of 80.

Le Doux was born at Liverpool (according to the Sunday Times of 2nd April), but spent his boyhood at a country house at East Molesey in Surrey, near the river Thames, opposite Hampton Court. His father had a large garden, with greenhouses containing orchids and other tropical plants, and thus began the interest in plants (and perhaps the call of the tropics) that lasted all his life. With his brother Gustave he volunteered for service in the war in South Africa, and remained in that country until 1906, when he again joined his brother, who had previously come to a tin mine in Johore.

Jacques soon turned from tin-mining to rubber-planting, in the Kota Tinggi district, where he remained for the rest of his life. After working on several estates, he established his own small rubber plantation at the 3rd mile, Mawai Road, calling it Tutankhamen Estate. There I first visited him in 1925, and found that he was known to Malays in the neighbourhood as "Tuan Jack". Later, through no fault of his own, he lost this property, and built a house for himself in an area of orchard land, which he called "The Dusun", on the other side of the road. He was there at the time of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, and was interned in Singapore during the years 1942–45. In the civilian internment camp he became friendly with George Peet, of the Straits Times editorial staff. Peet was impressed by le Doux's local knowledge of the countryside, its people and natural history, and after the war persuaded him to allow publication of some reminiscences in the Sunday Times. I remember le Doux telling me that he was very hesitant about publication, and that, though Peet wished him to write more, he doubted if he could do so. But he was persuaded to continue, and Tuan Djek's "Countryman's Journal" became a regular feature of the Sunday Times, so that he and his dusun, the cook and the cook’s growing family, the neighbours and the plants and animals which interested him, became well known to a large public in Malaya.

Early in his planting career le Doux established contact with H. N. Ridley, and sent him specimens of plants from time to time, calling at the Gardens on his occasional visits to Singapore, and
he continued this practice when I. H. Burkill followed Ridley as Director. I first met him at the Director's house, at a tea-time call, in 1922. In 1925 I stayed a long week-end with him at Easter, and we climbed Gunong Panti and also went into the Pelepah valley between G. Panti and G. Muntahak. At both localities, then and later, we found many interesting plants, some of which are apparently quite local. A year or two later he stayed for a time at a small house in Tanglin Road, Singapore, and kept a fine collection of varieties of Spathoglottis plicata in pots. His interest in these plants led me to look at them critically, as I had not troubled to do previously, and the results were recorded in a paper in the Malayan Orchid Review. This was my first study of a group of varieties of cultivated plants; it was for me a valuable experience which I owed to le Doux. I learnt from him also about his methods of cultivation of these plants, and this led to an improvement of those we had at the Gardens.

In subsequent years we corresponded and exchanged brief visits from time to time, and I learnt much from him in many ways. He had an observant eye, and noted the flowering and fruiting of the many different native trees and other plants around the dusun, as well as of his fruit trees. Among the plants he showed me in his later years were two bamboos on the bank of the stream near his house. One was the blowpipe bamboo, the other the only example I have seen in Malaya of Gigantochloa maxima, a variety of which is widely planted in Java; I think this species must have been brought by man from lower Burma. In 1952 le Doux wrote to me that this bamboo was flowering, and when I went to gather some flowers I walked down the road to a neighbouring kampong with him and found yet another bamboo which was previously very little known; this was Bambusa heterostachya, for 70 years only known from the original collection made near Malacca. Le Doux was equally interested in all kinds of animals, and corresponded frequently with zoologists at Raffles Museum, the University of Malaya, and the Institute for Medical Research.

Le Doux was a kindly and modest person, with a quiet dry humour in his conversation that made him always a good companion, whether in pleasure or adversity. He lived latterly detached from the world, which in general he appeared to regard with an amused tolerance, though upon occasion his comments could be caustic. There must be many who, like myself, remember him for his unobtrusive but stimulating help and his firm friendship. Requiescat in pace.

R. E. HOLTUM.