



THE CITY OF BANGKOK, SIAM.

The Kingdom of Siam.

Siam is a curious and interesting country, occupying the centre of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, and although it is so near to the great Indian Empire, it has, as yet, been scarcely touched by modern civilization. The people have many strange customs of which it may interest our readers to hear. We give an illustration of the town of Bangkok; it lies some few miles from the mouth of the Menam River, and in addition to the river, which is navigable for a long distance, there is a perfect network of canals round and through the city, which has been called the Venice of the East. The King of Siam, who recently visited Europe, and whose doings were duly cabled to Australia, lives in Bangkok. He is a very rich and powerful monarch, completely despotic, and holds the lives and properties of his subjects entirely at his free disposal. He has the monopoly of trading in many different products, the elephants are all his, and every Siamese man, with certain exceptions, must give him three months' labor in every year. He lives in great magnificence, keeping an enormous harem, and only goes among the people occasionally, in great state. When he goes by land, he is carried in a gilded chair on men's shoulders; the Court follows in order, keeping silence, and all whom they meet must fall prostrate. Two hundred elephants head the procession, then a large company of soldiers, and after the King his ladies are carried in closed chairs, upon elephants. The procession sometimes includes fifteen or sixteen thousand persons. A royal procession on the water sometimes consists of four or five hundred boats, while the people stand on the river banks, with joined hands and drooping heads. When the King dies, he is usually succeeded by his eldest brother, but frequently the crown is seized by some powerful member of the Royal family, who makes good his claim by murdering all the rest.

The religion of Siam is Buddhist, with variations, and there are many strange superstitions. A certain King of Aynthia, the ancient capital, made a collection of sixty volumes, compiled from old sacred books, in the year 1654 A.D., and they contain an extraordinary mass of fiction and

ignorance. They tell of a heaven, full of angels and other spirits, who even sit in judgment on man, but they lay much greater stress upon the eight different hells of various degrees of horror, each of which has sixteen minor hells, where the wicked suffer various tortures according to their crimes. There are great numbers of temples in every Siamese town; some made of brick and stucco, covered with arabesques, and sometimes with patterns in broken crockery, something like the 'crazy work' with which enlightened Australians decorate tin plates and drain pipes. Grander temples are made of marble, with images of the god in jasper, brass, or gold, covered with innumerable precious stones. There are great numbers of bonzes, or priests. In Bangkok there are about 10,000—and every boy must be a priest during part of his education. Their garments are all yellow, and they carry on their backs a sort of satchel holding an iron pot, and in their hands a fan which they hold over their eyes to prevent their attention from being distracted by distant objects. They abstain from marriage, but may leave the priesthood and marry if they like; they live on alms which they collect from the people. They have a great many rules, the tenor of many which seems to be that it is a sin to do anything useful; others apply to a great many points of ceremonial law, often very minute and frivolous.

The house of a Siamese peasant is made of bamboo, covered with a thatch of palm-leaves, and is usually very shaky. If it falls down, not much labor is required to re-build it, and the furniture is so scanty that not much damage will be done. In such a house as this there will be only a few vessels of coarse earthenware and wickerwork, and a mat or two spread on the floor. A superior workman, however, such as a carpenter, will have more furniture—carpenter's tools, a moveable oven, spoons of mother-of-pearl, plates and dishes of earthenware and metal, a large porcelain jar, another of copper for fresh water, and perhaps a tea-set and all the appliances for betel-chewing and tobacco-smoking. The Siamese all smoke, even little boys of five years old, and no lady's beauty is considered worth admiring unless her teeth are quite black from chewing betel-nut. They drink a great deal of tea, but take it in the

Chinese fashion, very weak, without milk or sugar. The national food is rice and curry, made so hot that a European cannot eat it. The Siamese are a very temperate people in the matter of drink; a spirit is made from rice, but drunkenness is almost unknown, and as the king is compelled by public opinion to be a teetotaler, he sets a fashion which is widely followed.

The Siamese are a very clean people. There is always plenty of river water at hand, and they often wade and swim many times a day. They constantly change their garments, which are somewhat scanty, most people wearing only a panung, a bright-colored silk or cotton cloth, arranged something like Turkish trousers, from the waist to the knee. A very rich man may wear a jacket, or his wife a silk scarf round her shoulders; but before they have worn it long they generally remove it, regardless of the presence of company, and tie it round their waists. They wear their hair shaved, all but a curious tuft on the top of their heads, which the men keep rather short; the women dress it in curious ways, and ornament it with jewels. The Siamese are most punctilious in matters of etiquette, and are very polite to each other. If one wishes to enter the presence of another of superior rank, he must crawl towards him on the floor, and no wife would think of assuming any other position while her husband was in the room.

The medical customs of Siam are very strange to our ideas. When a person is sick, the doctor is sent for and is asked, 'Can you remove my complaint?' He usually undertakes to do so, and, after much chaffering, a written contract is drawn up, the doctor agreeing to cure the patient for so much, including two wax candles for the god of Medicine. If the patient does not get better, there is no fee for the doctor. Their ideas of anatomy are very funny. They believe that the arteries are full of air, and most diseases are caused by internal storms. Their pharmacopoeia includes such substances as cat's-eyes, rhinoceros horn, sea-shells, and the like. If a man dies, his body is stained with turmeric and rubbed with quicklime, honey and quick silver are poured down the throat, and the body is stood upright in the house for some days, after which it is cremated. When a child is born, the mother is at once placed