

TRAVELS IN INDO-CHINA

AND

THE CHINESE EMPIRE

BY

LOUIS DE CARNÉ,

MEMBER OF THE COMMISSION OF EXPLORATION OF THE MEKONG.

WITH A

NOTICE OF THE AUTHOR BY THE COUNT DE CARNÉ.

Translated from the French.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193 PICCADILLY.

1872.

G

76

CHAPTER II.

STAY AT BASSAC. EXCURSION TO ATTOPÉE. THE FORESTS.
SAVAGES AND ELEPHANTS. WE LEAVE BASSAC. UBONE.

It is with civilisation as with health; one must feel the want of it before he knows its value. To sleep on a bed and to eat bread are very vulgar delights, seldom wanting, thank God, in Europe, even to those least favoured by fortune; and hence we do not realise the part they play in the happiness of life. Yet, after some weeks of wonder, and almost of pain, you feel the body bend, little by little, to new habits; but the privations, which each day made more grievous to us, in our sad camp at Bassac, were of another kind: we lived, forced back on ourselves, awaiting the end of the rainy season, without books or newspapers, at the time when, behind the illusions which flew away, and in place of the dream which faded off, nothing was seen but the austere forms of a painful duty. The first fine days would, however, allow us to seek, outside, that food of curiosity which is the one thing which can bear up the traveller; and when they came at last, I hailed them as the prisoners of the Ark might have done the end of the deluge, only they had been better housed than we.

Since the 26th of October 1866, the river had fallen six metres from the highest level it had reached. The immense lake that separated us from the mountains was nothing more than an ocean of mud; but this slime, at first fetid, was soon dried and hardened by the sun, and we were then able to take extended rambles round our hut. The town stretches along the banks of the river, on both sides of the royal dwelling. The narrow road that ran through it was, as yet, no better than a slough. The inhabitants had taken the trouble to lay trees of different sizes, from the thick palm to the slender bamboo, side by side in the mud, so as to form

responsibility to heaven, they are without love to their neighbour. They abuse their numerous privileges, treat the great of the earth almost as equals with equals, and despise the poor. Most of the young bonzes have a faculty of forgetting the monastic rules, some of which, however, it must be owned, are troublesome to excess. Bouddha prohibited his disciples from touching a woman, from speaking to her in a secret place, from sitting on the same mat with her, or from going on a boat which carried one. Indeed, he so dreaded the influence of the female sex on his religious, as to interdict their use of a mare or of a she elephant when they made a journey.

The Bouddhist calendar has a great many festivals. Every one was keeping holiday at Saravane; and the bonzes, whom the faithful are bound to feast on pain of loss of salvation, made a long breakfast the day after we arrived.

In the afternoon a procession went several times round the pagoda. It recalled the Catholic ceremonies of the same kind so thoroughly, as to make one forget himself. The bonzes marched before, carrying emblems and banners; the laics came after; and, lastly, closing the whole, appeared the women, in full dress and full chignon, their hands filled with flowers.

We exchanged visits of ceremony with the authorities. After the inevitable presentation of the letter from Siam, that magic talisman which opened every door to us, the governor promised to procure us six elephants, apologising that he could not get more; he was obliged to take away five for his annual visit to all the pagodas of his province, which would begin the next day. Six elephants were enough for us. A kind of narrow and long seat, like a child's cradle, set on several ox or deer skins, was kept in its place on the back of our beasts by a strong surcingle of rattan. When we left a village or came to one, we were helped to mount or descend these living walls, by ladders; but it was different when we had to halt in the forest. Some of the elephants, very well trained, knelt at the word of command from the driver. It looked as if a hill had fallen in on itself. Others were content to lift their fore foot, so as to form a kind of stool, by means of which one could scramble

into his place. The driver, astraddle on the neck of his beast, let his legs hang behind the huge ears of the elephant, which kept going all the time like huge fans.

A word was commonly enough to guide these intelligent animals; but it was sometimes necessary to use an iron hook, which was stuck into the skin of the head till it drew blood. In leaving Saravane we twice crossed the Se-don, which has very steep banks. Our elephants, to get down the high sides of the river, had to trust themselves to an almost perpendicular path, hardly wider than their own feet. When the soil was loose, they stiffened their legs before them, let their hind legs drag, so that their thighs were on the ground, and their belly not much above it, and slid to the very edge of the precipice, without for a moment losing either their coolness or their balance. When they emerged in this way from a hollow, they looked like a huge block of rock which had become detached and was in motion. We had seen their strength before, but now admired their prudence. We had to climb a dry watercourse full of rolling stones. They scanned the huge tree above them, with its bare roots, or the rocks overhanging them, and kept their eye on every tuft of grass or grain of sand, never advancing a step till they felt sure that the ground would bear them. In some difficult places they took an hour to a kilometre; but they never stumbled once.

When the woods had replaced the rice-fields, we ceased to meet villages at which to make our evening halts, and it was necessary to carry provisions for several days. We went along roads which no horse, however strong or active, could have travelled, and our beasts performed wonders of strength and cleverness. Reaching at last, after much toil, the top of a steep ascent, we discovered at our feet, beyond the foliage, a stretch of water, in which the mountains reflected their rounded summits. We took it for one of those magnificent lakes, which are the ornament of virgin forests, so often described; but our Laotians undeceived us—it was the river Attopée.

We had passed long days, formerly, at its mouth at Stung-Treng, so that it was an old acquaintance, and we wished to rest on its banks. The idea of this halt was

pleasant, for several reasons. The motion of elephants is very fatiguing. It is not strictly either rolling or pitching, but a mixture of both these horrible things, complicated, on the least sound, by a sudden and violent step backwards. These animals, once tamed, if not specially trained for war, are as timid as hares. I have been on one which, in spite of its formidable tusks and huge size, shied at the sight of a small dog. In the forest, which we had to cross to get to the river's edge, they met more worthy objects of terror; for we passed the lair of a rhinoceros, and a tiger crossed our path. We found ourselves, in fact, in a part abounding with these ferocious beasts, and our guides seemed no less terrified than the creatures they rode. M. de Lagrée did not the less give them the order to halt. We chose the dry bed of a torrent, which pours itself in the rainy season into the river Attopée, as our place of encampment. Our Lao-tians, always willing to halt, resisted this time energetically, and only yielded when they had exacted the promise, as impertinent as useless, that we would neither fight nor swear, nor get into any noisy discussions. For greater security they also forthwith built a little altar to Bouddha, with branches torn from the trees. All right with heaven, they thought it well to take the steps which worldly prudence dictated, and kindled huge fires round our camp. We got under our shelter of leaves, necessary at this season by the heaviness of the dews, and stretched ourselves on our mats, having primed our arms afresh. As to our guides, our drivers, and our baggage-carriers, they smoked their cigarettes, and chatted in a low voice, but were too cautious to close an eye. When, after a weary march, I recovered, under the reviving influence of a cool night, entire possession of myself, my thoughts turned sadly to France, from which no whisper had reached us for six months. My wandering life amidst silent forests, with every emotion quickened by close contact with the greatness of nature, filled me with unknown joys, and kept off those tortures of uncertainty about friends and country, which were daily becoming more keen. But while I tried to watch the stars twinkling through the interlaced branches of the gourbi, I saw all the evil phantoms which, under the horrid forms of