

AROUND TONKIN AND SIAM

BY

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TRANSLATED BY

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WITH TWENTY-EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

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CHAPTER IV.

From Hanoï to Van-Bou—Departure from Hanoï—Luggage—
The Black River—Cho-Bo (excursion to Cao-Phong and to
Thac-By)—In canoes—The Doc Ngu—Native Story—Van-
Yen—Our Followers, Boatmen and Boys—Arrival at Van-
Bou.

THE Hôtel Alexandre, which I may call the principal one in Hanoï, without wishing to reflect upon the others, is large and clean. This is the second time I have stayed there, and the travellers and officials who have not yet got settled into their houses mostly go there. The walls of the rooms are white-washed, and one sees a few little *jekkofs* running about and uttering their plaintive cry. But they are said to bring luck, and, besides, they give local colour to the scene. The windows do not close properly, but it is not cold, and all one has to do is to put one's valuables under the pillow, lock one's door, and put the key in one's pocket, for every traveller ought ever to have before him the maxim of Dr. Pangloss. On the ground floor is a large room with two billiard tables, and a number of small tables, around which the French element in Hanoï assemble to breakfast or dine, when not invited elsewhere or at the club. It is a great resort, too, for a "bitter" before dinner, the custom being to play a game of cards or dominoes to decide

several trips. For the assistance which he rendered in saving these guns the old Chinaman was given a medal, of which he is naturally very proud.

We do not find much to buy here, excepting the nail of a rhinoceros, which, as we are told, comes from the neighbourhood and is a remedy against headaches. Our men purchase sugar-cane, bamboos, salad, fowls (a franc each) and a very large pig, which costs nearly a sovereign, or about a third less than at Hanoi, according to Thou. Payment is effected in fragments of piastres weighed in Chinese scales.

All these matters being settled, we enter upon a fresh stage, but as our men want the afternoon to kill the pig and make merry over it, and as we are well in advance of time, we do not go far, being all the more inclined to meet their wishes in that they are very handy and willing, so that we are on the best of terms together. No sooner have we reached our destination than the boats are made fast, the wood picked up, the fires lighted and the kettle put on before our lazy cook has got out of his berth. The scene to-day is a most typical one, and a more graphic pen than mine would be needed to describe it. In a few hours the pig is killed, scalded, cut up, and put on to cook, the boatmen, who are seated in circles round the fires commencing the repast at daybreak and not terminating it till nightfall. First of all they eat the blood mixed with rice and pimento, then the tripe cut up into small bits and seasoned with wild tomatoes gathered in the woods, winding up with the bacon and meat. After all this, they fetch, with great precaution, several bamboo canes which had been stowed away in the bottom of the boats and

CHAPTER V.

Van Bou—Inhabitants of the District—Thaïs, Mans, Meos—A Visit to the Meos—Excursions to the Molou Goldfields—Departure from Van Bou—On the Black River—Arrival at Laïchau—Deo Van Tri; his Origin, his Life, his Family—Excursions to the Plateau of Tafine (and the Sas, the Yaos and the Yans)—Meeting at Laïchau with MM. Massie and Gassouin—Relations with Deo Van Tri—Information about the Country—Our Departure.

AFTER having spent several years in Tonkin, after having been in Guiana, Senegal, and Madagascar, Colonel Pennequin was last year placed in command of the military territory which corresponds more or less closely to the Black River. We soon find that he is a very able administrator, and the results which he has arrived at are truly surprising, for, all the way up the river and even beyond the frontiers of the Laos, we come upon traces of his handiwork, and we are constantly learning from the native chiefs themselves to appreciate him at his true value.

It is a piece of great good fortune for us to have encountered him, as his perfect knowledge of the country and of its inhabitants will greatly facilitate our journey, and I am all the more desirous of putting upon record how much I owe him, seeing that during our stay here I was indebted to him for

him to Hanoi" (Cho-Ken pas bon, faire divé Hanoi).

As we are now weeding our troop, I do not hesitate to dismiss another rather useless member. Baptiste is paid, and moreover he is content for he begins to find his profession rather tiring, and has discovered a source of wealth, which is more easily earned, by trading with the Meos. I wish him a safe return and good luck; and determine to manage without replacing him. Thou declares he is as good a cook as he is major-domo, and for the banquets that we are likely to make we do not require a great culinary artist.

Before starting again, we say good-bye to Deo Van Tri. Our intercourse with him has been most amicable during all our stay at Laïchau, and now he offers us a complete collection of the costumes of the country, in return I present him with a large bore rifle for elephant shooting. M. Pavie had told me that the chief has long wished for one, and I found that the gift was received with much pleasure. Thanks to the letters we brought to him, and to the recommendations of his friends, we have found every possible assistance provided for us by the Thou of Laïchau. He has given us all the information we have wished for, and has answered all our questions with the greatest kindness.

