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TEMPLES AND ELEPHANTS

TRAVELS IN SIAM IN 1881-1882



*His Supreme Majesty
Chulalongkorn I
King of Siam.*

BY

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MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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two large ones were specially prized, as no doubt they were—because I had selected them.

“Besides,” I continued, “you have not assisted me and my men to collect natural history specimens, but have put every obstacle in my way, although I offered to kill tigers for you. No wonder your spirits are angry when you disobey the Chow’s orders, and insult the stranger whom he sent to you to help.”

Here the subject dropped and the deputation withdrew, Tali not forgetting to give a good growl at them and to hasten their departure by barking loudly as they descended the rickety ladder.

I was now in a “fix.” I did not want to enter into a correspondence with the Chow Operat at Chengmai, nor did I desire to excite the further animosity of the natives here. The best thing to do was probably to take my departure. I had been here a month; I had seen all I wanted to see of the neighbourhood, and could not expect to add anything to my scanty natural history collection or to my archæological booty. Indeed, it was questionable whether I should be able to carry off the principal portion of the latter at all. I tried to induce some of the people who had accompanied me from Muang Pau to help me take them away on the promise of good payment, but they were afraid of being punished if it ever came to the Chow’s ears.

At the same time Mau Sua was still away with some of my followers, and I had nothing to do but to impatiently await his return and meanwhile devise some scheme for getting away with my figures, without further ado.

On the 16th of March a party of Ngiou came to the settlement, offering for sale some dried rhinoceros-blood, which the Laosians, like the Chinese, value for its supposed medicinal properties. In Lao it fetches

its weight in silver. It is done up in rolls like sausages, in the intestines of the rhinoceros. Kao invested six rupees in the purchase of half a dozen large sausages, but to his chagrin afterwards discovered that it was not the real article. It is difficult to cheat a Chinaman, but it would puzzle a good many men to tell the difference between bullock’s blood and rhinoceros-blood, especially when the former is carefully preserved in the “genuine” covering. Kao did not forget this robbery for some time, for he had calculated on making a little profit out of his purchase when he should return to Chengmai—though I do not think he was a Chinaman if he allowed his discovery to stand in the way of the fulfilment of this purchase.

At last on the 17th of March, Mau Sua returned, bringing a few hornbills and lizards, a tortoise or two, and one of the *Ngao-pa*, or wild buffaloes, which are by no means rare in the forests on the mountains. I retained the skull and skeleton, and left him the more profitable part, the flesh, which he disposed of among the natives. I was, of course, much disappointed too, that this great hunter had done so little. So I determined to return with him to his mountain-retreat on the Ngiou frontier, and see how far it was feasible to carry out my intention of proceeding across the Ngiou States. Here, I thought, I might possibly engage men to return with me to Muang Fang and carry away my images; and if the worst came to the worst I could go on to Kiang Hai with my letter of introduction to the chief there, and endeavour to get him to allow me the services of some of his men for the purpose.

To make quite sure of my ground, I sent a letter to Dr. Cheek, at Chengmai, telling him exactly how I was situated, and begging him to get a letter from the Chow there, with instructions to the Chow of

of ornamentation to the drawing and dining-rooms in the West. I am sure their inlaid mother-of-pearl ware would find a ready sale, and, besides being a source of great profit to them, these effective works of art would serve to relieve the dulness of the dirty yellow and sulky grey ornaments that now reign supreme on our mantle-pieces and sideboards. His Majesty exhibited a magnificent collection of works of this kind, two of which, large inlaid mother-of-pearl pictures, one of the royal arms, the other of the "Adoration of Buddha by Thewedas," attracted special attention. The latter was an exquisitely-finished and effective specimen of this quaint art, the colours, caused by the refraction of the rays of light by the nacre, and dependent therefore upon the selection of the pieces and upon the manner in which they were inserted, being wonderfully well arranged.

Besides these were two large cabinets destined to contain the sacred manuscripts in some temple-library, also inlaid with thousands upon thousands of carefully-cut bits of pearl-shell; and a number of *talum muk*—the trays given by the princes and nobles to high priests when they make offerings of garments.

The use of these trays, which are very expensive, is practically confined to the high priests, as they are as expensive as silver-ware, and the priests are not allowed to possess any articles of either gold or silver or their equivalents. The trays made for the use of the ordinary priests are manufactured in a peculiar manner. Although firm and apparently solid, as if made of wood, they are made of strips of bamboo woven together, upon which a paste, made of a mixture of *rack* lacquer, oil, and ashes, is run. The pattern in mother-of-pearl is then stuck on, and the intervening spaces filled up with *rack* to the level of the surface of the mother-of-pearl.

Of ordinary wicker-work or bamboo-plait articles, unacquered, there was (in section thirty-three) an instructive collection. What bamboo is *not* used for, it is difficult to say, and the array of mats, baskets, water-buckets, paddy-bins, &c., used by the Siamese, large as it was, might have been indefinitely enlarged if the exhibition had been open to foreign nations, and if the value of the bamboo were everywhere as fully appreciated as it is in Siam.

Very characteristic of this Land of Elephants was a small room full of a grand and probably matchless variety of elephant-tusks, with a few rhinoceros-horns. There were seven grades of ivory exhibited, the finest of which would sell in Bangkok for \$360 the picul. Rhinoceros-horn, used as medicine, is worth as much as \$22 for 1½ lbs.

Of planters' (cultivated) and forest (wild) produce I have only space to mention *en bloc* a great many varieties of rice and tobacco, which no doubt deserved careful attention; cardamoms—the true variety—of which there are large plantations in the Chantaboon and Sincora districts, and which sell in Bangkok for \$150 per picul, whereas the bastard cardamoms (also exhibited from Matabaung, Siamrahp, &c.) realize only \$18 per picul; golden gamboge from Chantaburee, which sells in Bangkok at \$78 per picul, while inferior gamboge only realizes \$24 per picul; teak-wood, sapan-wood, eagle-wood, and rose-wood; sugar; pepper; sticklac; birds'-nests; buffalo, deer, elephant, and rhinoceros-hides; cotton; mangrove-bark; gum Benjamin; Lukrabow seed; resins; and bees-wax. This last I have already mentioned as being largely used in the service of the temples throughout Siam and Lao, but it deserves special reference here, on account of the great skill the Siamese display in making not only wax