

THE SIAMSE KING'S HAREM.

Most of the women who composed his harem were of gentle blood, the fairest of the daughters of Siamese nobles, and of princesses of the adjacent tributary states; the late queen consort was his own half sister. Besides many choice Chinese and Indian girls, purchased annually for the royal harem by agents stationed at Peking, Foo-Choo, and different points in Bengal, enormous sums were offered, year after year, through "solicitors" at Bangkok and Singapore, for an English woman of beauty and good parentage, to crown the collection, but when I took my leave of Bangkok, in 1888, the coveted specimen had not yet appeared in the market. The cunning commissioners contrived to keep their places and make a living by sending his majesty now and then, a piquant photograph of some British Nourmahal of the period, freshly caught and duly shipped, in good time for the harem; but the gods never arrived. Had the King's taste been Gallic, his requisition might have been filled. I remember a score of genuine offers from French demopseles, who enclosed their cartes in billets more surprising and enterprising than any other "proposals" it was my office to translate. But his whimsical majesty entertained a lively horror of French intrigue.

The King, as well as most of the principal members of his household, rose at five in the morning, and immediately partook of a slight repast, served by the ladies who had been in waiting through the night; after which, attended by them and his sisters and elder children, he descended and took his station on a long strip of matting, laid from one of the gates through all the avenues to another. On his majesty's left were ranged, first, his children in the order of rank; then the princesses, his sisters; and lastly his maids of honor, and their slaves. Before each was placed a large silver tray containing offerings of boiled rice, fruit, cakes and the like; some even had cigars.

A little after five, the Pateon Dharma ("Gate of Merit") was thrown open, and the mazes of the guard drawn up on either side. Then the priests entered, always by that gate—one hundred and ninety-nine of them, escorted on the right and left by men armed with swords and clubs—and as they entered they chanted, "Take thy meat, but think it dust! Eat but to live, and but to know thyself, and what thou art below! And withal unto thy heart, 'tis earth I eat, that to the earth I may new life impart." Then the chief priest, who led the procession, advanced with downcast eyes and lowly mien and very simply presented his bowl (slung from his neck by a cord, and until that moment hidden under the folds of his yellow robe) to the members of the royal household, who offered their fruit or cakes, of their spoons full of rice or sweetmeats. In like manner did all his brethren. If, by any chance, one before whom a tray was placed was not ready and waiting with an offering, no priest stopped, but all continued to advance slowly, taking only what was freely offered, without thanks or even a look of acknowledgement, until the end of the royal train was reached, when the procession retired, chanting as before, by the gate called Duin, or, in the court language, Pritthi, "Gate of Earth."

After this, the King and all his company repaired to his private temple, dedicated by his majesty to the memory of his mother. This is an edifice of unique and charming beauty, decorated throughout by artists from Japan, who have represented on the walls, in designs as diverse and ingenious as they are costly, the numerous metamorphoses of Buddha. Here his majesty ascended alone the steps of the altar, rang a bell to announce the hour of devotion, lighted the consecrated incense, and offered the white lotus and the roses. Then he spent an hour in prayer, and in reading texts from the Phraja Parmita and the Phra ti-Moksha. This service over, he retired for another nap, attended by a fresh detail of women—those who had waited the night before being dismissed, not to be recalled for a month, or at least a fortnight, save as a peculiar mark of preference or favor to some one who had the good fortune to please or amuse him; but most of the party voluntarily waited upon him every afternoon.

At two o'clock he rose again, and with the aid of his women, bathed, and anointed his person. Then he descended to a breakfast chamber, where he was served with the most substantial meal of the day. Here he chatted with his favorites among the wives, and carried his children, taken them in his arms, embracing them, playing with them, puzzling or funny questions, and making droll faces at the babies; the more agreeable the mother, the dearer the child. The love of children was the constant and hearty virtue of this forlorn despot. They appealed to him by their beauty and their truthfulness; they refreshed him by their bold innocence of their ways, so frolicsome, graceful and quaint. From this decisive scene of domestic condescension and kindness he passed to his hall of audience to consider official matters. Twice a week at sunset he appeared at one of the gates of the palace to hear the complaints and petitions of the poorest of his subjects, who at no other time or place could reach his ear. It was most pitiful to see the helpless awe-stricken wretches, prostrate and abject as toads, many too terrified to present the precious petition after all. At nine he retired to his private apartments.

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