

NARRATIVE OF A RESIDENCE
AT THE CAPITAL OF
THE KINGDOM OF SIAM;
WITH A DESCRIPTION OF
THE MANNERS, CUSTOMS, AND LAWS
OF THE
MODERN SIAMESE.

BY

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CHAPTER XIII.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF SIAM.



Of the History of Siam previous to the visit of the French Embassy, in the seventeenth century, it is scarcely possible to obtain any accurate particulars. The Siamese themselves pretend that their records go as far back as the year 1300 of our era, at which time a king reigned, bearing the very hard and heavy name of Pra-Poat-honne

Sourritep-pennaratui Louanne Popitâ. Of him and his successors, for three hundred years, exceedingly little is known. The principal object which these various monarchs seem to have pursued, or, at all events, that to which their historians appear to have attached the most importance, was to build new capital cities, and transport the people *en masse* from the old towns to the new. What historical or other facts may be concealed under this statement, it is somewhat difficult to conjecture. Despotic as these kings of Siam always appear to have been, it is extremely improbable that they would be always desiring to change the seat of government out of mere caprice, nor could they exercise their power so effectually as entirely to depopulate the old towns. The king and his people must both have wished for these removals, and it is highly probable that the real history of that period would

put on shore in order that they might, without the slightest delay, render their accounts to the King, as, according to Siamese etiquette, it was necessary that they should have an audience with the King before they were even permitted to enter their own houses. The first officer of their own country they met asked them of course about the objects they had seen, and they stated, with truly oriental exaggeration, that they had seen angels—not men, and that France was not a kingdom, but a world. They described in the most pompous and poetical language the grandeur, the riches, the politeness of the French people, and tears flowed down their cheeks when they spoke of the manner in which they had been received, and of the civilities that had been profusely bestowed upon them by the great monarch who then ruled France. When they went to make their reports to the King, his Majesty, in the true Eastern style of taking matters, coolly and calmly, ordered the senior ambassador to attend him every day at a certain hour, and then deliver his report in the form of consecutive lectures. In this easy manner—easy for the lecturer—easy for the audience—and quite in the fashion of “the thousand and one nights,” did the King of Siam receive his Ambassador’s reports respecting a great country and a mighty nation, that were at the time leading the civilisation of the world.

When the ambassadors arrived, the King was engaged in hunting, but he left his sport specially for the purpose of receiving the Frenchmen. The game he was in pursuit of was the elephant, an amusement in which his successors do not appear to have extravagantly indulged. The woods that formed his hunting grounds contained elephants twelve and thirteen feet in height, few of them being under ten feet, and all, according to the Reverend Father Tachard, who describes them with uncommon piquancy, the most furious of beasts when enraged, and the most dangerous to hunt. Besides them, there were the rhinoceros, an animal said to be less dangerous than the elephant and the tiger, of enormous size, but more easily killed than either of the

others. The first interview with the King was a mere formal business, attended with the usual ceremonies, and at which the chief feature was a grand, eloquent speech, made in French, and translated to the King. The Jesuits who accompanied the mission had shortly after an interview with the King, and their spokesman, this same Father Tachard, told his Majesty that they, the Jesuits, had suffered much pain, and endured much grief, in leaving the King of France, their friends, and their dear country; but that this pain and grief had been sweetened by the hope that in Siam they would find the great King of the East—that they would find friends, and receive the royal protection. The benefits which his Siamese Majesty had already conferred on them, day by day, since their arrival, had made them forget all the fatigues of their long and painful voyage, and that they now wished, as their dearest desire, to employ the rest of their lives in understanding the language of the country—in communicating to the Siamese people a knowledge of the arts and sciences of Europe, and, above all, a knowledge of the true God. This speech was accompanied with presents of astronomical instruments, which were graciously received by the King, and the use of which he requested the Jesuits to explain. He said to them, however, very judiciously, that perhaps they would not find success in the principal object of their mission so easy as they hoped, but that patience always, in time, conquered even the greatest obstacles. This audience lasted two hours, and would have been still further prolonged had not the King been obliged to cut it short in consequence of his then suffering from an attack of rheumatism.

Things went on for some time very pleasantly for the French. They were treated with great respect and distinction by the King, and were appointed to important offices under him. They, in general, seemed to like the new country, in which they had been so well received, but, after a time, they began to show symptoms of an insolent and a haughty spirit that ultimately led to their ruin. There was, however, one exception in the