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SIAM

THE LAND OF THE WHITE ELEPHANT

AS IT WAS AND IS

COMPILED AND ARRANGED BY
GEORGE B. BACON

REVISED BY
FREDERICK WELLS WILLIAMS

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CHAPTER XVII.

NATURAL PRODUCTIONS OF SIAM

THE varieties of animal and vegetable life with which the tropics everywhere abound are in Siam almost innumerable. From the gigantic elephant and rhinoceros in the jungle to the petty mosquitoes that infest the dwellings and molest the slumbers of the crowded city; from the gigantic Indian fig-tree to the tiniest garden-blossom, an almost infinite diversity of life and growth invites attention. The work of scientific observation and classification has been, as yet, only very imperfectly accomplished. Much has been done by the missionaries, especially by Dr. House of the American Presbyterian Mission, who is a competent and scientific observer. And the lamented Mouhot, gathered vast and valuable collections in the almost unexplored regions to which he penetrated. But no doubt there are still undiscovered treasures of which men of science will presently lay hold.

“Elephants,” says Bowring, “are abundant in the forests of Siam, and grow sometimes to the height of twelve or thirteen feet. The habits of the elephant are gregarious; but though he does not willingly attack a man, he is avoided as dangerous; and a troop of elephants will, when going down to a river to drink,

fight, if I mistake not, an army of giants. With one kick he split a mountain in two, and report goes that he finished the war with honor.

“The Siamese have more respect for white animals than for those of any other color. They say that when a talapoin meets a white cock he salutes him—an honor he will not pay a prince.”

Tigers are abundant in the jungle, but are more frequently dangerous to other animals, both wild and domestic, than to men. The rhinoceros, the buffalo, bears, wild pigs, deer, gazelles, and other smaller animals inhabit the forests. Monkeys are abundant. In Cambodia Mouhot found several new species. And the orang-outang is found on the Malayan peninsula. Various species of cats, and among them tailless cats like those of Japan, are also to be found. Bats are abundant, some of them said to be nearly as large as a cat. They are fond of dwelling among the trees of the temple-grounds, and Pallegoix says (but it seems that the good Bishop must have overstated the case, as other travellers have failed to notice such a phenomenon) that “at night they hang over the city of Bangkok like a dense black cloud, which appears to be leagues in length.”

Birds are abundant, and often of great size and beauty; some of them sweet singers, some of them skilful mimics, some of them useful as scavengers. Peacocks, parrots, parroquets, crows, jays, pigeons, in great numbers and variety, inhabit the forest trees.

What the elephant is in the forest, the crocodile is in the rivers, the king of creeping things. The