Every one is well informed respecting the fauna of the country, for here every one hunts. We are told that elephants are numerous at a week's march from Lai, towards Poufang. The wild cattle, with short yellow hair,¹ are very dangerous; last year two

¹ Probably the *Bos gaurus*.

hunters were killed by one of these animals. The rhinoceros is becoming rarer; five or six years ago some of them were killed within a few miles of Lai. Deer, tigers, small-sized felines, large civet cats, with ringed tails, and monkeys are found in great abundance; amongst the latter are found the large gibbons with extraordinarily long arms. A native has given me the skin of a reddish-brown gibbon, marked with a stripe upon the head. The species seemed new at the Museum, but unfortunately I have only a flat skin, without a skull and with two paws missing. A great many peacocks, silver pheasants, and bee-eaters are killed for their plumage, and the large *buceros* for their extraordinary beaks, they utter the most discordant cries. As a rule, the members of Deo Van Tri's family hunt all day long, and fire at everything that comes within range; consequently they are often short of ammunition, and our visit has been a windfall for them, for I have distributed several boxes of powder amongst them on condition that they bring us their booty.

As regards variety, the flora has nothing to envy the fauna, for the forests contain the most diversified species. Some of them may be utilized when the means of communication have improved and the spirit of enterprise has provided some capital even in the higher districts. Deo Van Tri assures me that teak grows opposite Lai, here it is called *tiet-tao*; benjamin is missing, cardamom is rare, but cunao is very common and is sent to Hanoi, but I am told that the trade in these tubercles is not very profitable.

It is the same with the mines as with the woods;

CHAPTER VI.

From Laichau to Luang Prabang—Start from Laichau—Muong Moun—Legends—Plain of Theng (Dien Bien Fou)—Traces of the Siamese—The French Administration—Sop Nao—The first Siamese Post—In a Pirogue—The Nam Ou—Muong Ngoi—A Religious Grotto—Details on the Khas—A Laotian Evening—Mekong—Pakou—The Arrival at Luang Prabang—The Consulate.

FROM Laichau we go to Dien Bien Fou in five stages, for though the journey can be accomplished in three, we are delayed by our coolies. On the first day we left late and only advanced about nine miles. Until we stop at the foot of the hills, at Muong Toum, the road lies on the banks of the Nam Lai; the slopes have been cleared of wood half the way up, but above that height the trees are covered with white blossoms which give them from a distance the appearance of large orchards. The bottom of the valley is rich and well cultivated, it contains numerous villages. The itinerary given to me at the post mentions 260 houses. I should think that the number had increased, for there must be at least 2,000 inhabitants and a great many people are seen on the road. The women wear dossers fastened with braces or by a strap passed across the forehead, they then cross their arms, behind them. I often notice tattoo marks upon the hands,

bar the way, and we are continually forced to make fresh circuits. A river has to be crossed, the Nam Nona. Our interpreter takes us into the deepest part, and the water comes up to our knees, but fortunately the sun is powerful, and will quickly repair the mischief.

We halt at three o'clock in the afternoon and the coolies refuse to go any further; they say that we should not find any water, and that there is a high mountain in front of us which cannot be crossed before nightfall. We have no choice but to listen to our men's advice and to resign ourselves to stopping here. Shelters are erected side by side, facing the streams, like the booths at a fair, a polygon of crossed strips of bamboo is fastened to a post to drive away the spirits and large fires are lighted; at the risk of being roasted we draw near to them and smoke ourselves to escape the wasps, which prey upon the refuse left by the passage of other caravans.

The coolies cook their dinner in bamboo tubes with some water at the bottom, a horn formed of laurel leaves above it holds the rice, this is the sole apparatus. In other saucepans of the same kind some banana buds are boiling, and some pieces of pig's skin are roasting upon sticks. When dinner is ready a strip of bamboo is peeled lengthwise from one knot to the next and forms an improvised bowl in which the meat is served. A handful of salt which we give the men is received as a great delicacy, for salt is rare and very dear here.

I take a turn with my gun before nightfall; but the jungle is so thick that I can scarcely advance. I see traces of some large animals which recall the excre-

ment of the wild yaks; they can only be attributed to bisons or rhinoceros. I am told that black bears are often met with in these mountains, and I see an animal fleeing from me, which I think is a wolf, but I cannot shoot it. Tiger tracks are very frequent.

The road to-day is still worse than yesterday, the march through the bamboos is particularly tiring, for we risk blinding ourselves at every step, and when we descend the hill the path is one prolonged slide, besides, we have to squeeze through narrow places, and to force a passage between the entangled and frequently thorny creepers.

With a lively feeling of satisfaction we emerge upon a cleared track two yards wide. Everything is relative; we can believe that we are now in a fine road, so we lift our heads and breathe again. From this point the territory is subject to the authority of Siam.

There are a few clearings on the heights, but the country we are entering is not so wild as the region we have left, a river about thirty yards wide flows at our feet; opposite, a temporary village formed of a few houses shelters the people who cultivate the rice-fields. We encamp in a glade, a little rain is falling, and it is the first rain we have seen for a long time, but our improvised huts of banana leaves prove sufficient protection.

Our porters are tired after their day's work, for they have marched well; they belong to the Thais or Sas races. One of them has three blue circles tattooed upon his breast, which he conceals with his hand when any one approaches to look at them. He