TOWARDS ANGKOR

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE INDIAN INVADERS

BY

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K.C.S.I. K.C.I.E.

And with Forty-two Illustrations from Photographs and Several Maps

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FOREWORD

As Chairman of the Greater-India Research Committee I have great pleasure in writing a foreword to the present work of our Field Director. Dr Wales knows intimately Siam, French Indo-China, and Indonesia, and belongs to that younger school of explorers who have learned to combine history and geography in their researches. After serving at the Court of Siam for several years, and thereby receiving a thorough grounding in Hindu and Buddhist institutions, he undertook two archaeological expeditions under the auspices of the Committee. The first, during the season 1934-35, with the distinguished patronage of His Highness the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baroda, was undertaken for the purpose of investigating the overland route across the Malay Peninsula by which, some fifteen hundred years ago, Indian cultural influence spread to the shores of the Pacific. The second, in the following year, was made possible by the generosity of Mrs C. N. Wrentmore, a member of the India Society. On this occasion Dr Wales was able to penetrate regions never before visited by a European archaeologist, and discovered the earlier vestiges of the original Hindu art which found its culmination in Angkor.

The study of the culture of Greater India is still in its infancy, and a rich field awaits the patient investigator. But the author of the present volume has made a first contribution of undoubtedly importance. Moreover, he has written his account in a manner which will appeal not
only to the student but also, I think, to the general reading public by a skilful blend of scholarship and the art of the narrator. His is an entrancing tale of the peaceful invasion of a great sub-continent by the ancestors of our Indian fellow-subjects of to-day.

FRANCIS YOUNGHUSBAND
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CHAPTER I

THE LURE OF THE UNKNOWN

Across the steaming lowlands of eastern Central Siam a train of heavily laden bullock-carts was laboriously wending its way. The country it was traversing was not the luxuriant evergreen forest which clothes so much of Indo-China, for there cart travel is impossible; this was the shadeless, thin jungle of poor deciduous trees and tall grass, the haunt of tiger and deer, and though in the dry season it allows the use of carts instead of porters or elephants, it is by far the more trying to the traveller.

This particular caravan, with its screeching wooden axles and jingling bells—the true music of the jungle track—differed little from those one might see on any of the well-beaten trade routes which still form for many towns and villages in the remoter parts of Siam their only link with the railway and the capital. But for this route, which ran eastward from Lopburi towards the little-known Pasak valley, the remarkable thing about the caravan was its size: no less than eight carts, not to mention several armed men mounted on ponies. For the fact is that in A.D. 1936 this was really no trade route at all, and two or three men with pack-ponies or with a couple of carts were all that one might expect to find peddling cheap wares to the few squalid villages of this poor and undeveloped part of the country even at the very height of the dry season. But had it been just fifteen hundred years earlier, A.D. 436
(and unless one draws close enough to inspect the personnel in detail there is nothing to suggest that it might not be), it would have been a common experience to pass within an hour a dozen of such caravans of merchants, bearing eastward the products of the rich lands of the Menam valley to exchange them for goods from India at the great emporium of Śri Deva. This was the name of the city that guarded the pass at the point where the route left the plateau of the kingdom of Fu-nan and made its way to the lowland vassal states of the west. But on looking closer one sees that the bullock-drivers are Siamese peasants, that two Europeans clad in dusty shirts and shorts—the author and his wife—are tramping in the rear, and that what looks at first sight like any other caravan is in fact a scientific expedition on its way to probe one of the most enthralling mysteries of the ancient East, of which at that time the unrevealing heart of Indo-China still held the solution. The ‘mystery’ was no less than that of the origin of Angkor and the Khmer civilization.

The bullocks plodded patiently on their way, a track barely marked by cuts on the trunks of the trees, and so indistinct that there was at times a diversity of opinion as to which was the direction to be followed, while the sun, now sinking low in the west, yet beat implacably on our backs. For we were, in truth, on the march long after a halt should have been called and camp pitched for the night; but the necessity of reaching an ample water-supply, to quench the thirsts of bullocks and men, obliged us to press forward to a village on a stream which, according to those of our party who were reputed to know the route, should long since have been reached. It was useless to question them, for Siamese peasants have vague ideas
A Halt by the Way
on time and distance, and the only reply would be "Pradeo."\footnote{Presently."

Then almost suddenly, for there is no twilight in these latitudes, the shadows closed in, and the worst dread of jungle travellers was upon us; we were overtaken by black night. The oxen began to show signs of fear: their instinct and the strange movements in the grass beside the track told them of the proximity of tigers which might at any moment spring on to their backs; they began to low fearfully, each pair nuzzling up to the cart in front and increasing its pace in a manner surprising to those who are acquainted only with the normal solemn tread of these patient beasts. At last there came a sudden break in the jungle, and we felt rather than saw that we were in the open stretch of padi land that tells of approach to a village. Almost at once the foremost driver gave a shout, to signify that he had seen the light of the westernmost homestead, and a series of delighted exclamations passed down the line. Even as we bumped over the low mounds that formed the borders of the various rice-fields the villagers, having heard the jingle of the bells and the screech of the axles, were on their way out to meet us and guide us to the sala, or open caravanserai which stands in the temple courtyard of every Siamese village of any size. These people have inherited the spontaneous hospitality that belongs to dwellers on trade routes, even dead trade routes like this one; and in these days of schedules and hotels was for us, benighted in the jungle, an impressive experience of old-time travel all at once to see the bobbing lanterns of the villagers and receive their simple and unquestioning welcome.